

ARTICLE

Racial Ambiguity and Religious Vulnerability in Late Nineteenth- to Mid-Twentieth-century Iran: The Life of Ghulam-‘Ali Siyah Khurasani of Yazd, an Afro-Iranian Baha’i

Anthony A. Lee and Mehrdad Amanat

History, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Corresponding author: Mehrdad Amanat; Email: mehrdad.amanat@gmail.com

(Received 25 May 2026 UTC; revised 25 May 2026 UTC; accepted 25 May 2026 UTC)

Scholars of Iranian history have begun turning their attention to the presence of enslaved Africans in Iran. The history of Africans and racial categories and identities has emerged in academic literature as a topic worthy of study.¹ While there is much yet to be learned, we can recognize now that enslaved Africans in Iran were able to maintain their own religious ceremonies, speak their own Persian dialect, perform their own musical styles and forms of dance, conduct healing practices, and so forth. This African cultural influence has certainly been a factor in shaping all aspects of Iranian society.²

¹ Most recently, there is Beeta Bagholizadeh’s pioneering book, *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), which examines the erasure of salvery from Iranian collective memory and the construction of Blackness in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran. See also Belle Cheves, “Untidy Households: Kinship, Service, and Affect in Nineteenth-Century Qajar Iran (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023); Behnaz A. Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800–1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Behnaz Al Mirzai, “African Presence in Iran: Identity and its Reconstruction,” in *Traites et Esclavages: Vieux Problèmes, Nouvelles Perspectives?*, ed. O. Petre-Grenouilleau (Paris: Société Française d’Histoire d’Outre-mer, 2002), 229–46; Behnaz Al Mirzai, “The Slave Trade and the African Diaspora in Iran,” in *Monsoon and Migration: Unleashing Dhow Synergies*, ed. Abdul Sheriff (Zanzibar: ZIFF, 2005); Behnaz Al Mirzai, “Afro-Iranian Lives” (2007), video; Niambi Cacchioli, “Disputed Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, Asylum, and Manumission in Iran (1851–1913),” UNESCO website (<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/dialogue/pdf/Disputed%20Freedom.pdf>); Anthony A. Lee, “Ziba Khanum of Yazd: An Enslaved African Woman in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Slavery in the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Elena Andreeva and Kevin McNeer (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024); Anthony A. Lee, “Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz,” *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 3 (May 2012): 417–437; Anthony A. Lee, “Half the House- hold Was African: Recovering the Histories of Two Enslaved Africans in Iran, Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum,” *UCLA Historical Journal* 26, no. 1 (2016); Anthony A. Lee, “Recovering the Biographies of Enslaved Africans in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Changing Horizons of African History*, ed. Awet T. Weldemichael, Anthony A. Lee, and Edward A. Alpers (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2017); Anthony A. Lee, “Africans in the Palace: The Testimony of Taj al-Sultana Qajar from the Royal Harem in Iran,” in *Islamic Slavery*, ed. Mary Ann Faye (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Anthony A. Lee, *The Baha’i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952–1962* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), ch. 2.

² Joseph C. Miller, “Introduction,” in *Women and Slavery: Volume One: Africa and the Western Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Calder Miller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 4–5; Helge Kjekshus, *Ecological Control and Development in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi: Longmans, 1979), 14–16; Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), 5; Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), xi; Thomas

While we applaud this new research into the enslaved population of Iran in the nineteenth century, we should note the Afro-Iranian offspring of these enslaved individuals also have a great deal to contribute to understanding the somewhat unique experience of slavery in Iran. This notice shifts our attention to the next generation and the twentieth century. The great majority of Africans brought to Iran as slaves were women, who were destined for service in Iranian households as domestic servants and concubines. Naturally, they bore children by their Iranian masters who became part of the master's households. The lives of these Afro-Iranian offspring have yet to be studied, or even given a place in Iranian history. They remain invisible.

Racial ambiguities and anti-blackness

As the academic literature on the history of slavery in Iran has grown, the question of race as a factor in enslavement has emerged. Some scholars suggest that Iran developed a distinct racial system and hierarchy based on the legacy of enslaved Africans, but perhaps a system that never crystallized into reified racial categories that mirror those in the Americas. Other scholars argue that the question of race in Iran is more nuanced and complicated, involving the adoption of new racial identities by all Iranians in the Pahlavi era.

Behnaz Mirzai, in her history of slavery in Iran, notes that in nineteenth-century Iran, enslaved Africans were valued differently based on skin color and place of origin. Remembering that most of these enslaved people were women, the fairer skin of the Ethiopians was considered preferable and more valuable than the darker complexions of East Africans. This categorization, however, seems ambiguous and more akin to colorism than to hard racial categories.³

The academic literature indicates that blackness became distinctively and exclusively identified with slavery and exclusion only at the end of the nineteenth century. Racial categories were constructed along lines of color, but only tentatively and ambiguously. The hard racial categories found in the Americas were not replicated in Iran. Rather, a more complex and flexible, perhaps unspoken understanding of racial differences emerged; a system not fixed in "race" as a reified category of identity and status, but instead on wealth, kinship, skin color, and social standing.

Reza Zia-Ebrahimi finds a shift in Iranian racial identity in the twentieth century. Reza Shah Pahlavi invented a version of the Aryan myth, defining the Iranian racial identity as "white," akin to European races.⁴ Beeta Baghoolizadeh also contends that racial categories and anti-black attitudes developed in the twentieth century with the advent of the new technologies of photography and cinema. These images of enslaved Africans identified black skin with enslavement and reinforced notions of whiteness as the true Iranian racial identity. This visibility allowed other enslaved peoples, such as Caucasians, Kurds, and Circassians, to disappear from public consciousness. As a result, blackness became exclusively identified with slavery and racial exclusion. Baghoolizadeh argues that the term "Siyah" as applied to black Iranians emerged during this period as distinctly identified with enslaved people.⁵ As such, Baghoolizadeh argues, blacks became invisible as Iranians,

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

³ Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran*, 93.

⁴ Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁵ Beeta Baghoolizadeh, "Seeing Race and Erasing Slavery: Media and the Construction of Blackness in Iran: 1830-1960" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018); Beeta Baghoolizadeh, *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).



Figure 1. Ghulam-'Ali Siyah (Yazdi) Khurasani, at twelve to fourteen years old, c. 1885. The photograph demonstrates his dark skin tone and his obvious African features. His clothing indicates considerable wealth and status for the time. Source: Khurasani family archives.

marked as alien and dismissed from Iranian history. She discusses this invisibility generally in the epilogue of her groundbreaking book *The Color Black*.⁶ However, it is only when the lives of the Afro-Iranian children of masters and enslaved Africans are investigated that historians can begin to understand the history of that first generation of Afro-Iranians.

This article focuses on the life of one Afro-Iranian man, Ghulam-'Ali Siyah Khurasani (1869?–1949) [Figure 1](#), the son of a wealthy Iranian merchant in Yazd and his enslaved African concubine. This is possibly the first examination of the life of an Afro-Iranian actor in Iranian history, at least the first to acknowledge bi-racial ambiguity. Ghulam-'Ali does not seem to have been the typical son of an enslaved African woman, however. He became quite wealthy and influential, becoming one of the leading notables in Yazd during the mid-twentieth century, and one of the largest landowners in the city. But his status as a black Iranian and Baha'i exposed his social vulnerabilities.⁷ If Ghulam-'Ali experienced blackness

⁶ Baghoolizadeh, *The Color Black*, epilogue.

⁷ There is a considerable body of academic literature on the Baha'i religion and its history, especially in the United States and Iran. See, for example, the thirty volumes of Anthony A. Lee, ed., *Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions* series (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982–resent); Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Margit Warburg, *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Globalization Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); William Garlington, *The Baha'i Faith in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); William Garlington, *The*

as a form of disability, he would have done so as these twentieth-century racial systems were being constructed.

