

SACRED SPACES AND POTENT PLACES IN THE BAKHTIARI MOUNTAINS

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The Bakhtiari are a partially nomadic people, living in the Zagros mountains of south west Iran. Their twice yearly migrations between summer and winter pastures, across several chains of mountains, rivers and high snow fields, in spring and autumn, entail a particularly intense interaction with the natural world. To survive in this extremely mountainous environment the sheep and goat herding nomads travel shortly after the onset of spring<sup>1</sup>. The soaring temperatures, and the desiccation of grazing in the low lying hills of their winter pastures in Khuzestan, signal the start of the spring migration. This takes many of the Bakhtiari on a journey of up to 400 kilometres, lasting anything up to six weeks or longer, depending on the prevailing weather condition. Their sheep and goats graze on progressively higher pasture land, up over the highest mountain range with peaks of 14,000ft, over the higher snow bound passes at 12,000ft.

There are only four main migration routes in Bakhtiari territory, some more difficult than others, on which approximately a quarter of a million people, several million animals, horses, donkeys, and cattle travel. The routes lie along cliff faces, across fast flowing and freezing cold rivers, through gorges and ravines and over snow covered mountain passes with whistling gales. Dust storms and temperatures of up to 120 degrees in the foothills, rain storms, electric storms, sub-zero temperatures and sudden blizzards all occur while the nomads migrate. Old men and women crippled with rheumatism and arthritis, the newly born, pregnant women, as well as the young and healthy, all have to face what on occasion can be an extremely hazardous journey every year to the summer pastures. Accidents happen; animals and some people fall down cliff faces, drown in the rivers, and freeze to death. Tribal fights break down and people get maimed or killed. Camps (mal) are raided by sheep thieves.

The nomads stay in their summer pastures for approximately four months, moving more slowly, down the mountain slopes, gradually grazing the grass until autumn, when with the disappearance of grass, and before the higher mountain passes become impassable with snow, the nomads return, along the same narrowly defined routes once again to their winter pastures. The conditions of the environment on this migration are very different from the spring. The summer sun has burned most, often all available grazing. The animals go hungry, so too do the nomads. The rivers are low in the autumn and no longer present the same rushing hazards of the spring. The autumn migration is done much faster, pushing increasingly hungry and weakening animals as fast as possible through the mountains.

As can be seen from this rather brief description, a pre-requisite for successful nomadism and often for survival itself, depends on this knowledge of the mountains, on weather conditions and on being able to predict these conditions. Nomads in this context require a watchful and vigilant orientation to the natural world, through which they move. Experience is essential to cope with the vagaries of the environment and of the climate. Climatic

conditions in the mountains vary from year to year and unpredictable. Daily decisions while migrating have to be made, about when to move, calculating how far to move, assessing whether the weather will change suddenly. To be caught on a cliff face in the sudden rain storm or worse, a snow storm, in the high mountains can lead to total disaster. Whole herds of sheep have been lost in one night, caught on an exposed cliff face, unable to proceed onto a more sheltered spot. The mountains are dangerous, and movement becomes impossible in rain, snow, or dust storms which reduce visibility to zero. Every migration presents its own unique conditions, and on every migration, even under the best circumstances animals get lost.

#### The Significance of Stones (bard-sing)

Stones abound, unsurprisingly, in the mountainous territory of the Bakhtiari. Not merely the chains of mountains they have to cross on their spring and autumn migrations, with their forbidding cliff faces, rocky gorges and dramatic ravines, but boulders, rocks of every size down to pebbles, and stones everywhere, impeding the nomads and their many animals on the move. Stones, mainly limestone are everywhere underfoot, always awkward, often dangerous, and sometimes deadly. Pack animals and horses in particular, frequently damage their legs on these migration, not only with stones under their shoes, but debilitating wounds to their forelegs caused by the narrowness and rockiness of some of the gorges or ravines. To make the several migration routes easier, stones can be cleared, at least temporarily, but the nomads rarely do this. Repeated failure to keep the southern Bakhtiari trade route clear of stones for the muleteers bringing produce through the mountains between Khuzestan and Isfahan, was a cause of complaint by Government officials to the Khans, or tribal chiefs, earlier this century.

Ground strewn with stones (chul) needs to be cleared when brought under dry cultivation, and the stones are used where there is wheat cultivation to build protective stone wall, and mark boundaries. The nomads also build various enclosed structures of stones (cher) to keep young lambs and goats in, for straw, or to store grain. These circular walled structures are approximately four feet high.

Stones form the basis on which the saddle bags, containers and tent equipment are laid out to form the back of the tents. The more permanent camp sites (wargāh) are laid out in stone one or two layers thick, 1 metre by 5/6 metres, depending on the length of the tent. Such sites are tidied on arrival, with stones added as necessary. If the stopping place has not been regularly used the first task is to lay out the 'wargāh' of stones. In the permanent summer or winter pastures elaborate three sided walls (cher) are found, built to several feet, over which the tent is then pitched. If the camp group or tent is staying in the same spot for several days or even weeks in the permanent sites, spaces are made between the saddlebags and equipment and reinforced with stone lintels to

form useful niches for storing items, rather like open cupboards. At the other end of the tent, stone walls are also often easily built to keep out the worse of wind or rain, the gaps stuffed with available greenery, at either end of the tents. Heavy stones are also used to tie down the tent, as well as tent pegs which cannot always be used.

### Throwing Stones

Stones are thrown in a variety of contexts, usually with quite astounding skill and on occasion with lethal accuracy. Accompanying a range of different calls and shouts, stones are used as an aid to the control of pack animals and the flocks on the move in the mountains. By throwing a stone, stray or run away animals can be manoeuvred back to safer parts of the sometimes dangerously pathways and cliffs which have to be negotiated. Collapsed and heavily laden animals, donkeys or cows are encouraged to their feet with mercilessly thrown stones the size of fists. It is felt necessary to move them to avoid blocking narrow pathways. Fights over collapsed and blocking animals are common enough, so stones are readily used to force unwilling or frightened cows, in particular, to move on. Children learn to throw stones very young, at two or three. They learn by tormenting the tent dogs, so that by the time they are 7 or 8 and herding the young lambs and baby goats, they are skilled with stone throwing and very adept at controlling their energetic baby flocks.

Unlike some other cultures, including our own, dogs are not used in shepherding sheep. The shepherds were totally incredulous at descriptions of sheepdogs and roared laughing in total disbelief at the notion of competitive sheep dog trials. Bakhtiari dogs are either tent dogs or dogs for guarding the sheep against thieves and wild animals, particularly wolves. Tent dogs or camp dogs guard their own tents and their individual territory round the tent. These dogs are fed only by their owner and rarely leave the immediate environs of the tent. They rush ferociously at any stranger arriving at the camp. These dogs, while serving a guarding function are a major nuisance in camp life. The incessant barking, bickering with each other, and mock attacks on familiar members of the camp, cause irritation and children endlessly throwing stones at the camp dogs. This stone throwing is not merely teasing the animals but is explicitly encouraged by the adults to train the children. The dogs also clear up human baby excrement in the camp, and a common sight is to see a mother hold her very young child out to defecate straight to the tent dog. On approaching a strange nomadic camp, the experienced visitor will arm himself with several stones. As the camp dogs streak towards one, barking ferociously, it is often sufficient for the incomer to bed down to pick up a handful of stones, for the dogs promptly to turn tail howling back to the tent. Meanwhile, the camp members are alerted to the approach of strangers. Throwing the stones and really hitting the dogs is

regarded as perfectly acceptable by the owners. Limping dogs with misshapen legs can frequently be seen running around the camps.

