

Kawa the Blacksmith: A Mythological Study of Resistance, Identity, and Renewal

I. Introduction: The Enduring Figure of Kawa the Blacksmith

A. Kawa/Kaveh: A Pivotal Hero in Ancient Narratives

Kawa, known in Persian tradition as Kāveh Āhangar¹ and in Kurdish as Kawe-y Asinger¹, stands as a formidable heroic figure within the mythological tapestries of Iranian and Kurdish cultures. He is primarily identified as a humble blacksmith who, driven by profound personal loss and righteous indignation, ignited a popular revolt against a tyrannical ruler, thereby becoming an enduring symbol of hope and resistance for oppressed peoples.² The legend of Kawa, detailing his defiance against an evil king in ancient Persia, has resonated across centuries, consistently embodying the ideals of justice, freedom, and the power of collective action against despotism.² His narrative is not merely an ancient tale but a living symbol continually invoked in the pursuit of liberation.³

The potency of Kawa's story lies in its portrayal of an ordinary craftsman transforming into an extraordinary leader. His identity as a blacksmith is central; it is from the common populace, from the heart of everyday labor and suffering, that the impetus for monumental change arises. This aspect of his legend offers a compelling counter-narrative to epic traditions that often focus exclusively on heroes of aristocratic or divine lineage, highlighting instead the revolutionary potential inherent in the collective will of the people when galvanized by injustice.

B. The *Shahnameh*: Primary Literary Canonization

The most prominent and extensive literary codification of Kawa's legend, particularly in the Persian context, is found in the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), the monumental epic poem composed by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in the 10th century CE.¹ The *Shahnameh* serves as a vast repository of pre-Islamic Persian myths, heroic sagas, and semi-legendary dynastic histories, and in this capacity, it has played an indispensable role in preserving and immortalizing figures such as Kawa for posterity.⁴ Within its sprawling narrative, the "Story of Kaveh Ahangar" is specifically framed as a powerful testament to the themes of justice, resistance against tyranny, and the fight for rightful governance.⁴

While Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* provides the canonical Persian account, it is important to acknowledge that variations of the Kawa narrative and related motifs exist in other textual

traditions and oral folklore, particularly within Kurdish culture.⁶ Scholarly research indicates that Kawa's story, as it appears in the *Shahnameh*, is notably absent from the Avesta, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, and other earlier pre-Islamic Persian written sources, suggesting a specific historical period for its incorporation into the grand national epic, likely during the Sasanian era through texts like the *Khoday-Nameh* which served as a source for Ferdowsi.⁶ This complex textual history underscores the dynamic nature of mythology, revealing how legends are transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted over time by different communities to reflect their unique historical experiences, cultural values, and evolving identities. The variations between the Persian and Kurdish tellings, for instance, demonstrate mythology not as a static relic, but as a living tradition continuously shaped by its bearers.

C. Thesis Statement

This report will examine the multifaceted legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, analyzing his narrative, his profound cultural significance in both Persian and Kurdish traditions, his symbolic connections to festivals like Newroz, and the scholarly interpretations of his enduring myth, underscoring his timeless relevance as an emblem of righteous rebellion and the pursuit of freedom.

The enduring power of the Kawa myth is further illuminated by its deep integration with ritual practice. The strong, and in some traditions foundational, connection between Kawa's victory and the Newroz (New Year) festival, particularly the symbolic use of fire, illustrates how myth provides the narrative architecture for communal rituals. These rituals, in turn, imbue the myth with ongoing relevance, reinforcing collective memory, cultural identity, and shared values through cyclical re-enactment.

II. The Legend Unveiled: Kawa's Revolt Against Zahhak

A. The Tyranny of Zahhak: A Reign of Terror

The antagonist of the Kawa legend is Zahhak (also referred to as Zohag⁸, Azhdehak⁸, or, in some Kurdish interpretations, an "Assyrian king"¹), an archetypal figure of malevolent and oppressive rule. His tyranny is most vividly symbolized by a dreadful curse: two black serpents grew from his shoulders, a direct consequence of a pact with Ahriman, the spirit of evil in Zoroastrian cosmology, or as a result of Ahriman's deceitful kiss, often delivered when the latter was disguised as a royal cook offering novel, meat-based delicacies.¹ These serpents, a grotesque manifestation of his corruption, demanded a horrific daily tribute: the brains of two young men.⁹ This monstrous appetite led to a reign of terror across the land, plunging countless families into mourning and despair as their youth were systematically sacrificed.⁸ Zahhak's oppressive regime was not limited to these daily sacrifices. He had usurped the throne from the rightful king, Jamshid⁹, and his rule was characterized by burdensome taxes, draconian laws, and pervasive fear.⁹ The Persian term "مردم ستیزی" (misanthropy or anti-people nature) has been used to describe Zahhak, and the feeding of brains to his snakes has been symbolically interpreted as "گرفتن اندیشه از جوانان" (taking thought/intellect from the youth).¹²

This interpretation elevates Zahhak's evil beyond mere physical cruelty, portraying him as a force that actively sought to extinguish the intellectual vitality and future potential of his people. The serpents themselves can be understood as a potent metaphor for how tyrannical power becomes parasitic and monstrous, consuming the very essence of its populace—their intellect, their future—to sustain its own corrupt existence. This is not simply a tale of a cruel king, but a depiction of a spiritual and intellectual vampirism that drains the lifeblood of a nation.

