

NOWRUZ IN KING COUNTY WASHINGTON

Cultural Continuity, Identity Reconstruction, and Community Belonging

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Annual Nowruz gathering at the Washington State Capitol in Olympia
hosted by Representative Darya Farivar, 2025.



In collaboration with



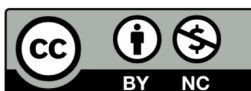
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Published in April 2026 by PORSESH POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (PR)

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Acknowledgements

We at PORSESH POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (PR) acknowledge that this research was conducted on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples. We honor and recognize the Indigenous communities who have stewarded this land since time immemorial and continue to do so today. We specifically acknowledge the Duwamish Tribe, Puyallup Tribe, Suquamish Tribe, Tulalip Tribes, and Muckleshoot Tribe as the original stewards of this land and its waters.

We are grateful to the cultural organizations and community groups in King County that continue to organize and support Nowruz celebrations. Their dedication to preserving and sharing cultural heritage has created spaces where memory, identity, and community flourish. Their efforts demonstrate how cultural traditions bring people together and enrich the region's social and cultural life.

As the researcher, I extend my sincere appreciation to colleagues and collaborators who offered guidance, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback throughout the development of this project. Their insights helped shape this research and strengthen its analytical depth. I am also deeply grateful to the many individuals and organizations whose support, insight, and encouragement made this qualitative research possible.

My deepest appreciation goes to Cathia Geller, President of Seattle–Isfahan Sister City Advocacy (SISCA), for generously welcoming me to give speech, observe, and participate in the two last Nowruz celebrations at Seattle City Hall. Her thoughtful interview and reflections on the cultural and civic dimensions of Nowruz in Seattle significantly enriched this study. Her long-standing commitment to cultural diplomacy and community engagement provided valuable context for understanding how Nowruz functions as both celebration and bridge-building.

I am equally grateful to Sarvar Abdulkarimov, Co–Vice President of the Seattle–Tashkent Sister City Association (STSCA), whose collaboration broadened the geographic and cultural scope of this research. His insights into Nowruz traditions in Uzbekistan expanded my understanding beyond my own cultural familiarity. He generously shared archival photographs, event materials from previous celebrations, and helped disseminate the Nowruz survey, strengthening both the depth and reach of this project.

I had the privilege of interviewing Shahrzad Shams, President of Peyvand and retired faculty member in the Persian and Iranian Studies program in the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of Washington. Her scholarly perspective, combined with her lived experience in organizing and managing Nowruz events, offered a nuanced comparison between celebrations of Nowruz in Iran and those in the United States. Her reflections were both intellectually illuminating and personally meaningful.

Together, these community leaders and their respective organizations have sustained Nowruz celebrations in King County for many years. Their dedication reflects the resilience

of cultural traditions among immigrants and the importance of collective effort in preserving heritage.

I extend my thanks to Reza Pedram, a cultural activist from Afghanistan who has been living in Seattle for nearly a decade. His reflections on Afghanistani experiences of Nowruz in migration added important dimensions to this research. I am similarly grateful to Dr. Hasan Javid, former president of the Hazara Community of Washington, whose insights into community organization and cultural continuity were invaluable. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Mahsum Kavut, an active member of the Kurdish Association of Washington (KAWA), whose valuable insights into the significance of Nowruz among Kurdish community added important depth to this research.

My sincere appreciation goes to the many participants who completed our Nowruz survey and shared their experiences. Although space does not permit naming each individual, their voices form important part of this study. This research would be incomplete without their willingness to reflect, remember, and contribute.

I gratefully acknowledge 4Culture for its financial support, which covered part of the project's expenses. At the same time, this work has been largely sustained through volunteer efforts and a shared commitment to preserving cultural heritage and promoting diversity.

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at Porsesh for their invaluable contributions to this project: Leilemah Aslamy, for narrating the video documentary and supporting the launch event; Jasper Bragg, for coordinating and managing the launch event; and Sian Nun Siam, for thoughtfully reviewing the research and providing insightful feedback and comments.

Finally, I wish to thank my friend and supervisor, Ehsan Shayegan, president of PORSESH POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE. His steady guidance, careful feedback, and ongoing encouragement were instrumental throughout the research and writing process. His mentorship shaped not only this project but also my broader approach to community-based scholarship. He also designed all visual elements of this research, from the cover and in-book visuals to the launch event posters.

To all who contributed — directly or indirectly — I offer my sincere thanks.

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Abbreviations and Key Concepts

This document identifies abbreviations and key academic concepts used throughout the research that may require further explanation for a general academic audience. Items are organized into three sections: Abbreviations, Cultural and Linguistic Terms, and Academic and Theoretical Concepts.

Abbreviations

SISCA: Seattle–Isfahan Sister City Advocacy. A cultural organization in Seattle that organizes large-scale Nowruz events usually at Seattle City Hall.

STSCA: Seattle–Tashkent Sister City Association. A community organization that promotes cultural connections between Seattle and Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

HCWA: Hazara Community of Washington. A community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to serving the Hazara immigrants from Afghanistan.

KAWA: Kurdish Association of Washington. An organization that organizes Newroz (Nowruz) celebrations representing Kurdish heritage in Seattle.

PR: Porsesh Policy Research Institute. The research organization that conducted and published this study.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The UN agency responsible for designating Nowruz as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2009).

UN: United Nations. The international organization that proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Nowruz (2010).

Academic and Theoretical Concepts

The following concepts are drawn from qualitative research methodology, diaspora studies, cultural theory, and UNESCO frameworks.

Researcher Positionality: a concept in qualitative research acknowledging that a researcher’s identity, background, and social location (cultural, linguistic, political) shape how they gather and interpret data.

Snowball sampling: a non-random recruitment method in which initial research participants refer the researcher to other potential participants within their networks.

Thematic analysis: a qualitative data analysis method involving the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns (themes) across a dataset such as interview transcripts or survey responses.

Semi-structured interviews: a data collection method combining pre-determined questions with flexibility for follow-up and open-ended responses.

Cultural memory: the collective body of knowledge, practices, narratives, and symbols through which communities preserve and transmit their shared history and identity across generations.

Imagined communities: a concept introduced by Benedict Anderson (1983) arguing that nations and large social groups are “imagined” — their members will never meet most fellow members, yet they share a sense of collective belonging constructed through shared symbols, narratives, and practices.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH): a UNESCO concept referring to living practices, rituals, knowledge, and traditions that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity.

Diaspora: communities of people who live outside their ancestral or national homeland while maintaining cultural, social, or emotional ties to their place of origin.

Ritual compression: a concept in diaspora studies describing how cultural rituals become shortened, condensed, or relocated to private settings when transplanted to new social environments that lack institutional or societal support for them.

Diasporic solidarity: the sense of shared heritage and collective identity that emerges among diaspora communities despite differences in national origin or political history, often produced through shared cultural celebrations and practices.

Portable homeland: a metaphor used in this study to describe how cultural traditions such as Nowruz allow displaced communities to reconstruct a symbolic sense of home — carrying the emotional, social, and ritual dimensions of homeland life into new geographic contexts.

Researcher Positionality

I begin this study from the conviction that research is always shaped by perspective and positional context. Every scholar writes from a particular location—historical, cultural, linguistic, and political. Making that location visible is essential to scholarly integrity. My engagement with Nowruz is not only intellectual but lived, embodied, and intergenerational. As a Persian-speaking Hazara from Afghanistan, now living in Washington State, my relationship to Nowruz precedes my research questions. It is rooted in memory, landscape, migration, and contestation.

My earliest understanding of Nowruz was shaped in a remote, mountainous village in Hazarajat (Hazaristan), central Afghanistan. Winters there were severe. Snow accumulated in heavy drifts; avalanches and blizzards were common. I recall my mother sharing a riddle: “Who can clear all this snow for us?” The answer was Nowruz. As a child, I imagined Nowruz as a mythic hero who would physically remove the snow and rescue us from winter’s hardship. Later I understood that Nowruz was not a muscular hero but a metaphor for seasonal transformation—the collective hope placed in the inevitability of spring.

In that landscape, Nowruz was not merely the first day of a calendar year. It was a force of nature. It melted ice, softened soil, reopened roads, and renewed agricultural life. It carried the scent of blooming flowers and the promise of movement after confinement. The waiting for Nowruz was both practical and symbolic: it meant survival, continuity, and reassurance that harshness is temporary.

Growing up, I witnessed the rituals that embedded Nowruz in everyday village life. My father bought new clothes for us. Married women visited their parental homes with sweets and cookies. With the arrival of spring, farming and livestock cycles resumed. These practices connected kinship, economy, ecology, and celebration. Later, when I moved to Kabul, I observed how Nowruz functioned in urban space—particularly at Kart-e-Sakhi, where large gatherings marked the new year. I also traveled to Mazar-e-Sharif to witness the biggest public celebrations of Nowruz in the country. These experiences expanded my understanding of Nowruz from a village-based seasonal turning point to a national and transregional cultural event.

At the same time, I became aware that Nowruz was not embraced among all. I heard radical clerics and Taliban condemn it as un-Islamic. I also encountered nationalist narratives that sought to distance Afghanistan from Iran by questioning Nowruz’s cultural belonging. These competing claims revealed that Nowruz is not only a seasonal celebration but also a site of ideological struggle. It can be framed as heritage, as heresy, as shared civilization, or

as contested identity. Witnessing these debates sharpened my analytical attention to power, discourse, and the politics of cultural ownership.