Ghulam-‘Ali’s biography should be recovered and rescued from invisibility for its own sake, of course, but we also find that his life story has much to contribute to understanding major themes of Iranian history. These include the history of anti-blackness and racial formations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the life of the wealthy merchant class during this period, the development of the Baha’i community in Iran, and the functioning of trading networks in Yazd and their connections to the Indian Ocean world. The ease with which the teenaged Ghulam-‘Ali traveled from Yazd to Palestine, and then on to Bombay, surprises us, as does his close association with Baha’i trading networks and his acceptance in these elite circles despite his African ancestry. His intimate association with central Baha’i figures in the household of the Prophet himself also comes as a surprise. His accumulation of great wealth and return to Yazd gives us insight into the profitability and significance of the Indian Ocean trade to the Iranian wealthy classes.

The legal status of black Iranians

Slavery in Iran was distinguished from Atlantic slavery by law in important ways. According to Islamic law (*sharia*), the children of enslaved women and Iranian masters are born free and entitled to inherit from their father’s estate upon his death at the same rate as children born of his wife or wives. Children of enslaved fathers are born as slaves and belong to their father’s enslaver.⁸ We might note in passing, therefore, that attention to the lives of children of enslaved African women and their masters, who were born free according to *sharia*, does not account for children of enslaved African fathers, who by law remained in enslavement. More research needs to be done on these enslaved children, as well as on Iranians of African descent in southern Iran who are not the descendants of slaves.

Sources for this article

The authors gathered much of the information about Ghulam-‘Ali’s life from interviews with his grandchildren, his daughter-in-law, and other relatives who generously shared their personal reminiscences. Such oral sources are a rich source of Iranian history and invaluable to the study of slavery and blackness in Iran. We urge historians to make more use of such important oral sources.

The memories of Shahnaz Khurasani, who was married to Muhammad Khurasani, the son of Ghulam-‘Ali, are especially valuable. Born in a Baha’i family in Shiraz, she married at age sixteen in 1947 and moved from Tehran to Yazd to live with the Khurasani family. Ghulam-‘Ali built a separate house, just outside the family compound, for his son and new bride to live in. Shahnaz witnessed the family’s life and, after the death of her father-in-law in 1949, became the leading lady of the house. As a teenager, she witnessed the dramatic events surrounding the religious attacks on the Khurasani family in 1948–1949, and was herself the target of some of these attacks.

Jalil Taqizadeh, a grandson of Ghulam-‘Ali, was also an important source of information and family lore. He grew up in the family compound in Yazd, later studied law at Tehran

Baha’i Faith in India: A Developmental Stage Approach (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2023); Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel, eds., *The Baha’is of Iran: Socio-historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008); Moojan Momen, *The Baha’i Communities of Iran 1851–1921* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2015); and Robert Stockman, ed., *The World of the Baha’i Faith* (London: Routledge, 2024). For a full discussion of the emergence of academic literature in Babi and Baha’i Studies, see Lee, *The Baha’i Faith in Africa*, ch. 1.

⁸ For a discussion of Islamic law concerning the rights of children of enslaved women and their masters, refer to Lee, “Ziba Khanum of Yazd.”

University, and had a practice in Tehran until the 1979 Revolution. He was in touch with his grandfather until the latter died in 1949.

Ghulam-‘Ali’s father

Ghulam-‘Ali’s father, Haji Muhammad-‘Ali Sadiq Khurasani (d. circa 1885?), was a local merchant in Yazd with substantial business dealings and land holdings. His association with Khorasan may indicate his ancestry or trade connections with the region. Muhammad Sadiq was wealthy enough to afford an enslaved servant/concubine, an African woman whom he named Ziba (beautiful) (d. 1932), ostensibly purchased as a nurse for his ailing wife.⁹ We know relatively little about Muhammad Sadiq’s life from the family’s oral tradition, partly because he died early around 1885, when Ghulam-‘Ali would have been in his teens. Muhammad Sadiq seems to have accumulated enough wealth and property to arrange for his elder son, Muhammad-Isma’il, to marry the daughter of Hajji Mirza Muhammad Afshar, a scholar and a leading merchant of Yazd and Bombay.

Yazd was one of Iran’s major trading centers; an important player in Indian Ocean commerce since antiquity. This was in part due to the city’s south-central location, at the crossroad of two major trade routes: from the east, from Khorasan and Central Asia, and to the north, from the Caspian ports through Tehran, both leading to the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, Yazd benefited from the expansion of local trade, agriculture, and textile industries. The city’s economy also grew due to steady expansion in Indo-Iranian commerce, which was heavily weighted in India’s favor. Iran imports included Kashmiri shawls, dyes, spices, sugar, and Chinese porcelain. Exports included wheat, dried fruit, wine, carpets, silk, tobacco, and precious metals.¹¹

A thriving modern print industry made Bombay a center of Persian publications and the spreading of new ideas.¹² The arrival of the Parsi businessman and philanthropist Manakji Limji Hataria brought a new intellectual dimension to Yazd’s connection to the Indian Ocean, as he worked tirelessly to advance the persecuted Zoroastrian community. Such efforts included the establishment of modern schools for the Zoroastrian community that were relatively immune from clerical opposition, but also served the larger community.¹³

The Khuransani family seems to have followed the familiar pattern of increasingly investing in land and agriculture. Merchants who benefited from expanding trade often used their excess capital to acquire land at, often, meager cost. Given the scarcity of water resources, agricultural development required investment in building new water canals (*qanat*). Thus, the value of the land increased only after such investments. Land ownership was also a relatively safe and inconspicuous investment area, less subject to confiscation by officials, looting, and theft at times of urban insecurity and chaos.

⁹ Enslaved people were generally given Persian names instead of the commonly used Islamic names, which were reserved for children of Muslims. For the life story of Ziba Khanum, insofar as it can be recovered, see Lee, “Ziba Khanum of Yazd.”

¹⁰ Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 1982); Abbas Amanat, *Cities and Trade: Consul Abbott on the Economy and Society of Iran* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983); Hamid Azizi and Sayed F. Mirdehqan, “The role of merchants in the historical context of Yazd city in Qajar era,” in *The Future of the Middle East*, ed. Mihaly Uzor (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2020), 1113–138.

¹¹ Scott C. Levi, “India xiii. Indo-Iranian Commercial Relations,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 13, fasc. 1 (2004): 44–47, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/india-xiii-indo-iranian-commercial-relations>.

¹² For history of Baha’i publishing in Bombay, see Farzin Vajdani, “Transnational Baha’i print culture: Community formation and religious authority, 1890–1921,” *Journal of Religious History* 36, no. 4 (2012): 499–515. Nile Green’s important contribution to transnational religious debate in a globalizing Bombay overlooks the role of Baha’is as an alternative to traditionalist and Sufi mystical interpretations of Islam. See Nile Green, *Bombay Islam, The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ Manouchehr Kashheff, “Anjoman-e Zartoshtian,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 2, fasc. 1 (1985): 90–95, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anjoman-e-zartoshtian/>.

