



SOFRA

SOFRA, in the most common usage of the term, a piece of cloth that is spread on the floor, and on which dishes of food are placed at meal times. Since sitting at dining tables has become increasingly common nowadays, the word may also refer to an ordinary tablecloth. Apart from this usual meaning in Persian, the word *sofra* has become associated with a number of religious, ceremonial (such as the *sofra-ye 'aqd*, the marriage ceremony spread; and of the [Haft Sin](#) spread of the Nowruz celebrations), and magical practices during which food is either served or put out for display.

Not only Muslims, but also Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians observe the custom of offering *sofras* to various holy figures (Boyce, pp. 62-65; Soroudi, pp. 466-73; Jamzadeh and Mills, pp. 36-40). Therefore, it may be tempting to connect the practice as a relic of pre-Islamic Iranian traditions (Soroudi, pp. 471-72; Shirazi, pp. 303-3). This is especially appealing in the case of *sofrasabzi*, which is offered in Yazd and Kermān for the purpose of securing an ill person's recovery (Boyce pp. 105-106, n. 14). Indeed the practice has been compared, from a comparative perspective, among the Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews, and Muslims, and it has been suggested that the Jewish custom of *sofra-ye Elyāhu hanavi*, "the *sofra* of Elijah the Prophet," as well as the various ritual *sofras* of the Persian Muslims, have pre-Islamic Iranian origins (Soroudi, pp. 463-68). Two reasons may be offered for positing this relationship. First, because the *sofra sabzi* among Iranian Muslims requires the services of an old Zoroastrian woman, and second, because the seven food items which are placed on the *sofra*, must—like the items placed on a *haft sin* spread—begin with the letter



sin (Massé, p. 299). Moreover, striking similarities in objects and foodstuffs placed on the Muslim and Zoroastrian *sofras* have been observed. However, the process and participation rules differ significantly among these groups (Jamzadeh and Mills, p. 34). Therefore, although one might be tempted to posit a genetic relationship between the *sofra* practice among the Zoroastrians, Jews, and Muslims of Iran because of the long history of mutual cultural influence and contact among these Iranian populations, one must also bear in mind that the custom of food offering to supernatural beings is so well-attested in different religious and cultural traditions that assuming its Iranian form to be originally Zoroastrian, and positing a scenario of diffusion from Zoroastrian practice into the practices of the Iranian Jews and Muslims may be problematical. Formal features of the custom are bound to have crossed ethnic and religious boundaries over the millennia of sustained contact among different Iranian populations; but establishing a “genetic” connection among the forms of this practice, and suggesting that two of these groups “borrowed” their *sofras* from the other would require a detailed comparative study before it can be convincing.

In general, *sofras* may be divided into three kinds: the “presentational,” the “votive,” and the “gratulatory.” The most common forms of presentational *sofras* are those of *haft sin*, and wedding (*sofra-ye ‘aqd*, see Jamzadeh and Mills pp. 37-40). The votive *sofras* are offered as supplicatory offerings to various holy figures for securing a favor. The gratulatory *sofra* is offered after the supplicant has received the help for which she offered the *sofra* in the first place. All but one of the hallowed figures to which *sofras* are offered are female and even in the case of the youthful Shi‘ite martyr, Abu‘l-Faẓl (see ‘ABBĀS b. ‘ALI) who is often referred to by his epithet of Qamar-e Bani Hāšem—those who attend the *sofra* are always female. Although the gender exclusivity of the *sofra* is said to be limited to rural areas by some investigators (Jamzadeh and Mills, pp. 25, 34, and 25 n.3), the existing Iranian ethnographic sources generally agree that no adult males can attend the ceremony or partake of the food. If they do, they will be afflicted by various misfortunes or physical impairments. The only exception to the rule is that women may take some food to their male relatives from a *sofra-ye Abu‘l-Faẓl*. Alternatively, when the *sofra* is offered for the purpose of curing a male patient, he may come into contact with the food. It is possible however, for a man to undertake the expenses of a *sofra-ye Abu‘l-Faẓl*.

Some of the *sofras* are associated with stories, poems, or sermons, which have



to be recited at some stage during the presentation. The most famous of these is the *sofra-ye Bibi Sehšanba* (Lady of Tuesday), which is offered on the last Tuesday (*sehšanba*) in the lunar month of Ša'bān, and of which a good English description is available (Jamzadeh and Mills, pp. 43-44, 56-59; cf. Massé, pp. 302-303). Bibi Sehšanba is said to have been a holy woman who was born, married, and died on the same day, a Tuesday. Since Bibi Sehšanba is associated with two other saintly women, this offering is also known by their name, as the *sofra* of Bibi ḤOur and Bibi Nur, who are said to be two of the Prophet Moḥammad's daughters (Šakurzāda, pp. 40-44). The stew or *āš* that is prepared for this *sofra* is quite efficacious. The time of making this offering is also flexible, except it may not be offered in the lunar months of Moḥarram and Šafar. The manner of preparation is as follows: On a Monday night (*šab-e sehšanba*), a clean *sofra* is spread out with plates of sifted flour, sugar, salt, dry roasted chickpeas, raisins. An antimony dispenser (*sorma-dān*), a cup of vinegar, prayer implement (*mohr, tasbiḥ, jānamāz*), a mirror, a Qur'an, a knife, and all other legumes and vegetables that may be needed for preparing the *āš* are included. Candles are lit and placed on the two sides of the mirror, and a lamp is placed in the middle of the *sofra*. Women who can't afford to sponsor such a *sofra*, may light a bit of oiled cotton at this time and place it on some other woman's *sofra*. The woman who is offering the *sofra* makes her ablutions, and performs a prayer of supplication (*namāz-e ḥājat*) by the *sofra*, then locks the room and leaves. None may enter the room until the next day, and the woman must fast until then. On Tuesday morning, the woman enters the room after making her ablutions, and if her request has been accepted, notices the palm print of the saints on the surface of the flour or the salt. She then proceeds to bake some of the flour into bread, and uses the rest to mix with the other ingredients for the *āš*. Once the food is ready, a knowledgeable woman recites verses from the Qur'an, while a prepubescent girl who must be named Fatima (Fāṭema), is made to sit at the *sofra* facing the direction of the Mecca. She spoons some of the food into an empty plate while the verses are being recited. This dish is later mixed with the rest of the *āš*. After the recitation of the Qur'an, a bit of oiled cotton is lit on a brick in the name of the twelve Imams, and once the cotton is burnt, the food is served among the attending women (Šakurzāda, pp. 44-7, and Shirazi, pp. 298-309 for details of this *sofra* and others). Only women may attend this ceremony, and if a man violates this taboo he will become blind. Pregnant women are excluded for fear that if their baby is a boy, he will be born without eyesight.



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