

Recovering the Lives of Enslaved Africans in Nineteenth-Century Iran: A First Attempt

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Africans were enslaved and brought to Iran in large numbers in the nineteenth century as part of the Eastern slave trade. While there are no definite historical statistics on the number of slaves exported from Africa to Iran, estimates among scholars for the Indian Ocean trade during the nineteenth century vary between one and two million. Possibly two-thirds of these slaves were women and girls.¹ In Iran, these Africans were almost always destined for residence in Iranian households as servants, eunuchs, and concubines.

Little scholarship has been undertaken on the history of Africans in Iran.² There are enormous gaps in our knowledge of slavery in Iran and of the influence of African people and

This paper is based, in part, on my earlier work on African slavery in Iran, in *The Baha'i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952-1962* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and ““Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz,” *Iranian Studies* (May 2012).

¹ 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.

² 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 Problemes, 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).

culture on Iranian history. More than a decade ago, Edward Alpers called forcefully for the study of the history of Africans in the northwestern Indian Ocean.³ However, his pioneering call for more research, for the most part, has not been taken up by other scholars. This paper is an attempt to recover the individual lives of slaves in nineteenth-century Iran and to reconstruct at least a part of their stories.

The Limited Value of Western Concepts

Scholars of Middle Eastern 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.⁴ Such binary, legal concepts of slave vs. free presuppose a secular state that is able to protect the lives and property of individuals who can claim its protection. Western notions are based fundamentally on the notion of a free individual, conceived as male (unconsciously perhaps, but the rights of women were limited), who enjoys personal autonomy, freedom of movement, choice of employment, marriage, and association, whose safety and whose legal rights are guaranteed by the state by virtue his citizenship. It is the guarantee of security of one's

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). Lee, *The Baha'i Faith in Africa*, also discusses slavery in Iran. See Chapter 2.

³ 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, so little research had been done on the subject at that time.

⁴ Similar cautions are made for the study of slavery in Africa and Asia. See, Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction," in *Women and Slavery*, pp. 25-??; 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.

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 constructed around the idea of rights, citizenship, or of a 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, or the protection of a powerful and wealthy patron. There was no ideal of freedom for anyone 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).⁵

This paper will attempt to illustrate some of the difficulties with the slave/free dichotomy that is usually assumed. All enslaved persons in Iran, and for the most part all other persons, necessarily were embedded in Muslim households and moved along a continuum of whatever

⁵ For some slaves, even in twentieth-century Iran, liberation was seen as a form of punishment. For example, Fasad Khanum, the slave wife of the late Haji 'Ali Khan, complained that she and her 12-year-old child had been unjustly expelled from her master's house in 1905. (Behnaz A. Mirzai, "Emancipation and Its Legacy in Iran: An Overview," UNESCO *Culture, The Slave Route*, <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/dialogue/pdf/Emancipation%20Legacy%20Iran.pdf>)

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 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.

Four Cases of Iranian Slavery

This paper will examine four cases of slave experience in Iran in an effort to demonstrate the widely varying conditions of enslaved persons during the nineteenth century. First, Bahrazian Khanum and Nur Sabbah Khanum, two sisters who found their freedom in 1892, but who in the absence of protectors were quickly re-enslaved. Second, Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum, servants of the middle-class merchant, Mirza 'Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz, known as the Bab (1819-1850), the founder of the Babi religion. The former an educated eunuch, who raised his future master from the age of seven, and was entrusted with his master's business affairs; the

latter a lifelong companion to the Prophet's wife who became a holy figure in her own right. Third, Khyzran Khanum and a young boy named Walladee, two slaves who fled to the British agent in Lingeh in 1856, seeking freedom. And, fourth, Gulchihreh Khanum, captured and enslaved as a child. She became a servant in a wealthy Iranian home and the beloved nanny of the family's children, but continued to protest her enslavement to the end of her life.

Case Number One: Sisters at Zubair

The lives of two Ethiopian sisters, Bahrazain Khanum and Nur Sabbah Khanum, illustrate the dangers of "freedom" and the vulnerability of isolated individuals 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.⁶

Here we have rare access to the African voice in this testimony, mediated through the British official and translated into English, of course. The interview is a bit stilted, was recorded for legal purposes, and legal concerns are paramount. But the story of the sisters comes through.

