

Original Research Article

The Influence of Ritualistic Landscapes on Public Perceptions for Advancing Tourism

The Case of the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge and the Nousti Ceremony in Ardabil

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Abstract | Ritual Tourism is a fundamental concept in the field of tourism that can breathe life and meaning into a landscape. A ritualistic landscape can be defined as a fusion of continuous historical behaviors in a space that has, over time, forged a distinct identity for that location. One such ritualistic landscape is the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge in Ardabil, which serves as the venue for the NOUSTI ceremony. In this present study, with a special focus on this site, we delved into the roots of this ritual and explored the impact of the ritualistic landscape on people's perceptions and its utilization potential for the advancement of tourism.

This research aims to introduce the "NOUSTI" ritual alongside the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge in Ardabil and examine the roots of this ritual and the cultural landscape's influence on the mindset of the citizens.

To fulfill the goal of the study, we used library research, field observations, interviews with local residents, and discussions with informed experts in the field of NOUSTI ritual and the cultural landscape's impact on the bridge. The research findings were analyzed and examined using MaxQDA 2020 software.

The results indicate that the NOUSTI ritual at the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge in Ardabil has its roots in mythological beliefs, the sanctity of water, and the desires of ethnic communities stemming from social and climatic characteristics. Water, as a sacred element since ancient times, has been the primary source of life and the formation of societies for the Iranian people. Various rituals are held based on the connection with nature and the mastery of the four elements: water, fire, wind, and earth. The findings of this research can lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between culture, landscape, and the people's mindset in creating cultural tourism and collective behavior at this location, enhancing the sense of place among citizens. Furthermore, recognizing and developing these rituals can contribute to the development of cultural tourism and the elevation of the local identity of the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge.

Keywords | Culture, Tourism, Historical Bridges, Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge, Ardabil.

Introduction | The history and culture of a city are primarily showcased through its heritage, which serves as a means to attract tourists to the city (Zhang, Zhong & Yu, 2022). Cultural hubs, at times, gain special attention due to the presence of significant cultural phenomena and become attractive destinations for cultural tourism (Dadvarkhani,

2012). Planning for the revitalization and promotion of beliefs and traditions, alongside other tourist attractions, fosters cultural cohesion and compatibility among individuals. The most significant factors contributing to the development of cultural tourism are beliefs, traditions, and the rich cultural capital of any society, which distinguishes one city from another (Niknam, 2014). The use of local festivals as a tool

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for tourism development has become a global movement (Hosseinpour, Fahim-Davin, & AdialBaf Moghadam, 2014). Festivals are a form of cultural tourism activity that enriches visitors and enhances the content of destination tourism products (Getz, 2008). Cultural festivals, as a form of collective national memory, are held at specific times and host various activities that reflect cultural traditions (Lin & Zhu, 2017). These festivals highlight cultural heritage, encourage social cohesion, and provide a unique experience to visitors (Huang, 2017). Cultural festivals also serve as gateways for interaction between traditional and modern cultures, allowing visitors to revive and appreciate the destination's culture through festival celebrations (Choi, Imon & Couto, 2020). Indigenous people are fundamental assets for generating identity processes and valuing territories (Zhang et al., 2022). Local populations should be considered essential elements in the development of cultural tourism to make them feel recognized, engaged, and not subjected to tourist intrusion.

The rich culture of Iranian ethnic groups, including valuable cultural assets, can become one of the most influential factors in expanding tourism when acknowledged and introduced. The ancient customs of each ethnic group, such as their national spirit, unique music, customs, and beliefs, reflect the culture and specific beliefs of that region, emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional customs as cultural symbols in preserving urban identity and urban life's revival (Mansouri, Javadi, Mokhles & Rahmdel, 2018).

The sustainability of festivals and customs intertwined with the environment leads to the creation of constructive and long-term relationships between tourists and that particular event, potentially helping sustain a tradition over time (Zifkos, 2015). Cultural festivals are typically held in specific regions and times, serving as reminders of regional or national cultural identities and ancestral roots (Chen, 2018; Lin & Zhu, 2017). This article investigates a specific tradition that takes place on the last Thursday of the year alongside the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge in Ardabil. In this ceremony, the delivery of the new year begins with water, and people believe that wishes and intentions are fulfilled by jumping over water and absorbing its energy. The Nowruz ceremony symbolizes the birth and rejuvenation of waters, and many believe that on this day, their wishes and intentions are fulfilled (Mansouri et al., 2018). In addition to its historical significance, it plays a key role in organizing customs and strengthening urban identity and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the natural element that plays a crucial role in this ceremony is water, which holds a special place among Iranians and has maintained its credibility to this day (*ibid.*). Iranian water-related customs are intertwined with various forms such as mythical stories, heroes, and narratives associated with the preservation of pure water (*ibid.*). In this context, an investigation into the nature and potential of the cultural landscape of the Haft-Cheshmeh

Bridge in promoting tourism, rooted in the cultural and social roles of traditions, can introduce new dimensions to tourism development. The presence of natural elements like water and its connection to a historical ritual is highly influential in shaping people's perceptions and reviving the cultural values of society.

