

Religion

The Bakhtiari are Shi'ah Muslims following the State religion of Iran. They have a rich religious life, though one that is not at all obvious. Only rarely does one see daily prayers being said, and mosques, for Friday prayers are not to be found in the mountains. There are village mosques in some of the Bakhtiari settled villages.

Fasting during the months of Ramadan is rarely done, and Moharram, the celebration of the death of Husain in Karabala is ignored. Muslim religious calendar follows the lunar year so all religious festivals are movable in a 33 year cycle. If major festivals fall at the time when the nomads are migrating then exemptions from fasting are the rule and there is no opportunity for holding the Tazieh or passion play which reenacts the tragedy of the death of Ali and Husain at Karabala.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage, one of the main Pillars of Islam is carried out and is of considerable social as well as religious significance. The Pilgrimage to Mecca is the central rite of Islam, the journey to the spiritual centre of the Islam world. To make such a journey confers on the pilgrim spiritual grace and the individual is given the title of Hajji, -one who has made the Hajj. Many Bakhtiaris, men and women make the Hajj and are subsequently known as Hajji Ali etc'

Karbala and Najaf are the major holy cities for Shiah Muslims and are centres of pilgrimage of great importance. These cities lie in southern Iraq. Pilgrimage to the shrines there confer the title Karbala'i.

In Iran itself the shrine of the 8th Imam, the Imam Reza in Mashad is another major pilgrimage centre, and carries with it the title of Mahsadi, contracted to the prefix Mash. These three titles, Hajji, Karbala'i. and Mashhadi are all found amongst the Bakhtiari. The most significant one is Hajji.

Shrines

Scattered throughout the Bakhtiari mountains are many shrines of various levels of importance, and religious significance. Some have only local significance and are only visited to make a vow or to ask for help such as continued good health or to restore health. Many of these shrines are noted for particular Munjes or miracles, and are located high in the mountains on the migration routes of some of the tribes. Such shrines are usually located on the sides of the mountains, or in isolated defiles. People may be buried in the precincts of the shrines. Each shrine has a small group of Motavali, or guardians who look after and maintain the shrines - called Pir or Imamzadeh (descended from an Imam or holy man) These guardians of shrines have an ambivalent relationship with the Bakhtiari nomads. They come visiting the passing migrating camp groups and are given "gifts" of flour, tea occasionally a few coins in return for a blessing. The pragmatic Bakhtiari complain very irreverently about such "blackmail from these unlettered and impoverished guardians" they are not real seyids" is the usual scornful expression used about these guardians. The Nazri or gifts are however always given by every family.

These visiting "seyids" sit outside the perimeters of the camp waiting to be invited to the tents. The dogs are often allowed to attack the sayids which causes much ribald laughter, before they are eventually called off and the syeids brought to to the threshold of the tent. They are never allowed to enter the tent proper.

Women, in particular barren women, or if there is anyone in a camp who is ill, make use of these guardians asking for formal blessings, and making vows of pilgrimage if a cure or a child is forthcoming. The following year the afflicted person will fulfill their vow by making a ziarat or pilgrimage to the shrine in question.

There are shrines which cure illness in cows, another cures sick mules and donkeys.

Trees, particularly unusual trees are thought to have magical properties. Little strips of cloth, or a stone are tied to such tree each representing a prayer for good luck, or to prevent bad luck befalling the individual. Many trees, growing in places of danger, on cliff faces are festooned with these strips of cloth and are believed to be efficacious in preventing accidents. On passing such trees on the migration, many will stop to kiss these ragged strips pressing them to mouth and forehead.

Similar functions are fulfilled by erecting little piles of stone at danger points. These are markers of places of ill luck and act as reminders to pray to Allah or one of the Imams for protection. The mountains are filled with such reminders. Every shrine has within a radius of a mile or so, cairns of stones erected - also called 'guardians'

Caves and the tops of mountains may also have magical properties in the folk beliefs of the Bakhtiari and obeisance is sometimes paid when passing to the tops of the mountains. Candles are to be found burning in some of these significant caves, and stories of hermits or holy men who lived in these give the cave its religious significance. All such places can give protection against harmful natural or social forces in the world.

There are also a number of important shrines associated with learned Sayids. Like all shrines, magical or religious, the term used is to "respect" - Ehteram" Salam berasid. You make a salam, a greeting and thereby protect, take to oneself the religious power to enhance one's own luck or power. These major shrines are the centres of pilgrimage with a large catchment area. They are associated with the sons and daughters of Imam Musa Qasem, and are connected with the Holy shrine of the Imam Reza in Mashad and of Ma'sem, sister of Imam Reza in Qum, the other major holy city in Shi'a Iran.

The Imam Reza, was governor of Khorasan and quarrelled with the Caliphate. His family, brothers and sisters were travelling from their homes in Baghdad when Imam Reza was poisoned. When they heard the news, and the subsequent unrest this caused, they were travelling through the Bakhtiari mountains. For safety they decided to stay there, and the three major shrines are to be found where these learned and holy individuals stayed. In the city of Shushtar, in Khuzistan near the Bakhtiari foothills are approximately forty shrines which date from this period.

