The Anthropological Unconscious of Iranian Ethnographic Films: A Brief Take

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Pre-Revolution Ethnographic Filmmaking: Salvage Ethnography

Ethnographic filmmaking—defined as making films that represent one culture to another or to itself—emerged in Iran in the 1960s, driven by many factors, such as rapid modernization and the resulting population displacements and psychic and social restructuring, which brought urgency to the task of documenting and preserving the country's traditions, cultural expressions, and ways of life before their disappearance. This resulted in a style of filming that we call here "salvage ethnography," which often exoticized its subjects as primitive.

Another impetus was the state's institutional support to produce film and other media as vehicles for a modern form of national identity formation and its projection of such identities at home and abroad. The majority of these so-called ethnographic filmmakers have been supported by powerful state cultural and media organizations. Under the second Pahlavi state (1941–79), such organizations included the Ministry of Culture and Art (MCA) and National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). Under the Islamic Republic, there were the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, and Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic. Filmmakers were either full-time civil-servant employees of these state organizations or were freelance artists commissioned by them. Commercial private sector and non-governmental agencies also contributed to documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, but to a far lesser extent. State institutions were involved not only in financing and sponsoring these films, but also in their production and, due to their near monopoly on documentary film venues and television networks, in their distribution and exhibition. Because of these structural underpinnings and the leftist politics of a majority of the filmmakers, ethnographic films were always already embedded in politics—from their conception to reception. What constituted "nation," "culture," and "tradition" to be documented, exoticized, and salvaged were contested categories between the state that funded the films and the filmmakers who received funding from it but nevertheless wished to maintain editorial independence.

Another impetus was the presence of a coterie of new filmmakers trained at home and abroad who were armed with the ideologies of secular modernism, salvage ethnography, and cinematic storytelling. However, most of these creators were neither trained in anthropology nor deeply linked to university anthropology departments or research centers. As such, few "ethnographic films" were part of academic anthropological studies or were organically informed by anthropological and ethnographic concepts and methodologies. Therefore, Farhād Varahrām's labelling of these films as "anthropological cinema without anthropology" is appropriate.[1]

Even so, there is what I call an anthropological unconscious at play in the works of these non-anthropologist filmmakers and non-anthropologist writers of cultural monographs about small communities, such as Ghulāmhusayn Sāʿidī (1936–85) and Jalāl Āl-i Ahmad (1923–69). This anthropological unconscious is exhibited in their choice and treatment of the subjects, rituals, customs, and events they deemed worthy of documenting and salvaging—constituting their films' ethnographic content. It is also displayed in the stylistic features of their films, which were driven by the filmmakers' ad hoc understanding of anthropological methodologies of research, their realist style of filming and narrative storytelling, and the technological limitations of cinema. Together, these factors of authorship, modernist ideologies of anthropology and nationalism, state support of films, choice and treatment of subject matter, and filming style constituted the political unconscious of Iranian ethnographic films.

This is long before new criticism and theory entered anthropology, and before the works of pioneer postmodernist cultural anthropologists at Rice University and elsewhere, such as George Marcus, Michael Fischer, James Clifford, and Steve Tyler, revolutionized anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic writing and filming.[2] As a result, Iranian ethnographic films tended to be straightforward and linear, relying heavily on a descriptive, wordy,

1. Farhād Varahrām, "Anthropological Cinema Without Anthropology," synopsis of paper for Visual Representations of Iran Conference, St. Andrews University, June 13–16, 2008, accessed 30 November 2013, www.st-andrews.ac.uk/anthropologyiran/abstracts.html

2. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, ed. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, ed. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

3. Jamal Omid, *Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279–1375* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1995), 395.

and authoritative, even authoritarian, voice-of-God style of narration. Such an approach to narration was dictated as much by the difficulty of synch-sound recording in the field— necessitating voice-over narration and the suppression of the subjects' voices—as by the oral narrative style of storytelling Iranians had internalized, or by the anthropological unconscious that necessitated a distance between anthropologist and subject. Yet, their deficit in terms of anthropological methodology became an asset in terms of their cinematic techniques, as some of the better filmmakers experimented with non-realist visual, musical, lyrical, and structural innovations to reduce this ethnographic distance and to suture the spectators into the diegetic worlds of their films. More sophisticated filmmakers created downright postmodern texts that self-reflexively parodied their subjects, the films themselves, and the complicit relationship of filmmakers and subjects in constructing the films.

