KĀKAGI

KĀKAGI. The term *kāka* and its cognate *kākagi* are common words in Afghan Persian (or Dari) and are roughly equivalent to the well-known Persian words, *ʿayyār* and *ʿayyāri*, and *javānmard* and *javānmardi* (see also Loewen, 2001). A kāka is a vagabond or vigilante characterized by the ideals of chivalry, courage, generosity, and loyalty. Kākagi refers to the customs and characteristics of a kāka. The word kāka is not to be confused with *kākā*, though the two likely have the same root. In Afghan Persian kākā means "paternal uncle" but is also used as an honorific, reflecting the idea of "sir." Similarly, terms such as *bibi kuku,* an honorific for a woman of respect, or *lālā ku*, an honorific for a respected master, reflect the notion of someone who is considered to be of superior status than others.

In Afghanistan today the term kākagi is interchangeably used with javānmardi. Positively, a kāka is understood as one who heroically opposes all forms of oppression and self-sacrificially guards a self-designated area from hooligans and cares for the weak, widows and orphans. However, not all kākas reflect the heroic and self-sacrificing ideals of javānmardi. The word kāka is also used for the fancy-dressed, somewhat cheeky young male—a "smart aleck" in English colloquialism. Thirdly, kākagi, more specifically *kākagerāʾi*, reflects the darker side of kākagi and describes the rough bully or prowling bandit and cavalier hooligan (see, e.g., Talāš, p. 12).

Ḡolām-Moḥammad Ḡobār (d. 1978) introduces the concept of kākagi in his brief overview of the Sistān area of southeastern Iran. Ḡobār links the movement of *ʿayyārān* who banded together against the Abbasid Arabs in the

9th century with later uprisings against despotic rulers of the Persio-Islamic world and claims that from the 14th century onwards, following the Mongol invasions (1219-50s), independent vigilantes were known as kākas in the Kabul region and as *javān* (youth) in the Kandahar region (Ḡobār, pp. 89-91).

No academic study has been done on the term kākagi, though modern Afghan writers frequently and idealistically refer to the kākagi phenomenon in histories and prose literature. What is known is that the words were of common usage in the 19th and 20th century, equivalent to the Iranian term, *luṭi*, also from the 19th century (see ʿAYYĀRĀN), and they continue to be used today.

In Afghanistan, the term kāka is equated with ʿayyār, as evidenced in Ḡolām Ḥaydar's survey of the ʿayyārān of Afghanistan in his book with the telling title, *ʿAyyārān wa kākahā-ye Ḵorāsān-zamin dar gostara-ye tāriḵ* (The ayyars and kakas in Khorasan throughout history). The kākas of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were well organized and ranked in hierarchical order. After initiation passages, a novice kāka graduated to the rank of *kāka-bānka*, and then to *ferq*, followed by *aflāk* and *samāwāt*, the final stage of kākagi (Ḥaydar, pp. 21-22). An anecdote from ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Khan's era (r. 1880-1901) reflects the belligerent nature of kākagi as well as the repressive rule of ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān. Fighting between two kākas of the aflāk rank and two of the samāwāt rank had thrown the entire city of Kabul into chaos. The king ordered all kākas to gather together in an open field, where he had the four leading kākas arrested and then banned the rest from congregating (Ḥaydar, p. 22).

The part of 19th- and early 20th-century Kabul where the kākas set up their areas (*maḥalla*s) of rule is known today as Šahr-e Kohna (Old Kabul), south of the Kabul River. Areas such as Šor Bāzār, Čendawal, Čawk, and well-known alleys such Koča-ye Bābā Ḵodi and Koča-ye ʿAli-Reżā Khan and Koča-ye Āhangarā were places influenced by kākas during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Akrām ʿOṯmān, 2006, pp. 29-30).

Two 20th-century Afghan prose writers have popularized the notion of kākagi in Afghan society. ʿAbd-al-Ḡafur Brišnā (d. 1972) is a key figure in the cultural history of Afghanistan, known for his broad spectrum of cultural skills—music, poetry, short story writing, and fine art. In his collection of fables, he has recorded the tale "*Kāka Awrang wa Kāka Badraw*," which was related to the poet laureate for Moḥammad Ẓāher Shah (r. 1933-73). Brišnā

recounts how a certain court official, Faqir Aḥmad Khan, who spanned the eras of ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Khan and Ḥabib-Allāh Khan (r. 1901-19), related various legends of the kākas of Kabul from 1854 onwards to King Ḥabibollāh, who was still grieving his father's death. This particular tale is of the standard vigilante type, portraying the rivalry between an elderly kāka from Old Kabul and a younger kāka from Deh-Afḡānān, which in the 19th century was not a part of Kabul city (Brišnā, pp. 77-88). Brišnā's framing the entire story in the milieu of the ancient *Šāh-nāma* warriors is indicative of how kākas were understood to continue the heroism of Rostam and his sort.

