Chapter Five

THE SLAVE TRADE AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN IRAN

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The study of the slave trade and the African diaspora continue to attract the attention of scholars. However, while the Atlantic world slavery is widely recognized as a unit of academic study, the complexity of the slave trade in Islamic societies, its social, religious and historical dimension is less well known and requires deeper insights. Most studies have focused on the Atlantic slave trade and the involvement of European and American traders, thereby ignoring the internal trade within Africa or the substantial number of Africans who were taken into Asia. The bias for the Atlantic trade also led to a focus on Christian traders and the role of Christian and European humanitarians in the abolition of the slave trade. In recent years, however, scholars have published substantially on the role of slavery in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa and the Indian Ocean. Yet, no study of slavery and the slave trade in Iran has so far been undertaken.

The study of slavery in the context of the Islamic heartland, including the Ottoman Empire, Iran and the Arab states, is the recognition that there was an important component of the population that was enslaved, and that the population and cultural interaction were mixed -- some theorists might even say 'hybrid' - and hence there was not a uniform 'ethnic' Iranian, Arab, or any other racial group. The influx of population is an important aspect of Middle Eastern history, and the people who were forcibly brought into this region through slavery came from the peripheries of the Muslim world - from the steppes of southern Russia and from Africa, especially east and northeast Africa for Iran, but West Africa for much of the Ottoman domains.

In this paper I attempt to examine the sources, destinations, and existence of Africans and their heritage in Iran. This essay demonstrates not only links between Iran and Africa but also slavery and the African diaspora as a continuum, which flows from Africa to Asia, the dynamics of African indigenous religious practices, and Iran's Islamic tradition.

East and northeastern Africa were the main sources of slaves destined for southern Iran. The process of enslavement, transportation and sale of Africans occurred through an established slave trade network in the African interior. The sea trade route of the Indian Ocean significantly facilitated the transportation of a large number of enslaved Africans from the Swahili coast to Muscat and Sur from where slaves were eventually carried into the Ottoman Empire, the Arab States, and Iran. Pilgrims were also bringing slaves through western and southwestern Iran from the Arabian cities of Baghdad,

An Iranian of African origin

Karbala, Mecca and Medina to Iranian markets.[1]

When slaves landed at Iranian ports, they were taken to the customs house and were then sent for disposal in various areas. Nowhere in Iran were there specialised slave markets.[2] There were no fixed days for the sale of slaves either. Instead, the owner of a boat would take his cargo to a hired dwelling where slaves were then sold privately. There were also several caravansarais and Bazars (markets) where slaves were taken and sold publicly.[3]

Many enslaved Africans were sold to local people in southern Iran. A small number were conveyed from southern ports to the interior and were absorbed in different locations and particular socioeconomic sectors. A large number of slaves along the shores of the Persian Gulf served as pearl fishers, labourers or domestics.[4] In Baluchistan, they were employed as agricultural labourers and domestics. In urban areas enslaved Africans were mainly employed as domestics. A great number of African slaves were engaged in specific tasks in the harams of Shahs and princes. One group consisted of eunuchs who served the Shah, his wives and their children.[5] African male slaves were employed as *lala* (male nurses) and female slaves as *daya* (wet nurses) and *dada* (females nurses). The children of African slaves were termed *Khanazad* (house-born).[6] Another group of African slaves was engaged in the royal army. The confidential household troops or guards of princes, called *ghulam-i Shahi,* were originally selected from among slaves. Arnold Kemball refers to two types of African slaves in Iran based on geographical origin: Swahili or Africans from the coast of Zanzibar; and *habashi* or Abyssinian from Ethiopia, the shores of the Red Sea, Jidda, Hodaidah, and Mocha.[7] The Abyssinian male slaves were often treated as *pishkhidmats,* confidential servants respected by the household. Habashi female slaves were most generally retained as concubines or employed as attendants in *andaruns* or *harams* (the women's quarters).

The development of the trade in African slaves was given religious justification by some in Islamic societies on the grounds of the need to convert a large number of

Africans to Islam, and was consciously used by them to justify enslavement. The culture and nature of slavery in Islamic societies derived from Islamic tenets. Islam had laws regulating the treatment, sources, marriage and emancipation of slaves. Slaves were considered to be part of the household, and since Islam opened many ways for their emancipation they could gradually be absorbed into the society.

