

“Black Pearls”: The African Household Slaves of a Nineteenth Century Iranian Merchant Family.

Slavery in the Middle East can be, and often is, approached in terms of laws and diplomacy, statistics and economics, as the availability of sources most readily supports such a discussion. What is less usual, and more difficult, is to attempt to examine the lives of individual slave: to give names, faces, and personalities to slavery.

Apart from some of the poster children for the vaunted different character of slavery in the Middle East – prominent concubines and state officials – there are relatively few sources to allow us to discuss the lives of particular slaves. I will attempt here to reconstruct something of the lives of some African slaves owned by a merchant family of Shiraz in the 1800s. In particular, I will discuss how they fit into the social structures of households and, as the rationale for the legitimacy of slavery in the Islamic world was that it constituted a vehicle for conversion, their religious identity.

The importation of African slaves into Iran was a long-established commonplace. Slaves were shipped directly, and pilgrims brought them back from the markets in the Hijaz. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British had extracted from the Persian crown the same sort of pro forma interdiction of the slave trade, with an associated grant of maritime police authority to themselves, that they obtained from other rulers in the region. While such achievements assuaged anti-slavery sentiment at home, in the field they were more

an inconvenience than a hindrance to the flow of goods for which the court itself would remain a leading consumer.

In Iran there was some use of African slaves in directly instrumental economic roles, but this was not widespread. African slaves were mostly absorbed into the market for domestic labor. As in the Ottoman regions, a distinction of desirability and hence price was made between 'Ethiopian' slaves and other slaves from Africa. The former were considered much superior in their capabilities to the latter and as a result were more likely to receive an education and to fill positions of trust.

Yershater remarked of Nasir al-Din Shah's reign that: "Internally, the rise of the Bab and the persecution of his followers, and the disturbances following the aborted concession of the tobacco monopoly to a British company, were the two notable events threatening the status quo of the social order." (1) The family whose slaves form the topic of this discussion was closely connected to both these events.

Mirza Muhammad Hasan Shirazi who issued the fatwa against the Tobacco Regie was a close relative; and a member of the family itself, Siyyid Ali-Muhammad, was the founder of the radical Babi religion and executed for his claims in 1850. Subsequently various family members were prominent not only in their kinsman's faith but also in its claimed (and, in Iran, equally stigmatised) successor the Baha'i Faith. Other family members remained, or became, indifferent, or even hostile to these religious innovations.

The descendants of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's maternal uncles and brothers-in-law became known as the Afnans and over time this designation transmuted into a family surname.

In the 1840s when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad began his religious activities, the family already had trading interests throughout Iran and in India. By the decade of the Tobacco Revolt, their interests spread from Hong Kong to Cairo.

Over the decades the family was not only involved in trade (and religion for some members) but had connections of blood and marriage with government officials. In the early 1900s, younger members were sent to such new educational opportunities as the American College in Beirut and became prominent in many fields and throughout the region. For example, Hussein Afnan was Secretary to the Council of Ministers of the Iraqi government in the 1920s and later served in the diplomatic corps. His wife was the noted promoter of education and international representative of Iraq, Bediah Afnan. (2)

Thus, this is not a typical merchant family, and that is why there are sources to work from. This has long been a family with a strong sense of its place in history and, for some members, a belief in the numinous nature of persons and events. When people believe that events are imbued with epochal significance they note and value even the most everyday of details surrounding those events. One does not have to agree with their interpretation to make use of the narratives they produce as a source for the taken-for-granted that would not usually be considered worth recording.

By the later decades of the twentieth century one member of the family, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, had come to be considered “the true custodian in this age of the traditions of the Afnan family.” (3) He was assisted in this effort by the extensive private archives held by members of the family, archives consisting of documents contemporary to events and later chronicles and memoirs.

In the 1980s, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan wrote a narrative of certain family slaves which circulated in near-print form in East Africa. An edited version of this account was published in the United States in 1988 under the title *Black Pearls*, with a second edition being published in 1999. I shall use the near-print version as my primary source text for this discussion as the less mediated one. (4)

The text runs the gamut from sections based on cited primary and secondary sources to those which simply record Abu'l-Qasim's personal memories. It is not a methodical work of history; neither is it simply a memoir. It seems evident that Abu'l-Qasim is concerned to present an 'accurate' narrative but his approach is less than fully conscious.

Not surprisingly, the main thread running through Abu'l-Qasim's account is the loyalty and devotion of the slaves to 'their' family, and in a few instances to the family associated religious movements. Yet this unquestioned assumption in itself leads to the naïve inclusion in the narrative of clues that allow us to go beyond it. Certainly, what we can recover from this text of the life experience of these slaves is merely fragmentary and suggestive, but it is nonetheless valuable in trying to give some voice to their experience.

Fortunately, our interrogation of this principle text in the case of some of the slaves can draw on published texts and memoirs more contemporaneous to the events and, indeed, on other versions of family tradition attributed to Abu'l-Qasim. In addition, the process of transforming the near-print text into a formal publication in 1988 involved correspondence between Abu'l-Qasim and the publisher which further elucidates his account.

One area in which this family is completely typical of the propertied classes of its time and place is that the family tree frequently doubles back upon itself. In addition, individuals often accrued a string of honorifics and sobriquets. I will refer to individuals in this discussion by the simplest version of their name that uniquely identifies them and will attempt to unravel the relationships between them as necessary.

The two slaves for which we have most sources other than Abu'l-Qasim's narrative are Mubarak and Fiddih as they served Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and his wife Khadijih Bagum. Abu'l-Qasim devotes eight pages to Mubarak, twice as many as to any other slave; and almost four pages to Fiddih, more than twice as many as to any other woman slave. These were the two slaves closest to the centre of numinousness and so most touched with significance thereby.

