



ČELLA

ČELLA, term referring to any forty-day period.

i. In Persian folklore.

ii. In Sufism.

i. In Persian Folklore

In terms of the traditional calendar there are three *čellas* in a year. One in the summer, *čella-ye tābestān*, and two in the winter. The summer *čella*, also called *qalb al-asad* begins on 1 Tīr/21 June and ends on 5 Mordād/26 July. It lasts 35 days. As the summer *čella* is not as important as the ones in winter and as it does not even last forty days, I suspect that it is a secondary development created by analogy with them. The winter *čellas* are called *čella-ye bozorg* or *čellabozorga* “the great *čella*” and *čella-ye kūček* or *čellakūceka* “the small *čella*.” The great *čella* begins on the first day of winter, that is 1 Dey/22 December and lasts forty days to 11 Bahman/30 January. The little *čella* begins on 10 Bahman and lasts twenty days (20 days + 20 nights = 40 nights and days, hence *čella*) and ends on the last day of Bahman (30 Bahman/20 February; Donaldson, p. 95; Enjavī, I, p. 18; Massé, *Croyances*, p. 182). The two winter *čellas* are more important than the one in the summer and are associated with special festivities and customs throughout Persia. The coldest days of winter are the last four days of the greater *čella* and the first four days of the lesser



čella and are therefore called *čārčār* “four-four.” It is said that the two *čellas*, which are in fact two brothers called Ahman and Bahman, argue during the period of *čārčār*. The younger brother, Bahman, scorns his older sibling, Ahman, for not having caused a severe enough cold to hurt the people and the flocks. He says to his brother, “If I had as much time as you do, I would have made the weather so cold that unborn colts would freeze in their mother’s womb.” His older brother responds, “You can’t do anything because the spring arrives on your heels” (Enjavī, I, p. 3). *Čella kūčeka* is followed by a ten- or seven-day period in the month of Esfand called variously, *sarmā pīr-e zan*, *kāla pīr-e zan*, *čella pīr-e zan*, or *bard al-‘ajūz* (Enjavī, I, pp. 2-4; II, p. 6). In Classical Persian texts this period is sometimes called *rūzgār-e ‘ajūz* or *sarmā-ye pīr zan* “the old woman’s cold,” and there is a story according to which the days of the *sarmā-ye pīr zan* are days in which all of the people of ‘Ād were destroyed by God, save one old woman, who was left to mourn them. Each of these seven days of the *bard al-‘ajūz* have a specific name (see Bīrūnī, pp. 262-63; idem, *Ātār*, pp. 254-56, tr. Sachau, pp. 244-46; Şafīpūrī, s.v. ‘-j-z). It is believed that there was an old woman whose camels were not impregnated by the end of the winter, and as camels only mate during the cold, she went to Moses or, according to other versions, to the Prophet Moḥammad and asked for an extension of the cold winter days so that her camels might be covered. Her wish was granted, and that is why this period is called *sarmā-ye pīr zan* or *bard al-‘ajūz* (Enjavī, I, pp. 3-4; Massé, p. 182).

The night of the greater *čella* is called *šab-e čella* or *šab-e yaldā* and is the occasion of special ceremonies. In most parts of Persia the extended family gather around and enjoy a fine dinner. Many varieties of fruits and sweetmeats especially prepared or kept for this night are served. In some areas it is believed that forty varieties of edibles should be served during the ceremony of the night of *čella* (Enjavī, I, p. 130). The most typical is watermelon especially kept from summer for this ceremony. It is believed that consuming watermelons on the night of *čella* will ensure the health and well-being of the individual during the months of summer by protecting him from falling victim to excessive heat or disease produced by hot humors. After dinner the older individuals entertain the others by telling them tales and anecdotes (Enjavī, I, pp. 18-27). Another favorite and prevalent pastime of the night of *čella* is divination by the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfez (*fāl-e Ḥāfez*, q.v.). It is believed that one should not divine by the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfez more than three times, however, or the poet may get angry (Pāyanda, pp. 180-82; Enjavī, I, p. 126).



The night of *čella* is a magically potent night. Its magic however, is primarily associated with eating. For instance, in Khorasan there is a belief that whoever eats carrots, pears, pomegranates, and green olives will be protected against the harmful bite of insects, especially scorpions. Eating garlic on this night protects one against pains in the joints. Placing one's mouth near a donkey's ear and whispering into its ear is certain to cure any ailment, while mixing camel fat and mare's milk and burning them will protect from insects the place where the smoke from this concoction penetrates (Šakūrzāda, p. 227).

Another common practice on the night of *čella* involves young engaged men. These send a platter containing seven kinds of fruits and a variety of gifts to their fiancées on this night. In some areas the girl and her family return the favor by sending gifts back for the young man (Enjavī, II, p. 154; Šakūrzāda, p. 228).

