

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

Our 10th festival celebrating silent film with music

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## Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life (1925)

Thursday 18 March 2021

**Music By: Mike Nolan**

Portraying an epic battle between man and nature, *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) traces the annual migration of the Bakhtiaris, one of the major tribes of Iran. Until the enforced modernising project in Iran they lived a nomadic lifestyle going back to antiquity. This migration, and the Bakhtiaris' very survival, was inextricably linked to the search for food for their 500,000-strong flock of cows, sheep, goats and even chickens. Fifty thousand Bakhtiaris would migrate twice a year between the highlands in the summer and the lowlands in the winter. The distance between the two seasonal quarters could extend to more than 400km with differences of altitude varying from 1,000-2,000m.

*Grass* depicted the hardship and uncertainty of nomadic life – from crossing torrential rivers with nothing more than inflated goat skins, to climbing rock-face mountains and pick-axing through ice and snow. To a lesser extent, it also illustrated the complexity of Bakhtiari social organisation and their internal solidarity. But it was already an endangered lifestyle.

The Bakhtiari tribes were a social, political and economic force to reckon with, not least for the role they played in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1909). But for the British, it was the oil in the Bakhtiari's winter grounds that highlighted their importance. In this regard, Sir Arnold T. Wilson, the British Commissioner in Baghdad (1918-1920) who had travelled to Iran a number of times noted in 1926 that the Bakhtiaris had 'a greater title to our gratitude and fame...The greatest oil-field in the world...is situated in their territory, and has been worked under the protection of guards supplied by their chiefs and by labour drawn to a great extent from their tribes for the best part of twenty years in a spirit of entire amity and goodwill.'

Shortly after the film was produced, Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941) crowned himself as the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty. Keen on modernising Iran, unifying the country and centralising power, Reza Shah soon set out to disarm the Bakhtiari tribes and settle them, going so far as to destroy their tents and ban the men's tribal dress. His successor, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979), took a more moderate approach allowing the nomads to continue their migratory lifestyle. By the 1960s, however, the nomads had been pushed to the margins and were almost invisible in the public discourse, in a trend which continued into and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, such that any references to the Bakhtiari tribal chiefs were omitted in official documents.

One of the most famous early documentaries, very much in the style of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Grass* was made by three Americans, Merian Cooper, Ernest Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison. Harrison, an adventurer, journalist, spy and author, raised the funds for the film and all three of them collaborated on the cinematography. Cooper and Schoedsack went on to have extremely successful careers most notably with *King Kong* (1933), which they made together.

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*Grass* was filmed over the 48 days it took the Bakhtiari to complete their migration. Despite knowing little about the region and culture they were filming, Cooper, Schoedsack and Harrison nonetheless provided a moving and magnificent testament to the spirit and resilience of the Bakhtiari by the simple act of pointing a camera to the drama unfolding before them. In doing so, the humour and wit of the filmmakers themselves come through in their framings, and the in-title cards. For Iranians especially, and despite its limited availability, *Grass* reflected and represented a heroism and pride in their peoples.

*Grass* went on to inspire a number of other documentary films, which also attempted to capture the nomadic way of life before its disappearance, not least *The Flaming Poppies* (Hushang Shafti, 1962), *People of the Wind* (Anthony Howarth, 1978), and *The Shabsavan Nomads of Iran* (Fereydoun Safizadeh, 1983). Iranian cinema has also produced a number of films on the lives of Iranian tribes, with Mohsen Makhmalbaf's fictionalised account, *Gabbeh* (1995), garnering international acclaim.

By **Professor Nacim Pak-Shiraz**

Professor Nacim Pak-Shiraz is Personal Chair in Cinema and Iran and Head of Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

Dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack | US | 1925 | N/C U | 1h 10m | English intertitles

Music Accompaniment: Mike Nolan

Screening material courtesy of Milestone Films