

Ziba Khanum of Yazd: An enslaved African woman in nineteenth-century Iran

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Historians have so far found little to say about Africans in Iran.¹ This is true of the history of the Indian Ocean Diaspora in general and the Indian Ocean slave trade, especially as compared to the large volume of scholarship now available on the Atlantic slave trade.² There are huge gaps in our knowledge of the history of slavery in Iran in particular and of the influence of African people on Iranians and on Persian society and culture. Uncovering this history will change our understanding of the history of Iran and the history of the African diaspora in general.

The scope of the slave trade

Domestic slavery has existed in Iran for centuries. By the nineteenth-century, Africans were enslaved and brought to Iran in large numbers as part of the East-African/Indian-

I am grateful to Dr. Mehrdad Amanat for his indispensable assistance with my research for this paper.

- ¹ The only doctoral dissertation written on the history of Iranian slavery appears to be Behnaz A. Mirzai's "Slavery, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Emancipation of Slaves in Iran (1828–1928)", Ph.D. dissertation, York University, Ontario, 2004, published as *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800–1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017). 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); also "Afro-Iranian Lives" (video). Niambi Cacchioli has also done work in this area: see, "Disputed Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, Asylum, and Manumission in Iran (1851–1913)", UNESCO website (http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/38508/12480962345Disputed_Freedom.pdf/Disputed%2BFreedom.pdf). Also, my own work on enslaved Africans in Iran: Anthony A. Lee, "Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz", *Iranian Studies* (May 2012); "Half the Household Was African: Recovering the Histories of Two Enslaved Africans in Iran, Haji Mubarak and Fezzeh Khanum" in *UCLA Historical Journal*, vol. 26 (2016) no. 1; "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); "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); *The Baha'i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952–1962* (Leiden: Brill, 2011) Chapter Two.
- ² A few recent works on the Indian Ocean slave trade are Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003); Edward A. Alpers, *East Africa and the Indian Ocean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009); Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon and David W. Blight, eds., *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Richard Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014). I would add Matthew S. Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015), and possibly Henri Médard, Marie-Laure Derat, Thomas Vernet and Marie Pierre Ballarin (eds), *Traites et Esclavages en Afrique Orientale et dans l'océan Indien* (Paris: Karthala, 2013).

Ocean trade. While there are no definite historical statistics on the number of slaves exported from Africa to the Persian Gulf, estimates among scholars for the Indian Ocean trade as a whole during the nineteenth century vary between one and two million. Possibly two-thirds of these slaves were African women and girls, who were almost always destined for residence in wealthy Iranian households as domestic servants and concubines.¹

In 1868, a census conducted in Tehran revealed that 12% of the civilian population of the city was designated as African slaves and/or “household servants”.² This count includes only urban households, and not slaves who were used in agricultural work, or to maintain the irrigation systems.³ Household servants and slaves were mostly women. This 1868 census reveals the extent of domestic slavery in large cities in nineteenth-century Iran and the importance of its African population, a subject that is usually ignored in Iranian histories.⁴ This paper attempts to recover at least a part of the life of one enslaved woman, Ziba Khanum of Yazd, the mother of Ghulam-‘Ali Siyah Khurasani (1871–1949).⁵ In previous published articles, I have been able to locate seven other African slaves who appear, usually by accident, in the Iranian historical record and to discuss their individual lives. I am interested in writing these partial biographies first for their own sake, to honor and to understand (insofar as is possible) individuals in history, as a matter of human dignity. This paper builds on this earlier research in hopes of constructing a history of African

¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, Third Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 60–61, 150–54; Joseph C. Miller, “Introduction”, in Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph Calder Miller, *Women And Slavery: Africa And the Western Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*. vol. 1 (Ohio University Press, 2007) 4–5; Helge Kjekshus, *Ecological Control and Development in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi: Longmans, 1979) 14–16; Gwyn Campbell, introduction to *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005) 5; Gwyn Campbell, *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004) xi. For a discussion of the number of enslaved people imported into Iran in the nineteenth-century, see Mirzai, *History of Slavery*, 63–66.

² 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. Still, I am highly suspicious of the census category ‘household servants’ in this context. The importation of slaves (at least by sea) had been formally outlawed by the Iranian government in 1848, but shipments of enslaved Africans had continued from East Africa and even increased. Under such circumstances it may have been prudent for the wealthy to refer to their African slaves as ‘household servants’, especially in official matters like a census. It may have been even more prudent for the Iranian government to refer to household slaves in public documents like a census, an ambiguous designation that would attract a minimum of foreign scrutiny and condemnation.

