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[Lee, Anthony A.](#), UCLA

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**Author Bio:**  
Anthony A. Lee, Ph.D., Lecturer, teaches African American History and African History at UCLA. He also teaches as an adjunct at West Los Angeles College.

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**Abstract:**  
Little scholarly research has been undertaken on the history of African slavery in Iran in the nineteenth century. What has been written focuses, almost by necessity, on statistical information or on the lives of the wealthy and powerful. Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum offer a rare opportunity for historians of Iran to reconstruct the biographies of two ordinary slaves. Because they were the slaves of the Shirazi merchant, Mirza 'Ali-Muhammad, the founder of Babism, surviving Babi and Baha'i chronicles (and oral traditions) include them in their pious histories and record at least part of their lives. At the same time, these histories erase these persons by steadfastly refusing to acknowledge any significance in their presence.

This paper will demonstrate that the recovery of the history of slavery in nineteenth-century Iran, even at the level of individual biographies, is possible. It will also argue that the significance



of large numbers of African slaves in Iran during this time has been erased from contemporary Iranian national history. Similarly, the presence of African slaves at the genesis of the Babi religion has been erased from contemporary Baha'i histories.

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# **Half the Household Was African: Recovering the Histories of Two Enslaved Africans in Iran, Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum**

**Anthony A. Lee**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

Can biographies of enslaved individuals who lived in nineteenth-century Iran be discovered and written by historians? This article will suggest that they can be, if we look in the right places and ask the right questions. The recovery of the history of ordinary Africans who were slaves in Iran and the history of their cultural influence on the nation can be accomplished—not only at the level of laws and statistics and general practices, but even at the level of individual lives. In this article, I suggest that Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum, domestic slaves of Mirza ‘Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819-1850), a young merchant, offer a rare opportunity for historians to reconstruct the biographies of two ordinary persons who were enslaved in Qajar Iran. Mirza ‘Ali-Muhammad became the prophet and founder of Babism, an Iranian religious movement and the precursor of the Baha’i faith. Because of this special circumstance, surviving Babi and Baha’i chronicles (and oral traditions) include his slaves in their pious histories and record at least some parts of their lives. A careful reading of these records will help us take a step closer to a history of enslaved Africans in nineteenth-century Iran.

A study of Baha’i histories (until recently, regarded as taboo in Iranian historiography) can provide unique information on these two individuals and on the history of slavery in Iran, if the texts are read critically. Enslaved persons were erased from Baha’i histories in the same way that other Africans have been erased from secular Iranian histories. Baha’i historians recorded their presence

as non-persons, but ignored them as actors in history by steadfastly refusing to attribute any significance to their presence at the founding of the Babi/Baha'i religions.

### Slavery in Iran

Historians have written little about the history of slavery in Iran. Thomas Ricks noted this absence as a “perplexing void” in Iranian historiography. He points out the paucity of scholarship on “the subject of slaves, slave trade, trade routes, collection stations, creditors, or slavery for the medieval, early modern, or modern periods of Iranian history.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, by the nineteenth century, the importation of slaves into Iranian cities was a long-established practice. Behnaz Mirzai concluded that reports in the mid-nineteenth century indicated that the majority of slaves taken from the East African coast were brought into Iranian ports.<sup>2</sup>

Domestic slavery had existed in Iran since medieval times.<sup>3</sup> It was the social norm in Iran by the nineteenth century, at least in the royal court and the courts of provincial governors, for wealthy families, and even within the households of middle-class merchants. Since for an urban, Iranian family of wealth and status during this period, the seclusion of the women of the household (or at least the pretense of such seclusion) was a social necessity,<sup>4</sup> domestic slaves or “household servants” were needed to carry out the public business of the house in streets and markets, and to maintain the honor of the family. Respectable Muslim women were expected to remain within the private sections of their houses and gardens and to venture out only when strictly veiled. Women of this class were, at least officially, expected to have no contact with men who were not their husbands or immediate relatives, such as fathers, brothers, or sons. Their slaves might haggle in the bazaar or move about the town without a specific destination, but such things were off-limits to high-caste, respectable women.

Historically, some slaves in Iran had served as laborers for public works projects and others were conscripted into the military. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, African slaves were almost always destined for domestic service and concubinage. The importation of slaves to Iran for such domestic purposes continued into the twentieth century. In 1905, for example, Jamila Khanum, an Ethiopian slave in Shiraz, wrote a letter summarizing her life as a slave. She wrote:

My name is Jamila Habashí,<sup>5</sup> my father is Lulá'd-Dín from Sáho, my mother Loshábah, and from the Omarānīah tribe. I was enslaved when I was a child then was brought to Mecca where I was sold to a broker; the broker took me to Basra from the Jabal, and sold me to an Iranian broker named Mullá 'Alí, who shipped me from Basra to Muhammara and from there he took me to the Bushihr port and there he sold me to a merchant called Hájí Mírzá Ahmad Káziruní who is in Shiraz now, I was his concubine for four years in Bushihr then Hájí took me to Shiraz and kept me

there for five years; in total, I was with him for nine years and then he sold me to Nas<sup>ir</sup> Nizám the son of ‘Atáu’lláh. After one year, Nasir sold me to Háji Muhammad ‘Alí Khán. Now it has been five years that I have been with him.<sup>6</sup>

A distinction in desirability and price was made between “Ethiopian” slaves (*habashi*), and East African slaves (*siddi*, *zanji*) from farther South on the African coast. Lady Sheil, a nineteenth-century traveler to Iran, noted that African slaves were divided into three types: “Bambassees, Nubees, and Habeshees. The former come from Zanzibar, and the neighboring country in the interior but I don’t know the etymology of the name [certainly from “Mombasa”]. The others as their names imply are natives of Nubia [Sudan] and Abyssinia [Ethiopia].”<sup>7</sup> Iranians considered Abyssinians superior to the others, and males were, therefore, more likely to receive full educations and to be placed in positions of responsibility and family trust.<sup>8</sup> They could be given important jobs within the household, even acting as their masters’ confidential stewards.<sup>9</sup> Due to the mutual dependence between master and slave, and because of slaves’ lack of kinship ties to rival families, it often happened that a slave would become the person in the household most trusted by the master. A slave’s loyalty was unlikely to be compromised by other considerations. Vanessa Martin observes that: “The master’s authority over the life of the slave, and its legal security, meant that the master could train a gifted slave from childhood and use him in the loyal management of his affairs.”<sup>10</sup> This might be especially true if the master had no sons, or perhaps only one or two.