B. A Father's Grief, A Nation's Spark: Kawa's Personal Tragedy

Amidst this pervasive terror lived Kawa, a blacksmith by trade. Some traditions place his origins in a village near Isfahan⁹, and he was respected for his skill and unwavering integrity.⁹ Kawa's life, like that of so many others, was irrevocably scarred by Zahhak's cruelty. Accounts vary on the exact number, but he had lost many of his sons to the tyrant's serpents—some sources mention two¹, others seven⁸, and one particularly poignant version states that seventeen of his eighteen sons had already been sacrificed, with his last remaining child now threatened.⁹

Even before this ultimate crisis, Kawa had demonstrated his defiance. When Zahhak, hearing of the blacksmith's skill, attempted to enlist him as his personal smith with offers of wealth and honor, Kawa contemptuously refused, declaring he would rather die than serve a tyrant who murdered innocents.⁹ The imminent sacrifice of his last son, however, proved to be the breaking point. Kawa stormed into Zahhak's court, not as a supplicant, but as an accuser. When Zahhak, perhaps seeking to placate him or to legitimize his own rule through a coerced signature on a document attesting to his justice, offered Kawa a letter or compensation, the blacksmith furiously tore the document to shreds.¹² In a moment of profound courage, he is said to have proclaimed, " !منم کاوه دادگر " ("I am Kawa, the bringer of justice!").¹² This act, born of unbearable personal grief, transformed his private sorrow into a public challenge, igniting the spark of a nationwide rebellion.

C. The Call to Arms: The Derafsh Kaviani and Popular Uprising

Emerging from the tyrant's palace, Kawa took his cause to the people. In the city square, he delivered impassioned speeches, decrying Zahhak's brutality and calling upon his fellow citizens to rise up against their oppressor.³ In a gesture that would become legendary, Kawa took off his leather blacksmith's apron (پیش‌بند چرمی آهن‌گری³), a humble emblem of his trade, and hoisted it upon a spear, fashioning a makeshift banner.¹ This banner, the Derafsh Kaviani (Kavian Banner), became the rallying point for the burgeoning revolt. Its symbolism was potent: it represented the labor of the common man, the raw courage born of desperation, and a defiant challenge to the established symbols of tyrannical power.³

The people, long suffering under Zahhak's reign, responded with fervor. Thousands flocked to Kawa's standard, drawn from various regions and tribes, forming a formidable army of citizens united by their shared suffering and their yearning for freedom and justice.¹ The Derafsh Kaviani, in its very simplicity, stood as a powerful counter-symbol to the opulent regalia of

corrupt monarchies. Its authority derived not from inherited privilege or material wealth, but from the righteousness of the cause it represented and the collective will of the people who gathered beneath it. This marked a symbolic shift, suggesting that true legitimacy could emanate from the populace itself.

D. Alliance with Fereydun and the Overthrow of Tyranny

Recognizing the need for a leader who could not only command an army but also restore legitimate rule, Kawa and his followers sought out Fereydun (or Faridoon ⁸). Fereydun was a young man of royal lineage, a descendant of the usurped King Jamshid ³, who was living in hiding, often said to be in the Alborz Mountains ¹, and was prophesied to be Zahhak's downfall. Inspired by Kawa's extraordinary courage and the palpable determination of the people, Fereydun agreed to lead the rebellion.¹ Some accounts even suggest Kawa played a role in freeing Fereydun from Zahhak's imprisonment before proclaiming him king.⁹ Under Fereydun's leadership, and with Kawa's Derafsh Kaviani held aloft as their standard—a banner Fereydun himself took as a favorable omen and ordered to be adorned ¹²—the revolutionary army marched against Zahhak's forces. Several significant battles ensued, with Fereydun often depicted wielding a formidable bull-headed mace (گرزِ گاوسر), possibly forged by Kawa himself.⁹ Ultimately, Zahhak was defeated. However, in most Persian accounts, he was not killed. Following divine instruction or for other mythic reasons, Fereydun had Zahhak bound and imprisoned in the desolate confines of Mount Damavand, there to remain until the end of time.⁷ This detail of imprisonment rather than execution is significant, perhaps suggesting a Zoroastrian-influenced cosmological view where evil can be contained and neutralized but never entirely eradicated from the world. Kurdish versions of the tale, however, sometimes narrate Zahhak's death at the hands of Kawa.¹

With Zahhak's reign of terror ended, Fereydun ascended the throne as the new, just king, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity.³ Kawa, the blacksmith who had dared to defy a tyrant, was greatly honored by the new king, and his last surviving son was freed from captivity.⁹ The alliance between Kawa's popular uprising and Fereydun's royal legitimacy thus culminated in the restoration of just governance, a recurring theme in Persian political mythology.

The profession of Kawa as a blacksmith is deeply symbolic and not merely incidental to his role. Blacksmiths are artisans of transformation, shaping raw, unyielding metal through the intense heat of the forge and the force of the hammer into tools of creation or weapons of destruction. Metaphorically, Kawa "forges" a rebellion from the raw despair of an oppressed populace, transforming their grief and anger into a disciplined force for change. His humble leather apron, a tool of his trade, is transmuted into the Derafsh Kaviani, a potent symbol of power and resistance. His craft, therefore, perfectly mirrors his mythic function: dismantling an old, corrupt order and helping to construct a new, more just society. Some Kurdish versions even speak of Kawa planning to use his hammer against Zohag ⁸, directly linking the tools of his trade to the act of liberation.