According to Abu'l-Qasim's narrative, the "Ethiopian" Mubarak was purchased as a child of five from slave traders by Haji Mirza Abu'l-Qasim, a brother of Khadijih Bagum. He received "training and upbringing" which are described as "exemplary." Abu'l-Qasim states, "I vividly recall my grandmother (the daughter of Haji Mirza Abu'l-Qasim) often remark about his extreme modesty and politeness. She would recount that, while intelligent, quick of understanding and with great capacity to learn, he yet displayed the utmost meakness and humility, showing kindness to all. She would also describe his manners and demeanour as being regal and well befitting his residing in the holy house [of the Bab]." [AQ:9]

Siyyid Muhammad-Rida, Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's father, died when his son was a child and Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's mother's brother, Haji Mirza Siyyid Ali took responsibility for him. When Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was fifteen, he formally entered his uncle's business, shortly thereafter moved to Bushire, and subsequently assumed management of the company trading-house there. In the spring of 1841, he settled the books and left for a pilgrimage to the holy cities of Iraq. At the urging of his mother, he returned to Shiraz in 1842.

It was then, when Mubarak was supposed to be nineteen, that Siyyid Ali-Muhammad purchased him from Mirza Abu'l-Qasim. Apparently a bill of sale is still held within the family and the purchase price was 14 tumans. By this time, Siyyid Ali-Muhammad had substantively 'retired' from business to concentrate on study and writing on religious matters. However, there were still affairs to be settled and Mubarak acted as Siyyid Ali-

Muhammad's agent. "He was delegated to collect and settle these accounts, and discharged these duties superbly." [AQ:9] Mubarak also delivered messages for Siyyid Ali-Muhammad, greeted his guests at the house door, acted as their escort within the house, and waited on them and his master.

Siyyid Ali-Muhammad not only acquired a slave in 1842, but a full household. In August, he married Khadijih Bagum. For her he "acquired" (to use Abu'l-Qasim's term) "an Ethiopian girl of tender years (probably no older than seven years of age)" named Fiddih. The new household thus consisted of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad, Khadijih Bagum, Mubarak, Fiddih, and also Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's mother, Fatimih Bagum. The 'house' in which they lived was not free-standing, but consisted of two storeys of rooms surrounding a courtyard. It was the house in which Siyyid Ali-Muhammad had been born and it interconnected with the adjoining houses of other family members including that of his uncle, Siyyid Ali.

Before considering further the lives of Mubarak and Fiddih it would be useful to look more closely at the formation of this household and their place in that formation.

Khadijih Bagum was the daughter of Mirza Ali, the brother of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's mother's father. Mirza Ali's house was adjacent to that of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's maternal uncle, Siyyid Ali. Khadijih Bagum and Siyyid Ali-Muhammad were about the same age and had played together as children. At the time of their marriage in 1842,

Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was 22 years old. If Khadijih Bagum was in her early twenties, that was a rather advanced age for a bride of her day. Then we also have the puzzle of why Siyyid Ali-Muhammad bought Fiddih for her, a young girl who had to be trained in household duties from scratch, rather than Khadijih Bagum bringing a fully trained slave with her from her natal household.

Apart from the family traditions and documents recorded in Abu'l-Qasim's narrative in the 1980s, there are earlier sources on the household. H. M. Balyuzi – whose mother was an Afnan - wrote a biography of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad which was published in 1973. In the Foreword, he expresses his “deep gratitude’ to Abu'l-Qasim Afnan for making available “the chronicle-history and the autobiography of his father, the late Haji Mirza Habibu'llah” and other family documents.(5) Balyuzi also prepared a short biography of Khadijih Bagum which was posthumously published in 1981. However, according to the foreword written by Robert Balyuzi, the work “is largely based on the written narrative of Abu'l-Qasim Afnan.” (6) Indeed, the first paragraph states:

Khadijih Bagum, would at times recount the story of her glorious but tragic life to the younger members of her family. Decades later, a niece, Maryam-Sultan Bagum, daughter of Haji Mirza Abu'l-Qasim, recalled all that she had heard from her saintly aunt; her grandson, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, has now put on paper these recollections. (7)



Balyuzi's work seems to be in large part, at least, a translation of his cousin's notes. Thus, the isnad for Afnan family traditions on this household does seem to always connect to us through Abu'l-Qasim.

Yet there is another source which lies outside the family. In 1871, Munirih Khanum (who was on her way to Palestine to marry Abbas Effendi, the son of Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith) visited Khadijih Bagum in Shiraz. There are two surviving versions of this visit. In the early 1920s, Lady Blomfield, an Englishwoman visiting Palestine, collected oral accounts of the history of the Babi and Baha'i faiths.(8) Among those she interviewed was Munirih Khanum whose daughters spoke fluent English. Thus, Blomfield's notes of the translation of Munirih Khanum's oral account should be reasonably reliable. Munirih Khanum also wrote her own brief account of her life around the same time and included in it another retelling of her visit to Shiraz.(9)

Both the Afnan tradition accounts and the Munirih Khanum ones tend to read like oft-told tales. The various versions have set scenes, even phrases, in common. This makes all the more likely to be illuminating any aspect which does not fit the standardised script.

This is what seems to happen in the Munirih Khanum versions. The elements are the same, but the chronology is different. But then Munirih Khanum had no reason to report anything other than her best memory of what Khadijih Bagum had told her. The Afnans may believe they only intend to do the same, but they are engaged not just with the narrative but with the family's reputation and how any version of events supports that.

There need not be anything conscious here; it is simply that one line of descent for the narrative of the formation of this household branches off many decades earlier than the other and was not enmeshed in the broader later narrative formation involved in creating the Afnan 'story.'

The Balyuzi versions have the betrothal and marriage of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and Khadijih Bagum taking place after Siyyid Ali-Muhammad returns to Shiraz in 1842.

Munirih Khanum's versions tell a significantly different story.

