

Introduction to 'People of the Wind'

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In 2003, the anthropology department at Durham University hosted the Royal Anthropology Institute's annual film festival. The highlight was the showing of the Oscar-nominated film, 'People of the Wind', which is based on David Brooks' script and anthropology. The film played to a packed auditorium, with David's family in the audience. Hardly anyone had seen the film before. The film was introduced by Susan Wright and Peter Ustinov made a memorable commentary on the film afterwards.

It is a privilege to introduce the film 'People of the Wind' and provide some background about the way the film was made and about the contribution to visual anthropology of its anthropologist, David Brooks. Although I have not seen the film before, I heard a lot about it from David and I have read about it in his archives. David died in 1994 and I am his literary executor.

'People of the Wind' is about the Bakhtiari in S.W Iran. It follows one leader and his camp group on their spring migration. Their winter quarters in the plains of Khuzestan, in the oil area of Iran, will soon become baking hot. They travel over the range of Zagros mountains to their summer pastures on the other side, in Chahar Mahal, near Isfahan.

This twice yearly migration is hazardous in the extreme. There are 6 major ranges to cross in the Zagros. The highest Zardeh Kuh, is snow-bound at 15,000 ft. Each of the major mountain passes follows a tiny rock path, polished by use and slippery with rain and ice, which goes diagonally or zigzags up sheer rock faces.

If a donkey catches its load on the rock face, if sheep panic or if a person, pregnant, crippled with arthritis, or carrying a young lamb or donkey round their neck, gets tired and loses their footing, they tumble down the precipice. Many people and flocks died in this way, or were caught in sudden thunderstorms whose deluges sweep all before them down the mountainside, or they failed to complete a pass during daylight and were frozen to death on the rock face overnight.

All this takes judgement on when and how fast to move without over-exhausting people and animals. Survival depends not only on getting through the passes, but on allowing the animals enough time to graze in intervening valleys and maintain their body weight, yet complete the whole journey in 4-8 weeks, before humans run out of their carefully calculated food supplies.

According to the 1966 census, there were 650,000 Bakhtiari nomads doing this migration.

There are only four routes through the mountains. The Munar Road, followed by David in 1964 and 1966, and by the film crew in 1971 and 1972, is used by 90,000 people - all setting off in the 6 week period after Persian New Year (21st March). David was fascinated by this major logistical operation and by the kind of leadership involved.

People travel in camp groups (*mal*) of 5-15 tents. This usually means a *mal* is about 70 people and 500-1000 sheep and goats, plus donkeys carrying their tents and equipment. Camp groups belong to tribal sections. We follow the migration of the camp group of Jafar Qoli who, as well as being leader of a *mal*, is also one of the leaders of the Babadi tribal section (20,000 people).

There are 180 tribal sections in all. Each has a designated territory in winter quarters and in summer quarters. There is an established sequence by which the tribal sections go through the passes. There are a traditional number of days each tribal section stays in the intervening valleys to graze their flocks without overly depleting the grass supply for the tribal sections that follow. Each camp group also has usual camping places - if they get there before others occupy them.

There is a continual tension between individuals and camp groups asserting their own independent judgement, moment to moment, day to day, for the survival and safe passage of their own camp group. Leadership of the tribal sections is based on respect rather than any formal authority. They try to marshal the leaders of the other camp groups in their tribal section who are all using their independent judgement so as to gain maximum advantage of resources and of weather conditions, whilst knowing that if any of them are caught infringing the customary rights of other groups, the whole tribal section will be embroiled in fighting and the migration will be put in jeopardy.

The film is a study of Jafar Qoli's management of the migration and the balancing act he performs in order to be a successful leader of his camp group and his tribal section.

