

Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz

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The history of slavery in Iran has yet to be written. Little is known about the lives of the men and women who were enslaved in the households of the wealthy throughout that long history. Beyond that, we have virtually no understanding of the lives of African women specifically who were brought to Iran as slaves in large numbers, beginning in the nineteenth century. This paper will attempt to examine the life of one such slave, Fezzeh Khānom,¹ who (along with Haji Mobarak, an African man) was a servant in the household of Sayyed ‘Ali-Mohammad of Shiraz, known as the Bab, the founder of the nineteenth-century religious movement known as Babism.²

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¹ Always referred to simply as Fezzeh in the existing literature. I have added the title “Khanom,” which is the customary honorific address given to any respectable woman in Iran, except perhaps a slave woman.

² There is a considerable literature on the Babi movement. The various works of Edward G. Browne are still important, especially his translation and extensive notation of *A Traveller’s Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1891) by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, and *The Tārīkh-i-Jadīd or New History of Mīrzá Alī Muhammad the Bab*, by Mīrzá Husayn Hamadani (Cambridge University Press, 1893), and Browne’s own *Materials for the Study of the Babī Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1918). The best recent academic treatments are to be found in Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989. Paperback Edition: Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005) and in Denis MacEoin, “From Shaykhism to Babism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shī’ī Islam,” Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1979 (published along with a number of other articles on the subject in *The Messiah of Shiraz* [Leiden: Brill, 2009]). The classic Baha’i chronicle of the period is Nabil-i A‘zam’s hagiographic *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’i Revelation*, trans. and ed. by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1932). See also, H. M. Balyuzi, *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973) and Peter

Through an examination of her life, the paper will address the enormous gap in our knowledge of the experience of enslaved women in Iran. This research hopes to demonstrate that a history of African slavery in Iran is possible, not only in terms of abstract numbers, changing laws, and government policies, but also at the level of individual biographies.

Until quite recently, scholars provided only two inadequate perspectives on slave women in Muslim countries, including Iran. The first discussed an idealized and legalistic view of the proper treatment of slaves based on passages from the Qur'an and the prescriptions of Muslim legal codes.³ This discussion of Islamic requirements for the humane and benevolent treatment of slaves was the beginning and the end of the matter. The other perspective—equally distant from the actual experience of slave women, and especially African slave women with their distinctive histories—was a romantic description of the Muslim harem. These views, depicted in art, in fiction, and in scholarship from Victorian times on, were usually fanciful and erotic descriptions of the luxurious circumstances that were thought to surround women in the households of wealthy and powerful polygamous men. From this perspective, slave women might be imprisoned and guarded, bored and tragic figures—but they were also idle and (at least) half naked. Their only duty was to provide sexual pleasure for their masters.⁴

Edward Said and other scholars eventually denounced both of these views as “Orientalism.”⁵ Said suggested that Western dominance of the Middle East had given rise to the construction of deliberately distorted ideas and images about Muslim culture and practice that were used as tools in support of European hegemony. Of these tools, one of the most persistent

Smith's sociological study, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From messianic Shi'ism to a world religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). The early volumes of the *Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions* series (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982-), Anthony A. Lee, General Editor, are also useful.

³ See, for example, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition, s.v. “‘Abd” (R. Brunschvig); *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. “Barda and Barda-Dari, part vi: Regulations Governing Slavery in Islamic Jurisprudence” (Hamid Algar).

⁴ See, for example, the extraordinary *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* by Alev Lytle Croutier (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), notable for its lush illustrations of harem women.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

and useful was the image of the harem as a symbol of Muslim decadence, pre-modernity, and unrestrained sexual indulgence. All of these qualities might be secretly admired, and even indulged if the scholar happened to visit Muslim lands, but they nonetheless clearly set Europeans apart as the superior race, holding higher values and adhering to a higher culture.⁶

As George La Rue has pointed out,⁷ Said's book and the works of other anti-Orientalists have been silent on the subject of African slaves. Perhaps their stance in defense of an Islamic world under attack by Western imperialism left no room to contemplate Muslim ventures in Africa, including traffic in slaves. In any case, both the Orientalists and their critics have simply written African slavery out of the narrative of recent Islamic history. The historiography presents African slaves, where they are noticed at all, as non-actors, without biographies, without personal pasts, and without agency.⁸

Slavery in Iran

⁶ Cf. Tamara Loos, "Transnational Histories of Sexualities in Asia" and Leslie Peirce, "Writing Histories of Sexuality in the Middle East," both in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 5 (2009).

⁷ George Michael La Rue, "African Slave Women in Egypt, ca. 1820 to the Plague of 1834-35" in *Women in Slavery: Volume One: Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, ed. by Gwyn Campbell, et al. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007) p. 110.

⁸ There are exceptions, of course. Ehud R. Toledano's excellent volumes, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998) and *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) should be noted. Neither book deals with Iran, however. Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) includes two chapters on slavery in Iran and has made a major contribution to the field. Behnaz A. Mirzai, et al., *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009) contains an essay on the Qajar harem. For the Safavid period, see Sussan Babaie, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004) with brief discussions of African slaves. Also of interest, but with no mention of Iran, are: John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2002); and Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003).

Fortunately, however, the history of African slavery in Iran is beginning to be explored.⁹ Thomas Ricks complained about the earlier “perplexing void” in Iranian history. He noticed the paucity of scholarship on “the subject of slaves, slave trade, trade routes, collection stations, creditors, or slavery for the medieval, early modern or modern periods of Iranian history.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, the importation of slaves into Iranian cities had been a long-established practice. British reports from the early part of the century put imports into the Persian Gulf at between ten thousand and twenty thousand slaves per year, with the center of the trade being at Muscat.¹¹ Behnaz Mirzai has concluded that reports from the mid-1880s indicate that the majority of African slaves taken from the East African coast were being imported into Iranian ports.¹²

While there is no definite historical data that would determine the number of slaves exported from East Africa into the Indian Ocean trade, estimates among scholars for the nineteenth century vary from between one and two million. Possibly two-thirds of these slaves

⁹ The only doctoral dissertation written on the history of Iranian slavery appears to be Behnaz A. Mirzai’s “Slavery, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Emancipation of Slaves in Iran (1828-1928),” Ph.D. dissertation, York University, Ontario, 2004. By the same author, see also “African Presence in Iran: Identity and its Reconstruction,” in O. Petre-Grenouilleau, ed., *Traites et Esclavages: Vieux Problèmes, Nouvelles Perspectives?* (Paris: Société Française d’Histoire d’Outre-mer, 2002) pp. 229-46; and, “The Slave Trade and the African Diaspora in Iran” in Abdul Sheriff, ed., *Monsoon and Migration: Unleashing Dhow Synergies* (Zanzibar: ZIFF, 2005); also “Afro-Iranian Lives” (video). Niambi Cacchioli has also done work in this area: see, “Disputed Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, Asylum, and Manumission in Iran (1851-1913),” UNESCO website (http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/38508/12480962345Disputed_Freedom.pdf/Disputed%2BFreedom.pdf). Other useful discussions of slavery in Islam, with brief references to Iran, include Joseph E. Harris, *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971) and Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Also, Nahid Mozaffari, ed., *Slavery in Iran* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Thomas Ricks, “Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi’i Iran, AD 1500-1900,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 36 (2001) no. 4, pp. 407-418. In addition to Ricks’s comments, Ronald Segal comments at length on the paucity of academic work done on slavery in Iran in *Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001) pp. 121-27.