It was also common for male slaves from Africa—both “Ethiopian” and otherwise—to be castrated as children before being exported to the Middle East. If the child survived the operation, he would fetch a much higher price on the market as a eunuch.<sup>11</sup> Such slaves were bought specifically to act as attendants to the women of wealthy households. Of course, their mutilation insured that their close association with the women in the private quarters of such households would be beyond reproach.<sup>12</sup> A eunuch could sometimes become his master’s confidant, as well.<sup>13</sup>

Polak stated in 1865 that the majority of black slaves (*ghulams*, *kanízes*) living in Iran were born in Africa.<sup>14</sup> In 1868, a census in Tehran found that 12 percent of the civilians living in the city were African slaves or “household servants.”<sup>15</sup> The residents of the city numbered about 100,000. This count of Africans includes only urban households, and not enslaved Africans who were used to do agricultural work or to maintain the irrigation system.<sup>16</sup> This census reveals the extent of domestic slavery in nineteenth-century Iran and the importance of the African population in Iranian cities, which is invariably ignored in Iranian history.<sup>17</sup>

A 12 percent segment of the urban population suggests that there have been enormous African influences on all aspects of Iranian culture, from food to music to language to religion. This represents roughly the percentage of African

Americans to be found living in the United States today, and of course the study of black people and their influence on American history and culture is a major field of academic study. Clearly, the study of the African presence in Iran could be a major field of Iranian studies, as well.<sup>18</sup> As in the American South, the influence that African slaves had on the history and culture of upper-class and wealthy Persian families should be especially significant. After all, enslaved servants maintained close contacts with their masters. As such, we should expect to find African influences on elite Iranian culture in areas such as elite cuisine, language, musical tastes, religious practices, and so forth.

Edward Alpers has also called attention to the absence of scholarship on the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean and on African cultural influences on societies from the Arabian Peninsula to India, including Iran.<sup>19</sup> In 1997, he called forcefully for the study of Africans in the northwestern Indian Ocean. He suggested that African cultural influences in this area could become a field of study. The consensus of all histories of Iran today has until recently, and quite inexplicably, insisted on “the all but complete disappearance of a black Diaspora in Persia.”<sup>20</sup> The significance of a large population of African slaves living in Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has simply been erased from contemporary histories.

A recent book by Vanessa Martin on Qajar Iran is a notable exception, since she devotes two chapters to black slavery in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> We might hope that Martin’s treatment indicates a new interest among academic historians in African influences on Iranian history. Yet Martin’s general discussion treats slavery as a legal category, dealing with the slaves themselves as objects and commodities,<sup>22</sup> ignoring slaves as individuals and actors, and seldom (if ever) asking about African cultural influences on Iranian history.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the presence of Africans in Iran in the nineteenth century is acknowledged, but their significance as African actors in Iran’s history is erased. The book provides little insight into the lives of ordinary slaves in Iran.

Such treatment of the African presence in Iran is the norm. But some researchers have begun to take a new direction. The Eleventh Biennial Iranian Studies Conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS) will be held in 2016, at the University of Vienna, on the theme of “African Slavery in Qajar Iran.” Pedram Khosronejad, an anthropologist at the University of St. Andrews, U.K., has curated a photo exhibition entitled “African Slavery in Iran, 1830-1930” at the Association Mémoire de l’Outre-mer in Nantes, France (2015).<sup>24</sup> The German-born, Iranian artist Mahdi Ehsaei has recently published a photo essay, entitled “Afro-Iran: The Unknown Minority.” These are his images of Iranians of African descent in the province of Hormozgan, on the Persian Gulf, who are the descendents of slaves.<sup>25</sup>

## Slavery and Social Death

Orlando Patterson, in his broad comparative study of slavery around the world defines the condition of slaves in relationship to their societies as a kind of social death. Slaves in all places, and in all periods of history, were considered to be persons without rights and without moral claims on the wider community. Patterson suggests:

Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death . . . Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure or starvation. . . . Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson.<sup>26</sup>

The only human relationship that slaves had that was socially recognized or legally sanctioned was their relationship to the master. As such, the enslaved person was stripped of all claims of birth and belonged (of his or her own right) to no social order. Patterson argues that this "social death" included the slaves' alienation from all kinship ties in the present and their alienation from all relationship to ancestors and to any role in history. As far as the society was concerned, they were social and legal non-persons.<sup>27</sup>

Until recently, even the academic literature on slavery has been influenced by this idea. Histories usually make reference to slaves as a class or a group, even as a gang in rebellion. But as non-persons, individual slaves were most often erased from historic memory. They could be remembered as objects, but not as independent actors in history. Slaves have been excluded from history, just as they were excluded from society. An individual slave might be praised for his loyalty, even his bravery, but his life could have no significance beyond devotion to his master. For the most part, this remains the state of even the academic literature today.

## African Presence at the Genesis of the Babi/Baha'i Religion

From its earliest beginnings, the Baha'i faith knew an African dimension and included African converts. The initial moment of Baha'i history is, interestingly enough, fixed by scripture at precisely two hours and eleven minutes after sunset on the evening of 23 May 1844,<sup>28</sup> in the city of Shiraz. On that day, Sayyid 'Alí-Muhammad Shírázî—who would later be known as the Bab (Arabic: gate)—invited a young theology student named Mullá Husayn into his home and convinced him during the course of that evening that he was the person who would soon fulfill certain prophecies and expectations of the Shi'i esoteric tradition.<sup>29</sup> This conversation led eventually to the Babi movement, to the imprisonment and execution of the Bab himself, and to the subsequent appearance of the Baha'i religion a couple of decades later.<sup>30</sup>

Even Nabil-i A'zam's hagiographic account of Mullá Husayn's conversion mentions an African man who was present on the first night of the Bab's "declaration."<sup>31</sup> This man, who was invariably referred to in Baha'i sources only as the Bab's (unnamed) "Ethiopian servant" attended to his master and guest that evening.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that the Bab owned slaves is not surprising. He belonged to a fairly wealthy merchant family doing business in Shiraz. There seems to be no reason to suppose that the percentage of the black population of that city would be any less than that described earlier for the city of Tehran in 1868. Indeed, since Shiraz is closer to the Persian Gulf slave routes, and since in the 1840s there was less international anti-slavery activity than there was in the 1860s, the population of African slaves would, in all probability, be even larger there. Mirzai notes that Afro-Iranian communities were established in the towns and cities all along the southern coast of Iran.<sup>33</sup> A report in 1847 shows that 3,488 slaves were brought yearly to the Persian Gulf and most of those were destined for Iran.<sup>34</sup> Shiraz was one of the principal cities in the south where slaves were disembarked for sale or transfer and so the African population there must have been significant.<sup>35</sup>

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of the event of the Bab's "declaration" in 1844, for the Baha'i community. It is regarded as the founding event of Baha'i history and the beginning of a new age of human development on the planet.<sup>36</sup> The exact moment of the declaration on the night of May 23,<sup>37</sup> was fixed by the Bab himself. The anniversary of this date is observed every year as a Baha'i holy day in every Baha'i community in the world. Usually, relevant passages from Nabil's narrative are read that recall, hour by hour, the events of that night.<sup>38</sup> The story of Mullá Husayn's conversion is intimately known to all observant Baha'is. I have argued elsewhere that there is no American Baha'i, for example, for whom Nabil's account does not carry profound personal significance. In fact, I have suggested that this story has become one of the foundational myths supporting American Baha'i identity, an episode that is replayed annually, at the holy day, in American Baha'i imagination.<sup>39</sup>

The role of an African slave in these events is not remembered, however. Nabil's account mentions the Bab's "Ethiopian servant." But he ascribes no significance to his witness to the first day of the revelation. Baha'is celebrate Mullá Husayn as the Bab's first believer,<sup>40</sup> but they ignore the African presence on this occasion. At best, they see the presence of an African servant in the Bab's household as only an extension of the Prophet's own charisma and hospitality.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, as will be seen, that African presence was important, visible, and profound.

