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For Afghan boys and men, kite flying is a way of life

By Kirk Semple
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KABUL — The kites appear suddenly, whimsical flashes of color that kick above this beige landscape of relentless dust and desperation.

They reveal themselves, like dragonflies, at the most unexpected moments: through the window of a grim government office, beyond the smoke curling from the debris left by a suicide bomb, above the demoralizing gridlock of traffic and poverty. To a new arrival in this chaotic city of three million, they are unexpected and wonderfully incongruous.

Banned during the Taliban regime, kite flying is once again the main recreational escape for Afghan boys and some men. (It still remains largely off-limits to girls and women.) And with the American release Friday of the film "The Kite Runner," based on the best-selling novel of the same name, a much wider audience will be introduced to Afghan kite culture.

Following a kite's string to its source will most likely lead to an Afghan boy standing on top of his roof or in an empty lot, playing the line in deep concentration.

But this is not the stuff of idle afternoons or, as in American culture, carefree picnics in the park. This is war. The sole reason for kites, Afghans will tell you, is to fight them, and a single kite aloft is nothing but an unspoken challenge to a neighbor: Bring it on!

The objective of the kite fight is to slice the other flier's string with your own, sending the vanquished aircraft to the ground. Kite-fighting string is coated with a resin made of glue and finely crushed glass, which turns it into a blade.

The big kite-fighting day is Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, when thousands of boys and men flock to their rooftops and to the summits of the craggy hills that ring the city, carrying stacks of kites fashioned from bamboo and brightly colored tissue paper, and miles of sharp string on wooden spools.

On a recent Friday afternoon, there were scores of kites locked in duels above Tapeii-i-Maranjan, a high bluff in a southeastern neighborhood of the capital and the city's most popular kite-flying venue. All strata of Kabuli life - male Kabuli life, that is - were well-represented: Schoolchildren were fighting ministerial officials, doctors were battling day laborers. They fought in teams of two, with one person tweaking the string and the other handling the spool.

Packs of boys too poor to buy their own equipment were sprinting after defeated kites as they fell to Earth. They were the kite runners.

"We don't have, like, soccer, baseball or basketball," said Ahmad Roshazai, a translator at a medical clinic near Bagram who was flying kites on the hill with two of his brothers. He had cuts on his fingers from handling the blade-like fighting string. "We don't have any good places for that," he said. "No green places."

He added: "This is the only game we have every Friday. That's it."

The inveterate kite fighters speak of their craft as part science and part art. The key to excellence depends on a combination of factors, both empirical and ineffable: the flexibility and balance of the kites' bamboo frames, the strength of the glue binding the tissue-paper skin, the quality of the string, the evenness of the spool and, of course, the skill of the fliers and their ability to adjust to the vicissitudes of the wind.

Rashid Abedi, 25, a business administration student, described the satisfaction of killing another kite.

"It has a taste," he said, and he likened it to the thrill of horse riding or driving a car. "These things all the time have a special taste."

"Even if I am cut 40 or 50 times," he continued, "I will fly again because I know how the taste is."

Kite-fighting string in Afghanistan was traditionally homemade by a laborious process that involved coating cotton string with a concoction of crushed glass and glue. But factories in other more-developed kite-flying nations like Pakistan, India, Thailand, Malaysia and China now churn out tens of thousands of spools of machine-made nylon fighting string that swamp the Afghan market.

Unlike in other Asian countries, like Pakistan and India, where kite-flying is wildly popular, Afghanistan's kite industry is still homespun and humble. There is still no Afghan kite federation, no national competitions, no marketing. While nearly all the string sold in Afghanistan is now factory-made and imported from other countries, most of the kites are still made by local artisans.

By consensus in Shor Bazaar, a block-long market of tiny kite shops in Kabul, the best kite maker in the capital is Noor Agha, a slender and vain 53-year-old man who lives in a squalid mud-and-stone hovel in a cemetery and is missing most of his teeth.

"Nobody can beat me, nobody can do what I'm doing," he said one recent afternoon as he sat barefooted on the carpeted floor of his workshop making a kite. "Even computers can't beat me."

His tools were arrayed before him: long stalks of bamboo and sheets of tissue paper; pliers and blades to cut and whittle the bamboo into long, flexible dowels for the frames; scissors to shape the tissue paper; and a bowl of glue.

"My prestige is higher than the interior minister," he said.

Noor Agha, like most Afghan kite makers, inherited the craft from his father, who made kites until he was too old to grip the tools.

Alone he can make about 40 kites a day, he said. But his business has gotten so large that he has enlisted the help of his two wives and several of his 11 children.

While most kites in Shor Bazaar sell for less than the equivalent of 30 cents, Noor Agha's kites can fetch upwards of $1. He sells custom-ordered kites to Afghan and foreign corporations and clients for much more, he said.

His local fame attracted the attention of the producers of "The Kite Runner," who hired him to train the film's child stars in the art of kite fighting and to make hundreds of kites used in the film.

For the kite-fliers of Kabul, the release of "The Kite Runner" will help to draw the culture of Afghan kite-flying out of the shadows of the much larger and more prosperous kite-flying nations in Asia.

It might also go some way toward explaining a particular Afghan kite ambush of an unsuspecting American kite-flier in Maryland in 2004.

That spring, Shoab Sharifi, a Colombia University student recently arrived from Kabul, was visiting Ocean City when he spotted several people flying kites on the beach. He bought a kite from a vendor and did what for him was the natural thing: He started to kite-fight.

"I thought people were doing it here, too," he said in a telephone interview from New York.

Sharifi went on: "There was a little girl, and I did the maneuvers and cut her string from below." As the wind carried the girl's kite into the ocean, and Shoab celebrated his first kite-fighting victory on American soil, the little girl broke down in tears.

When the lifeguards descended on him and accused him of "disturbing the peace," it dawned on Sharifi that he had stepped into a cultural rut between Afghanistan and the United States.

"In the United States, I think people try to avoid conflict," he concluded. "In Afghan culture everything is about fighting."

He added: "It was a very educational experience."

Ed Robbins contributed reporting.