He is doing at least 4 things at once:

1. Reading the fast changing environmental and weather conditions and responding quickly e.g. he dashes down a mountainside to avoid a thunderstorm.
2. Using a well-judged combination of persuasion, manipulation, wile, and assertions of authority to get fiercely independent men in the camp groups in his section through the mountains safely.
3. Protecting his tribal section from the onslaught of theft and attacks from other tribal sections - notably from the Mowri, a Bakhtiari tribal group whose winter and summer quarters are close together in the middle of the route, and who live by stealing animals from passing nomads. Jafar Qoli has married his sister to the leader of the Mowri and reminds him of this alliance by visiting him during the migration. Leaders such as Jafar Qoli with a reputation for clever negotiation and scheming with other leaders, yet who are known for immediate use of force against infringement of their rights, are able to protect their tribesmen.
4. Negotiating successfully with the state authorities that patrol the migrations and pastures, and whose policies have tried to impoverish and settle the nomads.

Jafar Qoli, born 1917/18, has survived the hostile, anti-tribal and enforced settlement policies of Reza Shah in the 1930s. Following the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, the Bakhtiari resumed migrations and fought the Persian army. Jafar Qoli gained a reputation for successfully leading these skirmishes.

Jafar Qoli has made strategic marriages first to the sister and then the daughter of the most powerful of the Babadi leaders - who in turn was married to the daughter of the paramount leader of the Bakhtiari, the Ilkan. Jafar Qoli also married women from other sections of the Babadi. This gave Jafar Qoli political and economic links to the provinces. For example, he got the contract for supplying Babadi labour to the Russian-built steel mill at Isfahan, from which he is profiting. He has 1000 sheep and goats, land, and construction and other economic interests. By the 1960s he was one of the 'rising stars' who negotiated successfully with the Shah's regime.

David Brooks' Anthropology

David's research started with the traditional concerns of 1960s anthropology - how a tribe is structured, how its leadership works, how it is organised economically, politically and socially.

But soon, also in keeping with his times, he had moved on to a concern with symbolism and the meaning the Bakhtiari make of their lives.

He described how he struggled with and discarded an analysis based on structures and boundaries. Foreshadowing Deleuze by several decades, he explained

‘coming to some sort of an understanding of the nature of Bakhtiari experience - attempting to interpret their culture - culture seen as systems of significance or meaning - has been bedevilled by the mobility, variability, and flexibility of their cultural forms. While this is by no means unique, the nomadic experience is one that is by definition primarily the expression of movement - of *moving through* rather than *living in* the world’.

Where David was ground-breaking was the way he saw the migration as not only providing the actual formative experience of the Bakhtiari, but the central metaphors of movement, mobility and flexibility for their ideas of leadership, masculinity, and bodily deportment. As his phrase ‘moving through the world’ also implies, David saw movement as providing the core metaphors for their ideas of cosmology and religion.

David argued that migration was the formative experience of the Bakhtiari - from birth, ‘they came to know their world through movement’. Or, as he put it, ‘The world is perceived, structured and imagined by the Bakhtiari in idioms of movement and mobility’. This movement and mobility has three dimensions:

- physical movement and the migration
- strategic and political flexibility.
- balance and judgement displayed in a man's deportment and the movements of his body - when to move slowly and deliberately and when to move quickly to seize a moment and assert control of events.

Movement is learnt, written on the body, and displayed in the men's stick dance – a combination of grace and combat in which timing, speed, strategy and judgement are of the essence.

In many ways, the film ‘People of the Wind’ is David's testament, his magnum opus, the place where his ideas are most clearly explained. He wrote some important papers, about tribal history, politics and leadership, and pilgrimage and sacred places, about dance, and about gender and women who successfully defy constraints on their role and behaviour and are labelled ‘shizan’ or lion women.

But his main energy went into two ways of putting over his ideas, both relying heavily on visuality. First, was his teaching and giving papers. In his lectures, while his exciting use of language made his ideas fly, he spoke to slides he had taken during fieldwork, or used the 1924 film on the Bakhtiari ‘Grass’. Especially when talking about the body, dance, and gender, he also dressed in tribal clothes and enacted scenes, even playing Bakhtiari music and staging the Bakhtiari stick dance/fights with his male graduate students.