### **Haji Mubarak**

According to Afnan, the "Ethiopian servant," Haji Mubarak, was purchased at the age of 19 by the Bab in 1842 (two years before the beginning of his religious



mission)<sup>42</sup> from Haji Mirza Abu'l-Qasim, a brother of the Bab's wife, Khadijih Bagum. He 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. His education is said to have been "exemplary."<sup>43</sup> 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, and the Bab entrusted him with the task of settling his outstanding accounts and winding up his business affairs in Shiraz.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that Mubarak was literate in the language and mathematics of the traditional accounting system (*síyáq*).

Although the significance of his African origins is ignored in the account, Nabil's narrative records that Mubarak acted as the doorman at the Bab's house on the evening of Mullá Husayn's conversion. As such, he greeted both master and guest as they arrived at the house.<sup>45</sup> Beyond this, he attended to the other needs of the two men while their conversation continued all night in the Bab's chambers, as he sought to convince Mullá Husayn of his divine mission and related his new religious teachings. The mullá's own recollections of Mubarak's service are recorded:

At the third hour after sunset, my Host ordered the dinner to be served. That same Ethiopian servant appeared again and spread before us the choicest food. That holy repast refreshed alike my body and soul. In the presence of my Host, at that hour, I felt as though I were feeding upon the fruits of Paradise. I could not but marvel at the manners and the devoted attentions of that Ethiopian servant whose very life seemed to have been transformed by the regenerating influence of his Master. I then, for the first time, recognized the significance of this well-known traditional utterance ascribed to Muhammad: "I have prepared for the godly and righteous among My servants what eye hath seen not, ear heard not, nor human heart conceived." Had my youthful Host no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient—that He received me with that quality of hospitality and loving-kindness which I was convinced no other human being could possibly reveal.<sup>46</sup>

After this passage, Mubarak disappears from Nabil's narrative of the events of May 23, 1844. Nabil goes on to proclaim this evening as the beginning of a new era in human history and to canonize Mulla Husayn as the first believer, never mentioning Mubarak again.

We are fortunate, however, that nineteenth-century accounts are not the only sources of information about these events or about the African domestic slaves that lived in the Bab's household. We also have the records, the oral traditions, and the personal reminiscences of the Bab's family. Not only did various kinsmen of the Bab eventually become Baha'is (while others remained indifferent, or

even openly hostile to the Bab's new faith and the subsequent innovations that transformed it into the Baha'i religion), but the family was also wealthy and prominent in other ways, developing a mercantile empire that stretched from Istanbul to Hong Kong.<sup>47</sup>

Although the Bab himself had no children, the descendants of his maternal uncles and of his brother-in-law claimed him as an ancestor. The Baha'i branch of the family, at least, was known as the Afnans (twigs<sup>48</sup>), which eventually transformed from an honorific title into a family surname. The Afnan family has maintained a keen sense of its own place in history, and particularly in the history of the Baha'i religion. By the 1980s, one member of the family, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, living in England, had come to be regarded as "the true custodian in this age of the traditions of the Afnan family."<sup>49</sup> Mr. Afnan wrote down the family traditions as they related to the African slaves in the Bab's household, in a narrative that included his own personal reminiscences, specifically for the edification of Baha'i communities in East and Central Africa. Of course, he had at his disposal the considerable resources of the Afnan library, held in private archives, which include documents and memoirs reaching back to the time of the Bab himself. His account was circulated in mimeographed form for some years. It was eventually published in 1988, in the United States, under the title of *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh*.<sup>50</sup> The book became the subject of considerable controversy within the American Baha'i community at the time.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, *Black Pearls* may be regarded as a primary source that embodies a small portion of the Afnan family's extensive memory and archive of the events of Baha'i history.<sup>52</sup>

It is no surprise that, although it is supposed to be an account of African slaves in the Bab's household, *Black Pearls* focuses a great deal of attention on the Bab himself as the source of the numinous. The slaves are praised repeatedly for their loyalty and selflessness, and for their unquestioning—even childlike—devotion and obedience to "their" family. So, while the presence of these African slaves is acknowledged, their significance to history is immediately erased. As such, the book repeats the approach found in earlier Baha'i histories, except that Afnan is quite personally attached to his relatives' reminiscences. For example, he writes:

I vividly remember that my grandmother, the daughter of Hájí Mírzá Abú'l-Qásim, would often recall Mubárák's extreme modesty and politeness. She would say that, while intelligent, quick of understanding, and possessing a great capacity to learn, he nonetheless displayed the utmost meekness and humility and showed kindness to all. She would describe his manners and demeanor as being regal, and would remark that they well befitted his service in the holy house [i.e., the house of the Báb]. More than anything else, though, she remembered him as a loyal and faithful servant of the Báb and His mother.<sup>53</sup>

But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>54</sup> Afnan also provides us with enough additional information to suggest that the event of the “Declaration of the Báb” should be reinterpreted to include an African presence at the genesis of the Babi movement.<sup>55</sup>

Afnan is able to locate Mubarak’s room in the house of the Bab, and even provides a photograph of the room in his book.<sup>56</sup> He informs us that it sits adjacent to the room in which the Bab received Mullá Husayn on the night of the declaration. Since it would have been unthinkable for a domestic slave to retire for the evening while his master remained awake, entertaining a houseguest, Mubarak “waited sleepless and vigilant, just outside the chamber, ready to serve when called upon.”<sup>57</sup> This account does not make much of the obvious fact that Mubarak was present—and perhaps not even out of sight—throughout the conversation that led to Mullá Husayn’s conversion, that he clearly witnessed the entire event, that he must have been fully aware of the religious claims that his



**Mubarak’s Room in the House of the Báb**

In Shiraz, Iran. According to Abu’l-Qasim Afnan, the room is adjacent to the audience room where the Bab received Mullá Husayn in the small house on the evening of May 23, 1844. The events of that night resulted in Mullá Husayn’s conversion and the beginning of the Babi movement. The house of the Bab was completely renovated in the 1870s, so the room would not have looked exactly like this at the time the Bab lived in the house.

This house became a place of pilgrimage almost immediately after the Bab’s execution in 1850. Here the Bab’s wife received Babi, and later Baha’i, pilgrims who came to pay their respects to the widow and visit the birthplace of the religion. The house remained a place of pilgrimage for Baha’is all over the world through the 1970s. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), it was razed to the ground by government officials because it was a center of Baha’i activity.

Source: Abu’l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls*, Second Edition (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1999): 4. Catalogued at the Bahá’i World Center, Audio Visual Department as NN 3559-4-29, FN 13241.

master was making, and that—since he was Muslim, literate and educated—the significance of these claims could not have been lost on him. While Mullá Husayn is understood by Baha'is to be the Bab's first convert, Mubarak was present at the time of his conversion and may have shared his experience. This possibility is not celebrated in Baha'i imagination, however.