The dogs guarding the sheep are larger, tougher dogs, trained to be ferocious, and are well thought of and better fed than the scavenging camp dogs. The dogs work with the shepherds in guarding the flocks at night. Thieves abound in the mountains and the flocks are particularly vulnerable, high in the mountains, when on the move.

Sometimes the flocks are brought into the camp site itself for protection, but more usually the flocks are settled away from the camp sites. Some nights all the men of the camp will stay with the shepherds to try and prevent thieves in the night. Several strategies are used, along with the dogs, to prevent surprise night thieves. Loud talk about guns to discourage any possible watcher in the dark and the throwing of stones energetically into the dark on all sides of the flock, periodically through the night are techniques to minimise theft. Not uncommonly stones from the dark come hurtling towards the defending men as disgruntled thieves give up. The discovery of an ongoing theft, which does happen regularly on the migrations, inevitably provokes dangerous and damaging stone throwing, with stones whistling through the night at alarming speeds. Bakhtiari, even when relatively young make deadly stone throwers. Smashed teeth, mangled lips, and head injuries from accurately thrown stones are a common sight.

Thieves are not the sole problem facing flock owners. Protection against wolves, which are found in the region, is necessary since the disarmament of the Bakhtiari in the 1960s. The guard dogs' ears are cut, and sometimes the tail is docked to avoid being grabbed by a wolf. Stone throwing as defence is a prized skill for the Bakhtiari. Some have the reputation for hitting hawks in flight as well as bringing down other birds on the wing. The stones can be heard whistling through the air.

A rather frightening game is played among Bakhtiari youths, by setting up two sizable stones about 50 yards or so apart. Two youths stand, one in front of each stone, and proceed to throw small stones to hit the large stone 50 yards away, 'defended' by his opponent. The winner is the one who hits the large stone most often. The game is also a test of courage as well as skill, since to defend successfully means not only distracting the opponent with one's body hoping he will thus miss, or, getting struck oneself. Bakhtiari games tend to be painful and teach skills required in nomadic life, as does their stick dancing. Sometimes, in the stone throwing game, the stones hit each other in the middle with a loud crack, which is regarded as honours even.

More serious conflicts than these competitive stone throwing games, are those between camp groups, between sub-tribes, and between nomad and peasant. They are the occasions of sometimes very serious fights which can lead to deaths. Several dozen furious

Bakhtiari men and women throwing stones at each other in deadly earnest over some dispute or other happens regularly. Tension between moving nomads at critical and dangerous mountain passes, where animals fall, collapse or get in each other's way is often inevitable where hundreds of people are struggling to get on to the neighbouring valleys.

Thrown stones also play a part in the rituals involved in the Pir Qār, the Shrine of the Cave, which will be described below, and have a religious significance rather than a purely practical or learning significance.

### Hearth and Standing Stones

As described earlier, in the domestic and camp context, stones are used to build walled enclosures, and as the base of the back of the tent on camp sites. Suitable boulders, one or two feet high are selected to grind wheat or acorns into flour, high in the mountains. Acorns form an occasional supplement to the diet in times of drought and among the particularly poor. A hollow is worn on such boulders by the grinding, which is done with a stone rolling pin (bard ar). Of great significance is the hearth of each tent, a square or triangular shaped depression dug in the ground. The hearth (chāla) is built up with three sizable hearth stones (chālmeh) which form a firm sided base for cooking pots, and to lay across the kebab sticks. There are two, sometimes three hearths in the tent. One or two for cooking, with one just outside the tent for convenience, in the woman's part of the tent. These hearths are the centre of tent life and they have the 'chālmeh' stones. Another hearth for entertaining, for tea making and grilling kebabs is found in the men's side of the tent. Oaths are sworn on the hearth and on the fire (ātesh) in the hearth, and respect is formally given to the hearth, in a sense, as the heart of the family. The hearth stone itself is believed to have potency, a power in itself, and all three are used in a curative ritual performed in the case of sudden and unexplained illness as a possible cure. While many Bakhtiari typically express scepticism about the efficacy of such rituals, there is no attempt to stop it being performed when though necessary by the women. Only women carry out the prescribed ritual, men are not allowed to carry out what is called Chālmeh Bori. The intention of the ritual is to get rid of the diseases by pulling it out of the body (bori- imperative of boridam to pull or take away).

A selected old woman performs the ceremony, where the patient is laid flat, and starting at the head, moving towards the feet, she touches the patient's forehead, nose, mouth, chin, chest, hips, knees, ankles, and toes, saying 'borid, naborid, borid, naborid', - 'take away, don't take away' at every spot, alternating at every touch. She does this, touching the patient with seven different items, which are 'thrown away' after the toes are touched, with a loud 'borid'- 'risheh' roots, a gun, a large cooking pot (tik) and the three hearth stones (bard-e chālmeh). A gun is not always available and a heavy club (gorz) used by shepherds can be used. The

disposable items are in fact thrown away, while the hearth stones, club and pot are symbolically put aside, throwing away the illness. A prayer for health is uttered at each place on the body touched. The seven items used were explaining as being the most important items in the life of the nomads. To complete the 'chālmeh bori' exorcism, a chicken or perhaps a goat sacrificed and the meat shared by everyone in the camp, further bringing efficacy and merit to the ritual.

A feature of the mountain landscape at particularly difficult and dangerous cliffs or mountains passes which have to be negotiated are small cairns of stones- (Chāalkuh). These 'chāalkuh' mark specific places on the cliff regarded as most dangerous and bad luck (bad balkt), places where animals regularly fall. One cliff face is so bad and steep only women and the flocks can use it, while the pack animals and accompanying men go a longer route over the top of this particular mountain range. The path is called the 'rāh-e zan' or road of the woman, and the women have to clamber as best they can down a rock strewn cliff face, clinging to a path way no broader than a person's body with a sheer drop into the valley more than a thousand feet below. 'Chāalkuh', cairns, are built on overhanging boulders and may be single stones or piled a foot high, and on this 'road of the women' they mark danger spots where in the past women have fallen to their death, serving also as a warning of danger to the migrating women. On passing such danger spots thus marked, the women mutter prayers to avert the danger, and pay respect (ehteram) to the person who placed the stone markers or built up the cairn, by making a 'salām' or greeting. Placing such a warning is regarded as being meritorious and by acknowledging such an act by an unknown predecessor, the woman hope to avert the danger lurking in such places of bad luck. The danger of this particular cliff face is enhanced by the fact that most women carry young children, babies, young lambs and baby goats, or, they may be heavily pregnant while negotiating this dangerous place.

A rather different pass, high up in the mountains and which roughly marks the boundary between the winter and summer pasture areas of the Bakhtiari tribes, on this particular migration route, is called Hezār Chāmeḥ, the Pass of a Thousand Hazards, is also locally known as the pass of vultures and thieves. During the spring migration in particular when there are thousands of very young lambs and goats as well, both vultures and eagles swoop high in the sky at this mountain pass, waiting on falling animals, feasting on the corpses of unfortunate pack animals when disaster strikes. Thieves habitually hover round the top of the pass itself because the animals are strung out single file and are extremely difficult to protect until the entire flock is over the top. Stones fly. Tempers break, mistakes are made and fights are common. The pack animals struggle fearfully on this pass, hauling their loads up what seems an endless mountain side, appallingly difficult underfoot. The boulders at the top of this pass, on either side of the path mark the most spectacular views forward to the summer pastures, and are

strewn with single stones, which mark both thankfulness that the pass is done with and look forward to the end now in sight, although still many days travel to go. It is the first view of the summer pastures and the stones mark the event.

