



in the West. The master is enjoined to show kindness to his slaves, and to refrain from excessive punishments, to give them food and clothing of a standard equal to the master's own, to give them only moderate work to do, and to set them free whenever possible. Although female slaves might become concubines of their masters, the children of these unions were born free and had equal rights of inheritance with the other children of the master of the house. Indeed, female slaves once they had borne children had more or less the same status as the other wives of their master, since they could not be sold separately from their children and they automatically became free upon the master's death. In some respects their position was more favorable than that of their master's wives, since they could not be divorced.

Islam has seldom used slaves for large-scale agricultural work, as was normal in the Americas. The main functions of slaves were either domestic service, military service, or concubinage. Slaves were usually considered part of one's household and treated with consideration. Any slave with talent could expect to advance. For the male slaves, domestic service could mean eventually being put in charge of the household. Military slaves had even greater potential mobility. The most promising of these could expect to be placed in command of whole battalions, or even to be given the governorship of a town or province. Egypt was, for some two hundred and fifty years, ruled by slave-kings (the Mamlukes). When each king died, his successor was chosen from among the most powerful of the slave-generals in the army. The Ottoman government, for several centuries, was run by slaves who were educated in special schools and then became government functionaries of all grades. The best of them rose to be ministers, and even Grand Viziers.

For female slaves, the path to social advancement lay in becoming the concubine of the king or of a powerful noble. Once these slave women had given birth to their masters' children, especially male children, their status changed. They were frequently freed to become one of the four allowed wives of their master (although many would plead not to have this happen, as it could open the way for them to be divorced). Among several dynasties of Islamic rulers, it became customary to have only slave wives. Thus, for example, the majority of the Abbasid caliphs and Ottoman sultans had slaves as mothers. Once the former ruler died, the mother of the new ruler became one of the most powerful figures in the kingdom. She was the head of the ruler's harem and frequently his only trusted adviser.

Curiously, over many centuries, the best educated and most powerful people in the Islamic world were either slaves or freed slaves. This meant that slavery was often the only means of advancement for those of peasant stock. And so, although the largest source for black slaves was capture in war or kidnapping from the East African coast, the largest supply of white slaves (particularly in later times) came through poorer families selling their children or themselves into slavery. In times of famine, the numbers selling themselves would be particularly large since, for the most part, Muslim slave owners observed their legal obligations to feed and clothe their slaves.

There was little breeding of slaves in Islamic society (in contrast to the Americas), and the children born of free men and slave women were freeborn. In addition, it became customary to free slaves after a number of years of good service. Therefore, the actual numbers of slaves in the Islamic world could only be maintained by a continuous supply of new slaves from outside. Once the slave trade was suppressed, mainly due to the efforts of the British in the second half of the nineteenth century, slavery in Islam gradually faded away.

In theory, all Muslims are equal regardless of race, and the majority of slaves in the Middle East converted to Islam. Although this was usually not forced, it was often a precondition to advancement and eventual freedom. In practice, the Muslim world has seen a degree of racial prejudice which has varied from time to time and place to place. It appears to have been least in the earliest days of Islam. Several of the most important figures of the Abbasid period, including the Caliph al-Mahdi, are known to have been born of black mothers or are described as having been black, indicating some presumed African ancestry. The mothers of several of the Shi'i Imams are recorded as having been African slaves. The mother of the seventh Imam was a Berber, that of the ninth Imam was Nubian, and that of the tenth came from Morocco. Therefore, the later Imams must have been dark-skinned.

But in later times, prejudice against blacks increased. A recent survey of medieval Persian poetry has demonstrated prejudice and stereotyping of blacks similar to that which occurs in the West today.[1] Nevertheless, its occurrence was not uniform, and it was still possible in these times for blacks to become governors of towns and to hold other prominent positions in the Muslim world.[2]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the sources of white slaves for Iran had almost completely dried up because of the Russian occupation of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The only continued source of slaves was from Africa. These captives were almost entirely used for domestic service (rather than concubinage). Indeed, with respect to females, Africa was almost the only source of servants for domestic service. It was difficult for Muslims to employ women within the household in any other way because Islamic law forbids the close association of men and women who are not married and not close relatives, except in a master-slave relationship. African slaves -- whether men or women -- were usually very well treated and regarded as members of the family. Their circumstances of life were certainly no worse than those of domestic servants in nineteenth-century households in Europe or America. They were usually freed after the death of their master, or after a number of years in service.

