

**The Practice of Pigeon Flying in Southern Tehran and its Image in
Iranian Society**

By

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Abstract

Pigeon flying has been a popular sport in Iran for many centuries and is practiced throughout the country. However, the hotbed of pigeon flying is generally accepted as being Southern Tehran and a few of the surrounding cities. Today, in many ways, pigeon flying has become associated with the concept of “traditional Iranian culture” and often juxtaposed with the idea of Iran as a “modern” country. Unlike other aspects of “traditional” Iran which are cherished and considered an important asset for the nation, pigeon flying has instead acquired mostly negative connotations.

This thesis aims to discuss these dynamics through an ethnographic research in Tehran. As pigeon flying in Tehran has largely been ignored as a topic of anthropological study, the primary objective of the thesis will be to undertake an examination of pigeon flying itself, and to examine the role that it plays within the society of the area of focus. Secondly it will examine the way the sport is perceived by different social classes as well as the importance of sport as an indicator of social status.

Résumé

Depuis plusieurs siècles la colombophilie a été un sport populaire en Iran et est pratiquée dans tout le pays. Néanmoins, les pratiquants de ce sport sont surtout concentrés dans le sud de la capitale, Téhéran et dans quelques villes voisines. De nos jours, la colombophilie est souvent associée avec le concept de « l'Iran traditionnel », un concept qui est souvent juxtaposé avec l'idée de l'Iran en tant que pays moderne. Contrairement à d'autres aspects de l'Iran « traditionnel » qui sont identifiés comme des traits authentiques de la nation Iranienne, la colombophilie a acquis surtout des connotations négatives.

Cette thèse vise à analyser cette dynamique à travers une recherche ethnographique dans le Sud de la ville de Téhéran. Comme les colombophiles de Téhéran ne sont mentionnés qu'en passant sans la plupart des études anthropologiques, le but primaire de cette thèse est d'entreprendre une étude du sport lui-même et son rôle dans la société de quelques banlieues particulières dans le Sud de la ville. Ensuite, la thèse examinera la façon dont la perception de la colombophilie varie selon les classes sociales et aussi l'importance du sport en tant que indicateur de statut social.

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The Practice of Pigeon Flying in Southern Tehran and its Image in Iranian Society

Introduction

Pigeon flying has long been a highly popular sport both in Iran and in the wider Middle East but has always been the subject of some controversy. In the past it was practiced by all levels of society and was a popular hobby among both the Abbasid Caliphs and a number of Qajar princes. Nevertheless, it often drew criticism because it was seen as being associated with gambling and because of the passion displayed by its adherents. Indeed, one Abbasid Caliph was said to have been deposed because he spent too much time with his pigeons instead of attending to affairs of state. Pigeon flying is without doubt one of the most widely practiced indigenous sports: flocks of pigeons form an integral part of the traditional urban landscape and the sport has come to be associated with “traditional Iranian culture”. However, unlike other aspects of “traditional Iran”

which are cherished, pigeon flying has come to be associated with crime and vice by a large portion of Iranian society.

Among Iranian pigeon flyers, the sport is widely believed to have begun in the city of Kashan well over a thousand years ago. Pigeons were originally kept for their excrement, which was highly prized as a fertilizer, their meat and their eggs. Even today, enormous round pigeon towers can still be found in many of the older and better preserved cities on the Iranian plateau such as Isphahan.¹ Because of the pleasure which they derived from seeing pigeons flying in flocks over these towers, people began to keep the birds in order to fly them, rather than for functional purposes.

Today, the sport is widespread throughout Iran. For the most part it is practiced in traditional urban areas, and pigeon flyers in different cities have developed new and innovative ways of flying their birds. Nevertheless, the sport remains most popular in the region in which it is believed to have first appeared: the Iranian plateau. The cities in which pigeon flying, known as *kaftarbāzi* in Farsi, is most common are Tehran, Qom and Kashan. Nonetheless, it is generally recognized that, due in part to the size of its population, the greatest concentration of pigeon flyers is in Southern Tehran.

Because *kaftarbāzi* in Tehran has largely been ignored as a topic of anthropological research, the primary aim of this thesis will be to undertake an ethnography of *kaftarbāzi* in Southern Tehran, based largely upon my own field research. The scope of the ethnography will be restricted to a particular area on the South Western fringe of Tehran which is made up of the neighbourhoods of Yāftābād, Esmailābād, Shahrak-e Vali-e Asr and the small satellite city of Eslāmshahr. All four of these

¹ Beazley E., 2003. *Pigeon towers and ice-houses on the Iranian plateau*. In *Technology, tradition and survival: aspects of material culture in the Middle East and Central Asia*. Eds., Tapper R., McLachlan K. London: Cass

neighbourhoods developed into urban centres over the course of the last forty years but, due to a number of economic and demographic factors, have maintained many of the characteristics of the traditional neighbourhoods in which *kaftarbāzi* was most common. As a result, it is in these areas that many of the most famous pigeon flyers, or *kaftarbāz*, live and compete with their birds.

Beyond the extensive fieldwork undertaken in the various areas of Tehran, this thesis relies almost exclusively on resources published in English. Although a number of recent articles about colombophilia and the *luti*² have been published in Farsi³, the difficulty in obtaining and translating⁴ them has prevented me from using them in this thesis.

In the ethnography, I have refrained from going beyond a necessary minimum concerning the characteristics of the birds themselves and the exceptionally rich vocabulary of *kaftarbāzi* that has developed over time. Instead, I have chosen to focus predominantly on the social aspects of *kaftarbāzi* and to look at the way the sport and its adherents have evolved over time. *Kaftarbāzi* has evolved significantly over the course of the last century and this thesis will examine the reasons behind the changes as well as the different classes of person attracted to the sport. Another area of focus is the pigeon shop, or *sa'leh*, which plays an instrumental role in facilitating social interaction among *kaftarbāz*.

² In the context of this thesis, the word *Luti* is adopted in its original sense which denotes a member of a chivalrous brotherhood, often associated with a particular area or village. Over the course of the last century it has assumed negative connotations, implying drunkenness, depravity and even pederasty.

³ Chehabi H. E., 2002. *An annotated bibliography of sports and games in the Iranian world*. Iranian Studies, vol. 35, no. iv.

⁴ Although my Farsi is more than adequate for the task of field work in poorer areas of Tehran, it is far from up to the task of translating academic works in Farsi.

The study of *kaftarbāzi* provides a number of valuable insights into the structure of Iranian society. Depending upon a person's social status, the sport is viewed in a radically different way. Among the lower classes it is largely seen as benign but somewhat inadvisable sport, common among the male youth. By contrast, among the middle classes it is seen as an activity implicitly associated with criminal and sexually depraved elements of society. By analysing the basis of these different perceptions of *kaftarbāzi* I hope to gain a better understanding of the Iranian class system and the importance of sport as an indicator of social status.

Chapter 1

The Evolution of Southern Tehran since the 1960s

Over the past few decades, most notably after the Islamic Revolution, the population of Iran has grown exponentially, from 35 million in the late 1970s to well over 70 million today. The capital city of Tehran was transformed from a modestly sized city to a veritable metropolis with approximately ten million inhabitants living in the city and the surrounding areas. However, the new urban areas that developed on the peripheries of the city evolved along different lines depending on their geographic location and the characteristics of the people who came to live in them.

The areas of Yāftābād, Esmāilābād and Shahrak-e Vali-e Asr are all low income suburbs located on the extreme fringe of South Western Tehran and were transformed from agricultural land to urban neighbourhoods as recently as twenty years ago. Eslamshahr, which is a few miles outside of Tehran, is a decade older but its growth was fuelled by low income families seeking better housing than that which they could afford in Tehran. Despite their relatively recent origins, the societies of these neighbourhoods or *mahals* bear many resemblances to those of the older neighbourhoods of Southern Tehran.

Traditionally, the South of Tehran was home to both the traditional lower middle class, made up of artisans and traders who worked in the bazaar, as well as the lower classes. Traditionally the civil authorities maintained a negligible presence in these areas and left the inhabitants to protect and administer themselves. As a result, it is widely believed that the security of the *mahal* was entrusted to the *luti*, chivalrous brotherhoods who would protect the interests of weaker individuals and of the *mahal* as a whole. Despite the relatively small role that they played in the affairs of the *mahal*, the *lutis* became well known outside of Southern Tehran because of the roles they were sometimes hired to play: to influence politicians or crowds through the use of strong arm tactics or organized riots.⁵ As a result, the poorer areas of South Tehran was often associated with violence and criminality.

In this chapter, I argue that a combination of economic, social and demographic factors have allowed for the poorer neighbourhoods of the South of Tehran to develop differently from other areas of the city, replicating many of the characteristics of the older *mahals* of Southern Tehran from which their first flows of immigrants came.

The expansion of Tehran

Like the traditional Islamic city that it once was, the centre of Tehran was dedicated mainly to government buildings as well a large commercial district centred upon the bazaar. The fact that Tehran is located on the southern fringe of the Alborz mountain range granted northern parts of the town with a more pleasant climate during

⁵ Floor W., 1981. *The political role of Lutis in Iran*, in *Modern Iran: the dialectics of continuity and change*. (Eds.) Keddie N., Albany: State University of New York Press

the summer months and, as the city grew, most of the city's wealthy inhabitants moved to the North of the city. By contrast, the southern part of Tehran, because of the heat, was inhabited by lower middle and lower classes and was known as *pāyin-shahr*, or the lower city, by virtue of its position.

During the 20th Century, Iran underwent significant economic, political and educational reform, causing the population to gradually begin the transition from an overwhelmingly rural to a more urban population. However, it was the White Revolution undertaken by Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1960s⁶ that acted as a catalyst for this process. The land reform undertaken during this period provided many peasants with insufficient amounts of land to be able to sustain their families⁷ and sparked massive emigration from the countryside towards the city, especially Tehran.⁸ Despite the drastic increase in population, the class boundaries that had defined the spatial distribution of Tehran were conserved. The richer population was pushed ever further north towards the cooler mountain air while the poorer neighbourhoods extended ever further south, leaving an ill defined middle class in the centre of the city, near the main government and trade areas.

In the areas of study, the vast majority of the later immigrants were from small towns and villages in the provinces and were either single men or young families. In most cases, the shortage of land in the provinces meant that they could no longer meet their needs through agriculture and they came to the city looking for work as labourers in the budding construction industry or in more permanent jobs in the many factories

⁶ Ansari A., 2003. *Modern Iran since 1921, the Pahlavis and after*. London, Longman Publications. Page 152

⁷ Lambton A.K.S., 1969. *Land reform and rural co-operative societies in Persia*. Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society, no. 56

⁸ Brown M. R., 1983. *The adjustment of migrants to Tehran*. Boulder: Westview

established in Southern Tehran during the Pahlavi era. The arrival of large numbers of immigrants created enormous demand for low income housing which the city, as it stood the, simply could not satisfy. This led to frequent conflicts between the urban poor and city authorities over the construction of illegal shanty towns.

The transformation of peripheral villages

The construction of illegal slum dwellings on the outskirts of Tehran has received a large amount of attention from scholars such as Assef Bayat.⁹ One of the conditions of the redistribution of land under the white revolution was that the peasant owners were forbidden from selling their land before a period of 15 or 20 years had passed. This policy complemented the Tehran development plan of 1966 whose main aim was to prevent the spatial expansion of the city for a period of 25 years.¹⁰ However, these policies were ill suited not only to the peasantry, who had often been granted portions of land that weren't large enough to be able to support whole families, but also for a country in which the urban population was increasing in size at an exponential rate. This combination placed immense pressure upon the housing market and served as an incentive for the creation unsanctioned dwellings in the surrounding agricultural zones, regardless of the threat of imminent destruction by the city authorities. The flood barriers were opened by the revolution in 1979 when the general chaos and the establishment of a populist Islamic government with strong connections with the urban poor allowed for the rapid construction of illegal lodgings all around the periphery of the city. In 1981 the

⁹ Bayat A., 1997. *Street politics: poor peoples' movements in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press

¹⁰ Hourcade B., 1992. *Urbanisme et Crise Urbaine sous Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi*. In Adle C. and Hourcade B., Eds. *Tehran Capitale Bicentenaire*, Paris-Tehran IFRI, pages 207-222

realities on the ground forced the new government to legalise what has since been termed the '*habitat revolutionnaire*'¹¹, and subsequently permitted the expansion of the city along more controlled lines.

Of the four areas that are being studied, Eslāmshahr is slightly different in that is considered to be a separate town within the greater Tehran area and, as early as 1962, it was growing by as much as 10% a year, alleviating some of the pressure on housing in Tehran.¹² The areas of Yāftābād, Esmāilābād began as small villages on the outskirts of the city, each of which was surrounded by agricultural lands belonging to its villagers. When the restrictions upon urban development on the peripheries were lifted, it was not only the city that expanded outwards; rather, the areas around the original villages were urbanized so that they continued to form the nucleus of the new urban. As each area expanded, they became joined until they came to form a continuous urban landscape or, in the case of Eslāmshahr, a city. Shahrak-e Vali-e Asr was a modern residential development which expanded in much the same fashion.

It is also important to note that these new urban areas do not consist of slum dwellings, as had been the case in previous decades. Except for the centres which are made up of the old villages, these areas were developed according to a grid system and are legally hooked up to the electricity and phone networks. Because of the extreme pace of expansion, city water is not usually available on the periphery, but most families have a common well and an electric pump as well as decent plumbing to supply their water needs. Most of the modern developments are in apartment form, separated into what had been affordable units of between 50 and 100 square metres and are primarily financed by

¹¹ Hourcade B., and Khosrokhavar F., 1983. *L'habitat Revolutionnaire, a Tehran, 1977-1981*. Herodote, 31, page 16-45

¹² Habibi M., 1996. *Eslamshahr, a new type of banlieue in Tehran*. CEMOTI, vol. 21, page 257

private developers, not the state. However, as the demand for housing in Tehran continues to rise, even these small dwellings are becoming increasingly expensive and beyond the budget of most young families, forcing further expansion of the city borders.

Economic Activities

As Tehran spread in every direction, the new urban areas that were created were characterised by the different economic activities of their inhabitants which in turn dictated the nature of the societies that inhabited them. For instance, the middle class neighbourhoods that extend to the West, such as Jannatābād and Sa'adatābād are suburbs that lodge mostly the white collar workforce of Tehran and most of their inhabitants commute to their jobs in the city centre. As a result, social links in these neighbourhoods are normally very weak and there is a very weak sense of community. Indeed, they are often referred to among Tehrānis as *Khābgāh* or dormitories because of the small amount of time their inhabitants spend at home.

By contrast, the most common economic activities in the neighbourhoods of the South involve less of a direct dependence upon the centre of Tehran and allow for the creation of a stronger local identity. Traditionally, the inhabitants of the Southern part of Tehran belonged to the lower and lower-middle classes and often held jobs that were linked to the bazaar. For the most part, this continues to be the case today. Because of the relatively low levels of education that are prevalent in these districts, very few people are able to compete for the sort of jobs, in either the public or private sector, which would

call for them to commute to the centre of town. Instead, the majority of the workforce is involved in a variety of 'blue collar' jobs located in their own part of the city.

The process by which these peripheral urban areas were created as well as the nature of their population allows for them to straddle the urban rural divide. Although the government authorities did allow for extensive urban expansion, they have nevertheless attempted to prevent certain areas of agricultural land from being developed. As a result many of the families that originally inhabited the villages continue to live in these areas, making their income from the agriculture, mostly growing fruit and vegetables. The return on these crops is often quite minimal, forcing them to find other jobs to complement their main incomes. The land which they grow, while incapable of fully meeting their financial needs, represents a valuable asset.

For many Iranians, land is seen as one of the safest investments because it doesn't devalue and land prices rarely suffer because of inflation. Because of its prized status, land prices are extremely high when compared to the annual incomes of the people who own it. This is especially the case in most areas of southern Tehran. Many families that own land on the fringes of the urban sprawl that has been designated as agricultural do so in the hope that the designation will change and they will be able to divide it up for development purposes. However, speculation and the possibility of high returns in the future means that prices are often set prohibitively high and the property market stagnates. This trend is reinforced by the fact that the banking services available to prospective buyers are very limited meaning that all transactions are done in cash, of which few people has a sufficient amount to buy even the smaller pieces of land. Therefore, many of the older families, whose land was designated as agricultural, have

chosen to remain in the area in the hope that, eventually, they will be able to sell it for development purposes and make their fortunes.

In these areas, many of the traditional economic characteristics of Southern Tehran have been maintained and a large portion of the workforce continues to be involved with artisan activities and low level trade, which are often symbiotic. The areas of Yaftabad and Esmailabad are known throughout the region for the production of wooden furniture. The furniture is produced in workshops known as *kārgāh* which are scattered throughout both neighbourhoods. Production usually involves a chain of *kārgāh*, each of which specializes in a particular stage. In the case of the furniture industry which is prevalent in the areas of study, one *kārgāh* produces the frames and then sells them to an upholsterer who then sells his wares to his distributor. Because of the relatively specialized task of each *kārgāh*, they are generally very small operations, needing minimal amounts of capital investment. For the most part, the main craftsman is also the owner and he will be assisted by a few apprentices, usually relatives. Although the prevalent types of trades involve some aspect of the furniture industry, there are also a number of other small scale industries of different sorts such as the production of clothing, iron mongering, and pottery.

These small scale industries usually work hand in hand with the bazaar at a variety of different levels. In some cases the tradesman will sell his own wares, but usually a distributor is involved. The central bazaar continues to be the main distribution centre for most products; however, there are exceptions. Many neighbourhoods, as is the case with Yāftābād and Esmāilābād, are known for a particular small scale industry that specializes in the production of a specific good. Especially with larger products, it

becomes impractical to trade via the main bazaar, and smaller specialized shopping areas are established locally, which are referred to as a *burs*, adopted from the French *bourse*. These are made up of a panoply of small to medium sized shops all selling the same types of merchandise. Once a *burs* becomes well known, distributors and buyers come from other areas of Tehran, knowing that they will be able to find more competitive prices. Thus, as well as a large population of artisans, most of these neighbourhoods are also the homes of a relatively large number of local traders.

The third important source of employment in these areas comes from large scale industry. Many larger scale industrial projects were established in Southern Tehran as early as the 1920s¹³, drawn by lower land prices as well as the prevalence of lower class neighbourhoods. This guaranteed a plentiful source of cheap labour as well as an absence of local opposition to the establishment of large factories. Traditionally, all of the less attractive and noisy industries such as brick kilns were located exclusively in the South. Subsequently, more modern industrial facilities were built, ranging from numerous paper mills to a large oil refinery. Most of these companies hire their labourers from nearby areas and many of the new arrivals or drawn by vacancies in these industries.

The prevalent forms of employment in these areas have significantly affected the nature of their societies. Very few people depend directly upon institutions or companies based in the centre of the city for employment. Commuting is almost unheard of most of the people who regularly make the trip to the centre of town are shop owners who purchase their wares from the central bazaar. The combination of certain social and economic factors have allowed for these newly established neighbourhoods to

¹³ Floor W., 1984. *Industrialisation in Iran 1900-1941*, in Occasional Papers Series no. 23. Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

independently develop many of the characteristics that could be found in the older neighbourhoods of Tehran and differ radically from most of the other newly developed areas of the fringe of the capital city.

The construction of a local identity

The first group to make the move to the new peripheral suburbs played an important role in transferring many of social and cultural characteristics of the older city to these new neighbourhoods. Up until the revolution, the demand for housing was extremely high, forcing many families to live in houses or apartments that were often too cramped or poorly maintained. Once permission was granted for the construction of new suburbs in the mid 1980s, the first wave of people who made the move to the suburbs were mostly families that had been living in Tehran for at least ten or twenty years, who were finally able to find appropriate housing, albeit further from the city.¹⁴ Most of these houses were built privately using cheap materials and usually with no regard for urban planning. With them, they brought many of the ideas and institutions associated with the traditional south of Tehran: a particular accent, ideas of social behaviour and even the *zurkhāneh* which continues to be common to this day. Even though the later expansion of these areas was in great part due to large waves of immigration from the provinces, only in some places did they arrive in sufficient number as to radically alter the pre-established local culture. This was the case in Shahriār for instance, where there are a number of predominantly Kurdish neighbourhoods. However, in most cases, the newly arrived immigrants sought to integrate themselves within an already established society that

¹⁴ Habibi M., 1996. *Eslamshahr, a new type of banlieue in Tehran*. CEMOTI, vol. 21, page 253

viewed itself as very much *Tehrāni*.¹⁵ This trend was assisted by the fact that rural identities carry certain stigmas and are usually associated with a certain naivety and lack of sophistication which is often set in stark contrast to the wiliness and resourcefulness of the *Tehrāni*. The terms used to describe new arrivals from the provinces, such as *dehāti* and *posht-e kuhi*¹⁶, are usually seen extremely derogatory. Also, many of the immigrants came from the areas of Azerbaijan and Rasht, which carry their own share of negative stereotypes. The end result was that these areas maintained most of the characteristics of the original southern sector of Tehran from which the initial flow of new inhabitants had come.

