

African presence in Iran : identity and its reconstruction

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Résumé

L'établissement de communautés Afro-iraniennes dans les ports du sud de l'Iran est dû, pour une large part, aux activités négrières des Arabes, des Perses et des Indiens, au cours du dix-neuvième siècle. Le rôle joué par les éléments socio-économiques au sein des communautés Afro-iraniennes, ainsi que la survie et le développement d'éléments culturels propres, à la fois parmi leurs membres et parmi ceux d'autres communautés, sont autant d'éléments permettant de souligner la pertinence d'une étude de la diaspora africaine en Iran ; une diaspora qui, loin d'effacer totalement les héritages antérieurs, permet en fait la construction d'une identité nouvelle, par le biais d'influences à la fois Africaines et iraniennes.

Abstract

The establishment of Afro-Iranian communities was to a great extent due to the slave trading activities of Arabs, Persians and Indians in the Persian Gulf, in the 19th century. The questions on how various socio-economic elements function within the Afro-Iranian communities and how their cultural representation perpetuate and develop among both their members and outsiders underline the significance of the study of African Diaspora in Iran which assist us to appreciate that African displacement could not totally erase their héritage, however, rather reconstruct a new identity influenced by both Africa and Iran as well.

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African Presence in Iran: Identity and its Reconstruction in the 19th and 20th centuries *

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Abstract : *The establishment of Afro-Iranian communities was to a great extent due to the slave trading activities of Arabs, Persians and Indians in the Persian Gulf, in the 19th century. The questions on how various socio-economic elements function within the Afro-Iranian communities and how their cultural representations perpetuate and develop among both their members and outsiders underline the significance of the study of African Diaspora in Iran which assist us to appreciate that African displacement could not totally erase their heritage, however, rather reconstruct a new identity influenced by both Africa and Iran as well.*

Key Words: *Identity, Diaspora, social assimilation, Iran, slavery, ethnic boundary, cultural continuity, Afro-Iranians.*

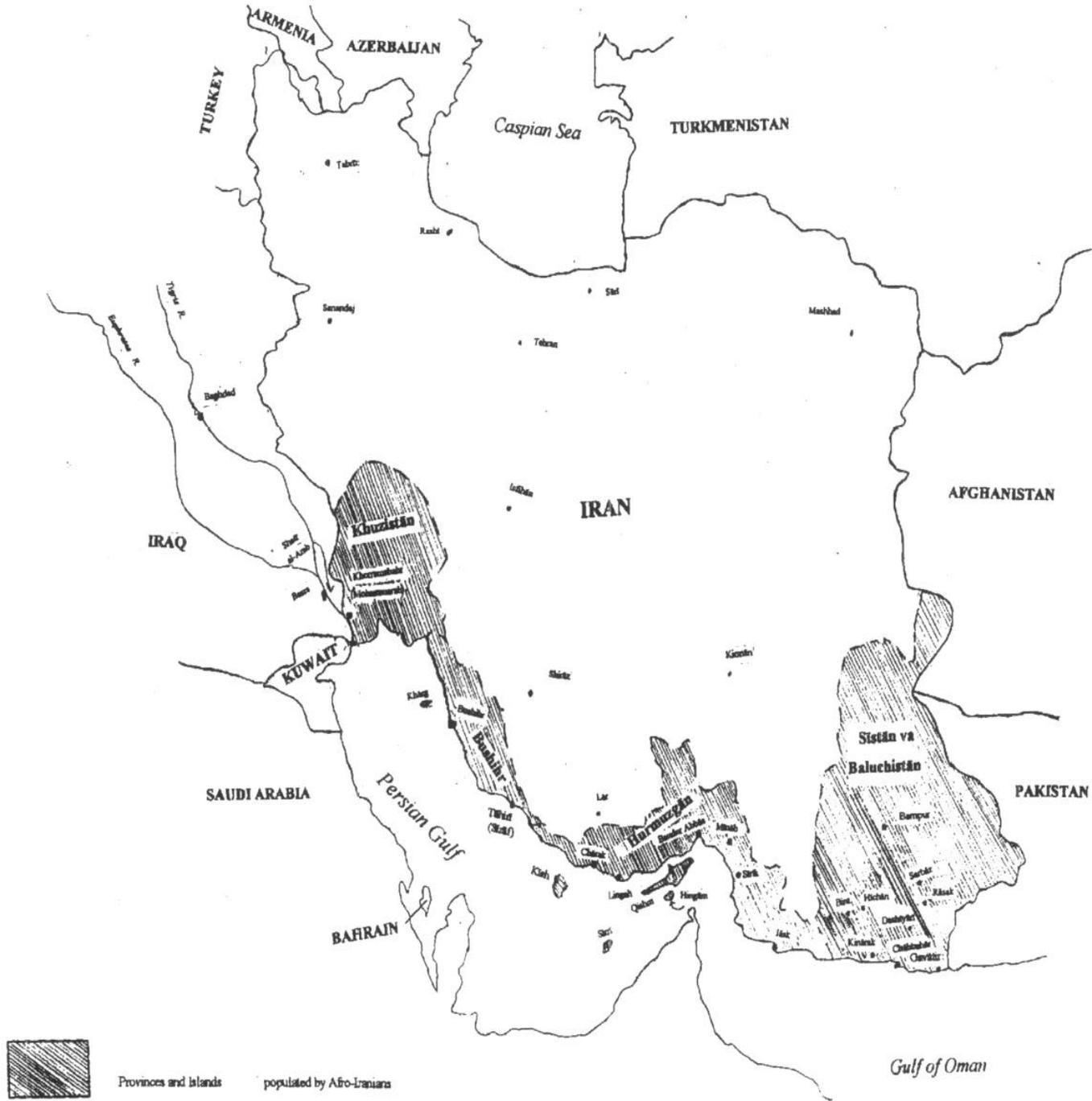
Résumé : *L'établissement de communautés Afro-iraniennes dans les ports du sud de l'Iran est dû, pour une large part, aux activités négrières des Arabes, des Perses et des Indiens, au cours du dix-neuvième siècle. Le rôle joué par les éléments socio-économiques au sein des communautés Afro-iraniennes, ainsi que la survie et le développement d'éléments culturels propres, à la fois parmi leurs membres et parmi ceux d'autres communautés, sont autant d'éléments permettant de souligner la pertinence d'une étude de la diaspora africaine en Iran; une diaspora qui, loin d'effacer totalement les héritages antérieurs, permet en fait la construction d'une identité nouvelle, par le biais d'influences à la fois Africaines et iraniennes.*

Mots-clefs: *Identité, diaspora, assimilation sociale, Iran, esclavage, frontières ethniques, continuité culturelle, Afro-Iraniens.*

In his article on *Africans in Asian History*, Joseph Harris mentions that: "there are virtually no published materials available in English or French about African communities in Iran".¹ That statement signifies that important work needs to be done to fill in the gap. But research on this theme is problematic in the sense that black communities who were mostly imported through enslavement in different periods are dispersed in different parts of

* I wish to thank professors Edward A. Alpers, Houchang Chehabi, and Sydney Kanya-Forstner for their significant scholarly criticism and comments on this paper.