The perception of people about a place causes traditions and customs in that place to be strengthened and retained in collective memory. Another significant impact of traditional cultural festivals results from innovation in the form of economic development and increased international travel (Moriuchi & Basil, 2019). Cultural festivals have expanded beyond mere entertainment to become powerful tools for supporting national development and cultural revival (Suntikul, 2018). Increasingly, younger generations are embracing cultures different from their own, and the acceptance of traditional customs is on the decline (Farsani, Coelho & Costa, 2012). The goal of this research is to introduce the NOUSTI ceremony alongside the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge, understand the roots of this tradition, and examine the cultural landscape's impact on the perceptions of citizens and their collective memory, with the following questions in mind: 1. What are the origins of the NOUSTI ceremony? 2. What role does the cultural landscape of the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge play in creating collective memory and strengthening tourism?

Research Background

Cultural festivals should be organized with the aim of highlighting rituals, emphasizing the unique features of the region, and enhancing people's participatory experiences. Deep experiences contribute to a stronger sense of cultural identity related to rituals (Zou et al., 2021). Commercialization and tourism increase the influx of tourists, and considering the global impact of cultural heritage and traditions, it fosters the development of cultural festivals, which require further study (Wang, Chen, 2019). Utama and colleagues stressed the importance of creating social joy and dynamism in cultural tourism for people (Utama, Turker, Widayastuti, Suyasa & Waruwu, 2020). Salehzadeh, in the context of Iranian ritualistic tourism, emphasized the role of behaviors formed in society as a form of participatory behavior passed down to future generations, such as rituals, customs, and religious practices acting as symbols of identity (Salehzadeh, 2014). Sakuti's research on the "Aliabad Historical Ritual Ceremony" demonstrated that rituals, historical roots, and mythical elements provide strong evidence that people in a region shape culture based on their native interests and represent patterns and accepted values through symbolic representations (Sokouti Aliabadi, 2016). Alehashemi, in a study on the "Linking Traditional Water Infrastructure and Neighborhood System in Iranian Cities," explained that the sanctity, location,

and active structures of religious and ritualistic elements in Iranian society are typically situated in the heart of nature and alongside water, making them revered and sacred to the people (Alehashemi, 2020). Khoramrouyi and colleagues, in their research on the “Role of Water Rituals in Shaping the Urban Landscape of Semnan and Damghan,” highlighted the significant impact of water rituals on shaping the cities of Semnan and Damghan, both tangibly and mentally, creating distinct spatial qualities in city neighborhoods (Khorramrouei, Varzaqani, Gheidi, Afzali, Khodabandeh & Alipour, 2022). Abarghouyi Fard, in his article on “Ritual Landscape from the Perspective of Tourism,” stated that throughout history, people have created myths and employed rituals to fulfill their material and spiritual needs. Rituals, as practical embodiments of beliefs, have three facets: physical, symbolic, and social, formed through the interaction of three elements: humans, the human environment, and nature (Abarghouei Fard, 2020).

While research has been conducted on rituals and the importance of natural elements, there hasn't been any research on the specific NOUSTI ritual, making this the first study of its kind in Ardabil. This research delves into the details of the NOUSTI ritual, facilitating a deeper understanding of the ritual and contributing to its promotion in the community. It provides the opportunity to develop policies and appropriate plans for attracting tourists and leveraging the cultural and natural capacities of the region.

The Sense of Place and Collective Memory

Place is a component of space imbued with intrinsic meaning; when space acquires significance for an individual or a group, it transforms into place (Tuan, 2001). In retrospection of memories, the role of places often surpasses that of people; the influence and role of architectural structure in reinforcing the sense of place and memory-making from the spatial perspective can also be contemplated (Pakzad & Bozorg, 2014, 417). A collective mental image commonly shapes structures and beliefs for a society regarding its past. Collective memory is regarded as a fundamental element in shaping national, local, and civic identity. Desired behaviors in specific locations continually unfold and, after being recorded in long-term memory, transform into memories. In this context, place and its relevant attributes play a fundamental role. As the recall of long-term memory contents occurs through recollection, the revival and identity-establishing of these urban spaces and places where rituals, beliefs, and perspectives of a region occur, alongside the elements they bring to existence through their interconnections over time, significantly shape the overall identity and spirit of a community.

