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ČAHĀRŠANBA-SŪRĪ

ČAHĀRŠANBA-SŪRĪ (usually pronounced Čāršamba-sūrī), the last Wednesday of the Persian solar year, the eve of which is marked by special customs and rituals, most notably jumping over fire. Variant local names include Gūl Čāršamba (Ardabīl) and Gūla-gūla Čāršamba (Gīlān), Kola Čowāršamba (Kurdistan), Čowāršama-kolī (Qorva, near Sanandaj), and Čāršamba-sorḵī (Isfahan; Honarī, pp. 20-21, 28; Pūr-Karīmī, pp. 15, 19). Some scholars relate the word *sūrī* to *sūr* (feast) and take it to mean "festive" (e.g., Nafīsī, p. 841). Others, more plausibly, consider *sūr* to be a variant of *sorḵ* (red; cf. *gol-e sūrī* "red flower," i.e., "rose"; *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ*, ed. Moʿīn, II, p. 1185) and take it to refer either to the fire itself or to the "ruddiness"(*sorḵī*), meaning good health or ripeness, supposedly obtained by jumping over it (Moqaddam, p. 78; Dādgar, p. 66). The variant Čāršamba-sorḵī in Isfahan and the common dialect form *sūr* for *sorḵ* (Pūr-Karīm, p. 15; Honarī, p. 20) lend further support to this view.

Principal rituals. One or two days before the last Wednesday of the year people go out to gather bushes, camel thorn, date-palm leaves (Ḵūr), desert brush (*gavan*), or rice stalks (in Gīlān); in the cities they buy brushwood. In the afternoon before the start of Čahāršanba-sūrī the brushwood is laid out in the yard of the house, if it is spacious enough, or in a village square or city street; it is arranged in one, three, five, or seven bundles (always an odd number) spaced a few feet apart. At sunset or soon after the bundles are set alight, and while the flames flicker in the dusk men, women, and children jump over them, singing *sorḵī-e to az man, zardī-e man az to* "[let] your ruddiness [be]

mine, my paleness yours," or the equivalent in local dialects (see Honarī, pp. 24-29; Pūr-Karīm, pp. 18-19). It is believed that this ritual renders them immune for a whole year to maladies and misfortunes that make people pale and thin. In some places (e.g., Nāʾīn, Anārak, Ḵūr, Urmia) fires are kindled on the rooftops, a jug of water is poured on the fire, and burning brush is thrown into the street below; in other places the ritual takes place on hilltops (Honarī, pp. 25-27, Pūr-Karīm, p. 20).

No one must blow on the fire (Massé, p. 150; Honarī, p. 29); after everyone in the household has jumped over it it is left to die out or quenched with water (e.g. at Ḵūr). If the ritual has been performed in the yard, the ashes are removed by a member of the family, usually a girl who has not yet reached puberty. She carries them in a dustpan to a crossroads, where she scatters them, then returns home. She knocks on the door and the following questions and answers are exchanged: "Who is it?" "It's me." "Where do you come from?" "From a wedding." "What have you brought?" "Good health." (Honarī, p. 29). A very similar custom of jumping over fire is celebrated on the holiday of Derendez (14 February) by the Armenians of Iran (Honarī, p. 29; Rāʾīn, p. 57; Enjavī, II, pp. 120-24).

Such rituals are customary in all parts of Iran. In most villages local musicians and drummers play an accompaniment (Honarī, p. 24). The 13th/19th-century author Āqā Jamāl Ḵᵛānsārī (d. 1121/1709; p. 20) prescribed playing a musical instrument to ward off bad luck on this day. Until the 1300s Š./1920s, when carrying arms was prohibited, men used to fire shots into the air as a signal that the brushwood had been set alight. Now, instead of gunshots, there are firecrackers.

Origin. According to E. Pūr-Dāwūd (pp. 73, 75), the feast of Čahāršanba-sūrī is derived from the Zoroastrian feast of Hamaspāθmaēdaya, which after the calendar reform under Ardašīr I (a.d. 224-40; see calendars i) was celebrated six days before Nowrūz. The choice of Wednesday, as well as the ritual of jumping over fire and "insulting" it, must, however, have originated after the Islamic conquest. The choice of the last Wednesday of the year is likely to have been prompted by an Arab superstition that Wednesdays are unlucky (Jāḥeẓ, p. 227). This belief apparently became widespread in Persia during the first two Islamic centuries (Manūčehrī Dāmḡānī, p. 220; Massé, p. 274 and n. 2; Pūr-Dāwūd, p. 73). On the other hand, the use of fire in celebrations had a long history in Iran. Naršaḵī (p. 37) refers to an old custom under the Samanids of kindling a large fire on one evening before the end of the year; he calls the