1. Joseph E. Harris, "Africans in Asian History" in Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, (Washington, 1993), 325.



Iran and do not know their precise origins. To address this problem, this paper makes use of the works of authors who have been among Afro-Iranians, and familiar with their situation. Persian sources, which significantly contribute in this research, comprise of three categories including historical, musicological and travelers' account. For example, Kabābī's works besides illuminating the socio-economic history of Bandar 'Abbās and the Persian Gulf, give some important information on Afro-Iranians in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. The significance of Muqaddam's account lies in his close observation of the status of Africans in Baluchistān in the 20th century. The cultural representation of Afro-Iranians, in particular, spirit possessions in the modern period were examined by Rīyahī and Sa'idī. Moreover, primary English sources including Sheil's contain brief but useful information about the status of Afro-Iranians in Persia. Since the history of the African Diaspora is tied to the slave trade, the study of the archival documents in Iran and England relating to slavery has been significant. On the other hand, my interviews with the local people of Bandar 'Abbās, Mīnāb, and Qishm played a crucial role in appreciation of the concepts of self-identification, ethnic awareness, and linguistic and cultural continuity of Afro-Iranians. It is hoped that this short survey on Afro-Iranian communities will contribute to the historiography of both Iran and the African diaspora.

This paper examines the African presence in Iran in the 19th and 20th centuries by surveying its geographical dispersal, socio-economic status, culture and rituals. Attention is drawn to the fact that Afro-Iranians were scattered in various coastal region of southern Iran in different periods. It is also argued that some elements associated with the African homeland were preserved by the Afro-Iranians and such cultural heritage, which includes common rituals such as *Zār*, not only unified their communities but also led to the reconstruction of a new identity in the host land. The recognition of this identity will assist us to appreciate the continuity of African history in relation with the diaspora.

Trade and the Diaspora

Historians, archeologists and anthropologists put different interpretations on the question of the timing of the African presence in Iran. Since there has been a constant traffic between Iran and Africa, it is difficult to determine the timing of Africans' migration to Iran. Afshār states that in the ancient period black skinned people were living in Khuzistān, but after the arrival of black slaves from Muscat and Zanzibar a new ethnic group of blacks emerged there.² Some researchers believe that at the time of the migration of

2. Iraj Afshār Sīstānī, *Khuzistān va Tamadun-i Dīrīni-yi Ān*, (Tihiran, 1373), vol. 1, 474.

Aryans³ to Iran (about 3,000 B.C), the indigenous people of the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf and Oman were black people or Habashis.⁴ In this regard Sykes refers to the archeological research that:

“Dieulafoy and de Morgan, who both headed expeditions to Elam, and who studied the question most exhaustively on the spot, concur in the opinion that there was a very ancient occupation of the Susian plain by Negritos, and that, so far as is known, these were the original inhabitants. In support of this view Herodotus writes: “The Ethiopians from the direction of the sunrising (for the Ethiopians were in two bodies) had been appointed to serve with the Indians, being in no way different in appearance from the other Ethiopians, but in their language and in the nature of their hair only; for the Ethiopians from the East are straight-haired, but those of Libya have hair more thick and woolly than that of any other men.” Again, there is the fact that in the most ancient bas-reliefs, figures of Negritos appear with frequency. More especially is this the case in the famous stele of Naramsin, referred to in the next chapter, where the monarch, who is of Semitic type, is portrayed as leading Negritos to victory”.⁵

Field examined different ethnic groups in Iran in the context of the anthropological research. He refers to the various theories in analyzing the idea of blacks as being the natives of Persia. “Brinton considers that the alleged primitive Dravidian or Negritic Black race as depicted on the monuments at Susa are more likely to have been portraits of slaves or captives than of an old resident population.”⁶ Regarding the existence of an African population in Iran, Field states that: “In Iran the presence of Negroid features may be due to an ancient strain in the population or to the infiltration due to slaves or sailors. The important fact is that evidence of Negroid blood was recorded among the modern population examined.”⁷ However, the timing of the blacks’ settlement in Iran, and the possible link between blacks and Africans may remain controversial, the development of commercial activities should be regarded as the major cause for Africans migration to Iran.

The historical connection between Iran and Africa was established through trading activities. Significant consequences of such commercial and geographical linkage include cultural exchanges and population movements in both directions. Merchants established trading contacts through the sea routes from the Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf to Somalia, Kenya, and Tanganyika. Iranian merchants in the port of Gung were exporting dates, and salt from Qishm Island to Kenya, and Tanganyika. In return, they sought other goods especially mangrove (in Persian Chandal).⁸ Mangrove is native to

3. Aryan-speaking Nordic nomads from eastern Russia assimilated original inhabitants of Persia in some areas as early as 2000 B.C. (Henry Field, *Contributions to the Anthropology of Iran*, [Chicago, 1968], 608.)

4. Hasan Pīrnīyā, *Irān Bāstānī*, (Tihiran, 1362), 144.

5. Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia*, (London, 1969), 51

6. Field, *Contributions to the Anthropology*, 108.

7. Field, *Contributions to the Anthropology*, 531.

8. Husayn Nurbakhsh, *Bandar Gung*, (Bandar ‘Abbās, 1359), 126; Jalāl Āl Ahmad, *Jazīri-yi Khārg, Dorr-i Yatīm-i Khalīj-i Fārs*, (Tihiran, 1376), 87; Husayn Nurbakhsh, *Jazīri-yi Qishm va Khalīj-i Fārs*, (Tihiran, 1369), 475.