Ritual Tourism

Cultural Ritual Tourism is a branch of cultural tourism that

encompasses intangible cultural heritage. What exists in ritual tourism are beliefs that have persisted to this day. Ritual tourism is a form of travel aimed at experiencing places and activities that genuinely reflect historical and contemporary events and people (Beygi, 2019). It defines ritual tourism based on nostalgia and a desire to experience different cultural landscapes. This type of tourism is broadly linked to the cultural heritage of the past or cultural resources (Kazemi, 2006, 154), and one of its main objectives is to preserve diverse cultural identities and heritage, constantly striving to keep them alive (Salehipour & Porfaraj, 2011, 7). In various forms of rituals, ritual tourism assists tourists in understanding the underpinnings of ritual activities at tourist destinations (Kim, Kim & Park, 2013, 245). One of the most significant outcomes of ritual tourism is the documentation of ritual components related to the historical and traditional features of a cultural heritage site. In general, tourists will be able to experience historical symbols and ritual ceremonies related to the cultural heritage of a place, which includes historical stories and their ritual structures (Tetreault & Kleine, 1990, 38; Browne, 1980, 35). This type of tourism is considered a social ritual that leads to the re-creation of meaning and a departure from everyday life (Kim et al., 2013, 263). In socio-cultural anthropology, some rituals are perceived as symbolic displays, traditional ceremonies, or volunteer activities with symbolic architecture and rites of passage in a specific society (Jafari, 2001).

Water and Its Rituals in Iran

The significance of water in Iranian life and livelihood has led to a reverential attitude towards this element. Iranian traditions and rituals have become intertwined with myths and legends related to water. For example, the Tirgan festival, celebrated on the 13th day of the Tir month, was an occasion for the grand celebration of water pouring ceremonies (Mansouri et al., 2018, 19). The respect that Iranians hold for water is deeply embedded in their everyday beliefs. They have numerous beliefs and convictions surrounding the role of water in life, which may vary across regions but generally emphasize the sanctity and respect for water.

Iranians did not separate the concepts of water and Anahita, the “Goddess of Water”; in fact, they saw no distinction between Anahita as the bestower of water and water itself. They ascribed all the benevolent attributes of water to Anahita and sought to find all the sanctity of water in her existence. Consequently, water ceased to be merely functional and acquired a role beyond utility. Water became a sacred element and a symbol of Anahita. Therefore, sacred waters such as springs, ponds, lakes, and sacred rivers became integrated into Iranian spaces, giving rise to rituals of goddess worship near these sanctified sources in Iranian culture (ibid., 20).

Iran is a land replete with rituals directly related to water or where water plays a significant role. These rituals include

rainmaking and sun-worshipping ceremonies. In ancient Persian culture, intimately tied to the issues of water and drought, mourning and crying were symbols of rainfall (Bahar, 2008). In addition to these ceremonies, Iranians pay special attention to water and its blessing aspect in their national and religious rituals. The people of Sistan, for instance, perform rituals at Hamun Lake during the Nowruz (New Year) celebration and wedding ceremonies that harken back to their ancient beliefs and the Zoroastrian myths of the past. Even today, the people of Sistan offer sacrifices near the lake and make vows on the Khwajeh Mountain (Mirshokrayi, 2001).

Iranian New Year's customs are closely tied to water and its characteristics of blessing and illumination. In Gilan, there is a popular belief that the water drawn from a well or river on Wednesday night and Thursday morning of Charshanbe Suri (the last Wednesday of the Iranian year) is blessed, and drinking and washing with this water is believed to ward off illness in the new year (Beshra & Taheri, 2009). Following the advent of Islam, the endorsement of water in Islam as a symbol of divinity, coupled with the removal of its mythical attributes like Anahita, allowed water to maintain its position in Iranian culture. On the one hand, sanctifying water in Islam as a divine sign, either genuinely or by blending it with myths, resulted in water maintaining its special and significant status within the new culture. The role of water in the event of Ashura and as the dowry of Lady Fatimah (peace be upon her) is among the prominent documents that led Shia Iranians to replace their mythological deities with divine figures. In this way, ancient traditions that gave rise to profound concepts regarding water and its various manifestations continued in Islamic culture, reaching their culmination through Quranic concepts (Mansouri et al., 2018, 34).

The Significance of Trees in Iranian Culture

In Iran, trees, like water, are not merely utilitarian elements but have a deep-rooted religious and cultural significance, extending beyond their functional roles. Trees, much like water, had custodians who cared for them to ensure their vitality and well-being. In Iranian culture, the destruction of a tree is considered even worse than hunting, as in common belief, if hunting leads a person to mendicancy, cutting down a tree shortens their life (ibid., 2018, 61).

Another Nowruz ritual rooted in ancient Iranian beliefs is the "Sabzeh" tradition, where Iranians plant various grains in dishes or containers 25 days before Nowruz. Depending on the growth and type of grain, they choose which type of grain to plant for the new year (Roozi, 2002).