⁶ Quoted in Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, p. 155. (Talbot to Lascelles, in No. 34, 13.2.1892, FO 248/543.)

Especially, the last sentence has the ring of authenticity: Bahrazain Khanum protests: “I was originally free but have now been bought.”

Here we see the limitations of freedom in traditional Iranian society. After the unexpected death of their master, Haji Abdollah, the two sisters were effectively “free,” in Western terms. 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 wealth or freedom, and were even unable to maintain their family bond. There were no state authorities to turn to. 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.

Case Number Two: Slaves of the Prophet

Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum were the servants of Sayyid ‘Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz, known as the Bab, the founder and prophet of the Babi movement in Iran.⁷ These two household slaves offer a rare opportunity to not just glimpse enslaved Africans in Iran at a particular moment in their lives, as with the sisters of Zubair, but to reconstruct fairly complete biographies and to follow them over a number of years.

⁷ This movement later developed into the Baha’i religion. There is a considerable literature on the Babi movement. 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, *The Messiah of Shiraz* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). The classic Baha’i chronicle of the period is Nabíl-i A‘zam’s hagiographic *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl’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 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 Bábí and Bahá’í Religions* series (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982-), Anthony A. Lee, General Editor, are also useful.

Haji Mubarak was purchased by the Bab in 1842, at the time of his marriage and two years before the beginning of his religious mission, from Haji Mírzá Abu'l-Qasim, a brother of the Bab's wife, Khadijeh Bagum (who was his cousin).⁸ Mubarak had been transported from East Africa as a young child, bought from slave traders when he was five years old, and trained for business and domestic service in the household of the Bab's future brother-in-law. Of course, he was raised as a Muslim. His education is said to have been "exemplary." All sources are silent on this issue, but because of the nature of Mubarak's service in the household of the Bab, and later in Karbala, as the attendant of the women of the household, it is likely that he was a eunuch. He was literate and skilled at commerce. The Bab had known Mubarak since childhood. After 1842, as he withdrew from business activities to pursue his religious mission, the Bab assigned Mubarak (now newly owned) the task of settling his outstanding accounts and winding up his business affairs in Shiraz.⁹ This suggests that Mubarak was literate in the language and mathematics of traditional accounting (*síyáq*) and was entrusted with his master's confidential affairs.

Mubarak's relationship with the Bab was extremely close. After the declaration of his prophethood in 1844, and as he began to attract a following among all segments of Iranian society, the Bab wrote almost continuously, producing volumes of treatises, prayers, and commentaries that were to become the sacred scriptures of his new religion. In these writings, the Bab mentions Mubarak in a number of places and praises him highly.¹⁰ The Bab's father died when he was one year old, and he was raised by his material uncle (within the extended

⁸ Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988 [1999]) p. 5. The biographical information concerning Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum is taken from this book, unless otherwise noted.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ The information about the mention of Mubarak in the writings of the Bab is taken from Nader Saiedi, "Sultan-i Habashi" in *Payam-i Baha'i* (France), May 2010, pp. 10-13, unless otherwise noted. Dr. Saiedi has been able to read the entire corpus of the Bab's writings housed in the International Baha'i Archives, Haifa, Israel.

family of his future wife).¹¹ Yet he often prays for both his father and his mother in his devotions. It is seldom that the Bab refers to his parents in these writings, asking for Divine blessings, that he does not also mention Mubarak at the same time.¹²

In 1850 (1265 A.H.), shortly before his execution as a heretic, and while imprisoned in Azerbaijan, the Bab wrote *The Book of Thirty Prayers (Kitáb-i sí du'á)* in celebration of his approaching thirtieth birthday. The book takes the form of thirty long supplications addressed to God, one for each of his years. But in the process, the prophet also reveals his own biography, recounting the events of his life. In the seventh prayer of the book, the Bab writes: “O God! You sent me when I was seven, someone who came to raise me, and his name was Mubarak. God send blessings upon him.” In another place in the book, the Bab asks for God’s favor on his father and his mother and on “the person who brought me up and taught me good character (*tarbiyat kard*), and raised me,” again referring to Mubarak.¹³