evening *šab-e sūrī* (red evening/evening of celebration) but does not mention the specific rituals later associated with Čahāršanba-sūrī. Popular belief, particularly in Khorasan, attributes the origin of the fire ritual on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī to Moḵtār b. Abī ʿObayd Ṯaqafī, who in 66/685 led a Shiʿite uprising in Kūfa. It is erroneously believed that Moḵtār launched this movement on the last Wednesday of the year (he actually did so on 14 Rabīʿ I 66/20 October 685), ordering his followers to light fires on their rooftops (Šakūrzāda, 1363 Š./1985, p. 79; Honarī, p. 19; Massé, p. 150). Some people believe that the fires were to celebrate Moḵtār's victory over the murderer of Imam Ḥosayn b. ʿAlī and his companions at Karbalāʾ in 61/680, but this is not supported by historical evidence. It is also reported that Abū Moslem launched his uprising in Khorasan by instructing his followers to light fires on the roofs of their homes (Yūsofī, p. 66). According to Bīrūnī (*Āṯār al-bāqīa*, p. 218), the Sasanian king Hormoz I (270-71) ordered fires to be kindled on high places at Nowrūz because he thought they would purify the air of unhealthy elements. The idea of fire ritual could have been adapted from the Zoroastrian Sada festival, a winter festival that was celebrated with great rejoicing on the eve of 11 Bahman by the lighting of huge fires in open fields and on hilltops (Bayhaqī, ed. Nafīsī, I, p. 538; Ebn al-Aṯīr, VIII, pp. 298-99). According to Bīrūnī (*Āṯār*, p. 226), for this holiday the ancient Persians used to fumigate their homes in order to drive away the evil eye and eventually the kings adopted the practice of lighting large fires in celebration.

The custom persisted in Islamic times, despite objections from orthodox theologians, and spread to virtually every Iranian town and village. The rituals now customary throughout Persia appear also to have been widely practiced for several centuries; during periods when Muslim theologians (*foqahāʾ*), who suppose them to be of Zoroastrian origin, have been powerful enough to threaten severe punishment for participants they have been shifted from the last Wednesday of the solar year to the last Wednesday of the lunar month of Ṣafar, which was and still is considered a particularly unlucky day (Massé, p. 273). According to Binning (I, p. 334), in Shiraz Čahāršanba-sūrī was the name of the last Wednesday of Ṣafar. In Isfahan, once the Safavid capital and the seat of such powerful theologians as Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesī (1037-1110/1627-98), some people still celebrate both Čahāršanba-sūrī and the last Wednesday of Ṣafar (Massé, p. 150 n. 5; Honarī, p. 26). In Ardabīl and Urmia the last three Wednesdays of the year (Tūz Čāršanba, Kūl Čāršanba, and Gūl Čāršanba, in Ardabīl; Yālāṇčī Čāršanba, Ḵabaṛčī Čāršanba, and Āḵer Čāršanba in Urmia) and in Bozorgābād, a village near Urmia, the last four

Wednesdays of the year (Moštoloqčī Čāršanba, Kūla Čāršanba, Qara Čāršanba, and Āḵer Čāršanba) are celebrated (Honarī, pp. 21, 26-27). For the first two years after the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 the government prohibited celebration of Čahāršanba-sūrī, declaring it a relic of fire worship, but the people persisted in lighting the fires, and eventually the authorities relented; the practice is now tolerated.

Supplementary rituals. In addition to lighting fires, various concomitant rituals are performed in different regions of Iran on Čahāršanba-sūrī. In Tabrīz on this day people do their shopping in the Čahāršanba Bāzār, which is lavishly decorated and illuminated (*čerāḡān*) for the occasion by a great many lamps and candles. Traditional purchases for each family include a mirror, seeds of rue (*esfand*), and a new jug for the new year (Honarī, pp. 22-23). According to the 11th/17th century traveler Adam Olearius (apud Massé, p. 148), on the day before Čahāršanba-sūrī the people or Šamāḵī refrained from all business transactions except payment of debts (cf. Ḵᵛānsārī, p. 22).