³ Ricks, “Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi’i Iran”.

⁴ For a brief discussion of domestic slavery in Iran, see Abbas Amanat. *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). It is probable that cities in the southern part of Iran, during this period, such as Shiraz or Bandar Abbas, would have had an even higher percentage of African slaves, being closer to the ports of import. However, Tehran may not have been so different in this regard from other world capital cities. The percentage of black populations of both London and Lisbon during the mid-nineteenth century were probably similar. 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 Jeronimo. Setembro de 1999 a 24 de Janeiro de 2000* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as comemorações dos descobrimentos, 1999); A.P.D.G. *Sketches of Portuguese Life, Manners, Costume, and Character* (London: G. B. Whittaker/R. Gilbert, 1826); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1984). I am grateful to Dr Edward Alpers and Dr Gregory Pirio for this information.

⁵ Zibá-chihr Khánum (d. 1932).

slavery in Iran at the level of individual biographies. An examination of Ziba Khanum's life, as well as the lives of other enslaved women in her household, can begin to fill the gaps in our knowledge of African slavery in Iran. Ghulam-'Ali's dramatic career illumines issues of race, religion, and assimilation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran.

Ziba Khanum and her son

Ziba Khanum (d. 1932), an African woman, lived as a slave and the concubine of her master, Haji Muhammad-'Ali Sadiq Khurasani (known as Gunduli, the fat), in the city of Yazd, in central Iran, in the second half of the nineteenth century. She is absent in the documentary record.¹ Information about her life has been taken from multiple interviews with her descendants and other living relatives.² She is remembered by her great-grandchildren as their earliest ancestor. Her descendants relate different stories of her origins as part of family lore. Some suggest that she was purchased in Zanzibar on one of her wealthy master's merchant voyages. Others suggest Mombasa as her point of origin. Others say she was acquired in Bandar Abbas, in southern Iran, on the slave market.³ In any case, she would have been given her name Ziba (beautiful) by her master after purchase. Enslaved Africans were not given (Arabic) Muslim names, but were assigned Persian names as part of the process of assimilation into Persian families.⁴ The name Ziba suggests that Haji Muhammad-'Ali wanted to bring a beautiful African girl into his household. Enslaved African women and eunuch men, in nineteenth-century Iran, were considered a sign of wealth and prestige among rich merchants and aristocrats.⁵ The shah of Iran had dozens, and eventually hundreds, of enslaved African women and eunuch men as part of his harem.⁶

¹ The only written record that I have been able to find that mentions her is on the manuscript family tree created by a distant relative that will be discussed below.

² Interviews with Jalil Taqizadeh, Los Angeles, 4/7/17, and by phone from Los Angeles, 11/14/17 and 1/9/18; interview with Monir Ardekani, by phone from Vancouver, 9/29/17; interview with Shahnaz Khorasani, by phone from Peekskill, NY, 10/19/17 and in Peekskill, NY, 11/18/17. Dr Mehrdad Amanat has conducted interviews with the same informants.

³ This would make a difference, since, as commodities, slaves were classified by country of origin. Lady Mary 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]." (Lady Mary Elenor Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London: John Murray, 1856) 243–45.) The *habashis* were regarded as the most beautiful, intelligent, and expensive slaves, followed by *bambasis*, and then *nubis* and *zanjis* (from Zanzibar). These are not ethnic designations, but refer only to the port from which the enslaved Africans embarked in the slave trade. Since her descendants indicate she embarked from Mombasa or Zanzibar, at least we know that Ziba Khanum was not an Ethiopian.

⁴ Mirzai, *History of Slavery*, 100–101.

⁵ See, for example, the memoir of Taj al-Saltana, the daughter of Nasir al-Din Shah. Taj al-Saltana, *Khatirat-i Taj al-Saltana*, ed. Mansura Ettihadia (Nizam Mafi) and Sirus Sa'dvandian (Tehran, 1361 [1982]) trans. as *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess From the Harem to Modernity, 1884–1914*, Abbas Amanat, ed. (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1993) 112–113.

⁶ For a discussion of eunuchs and enslaved women in the shah's palace, see Mirzai, *History of Slavery*, 111–122.