My migration to the United States introduced another transformation in my relationship to Nowruz. Here, Nowruz became less tied to agricultural cycles and more to memory, nostalgia, heritage preservation, and community-making among immigrants. Celebrating Nowruz in diaspora spaces reactivates fragments of homeland while simultaneously reshaping them. The ritual becomes portable, reinterpreted in community centers, private homes, and public gatherings far from its original ecological context. My own participation in Nowruz celebrations informs the central research questions of this project: How does Nowruz function as a cultural anchor among displaced communities? How does it mediate belonging, identity, and resilience? How do memories from Nowruz region travel into diasporic celebrations?

My identity as a Persian speaking Hazara further shapes this inquiry. As a member of a historically marginalized ethnic in Afghanistan, I am attentive to how cultural practices can operate as forms of dignity and continuity under conditions of exclusion. Nowruz, in this sense, is not merely festive—it is an assertion of historical depth and civilizational presence. My decision to study Nowruz is therefore partly an act of cultural affirmation. It reflects my belief that preserving and analyzing such traditions constitutes a form of intellectual and symbolic resistance against erasure.

Methodologically, my positionality influences both access and interpretation. Shared language and cultural familiarity facilitate trust in interviews and community conversations. Participants often speak to me not only as a researcher but as someone who shares their memories of snow, migration, and contested belonging. This insider position provides depth, nuance, and affective understanding. At the same time, it requires reflexivity. I must remain attentive to the risk of romanticizing tradition or assuming homogeneity within diverse immigrant experiences. Throughout this study, I therefore balance narrative closeness with analytical distance, situating personal memory within broader historical, sociopolitical, and diasporic frameworks.

Ultimately, this research emerges from an intertwining of scholarship and lived experience. For me, writing about Nowruz among immigrants is not solely an academic exercise; it is an exploration of how seasonal renewal becomes a metaphor for cultural survival. Just as in my childhood village we believed that Nowruz would eventually melt the snow, I approach this study with the understanding that traditions carry within them the capacity to outlast political winters. By making my positionality explicit, I aim not to center myself, but to clarify the interpretive lens through which this work has been conceived and conducted.

Introduction

Migration reshapes cultural landscapes by transporting traditions, memories, and identities across borders. Immigrants do not arrive in new societies as blank slates; they carry with them cultural practices that continue to shape their communities and relationships in diaspora. Through these practices, cultural heritage travels, adapts, and acquires new meanings within changing social environments. Among the many traditions that migrate with communities from western and central Asia, Nowruz occupies a unique place as a powerful cultural heritage and anchor that connects them to their roots and community. As one of the oldest continuously celebrated festivals in the world, Nowruz symbolizes renewal, rebirth, and the cyclical transformation of nature.

Originating in ancient Persian civilization, Nowruz begins at the exact moment of the vernal equinox (commonly called the spring or March equinox). This astronomical event occurs when the Sun crosses the celestial equator, resulting in nearly equal lengths of day and night across the Earth. At this moment, the Sun is positioned directly above the equator. The vernal equinox marks the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere and typically falls on March 20 or 21 each year.

Over centuries, the celebration spread far beyond its origins and today transcends national boundaries. Nowruz is observed across the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and parts of South Asia, bringing together diverse communities through shared rituals and symbolic meanings. In recognition of its cultural significance, UNESCO inscribed Nowruz on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, acknowledging it as a tradition shared by multiple societies. The following year, the United Nations proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Nowruz, highlighting the festival's role in promoting cultural diversity, dialogue, and peace.

Little attention has been given to how Nowruz functions within diaspora communities, particularly in Western societies where immigrant populations negotiate complex questions of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation. In diaspora contexts, traditions often acquire new meanings: they become spaces where cultural knowledge is transmitted to younger generations, where memories of homeland are sustained, and where communities rebuild social bonds in unfamiliar environments.

Seattle metropolitan area and King County in Washington, provide a particularly valuable case study for examining these dynamics. Over recent decades, the region has become home to growing immigrant communities from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and other countries where Nowruz is widely celebrated. Community organizations, cultural leaders, and volunteers have organized public celebrations that bring Nowruz into

civic institutions and public spaces across the region. These events take place in libraries, schools, parks, performance centers, universities, and Seattle city hall, transforming an ancient seasonal festival into a visible component of the cultural life of a modern American city.

This qualitative research, conducted by the *Porsesh Policy Research Institute (PR)*, seeks to document the cultural significance and recent history of Nowruz celebrations in Seattle metropolitan area. While Nowruz has ancient roots in Central and Western Asia, its meaning continues to evolve as immigrant communities carry the tradition into new social, cultural, and geographic contexts. For many individuals living in diaspora, Nowruz functions not only as a celebration of spring but also as a cultural anchor that connects them to their heritage, collective memory, and sense of identity.

This research explores questions like how immigrant communities in King County celebrate Nowruz, examining both practices and community-based traditions across generations. It seeks to understand the cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings the festival holds for individuals and families, and how it contributes to identity, belonging, and the transmission of values and heritage. The study also investigates how Nowruz traditions are adapted or transformed within the U.S. context, as well as the role of public celebrations in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting cultural diversity in a multicultural society.

To address these questions, this research begins by providing an overview of the historical and cultural background of Nowruz in the regions most relevant to this study. It then considers how Nowruz celebrants in King County have sustained and reshaped the celebration within new social environments. Building on this foundation, the study draws on qualitative interviews with community leaders, cultural organizers, scholars, and participants who host or participate in Nowruz celebrations throughout the County. These conversations document the recent history of Nowruz events in the area while also offering insight into the evolving meaning of the festival for diaspora communities.

Beyond documenting cultural practices, the research also gathers perspectives from participants about the future of Nowruz in King County. Community leaders and organizers reflect on how cultural organizations, public institutions, and local governments can support the continued visibility and preservation of Nowruz while ensuring that younger generations remain connected to this heritage.

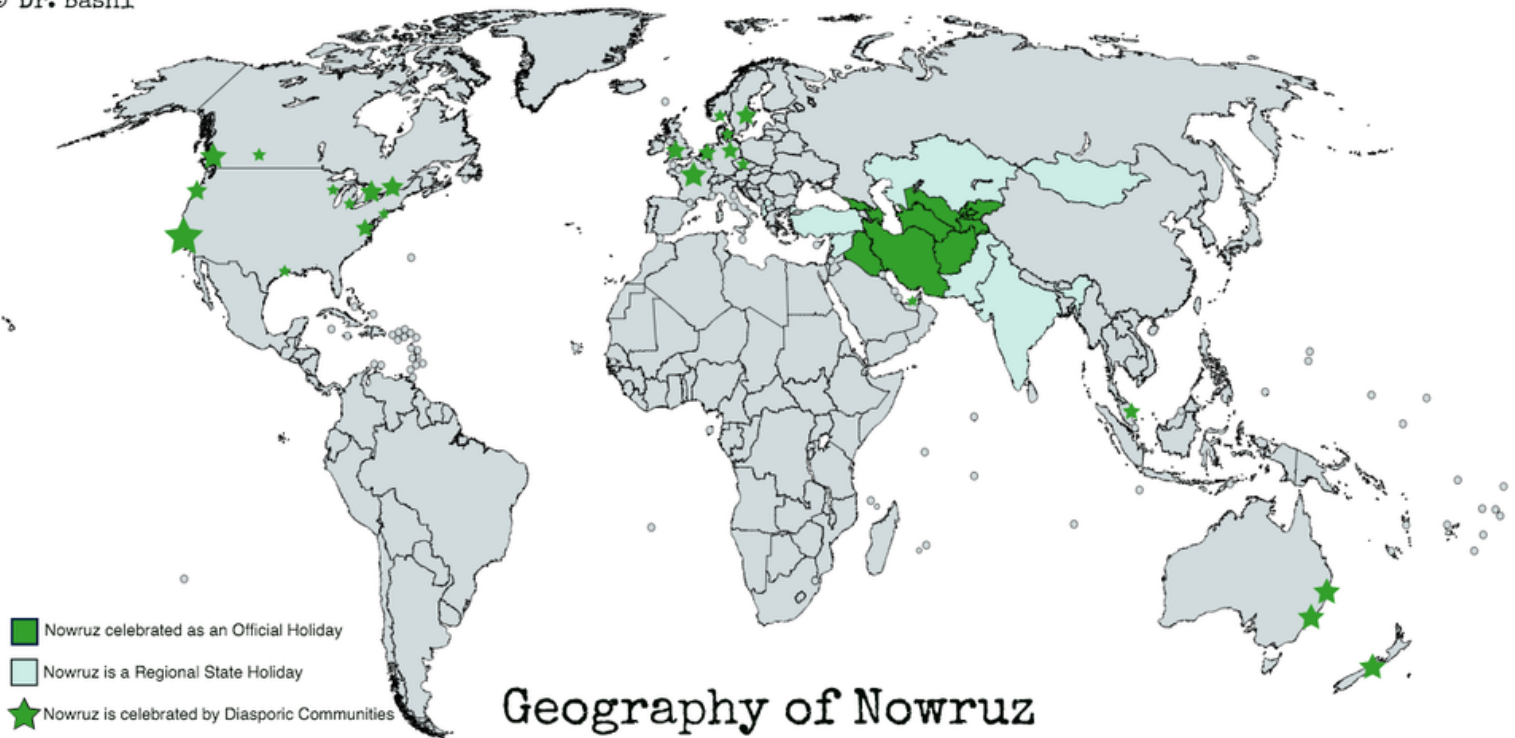
As part of the project's public engagement, a documentary-style video will be produced as a core component of the research. The video brings together selected interview excerpts with footage of local Nowruz celebrations, offering a visual narrative that

complements the written study. It highlights the vitality and diversity of Nowruz in the region while making the research more accessible and engaging for a broader public audience.

By documenting Nowruz as a living tradition within King County this research seeks to honor cultural continuity while highlighting the creative ways immigrant communities adapt their heritage in new environments. At the same time, the study aims to amplify immigrant voices, foster intercultural understanding, and illuminate the cultural diversity that shapes the social fabric of King County.