Based on their content, I divide these ethnographic films into several thematic types which evolved over time, in particular in reaction to the revolution of 1978–79 and the subsequent eight-year war with Iraq (1980–88). Stylistic features of these films are also noted throughout this taxonomy.

Films of Religious Culture and Rituals

Religion, religious culture, and religious rituals and ceremonies, particularly those related to Shiʿism, are important topics covered in Iranian ethnographic films. An important early example of these films' treatment of religion is Abūlqāsim Rizāʾī's intimate and poetic film on the Hajj pilgrimage, Khānah-ʾi khudā (Mecca, The Forbidden City, 1965). Produced by Iran Film Studio, Khānah-ʾi khudā powerfully imparts the transcendent force of collective prayer and belief involving massive numbers of the faithful from different nations participating in the annual Muslim pilgrimage, including the circumambulation of the Kaʿba. Despite its seeming lack of a unifying idea, the film's attention to details of religious traditions and practices gives it ethnographic and authentic depth, and its chronological treatment of pilgrimage gives it a pronounced forward momentum.

These elements, and its use of rare and revealing documentary footage, made it an important and popular film. Some twelve commercial cinemas screened it in Tehran, a rare occurrence for documentaries. In honour of this religiously themed film, commercial cinemas removed flamboyant posters of sexy movie stars and coming attractions from their lobbies, and instead decorated them with posters of holy religious sites.[3] In fact, the movie was so popular that it apparently led to the inauguration of the first public cinema in the holy city of Qom, across the river from the shrine of Hazrat Maʿsūmah, the sister of Imam ʿAlī. This film prompted the official religious strata, for the first time, to accept the medium of film as a vehicle of religious expression, thus paving the way for the recognition both of filmmaking as a legitimate profession and of film enjoyment as a legitimate pastime. It was dubbed into English and sold by Ashoqa Film to many foreign countries, the first Iranian film to receive such a wide foreign distribution.

In Īrān Sarzamīn-i Adyān (Iran: The Land of Religions, 1971), made for MCA, Vienna-trained documentarian Manūchihr Tayyāb focuses on the coexistence of major religious traditions in Iran—Shiʿism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism (with no mention of Bahaʿism)—which he renders with a smoothly gliding camera, deft realism, and glorious colour, and without voice-over narration. These techniques decrease distance and helped bring the spectators closer to the religious monuments and subjects. The scenes of Shiʿi faithful beating their bare chests into the camera, rhythmically, and in concentric circular formations, are particularly spectacular. Interestingly, the film created the false impression that Shiʿism, predominant in Iran, was tolerant of other religions. Ironically, in an interview in Jamshīd Akramī's The Lost Cinema: Iranian Political Films in the 70s (2006), Tayyāb states that the film was banned, and never to be screened in public, due to religious objections, but he does not specify what those objections were.

Figure 1: A Muslim man praying. *Īrān Sarzamīn-i Adyān* (*Iran: The Land of Religions*, 1971), Manūchihr Tayyāb, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taMa3iTZFbo (02:35).

Figure 2: Christian religious ceremonies. *Īrān Sarzamīn-i Adyān* (Iran: The Land of Religions, 1971), Manūchihr Tayyāb, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taMa3iTZFbo (02:54).

Figure 3: Zoroastrian religious ceremony, the mobad beside the fire vessel. *Īrān Sarzamīn-i Adyān* (*Iran: The Land of Religions*, 1971), Manūchihr Tayyāb, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taMa3iTZFbo (12:50).