In both Balyuzi's (probably in effect Abu'l-Qasim's) biographical account of Khadijih Bagum and in Munirih Khanum's accounts of her visit to Shiraz there is a retelling, purportedly in the words of Khadijih Bagum, of two dreams. One dream presages her engagement; the other occurs when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad is in Bushire. The Balyuzi/Afnan account states that the Bushire dream occurred first and the engagement dream happened after Siyyid Ali-Muhammad returned to Shiraz from Iraq. Both Munirih Khanum versions place the engagement dream *before* the Bushire one. All accounts agree that the engagement took place very shortly after the predictive dream and the one written personally by Munirih Khanum states explicitly that the betrothal came before the journey to Bushire. [MK2:33]

Thus the Balyuzi/Afnan account has the betrothal and marriage occurring shortly after one another in 1842, but both Munirih Khanum versions put the betrothal before Siyyid Ali-Muhammad went to Bushire and the marriage after he returned. The Munirih

Khanum versions solve the problem of why Khadijih Bagum remained unmarried at such an 'advanced' age. By these versions she was actually betrothed in her mid-teens.

It seems likely that with Siyyid Ali-Muhammad being sent to Bushire it was thought that the groom was too young for an immediate assumption of the role of head of a household and that the marriage itself should be delayed until he was more established in business. It may be that part of his mother's concern that he return from Iraq to Shiraz in 1842 – something it seems that he had to be strongly persuaded into doing - was this long drawn out betrothal that she had arranged.

Afnan accounts emphasise the high respect in which Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was held by the family and there are contemporary letters that bear this out for some family members. Yet, the oral account by Munirih Khanum suggests that this regard was not monolithic and had its limits. According to Munirih Khanum, Khadijih Bagum told her: "We were three sisters; our father was the least prosperous of the great-uncles of my Beloved. We were far from being wealthy when we were married, as the world counts wealth. Therefore there was little joy amongst our relations and friends at our union." [MK1:77]

This is certainly not the complexion that later Afnan accounts apply to events, but it has a considerable ring of authenticity to it. Khadijih Bagum is said to have commented that at the start of their marriage Siyyid Ali-Muhammad:

... had no definite occupation. He spent most of his time in the upper chamber of the house, engaged in devotions. At times, he went in the morning to his uncle's trading-house in the Saray-i-Gunruk (Customs Serai). And some afternoons he would go for a walk in the fields outside the city and come home at sunset. It was his wont to write his letters or his meditations in the early part of the evening, after performing the obligatory prayers pertaining to that period of the night. [B/A:9-10]

That Siyyid Ali-Muhammad ceased to engage in the business of this energetically mercantile family; that Khadijih Bagum's brother sold Mubarak to him at an absurdly low price; that she did not bring a slave from her natal household and made do with an untrained, young child; and that they seem to have lived fairly separately from the rest of the family, even though their accommodation connected with other, presumably much better equipped, households; all suggest the likelihood of both financial strictures and less than total family harmony.

Mubarak and Fiddih were thus brought into a newly forming separate household where they would have found themselves both the major labor sources and significant personal supports without full participation in the broader family service network. The lasting effect of this can be seen particularly in the case of Fiddih.

Abu'l-Qasim states that:

Fiddih received instruction from and was educated by the mother and wife of the Bab. At an early age, she showed a prodigious mastery of manners and etiquette. She also excelled in the culinary arts and acquired a reputation for needlework and embroidery.

From the start, Fiddih was regarded by young and old alike as a member of the Bab's family, and was treated accordingly. She, herself, was enthralled by Khadijih Bagum ... who also loved her dearly. Such was their affection for one another that neither could bear to be parted for even a short time. [AQ:16]

Yet, it is presumably through Abu'l-Qasim that we also have the recollection of Khadijih Bagum of one day in 1844 when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad "asked that dinner be served earlier" and "Fiddih, the servant who did all the cooking, was so informed." On the following day: "At sunrise Fiddih took the samovar and tea-things to the room of my mother-in-law and, as usual, he went to his mother's room to take tea." [B/A:10;12] This was when Fiddih was about nine years old. It sounds like Fiddih had plenty of work to do, probably more than her 'Ethiopian' status would have required of her in a more substantial household, and certainly more than a 'member' of such a family. After all, she was a child doing "all the cooking" in a household with two adult women.

As things turned out, the separate household was not of long duration - lasting only just over two years. Khadijih Bagum give birth to a son in 1843, who was either still-born or died shortly after birth. And then in 1844, Siyyid Ali-Muhammad began his public religious career leading to his arrest, confinement and execution. In late 1844, he left to

make the hajj taking Mubarak with him. On his return he was arrested and, apart from some brief interludes in the first year, would be under increasing confinement until his execution in 1850.

These years saw both increasing knowledge of his religious claims and increasing persecution by religious and civil authorities of those who accepted them. He was removed from Shiraz in 1846, and did not see any member of this little household thereafter.

With the breakup of the household, Mubarak and Fiddih were charged by Siyyid Ali-Muhammad with looking after his mother and wife and their roles changed more to that of personal attendants to persons who were living in provisional situations. It was often unsafe to live in their former house and the two women resided in one or other of the adjoining houses of their relatives.

While Fatimih Bagum, Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's mother, remained in Shiraz "Fiddih devoted much time to nursing her and looking after every detail of her life." But when Fatimih Bagum left Shiraz, then:

... Fiddih was able to dedicate herself completely to Khadijih Bagum to the exception of all others in her life. Never did she develop any warm friendship with anyone else, even though there were a number of servants in the houses of the uncles of the Bab. Never would she appear in public except in attendance on Khadijih Bagum. [AQ:16]

According to Abu'l-Qasim, this reported devotion to Khadijih Bagum was so pronounced that:

She would always beseech Khadijih Bagum to pray that she would not continue to live after her beloved lady. Fiddih could not even contemplate life without her. In her prayers, Fiddih would supplicate God to accept her wish that, so long it was destined for the wife of the Bab to remain in this mortal world, that Fiddih too, would remain to serve her, but that she would not live to see the day when her mistress was no longer with her. [AQ:17]

And, indeed, when Khadijih Bagum died in 1882: “While arrangements were still in progress for the funeral and interment, true to her soul’s desire, the spirit of Fiddih winged its flight to join her beloved mistress. [AQ:18] The Balyuzi account states that: “... strangely, the faithful servitor, Fiddih, died two hours after the death of her mistress, in the same house.” [B/A:35]

The tone of these references nicely balances the narrative claim that Khadijih Bagum died of grief when a relative failed to come and escort her to visit Baha’u’llah as promised. Actually, both women are said to have died of dysentery: Khadijih Bagum probably being somewhat over 60 and Fiddih around 47. That the personal attendant of someone afflicted with dysentery should also contract the illness is no surprise; and that the complaint should be fatal for either or both even less so.

