

Tape for Ann Harman. Sept 19 1971

Fieldwork

Nothing in my academic training in Anthropology really prepared me for the experience I encountered doing my own fieldwork. It's one thing to read in book accounts of the proper customs, the politics, the religious beliefs and so on, it is a profoundly different thing to actually go live with strange people, eat with them, talk with them, and learn their language. No matter where one goes, one is found with a physical and real environment that is often completely alien.

I chose to study a group of tribal nomads called the Bakhtiari, who live in the mountains of Southern Persia. Very little was known about any of the tribal groups in Persia, and this was one of the factors which led me to choose this particular group of people. Nomads are notoriously difficult to work with, because they move around a lot, usually in rather difficult country, either in desert conditions or in mountainous areas, neither of which can sustain settled life.

Now, I often rather envy colleagues who chose to study village communities. Information is much easier to collect if one is not constantly on the move, as I more or less was. However, the Bakhtiari are not completely nomadic. As well as herding sheep and goats they practise some agriculture. As I said they are mountaineers. Their territory, which is about 200,000 square miles, consists of several ranges of mountains, reaching up to 15,000ft. The nomads cross these mountain ranges twice a year, in the spring and back again in the autumn, moving between their summer and winter quarters. They move because their sheep and goats need a continuous supply of grass and water. In the spring, their winter pasture dries up and the nomads begin to move across the mountains, where pasture in the higher valley and mountain slopes can still be found. They move over a period of 5 or 6 weeks constantly grazing their animals, until the summer pastures are reached. These summer areas are much higher than their winter pastures, and this is grass for the animals until the early autumn. The nomads then move back on the same trail before the snows come, closing off the mountain pass.

The only control they practice over their inhospitable environment is to move. Their way of life is almost entirely constrained by the climatic and physical conditions they are faced with. If the rains don't come in the winter and early spring, then the grass fails, the animals starve and die. To start the spring migration early because of lack of grass means that they arrive too early higher in the mountains, and are faced with blizzards and impossible weather conditions. Sheep can no more survive blizzards at a height of 11,000ft, than they can survive a drought.

The Bakhtiari, and all mountain nomads like them, are faced constantly by crucial decisions as to when to move, how far to travel in any one day, and so on. In such severe weather conditions a wrong decision on a spring migration can easily result in the complete loss of one's herd. At a stroke this nomad's livelihood can be wiped out. Even when the weather is clement, the toll of animals negotiating the mountains in these migrations is very high. There are only 4 routes possible through the range of mountains they cross, a distance of about 180-200 miles. Fast-flowing rivers have to be crossed, cliff paths only a few feet wide have to be negotiated. Everything the nomad owns is taken along. His home is a goat hair tent which, as I know to my cost, gives very little protection and no comfort at all. It is an exhausting regime, everyday striking camp, loading up bags and baggage on to unwilling donkeys and then spending anything up to 8 hours climbing over mountain passes, up cliff faces, across rivers.

The nomads travel in camp groups of about 10 tents. A camp clan size will consist of about 70 people, 25-30 donkeys for carrying everything, maybe 500 sheep and a hundred goats, sundry chickens and vicious guard dogs. (end of page 3)

Camps larger than this are impossible to maintain because the number of sheep entailed would not find enough grass. Too many animals inevitably results in a camp split into more manageable

proportions. In grazing and in relocation sheep are of course constantly being stolen by thieves, and often simply by other nomads. It's quicker to steal sheep than breed them.

There are about 500,000 Bakhtiari nomads found over the territory, fitting into a number of tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and camp groups. I lived and travelled with one of these camp groups.

The field conditions I found myself in couldn't have been more different to what I had been brought up in. I had lived most of my life in Glasgow, never been in a tent in my life, wasn't especially fond of fresh air, had never climbed anything bigger than a hill, and the only acquaintance I had had with horses was safely in the cinema. In short, I made a lousy nomad. Life with the Bakhtiari to begin with was sheer hell.

