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Dawn breaks over a wintery range in the Zagros mountains. Spring is coming, river valleys turning green, bright red poppies, and, suddenly we are in the midst of an ancient and timeless journey, a migration to summer pastures, and everywhere around us brightly clad women and old men are loading children and newborn lambs onto the backs of donkeys, and suddenly we are climbing long barren slopes and helping our sheep maneuver down rocky swollen streams.

Many questions pass through my mind as I watch Cima Sedigh's documentary, "The Bakhtiari Alphabet," unfold before my eyes. Why would a professor of Education return to her homeland, where at one time she had been proscribed as an "enemy of the people" to renew contact with her cultural and spiritual roots? Much more than a personal quest, her journey among the nomadic pastoral Bakhtiari people is also an exploration of the cultural roots of the Persian people, offering a rare glimpse for American students of the hidden beauty and traditions of a country often demonized in contemporary politics.

The first part of this documentary succeeds in making us not just witnesses but participants in the migration. It is devoted to the actual nomadic journey, from breaking camp, lowering black tents, and throwing kilims over the backs of donkeys and horses, to little girls gathering sticks for the fire and mothers casting flat bread over coals to bake. Not just the extraordinary mountains, valleys, and herds of horses and goats that flow over the rocks and down cliffs like water inundating the land with new life, are given to us, but the less romantic, hard work, never over, always beginning again to lift the tiny lambs and children on the backs of animals, to keep moving one step at a time to ascend unbelievable heights and descend through magical rock formations to unpack, camp, and begin the round again.

We become familiar with the important roles of women, men, and children in this society. One for all and all for one. A woman milking a sheep. A little boy learning to ride a horse. And then a teacher under a solitary tree in a flat enormous pasture with a group of tiny girls sitting in the grass, learning their alphabet. This brings us to the second part of the documentary, the special educational needs of the Bakhtiari children. Their stark dormitory schools in their winter quarters, the confusion of trying to explain pictures of traffic signs in a textbook and cars in a textbook designed for urban students to children who have never seen a city or a traffic light.

As a professor of Education dedicated to teaching cultural diversity to her students, Dr. Sedigh poses the question of how an indigenous people can be educated for life in the modern world without losing their age old culture and traditions. But more importantly the Baktiaris have a story and message for the modern world and contemporary students about the human journey and those values and traditions that follow the cycle of the seasons and survive the changes of technology and political turmoil. This is the underlying message that makes this documentary so compelling for contemporary students today.

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