As can be seen from the career of Ghulam-‘Ali, the merchant networks of Yazd were closely connected to trade routes between Bandar Abbas, Bombay, and beyond, held together by bonds of kinship and religion. Ghulam-‘Ali joined networks of Baha’i merchants through the aforementioned Afshar family of traders, who were related by marriage. The Afshars were connected to the Afnans, another family of Baha’i traders, whose networks stretched from Constantinople to Hong Kong.¹⁴

Early life of an Afro-Iranian Son of slavery

Ziba Khanum’s son by her master was named Ghulam-‘Ali (Slave of ‘Ali). This is a common name in Iran, as Imam ‘Ali is a holy figure in Shi’a Islam. But perhaps this is where the ambiguities begin. The name has a curious resonance concerning slavery. The boy’s father’s name was ‘Ali. As such, “Slave of ‘Ali” both elevates Ghulam-‘Ali to his father’s station and simultaneously subordinates him to his mother’s master. Ghulam-‘Ali took his father’s surname later in life, calling himself Ghulam-‘Ali Khurasani, but he was known widely in Yazd as Ghulam-‘Ali Siyah (the black one), and possibly just as Siyah. This was not necessarily intended as an insult, though his grandchildren say that no one would call him that to his face. He never applied this tag to himself, nor can one imagine that the designation would have been publicly used later in his life, when he became wealthy and politically influential. He eventually left home and built a career as a merchant in Bandar Abbas. Before that, he first traveled to Palestine and then to India, where he worked as an apprentice in the trading network of the above-mentioned Afshar family. He returned to Yazd a wealthy man and gradually went on to become a person of considerable status in the city. His mansion compound in Yazd still exists and has been turned into a modern hotel in a traditional style (Figure 2).

As his Baha’i descendants recall, Ghulam-‘Ali secretly converted to Baha’ism in his early youth. The family claims that he was his father’s favorite son, as he regularly accompanied his father to merchant and landowner social gatherings in which they would conduct business, smoke opium, exchange gossip, etc. There were Baha’is at these gatherings who would find ways to talk about their new faith.¹⁵ Such gatherings were a normal part of nineteenth-century social life among wealthy men in Iran. Ghulam-‘Ali was introduced and accepted into this network of merchants and landowners very early, despite his obvious African background and the fact that his mother was known to have been enslaved. Later in life, Ghulam-‘Ali continued this social practice in his own wealthy household in Yazd into the mid-twentieth century. His daughter-in-law remembers that he would entertain men with food and conversation in his house every night, almost to the end of his life.¹⁶

Two merchants from Yazd, Haji Aqa Muhammad Alaqband and Hajji Muhammad Afshar, introduced Ghulam-‘Ali to the Baha’i faith.¹⁷ Later in life, Ghulam-‘Ali married a pious Baha’i woman, Munavvar Khanum, a daughter of Mirza Yousef, an employee of the wealthy and

¹⁴ On Afnan trading networks, see Juan R. I. Cole, “Religious Dissidence and Urban Leadership:

Bahais in Qajar Shiraz and Tehran,” *Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 37 (1999): 123–142; Momen, “Genealogy of the Afnān Family” is Table 14 included in the author’s entry “Afnān,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* I, Fasc. 6, pp. 567–569 (1985).

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Monir Afaghi, September 29, 2017.

¹⁶ Shahnaz Khurasani, interview by author, October 29, 2017. Peekskill, New York.

¹⁷ Alaqband was a well-educated merchant from Yazd who lived in Tehran around the turn of the century and authored a number of works, including an unpublished account of the Constitutional Revolution. Hajji Muhammad Afshar was said to be the “wealthiest” merchant in Yazd, according to one source. See Muhammad Kazemayni, *Daneshnamah -i Mahshir-i Yazd*, vol. 1 (Yazd, 2003), 153. Hajji Mirza Muhammad was also an accomplished scholar who authored *Bahr ul-Irfan* (Bombay, 1890?), which is believed to be the first published book of Baha’i proofs. See Asadullah Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 6 is not a published volume. It’s only available online. Momen, *Baha’i Communities of Iran*, 2:362; Hajji Muhammad-Tahir Malmiri, *Khatirat-i Malmiri* [Memoirs of Malmiri] (Hofheim: Bahá’í-Verlag, 1992), 35–37. Malmiri ... (Hofheim: Baha’i Velag, 1992).



Figure 2. Inside Ghulam-Ali's Mansion in Yazd, which is now a hotel. Source: Trip Advisor (2017), https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g303962-d3731471-Reviews-Mehr_Traditional_Hotel-Yazd_Yazd_Province.html.

influential Afnan family. The Afnans were Baha'is who were related to the Alaqband family. Ghulam-Ali's older half-brother from a formal Muslim marriage, Muhammad-Isma'il Khurasani, also known as Gunduli (the fat one, a title he inherited from his father), became a Baha'i as well, through the same Baha'i merchant network. Muhammad-Ali Sadiq, their father, seems to have been unaware of or uninterested in his sons' new faith.

Muhammad-Isma'il, at least later in life, was quite open about his conversion to the new faith, while Ghulam-Ali seems to have never publicly professed his religion. Though he was a fervent believer early in life, he never became an important or influential Baha'i. Muhammad-Isma'il, on the other hand, after his father's death in the early 1900s, used his opulent, walled estate in Yazd as a center for openly held Baha'i gatherings for dawn worship (*mashriqu'l-adhkar*), which were regularly attended by large crowds. There were other Baha'is in their father's social circle in Yazd, particularly Ismail's father-in-law, the aforementioned notable merchant and scholar, Haji Mirza Muhammad Afshar, who was instrumental in converting Ismail sometime in the mid-1870s (around the time Isma'il reached his thirties), and who would later become important in Ghulam-Ali's life.¹⁸ As such, it appears that Ghulam-Ali was fully embedded in his father's business network and closely connected to several affluent Baha'i merchants in Yazd.

Here, we can observe that Ghulam-Ali's blackness does not seem to have hindered his participation in merchant circles, as class, privilege, and perhaps religious ties trumped racial inequalities, at least in his case. Possible reasons for the mostly well-to-do merchant community's attraction to a persecuted faith include the fact that merchants in this period maintained important ties to Shi'i *mujtahids*, which were not always beneficial. Through the payment of alms, various donations, and fees for certifying contracts and adjudicating disputes, merchants were the clerical class's main support and source of wealth and financial independence, and not always willingly. Merchants maintained some level of political

¹⁸ For Muhammad-Isma'il's conversion to the Baha'i faith, see an account by the Yazdi weaver and self-educated historian Haji Muhammad-Tahir Malmiri, *Khatirat-i Malmiri* [Memoirs of Malmiri] (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1992), 35–37. Tracing the author's life, we can arrive at the late 1870s as the date of Ismail's conversion, after Mirza Muhammad Afshar was introduced to the new faith by Malmiri.

independence, as local governors often turned to them to finance the purchase of offices and fund administration before receiving taxes and fees. Merchants also benefited from a higher level of education and had exposure to the outside world through their transnational ties. These traits may explain the openness of the merchant class to heterodox trends, which often defied the interests of the clerical establishment, including patronage of Sufi orders. Merchants' openness may also explain the appeal of the new faith, which offered a "modern" religious persuasion and a rationalized, hermeneutic reading of the scripture. The aforementioned Hajji Muhammad Afshar and (to a lesser extent) Hajji Muhammad 'Alaghband are two examples of educated merchants with unconventional religious views.

In the 1870s and early 1880s, Baha'is were mostly an underground community. Converts to the new faith usually did not make their convictions public. This kind of discretion, at times, provided protection against persecution for the relatively influential merchants. However, on other occasions, such as the anti-Baha'i riots of the 1890s and the 1903 riot in Yazd, the less protected artisan class became the main targets of anti-Baha'i riots, though merchants were also attacked.

Disinherited

Haji Muhammad-'Ali Sadiq died when his son, Ghulam-'Ali, was perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old. According to the Sharia, Ghulam-'Ali should have inherited a portion of his father's fortune, land, and property.¹⁹ However, Ghulam-'Ali's young age and possibly his social position—as the son of his father's enslaved African concubine—did not give him access to his inheritance. His older half-brother, Muhammad-Isma'il, seems to have taken control of his father's estate as the sole trustee of an undistributed estate and endowments.²⁰

Haji Muhammad-Isma'il, now a landowner of substantial wealth, enjoyed considerable social status as a prominent merchant and landowner with Baha'i affiliation. Part of his strategy for preserving the family estate was to not distribute it among heirs. This, presumably, protected the estate from family inheritance claims, disagreements, and, more significantly, the usual risk of taxation by local governors and conservatorship by clerics, especially in light of Muhammad-Isma'il's reputation as a Baha'i.