Two things a man, if he is Bakhtiari, can do- he can ride and he can shoot. Fortunately I shoot well, but I did not dare let on I had never been near a horse, let alone ride one. It was, sadly enough, a matter of honour. A couple of days after I settled in with the camp I was to live with, it was decided we would go for a ride. The migration was to start that week. I had timed my arrival in Bakhtiari country so that I could travel on the spring migration. Sort of doing things the hard way. Well, I rode alright, scared out of my wits, sitting on a horse that seemed 20ft tall. We all went galloping off over some very rough country, they hollering and yelling, me staying on paralysed with fright. I didn't fall off- at least not on that occasion. That really was the start of a most uncomfortable, most miserable but often exhilarating 3 months. I literally knew nothing as the nomads cheerfully but endlessly pointed out.

I was given the ignominious task of holding the donkey's nose and ears while they were being loaded. I had tried tying on loads, but they always fell off. I once, just once was allowed to help put up a tent, but it fell down.

To begin with I couldn't speak much of their dialect of Persian, so communication was slow, difficult and full of misunderstandings. I understood so little, not just of what they said, but of what they did, why they did it and so on. The sense of isolation could not have been more complete. Their attitudes to each other, to their women, to their children, to their animals, was strange. I could do little that conformed to their sense of values. My own values were irrelevant in this situation.

My academic training seemed nothing to do with the demanding personal confrontations. Spending exhausting hours every day moving, chasing animals, being yelled at for not doing the right thing; by the time we had arrived at our new camp site each day, pitched camp and waited for the women to prepare a meal; I was often so exhausted and so fed up at being constantly derided, that I found it was very difficult to think about collecting information, other than just obvious observations.

It took many months before the nomads would talk freely. Taking notes usually proved impossible. The nomads were irrationally afraid of spies from the central government and I was thought of by most of my tribal friends, at least a damned nuisance, at worst a dangerous government spy.

I used to have to write up the day's events in my sleeping bag with the hood pulled over, writing by the light of a small torch I had. Physically it was gruelling experience. On that first migration I went on, we had to cope with electric storms, dust storms, snow storms, rain, extreme heat and cold so bad it would freeze solid the kids' running noses.

The depth of my disgrace happened one dreadful day I was left in charge of one of the pack animals that carried our wheat supply for the bread made daily. The animal got carried away in a river and we lost the wheat. The highlight was when I successfully joined in a pitched gun fight one night when we were attacked by thieves.

As time passed my command over the language improved and I learned to understand more and more of the Bakhtiari way of life. I became a fairly efficient nomad. Too efficient for some of the Persian

peasants who live on the edges of tribal territory. The peasants never quite knew how to cope with a European who spoke, lived and dressed like a nomad whom they despise.

In all I spend about a year in various tribes with the Bakhtiari. I collected a mass of information about the political organisation of the tribe, about the economics of sheep herding, about their history, their folk tales, their religion, and many other aspects of their social life. I also learned a great deal about myself and my own beliefs, my own values. What I had learned of another culture, another very different style of life, fed back into my own British values. The Bakhtiari have their own answers to the problems of social life. Their answers are often different from ours, just as the environment they live in is different from ours. But not always.

I was involved in a particular tribal dispute over control of a number of sub-tribes. The chief of one of the groups involved had been murdered, he had in fact been murdered by a man from his own group. The murdered man had been a very well thought of chief and was greatly mourned. There was no one of his stature to follow on. After the funeral of this dead chief, one of his relatives asked what I thought, and I said it was a tragic that all this internal fighting should result in the death of the best chief they had had in years. The relative thought I was being a bit superior and turned on me saying, 'You civilised folk are no different. One of his own people shot your chief, Kennedy!' It was not long after the Kennedy assassination. On a much smaller scale, the reasons behind the murder of the Bakhtiari chief and the effects of it were the same as the death of Kennedy.

Despite all sorts of cultural differences, it's interesting to point out, that two events of more common human experience succeeded in bridging this gap between myself and the Bakhtiari I lived with. During my stay in Persia, my wife produced two sons, and I became a known as a father of sons, someone, in tribal values, worthy of respect. They urged me to settle with my family and stay in the mountains. By that time I was sufficiently weaned away from the idea of British city life to think seriously of taking them up on their offer.