One is tempted by Abu'l-Qasim's description of Fiddih to consider her a child so traumatised by the experience of enslavement that she attached herself totally to a 'protector' and grew up to be a withdrawn, asocial person. Yet, as the widow of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad, Khadijih Bagum was a person of considerable interest and influence in the religious circles that looked to her late husband as a numinous figure. She was visited by many women over the decades, acting as their guide to the house in which she had lived during her marriage and recounting tales of her days with Siyyid Ali-Muhammad. As Fiddih would have waited on this parade of visitors, she may not have been quite so singularly focused on Khadijih Bagum or such a social isolate as family tradition paints. Abu'l-Qasim mentions a letter from Munirih Khanum to Khadijih Bagum referring to Munirih Khanum's "gratitude for the services rendered by Fiddih" during her stay in Shiraz in 1871 and conveying warm greetings to her.

As for Mubarak, after the enforced departure of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad he served Fatimih Bagum and Khadijih Bagum. When Fatimih Bagum moved to Karbila in the 1850s she asked Mubarak to go with her and he died there at about the age of forty.

Abu'l-Qasim notes in the historical introduction that precedes his account of the slaves that in nineteenth century Iran:

The privileged classes – notably the rulers and their ministers – made eunuchs of young boys and sent them to serve in their private households, allowing them to mingle freely



with the women folk. The eunuchs were well respected and trusted by the ladies of the house and were often taken into their full confidence. In Iran, the nobility and the gentry too, kept eunuchs. Unlike ordinary slaves, some of these eunuchs were promoted and came to occupy places of prominence in society.” [AQ:5-6]

Despite this comment in his introduction, there is no mention in the narrative of the obvious fact that with his close relationship with Fatimih Bagum and Khadijih Bagum and others of their female relatives, Mubarak must have been a eunuch. That he was ‘Ethiopian,’ highly educated, given full confidence, mingled freely with the ladies of the household, and even his young age at death all suggest the same conclusion.

There is another slave whom Abu’l-Qasim eulogises who seems likely to have been a eunuch. Abu’l-Qasim says that Mas’ud was purchased by Haji Mirza Siyyid Muhammad “from slave-traders who had abducted him from Zanzibar.” Abu’l-Qasim describes Mas’ud as “but a youth” when purchased, but he must have been even younger than this suggests as Siyyid Muhammad sent him to a maktab. Abu’l-Qasim says that he there “acquired a broad education with a good grasp of sums and diction.” In addition: “Over the years he became renowned in Shiraz as a sportsman, and particularly in horsemanship. Mas’ud enjoyed cooking and would often prepare exquisite dishes which were admired by all.” [AQ:20]

After Mubarak left Shiraz, Mas’ud “would assist the wife of the Bab ... with all matters that required attention outside the house.” In contrast to the very personal devotion

attributed to Mubarak and even more so to Fiddih, Abu'l-Qasim comments of Mas'ud that his "love and devotion to the members of the family were unaffected by the death of" Siyyid Muhammad.

In the 1880s Mas'ud escorted Khadijih-Sultan Bagum, a daughter of Siyyid Muhammad, on the hajj and then on to Palestine. They stayed there for six months and Mas'ud wished to remain and enter the household of Baha'u'llah, but he was told to return with Khadijih-Sultan Bagum. On the return journey they spent several months in the house of Haji Mirza Siyyid Hasan, a brother of Khadijih Bagum, in Beirut. Khadijih-Sultan Bagum's sister was married to Siyyid Hasan and had "played a major role in the training and instruction of Mas'ud" when in her father's household. They completed their journey to Shiraz via Bombay.

Mas'ud was thus Khadijih-Sultan Bagum's escort for a trip that encompassed Mecca, Palestine, Beirut, and Bombay with travel between by land and sea, the whole lasting around a year and the lady arriving home with her reputation presumably intact. It seems almost inconceivable that Mas'ud was not a eunuch, yet there is a twist to this tale.

Abu'l-Qasim states that when Mas'ud got back to Shiraz he "became greatly distressed by his separation from Baha'u'llah. So intense were his feelings of sadness that they could not be contained." Mas'ud "withdrew from the society of his friends and secluded himself." The remedy applied by the family raises some questions. They "made every effort to comfort and console him. They urged him to marry, hoping that this new life

would make him less despondent and sad.” The way Abu’l-Qasim describes his response is intriguing: “Although he was spiritually unprepared to marry, he conceded to their wishes and married an Ethiopian girl called Golchihrih, who was also in the household.” To add to the questions, Abu’l-Qasim continues: “To them was born a daughter whom they named Sa’idih.”

The remedy was less than effective, however, as, “Despite his new life and the love and devotion shown him by his family, Mas’ud only longed for another opportunity to attain the presence of Baha’u’llah.” And, soon after his marriage, he died.

So what happened? Golchihrih was of the household and she undoubtedly had a daughter. One might, though, reasonably question the paternity. If she had become a mother by a member of the household, the child would have had inheritance rights. The marriage patterns of the family show how careful they were to maintain property within controlled lines. If she gave birth as a married woman there would be a presumption that the child was the child of her husband, even if he were “spiritually unprepared to marry.” The social fiction of marital parentage would prevail unless one of the principal parties refused to let it.

Mas’ud may have rendered his final service to the family by claiming to have started one of his own. Interestingly, when the daughter of that family, Sa’idih, married one Faraj, also of the household, her wedding was jointly celebrated with two Afnan family

marriages. Like her mother, Sa'idih had one child, a son named Mas'ud who lived in Shiraz until his death in 1968.

