

THE BAKHTIARI: A NOMADIC TRIBE IN SOUTH WEST PERSIA

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The Zagros mountain range in Western Iran is inhabited by a group of nomadic tribesmen known throughout Iran by the general name of Lurs. The Lurs comprise 4 territorially distinct tribal groups; the Feili in the north, the Bakhtiari situated centrally, the Kuhgelu and Mamassani in the south. Each of these 4 groups speak differing dialects of Lurs, which in turn is a dialect of Persian. My study is concerned only with the Bakhtiari.

Bakhtiari country is conceptually divided by the Bakhtiari nomads into the winter quarter- "Garmair" and the summer quarters- "Yeilaq". The winter quarters consists of a series of fertile plateaux and mountain valleys running in a North West- South Easterly direction, about 2,000 to 6,000ft in elevation among the western foothills of the Zagros chain. The summer quarters consist in a similar manner of fertile plains and valleys on the eastern slopes of this range.

Between the "garmair" and "yeilaq" proper lie a series of mountain ranges from 8,000 to 13,000ft in height with the peaks of up to 15,000ft. These ranges run approximately in a North-West South-Easterly direction with intervening valleys of 6,000 to 8,000ft. The mountains are inhospitable, consisting largely of snow covered peaks, deep ravines, rushing torrents, jagged cliffs, precipices and narrow mountain passes, all of which have to be crossed by the nomads on their biannual migrations between summer and winter quarters.

By early spring the winter pastures have been denuded and the heat becomes too much for the flocks so the Bakhtiari move slowly over the ranges of mountains to the now cooler summer pastures, grazing their flocks on the way. This spring migration starts soon after the Iranian New Year, about the 21<sup>st</sup> March and lasts from one to two months, depending on the prevailing climatic conditions. Travelling over the mountains is dangerous and dust storms, cloudy conditions, rain or snow storms often make any movement impossible. The summer quarters are inhabited by the nomads from May till September when they are forced to return to winter pastures by the increasing cold, growing lack of pasture and the threat of heavy snow which closes the higher mountain passes for three months of the year. This migration is made as quickly as possible because of the danger of severe snow and the lack of pasture en-route. They stay in the winter quarters from October till March.

### Fieldwork

My field work consisted of four visits to the Bakhtiari made between November 1963 and December 1964, making in all about 6 months. It proved impossible initially to obtain permission from the government to work for periods longer than three months at a time and latterly illness prevented me from utilising a longer period

granted by the authorities. However, I have reason to believe that on my return to Iran this coming July I shall have no such government restrictions to contend with.

A brief visit of 2 weeks in late November 1963 served as a reconnaissance trip and in March 1964 I spent two and a half months visiting various parts of the winter quarters and migrated with a group of nomads to the summer pastures. From August 1964 I spent two months in the summer area and in November-December I stayed for a month in a tribal village in the winter area. My wife accompanied me on all of these visits and she established a medical clinic in each of the areas we stayed in and on the migration itself. Since members of many of the more remote sections of the Bakhtiari came to the clinic I had a chance to make contacts with these sections more quickly than I had anticipated.

As will be obvious from the conditions of work described my knowledge of the Bakhtiari is still in an incomplete state, particularly concerning those aspects of the culture requiring a more sophisticated working knowledge of the language than was possible to obtain in 6 interrupted months. The months spent in Tehran were used largely in improving my written and spoken Persian, in reading generally on the Islamic background necessary for my research and in reading all the available literature on the Bakhtiari.

I propose now to present a brief precis of my research at this stage and then to outline the lines of inquiry I intend to follow on my return to Iran.

### Social Structure

The Bakhtiari are divided into two main groups of tribes known as the "Haft Lang" (seven legs) and "Chahar Lang" (four legs). These groups are territorially separate with carefully delineated boundaries between them. The Haft Lang area is the one I shall be discussing in this report.

The Haft Lang are divided into tribes, "Il" which in turn are divided into sub-tribes, "Taifeh". The taifeh comprise several clans, "Tireh", and the tireh are divided into lineages or "Tash". Further sub-divisions occur below the level of the tash; the "Oulad" or "Korboh", a collection of groups of tents, the "Mal", a single group of tents and finally the "Khuneh" which is the single tent, the smallest social unit consisting of an elementary family.