The trade in African slaves led to the formation of diasporic communities of Afro-Iranians along the shores of the Persian Gulf from the southwest to the southeastern parts of the country. After settlement, the divided lines of physical type, language and culture between enslaved Africans and the indigenous people became apparent. According to Robert Binning, the linguist and traveller in 1850, many African slaves in Shiraz had been brought from Zanzibar or had been born of parents from that area. At the present time, however, they are not visible in the city. The process of integration within a 'white dominated society' explains the invisibility of Africans in certain regions. However, the survival of Afro-Iranian communities and the development of their cultures are conspicuous in the southern regions.

The relationship between slavery and the diaspora highlighted cultural continuity. Enslaved Africans imported from east and northeastern Africa introduced cultural features central to their identity. They unconsciously struggled for the survival of African traditions and successfully preserved their heritage. Despite their intercultural variations, the imported cultures underlined principles representing African unity and their belief in supernatural elements. The cultures of the two societies of Africans and Iranians came into contact. Thus, the beliefs and values of enslaved Africans did not survive intact but blended with the new culture. The distribution of different healing cults signifies African cultural transformation in different countries of the Indian Ocean, including Iran.[9]

The practice of spirit possessions such as *zar*, *gowat* and *liwa* derived from Africa spread wherever the enslaved settled. The slave trade and pilgrimage contributed significantly to such cultural diffusions such as *zar* practices in Iran, Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Saudi Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf states, and Turkey. Ethiopia - especially the Gurage area - was an important centre for the supply of slaves to the Iranian market. The continuing practice of *zar* spirit possession in Iran is attributable to the enslaved Africans imported from these regions, since zar was widely practiced among the Gallas and the people of Gurage and Shoa.[10] In the mid- twentieth century, Iranian government officers outlawed the practice of spirit possessions, forcing the healers to perform their ceremonies in secret. As a result, some African-derived ceremonies such as *liwa* have gradually disappeared or been modified.[11]

The performers of the *zar* ritual, who are all blacks, are called *baba zar* or *mama zar*.[12] The association with music and dance is crucial in spirit possessions. The *zar* adherents trace many ailments to malicious winds, so they perform their ceremony by singing special songs and beating the dohol (drum), accompanied with rhythmic movements of head and body to ward off evil spirits from the body.[13]

Until today, people throughout the southern part of Iran from Khuzistan to Baluchistan believe in metaphysical forces. However, differences in regional varieties of the *zar* cult should be taken into consideration.[14] The *zar* ceremony has changed over time and its practice varies from place to place. According to the people of southern Iran, decades ago, the *zar* ceremony was much simpler than today's and it required only sacrificing a sheep. Nowadays, it has become a more luxurious and expensive ceremony.[15] Henri Masse had observed the *zar* ceremony used against illness in 1923 at Jask.[16] Based on his description, some common elements are still visible in the *zar* ceremony, such as the sick person being covered by a veil, a *mama* or *baba*, a stick to beat the sick slightly, chanting, and *qalyan* (water pipe) with a smoke-producing plant. Many Islamic elements were incorporated into the healing cult of *zar* highlighting the concepts of belonging and tolerance within a Muslim society. Through such a cultural and religious association people who were ethnically different were enabled to interact with the host society in such a way that they secured their cultural identity and were socially accepted.

The cultural orientation was maintained through social contact, traditional customs and habits. The Afro-Iranians' status as a minority in the host society was a driving force to sustain and reconstruct their cultural heritage. Muhammad Riza Darvishi states that the prevalence of psychological disorders among the people of the south of Iran caused by hardship in their lives were significant reasons for sustaining and spreading the belief in invisible forces.[18] There might be other causes besides healing that attract a specific social group or gender to participate in other parallel spirit possessions in different countries. The establishment of Islam in Hausaland and the subsequent political, economic and social transformations resulted in the participation of excluded Muslim women in the bori cult in order to deal with a male-dominated world.[19] Similarly, in Kuwait *zar* attracts the middle-aged and middle-class women alienated from westernised society seeking their familiar traditional world.[20]

In tracing the historical roots of spirit possession of the *zar-bori* cult I. Lewis states:

> this cult, or complex of cults, has its roots in Islamic West Africa (principally Nigeria and Niger), source of the *bori* component, and in Ethiopia, with its mixed Christian and Islamic heritage, source of zar. In the Sudan, both these currents flow together forming, in the presence of the local *tumbura* and other local cults, the hybrid *zar-bori* which has in turn spread to north Africa and the Middle East.[21]