Apparently there is little memory of African slavery among contemporary Iranians, at least among those in Los Angeles. Whenever I raise the subject among Iranian friends and acquaintances they express shock and deny that such a thing could ever have existed in Iran.

¹¹ Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, p. 153, citing J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1785-1880* (Oxford, 1968) pp. 414-16.

¹² Mirzai, “Slavery,” p. 70.

were women and girls. Certainly, the great majority appear to have been female.¹³ This adds a gender dimension to the history of slavery in Iran, and elsewhere, that is only now being acknowledged. The history of slavery in Iran and of the Indian Ocean slave trade might easily be configured as an aspect of women's history both in Africa and in the Middle East. This perspective might also give us some insight into why slave history in Iran has been so understudied.

Domestic slavery had become, by the nineteenth century, the social norm for the Persian royal court, for wealthy families, and even for some middle-class merchants like Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad, the Bab. For an urban, Iranian family of any wealth and status during this period, the seclusion of the women of the household (or at least the pretense of such seclusion¹⁴) was a supreme necessity. Respectable Muslim women were expected to remain within the private sections of their houses and gardens, and to venture out only when strictly veiled. Women of this class were, at least officially, expected to have no contact with men who were not their husbands or immediate relatives—fathers, brothers, or sons.¹⁵ In such a society, domestic slaves or household servants were needed to carry out the public business of the house in streets and markets, and to maintain the honor of the family. Slaves and low-class women might haggle in the bazaar or move about the town without a specific destination, but such things were off-limits

¹³ Miller, "Introduction," p. 4-5; Helge Kjekshus, *Ecological Control and Development in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi: Longmans, 1979) pp. 14-16; Gwen Campbell, introduction to *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 5; Gwyn Campbell, *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004) p. xi.

¹⁴ This was as much a matter of pretense as anything else. Lady Sheil noted, with regard to Tehran in the early 1850s: "[Women of] all classes enjoy abundance of liberty, more so, I think, than among us. The complete envelopment of the face and person [the veil, or chador] disguises them effectually from the nearest relatives, and destroying, when convenient, all distinction of rank, gives unrestrained freedom. The bazars [sic] are crowded with women in this most ungraceful disguise. The weekly bath and constant visits consume a large share of their time; and Thursday afternoon is devoted to a mock pilgrimage to some shrine outside the town, or else to the grave of some relation." Lady Mary Elenor Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London: John Murray, 1856) pp. 145-46. I am grateful to Sen McGlinn for bringing this quote to my attention.

¹⁵ For a general discussion of the Qajar harem, see Behnaz A. Mirzai, "Qajar Haram: Imagination or Reality?" in Mirzai, et al., *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, pp. 77-90.

to high-caste, veiled women.¹⁶ Slave women might, and often did in fact, become vitally important to their walled-off, aristocratic mistresses as intermediaries to the outside world and liaisons to persons of influence outside of the home.

Joseph Miller points out that women as slaves were valued also, in both African and in Muslim societies, for their reproductive abilities, as concubines, and for their progeny. Masters have legal sexual access to their slaves (male or female) in every society that accepts slavery. In kinship-based societies, where slaves were integrated into a family structure, some female slaves would bear the master's children and increase the number of dependents under his control, expanding the scope of his influence.¹⁷ In Muslim societies, such children are regarded as legitimate and have equal rights of inheritance from their wealthy fathers. The status of a slave who has borne a child by her master changes to that of a sort of junior wife (*umm walad*), who cannot be sold (at least not legally) and who is freed upon the death of the master. Her children are free at birth, if they are the master's progeny.¹⁸

Despite European imagination, however, only the most favored of female slaves ever became concubines in the sense of being their master's regular sexual partners or the mothers of his children. The harem of a wealthy Muslim slave owner would consist of wives, concubines, children, female servants, male attendants, eunuchs, and so forth, in numbers as large as the master could afford to enhance his prestige, status, and influence.

A distinction in desirability and price was made in Iran between "Ethiopian" (*habashi*) slaves and East African (*siddi*, *zangi*) slaves from farther south on the continent. Systems of

¹⁶ Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction," in *Women and Slavery*, pp. 11-12 (Note also footnote 30 of this article).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, s.v. "Concubines" (Jonathan E. Brockkopp). In practice, such rights of a slave mother and child would only be respected if masters acknowledged paternity, which they normally did.

classification were common (even necessary) wherever slavery has existed.¹⁹ Lady Sheil notes that African slaves in Iran were divided into three types: “Bambassees, Nubees, and Habeshees. The former come from Zanzibar, and the neighboring country in the interior but I don’t know the etymology of the name.²⁰ The others as their names imply are natives of Nubia and Abyssinia.”²¹ “Ethiopians” were considered superior to the others, and males were therefore more likely to be placed in positions of responsibility and family trust.²² They could be given important jobs within the household, even acting as their master’s confidential stewards and bookkeepers.²³

Place of origin and assumed ethnicity played a role in the service that all slaves were assigned. Habashi women were more likely to be purchased as concubines and be assigned to the lightest duties within the household. Slave women from Zanzibar or Mombasa were assigned to the heaviest and dirtiest chores. They were less likely to be chosen as their master’s regular sexual partners. No matter how important these ethnic identities were to the way masters classified slaves, terms such as bombassi and habashi refer only to a slave’s point of embarkation from Africa and say nothing about ethnic origin, place of birth, or self-identification. Mirzai suggests that, within the harem at least, the distinct ethnic identities of African women were blurred by their new situation. They gradually adopted self-concepts based on their dependency on their master, within the master’s family.²⁴

Some male slaves served as laborers for Iranian public works, and some were conscripted into the military. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy families bought African slaves mostly for service in their households as servants and concubines. This had become the

¹⁹ Slaves are, after all, commodities that must be classified and priced for sale.

²⁰ Certainly from Mombasa, a Swahili city on the East African coast.

²¹ Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, p. 243-45.

²² See *Ibid.* The book also contains an early account of the Babi movement in Iran. See also, Harris, *The African Presence*, p. 39-40, especially note 25.

²³ Mirzai, “Slavery,” p. 112.

²⁴ Mirzai, “Qajar Harem,” p. 82. This gradual process of African slaves in the Iranian diaspora becoming Afro-Iranians over time and over generations has yet to be adequately studied.

dominant pattern for the Indian Ocean slave trade. By the nineteenth century, it was common for a wealthy Iranian man to have at least one African slave woman in his service. Naturally, such wealthy men were a small percentage of the population, but the African presence in elite households is significant.