Journey to Palestine and pilgrimage

Shortly after his father's passing in Yazd, Ghulam-'Ali decided to travel to Palestine. According to the family narrative, at one point, his mother Ziba Khanum had been given a jeweled skirt embroidered with gold threads and pearls by her master.²¹ After his father's passing, Ghulam-'Ali told his mother about his intention to leave Yazd and travel to Palestine to obtain an audience with Baha'u'llah (1817–1892), the founder of the Baha'i faith, who was living in exile in Ottoman Palestine. His mother was supportive of his plans and gave him her jeweled skirt, which, according to the family narrative, he sold for 700 tumans. In the late 1880s, this was equivalent to about USD 1,400, a considerable amount of money at the time.²²

As a Baha'i, Ghulam-'Ali would have regarded Baha'u'llah as a prophet of God, the center of the numinous on earth, and the locus of divine law. The Baha'i faith abrogated the

¹⁹ Agostino Cilardo, "Inheritance ii: Islamic Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 13, fasc. 2 (2004): 131–140, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/inheritance-ii/>.

²⁰ Aqa Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Bayda, *Tarikh-i Bayda* [Bayda's History], ed. Siyamak Zabihi Moghaddam (Hofheim: Baha'i Verlag, 2016), 93.

²¹ Khurasani, interview, October 29, 2017, Peekskill, New York.

²² The Khurasani family has a robust family recollection of Ghulam-'Ali. The family's narrative was gathered from the following interviews with various relatives: Jalil Taqizadeh (grandson), interview by author, Los Angeles,

Islamic *sharia* and substituted Baha'u'llah's own book of laws, the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, for the laws of the Qur'an.²³ This marked the Baha'is as heretics according to the ulama. Baha'u'llah's other teachings included exhortations to world peace, the abolition of slavery, the abrogation of ritual impurity (*nejasat*), the emancipation and promotion of women's rights, the reconciliation of races and religions, and the need for world government.²⁴

Ghulam-'Ali's rapid departure from Yazd is explained in his family lore as due to religious devotion: the desire to make a pilgrimage to attain the blessings of the Baha'i prophet. However, his departure could also raise suspicions of a conflict or some kind of insecurity that caused him to leave the city. His mother's willingness to support his departure could reinforce such suspicion, but could also suggest that she may have become a Baha'i or a sympathizer and conceded to her son's plan to travel to Palestine as an act of faith. It is also possible that Ghulam-'Ali, after being deprived of his inheritance, intended to seek Baha'u'llah's support in persuading Muhammad-Isma'il to divide their father's estate fairly.

Certainly, Ghulam-'Ali must have been aware of the anti-Baha'i tensions, which had reached new heights by 1873, potentially influencing his decision to leave his hometown.²⁵ From the founding of the Babi movement in 1844 in Iran, Babis and later Baha'is were regarded as heretics and apostates from Islam. However, the ulama's attitude in Yazd was complex. Early on, some clerics seemed to be unconcerned about the movement, with a few even showing sympathy or converting. By 1873, however, there was a clear reversal of this trend, as repression and persecution became increasingly prevalent. In 1891, this persecution led to the arrest and execution of seven Baha'i men, widespread harassment, and looting of properties belonging to Baha'is, many of whom were craftsmen, masons, farmers, small shopkeepers, and merchants.²⁶

Upon his arrival in 'Akka, Palestine, Ghulam-'Ali was received into Baha'u'llah's house by his eldest son, Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921). Ghulam-'Ali lived there for some months, but was never granted an audience with Baha'u'llah. It seems that he arrived in 'Akka without permission, a requirement of Baha'u'llah, possibly due to restrictions set by the Ottoman authorities on the number of visitors he could receive.

At some point during his stay, Ghulam-'Ali received a tablet (a letter) addressed to him by Baha'u'llah.²⁷ In the message, Baha'u'llah said that Ghulam-'Ali's name had been mentioned in his presence, lamented that earthly treasures had corrupted most people and caused them to turn away from God, and urged Ghulam-'Ali not to grieve over the sorrows that came to him in this life or the changes and chances of this world. These remarks certainly reflect general Baha'i teachings of detachment and resignation in the face of adversity. But in the specific case of Ghulam-'Ali, Baha'u'llah's words seem to suggest that, in Yazd, Ghulam-'Ali had lost at least some of his wealth, which he remained in turmoil over. Again, disinheritance, family disputes, and religious persecution might be what Baha'u'llah was alluding to.

April 7, 2017 (in person), November 14, 2017 (by phone), and January 9, 2018 (by phone); Monir Ardekani (granddaughter), interview by author, Vancouver, September 29, 2017 (by phone); Shahnaz Khurasani (daughter-in-law), Peekskill, October 19, 2017 (by phone) and November 18, 2017 (in person).

²³ Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Baha'i World Center, 1992).

²⁴ For a collection of Baha'u'llah's teachings on these and other matters, see Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978). For a full study of Baha'u'llah's social teachings, see Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium*. For a full discussion of the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, see Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitáb-i Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2025).

²⁵ For a history of the Baha'i pogroms of 1903, see Haji Muhammad-Tahir Malmiri, *Tarikh-i Shuhaday-i Yazd* [History of the Martyrs of Yazd] (Karachi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978); Aqa Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Bayda, *Tarikh-i Bayda* [Bayda's Narrative], ed. Siyamak Zabihi Moghaddam (Hofheim: Baha'i Verlag, 2016); Moojan Momen, *The Baha'i Communities of Iran 1851–1921*, vol. 2, 346; Moojan Momen, "Iran: Province of Yazd," *The Baha'i Encyclopedia* (1994), https://bahai-library.com/momen_encyclopedia_yazd.

²⁶ See Haji Muhammad-Tahir Malmiri, *Tarikh-i Shuhaday-i Yazd*; Aqa Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Bayda, *Tarikh-i Bayda*.

²⁷ A copy of Baha'u'llah's tablet is kept in private hands, in the family archives, and was provided by Shahnaz Khurasani.

Furthermore, if Baha'u'llah had been asked to intervene, there is clear indication that he had no intention of getting involved in family inheritance disputes, which may also explain his unwillingness to meet the young Ghulam-'Ali.

During his months in Baha'u'llah's house, Ghulam-'Ali would have been instructed and socialized into fundamental Baha'i beliefs and practices. It appears he was a devoted believer at this time. The family story relates that, upon his arrival in the household of Baha'u'llah, Ghulam-'Ali gave all of his 700 tumans to 'Abdu'l-Baha as a donation. This money was returned to him upon his departure from Palestine, except for 100 tumans that he insisted 'Abdu'l-Baha keep to pay for the months of his room and board in the household.²⁸

Ghulam-'Ali's upbringing in a well-to-do household seems, however, to have been an uncomfortable fit with the simpler daily life of Baha'i exiles. His relatives tell a funny story about his stay in Akka. At one point, he was given the duty of doing the day's shopping for the household. While he was instructed to buy a chicken, he saw a whole turkey on sale at the market and, being used to the lavish lifestyle of his father's house, decided to buy it. When he brought the turkey back to the house, 'Abdu'l-Baha told him to return it, as the household could not afford such luxuries. When Ghulam-'Ali explained that he had bought the turkey with his own money, 'Abdu'l-Baha replied: "Ghulam-'Ali, you cannot afford such luxuries, either."²⁹

Eventually, Ghulam-'Ali was told that his stay in the household had come to an end.³⁰ He left Palestine intending to travel to Bombay, but, on his first stop in Alexandria, he was unexpectedly called back for an audience with Baha'u'llah. This was the culmination of his pilgrimage and it is a source of great pride for his family today, who boast that he was able to accomplish "two pilgrimages" during his time in Palestine.³¹