Sponsored by NIRT, Nāsir Taqvāʾī, a gifted writer from the South, made many short but insightful ethnographic sketches, including two well-assembled works that explored folklorist and religious themes with dramatic visuals, dynamic editing, lyrical narration, and native music. Bād-i Jin (The Sorcerer's Wind, 1970), narrated by poet Ahmad Shāmlū (1925–2000), deals with possession and exorcism rituals (zār) practiced on the coast of the Persian Gulf, particularly in Bandar Lengeh. The film opens with shots of waves, the seashore, and the town ruins, accompanied by Shāmlū's raspy and world-weary voice describing the origins of the people, rituals, and wind. In his account, the source of the beliefs and rituals of zār came from African slaves who in ancient times were brought to the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. They brought with them an ill wind, which purportedly decimated the population and left portions of the town in ruins. After this contextual opening, the film proceeds to the site of an exorcism ceremony that is very private and involves mixed-gender dancing and chanting to incessant, rhythmic drumbeats until trance is achieved and evil is expelled. Taqvāʾī filmed these scenes with both hidden-camera and direct-cinema techniques, countering the distancing of the opening scenes. He gained access to

these private events because of his familiarity with the Persian Gulf region's cultures and his personal connections with the participants.[4] His film Arbaʿīn (1971), shot in the Persian Gulf port of Bushehr, is also a highly visual, direct-cinema documentary on the religious processions and mourning rituals that annually commemorate Arbaʿīn, the fortieth day of Imam Husayn's martyrdom. Like The Sorcerer's Wind, this film emphasizes rhythmic action and rhythmic editing, without voice-over narration, to recreate the intensity of religious emotions evoked in men and young boys in these public rituals. It shows the preparation for the mourning, the colourful and sonorous processions, and focuses in the last sequence on the crowds gathered in the Dihdashtī and Bihbāhānī Mosques, moving rhythmically in concentric circles and beating their chests to the chants of a Muslim cantor. With the camera held either low or high, the vast dimensions and the intimate, frenzied tensions of this occasion are conveyed beautifully and powerfully. Interspersed throughout the film, we see shots of farmers working in fields and fishermen fishing, which both integrate the ceremony into their daily lives and demonstrate that these passionate, artistic people are the same people who ordinarily farm and fish. It also evokes an eerie atmosphere of the empty alleyways of Bushehr, through which a mysterious veiled woman scurries.

Figure 4: A scene of waves, the seashore, and the ruins of the city, accompanied by the voice of Ahmad Shāmlū. *Bād-i Jin* (*The Sorcerer's Wind*, 1970), Nāsir Taqvāʾī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcLBPglUDA (02:48).

4. Hamid Naficy, *Fīlm-i Mustanad: Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Mustanad*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Āzād-i Īrān, 1978), 324–25.

5. Lotte Hoek, "I Will Wash Your Shrine with My Blood: The Mazar in Bangladeshi Cinema," paper presented at *Global Seminar in Media, Religion, and Culture, Mission 21*, Basel, Switzerland, July 10–12, 2006.

6. Author's interview with filmmaker Manūchihr Tabarī, Tehran, Iran, August 1977.

Figure 4: A scene of waves, the seashore, and the ruins of the city, accompanied by the voice of Ahmad Shāmlū. *Bād-i Jin* (*The Sorcerer's Wind*, 1970), Nāsir Taqvāʾī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcLBPglUDA (02:48).

Manūchihr Tabarī, a NIRT filmmaker, made a shocking short film, Lahazātī chand bā Darāvīsh-i Qādirī (A Few Moments with Qādirī Dervishes, 1973), in which, using an invasive cinéma vérité camera, he documented, without narration or extra-diegetic music, the extraordinary acts of faith of dervishes under trance in Iranian Kurdistan. This includes their swallowing large stones and handfuls of razor blades, eating live snakes, drinking kerosene and eating the glass chimney of the kerosene lamp, and puncturing their bodies and faces with numerous long skewers, all while dancing to frenzied drum beats. Absolute frenzy rules, not only because of the action of the trance-dancers, but also because the camera itself seems to be in a frenzy. No anthropological distance exists here. As it rapidly zooms in and out with the rhythm of the music and the trance-dancers, the camera replicates the trance stylistically, creating what Lotte Hoek, in the context of religious inscription in Bangladeshi cinema, called "Cinematic Zikr" (sacred chanting)[5] until the camera suddenly goes black in mid-action, bringing the film to an end. As Tabarī told me in an interview, this was because one of the possessed participants lunged forward to swallow the camera lens.[6] This bit of self-reflexivity is one of the first instances of postmodernism in ethnographic films in Iran. While its exposé of

7. Author's interview with filmmaker Ismā'īl Imāmī, Tehran, Iran, August 1977.

the unusual customs of a community of believers is very powerful and informative, the film is a mere document of a trance session, offering no cultural context and no historical or ethnographic understanding.