The above is not, of course, intended to be an apology for slavery in the Islamic world. There were also abominable aspects to slavery in Islam. The transport of slaves from Africa often involved much suffering and death. The purpose of this brief introduction is to demonstrate that there were considerable differences between the conditions of slavery in the West and its reality in the Muslim history.

M. MOMEN

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1. Minoo Southgate, "The Negative Images of Blacks in some medieval Iranian writings," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 17 (1984) pp. 3-36.
2. See the example quoted in Graham W. Irwin, *Africans Abroad* (New York, 1977) pp.69-72.

2. Preface, from the 1st edition (1988)  
by Abu'l-Qasim Afnan

Until quite recently in human history, slavery has been prevalent throughout the world. Everywhere, in times of war and aggression, innocent people were captured, taken into bondage, and sold as slaves. These customs were so deep-rooted that the major religions sanctioned and even institutionalized the practice of slavery. In the Jewish scriptures, slavery was made lawful but subjected to regulations (See Lev. 25:39-55). And the Apostle Paul, in the New Testament appears to have condoned it (1 Tim. 6:2-3). Later, in the fifteenth century, Nicholas V gave papal sanction for the Portuguese, under Henry the Navigator, to capture and enslave pagans.

There seems little doubt that the prophet Muhammad never looked favorably on the practice of slavery; at most he only tolerated it. Nonetheless, there are numerous passages in the Qur'an which Muslims have taken to endorse the ownership of slaves (Sura 4 [Women]:91; Sura 24 [Light]:30-32; Sura 90 [The City]:12; Sura 33 [The Confederates]:49-51). But, it was a freed slave, Bilal ibn Ribah, the Ethiopian, whom Muhammad designated as the first muezzin of Islam -- even though he was a stutterer, and when chanting the adhan, the call to prayer, he would pronounce the letter "sh" as "s."

It was only toward the end of the eighteenth century that so-called civilized man first thought seriously of abolishing the institution of human slavery. The first attempt of the French legislature in 1794, to enforce a law outlawing slavery ended in failure. The British, through much of the nineteenth century, waged a battle against the practice in the Middle East and elsewhere. Most of their efforts proved futile, however, until the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh issued the divine decree and proclaimed unequivocally the law of God.

During the 1800s, throughout the Middle East, but particularly in Iran and in the Ottoman Empire, slavery flourished. The victims were not restricted to any special class, race, or color. Dark-skinned Africans and white-skinned Georgians or Caucasians might be included among the common slaves in the cities of Iran--even though the white slaves usually received preferential treatment and lived under better conditions.

These slaves were normally captives brought to Iran from foreign lands. Most of these unfortunates went through life remembering and cherishing their homelands and their mother tongues. There arose, in consequence, a small but beautiful mixture of languages in Persia which even found expression in poetry. One Bahá'í poet, Shuridih Shirazi, who has eulogized both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Mirza

Abu'l-Fadl, wrote a charming poem in this mixed creole language.

Slaves were a part of every wealthy household. Dirty and menial tasks were their daily work, and they could be treated cruelly. The rulers made eunuchs of young boys and took them into women's quarters of their palaces as servants. The eunuchs were respected and trusted by the ladies of the household and were often taken into their full confidence. Unlike ordinary slaves, these eunuchs sometimes came to occupy places of prominence in society.

Not until the revelation of the Kitab-i-Aqdas by Bahá'u'lláh (1873) was the practice of slavery condemned and forbidden to all believers. But before this, in His Tablet to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh had promised the queen a great reward because of the efforts of her government to abolish trading in slaves.

Here are collected the stories of those black slaves who found the Most Great Revelation and came to serve the families of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh at various times. Despite their unfortunate condition, they each attained to the highest station of spirit in this life, receiving the assurance of the pleasure and acceptance of the Holy Ones.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Farzad Katirai who kindly translated this article from Persian into English. I am also grateful to Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir who assisted with the translation. I must also thank Foad Ashraf who translated into English the reminiscences of Badi'i Bushru'i regarding Isfandiyar, the servant of Bahá'u'lláh.