This in turn was instrumental in shaping the future societies of these *mahal*. In 2005, R.S. Sarvestani undertook a survey of social relationships in residential areas of Tehran which is useful in gaining a better understanding of relationships in the areas of study¹⁷. The survey concluded that social relationships were far stronger in the poorer areas of Tehran where the inhabitants exhibit a greater degree of religiosity and where most people have a similar socio-economic status. This was especially the case among women. In stark contrast, neighbourly relations were significantly weaker in areas with higher income, especially among those living in high-rises.

Sarvestani's research is quite useful for the purposes of this thesis in that it identifies different forms and levels of interaction among urban dwellers according to their social classes. However, although his research is empirical in nature, it is also quite

¹⁵ *Tehrāni* is the term used to designate an inhabitant of the city of Tehran.

¹⁶ *Dehāti* merely refers to a person coming from a village while *posht-e kuhi* refers to someone from 'behind a mountain', i.e. someone from a very distant and isolated village. The second is far more derogatory, but both are used to refer to people lacking in class and sophistication.

¹⁷ Sarvestani R. S., 2005. *Survey of relationships in Tehran residential neighborhoods. Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 14, no.i

vague and he fails to take into account a number of other factors that might influence social interaction such as the histories of these communities, their economic activities etc. Nonetheless, insofar as the lower classes are concerned his conclusions coincide closely with my own research into social interaction in Southern Tehran. However, the main aim of his research is to compare and contrast social interactions in different types of societies in Tehran, rather than undertake a comprehensive study of those relationships themselves.

The levels of interaction in these poorer areas are also affected by the constricted and claustrophobic nature of their surroundings. The average family size in Southern Tehran is generally higher than in other parts of the city, bearing more resemblance to rural statistics.¹⁸ By contrast, the houses are far smaller, usually made up a kitchen and a pair of small rooms and seldom having more than a very small garden or patio area. Most families are also highly religious and are thus distinctly uncomfortable with having men from outside the family in the presence of their womenfolk. All of these features greatly influence the way in which neighbourly relations are undertaken.

These difficulties are overcome by establishing two spheres of social interaction, the public and the private. It is often noted that female neighbours interact more frequently with each other than their male counterparts. Although it may seem this way, it is not necessarily the case. Because of the small size of the houses and the prevalent ideas of Islamic propriety, it becomes impractical for men to visit each other's houses as the proximity of the host's womenfolk, collectively termed *nāmus*, would cause embarrassment to both host and guest. The unwillingness to cause such embarrassment can be seen in a number of instances. For instance, younger men are often unwilling to

¹⁸ Habibi M., 1996. *Eslamshahr, a new type of banlieue in Tehran*. CEMOTI, vol. 21. page 259

ring a friend's doorbell for fear that one of the womenfolk might answer. Instead they prefer to call to their friend from the street hoping that he will hear, or that someone else will hear and inform their friend. Because of these obstacles, social interaction between unrelated males is displaced into the public sphere and men tend to meet each other in the street, in shops, in tea houses or even at each other's pigeon lofts.

The public sphere is not seen as an appropriate area for women to socialise in and their gatherings mainly take place in each other's houses during the day, when the men are either at work or meeting their friends. The return of the men is the signal to leave and all of the women disperse, returning to their own homes. The fact that men and women make use of different spaces to interact can be quite misleading, causing people to believe that social linkages between men are weaker than among women, which is not necessarily the case. It is merely a case of men engaging in social interaction in a distinct forum.

Unlike many other areas, society in the neighbourhoods of Southern Tehran is very tight knit and people continue to identify themselves very strongly with their individual *mahal*, rather than the city as a whole. For instance people from Yāftābād will refer to themselves as *bachche-ye Yāftābād*, meaning a 'child of Yāftābād'. This allegiance to the neighbourhoods where they were born and raised continues to be of great importance even in cases where people have moved to other parts of Tehran. It is not unusual for people who have moved away, for one reason or another, to return to their *mahal* on an almost daily basis to see their friends and family and enjoy the strong sense of belonging that is often missing in their new areas. The tightly knit society and the sense of loyalty to the community were common characteristics in urban neighbourhoods

in the past when the weakness of the government forced each community to defend and organize its own affairs. In many respects, this continues to be the case today. Most problems are still solved internally, usually under the guidance of older and respected members of the community. This sense of civic duty and identification with the local community is usually counterbalanced by a sense of wariness with regards to the actions of the state and the civil authorities. As late as 1996, 80% of the inhabitants of Eslāmshahr who were asked what role the local authorities played in the affairs of the neighbourhood answered “None”.¹⁹

The more active role of the local community, which is characterised by relations of mutual assistance and control, allows for a different conceptualisation of public space. From a young age Iranian children are allowed to go into the street in front of their house to socialise with other children their age. The strong sense of community means that the children feel at ease in this environment while parents have the comfort of knowing that a neighbour will happily step in to help in the unlikely event of an incident. The importance of this different developmental space, known as the *kuche*, is rarely considered when looking at such neighbourhoods. In the *kuche* they are exposed, from a very young age, to a wide range of experiences, both positive and negative. They learn to develop relations with other children, to protect themselves and their friends and inform themselves about various aspects of the community life. The children also develop a far more uniform sense of identity in that their development is, in part at least, taken out of the hands of their parents and entrusted to the neighbourhood. The strong sense of belonging that most people in Southern Tehran feel in their own neighbourhoods stems in great part from the fact that most of their childhood was spent exploring its every corner and getting to know

¹⁹ Habibi M., 1996. *Eslamshahr, a new type of banlieue in Tehran*. CEMOTI, vol. 21, page 261

all of their peers in a public space that whilst expansive was nonetheless considered to be safe.

The city of Tehran has been expanding rapidly in every direction since the mid 1960s; however, the newly created suburbs have evolved differently and have maintained many of the cleavages that characterised the older city. Thanks to the economic activities that are particular to Southern Tehran, many of the *mahals* located on the southern fringe have managed to maintain or create their own particular identity.

This relative isolation has allowed for the society of these areas to conserve characteristics pertaining to the original wave of immigrants, many of whom came from the traditional lower class neighbourhoods to the South of Tehran, seeking better housing in the newly built peripheral suburbs. In the areas of study, subsequent flows of immigrants have had very little impact upon the cultural identity of the inhabitants because most have sought to integrate themselves into the local society. Although many of the older generation maintained provincial mannerisms and accents, the *kuche* has provided the means for their children to observe and adopt the mannerisms and ideals that were particular to *Tehrānis* from the traditional *pāyin-e shahr*.

Unlike other areas of Tehran where social relations have weakened significantly, the poorer *mahals* to the South maintained a strong sense of community. Surveys have indicated that low income levels, a high degree of religiosity as well as a relative parity in socio-economic status are conducive to far higher levels of social interaction than is the norm. Another factor that encouraged a tight knit society was the lack of an externally

imposed order. Originally the civil authorities in these areas had a strictly negative impact, their main role being to destroy illegal housing and prevent people from illegally using electricity and water. Greater integration has led an increase in the influence and role of the municipality, but the presence of a cohesive society with well established hierarchies allows for many problems and issues to be resolved internally.

Chapter 2

The practice of *Eshghbāzi*

The new low income urban areas to the south of Tehran have developed many of the characteristics of the older popular neighbourhoods of Tehran: their social structures, economic activities and also their sports. Each neighbourhood has at least one *zurkhāneh* while pigeon flying remains one of the most popular pastimes among men and boys of all ages. Over time, a number of different forms of *kaftarbāzi* have evolved, each of which had different aims and rules. This chapter is dedicated to *eshghbāzi*, which is the older form of *kaftarbāzi* and which, for a number of reasons, remains the most widespread.

Before the demand for housing sparked the widespread construction of multi storied buildings, most houses had a small garden or *hayāt*, offering an ideal space in which to could keep pigeons, which were seen as the ideal pets for young boys because they are seen as clean and are cheap and easy to keep. As such, most people who were raised in or around Southern Tehran prior to the revolution, or who moved there from the countryside, have owned a few pigeons at some point in their lives. This serves to explain the affinity for pigeons that is commonly found among the lower-middle and lower classes throughout Tehran as well as many other areas of the country.

Today, despite the important changes in the landscape of Southern Tehran, this affinity has remained: flocks of pigeons are a common sight and pigeon lofts or *ganje* can be found on many rooftops. For example, the small central square of the *mahal* of Esmailabad, where I based my research, has a *sa'leh*²⁰ on one side and pigeon lofts on four of the five buildings that overlook the square. Within a two block radius there are 15 people who actively engage in pigeon flying and any number of children who keep a few birds on their roofs.

The vast majority of the *kaftarbāz* of South Tehran do not compete with their pigeons in set competitions. Indeed, this form of *kaftarbāzi*, referred to as *eshghbāzi* hereafter, does not adhere to most commonly accepted notions of competition, making it an interesting topic of study but also very puzzling for those not actively engaged in it. It also creates a dilemma in terms of whether it can be categorised as sport or not. Although *eshghbāzi* is characterised by intense competition leading to both glorious victories and humiliating defeats, the fact that this competition is not regulated by a predetermined system of scoring has often caused confusion among those attempting to study it.

Eshghbāzi, which is the older form of *kaftarbāzi*, is primarily responsible for the bad name that *kaftarbāzi* has come to bear. This negative reputation can be construed as the result of two different but interrelated factors: mistrust and misunderstanding. *Kaftarbāzi* has, over the last century, come to be associated with the Iranian lower class, and especially with the *lutis*. In essence, it has always been associated with elements of society that presented a physical and ideological risk to the interests of the middle and

²⁰ The *sa'leh* is a bird shop that deals almost exclusively in pigeons but also plays a social role for the local *kaftarbāz* community.

upper classes.²¹ This longstanding class division has become even more obvious and polarized over the past fifty years or so as the middle and upper classes have adopted increasingly westernized lifestyles and habits, accentuating the differences between them and the lower classes.

This ever widening cultural gap between classes has significantly affected the general perception of popular pastimes such as *eshghbāzi*. Those raised outside of traditional areas generally don't understand the principles that guide the practice of *eshghbāzi*, and both fail to see the its attraction and misunderstand its aims. Indeed, the very rules of *eshghbāzi* have led to the *kaftarbāz* almost universally being labelled as a thief in Iran. It is the aim of this chapter to outline the practice of *eshghbāzi* and portray its role in the society of Southern Tehran while also attempting to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the stigmas that surround *kaftarbāzi* in Iran.

The *Eshghbāz*

People of all age groups and from all professions keep pigeons, but it is far more common among certain specific groups. This is relevant because the characteristics of the *kaftarbāz* affect the amount of time and money he is able to commit to his birds.

A fairly large proportion of those who engage in *kaftarbāzi* in Tehran are children. Pigeons are, for the most part, extremely robust and easy to keep. They are also relatively inexpensive to buy and feed, and need only a limited amount of space and attention. They are also very easy to buy and sell, both to and from the *sa'leh* but also

²¹ Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv

between the boys themselves. In this sense, if such a thing is possible, they are a bit like ‘trading cards’ for young boys in a western society and are traded on the same basis, except that their value is determined by colour scheme, size or flying ability. As in other childhood pursuits, most children stop keeping pigeons once they reach a certain age.

The second and perhaps the most interesting group is made up of young men, roughly between the ages of 17 and 25. As I have noted previously, university attendance in poorer areas of Tehran tends to be much higher among girls; I estimate that university attendance among boys is no higher than 30%. In part this is a cultural phenomenon: most young men aspire to become craftsmen or traders in their own right, in many cases taking over the family business from their fathers. These are seen as eminently respectable professions and those engaged in them frequently wield a greater local influence than those employed in larger organisations. Young men in this age bracket are the product of the baby boom that followed the revolution which resulted in a sudden increase in the number of young men seeking employment and adding extra pressure to the faltering Iranian economy. As concerns this thesis, the tangible result is that a large proportion of those engaged in *kaftarbāzi* in Southern Tehran are unemployed and undereducated young men who are supported as much as possible by their parents and who supplement their incomes by doing odd jobs. These youths often turn to *kaftarbāzi* as a cheap source of entertainment to alleviate the boredom enforced by lack of money or employment prospects. Although younger men do take pleasure from the flight of their birds, their main thrills come from the practice of *gharib-giri* and the ideas of competition associated with it.

A number of middle aged and elderly men also keep pigeons. Almost all of the true *gerowband* fall into this category, but this practice is addressed in the following chapter. Most young *kaftarbāz* give up their hobby once they get a job and have their own families, because they don't have the time to take care of their birds and sometimes because it is seen as beneath their newfound respectability. However, some continue to keep birds but rarely have the time to maintain them in flying condition. As a result, many transition *Naghshbāzi* and select their birds for their colours and aesthetic value.²² A number of older men also keep them as a means of keeping themselves busy during retirement but rarely fly them.

Pigeon flying in Southern Tehran is practiced by members of all age groups. It is also frequently passed from generation to generation and one family can have more than one *kaftarbāz* in the same house which can cause problems. In the case of one family I encountered, the father and two of his sons all kept pigeons separately and each claimed a particular corner of the same roof as his own. However, because of the time constraints placed on the older *kaftarbāz* and the lack of expertise among the younger ones, it is the unemployed young men who are so common throughout the mahals of Southern Tehran that tend to be the most active and 'competitive' adherents. As a result *kaftarbāzi* is often identified with this particular section of society.

The practice of *eshghbāzi*

²² The term *naghsh* means pattern in Farsi and the term *naghshbāz* is used to refer to people who keep pigeons with specific colors and patterns, all of which have their own names.

Before going into the technicalities of *eshghbāzi*, it is necessary to define it as a term. *Kaftarbāzi* in Tehran has its own internal hierarchy; however, the terms used to describe the different strata are often interchangeable and thus confusing. Although anyone who owns pigeons will refer to himself as a *kaftarbāz*, there remains a distinction between the ‘real’ *kaftarbāz* and the people who own and fly pigeons. To remove the obvious ambiguities, I have chosen to call the elite pigeon flyers *gerowband*, meaning those who take part in competitions, and call the rest *eshghbāz*, as in those who do it for the love of it, as a hobby. Because the term *eshghbāzi* refers to all pigeon flyers who do not actively compete with their pigeons in organized competitions, it actually encompasses a number of forms of *kaftarbāzi*

Among those who keep pigeons, there are a small number who keep them purely for their colour patterns. These pigeons are known as *Shahrestāni* pigeons, as opposed to *Tehrāni* pigeons and are not very popular in. They are mostly for decorative purposes and are not good flyers and as a result are often compared to hens by the pigeon flyers of Tehran, a most damning insult in the world of *kaftarbāzi* as it infers that they are land bound and overweight. The purer strains of *Shahrestāni* pigeons are much better flyers and some still train them using the *shallāgh*, or whip. In this form of *kaftarbāzi*, the *kaftarbāz* uses a long whip to direct his flock in different directions. The pigeons then fly in that direction for a kilometre or so, diving through other flocks of pigeons, before circling back towards their roost once again, often with other birds in tow, either to land or to fly on in another direction. This form of *kaftarbāzi* is mostly found in provincial cities in other parts of Iran and is addressed in Goushegir’s book²³.

²³ I have chosen to briefly address this form of *kaftarbāzi* because the accounts of it that I have heard are quite different from his. Without the sophisticated training involving the *shallāgh*, the staged battles that he

The majority of the *kaftarbāz* of Tehran fly their birds in a simpler fashion. By feeding his birds the right amount of grain, the *kaftarbāz* can keep them at their flying weight. Then he will force to the birds to take flight, startling them by whistling, shouting and shaking coloured cloths in their direction. After this is done once a day over the course of a few days, the birds become fitter and begin to enjoy flying. As the birds become comfortable in flight, they stop flying individually in haphazard circles and begin to draw together until they are flying in a tightly knit kit²⁴, called a *tip* or unit in Farsi. The *kaftarbāz* will often encourage them to fly together by placing their feed on the ground in a pile rather than scattering it, the belief being that making them eat together will cause them to fly together. Some pigeons have the genetic ability to do somersaults in the air and this is a highly prized trait among *kaftarbāz* as it is seen as a sign that the bird is enjoying its flight and the summersaults are referred to as *bāzi*, or play. At various intervals, these birds will rise above the flock and perform one or more quick somersaults before returning to the flock. Although most *kaftarbāz* in Tehran aspire to developing their flocks so that they are able to compete in *gerowbandi*, few are able or willing to take the necessary measures and most are content enjoying the small increases in flight time and the individual performances of their pigeons.

portrays would, almost always, end up in a draw and thus be quite uninteresting. This may be an attempt to introduce a more easily understandable concept of competition to the simple and haphazard practice of *gharib-giri* that it simply does not possess.

²⁴ Kit is the English word used to designate a tightly packed flock of pigeons, the Farsi equivalent is *tip*.

Gharib-giri

The most exciting part of *kaftarbāzi* for most *eshghbāz* is *gharib-giri*. *Gharib-giri* is literally translated as the ‘capture of strangers’ and actually signifies the capture, by one means or another, of somebody else’s pigeon. It is important to note that for most *kaftarbāz*, *gharib-giri* merely provides an extra dose of excitement to the already enjoyable experience of watching their flock of pigeons in the air. Nonetheless, the glee of the *kaftarbāz* who has successfully apprehended someone else’s pigeon, the politics that are sometimes associated with it, as well as the mixed feelings it causes among those who are not *kaftarbāz* themselves make it one of the most interesting aspects of *kaftarbāzi* to study. Indeed, some, like Goushegir, are led to believe that it is the sole purpose of keeping pigeons.

In principle, *gharib-giri* is very simple. Once pigeons have spent an extended period of time in one place and come to know their surroundings, they become bound to that area and will never leave unless they are forced or become lost. This is called *jald* in Farsi and even when they are scared into flight they will be most reluctant to perch anywhere but on their own roof. In order to achieve this, people take measures to prevent newly bought pigeons from flying until they are *jald*. Most cut or tie the primary feathers so as to prevent the bird from flying; others keep them in cages. After about three weeks, most birds will have become accustomed to their surroundings and can safely be released. The first flight is always a gamble, however, as some older birds will never forget their old homes, even after months or years, and will immediately fly away to look for the

more familiar surroundings of their homes. Some pigeons escape, some are allowed their freedom too early by enthusiastic children and others become disoriented or too exhausted and dehydrated in flight to be able to regain their homes. Needless to say, in an area as densely populated by *kaftarbāz* as Southern Tehran, there are always some *kaftar-e gharib* (stray pigeons) flying around.

When a stray pigeon shows up in a *mahal* it is obvious for a number of reasons. The most telling sign is its flight pattern, as it will often fly in straight lines or very large circles rather than the tight circles of the pigeon that knows where its house is. Also, *kaftarbāz* are able to recognize it by the colour under its wings. In flight, most pigeons look fairly similar from beneath, especially when high up, so almost every *kaftarbāz* in a densely populated area like Southern Tehran will dye the feathers under one or both their pigeons' wings with their own particular colour or combination of colours, the gaudier the better, so as to identify his own birds. Thus, it is immediately apparent, both by its flight pattern and its wing colour, when a stray pigeon has ventured into the *mahal*, and every *kaftarbāz* who is on his roof competes to be the one who lures it down.

Most stray pigeons are tired, hungry and thirsty and are looking for a place to settle anyway. All the *kaftarbāz* need do is to make his loft seem as unthreatening and welcoming as possible. Pigeons are most comfortable high up so lofts on top of building hold a distinct advantage. Once a stray is detected in the area, the local pigeon flyers encourage their birds into flight. Naturally gregarious, stray pigeons will usually seek to fly with others of their kind. When the stray joins the pigeons in flight and becomes caught up in the kit, the pigeon flyer will throw other pigeons, whose wings have been clipped, out onto the roof and very obviously throw them small amounts of grain. They

will also call to attract the birds' attention. The stray pigeon is comforted by the presence of large numbers of other pigeons and will feel much less threatened as the whole kit comes to perch upon the roof, drawn by the food. Once all the birds have settled, the *kaftarbāz* places a small pile of grain next to the water container and his own pigeons immediately clamber all over each other in an effort to get to the food. When the stray bird joins them and attempts to eat or puts his head inside the water container to drink he can no longer see the *kaftarbāz* who then leaps forward, seizing his prize.

