

# Slaves And Slave Trading In Shi'i Iran, AD 1500-1900

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## ABSTRACT

In 1501, the Safavids proclaimed themselves the new rulers of the Iranian plateau establishing Shi'ism as a "state" religion and a "new" economic and political order. The Safavid "new order," however, was an impossibility without the slaves, forced urban and rural labor, and periodic population transfers. This paper examines the changes in slave labor practices and slave trading in Iran from 1500 to 1900. The establishment of an Islamic empire did little to diminish the numbers and uses of slaves in Iranian society and economies. Indeed, slaves and the peddling trade in slaving greatly expanded during and after the Safavid rulers assumed power. By the nineteenth century, shortages of Iranian peasant labor, the expansion of land holdings in Central and Southern Iran, and the boom in Iran's trade through the Persian Gulf altered the older slave trade in several significant ways in particular the numbers, ages and usages of African slaves. Between 1840 and 1880, Iran's participation in the Indian Ocean trade surpassed all previous slave-trading practices including the pre-Safavid era.

While religion and politics are much in vogue today when discussing Iran, it is equally important to understand Iran in terms of its economies and societies. Indeed, Iran's contemporary political economy has been examined by several researchers (Bakhash 1989; Halliday 1979; Katousian 1981), and a few works have focused on Iran's social history, such as the history of its labor forces (Ladjevardi 1985). However, the history of Iranian slave labor (*ghulamān*, *'abidan*, *badigan*, and *kanizan*) remains a perplexing void in Iran's historiographical landscape. While there is continuous evidence of "habashi" or "Abyssinian" or "zangi" servants in middle and upper-class Iranian families and among pastoral clans from the early 1500s to the beginning of the twentieth century, there are few if any researched articles or dissertations on the subject of slaves, slave trade, trade routes, collection stations, creditors, or slavery for the medieval, early modern or modern periods of Iranian history.

Slaves and slave trading in Iran have been recorded in written texts as early as the third century AD era of Sasanian kings (Morony 1981:136, 148, 164-165, and

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174-175). Accounts exist that detail a regular but modest commerce in overland slave trading between Southern Russia and Northern Iran during the seventh to the tenth centuries (Ashtor 1976:24, 106-107, and 167). The well-known ninth-century Zanj Uprising of 15,000 slaves occurred in Southern Iraq, but may very well have involved officials from Islamic Iran. Indeed, the Qarmatian movement in the Persian Gulf region did involve Iranian slaves, merchants and military, both as participants and as conquerors (Faramarzi 1968; Ashtor 1976:115). Medieval texts including travelers' accounts make reference to the enslavement and sale of slaves as well as the use of slave labor in agricultural, artisanal, military, and domestic activities throughout the Southern Iran and the Persian Gulf region.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, slave trading and slave labor remained both an essential and integral part of Iranian society up to the end of the fifteenth century; that is, on the eve of the Safavid era (AD 1501-1722).

The period from 1500 to 1900 was a period of far-reaching changes and transformations within Iran's society and economy. The Safavid Empire restructured the society and economy while instituting an "imperial" administrative and religious tradition. Slave trading and slave labor became a significant contributor to the new Safavid "order" of revived and expanded building construction, public services, road and bridge construction, and long-distance trade. During the eighteenth century, a period of intense and bitter Shi'i Islamic conflict, slave trading and slave labor continued to contribute to the political, economic and social changes within Iran. By the nineteenth century, moreover, slave trading and slave labor went through a "boom" period of expansion as slave labor multiplied due to domestic and foreign demands on Iran's economy and society (Ricks 1988). Records show that despite the mid-nineteenth century ban on slave trading within Iran, slaves remained active in Iranian households and village fields up to the Constitutional Movement of 1905 to 1911. It is possible to characterize portions of Iran's early modern society and economy as a *slave society and economy* due to the integral and essential role played by slave laborers in the daily household chores, tilling of fields, tending of flocks, moving of credit and trade, building and repairing public structures, making and selling artisan goods, defending property, and assisting in short as well as long-distance trade. This paper intends to outline the general course of Iran's social and economic history over the period of AD 1500 to 1900, and then assess the presence of slave trading and slave labor for that same period.