A degree of terminological looseness is used among the Bakhtiari where they may describe a large taifeh as being an Il. This usually occurs when the taifeh in question is politically important. There are in the division of tribes and sub-tribes further complexities and the actual situation is more fluid than the above analysis suggests where shifts in allegiance take place for a number of reasons and one taifeh will attempt to be incorporated into the structure of a different Il or tribe.

On the ground each tribe has its own well defined territory in both summer and winter quarters and within each tribal area the lower order groups have their own distinct sectors. For example, the Osiwand taifeh of the Duraki tribe has its own area within the Duraki lands, and each of the sub-divisions of the Osiwand have their own areas. Subject to these tribal divisions all tribal land not under cultivation is communal. Any infringement of these divisions such as grazing sheep illegally in another division's area will lead to immediate trouble and rapid reparation.

The most socially relevant unit for any particular individual is the taifeh since most of the daily contacts are with members of one's own taifeh. Disputes within the taifeh and tireh tend to be domestic and relatively simply resolved as they usually involve relatives, since the taifeh is the endogamous unit. Disputes between taifehs involve larger numbers of people with almost no personal ties and have to be resolved by the arbitration of the leaders of the respective sub-tribes.

Disputes involving protagonists from different tribes usually take the form of blood feuds and split the whole of the Haft Lang as each of the four tribes that make up the Bakhtiari Haft Lang align with one another at such times. Only rarely have the Haft Lang and Chahar Lang fought one another.

As has been described, the migrations of the Bakhtiari occur twice a year and the organisation required for this is considerable. The Haft Lang tribes migrate over the Zagros mountains along three set routes, called "Il rah" or tribal roads. They move along these roads on a strict schedule and a specific traditional order. The longest tribal road takes from one to two months to cross and is used by about two thirds of the Haft Lang, about 100,000 people with their flocks and pack animals. Without a strict schedule rigidly adhered to this mass movement would become hopeless anarchy as at certain points the mountain passes allow one person along at a time, pasture is scarce for the number of sheep that have to graze over a period of time. Fights are frequent but have to be quickly resolved.

Each section of a tribe has the right to cross the grassy valleys grazing their flocks as they go for a fixed number of days and then they have to move on to let those behind use the valleys. Any attempt at lingering and getting more than a fair share will cause immediate war. The central part of this migration route passes through the territory of the Mowri sub-tribe which is a very large one and are an isolated predatory group who survive largely by thieving from the passing tribes. The migrating tribes tend to form larger groups while traveling through Mowri territory as no individual can afford to have his herd depleted in this way. The hazards of the journey take sufficient toll. As the foothills are approached some tribes who have to travel further to arrive at their quarters have to pass through other tribal territory already full of recently arrived tribesmen and their usufruct rights ensure a peaceful and successful migration tends to reinforce temporarily the internal solidarity of the tribe as internecine quarrels have to be put aside when faced with other tribes who are often antagonistic and having to pass through other tribes' areas. These internal quarrels are soon resurrected on arrival at their own lands.

#### Leadership

Each taifeh has a Kalantar or chief and each tireh has a Katkhoda as leader. The leaders of the tash, oulad and mal are either respected elders entitled "Rish Sefid" or grey beards, or are heads of families. Generally the Kalantar of a taifeh will also be the Katkhoda of one of its tireh. These positions usually fall to members of the leading family or families of the particular division. Both hereditary and elective elements are involved in these positions of power, and much depends on the personal following a prospective hereditary candidate can accrue. There is much latitude in the system and the most immediate heir does not necessarily nor automatically assume the position of leadership. If the son is considered too young or not decisive enough then a brother or other close relative thought to be more successful will become leader. In the position of Kalantar the assent of the Katkhodas and other

members of the important families and respected elders of the group is a prerequisite of success. If a complete outsider, i.e. not a near relative of the deceased, has a sufficiently strong personal following then he may well succeed to the position. The quality of the Kalantar is an important factor for the wellbeing of the taifeh. A poor or weak leader results in internal factions and the weakening of the whole tribe as has happened in one generation when a particularly strong Kalantar was succeeded by a poor one with resulting disintegration of the economic efficiency of the taifeh. Yet another taifeh of about 9,000 people has two excellent Kalantars and the taifeh is rapidly becoming one of the strongest and wealthiest in the mountains.