Africa and was used together with palm branches in the making of ceilings for houses in parts of southern Iran such as Khārg and Qishm Islands and 'Abbāsi and Lingah ports.⁹ Trade in mangrove dates back to hundreds of years ago. Istakhrī (d. 933 A.D.) refers to the usage of mangrove in the construction of houses in the city of Sīrāf.¹⁰ I visited Qishm Island, where the imported mangrove from Africa had been used in the construction of houses more than a hundred years ago, but such structures still survive up to the present day. Iranian traders exported ceramics made in Fīrozah, a village in the southern Iran, to Zanzibar.¹¹ Lārī, a currency minted in Lār, a city in the Fārs province, was extensively used for payment in commercial relations in Muscat and some African cities.¹² Slaves, ivory, teakwood, ambergris, tortoise shell, and gold, comprised the most important part of trade from East Africa to Iranian ports.¹³

The consequences of external trade for Africa include the deportation of a slave population from the continent. As in other parts of the world, such as the Americas, involuntary migration of Africans through the slave trade was the main reason for the presence of Africans and the establishment of their communities in Iran. Inevitably, trade connection also led to cultural exchange and population displacement in both Iran and Africa.

Various ethnic groups have been enslaved due to commercial, political and military upheavals in Iran in different periods. By 634 AD. when the Arabs invaded Persia, war captives including some of the indigenous people, formed a distinctive social group of *Bandagan* (slaves) used in mining and agricultural Plantations. In the ninth century, Turkish slaves were imported from Transoxiana to serve in the military, and gradually, they played a very crucial role in the socio-political system of Iran. Besides trade in white Turkish slaves, Africans, and Indians were also imported into Iran. In the period of the Great Shah 'Abbās (1588-1629), Georgian slaves, both female (*kanīz*) and male (*ghulām*), were imported and used in the *harams*, but the latter formed the permanent body of the army. Through the 1828 Treaty of Turkomānchāy, a large area of northern Iran was lost to Russia, which subsequently suppressed the importation of white, Georgian slaves into Iran. As a result, in the 19th century, slaves in Iran were mostly from eastern and northeastern African countries such as Tanganyika, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Kabābī (d.1943) who served as a government official indicated some instances of African slaves originally from Mozambique in Bandar 'Abbās.¹⁴ It is worth noting to consider the enslavement of different ethnic groups within Iran, such as Kurds or Turkomans who were sold in Baluchis-

9. Āl Ahmad, *Jazīri-yi Khārg*, 79; Muhammad Alī Kabābī, *Bandar'Abbās va Khalīj-i Fārs*, (Tihiran, 1368), 119.

10. Abu Ishag-i Istakhrī, *Masālik va Mamālik*, (Tihiran, 1368), 113.

11. Kabābī, *Bandar'Abbās*, 12.

12. Ahmad Iqtidārī, "Zabānhā-yi Mahallī va Fulklur-i Khalīj-i Fārs", *Majmū'a-yi Maqālāt-i Khalīj-i Fārs*, (Tihiran, 1369), 139; Kabābī, *Bandar'Abbās*, 57.

13. Thomas M. Ricks, "Persian Gulf Seafaring and East Africa: Ninth-Twelfth Centuries", *African Historical Studies*, 3/1 (1970), 343.

14. Kabābī, *Bandar'Abbās*, 361.

tān, or people of Bojnurd who served as slave in Astirābād. Meanwhile, Persians were also sold in other countries, for example Baluchī people who served as government soldiers in Oman and on the coast at places like Bagamoyo. They were the most vulnerable ethnic group who were also sent as slave from Iran to Oman and East Africa.

According to Lovejoy, the total number of slaves exported from East Africa, in the 19th century, was about 718,000, out of which 347,000 were exported to Arabia, Persia, and India.¹⁵ Martin and Ryan's estimates demonstrate that in the 19th century, the highest number of slaves exported from East Africa to Arabia, Persia, and India occurred during the years of 1850-1873, and at the same time, the average annual import of slaves to the former countries was about 6,500.¹⁶ Based on Sheil's report, in 1850, the number of slaves imported into the ports of Iran was around 2,000-3,000 per year.¹⁷ Based on the above figures, we may conclude that from 1850 to 1873, from the total average annual export of East Africans to Arabia, Persia, and India, %38 of slaves embarked in the Persian Ports, and at the same period, with regard to the total number of exported slaves from East Africa to all different countries, %18 imported to Persia.

This number though rather low, it was large enough that after a considerable period of time led to the formation of identifiable African communities in several districts in southern Iran. More likely the demographic pattern of African communities can be explained based on the gender difference of imported slaves. The gender ratio of African slaves according to Issawi demonstrates the dominance of males:

“The number of boats arriving at Kharg in August-October 1841 was put at 117, with 1,217 slaves. And an answer to a questionnaire stated that some 3,000 slaves (two-thirds male and one-third female) arrived in Busheir each year, of whom only 170 or 180 were sold in that town, the rest being sent on to Muhammareh and Basra; Bandar-Abbas took about one-quarter, as many as were sold in Bushire and a small number was also sold in Lingah and Congoon”.¹⁸

African slaves were imported to Iran either by desert from the western frontier or by sea from the south in the Persian Gulf. People of various ethnic group such as Arabs, Iranians, and Indians, were involved in the slave trade in different periods. A few number of slaves were bought by Persian pilgrims at markets in Mecca, Medina, or Karbalā.¹⁹ Mary Sheil, in her reports stated that the port of Bandar 'Abbās and city of Bushihr were receiving the largest number of slaves from Africa.²⁰ Muqaddam quotes from the local people in Baluchistān on how Africans were imported and sold in that area.

15. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, (Cambridge, 1997), 150.

16. Martin B. Esmond and T. C. I. Ryan, “A Quantitative Assessment of the Arab Slave Trade of East Africa, 1770-1896”, *Kenya Historical Review*, 5/1 (1977), 79.

17. Lady [Mary] Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, (New York, 1973), 245; Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran 1800-1914*, (Chicago, 1971), 125.