Another noted NIRT filmmaker and a key new-wave director, Parvīz Kīmīyāvī, trained in filmmaking at IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques) in Paris, made several films that violated the paradigmatic anthropological unconscious of ethnographic films long before such a violation became a style and a cliché in post-revolutionary cinema. He mixed nonfictional and fictional stories and filming styles to create dense, lyrical, and ironic ethnographic texts that exposed the contradictions of the ethnographic scene and the complicity of subjects with filmmakers. His most straightforward documentary is *Yā Zāmin-i Āhū* (*Oh, Protector of the Gazelle*, 1971), an intimate, ethnographically rich, and cleverly critical portrait of pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Rizā in Mashhad. As cinematographer Ismā'īl Imāmī told me in an interview, *Yā Zāmin-i Āhū* was filmed using a handheld and sometimes hidden camera—the latter violating the informed consent requirements of ethnographic cinema.[7] The film has no authoritative voice-over narrator. However, through contrapuntal uses of voice and vision, which create a contrast between the film's visuals and the voices of the pilgrims, Kīmīyāvī critiques the official Shi'i institutions for their failure to help the religious community (ummah). The visuals highlight the magnificent opulence of the massive silver and gold mausoleum, the shrine's great halls covered with massive beautiful carpets, and its walls and ceilings decorated with cut crystal, glass, mirror, and huge crystal chandeliers. The soundtrack, however, carries the desperate voices of the lowly supplicants requesting mercy, compassion, better health, or redemption.

Figure 6: A view of the golden dome of Imam Reza shrine. *Yā Zāmin-i Āhū* (*Oh, Protector of the Gazelle*, 1971), Parvīz Kīmīyāvī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb_jnXUWxIE (02:30).

Figure 7: A pilgrim kissing the shrine of Imam Rizā. *Yā Zāmin-i Āhū* (*Oh, Protector of the Gazelle*, 1971), Parvīz Kīmīyāvī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb_jnXUWxIE (07:40).

8. Farīdūn Safīzādah, "Yeyloq, Qishloq: The Lure of Grass and the Cinematography of Shāhsavan Nomads," *The Iranian* (January 30, 2003), accessed November 30, 2013, www.iranian.com/Travelers/2003/January/Migrate/index.html

Films of Tribes and Tribal Migration

Tribes and their "exotic" ways of life, colourful customs, and arduous annual migrations, so memorably documented in the 1920s by American filmmakers Cooper, Schoedsack, and Harrison in Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life (1925), became subjects for Iranian documentarists. Sedentarism and modernization, which were eroding their customs and nomadic way of life, seemed to have intensified the cosmopolitan city dwellers' nostalgia for and interest in them. In a kind of romantic "salvage ethnography," modern, often foreign-trained, filmmakers, who were themselves agents of modernity, documented the tribes before their disappearance—attempts that always seemed to refer to Grass as the archetypal progenitor. One notable example was that of Hūshang Shaftī, who, at the head of a large film crew, filmed the Bakhtiari tribe's migration in southwestern Iran for MCA. The resulting film, Shaqāyiq-i Sūzān (The Flaming Poppies, 1962), was technically well made and superior to its foreign predecessor in terms of its inclusion of colour, sound, and multiple camera viewpoints. It won the Silver Bear Prize at the 1961 Berlin Film Festival, and was widely distributed in Iran and abroad through Iranian embassies. However, it lacked the grandeur, drama, and scale of Grass and suffered from the shortcomings of the official style of documentary film, in which the Syracuse Team had trained Shaftī. Some such traits included an unimaginative and linear narrative structure and a plodding, voice-of-God, impersonal manner of narration.