Akrām ʿOṯmān (b. 1937), a well-known short story writer of Afghanistan, has written a trilogy of highly appraised short stories which have popularized the ideals of kākagi for urban Afghans: "*Mardāra qawl as*" (Real men keep their word, 1976), "*Waqteke nay-hā gol mekonand*" (When the reeds bloom, 1977), and "*Mard wa nā-mard*" (The hero and the coward, 1982, in ʿOṯmān, 1988, 4th printing, 2006; English tr., 2005. In the story, "When the reeds bloom," ʿOṯmān presents the traditional kākagi culture through the life of the protagonist, the blacksmith, Kāka Akbar Dast Quḡ. The description *dast-quḡ* (hand + hot charcoal) refers to thick-skinned, tough hands. Kākas are said to have frequently proven their valor by holding a handful of hot glowing charcoal in the palm of their hand until the charcoal burnt to ashes, without showing any pain or uttering a word. In Kandahar, such kākas were called *pā-ye luč* (bare-footed), who apparently dared to walk on burning coals with bare feet. Set in the times when ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Khan was only a prince, the story highlights Kāka Akbar's sense of loyalty and devotion to the ideals of javānmardi and how he is victimized by the self-seeking and power-hungry ruler of the day.

A third, less-known Afghan writer, Moḥammad Ṣadiq Talāš (b. 1956), former director of the Department of Publishing, Kabul University, has recently written a novelette, *Āʾin-e kākagi* (Customs of heroes, 2002), on the legendary lives of kākas in the Čahārdeh district (present-day southwest Kabul) of nearly a hundred years ago. Juxtaposing what he considers to be the characteristics of true kākagi (humility, generosity, and courage) with pseudo-kākagi (brash hooliganism), the author frames his story in the early 20th century, when refugees from Bukhara fled across the Oxus River to Afghanistan.

Obtaining a public reputation, a good name, or a mark in society (*nām o nešān*) was a fundamental driving force in the phenomenon of kākagi, as it is in ʿayyāri, *luṭigerāʾi,* (*luṭigari*), and javānmardi and among other heroic activity of the Persio-Islamic world.

Kākas maintained a strong sense of egalitarianism and esprit de corps among themselves. A kāka had the notion that he was a continuation of the heroic warrior of the past and hence was responsible to serve as a protector and patron of the weak in his community. He acted as a Robin Hood figure, taking the law into his own hands, and because of his intimidating strength, he needed no higher authority than himself to enforce what he considered to be morally correct. This resonates with the idealized heroic warriors of the pre-Islamic Mazdaean uprising who stole from the rich to serve the poor. Ideally, a kāka saw it as his responsibility to establish justice and equity in his community. In reality, however, the situation was often far from being as ideal. These kākas were often nothing more than knaves and thieves and heirs of the earlier ʿayyārs of Persio-Islamic world. Many kākas linked themselves with local or state politics for protection in their criminal activities. Depending on their moods and dispositions, they either terrorized neighborhoods or, conversely, served as local vigilantes, valiantly protecting the poor and widows and guarding their local quarter (*maḥalla*) against thieves. Frequently the kāka's rule over his neighborhood and service to his community were merely a cover for opportunism and a means to extend his power.

Each kāka had his group of followers and his designated area of rule. If an upcoming kāka wanted to set up his own territory, he donned a special turban with one end (*šaf*) hanging down low to his knees, to signify his unique identity. He strolled through the city with a special kākagi gait and deliberately strutted passed other kākas and their cronies, who sat "at their gates" or in their shops. If a rival kāka simply uttered a sound, it was seen as a challenge to fight, and so at an appointed time and place, a public battle ensued. If the novice kāka won the battle, he was publicly recognized as a kāka and could begin his own group. If he lost the battle or was injured, he could never again be part of the kākagi culture.

Those who voluntarily joined a kāka group had to undergo strict initiation rites, including night paroling in cemeteries and helping the vulnerable. Kākas were also wrestlers, swimmers, long-distant walkers, club-fighters and armed with clubs and daggers (guns in the early modern period). They normally supported themselves with their own trades (see Ḡobār, pp. 90-91).

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