



## LUṬĪ

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**LUṬĪ**, also *luti* (pl. *alvāt*), has a variety of meanings. The term was first mentioned by the tenth-century poet Kesā'i, who equated the luṭīs with catamites (*tāzand mikyāz*). For Jalāl- al-Din Rumi (13th century) and 'Obayd Zākāni (14th century) luṭīs were pederasts, and the related word *lavāṭi* (sodomy) is still used as such. Not every text offers this negative sexual connotation. Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow (11th century) equated the luṭīs with wine drinkers, thieves and whore-mongers, while Suzani warned that luṭīs cannot be trusted in commercial dealings. Hence the modern-day use of the terms *luṭi-bāzār* or *luṭi-bāzi*, meaning 'cheating,' particularly in financial matters, and of *luṭi-ḳurdan*: 'improvidence,' 'wastefulness.' In the 16th century, and probably much earlier, the term was also used to refer to a group of destitute dervishes and dervish-like entertainers who used intoxicating substances (*qalandarān-e bi sar o pāhā va luti-yān-e qalandarnamā luthā-ye bangiyāna bekār borda*; Monši, I, p.117). Luṭī also referred to a jester attached to the princely court and to itinerant entertainers (acrobats, dancers, buffoons) who performed improvisatory comedy or who were accompanied by animals, typically monkeys, bears or goats that danced while accompanied by music and lewd songs (Floor, 2005, chap. 1). In the 19th century the term was also used to refer to Robin Hood-type bandits and thugs, in the tradition of the *'ayyār*, who sometimes challenged oppressive governors, provided strong-arm support for local secular and religious leaders and bullied their fellow townsmen. Apart from this anti-social aspect, luṭīs were also known for their *luṭigari* or *javānmardi* ('chivalry,' or 'manliness'), hence the use of the terms *luṭi-ye ḳodā'i* ('godly luṭī') and *luṭi-ye allāhi* ('luṭī devoted to God'; both terms



conveying the relationship of their activities to divine justice).

The etymology of the word *luṭi* is uncertain. Given the meaning of loose living, gambling, wine-imbibing, and pederasty, many have argued that the term was derived from *liwāṭ* ('sodomy'), a derivative of the Arabic *maṣdar* of *lāṭa* or *lāwāṭa*, a denominative verb from *LUṬ* the prophet (*EI*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "Liwāṭ"). Others contest this. However, the occasional association of the *luliyān* ('gypsies'), who stood for everything immoral, with the *alvāṭ* strengthens the case of the derivation from Lot (Muḥammad Marvārīd, pp. 91, 175; *Golestāna*, p.337) as does the frequent mention of the prophet Lot in the works of *Ḳāksār* dervishes. The various immoral connotations of the term were further reinforced by the fact that *luṭis* were associated with the *malāmatiya* movement and its offshoot the *qalandars*, who held that all outward appearance of piety or religiosity, including good deeds, was ostentation. They were therefore known for their dissolute and immoral lifestyle, which the various meanings of *luṭi* describe. (Afšāri and Mir-Ābedini, eds., 1993, pp. 44-47). Another possible, but highly unlikely, derivation is from the Persian word *lut*, meaning "food," or "viands," and thus *luti* and *lutikvāri* ('glutton,' or 'greedy'. In current usage, the term, apart from entertainer, means 'rascal,' or 'vagabond.'

It thus would seem that the term *luṭi* primarily referred to dervishes and entertainers who were at the fringes of society. Because dervishes also were entertainers (storytellers, performers with snakes or scorpions) and the dervishes and regular entertainers performed together, the difference between the two groups was not always obvious. This was even more so given that both groups had a reputation for loose, immoral living (drinking wine, pederasty, using opium, and untrustworthiness). By extension, the term was used to refer to such behavior on the part of ordinary people that reflected the presumed lifestyle of *luṭis*.

We may distinguish two groups of *luṭis*, although many of their members may have overlapped. The first group was that of the dervishes and entertainers, all of whom belonged to the *Ḳāksār* order or its affiliated *fotovvat* movement. Although *luṭis* are not explicitly mentioned in *Kāšefi's Fotovvat-nāma* (ca. 1500 CE), a major part of his book deals with entertainers, among whom he included acrobats, buffoons, storytellers, wrestlers, and strongmen. Moreover, in another *fotovvat-nāma* the ninth leader of the *Ḳāksār* is named as Ḥasan-e Bašri, "from whom nine families of 'Ajam dervishes and the *luṭi* affiliation (*selsela-ye luṭihā*) originate" (Afšāri, 2003, p. 221). Also, in the nineteenth

century, itinerant entertainers who were closely affiliated with the Kāksār order of dervishes were generally referred to as luṭi. Central to the Kāksār system of spiritual organization were the so-called seventeen holy guilds, one of which was sometimes listed as that of the luṭis (Afšāri and Mir-Ābedini, eds., 1993, pp.339, 398, 400). Before starting a *soḵanvari* (oratory competition) session, the competing Kāksār dervishes referred to one another as ‘lover’ (*salām-e ‘ešq*) to express their mutual respect; what is called in modern times *dāš-mašdi* and *luṭi-ma’āb* (Afšāri and Mir-Ābedini, eds., 1993, p. 340). This link between the groups is further emphasized by the fact that the official in charge of *sayyeds* (people who claim descent from the prophet Mohammad, either in the male or female line), the *naqib al-mamālek*, also supervised the entertainers. In the nineteenth century, the luṭis were under the supervision of a *luṭi-bāši* who was appointed by the shah, while the *naqib* supervised only the Kāksār and Faqr-e ‘Ajam dervishes. The *luṭi-bāši* received 10-15 percent of the income of the luṭis and in return, in case of interference by government officials in the performance of their activities, the luti-bashi would intercede for them and provide protection. There seems to have been one or more *luṭi-bāši* in each major town.