The narrative variations observed across different tellings—such as the precise role of Kawa

versus Fereydun in the final defeat of Zahhak, the number of Kawa's children, or the detail found in some accounts of Kawa being offered kingship but refusing it ⁸—are not mere discrepancies. These variations often reflect how different cultural groups, be they Persian or Kurdish, or even different storytellers within those traditions, have adapted the core legend. Such adaptations allow the myth to emphasize particular aspects that resonate with their specific cultural values, historical experiences, or political narratives. For instance, the *Shahnameh*'s focus on Fereydun's ultimate kingship aligns with Persian dynastic history, while certain Kurdish narratives, which may grant Kawa more direct agency in Zahhak's downfall or even depict Kawa himself as imprisoning Zahhak through a cunning plan ⁷, tend to highlight themes of popular resistance and autonomy.

E. Table 1: Key Figures in the Kawa Legend

Character Name(s)	Role/Description	Primary Cultural Association(s)	Key Snippet References
Kawa / Kāveh Āhangar / Kawe-y Asinger	Blacksmith, leader of the rebellion, symbol of justice and resistance.	Persian, Kurdish	¹
Zahhāk / Zohag / Azhdehak	Tyrannical king with serpents on shoulders, fed human brains; antagonist.	Persian, Kurdish	¹
Fereydun / Faridoon	Rightful heir/prince, ally of Kawa, defeater of Zahhak, restorer of just rule.	Persian, Kurdish (less central in some Kurdish versions)	¹
Ahriman	Evil spirit in Zoroastrianism, responsible for Zahhak's corruption and the serpents.	Persian (Zoroastrian context)	⁸
Jamshid	Rightful king usurped by Zahhak.	Persian	⁹
Kawa's Son(s)/Daughter	Victims of Zahhak, catalyst for Kawa's rebellion (number and gender vary in accounts).	Persian, Kurdish	¹

III. Kaveh Ahangar in Persian Lore

A. The Hero of the *Shahnameh*: Kaveh's Portrayal and Significance

Within Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Kaveh Ahangar emerges as one of its most resonant and beloved heroes, a figure embodying profound integrity, unshakeable courage, and a righteous fury born from suffering and injustice.¹ He is not merely a victim of tyranny but the crucial catalyst for its overthrow, the voice that articulates the people's anguish and the arm that first raises the standard of revolt.³ The narrative arc in the *Shahnameh* meticulously charts Kaveh's journey: from the depths of personal tragedy with the loss of his sons, through his defiant public confrontation with Zahhak, to the galvanizing of popular support under his makeshift banner, and culminating in the strategic alliance with Fereydun, the rightful heir, which leads to ultimate victory.¹

A significant aspect of Kaveh's portrayal in the Persian epic is his unwavering loyalty to the principle of just kingship. Once Fereydun is identified as the legitimate claimant to the throne, Kaveh channels the popular uprising towards the goal of restoring this rightful order.¹ This highlights a key theme within the *Shahnameh*'s political ideology: rebellion, while sometimes necessary to expunge tyranny, should ideally serve the purpose of re-establishing a just and legitimate monarchy, rather than leading to anarchy or the blacksmith himself seizing power. Kaveh, in this context, acts as a kingmaker, a righteous commoner whose actions pave the way for the return of a virtuous royal line.

B. Emblem of Justice, National Unity, and Resistance

In Iranian culture, Kaveh Ahangar transcends his narrative role to become a potent and enduring symbol of justice (دادخواهی – *dādkhāhi*) and the aspiration for freedom (آزادیخواهی – *āzādikhāhi*).³ His uprising is consistently interpreted as representing the collective will of the Iranian people rising against foreign domination or illegitimate, tyrannical rule.¹ The blacksmith, a man of the people, embodies the nation's inherent strength and resilience. The story of Kaveh has retained its power to inspire national pride and has been invoked by various movements advocating for justice and sovereignty throughout Iranian history.¹ A notable historical example is Ya'qub ibn al-Layth al-Saffar, founder of the Saffarid dynasty in the 9th century, who, in challenging the Abbasid Caliphate and seeking to revive Persian glory, sent a poem to the Caliph Al-Mu'tazz in 867 CE, proclaiming: "With me is the Derafsh Kaviani, through which I hope to rule the nations".¹ Though physical possession of the ancient banner was impossible, its symbolic invocation was a powerful claim to legitimacy and Persian heritage. Further testaments to Kaveh's enduring symbolic capital include the naming of "Kaveh," a nationalist magazine published during World War I, and the incorporation of his imagery or name in the flag of the short-lived Persian Socialist Soviet Republic (Soviet Republic of Gilan) in 1920.¹ These instances demonstrate how Kaveh has been continuously reinterpreted as a figurehead for resistance and national identity across diverse political spectrums.