And what of her mother, Golchihrih? Here we enter territory encompassed by Abu'l-Qasim's personal memory:

The author remembers Golchihrih distinctly. She was a tall, slender woman with an attractive countenance. She was jolly, talkative and very fond of the water-pipe. She came to the house of my father to care for my mother and lived with us for a number of years until her death. [AQ:21]

At the end of his memoir of the Afnan slaves, Abu'l-Qasim returns to Golchihrih in the midst of more general closing comments:

Most of these innocent victims of slavery went through life remembering and cherishing their mother tongues. ... The majority of these people also remembered their homes and childhood days. Golchihrih, ... whom the author distinctly remembers, would hold me on her lap and tell me about her home. Not once was she able to finish her story without my breaking down and weeping.

Golchihrih would longingly describe the wide tree-lined avenues of her native town and the large home in which she lived. She would say: "There was a brook running outside our house where I would play with my brothers and sisters. Our parents used to warn us

to beware and keep away from the white man. One day, while playing with my friends, we spotted two camel riders approaching. As they drew near, the older children recognized who they were and fled. I could not keep up with them and was soon caught. One of them put a knife to my throat and threatened me. I dared not say a word. They took me away and eventually, I was shipped to Bushihr.” She would also describe her family – father, mother, aunts and uncles – and the love and warmth which existed among them. She remembered that she also had a new-born brother who was very dear to her. [AQ:29]

While at one level Golchihrih’s story is a variant of the caregiver’s traditional warning to children about behaving or they may be stolen by ‘gypsies,’ the circus, or the ‘boogie-man’ – himself the naturalised representative of the Bugis, the feared pirates, and slave traders, of the South China Seas – there is not the solace that this is a fiction. It is the testimony of one who was herself stolen; one who for a minor lapse in childhood correctness (she did not, could not, “keep away”) lost home and family forever – but not her memory, her knowledge that her life could have been, should have been different. And in rehearsing that memory to the successive generations of her owners she asserted the cost of their comfort.

Without questioning the care she took of their children and the regard she may indeed have felt for them, there is an essential aggression in constantly repeating to the children of her owners how she had herself been stolen as a child: Her care for them came at the cost of her own childhood, her own home, her own family. Golchihrih may have been

“jolly” and enjoyed her pipe, but she was not going to be simply subsumed into this family and they should know that.

Let me turn now to the issue of the religious identity of these slaves. The United States publisher of Abu'l-Qasim's account publicised it as forthcoming under the title *Black Babis*. Abu'l-Qasim strongly resisted the idea that these slaves could be characterised as 'Babis.' With the exception of Ma'sud, he denied that any of them could be considered Babis or Baha'is based on an analysis of their behaviour. It would seem that part of the problem was that Abu'l-Qasim projected a bureaucratic view of religious identity that became common in the Baha'i community around the 1930s on his subjects. For him religious identity required instruction and acceptance by an 'authority.'

Without these, in Abu'l-Qasim's world view, the slaves must remain default Muslims whatever one may wish to infer from their actions. Yet large numbers of those acknowledged as 'Babis' in the mid-nineteenth century were primarily focused on the person of the Bab rather than having any developed ideological understanding of their 'new' religion. And even for those who did, the majority maintained a public conformity with Islam.

Abu'l-Qasim's approach can be seen from the following extracts from his correspondence with the publisher on this issue:

... there is no evidence which indicates that any of the black servants mentioned in my book except Masoud became a believer in the Bab or Baha'u'llah. .... 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. .... 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. (10)

... these black servants were not declared Babis except Masud, but they were dedicated and faithful, selfless, truthful and loving followers of the Bab and Baha'u'llah and their family and followers. (11)

Mas'ud was the exception as: "In manners, demeanor, in all respects of propriety and in relations with others, he was meticulous," and because of this Siyyid Muhammad, "favoured him with special affection and endeavoured to teach him the Faith. Mas'ud became deeply attracted and was soon to rank among the foremost believers in Shiraz." [AQ:20] That he was consciously taught, and overtly accepted that teaching, provides Mas'ud with the requisite credentials.

Of Fiddih, Abu'l-Qasim simply states that she "was faithful in performing her religious duties" (we are obviously meant to infer that he means Islamic ones), and that "she was not aware of the station and mission of the Bab." [AQ:17] And of Golchihrih that: "Unfortunately, she knew nothing of the Faith which had been so dear to her husband." Obviously, that is not literally true, especially as Abu'l-Qasim describes her daughter,

Sa'idih, as “a believer and ... well versed in the teachings.” [AQ:23] It would seem that Golchihrih must have chosen not to know.

Which brings us to Mubarak who was with Siyyid Ali-Muhammad during the whole period of his initially declaring his religious mission. Many of Mubarak's activities between May 1844 and September 1846, when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad left Shiraz for the last time, involved him in the early stages of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's independent religious activities. He was present in an adjoining room when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad first declared his claimed religious position to Mulla Husayn-i-Bushru'i in May 1844; he carried secret correspondence between Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and some of his first followers; and he personally attended to them in Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's house. When not in the upstairs reception room with Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and his visitors, Mubarak occupied a room next door within easy earshot in case should he be needed, and thus overheard everything that was said. He was Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's companion on the hajj in late 1844 when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad announced at the Ka'aba that he was the Qa'im; was with him when he was first arrested on his return to Iran in 1845; and was entrusted with the care of his wife and mother when Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was taken from Shiraz in 1846.

One of the things that most upset some African-American Baha'i readers of Abu'l-Qasim's account when it was first published in the United States was that the slaves were not 'taught' a new religious identity. They felt the emphasis on personal loyalty - without a sharing of religious understanding - to be demeaning.



Something that is not fully clear in reading the book is the generational distinction between these slaves. Mubarak died in the early 1860s; Mas'ud in the 1880s. There was a considerable distinction between the inchoate Babi situation of Mubarak's day and the gradually rationalising Baha'i one of Mas'ud's. Whatever the belief consequences correlate with a personal devotion to Siyyid Ali-Muhammad in the time of Mubarak, they were not inconsistent with continuing a pattern of Muslim observance. That he did so, is not a solid basis on which to argue his ignorance or lack of understanding of the claims of his master. All indications are that Mubarak was fully within the confidence of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and it seems likely that this was based on more than simply Mubarak's personal loyalty.