One of the most potent places on one of the migration routes used by many of the migrating Bakhtiari, the 'Rah-e Munar', the Munar Road, is the Munar mountain, which gives its name to the whole route. The Munar is one of the most formidable obstacles the nomads face on their migrations. Its potency as a place comes not only from its rugged grandeur and difficulty, but it is a place on which several very important intertribal conflicts have taken place with many deaths, both this and last century. It is on this mountain pass that one of the leading Bakhtiari Khans (leader) had killed the leading Duraki Khan Ja'far Qoli Khan circa 1836<sup>2</sup>, a killing which marked the beginning of major shifts in the internal balance of power in the Bakhtiari polity and the beginning of the rise to power of the recent powerful Bakhtiari Khans this century, as well as territorial changes among the sub-tribes of the Bakhtiari. More recently, intertribal conflict in the 1940s resulted in deaths and feuding. Bakhtiari have vivid songs about such fights on the Munar. The Munar is a mountain chain in itself, with the path to be negotiated running many kilometres along the cliff face, before eventually winding round and over to other side. The steep slope is sheer, in places with overhanging smooth cliff, the path just wide enough for an animal in places, with the pathway worn glass slippery smooth with the passing feet of generations.

It usually takes virtually a whole exhausting day to travel along the rocky approached to the cliff face, winding higher and higher and then along under the overhanging cliffs of the escarpment. The valley lies many hundreds of feet below. In places the pack animals have to be led nose and tail, coaxed out towards the very edges of the cliff face. The danger is greatest for the heavily laden donkeys, particularly the ones laden with the heavy tent. The bulk of the loads on occasion forces the animal to bump against the cliff face. The panicked braying of an overladen donkey crescendoing into a scream as it tips its load, unbalances and scrambles over the edge and down into the valley is not uncommon. Shrieks of noisy horror and despairing ululation by the woman accompany such disasters, the animal dead and its load virtually irrecoverable. In the spring the heat the noise of shouting Bakhtiari, wailing children sometimes tied to the backs of the already overladen pack animals, barking dogs, the spitting of goats, the tinkling of animal bells, compete with the complaints of women uncomfortable in a whistling wind, the continuous smell and splashing of animal droppings, the laughter of girls taking the opportunity to flirt with passing youths, the movement of hundreds of nomads and thousands of animals, nose to tail, strung all along the mountain faces they struggle to the other side, makes the Munar one of the most notable places in this region.



On the approaches to the Munar, and along the path itself are many many 'chālkuh' cairns of stones. As were those cairns on the 'rah-e zan', those along the cliff face, on boulders right on the edge of the tortuous pathway, mark danger spots, places of bad luck and the stones are instrumental in averting the bad luck. There are however other piles of significant stones on the upper approaches to the Munar pass itself, on boulders and rocks overlooking the valley far below. The stones are piled in sizable cairns, in places forming a virtual wall of small stones, on top of large boulders. Cairns of stones are found on virtually every sizable boulder on these approach slopes, and particularly around three 'sacred' trees in which stones are also placed individually. These three trees are solid with stones, and festooned with strips of torn rags tied to every twig and branch. Each stone and rags (hokm- religious command) represents a vow (nazr), a token of a pledge to remember, to thank, to honour the memory of the long dead saint whose shrine (Imamzādeh) can be glimpsed, glistening far below by the side of the mountain<sup>3</sup>. In so invoking the help of this saint the nomads wish for a safe passage across the Munar, The rags are tied by women, torn off their skirts, or veils from their backs, with a muttered prayer, perhaps vowing to call a future child after the saint (Abdullah), or asking for general help from the saint as intercessor or for safe passage. Both men and women put stones in the trees, after first pressing them to the forehead and kissing the stone three times. Many however completely ignore the trees or laugh at those who tie rags and insert stones. Twigs broken off from other trees can also be inserted into the branches of the 'sacred' trees. Above the path where these trees are to be found, which also have stones heaped rounded the base, are several slightly differently structured cairns, comprising a tall single narrow stone with one or more stones on top, standing tall, overlooking the path and the valley far below. These are pointers to Imamzādeh Abdullah's shrine below, there standing like sentinels, and are called custodians or guardians (mutāvalli) of the shrine. This is both a potent and a sacred place for many of the passing nomads, particularly for the women. If a woman is pregnant on a migration, at this place she will undoubtedly place a stone and tie a rag to invoke a safe delivery of her child, to Imamzādeh Abdullah's shrine below.

Standing stone lions (bard-e shir) are the final standing stones to be discussed here. These stylised sculpted lions stare out permanently from isolated Bakhtiari graveyards in the many valleys of the Zagros mountain chains. Sometimes singly, sometimes clusters of them stand proud in the same graveyard, marking the graves of important men, in particular of warriors, or men who have died in battles. In the valleys close to Munar mountain the migrating nomads pass by or even beside the graveyards every migration where such lions are found. Some are so old they have fallen on their sides with the names and dates of the fallen hero now faded. Yet others are very recent, shining white, and with eyes, and opened mouth, with fangs showing in a ferocious grin<sup>4</sup>, picked out in contrasting black. The sides of the lions have sculpted horses, horse and rider,

some have rifles or a wild goat, in raised relief. Other older stone lions have pistols, sword, and dagger carved in relief<sup>5</sup> marking the graves of warrior heroes of the past. Many travellers in the region, from Sir Henry Layard in the 1840s, Mrs Isabella Bishop in 1880s and many more recent, have all mentioned these stone lions which strike everyone's imagination, not least because such sculptures are rarely found outside this part of the Zagros. The oldest grave mentioned in the literature, in A.D. 1633/34 (A.H. 1045)<sup>6</sup> is in the graveyard at Dizak on the edge of Bakhtiari territory in the summer pastures. Others have been dated A.D. 1789/90, (A.H. 1204) deep in the mountains<sup>7</sup>.

These standing stone lions, with their eyes and fangs carved in relief stand vigilantly, symbolising bravery, manliness and male prowess in riding, hunting, or fighting, are highly visible symbols, in permanent stone, of the most highly prized male power and male qualities. Fossilised heroism, eternally vigilant, displaying ferocity in the visible fangs, these lions stand testament to what all Bakhtiari men aspire to be. While the decayed bodies of the dead lie invisible, in the earth, the qualities of these exemplary nomads are visibly and permanently displayed in the lion, symbol par excellence in Iran of bravery. Lions once were common in Bakhtiari territory in the winter pastures of Khuzestan, and Layard has several stories of lion hunts and encounter with lions<sup>8</sup>. In his study of a lion's tooth in this area as late as 1963<sup>9</sup>, although the lion has been thought extinct for much longer than that. The word lion (shir) is used for hero, and is attached to the name of individual men, most famously perhaps Shir Ali Merdun, meaning Ali Merdun the hero, about whom songs are sung. The lion as metaphor for hero is well known in Iranian literature, and is of course one of the terms used for Ali, the revered son-in-law of the Prophet. Thus both as a metaphor and symbol the lion is a potent image of heroism for the Bakhtiari.

It is also used in rare cases to signify powerful, even aggressive women in the term 'shirzan', lion woman. This term, when used for women is never accompanied by the individual woman's name, She is known as a 'shirzan', or in the past 'shir bibi', where bibi is the title for a high status woman belonging to the family of leading Khans. One such 'shirbibi' was Bibi Mariam, the mother of the Shir Ali Merdun mentioned above. The nomads maintained that 'Ali Merdun inherited his heroic qualities from his mother, who was a particularly independent and dominant woman earlier this century. The linguistic use of lion, the symbol of maleness, for a woman clearly signifies the unusual and anomalous qualities of such women. The paradigm for this term 'shirzan' is that of Zainab, the Shirzan of Karbala, the daughter of 'Ali, and sister of the martyred third Imam, Hussain, who is so central to Shi'i Islam.

