

THE LUTI, AN OUTCASTE GROUP OF IRAN

by Sekandar Amanolahi and Edward Norbeck

An ethnographic account is presented of the way of life of the Luti (Tushmal) outcastes of southwestern Iran, a people who are turning from their traditional pastoralist economy to farming.

KEY WORDS: Outcaste group, Luti, pastoralism, Iran

This paper sketches the circumstances of life of a socially distinct people of Iran called the Luti, who hold the status of outcastes. To our knowledge no anthropological studies or any other published accounts of this group are available beyond brief mention of them in a very few historic writings. Most of the data on the Luti presented here were gathered in Luristan and Bakhtiari, Iran, in 1973 by Sekandar Amanolahi, senior author of this article, by means of interviews with Luti and other Iranians and by observation. Interviews were conducted with forty persons, principally at their homes, of whom thirteen were Luti, five Tushmal, sixteen Luri, and six Bakhtiari.

Although himself an Iranian citizen from Luristan, Amanolahi had known little about the Luti until his attention was attracted to them in the course of conducting anthropological research in Iran on another subject which brought him into contact with a number of Luti people. Amanolahi then recognized these people as belonging to a social category that has counterparts elsewhere in the world and, as best he could in the time available for this purpose, collected information on them with the intent of continuing his investigations at a later time. As a preliminary report based upon limited investigation, therefore, this article often lacks information or precise information on various subjects. Motives for studying the Luti were a combination of scholarly curiosity about a society unknown to the rest of the world and the opinion that knowledge of their culture has potential value to the social sciences in general, particularly in contributing to our understanding of the nature of caste systems and outcaste groups.

Mr. Amanolahi is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Pahlavi University in Shiraz, Iran. Mr. Norbeck is Professor of Anthropology at Rice University.

LUTI CULTURE

The number of the Luti, their geographical distribution, place of origin, and history are all unclear. It is certain, however, that they live in at least the southwestern part of Iran in Luristan, and almost certain that they inhabit the adjoining Bakhtiari region. In Bakhtiari a people known as the Tushmal, a Turkish term meaning "leader" or "headman," appears to be identical with the Luti despite being known by a different name. Some Luti—known by this name—live among the Sagvand people in Khuzistan, near the city of Andimeshk. Most Luti live in rural areas, and only a few are in towns and cities.

The Luti are thinly distributed and no separate census data on them are maintained, making it difficult to present with assurance information about their number. The total population of Luti and Tushmal in southwestern Iran is probably two or three thousand people, of which at least one thousand (Luti) live in Luristan. In Khurramabad, the capital of Luristan, the number of Luti is estimated to be between fifty and a hundred people.

The language spoken by the Luti in Luristan is *Luri*, the language of this region of Iran. The Tushmal of Bakhtiari also speak Luri, the language of the dominant people of the area, although the Bakhtiari dialect differs somewhat from that of Luristan. Many people in both areas also speak *Farsi* or Persian as a secondary language. (Farsi and Luri are two of the Southwestern dialects of the Persian group of the Indo-Iranian languages.) It appears certain that the Luti, including the Tushmal, formerly had a distinctive language, and some Luti retain partial knowledge of this language although it is not used by them in public. Some informants stated that this dying language is called *Darvishi* (etymology unknown) and others called it *Lutiyuna*, "the language of the Luti." All Luti informants who were interviewed knew a few words of the language, but no informant could remember a story or a song in the language. Although the Luti of Luristan and the Tushmal of Bakhtiari do not appear to know of the existence of each other, the "native" languages of the two peoples appeared to Amanolahi to be the same.

Examination of a brief glossary of Luti words collected in the field suggests that the Luti language is not closely related to either Luri or Farsi. Comparison of Luti words with a very small vocabulary of Iranian Gypsy terms suggests that an affinity exists between these languages, and therefore also suggests that the Luti language is more closely related to Hindustani than to either Luri or Farsi. Unfortunately, information available on the language of the Iranian Gypsies (Sykes 1902) is too scant to allow any firm conclusions about linguistic relationships. A comparison of a few common words in the Luri, Farsi, Luti, and Iranian Gypsy languages appears below:

	LURI	FARSI	LUTI	IRANIAN GYPSY
dog	sag	sag	sanuta	sanafta
eye	tiya	cheshm	nahur	nahur
horse	asb	asb	goura	ghora
ox	gow	gov	tirang	tirang
bread	nu	nan	mana	mana
man	peya	mard	mones	mones
daughter	dokhtar	dokhtar	dontaz	
brother	brar	brather	bri	
mother	da	mather	daghes	
father	bowa	padar	baghes	
boy, son	kor	pesar	kala	
good	kho	khob	dakh	khábeh
leader, headman	kekha	kadkhoda	gowari	
night	show	shab	rad	lail (Arabic)
to hit or to beat	ab-za	ae-zan	batavar	taburdan

Two publications dealing with Iranian history give brief support to the view that the Luti are descendants of Gypsies. Bausani (1972:60) states that Vahram (or Bahram), a famous Sassanid king who reigned from A.D. 421 to 439 had "summoned bands of Luti, the ancestors of the gypsies, all the way from India" to Iran. Sykes (1902:437-438) refers to the various names by which the Gypsies are known in different parts of Iran, stating:

In Persia they bear different names in different provinces, generally however speaking of themselves as *Fiuj*, which is said to be Arabic. In Kermán they are known as *Luli*, but in Baluchistán as *Luri*. In Fárs *Kaoli*, a corruption of *Kábuli*, is their usual appellation, although *Gurbati* is also used. In Azerbaiján we find the name *Kara Chi*; in Khorasán *Krishmál*, a corruption of *Gheir-i-Shumár* or Out of the Reckoning, and, to go further afield, in the Chengyáni of Turkey we find an approximation to, or the origin of the European *Zingari*.

The similarity in the foregoing quotation of the names *Luti*, *Luli*, *Luri* (as used in Baluchistan; in Iran, *Luri* and *Luti* are not synonymous) is noteworthy. So also is the information acquired by Amanolahi in the course of his field investigation that in Luristan the Luti are sometimes referred to by the name *Kawali*, a variant of the Farsi term *Kabuli*. In a personal interview, Yadula Khan, son of the former Wali (ruler) of Posht-i Kuh in Luristan, described the connection between the names *Luti* and *Kawali*, stating that his father had told him the *Kawali* or *Luti* were brought from Kabul, Afghanistan during the reign of Nadir Shah Afshar (1736-1747) and were settled near Burujerd. It was expected that they would remain there as farmers, but they soon left and spread over all of Luristan.

The Luti interviewed by Amanolahi did not know how long they had been in Iran and had no other knowledge of their historic background. All stated that they have been in Luristan as long as any of them could

remember, and none knew if any Luti live in other parts of Iran. Although the modern Luti have no connection with Iranian Gypsies, who do not reside today in either Luristan or Bakhtiari, it appears possible that the Luti are descendants of one of the social groups that later became known as Gypsies.

Traditionally the Luti gained a livelihood by serving as entertainers, playing musical instruments, singing, and dancing, by producing handicrafts such as wooden plows, bowls, spoons and other simple tools and utensils, by performing circumcisions, a defiling activity, and by begging. No restriction prohibited them from raising domestic animals and farming, and some Luti have long done so, although until recently they owned no land and obtained by arrangements with non-Luti landowners the right to use land in return for a part of the proceeds of husbandry or for labor or other services. Such Luti as live in Khurramabad and other towns and cities have followed their traditional occupations as entertainers, circumcisers, and beggars.

Modern times have so far brought no great changes to the Luti economy. Most Luti still follow their old professions, but a greater number are farmers today than in the past and, as a result of a land reform during the years 1963 to 1970, a few now own small plots of land. Some Luti now work for wages when they can. North of Abdanan, in Posht-i Kuh, lives a small group of pastoral nomads who still raise goats, sheep, cattle, horses, donkeys, and mules. They are said to have migrated from the vicinity of Ilam, to the west of Abdanan. This group continues to follow one of the traditional handicrafts, making wooden sugarbowls for sale in villages and large settlements. The group is said to continue to observe the custom of hunting and eating wild boars, a defiling practice forbidden by Islam which non-Luti believe was a general custom among all Luti. Because of this practice, non-Luti refer to the Luti as *harum-har*, "eaters of the unclean."