## I.

In 1501, the Safavid family proclaimed themselves the new rulers of the Iranian plateau, establishing Shi'i Islam as the new empire's religion and the Safavid family as the imperial dynasty (AD 1501-1722). By 1602, the new spacious and prosperous city of Isfahan was completed and geographically centered in the

middle of the Iranian plateau between northern and southern Iran, and between western Ottoman Iraq and the eastern Hindi Kush mountains. The "new order" of the Safavid family had not only centralized the regional economic, social, and political affairs of historical Iran, Shi'ism also had provided the new rulers with a religious and political identity distinct from the surrounding Sunni Islamic empires.

By 1602, most of the formerly-Sunni Muslims of Iran had accepted Shi'ism. A significant number, however, did not accept Safavid rule, prompting Shah Abbas I (1588-1626) to institute a number of administrative changes (Savory 1980). The reforms were to weaken the political and social prestige of the original administrative and military elite while strengthening the authority of the Safavid family. Two strategies were adapted by Shah Abbas I: (1) an expansion of the earlier system of slave raids into the Christian Georgian and Armenian regions of the Caucasus, and (2) the re-settlement of certain peoples both urban and rural within Iran and along the empire's borders. Village and pastoral peoples were settled along Iran's northern borders where they had little or no historical relations with the indigenous population thus ensuring Iran's territorial integrity and Safavid stability through the loyalty of the newly-created border "clients." Both policies were intended to supply the Safavid administration and military with a "new" administrative and military elite loyal primarily to the Safavids while ensuring the commercial prosperity and safety of the empire (Reid 1983:19-20, 124-125).

The centralization coincided with the emergence of an Ottoman Empire to the west and a Mughul Empire to the East. The emergence of a centralized and prosperous Safavid Iran also coincided with the rise of the European global trading companies, particularly the English East India Company (AD 1600), the Dutch Oost-Indische Compagnie (AD 1602), and the French Compagnie des Indes Orientales (AD 1664). Both soldiers for foreign wars and domestic labor for the continued construction and public service projects of Safavid Iran necessitated new sources of labor. Already familiar with the medieval trade in slave labor, the Safavids like other rulers in northern Iran drew on the Christian villages of the Caucasus, particularly from the Armenian, Georgian, and Circassian population. Armenians, Georgians, and Circassians were converted to Shi'i Islam and trained in administrative and military affairs while young Georgian, Armenian, and Circassian girls were forced into the royal harem.<sup>2</sup>

Following the establishment of Isfahan as the imperial capital city, and the location of the principal financial and administrative offices in central Iran, Shah Abbas I began to resettle large numbers of urban and rural peoples around Isfahan, and along the empire's frontiers. Kurdish and Lur villages were resettled in Northern Khurasan while Armenian jewelers and craftsmen from Southern Russia were brought to a suburb of Isfahan (New Julfa). Armenian and Georgian villagers were relocated from the Caucasus to regions west and southwest of Isfahan. Both the urban and rural peoples from the Caucasus solved several of Shah Abbas'

political and economic problems. The slave institutions created a lasting demand for royal domestic slaves, and able military and administrative talent. One of the factors contributing to the demise of the Safavids two centuries later was the Safavid failure to continue to draw on the ablest of slaves from the Caucasus, particular from the region of Georgia.

Soon after, Shah Abbas I turned his attention to expanding the overland routes of the empire and sought foreign assistance in establishing an Iranian presence in the Persian Gulf. In 1622, a joint Safavid-English expedition dislodged the Portuguese merchants and military from the strategic island of Hormuz at the southern choke-point of the Persian Gulf. With the Portuguese relegated to a few islands and to the port of Kung on the Persian coast, the way was open for the English, French and Dutch East India companies to establish trading houses on Iran's southern shores. A new port was established on the Iranian mainland called Bandar Abbas and very rapidly eclipsed Hormuz Island as the port-of-call for the major Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf dhows. The seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century prosperity of Iran's ports and inland markets reflected the "opening up" of its trade and Gulf commerce to the Indian Ocean and to world merchants and markets. While the seafaring community of the Indian Ocean was well-acquainted with the Gulf trade, the Safavid period drew even greater attention to the goods and products of the Gulf region. The changes in the world economy and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emergence of English seapower affected the Gulf and Iran in a number of profound ways, including the abolition of the Gulf and Southern Iranian slave trade with East Africa.

