

Sacred Space and Sacred Place: pilgrimage in the Bakhtiari of Iran

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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 entails 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. 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, which 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 conditions, grazing their sheep and goats on progressively higher pasture land, up over the highest mountain range with peaks of 14,000ft, over the highest passes, often snow bound, at 12,000ft.

There are only four main migration routes in Bakhtiari territory, some more difficult than other, 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 bound mountain passes with whistling gales. Dust storms with 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 sometimes people fall down cliff faces, drown in rivers, freeze to death; tribal fights break out and people get maimed or killed; camps get 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 mountains 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 do the nomads. The rivers are low in the autumn and no longer present the same rushing hazards of the spring. This 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 overly brief description, a pre-requisite for successful nomadism and often for survival itself depends on their 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 on 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 are

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 a 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 into 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 conditions, animals get lost.

The constant draining of animals through accident, careless herding, and bad decisions can quickly set a nomad on the path to ruin. The loss of a pack animal can spell disaster for a family, particularly if that pack animal was carrying the wheat flour, on which they live. One infamous pass, for example, is so narrow as it runs for over one kilometre along a cliff face, with overhanging rocks, that the animals have to go single file, and on occasion an overly laden animal will accidentally slip, its bulky pack bump against the cliff face, sending the wretched beast over the cliff to a valley floor several hundred metres below. Another pathway, so difficult only people on foot can travel this way, while the pack animals travel over the pass higher up. This is known as the Path of the Women, and involves scrambling with great difficulty down a jagged rocky cliff, a feat very difficult for heavily pregnant women. Many women, over the years have fallen to their death here.

In spite of and, at least in part, because of the undoubted natural hazards of the migrations, they are also a time of adventure, a time when the nomads meet many others they normally would not. The young men, and women enjoy this chance to meet, look at and, with care, flirt with one another while on the move. It is a time of excitement, continual movement and activity. Their rich poetry and song sing of the delights and the dangers of the mountains, of their freedom, of their bravery, singing of past tribal fights in the mountains, and tell stories of events, of thieves and adventures boar hunting. To become Bakhtiari is to know the mountains, to participate in this fluid, mobile system in which movement is the predominant feature.

Migrations are looked forward to with mixed emotions. The young anticipate the adventure keenly, the women with wary anticipation of a period of hard and constant work, the elder men with worries about grazing and weather conditions. Much discussion and consultation is necessary before deciding when to start migrating. Information is gathered as best as possible about weather conditions high in the mountains, whether the snow is bad, the rivers high, whether to move early to avoid bad snow. Much anticipation of conditions they are likely to meet weeks or so later on, when they expect to reach the snow line. Above all, an auspicious day must be chosen for the start, if they are to avoid trouble, and commonly the Quran is consulted. Time as well as space

and place vary qualitatively for the Bakhtiari. There are auspicious days and times of day, there are inauspicious days and times of day, just as there are places of good luck and bad luck. There are days on which it is especially inauspicious to move at all, to stir outside the tents, and if for climatic reasons which make movement unavoidable on such days, at such times, then direction of movement will be reversed for a short distance, before setting out in the direction needed, thus sending the inauspiciousness in the wrong direction.

Briefly then, nomadic Bakhtiari come to know their world, their environment, nature through their constant movement. As pastoralists they do not transform nature but move through it, like the wind. One of their self-descriptions is 'Badi' meaning 'People of the wind' as opposed to 'khaki', or those of the earth. This fluid metaphor is particularly apt for these nomads; they live in small camping groups, and blend into the natural environment almost invisibly. Their camp formations are irregular, adaptable to changing camp sites, changing in composition and size according to the terrain they are passing through, or prevailing grazing conditions and also extant political conditions. Sometimes larger groups are necessary for defensive reasons. Nomadic society has to be fluid, expanding or contracting through time, hyper adaptable, flexible yet strong.

Movement through space and in time is thus the major means whereby the nomadic Bakhtiari interact with and live in nature. They are part of the natural world, a world which, as has been described, is dangerous, unpredictable, and changeable. 'Nature' can never be ignored, but must be given exceedingly carefully and vigilant attention. Not to know the natural world is to invite disaster, is to be foolhardy at best, and arrogant at worst, an arrogance which brings with it the real possibility of death, not only to oneself, but to others. The natural world is not conceived of, or experienced as separate by the nomadic. They see themselves as living in nature, just as nature lives in them, enclosed by the natural world, as they in turn enclose their own natural beings. Each qualitatively transform each other through their mutual interaction, and through their experience and knowledge of each other. The notion of a knowledgeable natural world, and in turn man knowing and 'respecting'- 'Ehteheram' nature entails the active knowing and respecting by man. Not to know, to ignore or be careless of the natural world, not to respect its inherent power is to invite retaliation. Not only in the apparently pragmatic issues of bad decisions leading to loss of animals, but in illness, failure, injury and on occasion death. A great deal of knowledge entails experience, and remembering. Knowledge in large part is memory. Forgetfulness is not only produces inconveniences, but just the sorts of disasters mentioned above. A particularly poignant example about such 'forgetfulness', wilful lack of knowledge is exemplified in a popular Bakhtiari ballad about a young Bakhtiari who fell in love with a beautiful girl from another tribal section, rode into