The importation of slaves to Iran for domestic service and concubinage continued into the twentieth century. By then, British patrols were reporting that ships captured bringing slaves from East Africa by in the Red Sea carried mostly young women, girls, and young boys. These were considered more suitable for domestic service, and more easily controlled and integrated into established households.²⁵ In 1905, for example, Jamila, an Ethiopian slave in Shiraz, wrote a letter summarizing her life as a slave. In a rare record of a subaltern voice, she writes:

My name is Jamīla Habashī, my father is Lulā’ d-Dīn from Sāho, my mother Loshābah, and from the Omrānīah tribe. I was enslaved when I was a child then was brought to Mecca where I was sold to a broker; the broker took me to Basra from the Jabal, and sold me to an Iranian broker named Mullā ‘Alī, who shipped me from Basra to Muhammara and from there he took me to the Bushihr port and there he sold me to a merchant called Hājī Mīrzā Ahmad Kázirunī who is in Shīrāz now, I was his concubine for four years in Bushihr then Hājī took me to Shīrāz and kept me there for five years; in total, I was with him for nine years and then he sold me to Nasir Nīzām the son of ‘Atāu’llāh. After one year, Nasīr sold me to Hājī Muhammad ‘Alī Khān. Now it has been five years that I have been with him.²⁶

²⁵ Miller, “Introduction,” p. 13, and Paul Lovejoy, “Internal Markets or an Atlantic-Sahara Divide?” both in Campbell, *Women and Slavery*. These were also probably the most sexually desirable slaves at the time.

²⁶ Jamila’s saga apparently begins in 1880. Quoted in Mirzai, “Slavery,” p. 72, from the statement of Jamila, 8 Shawwāl 1323, File 2, Box 3, 1323, Center of Documents, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran. Mirzai suggests in footnotes nos. 24 and 25 (Ibid.), that Sāho is “a Cushitic-speaking group in northern Ethiopia,” and that Omrānīah presumably refers to the Oromo. The latter supposition is certainly not true because linguistic barriers would prevent such a shift in pronunciation. (Christopher Ehret, personal conversation, July 2, 2007.)

Slavery was not limited to African imports. Even indigenous Iranian women might be sold as slaves. In 1905, a catastrophic attack of locusts destroyed the winter harvest of the peasantry of Quchan in northeastern Iran. In what became a serious national scandal preceding the Constitutional Revolution, government officials demanded the payment of heavy taxes despite the calamity. As a result, hundreds of peasant girls in Quchan had to be sold into slavery to satisfy government demands. Such events were not unusual during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Iran.²⁷ But this particular incident became the cause of wide outrage and agitation against the central government during a time of revolutionary fervor. Afsaneh Najmabadi's research has shown that during the entire term of the first Majlis (1906), the incident occupied a central place in parliamentary debates and other forums of political debate within the country. However, this widely known and often told story of the "daughters of Quchan" was quickly written out of later histories of the Constitutional Revolution and forgotten. It is instead government outrages against wealthy and important men that were remembered as the precursors to the revolution in twentieth-century, Iranian national consciousness, and not the exploitation of women or the sale of slaves.²⁸

²⁷ Muhammad Ibrahim Bastami Parizi cites a number of examples of selling wives and daughters to pay taxes during this period, as well as the regular practice of slavery in the eastern provinces of Kirman, Baluchistan, Sistan, and Khorasan in *Hasht al-haft* (Tehran: Arghavan, 1991), cited in Afsaneh Najmabadi, "'Is Our Name Remembered?': Writing the History of Iranian Constitutionalism as If Women and Gender Mattered," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 29, no. 1/2 (1996) p. 91, note 17.

²⁸ Najmabadi, "'Is Our Name Remembered?'," pp. 85-109; idem., *The Daughters of Quchan Gender and National Memory in Iranian History* (Syracuse University Press, 1998). Najmabadi does not discuss African slaves, however. For another article on the exclusion of the Other from Iranian national consciousness and history, see Juan R. I. Cole, "Marking Boundaries, Marking Time: The Iranian Past and the Construction of the Self by Qajar Thinkers," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 29, no. 1/2 (1996) pp. 35-56.

For the nineteenth century, Polak stated in 1865 that the majority of black slaves (gholam, kaniz) living in Iran were born in Africa.²⁹ In 1868, a census in Tehran found that 12% of the civilians in the city were listed as African slaves and/or “household servants” (who may or may not have been Africans³⁰). This count includes only urban households, and not slaves who were used in agricultural work, or to maintain the irrigation system.³¹ Household servants and slaves were mostly women. This census reveals the extent of domestic slavery in nineteenth-century Iran and the importance of the African population in cities, which is invariably ignored in Iranian history.³²

There does not seem to me to be any reason to think that the situation in Shiraz twenty-five years earlier, when the Bab acquired his slaves, was qualitatively different. Indeed, since Shiraz is closer to the Persian Gulf slave routes, and since in the 1840s there was less international anti-slavery activity than there was in the 1860s, we might suppose that the population of African slaves would be even larger there. Mirzai notes that Afro-Iranian communities were established in towns and cities all along the southern coast of Iran. A report in 1847 shows that 3,488 slaves were brought that year to the Persian Gulf, and most of those

²⁹ Jakob Eduard Polak, *Persien, das Land und seine Bewohner* Leipzig:Brockhaus, 1865) p. 248. Cf. Mirzai, “Slavery,” p. 80.

³⁰ Still, I am highly suspicious of the census category ‘household servants’ in this context. The slave trade had been formally outlawed by the Iranian government in 1848, but the importation of slaves from Africa had continued, even increased. Under such circumstances it may have been prudent for the wealthy to refer to their African slaves as ‘household servants,’ especially in official matters like a census. It may have been even more prudent for the Iranian government to refer to household slaves in public documents like a census with an ambiguous designation that would attract a minimum of foreign scrutiny and condemnation. Similarly, slave children who were purchased and brought into households could have been overlooked, or classified as “orphans.”

³¹ Segal, *Islam’s Black Slaves*, p. 126, quoting an unpublished paper by Thomas Ricks, which was eventually published as “Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi’i Iran, AD 1500-1900.”

³² Tehran may not have been so different in this regard than other world capital cities. The black populations of both London and Lisbon during the mid-nineteenth century were in this same range. The black population of Lisbon may have been as high as 20%. See, for example, *Os Negros em Portugal: sécs. XV a XIX*: Mosteiro dos Jeronimos 23 de Setembro de 1999 a 24 de Janeiro de 2000 (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as comemorações dos descobrimentos, 1999); A.P.D.G. *Sketches of Portuguese Life, Manners, Costume, and Character* (London: G.B. Whittaker/R. Gilbert, 1826); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1984). I am grateful to Dr. Edward Alpers and Dr. Gregory Pirio for this information.

were destined for Iran.³³ Shiraz was one of the principal cities in the south where slaves were disembarked for sale or transfer, and so the African population there must have been significant.³⁴

A 12% segment of the urban population simply cannot be ignored and suggests that there have been significant African influences on all aspects of Iranian culture—from food to music to language to religion. This represents roughly the percentage of African Americans to be found living in the United States today, and of course the study of black people and their influence on American history and culture is a major field of academic study. Clearly, the study of the African presence in Iran could be a major field of Iranian studies, as well—even if the estimate of 12% were to be cut in half. As in the American South, this would be true especially as regards influences the African presence had on the culture of upper-class and wealthy Persian families, including the royal household.