C. The Derafsh Kaviani: From Humble Apron to Royal Standard

The genesis of the Derafsh Kaviani (Kavian Banner) from Kaveh's unassuming leather blacksmith apron is a cornerstone of the legend.¹ This humble origin imbues the banner with profound symbolism, representing the power and legitimacy derived from the common people

and righteous struggle. Following the successful overthrow of Zahhak, Fereydun, the newly enthroned king, ordered this makeshift standard to be lavishly adorned with precious jewels, gold, and fine silk (پرنیان و زر و گوهر).¹ Thus transformed, the Derafsh Kaviani was elevated to become the official royal standard of the Persian kings, a status it maintained for centuries, most notably throughout the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE).¹

Historical and literary descriptions of the later, imperial Derafsh Kaviani paint a picture of magnificent regalia. It is said to have featured a lotus emblem (or possibly a star, leading to the alternative name *Akhtar Kaviani*, meaning Kavian Star¹²) on a purple field, richly encrusted with jewels, and adorned with trailing streamers of red, gold, and purple.¹² Some accounts suggest its dimensions were considerable, approximately 5 meters by 7.5 meters, and that it was crafted from durable leather, or possibly leopard or lion skin.¹² The term *achtar* (star) associated with it was significant, as the star also symbolized "fortune"; thus, the banner represented not only imperial authority but also the divine favor and good fortune of the Iranian state (*Ērānšāhr*).¹⁴

The historical fate of the Derafsh Kaviani is tied to the decline and fall of the Sasanian Empire. It was captured by Arab forces following the decisive Sasanian defeat at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636 CE.¹ The soldier who recovered it, Zerar bin Kattab, reportedly received a substantial sum of 30,000 dinars for it. After its precious jewels were stripped away, the Caliph Umar is said to have ordered the venerable standard to be burned.¹⁴ The destruction of the Derafsh Kaviani symbolized more than just a military loss; it marked the end of an era and the eclipse of Sasanian sovereignty.

The symbiotic relationship between popular uprising, as initiated by Kaveh, and the restoration of legitimate kingship, embodied by Fereydun, reflects a distinct characteristic of Persian political ideology as presented in the *Shahnameh*. While the people's will, sparked by a commoner's courage, serves as a vital corrective to tyranny, the narrative arc typically culminates in the re-establishment of a just monarchical order. Kaveh's well-documented refusal to accept kingship for himself⁸, despite his pivotal role, reinforces this ideal: the hero from the populace facilitates the return of righteous governance under a legitimate royal figure, rather than seeking to overturn the system of kingship itself.

Furthermore, the Derafsh Kaviani's journey from a simple apron to an imperial standard, and its subsequent symbolic resurrection in later centuries by figures like Ya'qub al-Layth, demonstrates its function as a "floating signifier" of Iranian identity. Its physical destruction did not extinguish its conceptual power. The *idea* of the Derafsh Kaviani—representing Persian glory, resistance, and sovereignty—transcended its material existence, allowing it to be revived and reinterpreted across different historical epochs to serve contemporary aspirations for national identity and legitimacy.¹ This enduring symbolic resonance is a testament to the power of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* not merely as a record of past tales, but as an active cultural force that has shaped and codified Iranian national consciousness for over a millennium, providing a shared heroic lexicon and a timeless model of courage, justice, and patriotism embodied by figures like Kaveh.⁴

IV. Kawe-y Asinger in Kurdish Tradition

A. The Kurdish Hero's Narrative: Specifics and Nuances

In Kurdish folklore, Kawe (often Kawe-y Asinger, "Kawe the Blacksmith" ¹) holds a place of paramount importance as a foundational hero, embodying the spirit of resistance against oppression in a manner that is deeply resonant with Kurdish historical experience.² The tyrant in the Kurdish narrative is typically identified as Zohag or Dehak ⁸, and is sometimes explicitly characterized as an "Assyrian king" ¹, a detail that aligns with Kurdish historical narratives of struggle against powerful regional empires.

The core elements of the Kurdish legend parallel the broader Kawa myth: Kawe the blacksmith, the unspeakable cruelty of the king whose shoulder-serpents demand a daily tribute of children's brains, Kawe's profound personal loss, and his ultimate decision to revolt.⁸ However, distinct nuances mark the Kurdish versions. One particularly significant variation involves the role of a compassionate royal cook. This cook, pitying the suffering people, secretly spares one child each day by substituting a sheep's brain for one of the human brains destined for the serpents. The children saved in this manner are then sent into the remote safety of the mountains.¹ This element, often less prominent or absent in Persian accounts centered on Kaveh, is crucial in Kurdish tradition, as these mountain-dwelling children are widely believed to be the very ancestors of the Kurdish people.¹

Furthermore, in many Kurdish tellings, Kawe's agency in the overthrow of the tyrant is often more direct and central. While an alliance with a figure like Fereydun might exist in some variants, the emphasis frequently falls on Kawe's own initiative in planning the uprising, arming the youth in the mountains, and leading the attack.⁸ Crucially, it is Kawe himself who, upon achieving victory, lights a great fire on a mountaintop to signal liberation to the people below.⁸ This act of lighting the signal fire is a defining motif in the Kurdish celebration of Newroz. Some versions even narrate Kawe killing Zohag with his blacksmith's hammer.⁸

B. Symbol of Freedom, Resistance, and Kurdish Identity

For the Kurdish people, Kawe is far more than a mythological hero; he is an active and potent symbol of their enduring struggle for freedom, self-determination, and cultural survival.¹ His story, and the Newroz festival intrinsically linked to it, are deeply interwoven with Kurdish national identity and aspirations.⁸ Kawe represents "work, rationality... freedom, emancipation from slavery, uprising against oppression," as articulated by Kurdish historian Faris Othman.¹¹ The fires lit during Newroz are not merely celebratory but are a direct commemoration of Kawe's signal fire, symbolizing the inextinguishable spirit of the Kurdish people and their continuous fight against adversity.⁸

The profound symbolic weight of Kawe in the Kurdish consciousness was starkly illustrated by the outrage that followed the reported destruction and defacement of a statue of Kawe the Blacksmith in Afrin, Syria, by Turkish-led forces in March 2018.¹¹ This act was widely condemned by Kurds as a deliberate assault on their identity, heritage, and the very ideals

Kawe represents— "a return to authoritarianism, ignorance and oppression".¹¹ Such events underscore that Kawe is not a relic of the past but a living symbol whose meaning is actively contested and defended in contemporary geopolitical realities.