Pir Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Ibrahim was the son of Musa Qasem and the brother of the Imam Reza; this shrine is in the south western region of Bakhtiari territory in or near Andeka. Sultan Ibrahim died there. His descendants now form a large Taifeh and are incorporated into the Bakhtari political structure. These "sa'dat" are described as being very famous and religiously powerful. This group move and migrate like the other Bakhtiari though they are centred round their shrine in the winter pastures. They are considered to be and to look like Arabs. Bakhtiari freely intermarry with them both giving and taking wives.

The leaders of this group act as mediators in disputes and play an active political role as well in Bakhtari intertribal affairs. They own much agricultural land as well.

Pir Shah Qotbeddin This shrine is that of Shah Qotbedin, the name means "Pole of religion", or Pir Shah Abdollah. He was also a son of Imam Musa Qasem. There are a few descendants of this group who stay permanently around this shrine, situated near the Munar range.

This shrine plays a very important part in a ritual to bring rain. In times of severe drought, people from all the Bakhtiari taifehs in or near this region come to pray for rain. This ritual is regarded as being dangerous and is only rarely performed, only in times of really severe drought.

It involved one of the guardians of the shrine lifting two large stones and standing them erect, while prayers are said to bring rain. Not long after this the guardian invariably dies.

The Bkahtiari say that because of this, the guardian gives his life in return for rain, that only a very old guardian near to death is ever chosen to perform this ritual.

The attendant members of the taifehs pay a great deal of money to the guardians for the performance of this ritual - in return for the "blood of the guardian". It is a form of blood money, similar to the money paid in blood feud killings to compensate for the death of those killed in the fighting.

Pir Sa'adat Khatin This shrine is located in Mizdej region of Chahr Mahal in the summer area and is a settled village near Sar pir. It is used a great deal by the peasant population of the area rather more than the Bakhtiari. Khatin was a daughter of Imam Musa. This is a very famous centre of pilgrimage used a lot during Moharram and especially for the Ashura ceremonies in the last ten days of mourning. It is also a shrine much visited by women. There is a special lower story to the shrine which is forbidden to men, and used exclusively by women. Within this holy of holies impenetrable to men there is a "sandoq" a log of wood reputed to be several metres long. On this wood, which is not native to Iran is inscribed the history of the area of 1000 years ago.

The passion play is rarely performed at the shrine but every Thursday and Friday the shrine is visited for Rozakhaneh. The chanting of the story of Ali and Husain at Karbala.

The miracle associated with the Pir Sultan Ibrahim is the curative properties of an ancient Gazelle skin - "pust-e Ahu" which is put on

by the sick person, prayers are said beseeching for recovery, vows are made such as the promise to name and dedicate any future child to the name of the shrine, a sheep is sacrificed and shared with the Guardians of the shrine and considerable sums of money are paid.

The variety of rituals associated with these shrines are markedly similar. Wrapping, tying, binding, putting on a magical animal skin, making sacrifice of sheep or chickens or in the case of Shah Qotbedin, the sacrifice of one of the guardians with the payment of blood money.

In all of these man's subservience to the higher power of Allah is clearly stated, and the reciprocal relationship between men and God confirmed.

A hierarchy of significance can be seen in these shrines, from caves and trees at the folk level, through minor shrines with specific uses for specific types of illness of animals, for barrenness etc, to the highest level, the shrines of the family of Imam Reza, which have great religious power, and are centres of pilgrimage for people all over the Bakhtiari mountains. The power religiously powerful the shrine the larger the catchment area of pilgrims, with the pilgrimage to Mecca the centre of the entire Muslim world.

Pilgrimage to a physical worldly centre is the central religious rite in Islam. In many ways this religious journey to gain spiritual and religious worth is mirrored in the sequence of Bakhtiari dances which could be seen as a spiritual journey to the centre within the self. The word used for making a pilgrimage is Zi'arat kardan, and the word for shrine is Zi'arat - or ziggarat.

The structure of the shrines, especially in the winter quarters and all conical stepped structures like the ancient elamite ziggurat - Chugha Zanbil in the plains of Khuzistan. This is a seven layered pyramid where ritual sacrifice was said at the top.

Suggestively the male costume is called Chugha - the same as the modern term for Zaggarat or Holy mountain, and the design of the coat is of a stepped inverted hanging ziggurat. The design was on one occasion described to me as being "mesle zi'arrat" like a shrine, *like a / ziggurat*

When more work is required there does seem to be a clear connection of ideas in the design and the structure of the shrines, and the structure of the dance. Both the ritual of pilgrimage and the dance are moving fluid forms, processes. The shrines and the design on the costume are necessary static. They project the same structure in static form, that which is portrayed acted and danced out in the pilgrimage and the dance.

In dramatic ritual of both dance and pilgrimage the same processual structure is revealed. The logic, the abstract mathematical basis of this logical structuring of a timeless world is revealed in both static and dynamic form.