Taj ol-Sultaneh (1884-1936), one of the daughters of Naser ol-Din Shah, grew up from infancy within the walls of the royal palace. She was raised by a wet-nurse and two nannies, one of whom (the “Matron Nanny”) was an African woman. She recounts in her memoirs that she was, as a child, surrounded by African slaves: “. . . we had many negresses and bond servants in our quarters. A cradle-rocker, a valet, a chamberlain, a washer-woman were also assigned to me, all from the same race.” She developed a deep emotional attachment to her African nanny, deeper than her attachment to her own mother. “I was keen to speak in her accent and follow her mannerisms and habits,” she confesses. So much so that her first language was her nanny’s Afro-Persian dialect, a language in which she remained fluent for the rest of her life. Clearly, the

³³ Mirzai, “Slavery,” p. 97-98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 74 and 78.

Iranian princess Taj ol-Sultaneh was from childhood deeply influenced by African culture, as were others of her class.³⁵

Edward Alpers has commented on the absence of scholarship on African cultural influences in Iran and in societies from the Arabian Peninsula to India.³⁶ More than a decade ago he called forcefully for the study of Africans in the northwestern Indian Ocean. However, his pioneering call for more research, for the most part, has not been taken up by other scholars.³⁷ The consensus of all histories of Iran today insists, quite inexplicably, on “the all but complete disappearance of a black diaspora in Persia.”³⁸

The Limited Value of Western Concepts

Miller and other scholars of Indian Ocean slavery have warned about the limited value of Western concepts and legal distinctions between slavery and freedom when applied to the study of slaves in the Muslim world.³⁹ Such concepts are based fundamentally on the notion of a free individual conceived as male (unconsciously perhaps, but the rights of wives were often limited),

³⁵ Taj ol-Soltaneh, *Khaterat-e Taj al-Soltaneh*, ed. by Mansura Ettihadia (Nizam Mafi) and Sirus Sa'dvandian (Tehran, 1361 [1982]) trans. as *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess From the Harem to Modernity, 1884-1914*, ed. by Abbas Amanat (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1993) pp. 112-15. Taj ol-Soltana explicitly substitutes a description of her African nanny for tender memories of her mother. For a brief discussion of Taj ol-Soltaneh's attitudes towards her nanny, see Nasrin Rahimieh, *Missing Persians: Discovering Voices in Iranian Cultural History* (Syracuse University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Edward A. Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions in Research,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (formerly *South Asia Bulletin*), Vol. 17 (1997) no. 2, pp. 62-81. Even Alpers's article—while calling on evidence from Arabia and India—was unable to discuss Iran as the site of African cultural influence, however. Presumably, this is because so little has been written on the subject.

³⁷ Campbell's important volume, *Women and Slavery*, does not mention Iran, for example, as her earlier edited anthology, *Structure of Slavery*, did not.

³⁸ Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, p. 127. Such an assessment rests on the racial classification of the Iranian population into contemporary Western categories, which is questionable at best.

³⁹ Similar cautions are made for the study of slavery in Africa and Asia. See, Miller, “Introduction,” pp. 25-20; Gwyn Campbell, “Introduction: Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour In the Indian Ocean World,” in *Structure of Slavery*, pp. viii-xviii; Suzanne Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition,” in *Structure of Slavery*, pp. 1-14.

who enjoys personal autonomy, freedom of movement, choice of employment, marriage, and association, whose legal rights are guaranteed by the state by virtue his citizenship. It is the guarantee of security of one's person and property made by the modern state which, at least theoretically, releases a free person from dependence on, or obedience to, powerful others and allows for free choices within the law. Slaves, on the other hand, were excluded from such guarantees in modern Western societies and were held as chattel property for life by their owners. They held no rights that the state needed to respect (save perhaps the right to life itself) and lived in a relationship of total dependence on their masters, the only relationship of theirs that the law would recognize. A slave then must survive without the protection of law, family, or the state, reliant on and obedient to his master.

Such concepts of slave and free are of limited value when discussing societies that are not built around the idea of the secular state, but rather built on concepts of kinship, belonging, religious authority, and hierarchies of dependence. For Muslim societies in the nineteenth century, personal security and identity could only be protected by ties of kinship, household, community, and the protection of a powerful and wealthy patron, rather than through any rights of citizenship. There was no ideal of freedom from such relationships, with their implications of dependence, obedience, and obligation, and any such freedom would have left an individual isolated and vulnerable. This is particularly true of women who, whether slave or free, were never regarded as autonomous agents, but always attached to a male patron (father, husband, brother, master).

The lives of two Ethiopian sisters, Bahrazain and Nur Sabbah, illustrate this kind of vulnerability in the absence of a protector. Recounted by the former when she fled for refuge to the British consulate in Bushihr in 1892, their story is this:

A person named Haji Ibrahim kidnapped me and took me along with pilgrims to Abu Rashid. There he sold me and my sister, Nur Sabbah, to Haji Abdullah, who died there. Both my sister and I then hired a camel and went to Zubair, where two persons called Rahim and Yusif appeared: the latter took my sister as his wife and deceived me and brought me to Bushire. They sold me . . . to Abdul Nabi through Aqa Reza Dallal. I work in the house of Abdul Nabi but am not properly looked after. I am beaten and get no clothes. I was originally free but have now been bought.⁴⁰

After the unexpected death of Haji Abdollah,, the two sisters were effectively “free.” They clearly had access to their late master’s wealth and could hire transportation to Zubair on their own initiative. But once there, they had no means of protecting their freedom. Nur Sabbah was “married” to Yosef with or without her consent. Bahrazain was carried off to Bushihr and sold into slavery again. Finally, the only protector she could turn to was the British consul.

All enslaved persons, and for the most part all other persons, necessarily were embedded in Muslim households and moved along a continuum of whatever situation of power, respect, wealth, and independence they might be able to negotiate within those households. All women tended to occupy positions outside of the public sphere and at the margins of wealth and power, slave women most especially. They moved toward the center of their households as they became mothers, bore the master’s children, and found acceptance within families. In this sense, the distinction between slave and “free” was more permeable for a female slave than for a male slave, since she might hope to be accepted as a valuable worker within a household, become her master’s concubine, give birth to some of his heirs, and in unusual cases become the wife of a powerful and wealthy patriarch. The most important consideration for slave women may not

⁴⁰ Quoted in Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, p. 155. (Talbot to Lascelles, in No. 34, 13.2.1892, FO 248/543.

have been their legal status as slaves, since no sharp distinction in law or practice existed. Rather, their aim would have been to negotiate the most respected position that they could achieve within the family that they found themselves attached to. In fact, that would have been the goal of any woman, slave or free, in nineteenth-century Iran.

Nineteenth-century travelers to the Middle East regularly commented that slavery in Islamic countries was more humane and less brutal than the slavery found in the Americas. The Qur'an accepts slavery as part of the natural inequality of human society, but commands good treatment and kindness to slaves, and recommends manumission as highly meritorious. Muslim law recognizes the slave's subordination to his master, but grants the slaves more rights than were generally recognized in Christian countries where the concept of slave rights was virtually a contradiction in terms. Vanessa Martin states that her overall impression "from reading both primary and secondary material is that slaves were better treated in Iran" than in other Muslim lands.⁴¹ If this impression is borne out by further research, the incorporation of slaves into Iranian households as (subordinate) members of the family may be the cause. Martin's research also demonstrates that slaves could rise to positions of influence within wealthy families and acquire wealth for themselves. She discusses the life of Haji Bashir Khan of Bushihr (b. 1836?), an Iranian-born, African slave of the Malek ol-Tojjar, who at one time had amassed a considerable fortune worth some 50,000 tumans, including homes inside and outside of the city.⁴²

Recovering the Life of Fezzeh Khanom

⁴¹ Martin, *Qajar Pact*, p. 150, 151.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 170-82.