Before the forced settlement of the pastoral nomads of Luristan by the Iranian government during the period 1921-1929, most of the Luti in that region were distributed in small numbers among various nomadic "tribes" of Luri pastoralists and were thus also nomadic pastoralists. However, although these Luti were sometimes herdsmen, they held other exclusive economic roles that were necessary or regarded as necessary by their Luri superiors. Ordinarily, the Luti remained permanently with the groups of Luri herders, but they were said to be free to leave if they so desired.

Until about sixty years ago, the pastoral nomads of Iran were economically self-sufficient in most matters. An 87-year-old Luri informant stated that in his youth very few metal tools and utensils were purchased but that instead wooden counterparts were used which were made by the Luti associated with the Luri. The Luti also entertained the Luri and performed circumcisions for them. In return for their services, Luti were given food,

other goods, and money. Some Luti owned a few herd animals and a few did a little farming, but they depended for a livelihood principally upon returns from their specialized services to the Luri.

Luti entertainers were males only, who performed mostly at weddings. The Luri also danced at these events but the Luti provided the instrumental and vocal music, a demeaning occupation. Instruments consisted of a small drum (*tombak*), a large drum (*dahol*), a long wind instrument (*saz*), and a three-stringed violin (*kamancheh*). The large drum and the wind instrument provided dance music and the violin and small drum were generally used to accompany singing.

According to a Luri custom called *gol*, guests at a wedding ceremony must contribute money to the bride and groom and also to the Luti entertainers. When the wedding feast came to an end, the Luti began to entertain, interrupting their performance after a few minutes to pass among the guests a tray for contributions of money. The Luti also received money during wedding ceremonies in accordance with another custom called *shava*, a ceremonial practice of exchanging gifts that signifies good will and mutual support. Participants in the wedding celebration gave a sum of money to a Luti entertainer, stating at that time the name of another participant whom the gift honored. The Luti retained the money but went to the named person and loudly announced both his name and the name of the donor, saying "*Shava, shava* (name of recipient) *namira havadarash* (name of donor)" (Long live X and his supporter Y).

An important source of money for the Luti was begging (*hass*), which was institutionalized and followed set procedures. At various times of the year, Luti men approached male leaders of the Luri group and household heads to ask for money, food, or clothes, which were ordinarily given to them. Where agriculture was practiced, the Luti went to the fields at harvest and requested wheat and barley. Giving such "gifts" to the Luti brought prestige to the donor because the Luti recipients announced the gifts at the time they visited other people to make additional requests.

The manner of requesting goods or money is said always to be extremely polite and to be accompanied by words of extravagant praise for the qualities of the person addressed. Failing or refusing to make a gift to a Luti might bring shame, embarrassment, and dishonor because of retaliatory acts performed by the Luti. Some of the Luti, who bear the name *dali*, are said to have unusual ability in creating heroic songs and epic poems. In earlier times, the *dali* composed such songs and poems about tribal battles and brave warriors, and they were sometimes paid to compose laudatory songs about certain persons. One such example is a song about Qadamkhair, a woman of the Qalavand tribe, which lauds her beauty, generosity, courage, and skill in doing such things as making rugs, fighting, and riding horses. A man who refuses the request of a Luti may be satirized in

a poem or song. An example said to have occurred a few years ago concerns a man named Rahim Kho of eastern Luristan who stole some goats from the Luti and refused to return them when asked to do so. In retaliation, the Luti composed a satirically insulting song entitled *Rahim Kho Garr* (Mangy Rahim Kho). According to the song, Rahim Kho has a loathsome case of mange, his guest house is filled with rats and lizards (meaning that no one will visit his home), and he has many other unpleasant attributes. Many people stated that they gave gifts to the Luti for fear of their satiric songs if the requests were refused. A man in Sar-dasht, Bakhtiari, stated that he annually gave to the Luti about 1,000 rials (approximately \$14.60) in order to protect his reputation.

Division of labor among the Luti is principally on the basis of sex and age. Women and girls prepare food, wash clothes, carry water for domestic use, milk the animals if any are owned, weave, and do other household tasks. As noted earlier, males work as entertainers. Performing circumcisions, begging, making wooden tools and utensils, and plant and animal husbandry are also the occupations of males. Men sometimes work in communities other than their own, doing any of the tasks described above or, in recent years, serving as wage laborers.