Ghulam-'Ali then traveled on to Bombay, where he became an apprentice or agent in the trading house of the Yazdi merchant Afshar family. Possibly, his mother's gift gave him the ability to run some of his own transactions or attach himself to the Afshar trading house as a junior partner, led by Haji Mirza Muhammad Afshar. In an undated letter sent to Bombay addressed to "Ghulam-'Ali Yazdi," 'Abdu'l-Baha acknowledges receiving a letter from Ghulam-'Ali, apparently sent shortly after his arrival in India. 'Abdu'l-Baha appreciates Ghulam-'Ali's expressions of conviction in the new faith and has words of encouragement for him as a steadfast believer. 'Abdu'l-Baha states that he is happy that Ghulam-'Ali's heart is always producing new flowers and fruits of spiritual insight.³²

In Bandar Abbas

Ghulam-'Ali remained in India for some years and seems to have accumulated enough wealth to establish his own trading house in Bandar Abbas. He likely remained associated with the Afshar family and Bombay trading networks, importing and exporting goods from Yazd, through Bandar Abbas, to and from India and beyond. Ghulam-'Ali most likely also benefited from a network of high-ranking Qajar officials on the Persian Gulf coast

²⁸ This may be a pious invention by the family. But if not, it demonstrates Ghulam-'Ali's commitment to his new faith.

²⁹ Afagh, interview.

³⁰ Jalil Taqizadeh stated that Ghulam-'Ali remained in Baha'u'llah's house for six months, but other members of the family say that he stayed for nine months.

³¹ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

³² A copy of the tablet is kept in private hands in the Khurasani family archives. The original has certainly been sent to the International Baha'i Archives in Haifa, Israel, as Baha'is are required to send original copies of sacred scriptures there for safekeeping. We are grateful to Dr. Nader Saiedi for his assistance with these letters.

with Baha'i sympathies or convictions.³³ In a second letter, also undated, from 'Abdu'l-Baha sent to Bandar Abbas in response to Ghulam-'Ali's correspondence, in which he had expressed sorrow and longing on account of his separation from the holy household, 'Abdu'l-Baha offers more statements of encouragement.³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Baha's extensive correspondence with Baha'is throughout the world was his main instrument of community building.

A third letter from 'Abdu'l-Baha sent to Yazd a few years later, sometime around 1920, is addressed to an unknown Baha'i who appears to have been an associate of Ghulam-'Ali.³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Baha uses his characteristic humor to complain that he has not heard from this person in a while and hopes that material concerns have not distracted him from spiritual matters. 'Abdu'l-Baha expresses concern for Ghulam-'Ali and asks this person to look after his welfare. The letter is difficult to interpret without more context, but may well be a sign that Ghulam-'Ali was distancing himself from the Baha'i community.

Anti-Baha'i pogrom in Yazd, 1903

During Ghulam-'Ali's long absence from Yazd, his half-brother, Haji Muhammad-Isma'il, became the victim of an anti-Baha'i pogrom that erupted in Yazd and its surrounding villages in 1903. The pogrom lasted thirty-five days, with over eighty Baha'is killed by mobs in a frenzy in which a wide variety of the city's population participated. Attacks on Baha'i homes—including those of many artisans, masons, and farmers—by mobs that often included victims' relatives and neighbors, seminarians, *luties*, and thieves were frenzies that accompanied music and dancing. Muhammad-Isma'il's life was miraculously saved, as he managed to hide in an indentation inside his home's subterranean water canal (*qanat*) after the mobs entered his walled estate, burning down its otherwise impenetrable fortified gate. The looting of the mansion, down to the doors and windows, lasted all day.³⁶ Once he escaped from Yazd, Haji Muhammad-Isma'il lived the rest of his life in Tehran, where he managed the family property from a distance.

Return to Yazd

According to the family narrative, Ghulam-'Ali returned to Yazd around 1920, after having amassed much of his own wealth. The family lore has it that he returned to Yazd with forty camels loaded with valuables, merchandise, and household goods.³⁷ This is, no doubt, an exaggerated estimate meant to demonstrate Ghulam-'Ali's wealth. However, the timing of his arrival in Yazd is notable for its proximity to the death of his half-brother Haji Muhammad-Isma'il in Tehran in 1919, and could well have been related to taking over ownership of the family's "undivided" estate, especially in the absence of other qualified male heirs or contenders. Local *mujtahids'* expropriation of the property of a deceased person with no male heir by was fairly common in the Qajar period. Ghulam-'Ali would have had a valid claim to his father's estate as a legal heir and son of his father's enslaved concubine with some wealth and influence. Ghulam-'Ali also would have had enough money to facilitate the transfer of the inheritance if bribes were required to buy off local officials and clerics.

³³ Most relevant among them was Muhammad 'Ali Khan Sadid al-Saltaneh Minabi Bandar Abbasi (1874–1941), a prolific scholar, literary figure, and agent of the passport department in Bushir. Momen, *Baha'i Communities*, vol. 2, 344–45.

³⁴ A copy of this tablet is kept in private hands in the Khurasani family archives.

³⁵ A copy of the letter is in private hands, in the Khurasani family archive.

³⁶ Aqa Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Bayda, *Tarikh-i Bayda*, 92–99.

³⁷ Jalil Taghizadeh, Interview in Los Angeles, April 17, 2017.



Figure 3. Ghulam-'Ali Siyah Khurasani with his wife, Munavvar Khanum (center, front), their children, and grandchildren in their home in Yazd, taken September 1940. Back row (left to right): Iraj Torkzadeh, Paridokht Haghighat, Iran Haghighat, Parvin Haghighat, Hushang Khurasani, Jalil Taghizadeh, Muhammad Khurasani, Forugh Taghizadeh, Turan Turkzadeh, Afaq Taghizadeh. Front row (adults, left to right): Shamsi Khurasani Tadayuni, Nusrat Khurasani Turkzadeh, Sorayya Khurasani Haghighat, Munavvar Khurasani, Ghulam-'Ali Khurasani, Malekeh Khurasani Taghizadeh, Moluk Khurasani Sarraf, Safa Khurasani (a relative). Front row (children, left to right): Arassa Khurasani, Naser Turkzadeh, Mahvash Taghizadeh, Farhang Sarraf, Mehrbanoo Khurasani. Images identified by MonirArdakani. Source: Khurasani family archives.

The 1920s was also the beginning of a period of relative stability, marking the end of the post-constitutional period of insecurity and widespread banditry that had caused much damage to the Iranian economy and the merchant class. The increasingly strong Pahlavi central state not only protected the merchant and, at least initially, the landowning classes from the excesses of Qajar governors, but also the occasional harassment by clerical elements, thus providing these classes with greater amounts of capital. A modern judiciary and property registry rationalized business relations, even though Reza Shah's land-grabbing habits, primarily in the north, sometimes disrupted this pattern.

New avenues opened for major landowners, such as Ghulam-'Ali, to become active in the political sphere. Delivering large numbers of peasant votes in Majles elections allowed landowners to enjoy a good deal of local influence and a limited level of political participation, to the extent tolerable by the Pahlavi regime. In Yazd, Ghulam-'Ali was able to build a large, walled compound where he eventually lived with his mother (Ziba Khanum), his wife, his eight children, their spouses, and his grandchildren (Figure 3). A number of family members in the compound remained Muslims, living among their Baha'i relatives with a level of tolerance.

Family members were able to maintain their Baha'i identities at least within the home, including: Ghulam-'Ali's wife (Munavvar Khanum), his two sons and their wives, and the four daughters who married Baha'i spouses. Two daughters married Muslims. In public,

however, the family presented the façade of being Muslim. As Ghulam-‘Ali’s daughter-in-law related, “Everyone knew we were Baha’is, but everyone pretended we were Muslims.”³⁸ Of course, this pretense would have included Ghulam-‘Ali and the other family members publicly presenting themselves as Muslims.