So we learn that one of the duties that Mubarak had within the Bab’s uncle’s household was to look after the young ‘Ali-Muhammad and train him in good manners. Clearly, Mubarak became a father figure to the boy, and he includes him as a substitute father in his prayers and writings. Beyond that, in the same book we find this passage: “O God! Because in those days Mubarak made bows and arrows for me [to play with], send down upon him your mercies and your bounties.”¹⁴ This is a touching tribute to the filial sentiments that the Bab had for his African care-giver.¹⁵ During the period of his exile and imprisonment in the north of Iran (1846-

¹¹ Nader Saiedi, personal communication (March 2013). Balyuzi, *The Báb*, p. 32.

¹² Nader Saiedi, personal communication, March 2013.

¹³ Saiedi, “Sultan-i Habashi.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ It also may be a peek at the influence of African culture on the future Prophet. It is not clear to me that Iranian children normally played with bows and arrows as toys.

1850), in letters written to his mother, his wife, and his uncles, the Bab often mentions Mubarak, and always praises him.

Some decades later, Taj al-Soltaneh (1884-1936), one of the daughters of Nasiru'l-Din Shah, developed a similar emotional attachment to her African nanny. So much so that, in her autobiography, she substitutes tender memories of that slave for memories of childhood with her mother.¹⁶ The Bab seems to have done something similar with his memories of Mubarak, substituting memories of a childhood with him for memories of his deceased father. We might expect that other slaves who served as nannies and care-givers for Iranian children developed the same sorts of parental relationships.

So, when the Bab purchased Mubarak from his wife's family for the absurdly low price of 14 *tumans* (about \$28.00), the two were already intimately known to one another. No doubt, Mubarak was more of a wedding present from the brother-in-law than anything else.¹⁷ Mubarak served his new master and his family as a household servant, bookkeeper, and confidant. As such he was associated with the events at the genesis of the Babi movement and participated in those events fully. Still, he remained subordinate and invisible as a slave.

Between May 1844 and September 1846, when his master was finally arrested for his religious heresies and was forced to leave Shiraz for the last time, Mubarak met and served all of the first disciples of the movement; he carried secret verbal messages and written correspondence between his master and these disciples. Mubarak was the Bab's companion and

¹⁶ Taj al-Soltaneh, *Khaterat-e Taj al-Soltaneh*, ed. by Mansura Ettihadia (Nizam Mafi) and Sirius 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. For a brief discussion of Taj al-Soltaneh's attitudes towards her nanny, see Nasrin Rahimieh, *Missing Persians: Discovering Voices in Iranian Cultural History* (Syracuse University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, p.5. Apparently, the bill of purchase still exists in the archives of the Afnan family.

attendant (along with one other disciple) on the pilgrimage in 1844-1845, to Mecca, where the new prophet publicly announced his claim to be the Qa'im (the Shi'ite messiah). There, Mubarak performed all the rites of pilgrimage and became a *haji*.¹⁸

Mubarak was witness to the Bab's nearly continuous dictation of sermons and religious treatises during the pilgrimage; he was shocked when most of these writings were stolen and was willing to defend them at the risk of his life. He was present when his master was arrested in June 1845, and placed under house arrest in Shiraz. During the period of that confinement, he served his master and was in charge of surreptitiously (and in defiance of government orders) bringing followers to meet with him through a secret passage to the house. When the Bab finally left for hiding in Isfahan, neither Mubarak nor the Prophet's family ever saw him again. Mubarak was entrusted with the care of the Bab's wife and mother, both of whom remained at home in Shiraz.¹⁹

After the Bab's execution in 1850, his mother and grandmother eventually felt compelled to move their residence from Shiraz to Karbala, in Iraq, to escape from the contempt and hostility of their Muslim relatives.²⁰ Mubarak accompanied them to their new home and died there, in their service.²¹ To salvage their respectability after 1850, members of the Bab's family maintained in public that the Bab had not been executed, but rather was living in India, administering the family's trading affairs in that country. While serving the family in Karbala, Mubarak helped to preserve this polite fiction by vowing to sweep the courtyard around the tomb

¹⁸ It seems clear that he was never known by this title, however. Perhaps Mubarak's status as a slave precluded the use of such honorifics. In all of the sources, Mubarak is referred to only by his given name. More often, he is referred to only as the Bab's "Ethiopian servant" (*gulam-i habashi*). I have referred to him as Haji Mubarak in all of my publications.

