

CHAPTER TWO

THE AFRICAN PRESENCE AT THE GENESIS OF THE BABI/ BAHA'I RELIGIONS

From its earliest beginnings, the Baha'i religion knew an African dimension and included African converts. Even the hagiographic accounts of Mulla Husayn's conversion mention an African man who was present on the first night of the Bab's 'declaration.' This man, who is invariably referred to as the Bab's 'Ethiopian servant,' attended to his master and guest that evening. He can be glimpsed a number of times in Babi histories as a servant and companion of the Bab and a participant in some of the early events of his master's new ministry.

It is, I suppose, to be expected that the nineteenth-century Iranian sources leave it at that; they attach no significance to this African presence. It is perhaps less understandable, however, that contemporary histories reflect this same attitude, ignoring the implications of Africans participating in founding events of Baha'i history. Nonetheless, as will be seen, that presence was important, visible, and profound.

The 'Ethiopian servant,' Haji Mubarak, was purchased by the Bab in 1842 (two years before the beginning of his religious mission) from Haji Mirza Abu'l-Qasim, a brother of the Bab's wife, Khadijih Bagum. Mubarak was nineteen years old. He had been transported from East Africa as a child, bought from slave traders when he was five years old, and trained for business and domestic service in the household of the Bab's future brother-in-law. His education is said to have been 'exemplary.'¹ He was literate and skilled at commerce, and the Bab entrusted him with the task of settling his outstanding accounts and winding up his business affairs in Shiraz.² Nonetheless, he has remained invisible to history.

¹ Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988 [1999]), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.



Illustration 2.1. An African Slave, 1840

A portrait of a black slave, probably Ethiopian, dated 1256 AH/1840 AD. In the manuscript he has in his hands, his face is compared to the 'night of revelation' (*laylat al-qadr*) of the Prophet Muhammad. The painting, from the Qajar period, is contemporary with the Bab and his servant, Haji Mubarak. Source: Vanessa Martin, *The Qajar Pact: Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2005).