18. Issawi, *The Economic History*, 125.

19. Sheil, *Glimpses of Life*, 245.

20. Sheil, *Glimpses of Life*, 244.

“Since a long time ago, black *ghulāms* and *kanīzes* ²¹ were living in Baluchistān. Arab merchants were traveling to Zanzibar and the coastal area of Africa by ship; and kidnapping or buying them [Africans], then were selling them to the prosperous Baluchīs”. ²²

The point here, however, is that the presence of Africans in Iran through enslavement was mainly a result of commercial activities, and also this massive involuntary migration and displacement of Africans occurred before the abolitionist movement in the 19th century.

Ethnicity & Geographic Boundary

Afro-Iranian communities are widely scattered from southwest Iran through the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf to the southeastern region of the country. Black communities are also settled in the provinces of Sīstān va Baluchistān, Hurmuzgān, Bushihr and Khuzistān, including the Southern Islands of Qishm, Khārg, and Kīsh. At present, there is no indication of an African presence in northern cities such as Tehran. Although, in the 19th century, African slaves were living in cities such as Shiraz, and Tehran, where they were mainly employed as domestics, such as, *lala* ²³ or *dāya*, ²⁴ dowry, or concubines in the *harams*, of the well-to do, it is most likely that they have been completely assimilated into the host population, and have disappeared as a distinguishable ethnic group. Southern Iran is the only part of the country in which Afro-Iranian communities are visible. Perhaps the difference in the total numbers of imported African slaves in various areas was one of the significant reasons for such complete social assimilation. Thus more slaves were retained in southern Iran, where they were involved in various economic sectors and created Afro-Iranian communities in the region.

The pattern of population settlement and social and ethnic structure among Afro-Iranians varies in each geographical area. As this demographic pattern suggests in some cases Africans are identifiable as a distinguishable social group of slave descent; and in some cases their equal membership in the host society provided them opportunity for social assimilation. The formation of different patterns of African communities was necessitated by socio-economic considerations peculiar to each region.

Social and economic structure in some cities like Bandar ‘Abbās, Qishm Island, and Mīnāb facilitated Africans’ assimilation into the host society. Kabābī refers to manifestations of ethnic boundaries in religious issues when he observes that liberated African slaves performed Islamic ceremonies in places separated from other ethnic groups in Bandar ‘Abbās in the early 20th century. ²⁵ Yet despite the segregated geographical location of black commu-

21. *Ghulām* and *Kaniz* are Persian words; *ghulām* applies to male and the latter to female African slaves.

22. Mahmūd Zand-i Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, (Tihran,1370), 439.

23. Male slaves employed to tutor children.

24. Female slaves employed to look after children.

25. Kabābī, *Bandar ‘Abbās*,158.

nities in some districts in Bandar 'Abbās, their marriage with indigenous people gradually assisted in breaking down ethnic boundaries and led to the absorption of Africans into the host population. One of the consequences of marriage with the local people was the increase in the population of mulattos and the corresponding decline in the number of pure blacks, and perhaps the gradual loss of ethnic identity. The reason for this could be found in the geographical location of Baluchistān as against Bandar 'Abbās and others. The latter districts were located closer to India, Africa, the Arab countries and the Indian Ocean world. Because of this, they were more exposed to foreign influence making room for an alternative worldview.²⁶

In Baluchistān, Afro-Iranians live together; they are described as descendants of slaves whose identity depends upon the position of their masters and the condition imposed by the local situation. In Baluchistān marriage restrictions play a crucial role in generating ethnic boundaries, thereby preventing socio-economic movement. Salzman refers to the marriage condition among Baluchīs that: "There were general categories of people who were proscribed as ineligible spouses for Sarhadi baluch: Ghulāmzāī, the descendants of slaves; and Lurī, the small groups of itinerant blacksmiths."²⁷ The *ghulāms* can only marry the *kanīzes*, and most of the *kanīzes* become the wives of the *ghulāms*. *Suryāt* is when an owner have a relationship with his *kanīz*, the child born of their union is regarded as free. If a *ghulām* marries a *kanīz* belonging to another slave owner, the *ghulām* will be recognized as a new slave for the latter. In this case, there is no right for the owner to protest. But, if the marriage occurs between a *ghulām* and a *kanīz* of two different tribes, such as Zihīhā and another tribe, the owner of the *kanīz* has to buy the *ghulām* from his owner.²⁸ *Ghulām* and *kanīz* can be inherited by the children of the owner, or can be given as dowry to their daughters. In Sīrīk, in the southern Iran, the recognition of ethnicity created boundaries, which separated African descendants from other social groups. After the abolition of slavery, this distinct slave society was transformed from slavery to servitude. The social position of Africans was not changed; rather they became servants who depended upon their masters. The social hierarchy in Sīrīk was so strict that any socio-economic mobility was hard to achieve; thus Afro-Iranians remained marginalized. Their ethnic identification as outsiders became apparent in inter-marriage restrictions. So in this area, Africans defined their membership in the host society as a subordinate ethnic group.²⁹

In general, in all societies, stereotypes and racial designations prevent the formation of a new identity for Africans in the host society. This state of affairs had been maintained through marriage restrictions prevented the

26. This is based on my observations during my fieldwork and so are many of the following descriptions.

27. Philip Carl Salzman, *Black Tents of Baluchistan*, (Washington and London, 2000), 241.

28. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 440.

29. My interview with Mr. Ja'fari, one of the officials of the *Sazman-i Irshad-i Islāmī* in Bandar 'Abbās, November 2000.

absorption of the black population within society especially in some parts of Iran. However, marriage could be affected between Muslims of two different schools of *Sunni* and *Shi'ite*,³⁰ it rarely happened between blacks and whites; white men usually could marry black women, but it could not occur other way around.³¹ Breaking ethnic boundaries is difficult, while racial difference generates barriers over time for further generations. This racial difference could prevent Afro-Iranians' children from socio-economic promotion. In the rural area of Butī, in Baluchistān it seems that Afro-Iranians were illiterate.³² The children of *ghulāms* were not educated; only in 1966, for the first time, were two or three of their children sent to school.³³ In Iran, stereotypes and racism that had rooted in a traditional view was gradually losing its significance in the late 20th century.