Very seldom does a pigeon get lost in its own area, so for the most part *kaftarbāz* capture lost pigeons from other areas and it is quite impersonal. However, in certain specific times, *gharib-giri* becomes far more targeted. The only types of pigeons liable to get lost within their *mahal* are new pigeons and chicks. With chicks, the *kaftarbāz* faces a conundrum in that he has to fly them before they reach adulthood so that they get used to the process, but he also knows that they are not as securely bound to his loft as adults. Once in the air, inexperienced chicks are prone to getting confused, tired or lost. In the first case, they may join other flocks and land on a different roof; in the second, they may start drifting on the wind to conserve energy and in a very short of time are completely lost. These characteristics make them particularly susceptible to being captured by neighbouring *kaftarbāz*. This is also the case with new birds which are wholly unfamiliar with the area and only slightly more likely to return to their new owner's loft than to sit on somebody else's. In areas such as Southern Tehran where links within the community are very strong²⁵, especially among *kaftarbāz*, everyone knows, almost to the day, when a *kaftarbāz* will be flying his new birds. As a result, they will know exactly when they

²⁵ Sarvestani R. S., 2005. *Survey of relationships in Tehran residential neighborhoods. Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 14, no.i

should be either flying their birds most enthusiastically or not at all, depending upon the politics of the situation.

The politics of *kaftarbāzi*

Capturing someone else's pigeon is not seen as theft amongst *kaftarbāz*; indeed, the Qajar princes who flew pigeons in the 19th Century used to attach golden rings to the to their birds' feet to encourage anyone who captured one should come and claim a recompense rather than keep the bird, which he had every right to do.²⁶ In Southern Tehran however, capturing another person's pigeon can have far more significance than a mere monetary reward.

One of the main characteristics of society in poorer areas of Tehran is the higher levels of interaction that exists between people and their neighbours. This is especially the case among the younger men, who are of particular interest to anyone studying *kaftarbāzi*. The architecture of most of the houses, together with Islamic ideas of propriety, make it almost impossible for boys or younger men to congregate within a particular house, as discussed in the previous chapter. Instead, most social interaction between men takes place in the streets and squares of their *mahal* or sometimes in small shops owned by friends. This blurring of the public and private spheres changes the nature of interpersonal relationships. First of all it sets the stage for a far greater level of familiarity between all the younger men, which is a common trait of poorer neighbourhoods. Secondly, it fosters a sense of both ownership of and loyalty towards the

²⁶ Ragheb Y. 2002. *Les messagers volants en terre d'Islam*. Paris : CNRS Éditions. Page 192

area in which they have grown up. And most importantly, it creates the need for a particular type of public persona.

The increased role of government at both a national and local level may have rendered *luti* gangs obsolete in their traditional sense²⁷ but it did not substantially change the social framework that had produced them. Far from being an exclusively *luti* trait, the ideas of honour, respect, loyalty together with physical toughness are components of the idea of *mardānegi*, or manhood, of which the *lutis* were the most obvious adherents. Today it continues to be the ‘code’ by which many young men in Southern Tehran lead their lives today.

A man’s reputation within the community continues to be all-important. On the one hand this has to do with ideas of honesty and loyalty to ones friends and family. Any attempt to swindle ones friends or failure to help them when they are in need would immediately become known within the community and would be unpardonable. It also has a lot to do with the steps that he is willing to take to uphold his reputation. Like the *lutis* of old, strength and toughness are highly prized. Body building clubs and martial arts centres are hugely popular and massive bodily strength and a knowledge of martial arts are prized social assets. Indeed, anyone who is strong and willing to get into a fight is referred to as a *gardan-koloft*²⁸ and treated with a certain amount of respect. Accounts of fist fights or even knife fights, depending on how rough the area is, are quite a common topic of conversation among both boys and men. In most cases they are set in the context of upholding one’s personal honour or that of a friend or else that of defending the

²⁷ See Floor W., 1981. *The political role of Lutis in Iran*, in *Modern Iran: the dialectics of continuity and change*. (Eds.) Keddie N., Albany: State University of New York Press

²⁸ *Gardan Koloft* which literally means “thick neck” is one of a host of terms commonly used in Southern Tehran to refer to a person who is tough.

interests of the *mahal*. Many neighbourhoods take great pride from the fact that their “*bachche-ye mahal*”²⁹ are the toughest in the area.

Among many groups of youths, being a *kaftarbāz* has become very much associated with the concept of *mardānegi*. This may have a lot to do with the role played by the *sa’leh*. The younger *kaftarbāz*, who often fulfil many of the characteristics of the ‘*mard*’³⁰, will often congregate around the *sa’leh*. As a result, aspiring *gardan-koloft* who suffer from what is known as *esgh-e lāti*³¹ often purchase noticeable pigeons, such as those which do regular back flips, so that they will be noticed and recognized as a *kaftarbāz* among their peers.

Disagreements often polarize the youth community; perceived insults, a lack of respect or attempts to swindle each other often provoke scuffles between two individuals which grow out of proportion as each seeks to recruit his tougher friends and relatives with the goal of teaching the other party a lesson. These disagreements, which almost always come to involve a larger group of people, often filter down to the realm of *kaftarbāzi*.

Harif and Rafigh

The two terms *harif* (rival) and *rafigh* (friend) denote the enmities and alliances that come to exist in *gharib-giri*. Friendships outside the realm of pigeon flying are often

²⁹ *Batch-ye mahal* literally means ‘children of the neighborhood’ and is often used to refer to men born or raised in a particular area with which they identify.

³⁰ Although *mard* means ‘man’ it is also used to refer to a person who is ‘manly’ and fulfils the criteria mentioned above. This idea is further discussed in chapter six.

³¹ *Esghe-lāti* is a term used to refer to people who want to be seen as tough and dangerous and go out of their way to demonstrate it. *Lāt* means thug.

reflected within it so when a *kaftarbāz* he will usually, but not always, return the bird to him once it becomes clear who it belongs to. Many people who focus on the purer aspects of pigeon flying are uninterested in *gharib-giri* will often return captured bird to the first person who asks for its return, often without any rightful claim, and this also can spark large scale disagreements. Asking someone to return a bird does not happen often, in that the humiliation of having to ask for it back is often seen as outweighing the value of the bird itself. If someone captures a bird and nobody comes and claims it, they will quite often sell it to the *sa'leh* in exchange for grain rather than keeping it, thus allowing its original owner to buy it back if he so wishes.

In some instances, however, two *kaftarbāz* may consider themselves to be *harif*, or rivals. This need not necessarily be the result of a personal disagreement but it is often the case. In some instances, a *kaftarbāz* might choose to be the *harif* of all the other *kaftarbāz* in the area in order to have free rein to capture as many birds as he can thereby increasing the thrill of competition. In the case of the family of three *kaftarbāz* mentioned earlier, there were all *harif* and if one person's bird ventured over a predetermined line on the roof then it could legitimately be captured! Those who do choose to declare themselves as being everyone's *harif* usually espouse the following motto: "if I catch your bird I'm keeping it and if you catch mine, I didn't want it anyway." In order to cement their position as everyone's *harif*, *kaftarbāz* sometimes go to quite extraordinary lengths to deter anyone from coming after their captured birds. The most extreme case I heard of was an older man who used to keep pigeons in his youth: when someone came to his door asking to have a bird returned, rather than simply accepting or refusing to give

it back, he would pull the unfortunate bird's head off and throw it's carcass from the roof to land next to its erstwhile owner. Needless to say, it proved a very effective deterrent.

In cases where there is a more personal dislike or grievance, *kaftarbāz* go to greater lengths to frustrate their *harif*. The main opportunity for this is at the end of the breeding season when the *harif* is looking to fly his chicks for the first time. The *kaftarbāz* will keep a watchful eye on his rival's loft to gauge how mature his chicks are and will often enquire among other *kaftarbāz* so that he can estimate exactly when his rival will be flying them. When the day eventually comes, the *kaftarbāz* will be on his roof early and have his birds primed and ready. On their initial flight, chicks fly in a scattered formation and further from their roof than normal as they seek to get better acquainted with the area. Upon seeing this, the *kaftarbāz* launches as many birds as he has and, if he is fortunate, his flock may scoop up a dozen or so chicks which he will be able to quickly familiarise with his own roof and then fly them himself within a week, to the intense frustration of the *harif*.

When a *kaftarbāz* does capture a rival's bird he may keep it, sell it or, in some cases, attempt to infuriate his rival even more. It is not unknown for a *kaftarbāz* to place captured birds in a friend's *sa'leh* with strict instructions. If it is a good bird, the owner will be looking for it anyway and will be scouring all of the area's *sa'leh* in the hope of buying it back. If the previous owner is a *harif* of the *sa'leh-dār* or one of his friends then the bird will be prominently displayed and the price will be placed prohibitively high to prevent their *harif* from buying it back. If he is unwilling to pay, the bird is then sold for its true value to the next person who wants it. Needless to say, word of this small victory usually finds its way back to the original owner.

Losing a bird to a *harif* is both frustrating and embarrassing for most *kaftarbāz*, and will take extensive precautions to ensure that it never happens. Although people not involved in pigeon flying often accuse *kaftarbāz* of getting their pigeons addicted, I personally have found these accusations to be groundless, stemming mainly from the prevalent negative view of the *kaftarbāz* and a misunderstanding of the pigeon's hominif instinct. However, I personally witnessed far more ingenious tactics. One *kaftarbāz* in Yāftābād would always go onto his loft wearing pure white clothing with no other colours until his pigeons became accustomed to him wearing only that particular colour. He would never let anyone else up to his loft. Every once in a while, he would get one of his friends to put on colourful clothing, give him a large piece of sacking and tell him to go chase the pigeons around the loft, buffeting them with the sack but not hurting them. The friend would then come downstairs and he, wearing white, would go up to feed them and pamper them a bit. As a result, his pigeons are far too terrified to sit on any roof where there is someone wearing anything but pure white and he very rarely loses any.

It is also interesting to note the role that the town authorities have come to play, on some occasions in the world of *kaftarbāzi*. The authorities often consider pigeons to be a sanitary liability as well as a nuisance in urban areas. Also, in one of the many airplane crashes at Mehrabad Airport, the engineers blamed the accident on a flock of pigeons which had supposedly gone into the engine. The 'campaign of terror' which followed, in which the security services would give a *kaftarbāz* two days to get rid of his pigeons before coming and disposing of them, is still spoken of today. On the whole the authorities are generally viewed with scorn by most people in Southern Tehran for reasons discussed earlier. For the *kaftarbāz* they are an added nuisance as annoyed

neighbours sometimes report them and they are forced to sell or move their birds.

However, in cases where there is an extreme grievance between two *kaftarbāz*, they have been known to report each other to the municipality on the basis of *mozāhemat*³², despite the fact that they may even live next door to each other. This is ironic, because the civil authorities, who were responsible for the demise of *lutis* as organized groups, are nonetheless still drawn into these feuds between rival groups.

Kaftarbāzi in Tehran has come to be associated with a very specific bracket of society, that of the young unemployed and unmarried men from the southern part of the city. In practice this is definitely not the case: *kaftarbāzi* remains a very popular activity across all age groups. Nevertheless, age does affect the way in which people approach the sport as only the previously mentioned group really has the time or enthusiasm to take part in *gharib-giri*.

It is very probable that *gharib-giri* is one of the main reasons for which *kaftarbāzi* is seen in such a poor light by a large portion of Iranian society. During my interviews, I interviewed people from a cross-section of Tehran society as to why pigeon flyers had such a bad reputation among the majority of Iranian society. Many made reference to the fact that they are often seen arguing and bickering over their birds, which they were always stealing from each other. This led them to the conclusion that on the whole they were “*adamhāye kharāb*” or bad people. In their eyes, the capture of another’s bird is stealing and the fact that it happens so often merely reflects upon the absence of moral fibre among the *kaftarbāz* themselves. Having become used to more conventional forms

³² *Mozāhemat* literally means ‘inconvenience’ but is usually used in cases when a neighbor’s actions are unacceptable.

of competition, many Iranians find it difficult to accept *kaftarbāzi*, in the form of *gharib-giri*, as a legitimate form of competition.

Another factor in the bad reputation of *kaftarbāzi* is that it has always been associated with the idea of *lutis*, who in some ancient treatises are even referred to as *ahl-e lut* as if they constituted a separate people.³³ Although the *lutis* have disappeared in their traditional sense, the culture that produced them remains very much intact and is still widely associated with *kaftarbāzi*. Among the youth of Southern Tehran ties to the *mahal* in which they people were born and raised remain strong and ideas of *mardānegi* and *javānmardi* still play an important part in the way men lead their lives. In many ways, pigeons, which can almost always be seen flying over the neighbourhoods of Southern Tehran, have come to represent the separate identity of Tehran's *pāyin shahr* or the 'lower city': a physical and ideological threat to a modern Iran.

³³ Meier F., 1963. *A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati*. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran, page 271

Chapter 3

The practice of Gerowbandi

Over the past few decades, no doubt influenced by the introduction of foreign sports, a new form of the sport of *kaftarbāzi* has emerged. Unlike *eshghbāzi* where any direct competition was based primarily upon personal rivalries and a large element of chance, this new form of *kaftarbāzi* evolved so as to allow *kaftarbāz* to challenge each other in a more direct fashion whilst avoiding the tapestry of petty rivalries. These were to be trials of strength and endurance intended to test the quality of the *kaftarbāz*'s bloodstock and the efficacy of his training system. Because this form of the sport first appeared and is primarily practiced in the city of Tehran, it is known as *kaftarbāzi-e*

Tehrāni. However, this term refers principally to the strain of pigeons flown in Tehran which are bred to fly at great heights for long durations as opposed to *shahrestāni* pigeons which are bred for their colour schemes; to distinguish the this new form of *kaftarbāzi* from the more traditional forms of the sport predominantly found in Tehran I shall refer to it as *gerowbandi*, which is the term used for the competitions themselves.

The evolution of this new competitive form of *kaftarbāzi* based upon performance in the air had a dramatic effect upon the techniques and traditions of *kaftarbāzi*. Traditionally pigeons were kept in baskets³⁴ or in crudely constructed *ganje*³⁵, made of mud or bricks.³⁶ Pigeons were mostly left to their own devices during the breeding season and chicks were usually the result of haphazard pairings; they also followed no specific dietary or training regime. However, the new sport of *gerowbandi*, with its hefty financial commitment and the potential to reap financial reward, created the need for a re-evaluation of the ways in which pigeons were kept and trained.

The evolving techniques used to keep and breed pigeons capable of competing at a high level placed new demands upon the *kaftarbāz*, which those who were traditionally most active at *kaftarbāzi*, the younger men, were not necessarily able to meet. As *gerowbandi* gradually became more and more sophisticated and financially demanding, the demographic of those who were involved in it also changed.

This new form of competition also had a radical effect upon *kaftarbāz* society. In the past, the hierarchy of pigeon flyers had mostly been based upon a person's experience

³⁴ Meier F., 1963. *A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati*. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran, page 270

³⁵ *Ganje* is the proper Farsi term for a pigeon loft.

³⁶ Goushegir A. 1997. *Le combat du colombophile: jeu aux pigeons et stigmatisation sociale*. Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran. There are a number of photos of these crudely constructed lofts which remain common in provinial areas.

as a *kaftarbāz* or upon a person's stature within a community and, on the whole, was not of great importance outside of the *mahal*. The introduction of competition created a new and far clearer hierarchy. Gradually, *gerowbandi* came to be perceived summit of *kaftarbāzi*, far superior to *eshghbāzi*, and the successful *gerowband* assumed a position at the top of the *kaftarbāz* hierarchy. This hierarchy was also acknowledged further afield as competitions would often pit two great *kaftarbāz* from rival *mahals* against each other, serving to polarize the whole *kaftarbāz* community.

The Rules of *Gerowbandi*

The competition season for *gerowbandi* is limited to the month of *Tir* which corresponds roughly to late June and most of July. This month is chosen for a number of reasons, most of which have to do with the constant improvement of the birds as a result of selective breeding. The predictable climate at this time allows for the competition to take place over two days without granting either competitor any significant advantage. On some rare occasions, two *kaftarbāz* will fly their birds at the same time, but this causes a number of logistical problems which will be addressed later in the chapter.

The rules of the competition are relatively simple. At a specified time, usually half an hour before dawn, to take advantage of the cool mornings, the *kaftarbāz* will release his birds from their cages and then start them by whistling and waving a bright piece of cloth. Once the birds have taken to the air, the *kaftarbāz* and all spectators are banned from whistling or offering the birds encouragement of any sort until the end of the competition. Indeed, in most cases, the competitor is asked to leave the roof entirely.

The birds, which are bred and trained to fly high, rise in a relatively tight spiral that is centred upon their loft, until they are barely visible to the naked eye. During the course of the day, they will often come down to about half that height to get a better look at their homes and then rise once again. In most cases, after about five hours, the first pigeons will begin to tire and will descend, spiralling down and eventually coming to perch upon the loft. The times at which they land upon the loft are carefully noted. Any bird that lands anywhere but upon the roof of its loft is immediately disqualified. Once all of the birds have returned, their combined times are added up and the competitor with the highest time is victorious.

Among the *gerowband* themselves there is also an internal hierarchy. Those who fly the largest number of birds are most respected because of the difficulties involved in the breeding and training of such large numbers. In the event that a challenger has fewer birds but still desires to compete the rules are slightly different. If for instance, a *kaftarbāz* with one hundred birds chooses to challenge one who flies two hundred; at the end of the competition the challenger will score the average of all his birds while the other will score the average of his top one hundred birds, giving him a distinct advantage.

The *Gerowband*

Pigeon flyers in the four *mahals* studied in this thesis represent a fairly broad demographic category: people of all ages and professions commonly keep a few birds. By contrast, the demographic of the *gerowband* is far more uniform. Maintaining a flock of competition pigeons requires a serious commitment of time and money as well as a

suitable location. This severely restricts the number of people who are able to engage in the sport.

By the standards of Southern Tehran, competitive pigeon flying is also an extremely expensive endeavour. Agha Zafar, one of the more famous *gerowband* of Eslāmshahr, who was also the most open to being interviewed, estimated that he had spent somewhere in the vicinity of two million tomans (twenty million rials) on grain to feed his flock of four hundred birds.³⁷ During the months of *Tir* and *Khordād* he cannot go to work because he has to ensure that his birds are taken care of properly, a job requiring such dedication and attention to detail that it cannot be delegated to anyone else. Also, in order to make space for his five large lofts, he has set aside the whole of his large roof for the exclusive use of his pigeons. Although Zafar is acknowledged as one of the greats of Southern Tehran, with facilities that match his status, it is almost impossible to become a successful *gerowband* without a similar commitment of time, money and space.

This severely limits the numbers of those who are even capable of engaging in *gerowbandi*. The young, old or unemployed seldom have enough money or space to be able to keep competition pigeons, while those who have formal jobs working for the government, a bank, a company or any other institution don't have the luxury of ceasing to work for two months of the year because it is pigeon flying season.

The city of Tehran is fairly unique in that it has not been overtaken by western retail giants and thus much of the commercial and production activities continue to be performed by very small scale operations often run by families. As mentioned in an

³⁷ This represents over a year's salary for most of the inhabitants of Southern Tehran and equates to roughly \$1,500.

earlier chapter, the prevalent economic activities in the areas of study result in their being a substantial number of independent businessmen and craftsmen who, by local standards, are fairly well to do. These characteristics played an important role in allowing *kaftarbāzi* to evolve as it has. The vast majority of *gerowband* in the area come from this particular section of society: self employed, reasonably well off artisans, shopkeepers or merchants who keep their pigeons on the roofs of their houses or workplaces and are able to manage their time as they see fit.