camp on a particular night and carried her off, normally a feat of considerable heroism. Khodabas, the beautiful dark-eyed beauty dies shortly after, sung about with much lamentation, because Abdo Mahmad, the 'hero' stole her away on one of the most inauspicious nights of the year. He forgot, he carelessly ignored a 'natural' fact, the inauspiciousness of his chosen time, and the object of his love, Khodabas pays with her life as a result of his inattention. Abdo Mahmad forcefully journeying to the centre of the alien camp in quest of his love brings about the death of this love object, and she is transformed for ever into a memory, constantly sung by the Bakhtiari. The union be so desired, as result of his 'senses being out of place' as the song sings, results in a terminal separation.

As nomads, their experience of places varies in time. Places are for coming to, arriving at and leaving. For Bakhtiari nomads places are in fact events associated with these places, and are associated with the history of their experience of that place. Thus through particular events places come to be auspicious or inauspicious, a place where a battle was won for example. But that same place has inauspicious associations for those who lost that particular battle. Different tribal groups have very different associations of the same place. The same tribal group also can have different and contradictory or opposed associations of the same place from year to year. Moreover, in nomadic experience, all places are for passing through, year after year. The temporary association with places results in events, history being an integral part of the place, and space in the abstract is conceived. The multiplicity of names for the same place strongly suggests this. Space is always qualitatively perceived, and is of course dependent on the human experience of place. Space, and particular places thus are the product of the human experiences of it.

The Bakhtiari mountains are filled with places of good luck or bad luck, and in passing through such positively or negatively charged space the nomads constantly acknowledge the power of such places. The 'power' comes from the human experiences accumulated around that place, and cannot be ignored without consequence. Bad luck requires to be stopped or deflected, good luck to be incorporated, injected.

The mobile image of swallowing bad or good luck, negative or positive power is the most commonly used metaphor. The ecology of the mountains makes such confrontation with these negative power places inevitable, since they are the accumulated product of nomadic experience. Places of bad luck contain the 'memory' of the evil, bad events and as such has to be dealt with. Just as movement itself in inevitable and necessary for Bakhtiari nomads, it is also dangerous. Deflecting such dangerous places takes a variety of forms, all of which acknowledge the existence of the negative qualities of the particular place- saying a preventative prayer, invoking the aid of innumerable saints, tying a rag to a tree, placing a stone in a tree with an appropriate invocation powerful enough to stop the bad luck from entering oneself, to deflect the power.

The prayer, muttered sotto voice, the stone and the rag all are active alignments with the power of God, with positively charged power. This places with the reputation of evil are skirted if possible, if not, are acknowledged, and are littered with little cairns of stones, or trees festooned with rags and stones. To further the identification of the self with the tied rags or stone, each will be kissed three times, pressed against the forehead 3 times before placing in the tree (knowledge again). These small cairns of stones and stone infested trees act as markers, signals of the presence of danger and evil. They mark off the danger area, enclosing the danger, containing the danger. They are however more than mere markers of negative power. These cairns of stones and in particular the rags or stone festooned trees are positively charged symbols of containment. The living tree containing stones, more permanent immobile symbols of the 'knowledge' and attention of the nomad, of his/her prayer becomes charged with the power of the many prayers acknowledging the invoked aid and power of Allah, or the saints. The structure of the whole then becomes an image of transformation, the positive power of the passing nomad's alignment with divine power containing the negative power or bad luck, the result of past events. The past is thus also acknowledged and transformed by the ongoing present in an act of knowledgeable memory. The present is not separated from the past, but contains the past, in this case negative, in order for the future to be qualitatively positive. Thus the ritual activities, carried out with a degree of casualness, associated with the many places of lurking bad luck, do not just deflect, but make a positive attempt to qualitatively transform.

Places of positive power are also found scattered throughout those mountains. Here we find the balance of nature and culture constructed rather differently. With nature being more clearly enclosed by culture if I may put it this way. These places of positive power are marked by shrines. To formalise the argument somewhat it is possible to see in Bakhtiari territory a hierarchy of shrines which link the more naturally grounded places of ill omen into the world of Islam. These shrines are the focus of local visitation and pilgrimage. Unlike the places of negative power outlined above, which are unavoidable, the shrines are sacred places which one journeys to with deliberation. At least some Bakhtiari do. Many are thoroughly sceptical about the claim to sacredness of some of the shrines, dismissing the miracles- 'monjes' associated with these lesser shrines as nonsense. Others, associated with descendants of the Imams of Shiah Islam- Imamzadeh as they are referred to, are given considerably more respect, even when the authenticity of the reputed descendent of the Imam's is openly in doubt. The term 'Pir' is for all of the shrines- meaning venerable, or saint, but Imamzadeh is reserved for those shrines associated with a descendent of the Imams. Being high in the mountains all of those sacred spaces, positive power points are the centres of only local Ziarat- local visitations most of them being relatively inaccessible even for the Bakhtiari.

