

GRASS

black and white; silent; 43 mins.

1924, by Merion Cooper and Ernest B Schoedsack

The main subject of this film is the spring migration of the Bakhtiari nomads of Southwest Iran, from the Khuzestan plains near the Gulf to summer quarters high in the Zagros Mountains near Isfahan. The makers (who were later to make the original King Kong and a variety of John Ford Westerns) were on their way to India and stumbled on the Bakhtiari migration quite by chance while stuck in Khuzestan because of the uneasy political situation in southern Persia. They were totally ignorant of the Bakhtiari tribes, both as pastoral nomads who migrate to the mountains and back every year, and as a powerful force in Persian politics. Cooper found out more about the tribes before producing his book Grass, which is quite informative- but none of this appears in the film. With their naivety, their lack of awareness of why it was possible for them to make the film at all, and the artificial security and indeed comfort of their journey, they produced a remarkably authentic and realistic documentary in a modern style- structured not by the editor but by the events themselves. They were so ignorant of what they were filming that the camera could not lie. On the negative side, the subtitles are almost all romantic and melodramatic nonsense.

The first quarter of the film shows scenes from the journey across southern Turkey and Jordan, including some heavy-handed humour with Camel Corps, before finally reaching 'The Forgotten People', as the Bakhtiari are ineptly named. The rest of the film shows the most spectacular moments of the 45-day spring migration of the Baba Ahmadi sub-tribe, vividly depicting the hardships the nomads undergo, especially in the crossing of the Kurun River and the climb up and over the snow-covered Zardeh Kuh (15,000ft) - though in fact conditions that year were better than usual.

Far from being forgotten, the Bakhtiari chiefs not only controlled southwest Persia, but with British support had formed the Government of the country the previous decade. Lord Curzon had described them as the single most important people in the British Empire. The reason was mainly the location of British oil interests in Bakhtiari winter pastures. During 1924, however, Reza Khan, later to become Reza Shah Pahlavi, was well on the way to dismantling Bakhtiari power in the Southwest. At the time, Bakhtiari affairs were almost fully occupying him, not to mention the telegraph lines between the British consulate in Ahwaz, the Legation in Tehran, and the Foreign Office in London.

The spring migration, into which Cooper and crew wandered blithely unaware, was the moment of taking breath before an inevitable explosion in the complex political situation among the tribal chiefs and other elements in the area. The paramount chief (Ilkhan), who was only in Khuzestan for special reasons to do with his conflict with Reza Khan, gave Cooper permission and protection, in part to show Reza Khan how effectively the mountains were actually

controlled by the Bakhtiari chiefs, and to show the latter's goodwill to Reza Khan- hence the document with which the film ends. Haidar, the Baba Ahmadi sub-chief who stars in the film, was a servant of the paramount chief and very well-off: the presence of the protected film crew also served to protect Haidar from his neighbours' hostility during migration.

The explosion came a few days after Cooper left the mountains. Many sub-tribes revolted against the chiefs, there was fighting among the chiefs, and some rebelled against the government. The paramount chief and his deputy had resigned by September, and Reza Khan's authority was established.

(Abstracted from MS by David Brooks)

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