Dance performance at the STSCA Nowruz celebration. Photo by Marina Savilova. 2025



Chapter I: Background Information

1.1 Meaning and Significance of Nowruz

Nowruz (also spelled Navruz and Newroz), literally means “new day” in Persian. It is an ancient festival marking the spring equinox and symbolic of renewal and rebirth of nature. It is also the first day of the Persian new year, the calendar used in Iran and Afghanistan. Celebrated for over 3,000 years by more than 300 million people across regions such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. According to [UNESCO](#), the tradition is celebrated in all the countries that were once part of the Persian Empire.

Since 2009, Nowruz has been inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a festivity of rich diversity promoting peace and solidarity across regions and generations ([UN News](#)). Countries that are officially part of the UNESCO multinational inscription of Nowruz are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. Nowruz is

also celebrated in China (particularly in Xinjiang), Georgia, Mongolia, and Russia, where it is observed by various ethnic and cultural communities, often with regional variations in practice and significance.

In 2010, the “International Day of Nowruz” was proclaimed by the [United Nations General Assembly](#). This Resolution welcomes the efforts of Member States where Nowruz is celebrated to preserve and develop the culture and traditions related to Nowruz, and encourages Member States to make efforts to raise awareness about Nowruz and to organize annual events in commemoration of this festivity.

The United States recognizes Nowruz primarily through symbolic and diplomatic means rather than as a federal holiday. In 2010, Congress passed a resolution acknowledging its cultural significance. While George W. Bush issued a Nowruz message in 2008, the practice became more consistent under Barack Obama, who addressed global audiences, especially Iranians. These messages typically highlight renewal, peace, and mutual respect, sometimes incorporating cultural symbols like the *Haft-Seen* table. Later administrations, including Donald Trump and Joe Biden, have continued the tradition, reflecting both cultural recognition and broader diplomatic messaging.

Locally, Nowruz has been recognized in Washington State and in several cities—including Seattle, Bellevue, and Kirkland—through proclamations. These recognitions reflect the growing presence of Nowruz celebrants and their efforts to share this ancient tradition of spring, renewal, and cultural heritage with the broader public.

1.2 The Celebration of Nowruz Across Different Regions

Nowruz is a festival deeply rooted in the cultural and historical heritage of many regions. While its origins can be traced to ancient Persia (D'Onofrio, 2019), the celebration has transcended national boundaries, adapting to diverse cultural contexts while maintaining a shared emphasis on renewal, community, and continuity. Across Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kurdish regions, and diaspora communities in Western countries, Nowruz functions as both a cultural tradition and a social institution, embodying values of unity, resilience, and identity. Despite variations in practice, the holiday symbolizes the cyclical nature of time and humanity's enduring connection to nature.

In Iran, Nowruz is regarded as a major national holiday and is celebrated with extensive rituals and festivities. It begins at the precise moment of the spring equinox, symbolizing the renewal of nature and the turning of the year. Central to Iranian traditions is the *Haft-Seen* table, an arrangement of seven symbolic items beginning with the Persian letter “S,” each representing essential human values such as health, prosperity, love, and rebirth (Shahbazi, 2002). Families prepare for Nowruz through *khaneh-tekani* (shaking the house/

house cleaning), the purchase of new clothing, and the preparation of special foods, all of which emphasize purification and fresh beginnings (Preston, 2025). The celebration extends about two weeks, characterized by reciprocal family visits, the exchange of gifts, and communal meals. The holiday concludes with *Sizdah Bedar* (getting rid of thirteen/ thirteen outdoor), when families gather outdoors to enjoy nature, underscoring themes of harmony and renewal. These traditions not only reinforce family ties but also sustain intergenerational cultural continuity, making Nowruz both a personal and collective expression of identity.

Afghanistan shares many similarities with Iran in its observance of Nowruz due to their intertwined history, language, and cultural exchange. Nowruz is officially recognized as the first day of the New Year in Iran and Afghanistan, while in other countries it is primarily observed as a cultural or seasonal festival. Families from Afghanistan also prepare through cleaning, decorating, and setting festive tables. However, a distinct feature of Afghanistan tradition is the *Haft Mewa* (seven fruits), a dish prepared with seven dried fruits and nuts, symbolizing renewal and abundance (Sharifi, 2019). In the historic province of Balkh the Blue Mosque (The Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-i-Sharif) served as the focal point of public celebrations, most notably the *Jahenda Bala* (banner-raising) ceremony, where a sacred banner was raised to symbolize unity and renewal. The Red Tulip Festival, closely associated with the arrival of spring and Nowruz, is held annually in Balkh in the weeks following Nowruz, when blooming natural tulips across the plains and hills around the city draw thousands of visitors to celebrate nature, culture, and community. Nowruz festivities typically include music, dance, poetry, and kite flying, creating a vibrant communal spirit that strengthens social bonds. Yet, since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, official celebrations have been banned. The Taliban reject Nowruz as a non-Islamic tradition and have attempted to suppress it, underscoring the tension between cultural heritage and political authority. Nevertheless, within society, the festival endures as a meaningful tradition that connects communities to their past and to each other.

In Tajikistan, Nowruz is both a cultural tradition and a state-recognized holiday. Festivities include preparing homes, gathering with family members, and cooking traditional foods, particularly *sumalak*, a sweet paste made from sprouted wheat, flour, and oil that symbolizes renewal and the continuation of life (Dodkhudoeva, Yusufbekova and Shovalieva, 2019). Public celebrations feature music, dance, poetry readings, and traditional sports such as wrestling and goat-carcass polo (*buzkashi*), bringing together communities in both urban and rural settings. As both a familial and national occasion, Nowruz in Tajikistan highlights the connection between cultural continuity and state identity. Its widespread observance demonstrates how ancient rituals can be integrated into modern national life while sustaining shared values of renewal and social solidarity. In Uzbekistan, Nowruz is celebrated in similar

ways, with communal festivities, traditional foods, and public cultural events that likewise emphasize renewal, unity, and cultural heritage. In Central Asian countries, Nowruz involves preparing sweets, visiting relatives, and enjoying outdoor festivities marked by music, dance, and sports

Among the Kurds, Nowruz carries profound cultural and political significance. Beyond its seasonal symbolism, the festival is closely associated with the legendary tale of Kawa the Blacksmith, who led an uprising against the tyrannical king Zahak. Upon defeating the tyrant, Kawa lit a great bonfire atop a mountain to signal the people's liberation, a gesture that came to embody the triumph of light over darkness and the arrival of spring. Kurdish festivities also include traditional dress, music, and dancing, marking the holiday as an affirmation of cultural pride, resilience, and unity. For Kurdish communities, Nowruz is not only the start of spring but also a symbolic assertion of freedom, resistance, and aspirations for justice (Khalid, 2020).

Among diaspora communities in Western countries, including here in Washington State, Nowruz continues to thrive as a means of cultural preservation and adaptation. Families often set up *Haft-Seen* tables, prepare traditional foods, and gather with relatives and friends. Cultural organizations and community centers play a vital role in organizing public events that include music, dance, poetry, and storytelling, introducing Nowruz to wider audiences while strengthening bonds within immigrant communities. For younger generations born abroad, these celebrations provide a connection to their cultural roots, fostering intergenerational identity and belonging. Though celebrated on a smaller scale compared to the countries of origin, Nowruz in the diaspora reflects both resilience and adaptability, serving as an introduction to host communities while sustaining cultural pride and integrating into multicultural societies.

Overall, Nowruz is more than a seasonal celebration of spring; it is a living cultural tradition that embodies themes of renewal, identity, and continuity. Across Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Kurdish regions, and the diaspora, it functions as both a personal and collective ritual that strengthens social ties, affirms cultural pride, and bridges past and present. Despite political challenges and regional variations, Nowruz endures as a festival that unites diverse peoples across vast geographies, reflecting a shared heritage while embracing local meanings. In this way, Nowruz illustrates the capacity of cultural traditions to adapt, persist, and remain vital across time and space.

1.3 Nowruz and Religions

Nowruz is often described by its celebrants as a secular and natural holiday that transcends religious boundaries. Many from the Nowruz region emphasize with pride that it is not

formally tied to a single faith but instead belongs to humanity as a commemoration of seasonal renewal and arrival of spring. Nevertheless, the history of Nowruz reveals a far more complex relationship with religion. Over centuries, it has been shaped by diverse religious traditions, suppressed by some authorities, and reinterpreted by others. While it has no direct or exclusive connection to Islam, its pre-Islamic roots have made it the subject of both criticism and accommodation. At the same time, Nowruz retains enduring ties to Zoroastrianism, the ancient faith of Persia, from which many of its symbolic and ritual dimensions originate.

The connection between Nowruz and Zoroastrianism is particularly evident in its cosmological symbolism. The transition from winter to summer mirrors the Zoroastrian dualistic worldview that conceives of existence as a battle between good and evil (Boyce, 2000). Likewise, the joyful celebration of spring can be read as a reflection of Zoroastrian eschatology, which envisions the eventual triumph of good and the restoration of the world to an original state of harmony. Today, Zoroastrian communities such as the Parsis of western India continue to observe Nowruz as a time of spiritual renewal, underscoring the holiday's ongoing religious resonance.

Persian literary tradition has also preserved the cultural and mythological significance of Nowruz. In Ferdowsī's monumental epic, the *Shāh-nāmeḥ* ("Book of Kings," c. 1010 CE), the festival is attributed to the mythical King Jamshīd (Yima in Avestan texts). According to this account, Jamshīd, after bringing prosperity and civilization to his people, ascended into the heavens on a jewel-encrusted throne. The day of this exalted event was declared *Nowruz*, embedding the festival within both mythology and national identity (Boyce, 2000).