On their biannual migrations, the nomads pass several of their shrines which are to be found on all routes. Each of the many tribes of the Bakhtiari are reputed to have a shrine within their own winter or summer pastures. I have by no means information on all of the shrines in Bakhtiari territory. On passing a shrine, which are usually to be found at some distance from the migration routes, on the sides of mountains, or in narrow gorges, Bakhtiari do not noticeably react at all. Again an overwhelming casualness appears at first sight to characterise most Bakhtiari, in particular the men, where there is not downright scepticism. However, not to acknowledge the presence of these distant sacred places is to show 'lack of respect'. The women of the camp group will usually 'silam berasand'- make a greeting directly towards the shrine. This is done by a slight bowing of the head as the woman turns in the saddle of her horse, or donkey, towards the shrine and makes a circular motion with her hand, drawing the positive emanating from the sacred place towards her. Again the notion of incorporation, of swallowing is used. If anything untoward happened, an accident, catching cold or worse afterwards, then a possible explanation will be that no one has acknowledged the presence of the sacred shrine. No respect had been given. The shrine had been forgotten. In discussing the nature of the power of these sacred places, it was explained using the analogy of invisible electric wires with power flowing out, radiating out from the shrine, and it was necessary to align yourself with this power, to immerse oneself knowingly within the power field. The importance of intention (niyat) necessary for the efficacy of all Islamic rituals including the Haj was stressed. Such intentional acknowledgement of the shrines enhances one's life chances, success and helps keep the negative influences extant in the world at bay. There is thus two simultaneous effects, deflecting of the bad and enhancement of the good.

However since, when only passing these shrines, and not making a visitation, a ziarat, being distant from the power source itself, it would be dangerous to make an open show of one's respect. This would be to attract the possibility of the 'evil eye' of bad luck, so such distant acknowledgements are done almost invisibly, not to advertise the activity. It took me some considerable time to notice that such alignments were in fact consistently done every time a shrine is in the vicinity. As mentioned above sotto voice prayers accompany such alignments orally marking the 'niyat' the intention.

Each shrine is in fact the centre of positively charged space, the source of this power coming from the divine presence of a long dead saint- remembered and embodied in the shrine. Surrounding the shrine at distances of several kilometres are 'Motavali' or guardians of the shrine. These are tall cairns of stones which mark the presence of the shrine- reminders, visible presences of the more powerful shrine itself, both surrounding the shrine, guarding the shrine, and pointing towards the shrine. Mnemonic marks to the nomads of the sacred shrine. Each tribal section's territory thus appears to have in its centre a shrine, the centre of qualitatively

defined space associated with the divine presence in the natural world.

Most of the shrines also have human guardians, living beside the shrine, less permanent than the stone motavali marking the periphery of these sacred places, but maintaining the shrine. These seyids are usually thoroughly impoverished, and although many Bakhtiari come to make vows and pray for better health at the shrine's they tend to prey upon the seyids, treating them with a deep ambivalence bordering often on outright contempt. The seyids however are rarely denied their small tribute of tea, sugar, bread and salt when often they come visiting the passing nomadic camps. While receiving these 'gifts' in return for dubiously received prayers for the nomads wellbeing, as often as not the Bakhtiari will allow their camp dogs to speed the sayids on their way. These sayids attending the less important shrine are entirely illiterate and unversed in religious matters. At the more religious sanctioned Imamzadeh are to be found. They are treated with much more respect.

These lesser shrines have dubious 'miracles' associated with them and develop particular reputations. One particular is famous for curing barren women, another for curing lame pack animals and horses, yet another cows diseases. One shrine, Pir Baba Zaid, high on the side of a precipitous mountain and difficult to get to, provides sanctuary, effectively in inter-tribal fighting. Common to all of these shrines, which are conical or dome structures is that beside the shrine there is always a large tree, festooned with rags, broken twigs and stones representing prayers and vows by visiting pilgrims. In the case of Pir Baba Zaid, the shrine has been built round the tree, and pilgrims enter the shrine, circumambulate the tree seven times and press themselves against the tree, merging as far as is possible with the 'centre'. The tree will invariably be kissed as the invocation is made. The conjunction of culture, the shrine, evoking a memory of a saint associated with the shrine, with enclosed nature, the tree, which is circumambulated and then kissed is the structure common to all shrines. It is also of course strikingly similar to the circumambulations of the Ka'aba, the most sacred centre of the Muslim world. The desired effect in the case of Pir Baba Zaid is to activate, by circumambulation the power of the sacred place, in order to effect a transformation of the pilgrim, cure barrenness, improve health, ensure good fortune. None of these lesser shrines contain the tomb of the associated saints, but all have contained within them or are built right beside a large tree. In another case a pool in which sacred one-eyed fish which can never be eaten are to be found. The power of these sacred places comes from the association, often dubious with a saint, with a powerful object from living nature- special tree, a pool with sacred fish, culture containing nature.