Shi'ism did little to change an already Islamic Iran. The principal effect was seen in the definition of Iran's political authority. More so than with Sunni Islam, Shi'ism stressed the role of the Imamate and the religious leaders (*mujtahids*) in the spiritual and political well-being of the Islamic community. Islamic political theory generally enhanced the role of Islamic rulers. Initially, Shi'ism did the same for the Safavid rulers or *shahs* both in terms of their spiritual and imperial functions. The administrative and military reforms under Shah Abbas I, aimed to curtail the political and economic power of the old social tribal elites, did little to hinder the religious hierarchy. Indeed, during the thirty-eight years of Shah Abbas' reign, the Shi'i *mujtahids* began to accumulate property and gain access to landed wealth as the old social order collapsed under the Safavid reforms. The old elite increasingly shifted large amounts of land and numbers of buildings towards religious endowments, or *waqf* property. The property was managed by the *mujtahids* with profits going to the poor and social institutions assisted by the Shi'i clergy. The *waqf* property also was tax-free thereby escaping the rapaciousness of the Safavid tax collectors, the new social elites' greed, and the claims of the slave administrative and military leaders. By 1722, the end of the Safavid empire was realized with the Afghan siege and seizure of the Safavid prized capital city

of Isfahan. However, with the assistance of the pre-Safavid elites, the Shi'i leaders were just beginning to flex their political muscle.

Politically, Iran split into two regions with capital cities located in the north in Mashhad and then in Tehran, and in the south in Shiraz. Along with the political and economic realignments during the eighteenth-century, there followed religious and social adjustments. Shi'i Islamic leaders waged an intense political and theological war as the Usuli and Akhbari schools wrestled with the concepts of *ijtihad* and *taqlid*; a warfare that focused on the political role of the religious elite. The Akhbaris opposed *ijtihad* or legal interpretation of Islamic law while the Usulis favored expert legal interpretation and sought greater independence from temporal rule. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Usulis emerged as victors (Algar 1976, 1969). By 1800, the Qajar dynasty had reunited Northern and Southern Iran with a new capital in Tehran. The nineteenth-century relations between the new Qajar rulers and the Shi'i leaders were never like the earlier relations between Safavid king and the Shi'i clergy. The Usuli Shi'i leaders with the assistance of merchants and landlords successfully began to challenge Qajar rule during the second half of the nineteenth century.

## II.

Throughout the period from 1500 to 1900, slave trading and slave labor had expanded in new directions unhindered generally by the political disputes between ruler and religious. Indeed, the slave trade to and from Iran dates to the earlier imperial epochs including the Islamic period. The Safavid period, however, inaugurated newer uses for slaves as the economic conditions within Iran created newer demands for slave labor. The records regarding the origins of the slaves, the slave collection centers, the annual importation of slaves, the slave traders and creditors, slave markets and the final destination of the slave are neither clear nor accurate. The imperial court records focused only on the royal household and imperial slaves, while provincial and traveler accounts are silent on the exact nature of the slave trade or background of the slaves. There are, however, a number of sources that give a new and revealing look at the extent of the slave trade, and the numbers of the slaves within Iranian society.

Iskander Beg Munshi, the major Safavid court historian, mentions in detail the importation of the Georgian, Armenian, and Circassian slaves (*ghulaman* and *kanizan*).<sup>3</sup> He, however, records little information about Isfahan's slave markets and its role in the slave trade. The seventeenth-century slave trade differs little from the earlier period except that fewer slaves appeared to come from the Caucasus and more from the Persian Gulf. The size of the royal court had indeed expanded if the numbers of male and female slaves including white and black eunuchs are any indicators. According to a contemporary historian, Shah Sultan Husayn (d.