Despite the Arab Muslim conquest of the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century, Nowruz survived as a vital cultural practice. Although Zoroastrian political authority was displaced, Persians continued to celebrate the holiday, which was gradually incorporated into the life of Islamic dynasties such as the Samanids and Buyids. Later Turkic and Mongol rulers did not suppress Nowruz, and under their rule the festival continued to spread across Central Asia (Shahbazi, 2000; Preston, 2025). Its persistence illustrates the adaptability of Nowruz within changing religious and political contexts.

Islamic scholars responded to Nowruz in divergent ways. Some early caliphs and theologians condemned the holiday as a remnant of pagan custom, while others sought to integrate it into Islamic tradition. Certain hadiths depict the Prophet Muhammad accepting a Nowruz gift, other narratives attributed to Ja'far Ṣādiq, the sixth Shi'ī imam, ascribe cosmic and theological significance to the festival. These narratives link Nowruz to key moments in sacred history, from the covenant of monotheism to the destruction of idols in Mecca, and even to the final resurrection. Such reinterpretations allowed Nowruz to gain legitimacy

within Islam, particularly among Shi'i communities (Shahbazi, 2000; Preston, 2025). In Afghanistan, the largest public Nowruz celebration was traditionally held at the Shrine of Ali, the first Shi'i imam in Mazar-e-Sharif. Thousands of people gathered there for the *Jahenda Bala* ceremony, raising a sacred banner to mark the new year and celebrating with music, food, and communal festivities.

In the modern period, the religious and political contestation of Nowruz has continued. Since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, clerical leaders have sought to diminish the festival, framing it as a Zoroastrian custom incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy. Yet their efforts have largely failed, as Iranians continue to embrace Nowruz as a cherished cultural tradition, with some even viewing it as a form of quiet resistance to theocratic authority. Similarly, the Taliban in Afghanistan have attempted to suppress Nowruz as un-Islamic, but local communities persist in marking the day, often in private or clandestine gatherings.

Elsewhere, Nowruz has faced suppression under different ideological frameworks. During the Soviet era, it was banned in Central Asia on the grounds that it was a religious festival, deemed incompatible with communist anti-religious policies. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, Nowruz reemerged as a central cultural celebration. Today, it is publicly observed in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, each country adapting the holiday to its own national and cultural identity.

Taken together, these histories reveal the remarkable resilience of Nowruz across religious and political transformations. From its Zoroastrian origins to its reinterpretation in Islamic contexts and its revival after state suppression, Nowruz illustrates the dynamic interplay between religion, culture, and politics. Far from being a purely secular or purely religious festival, it is best understood as a living tradition that has continually negotiated its meaning within changing historical circumstances.

1.4 Nowruz and Nationalism

Nowruz has long been intertwined with questions of cultural identity and nationalism. In recent years, the festival has occasionally become a site of political and nationalist contestation. For instance, during Nowruz 2025, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [stated](#), "We will propose the adoption of Nowruz Day as a shared occasion of collective commemoration and celebration by the Turkic world" (Turkey Ministry of Communications, 2025). This declaration provoked strong reactions among Iranian scholars and the broader public. Erdoğan's framing of Nowruz as a holiday with Turkish roots was widely criticized in Iranian media and on social networks, with commentators asserting that it represented an

attempt to appropriate a tradition deeply embedded in Iranian civilization. In response, the [Iranian government spokesperson](#) emphasized that “Nowruz has roots in Iranian civilization and has been celebrated across the Iranian plateau since antiquity. We take pride that Iranian Nowruz, with its profound humanistic and cultural message, is now embraced by numerous nations and ethnic communities, including Turks.”

In addition, Nowruz has also been employed in nationalist rhetoric in other countries. In Tajikistan, the holiday is frequently presented as a marker of national identity, celebrated with state-sponsored events that emphasize Tajik cultural heritage. In Afghanistan, however, Nowruz can be a source of division sometimes, reflecting tensions between different ethnic groups and religious and non-religious people. Among Kurdish communities in several countries, the festival serves as both a cultural and political symbol, with celebrations highlighting [Kurdish identity](#), resilience, freedom, and historical continuity (TISHK, 2024).

These examples illustrate that Nowruz, while fundamentally a celebration of spring and renewal, functions as a symbolic arena for expressing, negotiating, and contesting nationalist claims. Its significance varies across regions, reflecting local histories, ethnic identities, and political contexts. As such, the festival is not merely a cultural ritual but also a site where questions of belonging, heritage, and political legitimacy are actively performed and debated.

1.5 Nowruz, Multiculturalism, and Social Inclusion

Western countries increasingly define national identity around multiculturalism, diversity, and social inclusion, and Nowruz celebrations align naturally with these values. They enrich cultural calendars and bring fresh artistic traditions into public life, including poetry, folk music, traditional dance, handicrafts, and cuisine. They also create meaningful opportunities for intercultural dialogue and mutual respect.

Participation in Nowruz can help members of host societies deepen their understanding of immigrant communities beyond the stereotypes shaped by geopolitics or media narratives. It transforms immigrants from subjects of political discussion into recognized cultural contributors and community leaders. As cultural studies scholarship has long argued, communities benefit when cultural differences are seen as sources of strength. Cultural recognition improves social cohesion, sense of belonging, and civic participation among immigrant populations. Nowruz provides a platform through which newcomers can celebrate their identity while affirming their commitment to shared civic life in their host societies.

Nowruz has endured through empires, religions, wars, and ideological regimes. This durability is not accidental. As Stuart Hall (1990) argues, traditions survive when they adapt.

Nowruz has demonstrated this quality across centuries: it integrated into Islamic contexts while retaining Zoroastrian symbolism; it survived religious restrictions, ideological suppression, and authoritarian attempts at erasure; it absorbed regional practices while maintaining shared core values. In diaspora, Nowruz continues this evolution through multicultural educational programs, youth-focused activities, digital media content, and hybrid artistic forms. This adaptability demonstrates that Nowruz is not a nostalgic recreation of the past but a living tradition—one that thrives when nurtured by creativity, participation, and shared values.

1.6 Research Gap

Nowruz has been widely studied in its countries of origin, and most of these studies focus on the festival's historical roots, symbolic meanings, religious interpretations, or its role within national cultural traditions. These studies have significantly contributed to understanding Nowruz as an ancient seasonal celebration tied to the spring equinox and as an important element of cultural heritage across the Persianate and Central Asian worlds. However, less attention has been given to how Nowruz is practiced and experienced among immigrant populations living in Western countries including the United States.

In particular, the ways in which Nowruz is preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted within diaspora communities in Western societies remain underexplored. Migration often transforms cultural traditions as communities negotiate new social environments, institutional structures, and generational dynamics. Rituals that once existed within a shared national or cultural landscape must be recreated in new contexts where they may not be widely recognized or institutionally supported. As a result, traditions such as Nowruz may acquire new meanings and functions, serving not only as celebrations of seasonal renewal but also as mechanisms for cultural preservation, identity formation, and community cohesion.

King County, Washington—one of the most culturally diverse regions of the United States—offers a particularly important context for examining these dynamics. The region is home to growing diaspora communities from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and other societies where Nowruz is widely celebrated. In recent decades, cultural organizations, community leaders, and volunteers have organized public Nowruz events in libraries, schools, parks, community centers, and civic institutions such as Seattle City Hall. Despite the increasing visibility of these celebrations, there has been no systematic academic effort to document their development, meaning, and impact within the region.

This qualitative study seeks to address this gap by documenting the recent history and contemporary practices of Nowruz celebrations in King County. Through interviews with cultural scholars, community leaders, and participants involved in organizing and attending

Nowruz events, the research explores how the festival functions within a diasporic environment. In doing so, it captures both the symbolic and practical significance of Nowruz for immigrant communities and examines how traditions are sustained and transformed in a multicultural setting.

More broadly, the study investigates how cultural rituals travel across borders and adapt to new social contexts. It considers how Nowruz contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage, the strengthening of community networks, and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. By situating these local experiences within broader discussions of diaspora, cultural memory, and identity formation, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Nowruz as a living cultural practice that bridges homeland heritage and diasporic life.

Chapter II: Analysis Framework and Methodology

This chapter outlines the analytical framework and methodological approach of the study. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in cultural studies, diaspora theory, and intangible cultural heritage, the framework situates Nowruz as a dynamic site of identity formation, cultural memory, and community-making. Building on these theoretical perspectives, the chapter then presents a qualitative research design that combines interviews, surveys, participant observation, and reflective analysis to examine how Nowruz is practiced, experienced, and reinterpreted within the multicultural context of King County.

2.1 Analysis Framework

Scholarly research on Nowruz spans multiple disciplines, including history, anthropology, and cultural studies. Much of this literature focuses on the historical origins of the festival, its symbolic meanings, and its role within national cultures in the Nowruz region. These studies highlight Nowruz as an ancient seasonal celebration rooted in pre-Islamic Persian civilization and closely connected to the spring equinox, renewal of nature, and cyclical understandings of time.

While this body of scholarship has significantly deepened understanding of the cultural and historical foundations of Nowruz, relatively little attention has been given to how the festival functions within diaspora communities. The migration of people from the Nowruz region to Western countries has created new social contexts in which traditions must be adapted, negotiated, and reinterpreted. Examining Nowruz in diaspora therefore requires engagement with broader theoretical discussions on cultural identity, diaspora, memory, and ritual practices.

One influential framework comes from Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed or essential characteristic but rather a process that is continuously produced through historical experience, memory, and representation. For communities living in diaspora, identity is shaped through ongoing negotiation between past and present, homeland and host society. Cultural traditions such as

Nowruz provide important spaces where this negotiation takes place. Through ritual practices, storytelling, and symbolic objects, individuals reconnect with collective memories while adapting cultural expressions to new social environments. Nowruz functions as what cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as a site of identity production: a moment where cultural memory and lived experience meet, shaping meaning for individuals and groups.