Ziba, the family remembers, was purchased as a girl or young woman, possibly as a nurse for her master's ailing wife. This is also suggested by the family nickname by which she was known, *Dadé* (*dadih*, Persian: nanny or nursemaid). She lived in the household of her master, with his wife and children—two daughters and a son, Muhammad-Ismail Khurasani, the half-brother of Ghulam-'Ali. Family lore (at least as told by her descendants) suggests that Haji Muhammad-'Ali took her as a concubine with the permission of his wife, by some accounts because his wife was sick and could no longer serve him. Others suggest that the master married Ziba after his wife's death, which is unlikely.

These are certainly modern rationalizations for Ziba's sexual relationship to Haji Muhammad-'Ali, a relationship that would have required no explanation or justification at the time. There were no barriers—either legal, religious or moral—to a master taking a slave as his concubine. Both slavery and concubinage are recognized and regulated by Islamic law (the *shari'a*). A slave woman who bears a child by her master is afforded a change of status by this law. She becomes an *umm-walad*¹ (mother of a son) and cannot be sold. She is freed upon the death of her master. Her child is born free and by law will inherit his father's name and fortune at the same rate as his children by his wife (or wives). The sexual aspects of the relationship are considered incidental and carry no moral stigma. It is simply assumed that a master will have sexual contact with his slaves (male or female), if he wishes. A slave woman would, under these circumstances, even have a strong incentive to bear a child by her master, in order to move toward the center of her master's household, to protect herself from sale, to free her child and herself, and to inherit part of the master's wealth (through her offspring). Children born to enslaved fathers are slaves and, of course, do not inherit.

¹ "Umm al-Walad: Mother of the son. Refers to a slave woman impregnated by her owner, thereby bearing a child. In the opinion of many classical jurists, such a slave woman cannot be sold. ... Children, male or female, born of this union are legally free and enjoy all rights of legitimate parentage, including inheritance and use of the father's name." (Oxford Islamic Studies Online. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2424>)



Ghulam-'Ali Siyah (Yazdi) Khurasani

Ghulam-'Ali Siyah (Yazdi) Khurasani appears to be 12 or 14 years old, c. 1885. His clothing indicates considerable wealth and status for the time. (Source: Khurasani family archives. In private hands.)

Ziba Khanum bore one son by her master who was named Ghulam-'Ali (slave of 'Ali). This is a common enough Muslim name, since the Imam 'Ali is a holy figure in Shi'i Islam. However, the name has special resonance here with regard to slavery. His father's name was also 'Ali, which both identifies him with, and subordinates him to, his mother's master.

He took his father's surname later in life and called himself Ghulam-'Ali (Yazdi) Khurasani. But he was universally known as an adult in Yazd as Ghulam-'Ali Siyah (the black), and perhaps not even pejoratively, though his grandchildren say that no one would call him that to his face. Ghulam-'Ali eventually left home and built a career as an Afro-Iranian merchant in Bandar Abbas, traveling first to Palestine and to India. He returned to Yazd as a rich man and became a wealthy and notable person in the city. His large mansion compound in Yazd still exists and has been converted into a modern hotel.¹ Ghulam-'Ali became a Baha'i, while still a teenager, a follower of a persecuted minority religion in Iran.² Ziba Khanum lived in her son's Baha'i household after his return, with his children and grandchildren until the end of her life.

Conversion and pilgrimage

As his Baha'i descendants remember it, Ghulam-'Ali was converted to the Baha'i Faith in his early youth. He would accompany his father to regular gatherings of men that were held as social occasions, for business and entertainment, to smoke opium, etc. There were Baha'is at these gatherings who would talk about their religion. This was a normal part of nineteenth-century social life among wealthy men in Iran. In fact, Ghulam-'Ali continued this practice in his own wealthy household in Yazd into the mid-twentieth century, entertaining men with food and conversation every night, almost to the end of his life. Ghulam-'Ali accepted the Baha'i Faith as a matter of personal conviction as a teenager, but he told no one about his beliefs, not even his father. His half-brother, Muhammad-Isma'il Khurasani (also known as Gunduli), became a Baha'i as well. However, Muhammad-Isma'il was quite open about his new religion. There were other Baha'is in their father's social circle, particularly Haji Mirza Muhammad Afshar, a wealthy merchant in Yazd who was instrumental in converting Muhammad-Isma'il, and who would later become important in Ghulam-'Ali's life.³ Apparently however, Ghulam-'Ali was converted to the new faith by Haji 'Abdu'l-Rahim 'Alaqqband, another wealthy merchant of Yazd.⁴ So it appears that

¹ The Mehr Traditional Hotel, Yazd. https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g303962-d3731471-Reviews-Mehr_Traditional_Hotel-Yazd_Yazd_Province.html.