Fezzeh Khanom provides one case of an unusual female slave in Iran. Brought into the Bab's family as a child, she became the constant companion of the Prophet's widow, lived at the center of her household, and eventually found herself an object of veneration and respect for Babi (and later Baha'i) pilgrims who came to pay homage at the Bab's sacred house.

Despite her remarkable status, Fezzeh Khanom nonetheless remained a servant and a slave. She is always present, but she remains invisible. She is a witness to sacred events, but her witness is given no significance. She is seen, but she is immediately forgotten. She is given, in Babi and Baha'i histories, the curious status of a "non-person." Her story provides us with an extraordinary window into the life of one domestic slave in the nineteenth century. By interpreting what we learn of her with contemporary sensibilities, we can locate an example of the African presence in Iranian history. Nonetheless, Fezzeh herself remains voiceless and her inner life remains a mystery.

The examples of Haji Mobarak and Fezzeh Khanom, two African slaves in the household of Mirza 'Ali-Mohammad, the Bab, offer a rare opportunity for historians of Iran to reconstruct the biographies of two ordinary slaves. Admittedly, they are ordinary slaves living in extraordinary circumstances. Because of their association with the Babi prophet, surviving Babi and Baha'i chronicles (and oral traditions) include them in their pious histories and record at least parts of their lives. As a result, these accounts contain more information than is usually found on household slaves in the nineteenth century, who are normally unmentioned. A careful reading of these records will help us take one more step toward a history of enslaved Africans in Iran, even though their experiences may not be typical.

At the same time, it must be recognized that slaves were not fully represented in Baha'i histories, just as slaves have been unrepresented in secular Iranian histories. Baha'i historians

have recorded Mobarak and Fezzeh's presence on occasion (as non-persons) but ignored them as actors in history by steadfastly refusing to attribute any significance to their presence at the genesis of the Babi/Baha'i religions. Nonetheless, these sources are highly useful, if not unique.

Fezzeh Khanom was introduced into Baha'i history books, at least those written in English, only in the 1980s, primarily by the slim volume entitled *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh*, written by Abu'l-Qasim Afnan.⁴³ Previous histories had ignored her or mentioned her only in passing.⁴⁴ *Black Pearls* was based on the records, the oral traditions, and the personal reminiscences of the Báb's family. Although the Báb himself had no children, the descendants of his maternal uncles and of his brother-in-law claimed him as an ancestor. Various kinsmen of the Báb eventually became Baha'is, while others remained indifferent or even openly hostile to the Báb's new faith and the subsequent innovations that transformed it into the Baha'i religion. Despite these internal differences, the family was wealthy and prominent in other ways, developing a mercantile empire that stretched from Istanbul to Hong Kong.⁴⁵

The Baha'i branch of the family, at least, was known as the Afnans (twigs⁴⁶), which eventually transformed from an honorific title into a family surname. The Afnan family has maintained a keen sense of its own place in history, and particularly in the history of the Baha'i

⁴³ Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988). Second Edition, 1999.

⁴⁴ Hasan Balyuzi's *Khadijih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) had mentioned her name. Since the publication of *Black Pearls*, Fezzeh Khanom has been mentioned briefly in the translation into English of Mirza Habibu'llah Afnan's memoirs, *The Genesis of the Babi-Baha'i Faiths in Shiráz and Fárs*, trans. and annotated by Ahang Rabbani (Leiden: Brill, 2008) and in Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2008), She is always referred to simply as "Fid.d.ih."

⁴⁵ See Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, "'Black Pearls': The African Household Slaves of a Nineteenth-Century Iranian Merchant Family," a paper presented at the Conference on Slavery, Islam, and Diaspora, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, Department of History, York University, October 24-26, 2003.

⁴⁶ That is, "twigs" branched from the "Holy Tree" (of the Báb). This, as opposed to the Aghsan (branches), the direct descendants of Bahá'u'lláh.

religion. By the 1980s, one member of the family, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, living in England, had come to be regarded as “the true custodian in this age of the traditions of the Afnan family.”⁴⁷ Afnan wrote down the family traditions as they related to the African slaves in the Báb’s household in a narrative that included his own personal reminiscences, which was specifically directed toward a Baha’i audience. Of course, he had at his disposal the considerable resources of the Afnan family, held in private archives, which include documents and memoirs reaching back to the time of the Báb himself. His account was published in 1988, in the United States, under the title of *Black Pearls*.⁴⁸ The book became the subject of considerable controversy within the American Baha’i community at the time.⁴⁹ *Black Pearls* may be regarded as a primary source that embodies a small portion of the Afnan family’s extensive memory and archive of the events of Baha’i history.

It is no surprise that, although it is a biographical account of African slaves in the Báb’s household, *Black Pearls*⁵⁰ focuses a great deal of attention on the Báb himself as the source of the numinous. The slaves are praised repeatedly for their loyalty and selflessness, and for their unquestioning—even childlike—devotion and obedience to “their” family. But while it is commendable that the presence of these African slaves is acknowledged, their significance to history is ignored. As such, the book repeats the approach found in earlier Baha’i histories,

⁴⁷ Robert Balyuzi, in the Foreword to H. M. Balyuzi, *Khadijih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) pp. xi-xii.

⁴⁸ Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls*. Second Edition, 1999. The book remains in print today and is no longer the subject of much controversy.

⁴⁹ Some African American Baha’is were outraged at the revelation that the Central Figures of their religion had been slave owners. (See, for example, <http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/3016/racism.htm>) Others seemed unconcerned about that but felt that a public portrayal of early black believers as slaves—even if slaves to the founders—was unseemly and ill-considered. They preferred to see black Baha’is in history occupying more dignified positions. They also objected to Mr. Afnan’s accounts as patronizing. The book was allowed to go out of print for a time.

⁵⁰ This very interesting little book (besides discussing Fezzeh and Mobarak) provides biographies of the African slaves and servants who served in the households of Bahá’u’lláh, and of his son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Iran and in Palestine. These narratives are also of considerable interest, but are beyond the scope of this study.

except that Afnan is quite personally attached to his relatives' reminiscences, and he is willing to write at length about the family's slaves.⁵¹

I have discussed the life of Haji Mobarak at some length elsewhere.⁵² Afnan's book devotes a chapter to him and a chapter to "Fiddih",⁵³ who was the servant and companion of the Bab's wife, Khadijeh Bagom. When the Bab married in 1842 in Shiraz, he established a new household which consisted of these two slaves, his wife, his mother, and himself. Of the family of five, two were Africans; and after the Bab's arrest and forced departure from the city, half the household was African.

At the time of his marriage, Fezzeh was a child, probably no more than seven years old, and clearly did not represent a great investment of funds. The family lived in a small two-story house in Shiraz, and seems to have had modest means. The Bab had some time earlier retired from his business activities to pursue religious studies and devotions. It is not clear that he had any income at all, at this point, and may have relied on relatives for support.⁵⁴

Afnan's portrayal of Fezzeh's life presents a narrow picture of a selfless servant utterly lost in devotion to her mistress, the Bab's wife, and in service to her master and his mother. After the mother eventually departed with Mobarak to Iraq, Afnan assures us: ". . . Fezzeh was able to dedicate herself fully to Khadijeh Bagom to the exception of all others in her life." According to this account: "She never developed any warm friendship with anyone else, even though there were many other servants in the homes of the uncles of the Báb. Never would she

⁵¹ I am deeply grateful for Afnan's unprecedented attention to African slaves in his writings, despite any shortcomings that I discuss below.

