

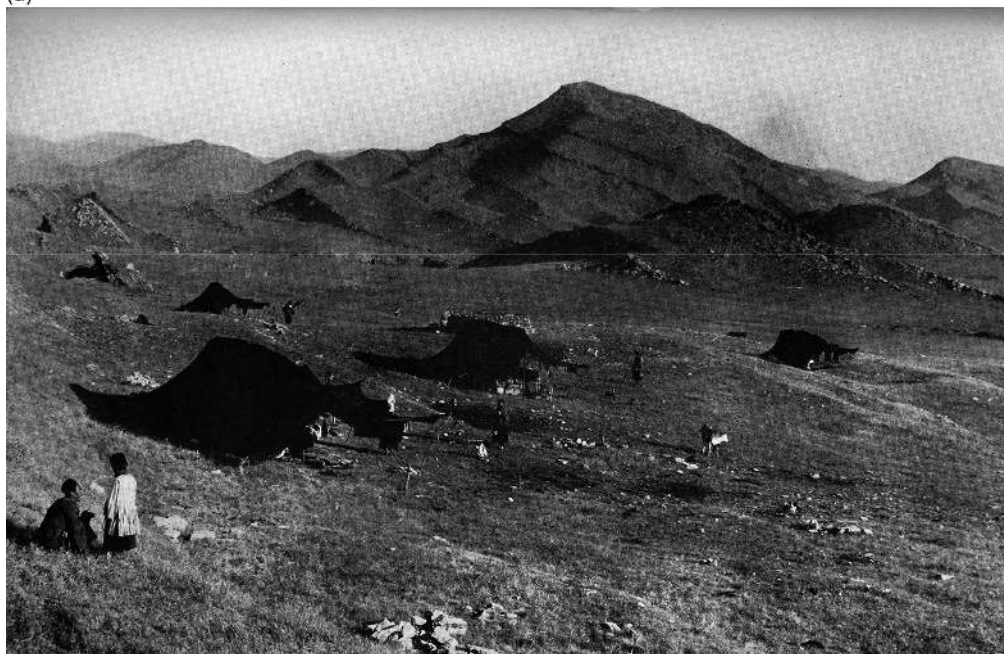
PROLOGUE

Grass and Orientalist Perspectives on the Bakhtiari

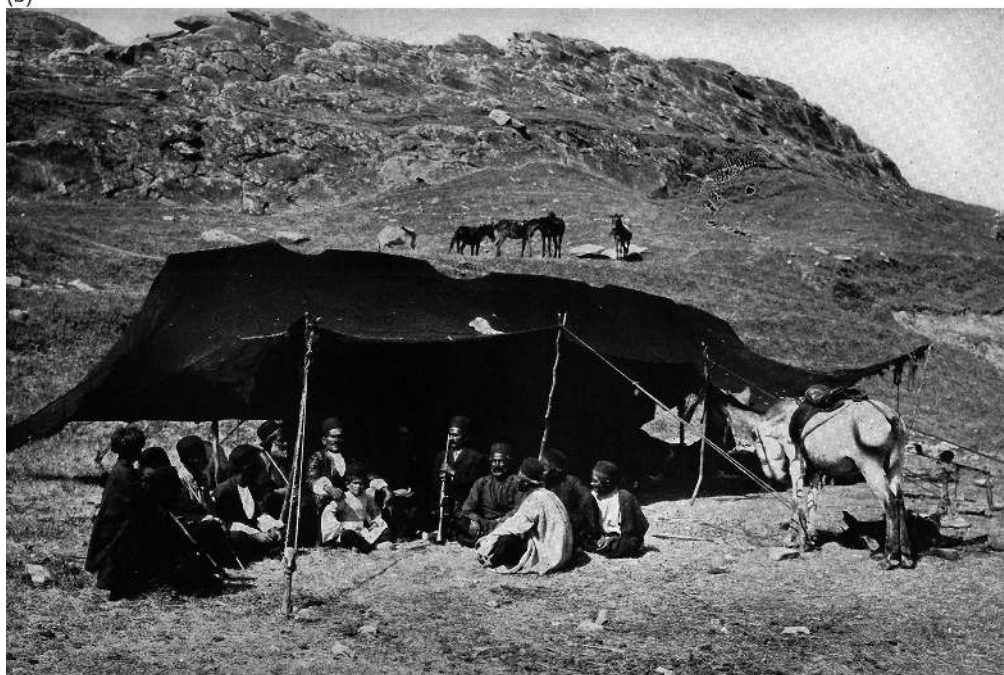
IT IS ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE AND DRAMATIC SCENES OF EARLY film: the Bakhtiari headman Haidar Khan, 5,000 of his tribespeople bearing all their worldly possessions, and 50,000 animals perched on the banks of the mighty Karun River in southwestern Iran, preparing to cross it on rafts buoyed by inflated goat skins (Figure 0.1). Torrents of icy spring snowmelt from hundreds of valleys and streams in the Zagros Mountains have swollen the Karun. Swift currents sweep the overloaded rafts far downstream. Churning vortexes threaten to claim the men, boys, sheep, cows, donkeys, and horses who swim alongside. Shepherds of all ages enter the river in waves alongside their herds, and with great effort they propel themselves back and forth, clutching inflated goat-skin life preservers as they attempt to keep the animals together and to help those who struggle to stay afloat. Women, children, infant animals, goats, and household goods brave the angry eddies on rafts buoyed by the same inflated skin floats. Several smaller animals drown, and families reassemble on the opposite bank exhausted yet also tasked with setting up a new camp for the night. It takes 6 days for the whole tribe to make this crossing (Figure 0.2).