Beyond this, Afnan makes reference to the traditional sources that document Mubarak's intimate association with his master during the whole period of the Bab's early activities. Between May 1844 and September 1846—when the Bab was finally arrested for his religious heresies and 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; he was the Bab's companion and 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. 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 and attempt to retrieve them at the risk of his life. He was present when his master was detained 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 Shiraz for hiding in Isfahan, Mubarak never saw him again but was entrusted with the care of his wife and mother, both of whom remained at home.<sup>58</sup>

### **Fezzeh Khanum**<sup>59</sup>

Mubarak was not the only slave in the Bab's household. Afnan also introduces us to Fezzeh Khanum, an African woman who was the servant and companion of the Bab's wife, Khadijih Bagum. When the Bab married in 1842, he established a new household which consisted of two slaves, his wife, his mother, and himself. Of the family of five, two were Africans; and after the Bab's forced departure, half the household was African.

The Bab had purchased Mubarak from his wife's brother for 14 *tumans* (about \$28.00), and he was probably more of a wedding present from the brother-in-law than anything else.<sup>60</sup> At the time of his marriage, the Bab also "acquired" (to use Afnan's term) a servant for his wife, Fezzeh Khanum, an "Ethiopian" child who was probably no more than seven years old and clearly did not represent a great investment of funds. They all lived in a small two-story house in Shiraz and the family seems to have had modest means. The Bab had some time earlier retired from his business activities to pursue religious studies and devotions. It is not clear that he had any income at all, at this point, and may have relied on relatives for support.<sup>61</sup>

Afnan's portrayal of Fezzeh's life presents, if possible, an even more ideal picture of a selfless servant utterly lost in devotion to her mistress than does his

portrayal of Mubarak. After the Bab's mother departed with Mubarak to Iraq, Afnan assures us that: ". . . Fezzeh was able to dedicate herself fully to Khadíjih Bagum to the exception of all others in her life. She never developed any warm friendship with anyone else, even though there were a number of servants in the homes of the uncles of the Báb. Never would she appear in public except in attendance on Khadíjih Bagum."<sup>62</sup> Beyond this, Afnan insists that: "Fezzeh Khanum refused to even contemplate life without Khadíjih Bagum."<sup>63</sup> In fact, both women actually died on the same night, November 15, 1881. Fezzeh was about 47 years old. Afnan explains that Khadíjih Bagum died first, and that a short time later ". . . true to her heart's desire, the spirit of Fezzeh winged its flight to join her beloved mistress."<sup>64</sup> The narrative is so idyllic on this point that one would assume that Fezzeh had either died of acute grief or had committed suicide. Afnan assured me personally however, upon my inquiry, that both women had simply succumbed to dysentery, one after the other.<sup>65</sup>

As Armstrong-Ingram remarks in his discussion of Fezzeh's life, one is tempted by Afnan's account "to consider her a child so traumatized by the experience of enslavement that she attached herself totally to a 'protector' and grew up to be a withdrawn, asocial person."<sup>66</sup> However, there are aspects of her story in this and in other histories that suggest otherwise. Some time after her husband's execution, Khadíjih Bagum's home became a center of pilgrimage for the persecuted Babis (and later Baha'is) of Iran.<sup>67</sup> Streams of visitors came to the house to seek out the presence of the wife of the Bab, who was regarded as a holy person in her own right by virtue of her direct relationship to the Prophet. Some of the women, at least, might remain as houseguests for extended periods. Khadíjih Bagum would receive these visitors, act as guide to the holy house, and recount her memories of her husband and her marriage to her devoted listeners. In this role, she became a person of considerable influence within the Baha'i community. Fezzeh, for her part, remained the only servant in the house and would wait on and cook for the guests—so social isolation was not an option.

In addition, Fezzeh Khanum—having known the Bab and lived in his household—also inherited some of the Prophet's charisma. Abu'l-Qasim Afnan explained to me that she was also an object of reverence and devotion for visiting pilgrims. He made a point of saying that these visitors would kiss the shoulder<sup>68</sup> of Fezzeh as an act of subordination and reverence and that they regarded her spiritual station as above their own.<sup>69</sup> I would suggest that these acts of veneration for an African slave woman can hardly be regarded by historians of Iranian history as devoid of significance, both cultural and religious. Yet I can only cite them here as a result of my brief encounter with the oral traditions of the Afnan family. Veneration of Fezzeh Khanum is never mentioned in any book of Baha'i history.

## Presence and Erasure

Despite their close relationship to the Bab and their acknowledged participation in some of the most critical early events of his ministry, neither Mubarak nor Fezzeh are given much notice in traditional Baha'i histories, and even less in academic discussions of Babi/Baha'i history. Afnan himself rejected the idea that they should even be regarded as Babis. He is careful in his book to characterize their service to the Bab as demonstrating only their devotion to his person and as having no religious significance—either for present-day Baha'is or for the individuals themselves. He repeatedly denied that such devotion should be interpreted in such a way as to grant a Babi identity to either Haji Mubarak or Fezzeh Khanum. Indeed, none of the early sources ever make reference to them as “Bábis.”

However, the sources never make reference to anyone as a “Bábi.” Especially during the early years of the Bab's mission, the nature of Babi identity was extremely fluid and undefined and even the word itself had not yet been coined. The religious identity of the early followers of the Bab is simply inferred from their behavior and their identification with, their loyalty and devotion to, the Bab as the source of the numinous. Perhaps because of their status as slaves, different rules seem to be applied for Mubarak and Fezzeh. From the perspective of the sources, it could be that their slave status simply disqualified them from the possibility of having a Babi identity. Or, perhaps, it was assumed that, as slaves, they were not free agents and could not, therefore, choose to change religions or dedicate themselves to the person of the Bab as a matter of their own personal decision. Still, it is curious that an author like Afnan would spend so much time praising the selfless and unflinching devotion of both of the servants he memorializes if he felt that such devotion were coerced.

The publisher of Afnan's *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* intended to bring the book out under the title of “Black Bábis,” with the same subtitle.<sup>70</sup> The book was even initially advertised as forthcoming with the “Black Bábis” title. However, the author flatly refused to allow this title to be used for his book. An exchange of letters followed in which the publisher argued that all of the persons written about in the book should be regarded as Babis based on their actions, their devotion to the Bab, and their participation in seminal events of Babi history. Afnan was not convinced, however. He wrote:

. . . there is no evidence which indicates that any of the black servants mentioned in my book except Masoud<sup>71</sup> became believers in the Bab or Bahá'u'lláh. . . . We have to bear in mind that simply the fact of the presence of these servants at certain important historical occasions is not sufficient as evidence of belief or proof of declaration.<sup>72</sup> . . . Therefore, not having seen or heard any evidence of a declaration of faith by any of these black servants, I am reluctant to state categorically that they became believers.”<sup>73</sup>

Again:

... these black servants were not declared Bábis except Masud, but they were dedicated and faithful, selfless, truthful and loving followers of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh and their family and followers.<sup>74</sup>

Of Fezzeh, Afnan states directly in his book, “[S]he was not aware of the station and mission of the Báb.”<sup>75</sup> Of course, in the case of the Bab’s manservant, such a statement would have been absolutely unsupportable, and we find no similar remark in Afnan’s chapter on Mubarak. Moreover, I would suggest that the notion that Fezzeh could have remained unaware of the claims of the Bab throughout her lifetime beggars all reason, though this view was obviously held concerning her within the Afnan family. This same conclusion with regard to Babi identity also represents the consensus within the Baha’i community with regard to both servants. Their presence is acknowledged; their significance is erased. In any case, the title “Black Bábis” was changed to *Black Pearls* at the author’s insistence.