Plant elements, particularly trees, in ancient Iranian culture, were always associated with deities like Mehr and Nahid, and as a result, they were considered sacred. This sanctity was so deeply ingrained in an ancient culture that these elements

assumed a divine status, and people, in a way, worshiped these divine symbols. In the culture of early Islamic Iran, the god-like status of trees was removed, but respect for these elements persisted. Trees dedicated to Imams, Imams' descendants, and Sayyids were preserved, and they found a new life within the new culture. The perpetual connection of Iranians with the natural elements indicates that they did not discard their ancient culture but rather found common ground between their ancient traditions and the teachings of the new religion. Thus, with the advent of Islam, sacred trees remained, and even today, in many cities and villages of Iran, one can see ancient trees that are revered by the local people (Mansouri et al., 2018, 83).

Research Methodology

Based on the nature of the study, this study adopted a case study approach within a survey framework. Data collection methods included a literature review, field observations, and interviews with informed individuals and experts. The interview questions were constructed by the researcher to meet the main research objectives. The participants consisted of experts in cultural tourism and cultural rituals in the city of Ardabil. The snowball sampling method was used for selecting participants, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached. In total, 15 individuals were interviewed, and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a coding method. The coding process involved four stages: initial coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process allowed for the extraction of raw codes, concepts, subcategories, and main categories. The coding was performed using MaxQDA 2020 software to ensure a systematic and efficient analysis while minimizing errors. Overall, this research approach was qualitative, emphasizing in-depth understanding, and utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined both library research and empirical data gathered through fieldwork and interviews with experts.

Case Study: Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge, Ardabil

In consideration of the passage of the "Balighli Chay River" through the heart of Ardabil city, multiple bridges have been constructed across this river to facilitate the connection between its two banks. The bridges of Seyyedabad, Yaghoubiyeh, Ebrahimabad, Haft-Cheshmeh, and Nadri date back to the Safavid era and remain significant architectural landmarks within the city.

The Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge, locally known as "Yedi Goz," is situated on the first coastal street across the Balighli Chay River (Fig. 1). This pedestrian bridge is also referred to by various names, including Jajin, Korpi Gharamizi, and Dash Kasan Bridge. It features dimensions of 46.70 meters in length and 3.80 meters in width, with a height of 3.70

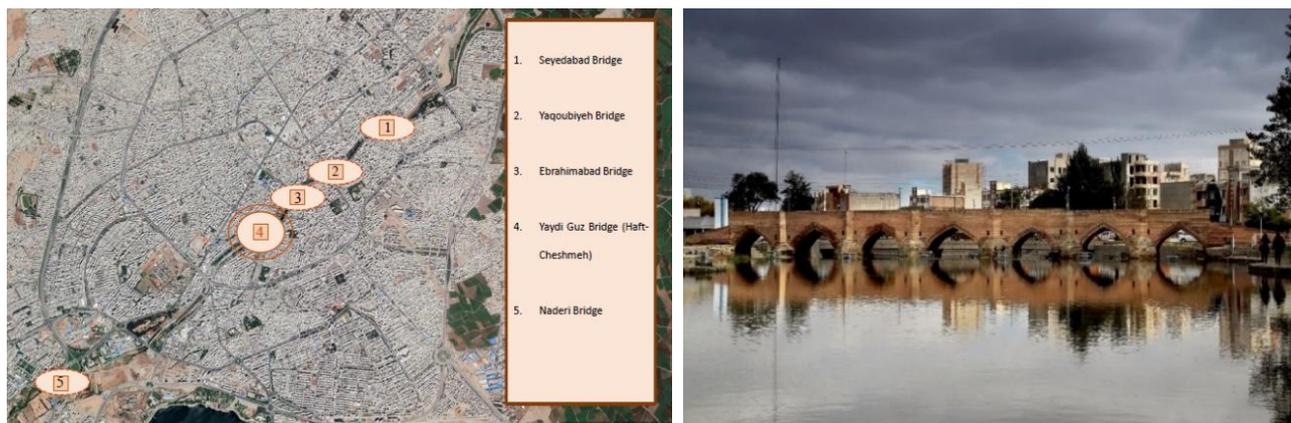


Fig. 1. Photo and map of the studied area (Haft Cheshme Ardabil bridge). Source: Google Earth.

meters. The bridge is adorned with seven stone-based arches and brick-made vertical piers.

Findings

• Definition of the NOUSTI Ritual

Entry into the Mithraism ritual consists of seven stages, with the first stage being “Noukar,” meaning the city of water or fountain (Interviewee number four). NOUSTI is a ceremony that venerates water as the source of life and a symbol of the ancient worship of the goddess Anahita. In the Turkish language, Nowa is derived from the words “nowa” meaning pond, stream, or small water channel, and “osti” meaning head or top. In essence, Nowa osti means leaping from the water. Interviewee number one explains, “In the past, they would hollow out the inside of a tree trunk to the extent that they could turn it into a container for holding water, which they called ‘Naw.’ This part of the river, known as ‘Nou usti,’ was famous for leaping from the Naw, a boat-like device for transporting water from one place to another.” This ritual is performed alongside mills, rivers, or wherever there is flowing water. The table and charts below illustrate the coding of the NOUSTI ritual definition (Table 1; Fig. 2).