The bar-e shir, or stone lions can figure in a particular ritual concerning men, who are not complete men- cowards (tarsu). Several nomads described the ritual, although they suggested it was very rarely done because there were not many cowards among the

Bakhtiari. Something very similar is to be found in Mrs. Isabella Bishop's book of her travels further north in Bakhtiari territory<sup>10</sup>. The coward is taken by his friends to the graveyard, on a full moon night<sup>11</sup>, and while saying prayers to the dead hero, passes seven times under the stone lion, between its legs. A prayer is supposed to be said for every 'circumambulation'. The afflicted man is also supposed to crouch under the lion and pray for bravery (delīri, shojā'ati). I was assured it worked. This potency to bring about a transformation, to cure an affliction is more usually the prerogative of sacred places, of the Imamzādeh, or shrine which are found scattered irregularly in the mountains. It is however primarily women who visit shrines.

According to Donaldson there was in the past a carved lion outside the city gates of Mashad, where childless women, i.e. incomplete women, visited to pour oil upon it, and to walk or crawl under it, hoping that by doing so they may become pregnant<sup>12</sup>. Such women in Bakhtiari territory more commonly visit a particular shrine. Fertility is of course the supreme value of women.

### Sacred Stones

Some stones are regarded as sacred by virtue of the use to which they are put. The simplest of these are sacred stones carried by impoverished, itinerant seyyids. They are associated with a shrine, and are polished shell shaped stones wrapped in cloth and produced by the seyyid for blessing passing nomads. Such ragged and illiterate seyyids travel, 'mal gardesh', round the māls, camp groups, as they pass through the area or valley in which the shrine is located. Each individual is tapped on the shoulder several times with the stone, the stone then pressed to forehead and lips, and the seyyid murmurs a blessing. In return he gets a coin or two, a plateful of flour, a handful of sugar, possibly some salt. Usually when such as seyyid arrives he is greeted by the camp dogs with what seems to be particularly ferocious energy and he makes an undignified entrance thrashing frantically at the bounding dogs, while Bakhtiari in the tent make little attempt to hid their laughter, and none to control the dogs. The seyyid, however casually he is treated, is always given something to eat, and most people accept what many of the men obviously regard as a very doubtful blessing.

A more profoundly sacred stone in the foothills, was the only example in these mountains of a 'qadamgāh', or place of the footprint of the revered eighth Imam Riza, buried in Mashad. Such sacred places are found in many other parts of Iran. On top of a smooth stone ground there is a large, partially shaped stone several feet high with a niche carved out of it near the top. Inside the niche is a 'panjeresti', a copper 'Hand of Fatima', and an inscribed stone covered with rags. Passers-by, or those that wish, are supposed to put their hand into the niche, while making their request of Imam Riza, in return for the promise of whatever is asked they make some sort of vow, to visit a close by shrine for example.

Close to this site is a 'nazargāh' a place for making vows. It consists merely of a dozen or so large stones set in a wide circle about 10 feet in diameter and with a stone lintel making a small door structure. Cloth strips are slung between the stones, It is set beside a huge tree. It was said that the stones must not be touched or the tree cut or death will follow. The Imam Riza is thought to have had lunch once on this spot and the tree grew. The tree now blossoms with torn strips of coloured rags, the votive offerings of a multitude of women's wishes<sup>13</sup>.

Mutāvalli (guardian, custodian) are another type of sacred stone found in the mountains. These function as markers or signs of a neighbouring shrine. While the shrine may be invisible, located in a sheltered defile, often at a water source at the foot of the mountains ranges, or up a side ravine, the Mutāvalli are located on slopes easily visible to passing nomads. Depending on the terrain these tall standing sacred stones can be close to, or several kilometres from the shrine, to whose presence they stand witness. On passing these guardians, the women make an obeisance of the head, and a 'salām' greeting the particular saint, acknowledging the presence of the shrine. A prayer is muttered sotto voice. Men do not bother, being sceptical of such matters, but the mutāvalli are never ignored completely. These stone guardians are up to four or five feet tall, constructed of tall narrow stones, no more than one on top of another, like a column, quite distinct from the cairns of small stones described above. These guardians are a means whereby the nomads are orientated in the direction of the shrine, and their minds orientated towards the presence of a sacred shrine. The women may carefully search among the foothills with their eyes to catch a glimpse of the signalled shrine, an activity when met with success which accompanied with a distinct sigh of pleasure at the merit so achieved. Such places are known as salāmgāh<sup>14</sup>.

Like the sacred trees on Munar, the mutāvalli are said to belong to their particular shrine, and their potency, their religious worth is sourced in the shrine and ultimately in the holy figure whose special shrine it is. There are tens of these shrines scattered in the mountains, just as there are thousands in the villages and cities of Iran. In the immediate vicinity of the Bakhtiari shrines are found dozens of chāлкуh, built all round. Any trees close by are solid with stone sand fluttering with rags, and with several mutāvalli standing on neighbouring slopes, all of which intensify the vibrant potency of these sacred places which also have graveyards beside them, some with stone lions.

Pir Qar, the shrine of the cave is, as far as I know, unique among the sacred places in Bakhtiari territory. A combination of political, religious and natural elements creates a small but potent place of local visitation. The deep cave is located at the foot of a cliff, in the mountains above the village of Dehcheshmeh (the spring village), beside the source of a rushing spring, which irrigated the fields down below, and provides the water source for the village, in the summer area of Chahar Mahal. On the cliff face, near the

entrance to the cave, carved in relief, are three panels, one recounting the history of this family of **Khans**, one the role played by the Bakhtiari in the Constitutional revolution in Iran circa 1910, and the third a partial genealogy of the Khans. Here carved in stone are commemorated the deeds of these tribal leaders. The shrine is in the cave, which inside is honeycombed with recesses, tapering off into the depths of the cave, and forming a funnel, finally disappearing up into the cliff. The story goes that a holy man, whose name has long since been forgotten, went into the cave to pray. He did so, but he never reappeared, he 'gadib shod', he vanished and was never seen or heard of again- a pale echo perhaps of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, the Hidden Imam. This is the only pīr, shrine, which is nameless, all the others are named after a dead holy man, or in one instance holy woman. In front and beside the cave entrance an area has been cleared and flattened, making a platform, where those coming to the shrine, whether tribal or peasant, can rest and eat a ritual meal if wished besides the gurgling stream. As at most shrines it is mostly women who come here, asking the pīr, the old holy man to intercede and grant them their request, for recovery from illness, for health for themselves and particularly children.

Inside the cave, slung from wall to wall, is a rope of amulets, copper bells, woven materials, rags, and safety pins interspersed with blue beads. Just below one end of this rope, which is hung about three feet off the ground, is a large honeycombed rocky recess filled with solidified candle grease, and ablaze with lit candles. The recesses above this spot are black with greasy smoke, testament to the many, many lit candles. Women who come with their requests and their vows (nazr, pl.-nazoor) light a candle. To get their wish granted, the petitioners have to throw stones, up to seven times, up into the cave wall. If the stone sticks in one of the crevices and recesses then the request, it is believed, will be granted. If the stone falls, then it will not.

This cave shrine is thought to be particularly efficacious for sick babies and young children, who are brought into the shrine and are passed over and under the rope of copper bells, either three or seven times, a quasi-circumambulation. Afterwards and ideally, a goat is slaughtered and the meat distributed among the local poor. This shrine is apparently very popular with the villagers of this region for whom it has become their local shrine.

#### Shrines- Imamzādel (descendants of the Imams)

The term Imamzādeh is used to designate both the shrine itself and the descendent of a Shi'i Imam, always named, although in the Bakhtiari there is not always agreement as to precisely who these descendants are particularly for the smaller and more localised shrines. Those of doubtful descent are often more commonly called Pīr, meaning ancient or old, as for example in the case of the cave shrine mentioned above. In Iran most shrines are associated with relatives of the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam, Imam Riza, who was killed in what is now

the pilgrimage city of Mashad in A.D. 818. Many of the Imam's relatives were in Iran, or traveling towards Mashad when he died.