This difference with the more common *eshghbāz* of Southern Tehran is often apparent from the manner in which *gerowband* refer to each other. Family names are very rarely used to identify people in South Tehran and, interestingly, they are mostly used for people who have a higher level of education, mainly engineers and doctors. People from within a person's *mahal* are referred to by their first names and the title 'āghā', meaning "Mr". However, when referring to people from further away or in different mahals, this system becomes unworkable. Most *eshghbāz* are identified by their first name and some form of nickname often referring to his ethnic or regional background. This addition to the name is known as a *laghab*³⁸. Two of the *eshghbāz* interviewed in Esmailabad were known respectively as Hadi *Rashti* (Hadi from Rasht) and Dariush *Torke* (Dariush the Turk) while most others are identified by the location of their houses. By contrast, because there are far fewer *gerowband*, and they are spread over a wider area, it becomes more difficult to refer to them by where they live and consequently, they are most often referred by a *laghab*. However, these *laghab* refer almost exclusively to a profession rather than a place. Some examples of famous *gerowband* in the areas of study are Sadeq Ahangar (Sadeq the ironmonger), Asghar

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Samāvarsaz (Asghar the maker of Samavars) and Sadeq Hamāmi (Sadeq the owner of the *hamām*). All of these appellations imply ownership of a small business.

These two separate systems of identifying pigeon flyers is very significant. It would suggest that, as opposed to many *eshghbāz*, *gerowband* are known beyond the immediate area in which they live, making first names and street names insufficient. It also suggests a far greater degree of respect than the regional nicknames which can sometimes be considered as being derogatory. It is also possible to extrapolate that another reason for which many *eshghbāz* do not use the same appellations is that they either work for someone else, and so don't have the right to bear the *laghab* of their profession, or are unemployed.

Keeping and Training Competition Pigeons

Over the past few decades, competition pigeons in Tehran have improved steadily, flying for longer and longer periods of time. As recently as thirty years ago, a pigeon that flew for anything over three hours was considered an excellent bird.³⁹ Nowadays, most high level pigeon flyers own a number of birds that can be relied upon to fly for over nine hours in competition season and average times have increased to around six and a half hours for flocks of over one hundred. This exponential increase in flying time is almost entirely the result of improvement and the systematisation of the methods of *kaftarbāzi*. To my knowledge there has been almost no importation of foreign stock.

³⁹ www.kaftar.homestead.com This is an English language website administered by Tony Mirseydi, who now lives in the USA.

One of the most obvious improvements is in the construction of the pigeon lofts themselves. In the past, pigeons were often kept in small mud *ganje* in the corner of the garden. Today's lofts bear a number of important considerations in mind. Most *gerowband* have at least three or four lofts so as to be able to separate their pigeons as they see fit, according to sex, age, quality, etc. All of the best lofts are large and airy and are built so as to ensure the most hygienic conditions possible for the birds. The walls are made of concrete and frequently coated with lime, *āhak* in Farsi, to keep the lofts free of pests such as ticks or fleas. The lofts are also usually fronted with heavy gratings that let in light and air, ensuring the birds' comfort while preventing theft. Floors are tiled so as to make the daily cleaning process as thorough as possible.

The *kaftarbāz* also maintains complete control over all other aspects of the pigeon's life. Food is the means by which the pigeon flyer maintains control over his flock. First of all, after the winter break during which the birds' feed is increased so that they are less affected by the cold, the pigeons have to gradually be brought back to their flying weight. Once the birds are at their flying weight, their daily intake of food determines their flight. At a very basic level, if they are given too little they will be hungry and will fly for a short period before returning in search of more food. The birds' pangs of hunger are referred to as *za'f*. On the other hand, if the birds are fed too much they will feel heavy and won't want to fly either; if coaxed too much they will merely go and sit on the neighbour's roof, to the mortification of their owner. However, in the case of the high level *gerowband*, food becomes a far more sophisticated tool. Most *gerowband* are so familiar with the characteristics of their birds that they are able to feed them in a way that leads them to fly for a predetermined length of time. By carefully

regulating their food intake, they prevent the birds from reaching their full potential before the day of the competition and prevent them from becoming worn out. On the day of competition, they are fed the optimum amount and usually fly their best times of the year.

Apart from during the breeding season, birds are separated by sex. This forced celibacy makes the birds become *mast*⁴⁰, making them fly better. Like the feeding regime, the training and preparation schedule for the mature birds is very precise. It begins 15 days after *Eid-e Nowruz*, in late April, when the *kaftarbāz* will pull out every bird's primary feathers⁴¹, the six longest feathers on the wing, as well their covering feathers. Ten days later he will pull all of the secondary feathers of the wing as well as the tail feathers. This process is called *kapk kardan* and ensures that the birds begin the season with new set of pristine feathers. The ten day gap is to ensure that the primaries, the most important feathers, get a head start on the other less important feathers and that their development is not compromised. It also means that all feathers are fully grown at the same time meaning there is no delay to the start of training. The birds are well fed until the feathers have developed completely and will not be allowed to fly until then, for fear of stunting them.

Once the feathers have matured, usually at the beginning of *Khordād*, the adult birds will be flown every morning. Because they get fit very quickly, the times they fly will increase every day until the better ones reach six or seven hours. The *kaftarbāz* carefully records all of his birds' flight times because after about six consecutive days of flying, there is a drop off in performance. This is an indication that the birds have started

⁴⁰ *Mast* is the same word as is used for being drunk in Farsi. In the context of *kaftarbāzi* it signifies that a pigeon is highly energetic because of pent-up sexual energy.

⁴¹ *Tize* in Farsi

to reach their maximum and have worn themselves out. They are given three days rest and then flown on alternate days, females on one day, males the next and their flying times are regulated using food. Their flying times will gradually improve throughout the month of *Khordād*, so that they are ready to compete at the beginning of the month of *Tir*.

The modern breeding system

For most non-competition pigeon flyers in Iran, breeding pigeons is a fairly simple and haphazard affair. Although some pairs are selected by the owner, either for their colours or their performance, most of the chicks that are produced are the result of random pairings. However, the breeding and rearing of chicks has changed radically in the hands of the *gerowband* of Southern Tehran. An excellent example of this is the breeding system of Agha Zafar of Eslamshahr, who is highly respected among the other pigeon flyers in his *mahal*, and who was jokingly introduced to me as being a professor who got his doctorate in *kaftarbāzi*.

Twice a year, once in early spring and once in late summer, Zafar breeds between 150 and 200 hundred birds. All of these birds are selected not only for their flying times but also for the way they flew during competition season. Only those who flew by themselves, not in a flock, for over six hours were considered acceptable. Among these birds, he distinguished two main bloodlines identifiable by their different patterns. One of these was descended from a bird he had had in his youth while others were descended from a pair that he had acquired from a fellow *gerowband*. According to Zafar, the chicks

that flew the best were the result of a crossing of these two bloodlines, as the two lines complemented each other.

Each breeding season, Zafar records all of the different pairings, identifying both the chicks and parents by the patterns and by his own system of coloured rings placed upon their feet. In this way, he is able to trace each individual pigeon's ancestry back a half a dozen generations or more. By carefully introducing new blood from time to time through birds acquired via trades with other *gerowband*, Zafar is able to continue to combine his two core bloodlines without fear of inbreeding, which, unlike most *eshghbāz*, he sees not only as a taboo but also as producing inferior chicks. This recording of bloodlines also allows him to mould his pigeons to his likings as he is able to predict, with an amazing degree of accuracy, the colours and qualities of his chicks. An example of this was that he preferred white pigeons because his experience was that they were less likely to fall prey to falcons. As a result, good pigeons with less desirable patterns were paired with mates that would guarantee chicks with suitable ones. He could also predict the colours of each generation of new chicks even though they sometimes bore no relation to those of their parents or to the previous generation.

Zafar also goes to great lengths to ensure that his chicks are reared properly and develop uniformly. Most pigeons will raise their own young without any assistance. However, it is often the case that one weaker chick will receive less food and develop more slowly, sometimes remaining stunted for life. Zafar prefers that his birds should grow larger so that they are powerful enough to overcome the regular winds that blow over Southern Tehran in summer. In order to achieve this, every morning and evening, Zafar uses a syringe-like device of his own design to supplement the chicks' food with a

combination of water and high energy grains. He has been doing it for so long that he is capable of feeding a whole bucket of grain and water to 150 chicks in the space of twenty minutes.

As previously described, pigeon chicks on the verge of maturity are very prone to getting lost when flown for the first time. For someone like Zafar who has spent much time, money and effort on his birds it is imperative that he minimize losses. He does this by ensuring that the chicks recognize their loft and the surrounding area before they are allowed to fly freely. Zafar and his son erect a four metre pole in the centre of the roof which serves as the central strut for a tent like structure made of netting. The chicks are allowed to fly freely under the netting so that they gain strength and learn to recognize the house and its immediate surroundings. After they have done so, the netting is removed and they are allowed to fly freely. Once they have learned the area and are beginning to fly for decent times, their feathers are cut and they are kept inside until the following year's competition season. This is done because his birds have been selectively bred to such an extent that chicks, upon discovering the joys of flight, will rise to such heights that they lose sight of their house and get lost, even after weeks of flying.

Over the years, the *gerowband* of Southern Tehran have gone to increasing lengths to ensure that they breed the best possible chicks. In choosing breeding pairs, their considerations go well beyond performance and appearance and many have begun to use scientific terms to justify their choices. Most keep meticulous breeding records so as to avoid any inbreeding that would weaken their stock while great measures are taken in rearing process to guarantee the best possible competition birds.

The Competition

Historically, *gerow* used to take place in the middle of spring but, today, they take place almost exclusively in the month of *Tir*. There are a number of reasons for this, most of which have to do with the dramatic improvement in performance over the years.⁴² *Tir*, which is in late June and early July, is the time of year in which the days are at their longest and the weather remains constant. In the morning there is a constant wind coming from the West and in the afternoon it switches to the East. Noon temperatures are almost always a few degrees above 40 Celsius. This period represents the most challenging flying conditions that Tehran can offer. This was a necessary step because if today's competition birds were flown in spring, most would fly the whole day and part of the night and all be disqualified because the judges would have no way of ensuring that they had not perched somewhere for the night. Many valuable birds would also be lost.

During the month of *Khordad*, most *gerowband* who wish to compete will identify someone who they see as a fit opponent. The *Sa'leh* plays an important role in this process, as outlined in a later chapter. For most of the very well known, and therefore successful, *gerowband* it is not necessary to go looking for opponents because challengers will often present themselves at their doors. The process is much like boxing in that whoever defeats one of the greats immediately takes his place in the eyes of their fellow *gerowband*. Some of the great pigeon flyers such as Sadeq Ahanangar have not competed in years because the result is a foregone conclusion and nobody is willing to challenge him. On the other hand, other senior *gerowband* are constantly being challenged by pretenders. The number of pigeons that a *gerowband* flies acts as a mark of

⁴² www.kaftar.homestead.com

seniority as it demonstrates both wealth and a high level of skill. One of the ways in which these pretenders are politely declined is by encouraging them to come back when they have a comparable number of birds.

Once a suitable opponent is found, the competitors must agree on the conditions of the competition. In most cases a contract is drawn up, sometimes with the help of the local *sa'lehdar*, who often has much experience in such matters. First of all they agree upon the number of birds to be flown. This number is usually in the hundreds but it has to be a multiple of ten plus one. This is done in the belief that at least one pigeon belongs to God and will either lose its way through exhaustion, or will fall to some natural threat such as a falcon. They also determine how many pigeons will be left free to walk around the roof. These pigeons, which have been rendered flightless by trimming their feathers, are referred to as *zir-e pāyi*, and their purpose is to show the birds in flight that there is no danger, allowing them to land as they please. This is another measure taken to reduce times by making the conditions harder. Once these conditions are agreed upon, they must establish the *gerow* (bet) itself. Usually bets are in the form of cash but sometimes they will also bet gold *sekke* (coins) or even cars. The size of bets varies considerably from just a few thousand tomans to truly astronomical sums. Finally each competitor nominates his own judge or *dāvar* who acts as his second.

The role of the *dāvar* is extremely important during the whole of the competition and they may indeed be kept busier than the participants themselves. The *dāvar* must be entirely trustworthy but must also have an intimate knowledge of *gerowbandi*. Usually people will nominate a friend of theirs who is an equally experienced *gerowband* and the request will often be accepted on condition that the favour is returned. Once they are

chosen, the *dāvars* organize most of the logistics of the competition. Their first job is to get together and choose a third impartial *dāvar*. The impartial *dāvar* is usually expected to be someone of high standing in the *kaftarbāz* community who has impeccable credentials as both a *gerowband* and a person. Often a slightly older gentleman is chosen: often someone who has retired from active participation in the sport. The two initial *dāvars* will offer up names until they can agree on a suitable candidate.

The competition usually takes place over two days, often with a few days in between. On the night before a competitor's birds are due to fly, his opponent's *dāvar* comes to his house. Using a stamp chosen by the *kaftarbāz* he is representing, the *dāvar* stamps every single bird due to take part, usually on the primaries or on the tail feathers. This is to prevent the competitor from having a friend let loose some of his pigeons in the middle of the day that would then register better times while also encouraging the others to fly longer. After this the *dāvar* supervises the feeding and watering of the pigeons so as to rule out the possibility of foul play. Once the *kaftarbāz* is done, the *dāvar* locks the pigeon loft using his own lock to ensure that it is kept closed until the morning. Usually he will be invited to stay the night because the preparations go on well into the night and the competition begins before dawn.

On the day of the competition the *kaftarbāz* awakes well before dawn to encourage his birds to have one last drink to avoid dehydration in the extreme heat. Some have been known to follow each individual pigeon around until it takes a drink of water. The opponent and the *dāvars* arrive well before dawn. At a predetermined time, usually half an hour before dawn, the *kaftarbāz* encourages the pigeons to leave the loft. Once they are out, their owner claps his hands and whistles and the birds take flight. At this

point, the two main *dāvars* set the clock and ask everybody, including the owner, to leave the roof.

The sporting side of *gerowbandi* is usually accompanied by a social event. When asked what he did during the competition day if he was not allowed onto the roof until all his birds had landed Zafar answered that he put on a suit and tie and took care of his guests. The suit and tie, although frowned upon by the Islamic Republic, nonetheless continues to be the formal dress *par excellence*, usually worn at weddings, and goes to show the social importance of the event. The *kaftarbāz* who is hosting the event will usually invite a large number of his friends who share his interests to experience this prestigious event; the opponent is usually accompanied by at least a dozen of his friends and a number of other *kaftarbāz* acquaintances may choose to make an appearance. In competitions between well known *kaftarbāz*, crowds of strangers will often stand in the street watching the sky and sometimes making their own private bets. A large number of the younger male relatives are drafted in to serve up innumerable cups of tea and the host is usually expected to provide breakfast and lunch and, depending on the performance of his birds, even dinner.

These events serve a number of purposes. For the host it provides a valuable opportunity to reaffirm his position within the local *kaftarbāz* society in a far more intimate setting than might be found at the *sa'leh*, the only other place at which they tend to congregate. Although there is no formal hierarchy among *kaftarbāz*, there is definitely an informal one. One's position within that hierarchy can be based upon a number of factors. The older members will continue to command respect even if they no longer actively compete. For instance Sadeq Hamāmi no longer competes and mainly breeds his

birds for sale. However, his intimate knowledge of every aspect of *kaftarbāzi*, especially pigeon illnesses and their cures, as well as his excellent stock, guarantee him a large measure of respect. For most *kaftarbāz* however, their standing depends both on the ability of their birds to perform, as well as the amount they are willing to bet on them. For instance, Sadeq Ahangar's bet thanks to which he won seven new cars guarantees his place in the sport's history as well as his position as one of the most respected *gerowband* in Esmāilābād. The social occasion that goes with the *gerow* gives the host a chance to show his generosity but also a chance to exhibit the quality of his birds and the depth of his pocket. For others it represents a chance to gauge their rival, meet prospective opponents as well as find new stock with which to improve their own. In one instance, having just lost a *gerow* to Agha Zafar of Eslāmshahr, his opponent approached him and offered to buy one hundred of his chicks at any price. Because of his feeling of *rudarbāyesti*⁴³, Zafar accepted, but asked his friend to set the price which was set at one million toman⁴⁴, about one third of what he could reasonably have asked for them. Because of their respected position as men of substance within the community, such formalities are strictly adhered to and are seen as a mark of a man's quality.

In the early afternoon, the birds begin to settle in ones and twos. As they settle, the *dāvars* note down the time and then examine the bird. An experienced *dāvar* is an absolute necessity because they have to be able to tell just from looking at the bird whether it has actually been flying during the whole time. For the greater part of the day the pigeons are so high that they are invisible to the naked eye. Also, if a strong breeze

⁴³ *rudarbāyesti* refers to the Iranian sense of common courtesy and politeness which demands that a person offer to give any of his personal possessions to a friend or guest who inquires about them. Usually this is merely a courtesy, but it is sometimes abused.

⁴⁴ Approximately 1200 dollars.

begins to blow, the whole flock may be pushed up to a few kilometres away. In this case, some may land and sit for a few hours to recover before returning to the loft. The *dāvvars* have to be able to tell from their appearance, the way they breathe, the way they stand, the colour of their droppings, and a host of other indicators whether they have indeed been flying for the whole time. The third *dāvar* is only consulted in the event that the other two cannot reach an agreement and will sometimes spend the whole day downstairs mingling with the other guests. At the end of the two day competition, the times of each participant's birds' flight time is added up and the victor takes home the prize money.

From Ritual to Record

Over the past few decades, *kaftarbāzi* in Southern Tehran has become split into the two categories of *eshghbāzi* and *gerowbandi*. Whereas *eshghbāzi* has remained virtually unchanged and continues to be highly popular, *gerowbandi* has evolved significantly and undergone what anthropologists of sport term the move from ritual to record, which serves to distinguish games from sports.⁴⁵

Eshghbāzi in South Tehran, both in the past and in the present, does not possess the necessary characteristics that would allow it to be referred to as a sport. A large number of those of *eshghbāz* keep birds simply for the pleasure of handling them and seeing them fly. *Gharib-giri*, or the capture of a rival's pigeon, on the other hand, is highly competitive, but not in what might be called a 'sporting' sense. The degree of competitiveness is often dependent upon the personal rivalries between the *kaftarbāz*

⁴⁵ Guttman A., 2004. *From Ritual to Record: the nature of modern sports*. New York, Columbia University Press

themselves and victories are not measured by the performance of the pigeons themselves but by the amount of embarrassment caused to a rival who has lost his bird and the triumph of the one that increases his flock.

This is far from the case in *gerowbandi*. Although the personal reputations of the *kaftarbāz* is still of utmost importance and personal rivalries persist, they no longer form the basis for competition. Now, the keeping of records has become both the basis of the sport as well as the means by which it has succeeded achieving sustained improvement in performance levels. During the training period, the *kaftarbāz* will keep a record of each pigeon's daily times so as to better be able to choose their competition birds. The point of emphasis in the competition has also changed. Rather than crowing about foes defeated, today's *kaftarbāz* keep records of their victorious birds' times as well as the amount won upon their wall as a sign of their victory.

Recordkeeping has also become all important in other areas, most notably the breeding process. The breeding of competition birds today is based upon a large number of factors most of which are only made available by meticulous record keeping over a long period of time. In choosing the parents of the next generation of birds, past performances, the degrees of interrelation, as well as the compatibility of the two bloodlines are all taken into account to great effect, as proved by the results.

The adoption of more conventional ideas of competition has also had a significant impact upon the society of *kaftarbāzi* which has evolved significantly over time. The new hierarchy created by the introduction of different forms of competition has allowed for the perceptions of *kaftarbāz*, at least at a local level, to change. In the past, being highly involved with *kaftarbāzi* was often frowned upon by most members of society because it

meant becoming involved in all the bickering that was associated with *gharib-giri*. However, as *kaftarbāzi* began to evolve and the elite level of *kaftarbāzi* came to be made up of highly respectable members of society, its image has changed, at least at a local level. Among their ranks, *kaftarbāz* count war heroes such as Agha Zafar, who spent almost seven years on the front line during the Iran-Iraq war, sporting heroes such as the Olympic gold medalist wrestler Ali-Rezā Soleimāni and even the children of Islamic clerics. However, in Iranian society as a whole, the negative image of *kaftarbāzi* persists.

Chapter 4

The *Sa'leh*

Among Iranians as a whole, keeping birds of all shapes and sizes is a very popular hobby and bird shops selling a variety of birds are a common sight in almost every neighbourhood. Indeed, there is one area of the old bazaar which is entirely dedicated to selling birds. The bird bazaar begins on the southern side of Mowlavi Junction and spreads over almost three city blocks and is divided into a number of sections. The main part is made up of shops that are open most days of the week and sell a wide variety of

birds, while the other parts are mainly busy on Friday and focus almost exclusively on pigeons and chickens.