The interval between Čahāršanba-sūrī and the vernal equinox, when the new year (Nowrūz) begins, is no more than six days, and in this interval Iranians give their homes a “spring cleaning” (*ḵāna-takānī*) before the Nowrūz festival, replacing worn-out or shabby household articles. Damaged crockery is deliberately dropped and smashed in order to avert misfortune. To ward off the evil eye the corners of rooms are cleaned especially carefully, then sprinkled with soda ground in a brass mortar by one, three, five, or seven young girls and dissolved in a jug of vinegar. According to Adam Olearius (apud Massé, p. 148), in the 11th/17th century the people of Šamāḵī went, without speaking, to fetch water from the river for washing their houses and furniture, believing that this procedure would prevent misfortune throughout the next year. They also threw some of the water in the faces of people whom they met on the way. In Shiraz people used to carry baskets of salt and rue on their heads through the streets, passing out handfuls to people they met, who gave them coins in return. On Wednesday they cooked *āš-e rešta* (see āš) and sent to each other (Binning, I, p. 334). Other practices are listed here in the order of current popularity.

Smashing the pot (*kūza-šekanī*). In most towns pots are smashed after the jumping over fire; this custom is evidently rooted in the superstitious belief that smashing a pot transfers misfortune from the people of the house to the pot. There are slight variations in different regions. In Tehran one or more coins are put into a new jug, which is then dropped from the roof to the street

below. Until the early years of the Pahlavi period many Tehranis liked to go to the gallery of the Naqqāra-ḵāna, where drummers used to perform at certain hours, and drop their jugs from there. In Khorasan a lump of charcoal symbolizing bad luck, salt to ward off the evil eye, and coins for charity are put into the pot before it is smashed; then each member of the family swings the pot around his or her head so that any misfortune due in the coming year may be transferred to the pot. Finally, the pot is thrown from the roof into the street. In eastern and southeastern Iran a useless old pot is usually chosen, rather than a new one. In Arāk and the Āštīān district grains of barley are put into the pot.

Banging spoons (*qāšoq-zanī*). Another very popular custom on Čahāršanba-sūrī is to bang spoons against plates or bowls, both for entertainment and as a means of telling fortunes; it often has amatory overtones. After jumping over the fire, when the night has grown dark, women and sometimes men disguise themselves in *čādor*s and, each with a spoon and a plate, go to the doors of their neighbors' houses and bang the spoons against the plates. In response the householder puts a small gift—a morsel of food, a fruit, some nuts, or a trinket—on each plate. Young men often take this opportunity to establish rapport with neighbor girls; indeed, the common purpose of spoon banging is to give a young man an excuse to go to the house of a girl in whom he is interested. If she has any feeling for him she usually puts one of her own trinkets or some sugared almonds or boiled sweets on his plate; otherwise, she drives him away by spraying water at him (Enjavī, I, p. 126).

Fortune telling (*fāl*). Another popular practice on Čahāršanba-sūrī is fortune telling from a jug (*fāl-e kūza, fāl-e bolūnī*), usually one with a wide mouth (*bolūnī*). Everyone present puts an ornament—a ring, bracelet, an earring—that he or she has been wearing into the jug. Then slips of paper inscribed with verses or sentences containing auguries—the number of slips must equal the number of people present—are put into the jug. A young child is assigned to reach into the jug and pull out one piece of paper and give it to the most learned or literate man in the party. Then the child pulls one of the ornaments from the jug. The man reads aloud the verse on the piece of paper, and the owner of the ornament learns from it what his or her fortune will be. In many places, including Isfahan and towns in central Iran, it is customary to take the fortunes from a copy of the *dīvān* of Ḥāfeẓ, rather than from pieces of paper. The reader chooses a verse at random as the fortune for the owner of the object taken from the pot. At Isfahan a small mirror and a box of

collyrium, which supposedly bring good luck, are added to the ornaments in the jug (for similar customs connected with the first evening of winter, Šab-e Čella, see Enjavī, e.g., I, pp. 26, 126; II, p. 165).

Burning rue. Burning rue seeds (*esfand*) or frankincense (*kondor*) at parties on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī is a widespread practice in most regions of Persia, being considered a necessary precaution against the evil eye and malevolent spirits, devils, and genies (cf. above on fumigation to avoid the evil eye). While rue and a small amount of salt are thrown on the fire the people recite rhymes, which, though varying with the local dialects, usually go something like this: “Rue shrubs and rue seeds (*esfandūne*, i.e., *esfand-dāna*), rue shrubs with thirty-three seeds (*dūne*), rue shrubs know themselves; let them blast (*be-tarkūne*, i.e., *be-tarakānad*) the jealous eye” (or “the evil eye”).