¹⁹ Nabíl-i A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 53-72 passim, 129, 132-33; Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 11-16; Balyuzi, *The Báb*, pp. 17, 49, 57, 71, 84; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, pp. 166-67, 241-43.

²⁰ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, p. 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.

of the Imām Husayn in Karbala every day until his master’s “return.” He performed this pious duty every morning until his death c. 1863.²²

At the time of his marriage, the Bab also acquired a servant for his wife. Fezzeh Khanum,²³ an “Ethiopian” child was probably no more than seven years old at the time. I have discussed the life of this African slave at length elsewhere.²⁴ Suffice it to say here that Fezzeh Khanum lived as the lifelong companion of the Bab’s wife. She shared in the dangers, the isolation, and the difficulties of the family of the heretic prophet. Eventually, she became a holy figure herself and an object of veneration for Babis, and later Baha’is.

I should note here that, at the time of his marriage, the Bab’s new household consisted of himself, his wife, his mother, and two slaves: Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum. Two out of five members of the new household were Africans. After the Bab’s arrest and departure from the city, half of the household was African. Khadijeh Bagum’s close relationship with Fezzeh Khanum represents the pairing of an African woman with her Iranian mistress over a period of decades.

Sometime after her husband’s execution, Khadijeh Bagum’s home and person became a center of pilgrimage for the persecuted Babis (and later Baha’is) of Iran.²⁵ Streams of visitors came to seek out her presence and regarded her as a holy person in her own right by virtue of her direct relationship to the Prophet. In a Tablet (an open letter) to Khadijeh Bagum, Baha’u’llah (the Baha’i prophet, who replaced the Bab as head of the movement) addresses her, saying: “It

²² Ibid., p. 18. Lee, “Haji Mobarak” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*; Lee, *The Baha’i Faith in Africa*, pp. ???.

²³ Again, the polite title “Khanum” is not used in the sources with respect to Fezzeh. I use it in all of my publications.

²⁴ Lee, “Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran.”

²⁵ 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.

behoveth everyone to venerate thee, glorify thee and through thee pay heed to the truth of God and His Cause.”²⁶

Some of her pilgrim visitors, at least, remained in her home as house guests for extended periods.²⁷ Khadijeh Bagum would receive these visitors, act as guide to the holy house, and recount her memories of her husband to her devoted listeners. Fezzeh Khanum remained the only servant of the house; she would cook meals for and serve these guests. In addition, Fezzeh Khanum—because of her close association with the Bab—inherited some of the Prophet’s charisma. She also became an object of reverence and devotion for visiting pilgrims. These pilgrims would bow to kiss her shoulder²⁸ as an act of subordination and reverence.²⁹ This is the only case of the veneration of an African woman by Shi’ite Muslims (here, as Baha’is) that I am aware of in Iranian history.

Khadijeh Bagum and Fezzeh Khanum both died of dysentery on the same day in 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 Shiraz, considered sacred to Shi’ite Muslims. In a Tablet revealed posthumously in honor of Khadijeh Bagum, Baha’u’llah recognizes her as a holy figure and also beatifies Fezzeh Khanum as well, without actually naming her.³⁰

Both Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum lived at the center of their master’s family. Because of the unique circumstances that surrounded the establishment of a new religious movement by

²⁶ Ma’ani, *Leaves*, pp. 54-56.

²⁷ See, for example, Munírih *Khánum*, *Munírih Khánum: Memoirs and Letters* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986) trans. by Sammireh Anwar Smith, pp. 26-38.

²⁸ Kissing of hands is forbidden by Baha’i religious law. (Baha’u’llah, *The Kitab-i Aqdas*, K34.)