A *sa'leh* in the traditional sense is very different from a bird shop in that it is far more specialized. Unlike ordinary bird shops, the *sa'leh* is dedicated almost exclusively to pigeons and, as a result, can only be found in areas where pigeon flying is very popular such as South Tehran and some of the nearby cities such as Qom, Kāshān and Sāveh. The term *sa'leh* itself is part of the vocabulary of the *kaftarbāz* and it generally not understood outside of these areas.

I have chosen to dedicate an entire chapter to the *sa'leh* because of the important role that it plays in *kaftarbāz* society. As a business, the *sa'leh* revolves around the buying and selling of pigeons and all related supplies, but also fulfils a number of other purposes for *kaftarbāz* of all ages and levels of experience.

Every *mahal* in Southern Tehran has at least one *sa'leh* and it assumes an important role because it is a part of the public sphere which, by virtue of its specialist nature, remains the exclusive preserve of the *kaftarbāz* and those interested in *kaftarbāzi*. The *sa'leh* provides a location which *kaftarbāz* can congregate to exchange information, discuss tactics and establish alliances and rivalries. It is also vital insofar as a *gharib-giri* is concerned.

The *sa'leh* also plays an important part in the activities of the *gerowband*. *Sa'leh* are very numerous in Tehran, and the nature of their business and clientele often depends upon the *sa'lehdār*, the owner of the *sa'leh* and usually an experienced pigeon flyer. The better *sa'lehdar* that cater to the *gerowband* fulfil a wide variety of functions: bringing

competitors together, acting as judges and keeping people abreast of what is going in the World of pigeon flying.

The *sa'leh* and the *sa'lehdar*

Most of the areas of Southern Tehran were originally villages that were slowly incorporated into the city as the population grew and new areas were developed. In most cases, these *mahals* expanded by building new residential buildings on the periphery of the older villages until the whole area was urbanized. As a result, they are still usually centred upon the old village where most of the shops, including the *sa'leh*, are usually located. Their position at the centre of the *mahal* is important in that it is also the place where people naturally congregate during times of leisure and most *kaftarbāz* will gravitate towards the *sa'leh*.

As the *sa'leh* focuses almost entirely on pigeons, there is no need for the large number of cages that take up space in ordinary bird shops. In most cases, one wall and about half of the shop's area is devoted to large enclosures where the pigeons are kept. Like in ordinary pigeon lofts, the *sa'lehdār* affixes a number of long canes to the side walls which stretch across all of the enclosures and serve as a perches which are called the *neybandi*. These are situated one above the other with a gap of approximately 10 inches between each other and the back wall. Usually they extend all of the way the ceiling allowing for a large number of pigeons to perch upon them. The pigeons are usually placed in separate enclosures according to either their sex or their price, depending upon the *sa'leh*.

The rest of the *sa'leh* is usually very sparsely furnished. Often, there is also a small desk and a set of smaller cages, similar to a display case, in which the *sa'lehdār* will place either breeding pairs with eggs or chicks or prized birds with significantly higher price tags. However, the most important item of furniture that is present in every *sa'leh* is the set of benches or chairs where the clientele or merely interested *kaftarbāz* may sit and pass the time. The *sa'leh* itself rarely offers any sort of refreshment, but its location in the heart of the old village guarantees that there is a grocer within a few metres where the people in the *sa'leh* can purchase beverages and food. The stated purpose of the *sa'leh* may be to buy and sell pigeons so that the owner can make profit, but they are almost always designed so that they can serve a social function as well.

Because of the personal nature of its business, the success of a *sa'leh* depends to a great extent upon the character of its owner. If he is not liked and respected within the *kaftarbāz* community or is deemed to lack the necessary expertise, his business will suffer. A successful *sa'leh* can be quite a profitable venture in that there is an extremely high volume and rapid turnover of stock and it is accepted that the owner will buy new birds at around half or a third of the price that he expects to sell them. As a result, most *sa'leh* owners are very personable as well as generally being experienced *kaftarbāz*. Some *gerowband* open a *sa'leh* because the flexible hours allow them time to take care of their pigeons while having a good reputation within the *kaftarbāz* community is good for business.

The role of the *sa'leh* among *eshghbāz*

The most active *eshghbāz* in Southern Tehran are usually the younger men and they are the ones that are most often to be found in the *sa'leh*. The popularity of the *sa'leh* among this group can be attributed to a number of factors. As outlined in a previous chapter, the layout of most houses combined with Islamic ideas of propriety entail that most social activities involving men take place outside of the house. The poorer neighbourhoods of Tehran also suffer from an absence of places designed for social interaction or entertainment purposes. The city is usually reluctant to provide licenses for coffee shops or tea houses in these areas for fear of being unable to control what takes place within these establishments while most other sorts of entertainment such as cinemas are located nearer the centre of Tehran and the distance and expense makes them inaccessible to most of the younger men.

The result is many locations assume a social role beyond their primary function, and places associated with activities such as body building, wrestling or pigeon flying assume a far greater importance than the mere physical activity would warrant. Participation in a sport or activity takes on a far greater significance for the youths of these areas as it also grants them the privilege of being able spend their free time among people with similar interests. Because *kaftarbāzi*, unlike wrestling or body building, is not centred on a particular location such as a club, the *sa'leh* assumes this role.

Because of the nature of *kaftarbāzi*, the *sa'leh* plays a very important role in creating a group dynamic among *kaftarbāz*. *Kaftarbāzi* is, out of necessity, an individual activity in that each person keeps his pigeons upon his own roof and, bar exceptional circumstances, interaction cannot occur whilst they are flying their flock. Although they are usually aware of other *kaftarbāz* in the area because they can either see their flock in

flight or perched on the roof, *kaftarbāz* in a *mahal* do not necessarily know each other except by sight or through friends and family. The presence of a *sa'leh* within an area gives the *kaftarbāz* a common ground towards which they naturally gravitate and allows for the development of a far more personal dynamic in activities such as *gharib-giri*.

In the *sa'leh*, *kaftarbāz* have a chance to meet each other but also to keep themselves and each other informed. Topics of conversation vary but usually return to pigeons. In the evenings *kaftarbāz* will often go to the *sa'leh* to find out who a particular stray pigeon that had been seen flying over the *mahal* actually belonged to and who, if anyone, eventually caught it. In the event that they lose one of their own pigeons they will go to the *sa'leh* to find out if anyone caught it and, eventually, attempt to negotiate with that person for its return, depending whether they are *harif* or *rafīgh*. Unlike most other shops, the *sa'leh* will usually stay open well into the night according to the whim of the owner who may choose to stay late to converse with his fellow *kaftarbāz*, usually his close friends, rather than go home. In the event that he does have to leave, he may leave it in the hands of one of the regulars so as not to upset his clientele. The fact that the substitute is often forbidden from selling any birds until the owner's return underlines the *sa'leh*'s social function.

Finally, the *sa'leh* is also the place where the *kaftarbāz* hierarchy is established. Among the *kaftarbāz*, hierarchy can be dependent upon a number of factors such as experience, the number of pigeons owned, a person's success in competitions etc. However, among *eshghbāz*, hierarchy is usually established according to the way a person acts in the *sa'leh* itself. The *sa'leh* is usually staffed by the owner himself and a number of regulars who may sit there for the better part of the day, conversing among

themselves. At regular intervals other customers will enter the shop looking to either buy or sell pigeons. Purchasing a bird is usually anything but a private transaction between the *sa'lehdār* and the prospective client. In the event that the *sa'lehdār* is looking to buy pigeons, most of the regulars will chip in with advice regarding the health, quality and price of the birds. In the event that a customer is looking to buy a bird, other *kaftarbāz*, who usually see themselves as being more knowledgeable than the client, encourage him to buy a particular bird which they have identified as being a particularly excellent pigeon and enthusiastically offer guarantees of performance and good health.

Although every *kaftarbāz* will offer his opinion, they will usually defer to people whom they hold in high esteem as a *kaftarbāz*. If one of the lower ranked *kaftarbāz* is consulted by the client, he will usually look to the higher ranked *kaftarbāz* in order to gauge whether he is interested in offering an opinion before volunteering his own. In the event that the lower ranked *kaftarbāz* should disagree with an assessment, his doubts will almost always be expressed in the form of a question asking whether a certain characteristic of the indicated bird might not be a problem or whether a certain other bird might not be just as good. Among *kaftarbāz*, deferring to another when choosing which bird to buy is seen as both a sign of respect and an acknowledgement of the other's superior knowledge in this domain. In the event that a guest who is also a known *kaftarbāz* should visit, it is considered common courtesy to consult him first of all.

The role of the *sa'leh* for the *gerowband*

The fact that most of the *gerowband* in Southern Tehran are self-employed business men rather than youths means that they are usually less inclined to spend large amounts of time at a *sa'leh*, fraternizing with other *kaftarbāz*. Because most own their own houses and are married, they are more inclined to visit each other directly and enjoy the hospitality of each other's houses. Although a community of *gerowband* does exist, it is less tightly knit and more exclusive than that of the *eshghbāz*. This leaves the *gerowband* with a problem in the month of *Tir*. Most of the *gerowband* who are friends or in frequent contact know the capabilities of each others' birds and have a good idea of what the likely outcome of a competition would be. Because there is no system of odds in *kaftarbāzi*, there is very little incentive to challenge each other to a competition, because the result would be a foregone conclusion. Most *gerowband* are also unwilling to undertake competitions between friends which could erode ties of friendship.

Come the month of *Khordād*, *gerowband* are forced to look outside of their friendship circles in order to locate a likely adversary. This presents a number of problems. Among the *gerowband* of Southern Tehran, some have pigeons that fly longer times than others and thus it is important for the *gerowband* to be matched up against someone whose birds fly similar or lower times than his. The *gerowband* find that they need a place where they can get together and meet each other, but where they can also ask someone about their prospective opponent's past competitions and times so that they are not drawn into a *gerow* that they are bound to lose. The famous *gerowband* are usually challenged by pretenders seeking to become famous themselves and need not worry about locating opponents, but for the ordinary *gerowband*, finding a suitable opponent is a serious affair.

Towards the middle of *Khordād*, when the *gerowband* have a fairly accurate idea of how well their pigeons are flying that year, they begin to frequent the *sa'leh* on an almost daily basis. Usually they will focus on a *sa'leh* where they know the owner, but they will also go to other *sa'leh* in the area where they can meet different groups of *kaftarbāz*. In that one month the *sa'leh* is of vital importance to the *gerowband* as a source of information. By talking to other *gerowband* and exchanging information about potential rivals such as the performance of their birds and the minimum or maximum size of bet they are willing to accept, they can begin to form a list of prospective candidates. This common well of information is especially useful because it allows for an in depth assessment of not only the other person's abilities as a *kaftarbāz* but also his trustworthiness as an opponent. Faced with the possibility of a large financial loss, some *kaftarbāz* have been known to resort to cheating. This can take on many forms, such as getting a neighbour to fly his birds in the early afternoon to encourage the competition birds to fly longer, which would render the competition void. Others simply refuse to pay when they lose. Once a reputation for cheating is established, it becomes almost impossible to find another adversary as word travels rapidly and is usually stored indefinitely in the collective memory of the *kaftarbāz* community.

When I asked one interviewee what the role of the *sa'leh* was for the *kaftarbāz*, he described it as being the *bongāh* or real estate agency of *kaftarbāzi*, not only because they go there to find somebody to compete against but also because of the role played by the *sa'lehdar* himself. The *sa'lehdār* of a *sa'leh* frequented by *gerowband* is usually well connected and a valuable source of information and may suggest suitable opponents. Once two *kaftarbāz* have decided to pit their birds against each other, he also plays a vital

role negotiating the terms and completing the necessary ‘paperwork’. As explained in the previous chapter, there are a number of details that need to be agreed upon prior to the competition such as the number of birds to be flown, the number of *zir-e pāyi* pigeons, the size of the bet etc. The *sa'lehdār* ensures that all of these issues have been addressed and offers his opinion when needed. Once the negotiation is complete, the *sa'lehdar* draws up a legal contract which lists all of the conditions of the competition and it is signed by both interested parties and also by the *sa'lehdār*, who acts as a witness. Because of the important role that they play within the *kaftarbāz* community, *sa'lehdārs* are usually invited to observe most of the competitions that take place within their areas, further enhancing their position as a valued source of information.

The structure of society of Southern Tehran, coupled with the absence of the entertainment facilities that one would expect in richer areas, gives social institutions such as clubs, sports centres and even shops a newfound importance. These areas, which straddle the borders of the public and private sphere, provide the forum for the creation of numerous subcultures. The most famous of these was the *luti* subculture which was generally centred upon a particular *zurkhāneh*. The *sa'leh* provides a location in which the *kaftarbāz* society is formed. The individual nature of *kaftarbāzi* would have made the creation of such a subculture far more difficult if it weren't for a particular location exclusively reserved for *kaftarbāz*.

The *sa'leh* is of particular importance among the *eshghbāz* of Southern Tehran in that it both allows for the creation of a subculture and the formation of a hierarchy. Thanks to a system of deferral and courtesy, the hierarchy is established, placing those

with greater knowledge and experience with pigeons at the top, regardless of actual social position within the community. It also acts as a centre for *gharib-giri*, in that, without a specific place in which *kaftarbāz* could gather, people would not develop the degree of competition and personal antagonisms for which *kaftarbāzi* has become famous.

The fact that most *gerowband* have a different social status to the more active *eshghbāz* entails that the *sa'leh* does not play quite as crucial a social role among them. Nonetheless, it is of great strategic importance to them in the period preceding the month of *Tir*, in that it allows them to vet their prospective opponents by making use of the experience and knowledge of their fellow *gerowband*. For those with less experienced in *gerowbandi*, the *sa'lehdār* is an excellent source of valuable information and insights on how to become and initiate of the sport.

Chapter 5

Local Perceptions of *Kaftarbāzi*

Pigeon flying in the Middle East, and especially in Iran, has generated interest among a number of scholars because, despite being popular and widespread, it is a hobby that frequently frowned upon by the societies in which it is practiced. The prophet himself, upon seeing a man chasing a pigeon down the street, is believed to have described them as “a *shaitān* chasing a *shaitāna*”, condemning them both.⁴⁶ In Iran, examples of pronouncements dating back to the 19th century can be found that denounce and attempt to ban pigeon flying entirely. In one such tract, pigeon flying is not only described as being an immoral practice, it is also denounced as being a key characteristic of the *Qum-e lut*, and therefore to be strictly avoided.⁴⁷ By using the words *qum* and *ahl*⁴⁸ to describe the *lutis*, the author infers that they are not part of Iranian society but a different nation, known for its depravity and vices, of which colombophilia⁴⁹ is but one.

One of the problems that often presents itself when attempting to study what can be called traditional popular institutions and activities such as the *zurkhāneh* or

⁴⁶ Ragheb Y. 2002. *Les messagers volants en terre d'Islam*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, page 55

⁴⁷ Meier F., 1963. A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran, page 271-272

⁴⁸ Both of these words are used to give an idea of a separate *luti* community.

⁴⁹ Floor W., 1981. *The political role of Lutis in Iran*, in *Modern Iran: the dialectics of continuity and change*. (Eds.) Keddie N., Albany: State University of New York Press. Page 87

kaftarbāzi, is that most studies are coloured by the impressions or suspicions of a particular section of society. In the case of *kaftarbāzi*, the very small amount of scholarship that even touches upon the subject tends to uncritically adopt many of the wider preconceptions regarding *lutis* and, by association, *kaftarbāzi*. Thus, before attempting to analyse the basis for these preconceptions, it is important to get a better idea of the way in which the *luti* and the *kaftarbāz* were viewed within their own communities.

Most of academic studies that feature *lutis* restrict themselves to descriptions of their roles in politics and their mores within institutions such as the *zurkhāneh*. To get a better idea of the way that they were perceived within the societies that produced them, I have chosen to make use of a slightly unconventional resource to complement my own field research: the films of Mohammad Ali Fardin, the popular Iranian icon of the 60s and 70s. These films are an invaluable resource in that they portray the role of the *lutis* within their neighbourhoods in a far more generous fashion while also shedding light upon the real use of a number of terms that are often misapplied.

In this chapter, by combining my own findings with the more romantic perception of the *luti* that is to be found in popular film, I intend to analyse the different ideas of masculinity that prevail in Southern Tehran in order to examine the influence of the ideas of *lutigari* as well as the perceived role of *kaftarbāzi*. Secondly, I will look at the role played by the younger men in today's society and compare it to the role played by *lutis* in previous eras. Finally, I intend to examine the way in which the *luti*, and by extension the *kaftarbāz*, are perceived within their communities paying special attention to the ways in which perceptions have evolved over time.

The *Lutis* of Southern Tehran

In her article *Mullahs, Martyrs and Men: conceptualizing masculinity in the Islamic republic of Iran*, Shahin Gerami attempts to classify the different forms of masculinity that exist in Iran and examines the way these have been altered by the Islamic revolution of 1979. After the creation of the Islamic Republic certain pre-Revolutionary masculinity types such as military officers, artists and even some professional groups were discredited and Islamic masculinity types, namely that of the mullah and the martyr were promoted instead.⁵⁰

The subdivision of Iranian male society into various categories each possessing its own prototype of masculinity offers some very interesting insights into the male society of Southern Tehran. Unfortunately, as it is not the focus of this work, the prototypes of masculinity that the author identifies for the popular classes are both insufficient and quite negative. The lower class prototypes she identifies were that of the worker (*kārgar* and *amaleh*), that of the villager (*dehāti*) and peripheral and less significant prototypes of the urban cowboy (*Jāhel*) and misfits (*lāt-hā*), all of which present a number of problems. First, one can argue that the worker and the villager are mere professional occupations and don't carry the necessary connotations that would allow them to be referred to as prototypes of masculinity. Second, the language she use to designate her prototypes implies a fairly elitist perception of Iranian society. The terms *amaleh* and *dehāti* both

⁵⁰ Gerami S., 2003. *Mullahs, martyrs and men: conceptualizing masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Men and Masculinities, vol. 5, no. iii , page 264

posses very negative connotations in Farsi, and imply a lack of both sophistication and education. The words *jāhel* and *lāt* are pejorative terms used to designate callous men from the poorer strata of society.

Gerami's attempt to subdivide the Iranian male population into groups that adhere to certain prototypes of masculinity is cumbersome and superficial at best, especially as concerns the popular classes. Nevertheless, the fact that young men in southern Tehran give such importance to ideas of *mardānegi* and honour implies that such a lower class prototype of masculinity does exist and merely needs to be identified in a more accurate fashion. Rather than limiting oneself to mere professional characterisations, it is important to identify the ideas and beliefs upon which this masculinity is based. Using my own research and combining it with an examination the beliefs exhibited in popular film, I have reached the conclusion that many of the ideas of masculinity that exist in southern Tehran today revolve around the traditional values and attributes that are often associated with the *lutis* of old.

Contested visions of the *Luti*

The influence of the *lutis* on Iranian society over the last few centuries is extremely hard to qualify, not least because the term itself has evolved so significantly over time, both in its meaning and in its connotations. Even the original meaning of the word is hotly contested and in his article on the *zurkhāneh*, Philippe Rochard identifies three different versions all of which offer very different impressions of the *luti*. In the *Tadkhirāt al-muluk*, the *lutibashi* is the title of the leader of the king's acrobat/clowns. By

contrast, Mir Najat Isfahāni in his *Gul-i Kushti* of 1700 uses the term *luti* in the sense of “companion of God”.⁵¹ However, it is interesting to note that the word derives from the root l-w-t which may be related to the name of the Prophet Lot of the Old Testament. Based perhaps on account of Sodom and Gomorrah, this root also provides the word *lawat* to designate homosexuality, an association that has always weighed heavily on the reputation of the *lutis*.⁵² Over time, the meaning of the word has changed considerably. For some it “connoted a lifestyle, argot, and code of behaviour espoused by the gang leaders of the cities’ traditional neighbourhoods.”⁵³ However, it could also be used to designate anything from “good fellows, pleasant boon companions, and womanizers, men who transgressed some social norm but nonetheless had a certain sense of honour, to members of the criminal underworld....”⁵⁴

Even if the disputed origins of the word are set to one side, defining the word *luti* still remains a problem as it is possible to divide the list of definitions into two broad and mutually contradictory groups. On the one hand, the *luti* is an honourable man, a boon companion while on the other he is a man of questionable morals and criminal tendencies. This difficulty in defining the term, which often confuses any attempt to study the *lutis*, stems from the fact that each group of definitions is put forward by different sections of society which use the term in different contexts and to refer to different sorts of people.