But the Bakhtiari still face additional dangers. After several more days of travel, they must cross a very different natural barrier: Zardeh Kuh, a steep, rocky range in the Zagros Mountains. To save their canvas shoes, Haidar Khan and his tribespeople climb in their bare feet on snowy trails and narrow rock ledges over 2 kilometers in elevation. Toward the top, the men, clad in

(a)



(b)



0.1 The camp (a) and tent (b) of Bakhtiari headman Haidar Khan, in Khuzestan, Iran, before the beginning of the 1924 spring migration. Photographs by E. B. Schoedsack, published in Cooper (1925: 83, 133). Public domain.

(a)



(b)



0.2 Bakhtiari families crossing the Karun River, Iran, during the 1924 spring migration. (a) People enter the river on rafts buoyed by inflated animal skins. (b) The swift river current sweeps people and animals far downstream. Photographs by E. B. Schoedsack, published in Cooper (1925: 155, 183). Public domain.

nothing but thin cotton garments, swing shovels and picks to clear a path through the ice for the rest of their households and their herds to follow. Women hike with children and cradles strapped to their backs; men are sometimes forced to carry mules who cannot go on. Children and adults urge other pack animals forward, overladen with household equipment and smaller animals. Several distant shots show the slowly moving, zigzagging trains of tribespeople, their smallness almost lost in the vast barren landscape (Figure 0.3). On the far side of the mountain, the tribespeople descend slowly into a valley filled with the grass that will sustain their herds for the next several months. Their journey is over, but to be repeated in reverse once the onset of winter threatens.

This Karun River crossing and summiting of Zardeh Kuh are the dual climaxes of Merian Cooper, Marguerite Harrison, and Ernest Schoedsack's 1925 silent documentary film *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*.¹ The Bakhtiari are mobile pastoralists and one of the two largest and most powerful Iranian tribes over the last centuries. The film depicts the 48-day² spring migration of the Baba Ahmedi-ye Kashki subsection of the tribe, which began on April 17, 1924. The river and the mountain range separate their winter and summer pastures in lowland Khuzestan near the Persian/Arabian Gulf and highland Chahar Mahal near Isfahan (Figure 0.4). Twice a year the Bakhtiari face these natural barriers as part of their migrations. Their goal is to access resources – water and vegetation for their herd animals – that may be only seasonally plentiful in arid and semi-arid areas.

