

of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore—where temples to the Mother of the Dipper and her nine star sons are still popular. The Dipper Mother is still worshipped in a few places in China, most notably at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, but the most impressive festivals for her sons are found at such places as Phuket Island (Thailand); Penang, Butterworth, and Ampang (Malaysia); and Singapore.

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See also Double Ninth Festival; Pure Brightness Festival; Spring Dragon Festival.

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Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í)

Bahá'ís gather together once every 19 days to participate in their local communities' “Nineteen-Day Feast.” To those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, this might seem like odd timing, but it is perfectly in keeping with the seasonal rhythm of the Bahá'í calendar of 19 months of 19 days. In the Bahá'í calendar, each day, month, year and cycle of years is named after a godly attribute that can be expressed as a goodly virtue. The Nineteen-Day Feast is at the heart of Bahá'í community life and is an essential feature of the “community building” that takes place in each local Bahá'í faith-community, which is typically defined by city/town boundaries. Unlike those religious “congregations,” where believers choose the particular group with whom they wish to affiliate, Bahá'ís in a given town must learn to function together not as a congregation but as a community, both socially and for purposes of local administration. This structure is itself conducive to achieving the purposes of the Bahá'í Faith—to eliminate barriers and prejudices of all kinds, and to bring about unity through concerted action.

An integral part of the Bahá'í calendar, the first day of each Bahá'í month is often referred to as the “Feast Day.” While the Nineteen-Day Feast is not one of the nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is suspended, the Bahá'í Feast, informally at least, functions as though it were a “monthly” Bahá'í holy day. It is a time of worship, deliberation, and fellowship, as reflected in the three formal phases (i.e., devotional, consultative, and social) of each Bahá'í Feast comprising its spiritual, administrative, and unitive functions.

Historically, the Nineteen-Day Feast has its origins in the religion of the Báb (1819–1850), the herald and precursor of Bahá'u'lláh (1819–1892), the

prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith. In the *Arabic Bayán*, the Báb commanded his followers to invite 19 people every 19 days, even if one is able to offer only water in this offer of hospitality. Bahá'u'lláh ratified this practice in the Most Holy Book: “Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means” (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 40). Here, the primary purpose of the Feast is “to bind hearts together”—that is, to produce unity among the believers.

The term, “Feast” (Arabic, *díyáfat*) primarily means “hospitality” and has been used in connection with sacred events, such as the Lord’s Supper, portrayed in the Qur’an (Q. 5:112–15) as a banquet table descending from heaven, from which the disciples ate. “Feast” includes “both earthly and heavenly” food, with spiritual sustenance being the latter meaning. Thus, in current practice, refreshments are commonly served in the social portion of the Feast, after the spiritual enrichment of the devotional portion of Feast, consisting primarily of prayers and readings from the Bahá'í scriptures. In some Bahá'í communities, there may on occasion be a dinner (whether a “potluck” or provided by the host) that takes place before the formal Feast program begins.

The Nineteen-Day Feast was further developed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. During the time of the Báb and Baha’u’llah, the Feast was individually observed as the offer of hospitality to guests invited to the home. During the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, the Feast became communal in character and was essentially institutionalized. Of this development, Bahá'í historian Robert Stockman wrote:

In early 1905 Howard and Mary MacNutt and Julia Grundy attended a Feast hosted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Akka. The celebration included Bahá'ís from many parts of the world and was especially moving . . . The next morning at breakfast ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praised the Feast, adding, “You must meet together in this way in America.” The three pilgrims took His exhortation as a commandment. After returning home Howard MacNutt consulted with the New York Board of Counsel and it organized the first real Feast known to have been held in North America. It occurred on 23 May 1905 in New York City. . . . Isabella Brittingham took the Feast to the rest of the United States. . . . In early 1906 she visited Johnstown, New York; Chicago; Kenosha; Racine; Milwaukee; Minneapolis; and Cleveland. In all of these cities she inaugurated the Feast as a formal community event. (Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Early Expansion, 1900–1912*)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed the devotional character of these gatherings and their unitive function in providing greater social cohesion among the Bahá'í faithful, and promised that “all its mystic meanings” would unfold in the faithful observance of the Bahá'í Feast (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 91).

Perhaps one of the mystical dimensions of Feast is the very real sense that the spirit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá may be present when true unity is experienced:

On that night thy house was the nest and the shelter of the birds of God. The divine melodies and the celestial lyres made that place a feast of heaven and an assembly of the Kingdom. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was present there in heart and soul and was joyful and happy. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, 216)

Although no sacramental importance attaches to the Bahá'í Feast, 'Abdu'l-Bahá attached great importance to it and, in doing so, compared the Bahá'í Feast to the "Lord's Supper" among Christians:

Thou hast written concerning the Feast. This festivity, which is held on a day of the nineteen-day month, was established by His Holiness the Báb, and the Blessed Beauty directed, confirmed and warmly encouraged the holding of it. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance. You should unquestionably see to it with the greatest care, and make its value known, so that it may become solidly established on a permanent basis. Let the beloved of God gather together and associate most lovingly and spiritually and happily with one another, conducting themselves with the greatest courtesy and self-restraint. Let them read the holy verses, as well as essays which are of benefit, and the letters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; encourage and inspire one another to love each and all; chant the prayers with serenity and joy; give eloquent talks, and praise the matchless Lord.

