

GRASS 16 Nov. 1974

Filmed in 1924 by Merion Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, who were later responsible for such epics as King Kong and a variety of John Ford films.

They stumbled on the Bakhtiari migrations quite by chance while stuck in Khuzestan because of the uneasy political situation in Southern Persia. They were in fact on their way to India, if I remember correctly.

They literally were totally ignorant of the situation they walked into, knowing nothing at all of the Bakhtiari- neither as pastoralists who migrated twice a year every year, nor their political position within Persia. Cooper boned up quite a bit on some facts about the Bakhtiari afterwards and out of this came his book *Grass*, which in fact is quite informative. None of this appears in the film. The effect of their 'naivety' and blithe unawareness of why it was possible to make the film at all, the security and one could almost say artificial luxury of their journey was to have 'inadvertently' produced a remarkable realistic documentary. They were so unknowing of what they were filming that the camera could not lie. It is, so to speak, a documentary structured not by the editor but by the events themselves. Contrast this with the rubbish of Bronowski's structuring of the Bakhtiari experience, in which they were USED to make his point, the reverse is the result seen in *Grass*, where ignorance produced a stark truth. It is very 'authentic', although as I say atypically luxurious.

The negative side of this ignorance is unfortunately evident in the sub-titles throughout the film, which are without exception factually wrong, wildly romantic, lurid, hilarious and melodramatic, as nonsensical as some of Bronowski's remarks.

You could set the film into two contexts:

1. The socio-political situation which made the making of the film possible, and which determined the conditions under which the film was made- i.e. the group they travelled with; its atypical wealth; the unusual security which surrounded the group simply because the film crew were there under the direct protection and 'seal' of the Ilkhan. The crew were protected by this and in turn their presence with the 'seal' protected the group they were filming, a fact deliberately used by the local chief under whose auspices they travelled.
2. The variability of climatic conditions which constrains extent, style, speed etc. of movement which affects flock size, size of camp groups etc. The fluidity and flexibility of social grouping in pastoralist situation.

The film, made in 1924 shows good grazing conditions, large flocks and good weather. The net results of these climatic factors, plus the fact that the political conditions generally within the migration route shown were very insecure, meant larger camp groups

clustered closer together for protection, without results deleterious to the larger and more densely packed herds.

If the grass had been bad, weather worse, such large camps would have led to rapid deterioration in the flocks. In other words that particular year, the need for political protection did not clash directly with grazing and flock needs.

Cinematically the result is best seen in the snow scene, the climax of the film with the winding ribbon of nomads struggling up the snow. Such bunching of people is not common.

It looks dramatic and makes good cinema, but in fact as far as the nomads are concerned these are good conditions. Digging a path in the snow is far safer than having that pass impassable because of worse falls of snow, which was the case on both occasions I travelled. We had to swing south to another pass less exposed which we had to cross once in a blizzard which was appalling, and once under disastrously milder conditions later in the year when the snow had begun to melt and conditions underfoot were impossible. On both occasions many animals- sheep, and worse, pack animals- were lost.

The film shows at the end the 'arrival' in the summer quarters in the land suggestive of 'milk and honey'- the 'Grass' of the title. Brilliant sunshine to relax and recover after the rigours of the migration. When we came down out of the blizzards we still had ten days travelling to get to our summer pastures and were stuck for 5 days on the less exposed valley floors in howling gales and floods of rain in which everything- people, supplies, clothes, and animals- were perpetually soaked and cold. More animal deaths. Just at the point when the animals DO need to rest after the snow passes, nature can and often does the dirty on them. However it does not make for good cinema.

The Bakhtiari scenes in the film concentrate exclusively on the movement, i.e. scrambling up cliffs, over mountain passes, on rafts across the Karun. Some of these shots are duplicated by my still photographs exactly 40 years later, often of identical places. The film does not show the less dramatic movement along the valleys, the days when no movement is possible because of animal fatigue, rain storms, etc.

The migration they filmed took 45 days. Length of time varies from year to year, some routes are longer and more difficult than others. There are 5 routes in all, of which this one is the longest and the second most difficult.

Length of migrations varies from 20 odd miles for some groups, to about 250 miles, possibly more, winding through the mountain ranges.

Autumn migration takes much less time, conditions are arid after summer heat, little water and grazing often non-existent. Starvation is common in a bad year and animals easily debilitated by the need to move fast. 21 days for the return journey- i.e. twice as fast under drier conditions. This happened in 1964 and by November the

sheep were in a delicate state of health, the rains came early and hard, lush grass grew fast, flocks ate this lush grass, caught a flux, a kind of dysentery, to which they are apparently prone when eating very lush grass on dried out bellies so to speak. Result was within a week 80% of all Bakhtiari flocks died. Catastrophic. It was as a direct result of this, which affected most of the Zagros, that the supply of meat to the city markets dwindled hugely in 1965 and 66 and Iran had to start importing meat on a large-scale.