Diaspora studies highlight how identities are reshaped when individuals live outside their countries of origin. Migration often creates a space in which people must navigate multiple cultural influences simultaneously. In this context, traditions become important tools for maintaining continuity with cultural heritage while adapting to new social environments. Celebrating Nowruz allows immigrant communities to maintain a sense of cultural rootedness while negotiating the realities of life in a multicultural society. The festival becomes both a reminder of homeland traditions and a means of constructing hybrid identities that combine elements of multiple cultural worlds.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (1983). Anderson argues that communities are socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and practices that allow individuals to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective (Anderson, 1983). In diaspora contexts, cultural celebrations often function as mechanisms through which dispersed populations recreate a sense of belonging that transcends geographic boundaries. Nowruz celebrations among immigrant communities can therefore be understood as moments where individuals reaffirm shared cultural ties and reimagine community across national and territorial divides.

Building on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, this research considers how cultural rituals help sustain collective identities beyond national borders. Diaspora communities are often geographically dispersed and culturally diverse, yet shared traditions allow individuals to imagine themselves as part of a broader cultural community. Nowruz celebrations in diaspora create spaces where individuals from different national backgrounds can gather under a shared cultural tradition. In doing so, the festival fosters a sense of belonging that transcends political boundaries.

Scholars of diaspora and migration studies also emphasize the importance of ritual practices in sustaining cultural identity across borders. Rituals serve as vehicles of cultural memory, enabling communities to transmit traditions, values, and historical narratives across generations. Celebrations such as Nowruz provide opportunities for diaspora communities to maintain connections with their cultural heritage while also adapting traditions to the social realities of life in new environments. Through gatherings, symbolic rituals, and communal events, cultural memory is preserved and reinterpreted within the context of migration.

The study also draws on the concept of intangible cultural heritage, as defined by UNESCO. Intangible heritage includes practices, rituals, and traditions that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity. Unlike physical monuments or artifacts, intangible heritage exists through the continued participation of communities who sustain and transmit these practices over time. Nowruz, recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, exemplifies this idea. Its survival across centuries and across continents demonstrates how cultural traditions remain alive through collective practice and adaptation.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding Nowruz not simply as a seasonal celebration but as a dynamic cultural system through which memory, identity, and community are continually produced and renewed. This research builds on these scholarly discussions by examining how Nowruz functions within the specific diasporic context of King County, Washington.

2.2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the meanings, practices, and experiences associated with Nowruz celebrations in King County. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for examining cultural traditions and community practices because they allow researchers to capture the perspectives, narratives, and lived experiences of participants.

To establish a solid foundation for this study, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. A wide range of sources—including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, encyclopedia entries, and research reports—were systematically examined. These sources informed the conceptual framework of the study and have been incorporated as references throughout the research, with full citations provided at the end.

The primary data for this study are gathered through different data collection techniques in order to reach various participants. It relies on several complementary methods:

2.2.1 Semi-structured interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with six cultural scholars, community leaders, and organizers involved in Nowruz celebrations in King County, Washington. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share personal experiences and reflections while also addressing key research themes related to cultural identity, community engagement, and the evolving meaning of Nowruz in King County. These key informants were identified through snowball sampling, leveraging the researcher's established networks with community leaders. Data were collected using a structured interview protocol and conducted through semi-structured interviews.

These six key informants come from three different countries and have been living here for periods ranging from ten to fifty years.

2.2.2 Online survey:

An online survey comprising ten questions was shared to community members participating in Nowruz celebrations through community leaders and organizations, employing a random sampling approach. The survey collected responses regarding the personal meaning of Nowruz, changes in celebration after migration, and the role of the festival in fostering belonging and cultural continuity. Thirteen participants completed our survey and shared their insights. The researcher utilized an online questionnaire to collect data for this study.

2.2.3 Participant observation:

The researcher attended and observed Nowruz celebrations and cultural events in King County, including public festivals and community gatherings for many years. Since 2023, the researcher has consistently gathered relevant data, images, videos and has actively archived the information intending to thoroughly investigate it. Years of participation and involvement in seven Nowruz celebrations organized by diverse communities from different cultural and national backgrounds have significantly informed this study. Participant observation allowed for firsthand documentation of rituals, interactions, and cultural expressions associated with the celebrations. The researcher utilized journaling to document observations throughout the research process.

2.2.4 Autoethnographic reflection:

Given the researcher's own cultural background and personal experience with Nowruz, the study also incorporates elements of autoethnography. This approach recognizes the researcher's positionality as part of the analytical process while maintaining critical reflection and methodological transparency.

2.3 Participants

Participants included scholars, community leaders, and organizers involved in Nowruz celebrations in King County, as well as members of the broader immigrant community who regularly participate in these events. Interviewees represented diverse cultural backgrounds connected to the broader Nowruz region, including Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

Through these methods, the study seeks to capture a rich and nuanced understanding of how Nowruz is celebrated, interpreted, and transmitted within diaspora communities in King County. By combining interviews, surveys, observation, and reflective analysis, the

research provides insight into both the collective and personal meanings of the festival within the multicultural context of King County.

The researcher employed manual thematic analysis to code and analyze the data, given the relatively small size of the dataset. Rather than summarizing interviews individually, the study synthesizes participants' voices into interconnected themes. Across diverse national backgrounds—Iranian, Afghanistani, Uzbek, and Kurds—Nowruz emerges not simply as a seasonal ritual but as a dynamic site of identity production, cultural diplomacy, and intergenerational negotiation in the diaspora.



Haft-Seen table at the Nowruz event in Seattle City Hall, featuring performers and organizers from SISCA and HCWA. Photo by Solmaz Dadgary. 2024

Chapter III: Findings and Analysis

Migration reshapes cultural traditions by placing them within new social and institutional contexts, where they are actively reconstructed. In diaspora settings, practices such as Nowruz are sustained through collective efforts. In King County, Washington, Nowruz provides a compelling example of how an ancient seasonal celebration is preserved and reinterpreted within a multicultural urban landscape.

As immigrant communities from Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and other regions have grown in King County, Nowruz has evolved from private, family-centered gatherings into increasingly visible public and civic events. This transformation has been driven by community organizations, cultural leaders, and public institutions, expanding the holiday's role beyond celebration to include cultural preservation, education, and intercultural engagement.

This chapter examines how Nowruz is organized and experienced in diaspora, identifying key themes such as renewal, identity reconstruction, and community belonging. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of cultural memory and diaspora identity, the findings show that Nowruz is not simply preserved but actively reconstructed—functioning as both a cultural anchor for immigrant communities and a dynamic platform for connection within a diverse society.

3.1 Nowruz Organizers in King County

The celebration of Nowruz in King County has evolved from intimate, home-based gatherings into widely recognized public and civic events. This transformation has been driven largely by the efforts of community organizations, cultural leaders, and public officials who have expanded the scope and visibility of the holiday. The following findings highlight the key actors involved in organizing Nowruz celebrations and examine how their activities contribute to cultural preservation, community cohesion, and intercultural engagement across the region.

As noted by Shahrzad Shams, president of the Peyvand Organization, and Sarvar Abdukarimov, Co-Vice President of the Seattle–Tashkent Sister City Association (STSCA), Nowruz celebrations in the Seattle area during the 1990s were primarily held in private homes and small community settings. Families marked the occasion by preparing traditional foods, arranging symbolic *Haft-Seen* tables, and gathering with relatives and friends. Over time, these practices expanded into public spaces, reflecting a broader shift toward community-based and institutionally supported celebrations.

Several organizations have played a central role in this transition. The Seattle–Isfahan Sister City Advocacy (SISCA) has emerged as one of the most prominent organizers of large-scale public Nowruz events. Held at Seattle City Hall, these celebrations attract thousands of participants and feature cultural performances, art exhibitions, traditional cuisine, and educational presentations. According to SISCA president Cathia Geller, these events are designed not only to celebrate Nowruz but also to foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Similarly, the Seattle–Tashkent Sister City Association (STSCA) has contributed significantly to the visibility of Nowruz through its annual Navruz celebrations. These events emphasize Central Asian cultural traditions, including music, dance, and cuisine, and have grown from modest gatherings into well-attended public programs. STSCA’s work reflects a broader effort to preserve cultural heritage while introducing it to diverse audiences in the United States.

The Peyvand Non-profit Organization has focused on educational and community-based approaches to Nowruz celebration. Through partnerships with libraries and educational institutions, Peyvand has organized cultural installations, storytelling programs, and interactive activities such as egg painting across King County. These initiatives aim to increase public awareness of Nowruz and provide accessible educational resources, particularly for younger generations. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Peyvand also hosted large-scale Nowruz celebrations at the University of Washington.

Other community-based organizations, including the Hazara Community of Washington, have played an important role in sustaining Nowruz traditions among Afghanistani diaspora communities. Their events often feature live music, dance, traditional fashion shows, and communal gatherings that reinforce cultural identity and social cohesion. For many participants, these celebrations serve as a vital link to cultural heritage and a platform for community building.

Public leadership has also contributed to the institutional recognition of Nowruz. Darya Farivar, an Iranian American politician and State Representative in the Washington State House of Representatives (46th Legislative District), has actively promoted Nowruz

through legislative and community initiatives. She introduces an annual resolution recognizing Nowruz and organizes celebrations at the State Capitol, thereby enhancing the holiday's visibility and affirming its cultural significance within the broader public sphere.