Some were buried also in Mashad while many of the descendants' tombs are found all over Iran. Bakhtiari believe that three of their dozens of shrines are close relatives of the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam, 2 who are thought to be brothers and one Imam Riza's sister. Another sister's tomb is in Qum, the shrine of Fatima, being one of the major pilgrimage centres in Iran. It is widely believed among the nomads that these three relative were on their way to visit the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam when news came that he was dead, and they stayed where they were in the Bakhtiari mountains and died there. These shrines, Imamzādeh are by far the most well-known among the nomads and are regarded as being particularly sacred and their authenticity is not doubted.

The other Imamzādeh are not so widely known, being familiar only to those who either live part of the year relatively near these shrines or who pass them on their migration routes. Many are sceptical about these shrines, although most acknowledge they must be the shrines of holy men. The activities associated with the three major Imamzādeh are more elaborate, and the catchment area of visiting pilgrims much wider. In Shushtar, a small market town close to the edge of Bakhtiari territory in Khuzestan, their winter area, has approximately 80 such shrines, while Shiraz, a major city in the south of Iran has over one hundred<sup>15</sup>.

There is a degree of specialisation among even the small shrines and each has an associated miracle, mo'jez, with belief in these miracles ranging from general acceptance for the major shrines, to downright scepticism for some of the more local shrines. Attendance at the minor shrines is virtually exclusively a female activity. When migrating the nomads rarely visit the shrines as they pass. The resident seyyid, human guardian or custodians motāvalli come visiting the māl, camps, collecting flour, cash sometimes, sugar, tea, for performing services such as burial when needed. Several of the smaller shrines have living descendants of the Imam, resident beside the shrine itself. These descendants now form small lineages and are part of the Bakhtiari polity. They do not migrate, and do not own any territory. Some such seyyids are literate and even well versed in the Koran. At least one shrine the resident group of seyids are given a proportion of the locally grown wheat in return for their religious services when called upon. In the southern reaches of Bakhtiari territory lies the area controlled by a whole sub-tribe, tā'ifeh of seyyids called Masha'ekh, who trace their descent 14 generations back to Seyyid Sāleh, reputedly a son of the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam Musa, father of Imam Riza. There is a shrine called Imamzāde Saleh near their territory about which I have no other information. The shrines I shall discuss are those near the rāh-e Munar migration route and the more southern migration route which runs near the Māl-e-Mir region, known as the rāh-e Despart, or Bakhtiari road. Most of the minor shrines have associations with either domestic or wild animals, connecting the sacred with the natural world. Stones, trees, well springs have already been

mentioned along with the wild animals, lions and wolves. The conjunction of the sacred with the natural world is also typical of the Imamzādeh in the Bakhtiari mountains.

Shahzādeh Mahmad Dināvar is a minor shrine, of local interest in the upper Bazuft valley near the highest mountain, Zardeh Kuh. The shrine is called after Shahzādeh Mahmad who is reputed to have brought Islam to this region. His descendants known as Shiekh-e Ravāti form a sub-tribe, tā'ifeh and have their summer pastures here, as well as a few small hamlets. The saint is in fact buried in Shiraz. The name Dināvar means bringer of religion. Prior to Islam, Iran was Zoroastrian and there are stories of rock graves in the higher mountains here. The Ravāti guardians look after this shrine and vehemently claim that the shrine is a miracle worker. As proof, the following story was told to an audience of migrating nomads, who greeting the tale with raised eyebrows, solemn nods and winks to each other:

'An old woman in Bazuft was out with her goats, a wolf took one. She wailed and called loudly on Shahzād Mahmad for help, asking only for the wolf, not for the return of the goat. That very day the wolf came into the village, never opening its mouth- like a donkey. Children could ride around on the back of the wolf without being harmed, and 'gusht-e gorg be chāleh', (the wolf meat in the hearth) they killed it.'

Wolves, as has already been recounted are a real danger in the mountains. There are many stories and proverbs about wolves, including the one above about the wolf meat in the hearth. This is told to children to stop them being afraid of wolves. Children wear talisman, little amulets (telesm) tied to their upper arms, made of a green cloth sown up with the hair of a wolf inside or if they can get the claw of a panther (palang) also reputedly found in the mountains. These prophylactic amulets are meant to deflect the danger of wolves, a living baby wolf may be buried in the courtyard of the house, an event not at all unknown. That wolves can in fact be coped with and defended against is apparent in the proverb 'when a wolf becomes old, the dog laughs'. Revenge is of course a typical tribal theme.

The sceptical reception of the above story led the indignant Ravati Shiekh to turn to one of those present and remind him, how the previous year they had been watching others out hunting ibex (pazan) on the opposite slope, without any luck. The other turned to the Shiekh and asked why he wasn't helping, since he was a Shiekh. So the Sheikh called on Shahzādeh Mahmad Dinaver, saying if he did not help, he would no longer believe in his power and would stop making prayers (nemāz) to him. Under this threat, almost at once the two ibex ran almost literally into the arms of the hunters and first one, then the other, was killed.

The Sheikh turned triumphantly to his companion and said now he too must believe and also give him a nazr, gift, because of the vow. He was given one of ibex, to be distributed among the Ravati.

This recounting of a deal made with the saint is typical of the nazr made at Imamzādeh, a sort of quid pro quo, where if the saint successfully grants the request, the pilgrim will do something in return, in this case continue to believe and serve the shrine.

This particular shrine is concerned with relations with wild nature, as both tales illustrate the help in controlling, in the first case, danger, in the second a source of food, these religious Imamzādeh provides help for the Bakhtiari when called upon in their encounters with wild nature.

Pīr Ahmad (Bedal)- Ahmad the guide, is a shrine on the other side of the mountains in the winter pastures in Khuzestan, in the region of Andeka. The Sa'adat (plural of seyyid), or descendants of the Imams, of this shrine are called Mārgir, catchers of snakes (mār). The shrine is especially for snakes, and the sa'adat of Pīr Ahmad have the power to protect people from snake bites, and from the effects of snake bites. Not all snakes in the region are poisonous, and few are deadly, but it is thought that during the hot dry summers, the poison in the snakes is concentrated and more dangerous. Pīr Ahmad reputedly is crawling with snakes, which never bite or harm even the children of the Sa'adat residents beside the shrine itself. Again it is held that the snakes congregate most numerously on auspicious days. These Mārgir are familiar sights in the mountains. The travel around the māls of the nomads and the settles hamlets and villages with a bag of snakes. Of the thirteen types of snakes they claimed swarmed round their shrine, some they said they ate. They perform a protective ritual for those who wish to make a nazr to the distant Pīr, and contribute food or cash, flour or even wheat. A snake is taken by Mārgir, from his bag, and laid on the back of the neck of the supplicant, who holds the head of the snake, which the tail is held by the Mārgir. An invocation for protection is made to khoda, God, asking the intercession of Pīr Ahmad. If the subject is afraid, then he or she holds the Mārgir's hand, who then holds the snake by the head and pronounce the appropriate prayer. As I was an unbeliever, the visiting Māroir said it was necessary to wind the snake right round my neck while I held the head of the snake and he held the tail. As he was mumbling the incomprehensible prayer the snake curled and bit me on the back of the hand. The quick witted Mārgir claimed that because this happened precisely when the secret prayer was being said I would come to no harm. Apart from a slight swelling, this proved to be the case. He sucked the wound, spat out the 'badness' and said another prayer. They themselves get bitten sometimes but are never harmed. Fear is worse than even the most dangerous bite he claimed, and recited a story familiar to the members of the camp group about how a man was sitting under a tree talking to a Mārgir, when a snake crawled down the tree above him and bit him on the head, without the man seeing. He brushed away what he thought was a mosquito. The Mārgir said



nothing. Some days later, the same two were sitting under the same tree and the Mārgir told the man, that he had been bitten without realising it. The man promptly dropped dead.