² There is a considerable body of academic literature on the Baha'i religion and its history, especially in the United States and in Iran. See, for example, the twenty-five volumes of the *Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions* series, Anthony A. Lee, General Editor (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982). See also, Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (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); 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*, vol. 1 (Oxford: George Ronald, 2015), Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History. passim*. For a full discussion of the emergence of an academic literature of Babi and Baha'i Studies, see Lee, *The Baha'i Faith in Africa*, Chapter One.

³ Muhammad Tahir Malmiri, *Tarikh-i Amriy-i Yazd* (History of the Cause in Yazd), (Bundoora, Vic., Australia: Century Press, 2013) 109.

⁴ His conversion by Alaqqband is mentioned in an editor's footnote in *Amr-i Baha'i dar Ardakan* by Sadri Navvabzadeh Ardakanii, ed. by Vahid Rafati (Hofheim, Germany: Baha'i Verlag, 2009) 42.

Ghulam-‘Ali was deeply enmeshed in his father’s business network and was connected to many wealthy merchants in Yazd.

It seems that Haji Muhammad-‘Ali died when his son, Ghulam-‘Ali, was quite young, perhaps 17 or 18. According to the shari‘a, he should have inherited a portion of his father’s fortune, land and property. However, it would seem that the shari‘a was ignored in this case, since Ghulam-‘Ali did not get any part of his father’s house, nor any land, and the family has no memory of an inheritance. The shari‘a was interpreted and administered by Shi‘i clerics in Yazd, and there was always room for manipulation of the law.

Ghulam-‘Ali’s descendants do remember that Ziba Khanum had been given a jewelled skirt by her master that was extremely valuable, embroidered with gold threads and pearls. This became his only inheritance. After his father’s passing, Ghulam-‘Ali told his mother that he was a Baha’i and that he had determined to leave Yazd and travel to Palestine to meet Baha’u’llah (1817–1892), the founder of the Baha’i Faith, who was still living in exile there as a prisoner of the Ottoman state. As a Baha’i, Ghulam-‘Ali would have believed Baha’u’llah to be a Prophet of God. His mother supported his plans to make this pilgrimage and gave him her jewelled skirt, which he was able to sell for 700 *tuman* (perhaps \$1,400, sometime in the 1880s).¹ This was a substantial amount of money at the time.

The limited value of binary concepts of slave vs. free

Ziba Khanum remained in the household of her deceased master and continued to live with his family in Yazd after the departure of her son. Certainly, she would have remained a servant in the house and would have continued to perform her domestic duties as she had before. Her legal status as a free woman, if it was recognized at all by the late Haji Muhammad-‘Ali’s family, would have been of little consequence. She remained a dependent of the family and lived in their household, with no other place to go. Her situation illustrates the problem of applying Western legal categories of “slave” and “free” to the lived experience of enslaved women in Iran. I have discussed this theoretical problem elsewhere.²

Historians of Middle Eastern slavery have warned about the limited value of binary legal distinctions between slavery and freedom when applied to the study of the Muslim world.³ Such legal concepts presuppose a secular state that is able to guarantee the lives and properties of individuals who can claim its protection. It is this guarantee of security made

¹ Perhaps, as much as \$3,500. The value of the Persian *tuman*, a gold coin, varied widely in the nineteenth century from city to city and from decade to decade. See Mirzai, *History of Slavery*, iv–v.

² Lee, “Recovering the Biographies”.

³ Similar cautions are made for the study of slavery in Africa and Asia. See, Joseph C. Miller, “Introduction”, in *Women and Slavery*, 25–29; Gwyn Campbell, “Introduction: Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour In the Indian Ocean World”, in *Structure of Slavery*, viii–xviii; Suzanne Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition”, in *Structure of Slavery*, 1–14.

by the modern state that, at least theoretically, releases a free person from dependence on, or obedience to, powerful others and allows for free choices within the law. Slaves, within this system, were excluded from such guarantees in modern Western societies and were held as chattel property for life by their owners. They lived in a relationship of total dependence on their masters, the only relationship of theirs that the law would recognize. The slave uniquely was forced to survive without the protection of law, family, or state, reliant only on his master.

Concepts of slave and free are of limited value when discussing pre-modern societies that are not constructed around the idea of rights, citizenship or of a secular state; but rather built on concepts of kinship, belonging, religious authority and hierarchies of social dependence. In nineteenth-century Iran, personal security could only be maintained by ties of kinship, household belonging, community solidarity, or the protection of a powerful and wealthy patron. There was no ideal within the society of freedom from such relationships, with their implications of dependence, obedience and obligation. Furthermore, any such freedom would have left an individual isolated and vulnerable. This was true for anyone, but particularly true for women who, whether slave or free, were never regarded as autonomous agents but always attached to a male patron (father, husband, brother or master).