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ii. In Sufism

Āella (Ar. *arbaʿīnīya*) is a period of forty days' retreat and fasting observed by Sufis. Koranic sanction for the practice is drawn from 7:142, where reference is made to a vigil of forty nights imposed on Moses. His vigil is said to have consisted of the whole of the month of *Ḍu'l-qa'da* and the first ten days of *Ḍu'l-ḥejja*; it was therefore regarded as desirable to observe a *Āella* during this period and to emerge from retreat on the Festival of Sacrifice (*ʿĪd al-Azḥā*; Sohravardī, p. 132). Discussions of the *Āella* in Sufi literature additionally make reference to the Prophet's habit of seeking seclusion in the period leading up to the beginning of revelation, although no precise duration has been recorded for his retreats. Also seen as relevant is a tradition attributed to the Prophet: "Whoever worships God sincerely for forty days, the springs of wisdom shall well up from his heart to his tongue" (*"Dāya,"* p. 281). The general property of the number forty, indicating completeness and maturity, is sometimes invoked, particularly in its application to the divine kneading of the clay of man's form. Thus Sohravardī (d. 632/1234) establishes a connection between the forty days in which man's physical form was molded and the forty days of the *Āella* by suggesting that each day of the kneading was equivalent to the interposition of a veil between man and God, while each day of the *Āella* corresponds to the removal of a veil (Sohravardī, p. 124).

The earliest handbooks of Sufi practice make no mention of the *Āella* in their discussions of retreat. The earliest full exposition of the matter is found in Sohravardī's *ʿAwāref al-maʿāref*, in an account that was repeated or paraphrased by many later authors. The purpose of the *Āella* is specified as a permanent change of inward state, lasting long after one's emergence from retreat, not a mere interval in a life of heedlessness. It is therefore regarded as mandatory at the beginning of the spiritual path. According to certain authorities (e.g., Sofyān Tawrī, d. 161/778, quoted in Sohravardī, p. 130), the *Āella* should be repeated annually, and Moḥammad b. Kaḥfīf (d. 372/982) is said to have observed four *Āellas* a year (Hojvīrī, p. 57; tr., p. 51).

The one embarking on a *Āella* should make a complete ablution, don clean clothes and enter a room totally impervious to sunlight and sound. Throughout the forty days he should remain completely alone, although if a novice he may be visited once a week or every ten days by his spiritual guide, and emerge from his retreat only to participate in congregational prayers;



failure to pray in congregation was seen by Sohrawardī as liable to lead to mental disorder (p. 130).

Great emphasis is placed on rigorous fasting. Moses is held to have abstained completely from all food and drink during his vigil, and the Sufi in his *čella* is encouraged to follow his example as closely as his powers permit. Thus a certain Zāhed Ḳalīfa of Abhar is said to have contented himself with a single almond once every forty days (Sohrawardī, p. 131). While in retreat, the Sufi should be engaged constantly in *dekr*, either silently or, as a Kobrawī text puts it, “softly like the cooing of a dove” (Bāḳarzī, p. 319). *Dekr* may be supplemented by other devotional practices such as the recitation of the Koran and of litanies (*awrād*). Sayf-al-Dīn Bāḳarzī (p. 295) held weeping in the course of a *čella* to be meritorious. One should sleep only when overwhelmed by fatigue, and even then remain in a sitting position, resisting the temptation to recline.

A special variation of the *čella*, found first in Khorasan and then in India, was the *čella-ye ma’kūs*, the “inverted *čella*,” which consisted of suspending oneself upside down for forty days (Schimmel, pp. 346, 358; cf. Meyhanī, I, pp. 30-31).

Although any dark and isolated place may serve as the setting for a *čella*, Sufi hospices came to include special facilities for the purpose, known as *čella-kānačellas* in hollow tree trunks (Kissling, p. 237).

Of the Sufi orders that have flourished in Persia at varying times, the Qāderīya, the Kobrawīya, and the Ḳalwatīya have placed special emphasis on the *čella*. Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī by contrast opposed it—and, indeed, the practice of retreat in general—as a reprehensible innovation (*beḳ’at*), valid only for the followers of pre-Koranic revelations (Aflākī, II, p. 793). The Naqšbandīs and, at the opposite pole from them, the antinomian Ḳākšar, have also disdained the practice for a variety of reasons (Şafī, pp. 23-24; Gramlich, p. 74). The *čella* appears to have vanished completely from the life of the Sufi orders in modern Persia (Gramlich, pp. 454-55).

It may finally be noted that the word *čella* has passed into Turkish as *čile* (*çile*), designating in modern usage a prolonged ordeal of any kind (Gölpınarlı, pp. 80-82).

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