From their beginnings, the Babi and Baha’i religions were conceived by their founders as world religions, comparable in universality and in divine mission to Christianity or Islam. As such, the Baha’i scriptures anticipate the eventual conversion of all peoples into a worldwide community of faith. Even in his first treatise, the Qayyumu’l-’Asma,\(^1\) which the Bab began writing on the night of the conversion of Mulla Husayn, he called upon the “people of the West” in one passage to “issue forth from your cities and aid the Cause of God.”\(^2\) Some years later, Baha’u’llah wrote, concerning his own cause: “When the victory arriveth, every man shall profess himself as believer and shall hasten to the shelter of God’s Faith.”\(^3\) Therefore, the conversion of African peoples was always regarded by Baha’is as inevitable—an event to be anticipated as a necessary aspect of the eventual conversion of all humanity.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, Baha’u’llah’s eldest son and designated successor, explicitly anticipated the entry of Africans into his father’s religion as part of this triumphant destiny. For example, he writes:

> How great, how very great is the Cause; how very fierce the onslaught of all the peoples and kindreds of the earth! Erelong shall the clamor of the multitude throughout Africa, throughout America, the cry of the European and of the Turk, the groaning of India and China be heard from far and near. One and all they shall arise with all their power to resist His Cause. Then shall the Knights of the Lord, assisted by grace

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\(^3\) Quoted in *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, trans. by Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1939) p. 319. Neither the date nor the context of this particular passage is explained in the text of the book, which is a compilation of excerpts from the major works of Baha’u’llah.
from on high, strengthened by faith, aided by the power of understand-
ing and reinforced by the legions of the Covenant, arise and make mani-
fest the truth of the verse: “Behold the confusion that hath befallen the
tribes of the defeated”\textsuperscript{4}

In passages such as this one, the conversion of Africans seems almost
to be consigned to an eschatological future. However, ‘Abdu’l-Baha
also took practical steps to encourage a Baha’i presence in Africa. In
April 1916, in one of a series of letters written to the Baha’is of the
United States and Canada, he urged them to carry the Baha’i message
to the continent of Africa and to its surrounding island groups:

Similarly, if possible, they should travel to the continent of Africa,
Canary Islands, Cape Verde Islands, Madeira Islands, Réunion Islands,
St. Helena, Zanzibar, Mauritius, etc., and in those countries summon the
people to the Kingdom of God and raise the cry of ‘Yá Bahá’u’ll-Abhá!’\textsuperscript{5}
They must also upraise the flag of the oneness of the world of humanity
in the island of Madagascar.

Books and pamphlets must be either translated or composed in the
languages of these countries and islands, to be circulated in every part
and in all directions.

It is said that in South Africa, a diamond mine is discovered. Although
this mine is most valuable, yet after all it is stone. Perchance, God will-
ing, the mine of humanity may be discovered and the brilliant pearls of
the Kingdom be found.\textsuperscript{6}

As we have seen in Chapter Two, there had been a presence of Africans
at the very genesis of Baha’i history. Both the Bab and Baha’u’llah
owned black African slaves who were intimately involved in every
aspect of their households. Africans had become Babis and Baha’is.\textsuperscript{7}
But by the middle of the twentieth century, Baha’is on the African
continent itself were limited to a number of Iranian expatriates (and
some converts) living in Egypt and Sudan,\textsuperscript{8} a small Baha’i group in

\textsuperscript{4} Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, Bahá’í Administration (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing
Trust, 1928) p. 123.

\textsuperscript{5} ‘Abdu’l-Baha to “the believers and maid-servants of the Merciful of the Bahá’í
Assemblies and meetings in the United States and Canada,” April 11, 1916, in The
Tablets of the Divine Plan revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the North American Bahá’ís during

\textsuperscript{6} Afnan, Black Pearls, passim.

\textsuperscript{7} A few Egyptians converted to the Baha’i religion, especially the students of Mirza
Abu’l-Fadl. I believe that the number of his student-converts was fourteen. At least
one Christian became a Bahá’í in Sudan. The first local Spiritual Assembly was elected
in Egypt (Cairo) in 1912. The first National Spiritual Assembly (including both Egypt