Nonetheless, there were tensions within the family concerning the extent and form of Baha’i practice they would adopt. The nature of the Baha’i identity was undergoing change, at least in large cities such as Tehran. While Ghulam-‘Ali had originally adopted the religion as a private conviction, the Baha’i community by the 1940s had developed a formal practice of regular meetings and an outward social life.

Shahnaz Khanum’s arrival in Yazd after her marriage to Ghulam-‘Ali’s son, Muhammad, in 1947 precipitated a major family row that she still remembered vividly seventy years later. Shortly after her marriage, the sixteen-year-old bride demanded that her husband accompany her to the Baha’i Nineteen-Day Feast, held as a regular Baha’i gathering. Apparently, it had been her practice to attend the feast regularly in Tehran. Her husband, on the other hand, was committed to remaining at home to entertain his father’s wealthy guests most nights. An argument erupted during which Shahnaz threatened to go to the evening meeting alone. Muhammad was unable to placate her and called his father to settle the dispute. Ghulam-‘Ali jokingly acknowledged his daughter-in-law’s anger and arranged for a male servant to accompany her to the Baha’i meeting; an arrangement she continued every nineteen days.³⁹

While it was certainly a delicate balance, the family was able to maintain this complex dual identity for many years, allowing them to live in peace with their Muslim neighbors. Still, this arrangement eventually came to a dramatic and tragic end.

Wealth and political influence

As noted, Ghulam-‘Ali’s return to his home city of Yazd, after being away for thirty years, coincided with the death of his half-brother, Isma’il. Taking over the family estate made Ghulam-‘Ali, despite being the son of an enslaved woman, his father’s only male heir who could legally claim the family’s land holdings. It appears that he was successful in taking control of these properties and administering them alone. His land holdings, which became known as the Khurasani Belt (Kamarband-e Khurasani), surrounded the city.⁴⁰ As such, he could conveniently deliver votes in local elections to his political ally, Doktor Hadi Taheri, a conservative, pro-British, influential Majles deputy and leader of an important parliamentary faction for over thirty years, beginning in 1925.⁴¹

Accused of murder

His wealth and power brought Ghulam-‘Ali political enemies. Sometime in the 1930s, when Ghulam-‘Ali served as the head of Yazd’s merchant guild, Utagh-e Tejarat, he was involved in a conflict with a local prosecutor, who unsuccessfully tried to get the guild to collaborate in prosecuting a local tea merchant on charges of customs-related irregularities. Ghulam-‘Ali

³⁸ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

³⁹ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁴⁰ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁴¹ Muhammad Hadi Doktor Taheri Yazdi (d. 1957), also known as Sheikh Hadi Sheikh al-Ra’is, was an influential Majles deputy from Yazd. He was educated in the traditional *madreseh* seminary, where he studied traditional medicine, and was granted a license to practice medicine under a provisional law. In 1925, he was elected as a deputy from Yazd to the fifth Majles and, except for the fifteenth Majles (1947–1949), he was continuously reelected to represent the Yazd district until the dissolution of the seventeenth Majles in 1953. He was known for his conservative and pro-British views. He was also deputy prime minister in Muhammad Sa’ed’s cabinet (1948–49).

insisted on the merchant's innocence and refused to cooperate with the prosecutor.⁴² The grudge reportedly led to the prosecutor bringing new charges in a separate case against Ghulam-'Ali.

In 1933, Ghulam-'Ali was the subject of a conspiracy in a murder case in the township of Herat, in the vicinity of Yazd, where he had substantial landholdings. Another merchant-landowner had gotten into a dispute with Ghulam-'Ali's agent during an audit. A fierce quarrel led to the agent publicly insulting the landowner, who subsequently shot and killed the agent. While the agent's pugnacious behavior seems unusual, the landowner's atrocious act of murder was not rare in the landowning culture of the time. The landowner used his clout with village officials to cover up his crime, getting an ex-gendarme wrongfully accused of the murder. Once the file found its way to Yazd, the vindictive prosecutor used a ten-tuman payment (equivalent to one month's salary) Ghulam-'Ali had made to the accused gendarme as evidence for implicating and detaining him for murder. Ghulam-'Ali's merchant friends and supporters managed to bail him out. The case was referred to the Tehran Ministry of Justice, and after a more thorough investigation, both accused were exonerated, while the culprit landowner escaped prosecution.⁴³

Despite these charges, Prime Minister 'Ali Mansur formally reappointed Ghulam-'Ali to the aforementioned merchant guild in June 1935, serving as one of its twelve members, a position he had held since 1931.⁴⁴ At the time of his death in 1949, he served as head of that body.⁴⁵ Ghulam-'Ali was also on the board of directors of the city's two main textile industries—the publicly owned Eqbal and privately established Derakhshan—and served as the head of the city's electoral board (Komiteh-ye Nezarat Entekhabat), was responsible for bringing one of the two electrical power plants to Yazd, and owned one of the city's two private automobiles, which he used to tour the city and oversee his properties.⁴⁶ However, the same forces that facilitated his political rise also led to his downfall.

Persecution and demise

In 1947 Muhammad Harati, one of Ghulam-'Ali's relatives, defeated Dr. Taheri in the elections for the fifteenth Majles. The elections followed the passage of a new electoral law and were marred by allegations of irregularities favoring Prime Minister Ahmad Ghavam. A year later in 1948, Dr. Taheri was appointed deputy prime minister in Muhammad Sa'ed's cabinet. For Ghulam-'Ali and his family, who had miscalculated the complex political process, this meant losing local influence and protection.

These developments coincided with an anti-Baha'i campaign in Yazd in 1948, which was primarily directed at the Khurasani family, seemingly with the help of Ghulam-'Ali's political rivals. The main instigator was the articulate and charismatic cleric Mulla Muhammad

⁴² The case in Yazd was against a local merchant, Muhammad Golshan, who was also a member of the merchant guild. The aggressive local prosecutor, Ahmad Mu'avenzadeh, who was appointed to audit local tea merchants after Reza Shah ordered the detention of Arbab Mehdi Yazdi, a major tea merchant in Tehran, for alleged violations of the customs law enacted in 1931 to establish a monopoly over international trade, Ghanun-e Enhesar-e Tejarat-e kharej. Muhammad Taghi Afnan, *Bigonahan* (n.p., 1378/1999), 8.

⁴³ Afnan, *Bigonahan*, 9–13.

⁴⁴ Office of the Prime Minister, appointment of members of the Yazd Chamber of Commerce, doc. no. 2173, June 15, 1935, in "Tarikhcheh-ye otaq-e bazargani-ye Yazd" [A history of the Yazd Chamber of Commerce], Yazd Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, Accessed December 15, 2024, <https://yazdccima.com/about/>

⁴⁵ According to the family narrative, Ghulam-'Ali's father also had a leading role in the merchant guild. Afagh, interview.

⁴⁶ Both vehicles shared a single driver on alternate days. Jalil Taghizadeh, interview by author, Los Angeles, February 15, 2025.