All enslaved persons in nineteenth-century Iran, and for the most part all other persons as well, necessarily were embedded in Muslim households, and moved along a continuum of whatever situation of power, respect, wealth and independence they might be able to negotiate within those households. All women tended to occupy positions outside of the public sphere and at the margins of wealth and power, slave women most especially. They moved toward the center of their households as they performed valuable domestic duties, found favor within the family, became the master's regular sexual partner and bore the master's heirs. The most important consideration for enslaved African women may not have been their legal status as slaves, since no sharp distinction in law or practice existed. Rather, their aim would have been to negotiate, with the family that they were attached to, the most respected position that they could achieve. In fact, that would have been the goal of most women, whether slave or free, in nineteenth-century Iran.

From Yazd to Palestine and India

Ghulam-'Ali's rapid departure from the city of Yazd is explained by the family lore of his descendants as a consequence of religious devotion, simply a desire to make a pilgrimage to attain the blessings of the Baha'i Prophet. However, it might also suggest some conflict or insecurity that would cause him to leave the city, especially since he did not return after his pilgrimage. His mother's willingness to support his departure might reinforce such a suspicion. However, her support may also suggest that she herself had become a Baha'i and wanted her son to make the pilgrimage as an act of piety. In any case, she supported her son's exit from the city, giving him the only asset she owned.

Yazd has a very long history of violent persecution of Baha'is.¹ From the founding of the movement in 1844, Babis and Baha'is in Iran were regarded as heretics and apostates from Islam. As a result, there was always a rather intolerant attitude toward Baha'is among the 'ulama in Yazd. Nonetheless, some clerics in the city were indifferent, at first, to the movement, while a few even became secret believers. However, by 1873 repression and persecution became more serious, culminating in 1891, with the arrest and execution of seven Baha'i men. There was also widespread harassment and looting of Baha'i properties.² If Ghulam-'Ali's Baha'i identity had become known by this time, he may have felt under threat. Also, being a Baha'i would have been grounds to disqualify him for inheritance, since according to the shari'a, non-Muslims can inherit nothing from a Muslim relative.³

In any case, Ghulam-'Ali left Yazd with a large amount of money and arrived in 'Akka, Palestine, where he lived in the household of Baha'u'llah for some months.⁴ Although he was unable to meet the Prophet, it was probably during this time that he received a Tablet (a letter) addressed to him by Baha'u'llah. This was considered a great honor among Baha'is, and a blessing, since all of the writings of Baha'u'llah were considered sacred scripture by the Baha'is (and still are). In the message, Baha'u'llah laments that earthly treasures have corrupted most people and caused them to turn away from God. He urges Ghulam-'Ali not to grieve over the sorrows that come to him in this world. The Tablet begins:

He is the Witness, the All-Informed.

... All created things bear witness to the revelation of the Creator of the heavens, and the concourse on high is stirred up by the sweetness of the celestial call, and yet the people, for the most part, perceive it not. Verily, the treasures they have laid up have drawn them far away from their ultimate goal, and vain imaginings have debarred them from turning towards God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. They cast behind their backs the Book of God, cleaving fast unto their idols and idle fancies.

¹ See Haji Muhammad-Tahir Malmiri. *Tarikh-i Shuhaday-i Yazd* (History of the Martyrs of Yazd), (Le Caire, 1926), reprinted Karachi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978, for the history of the pogroms of 1903. Also, Aqa Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim Bayda, *Tarikh-i Bayda* (Bayda's Narrative), ed. by Siyamak Zabini Moghaddam (Hofheim, Germany: Baha'i Verlag, 2016).

² Moojan Momen, "Iran: Province of Yazd", draft of article for "The Baha'i Encyclopedia" (1994). https://bahai-library.com/momen_encyclopedia_yazd.

³ *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v., "Inheritance ii. Islamic Period".