Another thing which upset some African-American readers was that the account states that Mubarak and Fiddih were not told of the death of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad. Abu'l-Qasim states that:

Even until the time of his death, Mubarak was not told of the Martyrdom of the Bab. The family wanted neither to distress him nor to allow the members of the household who were regularly seen in the market-place to inadvertently become the source of rumours. Both Mubarak and Fiddih imagined that the Bab had voyaged to India in pursuit of his mercantile affairs and would eventually be returning. [AQ:14]

Obviously, nobody knew better than Mubarak how little interest Siyyid Ali-Muhammad had in pursuing “his mercantile affairs.” And as an educated, literate man there was no way that he could be uninformed of an event that had even been reported in European newspapers. But there is a deep strain in Iranian culture (comparable to that in nineteenth century European culture) of being conscious of the distinction between what one knows and what is known. Public acknowledgement of only what is known is expected.

Abu’l-Qasim tells the story of how in Karbila Mubarak made a broom with a green handle (symbolising the lineage of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad):

Every morning at the hour of dawn, he would use the broom to sweep the courtyard around the sanctuary of the shrine of Imam Husayn, vowing to perform this deed until the return of his Master. Each morning after this exercise, he would proceed to procure the provisions required by the household. [AQ:15]

Mubarak was attending two aging women who had fallen out with their relatives, I can think of reasons why he would wish to pursue regular morning “exercise” out of the house, and if that exercise conferred some religious merit by being a service to a shrine, all the better. I do not think that his performing this daily task years after the execution of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad can be seen as confirming that he had no idea of something that was common knowledge. What it likely did do was act as a public gesture to reinforce a story that made it more comfortable for those two women. Obviously, Fatimih Bagum would live more comfortably in Karbila with a public persona as a

widow whose only child was away in India in business and who had thus come to the holy city to live out her final days, than as the mother of an executed heretic.

Fiddih may be a different matter. Abu'l-Qasim states that, when the house in which she had first lived with Khadijih Bagum and Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was being repaired in 1877 so that Khadijih Bagum could resume residence there, Fiddih thought the repairs were being made because Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was about to return from his journey.

The correspondence between Siyyid Ali-Muhammad and Khadijih Bagum shows them to have been truly in love. Fiddih must have been aware of the closeness of their relationship. Can she have really thought that he had gone on a commercial trip that lasted 30 years and had not sent a letter or message for over a quarter of a century? And then there were all those conversations that Fiddih must have heard between Khadijih Bagum and her guests while she attended the samovar, served meals, and made up beds. Conversations in which Khadijih Bagum recounted the stories of her life with Siyyid Ali-Muhammad that have been passed down through the sources we are discussing. One must suspect that Fiddih was also playing the what's known game and that her focus on her mistress gave a added fillip to her maintaining the appearance that she believed Khadijih Bagum wanted.

Siyyid Ali, the maternal uncle of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad was executed in Tehran a few months before his nephew was executed in Tabriz in 1850. The news of both deaths was initially kept from the women of the household. According to Khadijih Bagum:

“whenever we mentioned rumours that had come to our ears, the men would hotly deny them – all lies they would say.” [B/A:26]

The time limit on the men’s denials was short, however. Haji Mirza Abu’l-Qasim, Khadijih Bagum’s brother, had gone on pilgrimage with Mirza Javad, the eighteen-year-old son of Siyyid Ali. On their return journey from Mecca, Mirza Javad died at Jiddah. Mirza Abu’l-Qasim delayed coming home to Shiraz until over a year after the executions but eventually he did. When the death of the son became known, then the death of the father had to be revealed and the execution of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad also. So, the women of the household suspected, but did not know of the death of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad for something over a year.

Abu’l-Qasim asserts that Khadijih Bagum confided in Fiddih entirely. Yet Khadijih Bagum is reported to have said: “Of the servants and the maids whom we had in the house, no one knew of the martyrdom ... It was not possible to talk of such matters with anyone.” [B/A:29] And she is reported to have told the story of Fiddih and the repairing of the house. But there must be some carefully structured social play at work here. Indeed, one can picture Khadijih Bagum retelling these narratives of ignorance as Fiddih quietly pours tea for her and her guests and then withdraws to the background until needed again.

The rumours and the men’s denials must have caused considerable discussion among the women of the family. Then the news of the deaths occasioned such grief on the part of

the bereaved, and such spite on the part of those of the family who had deprecated Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's activities, that it precipitated Fatimih Bagum's move out of Shiraz.

How could anyone living in the household remain actually unaware of what was going on - although they might be required to be unaware socially? How could Fiddih who "devoted much time to nursing her and looking after every detail of her life" be unconscious of the cause of Fatimih Bagum's grief?

The range of religious feeling within the family may be gauged from Munirih Khanum's account of her visiting in Shiraz in 1871 (by which time things were much calmer than in the 1850s). She describes a daughter and two daughters-in-law of Siyyid Muhammad as being "not absolutely Baha'is, though interested in the Cause." She notes their pleasure that she joined them in ablutions and chanting the sunset prayer. [MK1:75] Munirih Khanum also describes Khadijih Bagum's eldest sister, the widow of Siyyid Ali, as "firmly attached to the orthodox ordinary Muslim religion," and continues:

She moaned "Why should religion cause so much bloodshed? Surely it should be a cause of peace. I am perplexed and distressed, and my heart is full of sorrow."

I tried to help her, I longed to do so. Being a stranger, she listened to me. I chanted some prayers, and she wept, but understood not at all.

This condition of mind was very usual amongst those Persians who, far from being enemies, were kind and good, but whose eyes had not been opened. [MK1:76-77]

At the time of the Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's execution the only member of his family who fully accepted his religious claims was his wife. His uncle, who had also unreservedly accepted him, had already been executed in Tehran. For the Afnans generally, their main concern in this period must have been survival. Indeed, family accounts describe the urgent destruction of any paper in Siyyid Ali-Muhammad's handwriting by washing off the ink and then burying the paper.