Khalesizadeh (1890–1963), who arrived in Yazd around 1947 from a period of exile in Kashan. Born and raised in Iraq, he was an anti-British agitator during the British mandate period, one of the earliest proponents of the clerical takeover of government, and spent much of his life in exile under both British and Pahlavi rule. He also engaged in public debates with Baha'i propagators. Ghulam 'Ali's family remembers that Khalesizadeh would mount the pulpit in the mosque every day to denounce the family and their religion.⁴⁷ There were an estimated 4,000 Baha'i residents in Yazd and its vicinity in the 1940s, who were occasionally under threat of persecution.⁴⁸

By 1947, the 1936 dress code was no longer enforced and many traditional women returned to old practices. Ghulam 'Ali's daughter-in-law, Shahnaz Khanum, seems to have been one of the few women in Yazd who went out in the street without a full veil, against the advice of her husband. Her street clothing attracted unwanted attention, as people came out of shops to gawk at her. Eventually she agreed to wear a perfunctory veil. She relayed that Khalesizadeh would preach from the pulpit against Ghulam 'Ali and "his naked daughter-in-law," who was a blight on the city.⁴⁹ Khalesizadeh aroused considerable public sentiment against the family, which now lacked political support. This is an example of how women became easy targets for instigating anti-Baha'i sentiments. Accusations of Babi and Baha'i women's unchastity were familiar and had been weaponized against the religion since the earliest days of the faith.⁵⁰

The campaign led to threats against Ghulam 'Ali's life; he was under great pressure to at least make an outward show of conviction to Islam. He was refused entry to the public bathhouse, which would have been unthinkable only months before. His daughter-in-law remembered that he had to go out secretly at night to use the Baha'i bathhouse.⁵¹ The attacks continued and, eventually, it became unsafe for Ghulam 'Ali to leave his family compound. He remained in self-imprisonment for six months, until his death from pneumonia in January 1949. His family maintains that his illness was related to the stress and anxiety caused by the anti-Baha'i attacks. His daughter-in-law poignantly mused during one interview that it may have been providential that he died when he did. Otherwise, he may have been tempted to deny his faith.⁵²

Ghulam 'Ali's story also had a posthumous dramatic final chapter. The Khurasani family, both Muslims and Baha'is, arranged for a grand memorial gathering in the city's main Mir-Chakhmaq Mosque. However, crowds instigated by Khalesizadeh interrupted the service, threatening to murder Ghulam 'Ali's son, Muhammad, who had to be rescued by his friends. There were also death threats to Muhammad's wife, Shahnaz Khanum.⁵³ The affair ended

⁴⁷ Mina Yazdani, "Khalesizada Muhammad b. Muhammad Mehdi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2015), <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/khalesizada#prettyPhoto>; Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁴⁸ Lesān al-Molk Sepehr, governor of Yazd. Letter to the minister of the interior and the prime minister. November 3, 1948. Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran. Accessed March 9, 2025. https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Persian/003876P_1.pdf.

⁴⁹ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁵⁰ Conflating religious dissent with "immoral" behavior, especially for women, has deep roots in Iran. One archetypal case is that of the woman Babi leader Tahereh Qurrat al-'Ayn, whose anti-establishment beliefs made her the subject of wild fantasies by her opponents. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 309, 312, 320–21.

⁵¹ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Khurasani, interview, November 19, 1947.

only after personal intervention by the provincial governor.⁵⁴ A large Baha'i memorial was subsequently held in the family compound.⁵⁵

Before the memorial, the burial was also a scene of conflict, as the deceased's Baha'i and Muslim relatives disagreed over his burial place. Since he had been a victim of an anti-Baha'i attack, some Muslim relatives were afraid they might become implicated in the matter. As such, they insisted on burying Ghulam-'Ali in a family mausoleum in the Muslim cemetery with Islamic rites, asserting an Islamic identity for him and minimizing the chance of losing his estate to increasingly powerful clerics during the post-World War I period.

A melee erupted when Muslim relatives appeared at Ghulam-'Ali's house, threatened his Baha'i family, and seized his body. His wife, Munavvar Khanum, was distraught. She rushed into the street without her chador on, shouting that she would never allow her husband to be buried in a Muslim cemetery, but there was nothing she could do to stop it.⁵⁶

The abduction of the bodies of converts with ambiguous, fluid, or dual religious identities was common in this period. Perpetrators were usually relatives with a vested interest in purging the deceased's past nonconformities, thus asserting a pure conviction to the center by insisting on burying the body in a Muslim cemetery. Like the case of Ghulam-'Ali, the burial site became a cornerstone of the deceased's past identity, a definitive piece of evidence to use in inheritance disputes, and protection for family property against confiscation.⁵⁷

Anti-blackness and ambiguity

Bagoolizadeh has argued that by the twentieth century, the term *siyah* had become a pejorative designation that pointed to enslaved ancestry. She uses the example of Sayyid 'Abdullah Behbahani, one of the most influential clerics of the Constitutional Revolution, who was labeled Shah Siyah (the Black King) by his enemies to lambast his drive for wealth and power, thus demeaning his status. The designation sarcastically referred to his autocratic power in government and to his African background.⁵⁸ He was the son of prominent Tehran cleric Sayyed Esma'il Behbahani and his enslaved African concubine Zarafshan, who was "given" to him by a Qajar official.⁵⁹

The whispered, somewhat disparaging epithet *siyah* may have also served to diminish Ghulam-'Ali's status in Yazd. Ghulam-'Ali's grandson tells the story of an incident on the streets of Yazd when his grandfather's blackness spilled over into public discourse, potentially pointing to the wider issue of racial disability. As we have seen, everyone used the tag *siyah* after Ghulam-'Ali's name, but always privately. On one occasion, however, he was accosted on the street by a sex worker who wanted his help. She was riding a bicycle and had stopped to repair the bike. She called to "Ghulam-'Ali Siyah," who was nearby, for help. While others tried to ignore her call, Ghulam-'Ali responded to her request and helped her

⁵⁴ The letter recounts disturbances, reportedly instigated by Khālešizādeh, that prevented Ghulam-'Ali's memorial from being held in Yazd's main Mir-Chakhmāq Mosque, and it identifies him as head of the Chamber of Commerce (otāq-e tejārat): Lesan al-Molk Sepehr, governor of Yazd, to Prime Minister Muhammad Sa'ed, January 20, 1949, Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/fa/archive/tmsh-dr-yzd>. See also Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁵⁵ Khurasani, interview, November 18, 2017.

⁵⁶ Afagh, interview.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of postmortem identity disputes, see Mehrdad Amanat, "Set in Stone: Homeless Corpses and Desecrated Graves in Modern Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012): 257–283.

⁵⁸ Baghoolizadeh, *The Color Black*, 55.

⁵⁹ Like Ziba, the name Zarafshan is meant to identify the enslaved person's non-Muslim origin. The official in question was Masqat-born Iranian Ahmad Khan-e Sartip-e Kababi, who served as an agent of the Omani sultan prior to coming to Iran and presiding over a number of high positions, mostly on the Persian Gulf coast. Kababi was the father of the aforementioned scholar and poet Sadid Al-Saltaneh. The "giving" of enslaved young women as a demonstration of power and wealth or for gaining favors was not unusual among the Qajar elite.