The significant feature of Iranian society is its composition of different ethnic groups, such as Turks, Arabs, Baluchīs, Kurds, and Lurs as well as Persians. In essence, Africans were dispersed into a heterogeneous society that was composed of various ethnic groups. Afshār asserts that inhabitants of Khuzistān are Arabs, Lurs, and Turks; and various mixed ethnic groups such as Fārsīs, Baluchīs, Arabs, and blacks (Africans) live in Bandar 'Abbās and the province of Hurmuzgān.³⁴ Various ethnic groups such as Hindus, Asurīs, Afghanis, and Africans are also settled in Mukrān in Sīstān va Baluchistān, Hurmuzgān and Jāsk.³⁵ Curzon refers to the port of Lingah and its mixed population of Arabs, Persians, and Africans.³⁶ Bampur, one of the Baluchistān's villages had a mixed population of blacks and whites.³⁷ Kabābī refers to two villages of Ghīl and Balād al-'od in the Hingām Island and that its 500 population was composed of mixed people of black and white.³⁸

The emergence of different patterns of language structure was one of the significant consequences of these diverse ethnic groups. Each geographical region is recognized as having its own specific local dialect and language spoken by the majority ethnic group of that particular area. As a result of the deep historical connections between southern Iran and India, Arabia and Africa, there was a huge linguistic interaction. According to Afshār, southern Iran has deep historical connections with India, Arab countries and Africa that consequently resulted in cultural and linguistic influence.³⁹ The main language in the province of Hurmuzgān is Fārsī (Persian) but it has been mixed with Arabic, Swahili, and very limited words in English, Polish, Portu-

30. Khusru Khusravī, *Jazīrī'i-yi Khārg*, (Tihiran,1342), 105.

31. In my interview with Mr. Ja'farī, he referred to his father's will suggesting that the marriage between a white girl and a black should be prohibited. November 2000.

32. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 212.

33. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 201.

34. Iraj-i Afshār, *Shinākht-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, (Tihiran,1378), 302.

35. Afshār, *Shinākht-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 303.

36. George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, (London,1892), Vol. 2, 409.

37. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 24.

38. Kabābī, *Bandar 'Abbās*, 131.

39. Afshār, *Shinākht-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 201.

guese, and Hindi.⁴⁰ Over time, the language structure and dialect of each particular area greatly influenced the Africans. Significantly, they absorbed the language of local people such as Arabic, Baluchī, Lurī, ‘Abbāsī, Larī, or Mukrānī while they nevertheless maintained and conveyed Swahili words in their daily lives. During my fieldwork, I recorded my interviews with Afro-Iranians who spoke Arabic, Persian as well as Swahili languages. Due to the constant traffic of people from both sides of southern Iran and the eastern coasts of Africa Swahili became a lingua franca for the western Indian Ocean, especially, the Gulf, the Oman-Bandar and the southern Iran sub-region. However, more research is required in order to have a full appreciation of this mutual linguistic impact.

Socio-economic Status

Members of the African diaspora are influenced by specific linguistic and socio-economic patterns, as well as cultural practices of the host society of each particular region that they were settled in. Those Africans who live in ports and commercial cities such as Bandar ‘Abbās and Qishm Island have had more opportunities in terms of their assimilation with the host society and improvement of their socio-economic status. In fact, commercial cities facilitate cultural, technical, and ideological interaction. In small cities and remote villages there was actually no chance for socio-economic movement, since people as a whole— both indigenous and Africans— lived in poverty, so blacks remain subordinate in this atmosphere.

Based on the collected reports on the tribal condition in Iran in 1934, Field provides useful information on the status of Africans in Iran. He refers to the socio-economic structure of Baluchistān based on feudalism and the fact that the local chiefs, called *Sardars* or *Mīrs*, besides having the prime power owned a number of slaves.⁴¹ According to Field the population of Bint, one of the villages of the Mukrān district in Baluchistān, was composed of some Baluchī and about 2000 slaves for whom date plantations were the major economic activity.⁴² Muqaddam, who spent some time in Baluchistān, provides very useful information on the socio-economic status of people in different villages of this area. Based on Muqaddam’s report, around 1965, the total population of Ghulām Muhammad Bāzār, a rural area in Baluchistān, was about 250, of whom 10 were *ghulāms* and 12 *kanīzes*, all Africans of slave descent.⁴³ Among the total population of 5,000 in the village of Dashtyārī some were Africans of slave descent. “Most of them [Afro-Iranians in Baluchistān] are inhabitants of Dashtyārī, a few in Rāsak, most of the inhabitants of Turshāb are slave descendants, but none of them live

40. Afshār, *Shinākh-t-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 304; Iqtidāry, *Zabānhā-yi Mahallī*, 143.

41. Field, *Contributions to the Anthropology*, 236.

42. Field, *Contributions to the Anthropology*, 238.

43. Muqaddam, *Hikayat-i Baluch*, 164.

in Sarbāz".⁴⁴ From the headman of Dashtyārī, Muqaddam was informed that:

"some people of Dashtyārī are blacks; our fathers brought them from Zanzibar, or bought them from Arab merchants in Chāhbahār, Kinārak, and Kirāchī. Men are *ghulāms*, and women are *kanīzes*, it is an old tradition, of course, now, they are the same (as us), and there is no difference between a *ghulam* and a Baluch".⁴⁵

The pattern of social organization in the Sarhad Baluch suggests general egalitarianism only among the tribesmen, while categorized Afro-Iranians as the descendants of slaves and the lowest social class.⁴⁶ They were easily identifiable from the Blauchīs through the colour of their cloths which were in muted hues of blue and dusty rose cloths.⁴⁷

In Dashtyārī, Afro-Iranians were working on wheat plantations, and after harvesting; they could take part of the produce.⁴⁸ In his visit to the rural area of Butī, Muqaddam met an old man called Jidgāly, the owner of 5 to 6 *ghulāms*. He describes the situation of the *ghulāms* as follows:

"previously, their fathers were slaves; our ancestors were buying them from the captain of the Arabs' ships in Karachi. Now, they are no longer slaves, they are working for us, and live in Kapar⁴⁹ where their fathers were living".⁵⁰

That statement reveals that in fact there was neither social nor geographic mobility for the descendants of slaves. In Butī, Afro-Iranians worked in agriculture; tilling, sowing, and threshing corn in order to get a portion of the products. They were also involved in cutting the branches of trees, weeding, and feeding cattle. *Kanīzes* or female slaves were involved in milking, making dairy products, baking, spinning, weaving, baby-sitting, among others.⁵¹

In Hīchān, a village in Baluchistān, tribal hierarchy was an essential characteristic feature, so each tribe played a specific role in terms of their function in socio-economic activities. Mubārakīs and Raīsīs tribes were the owners of land, cattle, water, and houses. The headman of Hīchān village was from the Raīsī tribe. The people of Durāzī tribe were cultivators of palm trees and could keep a portion of the produce. They were not landowners; the property of some of them consisted of one or two goats. But Durāzīs were free people. Originally the people of the Dāwudīs tribe were Lur. Their occupation consisted of playing music such as drums, and dancing at weddings or different ceremonies. Dāwudīs also worked as artisans and performers. At the bottom of this hierarchical system were servants or slave descendants who constituted a deprived social group which had no property.