ABU'L-QASIM AFNAN  
OXFORD, ENGLAND

3. Editors note, from the 2nd edition (1999)  
by Anthony A. Lee

Few historical institutions are more repugnant to our modern sensibilities than that of slavery. Other forms of injustice and oppression continue to flourish, of course. But, the right of one human being to own another as property, once recognized by every nation in the world, is now universally repudiated and outlawed.

Nowhere is this feeling of repugnance for slavery stronger than in the United States, where slavery is associated — in a way that it is no where else — with racist theories and ideas of superiority of white over black. Africans were brought as slaves to the New World within a few years of Columbus's discovery. But they did not enter the American colonies until 1619, more than one-hundred years later. Nonetheless, it was in North America that the most virulent notions of white supremacy were to take root and grow, bearing their bitter fruit in ways that we continue to experience today.

Certainly slavery was an ugly fact of life for centuries in the Caribbean, in Mexico, and in the Central and South American colonies of Spain and Portugal. Taken together, ten times as many Africans were transported to Latin America as

were brought in chains to the United States. And they were brutally, inhumanly mistreated. Yet, racism never took hold in areas to the south in quite the same way as it did in the United States, for reasons that have never been adequately explained.

Despite our modern abhorrence, any student of history must realize that slavery as an institution was an accepted part of all human societies throughout most of history. It was only in the middle of the last century that it began to disappear. Before that, slavery was such a basic part of social life in most places that it was hardly even questioned. As such, it was sanctioned by both custom and religion.

The followers of Christ bought and sold slaves from the earliest days of Christianity. Certain passages in the Bible clearly approved the practice. Paul wrote:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ . . . (Ephesians 6:5)

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Colossians 4:1)

These and other biblical passages were quoted often by Christian slave owners in America to justify the morality of their position, right up to the Civil War.

Likewise, slavery was practiced in Muslim societies, and deemed legal and acceptable by orthodox Muslims. The slave ('abd), especially the Muslim slave, had an accepted position in society. While certain passages in the Qur'an sought to improve the condition of slaves and encourage manumission, the institution itself was implicitly sanctioned:

And we have guided him to the two roads of Good and Evil. Yet he made no attempt to ascend the good. And what shall teach you about how to ascend? It is the freeing of a slave; Or feeding an orphan who is your kin, Or a poor man lying in the dust, In time of famine. (Qur'an 90:11-17)

The first and only world religion which insists on the prohibition of slavery in its Sacred Texts is the Bahá'í Faith. Slavery is here, for the first time, categorically and unambiguously forbidden to all believers. Bahá'u'lláh, in His famous epistle to Queen Victoria (1869), praised the British monarch for her efforts to abolish the slave trade:

We have been informed that thou has forbidden the trading in slaves, both men and women. This, verily, is what God hath ordained in this wondrous Revelation. God hath, truly, destined a reward for thee, because of this. He, verily, will pay the doer of good his due recompense . . . (The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 33-34)

In His Most Holy Book, the *Kitab-i Aqdas* (1873), Bahá'u'lláh has written:

It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for

him who is himself a servant to buy another of God's servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet. Thus, by His mercy, hath the commandment been recorded by the Pen of justice. Let no man exalt himself above another; all are but bondslaves before the Lord, and all exemplify the truth that there is none other God but Him. (The Kitab-i Aqdas, p. 45, x72)

Thus, slavery is forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh on the grounds that it is incompatible with the principle of the equality of all people before God, the oneness of humanity.

The enormous evil of slavery and the fact that it has now passed from civilized society should not, however, blind us to the history of those millions of men and women who lived their entire lives in bondage. Slaves were devalued by their position in society — a position that Bahá'u'lláh has outlawed and rejected — but that does not mean that their lives were unimportant or that they have no story to tell.

Indeed, quite the opposite. Since we today believe that slavery was wrong, we should be eager to affirm in history the dignity and significance of the lives of individual slaves. We should hope to recover the stories, the sayings, the culture, and the biographies of slaves, in the same way that we would seek to reconstruct the personal histories of those whose stations in life were more fortunate. We should certainly guard against the danger of shifting the stigma of slavery onto the victims of the system, assuming that since bondage is distasteful so must be the lives and history of those who suffered under it.