The theme of protection against the dangers of the wild, and the necessity of not being afraid is clear, reinforcing familiar values of bravery and discernment held dear by the Bakhtiari.

Pār Shah Alborz, is a well-cared for shrine with a magnificent old oak tree beside it in the Bakhtiari village of Alikuh, deep in the mountains. Associated with this shrine, far on the opposite side of the valley is a strange discolouration on the upper slopes of the mountainside shaped like a huge camel. Camel, though common further south among the Qashqa'i tribes, are very rare in the more precipitous Bakhtiari mountains. More significantly than this association, is the fact that the custodians of this shrine who reside in Masjid-i-Suleiman, in the winter area of Khuzestan, are also custodians of an ancient document, some said inscribed on a sheep skin, from the time of Nadir Shah, (circa 1746) giving title deeds to the land, now the village of Alikuh, as reward for the role a particular Bakhtiari played in Nadir's armies during the siege of Qandahar, in present day Afghanistan. These title deeds have insured the continuing settlement of the members of his subtribe in this fertile area, in spite of concerted attempts by the leading Khans to dispossess them at the turn of this century and later. The Sa'adat holding the ragam, the document, provided the protection necessary against illegitimate force (zur) against the tribesmen, a theme which is central in Shi'i Islam. The attempt by the Khans to oust them however, gained some support within the village causing such internal dissensions that many deaths occurred and houses destroyed. About half the inhabitants were forced to take up migrating with fellow nomads for at least a decade. It was pointed out that such was the result of attempted oppression, zur.

Pir Baraka, is a typical mountain shrine in the winter pastures in Khuzestan, hidden up a defile, with a tall conical structure rather than a dome, on top of a rectangular mausoleum, or room, always kept carefully locked. This shrine has no resident sa'adat, and the saint, one who died in the south is 'remembered' in this spot. It is surrounded by a pathway lined with cairns of stones, has several trees thick with stones and flying the usual streamers of rags, and thick with stones. The accompanying graveyard has stone lion of indeterminate age. The shrine is thought to be specifically for sick cows, which are brought here. 'Oh Barakeh, gar (gusaleh) namord: ye pas be narzet' - 'Oh Pir Baraka, do not let the calf die, one leg belongs to you as our vow'. One quarter of the calf then belongs to the Sa'adat, pledged to the shrine, or the value of a quarter of the animal. The exchange is both a cure and protection against illness.

Pir Boveir is another conical shrine close to the Munar mountain range. This shrine however has resident guardians, motāvalli, and the sa'adat who live in three of four houses beside

the shrine. There are several stone lions in this graveyard, with swords and muzzle-loading guns, puzpor, carved in relief on the sides. The shrine is located by a small water source at the head of a twisting defile. This shrine specialises in horses, donkeys and pack animals. The sa'adat also go out visiting the passing nomads from this shrine. The loss of a pack animal is always severe, since without enough pack animals the nomads cannot move their household equipment. In extreme circumstances cows are pressed into service. As well as periodic horse plagues, and the constant accidents, there is the normal irritation of heavy loads rubbing on shoulders, which regularly produce fearsome wounds. These debilitating wounds are treated with hot poultices of grasses and herbs boiled to mush and mixed with antiseptic ashes from the hearth fire, liberally applied to the protesting animals. Pir Boveir is regularly asked to help 'Ya boveir, Asb-om khu bashah'- 'Oh Boveir, make my horse well' combining the practical and the sacred in the attempt to cure the animals.

Imamzādeh Bābā Za'id is a shrine built high up on a mountainside to which a narrow winding path eventually leads. Down in the broad valley floor, there are two sacred trees, festooned with rags and heavy with stones, standing as markers of this shrine. The shrine itself is built literally round a large oak tree. Resident sheikhs, belonging to one of the major Bakhtiari sections, but terribly impoverished live here right in the middle of tribal territory. Only a few households, of completely illiterate sheikhs stay huddled on the mountainside beside this tree shrine. Bābā Za'id apparently was an old hermit. Women coming to this shrine circumambulate round the trunk of the tree inside the shrine. This shrine is particularly associated with bast, sanctuary, although ideally this is a property of all shrines. The sheiks here also play a role as mediators in inter-tribal conflict, historically very common in this particular broad and lush valley. To stop the fighting the sheikhs throw their foutāh, turban, amongst the fighters and again ideally the conflict stops and the process of negotiation can start. On Imam Riza the winding path are lines of the usual chāлкуh, stone cairns marking the way, and trees with rags tied. Characteristic of the nomad's ambivalent attitude towards such impoverished shrine sheikhs, they commonly steal what little wheat the sheikhs manage to grow down in the valley, leaving them to eke out their meagre diet with acorn bread.

Pir Bauruzemun or Pir Ali Riza: There are resident sa'adat round this shrine in Iran is called zi'ārat, to pay a visit. Women make zi'ārat to this shrine very commonly, staying at least one night and sometimes as long as a week. There is the typical conical structure on top of the rectangular tomb room. This shrine is well looked after and is surrounded with evergreen murt, myrtle trees, which 'smell sweet', balut (oak) and arghaman (judas tree) in the precincts of the shrine. This well thought of shrine, believed by many of the women to be genuinely associated with the Imam Riza, specialises in curing childless, barren women. When a woman does not

have children, a total disaster for a women, or has difficulty in bearing live children, it is to this shrine she will come, on the road to the Munar in the winter pastures. A pilgrim woman, will bring with her foodstuff for several days. She usually is accompanied by other women. The barren woman must lay a small new, green cloth under one of the trees in the graveyard, folded up and left there during the night. If by the end of her stay the leaf of a murt, myrtle tree, falls on to her cloth, then her fervent wish to bear a child will be granted. If it does not then she will not. The resident sa'adat are given the usual offerings of flour, tea, sugar, and are given the green cloth. If in fact they do subsequently successfully bear a child, they return the following year with money for the sheikhs fulfilling their nazr, vow. Thus, incomplete women hope to be made whole, and fulfil their most important role, the bearing of sons, at this shrine. They ask the saint to intercede on their behalf with God, khoda, by reciting 'En khoda, ye kore de be mo'oulad nadorom'- 'Oh God, give me a son, I have no lineage (descendants). This shrine functions as the female equivalent of the stone lions for cowardly, incomplete males in the night. To be barren, or to continually miscarry, or to have one's children die one after the other is not only a personal tragedy for the afflicted woman but a social disaster for the husband. A man's personal and social identity is critically tied to the fertility of his wife, to the physiology of women. A man must have children, much preferably sons, to be fully adult, to be a complete man. A man whose wife fails to provide him with sons will inevitably find his future diminished and he will marry gain. To be the mother of sons is the ideal of every woman, ensuring a future for herself. Thus men as well as women have a particular interest in this Imamzadeh and are unlikely to complain even if the wife stays several days at the shrine. They hope the evergreen myrtle leaves will fall and provide hope that their fervent request for a future is fulfilled.

The three remaining shrines are the ones regarded as being authenticated close relations of the 8<sup>th</sup> Imam Riza, and scepticism expressed is very poorly regarded by most Bakhtiari.