Anthropologist Farīdūn Safīzādah first saw Grass in 1971 in an undergraduate ethnographic film class in the United States. It was so gripping that it inspired him to "retrace," some fifty years later, the footsteps of the American filmmakers by filming the Bakhtiari annual migration, and it served as a "catalyst" for the 28-minute documentary *The Shahsavan Nomads of Iran* (1983), which he co-directed with his sociologist spouse, Arlene Dallalfar.[8] That viewing of Grass was also instrumental in redirecting his academic interest from engineering to visual anthropology. However, logistics, proximity, and familiarity forced another type of redirection, as Safīzādah shifted attention from filming the southwestern Bakhtiari nomads to filming the northwestern

Shāhsavan pastoral nomads of Azerbaijan. The Shāhsavan's colourful seasonal migration between the Aras River in the Mughān Steppe and the high pastures of Sabalān Mountain provided a dramatic narrative focus, and Safīzādah's Azari background, knowledge of culture and language, and contacts made a film about the Shāhsavan more plausible, particularly during the tumultuous revolutionary period.

Figure 8: The Shāhsavan nomads migrating. *The Shahsavan Nomads of Iran* (1983), Farīdūn Safīzādah and Arlene Dallalfar, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/AiaXK (01:54).

This project is worth noting here because of the influence of Grass on its inception, its female-centered filming, its ethnographically informed narration, and the effects of the anti-Shah revolution on its production and completion. By mid-January 1978, Tabriz had risen to commemorate the "martyrs" of the Qom demonstrations forty days earlier, and anti-government forces had burned and destroyed banks, liquor stores, and cinemas. The three-week spring tribal migration would take place in late winter. There was no time to lose. Safīzādah made a proposal to Nādir Afshār Nādirī (1926–79), director of Tehran University's Institute for Social Research, to film the Shāhsavan camp life and forthcoming migration, a proposal that Afshār Nādirī approved, providing him with 5,000 feet of 16 mm raw stock and access to NIRT's facilities for lab work and editing.

Safīzādah and Dallalfar formed an effective mixed-gender team, for they were able to film not only the male-dominated public events of the Mughānlū lineage of the Shāhsavan such as shepherding, felt-making, the buying and selling of flocks and wool, but also female-centred private activities inside and outside the women's ālāchīq tents such as fetching water, baking, cooking, churning milk, making butter and yogurt, wool spinning, weaving, and nursing babies. They also documented the migration over rivers and mountain passes. By mid-September 1978, when they began editing the footage, the Zhālah Square massacre, known as "Black Friday," had shaken the government to its core and emboldened the uprising. NIRT employees joined the national strike, which eventually brought the Pahlavi regime to an end. Sādiq Qutbzādah became Director General of the post-revolution broadcasting authority—the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic—and mandated a re-evaluation of all projects that brought them all to a halt. Purification purges took their toll, as did chaos and uncertainty, which forced Safīzādah and Dallalfar to give up "any hope of being able to complete the film."[9] Unable to retrieve the original footage from NIRT, they left Iran with approximately 2,000 feet of their work-print (nearly one hour), which Dallalfar subsequently edited as a sociology graduate student at UCLA into The Shahsavan Nomads of Iran. Dallalfar read the voice-over narration for this somewhat rough and incomplete but valuable film, providing additional textual information about the impact of agricultural modernization, land reform, sedentarism, large-scale irrigation systems, and modern transportation on the tribe's way of life and livelihood. In his write-up about the film, Safīzādah admitted that the romance of authenticity and the impulse toward salvage ethnography prevented them from filming

> the newly adopted technological ways of doing things, for example using pickup trucks to go and come from the camps, or the use of Mercedes trucks to relocate sheep from the Mughān Steppe to the Sabalān range, or to show the canning factories in Mughān where the Shāhsavan worked as day laborers.[10]

9. Safīzādah, "Yeyloq, Qishloq," 9.

10. Safīzādah, "Yeyloq, Qishloq," 11-12.

11. Author's e-mail correspondence with Farīdūn Safīzādah, Boston, Massachusetts, August 28, 2006.

Figure 9: A Shāhsavan woman milking a sheep. *The Shahsavan Nomads of Iran* (1983), Farīdūn Safīzādah and Arlene Dallalfar, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/AiaXK (03:48).