• Initiation of the NOUSTI Ritual

The origin of the NOUSTI ceremony can be traced back to the mythological worldview of ancient Iran, particularly the beliefs in Mithraism and the goddess Anahita, in the Ardabil region. In ancient Iran, water was considered a sacred element because it was a symbol of the goddess Anahita. In Zoroastrianism, water was also revered as one of the four primary elements, and today, it is highly respected as the fundamental element of human life. Due to limited scholarly studies, it is unclear when the NOUSTI ceremony began, and various speculations exist about its starting point. Iranians associate its origin with the coronation of King Jamshid, Azaris with the coronation of Aghuzkhan, and Shiʿas with the commencement of the rule of Imam Ali (A.S). In ancient Iran, wherever there was flowing water, rituals were conducted alongside it. The ceremony had different names in various regions, such as “Cheshme Bashi,” “Chay Oosti,” and

“Bolagh Bashi.” These diverse perspectives highlight the deep cultural and historical significance of the NOUSTI ceremony, which reflects the reverence for water and its connection to the spiritual and mythological beliefs of the region. It is a tradition that has been carried forward through generations, and it continues to be practiced alongside flowing waters in different areas, with various names and local variations (Table 2; Fig. 3).

• Roots of the NOUSTI Ritual

The discussion of climate plays a significant role in the formation and roots of rituals and beliefs. In cold regions with heavy snowfall and severe winters, people used to compare the winter season to hell. Because of this, fire and the sun were considered sacred and objects of worship in ancient regions of Azerbaijan. Due to the hardships and challenges of life during the winter season, people considered the day of the sun’s birth sacred and the basis for the New Year. In mythological beliefs, people divided the winter season into smaller sections to mentally pass through it more quickly. For instance, they had myths and names associated with the Great Chelleh, Small Chelleh, Klooze Ghasseh (Night of Klooze), Charchar, and Khodar Nabi. In ancient Iran, the number four was considered sacred. This number can be seen in traditional artwork and handicrafts, and it also symbolizes the elements of quadrinity. People divided the month of Esfand (the last month of winter) into the Four Chelleh Thursdays, each named after an elemental symbol: Soochar Chaharshanbe-si (representing the element of water), Ood Chaharshanbe-si (representing the element of fire), Yell Chaharshanbe-si (representing the element of wind), and Toorpaq or Kool Chaharshanbe-si (representing the element of earth). These names have their roots in mythological beliefs. On the first Chelleh Thursday, the primary element of life is rejuvenated with the help of the elements of fire and wind, awakening the earth from its winter slumber. The table and chart below provide the coding for the roots of the NOUSTI ceremony (Table 3; Fig. 4).

Conducting the NOUSTI Ritual

In the Niyakan belief system, the first thing that is renewed

Table 1. Definition of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Category	Sub- Category	Meanings	Codes	
Definition NOUSTI Ritual	The Sacredness of Water	The Importance of Water in the Region	Seven stages of the Mitraism ritual The first stage Noukar Respect for Anahita	Celebration of Water Purification Source of Life
		Increasing Water Resources in the Region	Street Flooding	Mills
	The Nature and Performance Method of the Ritual	The etymon of the word NOUSTI	Kar means Reticulation Nou means Water	Neor city of water Gutter
		Initial Method of Performing the Ritual	Jumping out of Water	Inside the Hollow of a Tree

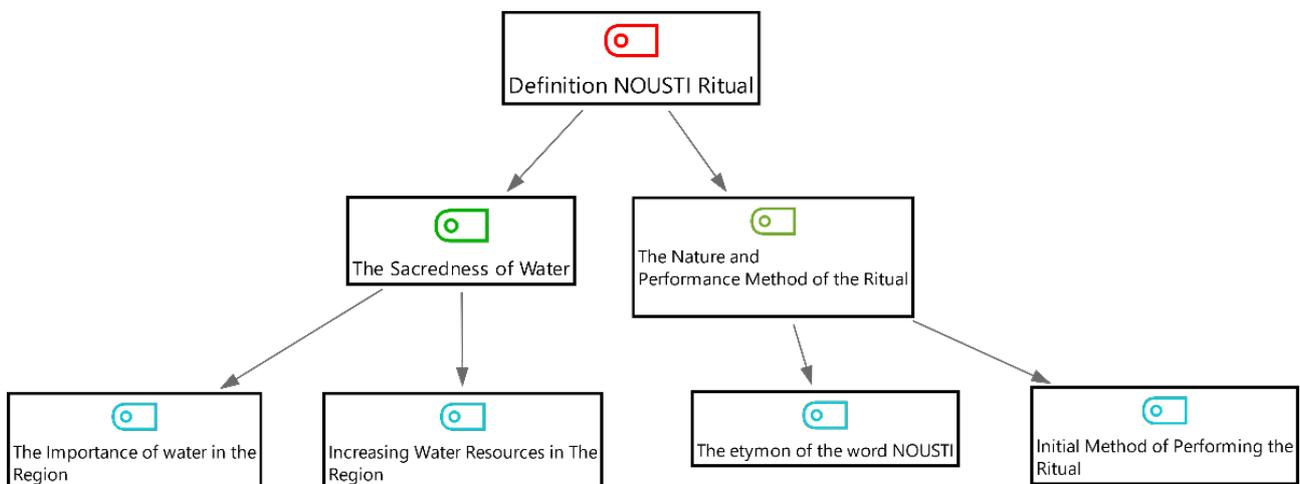


Fig. 2. Factors Influencing the Definition of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