Until quite recently, most academics have chosen to adopt the negative definitions of the *luti*, probably because they are mostly exposed to writings penned by members of

⁵¹ Rochard P., 2002. *The Identities of the Iranian Zurkhanah*. Iranian Studies, volume 35, no. Iv, page 326

⁵² idem, page 327

⁵³ idem, page 327

⁵⁴ idem, page 327

the Iranian elite throughout the 19th and early 20th century. By contrast, the word *luti* had and continues to have a very different meaning in the more traditional areas of Southern Tehran. In attempting to understand the different popular conception of the *luti*, popular films such as those of Fardin are extremely useful. Fardin, who has the leading role in these films, always plays the part of a young man from a traditional family in Tehran and can be considered to be the paragon of the popular conception of the *luti*: respectful and loyal towards his family and friends, physically strong, willing to defend others against oppression and fiercely attached to his *mahal*. Although he is never directly referred to as a *luti*, other similar words are used to describe him such as *pahlavān*, which means a strong and honourable man. Although he is never referred to directly as a *luti*, the word is often used in other context that are just as instructive. For instance, men who do not follow the same code of honour as Fardin are frequently referred to as *nā-luti*, meaning someone who is not a *luti*, which implies both that Fardin sees himself as being a *luti* but also that the term entails a certain code of conduct.

This importance of this code of conduct is evident throughout his films. In all the films, the importance of social ties within the *mahal* is of primary importance. In most cases, one of Fardin's parents has either died or long since disappeared while the one that is left is usually infirm or very old. Fardin's devotion to his remaining parent is obvious from the way he sacrifices his own interests in order to better be able to care for his remaining parent. His characters also shows great respect for their elders, always allowing for their wisdom to temper their more hot-headed nature, often preventing him from avenging the offences of other *nā-lutis* in a way that might lead to his imprisonment or death. He also exhibits extreme loyalty to his friends, doing all that he can to help

them or get them out of trouble. In *Kuche-ye Mardhā*, Fardin, upon finding out that both he and his friend love the same girl, annuls his own betrothal to her and even approaches her father on his friend's behalf so that his friend might find happiness in married life and forgo the dangerous life that he was leading. This loyalty also extends to the other inhabitants of the *mahal* whom Fardin feels compelled to protect from others because he has been blessed with greater strength and superior fighting ability.

Another interesting aspect of these films is the different way in which the concept of honesty is portrayed. Whereas in most films he is an extremely honest person, in one he is a pick pocket, forced into his trade by the illness of his single-mother. However, in all of these films, even when engaged in a necessarily dishonest trade, he continues to adhere to the ideas of *lutigari* and the concepts of *halāl* and *harām*. Thus, it would be unthinkable to lie to a friend for instance, or to steal from someone who was in desperate need of money themselves. In this sense, the *luti* is seen as being similar to a kind of Robin Hood in that they are essentially “good guys”⁵⁵ who are forced by circumstances to turn to crime. The popular idea of the *luti* also incorporates a strong sense of class inequality.

The films in which Fardin starred provide a number of insights into the role of the *luti* in Southern Tehran. Although Fardin's roles as a young man from a poor background tend to glorify and romanticize the concepts of honour and loyalty which are part and parcel of the popular vision of the *luti*, they nonetheless provide a suitable counter balance to the negative connotations of the word that have become more widespread in

⁵⁵ Floor W., 1981. *The political role of Lutis in Iran*, in *Modern Iran: the dialectics of continuity and change*. (Eds.) Keddie N., Albany: State University of New York Press., page 83

recent times. For many, the word *luti* had a very similar meaning to *javanmard*⁵⁶, a word that is used less often and has thus avoided becoming burdened with the same negative connotations as *luti*. These films also provide a number of insights into the social tensions that have led to these two contested visions of the *luti*. Most of the films centre around an opposition between a lower class Iranian, played by Fardin, who, though poor, has maintained his integrity and his sense of honour and a richer Iranian who has adopted the paraphernalia of the West and lost sight of the ideas of *javānmardi* and *lutigari*.

The continuing role of the *luti*

In the present day, the word *luti* is no longer used in the way it was up until the 1960s, probably as a result of the negative stigmas that have become attached to it. Although the word itself has all but disappeared from everyday usage, the ideas that were associated with it have survived almost intact, forcing the language of Farsi to evolve so as to overcome the stigmatization that was attached the original word. In the past, a man such as those portrayed by Fardin would have adhered to the ideas of *lutigari* and commonly referred to other men as being either a *luti* or a *nā-luti*. Today, the words *luti* and *lutigari* have been replaced, with very little difference in meaning, by the words *mard* and *mardānegi*.

The ideals of *lutigari*, now referred to as *mardānegi*, formed the central tenet of the identity of the *pāyin-shahri*. When the wholesale emigration of families from tightly packed *mahals* of the older parts of the city to the newly formed peripheral suburbs took

⁵⁶ Adelkhah F., 2000. *Être modern en Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press in Association with Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationals

place, these ideas were also transferred. The new environment that they had come to inhabit also provided a fertile ground in which these ideas could flourish. Because of the huge demand for new lodgings for the urban poor, the city expanded so rapidly that the civil authorities were unable to keep pace. For the most part, these new *mahals* controlled most of the aspects of their lives themselves and often resented the establishment of what they saw as a corrupt civil authority, preferring to continue to look after their own affairs. Many of the conditions that had made the ideas of *lutigari* so important in the first place were recreated in these newly established neighbourhoods.

As explained in chapter two, most of these *mahals* were the result of rapid urban development around previously existing villages and only in recent years have they expanded far enough to form an uninterrupted urban landscape. These isolated beginning as well as the need to administer themselves without recourse to the civil authorities brought about the creation extremely tight knit societies where people continued to have a strong sense of loyalty to their area and to their relatives and neighbours. The tight-knit society made administering the affairs of the area much easier as one of the family elders would usually speak for his whole family. Their relative isolation also meant that they could not appeal to the civil authorities to prevent any injustices and each *mahal* depended upon its own young men to prevent abuses either by its own inhabitants, men from other neighbourhoods or even the local authorities. As a result, a person's physical toughness became a prized asset as well as loyalty of friends who could be counted on for assistance in the case of an injustice. Ideas of Islamic propriety also continued to be of importance amongst the local youths because any perceived breach of conduct could cause divisive rifts within the community.

Even today many of the more peripheral communities continue to manage their own affairs with little regard for the civic authorities. The threat of retribution either in the form of a physical beating or the destruction of property serves as a very effective deterrent. Also, the ideas of the inhabitants of the *mahal* often differ from those of the central authority concerning what is and isn't permissible. For instance, certain festivals such as *Chahar-shanbe-souri* or the birthday of Imam Zaman provide opportunities to show group solidarity and people, especially the male youths, go to great lengths to beautify their houses and streets with lights, banners and ribbons. On the day, people pour into the street to celebrate in fashion that sometimes prompts the local authorities to attempt to intervene, often resulting in violent brawls between locals and the police. The harshest punishment is usually reserved for those who are seen to have betrayed fellow members of their community to the authorities for their own profit. Such people are referred to as *ādam-forush*, or sell outs.

As the power of the central government has increased over time, the political role of the *lutis* as described by Willem Floor has all but disappeared in Iran. Also, the negative connotations that the word has come to possess has resulted in the term *luti* being used less and less often. However, the ideals of *lutigari* as well as the social role played by the original *lutis* have continued to prosper under a new name in the poorer areas of Southern Tehran. Within these *mahals*, young men who ascribe to the ideas of *mardānegi* are seen as the means by which tight knit communities continue to manage their own affairs and protect themselves from the depredations of outsiders or corrupt local officials. Although the younger men of Southern Tehran who continue to espouse the ideals of *mardānegi* no longer refer to themselves as *lutis*, to call such a person a

mard or ‘man’ would be misleading and I have chosen to use the older name for the purposes of this thesis.

Kaftarbāzi and the luti

Many of the negative perceptions of *kaftarbāzi* among Iranians are derived from fact that they see the practice as being strongly associated with the idea of the *luti* in its pejorative sense, that of ruffians and crooks. In most literature on the *lutis* or on the *zurkhānehs*, which were seen as the preserve of the *lutis*, it is usually mentioned that *kaftarbāzi* was a very popular hobby amongst them. Although it was no doubt a common pass-time among the *lutis*, it was far from their exclusive preserve: *kaftarbāzi* was and continues to be a popular activity among all types of people in the poorer areas of Southern Tehran. Even if it were the case, the term of *luti* is not necessarily seen to be derogatory in these areas.

As a result, in the poorer *mahals*, *kaftarbāzi* and the *kaftarbāz* rarely receive the same universal condemnation as they would in the richer and more westernized areas to the North of the city. Although the *kaftarbāz* was sometimes regarded with suspicion, for reasons which will be developed later, *kaftarbāzi* itself was not seen as something which ought to be prohibited: it was a harmless and popular pass-time.

However, as these newly developed *mahals* have become more established, the peoples’ perception of *kaftarbāzi* has become less benevolent and has come to bear many similarities with middle class perceptions. The improvement and expansion of the education system has allowed for the youth of the poorer areas of Tehran to differentiate

themselves into two distinct groups. In the past, once a boy reached a certain age he would usually be apprenticed to an artisan or merchant working in the area and he would work there until he was competent in his trade. Then he would aspire to establishing a workshop or shop of his own. When he was married he would move into a house next to that of his parents and would rarely leave his *mahal*. Today, universal and relatively access to inexpensive education at all levels has encouraged a number of younger men to aspire to join the burgeoning Iranian middle class and lead a better life in more ‘respectable’ areas of the city. Others, on the other hand, are content to remain in the areas where they grew up, preferring to lead a more traditional lower-class lifestyle. It is predominantly this group who continue to engage in *kaftarbāzi*.

As the societies in the poorer southern *mahals* have become more established and have had better access to urban public services, they have begun to conform to widely held beliefs on issues such as *kaftarbāzi*. Those who wish to lead a more prosperous middle class life rarely keep pigeons. Thus, *kaftarbāzi* has gradually become associated with those who are either content with their lot in Southern Tehran or those who lack the motivation to try to make something of themselves.

Traditional misgivings regarding *kaftarbāzi*

The popularity of *kaftarbāzi* in poorer areas of Tehran means that most men kept pigeons at some point in their lives and almost everyone has at least a superficial knowledge of how it is practiced. Although most view it as being a benign pass time in of itself, there nonetheless remain certain misgivings. Even today, when asked as to the

reason behind the bad name which the *kaftarbāz* has acquired, many attributed it to the position of the *ganje* which is traditionally situated on top of the roof. In the densely populated poorer areas, peoples' houses are usually tightly packed together and the roof of one house is usually accessible from that of at least two neighbours.

Throughout Southern Tehran, people are known to be far more religious than those living in the middle and upper classes where many people increasingly live their lives according to more western concepts of society. As a result, the separation of the sexes is strictly enforced and young women are rarely venture out of the house unless accompanied by one of their male relatives. The enclosed courtyard or *hayāt* was seen to be an area outside of the house in which women were free to come and go as they pleased without fear of prying eyes. Women would also perform many of their chores such as washing clothes and dishes, cooking, etc. Most women choose not wear the chador in the *hayāt* because it is impractical and prefer to wear a simple head-scarf.

The presence of a *ganje* upon a neighbouring roof often served to completely disrupt the easy and familiar atmosphere that existed in the *hayāt* as it stripped it of the element of privacy that had allowed the womenfolk of the house to come and go as they pleased. One of the inescapable facts of *kaftarbāzi* is that, in order to be successful, the *kaftarbāz* must spend long hours upon his roof tending to his birds. The presence of a *kaftarbāz* on a neighbouring roof could cause considerable consternation to the womenfolk of neighbouring houses in that they were forced to be constantly on their guard so as to cover themselves and retire to the safety of the house upon the arrival of the *kaftarbāz*. The resentment caused by this unwelcome intrusion was no doubt responsible for the first misgivings as to the propriety of *kaftarbāzi*. Most of the richer

kaftarbāz choose to enclose their roofs with a relatively high wall which will protect them from such accusations from neighbours. The bad repute of the sport is usually laid at the door of people who are described as *lāshi* or worthless and choose to observe the activities of their neighbours from their vantage point.⁵⁷

The fact that many roofs in poorer areas are connected, providing easy access from one to the other, also brought suspicion to bear upon the *kaftarbāz*. It is often the case that a stray pigeon or even a *kaftarbāz*'s own pigeon will choose to sit upon a neighbour's roof rather than return directly to its own loft. In the case of strays, this is because they are often hesitant to sit upon a rooftop that they are not familiar with if the *kaftarbāz* is present. In the case of the *kaftarbāz*'s own birds, when they are of poor quality or when they are unfit and forced to fly beyond their endurance levels, pigeons will often prefer to sit on a nearby roof rather than continue to fly. Needless to say, the sight of his pigeons sitting upon a neighbour's roof but very much within reach is a source of such vexation to most *kaftarbāz* that it is hardly surprising that they are often seen on roofs where they had no right to be.

Given that most of the neighbours seldom have any sympathy for the plight of the *kaftarbāz* who undergoes the indignity of having his birds perch where they shouldn't, these fairly frequent instances of trespassing served to further damage the image of *kaftarbāzi*. Because the reputation of the *kaftarbāz* was already tarnished in the eyes of many, their trespasses were very much frowned upon. For many, errant pigeons merely provided a pretext through which thieves could justify their presence on someone else's roof.

⁵⁷ Goushegir A. 1997. *Le combat du colombole: jeu aux pigeons et stigmatisation sociale*. Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran. Page 53

Traditionally, it is not the practice of *kaftarbāzi* itself which has drawn the condemnation of people within the *mahal* but the way in which it is undertaken. Most people considered the sport to be completely benign so long as it was practiced with proper consideration for the feelings of other people within the *mahal*.

Evolving perceptions of *kaftarbāzi*

Although these previously established reservations which people had regarding the *kaftarbāz* continue to be valid today, the rapid evolution of the peripheral areas of Tehran over the past two decades has brought about new attitudes towards the keeping and flying of pigeons. Although the *mahals* to the South remain poor in comparison to other areas, their societies have evolved significantly over time. The city's public services were able to expand their scope to cope with these mushrooming communities providing education, roads, the telephone etc. This, together with the constant increase in property prices, even on the peripheries, has led to these neighbourhoods becoming more affluent and has led to an evolution in the aspirations of their inhabitants and, as a result, their perceptions.

As mentioned above, the improvement in the education system led to certain divisions within the male youth which have begun to make themselves felt within the last few years. Until recent years, few people born in poorer areas of Tehran had easy access to higher education meaning that most had undergone only a few years of education, at best. Today, the massive expansion of the education system, especially universities, has allowed a large number of young men from less prosperous backgrounds to pursue

education to the highest levels, thus earning unparalleled respect within their communities. Nevertheless, the majority of the younger men continue to be satisfied with a basic level of schooling, preferring to take up more traditional economic activities for which education was seen as unnecessary.

Especially over the last decade, the inefficiency and unpredictability of the Iranian economy has caused much hardship among the urban poor. The already saturated job market has provided few opportunities for the prospects of increasingly large numbers of young and mostly uneducated men looking for jobs. Whereas most of the younger men who have a degree are at least able to get lower level jobs in large institutions such as government departments, banks or companies, those lacking education have fewer options and are left unemployed.

Different levels of education have also led to changes in the types of activities that people pursue as well as the way they perceive themselves and those around them. Those with a better level of education seek to emulate the middle classes in their recreational pursuits as well and rarely indulge in more traditional pastimes, the most obvious of which would be *kaftarbāzi* and the *zurkhāneh*. As a result, *kaftarbāzi* has come to be associated with younger men who, either through lack of opportunity or by design, have failed to find employment and this has led to the development of new misgivings regarding *kaftarbāzi*.

Modern perceptions of *kaftarbāzi*

Over the last decade or so, the difficulty of life and the lack of prospects in poorer areas of Tehran have brought about a number of social problems, the most significant of which is widespread drug use. Vast quantities of class-A drugs, smuggled across the border, are easily available from a multitude of sources. NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings are quite a common sight, as they are usually carried out in public spaces such as parks or squares. Interestingly, the passion and devotion of the *kaftarbāz* to his birds is often spoken about using many of the same terms as drug addiction and both are described using the same word: *e'tiyād*.

Even among themselves, many *kaftarbāz* lament the fact that they have become so attached to their birds and often blame them for the fact that they have been unable to make something of their lives. They tend to mourn the fact that rather than attending their classes, which would have provided them with a step up in life, they chose instead to skip school in order to spend more time with their birds. In describing their attachment to *kaftarbāzi*, *kaftarbāz* often even use the vocabulary of addiction and speak of the difficulty of 'going clean' or *tark kardan*. Although they see it as the reason for their lack of success in life, their passion for the sport precludes them from abandoning it.

Within the local community, *kaftarbāzi* is seen in much the same way and is considered to have many of the same effects as any other drug addiction. Seeing so many of the local young men spending so many hours of the day with their pigeons rather than working, many tend to blame the activity of *kaftarbāzi* rather than the lack of opportunity which has left so many with so much time upon their hands. Although there have been

genuine cases of people neglecting all other areas of their lives to spend time with their birds, many people do so because they are unemployed and there are few other sources of entertainment, none of which they can easily afford. Nevertheless, rather than seeing this propensity to waste time with birds as a symptom of the general economic malaise, people see it as the root cause behind the inability or unwillingness of the youth to find a worthwhile occupation.

Because it is viewed as an addiction, *kaftarbāzi* is expected to produce many of the same social symptoms as drugs in those who indulge in it, and this is indeed the case in some instances. Like drugs, *kaftarbāzi* is perceived to be a common reason behind the disintegration of many a household. Men who keep pigeons are seen as having skewed priorities and risk giving priority to the needs of their birds and the sport at the expense of their professional obligations or the needs of their families. Indeed, such events were even noted in Iranian newspapers and F. Meier, in his article on a quatrain by Mashati, mentions a newspaper report of 1957 in which it is reported that some men are such slaves to this sport as to neglect their work and family – so much so that the wife may start divorce proceedings.⁵⁸ In the present day, some men are known turn down work opportunities on the basis that it would prevent them from spending the necessary time with their pigeons, preferring less respected forms of work which allow them more free time, working as a street vendor for instance. Whether or not a man is a *kaftarbāz* is often taken into consideration by the family when a person comes asking for a woman's hand in marriage and it not uncommon for an otherwise suitable man to be turned down on the basis that he is a *kaftarbāz*.

⁵⁸ Meier F., 1963. *A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati*. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran, page 270

As is the case with people who cannot hold a job because of drug addiction, people often suspect the *kaftarbāz* of earning money through dishonest means. Because of his frequent presence on his own and sometimes other peoples' roofs, the *kaftarbāz* was already suspected of dishonesty. This impression was strengthened by the fact that the *kaftarbāz* were seen as being lazy or *allāf* and disinclined to work and thus had to find money via dishonest means. Thus, it is often suspected that *kaftarbāz* either deal drugs or other banned substances or else are forced to steal in order to maintain the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed.

Because the *kaftarbāz* is often considered to be a person of unscrupulous nature with little sense of moral rectitude, many people are also very suspicious of the true purpose of the *ganje* and the *sa'leh*, the two places in which *kaftarbāz* congregate. In the past, those who many saw as being *lutis*, used to congregate in cafes or *pātoq* where they gambled, drank alcohol, smoked opium and amused themselves.⁵⁹ Such places were still prominent in the 60s and are often portrayed in the films of Fardin. However, under the new Islamic government, they are no longer permitted and the youth are forced to gather in other alternative areas where they can socialize amongst themselves. One such place is the *sa'leh* where *kaftarbāz* are free to spend time sitting and talking to each. Nevertheless, it remains a public place and people who keep pigeons often invite their friends up to the *ganje* where they can enjoy more privacy and can sit and watch their birds while talking. However, such private places draw the same sort of criticism as the cafes used to and are often suspected as being private locations where young men can either drink alcohol or take drugs. Indeed, it is a common belief among those who have never kept pigeons that

⁵⁹ Floor W., 1981. *The political role of Lutis in Iran*, in *Modern Iran: the dialectics of continuity and change*. (Eds.) Keddie N., Albany: State University of New York Press., page 87

the sport couldn't possibly provide enough entertainment during the hours during which the pigeons fly and that it is merely an excuse for people to sit on their roofs in peace and smoke opium...

