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“The Land they lost...”
Oil exploitation in Persia and its environmental impact
on the Bakhtiyari lands at the beginning of the 20th century

The Bakhtiyari formed a powerful nomadic tribal confederation in the 19th century, based in the South Western Persian province of Khuzestan. Since centuries, the Bakhtiyari tribes had been living semi-independently from Isfahan and Tehran and as a matter of fact, the Zagros Mountains formed a natural barrier from state intrusion. Under the Qadjar dynasty, relations between the central power and the Bakhtiyari confederacy were very seldom and the capital failed at integrating the Bakhtiyari lands to the imperial domains. Rebellions frequently out broke and the Bakhtiyari, federated under the leadership of Khans, managed to threaten of the centres of the Empire, Isfahan. Pastoral nomadism, autonomy and political leadership of the Khans defined the Bakhtiyari confederation. The Persian Shahs, whose authority was weakened during the long 19th century by military losses and western imperialism, saw the Bakhtiyari becoming a leading political force. At the end of the 19th century, around 250 000 Bakhtiyari lived of the resources of a pastoral economy, exchanging flocks of sheep and goats, herds of horses and mules for goods found in the city of Isfahan. They traded textiles woven from their sheep’s wool and supplied Isfahan with mutton and lamb. Besides a horse and rug carpet trade, they also practised seasonal cultivation for their supply in grains.

In the 19th century, Tehran and the British depicted the Bakhtiyari tribes in a very “classical” way, comparable to other imperial discourses regarding tribes of South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. They praised the manliness and strength of the Bakhtiyari living in the harsh environment of the Zagros Mountains but condemned nomadism, seen as “anti-civilisation” and as a proof of “archaism” and “backwardness”. Tehran’s imperial project to integrate the Bakhtiyari and to diminish their independence failed. Under British pressure, the opening of the Karun River to steam navigation and the construction of the “Bakhtiyari road” in the Zagros Mountains started to bring the state back in the Bakhtiyari country. However, the beginnings of oil exploration and exploitation saw the end of the Bakhtiyari independence and brought several changes. It marks a milestone in the history of the South Western periphery of the Persian Empire.

This paper will argue that the British petroleum companies led at the beginning of the 20th century the “imperial project” imagined by Tehran, London and the Anglo-Indian Empire in the 19th century . By studying the violent encounters between the oil companies and the Bakhtiyari from 1905 onwards, this paper will demonstrate how the Bakhtiyari lands became assimilated to a wider imperial territory and to the world economy at the eve of the 20th century.

The paper will focus on the heavy environmental and social consequences of this oil and imperial policy. In the Bakhtiyari lands, the drillings by the D’Arcy Syndicate and the construction of pipelines put an end to nomadism. The forced settlement process organised by the British oil companies led to a decline of the pastoral economy. Fields once in

common became private property. Furthermore, development did not follow this phase of “assimilation” of the Bakhtiyari. The tribes employed in the oil fields remained unskilled labourers with low wages. The era of oil also brought new hierarchies in the Bakhtiyari confederacy, as the Khans made a lot profits selling their lands to British petroleum companies. Explosions of violence just after WW1, protests and the re-negotiations of the agreements signed by the British and the Bakhtiyari Khans in 1905 show the difficulty of adaptation of a “tribe” to a new mode of life and the consequences of oil exploitation on a very specific type of environment.