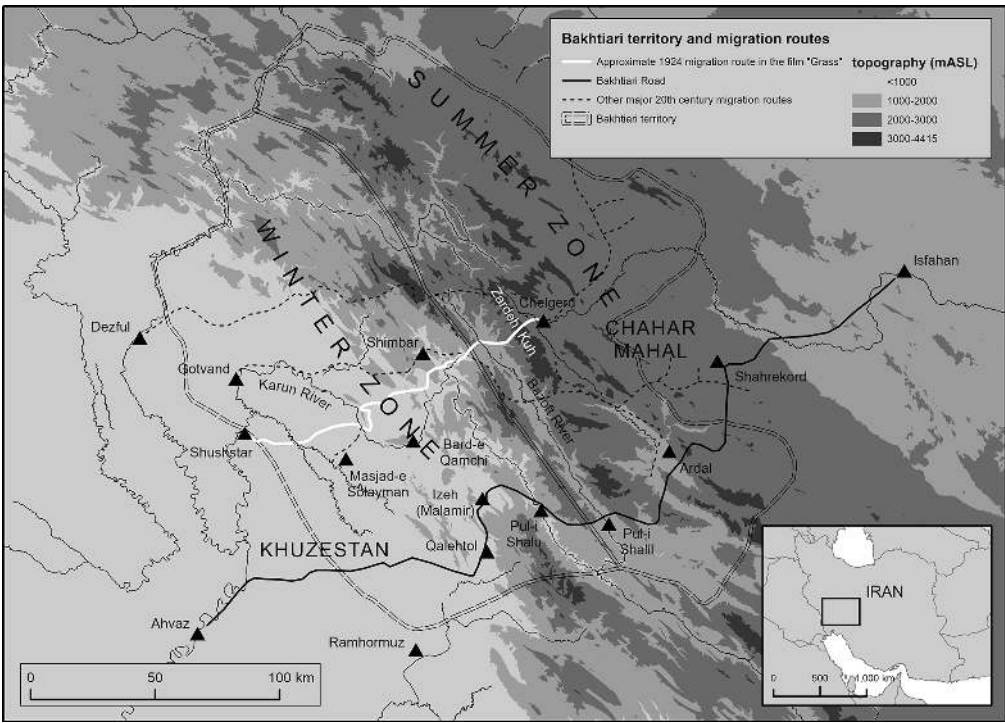
Grass, and the two recounted scenes in particular, provide an accessible and compelling introduction to mobile pastoralism; the film is frequently shown in introductory anthropology and Middle Eastern studies classes. However, it is also framed around ideas of “changeless” pastoralists who are disconnected from the surrounding society, who are almost wholly shaped by external environmental forces, and who have failed to progress to higher stages of social and political complexity. In this, the film illustrates problematic conceptions that still underlie the contemporary study of historical and ancient pastoralism by historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. The central argument of this book is that such problematic conceptions limit our understanding of the history of pastoralism and frequently mislead us about what pastoralists were like and *how* they have impacted societies and environments.

¹ Cooper and Schoedsack are better known as the directors and producers of the 1933 horror film *King Kong*. For a comparative analysis of the depiction of “natives” in these two films, see Bradburd (2013).

² The Persian version of a letter signed by Robert Imbrie, Vice Consul of the United States in Tehran in June 1924, says 46 days, but the English version says 48 (Maghsoudlou 2009: 245).



o.3 Bakhtiari families summitting Zardeh Kuh, in the Zagros Mountains of Iran, during the 1924 spring migration. Photograph by E. B. Schoedsack, published in Cooper (1925) as the frontispiece. Public domain.