The film lasts about 43 minutes taking the first 10-15 minutes to move across Turkey, Taurus Mountains, caravanserai down south through Jordan, stopping off for the heavy handed humour with the Camel Corps Headquarters before finally reaching 'THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE' as they misnamed the Bakhtiari.

Some scenes of the winter pastures of the Baba Ahmedi Kalantar's camp, with whom they travelled.. 'the way is East' and off we go into the mountains.. along the Tang.. over the Karun river.. along a cliff face.. up Zardeh Kuh (15,000ft) in the snow, ... over... down... arrival in the 'land of Grass'.

Film finishes with a shot of a document signed by Amir Jang, Ilbegi of the Bakhtiari, 28th June 1924, saying I think that they travelled through the mountains under the auspices and protection of the Ilkhan of the Bakhtiaris.

Political context, of which Cooper et al were mercifully ignorant:

Reza Khan was well on the way to dismantling Bakhtiari power structure in the south. He had already cut back the sphere of influence of the Khans by removing them from the Governorships of the south including Isfahan, and over the Kuhgelu. He had slapped them in late 1923, using Shushtar's calculations, for back taxes of about £1.5 million. The Khans had not paid their annual dues to the Crown since 1909. There had also been an attack on a detachment of the Persian army as it travelled through Bakhtiari country the previous year, which had infuriated Reza Khan and the public and they had been fined 2 million tomans, which Reza Khan was trying to get out of the Khans whom he held responsible. He was also threatening to invade Bakhtiari country.

As you might imagine all of this threw the tight-fisted crooks, which the Khans were, into just a wee bit of a panic. Reza kept some of them in Tehran as hostages, sent the senior Khans to the mountains to restore order. Several of these senior Khans, who in the previous decade had formed the Cabinet of the country returned to their estates in Khuzestan in the spring of 1924 to try and overcome the growing dissent amongst the younger Khans, and the revolts of their own tribesmen against them. They enlisted the help of the British to try and reduce the demands for indemnity and back taxes, hinting to the British that if they did not receive help they would cause chaos, blowing up oil installations and pipes. The British duly complied to the degree of their own self-interest. They were increasingly alarmed at Reza Khan's policy of crushing the

power of the Khans because in 1924 Reza Khan was not in a position to effectively control the southern part of the Zagros. In 1924 Reza Khan balanced the need for a measure of security in the south with his determination to crush the power of the Khans, by the tactic of taking hostages in Tehran, sending some Khans to their tribal territories, promises of indemnity and reduced tax claims, - a set of double dealing lies pitting each Khan faction against each other, promising rewards if the Khans supported the Government's policy of disarming the Lurs and the Qashqa'i.

This is inevitably a much simplified summary of some of the tensions existing in southern Persia and focussed on Bakhtiari territory in the spring of 1924. The spring migration in fact saw a moment of necessary calm while the animals were got up to their summer quarters, which was in fact rather as if everyone was taking a long deep breath just before the explosion, which was inevitable.

Cooper et al meandered through all this filming away, apparently unaware that they had arrived just as everyone was drawing breath. He got permission of the Ilkhan, who was in the south for the reasons given above, in part because to let Reza Khan know that the mountains were so effectively controlled by the Khans that an American crew had filmed the tribes on their migration, was 'proof' of the Khans' goodwill towards Reza Khan. Hence the shot at the end of the film of the document duly signed by the Khans.

Cooper was up in Tehran by 28th June, the date of the document, not knowing that only a few days after they left the mountains all hell let loose amongst the Bakhtiaris safely arrived in their summer quarters. Many of the taifeh (sub-tribes) revolted against the Khans, fighting broke out amongst the Khans themselves and many younger Khans turned 'Yaghi' moving up the mountains with armies of armed tribesmen to prevent the rumoured Persian army from attacking their estates. By September the Ilkhan and Ilbegi had resigned and a new set of Bakhtiari governors installed by Reza Khan.

If the film unit had arrived any earlier- no migration, if even three weeks later than they did, there would have been no chance either because the situation exploded.

That spring in fact marks the beginning of what was to be a highly successful campaign by Reza Khan to crush the Khans.

All this- and sorry it is so long winded- makes the term 'Forgotten People' singularly inept. The Bakhtiari were in fact fully occupying Reza Khan at the time, not to mention the hive of activity burning up the telegraph lines between the consulate in Ahwaz, the Legation in Tehran and the Foreign Office.

During 1918 and afterwards, when Lord Curzon's Middle East policy was beginning to crumble, Curzon had describe the Bakhtiari as the single most important people in the British Empire- because of oil of course.

One of the brothers of the man who signed the document shown at the end of the film in fact got a Knighthood from Britain because of his 'loyal' services during the First World War.

I hope these slightly random notes help you to introduce the film.

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