⁵² Anthony A. Lee, "The Establishment of the Baha'i Faith in West Africa: The First Decade, 1952-1962," Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 2007; idem., *The Baha'i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952-1963* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁵³ The Baha'i system of transliteration produces the spelling "Fid.d ih." I have used this journal's system of transliteration for this article.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to the late Jackson Armstong-Ingram for some of these insights.

appear in public except in attendance on Khadíjeh Bagom.”⁵⁵ Beyond this, Afnan insists that: Fezzeh “refused to even contemplate life without Khadíjeh Bagom.”⁵⁶ In fact, both women actually died on the same night, November 15, 1881. Fezzeh was about 47 years old. Afnan explains that Khadijeh Bagom died first, and that a short time later “. . . true to her hearts desire, the spirit of Fezzeh winged its flight to join her beloved mistress.”⁵⁷ The narrative is so idyllic on this point that one would assume that Fezzeh had either died of acute grief or had committed suicide. Afnan assured me personally however, upon my inquiry, that both women had simply succumbed to dysentery, one after the other.⁵⁸

As Jackson Armstrong-Ingram remarks in his discussion of Fezzeh’s life, one is tempted by Afnan’s account “to consider her a child so traumatized by the experience of enslavement that she attached herself totally to a ‘protector’ and grew up to be a withdrawn, asocial person.”⁵⁹ However, there are aspects of her story in this and in other histories that suggest otherwise. Sometime after her husband’s execution, Khadijeh Bagom’s home and person became a center of pilgrimage for the persecuted Babis (and later Baha’is) of Iran.⁶⁰ Streams of visitors came to seek out the presence of the wife of the Bab, who was regarded as a holy person in her own right by virtue of her direct relationship to the Prophet. Among her many honorific titles found in Baha’i scriptures are: Haram-e Asar, the Purest Wife; Hazrat-e Varaqeh-ye *Olya*, Her Holiness the Exalted Leaf (of the Holy Tree); *Mir’at’ollah*, the Mirror of God. Also, the Immaculate Virgin; the Throne of God; the Consort of the Point (a title of the Bab); the Consort of God, etc. In a

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 22. I should note that the other servants mentioned here lived in adjoining houses of the Báb’s relatives. This remark indicates the importance of the African presence in these households and implies that the African servants were naturally close to one another and were expected to relate with “warm friendship.” Here we can catch a brief glimpse of slave networks that would be able to preserve and reproduce some aspects of Afro-Iranian culture.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁵⁸ Afnan, personal conversation with the author.

⁵⁹ Armstrong-Ingram, “Black Pearls,” p. 16.

⁶⁰ The Báb’s house remained an important place of pilgrimage for Baha’is until it was razed to the ground by Muslim zealots after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Tablet (an open letter) to Khadijih Khanom, Baha'u'llah (the Baha'i prophet) addresses her, saying: "It behoveth everyone to venerate thee, glorify thee and through thee pay heed to the truth of God and His Cause."⁶¹

Some of her pilgrim visitors, at least, remained in her home as houseguests for extended periods. Khadijeh Bagom would receive these visitors, act as guide to the holy house, and recount her memories of her husband to her devoted listeners. In this role, she became a person of considerable influence within the Baha'i community, even though her primary association was with the Bab, rather than Baha'u'llah. Fezzeh Khanom, for her part, remained the only servant of Khadijeh Bagom and would wait on and cook for her guests. As a permanent fixture of the household, social isolation was not an option.

In addition, Fezzeh Khanom—having known the Bab and lived in his household—also inherited some of the Prophet's charisma. Abu'l-Qasim Afnan explained to me that she was also an object of reverence and devotion for visiting pilgrims. He made a point of saying that these pilgrims would bow to kiss the shoulder⁶² of Fezzeh as an act of subordination and reverence, and that they regarded her spiritual station as above their own.⁶³

Nonetheless, Afnan himself rejected the idea that Fezzeh should be regarded as a follower of the Bab (a Babi). He is careful in his book to characterize her service to the Bab as demonstrating only her devotion to his person, having no religious significance—either for present-day Baha'is or for Fezzeh herself. He repeatedly denied that such devotion should be interpreted in such a way as to grant a Babi identity to either Mobarak or Fezzeh.

⁶¹ Ma'ani, *Leaves*, pp. 54-56.

⁶² Kissing of hands is forbidden by Baha'i religious law. (Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i Aqdas*, K34.)

⁶³ This statement was his response to objections which had been made by some African American Baha'is that his portrayal of Fezzeh was demeaning to black people. He insisted that Iranian Baha'is of a previous generation had regarded Fezzeh as a holy person, as did he. I remember quite vividly that at the end of our visit, perhaps in illustration of his point, Afnan embraced me and kissed my shoulder. The effect was indeed startling and inspired me with a sense of humility and deep respect for the man, who seemed to embody at that moment all of the traditional dignity, modesty, and rectitude of his illustrious family. (Afnan, personal conversation with the author.)

Of Fezzeh Khanom, Afnan states directly in his book that “. . . she was not aware of the station and mission of the Báb.”⁶⁴ Of course, in the case of the Bab’s manservant, Haji Mobarak, such a statement would have been absolutely unsupportable because of his close association with the Prophet, and we find no similar remark in Afnan’s chapter on him. I would suggest, likewise, that the notion that Fezzeh could have remained unaware of the claims of the Bab throughout her lifetime beggars all reason, though this view was obviously held concerning her within the Afnan family. This same conclusion with regard to Babi identity also represents the consensus within the Baha’i community with regard to both servants. So much so that the publisher’s choice of book title “Black Bábís” was changed to Black Pearls during editing of the book at the author’s insistence.

One aspect of Afnan’s book that most startled his American readers was the assertion that neither Mobarak nor Fezzeh was told by the Bab’s family about the Prophet’s execution as a heretic by clergy and government in Tabriz in 1850. The Bab had been imprisoned for years before his execution, and the Babi movement had created a political and social upheaval in Iran. Armed conflicts broke out in various parts of the country, clerics regularly vilified Babis from the pulpit, and the Bab was the subject of general rumor in all parts of Iran. But the final blow came as a shock to the Bab’s relatives, and Afnan admits that the menfolk tried to keep the news from the women in the family for as long as they could.⁶⁵

Of Mobarak, Afnan writes:

⁶⁴ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 16-17. This is not an unusual strategy for dealing with the death of an absent relative within Iranian families. Quite often, the bad news will be kept from as many relatives as possible for as long as possible. Of course, the charade inevitably comes to an end. The dreaded truth is either revealed openly and deliberately or accidentally—and it is then either fully acknowledged within the family or a feigned ignorance is maintained as a polite fiction that is respected by everyone.