C. The Myth of Ancestry: Connection to the Origins of the Kurdish People

A defining characteristic of the Kurdish Kawa legend is its direct linkage to the ethnogenesis of the Kurdish people. The narrative of the children spared by the compassionate cook, who then took refuge in the Zagros Mountains and became the progenitors of the Kurds, provides a foundational myth of origin.¹ This story intrinsically connects Kurdish identity to acts of resistance against tyranny and to the mountainous homeland that has historically served as a sanctuary and a crucible for Kurdish culture. The mountains, therefore, are not just a geographical feature but a mythically charged space of origin and resilience. This ancestral narrative imbues the Kurdish people with an origin story rooted in defiance, survival, and a distinct historical trajectory. Some linguistic theories even propose that the ethnonym "Kurd" itself might derive from an old Iranian term for "blacksmith," thus directly linking the name of the people to the profession of their heroic ancestor, Kawe.¹ This interpretation, if valid, would further cement Kawe's role as not just a hero of the Kurds, but as an eponymic figure representing their very essence. The Kurdish version of the Kawe myth, therefore, functions as a powerful "mythic charter," legitimizing Kurdish identity as ancient, inherently tied to a specific geography, and defined by a spirit of resistance. This is particularly significant for a people who have historically faced pressures of assimilation and statelessness.

D. Table 2: Comparative Aspects of the Kawa Legend in Persian and Kurdish Traditions

Feature	Persian Version (Primarily Shahnameh-based)	Kurdish Version	Key Snippet References (Illustrative)
Protagonist's Name	Kāveh Āhangar	Kawe-y Asinger / Kawa	¹
Tyrant's Name/Origin	Zahhāk (often an Arab usurper in <i>Shahnameh</i>)	Zohag / Dehak (sometimes an Assyrian king)	¹
Catalyst for Rebellion	Loss of Kaveh's sons (e.g., 17 of 18); direct confrontation with Zahhak.	Loss of Kawe's children (e.g., 7 sons); direct confrontation.	⁸
Role of Fereydun	Central; Kaveh enables Fereydun's rise; Fereydun	Less central or absent in some versions; Kawe often takes more direct	¹

	defeats/imprisons Zahhak and becomes king.	action in defeating Zohag and signaling victory. Fereydun may be an ally.	
Origin of Derafsh Kaviani/Symbolism	Kaveh's leather apron, becomes royal standard of Persia, symbol of justice and national sovereignty.	Kawe's apron waved in victory, or fire on the mountain as primary signal; symbol of liberation and Kurdish resistance.	¹
Myth of Ancestry	Not a primary feature for Kaveh's direct story (focus on restoring Persian kingship).	Central: Spared children escaping Zohag become ancestors of Kurds in the mountains.	¹
Newroz Connection	Linked to Fereydun's victory over Zahhak (Mehregan also important), Kaveh's uprising is a precursor. Fire symbolic.	Directly linked to Kawe's victory; lighting fires is a core reenactment of Kawe's signal. Central to Kurdish identity.	⁸
Primary Symbolic Focus	Restoration of just (Persian) monarchy, national unity, resistance to foreign tyranny.	Popular uprising, freedom from oppression, Kurdish ethnogenesis and resilience, self-determination.	¹

The "weaponization" of mythology in contemporary conflicts, as seen with the destruction of Kawe's statue in Afrin ¹¹, reveals the enduring power these ancient symbols hold. Such acts are not mere vandalism; they are calculated attempts to demoralize a population by attacking the tangible representations of their identity, history, and aspirations for freedom. This underscores that myths are not confined to the pages of ancient texts but remain active and contested elements in modern political and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, while Newroz is a festival celebrated by diverse cultures, its profound and central linkage to Kawe's victory in Kurdish tradition transforms the celebration into a potent annual reaffirmation of Kurdish identity, resilience, and the unyielding quest for liberty. The celebratory fires are not generic symbols of spring but specific, ritualized re-enactments of Kawe's historic signal of liberation, making Newroz a particularly charged and significant cultural event for Kurds, often carrying strong political undertones, especially in contexts where their cultural expression has been historically suppressed.⁸

V. Echoes of Victory: Kawa, Newroz, and Festive

Commemoration

A. Newroz (Nowruz): Kawa's Triumph as Mythological Underpinning

Newroz, the vibrant celebration marking the New Year, typically observed on the Spring Equinox around March 21st, is a cherished tradition for numerous peoples across Western and Central Asia, including Iranians, Kurds, Afghans, and others.² A profound mythological connection exists between the legend of Kawa's triumphant revolt against the tyrant Zahhak (or Zohag) and the core symbolism of the Newroz festival. This victory is widely interpreted as representing the primordial triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, justice over oppression, and the cyclical renewal of life that accompanies the arrival of spring.²