His second main activity was in putting anthropological ideas over to the public through popular publications like encyclopaedias, the National Geographic, or newspapers. Often his

contributions took the form of extended captions to photographs, or better still, by enabling filmmakers to make anthropologically informed documentaries for popular consumption. He provided extensive briefing notes on the Bakhtiari to a number of programme makers, for example for Bronowski's 'Ascent of Man' for the BBC. He also provided very detailed and accurate advice on who to seek out in the complex and very tense political scene both in S.W. Iran and within the national bureaucracy in order to get rare access and permission to film - while at the same time expose the invidious policies of the government towards the nomads. Against the trend of the 1970s to make anthropology exclusive and obscure, he, on the contrary, wanted to spread the message in clearly understood images and language about the ways that participant observation gave unique insights into how other people made meaning in their lives. He was passionate but not precious about anthropology. Unlike many other anthropologists of this time, he wanted non-anthropologists, especially film-makers, to engage in participant observation too. He even helped them to participate in the rite of passage that had defined him as an anthropologist - joining the Bakhtiari in their hazardous migration.

David and Marianne Brooks' fieldwork in the 1960s

David and his wife, Marianne, arrived, newly wed in Iran, just after a rebellion in the Bakhtiari, so no permission to do research was available. At that time, the Shah's policies towards nomadic tribes combined a carrot and a stick:

- the tribes were no longer subject to enforced settlement
- there was military rule and disarmament of the tribes
- the forests, on which tribespeople relied for firewood and grazing were nationalised, which was a way of restricting or controlling access to this essential resource
- there was a tax on goats. Sheep are the income earners, by selling lambs. But goats are the survival mechanism: they provide milk; the tents are woven from goat hair, which makes them adaptable in both heat and rain; goats do not just rely on grass but eat trees and even browse in mountain gorges. A tax on goats threatened the basis of their livelihood.
- the government developed services to make the government look benign and to encourage settlement.

To develop services, the government has set up a Department of Tribal Affairs and Mary Gharagozlu (wife of Hamid, the Bakhtiari Ilkani) was responsible for planning developments in the Bakhtiari. She set up a small team of professionals to experience the nomads' lives at first hand and plan improvements. This included finding a medically trained person to run a clinic while migrating with them as well as in the summer and winter quarters.

David's wife Marianne was a trained nurse and she got the job. The clinic consisted of four trunks on the back of 2 donkeys. David and Marianne had one week to learn how to ride. Then they were off on the migration. They went with a tent group of Bardin (part of the Osiwand tribal section) made up of 11 tents, 70 people, 800 sheep and goats and plus the government officials who monitored the migration.

Marianne's clinic was a great success. After each morning's travel, when the nomads stopped for the day, Marianne put up her clinic. It was visited by crowds of Bakhtiari nomads throughout the migration to the summer quarters. She was known as *shizan*, which David explained was 'a term given to women who shall we say don't allow either men or difficult circumstances to dominate them'. Later, after their son Ruaridh was born, David continued to do fieldwork on his own, but he said, 'every trip, I made, I lived on the kudos of Marianne's clinic!'

The first person to call Marianne 'shirzan' was Jafar Qoli, the hero of this film. He was coming to prominence under the Shah, as a daring and imposing figure. Although there was a blood feud between Jafar Qoli's Babadi tribal section and the Bardin's Osiwand tribal section, courageously, he came to the Bardin camp. He strode through the crowd on a particularly busy day at Marianne's clinic and demanded instant treatment. Marianne made Jafar Qoli wait his turn, which meant she treated women and children first - something unheard of in tribal life. There was a sudden silence. David said 'I mentally said goodbye to my research but finally Jafar Qoli grinned and said he would wait'.