The basic social unit of the Luti is the family, which exists in various forms but is always headed by a male. Above the family is the patrilineage composed of a number of men who trace descent from a common male ancestor living several generations ago. Each lineage is known by the name of its founder, but the process of formation of the lineages is unclear. The lineage is not a territorial unit, and its members are sometimes dispersed in a number of localities. Within each lineage one man is generally recognized as the head, but he appears to have little authority today. Lineages of the Luti in Luristan are small and are not united with all other lineages by traditions of common ancestry or in any other way. In other words, the Luti do not claim to be the descendants of a single ancestor and they do not form a single corporate group. Generally, one lineage is attached to a particular tribe of Luri, although some lineages are dispersed. In southeastern Luristan four lineages of Luti are associated with five different groups of Luri and a few members of one lineage live in a city. The Shama lineage is attached to the Sagvand; the Bisavand lineage to the Baharvand (and a few of these Luti live independently in Khurramabad); the Qajar lineage to the Mir; and the Konar lineage to the Papi and Qalavand. The members of the Shama and Konar lineages claim a common ancestor.

Luti groups are generally identified among non-Luti by the names of the tribes to which they are attached. For example, the Qajar lineage is known as the Lutiyon-Miro (the Luti of the Mir). Among themselves, however, the Luti also are identified by their lineage affiliation. The func-

tional significance of the lineages, past and present, is unclear. Today the individual lineages do not appear to be closely united corporate groups, although identification with a lineage seems to have psychological importance.

As might be expected for any group of outcastes, the Luti are endogamous, a rule that is strongly enforced by the belief among non-Luti that they are defiled and defiling to others. Marriage of a Luti to a non-Luti is unthinkable. A few Luti are polygynous but monogamy is the general rule. Parental consent for marriage is necessary, and payment of a bride price to the parents of the bride is required. Traditionally the Luti did not observe *nekan*, the procedures of marriage prescribed by Islam. Their symbol of marriage was the giving of a needle to the parents of the groom by the parents of the bride, but this custom appears to have waned in the present century.

Residence after marriage is most commonly patrilocal, but it is not unusual for a man to live with his wife's relatives. The customs of the levirate and sororate are both followed. The levirate is described as continuing to be common today, but the sororate is, or has become, uncommon.

Most Luti households may be classified loosely as falling into five types: 1) the nuclear family; 2) the polygynous family; 3) the extended, non-polygynous family, which is probably the most common type since the Luti are poor and are often unable to establish separate households at the time of marriage; 4) the joint family, generally consisting of two brothers, one of whom is recognized as the head of the household, their wives and their children; and 5) the anomalous family, which lacks a pair of spouses, and consists of a widow or widower with unmarried children or an unmarried brother and sister. The extended family (type 3) is variable in composition but commonly includes a male household head, his wife or wives, their married sons and their children, unmarried sons and daughters, and it may include other relatives such as the parents of the household head. Variations of the other four types also exist; rather commonly, for example, one or both parents of a married man might live with him in what is otherwise a nuclear or a polygynous family.

Children receive training for adult roles from their parents according to their sex. Thus a boy receives training from his father in male tasks. He must, for example, have training to know how to beg, learning to speak at this time with great politeness and in ways that make the importuned people feel important. These occupations are learned practically and gradually and, although some Luti boys today attend school, where they learn new occupations, it is still regarded as important for a Luti boy to learn the traditional profession of his father. Girls are similarly trained by their mothers, but, as yet, few if any girls have received formal schooling.

In general, the way of life of the Luti is much like that of poor non-Luti

of Iran in such matters as the kinds of food they eat, their clothing, and their dwellings. Various features of Luti social organization, such as the manner of composition of their families, also resemble or are the same as those of the non-Luti. However, the Luti are sharply distinguished from the dominant population on the basis of their traditional occupations, which many still follow, and their state of pollution. Non-Luti attribute this condition of pollution to several sources. One view is that an ancestral Luti committed incest with his sister; another version is that this remote ancestor married his sister. According to the teachings of Islam, incest results in permanent defilement or *haram*, a term that means *forbidden* or *tabu* as well as *defiled*, *polluted*, or *supernaturally unclean*. The food, all other possessions, and the persons of the Luti are all *haram* and defiling to other people. Another view of the source of their pollution is the custom previously mentioned of eating the flesh of wild boars. Except for the small group of Luti previously described who live near Abdanan, however, the modern Luti are said to have abandoned this custom. Probably the most important circumstance bearing upon the state of pollution is the fact that the Luti fail to observe many Islamic rules and regulations and are for this reason regarded as *haram*.