In Kurdish tradition, this linkage is exceptionally direct and foundational. Kawa's successful rebellion is often viewed as the very event that Newroz commemorates, making the festival an annual reaffirmation of Kurdish identity and their historical struggle for freedom.⁸ The Kurdish poet Taufik Abdullah is noted for formally connecting the Newroz holiday with the legend of Kawa in the 1930s, thereby solidifying this association in modern Kurdish national consciousness.¹⁶ For Kurds, Kawa and the people who freed themselves from Zahak are often seen as the mythological progenitors of their nation, and Newroz is thus inextricably linked with themes of liberation.¹⁶

Within the Persian tradition, while Kaveh's uprising is an integral part of the larger narrative cycle culminating in Fereydun's reign (whose victory is also associated with seasonal festivals like Mehregan), the Newroz connection to Kaveh himself is also acknowledged.¹² Here, Kaveh's actions are a critical precursor to the restoration of order, and the festival's themes of overcoming darkness and ushering in a new era resonate with his heroic deed. The aesthetics of Nowruz, such as the emphasis on light and brilliance, are shaped by multiple myths, including that of King Jamshid, but the Kawa legend provides a crucial narrative of popular resistance contributing to this renewal.¹⁷

B. The Symbolism of Fire: Liberation and Renewal

The lighting of bonfires is a central and visually spectacular ritual in Newroz celebrations, particularly prominent and deeply symbolic in Kurdish communities.⁸ These fires are not arbitrary; they are a direct and conscious commemoration of Kawa's legendary signal. After vanquishing the tyrant, Kawa is said to have lit a great fire on a mountaintop to announce the victory to the expectant people below, signaling the dawn of freedom and the end of oppression.⁸

The symbolism of these Newroz fires is multifaceted. They represent victory, joy, and purification, with the flames believed to consume the darkness, negativity, and hardships of the past year, making way for the light, warmth, and hope of the new.⁸ The fire embodies the reawakening of spring, the triumph of light over darkness, and, most powerfully in the context of the Kawa myth, freedom from tyranny.⁸ Rituals such as Chaharshanbe Suri (the Festival of Fire), celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz, involve participants leaping

over bonfires. This act is a potent visual and symbolic expression of casting away the old and embracing the new, directly echoing the myth of Kawa's triumph.¹⁷ In some Kurdish communities, as participants jump over the flames, they chant, "I give you my yellow colour (sickness, paleness of the old year), I take your red colour (vitality, health of the fire and new year)" ¹⁷, adding an auditory and deeply symbolic layer to this ritual of purification and renewal.

The Newroz fire rituals, therefore, serve as a form of embodied myth and collective memory. By physically engaging in the lighting and leaping over fires, individuals and communities do not merely recall an ancient story; they actively re-enact Kawa's liberating act. This annual participation reinforces the myth's message on a visceral level, embedding it within the cultural consciousness and ensuring its transmission and potency across generations.

C. Mehregan: Connection to Fereydun's Victory

While Newroz is strongly associated with the Kawa narrative, especially in its Kurdish interpretations, another ancient Iranian festival, Mehregan, also shares connections with this mythological cycle. Mehregan, typically celebrated in the autumn, is often linked more specifically to the culmination of the struggle against Zahhak: the final victory and subsequent enthronement of King Fereydun.¹² Thus, if Newroz, through Kawa, can be seen as celebrating the spark of rebellion and the promise of renewal, Mehregan commemorates the establishment of the just order that this rebellion made possible. This distinction highlights the rich tapestry of festive commemorations tied to this pivotal legend in Iranian tradition. The celebration of Newroz across a wide cultural and geographical expanse—by Persians, Kurds, Afghans, Tajiks, and others ⁸—demonstrates its transcultural appeal. However, the Kawa myth provides a specific interpretive lens that can amplify or particularize its meaning for different groups. For many Persians, Kaveh's story is one layer among several mythological narratives associated with Nowruz, including those of Jamshid.¹⁷ For Kurds, however, Kawa often becomes the dominant, if not exclusive, narrative framework for Newroz, inextricably tying the festival to their unique historical experiences and national aspirations for freedom and self-determination.² This illustrates how a shared cultural phenomenon can carry distinct, deeply felt meanings reflective of the diverse priorities and identities of its celebrants. Consequently, in regions where Kurdish identity and cultural expression have faced suppression, Newroz celebrations, imbued with the spirit of Kawa's resistance, can transform from simple cultural festivals into politically charged assertions of identity and expressions of dissent.⁸

VI. Scholarly Perspectives: Deconstructing the Myth

A. Theories on the Origin and Historical Basis of the Kawa Legend

The origin and historical antecedents of the Kawa legend have been subjects of considerable scholarly debate. A significant point noted by researchers is the apparent absence of Kawa's story in the Avesta, the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures, and in other extant pre-Islamic Persian

texts. Within the *Shahnameh* itself, Kawa (Kāveh) appears specifically within the narrative cycle of Fereydoun, a factor that has fueled controversy regarding the antiquity and original form of the myth.⁶

Researchers have proposed various theories, which can be broadly categorized into four main lines of thought as outlined by Gazerani⁶:

1. **Avestan Name, Later Character Development:** This theory posits that while the name "Kawa" might have connections to Avestan linguistic roots or names, the character and the narrative as widely known today developed in a later period, likely after the Parthian era. The story would then have been incorporated into Sasanian historiographical works like the *Khoday-Nameh* (Book of Lords), which served as a primary source for Ferdowsi. Proponents of this view include scholars such as Ferdinand Justi, Arthur Christensen, and Zabihullah Safa.⁶
2. **Ancient Mythological Figure:** Conversely, another group of scholars considers both Kawa's name and his character to be of ancient and purely legendary origin. They have sought to establish connections between Kawa and other mythological figures, such as Kai-Qubad (another figure from the *Shahnameh*) or even Tvasht, the divine blacksmith of the Vedic pantheon in ancient India, suggesting a shared Indo-Iranian mythological heritage. Johannes Hertel, Bahman Sarkarati, and Turaj Daryaei are associated with this perspective.⁶
3. **Persian Ayyari Story:** A third interpretation, notably advanced by Mehrdad Bahar, suggests that the story of Kawa is not primarily mythological in the traditional sense but rather a Persian *Ayyari* tale. The *Ayyaran* were groups known for their chivalric codes, sometimes acting as popular champions or social bandits. According to this view, Kawa's story, reflecting the ethos of such groups, was incorporated into the national epic during the late Sasanian or early Islamic period.⁶
4. **Association with the Primordial Cow:** A fourth category of theories links Kawa symbolically or etymologically with the primordial cow (Gav), which plays a significant role in Iranian creation myths and in the broader struggle against Ahriman (the evil principle), particularly within the story of Fereydoun, whose life is often connected to a miraculous bovine.⁶

Beyond these mythological and literary origins, some scholars have explored potential, albeit speculative, historical connections. One such hypothesis suggests that Kawa's rebellion might be a legendary echo of a historical revolt against the Median king Deioces, who reigned from approximately 728 to 675 BCE. In this interpretation, the tyrannical Zahhak could be a symbolic representation of Deioces's reportedly harsh rule and the centralizing policies that may have provoked resistance among certain Iranian tribes.⁹

The argument that Kawa's story, in its celebrated *Shahnameh* form, is not found in Avestan or earlier pre-Islamic texts⁶ suggests that the legend may represent an "invention of tradition" or a significant later crystallization. It could have been elevated, adapted, or even substantially reshaped during the Sasanian period and subsequently canonized by Ferdowsi to serve specific cultural, ethical, or national-identity purposes relevant to the socio-political context of 10th-century Persia. This does not diminish its profound cultural importance but rather

historicizes its development within the broader evolution of Iranian epic narratives.

B. Evolution and Transformation of the Narrative

The narrative complex involving Kawa, Zahhak, and Fereydoun has demonstrably undergone significant evolution and transformation across different textual layers and oral traditions over centuries.⁷ Analyses comparing the *Shahnameh* account with information gleaned from Avestan fragments, other pre-Islamic textual references, Islamic-era chronicles, and particularly the rich tradition of *Naghali* (Iranian epic storytelling) scrolls reveal a dynamic process of adaptation and reinterpretation.

For instance,⁷ highlights several notable variations:

- In some *Naghali* scrolls, Zahhak is ultimately killed, which contrasts with the *Shahnameh*'s account of his eternal imprisonment. This variant of Zahhak's demise aligns more closely with the fate of his Indian mythological counterpart, the three-headed serpent demon Vishvarupa, who is slain by the god Indra.
- Another variant portrays Kaveh employing cunning and feigned friendship to lure Zahhak to Mount Damavand, where he then, following the instructions of a sage-like figure (Hum Abed), imprisons the tyrant and establishes magical wards to ensure his confinement. This version attributes more direct agency and strategic thinking to Kaveh in the final act of neutralizing Zahhak.
- The intervention of the mythical bird Simorgh is sometimes introduced to prevent Zahhak from being killed outright, decreeing that his final judgment must be deferred until the Day of Doom, adding another layer of cosmological depth to the narrative.

These examples of narrative fluidity underscore the living nature of both oral and literary traditions in reshaping and re-contextualizing myths to suit new audiences, cultural understandings, or storytelling conventions. The existence of these multiple, sometimes conflicting, scholarly theories about Kawa's origins—be they mythological, historical, or literary⁶—also highlights that the study of mythology is itself an interpretive and often contested field. There is rarely a single "correct" origin or definitive meaning; rather, different academic disciplines and perspectives yield a range of plausible interpretations based on the available textual, linguistic, and comparative evidence.

The suggested connections between figures like Kawa and the Vedic Tvashtr⁶, or between the Fereydoun-Zahhak dyad and the Indra-Vishvarupa conflict in Indian mythology⁷, point towards a deeper, shared Indo-Iranian mythological substratum. This suggests that elements within the Kawa legend, even if codified in their current form at a later date, may draw upon extremely ancient archetypes, narrative patterns, and cosmological concepts common to the broader Indo-Iranian cultural sphere before its linguistic and cultural divergence. Such connections hint at roots far older than the specific Persian or Kurdish formulations of the tale, tapping into primordial themes of heroic craftsmen, divine struggles against demonic forces, and the cyclical battle between order and chaos.