44. Muqaddam, *Hikayat-i Baluch*, 311.

45. Muqaddam, *Hikayat-i Baluch*, 169.

46. Salzman, *Black Tents of Baluchistan*, 9.

47. Salzman, *Black Tents of Baluchistan*, 37.

48. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 197.

49. A house made of the palm branches and mat.

50. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 211.

51. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 212.

Muqaddam quotes the headman of Hīchān village: “Previously, they [the servants] were *ghulāms* and *Kanīzs*; our fathers were buying them. Now, that slavery is abolished, they are servants”⁵² After the abolition of slavery in 1928, all *ghulāms* and *kanīzes* were emancipated. They chose a family name for themselves, although these names came as a reminder of slave origins, such as Shanbih Āzādī (Saturday freedom), or Jumāh Āzādī (Friday freedom) and obtained identity cards.⁵³

In the coastal areas such as Bandar ‘Abbās, lack of sufficient water and fertile soil prevent the involvement of people in agriculture. On the other hand, the conditions of northern regions are much more suitable for agriculture than areas close to the coast.⁵⁴ So, fishing comprises the main economic activity of people in the coastal area of southern Iran and the Africans were equally employed in this sector.

In my interview with one of the local people in Bandar ‘Abbās, I was told that in the past, the conditions of blacks in northern Bandar ‘Abbās differed from those in the southern city. For instance, in the north blacks served the head man as his agents. Among other activities, slaves were involved in announcing news, and had access to people’s houses. Through their acquired power derived from the headman, blacks in northern Bandar ‘Abbās could improve their socio-economic status. In the south, blacks who were living in the marginal area of Bandar ‘Abbās were treated as *ghulāms* and *kanīz* of the lowest social group.⁵⁵ Kabābī states that in 1898 the population of Africans in Bandar ‘Abbās was about 300 and was comprised of slave descendants. “They were minstrels, stone breakers, woodcutters, and the area they were living in the northwest of the city called Blacks’ Quarter.”⁵⁶ He states that a very limited number of Africans were also involved in rope weaving.⁵⁷ Two separate quarters still exist as the heritage of blacks’ isolation in the past: “Manbar-i Sīyāhān” (Blacks’ pulpit), and “Pusht-i Shahr” (Behind the city).

Since Bandar ‘Abbās has been one of the biggest cities and a significant port for Iran, its logistical situation and maritime facilities brought it in close contact with the world through the Persian Gulf. In the 20th century, the development of maritime technology gradually changed the socio-economic status of Afro-Iranians in that area and brought people of various ethnic groups and societies together.

Perpetuation of Identity

Afro-Iranians in each province tend to perceive themselves in terms of communities rooted in the local region and emphasizing discontinuities with

52. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 45.

53. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 441.

54. Ghulām Husayn Sā’idī, *Ahl-i Havā*, (Tihran, 2535), 22.

55. My interview with Mr. Ja’fari, Bandar Abbās, November 2000.

56. Kabābī, Bandar Abbās, 157.

57. Kabābī, Bandar Abbās, 162.

their homeland. Khusravī states that in Khārg Island an African from Zanzibar proudly identified himself as an Iranian.⁵⁸ In my interviews with Afro-Iranians in Bandar 'Abbās and Qishm Island, they identified themselves as Iranian, and in some cases even rejected any connection with Africa. On the other hand, the majority of Persians also do not know the homeland of the blacks as Africa; rather, they consider them as inhabitants of the regions and as one of the local ethnic groups in southern Iran. Besides emphasizing their nationality as being Iranian, the identification with Islam was also strong among Afro-Iranians. Islam is the religion of the majority, and most people in Baluchistān are *Sunni Hanafite*. Initially, Africans were identified as infidels, but their conversion to Islam assisted in maintaining their communities.⁵⁹ In Baluchistān, Afro-Iranians identify themselves as Baluch and speak Baluchī; they have no knowledge of their background, ancestors or historical connection to the homeland.⁶⁰ Afro-Iranians were not able to determine their origins due to the formation of new identities in the host society. They, however, unconsciously remained an agent for the continuation and survival of their cultural links to Africa. In this regard, scholars who have knowledge of African history can play a significant role in determining their cultural linkage with Africa.

Cultural expression among Afro-Iranians should be regarded as the most significant constituent of their association with Africa. Curzon states that due to the large importation of slaves from Muscat and Zanzibar, considerable African elements exist in Baluchistān.⁶¹ Rīyāhī who has traveled to Baluchistān refers to the circumcision of girls among one particular ethnic group of blacks as the result of the influence of African culture. He states that these people are related to the Kikoyo⁶² in Africa. "Until a few years ago, a specific group of blacks were circumcising their daughters on the rocks close to the sea in a region of Chāhbahār in the southwest of the city beside the tomb of Khazar. But today they do it rarely and only in secret."⁶³ It is much more likely that the custom entered Afro-Iranian society from the Horn, where it is prevalent among the Somali and many Ethiopian peoples.

The development of different features of African cultures is regarded as an important component of African identity in the diaspora. Afro-Iranians' roots are easy to perceive through their skin colour and cultural elements associated with their homeland.

Kabābī refers to the use of black tobacco, or *Totoon* among the people of low social groups in Bandar 'Abbās.⁶⁴ The custom of using the edible tobacco in southern Iran can also be traced to Africa, and the Swahili people who mix tobacco with saltpeter and then chew it like gum. Playing the

58. Khusravī, *Jazīri'-yi Khārg*, 110.

59. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 212.

60. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 211–212.

61. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 259.