Not all scholars agree with this hypothesis about the origin of *zar* and *bori*, however; and some refer to spirits as having originated in Persia.[22]

In speculating freely upon the cultural traits common between Persia, north-east Africa and the Sudanic region, Frobenius developed the hypothesis that zar and bori were manifestations of an early system of beliefs derived from Persia and spread throughout the grassland belt from the Abyssinian highland through Kordofan to Hausaland.[23]

Socioeconomic, geographic and cultural variables peculiar to the host society as well as cultural traditions such as spirit possession originating from Africa have been important in the creation of Afro-Iranian identities in Iran. The association of these elements was significant in the formation of Afro-Iranian communities rendering them one of the ethnic groups whose identities were characterised by their assimilation into Iranian society and their inherited African features and traditions. The recognition of the historical and cultural components associated with Afro-Iranian identity categorises it as a significant constituent of Iranian society and illuminates its identifiable connection with Africa.

NOTES:

[1]James Bassett, (1887) *Persia the Land of the Imams: a Narrative of Travel and Residence 1871-1885* (London: Blackie & Son),p. 287.

[2]C.J. Wills, (1886) *Persia As It Is* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle& Rivington,), 75; Bassett, (1887) p., 288.

[3] Kemball to Robertson and Sheil, 8 July 1842, Public Record Office, London, FO 84/426.

[4]Arthur Arnold, (1877)*Through Persia by Caravan* (New York: Harper & Brothers,) p. 433.

[5]Report on the Persian Gulf by Kemball, 1847. PRO: FO 84/692; Sadr Azim to Meerza Mahmood Khan, 19.10. 1853, PRO: FO 84/919, 167-170.

[6]Sir John Malcolm, (1827) *Sketches of Persia* (London: John Murray) p. 19.

[7]Kemball 1847; Kemball to Robertson and to Sheil, 8.7.1842. .

[8]Robert B.M.A. Binning (1857) *Journal of Two Years' Travel in Persia, Ceylon* (London: Wm. H. Allen and Co.) p. 272.

[9]Edward A. Alpers (1997) 'The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions for Research' in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East,* Vol. XVII, N0. 2, pp.. 62-81, 69.

[10]Richard Natvig (1987) 'Oromos, slaves, and the zar Spirits: A contribution to the history of the zar cult,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 20/ 4, pp. 669-689 & 679.

[11]Taghi Modarressi (1966) 'The Zar Cult in South Iran', in Raymond Prince, ed., *Trance and Possession States* (Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society) p. 151; Ghulam Hosayn Saidi, *Ahl-i Hava* (Tihran: Amir Kabir, 2535) p. 93.

[12]Father and mother in Persian language, respectively

[13]Hosayn-i Hamidi (1996) *Hasht Bihisht* (Tihran: Mahur,) p. 20.

[14]Natvig (1987) p. 669.

[15]My interviews with Shanbah Rav?n, an Afro-Iranian in Bandar Abbas, November 2000.

[16]M. R. Izady, 'The Gulf's ethnic diversity', in L. G. Potter and G. G. Sick, eds. *Security in the Persian Gulf,* New York: Palgrave, p. 61 mentions the settlement of African slaves and farmers in the Minab-Jask region by Sultan Seyyid Said of Oman and Zanzibar in the early 19th century to cultivate spices.

[17]Henri Masse (1954) *Persian Beliefs and Customs* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files,) p. 755.

[18]Muhammad Riza Darvishi, (1378) *Musiai va Khaisih* (Tihran: Mahur) p. 19.

[19]Ismail H. Abdalla, "Neither Friend nor Foe: the malam practitioner - yan bori relationship in Hausaland" in I. M. Lewis, et al. eds. (1991) *Women's Medicine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,) p. 41.

[20]I. M. Lewis (1991) 'Zar in Context: the Past, the Present and Future of an African Healing Cult' in I. M. Lewis, et al. eds., (1991) p. 6.

[21]Lewis, (1991) p. 2.

[22]Natvig (1987) p. 674.

[23]Pamela Constantinides (1991) 'The History of Zar in the Sudan: Theories of Origin, Recorded Observation and Oral Tradition', in Lewis, et al. eds., (1991) pp. 83- 99, 84.