



FESTIVALS X. IN AFGHANISTAN

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Festive ceremonies in Afghanistan mark special religious days and major events in individual life cycles. Few are formally organized, being celebrated primarily to keep family bonds strong and community ties congenial.

Religious festivals. According to popular belief among the Shi'ites in Afghanistan, Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb (q.v.) became the fourth caliph on Nawrōz/Nowrūz, the Persian New Year's Day, 35/656. Thus, at Nawrōz/Nowrūz (21 March; 1 Ḥamal in the Afghan solar calendar), thousands of pilgrims gather in Mazār-e Šarīf, capital of Balk province in northern Afghanistan, at the Rawza-ye Šāh-e Welāyat, where 'Alī is popularly believed to be interred. This is also connected with the famous Gol-e sorḡ (red rose) festival, when the desert area suddenly blossoms. Thousands travel there in the hope of seeing this amazing display. The festival begins on Nawrōz/Nowrūz and lasts for about two months (*Gazetteer of Afghanistan* IV, pp. 411-12).

The festivities open with the raising of the religious banner, symbolizing the blossoming of renewed hopes for the coming year. A great fair in the gardens surrounding the shrine includes ferris wheels, storytellers, games of chance,



and wrestling bouts. The famous northern Afghan game of *bozkašī* (q.v.) is widely featured at many northern districts, provincial towns, and villages. *Bozkašī* involves a vast undetermined number of horsemen on opposing teams using a decapitated goat to score goals (Azoy, p. 91; L. Dupree, pp. 218-21). Food and sweet stalls abound with seasonal specialties such as fried fish and crisp pastry soaked in sugar syrup (*jelābī*; N. Dupree, 1967, pp. 54-56). A fruit compote called *haft-meywa/mīva*, made of walnuts, almonds, pistachios, red and green raisins, dried apricots, and the fruit of the oleaster tree (*senjet*), is also served at this time of year. *Samanak/samanū*, a rich desert made of the juice of sprouting wheat and flour and which takes more than two days to prepare, is also a spring speciality often served for Nawrōz /Nowrūz.

Similar fairs take place in Kabul at the Zīārat-e Saḳī, where, according to popular legend, the cloak of the Prophet was kept for a few days on its journey from Badaḳšān to Qandahār in the 18th century (N. Dupree, 1972, p. 140), and at Zīārat-e Šāh-e Šahīd, where legend recounts that an early Islamic commander lost his life (N. Dupree, 1972, p. 198).

Other religious festivals in Afghanistan mirror those of most Muslim countries, but there are no set ceremonial performances. Most are popularly celebrated by family outings, picnics, new clothes, culinary specialties and games, plus much spirited socializing among family and friends. Īd-e feṭr (also called Īd-e Ramažān; Pashto: *Kamkay aḳtar* or *Kūčṅay aḳtar*, “little holiday”) joyously celebrates the end of Ramažān, the month fasting. Festivities last for three days.

The yearly pilgrimage to Mecca during the last month of the Muslim calendar (Ḍu’l-ḥejja) ends with the Feast of Sacrifice, (Īd-e qorbān; Ar. Īd al-aḏḥā; Pashto: *Loy aḳtar*). It commemorates God’s command to Abraham to slaughter a sheep in place of his son Ishmael (or Isaac) through the ritualized slaying of animals. Sheep, goats, cattle, and camels are sacrificed, one third of the meat going to the family, one-third to the kins, and the rest distributed among the poor. Other gifts may be exchanged as well.

The day before Īd-e qorbān, the day the Prophet Moḥammad preached his farewell sermon on the plain of ‘Arafāt is also remembered, but without special ceremony. Īd-e qorbān festivities last four days, during which family and friends exchange visits; but the days are spent less exuberantly than those



of ʿĪd-e feṭr.

The birth (Mawlūd-e šarīf or ʿĪd-e mīlād-e Nabī) and death dates of the Prophet are commemorated on the 12th and 13th of Rabīʿ I, respectively. ʿAšūrāʾ (q.v.) is celebrated on the tenth day of Moḥarram in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn, the grandson of the Prophet Moḥammad, along with his small band of followers at Karbalāʾ in 680. Although it is primarily a Shiʿite festival, it is also widely observed in predominately Sunni Afghanistan. On this day *šīr-berenj* (rice pudding), *šola-ye gūštī* (meat boiled with short rice and split peas), *ḥalwā* (thick, mildly sweet dessert made from farina flour spiced with cardamom), and sherbert are distributed to both the rich and the poor.

Some households, chiefly in urban areas, celebrate Šab-e barāt, usually on 15 Šaʿbān, when the Archangel Michael is believed to make out culinary bills of exchange (*barāt*) for families to draw on during the coming year. A variety of rich and delicious dishes are prepared for immediate family members as samples of what they hope will be granted to them in the coming year. Much setting off of various types of fire crackers, including miniature cannons, also marks this evening.

Communal and family festivals. The celebrating of individual rites of passage vary from group to group, but some similar patterns may be noted. Birth is greeted more joyously for boys than girls and often includes the firing of guns and beating of drums. Food is distributed to the poor. Three days following the birth the child may receive its official name which, together with *aḏān*, is recited in its ear by a member of the clergy or by a close relative, such as an uncle. Others prefer to name the child during the sixth night festivities held actually on the seventh night after the birth, when relatives and friends bring gifts to the infant. There is much singing and dancing, especially among the women.

Boys undergo circumcision (*kaṭna kardan*; Pashto: *sonnat kawel*) at about seven years of age with a feast and often special sports events, including *bozkašī* in northern Afghanistan for broader community participation, especially if the family is affluent or politically important (Azoy, p. 43). Puberty among girls goes relatively unremarked except in Nūrestān, where newly pubescent girls are isolated in menstrual huts. In some Pushtun areas a special



sweet made from unrefined molasses (Pers: *gūr*; Pashto: *gōra*) is shared among close female relatives.

Engagements and marriages for both boys and girls are celebrated most elaborately with a whole series of ceremonies stretching over months in which foods and sweets play a major role (L. Dupree, pp. 197-205). These begin with the *lafz/labz gereftan* (or *bala-borān*) “making preliminary agreement” when the families give their consent, and later at the *šīrīnī gereftan* (in Persia: *šīrīnī-koṛān*, i.e., celebrating the consent with “partaking of sweets”), which seals the agreement and is publicly announced. The wedding itself takes place over three days with great ceremony and much feasting (Doubleday, p. 209). The Šab-e kena (Night of henna; Pashto: *de kīnay špā*), in which the bride’s friends decorate the palms of the bride with a paste made from henna (in Persia: *henā-bandān*), is still popular. A sister or a cousin carrying a tray of henna precedes the bride as she walks toward the groom. The traditional ritual of breaking a conical sugarloaf (*qand*) with a ceremonial axe over the head of the bride at the *lafz/labz gereftan* is rarely performed at the present time.

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