²⁹ Lee, “Enslaved African Women,” p. ???; Lee, *The Baha’i Faith in Africa*, p. ???

³⁰ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 23-26.

their master, and the documentation that the Bab and others created around those events, we are able to recover partial biographies of the lives of his slaves. We can actually learn a great deal about them. This provides us with an extraordinary window on domestic slavery in nineteenth-century Iran. The roles that the Bab's slaves played within his family may not have been much different than the roles of slaves in other merchant families. Enslaved men and women were incorporated into family networks and found their places within them.

Unfortunately, there is no record of even one word spoken by either Fezzeh Khanum or Haji Mubarak. All of our information about them is mediated through others. In all probability, their voices are lost to history. They remain subaltern and silent. Though pious Baha'i histories sometimes mention them, they steadfastly refuse to ascribe to them any significance beyond their personal devotion to the Prophet. Despite their honored positions within the Bab's family, they are treated as non-persons; in fact, as slaves. But we should not assume as a consequence that they had no inner life or no personal identity. This would be a serious mistake, as the story of Gulchihreh Khanum demonstrates below. Historians must struggle to listen to the voices of subaltern actors, even if those voices cannot be heard.³¹

Case Number Three: Seeking Refuge in Lengeh

Niambi Cacchioli has discussed two Africans previously unknown to history who were enslaved by 1856, in Lengeh, a port town on the southern coast of Iran, west of Bandar Abbas, and an

³¹ 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) pp. 242-61.

important center of African slave trading.³² Khyzran Khanum, a young woman of about 22 years, and a 13-year-old boy named Walladee both sought protection from the British agent in the town, Mulla Ahmad, an Iranian. He wrote their testimonies down for his employer.³³

Khyzran Khanum and Walladee found themselves in different situations, however.

Khyzran had been born a slave in a town near Zanzibar in about 1834. She was a domestic slave there until the age of 13, when she was freed upon the death of her master. Several years later, both she and her sister were abducted on the streets of Zanzibar one evening by a slave trader as they were returning home. They were hidden on board a dhow with twenty other captives and carried to Ras al-Khaymah, on the Arabian Peninsula, where they were sold to individual buyers. Khyzran was separated from her sister at this point and sold, along with Walladee and another slave, to a dealer based in Lengeh. The three were smuggled into Iran. Khyzran was sold to a resident of Lengeh, identified as Kammal and worked as a domestic servant in his house. Khyzran explained that she was expected to remain indoors. She says: “Kammal insisted that I was not to show myself outside the house because the English Agent would see me.”³⁴ She did not necessarily follow these instructions, however, since we find that she was able to make contact with other slaves in Lengeh sometime later.

Within a short time, Kammal left to visit his native village. Khyzran Khanum claimed that he simply abandoned her, though this seems unlikely. Perhaps he assumed that she could rely on a network of African slaves in the town to sustain herself until he returned. Or perhaps, his newly acquired slave simply took the opportunity to attempt to regain her freedom. But, in

³² Niambi Cacchioli, “Fugitive Slaves, Asylum and Manumission in Iran (1851-1913),” *UNESCO Culture, The Slave Route*, http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/38508/12480962345Disputed_Freedom.pdf/Disputed%2BFreedom.pdf.

³³ Found in IOR R/15/1/157, British Library. The details of the case, according to Cacchioli, are found in the statements given by the two slaves at the Basaidu freed slave depot and in correspondence between Mulla Ahmad and th Persian Gulf Political Resident, Mr. Felix Jones.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

any case, Khyzran sought out the consul of another slave woman in Lengeh who advised her that: “Rather than attempting to locate my owner, I should go to Ahmed the Agent who would save me, which he did.” Mulla Ahmad helped her to file a petition with the British Agency claiming her freedom on the grounds that she had been abandoned by her owner after having been illegally imported into Iran.

A few days later, while still in Lengeh, Khyzran ran into Walladee on the street. He told her that he had been sold to another resident of the town. She informed him about Mulla Ahmad and escorted him to the British agent’s house. There Ahmad filed a claim for emancipation on behalf of Walladee also and arranged for the two fugitives to stay at the slave asylum at Basaidu. The claims of illegal importation seemed sound since the stories of the two enslaved Africans corroborated one another. They had clearly been imported that year.