⁴ Some say six months and some nine months. However, there is agreement that he was not able to see Baha'u'llah because of the latter's strict terms of imprisonment. Nonetheless, upon arrival in the household, Ghulam-'Ali gave his 700 *tuman* to 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), the eldest son of Baha'u'llah who was in charge of household affairs. This may have been intended as a contribution, since the 700 *tuman* were returned to him, over his protests, when he left Baha'u'llah's household. He finally agreed to accept 600 *tuman* back. After he left Palestine, he traveled first to Alexandria, Egypt. While there, he received a message that Baha'u'llah was able to receive visitors again, and that he was invited back to the Holy Land. On the second visit, he met with Baha'u'llah. Therefore, his descendants proudly insist that he was able to achieve two pilgrimages during his lifetime.

... In truth, thy name was mentioned before this Wronged One. Thereupon, the Ocean of utterance surged, the Countenance of the Ancient of days turned towards thee and revealed for thee that which enraptureth hearts and souls. Grieve thou not over the changes and the chances of the world. In all thy affairs, put thy reliance in God, the Lord of the Promised Day.¹

The admonition not to grieve over the changes and chances of the world, as well as remarks about the waywardness and materialism of most people, certainly reflect general Baha'i teachings of detachment and resignation in the face of adversity. However, in the specific case of Ghulam-'Ali, Baha'u'llah's words seem to suggest that his life in Yazd had encountered some difficulties about which he remained in turmoil. Again, disinheritance, family disputes, and religious persecution might be obvious references. The Tablet continues with a prayer for steadfastness that Ghulam-'Ali should say.²

Return to Yazd

Ghulam-'Ali did not return to Yazd immediately after his stay in the Holy Land. He left Palestine for India. He seems to have been well connected to Baha'i networks, at least in Palestine and in South Asia. He worked as an agent of the previously mentioned Haji Mirza Muhammad Afshar, the Baha'i in Yazd, for his trading company in India. He was able to accumulate some capital and eventually established a business of his own in Bandar Abbas, apparently importing and exporting goods between India and Yazd. Some time later when he returned to Yazd, he brought Ziba Khanum into his home, where she lived as his dependent. He was very rich; family lore has it that he returned to Yazd with 40 camels loaded with valuables, merchandise and household goods.³ He was able to buy land and build a great house where he lived with his mother, his wife, his children and his grandchildren. By the end of his life, he was the largest landowner in the city and extremely influential in politics and business affairs. It seems that he also acquired three slaves of his own, or at least three African women who lived in his house as dependents and were known as *kaniz* (enslaved women)—Fezzeh (silver), Zaffaron (saffron), and Shireen (sweet).⁴

¹ I am grateful to Dr Nader Saiedi for the translation of this text from the original Persian.

² The remainder of the Tablet reads: "Say: Praise be unto Thee, O Lord of Names, and glory be to Thee, O Creator of Heavens. I beseech Thee by the lights of the Throne, and the mysteries of the Cause, to enable me to hold fast unto the cord of steadfastness in thy love, and to cleave to that which Thou hast commanded me in Thy Tablets. Thou beholdest, O my God, Thy servant detached from all except thee and earnestly seeking thy bounty and favor. Ordain then for him that which beseemeth the heaven of Thy grace and the ocean of Thy bounty. Powerful art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. There is none other God but Thee, the Forgiving, the Gracious."

³ Certainly, the 40-camels tale should not be understood literally. No doubt, Ghulam-'Ali did return to Yazd with camels. The date of his return is unclear. The number 40 probably simply indicates a large number.

⁴ Kaníz, Fiḏḏa, Za'farán and Shírín.



