



SAQQĀ-KĀNA HISTORY

SAQQĀ-KĀNA HISTORY, term referring to public water dispensers.

Public water dispensers were, and in some places still are, a feature of some large institutional buildings, typically mosques, shrines, and bazaars in Iran, serving travelers, workers, and passers-by (FIGURE 1; FIGURE 2). Famous *saqqā-kānas* included the one in the boq'a-ye Šayḡ Safi-al-Din in Ardabil (16th century), in the Kuča-ye Dabbāg-kāna in Yazd (1517), the Saqqā-kāna-ye 'Aziz-Allāh adjacent to the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, built under Šāh Soleymān (r. 1666-1694), and the Saqqā-kāna-ye Esmā'il Ṭalā'i erected by Nāder Shah (r. 1736-47) in the shrine of Imam Rezā in Mashad. Of these, only the last mentioned still exists (Ṭabāṭabā'i, II, p. 128; Afšār, II, pp. 755-56; Honarfar, pp. 136-37; Qaddusi, p. 657, 660; Mo'taman, pp. 186-88 [with ill.]; 'Aṭṭār-Dey, pp. 237-38). The recorded inscriptions of these Saqqā-kānas do not display the Qajar era practice of referring to the Karbalā events, except for an inscription dated 1610 in a shrine (an *Emāmzāda*) in Astarābād (Rabino, p. 41 [Persian text]). This suggests that a *saqqā-kāna* prior to as well as during the Qajar period and later could be just a public water dispenser and not necessarily a votive institution. During the Qajar period the Saqqā-kāna-ye dowlati was also just the water department in the palace complex; and for craftsmen it meant a water storage tank (*Ruznāma-ye Irān* 2, p. 1557; 3, p. 2954; 4, p. 3464; Wulff, p. 30). The number of these *saqqā-kānas* seems to have been limited since there are hardly any reports about them prior to the 19th century or thereafter in inventories of historical monuments, memoirs, and travelogues. In 1801, Mir 'Abd-al-Laṭif Kān Šuštari (Jazā'eri) mentions approvingly (p. 262) the numerous



public water pumps (*saqqā-kānas*) in London, implying therefore that this was not the case in Iran. For apart from wells (see *ĀB*), cisterns (see *ĀBANBĀR*), and underground irrigation systems (*qanāts*), it was peripatetic and institutional water-carriers (*saqqās*) that served urban dwellers' thirst for water in public places.

Saqqā-kānas with an explicit votive function became a widespread urban phenomenon only in the late 19th century, for most of those surviving are not more than 100 years old (Bonyādlu; Afšār, II, pp. 756-57). It would seem that from the early 19th century various individuals installed water dispensers in public squares (*meydāns*), thoroughfares, and bazaars. These were simple constructions: a niche in a wall, or even just a ledge with a small water dispenser and a jug (Balāgi, p. 202). This development was stimulated by the enormous popularity at the time of the Shi'ite mourning ritual plays (*ta'ziya*) in which 'Abbās b. 'Ali, the water-carrying martyr (*saqqā-ye Ḥoseyn*) of Karbalā, to whom *saqqā-kānas* were consecrated, plays an important role (Šahri, I, 1998, pp. 153-56). This may also explain why many popular *saqqā-kānas* were situated at locations where 'Ašura mourning ceremonies took place (N. N., "Bāzārčahā-ye Tehrān," p. 28; Afšār, II, p. 752). When a particular water dispenser became popular, people associated with it placed larger water-storage units there, flowerpot-like vessels (*dustkāmiḥā*), to attract more users; and candles were placed at these water dispensers to facilitate drinking in the evening. Pious passers-by believed them to be ex-votos and gradually these locations were indeed used as such. Slowly, these *dustkāmiḥā* locations became so well frequented in terms of ex-votos placed there that people began to refer to them as *saqqā-kānas*. Believers placed candles, attached written vows and wishes to the water dispenser, tied pieces of cloth or a padlock to it, indicating a binding vow, while they also offered coins or pieces of silver jewelry, placing them in a casket installed for this very purpose. Not everyone felt obliged to drink from the dispenser when visiting the site. Passers-by also just stopped, touched the ex-votos, then their face, probably said a prayer, and moved on. The water dispenser usually was embellished with all kinds of inscriptions cursing the instigators of the Karbalā tragedy, particularly Yazid (Massé, I, p. 226) and only Moslems were allowed to drink from it lest it became polluted on religious grounds (Höltzer, p. 17). In the summer the water was cooled with ice. Some people identified collecting ex-votos as a profitable business venture and they constructed shop-sized *saqqā-kānas* complete with a portico with themselves as its custodian (*saqqā-kāna-dār*). Some of the most profitable and famous *saqqā-kānas* in Tehran such as the



Nowruz-kāna, Āšeyk [Āqā Šeyk] Hādi, and Āyina were operated professionally for pecuniary gain (Šahri, 1989, I, p. 275, pp. 459-60; V, p. 114, pp. 126-27 [illus.]; VI, p. 143; Moštavafi, pp. 82-83; Idem, 1998, I, pp. 153-56, 165; II, p. 159; IV, p. 443, n. 87).