with the arrival of the new year is water. It is believed that by jumping into the water, individuals can absorb its energy. The NOUSTI ceremony is a celebration of the birth and rejuvenation of waters. Many people, especially women and young girls, engage in specific rituals on this day, with the belief that their wishes and intentions will be fulfilled. The following rituals are observed on this day: Women apply henna to their hands and comb their hair, donning new clothes. Holding scissors, a broom, and clay jars, they gather at the historical bridge known as Yedi-Goz (Haft-Cheshmeh) in Ardabil. They sing songs and cut a small portion of their hair, casting it into the water. They then trim their nails as a symbolic act of disapproval of negativity, which they entrust to the power of the water to carry away from their lives. They sweep the water with brooms, a gesture symbolizing the removal of impurities, troubles, and obstacles from their paths. This act signifies that the water is capable of purifying their lives. Stones are thrown into the water as a sign of closing the mouths of enemies. Seven stones are cast into the water to represent the casting away of pain and life's difficulties. Old shoes are discarded into the water as a symbol of getting rid of life's problems and difficulties. Coins are thrown into the water

as a gesture to increase one's livelihood. Ceramic jars from the previous year are broken near the water, and new jars are filled with fresh water. The water is then carried back home for various uses. On the return journey, three stones are collected from the river or spring's bed, with one stone placed inside a flour bag, one in a salt bag, and the last one kept inside the jar. These stones symbolize blessings and sustenance since they were taken from the holy water source during an auspicious time. The water is used to wash the home's floor, symbolizing cleanliness, warding off negativity and impurities, and inviting happiness and prosperity. This act ensures that the new year will be filled with light and purity. This rich tapestry of rituals and beliefs in the NOUSTI ceremony represents a deep connection with water, nature, and the cycle of life. It is a celebration of renewal, purification, and a fresh start for the year ahead (Figs. 5&6; Table 4).

Changes in the NOUSTI Ritual

Due to neglect of ancient rituals and changes in the way they are conducted, the NOUSTI ceremony has undergone modifications. Based on historical accounts and events that have been passed down through time, water has played a

Table 2. The beginning of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Category	Sub- Category	Meanings	Codes
The beginning of the NOUSTI Ritual	Reasons for Initiating the Ritual	Historical Beginning	Regional Mythology Perspective Beliefs of Anahita and Mithraism Ancient Iranian History Zoroastrianism Anahita, the Goddess of Water The Coronation of Jamshid The Coronation of Oghuz Khon The Leadership of Imam Ali
	The Sacredness of Water	Anahita, the Goddess of Water	Goddess of Water Anahita Hill Symbol of the Goddess of Water Worship of water
	The Importance of Water	Nature Water, the Essential Element of Life	Nature Importance of Water Formation of Human Life Flowing Water Climate