o.4 Map of the approximate path of the Bakhtiari spring migration route followed by the *Grass* filmmakers in 1924, the approximate path of other twentieth-century Bakhtiari migration routes, and the location of the Bakhtiari (Lynch or Atabayg) road in southwestern Iran. Information drawn from maps and text in Cooper (1925: 7); Digard (1988: figure 14); Garthwaite (1983a: xxi); Hansman (1973: 46–49; 1980); J. Harrison (1932: fold out map); Johnson (1969: 122); Khazeni (2010: 75–111); Lynch (1890: fold out map); and Unknown (1929). The 1920s route of the Bakhtiari Road has been reconstructed based on place names mentioned in daily stages along the road by an unknown author “R. H.” in 1928, who wrote about his experience the following year (1929). The stages in Lynch (1890) are from before the time of the road’s reconstruction by the British firm Lynch Brothers in 1898–1900. The two official suspension bridges constructed for the Bakhtiari/Lynch Road were located at Pul-i Shalu, which bridged the Karun (in a location now submerged by the Karun-3 dam), and Pul-i Shalil, earlier known as Pul-i Imarat, which bridged the Bazoft River, a confluent of the Karun (in a location now submerged by the Karun-4 dam) (Hansman 1973: 48–49; 1980; Khazeni 2010: 104). These were the first two modern bridges in Iran. As detailed by Khazeni (2010: 80), the Bakhtiari in the twentieth century followed three main migration routes: (1) il rah-i Dizpart, which followed the Bakhtiari Road from the Karun toward Isfahan; (2) il rah-i Bazuft, which connected winter pastures near Masjid-i Sulayman to summer pastures on the Bazuft branch of the Karun; (3) il rah-i Hazarcha or Kuh Rang, leading to summer pastures on the slopes of Zardeh Kuh. Others mention five total migration routes, as the Bazuft and Hazarcha/Kuh Rang routes had variants. The Kuh Rang was the most difficult of the routes and was the one used by the Baba Ahmedi section of the tribe, headed by Haidar Khan, in 1924 when the filmmakers traveled with him. The reconstruction of this route is much more approximate because it did not follow a constructed road and because Cooper (1925) only mentions a handful of place names and landmarks along the route: Shushtar, the Karun River crossing, Shirbar, and Zardeh Kuh. I have taken the path of the 1920s roads from Shushtar to Shirbar and from Shirbar to the Bazoft valley (the valley in front of Zardeh Kuh), represented in Ehmann (1974: 144), as approximations of the filmmakers’ routes, but of course their exact route with Haidar Khan could have been different. Elevation data is from the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission. Image credit: Emily Hammer.

I thus begin this book – which is about the archaeology of pastoralism – with a brief analysis of the film, its highly misleading picture of the Bakhtiari in the 1920s, and its biased picture of mobile pastoralism in general. The film shows some pernicious modes of thought that remain embedded in scholarly and popular thinking even today and that will continue to plague how we study and imagine past pastoralists – as well as how we treat present and future pastoralists – until scholars endeavor to collect empirical data allowing for the writing of histories of pastoralism.

The logics by which the Bakhtiari find themselves on the banks of the Karun and the flanks of Zardeh Kuh, and the realities of a migratory, herd animal-centered life can be difficult for western – frequently urbanite – scholars and students to comprehend. Documentary films focused on mobile pastoralists have thus played an important role in how scholars and the public imagine pastoralist societies of the present and of both the recent historical and more remote, ancient past. Especially in the case of early films like *Grass*, shot completely from the filmmakers' perspective, these works play into Orientalist and primitivist discourses about non-western societies (Malek 2011: 318; Naficy 2006: 117–118), and therefore these problematic discourses have long colored scholarly and popular narratives about pastoralism.

Grass gives audiences the impression that mobile pastoralists like the Bakhtiari are: (1) primarily shaped by environmental forces over which they have no control, in particular seasonal forces that compel a particular type of mobility; (2) evolutionarily inferior to white westerners; (3) both physically remote and socioeconomically disconnected from the outside world; and (4) changeless and somehow lacking in agency within their environmental and social context. These four interlinked characterizations come through in the choice and framing of the silent film clips, in the language of the intervening title cards (intertitles), as well as in the memoirs of the three filmmakers.

The film's main narrative, conceived as an epic, timeless struggle for basic survival against an unforgiving nature, was established long before the film-making trio set off for the Middle East and was a driving motivation for their project.³ Their memoirs reveal that Cooper, Schoedsack, and Harrison were inspired to find and film a pastoralist tribe on migration because of their belief that such a tribe would provide an exemplary case of man's victory against nature (Cooper 1925: ix–xi; M. Harrison 1935: 566; Maghsoudlou 2009: 153–154; Schoedsack 1983: 43). These memoirs also reveal the filmmakers' assumptions that they were witnessing an activity of great antiquity that must have remained unchanged through history (Bradburd 2013: 65; Maghsoudlou

³ See Crawford (1992) for more on ethnographic filmmakers who have been drawn to mobile pastoralism and how the migration provides a natural narrative structure. See also Malek (2011: 317, n. 15).