Ascending, the spiritual hierarchy, a particularly interesting shrine is to be found on the edge of tribal territory proper associated with a cave- called Pir Qar the cave shrine. Long in the past a descendant of the Imams entered this cave to pray and never

reappeared. The cave has a sort of funnel which disappears up into the cliff in which this cave is to be found, and where the Imamzadeh is reputed to have 'disappeared'. A sort of 'Hidden Imamzadeh' in minor occultation. This particular shrine has the power to cure children of a wide range of complaints. Women only bring their children here, light candles inside the cave and throw stones up into the cave walls. If the stone sticks on the many crevices of the wall the child will be cured. This has to be done three times. Across the walls of the cave is strung a string of beads, bells and tied stones. The sick child has to be carried over and under this string of bells seven times. The child is made to circumambulate the string of bells.

This little shrine is at the source of a small river, and is surrounded by huge cypress trees. It has become a picnic place as well as a place of local pilgrimage. It is cool and very pleasant, and the many women who journey here obviously enjoy what has apparently become for them a holiday, as well as a holy place. The women stay here overnight for efficacy, and the villagers close by do rather well in renting out sleeping quilts, providing tea and so forth. It has become a small scale business.

All of the shrines described above are of doubtful, or at the very least ambiguous, religious authenticity in the eyes of many Bakhtiari and particularly the religiously educated specialists, found in the permanently settled regions surrounding tribal territory, who are very scornful about the credulity and superstitious nature of the nomads, whom they derisively claim worship trees and magic pools. While this perception of the nomads is clearly coloured by the attitudes of 'formal' Islam, as I have briefly mentioned the ritual activities associated with the shrines falls quite clearly within the framework of Muslim pilgrimage.

There are several shrines in the area that are however associated with relatives of the 8th Imam, Imam Reza, who is buried in the pilgrimage centre of Kashed. Such associations are quite common in Iran, where there are many shrines claiming to be associated with the brothers and sisters of Imam Reza. There are three to be found in Bakhtiari territory. Again like all such shrines, doubts can be cast as to their authenticity. All three of these shrines are centres of pilgrimage for the Bakhtiari on a much larger scale than the other shrines.

Pir Sultan Ibrahim is the centre of what is now a very large sub-tribe of guardians who are associated with the shrine, the descendants of Sultan Ibrahim a reputed brother of Imam Reza. In the keeping of these motavali is a miraculous gazelle skin, with remarkable curative properties. Afflicted individuals come to the shrine to be cured by wrapping themselves in this ancient gazelle skin. They place themselves in the centre of nature in this skin becoming themselves contained by powerful nature. They enter into nature to become whole. Again the recurrence of the theme of containment.

A sister of Imam Rezan is reputed to have stayed in Bakhtiari territory when she heard of the death of her brother, and she in turn dies there. A shrine was built which become a centre for Moharram ceremonies. This shrine is on the very fringe of tribal territory..

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...for blood payments as the result of killing. When the rain comes, which is supposed to always happen as a result of this ceremony the stones are laid on their sides again.

To complete this picture of locally defined sacred places, and sacred centres, the Bakhtiari, as Shiah Muslims also, in small numbers make pilgrimages to the sacred cities in Iran, to Qum, Kashad, and also to Karbula and Najaf in Iraq, as well as making the Haj to Mecca. We thus see the hierarchy of sacred centres from those almost exclusively defined by nature, sacred pools, trees, places associated with minor holy figures, to the most significantly religious of all which articulated the whole Muslim 'Umma' in Mecca.

The particular emphasis perhaps of the Bakhtiari shrines, is the containment of nature, and natural power, the power of nature by culture. With the recurrent images of wrapping, circling and circumambulating. At all shrines some sort of sacrifice is made, of chicken, sheep and in the case of Pir Shah Qotbedin of an elderly guardian of the shrine, affirming the interaction of man with nature of man living in and acknowledging the power of nature, sourced in the acknowledgement that man, as part of nature, is created by God. In the words of the poet Rumi:

Rise up and go about
 The pole of our salvation
 As winds the pilgrim route
 By Mecca's holy station.
 Why art thou slumber bound
 Like clay the earth caressing
 In movement shall be found
 The key to every blessing.