Imamzadeh Shah Qut-ud Din<sup>16</sup> also known as Pir Abdullah, lies in the valley within sight of the Munar pass, and is the shrine which is the power source of the three sacred trees mentioned earlier. Qutb-ud Din pole of religion is identified as a son of Imam Musa, and thus brother of Imam Riza. There are resident Sā'adat here, and in one instance at least, they gave sanctuary to several yāghi, rebels who during the disturbances in 1952 were attempting to rally support for Mossadegh. The shrine however is most famous for a rare rain making ceremony, dar khaste bārun. For the only time at any shrine, large bodies of men are involved. After an extended period of extreme drought this ceremony may be asked to be held by the kalāntars, political chiefs of the sub tribes, ta'ifeh, whose territories are most affected. They and their followers collect at the shrine and collectively ask the resident sheikh to perform the ceremony. Each tā'ifeh provides a pel, bull, for the sacrifice. The

sheikhs are asked to erect the two bard-e Shah Qutb-ud Din, two large cone shaped boulders which lie normally on their side. The stones are apparently very heavy. An elderly sheikh is chosen to erect the stones. He has to be as old as possible because it is believed that the one who stands these stones erect will always die very shortly. It was repeatedly stated that it was certain that the man dies. The rain is reputed always to come when he dies, and the bard, stones, are then laid back down on their sides. The rain is regarded as this shrine's mo'jes, miracle. That this is a consciously known death, willingly carried out on behalf of the collected tribesmen, is seen in the exchange of the large sum of money, 20,000 tumans (about £800) was mentioned. The money is carefully and exactly collected through the attendant kalantars, and is called hin pil, the blood money for the sheikh who will die. Such blood money is normally paid between ta'ifeh for blood spilled and for killing in their feuds. The blood money is then distributed amongst the sheikhs with the bulk of the money paid to the immediate family of the elderly sheikh chosen. It was also said that the oldest was normally chosen because he would be naturally closest to death anyway. The ritual is very rarely performed because of the seriousness of the consequences for the resident sheikhs, I was informed.

Imamzādeh Sultan Ibrahim: another son of the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam Musa is the saint of this shrine, the only one in the mountain said to be visited by thousands of pilgrims, zi'āratkon, some very illustrious. In January 1878, Husain Quli Khan, the Ilkhani, or paramount chief of all the Bakhtiari tribes until his murder by the government in 1882, made the pilgrimage to Sultan Ibrahim's shrine, staying for several days<sup>17</sup>. The shrine is not at all easily accessible, being on the south side of the river Karun in a gorge. Crossing for the pilgrims is by a rope swing bridge, sitting in two legged baskets. According to another of the leading family of Khans, Sardar As'ad, frightened pilgrims tie themselves to these baskets<sup>18</sup>. Three of these jorreh (possibly charak) at this part of the river belonging to the Imamzādeh. There is a sizable community of his descendants, the Sa'adat of the shrine, now living in a village near the shrine. They were exempt from taxes and any service during the 19<sup>th</sup> century time of the Khans dominance<sup>19</sup>.

Although Sardar As'ad does not mention it, the nomads attribute a mo'jes (miracle) to Imamzādeh Sultan Ibrahim- a magical skin of gazelle, ahu, 1000 years old<sup>20</sup>. Pilgrims who are sick make for this shrine hoping for a cure by wrapping themselves in this ancient gazelle skin, which has verses written on it. Prayers are said, money is paid, sheep are sacrificed and given to the sa'adat.

The Sa'adat or sheikhs as they are sometimes known in all of the shrines mentioned, are now being incorporated into the Bakhtiari tribal system. Some like those of Sultan Ibrahim migrating with flocks and cultivating some wheat. All are regarded as being of Arab origin, being descendants of the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam, and in the latter shrines discussed, actual siblings of the revered 8<sup>th</sup> Imam Riza.

The final sacred place to be considered is that of Pīr Khantun Hal reputedly a sister of Imam Riza. It is situated near the village of Sarpīr in Chahar Mahal, right on the edge of Bakhtiari territory. It is the only example of a female saint in this part of Iran. This shrine, perhaps because of the extensive settlement in the region, both peasant and Bakhtiari, specialises in the ceremonies associated with Ashura and Tasu'a, on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> month of Muhurram. There are ceremonies mourning and commemorating the death of Husain, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Imam, who is central to the emotional and religious life of Shi'i Islam. Commemorating his martyrdom is the central ritual of Shi'ism.

This shrine has two storeys, the lower one accessible only to women. This inner and lower room is said to contain a dead, 1000 year old log of wood, on which is carved a history of the area, az qadīm, from long ago. Men are forbidden from this inner sanctum. The shrine thus links purely local elements, the ancient log, with the wider world of Shi'i Islam in the most direct way.

These last three shrines are felt to be distinct from the rest of the lesser shrines, are believed authentic and as such, more potently sacred than the others. They are far more famous, ma'ruf, more widely known among the tribemen than the others. The others are similar to other 'inauthentic' Imamzādeh in other parts of the Bakhtiari and neighbouring regions.

While a few Bakhtiari have made the pilgrimage, Hajj, to Mecca, many more have made zi'ārat to the central Shi'i shrines, to Mashad, to visit the tomb of Imam Riza, and to Karbalā, in Iraq, the site of the tomb of the third Imam, Imam Husain, whose martyrdom is annually emotionally commemorated in the rituals of the month of Muharram. Social and political status comes to those who have made such visits, while also conferring considerable religious prestige. As well as making zi'ārat to local sacred shrines, making nazr, vows, with gifts of flour, tea, sugar, and a sacrificial animal, contributing to the upkeep of shrines, whether local or central is considered a meritorious religious act.

In 1973, possibly as a consequence of a destructive earthquake in parts of Bakhtiari summer quarters, Husain Quli Khan, the Ilkhani, sent an artisan to Karbala to decorate the inner sanctum of the tomb of the Imam Husain with mirror mosaic (ā'ineh kāri)<sup>21</sup>. The worker returned three years later having expended the then not inconsiderable sum of 6,000 tumen, on the mirror work of the 'harem of Sayyid al Shuhadah', the inner sanctum of the 'lord of Martyrs', on of Husain's major titles<sup>22</sup>.

Tragically, the wanton destruction of the shrines of Karbala was reported early in 1991, by the troops of Saddam Hussain, against the Shi'i uprising during the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces.

'The most damaged shrine is the tomb of Imam Hussain...sprays of machine gun fire mark the wondrous glass works, and marble pillars in the inner sanctum of Husain's tomb'<sup>23</sup>

As has been seen in Iran as well, on several occasions, politics is no respecter of the sanctity of religious shrines.

Finally, a rather difficult tribal technique for protecting oneself from illness and dangerous forces, is at once very common, though now increasingly rare strategy of tattooing the body (khāl koftan). A deep blue colour is used for all types of tattoo (khāl). Occasionally one sees Bakhtiari men with blue dots, but rarely on the face, which is popular with the women. Sizable dots are tattooed on joints, vulnerable ankles, knees, and elbows, thought also to be a help against arthritis.

Dots are tattooed at the corners of the mouth, and of the eyes, on the cheeks and lips, protecting the vulnerable and visible orifices of the face. Sometimes the more isolated of the nomadic women have their eyebrows tattooed right across the forehead in a thick, unbroken line, which along with kohl on the inner eyelid, dramatizes and emphasises the dark green beautiful eyes (sauz-e tī-e kohl), much admired by Bakhtiari, combining aesthetic and protective reasons. Chins and necks are often tattooed with several different designs. Ankles and wrists may have a line circling both entirely, to protect the legs and arms from harm, while some have the word Allah etched protectively around the wrists. These permanent markers provide protection while also being thought to enhance a woman's beauty.

The colour of the tattoo is achieved by combining four contrasting elements. Pineh, a dark green herb which is put in dugh, a thirst quenching mixture of yogurt and water, to enhance its flavour, dīd-e cherāgh, sooty residue collected from the inside of the paraffin lamps commonly used, zahlu-e shekel, the bile of wild game, an ibex or wild goat for example, and finally shir-e piston, the breast milk of a woman recently delivered of a female child. These four items are mixed and boiled together, then kept for four days, to let the colour deepen. The part of the body to be tattooed is brushed with this mixture, with a needle continually pricking the skin, drawing blood until the mixture takes. The result is a greenish-blue tattoo.