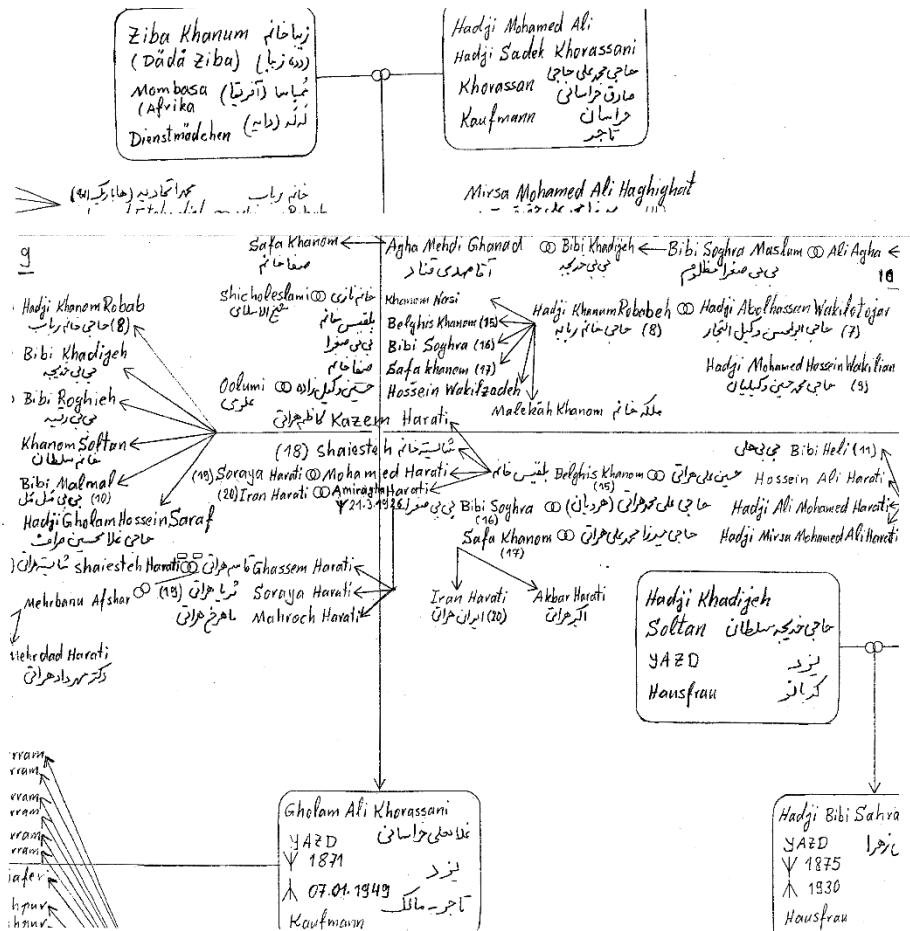
Ghulam-'Ali Siyah Khurasani with his wife, Munavvar Khanum (center, front), their children, and grandchildren in their home in Yazd, taken September 1940.

Back row (l. to r.): Iraj Turkzadih, Paridukht Haqiqat, Iran Haqiqat, Parvin Haqiqat, Hushang Khurasani, Jalal Taqizadih, Muhammad Khurasani, Furugh Taqizadih, Turan Turkzadih, Afaq Taqizadih. Front row (adults, l. to r.): Shamsi Khurasani Tadayuni, Nusrat Khurasani Turkzadih, Suraya Khurasani Haqiqat, Munavvar Khurasani, Ghulam-'Ali Khurasani, Malikih Khurasani Taqizadih, Muluk Khurasani Sarraf, Safa khurasani (a relative). Front row (children, l. to r.): Arassa Khurasani, Nasir Turkzadih, Mahvash Taqizadeh, Farhang Sarraf, Mihrbanu Khurasani. Images identified by Monir Ardekani. Note the two large and matching Persian carpets used as a backdrop, and as a display wealth. (Source: Khurasani family archives. In private hands.)

Scholars of Iranian history have sometimes puzzled over what they regard as the almost complete disappearance of the African diaspora in Iran.¹ Ziba Khanum's descendants demonstrate how fully Afro-Iranians were incorporated into Iranian society, especially among the wealthy classes, without regard to race. All of Ghulam-'Ali's adult children married into well-to-do Iranian families, and their children are indistinguishable from other Iranians. Moreover, none of Ghulam-'Ali's family make any attempt to hide their

¹ Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001) 127. Such an assessment rests on the assumption that a racial classification of the Iranian population into contemporary Western categories is viable.

African descent, nor Ziba Khamum's identity as an enslaved African woman. Similarly, all of her master's, Haji Muhammad-'Ali's, descendants, including the children and grandchildren of his Iranian wife, acknowledge Ziba Khanum as an ancestor. A genealogy of the family, produced in Germany includes her and her descendants, who make up a large portion of the tableau.



Detail of the Herati-Khorasani Family Tree

The Herati-Khorasani family tree, in German and Persian, was drawn up recently in Germany by the descendants of Haji Muhammad-'Ali Sadiq Khurasani. 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. No marker of race is included for her or her descendants. (Source: "Familien Tafel: Stammbaum des Dr Nasser Torkzadeh", 1995. In private hands.)

However, there is no one alive today who remembers meeting Ziba Khanum, and there are no documentary records of her life. All information about her must be gleaned from family traditions. Her descendants universally insist that she was always respected as a member of Ghulam-'Ali's household in Yazd. They describe her as gentle and loving, a typical grandmother figure. Living in her son's house, she may have indeed overcome her status as a slave. However, it has proven impossible for me to recover even one word that

Ziba Khanum spoke during her lifetime, and so it would seem that her voice is permanently lost to history. She remains silent and subaltern. The one act of agency that can be identified is the gift of the jewelled skirt to her son, which enabled him to make his Baha'i pilgrimage and possibly provided him with capital to go into business. More tentatively, we might include her possible conversion to the Baha'i Faith and her move into her son's house upon his return to Yazd. In any case, toward the end of her life, she was living in her son's Baha'i household and was functionally a Baha'i.