2009: 220; Rony 1996: 133–135). In summiting Zardeh Kuh, Cooper comments that “for centuries tribes, the exact replicas of ours, have gone up and over” (Cooper 1925: 310) and contemplates “the extreme antiquity of this recurrent migration” (316). In her memoir, Harrison imagined herself while among the Bakhtiari to be living as her “remote forebears” had in ancient times (M. Harrison 1935: 606) and commented that the migration was followed by “countless generations” (619, 634). As the filmmakers arrive in Khuzestan, the intertitles describe the film’s subjects as a “forgotten people” in an “unknown land” and claim that to rediscover these people requires going back to the “beginning of time” and to the “cradle of our race.” The intertitles present the filmmakers’ quest as “turning the pages backwards, back centuries till we reach the first chapter at the beginning.”

The presentation of the Bakhtiari and their lifestyle as ancient and unchanged has further racial and evolutionary undertones. The film and Cooper’s memoirs identify the Bakhtiari as non-Semitic “Aryans,” thus connecting the pastoralists, however distantly, to the heritage of white Europeans and Americans (Bradburd 2013: 56–57, 67–69; Naficy 2006: 130; Rony 1996: 133–137). In the lead up to the beginning of the migration, Cooper muses in his memoir that “it may well be that the migratory life which we are going to live with them is that of our own Aryan forefathers of many thousands of years ago” (Cooper 1925: 143), a sentiment he reiterates in the final lines of the book (362). Harrison similarly reflects on her experience among the Bakhtiari as awakening a set of “racial memories” of her own (i.e., white) ancestors (M. Harrison 1935: 606). The effect of this conceptualization is not only the construction of connections between the film’s Oriental protagonists and its western audience, but also the placement of the Bakhtiari mobile pastoralists within an earlier, primitive evolutionary stage in relationship to urbanite viewers (Naficy 2006: 130).⁴ Harrison’s memoir quite directly states this: “we had been able to record a phase in the evolution of civilization, or rather, we

⁴ For a slightly different conclusion, see Bradburd (2013: 67–69), who argues that the film displays elite anxieties of the 1920s about being cut off from nature and “real life.” All three of the filmmakers came from upper-class backgrounds: “I read the filmmakers’ view of the Bakhtiari and their lives, less as a representation of exoticism or of an inferior other than as a form of nostalgic yardstick of manly virtue . . . *Grass* takes on the character of a visit to a people who, because they are similar to the traveler but live a more dangerous, physical, and challenging life, provide an appropriate yardstick against which the filmmakers (and their audience) can measure themselves . . . The expedition is thus a kind of ‘outward bound’ experience which provided the filmmakers both the opportunity to show that their audience came from ‘good stock’ and to prove that they themselves had not lost their own primal vigor.” Maldonado (2018) similarly argues that the film’s depiction of the Bakhtiari was framed in reaction to 1920s elite anxieties concerning the over-sophistication and feminization of American men following urbanization, industrialization, and the closure of the western frontier.

had come into a backwater where civilization had stood still for two thousand years” (M. Harrison 1935: 635).

In their choices and framing of film clips, Cooper, Harrison, and Schoedsack cast the Bakhtiari as inhabitants of a remote, inaccessible wilderness, as socially, politically, and economically isolated from the surrounding world, and as defined by movement. Although the film’s title makes clear that the Bakhtiari are the main subjects, the first third of the film is in fact a form of travelogue captured as the filmmakers trekked through dusty towns in Anatolia and Syria toward Iran, searching for sufficiently picturesque nomads to film. This long “introduction,” with many landscape shots, serves to frame the filmmakers’ perception of the remote and barren nature of the Bakhtiari’s situation, a perception they might not have had if they had traveled more directly.⁵ The filmmakers’ choice of intense scenes like those at the Karun and Zardeh Kuh highlights the adventure, chaos, and struggle of migration, rather than the process and order of everyday animal herding or the connections that the Bakhtiari form with their agricultural and urban neighbors. Few scenes show aspects of pastoralist life not connected to the migration, and the migration scenes themselves mainly show the tribesmen actively packing or on the move, in the process of facing topographic obstacles. No film clips show periods of rest, which Cooper (1925: 261) notes in writing were both regular and necessary, for rain, animal fatigue, human illness, poor weather or mountain pass conditions along the route ahead, and other situations. No film clips show less-dramatic travel movement through the mountain valleys and steppes, places where the Bakhtiari had to linger for their animals to graze, and where they would have encountered fields, villages, and other indications of nonmobile ways of life. The main scenes not connected to the migration fall at the beginning of the Bakhtiari-related footage, with a few short clips showing tents, domestic activities like yarn-spinning and pipe-smoking, and dances performed by men with sticks and by women with scarves. These are all activities the Bakhtiari carry out themselves, not instances of interaction with surrounding societies. The film clips of the Bakhtiari show their guns, canvas shoes, pipes, tobacco, opium, shovels, and other possessions that are evidence