More recently, The Kurdish Association of Washington (KAWA) has expanded Nowruz (Newroz) celebrations in the region, enriching its cultural diversity. Their events unite Kurdish and broader communities through music, dance, food, and shared traditions, promoting cultural pride and intergenerational connection. Despite limited resources, these celebrations reflect strong collective effort, sustaining and reconstructing cultural identity in diaspora.

In addition, organizations such as the Alefba Group, Kabul–Washington Bridge, Cultural Supporting Iranian Club, and Kabul–Seattle Community Services have helped expand the presence of Nowruz celebrations in King County through their events. Through cultural programming that includes music, dance, traditional cuisine, and the display of the *Haft-Seen* table, these groups create inclusive spaces for celebration, cultural exchange, and the preservation of shared traditions among diverse diaspora communities.

Overall, the expansion of Nowruz celebrations in King County reflects a dynamic interplay between community initiative and institutional support. The efforts of diverse organizations and leaders have transformed Nowruz into a prominent public and cultural event that not only preserves heritage but also fosters intercultural dialogue and civic recognition. These findings demonstrate how diaspora communities actively shape cultural practices in new contexts, using celebration as a means of strengthening identity, building community, and engaging with the broader society.

3.2 Thematic Findings: Nowruz as Renewal, Resistance, and Reconstruction

The thematic findings presented in this section emerge from a qualitative analysis of participant narratives, guided by key theoretical frameworks including cultural memory, diaspora identity formation, imagined communities, and intangible cultural heritage. Rather than treating Nowruz as a fixed tradition, this analysis approaches it as a dynamic and evolving practice shaped by migration, adaptation, and social context. Across interviews and observations, recurring patterns reveal how Nowruz operates simultaneously as a cultural, emotional, and social phenomenon within the diaspora experience in King County.

Five interrelated themes highlight the multifaceted meanings of Nowruz: its role in public visibility and cultural diplomacy, its function as a moment of renewal, its significance in identity reconstruction, its contribution to community-building, and the constraints and adaptations shaping its practice. Together, these themes demonstrate that Nowruz is not only

a celebration of seasonal change but also a site of resilience, belonging, and cultural continuity. The findings illustrate how diaspora communities actively reinterpret and sustain tradition, transforming Nowruz into a powerful lens through which broader processes of migration, memory, and identity can be understood.

3.2.1 Public Visibility and Cultural Diplomacy

A striking theme across leadership interviews (Cathia Geller, Shahrzad Shams, Sarvar Abdugarimov) is the deliberate movement of Nowruz from private homes into public civic institutions.

Celebrations at Seattle City Hall, library installations, and legislative recognition represent more than festive expansion—they constitute cultural diplomacy. Cathia Geller, president of Seattle-Isfahan Sister City Advocacy (SISCA) described organizing Nowruz at City Hall during the first Trump-era Muslim ban as a way to “lower the temperature” between Iran and the U.S. What began as uncertainty drew over 1500 attendees, signaling public hunger for intercultural exchange.

Sarvar Abdugarimov, Co-Vice President of the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association (STSCA) framed STSCA’s work explicitly as citizen diplomacy: transforming political distance between Seattle and Tashkent into cultural connection. Public Nowruz events humanize geopolitical “others.” Food, music, and dance become tools of narrative reframing.

Shahrzad Shams explained that after the COVID-19 pandemic halted in-person celebrations, Peyvand organization adjusted its strategy. Instead of focusing primarily on community gatherings, the organization began prioritizing public education and cultural outreach. Peyvand developed Nowruz installations for libraries across King County, organized storytelling and egg-painting events, and initiated plans to introduce Nowruz into school curricula through educational kits.

This aligns directly with UNESCO’s framing of Nowruz as intangible heritage promoting peace and solidarity. In King County, that global discourse becomes localized practice. Public art exhibitions accompany celebrations. Nowruz becomes not only cultural tradition but civic contribution.

Participants consistently described positive reactions from non-Nowruz-celebrating communities, who expressed appreciation for the food, music, and festive atmosphere. These interactions created opportunities to share the cultural and symbolic meanings of Nowruz, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Expressions of curiosity, appreciation, and invitations to repeat such events demonstrate how increased visibility contributes to cultural recognition.

3.2.2 Nowruz as Renewal and Emotional Reset

Across interviews, participants consistently described Nowruz as a moment of renewal—not only seasonal, but emotional and existential. The language of “fresh beginning,” “hope,” “rebirth,” and “leaving sadness behind” appeared repeatedly.

Dr. Hasan Javid, former president of Hazara Community of Washington framed Nowruz as the awakening of nature after survival: winter is when nature “enters survival mode,” and Nowruz marks rejuvenation. Similarly, Reza Sakhi described it as an “emotional reset,” a chance to reflect, release difficulty, and begin again with intention. Qodrat Alami called it the “anniversary of nature’s rebirth.”

This articulation aligns with the cosmological symbolism discussed earlier, framing Nowruz as a moment of cyclical time and moral renewal. Participants did not simply repeat inherited definitions—they embodied them in lived experience. For Hazrat Askarzada, Nowruz signifies resilience after collective hardship, particularly for the Hazara community, which has historically endured persecution. Here, renewal becomes not an abstract metaphor but a narrative of survival in a new homeland. Similarly, Mahsum Kavut, an active member of the Kurdish Association of Washington (KAWA), described Nowruz as a symbol of resistance, rebirth, and continued existence. “For Kurds, it carries both seasonal and political meaning, marking the transition from hardship to renewal.”

Notably, renewal in diaspora often carries intensified emotional meaning. Several participants described immigration as marked by loss—distance from extended family, homeland landscapes, and communal atmospheres. In this context, Nowruz becomes a structured emotional intervention against isolation. Javid explicitly stated that celebrating Nowruz counters “the sense of loss and isolation” that accompanies migration.

3.2.3 Nowruz as Cultural Anchor and Identity Reconstruction

Another major theme centers on identity preservation and reconstruction in diaspora. Nearly every participant emphasized that Nowruz strengthens cultural identity. Farzad described it as “my most important holiday,” connecting him to childhood memory and civilizational history. Reza Sakhi explained that in the U.S., celebration has become more intentional precisely because traditions must now be consciously preserved. It also helps younger generations explore their cultural roots.

This intentionality marks a key transformation in the diaspora. In Iran, Afghanistan, or Uzbekistan, Nowruz saturates public space; it is ambient and collective. In King County, it requires deliberate effort. Shahrzad Shams described the difference poignantly: “You don’t feel it in the air.” The absence of societal recognition produces what diaspora scholars call ritual compression—celebrations move indoors, become shorter, and require scheduling around work and school.

Mahsum Kavut emphasized that Nowruz is deeply intertwined with identity: “As a Kurd, cultural expression is not merely a choice but an essential part of existence. The ability to share one’s culture is fundamental to being recognized and understood. In this sense, Nowruz becomes a powerful means of asserting presence, preserving heritage, and resisting cultural erasure.”

Yet this compression intensifies symbolic labor. Parents teach children the meaning of *Haft-Seen*, explain *Tahvil-e-Saal*, organize *Eid-didani* gatherings, and connect via video calls with relatives abroad. The embodied, multisensory nature of these practices—the smell of *Sabzeh*, the taste of *Ajil*, the sound of music and poetry—makes them particularly memorable for children and youth, anchoring cultural identity across generational distance. Ritual becomes pedagogical.

Cathia Geller explained that she makes a deliberate effort to keep Nowruz and other elements of her cultural heritage alive for her bi-national daughter. Through family celebrations and cultural engagement, her daughter and many of her friends have become familiar with the traditions and meanings of Nowruz. In this way, the celebration extends beyond individual families and becomes part of the broader multicultural fabric of King County.

Shahzad Shams emphasized the contrast between celebrating Nowruz in Iran and in the United States. In Iran, the arrival of Nowruz permeates public life; in diaspora, celebrations often occur primarily within private homes. Outdoor festivities are limited, and because children typically have school the following day, families rarely remain awake for the exact moment of the spring equinox that marks the new year. As Shams recalled, there were many occasions when she found herself sitting alone at the *Haft-Seen* table—an experience she described as both joyful and sad.

Here Stuart Hall’s concept of identity as production rather than essence is particularly relevant. Identity in diaspora is not passively inherited; it is actively assembled. Nowruz becomes a site where immigrant parents curate memory and transmit it forward. It is, in Hall’s terms, a moment where “cultural memory and lived experience meet.”

3.2.4 Community-Making and Belonging

Beyond family identity, Nowruz functions as a social glue. Survey participants repeatedly emphasized gatherings, music, dance, and collective meals. Esmat Alimi noted that community celebrations have grown significantly over time. Sarvar Abdulkarimov described Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association’s event evolving from a small board gathering in 1998 to a festival of over 500 guests.

This growth demonstrates how diaspora rituals create what Benedict Anderson calls imagined communities—transnational bonds extending beyond territorial borders. In Seattle

City Hall celebrations, Afghanistani, Iranian, Uzbek, and Kurdish communities gather under a shared seasonal tradition. Ethnic distinctions do not disappear, but they become secondary to collective celebration of spring and shared heritage and culture.

Significantly, these gatherings also mitigate fragmentation carried from homelands. Participants referenced political suppression (Taliban bans, Soviet discouragement, clerical opposition) and ideological disputes over whether Nowruz is “religious” or “national.” Among immigrants, however, the shared act of celebration often supersedes political fracture.

Nowruz thus produces what might be termed diasporic solidarity: a recognition of shared heritage despite divergent national histories.

3.2.5 Constraints, Adaptations, and the Politics of Celebration

Despite its vibrancy, Nowruz in the diaspora is shaped by a range of challenges and constraints. As Mahsum Kavut noted, even in the United States, some Kurdish individuals remain hesitant to attend Nowruz celebrations due to concerns about potential political repercussions in their countries of origin—particularly Turkey—including the possibility that public participation could affect their future.