In the modern day, the weakness of the Iranian economy has presented serious challenges to the traditional manufacturing economy based in Southern Tehran, leading to widespread unemployment among the many young men who aspired to jobs in this sector. The fact that it is these young men, who have chosen to conserve a more traditional lifestyle, who continue to keep and fly pigeons has led to unemployment and sloth being associated with the sport of *kaftarbāzi*. As such, in recent years, the perception of pigeon flying in lower class areas of Tehran is beginning to coincide with traditional middle class views on *kaftarbāzi*.

For the vast majority of Iranians, the practice of *kaftarbāzi* is intrinsically associated with the *lutis* of Tehran. However, this association presents a number of problems when attempting to gauge the way in which the *kaftarbāz* is perceived in Iranian society. Most of the scholarly works that deal with the *lutis* usually mirror a fairly elite view and portray the *luti* as a lower class criminal who preys upon society and is willing to sacrifice the interests of both the nation and the people for personal gain. However, among the popular folk of Southern Tehran the *luti* is portrayed in a very different fashion as was the case in the films of Fardin.

Far from being akin to a criminal, the *luti* is portrayed as being an honourable man who is fiercely loyal to both his family and the larger community and is willing to sacrifice his own best interests in order to further the general welfare of the community.

As such, the glorified image of the *luti* continues to offer a very powerful prototype of masculinity to the male youth of poorer areas and serves to counterbalance the western prototypes of masculinity which have become increasingly common in more affluent areas of the city. This concept of masculinity was instrumental in allowing for the creation of these peripheral suburbs in that it allowed for a more tight knit and self reliant community able to overcome the numerous initial challenges.

Despite the longstanding association of *kaftarbāzi* with the ideas of *lutigari*, *kaftarbāzi* nevertheless suffered from a number of negative connotations that mostly stemmed from the position of the *ganje* upon the roof of the *kaftarbāz*'s house. In the tightly packed poorer neighbourhoods, this was a cause of much concern to neighbours. As the new peripheral suburbs became more affluent, they assimilated many middle class characteristics which, combined with the poor economy, led to many of the erstwhile *lutis* being seen in a less favourable light. Lacking education and unable to find employment as artisans, many of these younger men spend long hours with their pigeons to pass the time. As a result *kaftarbāzi* has come to be seen as an obstacle to succeeding in today's world, akin to drugs. Consequently, *kaftarbāzi* is less frequently tolerated and the *kaftarbāz* is subjected to increased social condemnation.

Chapter 6

Middle and upper class perceptions of pigeon flying

Although it has long been the object of a number of stigmas, historically, pigeon flying had never been linked to ideas of class in the Middle East. It is recorded that at the Abbasid court, the Caliph and his courtiers were so caught up with the sport that one of resident clerics, in an effort to ingratiate himself, invented a *hadith* which stated that gambling on pigeon races was also permitted within Islamic Law.⁶⁰ Throughout the Middle East, there are records of rulers becoming fixated upon their pigeons, to the extent that some were even reputed to have lost control of their kingdoms because they spent too much time worrying about their birds.⁶¹ As argued in the previous chapter, if practiced with respect for ones neighbours and without excess, the sport was seen as being largely benign.

However, over the course of the last century, the image of *kaftarbāzi* has undergone a radical transformation and, today, it is frowned upon by the majority of

⁶⁰ Ragheb Y. 2002. *Les messagers volants en terre d'Islam*. Paris : CNRS Éditions. Page 61

⁶¹ For example Meier F., 1963. *A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati*. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran, page 270

Iranians living outside of the poor areas to the South of Tehran. In a process much akin to that which affected the image of the *zurkhāneh*, *kaftarbāzi* came to be associated with the worst kind of people. Both the *zurkhāneh* and *kaftarbāzi* came to be seen as activities implicitly associated with the pejorative image of the *lutis*.

This change in the way the *kaftarbāzi* was seen began to take place as of the 1920s and mirrored the way in which Iranian society was evolving at the time. In 1925, the military leader Reza Khan deposed the Qajar dynasty and was himself named king, initiating the Pahlavi dynasty. Upon assuming control of the country, Reza Shah initiated a radical program of nationalist modernisation and undertook the project of “dragging Iran ‘kicking and screaming’ into the modern age”⁶². As many of the social policies began to take effect, the characteristics and perceptions of Iranian society began to change. The number of people who had received a western style education began to grow as universities were expanded and large numbers of students were sent abroad. Over time, what had been a small western educated intelligentsia evolved into a new ‘modern middle class’, mostly employed in government jobs, as opposed to the traditional middle class who continued to be centred around the bazaar.

The creation of new social groups and a restructuring of ideas of class led to new social tensions. These new middle classes who saw themselves as being modern and progressive tended to define themselves in opposition to what they perceived as traditional classes that were seen to be holding the country back. The urban poor were depicted as miserable, reactionary and dangerous, with the *lutis* as their figurehead, representing all that was dangerous about them. In this context, sport came to assume an

⁶² Ansari A., 2003. *Modern Iran since 1921, the Pahlavis and after*. London, Longman Publications, page 40

important ideological role. On the one hand, sport was seen as providing the means to establish a progressive nation along an Anglo-Saxon mould. On the other, sport became a means of class identification.

The role of sport in creating a modern society

As of the beginning of the 20th Century, a large part of the intellectual debate among the Iranian intelligentsia dealt with the issue of transforming what they saw as a backward and traditional population into a modern one that would be able to return the country to the sort of glories that it had experienced in the past. Iran was seen to have abandoned the sort of mentality that had once allowed it to prosper and had fallen behind the countries of the West. This sense of inferiority was accentuated by the fact that some western states, namely Britain and Russia, used their newfound power to undermine Iran's sovereignty, extracting political and economic concessions from their powerless state. In order to replicate the achievements of the West, Iranian intellectuals sought to introduce many elements of western culture that were seen to have allowed it to flourish.

In their efforts to modernise Iran, social reformers were willing to attempt a complete transformation of their culture. Iranian modernisers adopted a grand narrative of progress in which “ideas, institutions, and social tensions are often portrayed as sites of the struggle between traditional impulses and modern desires.”⁶³ Many were very interested by what they saw as tools used by the West to mould their populations into a progressive, moral and disciplined group capable of furthering the ambitions of the

⁶³ Mirsepassi A., 2000. Intellectual discourse and the politics of modernization: negotiating modernity in Iran. New York: Cambridge University Press. Page 56

nation. In their eyes, the Iranian race was like the “French and other ‘Latin’ races” in that it was characterised by “corrupted morals” and had a “weak sense of sharing the same interests.”⁶⁴ As a result, it was seen as a wise precaution to follow the pattern for reform that was provided by the Anglo-Saxon and German nations where it was believed that “the real aim of education was the creation and expansion of moral qualities in a person.”⁶⁵ The British public school system was particularly admired in that the emphasis placed upon sport was seen as creating healthy, morally upright persons imbued with ‘self-discipline’ and team spirit through sports and games.⁶⁶

These ideas were particularly well received as of the 1920s, when Iran was undergoing a rapid process of industrialization as part of the effort to bring Iran up to speed with the rest of the developing World. One of the results was a rapid expansion of the urban population as people relocated to the towns in order to benefit from the increased opportunities resulting from the burgeoning industrial sectors. Consequently, one of the fears that drove the emerging middle class was that this uncontrolled urban expansion would lead to disorder and a crumbling of social values. Thus, their major concern was the creation of a modern society made up of “sane, healthy, orderly, educated, disciplined and useful” individuals.⁶⁷ Sport was seen as one of the more effective means of achieving many of these goals. The failure to practice sports or at least lead an active lifestyle was seen as going hand in hand with laziness, lack of morality and insufficient discipline. An article in *Kāveh*, which effectively illustrates the mindset of

⁶⁴ Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv, page 363

⁶⁵ idem, page 363

⁶⁶ idem, page 363

⁶⁷ Rejali D.M., 1994. *Torture and Modernity: self, society and the state in modern Iran*. Boulder, Westview Press, page 52ff

the period, chooses to demonstrate the theory that sport creates a nation of morally upright, healthy and hardworking people by taking clerks as an example stating that whereas a serious, disciplined, sports-minded person “works seriously and without complaining for eight to ten hours... and performs all his work in perfect discipline,” his lazy colleague does not only work much less (“at the most four hours”) but also mixes free time with work, for instance by drinking tea, smoking, or constantly chatting with other clerks.⁶⁸

Coupled with a number of other measures such as education, sports was seen by early Iranian reformers as an effective measure to transform the pre-industrial Iranian society. However, these ideas were based on a specific perception of the Iranian lower classes which, when combined with their ideas regarding health and sport, serve to explain negative image that *kaftarbāzi* came to develop over time.

Elite perceptions of the traditional lower classes

Many of the ideas for social reform that began to be formulated by the new middle class during the 1920s and thirties were based on a particular perception of the new urban lower classes that persevere in class relations to this day. As had been the case among the bourgeoisie in Europe during the 19th Century, the new middle class came to see the urban poor as a threat to their project of modernity in both a physical and ideological sense.

⁶⁸ “Asrar-I Tamaddun”, Kaveh, 6 (1921) quoted in Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*, page 349

As the state began to implement widespread industrialization in an attempt to modernise itself, a number of industrial complexes were built to the South of Tehran. The sudden creation of large numbers of low level jobs in the city lead to large scale migration of the rural poor towards the city in search of better opportunities. Tehran's population expanded from 210,000 in 1930 to 540,087 in 1941. However, industrialization and rapid urban expansion created a large number of new social problems as a "dual urbanism"⁶⁹ emerged. As alluded to in the first chapter, as of the mid 20th Century, the middle class lived in affluent neighbourhoods to the North while the urban poor lived in cramped working class quarters to the south, the locus of many factories, and where conditions were often appalling.

In the eyes of the middle class, the urban poor represented an ideological challenge to their efforts to modernise the nation. Many social reformers, including the Pahlavis, believed that the corruption of Iranian society had allowed it to fall behind and that, in order to be able to achieve meaningful progress, the cultural baggage acquired over the centuries needed to be shed, allowing for a return to a more dynamic Iranian culture. In the eyes of the middle class, the urban poor came to be seen as those who were standing in the way of social progress as they were stuck in their "insane, diseased, disorderly, undisciplined, ignorant and useless"⁷⁰ traditional way of living.

Apart from the ideological risk they presented, the urban poor were also seen as posing a sanitary risk to the middle class. Because of the deplorable conditions in which they lived, where hygiene was not considered to be a priority, social reformers sought to prevent them from "wrecking the whole nation building project by infecting it with their

⁶⁹ Ehlers E. and Floor W., 1993. *Urban Change in Iran, 1920-1941*. Iranian Studies 26, page 348

⁷⁰ Rejali D.M., 1994. *Torture and Modernity: self, society and the state in modern Iran*. Boulder, Westview Press, page 52

latent pathologies”⁷¹. Although sport was seen as a means of producing a healthy, productive and morally upright population, the language and presuppositions regarding a person’s, level of life, lifestyle and location of residence used in most of the articles about sport show them to be directed solely at the middle class. Instead, city authorities sought to counter the health risk posed by the lower classes by instituting preventative practices and institutions such as hospitals in poorer areas.⁷²

In the imagination of the middle classes, the poorer areas of Tehran were characterised by high levels of crime and presented a constant risk to the security of both individual members of the more affluent classes as well as to that of the nation building project itself. The poorer areas of Tehran, identified by their narrow streets and high population density were seen as dens of thieves into which criminal could elude capture by the police, when they dared even follow them. Initially, not much thought was given to the way in which the poorer class could undergo the same transformation as the middle class in order to become morally upright and ‘useful’ people. However, at the time, many articles written on subjects such as policing, crime and law and punishment engaged in “open discussion of possible ways to control and deter the lower classes.”⁷³

The fear of the lower classes also led to the demonisation of the *lutis*, who were seen to present a threat to the intelligentsia and the well being of the nation. From the point of view of the social elites of the time, they represented a threat because “certain undesirable elements in the government sought to utilize the *lutis* in order to direct and

⁷¹ Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv, page 348

⁷² idem, page 348

⁷³ idem, page 349

control the public for their own end.”⁷⁴ In the period of the constitutional revolution, monarchists and constitutionalists in most towns employed rival bands of *lutis* who were more than willing to fight each other for money. Even in the 1950s, many of the demonstrations organized against Mosaddeq were orchestrated by ‘*lutis*’ from Southern Tehran on the payroll of either the monarchist opposition or foreign intelligence services. Two of the better known *lutis* involved in the demonstrations of the time, Teyyeb Hāj Rezāi and Shabān Jafari, initially supported Mosaddeq but, when the religious leaders disassociated themselves from his movement, allowed themselves to be bought by the CIA and organized protests against him.⁷⁵ The result was that, in the eyes of the middle class, the notion of the *luti* came to incorporate all of the “degenerative characteristics”⁷⁶ of the lower classes.

These ideas of class distinctions were formed during the 1920s and 1930s and have been tempered over time. However, even today the lower classes continue to be mistrusted by the more affluent classes and symbols of class identity are still widely recognized.

Perceptions of Traditional Sports

As the city of Tehran rapidly expanded in size, *kaftarbāzi* gradually became a symbol of class differences in Iran. This was aided by the fact that *kaftarbāzi* is, by

⁷⁴ Arasteh R., 1962. *The Character, Organization and Social Role of the Lutis in the Traditional Iranian Society of the 19th Century*. Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 4, page 47-52

⁷⁵ Adelhah F., 2000. *Être modern en Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press in Association with Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales. Page 37

⁷⁶ Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv, page 349

definition, a very visible sport. During daylight hours, the poorer areas of the city almost always have a number of flocks of pigeons circling above them. However, the *kaftarbāz* was also seen as possessing most of the degenerative characteristics attributed to the lower classes.

During the earlier part of the 20th century, most articles about sport tended to focus exclusively upon modern western sports. A small number were drawn to the *zurkhāneh* because of its authentically Iranian origins, but the majority tended to dismiss it out of hand. This was done on the basis that the locations in which it was carried out were unhygienic, it was individualistic and because it didn't incorporate the scientific rationale that was seen to be the basis of modern sport.⁷⁷ However, issues of class were also important: "Some of us do not find even visiting and watching this (*zurkhāneh*) sport activities appropriate, and because we consider ourselves to belong to the class of the intelligentsia, or with respect to the social rank which we occupy, we think that these sport establishments do not merit being considered important."⁷⁸

Needless to say, the opinion of the middle class regarding *kaftarbāzi*, though not expressed, was, and continues to be, far worse. Insofar as hygiene is concerned, the presence of large numbers of birds together with their excrement on top of a residential building was seen as unpardonable and city legislation has made it almost impossible to keep pigeons outside of Southern Tehran, where it is assiduously enforced.

According to the logic of the time, the social benefits provided by this form of sport were questionable at best. Unlike most of the modern sports that were being introduced, *kaftarbāzi* was a solitary sport and was seen as encouraging the sort of

⁷⁷ "Dar zurkhaneh", *Ittila'at* 8.11.1938 in Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv. Page 366

⁷⁸ *idem*

individualistic attitudes that were detrimental to the cohesion of society. The physical exertion that modern sports demanded were also seen as having a salutary effect and it was the belief that a person who engaged in regular physical exercise would be more productive in the workplace and less inclined to waste time. *Kaftarbāzi* can hardly be described as a physically demanding sport in that once the birds are in the air, the *kaftarbāzi* usually remains rooted to his rooftop in order to gauge the improvements in his birds' performances. According to the logic of the period, far from making a person less inclined to waste time, the sport of *kaftarbāzi* could be seen as a waste of time in of itself.

Both the *zurkhāneh* and *kaftarbāzi* are often associated with sexual deviance and especially homosexuality. The reasons behind this are not clear in that it is not the case among the poorer populations where both of these sports are actually practiced. It may have been the case that homosexuality was just another of the charges of immorality that was laid at the doorstep of both the *kaftarbāz* and the *luti* by the Ulema and the elites in an effort to put a stop to both. The different ways of portraying the *kaftarbāz* according to class can be seen in film. In the popular films of Fardin the *kaftarbāz* is portrayed as masculine and honourable in the. By contrast, in *Toghi* by Behrouz Vosoughi, one of the more avant-garde directors of the 1970s, of the *kaftarbāz* who gather at a *sa'leh*, five are *luti*-like criminals and the other is an exaggeratedly effeminate homosexual.

The association of *kaftarbāzi* with criminality

Over the course of the last two centuries, as the Iran's class structure became more established, the perception of the *kaftarbāz* has undergone a radical transformation.

In the past, the *kaftarbāz*, by virtue of his position on the rooftop, caused considerable inconvenience to his neighbours and was often suspected of immorality. Over time, this reputation was distorted and enlarged to the point where *kaftarbāzi* today is almost implicitly associated with lower class criminals and thugs.

During the 19th Century, *kaftarbāzi* was a cause of some consternation to the religious authorities because it was perceived as being the basis for a number of immoral acts such as gambling and spying upon female neighbours. In an attempt to ban the sport, the religious authorities issued a number of edicts and tracts which sought to portray the sport as suitable only for *lutis* and therefore not to be indulged in by self respecting people within the community.⁷⁹

With the development of ideas of class in the early 20th Century, the middle class perception of *kaftarbāzi* was coloured by their fear of poor. The lower classes were seen as a leading a crime ridden existence in shanty towns to the South of the city where the criminal *lutis*, well known for being devotees of *kaftarbāzi*, engaged in extortion, drug dealing etc. This prejudiced view of *kaftarbāzi* was often strengthened by dramatic articles in the newspaper reporting instances of crime involving *kaftarbāzi*, such as one article in *ittila'at* where a man was reported to have murdered another after an argument over a bird.⁸⁰

The image of the *kaftarbāz* in Iran has also suffered on account of many aspects of the sport being misrepresented by people who do not understand its principles. Most of the middle class people interviewed for this thesis subscribed to the view that *kaftarbāz*

⁷⁹ Meier F., 1963. *A Difficult Quatrain by Mashati*. In *Melange d'Orientalismes Offerts a Henri Masse*, ed. by Minovi M. Tehran, Daneshgah-e Tehran. Page 271

⁸⁰ *Ittila'at*, Adhar 5, 1352

were generally dishonest and *kharāb*⁸¹ people, who were often known to engage in theft. Some sought to justify this perception by citing instances when they had witnessed these dishonest and quarrelsome characteristics of the *kaftarbāz* first hand. Almost all of these accounts involved the neighbourhood *kaftarbāz* becoming embroiled in a heated and very public argument in which one accused the other of having, by some means or another, captured or stolen a number of his birds. This is how *kaftarbāz* are depicted in the film *Toghi* where a man who captures a particularly beautiful pigeon is hunted down and beaten by the other *kaftarbāz* of the area in order to force him hand it over. The film is concluded with a number of murders by *kaftarbāz* keen to possess this exemplary pigeon.

Pigeons are very often the target of theft in Iran because they are usually in an exposed position, on the rooftop, and, once stolen, can easily be converted into cash without any questions being asked. However, people rarely steal a neighbour's pigeons because news of such perfidy would inevitably get out. It is my belief that, in most of these cases, the person witnessing the events has misinterpreted the goings on due to a lack of familiarity with the sport. Most people who are not raised in areas in which *kaftarbāzi* is widely practiced are generally unwilling to accept that the most exciting part of the sport is based around convincing another person's birds to leave their own roofs in order to capture them. Any bird that lands anywhere but upon its owner's roof is considered to be fair game and can be either returned or kept, depending on the capturer's relations with the bird's owner. Unexposed to this point of view, *gharib-giri* is seen as theft, pure and simple.

⁸¹ *kharab* which usually means broken can also be used to mean 'corrupted' or 'unscrupulous'.

The social importance of sport

Because of the Iranian fascination with many aspects of European, sport is a topic of great interest in Iran. As of the 1920s, the Iranian intelligentsia began to feel the need for a cultural renewal if Iran was ever to become a modern industrialized nation able to compete with the West. In order to achieve this, many aspects of European culture were introduced in order to mould the Iranian population into a more dynamic and progressive one. This process caused a redefinition of class boundaries.

This introduction of Western ideas and practices was far from universal however. They were adopted almost exclusively by the emerging middle classes, not the lower classes who were seen as a lost cause, stuck in their traditional and reactionary lifestyles. This had a profound impact upon class relations. Because the middle class was becoming increasingly westernized while the lower classes conserved their traditional lifestyles, class boundaries were increasingly determined by the level of westernization a person had achieved which, in turn, implied a certain level of affluence. This is clearly illustrated in films such as those of Fardin. Whereas Fardin is always poor and lives a traditional lifestyle, the villain, who is always rich, lives in a western style house and has adopted a number of western mannerisms and habits. This has remained largely unchanged, even after the revolution. Thus, the degree of westernization gradually became a social indicator in Iran.