### Khans

The term Khan means a leader over one or more tribes of "Ils". The Haft Lang Khans were a ruling family who came from the Bakhtiarwand tribe and became dominant over several other tribes and sub-tribes in the middle of the last century. From then onwards their powers and wealth increased. Since the beginning of this century when the Bakhtiari Khans achieved a position of political prominence outside the Bakhtiari, holding governorships in other provinces in Iran, their power has steadily diminished and at present none has any real influence in the tribal body.

The Khans owned large tracts of fertile land in the Chahar Mahal district in the foothills near Isfahan. They became very wealthy from the proceeds of this land, from the taxes and tribute exacted from the tribes and from the shares they were given in the oil company after oil was discovered in 1907 in their territory in Khuzestan. They played the part of intermediary between the Persian Government and the tribes representing the one to the other. The strength and fighting reputation of the Bakhtiari represented the power of the Khans and they never were afraid to use this fighting potential for their own political aspirations as was seen by their successful part in the Constitution movement in 1907.

From these ruling Khans no single hereditary leader emerged as was the case with the QashQai. The male members of the family were all given the title of Khan and their internal divisions were as acute as those so prevalent among certain of the tribes. The Shahs for generation had fostered such internal struggles among the Khans in order to weaken their power. There was a ruling triumvirate conferred by the Shah and chosen from and by themselves. The Il Khan was the head, with the Il Begi as his second-in-command. The third position of Hakim, Governor of Chahar Mahal was of great tribal importance as well, as the landowners of Chahar Mahal were the Khan families. In 1880 a quarrel arose between two brothers for the position of Il Khan and Il Begi which gave rise to a split among the Khans which became known as the Il Khan and Hajji Il Khan

factions. Both of these Khans got support from sections of the tribes and their respective sympathisers are more antagonistic to each other than the Haft Lang and Chahar Lang divisions. The split that followed from this quarrel departed from a strictly tribal alignment and fathers and sons are still to be found supporting opposing factions.

This quarrel laid the foundation for the eventual fall of the Khans from power with the Government and it also weakened the tribe, which has since found it impossible to be united in the face of an antagonistic Persian government. The tribesmen think that the Khans caused this division deliberately to weaken the tribe and so strengthen their hold over more of the tribal sections. At first this certainly was the case but it is now apparent that they did themselves a greater disservice in the course of time. In 1934, Reza Shah imprisoned many of the Khans who were not released until 1941 and he killed 5 of the most dangerous Khans. With recent land reforms in Iran, the Khans have since lost all but a fraction of their land and it would seem that the future will see an end to any involvement between the remaining Khans and the Bakhtiari tribal population.

Even while at the height of their influence among the tribes, their control was dependent on the proximity of the tribes and was therefore largely peripheral after they ceased to live and migrate as the tribal people did. They ruled through the Kalantars who had a great deal of freedom though, always subservient to the Khans in the long run, providing them with the levies required. Certain sub-tribes were favoured with more attention by the Khans than others, largely through a variety of marriages. These sub-tribes tend to think of themselves as the aristocrats of the tribes and certainly one result of their closer contact with the Khans is that they seem more able to cope with the Persian Government than many of the others who remain suspicious and come off second best.

The Kalantars would seem to be more powerful now as they no longer need to defer to the ruling of the Khans, though again this means less union still and in the past decade there has been some signs that more than one Kalantar has been attempting to gain influence over other sub-tribes. It is conceivable that a new class of "Khans" might develop and certainly the normal channels for developing influence like the old Khans are there.

#### Kinship and Marriage

As stated earlier the taifeh is the endogamous unit. The preferred marriage is with a parallel cousin, the father's brother's daughter for example. All the members of the taifeh and lower order groups have kinship links with each other. The taifeh of Osiwands all say they are descended from one man. The Khans have the

tradition of being descended from a Lur Khan who fled from his own tribe into Bakhtiari country.

The Bakhtiari are patrilineal and patrilocal. That is they inherit through the father and the women on their marriage leave their own parental home and join their husbands in setting up their home usually as part of a Mal or group of tents comprised of the husband's near relations. On a son's marriage he takes his inheritance then, is given a tent, a proportion of his father's sheep and some donkeys. The woman brings her "Mahr" or dowry; cooking equipment, saddle bags, and some sheep. The financial arrangements are all worked out by the families well in advance of the actual wedding as in many cases the couple have been affianced since their very early youth. The man's family give an arranged amount of money to the bride's family called "Shihr Pul" or milk money. This is in compensation for the milk the girl received when she was a child from her mother. This money is supposed to help provide the bride with part of her dowry.