Unlike in many countries of origin, it is not recognized as an official holiday, which means that work and school schedules often limit the time available for rituals and celebrations. Certain traditional practices, such as outdoor fire rituals, may also be restricted due to safety regulations. In addition, the absence of extended family networks reshapes the social dynamics and emotional experience of the holiday. Furthermore, in some communities, fundamentalist critiques of Nowruz continue to persist even in diaspora contexts, influencing how and whether the celebration is observed.

In addition, the seasonal symbolism of Nowruz does not translate everywhere. In the Southern Hemisphere, March 21 does not mark the beginning of spring but the start of autumn. Similarly, in countries that do not experience four distinct seasons or a pronounced spring, the seasonal atmosphere traditionally associated with Nowruz can be difficult to fully experience.

One major challenge is the lack of official recognition as a public holiday in the United States. In many countries where Nowruz originated, the holiday is nationally recognized and celebrated across society. In contrast, immigrant communities in the United States must often celebrate while continuing their normal work and school routines. As several participants noted, this can limit the ability to observe traditional practices that historically unfolded over several days.

Shahzad Shams and Reza Pedram recounted moments of being alone at home when other members of family had work and school obligations. These constraints generate adaptation. Zoom celebrations during COVID, library installations, school kits, and hybrid

public-private models illustrate resilience through modification. Traditions persist not through rigid preservation but through processes of adaptation, evolution, and reinvention within new cultural and social contexts.

Sarvar noted that one of the challenges of celebrating Nowruz here is preparing *sumalak*, a traditional Nowruz dish, at home due to the complexity and labor-intensive nature of its preparation. He recalled that one of his favorite childhood memories is the communal cooking of *sumalak*. This sweet paste, made from germinated wheat sprouts, is traditionally prepared by entire neighborhoods (*mahallas*) in a large cast-iron pot (*kazan*), where women and girls stir the mixture continuously for 12 to 24 hours. He also remembered that, as a child, he was sometimes allowed to place small stones or walnuts at the bottom of the pot to prevent the mixture from burning; discovering one in a bowl of *sumalak* is considered a sign of good luck.

Another challenge involves assimilation pressures and generational distance. Younger generations growing up in diaspora environments may feel less connected to traditions that originated in distant cultural contexts. Parents and community leaders therefore often make deliberate efforts to teach children about the meaning and symbolism of Nowruz through storytelling, cultural education, and participation in community events.

Participants also noted the presence of political and ideological divisions within diaspora communities, which can sometimes complicate collective celebrations. Historical conflicts and political tensions from countries of origin may occasionally shape how communities organize events or collaborate with different organizations.

Interestingly, diaspora also democratizes Nowruz. Javid emphasized its openness—no membership, no religious requirement. In pluralistic King County, this universal framing allows Nowruz to function as ecological celebration rather than sectarian ritual.

3.3 Cross-Cutting Subthemes

Across participants' narratives, several cross-cutting subthemes emerge that deepen the understanding of Nowruz in diaspora contexts. A strong sense of nostalgia and absence is evident, as many participants express longing for the atmosphere of their homelands—recalling flowers in markets, music in the streets, and extended public festivities. This nostalgia often coexists with pride, creating a distinctly bittersweet emotional tone described as both “joyful and sad.”

Intergenerational negotiation also plays a significant role in shaping how Nowruz is experienced and transmitted. Younger generations may initially resist practices that mark them as different, often seeking to “fit in” within their social environments. However, adults frequently anticipate that this distance is temporary. As observed by Shahrzad, some

university students later express regret for not learning Persian or engaging more deeply with their cultural heritage. In this sense, Nowruz can be understood as a form of deferred inheritance—one that is more fully appreciated and reclaimed in adulthood.

Finally, participants consistently emphasize the secular and universal nature of Nowruz, often asserting that it “has nothing to do with religion.” This framing reflects both a response to past experiences of cultural or political suppression and a strategic effort to position Nowruz within multicultural contexts. By presenting the holiday as a celebration of nature, renewal, and shared human values—as highlighted by Reza Pedram—communities foster broader inclusion and facilitate acceptance across diverse cultural and social groups.

3.4 Synthesis: Nowruz as Portable Homeland

Across all interviews, Nowruz emerges as what may be understood as a portable homeland—a ritualized reconstruction of belonging within contexts of displacement. It condenses multiple dimensions of collective life, including memories of landscape, kinship networks, historical continuity, moral renewal, and forms of civic participation. Through these layered meanings, Nowruz becomes more than a seasonal celebration; it serves as a symbolic and social anchor that reconstitutes a sense of home in diasporic space.

In King County, Nowruz is neither a direct replication of homeland practices nor a detached cultural artifact. Rather, it is hybrid, intentional, and adaptive, shaped by the conditions of migration and the opportunities of a multicultural environment. As such, it functions as both a mechanism for preserving cultural identity and a means of contributing to broader public life. The celebration simultaneously anchors immigrant identities and fosters intercultural engagement, positioning Nowruz as a dynamic and socially productive practice.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with several key frameworks. They reflect Stuart Hall’s understanding of identity as an ongoing process of production, Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities that extend across national borders, and UNESCO’s conceptualization of intangible cultural heritage as a living and evolving practice. Additionally, they support diaspora theory’s emphasis on ritual as a form of resilience, highlighting how cultural traditions are actively reinterpreted and sustained in migration.

Importantly, the findings suggest that Nowruz in the diaspora is not merely an act of cultural preservation but a process of identity reconstruction. The interviews demonstrate that Nowruz operates simultaneously across emotional, familial, communal, and civic dimensions. It counters social isolation, facilitates the transmission of cultural memory, bridges diverse communities, and enables the negotiation of complex political and historical narratives, all while adapting to structural constraints in the host society.

Rather than diminishing in diaspora, Nowruz appears to deepen in meaning and significance. Its portability sustains cultural continuity across distance, its universality fosters intercultural dialogue, and its adaptability ensures its enduring relevance over time. If, in one's homeland, Nowruz marked the melting of snow and the reopening of roads, in King County it dissolves distance—between generations, between communities, and between past and present, homeland and new home.

3.5 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Nowruz celebrations in King County extend far beyond seasonal festivity; they function as complex cultural practices through which immigrant communities sustain collective memory, reconstruct traditions in new environments, and cultivate a sense of belonging across national boundaries. Interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of cultural memory, diaspora identity formation, imagined communities, and intangible cultural heritage, these findings provide deeper insight into the role of Nowruz within diasporic contexts.

First, Nowruz in the diaspora operates as a powerful vehicle of cultural memory. Cultural memory encompasses the ways in which communities preserve and transmit shared knowledge, histories, and values across generations. Participants frequently described Nowruz as a meaningful connection to childhood experiences, family traditions, and memories of their homelands. Through rituals such as preparing the *Haft-Seen* table, cooking traditional foods, and participating in communal gatherings, individuals actively reproduce cultural narratives that bridge past and present. Even as the physical settings of celebration shift—from villages and cities in countries of origin to apartments and community centers in Seattle—the symbolic significance of the festival remains deeply rooted in memories of home. In this sense, Nowruz functions as a living archive, sustained through embodied practices rather than written records.

Second, the findings highlight the process of ritual reconstruction within diaspora contexts. Migration often disrupts the social environments in which cultural traditions were originally practiced, requiring communities to reinterpret and reestablish these traditions in new settings. Participants described how Nowruz celebrations have been adapted to fit the structural realities of life in the United States. Extended celebrations that once spanned several days or weeks are often condensed into shorter, weekend-based gatherings due to work and school commitments. Public and semi-public spaces—such as libraries, universities, city halls, parks, and performance venues—have become central sites for collective celebration. Cultural organizations and volunteers play a critical role in coordinating these efforts, ensuring continuity while accommodating change. These

adaptations underscore the dynamic nature of cultural traditions: rather than diminishing through migration, rituals evolve and are actively reconstructed through community engagement.

Third, Nowruz serves as a key mechanism for fostering transnational belonging. Diaspora communities maintain connections that extend across multiple countries and cultural contexts, and the celebration of Nowruz provides an opportunity to reaffirm these ties. Participants emphasized that Nowruz transcends national and ethnic boundaries, bringing together individuals from Afghanistani, Iranian, Uzbek, Tajik, Kurdish, and other backgrounds. Through shared celebrations, participants experience a sense of belonging that surpasses national identities and connects them to a broader cultural world spanning Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. In this way, Nowruz contributes to the formation of what Benedict Anderson conceptualizes as “imagined communities,” in which collective identities are shaped through shared cultural practices rather than geographic proximity.

Finally, the study highlights the growing role of Nowruz as a form of civic cultural participation. As celebrations increasingly move from private homes into public institutions—such as libraries, schools, and city halls—they become integrated into the broader cultural life of the region. These public events create opportunities for immigrant communities to share their cultural heritage while engaging with local institutions and diverse audiences. Through exhibitions, performances, and educational programs, Nowruz celebrations enhance the visibility of diaspora communities and foster meaningful intercultural dialogue. In this sense, the festival operates not only as a cultural tradition but also as a form of civic engagement that strengthens relationships between immigrant communities and the wider society.

Moreover, public Nowruz celebrations play a significant role in promoting cultural diversity and social inclusion. In multicultural settings, such events function as platforms for dialogue and mutual understanding. Publicly organized celebrations—held in venues such as city halls, libraries, community centers, and parks—provide accessible entry points for individuals unfamiliar with Nowruz to engage with its cultural significance. Music, art, storytelling, and culinary traditions serve as powerful mediums through which cultural knowledge is shared, fostering curiosity and cross-cultural appreciation.