The Luti are said to be distinguished from other people by their physical appearance, but this contention seems doubtful. A Luri in Posht-i Kuh stated that he could recognize Luti by looking at their eyes, but he could not make clear how their eyes differed. Others claimed that Luti have darker skins than non-Luti, but this statement also appears dubious. Still other non-Luti stated that Luti may be recognized by the way they talk. Most of these contentions about the distinctiveness of the Luti and all contentions about their distinctive physical features do not agree with the experiences of Amanolahi. On several occasions he encountered Luti people without so recognizing them, and he met no Luti who seemed to him physically distinctive. While in Bakhtiari, for example, he met two Tushmal who dressed and talked like the Bakhtiari—and only later learned that they were Tushmal. Similarly, while visiting a village north of Khurramabad, he talked with a group of men and only later learned that one of them was a Luti.

Insofar as the Luti might be distinguishable or recognizable among the non-Luti in the regions where they live, their distinctiveness appears to be wholly cultural rather than biological. It may be true that their speech is somehow recognizably distinctive to other people in Luristan or Bakhtiari, but it is Amanolahi's strong impression that Luti who wish to conceal their identity may do so easily among strangers. No information is available on the subject of "passing," but it seems to be favored by the facts that Luti names are essentially the same as those of the Luri, and that they lack any distinctive legal or documentary identification.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER IRANIANS

Regarded by the dominant Iranian population as polluted and innately inferior, the Luti occupy the lowest rank in Iranian society, a position from which they cannot move so long as their identity as Luti is known. A common Iranian view is not simply that the Luti are base people of low social status but that they are sub-human and beyond the boundaries of proper human society. An incident which Amanolahi observed while riding a passenger bus from Andimashk to Khurramabad exemplified this attitude. He witnessed an argument between a young male passenger and the driver's helper, and when the passenger left the bus at his destination, the driver chided his helper by saying, "You almost got us into trouble with someone who is not even a human being but a Luti."

Ideas of the inherent uncleanness and base nature of the Luti are deeply entrenched. When a Luti with whom a non-Luti is associated visits the home of the non-Luti, he may be served food and drink in accord with a highly valued Iranian custom, but afterwards the dishes and utensils the Luti used must be washed seven times to remove the harmful pollution they have acquired. Intimate social relations with Luti are firmly avoided, and, as we have noted, sexual relations with or marriage to a Luti is said to be beyond imagination. Some non-Luti say that if the Luti were to become faithful Moslems and stop performing circumcisions and playing music, an activity which Islam discourages, their food would become *halal* (pure), but it is clear that the Luti themselves would not thus become purified. The general attitude of non-Luti people is "once a Luti always a Luti." Amanolahi was unable to learn of a single instance of the marriage of a Luti and a non-Luti. In answer to his questions as to why the Luti are avoided, the customary answers were a combination of reasons that, for the most part, restate the ideas previously given of the origin of their condition of pollution: their failure to follow the teachings of Islam and their occupations, especially as entertainers, circumcisers, and beggars. To this was added an allegation that the Luti are morally loose, a charge for which no clear supporting information was given.

A comparison of the attributes of and attitudes toward the profane Luti and the sacred holy men of Islam (Sayed) reveals some interesting similarities and differences. Both groups are endogamous; the Luti are strictly so but Sayed sometimes marry members of the general population. Membership within both groups is determined by birth. The Sayed are inherently sacred because they are descendants of Mohammed, whereas the Luti are regarded as profanely polluted for the reasons previously stated. It appears to be probable that both Sayed and Luti may sometimes be identified by their speech, but neither group appears to be physically distinguishable from the general population. Both people are allowed to beg, but Sayed seldom do so whereas the Luti depend strongly upon begging to gain a