Sadly, the latter view has most often prevailed. Because the lives of slaves — and of women, of the poor, and of others with low status in society — were accorded no value, their history has most often also been accorded no value as well — and so never recorded or deliberately forgotten. Such people are made invisible to history in this way, and it is easy for those who come after to conclude that they were unimportant, or perhaps did not exist at all.

For example, a survey of the volumes of history that have been written on African-American history in the United States will show that little has been written about the individual lives of ordinary slaves. Even the history written by African Americans themselves tends to focus on the free, the rich, the powerful, and the famous — the "talented tenth," perhaps, of the black population who were, through heroic struggle, able to lift themselves above the rest and distinguish themselves with outstanding achievement. Or, the focus is on resistance and revolt, singling out those very few slaves (and others) who lashed out violently against the evil of their oppression. Serious attention given to the life of an ordinary slave is rare. Partially, of course, this is because information is sparse. But more seriously, it is because historians have pursued a path of "redemption" for black history — seeking to balance the

horror of slavery with more positive images of African-American life.

But, to refuse to consider the life of the individual slave as a worthy subject for history implicitly rejects the idea that slaves claim a human dignity equal to their masters, and to all others. It inadvertently accepts the notion that slaves have no social value, that they were absent from history, and that they are objects unfit for study. We all must be proud of black heroes, of course, but we must not allow ourselves to forget those whose lives were not marked by extraordinary acts of defiance or outstanding achievement. This majority struggled against impossible odds to live their lives with dignity and purpose, and their lives are not without importance and meaning.

The writing of Bahá'í history has, of course, barely begun. In future decades and centuries, Bahá'í historians will no doubt fill whole libraries with the life stories of Bahá'í heroes and ordinary believers. The Bahá'í history books

that we have today are mostly concerned with events associated with the Central Figures of the Faith and the lives of prominent believers. And, this is quite naturally so. Every Bahá'í will find deep meaning in *The Dawn-Breakers*, Nabil's chronicle of early Babi history, or in *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi's summary of the first one-hundred years of Bahá'í history. But the brilliance of this early work should not blind us to the fact that there are also other stories to tell.

Edward G. Browne, in the early part of this century, lamented the lack of information about Tahirih found in Persian Bahá'í histories. Products of their

culture, the Persian men who first recorded Bahá'í history were reluctant to discuss the details of the life of a woman. Such discussion was regarded as highly improper in the Muslim society in which they lived. As a result, the information that we have today about many Babi and Bahá'í heroines is scanty.

Only recently have Bahá'ís sought to recover the early history of women in the

Faith in any systematic way. The publication of *Khadijih Bagum: The Wife of the Bab*, by Hand of the Cause Mr. H. M. Balyuzi (George Ronald, 1981) was a beginning. This was followed by a small volume of the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wife, *Munirih Khanum: Memoirs and Letters* (Kalimat Press, 1986) and Bahá'ieh Rouhani Ma'ani's *Asiyih Khanum: The Most Exalted Leaf* (George Ronald, 1993). In a similar way, *Black Pearls* seeks to tell the stories of the early believers who acted as servants in the households of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh. Here is recorded a small portion of the oral tradition of the Afnan family, the relatives of the Bab. The author, Abul Qasim Afnan, a grand-nephew of the Bab, embodies today all of the dignity, the tradition, the spirituality, and the memory of that honored family.

This new willingness to look beyond the traditional story of Babi history and to explore the history of women and servants in the early days of the Faith has

already, at first blush, yielded the most startling discovery: that women and black people were participants in the earliest and most sacred events of Bahá'í

history. In *The Dawn-Breakers*, it is recorded that on the evening of May 22, 1844, Mulla Husayn and the Bab were greeted at the door of the Bab's house by his "Ethiopian" servant. The traditions of the Afnan family inform us that it was the duty of this black servant, Mubarak, to remain awake and attentive to the needs of his Master throughout the night, and that his room was adjacent to that of the Bab. Munirih Khanum, moreover, has related that Khadijih Bagum, the Bab's wife, likewise remained awake through that fateful night, listening to the conversation from the upstairs apartments of the house:

What an extraordinary night that was! The Bab said to me: "Tonight we will entertain a dear guest." His whole being was ablaze. I was most eager to hear what He had to say, but He turned to me and told me: "It is better if you go and sleep." I did not wish to disobey Him, but I remained awake all night and could hear His blessed voice until the morning, conversing with the Babu'l-Bab [Mulla Husayn], chanting the verses, and presenting proofs and arguments. (Munirih Khanum, p. 34)

And so we learn that the first night of the Revelation, the Declaration of the Bab, was witnessed not only by one man — but also by a woman and an African servant. Although the customs of a Muslim society did not allow these two to sit in the room as the Bab revealed Himself and initiated a new era of religious history, yet they were present at the event. They heard the Great Announcement, though the conventions of society dictated that they had to remain in their separate quarters as they heard it.

