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KUSA

KUSA (MPers. **kōsag*, Arabicized *kusaj* "a man with little or no beard, beardless"), a carnival character known to the medieval and modern folklore of central and western Persia. The celebration of the Kusa festival (*rokub al-kusaj*, *barnešastan-e kusa* "the riding of the thin-bearded") is reported by early Islamic authors (Masʿudi, sec. 1299; Ṯaʿālebi, p. 647; Biruni, 1923, p. 224; idem, 1954, I, p. 264; idem, 1983, pp. 256-57; Gardizi, p. 243; Šahmardān b. Abiʾl-Ḵayr, p. 39; Zakariyāʾ Qazvini, p. 79; Demašqi, tr., p. 406) and some more recent, secondary texts. A Zoroastrian New Persian work translated by Ervad Manekji Unvala (p. 208) seems to be based on Islamic sources.

The custom was particular of Fārs and Iraq and was still practiced in Shiraz in Abu Rayḥān Biruni's days (Biruni, 1983, p. 256). It was performed during the spring festival on the first day of the month of Āḏar, which, according to the sources mentioned above, in the Sasanian period (*akāsere*, *ba ruzgār-eḵosravān*) fell immediately after the Farvardagān days, when the Sun entered the sign of Ram. On this day an ugly, thin-bearded (also: funny, old, one-eyed, toothless) man, dressed in rags, appeared in the streets riding a donkey or a mule (Demašqi, a cow), holding a crow in one hand and a fan in the other. He bade farewell to the winter and announced the coming of spring, demanding money for his good news. In spite of a still cold weather, Kusa pretended to be hot, fanning himself with his fan and exclaiming *garmā! garmā*! ("warmth! warmth!") in Persian (Masʿudi, sec. 1299; Demašqi, tr., p. 406). In order to feel warm actually, he drank wine, ate warming food (chestnuts, garlic, fat meat), and rubbed some ointments on his body. The people threw water, snow, and

ice on him and he, by his turn, threw some muddy, staining matter at those who refused him a gift.

What is described in these old sources seems to be an institutionalized urban custom. The role of Kusa is hereditary (Biruni, 1923, p. 224) and lucrative; a tax (*żaribat*) is imposed on it (Biruni, 1983, pp. 256-57), andit is subject to strict regulations. Kusa is allowed to circulate only until the afternoon prayer (*namāz-e digar*); if caught afterwards, he may be beaten. According to some (e.g., Šahmardān, Unvala), Kusa was accompanied by mounted guards (*ḡolāms*) of the local ruler, who would help him to collect a "tax" from the shopkeepers. The income was divided in a fixed way between the king, the guards, and Kusa. Demašqi mentions a definite number of days (seven) during which Kusa is allowed to act. The festival gave occasion to revelry and violence. According to Šahmardān, the guards accompanying Kusa would plunder and destroy the shops whose owner did not give money immediately. Demašqi mentions of looting and brawling groups following Kusa. Mary Boyce (p. 529) looks for a religious background of the ritual in the Zoroastrian cult of Rapiṯwin, the patron of summer and crops, but the Kusa festival of Medieval Muslim cities seems to be a secular amusement. Biruni (1983) believes it to be performed "for [good] omen" (*az bahr-e fāl*) and Gardizi just for fun (*az bahr-eṭanz-o masḵaragi*). This is, however, not the case with the Kusa festivals preserved at the countryside up to modern times.

The most detailed information on modern Kusa rites (also known as Kusā, Kusā-galin, Kusa o Nāqāldi, etc.) has been collected by Abu'l-Qāsem Enjavi in his two-volume book on winter festivals. His material comes from western, northwestern, and central Persian villages (the regions of Māku, Ḵoy, Ḵalḵāl, Zanjān, Abhar, Sāva, Āštiān, Arāk, Maḥallāt, Ḵomeyn, Hamadān, and Nehāvand) with Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Lori-speaking populations (Enjavi, I, pp. 67-85, II, pp. 92-115, 170-85). Parallel customs (Ḡul-e Biābāni, Pir-e Bābu, etc.) have been recorded in Gilān and Māzandarān (Enjavi I, pp. 111-23, 132-35; Pāyanda, p. 120 ff.; Sotuda; Honari and Ṭabāṭāʾi, pp. 68-73). Testimonies by other authors confirm the existence of the custom in some regions (Kermānšāh and Mahābād) that are not covered by Enjavi's research (Honari, pp. 49-50), Iraqi Kurds of Solaymāniya (Bois, p. 71), and the Qašqāʾi tribes of Fārs (Beck, pp. 160-63). Jamshed C. Katrak (p. 144) reports on a pastoral rite similar to those of Kusa from the Navsari Parsees of India. The rural Kusa is, in general, a winter festival. Its most common term is around the 10th of Bahman, which once was the date of the Sada festival and currently is

the turn of the Great and the Small Čellas in popular calendar. In Katrak's report the rite is performed on the second (Bahman) day of Bahman, that is, the festival of Bahmangān (q.v.), dedicated to Vohu Manah (> Bahman), the Zoroastrian patron of cattle. Unlike its Medieval counterpart, modern Kusa rite is of a typically rural and pastoral character. In some villages, shepherds have an exclusive privilege to perform it, and its magical function of protecting cattle from diseases and of stimulating their fertility has been kept. The groups of mummers walk from house to house, greeting their hosts, staging a sort of play, sometimes performing a fertility magic rite, and collecting gifts in kind or in money. Usually, the troop includes Kusa and his rival (e.g., the white and the black Kusa), his bride (a boy disguised as a girl), a number of helpers, and some musicians. The scenario includes a fight (in form of *čub-bāzi*) over the bride between Kusa and his rival, possibly her kidnapping, the death of Kusa, the girl's lament over his body, and his revival. This looks to be a trace of an old death-and-resurrection myth. The animal features are clearly visible in the disguise and the attitudes of Kusa, who wears a horned mask, a hairy sheepskin coat, sometimes a tail, and in some cases artificial genitals as a symbol of fertility and utters the animals' voices (bleating). In an account from the village Āhu Tappa of Hamadān (Enjavi, II, pp. 172-74) Kusa makes the ewes and she-goats give birth to healthy lambs and kitten, by kicking at their barn and giving some wool from his beard to the owner, who would place it above the barn door. The songs sung by the Kusa teams consist of the wishes of well-being for the household, a description of its prosperity, a plight for a gift, and a blessing and thanks for the donors (or a curse for the mean ones).

In southernmost areas of its occurrence (in particular among the nomad tribes of Qašqāʾi, Baḵtiāri, and the Sorḵi of Fārs), the Kusa rite (known as Kusagari, Kusa-kali, Kusā-galin, Kal ʿAli Kusa, etc.) is not connected with a particular winter date, but performed as rain magic at any time needed (cf. Šahbāzi, pp. 164-65; Ḵosravi, pp. 130-31; Beck, pp. 160-63; Kiāni, pp. 254-55; Musawi, pp. 15-18). Many analogies can be seen between the Kusa rite and some other customs of the region, in which mummed characters are involved. The urban Kusa of Medieval sources seems to be close to Mir-e Nowruzi (the New Year Prince), who has a long-lasting tradition in the Middle East, and to his modern continuation Hāji Firuz (Rażi, pp. 240-42, 380-81). There are striking parallels between the Kusa and East European Christian caroling traditions (see: Krasnowolska, 2000).

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