Dropping the sash (*šāl-andāzī*). On the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī (and also on Šab-e Čella, see, e.g., Enjavī, I, p. 25) a young man who wishes to know his chances with a particular girl fastens a rope, a sash, or a long piece of cloth to a basket and, accompanied by a member of his family, drops it through an opening or chimney of the girl’s home or drapes it from her roof or over the door. Holding one end of the rope, he hides, and when he feels a slight tug he reels in the basket to find what the head of the girl’s family has put in it (or tied to the rope); from this object he can judge whether or not the family looks on him with favor. Sometimes he puts a present for the girl in the basket—an apple, a pomegranate, an egg, or some other village product; if the girl takes his present out of the basket, it is a sign of acceptance. In some villages this ritual is performed merely as a means of fortune telling. It is popular mainly in northern regions of Iran (Azarbaijan, Āstārā, Gīlān, Zanjān, Qazvīn, Sāva, Āštīān).

Soup of Abū Dardā (*āš-e Abū Dardā*). In a home where a family member has been ill for a long time on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī, a gruel (see āš) is prepared from ingredients obtained by spoon banging (see above) or begging, and the patient is made to swallow it as a cure. This custom is still quite common in Tehran, Shiraz, and Āštīān.

“Untying” one’s luck (*baḵt-gošāʾī* or *gereh-gošāʾī*). Women who believe their luck to be “tied” because they are still unmarried, have no children, or are ill-treated by their husbands perform a wide range of rituals on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī, especially in villages. For example, a small chain may be put around the neck of an unmarried girl, its ends fastened to a lock suspended

between her breasts; the key is tied under her right foot and a small mirror under her left. When it is dark enough for her to be unrecognizable she walks along the street, stops at an intersection, and asks the first man who passes by to open the lock. The man takes the key, opens the lock, and goes away. After his departure she picks up the mirror, examines her face in it, and goes home. Or an unmarried girl may buy rock candy and seven walnuts from a shop facing the *qebla* (Mecca); she takes them to a potter's workshop, sits at his wheel, and spins herself around seven times, cracking one walnut with each spin. She then gives the sweets and some coins to the potter. In a variation of this procedure in the late afternoon the unmarried girl visits an *ʿaṭṭārī* (drugstore) facing the *qebla* and asks for some useless and worthless (*ʿāṭel o bāṭel*) medicine. As soon as the shopkeeper turns aside to fetch it she runs out of the shop. She repeats this procedure at a second shop. Finally, in the third shop she buys the medicine and brings it home. Just before sunset the medicine is ground to a powder with mortar and pestle, preferably by seven girls who have not yet reached puberty. The powder is poured into a pot, which is then carried up to the flat roof and placed between the open blades of a pair of scissors. In the early morning before dawn the medicine is brought down and poured into some vinegar. Then all participants rub the solution on their faces and "untie" their luck by murmuring *Har ke karda kār-e marā ʿāṭel, man mī-konam jādū-ye ū bāṭel* (approximately: "Whoever has thwarted me I will make his magic worthless"). In Gīlān the *ʿāṭel o bāṭel* medicine contains rue seeds, frankincense, and soda, and the unlucky woman must run out of six shops before buying it at the seventh. In still another ritual, at sunset the mother, brandishing a piece of scorched firewood or a broomstick, chases her unmarried daughter out of the house; the daughter seeks refuge in a house with a front door facing the *qebla*. Or a lucky (*safīd-baḵt*) woman, that is, one who has a husband, takes some thread, a scissors, and a new jug and escorts the unmarried girl to the bank of a stream, where she ties the girl's thumbs together, fills the jug with water, and puts the scissors on the ground beside the girl; then she departs. The first passerby who notices these things picks up the scissors and cuts the thread. The girl then takes the jug of water home, where she inverts a vat (*tagār*) on her head and walks around the yard of the house seven times, saying, "My luck has been untied."

In Gīlān and Khorasan on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī the unmarried girl attaches a padlock to a corner of her *čādor* and sits beneath the minaret of the local mosque. In front of her she places on one side a plate of sweets and on the other the key to the padlock. A passerby picks up the key and opens the

padlock, saying “May God untie your luck!” Then he takes the sweets and departs. The girl stands up and asks another suitable passerby, “Sir, which is the way to the Bāzār-e Saršūr?” (at Rašt) or “the Bālā-ḵīābān?” (at Mašhad).