AD 1722) made it a practice to arrive at Isfahan's markets on the first days of the Iranian New Year (March 21) with his entire court in attendance. It was estimated by the contemporary recorder that 5,000 male and female black and white slaves including the 100 black eunuchs comprised the royal party (Asaf 1969:106-107 and *passim*; Keyvani 1982:189). While the quality of the royal slaves appeared to have diminished, the quantity did not decrease.

Eighteenth-century accounts note a variety of administrative and military positions throughout the provinces that were occupied at times by black slaves. In AD 1717, Ya'qub Sultan was appointed the Governor of Bandar Abbas, the principal port for Southern and Central Iran. A contemporary account notes that Ya'qub was a black slave (Mara'shi Safavi 1948:38). The eighteenth century was a period of tribal resurgence, according to some researchers. It was also a period, they argue, of bureaucratic decline including a decline in slave troops and slave administrative positions, such as *qullar aqasi bashi*, although research has shown that Georgian slaves could still be found in the early Qajar courts of the 1820s (Lambton 1976:111, 124). In 1736, Nadir Shah concluded one of several treaties with the Ottomans. One of the provisions was the return of Persian slaves; it is recorded that several thousand slaves were returned from Ottoman Iraq to Afshar Iran (Olson 1975:106).

The eighteenth-century Gulf slave trade and slave population, however, seemed to expand. In 1763, the Dutch trading company occupied Kharg Island close to the northern Gulf port of Basra. In order to protect their property and pearl fishing industries, the Dutch settled 100 "caffree slaves" on Kharg Island along with a small contingent of Chinese farmers (Amin 1967:147). During the rule of Karim Khan Zand (AD 1753-1779) in Shiraz, much of the former Safavid financial and administrative system was reinstated including the Georgian court slaves (both male and female), the *qullar aqasi bashi* post and the royal slave units (Perry 1979:208, 213, 217, 247 and 280).

By the early nineteenth century, slave trading and slave importations increased into the southern Persian Gulf region from East Africa by way of Oman from the 1820s to the 1870s (Ricks 1988:67), and into southern Russia from North-eastern Iran and Northwestern Afghanistan by way of the Transoxiana region (Issawi 1971:124-128; Lambton 1970:222). Slave trading in the Caucasus was active during the same period with the Lesghis in Daghestan as the principal slave traders/peddlers (Atkin 1980:15, 17). While there is presently little detailed evidence of slave activity in the early part of the nineteenth century, estate papers and royal decrees indicate the presence of slaves within upper-class households as domestic servants and in the fields as agricultural laborers (Qa'immaqami 1969:167, 169-171, 265 and 344).

Evidence of extensive trade routes, financing and marketing of slaves, and importation figures for Iran are yet to be worked out systematically for the

nineteenth century (Ricks 1988:66-67). However, three contemporary accounts for the second half of the nineteenth century indicate the extensive nature of the slave community within Iranian society; an extensiveness that came only as a result of a long association with slavery and slave trading within the Iranian medieval and early-modern economies.

In 1867, Mirza Abdul Ghaffar, a Qajar administrator, was asked by Nasir ul-Din Shah Qajar to compile an assessment of Tehran's population; that is, to carry out a census. Other cities were requested also to carry out the same assessment. Mirza Abdul Ghaffar formulated a questionnaire, established a committee and then carried out the census in the winter of 1867. By the spring of 1868, the results were published in part as follows (Pakdaman 1974:324-347) (see Table 1).