VII. Kawa's Legacy in the Modern Era

A. Contemporary Symbolism: Enduring Icon of Resistance and Pride

Kawa the Blacksmith has transcended his ancient mythological origins to become a potent and enduring contemporary symbol of resistance against tyranny, injustice, and oppression. His name and story are frequently invoked in diverse political and social contexts, particularly in Iran and among Kurdish communities, as a rallying cry for freedom and justice.¹ He remains an inspirational figure for movements advocating for fundamental human rights and self-determination, embodying the courage of the common individual to challenge overwhelming power.¹

More than just a historical or literary figure, Kawa represents profound cultural pride and heritage. His legend encapsulates timeless values such as courage, the transformative power of collective action by ordinary people, and the unyielding spirit of those who fight for dignity and liberation.³ The narrative of a simple craftsman who dared to confront a monstrous tyrant and succeeded in sparking a revolution continues to resonate deeply, offering a perennial model of hope and empowerment.¹³

B. Representations in Art, Literature, and Popular Culture

The compelling legend of Kawa has served as a rich source of inspiration for a multitude of artistic and literary works throughout history and into the modern day.⁹ Public monuments, such as the statue of Kawa in Afrin (prior to its damage), stand as tangible testaments to his heroic stature and enduring cultural significance within Kurdish communities.¹¹ His image has also graced historical artifacts, such as an illustration in a World War I era magazine and a stamp issued by the Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920, indicating his appropriation by various political and nationalist movements.¹

Kawa's story and its associated imagery are woven into the fabric of Kurdish cultural expression, notably in their songs and oral traditions.¹¹ In contemporary times, his figure continues to be reinterpreted through various mediums. While ²⁰ describes a modern Iranian visual artist who shares the name Kaveh Ahangar and draws inspiration from Persian artistic heritage for his geometric murals and 3D installations, the resonance of the name itself signifies the cultural weight it carries.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of Kawa's entry into global popular culture is the character "Kaveh" in the internationally acclaimed video game *Genshin Impact*. This character is explicitly based on the mythological Kaveh Ahangar, with his backstory and design incorporating elements from the legend, including visual motifs such as hair clips that resemble traditional symbols associated with Kaveh the Blacksmith, and blending them with aesthetics inspired by Sasanian and broader Persian culture, as well as aspects of Fereyduun's narrative.¹⁹ This adaptation, while fictionalized, introduces a traditionally Middle Eastern mythological hero to a vast, young, international audience, demonstrating the myth's capacity for cross-cultural transmission in the digital age. The inclusion of such a figure in a globally popular game signifies a new vector for the dissemination of regional mythologies. While these portrayals may simplify or alter the original narratives, they expose millions worldwide to figures and cultural aesthetics they might otherwise never encounter, representing a modern

form of cultural exchange that moves beyond academic or diasporic circles.

The enduring appeal of Kawa's story can be attributed, in part, to its powerful "underdog" narrative. A simple craftsman, armed with little more than his courage and his tools, takes on a monstrously powerful tyrant and, against all odds, ignites a revolution.³ This archetypal struggle of the seemingly powerless against the overwhelmingly powerful possesses universal appeal and readily lends itself to contemporary narratives of social justice, political change, and resistance against perceived oppressors, explaining its continued invocation and adaptability to new contexts.

However, the legacy of Kawa also illustrates how mythology can function as a "double-edged sword" in the complex dynamics of nation-building and identity politics. While the legend serves as a powerful instrument for fostering national unity and pride within a specific group (such as Iranians or Kurds), and for asserting a distinct ethnic or cultural identity¹, its invocation can also become a point of contention. Different groups may lay claim to the "truest" or most authentic version of the myth, and it can be employed to draw sharp distinctions between "us" and "them." The varied interpretations and, at times, competing claims of ownership over Kawa's legacy underscore this complexity, revealing how a shared mythic inheritance can be simultaneously a source of internal cohesion and inter-group contestation over history, identity, and legitimacy.

VIII. Conclusion: The Timeless Call of Kawa the Blacksmith

A. Recapitulation of Kawa's Multifaceted Significance

Kawa the Blacksmith, whether known as Kāveh Āhangar in Persian epics or Kawe-y Asinger in Kurdish folklore, stands as a monumental figure whose legend has reverberated through millennia. His story, centered on a courageous rebellion against the monstrous tyranny of Zahhak, encapsulates a universal struggle for justice and freedom. For both Persian and Kurdish cultures, he is far more than a mere character in an ancient tale; he is a foundational emblem of righteous resistance, the embodiment of popular will challenging despotic power, and a potent symbol of national and ethnic pride. The deep and enduring connection of his triumph to the Newroz festival, particularly through the evocative symbolism of fire, further cements his place in the collective memory and ritual life of these peoples, signifying renewal, liberation, and the victory of light over an oppressive darkness.

B. The Enduring Message of Courage and the Fight for Justice

The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith transcends its ancient Near Eastern origins, offering a timeless and universally relevant message about the profound courage required to confront tyranny and the extraordinary power that can be unleashed when a people unite for a just cause. His narrative serves as a perennial source of inspiration for all who strive for a more equitable, free, and dignified world. In an age marked by ongoing struggles against oppression in various forms, Kawa's defiance continues to echo, reminding humanity that even

the most formidable regimes are not invincible when faced with the unwavering resolve of those who refuse to be subjugated.

The legacy of Kawa is a testament to the enduring capacity of the human spirit not only to endure suffering but to actively challenge its sources and, in doing so, to forge a new destiny. Much like the blacksmith who, through the intense heat of the forge and the skilled strike of the hammer, transforms raw, unyielding metal into objects of purpose and strength, Kawa's story illustrates how collective action, born from the crucible of injustice, can reshape societies and usher in eras of hope and renewal. His call to arms, initially a cry of personal anguish, became the clarion call of a nation, a call that continues to resonate with all who believe in the fundamental right to live in freedom and dignity.

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