When Marianne did see him, he demanded medical supplies for his tribal section to last them through the migration. This would have depleted Marianne's clinic. She said no. Again, silence. His response was to call her 'shir zan' - an acceptance of defeat. As the tallest and most imposing of the Bakhtiari he also was conscious, as was David, that David was just slightly taller. A tense but mutual respect subsisted between David and Jafar Qoli ever after. David was enthralled by Jafar Qoli as an example of a successful leader who had survived successive regimes and continued to hold his own in the tribe and with the authorities.

When, back in Britain, David heard that *The Daily Telegraph* was planning to send that newspaper's photographer Anthony Howarth to the Bakhtiari along with Susha, the famous Iranian pop star and folk singer, as translator, David seems to have contacted them. He suggested they go on the migration with Jafar Qoli. One can almost see the glee with which he foisted this expensive crew on his sparring partner, but he also knew Jafar Qoli had the power to protect them and the ability to make them see their humanity as well as the terrible the conditions with which they lived.

Anthony Howarth and Susha went with Jafar Qoli on the spring migration in 1971. Susha wrote to David (letter dated 13 May 1971) clearly acknowledging that his advice and introductions had led to the success of the trip.

'My trip with the Bakhtiari was a dream! I must tell you at length about it. We took 8000 photos which was fantastic and I will show some to you. I travelled with Jafar Qoli and his family and 'mal'. They adopted me so sweetly that I could have stayed for a long time if I hadn't left the family behind'

The article in the *Daily Telegraph* is based on Howarth's fantastic pictures and David's briefing notes, woven into a day to day journal of events.

Anthony Howarth and David Koff formed a production company to make commercial documentary films, based in Los Angeles and London. They decided to make a further trip with the Bakhtiari and to film it. Again they travelled with Jafar Qoli. A small crew of 5 included sound, camera, and Susha as interpreter. It was a tough and mobile team because Bakhtiari wait for no one once they start moving. They filmed entirely on location. Nothing was acted or re-enacted.

Every piece of equipment was duplicated. They had two generators for charging camera batteries, and petrol to run them. They had four cameras, although they only used two at a time. They took sound equipment to supply the film with synchronised sound. They recorded sound throughout the migration, despite breaking five mic cables while sliding through ice and snow in the descent of Zardeh Kuh. They used 100,000 foot of Kodak Ektachrome film stock that was carried on three mules. No exposed film could be returned to base daily so it was all carried through the whole migration, and even though one donkey rolled down a mountainside, none was lost. Their equipment weighed two tons in total and was carried on 23 mules. Each of the crew had two mules,

one for riding and one for equipment. The rest were for sending ahead or behind the tribe out of shot.

The result was 35 hours of film recording, 5000 still photographs and 100 hours of taped conversations and interviews, as well as diaries and notebooks. In 1976 Howarth and Koff gave David a contract as translator and script advisor. The contract offered him a £500 fee, out of pocket expenses, credit on the film, and one 16mm print of the film.

David went to Los Angeles. According to Koff's own account David transcribed Jafar Qoli's interviews and the conversations on film, he annotated the pictures, and provided his own materials, not least 'voluminous research notes and vivid recollections'. The film's narration is 'woven together from these diverse ingredients to reflect as accurately as possible both in fact and in mood, the character of Jafar Qoli'.

David's idea was not to have the usual expert 'voice over' but to have Jafar Qoli in his own words, as interpreted by David, explain his own world.

They chose an actor to play the voice of Jafar Qoli, and 'the decision to use James Mason's voice was not difficult. The voice has to resemble in timbre the voice of Jafar Qoli and had to have a distinctive accent. The actor would have to use his voice to gently insinuate, to be ironical and sarcastic. The closer he could come to the way Jafar Qoli talks, the more insight he would give into Jafar's character'.

David was overjoyed that James Mason agreed and he was delighted with the acting of what by now he considered his script. His archive contains the script that James Mason spoke from with marks for pauses etc., and Mason's doodles of the lion gravestones of famous leaders that are seen on the film [these doodles, reproduced in David's teaching notes to accompany the film, are now available on the Brook's Archive website].