62. Kikoyo refers to the Gikuyu.

63. Alī Rīyahī, *Zār va Bād va Baluch*, (Tihran, 1977), 3.

64. Kabābī, *Bandar Abbās*, 163.

Dammām (a kind of drum) that is also found among Afro-Indians in Gujarat, the sickness of the *Zār* are all elements of African influences. ⁶⁵

Cultural continuity was an essential reaction and a form of resistance to slavery in which Africans generated a defensive mechanism to protect and unify themselves in the host country. Enslaved Africans defined their membership in their own communities by developing sub-cultures in the context of the host country. One of the significant cultural traits of African heritage is the practice of spirit possessions such as *Zār* among the African diaspora in Iran. Africans provided a common cultural core such as the widespread practice of the *Zār* spirit possession cult through which they could preserve their unity. Africans in the diaspora created a sub-cultural society by performing their music, song, and ritual practices independently of the host country. Afshār states that:

“during the night, in order to diminish their grief and sorrows, blacks were gathered all together, playing and singing in the tradition of their native land. In virtue of the combination of the Africans’ music with that of the indigenous, gradually, the traditional music of Hurmuzgān and the whole coastal area of the south were born”. ⁶⁶

People believe in metaphysical forces throughout the southern part of Iran from Khuzistān to Baluchistān. Based on the interviews and evidences I collected from southern Iran, without doubt the *Zār* practice is very common among Afro-Iranians. ⁶⁷ However, I encountered a few instances of young people, who believed that *Zār* was a mysterious and dangerous force, so scared of being involved in this rite. The characteristic feature of spirit possession is evident in its multiple aspects. The association of music and dance is crucial in spirit possession. Instead of belief in the efficacy of medicine, *Zār* adherents trace many ailments to malicious winds, so they perform their ceremony by singing special songs and beating the ‘dohol’ supported by rhythmic movements of head and body to ward off evil spirit from the body. ⁶⁸ Constantinides refers to the practice of *Zār* in other countries that: “In Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Saudi Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf states, Iran and Turkey, both the category of spirits and the cult of healing are called zar.” ⁶⁹

The African cultural heritage was transferred into a new land and combined with Islamic elements. Darvīshī states that spirits are divided into five: *Zār*, *Bād* (wind), Jinn, Div (daemon), and *Mashāyakh*, and he concludes that

65. Muhammad Husyan Ādammyyat, “Uza’a-i Ijtima’i-yi Khalīj-i Fārs”, *Khalīj-i Fārs*, 2 (1342), 149.

66. Afshār, *Shinākht-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 327.

67. A documentary videotape about the *Zār* in Bandar ‘Abbās demonstrates that it is a common practice among Afro-Iranians. My thanks to Musā Kamālī for providing me a copy of it.

68. Husayn Hamīdī, *Hasht Bihisht*, (Tihran, 1375), 20.

69. Pamela Constantinides, “The History of Zar in the Sudan: Theories of Origin, Recorded Observation and Oral Tradition” in I.M. Lewis, Ahmad Al-Safi and Sayyid Hurreiz. eds., *Women’s Medicine*, (Edinburgh, 1991), 83.

there are 15 different kind of *Zārs*, 12 different *Bāds*, and a few jins. ⁷⁰ According to Sa'īdī, there are more than 72 kinds of *Zārs* ⁷¹. He mentions that the influence of Islamic elements caused the division of winds into evil (includes different kind of *Zārs*) and good (includes different kind of *Mas-hāyikhs*). ⁷² There is a belief that *Zār* is the most dangerous and widespread wind brought from Africa into southern Iran. ⁷³ Poor mulattos and blacks such as fishermen and farmers are the most vulnerable social group influenced by *Zār*, and those who were possessed by one of the winds called *Ahl-i Hāvā* (air-inhabitant). The performers of the *Zār* ritual, who are all blacks, are called '*Bābā*' or '*Māmā*'.

In Baluchistān, *Gowāt* means wind or air, and *Gowātī* is the term used for a person whose body is possessed by *Gowāt*. Darvīshī states that all Blacks whom he encountered in Baluchistān were possessed by the evil wind at least once. ⁷⁴ The Baluchī people believe that music is the only way to force the evil spirits out of the body. This music should be performed along with rhythmic movements of the body. ⁷⁵ The *Gowātī* songs comprise of praising Abdul Qadir the founder of the *Qadiriyya sufi* order and L'i Shahbāz, one of the Iranian *sufi* leaders. ⁷⁶

“In Baluchistān, the *Gwāt-yi Māt* is the person who deals the healing. When the *Gwāt-yi Māt* recognizes what kind of *Zār* has possessed the body, then he starts the process of healing. *Kanīzes* and *ghulāms* sit around the sick person, and begin singing, playing drums, tamborah ⁷⁷, and cane. Each *Zār* has a specific song and melody. They [Afro-Iranians] play for three days and nights, sometimes five or six nights, then they sacrifice a kid; after cooking, everybody including the sick person must eat it”. ⁷⁸

The *Gwātī* ritual has different performance styles and utilizes various types of Baluchī musical instruments, such as Tamborah, Sarangī, Nay (cane), Dohol (drum), Qaranī or Zomir, and Bambo were used. ⁷⁹ But in the *Zār* ceremony, the only instrument that is used is the Dohol.

Song, music and dance in the province of Hurmuzgān and the southern Iran is widely influenced by Africa. ⁸⁰ Hamīdī suggests that the presence of dramatic, ritualistic, and mythological elements in music is evidence of an African cultural influence. ⁸¹ “The chief form of music in this area is ritualistic music, especially the '*Zār*' and the '*Nobān*'. This ritual is a kind of

70. Muhammad Rizā Darvīshī, *Āynah va Āvāz*, (Tihran, 1376), 34.

71. Sa'īdī, *Ahl-i Havā*, 64.

72. Sa'īdī, *Ahl-i Havā*, 40.

73. Afshār, *Shinākht-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 317.

74. Muhammad Rizā Darvīshī, *Mūsīqī va Khalsah*, (Tihran, 1378), 19.

75. Hamīdī, *Hasht Bihisht*, 17.

76. Darvīshī, *Āynah va Āvāz*, 34.

77. Tamborah or Tanborah is a kind of lute that is one-meter length, and consists of a bowl with three strings attached to it.