These events actually demonstrate a remarkable understanding of recent laws and decrees concerning the importation of slaves into Iran, which had only recently been taken effect, and of the role that the British might play in securing the release of recent captives. In 1848, the British government had pressured Muhammad Shah to issue a decree (*firman*) which forbade the importation by sea of all African slaves. This order had little effect in reality, however, since the shah died later that year, and the new Nasiru’l Din Shah did nothing to enforce it. Furthermore, the new government insisted that the British had no authority to enforce the anti-slavery law on Iranian territory. It was only in 1851, with the Anglo-Persian slave trade agreement, that the British gained the concession that would allow them to search Iranian vessels, seize illegal cargoes, and manumit any slaves found to have been brought into the country after that date. Enforcement proved to be extremely difficult, however, and British efforts were intermittent and

usually ineffective. For the most part, slave traders could easily avoid what they regarded as British meddling.³⁵

It appears, however, that the slave communities in Iran, at least in the southern ports, were very much aware of the new agreements with the British and were alive to take advantage of them. In 1856, only five years after the concession, Khyzran was able to learn of the possibility of British manumission on the streets of Lengeh from another slave woman. Her informant seems to have understood that since she and Walladee had been imported very recently (that is, after 1851), they were eligible. Khyzran claimed to have been abandoned by her master; Walladee simply escaped. The former seems to have been more realistic about her enslavement and had played the role assigned to her until her master left the city. She had, after all been born a slave in Zanzibar. Walladee, at thirteen, probably hoped for a chance to return to Africa.³⁶

Cacchioli does not discuss Khyzran Khanum's position as a slave or the reason for her master's departure. But it seems virtually certain that she had been purchased as a concubine, as well as a household servant. Since Kammal was returning to his home village for a visit, it appears that he did not want to have his relationship with Khyzran known to his relatives and fellow villagers. Most especially, he may have left a wife at home and did not want to complicate his domestic relationship.³⁷ He does seem to be curiously confident, however, that Khyzran would have no avenue of escape, despite his warnings to her about the British agent.

³⁵ Footnote political events. ???

³⁶ This is suggested by research on runaway slaves in America. Slaves in the country for less than a year more often ran away in an effort to return to Africa. See, for example, Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

³⁷ It seems likely to me that a man, at this time, who was wealthy enough to purchase a slave woman would have already been married some time before.

Perhaps he did not regard the British as any real threat to his property, but only an unwanted annoyance.

If so, he was correct. Some days after Walladee's escape, the local shaykh at Lengeh filed a vigorous complaint with the British Agency on behalf of the boy's outraged master. The latter claimed that Walladee was not a new import but had been in his service for two years. It does not seem that he offered any evidence of this, however. Nonetheless, the shaykh demanded the return of Walladee to his master and even threatened to use force, if necessary. Of course, Kammal was out of town and there were no similar complaints from him, though we might imagine that there would have been upon his return.

The local Agency found the situation rather prickly. Therefore, it was decided that the Iranian Mulla Ahmad had never been authorized to assist fugitive slaves, although some British officials stationed in Lengeh had done so. The Agency ordered the return of both Khyzran and Walladee from Basaidu. The boy was to be immediately restored to his owner. Presumably, Khyzran Khanum would be returned to Kammal, if and when he returned to town. In any case, she could not rely on any assistance from the British. Mulla Ahmad lost his job for stepping out of place.

Unfortunately, both Khyzran Khanum and Walladee disappear from the British records at this point. It is unlikely that any other record of them will be found. However, we can still reconstruct a small piece of their lives, the stories of their enslavement, and their efforts to gain their freedom. These stories are not only valuable for their own sakes, but also demonstrate to us something about the nature of slavery and freedom in nineteenth-century Iran. Although briefly free, without a powerful protector within Iranian society, the two were enslaved once again.