David Brooks then spent a further seven weeks in Hollywood with the editor, editing the film. He said 'what I learned was the way the script which Koff and I wrote determined major changes in the editing and that the editing is the crucial time in projecting 'meaning''. David Brooks even coined the title of the film 'People of the Wind', yet he is not credited in the film's publicity materials - let's see if he is credited on the film itself.

Although 'People of the Wind' was intended for a college market and was not distributed through commercial cinemas, the film ran for 16 weeks in San Francisco and outran King Kong! It received excellent reviews:

'Splendidly eye-filling and casually informative'

'Blessedly free from the stodgy, sociological posturing that had marred numerous documentary endeavours in the past'.

'There is no subtle condescension or anthropological tone taken about this so-called primitive tribe.'

'David Koff's script conveys a profound appreciation for the grace with which these people face a difficult existence and for the pride in the fact, as Jafar says, 'migration makes us what we are'. San Francisco Chronicle

Note that the script is especially praised and David's message has got through.

'People of the Wind' was nominated for an Oscar for 'best documentary feature' in 1977. It received a Golden Globe nomination for best documentary and it received a Film Advisory Board Award of Excellence.

But when the film did not actually win the Oscar, the distribution company seems to have lost interest. More importantly, the distribution company refused to comply with David's contract and send him a copy of the film. By 1981 David had still not seen the film himself. He went to New York to the offices of Unifilm and there persuaded them to give him a showing. There was then a correspondence in which he and Koff, the script writer and one of the directors of the production company, try to persuade Unifilm to let David have either his own copy as in his contract or a promotional copy of the film.

In the end, David persuaded Unifilm to lend him a cassette for one month (they refused to send him a print because of exorbitant shipping costs) to show at the 9-11 July 1981 meeting of the British Middle East Studies Conference where he organised a panel on Iran and Afghanistan. He also prepared teaching notes to accompany the film.

But the film was never released in the UK, even for college audiences. David had given about a dozen papers in the 1970s based on 'Grass', an earlier film on the Bakhtiari migration in 1924, which he contrasted with his own slides of the migration in which he participated during his fieldwork in 1964-66. His dream was to be able to lecture just as widely and publicly using 'People of the Wind' a film based on his knowledge of the Bakhtiari and very much reflecting his interpretation of the meaning of migration, movement and flexibility in their lives.

Conclusion: 'People of the Wind' in the context of anthropological documentaries

'People of the Wind' can be compared to another film about leadership of the same period- Ongka's Big Moka. Both are based on engaging characters. Both follow a story – Jafar Qoli's migration and Ongka's organisation of a pig feast in New Guinea. Both, via their stories, vividly depict the cultural values and logic at play, with a combination of deep respect and humor.

There are 2 main differences:

1. There was a tension in making Ongka, between the director who wanted to make the visual speak for itself and the anthropologist, Strathern, who saw a documentary as a genre 'into which to include as many ethnographic, i.e. verbally expressed facts, as possible'. The result is a visually exciting film with an Olympian sounding commentator who is disembodied from the action but knows all about it.

For 'People of the Wind', David Brooks worked with the script writer and editor in a different way. They used the film footage and sound recordings as ethnographic fieldwork, out of which to make an ethnography in film, rather than in a book. But just as in a monograph, the film reveals not only the anthropologist's analysis and understanding of the Bakhtiari's view of their world, but it shows how this analysis emerges from the words and actions of the people themselves. This is achieved by working from the words of Jafar Qoli and writing the script as if spoken by the key actor himself.

2. Whereas Ongka's Big Moka is probably the most shown ethnographic film that is included in most courses where film is used, no students have seen People of the Wind. It should be just as iconic in anthropology but the commercial distribution company has prevented access.¹

¹ A rather poor quality version of People of the Wind has since become available on video.