The 1867 Census of Tehran revealed that 17,655 black slaves and servants, or 12 percent of the total 147,256 people lived in Tehran. The Census also showed that the male and female slaves (*ghulam* and *kaniz*) numbered 3,770 or 2.5 percent of the total population. What the Census failed to reveal was the category of the missing 1,177, which completed the population figure of 147,256. As was the case in most population estimates in nineteenth-century European diplomatic and domestic Persian records, the category of "servants and other retainers" frequently included the "white slaves" from the southern Russian and Indian Ocean regions including the Caucasus, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Keeping in mind that the 1867 Census was unusual in its listing the "black" or African

*Table 1*  
*Population Assessment of Tehran, AD 1867*

|       |                                      |
|-------|--------------------------------------|
| <hr/> |                                      |
| 1.    | Total Number of Tehran's Population: |
|       | Six quarters of Tehran = 147,256     |
|       | All military troops = 8,480          |
|       | = <u>155,736</u>                     |
| 2.    | Non-Military Personnel               |
|       | Homeowners = 101,893                 |
|       | Renters = 45,363                     |
|       | = <u>147,256</u>                     |
| 3.    | Total Number of Categories           |
|       | Men = 42,467                         |
|       | Women = 45,063                       |
|       | Children = 40,894                    |
|       | Black slaves (male) = 756            |
|       | Black slaves (female) = 3,014        |
|       | [White male/female slaves = 1,177]   |
|       | Servants = <u>13,885</u>             |
|       | TOTAL = <u>147,256</u>               |
| <hr/> |                                      |

slaves in Tehran's population as a separate category, it did so without including the "other slaves" in Tehran's society. Thus, the missing category in the 1867 Census may very well have been the "white slaves" as the 1,177 people who were not listed in the total Tehran population figure. By adding the 1,177 "white slaves" to the number of "black slaves," the estimate of Tehran's total slave population becomes 4,947 slaves, or 3.3 percent of the total population, and the combined numbers of slaves *and* servants was therefore 18,832, or 13 percent of the total Tehran population.

In 1877, Mirza Husayn Khan, the principal financial officer of Isfahan, was commissioned to survey the properties and lands of Isfahan and the surrounding villages, fields and lands. In doing so, he reported that a total of 199 guilds and associations existed in Isfahan between 1877 and 1891, noting that one of them was designated "The Association of Male and Female Slaves" (Husayn Khan 1963):

No. 193. The Association of Male and Female Slaves (*jama'at-e ghulam va kiniz*). In Isfahan, there are many slaves. Some are free, some remain as slaves. The majority are children of slaves (*khanehzad*). At one time when the sale of slaves . . . flourished, many were brought to Isfahan and sold. All of them reproduced. Some of them are half breeds. While it is some years now that the sale of slaves is forbidden, a few are [still] brought into this region from Ethiopia and Zanzibar. (P.1227)

Finally, in 1877, a high-ranking officer of the religious center in Mashhad often left his home to tend to business matters in distant Tehran. In order to ensure the smooth running of his Mashhad personal estate, he left specific instructions for each of his household servants to follow regarding their tasks in the household and on the village's lands. In the household, the officer owned fifteen servants and slaves in addition to one village and two orchards. In writing out his instructions, he mentioned in particular the "black servant" women in the house whose well-being he carefully prescribed (Gurney 1983). The gentleman's diary reveals the essential role of slaves and servants within upper-class households. It also indicates the widespread presence of black slaves within Iranian households not only in Tehran but also in Iran's principal provincial towns, such as Mashhad and Isfahan.

From AD 1500 to 1900, Iran had a continuous trade in slaves, both white and black, from Southern Russia and Central Asia, and from the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean region. The slave trade flourished briefly in the mid-seventeenth century under Shah Abbas' reforms and the Safavid "renaissance," and once more in the mid-nineteenth century under the Qajar shahs. Both periods were times of far-reaching social, economic, and political changes within Iran and beyond its frontiers. The need for slave labor, particularly during the nineteenth century, arose in response to the increase in cotton, tobacco, opium, and rice production. With the dramatic rise in export "cash crops," new irrigation systems, the widespread seizure of agricultural lands by town merchants from tribal lords and the need for new



farm labor necessitated an increase in Iran's labor forces both within the Central and Southern Iranian plateaus and the Persian Gulf coastal lands, particularly as the integration of large portions of Iran's agricultural crops into the Indian Ocean economy accelerated. Nineteenth-century demands for Persian shawls and carpets for the Indian and European markets competed with demands for Persian opium, rice, tobacco, and cotton.