The film's reception was somewhat limited, as Safīzādah and Dallalfar, at the beginning of their academic careers in anthropology and sociology, could not devote sufficient time to its publicity and distribution, and they did not consign it to a professional distributor. As a result, as Safīzādah told me in an email, the film "remained pretty much within university circles and their collections." Several individuals and universities acquired it in Britain, Norway, and Turkey, but it has not been publicly screened in Iran.[11]

To conclude this section, I would like to mention two other films that are interesting in their differing anthropological approaches. Anthropologist Nādir Afshār Nādirī and filmmaker Ghulām Hosayn Tāhirīdūst each made a film called Balūt (Acorn, 1968 and 1971, respectively), documenting the disappearing traditional process of making bread made from bitter acorn. Nādirī made his film for the Institute for Social Research, which he headed, and Tāhirīdūst made his for NIRT, for whom he worked as a director. Both were made in the Kuhgīlūyah region of the Zagros Mountains in the southwest, where over half of the tribal population was migratory with the remainder settled in small villages. Despite their similarities in terms of topic, region, subjects, and institutional sponsorship, their ethnographic and filmic approaches were different.

As an anthropologist, Nādirī made an effort, as he told me in an interview, to "portray the daily life of a nomadic people with emphasis on the division of labor during the three seasons of autumn, winter and spring," during which he and his German wife and five other researchers lived in the region.[12] Such long-term cohabitation and participant observation was not something that non-anthropologist filmmakers had done before. The film focuses on the preparation of bread from acorns, whose bitterness is leached by running water from a stream, and places this process in the context of the daily activities of the nomads over a nine-month period. These scenes are filmed with a static camera and aesthetics that signal Nādirī's training as a photographer, not cinematographer. Although the scenes of daily life are ethnographically informed and accompanied by clear, pro-filmic sounds, they tend to disperse the film's narrative in all directions, and the lack of voice-over leaves certain key details unexplained, such as the colour change in the stream water that indicates the level of leaching.

Tāhirīdūst's film, on the other hand, shows, in graphic detail and in a more coherent and visual manner, the preparation of acorns for bread making as recreated by one family and filmed in just two-and-a-half days. However, Tāhirīdūst's recreation is not naïve for, as he told me in an interview, he had spent a year and a half of his Knowledge Corps service in the region and was well acquainted with the people and their way of life,[13] and thus he had been able to gain both cultural information and his subjects' confidence before filming. He was also at the time working on his thesis on the topic of "possession" (zār) under the venerable ethnographic filmmaker, Jean Rouch. Tāhirīdūst's film ends in a self-reflexive scene of the family eating their acorn meal, when the male head of the family looks directly into the camera and asks: "Is the film over?" The film freezes on the face of the man and ends with his question, thereby leaving the decision about the film's ontological status as a straight documentary to the viewer. This gesture is perhaps Tāhirīdūst's small homage to his mentor Rouch and his partner Morin and their seminal self- reflexive cinéma-vérité film Chronique d'un Été (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961).

The subject's question at the end of the film also raises the issue of power relations between cosmopolitan ethnographers and filmmakers and their rural subjects. If the film ethnographers were in a position of power because of their access to advanced film technology, anthropological knowledge, government support, and official permission to study and investigate their subjects, the natives were armed with suspicion—the traditional weapon of the weak in neo-colonial situations; as Afshār Nādirī explains:

> Although the tribespeople did not show any particular animosity toward us, nevertheless they did not regard us as benevolent anthropologists. We were similar to the type of soldiers who had recently murdered some of them. As a result, we were their potential enemies. We learned of this only after the tribespeople grew close to us. They confessed that at first they were suspicious that we were working for the army.[14]

Their different approaches to the same subject reflect Nādirī and Tāhirīdūst's respective training as anthropologist and filmmaker. While Tāhirīdūst's is widely considered a better film—it won several international awards—Nādirī's film is ethnographically more informative and the research that undergirded it contributed to a rich trove of para-cinematic materials, consisting of seven monographs, several ethnographic films, and a tribal atlas of the Kuhgīlūyah region.

Figure 10: The final scene of the film shows a family eating their acorn meal. Balūt (Acorn, 1968), Ghulām Husayn Tāhirīdūst, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/k739562 (18:06).

12. Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978*, vol. 2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 109.

13. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, 110.

14. Nādir Afshār Nādirī, "Chand murid az mahzūrat-i rishtah-i insān-shināsi," *Kitāb-i Tūs* (Summer 1987), 102. (Translated by the author).