Why Afnan should maintain such views is an open question. Armstrong-Ingram suggests that he simply “projected [back] a bureaucratic view of religious identity that became common in the Baha’i community around the 1930s on his subjects.”<sup>76</sup> I think it more likely that he unconsciously reproduced the views long held within his family—views that were primarily determined by cultural attitudes towards Africans, slaves, and household servants. A slave, after all, is a non-person, socially dead in Patterson’s terms. A slave, almost by definition, cannot be an independent actor. Rather, a slave is supposed to be a person attached by law and by custom to the identity of another individual, who is the master. A slave might be a good servant or a bad one, might be devoted and faithful, or careless and perfidious, might be truthful or false. But, the idea of a slave making a free and independent decision to assume a new religious identity is almost a contradiction in terms.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, as I have suggested above, it is certainly time to reconsider such false assumptions.

One aspect of Afnan’s book that most startled his American readers was the assertion that neither Haji Mubarak nor Fezzeh Khanum were told by the Bab’s family about the Prophet’s execution as a heretic by clergy and government in Tabriz (northern Iran) in 1850. The Bab had been imprisoned for years before his execution, and the Babi movement had created a political and social upheaval in Iran. Armed conflicts broke out in various parts of the country, clerics regularly vilified Babis from the pulpit, and the Bab was the subject of general rumor in all parts of Iran. Nonetheless, the final blow came as a shock to the Bab’s relatives. Afnan admits that the menfolk tried to keep the news from the women in the family for as long as they could.<sup>78</sup>

Of Mubarak, Afnan wrote:

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

While in Karbalá [in service to the Bab's mother], Mubárak longed for the return of his Master. He made a broom to which he attached a green handle. Green is the color of Muhammad's lineage: since the Báb was a descendant of the Prophet, Mubárak's broom was made in remembrance of Him. Every morning at the hour of dawn, Mubárak would use the broom to sweep the courtyard around the sanctuary of the Shrine of Imám Husayn. He vowed to perform this pious deed every day until the Báb would return. After completing this exercise, he would then proceed to procure the provisions required by the household and complete his other duties.<sup>79</sup>

Of Fezzeh Khanum, Afnan simply wrote, "[S]he was so enchanted by Him [the Báb] that she could not even fathom the thought that He could have been killed under such brutal circumstance."<sup>80</sup> In 1877, some 27 years after the execution, the house of the Bab in Shiraz was renovated by Baha'is so that Khadíjih Bagum could live there once again. Afnan relates a family tradition about this to illustrate the point that Fezzeh remained ignorant of the Bab's death until the end of her life. He said that Fezzeh was found rejoicing at the work being done, since she believed that the renovations meant that her master would soon return from his long journey to India. Afnan remarked, "Her joy was a heartbreaking testimony to her devotion."<sup>81</sup>

As persecutions of the Babi religion intensified in Iran, both during the Bab's lifetime and after his execution,<sup>82</sup> the situation of Khadíjih Bagum and the other members of her family in Shiraz became precarious, and even dangerous. For a time it was unsafe for the Bab's wife to remain in her house, and she took up residence with relatives. Under such circumstances, it became expedient for the family to maintain the public fiction that it was not their relative who had been executed. Rather, the story was released that Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad had traveled to India to take charge of an arm of the Afnan trade network there. He was on an extended journey, but he would eventually return.

Such a story may have made it a little easier for the Afnans to maintain face in public, but it certainly convinced no one. Naturally, the family's loyal household slaves were willing and able to defend the public fiction for decades.<sup>83</sup> But the Bab's mother and grandmother eventually felt compelled to move their residence from Shiraz to Karbala, in Iraq, to escape from the rumors and deprecations of their Muslim relatives who made no secret of their contempt and hostility.<sup>84</sup>



It is certainly absurd to maintain that either Haji Mubarak or Fezzeh Khanum remained literally unaware of the fate of their master, since they regularly attended to household duties in the streets of the city and would have heard all the news that circulated there. Both servants witnessed the Bab's arrest, his imprisonment at home, and his forced departure. They certainly overheard conversations within the household and witnessed the mourning of the family's grief-stricken women when the news of the Bab's execution was finally confirmed for them. Afnan maintains that the mother of the Bab, for example, was "beside herself with grief."<sup>85</sup> Beyond that, there was the parade of Babi and Baha'i pilgrims that Fezzeh Khanum witnessed and attended to for some thirty years after the Bab's death. It is not reasonable to suppose that the significance of any of these events would have been lost on anyone. Nonetheless, that is what Afnan asserts with regard to the Bab's slaves, and so that is the current state of Baha'i literature.<sup>86</sup>

So, the African dimension of the genesis of the Babi religion remains unexplored both by the Baha'i faith community and by the academic community. And it is not possible for me to explore it here, since such matters are beyond the scope of this work. However, the subject cries out for further study. At this point, it can only be said emphatically that there was an important African presence at the events that marked the germination of the Babi movement. During those early years, the Bab and his family lived in intimate association with Africans who were members of their household. We should expect then that a search for African cultural influences would prove fruitful. At this time, both Baha'i history and Iranian history seem unfamiliar with—perhaps hostile to—the concept that slaves might influence the tastes, the language, the actions, and even the ideas of their masters. However, the academic study of the African Diaspora in the Americas and in other parts of the world has demonstrated this truth beyond a reasonable doubt.

### **Recovering the History of African Slaves in Iran**

The results of our inquiry into the beginnings of the Babi Movement are perhaps surprising. Following up the hint of an "Ethiopian servant" in the house of the Bab found in traditional Baha'i sources, we discover an important African presence at the genesis of the religion. Indeed, half of the Bab's household was African after his arrest and exile in 1846. Thus, this paper illustrates the value of family traditions and oral sources for the recovery of subaltern histories in Iran. In this case, they allow scholars to recover at least partial biographies of two ordinary, nineteenth-century slaves in Iran—biographies that we had assumed were lost to history. These two people were acknowledged as present on important occasions in the sources and then erased from historical memory and made into non-persons. Yet, their stories can be recovered.

I suggest that the same process of discovery that we see on a micro-level within the history of the Babi/Baha'i religions can be applied on a macro-level to the history of Iran as a whole. Hints in the sources that demonstrate an African

presence in the royal household, and in Iranian society in general. need to be taken seriously, followed, and developed into research projects. The presence of Afro-Iranian communities in Iranian cities should be rediscovered. Family traditions and oral sources may yield surprising information. The lives of ordinary persons who were enslaved in Iran must be taken seriously. Historians need to deconstruct the ways in which these African people have been acknowledged and then erased from Iranian history.