Will the subaltern speak?

The voiceless Ziba Khanum presents the historian of slavery with a dilemma. How should her life be represented and understood? Gayatri Spivak aggressively raised this challenge in her noted essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"¹ in which she questions the use of subaltern subjects in writings about the history of India. She forcefully, and sometimes poignantly, demonstrates the appropriation of the subaltern voice in the service of the British imperialist "civilizing mission", by Indian nationalists conducting an armed insurgency against the British raj, and by contemporary historians and Marxist theorists in support of revolutionary ideologies. The absent and silent subaltern, it would seem, can be represented in support of any position at all. Spivak comes close to suggesting that a history of subaltern people, either as individuals or conceived as a class, cannot be written at all, and it should not be attempted. She seems determined, at least in this essay, to insist that subaltern persons, and especially women, will never be able to speak or represent themselves. She declares that "the subaltern female cannot be heard or read."² Spivak's challenge is of direct relevance to my own attempt to recover at least a part of the life of Ziba Khanum from family memory and tradition.

Eve Troutt Powell has raised Spivak's arguments with regard to the attempt by historians of slavery to recover the voice and history of Africans in the Middle East.³ Troutt Powell, however, does not reach the same bleak conclusions. She does warn of the tendency in the historiography of slavery to impose artificial frameworks and constructions on subaltern subjects, particularly the danger of applying abolitionist narratives and assumptions of Atlantic slavery to very different situations in Islamic realms. Edward Alpers and Matthew Hopper raise the same issue with regard to slave testimonies recorded by the British agents in western Indian Ocean ports.⁴ They conclude that even when faced with transcripts of interviews that claim to represent the voices of

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: MacMillan Education, 1988) 272–313.

² *ibid.*, 104.

³ Eve M. Troutt Powell, "Will the Subaltern Ever Speak? Finding African Slaves in the Historiography of the Middle East", in *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Israel Gershoni, et al. (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006).

⁴ Edward A. Alpers and Matthew S. Hopper. "Speaking for Themselves? Understanding African Freed Slave Testimonies from the Western Indian Ocean, 1850s–1930s", *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 1 (2017), 60–88.

former African slaves, the historian must exercise extreme caution, allowing for errors of translation and distortions of interpretation and interference by both indigenous and British officials. This conclusion is, however, closer to the ordinary care and caution that historians must exercise when examining any document.

However, there are no documents that claim to have captured Ziba Khanum's voice. Further, there are no oral reports of that voice. The family tradition found such words to be unimportant. So, is there any way to hear her voice? Or, to make Spivak's question specific: Can Ziba Khanum ever speak? Sadly, my answer is no. Her voice is lost; we have no access to her thoughts or her inner life.¹ However, that does not mean that her life is without meaning or value to history. We must listen for the African voice in Iran, even when it cannot be heard. Ziba Khanum's silent voice therefore is reduced to only a presence. That presence informs us that there were African women who were enslaved in Yazd in the middle of the nineteenth-century, that these women served as domestic servants and concubines, that they had children by their masters, and that they could sometimes act to support and protect their children (who were legally free). These Afro-Iranian children remained in Iran, married local people, and although they might be identified as black (*siyah*), could live normal lives as Iranians. Sometimes these Afro-Iranians might become wealthy and notable men. Some percentage of the Iranian population, as a consequence, is of African descent, though this heritage has never hardened into a clear racial category within the society.

I maintain that historians should continue to recover what can be recovered of the lives of enslaved Africans in Iran as individuals for their own sake—to understand and to honor those who were taken from their African homelands and enslaved in Iran, to rescue them from anonymity, and to restore their human dignity. Doing so, we must take these persons seriously, acknowledge their presence, listen for their voices, and regard them as actors, making choices (even when we cannot see their choices) among the options that were available to them, in an effort to gain as much dignity, status, and autonomy as might have been possible under the circumstances of their enslavement. Such a history of African slavery in Iran is possible.

¹ Of course, I have not interviewed every descendant and distant relative of Ziba Khanum. So, I still hope that we do not yet know everything about her that is still available.