Post-Revolution Ethnographic Filmmaking: Focusing on Emergent Practices

I would like to end with a few remarks about some of the new trends that I have noticed in post-revolution ethnographic films. In the aftermath of the revolution, ethnographic study and filmmaking declined, and even became somewhat delegitimized, for various sociopolitical reasons. First and foremost among these, the clerical regime was from the start both extra-nationalist—that is, interested in exporting the Islamic revolution to other Muslim countries, and anti-nationalist—seeking to suppress the pre-Islamic roots of Iranian identity and nationalism in favour of revitalizing its Islamic and Shiʿi roots. This eventually developed into the ideology I have called "syncretic Islamization," which was posed as an alternative to the secular and nationalist "syncretic Westernization" ideology of the Pahlavis. Both of these syncretic ideologies attempt to reconcile different, even opposing, dominant principles, ideologies, practices, and religions: Westernization and Islamization. By presenting tradition as the source of identity, the regime politicized not only tradition but also some of the tenets of anthropology which is given to their study. Consequently, anthropology "lost its social legitimacy and popularity."[15]

In the realm of cinema, this loss may account for both the decline of serious ethnographic films and the forceful emergence of socially concerned documentaries, which examined the social strata, gender roles, practices, institutions, and traditions of society, as ethnographic films would have done, but from decidedly critical and political viewpoints. This critical space of inquiry became available only after the end of the war with Iraq when social criticism could no longer be legitimately suppressed on the basis of war conditions, national security, patriotism, or what Khomeini (1902–89) used to call defence of "dear Islam." Universities and other educational and cultural institutions once again became hotbeds of thought and criticism. The creation in 1988 of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization consolidated education, research, preservation, and restoration of culture and cultural artefacts, as well as many anthropological and ethnographic studies, including ethnographic films.

15. Nematollah Fazeli, "Anthropology in Post-Revolutionary Iran," synopsis of paper delivered at *Anthropological Perspectives on Iran: The New Millennium and Beyond Conference, Institute of Historical Ethnology, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (30 September–2 October 2004)*, 4.

16. Christian Bromberger, "Commonplaces, Taboos and New Objects in Iranian Anthropology," synopsis of paper delivered at *Anthropological Perspectives on Iran: The New Millennium and Beyond Conference, Institute of Historical Ethnology, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (30 September–2 October 2004)*, 3.

17. Fariba Adelkhah, "Social Anthropology in Iranian Postrevolutionary Society and Dilemmas and Crises," synopsis of paper delivered at *Anthropological Perspectives on Iran: The New Millennium and Beyond Conference, Institute of Historical Ethnology, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (30 September–2 October 2004)*, 2.

Another new development was the emerging reversal of exchange relations between anthropology and filmmaking. Whereas during the Pahlavi regime, it was primarily filmmakers who moved into ethnography, in the Islamic Republic period, a reverse movement from anthropology into filmmaking and media making seemed to emerge. Anthropologists found the Khātamī-era bureaucracy (both during his time as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and as President) more lenient with awarding research permissions. These creators used tape recorders, still cameras, and video cameras as part of their research arsenal and methodology; some to record interviews with their subjects, and others to document scenes of daily life, customs, rituals, and performances. Although these were rarely filmed for the purpose of making coherent, autonomous documentaries, the unedited footage provides a valuable record for future films, but access to this material requires individual contact with anthropologists. Nevertheless, the ethnography of certain subjects—such as the prison system, racism, and stigmatized minorities such as Bahaʿis, Jews, Afghan immigrants, and homosexuals[16]—remained off-limits for a time; as did the topics that preoccupied Marxist and neo-Marxist schools before the revolution, such as class conflict, urban and rural relations, and the consequences of power and inequality.[17] Interestingly, however, filmmakers took advantage of the public spaces of discourse opened up by the reformists in the 1990s and 2000s to examine some of these topics in their social documentaries and in an emerging class of films I call "ethnographic-lite." Strictly speaking, these are not truly ethnographic, but are rather reportage films that, like those of the Pahlavi era, are informed by certain unconscious understandings of anthropological methods and film styles. Some of them are process films, showing a ritual from beginning to end; some only document one aspect of a traditional ritual; some continue to engage in salvaging operations; some are impressionistic and descriptive; and a few, such as Varahrām's films, are research-based, resulting from long periods of sociological and ethnographic study, participant observation, and interaction with their subjects. Many of the same taxonomic categories are still present here, from Shiʿi religious rituals to nomadic and tribal communities, as well as some new topics. Unlike the Pahlavi-era films