In the preface to the 2005 paperback edition of his book *Resurrection and Renewal*, Abbas Amanat suggests that anti-Baha'i attitudes in Iran, even among the secular enemies of the present Islamic regime, are rooted in a deep resentment of "the presence in Iran of an 'Other' that does not conform to the imagined Iranian Self." He suggests, perhaps wrongly, that this desire for a pure and unblemished national selfhood "runs deep in Iranian consciousness, a disease fed by the purity fetishism of the Shi'ite creed . . ." <sup>87</sup> That is, a need for purity deeply rooted in religion. The Baha'i community is that "Other," and so must be erased and dismissed, even by the non-religious. However, it may not be only Babis and Baha'is who threaten the unitary vision of the Iranian Self, but also black slaves pursuing their own African cultures on Iranian soil who have also been erased from history. Such a possibility has not yet been contemplated by academic historians. But if we are willing to follow the leads that are right before our eyes, we may be surprised by our own discoveries.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas 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 comments at length on the paucity of academic work done on slavery in Iran in *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), 121-127. 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)" (PhD diss., York University, 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), 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), 30-34; also "Afro-Iranian Lives," (video: 2007), <http://www.afroiranianlives.com/dvd.htm>. 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](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* (Syracuse University Press, forthcoming) and Author, *The Baha'i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952-1962* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) also discusses slavery in Iran. See Chapter 2.

Apparently, there is little memory of African slavery among contemporary Iranians, at least among middle-class, expatriate Iranians living in Los Angeles. Whenever I raise the subject

among Iranian friends and acquaintances in Los Angeles, they express shock and deny that such a thing could ever have existed in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Mirzai, "Slavery," 70.

<sup>3</sup> On medieval slavery in Islam, see Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*.

<sup>4</sup> This was indeed often more a matter of pretense as anything else. Lady Sheil noted, with regard to Tehran in the early 1850s: "[Women of] all classes enjoy abundance of liberty, more so, I think, than among us. The complete envelopment of the face and person [the veil, or *chadur*] disguises them effectually from the nearest relatives, and destroying, when convenient, all distinction of rank, gives unrestrained freedom. The bazars [sic] are crowded with women in this most ungraceful disguise. The weekly bath and constant visits consume a large share of their time; and Thursday afternoon is devoted to a mock pilgrimage to some shrine outside the town, or else to the grave of some relation." Lady Mary Elenor Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London: John Murray, 1856): 145-46. I am grateful to Sen McGlinn for bringing this quote to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> Meaning, Jamila the Ethiopian.

<sup>6</sup> Jamila's saga apparently begins in 1880. Quoted in Mirzai, "Slavery," 72, from the statement of Jamila, 8 Shawwāl 1323, File 2, Box 3, 1323, Center of Documents, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran. Mirzai suggests in footnote nos. 24 and 25 (Ibid.) that Sāho is "a Cushitic-speaking group in northern Ethiopia," and that Omrānīah presumably refers to the Oromo. The latter supposition is certainly not true because linguistic barriers would prevent such a shift in pronunciation (Christopher Ehret, personal conversation, July 2, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, 243–245.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Sheil's book also contains an early account of the Babi movement in Iran. See also, Harris, *The African Presence*, 39-40, especially note 25.

<sup>9</sup> Mirzai, "Slavery," 112.

<sup>10</sup> Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005): 171.

<sup>11</sup> In Iran, at this time, the price of a eunuch was three times more than that of other slaves. (Mirzai, "Slavery," 118). For a discussion of how the operations was carried out, see John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton: MarkusWeiner Publishers, 2002), 99–101.

<sup>12</sup> At least, any improper relations between an enslaved eunuch and the women in his care would produce no children and so could remain concealed.

<sup>13</sup> At least, according to Harris, *African Presence*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Jakob Eduard Polak, *Persien, das Land and seine Bewohner* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1865), 248. Cf. Mirzai, "Slavery," 80.

<sup>15</sup> Still, I am highly suspicious of the census category "household servants" in this context. The Iranian government formally outlawed the slave trade in 1848, but the importation of slaves from Africa continued. Under such circumstances, it may have been prudent for the wealthy to refer to their African slaves as "household servants," especially in official matters like censuses.

<sup>16</sup> Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, 126, quoting an unpublished paper by Thomas Ricks, which was eventually published as "Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi'i Iran, AD 1500–1900."

<sup>17</sup> Tehran may not have been so different in this regard than other world capital cities during this time. The black populations of both London and Lisbon during the mid-nineteenth century were in this same range. The black population of Lisbon may have been as high as 20%. See, for example, *Os Negros em Portugal: sécs. XV a XIX: Mosteiro dos Jeronimos 23 de Setembro de 1999 a 24 de Janeiro de 2000* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as comemorações dos descobrimentos, 1999); A.P.D.G. *Sketches of Portuguese Life, Manners, Costume, and Character* (London: G.B. Whittaker/R. Gilbert, 1826); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1984). I am grateful to Dr. Edward Alpers and Dr. Gregory Pirio bringing my attention to this information.

<sup>18</sup> The current state of Iranian scholarship with regard to African influences on the history, language, dance, folklore, music, and religion of Iran (among other aspects of the culture) resembles the state of American scholarship some sixty years ago, with regard to African influences on American culture. It was supposed then that there were none—that the experience of slavery had erased all cultural memory from the minds of slaves, who arrived in the New World as *tabulae rasa*. (At least the presence of an African diaspora was never denied.) The opening salvo of the destruction of such a position was Melville J. Herskovits's, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941) which documented the survival of African culture in the Americas and its influence on American societies. Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1972) was a major contribution to the study of African American slave culture. Since then, of course, although African American history remains a subaltern field in academia, the influence of African people on the United States has become an important field of study.

<sup>19</sup> 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 and examples from Arabia and India without difficulty—was unable to discuss Iran as the site of African cultural influence, however. Presumably, this is because so little has been written on the subject.

<sup>20</sup> Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, pp. 150-82. Chapter 8 is entitled "Slavery and Black Slaves in Iran in the Nineteenth Century." Chapter 9 is "Slaves II: Haji Bashir Khan—Love in a Complicated Climate."

<sup>22</sup> Slaves certainly were objects and commodities by reason of their legal status and their market value and I do not fault Martin for recognizing that. Nor do I think that such assessments should be avoided. However, slaves were also human beings, and it is important not to lose sight of that. As such, they are actors in history. Historians must strive to recognize that agency when writing history.

<sup>23</sup> Martin does note, almost in passing, that the African slaves of Bushir would regularly gather near the main gate of the city to play African music, beat drums, sing songs, and dance. The *ulama* objected to these mixed-gender music sessions, but they continued despite attempts to stop them (Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, 157). The significance of these gatherings as a site for the reproduction of Afro-Iranian culture, the fact that such sessions would indicate strong social networks among African slaves in Bushir, the hints that indicate there must have been other sites of African cultural expression in the city, the ability of the slaves to defy the *ulama* by whatever means, the position of Africans as singers and dancers within Iranian society—all such issues are simply not pursued.