In Khorasan a woman past the age of marriage (*dam-e baḵt*) or a childless wife takes seven candles, seven walnuts, a pot, and some sweets to the local tannery. She gives the sweets to the tanner, walks with him to the tanning pits, and crushes one of the walnuts with her foot beside each pit. Then she returns by the same path past the pits, and at each pit the tanner lights one of the candles and places it at her feet, while she scoops some tanning fluid into her pot. On her way home she asks the first man or boy whom she encounters “How do you do?” and puts a candy in his mouth. When she reaches home she pours the tanning fluid over her head.

At Zanjān the unmarried girl is taken to one or the town’s covered water reservoirs (*āb-anbār*), and seven knots are tied in her dress while she stands beside the tap. The knots are then untied by a small boy. At Rašt this ritual is performed in a slaughterhouse (for a description of interesting rituals around Isfahan, see Massé, pp. 152-55).

In Shiraz people, especially girls, bathe in a subterranean stream (Ḥawż-e Māhī) near the tomb of Saʿdī in order to “untie” their luck. It is also believed that in this way they wash off all the evil effects of the old year. Some people at Shiraz also make a special sweetmeat (*ḥalwā*), which they distribute among the poor before the main pulpit (*menbar-e Mortażā-ʿAlī*) in the old mosque (Masjed-e Jāmeʿ-e ʿAtīq).

In Šamāḵī unmarried young men used to walk through the streets beating on drums carried under their arms (Olearius, apud Massé, p. 148).

The Pearl Cannon (*tūp-e morvārīd*). A custom once in vogue in Tehran was to seek the intercession of the so-called Pearl Cannon on Čahāršanba-sūrī. This heavy gun, which was cast by the Persian foundryman Esmāʿīl Eṣfahānī in 1233/1800, during the reign of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah (Nafīsī, p. 843), became the focus of many popular myths (Pūr-Kārīm, pp. 16f.). Until the 1300s Š./1920s it stood in the Meydān-e Arg, to which Tehranis used to flock on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī; spinsters and childless or unhappy wives climbed up and sat on the barrel or crawled under it, and mothers even made ill-behaved and troublesome children pass under it in the belief that doing so would cure their naughtiness. These customs died out when the Pearl Cannon was moved to the

Officer's Club (Bāšgāh-e Afsarān) sometime in the 1300s Š./1920s (Āzād, p. 71; Karīmān, p. 169; see also Hedāyat, p. 174). Apparently there was another Pearl Cannon in Tabrīz; girls and women used to fasten their *daḵīl*s (pieces of paper or cloth inscribed with wishes and prayers) to its barrel on the eve of Čahāršanba-sūrī (*Keyhān* 7392, in Pūr-Kārīm, p. 21).

Special settings. In several Persian cities there were formerly special places where certain Čahāršanba-sūrī rituals were performed. Aside from the Meydān-e Arg in Tehran, already mentioned, at Yazd women would gather at an intersection in the *bāzār* where a bell hung from the roof and would try to jump high enough to set the bell pealing. Zoroastrians in Yazd went to the fire temple. At Shiraz women went to the courtyards of the shrine of Šāh(-e) Čerāḡ and the old mosque to have their fortunes told and their luck "untied." They also boiled sweets and left them as votive offerings under a venerable old tree at the house of Sayyed Abū Torāb in the street of the glassblowers. At Mūrgān, a village near Isfahan, spinsters used to climb through a hole in a rock near the village. At Hamadān a spinster would climb onto the (probably Parthian) stone lion and vow to anoint its head with oil if she found a husband; then she would ask the first man who passed by to help her down. At Ahvāz women visit the ʿAbbāsīya shrine and cook pasta soup (Šakūrzāda, pp. 88-91, quoting newspaper reports).

Food on Čahāršanba-sūrī. Families customarily enjoy snacks during the evening and a supper at night after the end of the festivities. The usual snacks are nuts and dried fruits (*ājīl*), including salted hazelnuts, pistachios, almonds, prunes, apricots, and raisins. The supper depends on available local ingredients. In Kermān and Shiraz the main dish is usually *polow* with pasta soup; the longer the pasta strands, the better the chances for a long life for each member of the family. In Māzandarān and Gorgān, Gīlān, and Tehran *sabzī-polow* with fish is most often eaten. At Qazvīn and Garmsār *sabzī-polow* is made with wild herbs from the desert. In Khorasan several kinds of *polow* (with lentils, pasta, herbs, and vetch) are traditionally served.

For a music sample, see Čahāršamba-suri.

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