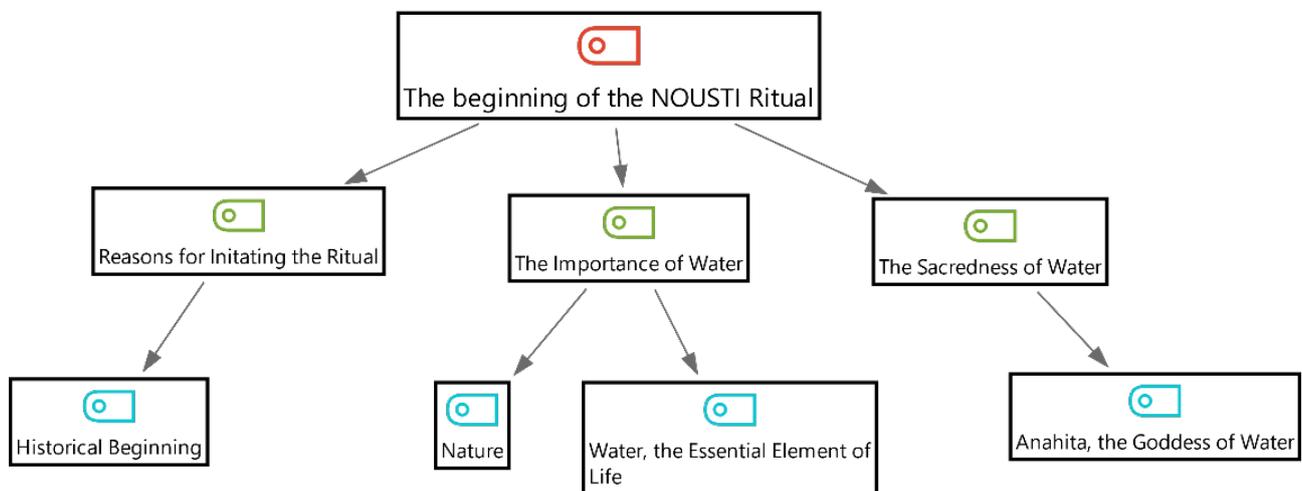


Fig. 3. Factors Influencing the Commencement of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Table 3. The Roots of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Category	Sub- Category	Meanings	Codes
The Roots of the NOUSTI Ritual	Preparations for Nowruz	The Beginning of Nowruz	Month of Esfand End-of-Winter Celebration Long Winter Binding Snow Birth of the Sun The Coronation of Jamshid The Coronation of Oghuz Khon The Leadership of Imam Ali
	Natural Roots	4 Elements of Nature	4 Element (Water, Fire, Wind, Earth) Four Thursdays Naming of the Days of the Week Soo Chaharshanbesui (Water) Oot Chaharshanbesui (Fire) Yeil Chaharshanbesui (Wind) Torpakh or Kool Chaharshanbesui (Earth)
	Mythical Roots	Myths	Symbols Small Sash Large Sash Moon Phases Mythological Beliefs

significant role in human life and holds high value for humans. This ceremony has predominantly taken place alongside flowing waters and rivers, with no fundamental changes in the location of the ritual throughout history. Throughout history, various beliefs of nations and ethnic groups have

influenced this ceremony. Today, due to the neglect of nature and the failure to introduce this ritual to younger generations, the ceremony is limited in its practice, primarily in Ardabil and its surrounding regions. As mentioned earlier, this ceremony used to be held on the last four Wednesdays of the

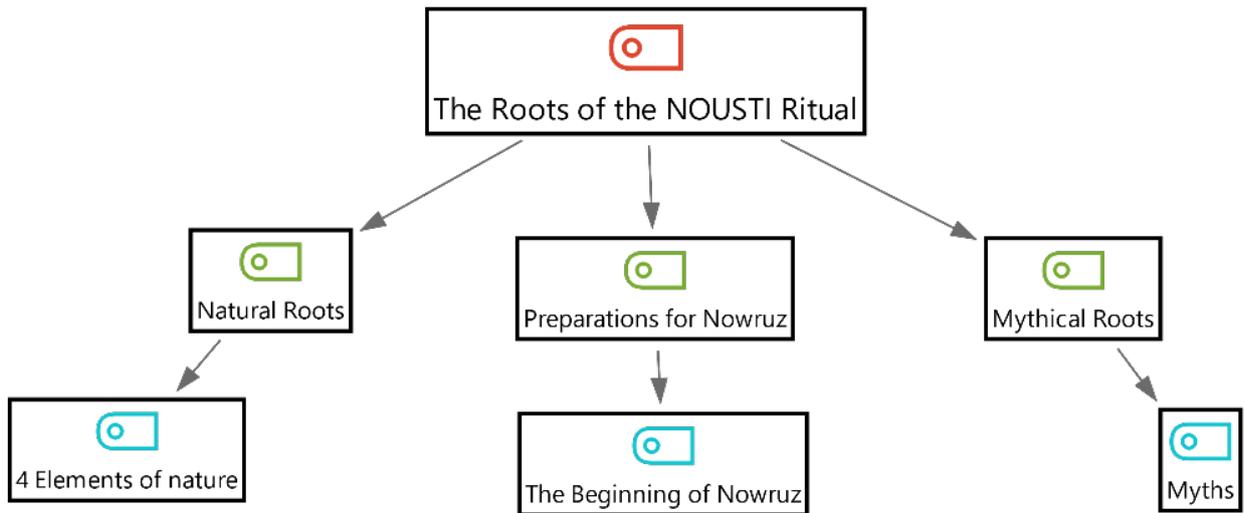


Fig. 4. Factors Influencing The Roots of the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.



Fig. 5. The manner of conducting the rite of novation. Source: Authors.