<sup>24</sup> Exposition «Des fleuves et des Hommes» de Marine Ernoult et Laurent Rigaux, du 7 septembre au 4 octobre - en partenariat avec Cosmopolis dans le cadre de «Fleuves.» <http://www.outremer44.com/>

<sup>25</sup> Afro-Iran: The Unknown Minority by Mahdi Ehsaei. <http://www.mahdi-ehsaei.com/afro-iran/>.

<sup>26</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5. Patterson's book is a work of great breadth that calls on ancient, pre-modern, and modern periods of history and compares sixty-six societies over time—including, Greece, Rome, medieval Europe, China, Africa, the Islamic world, and the American South.

<sup>27</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5-6. In recent critiques, Patterson has been misunderstood as suggesting that enslaved persons may have understood themselves to be "socially dead." This is not Patterson's argument, which is concerned only with the legal and social condition of slaves. He states directly: "When we say that the slave was natally alienated and ceased to belong independently to any formally recognized community, this does not mean that he or she did not experience or share informal social relations. A large number of works have demonstrated that slaves in both ancient and modern times had strong social ties among themselves. The important point, however, is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding." (*Ibid.*, 6.)

<sup>28</sup> That is, the evening of 5 Jamadíyu'l-Avval, 1260 A.H. of the Islamic calendar. This anniversary was celebrated for many decades on the evening of May 22, on the Western calendar by Baha'is. But the commemoration has recently been moved to the evening of May 23.

<sup>29</sup> At least according to the hagiographic account of the Bab's "declaration" found in the pious history of Nabil-i 'Azam (Mullá Muhammad Zarandí) edited and translated into English by Shoghi Effendi as *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932). There are other accounts of the event, most notably in Mirza Husayn Hamadani, *The Târikh-i-Jadid or New History of Mirzá Ali Muhammad the Báb*, trans. by Edward G. Browne (Cambridge University Press, 1893). For a full discussion of the sources, see Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 166-174. Other accounts, while no less affected by Baha'i piety than is Nabil's narrative, are more interested in chronicling Mullá Husayn's inner struggle to accept the Bab's messianic claim. This struggle almost certainly played itself out over a period of at least a few days—other sources suggest anywhere between three and forty days—rather than in one night, as Nabil relates.

<sup>30</sup> In his Persian Bayán (Bayán II, 7 30) the Bab himself fixes the exact moment for the beginning of his revelation. See *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1976), 107. Also, Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 170.

<sup>31</sup> There is a considerable literature on the Babi movement. The various works of Edward G. Browne are still important, especially his translation and notation of *A Traveller's Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1891 and Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004) and his own *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1918). The best recent academic treatments are to be found in Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* and in Denis MacEoin, "From Shaykhism to Babism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shí'í Islam," Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1979 (published in idem., *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3-249). The classic Baha'i chronicle of the period is Nabil-i A'zam's *The Dawn-Breakers*, mentioned above. 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 Bahá'í 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, Author, General Editor (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982- ) several essays on Babi history, especially, Vol. 3, *In Iran*, ed. by Peter Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986).

For an official version of Baha'i history, see Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'í Publishing Trust, 1944). See also the pious biography of Bahá'u'lláh by H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980). More academic treatments include Moojan Momen, *A Short Introduction to the Baha'i Faith*, Revised Edition (London: Oneworld, 1997); 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, Conn.: Praeger, 2005); Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel, *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008); Moojan Momen, *The Baha'í Communities of Iran, 1851-1921, Volume One, The North of Iran* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Nabil's narrative is the most well-known and popular history of the early days of the Babi/Baha'i religion. Since it was translated, edited, and extensively revised by Shoghi Effendi, it also has the aura of a sacred history within the Baha'i community.

<sup>33</sup> Haji Mubarak is also mentioned, though not by name, as being present with the Bab on other important occasions in early Babi history.

<sup>34</sup> The black population of Iran is today concentrated in those same southern provinces.

<sup>35</sup> Mirzai, "Slavery," 97-98.

<sup>36</sup> Mirzai, "Slavery," 74 and 78.

<sup>37</sup> Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (head of the Bahá'í religion, 1921-1957, known as the "Guardian of the Cause of God," *valí amru'lláh*) begins his official history of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions by citing the Báb's night of declaration: "May 23, 1844, signalizes the commencement of the most turbulent period of the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Era, an age which marks the opening of the most glorious epoch in the greatest cycle which the spiritual history of mankind has yet witnessed." (*God Passes By*, 3)

<sup>38</sup> That is, the evening of 5 Jamadíyu'l-Avval, 1260 A.H. of the Islamic calendar. This anniversary was celebrated for many decades on the evening of May 22, on the Western calendar by Baha'is. But the commemoration has recently been moved to the evening of May 23.

<sup>39</sup> Nabil-i A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 52-63.

<sup>40</sup> Author, "Reconciling the Other: The Bahá'í Faith in America as a Successful Synthesis of Christianity and Islam," *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi, and Baha'i Studies* 7 (March 2003), <http://www.hnet.msu.edu/~bahai/bhpapers/vol7/reconc.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Mulla Husayn was given the honorific title "Babu'l-Bab" (the gate to the gate) by the Báb himself. Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Bahá'í faith, praises him in hyperbolic terms. "... Mulla Husayn, . . . became the recipient of the effulgent glory of the Sun of divine Revelation. But for him, God would not have been established upon the seat of His mercy, nor ascended the throne of eternal glory." Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Iqan* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'í Publishing Trust, 1931), 222.

<sup>42</sup> I am referring here, not only to the early histories, such as those cited in Note 29, above, but also to more recent Bahá'í literature, for example: Hasan Balyuzi, *The Báb: Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973); Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Vol. 1. (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2008); and Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman, *Awakening: The Story of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths in Nayríz* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'í Publishing, 2013). All ignore the African presence at the genesis of the Bábí religion.

<sup>43</sup> According to Afnan, there is a bill of sale that exists that records Mubarak's age in 1842 at the time of his purchase by the Báb as 19. (Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988 [1999]), 5). More recently, Nader Saiedi has disputed this conclusion, suggesting that Mubarak was much older and had known the Báb as a child (Nader Saiedi, "Sultan-i Habashi" in *Payam-i Baha'i* (France) May 2010, 10-13). Dr. Saiedi has been able to read the entire corpus of the Báb's writings housed in the International Bahá'í Archives, Haifa, Israel, and bases his conclusions on that research. His article has been translated into English, Nader Saiedi (trans. and annotated by Omid Ghaemmaghami) "The Ethiopian King," *Baha'i Studies Review*, 17 (2011), 181-86. I draw no conclusions here concerning Mubarak's age, and the narrative of Mubarak's life after entering the Báb's household is not challenged by Saiedi's research. However, it appears that Saiedi's reading of the Báb's correspondence and prayers may provide more information about the life of Haji Mubarak. This, of course, reinforces the conclusion that Bahá'í literature (in this case, scripture) has something to offer to Iranian history and the notion that the biographies of African slaves can be recovered.