That the presence of these two silent witnesses to the Declaration of the Bab was overlooked by the first chroniclers of Bahá'í history is understandable. Their social positions made them invisible to everyone but the Manifestation of God. They served quietly and invisibly in the roles allotted to them by the unjust customs of Iranian society — customs which were soon to be swept aside in the whirlwind of a New Era. Their only contribution was service.

In the Bahá'í teachings, however, service is recognized as the highest expression of faith. Service to others, and certainly to the Manifestation of God, is the highest condition that a human being can achieve. So important is this concept of servitude that the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, His eldest son and chosen successor, chose for himself the title of 'Abdu'l-Bahá — meaning servant (or slave) of Bahá'u'lláh. Choosing this title, 'Abdu'l-Bahá places himself — precisely and literally — in the same condition as the subjects of this book, a servant to the Center of the Faith. This, 'Abdu'l-Bahá insisted, was his real honor, his highest station.

Some Bahá'ís in America felt uncomfortable with this title, as did some Persian believers. These Americans preferred to think of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the return of Christ and some continued to refer to him in those terms. In reply he wrote:

You have written that there is a difference among the believers concerning the 'Second Coming of Christ.' Gracious God! Time and again this question hath arisen . . . My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion . . . No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will ever have, except 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory. (quoted in World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 139)

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá forcefully rejects any station except the station of service, a station which is available to all people equally.

Both the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh lived in the closed Muslim society of nineteenth-century Iran. Naturally, they spoke the languages of the people and had no choice but to observe the customs of the time. For families of means who lived in the cities of Iran, the seclusion of the women of the household was a supreme necessity. Lower class women and female slaves could conduct business in public, but all others were expected to remain at home. Even their houses were walled compounds, enclosing trees and pools, and divided into two sections — sometimes two separate houses. One section was for men, the biruni;

the other for women, the andarun. The women of the household were more or less restricted from the male quarters, though they might enter them wearing the veil. Here is where male visitors might be found, the public part of the house.

Respectable women could seldom venture from the andarun. They left their houses only occasionally, heavily veiled from head to toe, usually at night to reduce the possibility of being seen; and then only to visit the house of a relative. Any other destination could easily raise rumors of impropriety, unchastity, or worse. Women of this class were expected to have no contact at all with men, beyond their husbands and immediate relatives, such as fathers or sons.

In such a society, domestic slaves were absolutely necessary to carry on the normal business of any household. Strict Muslim practice forbade the women of the family from even answering a knock at the door. Manservants could enter the andarun, as could other close male relatives, and so they could attend to the needs of the women of the house. They took care of the daily shopping, conducted the public business of the family, and handled other routine affairs outside the andarun. Domestic slaves were usually purchased at a very young age, trained and trusted as members of the family. They generally took their duties seriously and exhibited fierce loyalty to their households. They were

never sold, of course.

This book is a first attempt to recover the histories of the servants in the households of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh.

4. Intro, from the 2nd edition (1999)

by Abu'l-Qasim Afnan

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explore the history of women and servants in the early days of the Faith has already, at first blush, yielded the most startling discovery: that women and black

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that they both had to remain in their separate quarters, separated from Master and guest, as they observed this momentous event, but their participation in the event should not be erased. That the presence of these two silent witnesses to the Declaration of the Bab was overlooked by the first chroniclers of Bahá'í history is understandable. The social positions of women and slaves made them invisible to everyone but the Manifestation of God. They served, quiet and unseen, in the roles allotted to them by the unjust customs of society — customs which were soon swept aside in the whirlwind of a New Era. Their only contribution was service. In the Bahá'í teachings, however, service is recognized as the highest expression of faith. Service to others, and certainly to the Manifestation of God, is the highest condition that a human being can achieve. . . "

See the complete book online here.

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