78. Muqaddam, *Hikāyat-i Baluch*, 212.

79. Rīyahī, *Zār va Bād va Baluch*, 5.

80. Rīyahī, *Zār va Bād va Baluch*, 327.

81. Hamīdī, *Hasht Bihisht*, 20.

music with a curing quality; it is called ‘Gwātī’ or ‘damal’ in Baluchistān.”⁸²

Edward Alpers describes in detail the diasporic cultural transformation of Africa in different countries in the Indian Ocean, and refers to the influence of African arts in Oman as follows:

“two of these arts— at-tanburah (an-nuban) and az-zar— derive ultimately from northeast Africa, which we know was a source of slaves for Oman in the 19th century, although these performance styles may also have entered Oman from Zanzibar”.⁸³

In southern Iran, *Nubān* is considered a Muslim and sacred wind. Tambīrah or Tambora, which is considered a holy instrument, is the only instrument to be used in the *Nubān* ritual. This is an instrument of Sudanese origin and is also being used in Ethiopia which is named *Krar*.⁸⁴ It consists of six strings attached to a big wooden bowl, which is covered by the goatskin. Tambīrah is one of African musical instruments that Hamīdī believes was brought to the southern part of Iran about one or two centuries ago.⁸⁵ Darvīshī refers to his visit with BābāDarvīsh, a performer of *Zār* and *Nubān* rituals in the Qishm Island who inherited his Tambireh from his ancestors who brought it from Hamurā⁸⁶ in Africa.⁸⁷ According to Alpers, *Nubān* as a feature of African cultural influence is being practiced in Dubai, and the United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf.⁸⁸ Alpers quotes Racy that: “This ritual, which is connected with spirit possession and healing, is associated with an African instrument, the lyre, and it has *Nubān* roots.”⁸⁹ As in other countries in the Persian Gulf, the significant point about *Nubān* ritual in Iran is its association with Tambīrah.

Afshār refers to *Līwā* employing the earliest African musical instruments such as big drums (Dohol) and some sort of reedy instruments.⁹⁰ In general, *Līwā* is one of the famous rituals associated with spirit possession and amusement. According to the local people, nowadays, *Līwā* is being performed in ceremonies such as weddings.

“Many people, about 60-80, participate in the play of *Līwā*. They gather in a big square or field. Whoever is possessed by a wind or depressed participates in *Līwā*. In addition to Dohols (drums), Kornā, a kind of big trumpet whose sound reaches as far as hills and villages is used. When people hear that sound, they come to participate in *Līwā*. The Dohol, which is being used in *Līwā*, is the same as Pepe”^{91 92}.

82. Hamīdī, *Hasht Bihisht*, 20.

83. Edward A. Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions for Research” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 17/2 (1997), 69.

84. Cynthia Tse Kimberlin, “The Music of Ethiopia” in Elizabeth May, ed., *Musics of Many Cultures*, (Los Angeles, 1983), 237.

85. Hamīdī, *Hasht Bihisht*, 63.

86. The geographical location of Hamura is not clear.

87. Darvīshī, *Aynah va Avāz*, 137.

88. Alpers, “*The African Diaspora*”, 70.

89. Alpers, “*The African Diaspora*”, 70.

90. Afshār, *Shinākh-t-i Ustān-i Hurmuzgān*, 327.

91. Pepe refers to upepo which is a Swahili word meaning wind.

92. Sa’idī, *Ahl-i Ilavā*, 93.

Alpers also refers to the prevalence of *Līwā* among the people in Sohar, Zanzibar, Dubai, and Bahrain.⁹³

Āl Ahmad, who observed “Shaykh Faraj”, a dance specific to Afro-Iranians in Khārg, calls it similar to “*Dammām*”, a dance among Afro-Iranians in Bushihr.⁹⁴

“They were performing this dance at weddings, and parties, everybody was gathering in the house of the headman and playing different kinds of drums, one by one, they were standing up to dance. When all were standing up, they shook, and danced until they fell on the ground powerless”.⁹⁵

Khusravī who traveled to Khārg in 1962, states that Salmīn, an African from Mombassa performed the *Zār* using two drums called “Shaykh Faraj”.⁹⁶

According to Afshar, *Sabālu* is a song influenced by African music in southern Iran. People who want to perform *Sabālu* gather in a place, sit in a circle, play the tamborīne, and shake their shoulders from right to left.⁹⁷ *Sangalī* is also another type of traditional song performed by a group of sailors and seamen while rowing or loading the goods.⁹⁸ In addition, the Swahili songs are also used in the *Zār* ritual in southern Iran.⁹⁹

While there are many other African elements in Afro-Iranian culture, tracing each particular cultural trait is not the main aim of this paper. This essay rather serves its purpose in drawing attention to the African presence in Iran.

Conclusion

What was highlighted in this paper is that Africans in Iran had different experiences depending on different local condition. The socio-economic, geographic, and ethnic component in each region influenced their identity in society and the way they formed different types of communities. Their ethnic characteristics have changed over generations. In some big cities they have been socially assimilated, while in some areas, their identity is a reminder of slavery, which legitimated their status as servile and marginalized people. Nevertheless, Afro-Iranians successfully transformed their cultural heritage in the new land. The significance of their cultural heritage lies in the mutual influence of Africa and the host society. Music, dance, song, spirit possession, and language were significant cultural characteristics of the Afri-

93. Alpers, “*The African Diaspora*”, 70.

94. Āl Ahmad, *Jazīri-yi Khārg*, 81.

95. Āl Ahmad, *Jazīri-yi Khārg*, 82.

96. Khusru Khusravī, *Jazīri-yi Khārg*, (Tihiran, 1342), 109.

97. Iraj Afshār Sīstānī, *Maqālāt-i Irānshīnāsī*, (Tihiran, 1369), 499.

98. Ahmad Iqtidārī, *Khalīj-i Fārs*, (Tihiran, 2536), 251; My interview with Isam’īl Mubārak one of Afro-Iranians in the Qishm Island, Nov. 2000.

99. Darvīshī, *Āynah va Āvāz*, 175.

can diaspora in Iran that is influenced by Islamic and cultural elements of the society on the one hand, and was transformed by indigenous practices on the other. This mutual impact facilitated the continuity of the African heritage by making a significant part of Iranian society.