⁵ The first third of the film resulted from the trio’s (unsuccessful) search for a tribe to film in Turkey and Arabia. They failed to obtain permission to photograph and film Kurdish pastoralists in Turkey, their first-choice location (Schoedsack 1983: 43–44), and they found the Bedouin and other mobile pastoralists they encountered in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq to be unsuitable subjects for the film (Maghsoudlou 2009: 166, 174). The inclusion of some of the footage from their earlier travels in the final cut seems to have been motivated partly by the need to use the limited footage they had available to produce a feature length film (Naficy 2006: 128). However, the first third of the film did play an important role in communicating Cooper’s framing of the whole film as a search for a “forgotten people.” The effect of presenting the Bakhtiari as very remote occurs all the same, regardless of goals or intentions.

of their economic relationships with the “outside” world, but the film does not show the interactions that result in such connections.

Clearly, Cooper, Harrison, and Schoedsack had great admiration for the Bakhtiaris’ bravery and stamina in the face of what they as urbanite westerners perceived to be incredible physical hardship and danger (Bradburd 2013). But, in portraying mobile pastoralism as a lifestyle primarily defined by profound struggle with nature, the film characterizes mobile pastoralists as somehow lacking in the agency needed to build a more secure life further removed from the edge of survival.⁶ Despite many references to the Bakhtiaris’ lifestyle as an ancient one, the language of the film’s intertitles gives the viewer the general impression that the Bakhtiari are encountering all of the tasks and perils of the migration for the first time and are somehow facing an unusual amount of struggle and danger. At the beginning of the migration, the intertitles present the Bakhtiari as waking up to find the graze gone in Khuzestan, initiating their timeless “Quest for Grass.” Further along in the film, the intertitles romantically tell viewers that the Bakhtiari are “on the way where there is no way” and that they see before them “rugged unmapped mountains.” As the tribe pushes toward the summit of Zardeh Kuh, the intertitles proclaim that the tribe has no choice: “behind is starvation” and they must “go on or die.” Through these details and dramatizations, the filmmakers communicate that pastoral migration is a series of impulsive and desperate actions.

The only time the filmmakers accord agency to the Bakhtiari is in relationship to overcoming the harsh environment in which they find themselves. In situations of environmental difficulty, the intertitles are full of martial language to describe the Bakhtiaris’ actions. Their encouragements to each other as they cross the Karun and climb the mountain are characterized as an “ancient battle cry”; the tribesmen reaching the opposite river bank are described as an “endless desperate battling mob”; as they reach Zardeh Kuh, the filmmakers narrate that the Bakhtiari “come face to face with the most dreaded enemy of all”; and, at the conclusion of the migration, the intertitles proclaim that the “battle with fate is won” and that the Bakhtiari “fought and obtained their goal.”

Historical and anthropological evidence indicates that these four characterizations in the film were unrepresentative of the Bakhtiari or were untrue. This is perhaps unsurprising since the intertitles do not include any Bakhtiari dialogue and do not present a native viewpoint. From a practical perspective, many aspects of the film’s narrations seem misleading – the Bakhtiari are on a

⁶ In his book, Cooper expressed his own opinion that the tribes were not motivated to make or acquire items that might make the migration easier for them because of their pride and because their experiences conditioned them to endure a level of hardship impossible for westerners (Cooper 1925: 359–360).