By 1900, Iran's trade with India was indistinguishable from its trade with the Gulf; so successful was the integration of Gulf affairs into the Indian Ocean commercial world. By early 1900, slaves were no longer a principal item of trade due to increases in Iran's own labor forces, shifts away from opium, tobacco, and cotton exports, and the heavy hand of the British maritime anti-slave patrols. Furthermore, Iran was in the midst of a nationalist uprising, which culminated in the Constitutional Movement of 1905-1911. Slave troops and slave field hands were clearly no longer politically, economically or legally acceptable. The presence of domestic slaves, however, in both the urban and rural regions of Southern Iran had not ceased as quickly. Some Iranians today attest to the continued presence of African and Indian slave girls among the pastoral peoples, such as the Bakhtiari ilkhans.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, the short and long-term impact of Iran's historical association with and involvement in slaves, slavery and the region's slave trade on its society, economy, politics and culture for the sixteenth to twentieth centuries has only just begun to be examined and analyzed. Comparative analysis of regional data, increased cooperation between scholars of Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and India, and a rigorous examination of archival and oral resources will undoubtedly alter the present assessments of slaves and slave trading in Iran's medieval and early modern past.

#### NOTES

- 1 See W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, edited by C.E. Bosworth in the E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, Vol. 5 (London: Luzac and Company, 1968), pp. 220, 222, 227-228, 236, 240, 253, 261, 284 and 291 on Turkish slaves in the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries; *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, edited by H. Gibb, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 401 on a pious man in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Hormoz region who had a slave girl and slave herdsmen; J. Aubin, *Deux Sayyids de Bam au Xve Siecle* (Wiesbaden 1956), pp. 36-37, 41-42 on slave troops in Bam, pp. 92 and 94 on hundreds of Negro slaves in Bam, and pp. 99-100 and 107 on female slaves; and Adnan Mazara'I, *Tarikh-e Eqtesadi va Ejtemai-ye Iran va Iraniyan az Aghaz ta Safaviyyeh* (Economic and Social History of Iran and Iranians from the Beginning to the Safavids), Tehran, 1348/1969, p. 313 on slave cultivators and artisans in the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, p. 3143 on an Iranian slave trader with 12,000 black slaves (*bardeh-e siyahpusht*) in AD 936, and p. 315 on the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Zand Uprising in the southern Iraq salt fields.
- 2 Nasrullah Falsafi, *Zendegani-ye Shah Abbas Avval* (The Life of Shah Abbas I), Vol. 1, (Tehran, 1353/1974), pp. 175-176 on the establishment of the slave "recruitment" system similar to

- the Ottoman's *devshirme*. See Ahmad Ashraf, "Historical Obstacles to the Development of a Bourgeoisie in Iran," edited by M.A. Cook, *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 315.
- 3 Iskandar Beg Munshi, *Tarikh-e 'Alam Ara-ye Abbasi* (The History of the World of Shah Abbas I), 2 vols (Tehran, 1350/1971), Vol. I, pp. 72, 77 and 515 on the role of the Head Slave or *Qullar Aqasi bashi* and Vol. II, p. 655 on the special slaves to Shah Abbas, I. See Abbas Iqbal, "Qesmati az Majara-ye Khalij-e Fars (A Part of the Events of the Persian Gulf)," *Yadegar*, VI, No. 4 (Tehran, December/January, 1946-1947), p. 29 on Shah Abbas I and his personal slaves.
  - 4 Slaves, according to a Bakhtiari researcher, were bought by the Bakhtiari ilkhans and other tribal chiefs as servants in their households throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; they gave one slave to each daughter when they married as a wedding gift. "My grandma had one. My mother told me that these servants were reliable and very faithful. They were bought from India; perhaps from the Parses who maintained close social and economic ties between India and Iran." Personal communication to the author from Shahram Khosravi, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, June 1998.

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