These celebrations also contribute to cultural literacy by integrating the histories and traditions of immigrant communities into public educational spaces. Programs developed by cultural organizations—including school initiatives, library installations, and community presentations—enable students and families to explore the meanings and symbolism of Nowruz. At the same time, such events strengthen internal community cohesion. In the

absence of extended family networks, public celebrations become vital spaces where diaspora members reconnect, sustain social bonds, and form new relationships.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how Nowruz operates as a multifaceted cultural practice that supports both internal community resilience and broader social integration. By creating shared spaces of celebration, dialogue, and recognition, Nowruz contributes meaningfully to multicultural engagement and the ongoing negotiation of identity in King County.



Nowruz celebration by the Hazara Community of Washington. Photo by Yari. 2025

Chapter IV: Conclusion

This research set out to examine how Nowruz, one of humanity's oldest continuous celebrations, is practiced, experienced, and reinterpreted among immigrant communities in King County, Washington. Through qualitative methods — including interviews with community leaders, scholars, and organizers, survey responses from community members, and observations of public celebrations — the research documents the evolving meaning of Nowruz in a multicultural diasporic setting. The findings demonstrate that Nowruz functions not merely as a seasonal festival marking the arrival of spring, but as a multifaceted cultural practice that sustains collective memory, strengthens community bonds, and connects individuals to a broader transnational heritage.

Five themes defined this process in King County. Nowruz functions as a vehicle of emotional and existential renewal, offering immigrants a structured moment to release the accumulated weight of migration and begin again with intention. It operates as a cultural anchor and site of identity reconstruction, allowing individuals and families to maintain continuity with their heritage while navigating the demands of a new society. It generates community belonging across national and ethnic lines. It has evolved into a form of cultural diplomacy, moving from private homes into libraries, legislative chambers, and city halls, where it humanizes immigrant communities and fosters intercultural understanding. And it endures despite real structural constraints — the absence of official holiday recognition, compressed celebration schedules, generational distance, and the loss of the extended social networks that once made traditions feel effortless.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Nowruz in the diaspora is not a diminished version of a homeland tradition, but an intensified one. In the absence of the ambient cultural context that sustains it in countries of origin, the celebration becomes more intentional, more symbolic, more layered, and more consciously valued—gaining deeper social significance. It counters isolation, transmits cultural knowledge across generations, bridges communities with different national histories, and contributes to the multicultural public life of the region. In this sense, Nowruz is not merely preserved in King County — it is actively reconstructed

as a portable homeland, a ritualized space of belonging carried across borders and recreated through collective effort.

These findings carry broader implications for diaspora studies, cultural anthropology, and migration research. Cultural traditions are too often treated as static inheritances, vulnerable to erosion through migration and assimilation. This study demonstrates the opposite: that rituals like Nowruz are dynamic social processes, shaped and renewed by the very conditions of displacement that might seem to threaten them. Festivals serve not only as symbolic markers of heritage but as practical mechanisms through which communities maintain social networks, transmit cultural knowledge, and negotiate their place within multicultural societies. The enduring significance of Nowruz lies in its universal message — the renewal of life, the possibility of new beginnings, and the hope that accompanies the arrival of spring — a message that resonates with particular force among those who have journeyed far from home.

4.1 Recommendations for King County Institutions

The findings of this study offer several practical recommendations for cultural organizations, public institutions, and local government in King County and beyond.

Cultural organizations sustaining Nowruz celebrations should be recognized not only as community service providers but as civic infrastructure. Their work — largely volunteer-driven and operating on modest resources — produces measurable social goods: reduced isolation, intergenerational connection, intercultural dialogue, and public education. Sustained funding, access to public venues, and institutional partnerships with libraries, schools, and universities would significantly expand both their reach and their impact. The model already developing in King County, where organizations like SISCA, STSCA, HCWA, and Peyvand have built relationships with civic institutions, deserves intentional support and replication.

Local and state government should consider keeping formal recognition of Nowruz through annual proclamations, legislative resolutions, and the inclusion of the festival in multicultural civic calendars. Darya Farivar's annual Nowruz resolution in the Washington State Legislature offers a replicable model. Such recognition carries symbolic weight that communities notice and value. It signals that their presence is not merely tolerated but genuinely acknowledged.

Educational institutions at all levels have an opportunity to integrate Nowruz into multicultural curricula. Peyvand's development of educational kits for King County libraries points toward a scalable model. Introducing students to Nowruz — its history, its regional diversity, its scientific basis in the vernal equinox — builds cultural literacy and prepares

younger generations for life in an increasingly diverse society, while also creating meaningful points of connection for students from Nowruz-celebrating families.

Finally, community organizations themselves would benefit from investing in documentation and intergenerational programming. The oral histories, archival photographs, and lived memories that participants in this study so generously shared are not guaranteed to survive without deliberate effort. Digital archives, youth mentorship programs, and bilingual cultural education initiatives would help ensure that the traditions being reconstructed in King County today are available to the generations who will inherit them.

4.2 Future Research Directions

This study is, by design, a beginning. Its qualitative scope and focus on King County open several pathways for future inquiry. Future research could extend this inquiry in several productive directions. Comparative studies of Nowruz celebrations across diaspora communities in western countries and American cities would offer valuable insight into how local conditions—such as climate, demographic composition, institutional resources, and community size—shape processes of cultural adaptation. This would illuminate whether the patterns identified here are specific to King County's civic culture or characteristic of Nowruz in the diaspora more broadly.

Climate, in particular, represents a significant yet understudied factor. In many Western cities, Nowruz celebrations are commonly held outdoors, reflecting the holiday's deep association with nature and the arrival of spring. Communities often gather in public parks, organize cultural festivals and parades, and visit nearby natural landscapes such as hills, mountains, or green spaces to mark the new season. In contrast, Seattle's typically cool and rainy early-spring weather necessitates a different approach, with most Nowruz celebrations taking place indoors in community centers, cultural venues, and event halls. This contrast highlights how environmental conditions influence not only the form but also the spatial experience of cultural traditions in diaspora contexts.

Research focused on second-generation immigrants would offer deeper insight into how younger generations born outside the Nowruz region reinterpret and relate to these traditions. Scholars might also examine the growing role of digital technologies and social media in transmitting cultural practices across global diaspora networks, a dimension that has become increasingly significant in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.



Annex I: Cultural and Linguistic Terms

The following terms relate to Nowruz traditions, rituals, foods, and cultural practices across the regions discussed in the research. Many are Persian and Uzbek in origin and may be unfamiliar to non-specialist readers.

Vernal equinox: the astronomical moment when the Sun crosses the celestial equator, resulting in nearly equal day and night lengths. This typically falls on March 20 or 21 and marks the beginning of spring (Nowruz) in the Northern Hemisphere.

Haft-Seen: a ceremonial table arrangement central to Iranian Nowruz tradition. It features seven symbolic items whose names begin with the Persian letter “S” (seen), each representing a value or wish: *Sabzeh* (sprouts/rebirth), *Samanu* (wheat pudding/prosperity), *Senjed* (dried lotus/love), *Serkeh* (vinegar/patience), *Seeb* (apple/health), *Sir* (garlic/medicine), and *Somaq* (sumac/sunrise).

Haft Mewa: a popular Nowruz tradition in Afghanistan, featuring a dish of seven dried fruits and nuts (such as raisins, pistachios, walnuts, almonds, dried apricots, dried plums, and senjed) soaked in water, symbolizing renewal and abundance.

Khaneh-tekani: literally “shaking the house” in Persian; a ritual deep-cleaning of the home performed before Nowruz as an act of purification and preparation for the new year.

Sizdah Bedar: literally “getting rid of thirteen”; the outdoor celebration held on the 13th day of the Persian new year. Families spend the day in nature and traditionally release *Sabzeh* (sprouts) into flowing water to cast away bad luck.

Tahvil-e-Saal: the precise astronomical moment of the new year — the exact second of the vernal equinox. Celebrant families traditionally gather at the *Haft-Seen* table at this moment to welcome the new year.

Eid-didani: the practice of visiting family and friends during the Nowruz holiday period to exchange greetings and gifts. Comparable in function to holiday social visits in other cultural traditions.

Sabzeh: sprouts grown from wheat, lentil, or barley seeds in the weeks before Nowruz. A component of the *Haft-Seen* table, *Sabzeh* symbolizes rebirth and the renewal of nature. On *Sizdah Bedar* it is released into water.

Ajil: a traditional Persian mix of dried fruits, nuts, and seeds (such as raisins, figs, pistachios, and walnuts) consumed during Nowruz celebrations as a symbol of abundance and good fortune.

Sumalak: a sweet paste made from germinated wheat sprouts, flour, and oil. A traditional Nowruz food in Central Asia (particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), typically prepared communally over 12–24 hours in a large cast-iron pot called a *kazan*.

Kazan: a large cast-iron cauldron used in Central Asian cooking, traditionally used to prepare *sumalak* during Nowruz in communal neighborhood settings.

Mahallas: traditional neighborhood or community units in Central Asian societies. During Nowruz, mahallas historically organized communal cooking of *sumalak* and other shared celebrations.

Jahenda Bala: a sacred banner-raising ceremony held at the Shrine of Hazrat Ali (Blue Mosque) in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, marking the beginning of Nowruz. The raising of the banner symbolizes unity, renewal, and the start of the new year.

Buzkashi: a traditional Central Asian sport in which horse-mounted players compete to carry a goat carcass across a goal line. Played during Nowruz and other major celebrations in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and neighboring countries.

Afghanistani: In this research, the term *Afghanistani* is used in place of *Afghan* to refer to nationals of Afghanistan. Historically, and within Afghanistan, *Afghan* has been used to denote a specific ethnic group, Pashtuns. To maintain nuance and avoid potential ambiguity or exclusion, the researcher adopts *Afghanistani*, a term commonly used in the Persian language, as a more inclusive and precise descriptor.

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