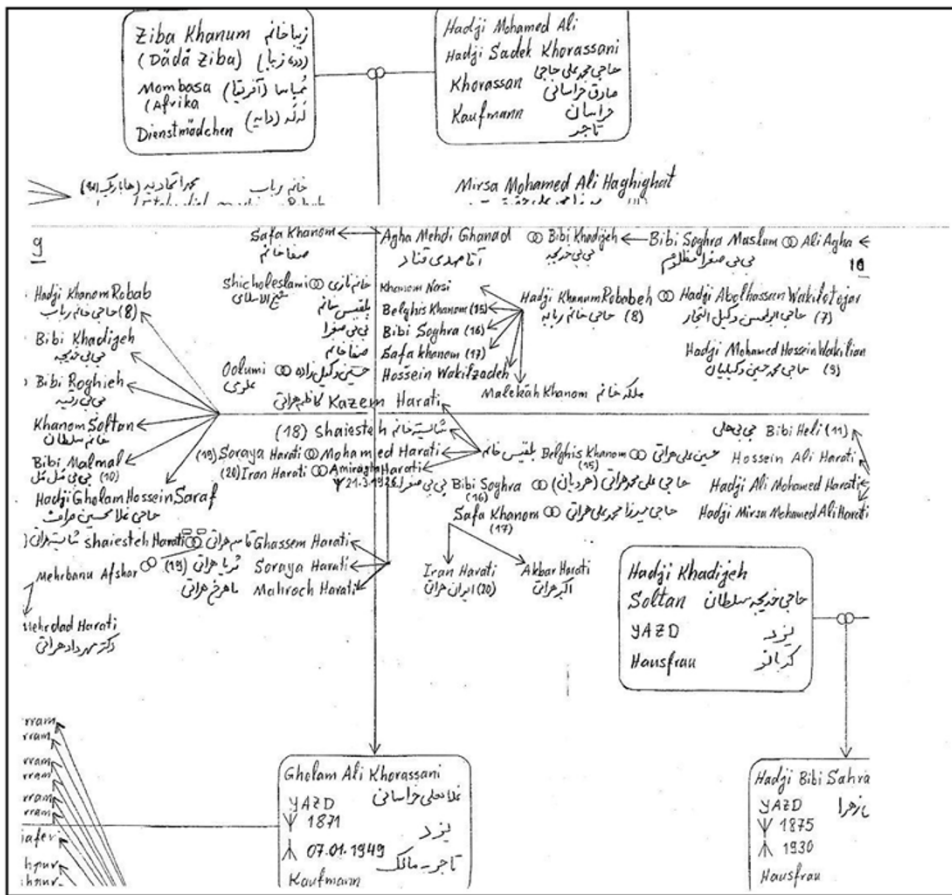


Figure 4. Details of the Herati-Khorassani family tree in German and Persian, drawn up in Germany by the descendants of Haji Muhammad 'Ali Sadeq Khorassani. Ziba Khanum (top left) is shown as the mother of Ghulam-'Ali (bottom center). The document suggests that Ziba was from Mombasa. She is designated with the name "Dadé" (Nanny), as she was known by the family. She is also designated here as *laleh* (nursemaid) and as *dayeh* (wetnurse) by occupation (suggesting, perhaps, that the author was unsure of her role in the family). No marker of race is included for her or her descendants. Source: "Familien-Tafel: Stammbaum des Dr. Nasser Torkzadeh" [Family chart: Family tree of Dr. Nasser Torkzadeh], 1995, private collection.

by calmly holding on to the bike.⁶⁰ This story indicates that Ghulam-'Ali was aware of the *siyah* label used for him and was not very upset about it. The sex worker's use of the designation to demand help from Ghulam-'Ali for a menial task could also be seen as a subtle revelation of a mostly hidden social bias by a subaltern less concerned with social conventions and formalities. It is not clear, however, whether this was used as a marker of a reified racial category or what kinds of social exclusion it indicated.

It is worth noting that the term *siyah* was not attached to the children or grandchildren of Ghulam-'Ali. His children all had one Iranian parent, Munavvar Khanum, without any known African ancestry, as did his grandchildren. Ziba Khanum's descendants

⁶⁰ Jalil Taghizadeh, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 17, 2017.



Figure 5. A Memorial to Ghulam-'Ali The slave child turned merchant-landowner, is the well-known Saray or Bazaar-e Ghulam 'Ali Siyah. Registered as a historical monument in 2007, locals and tourists frequent it. The innocuous use of the term *siyah* as part of a well-known urban landmark to this day may be seen as an indication of how racial differences were normalized and accepted by locals. The monument asserts a Muslim identity for Ghulam-'Ali. In a typical sneer to his Baha'i past, the market is known for its festive decorations on the occasion of the supposed birthday of the Twelfth Imam on the fifteenth of Sha'ban.⁶¹ Source: "The Ghulam Ali Black Marketplace of Yazd," GotoYazd.com, <https://gotoyazd.com/place/395/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%87-%DB%8C%D8%B2%D8%AF/>. accessed July 7, 2026.

⁶¹ The central claim of the Baha'i faith is that the Twelfth Imam, the promised messiah of Shi'a Islam, appeared in the person of the Baha'i prophets. Therefore, his coming, after 1,000 years of occultation, is no longer anticipated, but has been accomplished.

demonstrate how fully Afro-Iranians were incorporated into Iranian society, especially among the wealthy classes, without regard for race. All of Ghulam-'Ali's adult children married into Iranian families, and their children seem indistinguishable from other Iranians. Indistinguishable to us, at least. One of Ghulam-'Ali's grandchildren suggested that she had African facial features due to her Afro-Iranian ancestry, but we could not discern them.⁶²

Moreover, none of Ghulam-'Ali's family makes any attempt to hide their African heritage or Ziba Khamum's identity as an enslaved African woman. Similarly, all of her master's (Haji Muhammad-'Ali) descendants, including the Muslim children and grandchildren of his Iranian wife, acknowledge Ziba Khanum as a member of the family and a forbearer. A genealogy of the family produced in Germany includes her and her descendants, who make up a large portion of the tableau. After the 1979 revolution, the Khurasani family scattered and now reside in a number of locations, including Los Angeles, New York, London, and Germany (Figure 4).

Conclusion

Ghulam-'Ali's eventful life story makes one almost overlook the crucial fact that he was, after all, the subaltern son of an enslaved African woman. In a society in which class and privilege often trump race and ethnic distinctions, Ghulam-'Ali seems to have largely overcome racial obstacles with remarkable ease. At the end of his life, it was his Baha'i affiliation that made him vulnerable, no matter how distant he may have become from his Baha'i identity. Before that, his family connections, elite affiliations, merchant networks, and considerable wealth seem to have protected him from any negative consequences of his African descent.

On the other hand, there is the fact that he was, in effect, disinherited by his half-brother from his father's Iranian wife. Whether this was the result of Ghulam-'Ali's African descent or racial status is not clear. Disputes over family inheritance were common at the time, and Ghulam-'Ali was only a teenager—perhaps young enough to be ignored—at the time of his father's death.

The fact that he was universally referred to as *siyah*, at least behind his back, indicates that he suffered a certain social disadvantage within his community. However, racial distinctions were layered and ambiguous in pre-modern Iran. Other spheres of life—such as religion, sexuality, and gender—were similarly blurred. Such ambiguities provided a cover for non-conformists and racial misfits such as Ghulam-'Ali. An example of this ambiguity is found in the name of the present-day Bazaar named after him, which includes the designation *siah* without apparent pejorative intent (Figure 5). However, this protection was diminished with the advent of modern ways and the establishment of the nation-state.⁶³

By the 1940s, Ghulam-'Ali's loss of political clout alongside his affiliation with the persecuted Baha'i religion made him quite vulnerable. The arrival of a hostile cleric in Yazd threatened his wealth and property, terrified his Muslim relatives, and put his life in danger. As far as we know, Kholesizadeh's only complaint against the Khurasani family was that, as Baha'is, they were violating religious norms, including unveiling women. He did not mention race or African descent in his sermons.

⁶² Elahe Khurasani, private conversation with the author, November 29, 2017.

⁶³ For gender ambiguities in Qajar Iran, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For a more recent discussion of gender, see Sivan Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). On Iran's religious ambiguities, see Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

It would seem that Ghulam-‘Ali’s life story may have been unusually successful for the son of an enslaved African woman and her master, but perhaps not. Most slave owners were wealthy men. If their Afro-Iranian children were able to inherit a fair portion of their father’s wealth as required by Islamic law, they may have been able to maintain an elite lifestyle, marry into wealthy families, and simply merge into mainstream Iranian society, as Ghulam-‘Ali and his descendants did. The career of the aforementioned Sayyid ‘Abdullah Behbahani may provide another example of this kind of integration, but this can only be confirmed by further research into the lives of the Afro-Iranian children of wealthy masters. Such research is long overdue.