The wedding ceremony takes from one to seven days depending on the wealth of the families concerned. The ceremony as far as I have observed it is extremely simple and consists of the girl being brought to the tent of her husband and he comes to greet her. In the past the bridegroom had to ride to his bride's tent which may have been several miles off and had to ride down a lane of horsemen to greet his bride at one end of this line. He then had to take the veil from her face and ride back to his own tent without being caught by the horsemen who were all members of his wife's family. Many fatal incidents occurred and the Khans had to forbid the custom. I have not yet witnessed a complete marriage ceremony as the guests disport themselves in eating and dancing all day and much of the night. Ceremonies at both the husband's family and the bride's family occur at the same time.

Inter-tribal marriages take place occasionally though usually it is done by the Kalantars for political purposes. These marriages are usually with second or third wives. Monogamy is the rule though the wealthier Kalantars often take several wives. The Khans in the past certainly too several wives from different sub-tribes. An analysis of 58 marriages during 1900-1925 amongst the married Khans showed certain patterns. 70% were with parallel cousins i.e. within the tribe. 10.5% were with women from either the Chahar Lang or Qashqai confederations of tribes i.e. of political importance in the tribal context. 16% were with women of Tehran families and show the growing concern with central politics and less contact with the tribes of some members of the Khans families, and 3.5% were with European women. The spread of influence amongst the Khans was then very considerable.



A similar trend can be seen in the marriage preferences of the younger Kalantars who have some education where there is a reluctance to marry an illiterate tribal girl. As yet tribal pressure is still dominant.

### Settlement

The summer quarters include the very fertile Chahar Mahal district in which many non-tribal peasant villages are situated. In the past the cultivation carried out by the tribesmen had to be aided by the peasants whom the Bakhtiari hired to look after their plots while in their winter pastures. Over a period of time the peasants gained control of this cultivated land and were supported by the Persian government in so doing. The tribes were forced to look for cultivatable land higher up on the mountain slopes or in some cases simply settled down, built houses, and took back their land and extended them further away from the bounds of the village owned land. Only the wealthier families could do this and there is only amount of this type of settlement. There are a few such hamlet type communities scattered within this area. There has been quite a bit fighting between the peasants and tribes in such situations.

As a result of the efforts of Reza Shah to settle the nomads a number of villages were built and settled by whole sections of tribes who have since virtually given up their nomadic existence entirely, though some went back to herding flocks after Reza Shah abdicated. They maintain very close ties with the nomads still and often live in tents in their courtyards on occasion. They grow wheat, barley, and fodder crops, and live peaceably with the surrounding peasant population.

In Khuzestan there are a number of temporarily inhabited hamlets left deserted when the tribes are in their summer quarters. Such hamlets are inhabited by the equivalent of a Mal of tents. They will form their own Mal in the summer area. The tendency in Khuzestan is towards larger and permanent villages in each of the tribal territories. This tendency is in part new and dates from the discovery of oil and setting up of small oil towns such as Lali and Masjid-i-Suleiman. These towns have become market towns for the more isolated sections that can't get down to the Khuzestan towns of Shushtar or Dizful.

In the south there is the town of Mal Amir round which are clustered many Chahar Lang villages. The Chahar Lang have been settled in this area since the early tenth century and are no longer nomadic.

The main reasons for settlement are either extreme poverty where not enough sheep are owned to be viable, or growing wealth

where the attractions and security of privately owned land, and the accumulation of capital are the incentive.

#### Outline for Future Research

From this account of the main features of my research it will be apparent that it is a preliminary stage. Several topics have not been touched upon, in particular that of religious beliefs and values, and little has been set about inheritance or how law is maintained, how crimes are dealt with or on economies. As yet I have little information on animal husbandry or on the marketing of the animals and I need more specific information of the amount and kind of settlement.

The function of this report was merely to show an outline of which aspects of the Bakhtiari I was more familiar with. My coming field trip will provide me with the information I require which becomes every easier to obtain as my knowledge of the dialect increases.

This past term in Oxford has been used to improve my written Persian, in background reading in Islam and Persian history, and primarily in discussing my work with the Institute of Anthropology.