given largely to salvaging a disappearing world, however, these films focus on discovering emergent practices, such as underground music (Amir Hamz, Bahman Ghubādī), transgender identity and practices (Amīr Amīrānī, Elhum Shākirīfar), women's violence against husbands (Mahvash Shaykhulislāmī), rhinoplasty (Mihrdād Uskūyī), and schools for training professional mourners (Bahman Kīyārustamī). This shift from "disappearing" to "emerging" cultures and practices is another mark of postmodern ethnography and documentary practices in Iran. But this postmodernist practice exists side by side with the modernist salvaging practice, this time centered on Shiʿism, Shiʿi beliefs, and Shiʿi rituals, mythology, and martyrology. Tribes have continued to exert their fascination on ethnographers such as Farhād Varahrām, who made Tārāz (The Taraz Route, 1989), about a Bakhtiari migration, and Pīr-e Shalīyār (The Sage of Shaliyar, 1996) about an annual ritual among Kurdish tribespeople in the village of Urāmān.

Figure 11: A Bakhtiari man and woman eating food beside their tent. *Tārāz* (The Taraz Route, 1968), Farhād Varahrām, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/y19343g (17:01).

The Little Medium That Could

The wide availability of digital filmmaking and internet streaming of movies in the past couple of decades have empowered a new sort of documentary practice, one that is not just local, regional, and national, but also global, making its products available to worldwide audiences. As local amateur videos of street protests, police misconduct and violence, clandestine gatherings, and anti-regime investigations are posted online, they become global, feeding the "big media" of national and international Internet streaming services and daily broadcast and cablecast radio and television news and documentaries. The ready availability of mobile telephones with cameras capable of recording and live Internet streaming of high-definition video and sound is a newer development that feeds what I call the "little medium" consisting of worldwide, Internet-driven, mobile telephony. The impact of these readily available but sophisticated handheld mobile technologies for filming and sound recording, and the global dissemination of the resulting materials, which can then be used and reused by others to create new film and music pieces whose recordings are again shared globally via the Internet, is a new development that makes the little medium of cell phone into a big, global medium, hence the moniker "the little medium that could." Other factors in the rise of this little medium include the deepening of authoritarian political control and the rise of militarized and violent rules of Islamic regimes and ideologies, resulting in state monopolization of all of the traditional means of mass communication such as radio, TV, and the press.[18]

If the little medium of the 1970s-80s in Iran—portable audiocassettes, videocassettes, and handheld filming—energized the Islamic Revolution, some four decades later, it appears that the new little medium of the 2020s—cell phone and digital cameras—have become enablers of a new uprising in the making, as evidenced by the 2022 protest movement that followed the death of the young Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsā Amīnī, who died after she was arrested by Iran's Morality Police on account of violating the strict Islamic dress code by appearing in public without a state-sanctioned head covering. The resulting widespread vociferous protests on the streets of Iranian cities were called movements—"Jin, Jian, Āzādī" movement in Kurdish, "Zan, Zindigī, Āzādī" movement in Persian, and "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in English. These protests did not remain local or national, as documentary videos, professionally-made news footage, music videos, and amateur eyewitness videos were all widely shared and reshared on various global Internet sites. This Internet-fed fury against

18. For more on this topic, see my article "Internet Cinema: A Cinema of Embodied Protest," in *Cinema Iranica*, (2022), accessed May 25, 2023, https://cinema.iranicaonline.org/article/internet-cinema-a-cinema-of-embodied-protest/.

the compulsory restrictions of clothing and behavior (broadly called hijab), the brutality of the security forces, and the general government repression in all spheres has continued to escalate online and in the streets, one feeding the other.

How effective this little Internet-driven mobile filming and streaming medium can become in energizing and maintaining new social mobilizations resulting in sociopolitical change in Iran remains to be seen. Will it become a little medium that could?