Perhaps because of the insistence of early Iranian reformers, sport has always been a very important source of both personal and national prestige. For instance, throughout his reign, Mohammad Reza Shah often sought to portray himself as a keen

and enthusiastic sportsman as it was seen to show both his vigour and his modern sporting spirit. He even attended the parade celebrating his wedding to the Egyptian princess Fawzieh at the head of a troop of boy scouts, himself dressed in scout uniform.⁸² Sports is one of the main sources of national pride and one of the most historic events of the 1990s continues to be Iran's victory over America at the World Cup.⁸³ However, the symbolic value of sports has also come to be highly valued among ordinary Iranians.

Over the course of the last century, thanks in part to a much improved system of public education, the Iranian middle class has grown exponentially. Making the jump into the middle class is one of the main ambitions of many lower class young men who make it through university. The rapid expansion of the westernized middle class has led to the development of other indicators of class identity of which sport has become one of the most important.

Over the years, sport has become one of the most common ways in which people are able to show class and affluence and as a result a hierarchy of sports has evolved. Western sports such as football and volleyball have become so widespread that they offer those who play them no social advantage beyond the respect that is generally offered to accomplished sportsmen. The wholehearted adoption of western sports among the lower classes and the poorer middle classes has led to the development of a number of elite sports which only the most affluent can partake in and which are seen as the most 'respectable' of sports. This has led to a phenomenal expansion in the number of people who compete on horseback, who play tennis, who ski, water-ski etc. For example, over the last twenty years the number of riding clubs in the Tehran area has gone from a

⁸² Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv, page 341

⁸³ Chehabi H. E., 2002. *A Political History of Football in Iran*. Iranian Studies, vol. 35, no.iv

handful to well over seventy. Both the cost and the western origins of these sports guarantee them a place at the top of the sporting hierarchy.

The importance of sport in Iran as an indicator of social status is vital in gaining a better understanding of the reasons for which *kaftarbāzi* is regarded with such disdain by the majority of urban Iranians who consider themselves to be part of the modern middle class. In this sense, *kaftarbāzi* is far more than a sport in that the *kaftarbāz* is confirming his position as a member of the lower classes and therefore traditional, reactionary, unsophisticated and criminally minded.

In the early part of the century, a number of social reformers saw sport as an effective means of transforming Iranian society. With their emphasis on hard work, teamwork and fair play, western sports were thought to make up for a number of the lacunae of the Iranian national character whilst encouraging a healthier national character. This fascination with western sport together with a certain disdain for the lower classes entailed that indigenous sports were discouraged. *Kaftarbāzi* and the *zurkhāneh* were perceived as being unhygienic and too individualistic to encourage the sort of social mores the reformers sought to inculcate.⁸⁴

Despite the exponential growth of the middle classes over the course of the century, the disdain for *kaftarbāzi* has not waned. This is in large part due to the fact that the identity of the middle classes continues to be based on its differences with the traditional lower classes. Today, sport continues to be an important indicator of social status. By practicing a number of expensive western sports, middle class Iranians are able

⁸⁴ Schayegh C., 2002. *Sport, health and the Iranian middle class in the 1920s and 1930s*. Iranian Studies. Vol. 35, no.iv

to demonstrate that their progressive nature as well as their affluence. By contrast, to be a *kaftarbāz* is to associate oneself with the lower classes and everything that is associated with them in the eyes of the middle classes.

General Conclusion

The lower class areas of the city of Tehran have changed almost beyond recognition over the course of the last few decades. They have been gradually pushed further and further South, expanding all the time as a result of continuous flows of urban migration. Nevertheless, due to the fashion in which they were created and the nature of their inhabitants, many of these new peripheral suburbs of Tehran have maintained many of the characteristics of the traditional lower class areas of the city: their strong sense of

identity, their accents, their social structure and even their sports such as the *zurkhāneh* and *kaftarbāzi*.

Among these communities, especially among the disenfranchised youth, *kaftarbāzi* continues to play an important role that far exceeds that of ordinary sports. In areas plagued by a lack of prospects, money and entertainment facilities, sports such as *kaftarbāzi* have come to be seen as a shared interest around which youth society can be formed, based upon many of the same ideas as those of the *lutis*. The half private and half public space which is offered by the *sa'leh* enables the expression of this traditional male identity, allowing for the creation of a local hierarchy based upon a combination of factors such as reputation, strength or a person's ability as a *kaftarbāz*. It also provides a means for grievances and rivalries to be expressed without necessarily reverting to the brawls for which the *lutis* of old had been famous. *Gharib-giri*, although highly enjoyable, is in many cases as much a social phenomenon as a sporting one.

Despite their perceived antagonism, the introduction of modern sports had an important impact upon the native Iranian sports such as *kaftarbāzi*. Western ideas of competition based upon endurance and ability revolutionised this popular sport, changing everything from the methods to the social characteristics of the people who engaged in it. In the past, once men reached a certain age they would usually become far less active in *gharib-giri*; those who kept their pigeons did so for their aesthetics value and for the fond memories associated with them. *Gerowbandi* transformed the sport by offering the older, more experienced and more self-respecting *kaftarbāz* a means of challenging each other directly without becoming involved in the rather turbulent world of *gharib-giri*. As of that time, the sport was radically transformed and has witnessed the introduction of new

and better ways of keeping, breeding and flying pigeons. In doing so, it created a new hierarchy of *kaftarbāz*, placing the older and more experienced *gerowband*, who had had years to develop their pigeons' bloodlines, in a class of their own, firmly at the top.

Historically, the *kaftarbāz* has always been the subject of some suspicion within the local community. The lofty position which is essential in a good *ganje* causes considerable inconvenience to the neighbours of the *kaftarbāz*, allowing for his gaze to undermine the privacy of the *hayāt* which has always been seen as the place within which the women could come and go freely without worrying about being seen by unrelated men. This negative image of the sport was often heightened by the fact that it was seen as something approaching an addiction, often preventing young men from working or tending to their family and sometimes even driving them to criminal activities.

Nonetheless, if performed with consideration for neighbourly relations, and without excess, *kaftarbāzi* has always been perceived as a benign pastime. However, as peripheral neighbourhoods become more established and gradually assume a more middle class identity, these attitudes have begun to change, falling in line with more widespread middle and upper class assessments of the sport.

Upper and middle class perceptions of sport continue to be greatly influenced by the perceptions of early Iranian reformers. As a result of that early period, ideas of modernity have come to be implicitly linked with ideas of class. The lower classes were seen as the sort of reactionary and tradition bound side of Iran that had prevented the nation from fulfilling its potential as a great nation on the international stage and saw them as presenting a constant threat on a number of levels. They saw a need for a cultural

renewal that was based upon the adoption of a number of ‘modern’ concepts and practices from the West.

Sport was seen as one of the means by which Iranians would be able to assume a number of the characteristics of a modern society. People who were active and sporting were considered to be healthier, more productive and morally upright. This led to the outright condemnation of most traditional sports which did not satisfy many modern criteria. After a passing interest in the *zurkhāneh*, which some saw as an authentic Iranian sport, traditional sports were labelled as being conducted in unhygienic surroundings and not inculcating the sort of social mores that were deemed beneficial to society. This rejection was hastened by the association of most traditional Iranian sports with the *lutis* who, among the middle classes, were implicitly associated with criminality, extortion and sexual depravity. People who practiced these sports were given the same labels and the *kaftarbāz* is often portrayed as a wayward and lazy person often engaging in criminal activities and homosexuality.

The continued bad reputation of *kaftarbāzi* is mostly due to the social role of sport in Iran today. The practice of western sports has come to be associated with a modern and progressive outlook which the middle classes were seeking to portray. As a result, the practice of sport has come to possess a sort of brand value and provides a means of demonstrating one’s affluence and a progressive and modern mindset. Because of the connotations that sport has come to possess in Iran, traditional sports have come to be frowned upon in that they also have certain connotations. To be a *kaftarbāz* in modern day Iran is not only to identify with the lower class, it is also seen as a sign of moral deficiency and a reactionary mindset.

Appendix 1:

Brief summaries of the films used as references in the thesis

Mohammad Ali Fardin (1930-2000):

Fardin was known as the "King of Hearts" for his role in the Iranian film of that name. He was a former wrestler who came to fame in the 1960's. For the average Iranians, he represented a hero and served as an alternative to the foreign movie stars. He usually played the poor tough guy with the heart of gold who married the girl at the end. After the Iranian Revolution, he starred in only one more film, and his earlier films were

eventually banned. Subsequently, he opened a bakery in Tehran. More than 20,000 mourners attended his funeral in Tehran.

Kuche-ye Mard-ha

The two main protagonists of this film set in Tehran during the 1960s are Hassan “Bolbol”, known as such because of his voice, and his friend Ali “Khole”, known as such because he is a bit slow. Both come from the same *mahal* in the poorer areas of Tehran. Having led the life of a *luti* for a number of years, Hassan is determined to settle down and marry a beautiful local girl who he had saved from attentions of two criminals from a neighbouring mahal.

By contrast, Ali prefers to carry on as they had before and becomes involved with members of the criminal underworld and gets well out of his depth. At this point Hassan feels that he must do anything to bring his friend back to the path of respectability so that he may settle down. As a result, when Ali tells him that he is in love with the same girl as Hassan, Hassan not only breaks of his engagement to her but asks for her hand for his friend.

However, due to a misunderstanding during his brief involvement with the criminal gang, Ali is believed to have killed one of them whose brother now seeks revenge and eventually manages to kill Ali, forcing Hassan to seek revenge in turn.

Charkh-e Falak

In this film, as a young boy, the character of Fardin was forced to take care of his sickly single-mother whose husband had abandoned her years before. Faced with his mother's illness, the boy is forced to borrow money from a stranger in order to buy medicines. However, this supposedly benevolent stranger then forces the boy to work for him as a pick pocket, abandoning both his studies and the young girl from a good family that he had befriended.

After a number of years and jail sentences, meets the same young girl he had befriended at school while attempting to return her bag, which had been stolen by a friend of his who didn't share his moral stance about stealing from women. Throughout the film, the Fardin is forced to avoid the criminal gang for which he used to work as well as attempt to portray himself in a favorable light to his beloved's guardian and uncle who is opposed to their union. Eventually, it is discovered that the girl's uncle is actually Fardin's father who had left his mother because he mistakenly thought her unfaithful and the story ends happily.

Tufan-e Nuh

Fardin plays the role of a young man from a poor background who helps his elderly father, who is a Muslim sage and to whom Fardin is devoted, in their search for his long lost elder brother. When his brother is located, they discover that he has become extremely rich and has become corrupted by his wealth, spurning the love of his family because he suspects them of wanting his money.

By chance, Fardin is able to discover not only that his brother has made his fortune through the smuggling of diamonds but also that he is in deep trouble because he has been skimming a percentage off for himself. By pretending to be the agent sent over by the smugglers to kill his brother, Fardin is able to safeguard him while facilitating the capture of the whole ring by the police. In the end the family is happily reunited.

Toghi

Toghi was directed by the celebrated Behrooz Vosughi and is set in the city of Kerman. The story is of a young man who keeps pigeons and is one day fortunate enough to capture a pigeon with a particular pattern known as *toghi*, which is considered to be very special among *kaftarbaz*. A *toghi* is a pigeon that is all white except for a ring of colour around the neck. Seeing his capture of this precious bird, a number of *kaftarbaz* from the area seek to get their hands on it through a number of means, offering money and even threatening him physically.

The protagonist is asked by his uncle to go to the city of Shiraz to bring him his young bride. Upon his arrival the hero falls in love with his uncle's betrothed and eventually marries her himself. Between the wrath of his uncle and the desire of the numerous *kaftarbaz* to get their hands on his bird, the neighbourhood falls into chaos. In this circle of deceit and suspicion, a *kaftarbaz* come to steal the *toghi* wakes the hero's young bride and, in the darkness, mistakes her for him and kills her. Having located the killer by searching every *ganje* in the neighbourhood, the hero succeeds in avenging

himself by killing his bride's murderer. However, as he attempts to make his escape over the roofs, he is shot dead by the town guard who suspect him of being a thief.

Appendix II

Application for Ethics Approval for Human Subject Research

Research Ethics Board-I Application for Ethics Approval for Human Subject Research

Project Title: The Practice of Pigeon Flying in Southern Tehran and its Perception in Iranian Society

Principal Investigator: Alexander Reddaway **Dept:** Islamic Studies

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Mailing Address (if different than Dept.): Sehit Ersan Cad. 46/A, Cankaya 06680, Ankara, Turkey.

Status: Faculty ____	Postdoctoral Fellow ____	Other (specify)
____ Ph.D. Student ____	Master's Student ____	Undergraduate

Type of Research: Faculty Research ____ Thesis ____
Honours Thesis ____ Independent Study Project

Course Assignment (specify course name and #) _____

Other (specify) _____

Faculty Supervisor (for student PIs): Setrag Manoukian Email:
setrag.manoukian@mcgill.ca

Co- Investigators/Other Researchers (list name/status/affiliation):

List all funding sources for this project and project titles (if different from the above). Indicate the Principal Investigator of the award if not yourself.

Awarded:

Pending:

Principal Investigator Statement: I will ensure that this project is conducted in accordance with the policies and procedures governing the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects at McGill University.

Principal Investigator Signature: _____ **Date:**

Faculty Supervisor Statement: I have read and approved this project and affirm that it has received the appropriate academic approval. I will ensure that the student investigator is aware of the applicable policies and procedures governing the ethical conduct of human subject research at McGill University and I agree to provide all necessary supervision to the student.

Faculty Supervisor Signature: _____ **Date:**

Respond directly on this form below each question. Do not delete the text under the question. Do not omit or reorder any questions. Answer each question.

1. Purpose of the Research

Describe the proposed project and its objectives, including the research questions to be investigated (one page maximum). What is the expected value or benefits of the research?

How do you anticipate disseminating the results (e.g. thesis, presentations, internet, film, publications)?

Intellectual debate in Iran has, for the most part, centred on an opposition between the concepts of tradition and modernity and has, in turn, had a strong impact upon the perceptions of ordinary Iranians. This has had an important impact upon the way in which they view certain aspects of their own culture and traditions.

Pigeon flying has been a popular sport in Iran for many centuries and is practiced throughout the country. However, the hotbed of pigeon flying is generally accepted as being Southern Tehran and a few of the surrounding cities. The sport is generally practiced in the older and poorer areas of the city and has come to be associated with certain traditional elements of society such as the artisan classes, the merchants of the bazaar as well as the *Luti* (rowdies). This has led to the sport being generally labelled as a traditional sport which has had significant impact upon its image among most Iranians. Today, most Iranians see pigeon flying as anything from a remnant from a backward past to something inherently associated with criminality.

As pigeon flying in Tehran has largely been ignored as a topic of anthropological study, the primary objective of this thesis will be to undertake an ethnography *kaftarbāzi* in of itself and to examine the role that it plays within the society of a specific area of Tehran. I will be focusing on a small area of South Western Tehran which is known for the quantity and quality of its pigeon flyers. Most of my research will be based upon participant observation, but I will also be conducting interviews with a number of pigeon flyers of all levels, as well as their relatives, neighbours and others living in the area. I will be interpreting my findings using the framework of the field of sport anthropology

(Sands R. R., 1999) and intend to use a number of other studies of sports labeled ‘traditional’ as sources of comparison.

Subsequently, I intend to analyze the pejorative connotations associated with pigeon flying within the context of the dominant intellectual debate in Iran, that of the opposition between what is modern and what is traditional. In this manner, I would like to assess the tangible results of this debate.

2. Recruitment of Subjects/Location of Research

Describe the subject population and how and from where they will be recruited. If applicable, attach a copy of any advertisement, letter, flier, brochure or oral script used to solicit potential subjects (including information sent to third parties). Describe the setting in which the research will take place. Describe any compensation subjects may receive for participating.

During my field work I will be interacting with pigeon flyers from a small area of Southern Tehran, restricted to the four neighbourhoods of Yaftabad, Esmailabad, Shahrak-e Vali-e Asr and Eslamshahr so as to limit differences within the subject population. Because pigeon flyers within this area are a relatively tight-knit group, most of whom know each other at least by reputation, I will mainly be relying upon contacts established in my preliminary visit in August 2006. Because of the Islamic aspect of Iranian society, especially in the area in question, people are generally unwilling to accept strangers into their houses. In order to be allowed to interview the subjects and gain access to their pigeon lofts, it is almost essential to be presented by someone whom they already know or who they are related to. Most of the research will take place at the pigeon lofts themselves as men from outside the groups of family and close friends are rarely invited inside. Another set of interviews will be conducted at local bird shops

where pigeon flyers often congregate. For the most part, people are more than willing to exchange information and ideas and I foresee no need to provide financial compensation.

3. Other Approvals

When doing research with various distinct groups of subjects (e.g. school children, cultural groups, institutionalized people, other countries), organizational/community/governmental permission is sometimes needed. If applicable, how will this be obtained? Include copies of any documentation to be sent.

My research will be set in a purely informal setting and will not involve any institutions of any kind. As a result, I will need no governmental approval.

4. Methodology/Procedures

Provide a sequential description of the methods and procedures to be followed to obtain data. Describe all methods that will be used (e.g. fieldwork, surveys, interviews, focus groups, standardized testing, video/audio taping). Attach copies of questionnaires or draft interview guides, as appropriate.

My research will mainly be based upon fieldwork (participant observation) and a number of interviews with pigeon flyers and their kin. I will record the interviews.

5. Potential Harms and Risk

a) Describe any known or foreseeable harms, if any, that the subjects or others might be subject to during or as a result of the research. Harms may be psychological, physical, emotional, social, legal, economic, or political.

None

b) In light of the above assessment of potential harms, indicate whether you view the risks as acceptable given the value or benefits of the research.

N/A

c) Outline the steps that may be taken to reduce or eliminate these risks. If deception is used, justify the use of the deception and indicate how subjects will be debriefed or justify why they will not be debriefed.

6. Privacy and Confidentiality

Describe the degree to which the anonymity of subjects and the confidentiality of data will be assured and the specific methods to be used for this, both during the research and

in the release of findings. This includes the use of data coding systems, how and where data will be stored, who will have access to it, what will happen to the data after the study is finished, and the potential use of the data by others. Indicate if there are any conditions under which privacy or confidentiality cannot be guaranteed (e.g. focus groups), or, if confidentiality is not an issue in this research, explain why.

Because pigeon flying is a legal and very overt pastime in the neighbourhoods of study, confidentiality is not that great of an issue in this research. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees may prefer to remain anonymous, in which case they will be referred to by the neighbourhood in which they live. The data will be safely stored and only my supervisor and I will have access to it.

7. Informed Consent Process

Describe the oral and/or written procedures that will be followed to obtain informed consent from the subject. Attach all consent documents, including information sheets and scripts for oral consents. If written consent will not be obtained, justification must be provided.

At the beginning of each interview, I will ensure that I obtain the informed consent of my subjects by informing them that I am doing research for my Masters thesis at the University of McGill in Canada and that I will be working under the supervision of Professor Setrag Manoukian, a well known anthropologist who has dealt extensively with Iran. The aim of my research is to write an ethnography of the area's pigeon flyers based upon my research. Because pigeon flying in Tehran has never been studied by anthropologists, my primary aim will be to document the techniques and traditions of pigeon flyers in the area. In the second part of the thesis, I will be studying the way in which pigeon flying is perceived in Iranian society. I will then stress that they may choose not to answer any questions with which they feel uncomfortable and also whether or not the material gathered from the interview is actually used in the thesis. I will inform them that all of the notebooks and recordings will be kept on my person while I am in

Iran and that I will keep them in my house once I am in Canada. Once the thesis is completed, they will be destroyed.

In some cases I foresee that some may be reluctant to sign a written statement. None of the subject population are likely to speak, much less read, English and many of them are likely to be illiterate or semi-literate. Also, given the political situation, many are likely to be reluctant to sign any formal document.

8. Other Concerns

a) Indicate if the subjects are a captive population (e.g. prisoners, residents in a centre) or are in any kind of conflict of interest relationship with the researcher such as being students, clients, patients or family members. If so, explain how you will ensure that the subjects do not feel pressure to participate or perceive that they may be penalized for choosing not to participate.

N/A

b) Comment on any other potential ethical concerns that may arise during the course of the research.

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