livelihood. Begging by the Sayed is explicitly approved but begging by the Luti is condemned. Gifts are made to the Sayed to win supernatural favor, and they are given to the Luti out of fear of retaliatory poems and songs. The roles of the Sayed that regularly bring them into contact with the general population are religious activities, including death ceremonies, and peacemaking. The Luti have no comparable religious roles but, as profanely unclean entities, do have supernatural significance. Seemingly in part because of vague supernaturalistic beliefs, both the Sayed and the Luti are thought to be dangerous when they are angry. Both Sayed and Luti have traditionally had freedom of movement about the country. When traveling, the Sayed have immunity from bandits because of fear of supernatural retaliation and the Luti are also safe from robbers because of the belief that they are polluted. Sayed are recognizable by their black turbans, but the Luti wear no distinctive clothing and are recognized by other means that are not clear, perhaps sometimes by self declaration. The Sayed are respected and trusted, whereas the Luti are despised and mistrusted. The Sayed are free to follow any business or occupation and often have secular occupations, but the beliefs about pollution restrict the economic activities of the Luti. For example, a Luti cannot successfully operate a shop because no one would buy his polluted goods.

A review of this sketch of the Luti makes evident that they fit the classic definition of caste in being an endogamous, socially immobile group associated with specific occupations. It is also evident that their caste assignment is as an outcaste group, a segment of Luristan society that is ordinarily looked upon as being outside and below human or fully human society. Although seldom explicitly stated in definitions or discussions of outcaste groups, the fundamental trait of outcastes appears to be very low economic status, a condition which fosters the development of the other characteristics of outcastes.

The circumstances of the Iranian Luti are neither unique nor rare but, as we have noted, exist or formerly existed in many parts of the world. Traits which characterize outcastes in all parts of the world are fundamentally alike, varying principally in accord with local circumstances relating to occupations and other economic matters and, often, also relating to indigenous ideas of supernaturalism. As they existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Luti may be described as a poverty-stricken people, landless and owning little other property, who engaged in lowly, demeaning occupations. Islamic ideas of supernaturalism fostered the growth of the idea that they were polluted and this attitude became emotionally entrenched among their social superiors, the general population with whom they lived in a symbiotic relationship.

The circumstances we have discussed also describe the outcastes of India, although the caste system of India is far more complex in both

social groups and associated ideology. Small groups of outcastes existing in various countries of Africa resemble the Luti more closely in specific features. One example is the Fuga, a generic name given to an endogamous group of artisans and ritual specialists of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (Shack 1964). Like the Luti, the Fuga of Ethiopia are dispersed in small numbers among the groups of a larger and socially much superior people with whom they live in a symbiotic relationship. Living with the agricultural Gurage, the Fuga serve as tanners, smiths, or woodworkers, and as specialists in various ritual activities that include performing circumcisions. Like the Luti, the Fuga are despised and looked upon as polluted. The Fuga, however, are generally physically distinguishable from their superiors, a matter which does not appear to be a necessary precondition for the formation of outcaste groups.

Comparison of the circumstances surrounding the Luti and a group of geographically distant outcastes is informative in the matter of visible physical or biological differences as a marker or precondition of outcaste status. The outcastes of Japan (Tokushu Burakumin, a name that is often shortened to Burakumin), who today number perhaps two million persons, are physically indistinguishable from other Japanese, and all scholarly investigations of their history agree in the conclusion that they are genetically Japanese. In other matters the Burakumin share the usual traits associated with outcastes: lowly and defiling occupations, poverty, a condition of pollution, and, on the part of the general population, feelings of contempt and practices of strict avoidance. Like the Luti, the Burakumin are said to be base and immoral, and folk thought about them traditionally held that they were sub-human.

As this brief comparison of the Luti and the Burakumin suggests, the circumstances of both groups relate to the topic of the genesis of racial prejudice—which might more reasonably be called a variety of social or ethnic prejudice—as well as to the subject of the formation of castes. The treatment accorded to the Burakumin of Japan by the nation's general population has all the characteristics of what is elsewhere called racial prejudice, and for this reason a scholarly investigation of the Burakumin has given them the name "Japan's invisible race" (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1966). Although few in number so that they command little attention throughout the nation of Iran, the Luti appear similarly to be an "invisible race."

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