The host, with complete self-effacement, showing kindness to all, must be a comfort to each one, and serve the friends with his own hands.

If the Feast is befittingly held, in the manner described, then this supper will verily be the Lord's Supper, for its fruits will be the very fruits of that Supper, and its influence the same. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet to an individual believer, translated from the Persian, *The Nineteen Day Feast*, 425.)

The devotional portion of the Feast is often themed by the name of that particular Bahá'í month (i.e., "Honor," "Loftiness," "Power," "Mercy," etc.), although there is no requirement to do so. The devotions will consist of selected readings from Bahá'í sacred texts and the recitation or chanting of Bahá'í prayers (from memory or reading a Bahá'í prayer book). Music and singing may be included, and following the Bahá'í readings and prayers, creative or performative expressions of Bahá'í devotion may be integrated into the observance. Occasionally, passages from the scriptures of other world religions may be included in the Feast program. The Feast is the only Bahá'í event intended for the Bahá'í community alone other than elections, and thus not generally open, except that non-Bahá'ís who may be present will be treated cordially as guests, and consultation on sensitive community matters will be deferred.

Shoghi Effendi developed the administrative component by integrating into the institution of the Feast a period of consultation on the affairs of the Bahá'í community.

Thus the consultative part of the Feast is when announcements of upcoming events are made, community affairs are discussed, consultation on topics of special concern is facilitated, where ideas and recommendations for consideration by the local Bahá'í council (i.e., the annually elected, nine-member “Local Spiritual Assembly” or “LSA”) are offered and recorded. Such consultation gives every member a voice in community affairs and thus makes the Feast an “arena of democracy at the very root of society” (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, August 27, 1989). Study topics of particular relevance may be presented for brief discussion for the community’s edification, and the Bahá'í youth and children may be invited to perform or make special presentations. Thus, the consultative portion has an educative function in addition to its administrative purpose. It is also a venue in which the LSA may report its recent decisions to the Bahá'í community.

The social time of the Feast, which is typically at the end, is vital for promoting unity among the “Bahá'í friends” (as Bahá'ís are often called). Strength and vibrancy of the Bahá'í community is, after all, coefficient with its unity and solidarity. The vitality of social cohesion often manifests itself in the percentage of the enrolled Bahá'í members who participate in their community Feasts, and this, in turn, may have a direct impact on the level of giving to the Bahá'í Fund, to which only Bahá'ís may contribute.

The Bahá'í Faith has been established in every country except for the Vatican and North Korea, thus making it the second-most widespread religion in the world, next to Christianity. Today, the majority of the estimated six million Bahá'ís observe the Nineteen-Day Feast, which is an integral feature of Bahá'í community life. In some Muslim states in the Middle East, this practice has become restricted. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran has banned the practice as part of a systematic campaign, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (and in earlier regimes), to eradicate the Bahá'í Faith in Iran.

The Nineteen-Day Feast is adaptable to a wide array of cultural contexts, which is an important feature, considering the fact that societies are becoming increasingly diverse. Music is often featured in the Feast program and typically reflects the Feast’s geographic and cultural milieu. In the United States, for instance, the Feast might well feature upbeat gospel-style music, while Feasts in Bahá'í communities that are predominantly Native American, Native Canadian, or indigenous in Central and South America often incorporate cultural traditions as well; songs might be pentatonic in Bahá'í feasts in Asia. The Feast experience is further enriched by Bahá'í musicians around the world who, working in every genre and style and mixing them as well, set the Bahá'í writings to music, becoming a robust source of music not only for Feast, but for other Bahá'í devotional activities as well.

Ideally, the Nineteen-Day Feast operates to make each local Bahá'í community more tight-knit. This requires that the Bahá'ís themselves make it a priority and attach great importance to it. Although attendance at the Feast is not “obligatory” in the sense of being a Bahá'í law, and no one is pressured to attend, every Bahá'í should consider it a duty and privilege to be present at Feast. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said: “As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this feast be

held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endued with a power that is not of this world” (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 91).

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá’í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá’í Faith; Bahá’í Fast; Bahá’u’lláh, Ascension of; Bahá’u’lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Nino, Saint's Day of St. (January 14)

Nino (c. 296–c. 338), is part of a distinct minority of saints. She was a woman, she was an active missionary for the Christian movement, and she died of natural causes. She is also among the very few Orthodox saints remembered as “*isapostolos*” or equal to the apostles.

Nino, according to most traditional accounts, was from Cappadocia, an area now in central Turkey, and was a relative of George, the Roman soldier who became a Christian martyr and saint. It has been claimed that she was the daughter of the Roman general Zabulon and, on her mother’s side, the niece of Houbnal I, the Christian patriarch of Jerusalem. He facilitated her trip to Rome during which she had a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which she was told to go to Iberia (i.e., ancient Georgia) and given a cross as a protective spiritual shield.

While on her way to Iberia, she became part of a community of 37 virgins that the beautiful Armenian Hripsime (or Rhipsime, d. c. 290 CE). They lived together under the leadership of a man named Gayane. When the Armenian king Tiridates III took