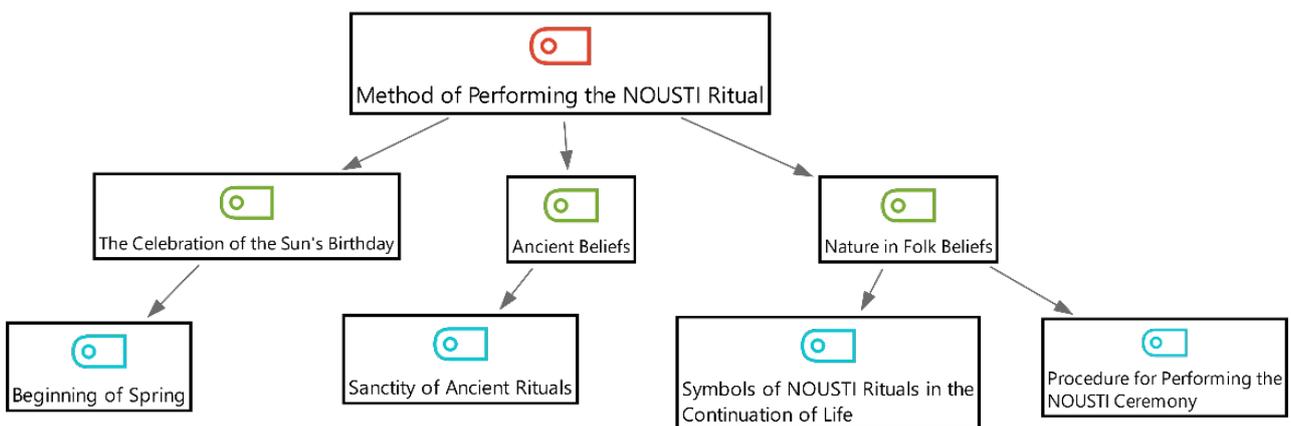


Fig. 6. Factors Influencing the NOUSTI Ritual Method. Source: Authors.

year. However, it is now compressed into a single day on the final Wednesday of the year. On this Wednesday, there are remnants and symbols of all four Wednesdays (Table 5).

Conclusion

Based on library research, field observations during the performance of these rituals, and interviews with

knowledgeable individuals, it can be asserted that the authentic roots of the NOUSTI ceremony, like many similar rites, can be traced back to the mythological beliefs of the Iranians, particularly the followers of Mithraism in this region. The cultural and mythological characteristics of the region, along with its climate, played a pivotal role in the emergence of the NOUSTI ritual. The link between this ceremony and

Table 4. Method of Performing the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Category	Sub- Category	Meanings	Codes
Method of Performing the NOUSTI Ritual	The Celebration of the Sun's Birthday	Beginning of Spring	Water Freshening First of Esfand Winter Solstice Summer Solstice Spring Equinox Autumn Equinox
	Ancient Beliefs	Sanctity of Ancient Rituals	Hazrat Khizr Water of Life Sacredness of the Number Four Sacredness of the Number Seven Rituals and Beliefs Associated with Water Mother of Hazrat Isma'il Participation in Mithraism Rituals Drawing Energy from the Four Elements Drawing Energy from the Four Elements
		Procedure for Performing the NOUSTI Ceremony	Face Washing Pouring Water Over One Another Breaking an Old Jug Trimming Nails Singing Melodies Sweeping Water Cutting Water Throwing Shoes into Water Sewing Water Throwing Coins into Water Throwing 7 Stones into Water Cutting Grass by the River Wearing New Clothes
	Nature in Folk Beliefs		
		Symbols of NOUSTI Rituals in the Continuation of Life	Filling a New Jug Pouring Water in four Directions Entry of four Items into House Salt as a Symbol of Fighting Corruption and Vice Multicolored Candles as Symbols of Light and Illumination Wooden Spoon as a Symbol of Sustenance for Continued Life River Water in a Clay Jug as Water of Life

Table 5. Changes in the NOUSTI Ritual. Source: Authors.

Category	Sub- Category	Meanings	Codes
Changes in the NOUSTI Ritual	Fading Ancient and Mythological Rituals	Forgetting Symbols	Forgetting Symbols Condensed Ceremonies Diminished Ceremonies Restricted Venue Fading Symbolic Actions Neglect of Rituals Disrespect for Nature Lack of Introduction to the Youth

the regional climate, particularly the harsh winter and the commencement of the ritual at the end of the cold season is one of its defining features. The reason behind the reverence for water and its life-sustaining properties is evident. Even after the advent of Islam, these ceremonies continued due to the respect that Islam accords to water. Regarding the second question, the Haft-Cheshmeh Bridge serves as a reminder of the NOUSTI ceremony for the people of Ardabil, and these two are intertwined in their collective memory. The bridge itself, as a venue for the NOUSTI ceremony, has become a significant cultural landmark and a testament to the national and religious identity. It creates a cultural and commemorative landscape, which, in turn, attracts cultural tourists. The presence of a collective behavior in a specific location throughout history

and the meaningful connection between the place (featuring natural elements like water, trees, and the bridge as a viewpoint for the ceremony) with the ritual have contributed to the creation of a shared memory among citizens. The cultural landscape of this bridge, especially with the performance of the NOUSTI ceremony on its premises, plays a significant role in cultural and ritual tourism. Understanding and introducing this ceremony can lead to a stronger bond between the people, the preservation of the ritual, and the reinforcement of the collective memory.

In future research, scholars can explore the symbolic locations where these ceremonies take place by examining historical texts, offering solutions for the revival and further promotion of this ritual, and reinforcing the cultural identity of the people.

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