Mubarak and Fiddih could not have been unaware of the religious claims of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad nor of his death. But their loyalty to Khadijih Bagum, and Fatimih Bagum, would have led them to adopt whatever self-presentation protected them. A public substitution of a fictional merchant on extended business in India for an executed heretic who was regarded by the government as a fomentor of rebellion, would certainly have been a logical course for the broader family. Khadijih Bagum's dependence on the family would necessitate her cooperation; and she would expect her slaves to go along with the pretence.

In all three cases, this acquiescence would be irrespective of whatever the individuals actually believed. The supposed ignorance of the death of Siyyid Ali-Muhammad on the part of the family slaves insisted on in the family narrative is unlikely to tell us anything about the knowledge of family affairs possessed by the slaves, but is likely to indicate the important role these slaves had in maintaining the public fictions which preserving face for the family required.

Although Mubarak, Fiddih, Mas'ud, and Golchihrih are the only slaves about whom Abu'l-Qasim gives much detail they would have lived in a context where among the various branches of the family there were many slaves. Abu'l-Qasim closes his account by noting of his own youth:

Altogether, seven blacks lived in our family – six women and one man. Three of them lived in the house of Hand of the Cause Mr. Balyuzi. The other stayed with my maternal uncle. The last remaining one was a woman from Zanzibar whose name was Gol-i-Bahar (spring flower), who remembered the Khal-i-Akbar [ Siyyid Muhammad] and would tell of the kindness he would show her. She had a very imposing and dignified stature, and lived to about ninety years of age. [AQ:29-30]

This would have been in the early twentieth century when we can assume establishments were rather reduced from earlier days. However, it is notable how the sense of “family” still includes more than one household.

According to Abu'l-Qasim:

The last slave purchased by my forefathers was a Swahili youth named Salman, who was acquired around 1870 in Shiraz. Eventually, Salman was sent to the town of Abadih to serve in the family of Da'i Husayn... [AQ:8]

But the last remaining slave living with the family is not quite clear. In his account he credits that status to Gol-i-Bahar, but in correspondence it is another Golchihrih he names.

The first published edition of Abu'l-Qasim's account had included a photograph captioned as being the Golchihrih who married Mas'ud, yet the woman did not fit the physical description of the text.<sup>(12)</sup> As this second Golchihrih is never mentioned in the account by name, one wonders why Abu'l-Qasim provided the photograph. It is a powerful image evidently cropped from a group photograph. It shows a somewhat heavy set, very dark woman in simple cotton clothes. Her hands are placed palm down on her thighs with work-thickened fingers spread apart. A child leans toward her. The correspondence reveals that this Golchihrih was not married, and "she was one of the maid servants of Monavar Khanoum the mother of ... H. M. Balyuzi." <sup>(13)</sup> Another letter adds that she was "the last African in the Afnan family." <sup>(14)</sup>

So even something as seemingly simple as naming the last African servitor of the family turns out not to be so simple. The sources that are available to us on these slaves have enabled us to frame as many questions as answers, but they did permit us to add names, fragments of life history, and even in one case a face, to a handful of the multitude caught up in the institution of slavery. And the questions that they raise remind us that slaves are fully human and their lives have all the nuances, inconsistencies, and complications of all lives.

R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram



## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Anthony A. Lee for enjoyable discussions over lunch and via email which have helped clarify my thinking on the Afnan slaves.

## Notes

- (1) E. Yarshater. "Observations on Nasir al\_Din Shah." In Edmond Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand (eds). *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change, 1800-1925*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1992: 4
- (2) I am grateful to Juan Cole and Richard Hollinger for confirming Hussein Afnan's family membership.
- (3) Robert Balyuzi. Foreword. In H. M. Balyuzi. *Khadijih Bagum: The Wife of the Bab*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1981:xi-xii Cited in the text as [B/A].
- (4) I am grateful to Anthony A. Lee for providing access to a copy of the near-print version. Cited in the text as [AQ]. The published version is Abu'l-Qasim Afnan. *Black Pearls*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988; 1999. Abu'l-Qasim includes an account of Salih Aqa who served the author's father and uncle in Egypt in the 1890s. Salih Aqa was a Berber who had formerly been a slave at the court of Isma'il Pasha. His case is an interesting example of an individual transitioning from slavery through patronage toward market labor, however it lies outside the scope of this discussion.
- (5) H. M. Balyuzi. *The Bab*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1973: xi
- (6) Robert Balyuzi. 1981:xi
- (7) H. M. Balyuzi. 1981:1

- (8) Lady Blomfield. *The Chosen Highway*. Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970[1940]. Cited in the text as [MK1].
- (9) Munirih Khanum (trans by Sammireh Anwar Smith). *Memoirs and Letters*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986. Cited in the text as [MK2].
- (10) A. Afnan to Anthony Lee. 13 August 1988. I am grateful to Anthony A. Lee for access to the publication file. I have silently corrected the spelling and grammar of these letters where that does not alter the apparent meaning.
- (11) A. Afnan to Anthony Lee. 29 June 1988.
- (12) Afnan. 1988:40.
- (13) A. Afnan to Anthony Lee. 25 January 1989.
- (14) A. Afnan to Anthony Lee. 19 June 1988.

**International Conference**

# **SLAVERY, ISLAM AND DIASPORA**

*Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora*

**Department of History**

**York University**

**Toronto, Canada**

**24-26 October, 2003**

*In memoriam*

**Nehemia Levtzion**

# Program and Sessions

**Thursday, October 23, 2003**

**12:00-8:00      Arrival and Registration**

Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, 202B Founders College

**Friday, October 24, 2003**

**8:00-9:00      Registration and Tea/Coffee (214 Calumet College)**

**9:00-10:00     Welcome and Opening Remarks**

Paul Lovejoy, Director, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora

Adrian Shubert, Associate Vice-President International

Ismael M. Montana, Graduate Program in History

John Hunwick, Northwestern University, on Nehemia Levtzion

**10:00-11:30    Panel 1: The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean**

Chair: Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (University of Toronto)

Thomas Vernet (Université Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne), Slave Trade and Slavery on the Swahili Coast, 1500-1750

R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram (University of Nevada), "Black Pearls": The African Household Slaves of a Nineteenth Century Iranian Merchant Family