This mix of vegetable, mineral, wild animal and human elements blending in particular an inedible part of a wild animal, the bile, with mother's milk, the most edible, life giving substance associated with fertile women, is thought a suitable balanced concoction to provide a permanent protective marking against all those unknown forces which can harm the vulnerable women in the mountains.

### Summary

The themes which emerge from this discussion of Bakhtiari encounters with the sacred are that of protection, against natural dangers confronted in their mountainous habitat, against the problems of the female life cycle, against illness or misfortune, and that of cure or transformation from illness to health with an

emphasis on the most vulnerable times of female life, pregnancy, giving birth, early childhood, and fertility.

Protection against the practical hazards faced on migrations in particular is by means of stones, thrown at dogs, at wolves, at thieves, at each other, in games, and in conflict, by means of stones built into protective walls, forming the solid base for their worldly goods against which they lean, as the back of their tents, and standing stones, marking danger spots on mountain passes. Evoking the location of sacred places, stone cairns stand as signs of the shrines, as well as symbols of powerfully protective holy descendants of the Imams, long dead, but whose tombs symbolise their permanent potency in the world. Stones, symbols of permanence, strewn everywhere in the mountains, are used in rituals as disparate as the individual chālmeh bori, the cure of sudden illness, to the collective rain bringing ritual at Shah Qutb-ed Din, transforming deadly drought to life sustaining rain for the community.

Entering into sacred spaces, into the Imamzādeh is hoped to be curative of and by itself. In so far as such zi'ārat visits are accomplished at all, they are regarded as being beneficial to the women, many of whom confessed quietly to enjoying the break from the often arduous daily work, as well as being surer they would feel better, become pregnant, or deliver safely. Although most men expressed deep scepticism, and cynical disregard for the potency of these Imamzādeh was common, the men rarely discouraged a woman from making a zi-ārat if she thought it was necessary.

Wrapping oneself around within sacred space, and round a sacred centre, the tomb in the shrine, by circumambulating, is a central mode of consciously locating oneself as close to the sacred source as possible. Echoing such circling round a sacred centre was seen within the Pīr Qār, the care shrine, where babies were passed over and under the rope of charms seven times. So too the tribal cowards, by the light of the moon, that friend of lions, pass repeatedly under the legs of the beriouc stone lions, crouched within the aura, the memory, of the dead hero, praying for the transformation for their incomplete manhood into heroism. The action of wrapping was seen also at Imamzādeh Sultan Ibrahim, where the sick enclosed themselves in the ancient pust-e āhu, gazelle skin, praying for health. The wrapping of snakes round nervous necks by mārgir seyyids continues the theme of wild nature contained by the sacred, apparent also in the protective amulets, where symbols of wild natural power, the hair of a wolf, or claw of a panther, are wrapped in cloth, coloured sacred green. Tying rags and the placing of stones in trees, themselves natural symbolic surrogates of the sacred shrines, is a means of wrapping a nazr, vow, in the sacred force field of the Imamzādeh, establishing an individual relationship with the long dead saint. Specific and personal circumstances are offered, invoking the help of the saint to protect, cure and thus transform their stat of being, their very lives.

Just as the sacred encloses and wraps up an ancient log, a tree, a sweet smelling myrtle leaf, individual Bakhtiari consciously journey in to these sacred places, zi'arat establishing a personal relationship with powerful, dead, sacred intercessors, reverently wrapping themselves in sacred knowledge, a protective power, source in khoda, God, to acquire aid in the practical daily struggles of their nomadic lives. Knowledge of sacred space and of sacred places thus comes from an essential part of their practical mastery of mountain life.

Our tombs are in the hearts of  
Our partisans and followers.  
Sabzawari

### Footnotes

1. The spring migration of the Bakhtiari is the subject of two documentary films. The classic Grass, filmed by Marian Cooper in 1924, with the Baba Ahmad ta'ifeh. See also Cooper, M.C Grass, 1925, Putnam, New York.  
People of the Wind was filmed in 1972 with the Babadi ta'ifeh by Anthony Howarth, on the Munar migration route. This feature documentary was an Academy Award and Golden Globe nominee.  
See also Brooks, D.H.M People of the Wind, 1981, manuscript, Durham. The author made the spring migration, also on the Munar route, with the Osiwand ta'ifeh in 1964 and 1966.  
For an interesting literary account of the southern Bakhtiari route through these mountains see Sackville-West, V 1928, Twelve Days, Hogarth Press, London
2. Garthwaite, G.R (1983) Khans and Shahs, Cambridge University Press, p74 quoting Hajji Khusrau Sardar Zafar (1329/1911-1333/1914), 'Tarikh Bakhtiyari', p6
3. See also Donaldson, B.A The Wild Rue, (1938) Luzac, London, p59.
4. 'When the lion shows his teeth do not  
Think that the lion smiles!  
Even when he smiles don't be secure:



He will be more bloodthirsty.' Rumi. Mathnavi M13039  
 Quoted in Schimmel, A (1978) The Triumphal Sun, London, p107.

5. Bishop, I.L Bird, Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, (1891) 2 Vols., Putnam's Sons, London, Vol.1 p 343. Vol. 2 p8 has an illustration of a stone lion gravestone. The original photograph is in Bishop, I.L Bird, Photographic Album, (1890) Collection 94, in Special Collection Department, Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
6. Tanavoli, P, Lion Rugs from Fars, (1978) Catalogue, Shanbanu Farar Foundation Festival of Arts Organisation, p21 with photographs of the stone lions.
7. Wright, H. (ed) 'Archaeological Investigations in North-eastern Khuzestan, 1976'. (1979) Technical Reports No. 10, Contribution 5, Ann Arbour, p20 and 27
8. Layard, Sir H, Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana and Babylonia, (1894), New Edition, J Murray London, Republished 1971, Gregg Int. England, p185-189
9. Tanavoli, P, op. cit. p23 and 24.
10. Bishop, I.L Bird, op. cit. vol. 2, p75 and 'The Upper Karun Region and the Bakhtiari Lurs', The Scottish Geographical Magazine, (1892), Vol 68, p13, Edinburgh
11. 'All the lions seek moonlight. I am a lion and the friend of the moonlight' Rumi. Diwan 919/9674  
 Quoted in Schimmel, op. cit. p155
12. Donaldson, B (1938) The Wild Rue, p24
13. Ibid., p59 on such sacred trees

14. 'Imamzādeh', Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition (1971), Vol. 3, Fasc. 59/60. Brill/Luzac, p1169-70
15. Bettridge, A (1981) 'Specialists in Miraculous Action: Some Shrines in Shiraz' Unpublished paper version
16. Hajji Ali Quli Khan, Sardar As'ad, Tārikh-e Bakhtiari, (1327/1909) Lithographed, Tehran, p.531. Here Sardar As'as states that this shrine is associated with the Shah Ni'mat u'llahi school of Darwishes.
17. Hussain Quli Khan's 'Kitābchah' (diary) in Garthwaite, G, Khans and Shahs, op. cit. p156
18. Tārikh-e Bakhtiari, op. cit. p219
19. Ibid., p530
20. '(The Imam Riza is) also popularly known as 'zāmen-e ahū', the protector of the gazelles', Richard, Y, Le Shi'ism en Iran, A.M Jean Maisoneuve, Paris, 1980, p17
21. 'Kitabchah', op. cit., p148
22. Ibid, p152
23. The Observer, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1991, 'Najaf', Kathy Evans