<sup>44</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Nabil-i A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> This quotation is also taken from the report of Mirza Ahmad Qazvini, as noted above. Nabil-i A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> See Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, "'Black Pearls': The African Household Slaves of a Nineteenth-Century Iranian Merchant Family," a paper presented at the Conference on Slavery, Islam, and Diaspora, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, Department of History, York University, October 24-26, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> That is, "twigs" branched from the Holy Tree (of the Báb). This, as opposed to the Aghsan (branches) the direct descendants of Baha'u'llah.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Balyuzi, in the Foreword to H. M. Balyuzi, *Khadijih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), xi-xii.

<sup>51</sup> Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls*. Second Edition, 1999. The book remains in print today and is no longer the subject of much controversy.

<sup>52</sup> Some African American Baha'is were outraged at the revelation that the Central Figures of their religion had been slave owners. (See, for example, the protest posted at <http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/3016/racism.htm>. Geocities closed in 2009, but can be recovered in archives.) Others seemed unconcerned about that but felt that a public portrayal of early black believers as slaves—even if slaves of the founders—was unseemly and ill-considered. They preferred to see black Baha'is in history occupying more dignified positions. They also objected to Mr. Afnan's accounts as patronizing. In effect, these African American Baha'is were (unwittingly, perhaps) insisting on the erasure of enslaved Africans from the history of the Baha'i religion.

<sup>53</sup> This very important little book also provides biographies of African slaves and servants who served in the households of Baha'u'llah, and of his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Iran and in Palestine. These narratives are also of considerable interest, but are beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>54</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Author, Foreword to the Second Edition, in *Black Pearls* (1999), xvii-xxii.

<sup>56</sup> And also a feminine presence, for that matter. The traditions of the Afnan family also include testimony from the Bab's wife, who said that she also "witnessed" the events of the Declaration of the Bab on the evening of May 23, 1844. Apparently, she remained awake the whole night listening to her husband's conversation with Mullá Husayn, which could be clearly heard even from the women's apartments in the Bab's modest house. (Munírih Khanum, *Munírih Khanúm: Memoirs and Letters* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1986), 34. Her testimony reinforces the conclusion that Mubarak must have also overheard this conversation,.

<sup>57</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 4. See below.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Nabil-i A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 53-72 passim, 129, 132-33; Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 11-16; Balyuzi, *The Báb*, 17, 49, 57, 71, 84; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 166-67, 241-43.

<sup>60</sup> I have discussed Fezzeh Khanum in an earlier article. Author, "Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz," *Iranian Studies* 45:3 (2012), 417-37.

<sup>61</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 5. Apparently, the bill of purchase still exists in the archives of the Afnan family.

<sup>62</sup> I am grateful to Jackson Armstrong-Ingram for some of these insights.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. I should note here that the other servants mentioned here lived in adjoining houses of the Bab's relatives. This also indicates the importance of the African presence in these households and implies that the African servants were naturally close to one another and were expected to relate to one another with "warm friendship." Here we can catch a brief glimpse of the slave networks that would be able to preserve and reproduce some aspects of African culture.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Afnan, personal conversation with the author.

<sup>67</sup> Armstrong-Ingram, "'Black Pearls,'" 16.

<sup>68</sup> The Bab'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.

<sup>69</sup> Kissing of hands is forbidden by Baha'i religious law (Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i Aqdas*, K34).

<sup>70</sup> This statement was his response to objections which had been made by some African American Baha'is that his portrayal of Fezzeh was demeaning to black people. He insisted that Iranian Baha'is of a previous generation had regarded Fezzeh as a holy person, as did he. I remember quite vividly that at the end of our visit, perhaps in illustration of his point, Mr. Afnan embraced me and kissed my shoulder. The effect was indeed startling and inspired me with a sense of humility and deep respect for the man, who seemed to embody at that moment all of the traditional dignity, modesty, and rectitude of his illustrious family (Afnan, personal conversation with the author).

<sup>71</sup> Kalimát Press was the publisher and I acted as the in-house editor for the book. In fact, Kalimát Press had proposed the publication of the book to Afnan in the first instance, after seeing the mimeographed biographies that had been circulated in Africa.

<sup>72</sup> A servant of Khál-i Akbar (an uncle of the Bab) who met Baha'u'llah and became a Baha'i.

<sup>73</sup> That is, a formal declaration of faith in the Prophet that would change one's religious identity. The concept here is similar to the recitation of the *shahada*, which instantly and unquestionably changes one's status to that of a Muslim in Islamic jurisprudence. The present-day Baha'i community requires a declaration of faith before one is admitted to membership.

<sup>74</sup> Abu'l-Qasim Afnan to Author, August 13, 1988. Kalimát Press archives. I have corrected some of the grammar and spelling errors in the original text.

<sup>75</sup> Abu'l-Qasim Afnan to Author, June 29, 1988. Kalimát Press archives. I should point out that the concept of a "declared Babi" is an anachronism that demonstrates the influence of later Baha'i ideas.

<sup>76</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Armstrong-Ingram, "'Black Pearls,'" 22. That is, Armstrong-Ingram suggests that since the Bab's slaves had never made a formal "declaration" of faith as is required in the contemporary Baha'i community, they could not be considered Babis.

<sup>78</sup> Armstrong-Ingram has also suggested to me, in private conversation, that in some ways the reputation and honor of the Afnan family might be involved here. After all, most of the Afnans were not Babis at all, but were converted to the Baha'i religion during the time of Baha'u'llah (ministry, 1863-1892). So, if Mubarak and Fezzeh were accepted as real Babis, they would have preceded the members of the Afnan family (except for the Bab's wife) into the Faith by almost a generation. Personally, I doubt that this was a conscious consideration on Afnan's part, though it may have unconsciously colored his thinking. The general Iranian attitudes towards slaves, even those for whom one had affectionate feelings, caused them to be treated as non-persons who could not fully participate in society.

<sup>79</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 16-17. This is not an unusual strategy for dealing with the death of an absent relative within Iranian families. Quite often, the bad news will be kept from as many relatives as possible for as long as possible. Of course, the charade inevitably comes to an end. The truth is either revealed openly, accidentally or secretly, and it is then either fully acknowledged or feigned ignorance is maintained as a polite fiction within the family and by outsiders.

<sup>80</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. The "brutal circumstances" are a reference to the Bab's execution by firing squad.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Persecution became especially intense in 1852, after an attempt was made on the life of the shah by a group of Babis in Tehran.

<sup>84</sup> There may have been an element of self-interest at play here, as well. Mubarak and Fezzeh were, after all, slaves. If their master were determined to be dead, his property could be divided up among his heirs. That property might include the two of them and their household would be destroyed. I am grateful to Mehrdad Amanat for this insight (Personal communication).

<sup>85</sup> Afnan, *Black Pearls*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> For example, Will C. van den Hoonard states categorically: "Neither Mubarak [n]or Fezzeh became Babis." In "A Survey of the Baha'i Faith in Africa from Its Earliest Days to 1986," *Baha'i Studies Review* 11 (2003), 12.

<sup>88</sup> Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, Paperback Edition 2005, xviii.