Alia Paroo (York University), The Ismailis in East Africa from 1835 to 1914

Discussant: Michael Salman (UCLA)

**11:30-1:15     Lunch (Founders College)**

## **1:15-2:45          Panel 2: Slavery in North Africa**

Chair: José C. Curto (York University)

George Michael La Rue (Clarion University), "Dying like Sheep with the Rot": The Health of Enslaved Sudanese in the Egyptian Army Myth and Reality, 1820-1835

Benjamin Brower (Cornell University), The Servile Populations of the Algerian Oases Seen Through the French Colonial Archives

Kim Searcy (Indiana University), Mahdist Proclamations on Slavery, the Slave Trade and Emancipation: 1885-1898

Discussant: John Hunwick (Northwestern University)

## **2:45-3:00          Coffee/Tea**

## **3:00-4:30          Panel 3: Slavery Beyond the Mediterranean**

Chair: Rina Cáceres (Universidad de Costa Rica)

Behnaz Mirzai Asl (York University), Commerce and the Dispersal of Africans in Persia

Abdul Sheriff (Zanzibar Museums), Slavery in Early Islam and the Social Composition of the Zanj Rebellion

Maryna Kravets (University of Toronto), Blacks beyond the Black Sea: Eunuchs in the Crimean Khanate

Discussant: Martin Klein (University of Toronto)

## **4:45-6:15          Panel 4: African Muslims in the Americas**

Chair: Carolyn Brown (Rutgers University)

Sultana Afroz (University of West Indies, Mona), Setting the Record Straight, the Invincibility of Islam in Jamaica

Maureen Warner-Lewis (University of West Indies, Mona), Religious Constancy and Compromise Among Nineteenth Century Caribbean-Based African Muslims

Jalani Niaah (University of West Indies, Mona), "Not a Continent for an Island": Rastafari, Representations and History

Discussant: Paul E. Lovejoy (York University)

## **6:30                  Reception and Music**

## **Saturday, October 25, 2003**

**8:30-9:00**      **Coffee/Tea** (214 Calumet College)

**9:00-9:45**      **KEYNOTE**

Introduction: Behnaz Mirzai Asl (York University)

Ehud R. Toledano (Tel-Aviv University), Ottoman Slaves as Individuals, Ottoman Slavery as a Relationship

Presentation: Yacine Daddi Addoun (York University)

**9:45-11:15**      **Panel 5: Slavery in the Maghreb**

Chair: Renée Soulodre-La France (King's College, University of Western Ontario)

Chouki El Hamel (Arizona State University), Writing Moroccan Slavery: Slave Registers and Slave Definition

Yacine Daddi Addoun (York University), Racialization of Slavery: The End of "White-European" Slavery in Algeria: 1816-1830

Ismael Musah Montana (York University), Religious Identity and Social Consciousness of the Black Slave Community of Tunis in the Nineteenth Century

Discussant: Thabit Abdullah (York University)

**11:15-12:45**      **Panel 6: Islam and the Abolition of Slavery**

Chair: David Trotman (York University)

Amal Ghazal (University of Alberta), Debating Slavery: Abolition between Muslim Reformers and Conservatives

Emad Ahmed Helal (Cairo University), The Anti-Slavery Movement in Nineteenth Century Egypt Between Shari`a and Practice

Bernard K. Freamon (Seton Hall Law School), The 'Ulama' and the Abolition of Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt: The Role of the Modernists

Discussant: Ehud R. Toledano (Tel-Aviv University)

**12:45-2:00Lunch**

**2:00-3:30 Panel 7: Islam and Slavery in the Central and Western Sudan**

Chair: Kwabena Akurang-Parry (Shippensburg University)

Jennifer Lofkrantz (York University), Power Dynamics, Society, and Ransoming of New Captives and Long-Term Slaves in West and North-West Africa in the Nineteenth Century

Olatunji Ojo (York University), Islam, Ethnicity and Slave Resistance: Hausa 'Mamluks' in Nineteenth Century Yorubaland

Mohammed Bashir Salau (York University), Slaves in a Muslim City: A Survey of Slavery in Nineteenth Century Kano

Bruce Hall (University of Illinois) Bellah Highwaymen: Slave Banditry and Crime in Colonial Northern Mali

Discussant: Femi Kolapo (University of Guelph)

**3:30-3:45 Coffee/Tea**

**3:45-5:15 Panel 8: Conceptions of Slavery and Emancipation**

Chair: Michele Johnson (York University)

Ibrahim Hamza (York University), Some Historical and Cultural Definitions of Slavery and Freedom Among the Hausa People

John Philips (Hirosaki University), Reconciling Definitions of Slavery

Osman Tastan (Ankara University), On the Notion of Slavery in Islamic Law: The Concept of Rights and Liberties Encountering the Historical Social Realities

Discussant: Sean Stilwell (University of Vermont)

## **Sunday, October 26, 2003**

**10:00-10:30**      **Coffee/Tea** (214 Calumet College)

**10:30-12:00**      **Panel 9: Slavery in Brazil**

Chair: A. Sydney Kanya-Forstner (York University)

José Cairus (York University), "Brothers," "Partners" and "Clubs": Muslim Brotherhood and Sufi Practices in the Diaspora in the Shadow of the Muslim Uprising's Criminal Court Trials Sources, Bahia (1835)

Nikolay Dobronravin (Saint-Petersburg State University), Multilingual Arabic-script Literacy in 19-th Century Brazil and Trinidad: New Sources in Dublin, Havre and Salvador (Bahia)

Mariza C. Soares (Vanderbilt University) and Juliana B. Farias (UFF), Religious Tolerance: Black Muslims among White Christians in 19th and Early 20th Century in Rio de Janeiro

Discussant: Joseph C. Miller (University of Virginia)

**12:00-1:30**      **Lunch**

**1:30-2:30**      **Closing Remarks**

Paul E. Lovejoy, Slavery, the Bilad al-Sudan and the Frontiers of the African Diaspora

**2:30**      **Vote of Thanks:** Mohammed Bashir Salau

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