Even until the time of his death, Mubárak was not told of the Báb's martyrdom. Likewise, the other servants of the household remained in ignorance of these events. The family wanted neither to distress them nor to allow their servants, who were the only ones of the house who were regularly seen in the marketplace, to become the source of delusive news or rumors. Both Mubárak and Fezzeh were told that the Báb had voyaged to India to manage his mercantile affairs and would eventually return.

While in Karbala [in service to the Bab's mother], Mubárak longed for the return of his Master. He made a broom to which he attached a green handle. Green is the color of Muhammad's lineage: since the Báb was a descendant of the Prophet, Mubárak's broom was made in remembrance of Him. Every morning at the hour of dawn, Mubárak would use the broom to sweep the courtyard around the sanctuary of the Shrine of Imám Husayn. He vowed to perform this pious deed every day until the Báb would return. After completing this exercise, he would then proceed to procure the provisions required by the household and complete his other duties.⁶⁶

Of Fezzeh, Afnan simply writes: “. . . she was so enchanted by Him [the Bab] that she could not even fathom the thought that He could have been killed under such brutal circumstances.”⁶⁷ In 1877, some twenty-seven years after the execution, the house of the Bab in Shiraz was renovated by Baha'is so that Khadijeh Bagom could live there once again. Afnan relates a family tradition about this to illustrate the point that Fezzeh remained ignorant of the Bab's death until the end of her life. He says that Fezzeh was found rejoicing at the work being done, since she believed that the renovations meant that her master would soon return from his long journey to India. Afnan remarks: “Her joy was a heartbreaking testimony to her devotion.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23. The “brutal circumstances” are a reference to the Bab's execution by firing squad.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

As persecutions of the Babi religion intensified in Iran, both during the Bab's lifetime and after his execution,⁶⁹ the situation of Khadijeh Bagom and the other members of her family in Shiraz became precarious, and even untenable. For a time it was unsafe for the Bab's wife to remain in her house, and she took up residence with relatives. Under such circumstances, it became expedient for the family to maintain the public fiction that it was not their relative who had been executed. Rather, the story was put out that Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad had traveled to India to take charge of an arm of the Afnan trade network there. He was on an extended journey, but he would eventually return.

Such a story may have made it a little easier for the Afnans to maintain their face in public, but it certainly convinced no one. Naturally, the family's household slaves were willing and able to defend the public fiction for decades.⁷⁰ But the Bab's mother and grandmother eventually felt compelled to move their residence from Shiraz to Karbala, in Iraq, to escape from the rumors and deprecations of their Muslim relatives who made no secret of their contempt and hostility.⁷¹

It is certainly absurd to maintain that either Mobarak or Fezzeh remained literally unaware of the fate of their master, since they regularly attended to household duties in the streets of the city and would have heard all the news that circulated there. Both servants had witnessed the Bab's arrest, his imprisonment at home, and his forced departure. They certainly would have overheard conversations within the household and witnessed the grief-stricken mourning of the women of the family when the news of the Bab's execution was finally

⁶⁹ Persecution became especially intense in 1852, after an attempt was made on the life of the shah by a group of Babis in Tehran.

⁷⁰ There may have been an element of self-interest at play here, as well. Mobarak and Fezzeh were, after all, slaves. If their master were determined to be dead, his property could be divided among his heirs. That property might include the two of them, and their household would be destroyed as a result. (I am grateful to Dr. Mehrdad Amanat for this insight.)

⁷¹ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, p. 17.

confirmed for them. Afnan maintains that the mother of the Bab, at that point, was “beside herself with grief.”⁷² Beyond that, of course, there was the parade of Babi and Baha’i pilgrims that Fezzeh Khanom attended to for some thirty years after the Bab’s death. It is not reasonable to suppose that the significance of any of these events would have been lost on anyone who was of sound mind. But that is the current state of the literature.⁷³

Life with Khadijeh Bagom

Since Fezzeh Khanom is barely mentioned in the sources, we can follow her life only by tracking the movements of her mistress and the events in her household.⁷⁴ After the Bab’s initial declaration of his claim to a divine mission on the evening of May 22, 1844, his house became a center of intense activity and religious discussion. Though these activities were kept secret, his home was the focus of a new religious movement. Within a few months, the Bab had confirmed eighteen mullas and students of religion as his first disciples. He then left for pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon his return, since rumors of his claims and his unorthodox teaching had spread, he was arrested for heresy as part of a dramatic raid on his house, on September 23, 1846. Khadijeh Bagom remembered the event:

One night we were asleep. Suddenly, the chief of police, the accursed ‘Abdu’l-Hamid Khán, entered with his men through the roof of the house and seized the Báb, who was

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ For example, Will C. van den Hoonaard states categorically: “Neither Mobarak [n]or Fezzeh became Babis.” (“A Survey of the Baha’i Faith in Africa from Its Earliest Days to 1986,” *Baha’i Studies Review*, Vol. 11 [2003] p. 12.) Most recently, one article concerned with Haji Mobarak, published in Persian, has begun to challenge this consensus, Nader Saiedi, “Soltan-e Habashi” in *Payam-e Baha’i* (France), May 2010, pp. 10-13.

⁷⁴ See Balyuzi, *Khadijih Bagum*; Rabbani, *Genesis*; and Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*.

clad only in a thin robe. They took Him away without any explanation. I never saw him again.

I cannot describe the terrible trials, ordeals, and difficulties that occurred after this. I did not see even one of his friends or followers after his arrest. The doors were shut on all sides, and communications were cut off completely.⁷⁵

The Bab was expelled from the city, exiled to the northern regions of Iran, and eventually executed in 1850. That same year, the Babi disturbances in Nayriz, near Shiraz, came to a head with the defeat of the Babi fighters there. The captive heretics were paraded through the streets of Shiraz in a great commotion before being released to their own devices. But the Bab's wife was still cut off from all contact. She relates that:

One day I saw that Shiraz was in turmoil. The populace was in an uproar and I could hear the loud noises of bugles and trumpets. People were saying that the heads of the martyrs of Nayríz had been brought into the city. The next day, with the same tumult and violence, those captured at Nayríz were paraded through the city. How I longed to meet a relative of one of those prisoners, but it was impossible. Two of the captives came to our house in the guise of beggars, but no one dared speak to them.⁷⁶

One can only imagine Fezzeh Khanom's reactions to these terrifying events. When a second upheaval occurred in Nayriz two years later and more Babi prisoners were brought to Shiraz and

⁷⁵ As reported by Muhirih Khanom in her memoirs *Munirih Khanum: Memoirs and Letters*, trans. by Sammireh Anwar Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1986) pp. 34-36. Obviously, it is not likely that these events or their significance could have gone unnoticed by the servants in the house.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

then released, Khadijeh Bagom was able to find a way to meet with them, at least with the refugee women and their children, and to offer them assistance.⁷⁷

As has been noted, the Bab's mother eventually decided to transfer her residence to Iraq. At that point, Khadijeh Bagom moved from her house to live with relatives, taking Fezzeh with her. She continued to receive Babi pilgrims, however. The Babi religion was reorganized and renewed by Baha'u'llah, Mirza Hosayn-'Ali of Nur, a prominent Babi, while he was held in exile in Ottoman territories. Baha'u'llah claimed to have received a fresh revelation from God and to fulfill certain Babi messianic expectations. Gradually, almost all Babis in Iran delivered their allegiance to Baha'u'llah—they now called themselves Baha'is.⁷⁸

After 1872, the Bab's wife was able to have her old house repaired and renovated. She and Fezzeh Khanom returned to the house that was still considered a holy place and a destination for pilgrimage by all Baha'is. Since the stream of Baha'i pilgrims inevitably drew attention to the house of the Bab as a center of Baha'i activity, Khadijeh Bagom and Fezzeh lived in some danger and had to exercise caution so as not to arouse the attacks of the ulama or other hostile officials. For example, the entrance to the house was never used and the front door never opened. The two women and the pilgrims came in and out through the house next door. In 1878, because of threats to demolish the house, Khadijeh and Fezzeh had to vacate their residence for a period until matters cooled down.

