

Futuwwa, A Second Origin
by Subhan John Lloyd

The Parthian Empire (Persia 247 BC – 224 AD) gave rise to a martial/chivalric order that complemented the Arab concept of Futuwwa and which still exists today.

A brief history - Futuwwa began in Arabia as an idealization of the moral and physical qualities of young men, the Fityan, beginning in the 7th CAD. Poets and storytellers made these ideas popular and, once Quranic references were found (18:10, 21:60), the ideas became widespread and generally accepted. Futuwwa grew from there into a loose system of lodges that adopted rituals and codes of conduct based on the historic exemplars of Prophet Ibrahim, Prophet Muhammad and Hazrat Ali, peace be on their memories. At the beginning of the 13th CAD there was an attempt to put all the lodges under a central government control, but the mid century Mongol invasion disrupted those plans. For the next two centuries, Futuwwa lodges developed in isolation leading to regional characters and differences.

This sketch leaves out an important influence. When the Arab armies entered Persia in the 7th Century, they found a network of social groups emphasizing the values of chivalry in young men centered around the pursuit of Javanmardi (a chivalric ideal, literally translated as young manliness). These young men, termed Lutis¹, gathered in Academies called Zourkhaneh (Houses of Strength) beginning as early as 130 BC to train as warriors and to pursue the ideals of Javanmardi. They engaged in rigorous calisthenics and spiritual practices based on Zoroastrian and Mithric spirituality along with a grappling/wrestling martial art called Koshti. When the Arabs arrived, the Academies initially went underground to preserve their practices but reemerged as the Persian population began to accept Islam. Some of the Javanmardi emerged as bandit groups called Ayyarun. Others took on elements of Shia Islam, the exemplar of Hazrat Ali in particular², and also the values of the Persian Sufis. Over time, Javanmardi thought informed the moral aspect of Sufism and Sufi thought informed the spiritual development of Javanmardi.

The Zourkhaneh Academies still exist today along with the practice of Koshti rivaling Chinese boxing as the oldest continually practiced martial art in the world.

¹ Observe caution using the term Lutis. Over time, usage has changed to include gypsies, musicians, entertainers and in some contexts the implication of homosexuality.

² "There is no sword but the Zulfiqar, and there is no youth but Ali". A phrase commonly inscribed onto weapons and talismans.