Case Number Four: The Lifelong Protest of Gulchihreh Khanum

Abul-Qasim Afnan (1921-2004), a descendant of the Bab's uncle and the author of *Black Pearls*,³⁸ his memoir of the African slaves associated with the early history of the Baha'i religion, recounts the story of another African woman, Golchihreh Khanum. She was a slave in the household of the children and grandchildren Bab's uncle, in whose home Khadijeh Bagum and Fezzeh Khanum had lived for a time. Afnan was one of the grandchildren. He recounts fond memories of the African servants who remained in the home during his childhood.³⁹

Gulchihreh was a woman of Ethiopian origin and had been captured and enslaved as a child, just as Fezzeh Khanum had been. Afnan recounts his personal memories of her as a servant in his parents' home, and so captures her voice. She clearly acted as his nursemaid in his early years. He writes:

I remember Gulchihreh 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.

Gulchihreh 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.

³⁸ See Note 6. The story of Gulchihreh Khanum is taken from this source.

³⁹ Slavery was not formally outlawed in Iran until 1928. Both before and after that date, however, African servants lived in a relationship of polite dependency on the families they were attached to. I assume that this was the case with Gulchihreh within the Afnan family, since Baha'i religious law had forbidden slavery from 1873. (Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i Aqdas*, K72.)

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 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.⁴⁰

Such vivid memories of her childhood would seem to indicate that Gulchihrih Khanum, despite her circumstances in Iran, was able to maintain an African identity for all of her life. She seems to have found her place within the Afnan family, and she is remembered as a beloved caretaker of the children. Nonetheless, she asserted her African identity every time she recounted the story of her capture to the children of the 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.⁴¹

So, we may, perhaps, be allowed to substitute her voice for the voice of Fezzeh Khanum, who served the same family a generation earlier and was also a child at the time of her capture in Africa. It is likely then that Fezzeh Khanum also never forgot her origins or discarded her African identity. Perhaps we can even hear the voices of Khyzran Khanum of Lengeh and her

⁴⁰ Afnan, *Black Pearls*, pp. 40-41.

⁴¹ Through a child of her master. 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.

lost her sister echoed here in Gulchihrih Khanum's lament for her lost family and country and her subtle, yet stubborn, protest against the evils of slavery.

Conclusions

Together, these glimpses of the lives of enslaved Africans demonstrate 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. Such studies 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 the nature of slavery and freedom in Iran and other Muslim societies. These four case studies demonstrate that modern Western notions of chattel slavery are of little use when studying slavery in these societies.

The fortunate sisters, Bahrazain Khanum and Nur Sabbah Khanum, were able to achieve their freedom upon the unexpected death of their master, and they fell heir to his wealth. But they found their new status worthless, even dangerous. They remained vulnerable to whoever might come along to take advantage of them, and they were ultimately re-enslaved. Bahrazain Khanum, at least, found herself in a worse position than before and fled to British protection.

Fezzeh Khanum was certainly a slave, but she achieved a permanent and respected position within the family that adopted her. She lived at the center of her mistress's world, alongside her until her death. Haji Mubarak was blessed and honored almost as a father figure by his master. He was entrusted with the care of master's mother and grandmother. At the same time, both servants remained non-persons in terms of their independent personal identities and were erased from history as a consequence. Nonetheless, they seem to have accommodated themselves to

their positions within the Afnan family, as did Gulchihreh Khanum some time later. At least the latter was able to preserve for us a trace of her own voice. Presumably, these three Africans would represent the norm of nineteenth-century Iranian slavery: the norm of subordinate persons embedded in extended families.

Khayzran Khanum and Walladee, on the other hand, are two more Africans found only in the British records as fugitive slaves petitioning for assistance. Along with Bahrazain Khanum, they represent the exception, rather than the rule for African slaves in Iran. These two refused, at least a first, to be incorporated into the family networks of their masters and made an unsuccessful bid for freedom. That such freedom would have been viable without a powerful protector seems unlikely, however. As recent imports, they may not have understood this social predicament.

Just how such complex relationships are to be conceptualized by historians raises difficult problems for the study of all Middle Eastern slavery: problems that have not yet been resolved. But it is clear that a simple binary concept of slave/free rooted in Western concepts of slavery and freedom found within the legal frameworks of the nation-state is inadequate to account for complexities of slave life in Iran.