These ‘commercial’ *saqqā-kānas* used various ploys to attract customers by encouraging rumors testifying to their miraculous powers, and by having a saqqā standing next to the establishment with his water skin with the street cries of: “Give for the sake of Ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abbās.” They also employed professional religious performers (*rowza-kāns*) and the like. One of the famous lyric singers (*ġazal-kvāns*) of Tehran at the turn of the 20th century was attached to the Āyina *saqqā-kāna*. The entrepreneurial custodians also embellished the water dispensers with mourning banners and stripes (sometimes partly burnt as an allusion to Karbalā), hand-shaped cut-outs of metal sheet, strings of beads, mirrors, lamps, candle holders and flower pots. In some cases entire parts of the street were bedecked. Later a large water tank might be installed with a faucet and a bowl with religiously edifying inscriptions. The Nowruz-kāna *saqqā-kāna* even had a *zur-kāna* bearing the same name attached to it. The portico was often embellished with figurative colored tiles, and/or a small painting on glass on canvas usually set behind an iron grille, depicting ‘Abbās or some other Shi‘ite martyr from some incident of the Karbala episode. These paintings have inspired a modern style of painting in Iran after 1960 that has been dubbed the Saqqā-kāna painting movement. The religiously devout were attracted by the spectacle and continued to frequent the *saqqā-kānas*, whether run as a business venture or not, since they, particularly women, believed in their efficacy. The ‘custodians’ fiercely defended and promoted their fiefdom and were even capable of turning the *saqqā-kānas* into a place of asylum or *bast*. The *saqqā-kāna* of Āšeyk Hādi acquired some notoriety when in 1924 the US consul Imbrie was killed there on the orders of its custodian, who remained scot-free (Zirinsky, pp. 275-92; Šahri, 1989, pp. 275, pp. 459-60; V, p. 114, pp. 126-27 (illus); VI, p. 143; Idem, 1998, I, pp. 153-56, 165; II, p. 159; IV, p. 443, n. 87; Šahid, p. 207).

One may distinguish three types of *saqqā-kāna*: (i) a stand-alone construction in cubic, cylindrical or octagonal form, usually found in shrines and mosques – these are the original traditional water dispensers; (ii) the most common ones look like a bazaar shop, or part thereof, in shape; they are to be found in bazaars and crowded parts of the city; and (iii) the so-called Rafi‘ *saqqā-kānas*, which are niches in a wall of building covered with a grille; these are found in



alleys. The latter two types are products of the Qajar era. In many cases these *saqqā-kānas* were not part of a charitable endowment (*waqf*), which is probably one of the reasons why most of them have disappeared without a trace (Bonyādli). Nowadays, in some towns, as for example in Borujerd, some families construct and embellish a make-shift *saqqā-kāna* in their home during the month of Moḥarram as a pious gesture to attract mourners to pay their devotions there. (FIGURE 3).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Iraj Afšār (Afshar), *Yādgār-e Yazd*, 2 vols., Tehran, 1975.

‘Aziz-Allāh ‘Aṭṭār-Dey, *Tāriḳ-e Āstān-e Qods-e Rażavi*, 2 vols., Tehran, 1992.

Sayyed ‘Abd-al-Ḥojja Ḥoseyni Balāgi, *Tāriḳ-e Tehrān-e qadim*, Qom, 1971.

Nādiyā Bonyādli, *Saqqākānahā-ye Tehrān*, Tehran, 2002.

Ernst Hölzter, *Persien vor 113 Jahren*, ed. Moḥammad ‘Aṣemi, Tehran, 1976.

Loṭf-Allāh Honarfar, *Ganjina-ye āṭār-e tāriḳi-ye Eṣfahān*, Tehran, 2nd ed., 1971.

Henri Massé, *Croyances et Coutumes Persanes*, 2 vols., Paris, 1938.

Sayyed Moḥammad Taqi Mostafavi, *Āṭār-e tāriḳi-ye Tehrān – amāken-e motabarraka*, ed. Mir Hāšem Moḥaddeṭ, Tehran, 1982.

‘Ali Mo‘taman, *Rāhnamā yā tāriḳ va towṣif-e darbār-e velāyat-madār-e Rażavi*, Tehran, 1969.

N. N., “Bāzārčahā-ye Tehrān,” *Ettela‘āt-e māhāna* no. 120, Esfand 1336/1958.

Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Qaddusi, *Nāder-nāma*, Tehran, 1960.

H. L. Rabino, *Mazandaran and Astarabad*, London, 1928.



Ruznāma-ye Irān, 5 vols., repr., Tehran, 1994.

Ja'far Šahid, *Dudmān-e Pahlavi: tāriḳ va šarḩ-e ḩāl-e kāndān-e salṩanati*, Tehran, 1949.

Ja'far Šahri, *Tāriḳ-e ejtemā'i-Ṭehrān dar qarn-e sizdahom*, 6 vols., Tehran, 1989.

Idem, *Ṭehrān-e qadim*, 5 vols., Tehran, 1998.

Mir 'Abd-al-Laṩif Kān Šuštari (Jazā'eri), *Toḩfat al-'ālam va deyl al-Toḩfa*, ed. Šamad Movvaḩed, Tehran, 1984.

Sayyed Jamāl Torābi Ṭabaṩabā'i, *Āṩār-e bāstāni-ye Ādarbaijān*, 2 vols., Tabriz, 1976.

P. L. Wilson and K. Emami, *The Saqqa-khaneh. Exhibition Catalogue*, Tehran, 1977.

Ehsan Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," in R. Ettinghausen and E. Yarshater *Highlights of Persian Art*, New York, 1979, pp. 363-78.

M. P. Zirinsky, "Blood, Power, and Hypocrisy: The Murder of Robert Imbrie and American Relations with Pahlavi Iran, 1924," *IJMES* 18, 1986, pp. 275-92.