The second group of luṭis was formed by urban Robin Hood-type bandits. They were members of the neighborhood *fotovvat* association and they were not supposed to submit to anyone who did not abide by their code of *javānmardi* (‘manliness’), in other words, they constituted a *pentī*. This meant that they were supposed to work for their living, help others, and defend their neighborhood and town. They were variously referred to as luṭi, *dāš*, and *mašti* and like the Kāksār dervishes with whom they were affiliated, they wore distinctive clothing but more stylishly, with obligatory objects such as a chain made in Yazd, a brass bowl from Kerman, a silk handkerchief from Kāšān, a knife made in Isfahan, and non-obligatory items such as a cherry-wood pipe, canvas shoes (*giva*) and a shawl; hence also the meaning ‘swell,’ ‘dandy,’ or ‘fop’ (Afšāri and Mir-Ābedini, eds., 1993, p.338). They had games and pastimes that were peculiar to them such as pigeon flying, cock and ram fighting, athletic contests, and gambling, and they also used a kind of secret argot among themselves. With luṭis of other city quarters they had friendly bouts (*gol-e košti*) in the *zurkāna* (traditional gymnasium; lit. “house of strength”) as well as unfriendly fights in the streets, partly as a result of their affiliation with the Ḥaydari and Ne‘mati (see [HAYDARI AND NE‘MATI](#)) urban moieties, and partly due to their association with local politicians. They had their own habitual café or *pātuq* for drinking, gambling, and other amusements, as well



as the Emāmzāda Dāvud in Tehran which they in particular visited to perform their devotions. During the months of Moḥarram and Šafar they played a major role in the mourning processions and the chanting of *nowḥas* (songs of religious lamentation or dirges). The *zurkāna* was used to learn and practice wrestling, and being a wrestler (*pahlavān*) was a *mašti*'s ideal. To rise in the group, one had to excel in *javānmardi* behavior, in poetry skills, and in physical contests.

The best of this type of luṭīs were those who actually tried to live up to the ideal of the Robin Hood-bandit, i.e. to be a *javānmard*, meaning an exemplary chivalrous person in both spiritual and material matters. This meant they had to be truthful, to hold to their promises even when doing so was not in their own interest, to be wise, generous and full of esprit, and maintaining a broad-minded bohemian outlook on life. These lutis were known for their *luṭigari* or chivalry and commanded great respect in their quarter. Even *penti* or thugs showed them humility and respect and avoided confrontation with them. [Sadeq Hedayat](#) eternalized such a luṭigari in the person of “Dāš Akol” (q.v.; or “Dāš Ākal”=“Dāš āqā kačal” [“Mr. bold brother”]) in a short story of the same title, just as Sadeq Chubak did with the luṭi or wandering player with animals in his short story “Antari keh luṭi-aš morda bud” (“The Baboon Whose Buffoon Was Dead”).

Because of their fighting skills and local connections, luṭīs were utilized by secular and religious leaders in their towns. These leaders often vied for power using the luṭīs as proxies and also used them to keep their townspeople in line. This made it difficult to do away with the luṭīs, because many secular and religious leader[s] needed them. Luṭīs sometimes took control of a city, which led to chaos and anarchy, such as in 1841 when the [Emām-e Jom'a](#) (the Friday prayer leader) of Isfahan, Moḥammad Bāqer Šafti, unleashed his luṭīs to oust his political rival. [Moḥammad Shah](#) had to come in person with an army to put down the turmoil, hanging a few score of luṭīs but not Šafti, who had been the cause of the disturbances. These Robin Hood types had no particular social philosophy except to seek self-gratification and aggrandizement, and 'Abd-Allāh Mostowfi, e.g., wrote that there were more *penti* than luṭīs. The most famous luṭīs in Qajar Iran were Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan (see [BĀQER KHAN SĀLĀR-E MELLI](#)), who backed the constitutional forces in Tabriz during the civil war of 1908-1909. As a matter of course, the luṭīs of rival city quarters opposed them; similar divisions also occurred elsewhere such as in Tehran and Dezful.

In the 19th and 20th centuries these luṭīs were often referred to as roughs (*owbāš*), knife-wielders (*chāqu-kešān*), or thick-necks (*gardan-e koloft*) and were used to organize ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations, even participating in opposing demonstrations on consecutive days. The most famous example was the demonstration led by Ša‘bān-e Bimoḵ that toppled premier Mosaddeq in 1953. In 1963 luṭīs led by rivals of Bimoḵ helped mobilize the demonstrations against the shah’s reform program that had outraged the ulema and the landowners. Subsequently, because of the government’s efficient control, the role of luṭīs remained mostly limited to wrestling and running protection rackets in the bazaars and neighborhoods. Luṭīs seemed to have outlived their political usefulness, and it was therefore a surprise that both the shah and the opposition tried to use luṭīs in mobilizing support for their respective camps in 1978. This lasted a short time, as genuine revolutionary sentiments provided the impetus for the people’s mobilization. However, the role of violence in political life and the relationship of thugs with secular and religious politicians survived the Islamic revolution. Many of those who in the past would have joined the ranks of the luṭīs have now become official agents of the government in the guise of members of the *basij* (paramilitary revolutionary forces).

For a music sample, see [Hāji Firuzi](#).

For a music sample, see [Song in praise of opium](#).

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