



ČĀVOŠ

ČĀVOŠ or ČĀVŪŠ, originally Turkish word (Kāšġārī, I, p. 307; Radloff, III, col. 1935; Doerfer, III, pp. 35-38) used in classical Persian texts with the meanings of 1. army commander; 2. master of ceremony or person in charge of the servants; 3. caravan leader; or, more specifically, 4. a guide on the road to Mecca or holy shrines, and who would call on people to take him on as a guide on the pilgrimage. (For the first meaning see: Moḥammad b. Monawwar, p. 378; Amīr Moʿezzī, p. 305; Kāqānī, p. 271; Neẓāmī, *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn*, p. 297, and Šaraf-nāma, in *Kollīyāt*, p. 906; for the second: Anwarī, I, pp. 39, 409; Kāqānī, pp. 177, 853; Neẓāmī, *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn*, p. 12; Mawlawī, *Matnawī* III, p. 45, IV, p. 502, and *Kollīyāt-e Šams* V, p. 293; and for the third: *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ*, ed. Moʿīn, II, p. 617 and n.; Moḥammad Pādšāh, II, p. 1407; Saʿdī, *Ġazalīyāt*, p. 327). In this article the fourth meaning of *čāvoš* and the customs associated with it will be discussed.

The function of the *čāvoš* was to induce people to go on pilgrimage to Mecca or the shrines of the imams in southern Iraq and at Mašhad and to guide them there and back. For this purpose he relied upon skillful recitation and chanting of poems in praise of the Prophet or the imams and by stressing the spiritual merit of the pilgrimage. This chanting or recitation was called *čāvoš-kʿānī*. Occasionally a *čāvoš* would recite the *ʿaḏān* (call to prayer) or chant dirges and elegies in ceremonies of mourning.

The origins of the *čāvoš-kʿānī* are no longer known, however, it has been thought to bear a certain similarity to the Bukharan custom reported by Naršaḳī (pp. 32-33, 209-10) of mourning the death of Sīāvoš with songs and the



annual pilgrimage of the magi to the place he was believed to be buried, which might point to a pre-Islamic origin (‘Anāṣerī, p. 164).

A *čāvoš* would announce an imminent pilgrimage by hoisting a special banner in a public place, for instance, the front gate of a mosque, a public drinking place (*saqqā-kāna*), or the village square. The banners used by the *čāvoš* were mainly triangular and green and bore pictures of the Ka’ba or the shrine of one of the imams accompanied by appropriate poems. To create the proper atmosphere he would chant poems in praise of the Prophet or the imams and stress the spiritual merit of the pilgrimage. Sometimes, carrying the banner over his shoulder, he would walk or ride from place to place singing his songs and encouraging people to go with him. In some parts of Persia today, for instance, at Sangsar (now Mahdīšahr) north of Semnān, when the time for pilgrimage approaches, a *čāvoš* rides through the streets, sometimes knocking on people’s doors to announce the pilgrimage (‘Anāṣerī, p. 139). Although *čāvoš-kānī* was normally in the form of a monody it could also be in the form of a dialogue between the *čāvoš* and his assistants and novices, and often the pilgrims and the people who were seeing them off joined in the singing. Sometimes younger *čāvošes* asked the more senior *čāvoš* to start a chant and they would follow it. This was a sign of respect for the older master.

The *čāvoš* would continue chanting his poems during the journey, at the shrine, and during the return journey, there being special poems for the different stages (see ‘Anāṣerī, pp. 140, 143, 149, 159; Dehḡodā, *Maqālāt* I, p. 275; Hedāyat, pp. 109-10; Katīrā’ī, p. 85). During the journey to the shrine he would recite poems glorifying the saint and tell stories about the wonders surrounding him. Sometimes, however, particularly when approaching the shrine of Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā’, the poems were in the form of dirges commemorating his suffering and martyrdom. In addition to his spiritual tasks it fell to the *čāvoš* to see to the material needs of the pilgrims in the course of the journey, such as accommodation or making sure that the caravan reached each resting place in time. On the return journey the *čāvoš* would go ahead of the caravan to inform relatives and friends of the pilgrims’ return so they could arrange appropriate welcoming ceremonies. For this he received presents and money. In ancient times the *čāvošes* did not expect to be remunerated by the pilgrims, but later they came to expect maintenance on the journey, as well as presents of clothes. To obtain this they might even engage in rivalry with other *čāvošes*.

The success of the *čāvoš* in persuading people to join him on the journey



depended mainly on the quality of his *čāvoš-kvānī*, but he also had to have a reputation for piety, as well as familiarity with the shrines and the roads leading there and the rites and prayers associated with them. The *čāvoš* therefore had to have a sweet and persuasive voice and an extensive repertoire from which to choose poems that suited the particular goal of the pilgrimage, as well as ability to improvise. Achieving these skills required a great deal of learning and practice. The *čāvoš* would start his training as a novice (*nowčā*) and assistant (*šāgerd*; ‘Anāšerī, p. 136) to a *čāvoš*. Though he might rely on notes to recite poems, still he had to memorize a great number of poems, and learn the special tunes and modes used in *čāvoš-kvānī*. But he must also learn about caravan routes, the holy places, and the customs of the profession in order to perform his special function well. A successful student would finally use his own banner as a sign that he was an accomplished *čāvoš*. The *čāvoš* was expected to have pupils. Sometimes, the job of a *čāvoš* was inherited by his children.

The *čāvoš* wore no special garb, except if he was a *sayyed*, or descendant of the Prophet, when he would wear a green scarf round his neck; otherwise, he would wear a broad black sash (*šāl*) around his chest.

The poems used in *čāvoš-kvānī* were gathered in special collections, where the authors’ names are usually not given. The *čāvošes* often improvised by changing or adding to the poems, and some wrote their own poems. Occasionally the poems are colloquial and technically of poor quality. The contents of the poems are mostly of religious nature, though sometimes more practical subjects are included, such as the difficulties of the journey, the harshness of the officials on the borders, and problems associated with obtaining permits (‘Anāšerī, pp. 167-69).

The poems used by *čāvošes* have not yet been systematically studied, though they no doubt contain interesting information, both geographic, folkloristic, and linguistic.



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