As noted earlier, Khadijeh Bagom and Fezzeh Khanom both passed away on the afternoon of September 15, 1882—thirty-two years after the Bab's execution. Fezzeh was 47 years old, her mistress was 60. They were both interred in a shrine tomb, Shah-e Cheragh, in

⁷⁷ Ma'ani, *Leaves*, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the Babi/Baha'i transition, see Denis MacEoin, "Divisions and Authority Claims in Babism (1850-1866)" in *Messiah of Shiraz*, pp. 369-407; Warburg, *Citizens of the World*, pp. 169-74. For a Baha'i perspective see, H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980).

Shiraz that is considered sacred to Shi'i Muslims. In a Tablet revealed in honor of Khadijeh Bagom, after her death, Baha'u'llah recognizes her as a holy woman and also beatifies Fezzeh Khanom, without actually naming her:

O thou who art the fruit of the Tree of My Life [Khadijeh Bagom]! Thy tribulations have caused the ocean of sorrow to surge and the breezes of forgiveness to waft. I testify that, as a blessing and bounty on Our part to thee, God hath forgiven every servant and maidservant who ascended [died] on the eve or the day of thine ascension to the Abhá Horizon, the Exalted Paradise, save for those who have denied his rights and rejected what hath been manifested from Him to all men.

Thus hath God chosen thee, O My Leaf, for this most great bounty and this foremost and primal rank.⁷⁹

Fezzeh is present in these pronouncements, but unseen and unmentioned.

The Voice of Fezzeh Khanom

There is no record of any direct testimony from Fezzeh Khanom. All of our information about her is mediated by others. Since she was a child at the time she entered the household of the Bab, we might assume that she was never taught to read or write and could leave behind no memoir. In all probability, her voice is lost to history. She remains subaltern and silent. But we should not assume as a result that she had no inner life or no personal identity.

⁷⁹ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, p. 26.

Afnan's account might lead us to believe that she was so young at the time of her enslavement, so attached to her mistress, so subsumed in the family of the Bab. and so occupied with selfless devotion to that family that her African identity was forgotten. But this would be a serious mistake. Historians must struggle to listen to the voices of subaltern actors, even if those voices cannot be heard.⁸⁰

Afnan was keen enough to recount the story of another African woman, Golchihreh Khanom, who was a slave in the household of the Bab's uncle, where Khadijeh Bagom lived for a time. Golchireh was of Ethiopian origin and had been captured and enslaved as a child, as Fezzeh had been. Afnan recounts his personal memories of her as a servant in his parents' home, and so captures her voice. He writes:

I remember Gulchihrih distinctly. She was a tall, slender woman with an attractive face. She was jolly, talkative and very fond of the water pipe. She came to the house of my father to care for my mother, and she lived with us for many years until her death.

Gulchihrih remembered her home and her childhood days in Africa. She would hold me on her lap and tell me about her life before she was taken as a slave. Not once was she able to finish her story without my breaking down and weeping for her. She would lovingly describe the wide, tree-lined avenues of her native town and the large home in which she lived.

She would say: "There was a brook running near our house where I would play with my brothers and sisters. Our parents warned us to beware of white men. One day, while playing with my friends, we spotted two camel riders approaching. As they drew

⁸⁰ For further discussion, see Eve M. Troutt Powell, "Will the Subaltern Ever Speak? Finding African Slaves in the Historiography of the Middle East," in Israel Gershoni, et al., eds., *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

near, the older children recognized who they were and fled. I could not keep up with them and was soon caught. One of them put a knife to my throat and threatened me. I dared not say a word. They took me away, and eventually I was shipped to Bushihr.” She would describe her father and mother, and aunts and uncles, and the love that existed among them. She remembered also that she had a newborn brother who was very dear to her.⁸¹

Such vivid memories of her childhood would seem to indicate that Gulchihrih Khanom, despite her circumstances in Iran, was able to maintain an African identity for the rest of her life. She asserted such an identity every time she recounted the story of her capture to the children of the Afnan family. At these same moments, she protested her enslavement and the violence of the slave trade. Her repeated tellings of the story were certainly intentional, and in this way she preserved her voice so that it could be heard by posterity.⁸²

So, we may, perhaps, be allowed to substitute her voice for the voice of Fezzeh Khanom, who served the same family and was also a child at the time of her initial enslavement. It is likely then that Fezzeh Khanom never forgot her origins or discarded her African identity.

Conclusions

⁸¹ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 40-41.

⁸² Through an Afnan child. For another example of an African slave (in Fez, Morocco) who was able to preserve her voice for posterity through repeated tellings of the story of her capture to a child in her care, see Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1994), especially Chapter 17, “Mina, the Rootless,” pp. 157-73. I am grateful to Dr. Bernadette Andrea for bringing this testimony to my attention.

Because of her unique position as the companion of the wife of the Babi prophet, enough glimpses of Fezzeh Khanom can be recovered to put together the outline of her life story. This is an unusual instance which allows us to get some insight into the life and circumstances of an ordinary slave. We are certainly surprised to find that this African woman became far from ordinary and was an object of deep respect and even veneration by Iranian Babis. She lived fully integrated into the Bab's family as a companion to his revered wife, and second in holiness only to the widow herself. Nonetheless, she could not escape her status as slave and subordinate and was made personally invisible by that status, even to those who revered her. To history, she was rendered silent and absent, even if perhaps not forever so.

Fezzeh Khanom's life demonstrates that a history of African slavery in Iran can be written—and not just written in the broad strokes of laws, treaties, statistics, and government policies. The lives of individual slaves can be recovered and studied, as well. A study of the African actors in Iranian history will provide a new window on Iran's past. This window has the potential of yielding new insights into Iranian culture, its development and contemporary character. Certainly, it will offer us surprises. Africans have played important roles in Iranian households and have been present and active at the most seminal events in Iran's past, such as the genesis of the Babi/Baha'i movement. We can anticipate that there is an African component to Iranian culture that has not yet been appreciated.

Again we might note that Fezzeh Khanom's unique circumstances demonstrate that modern Western notions of chattel slavery are of little use when studying slavery in Iran. Fezzeh was certainly a slave, but she achieved a permanent and respected position within the family that adopted her. At the same time, she remained a non-person in terms of her independent personal identity and was erased from history as a consequence. Nonetheless, there is no reason to doubt

that she retained such a personal identity, an awareness of her African origins, an inner life, and enough agency to negotiate her circumstances within her home. Just how such complex relationships are to be conceptualized raises problems for the study of all Middle Eastern slavery: problems that have not yet been resolved.