

Review Essay

Afro-Iranian Lives, Behnaz Mirzai (director), 45 min., color, documentary film, 2007, and *The African-Baluchi Trance Dance*, Behnaz Mirzai (director), 25 min., color, documentary film. Ottawa: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2012.

These two films will be of great interest for Iranian Studies scholars, students, and the thirsty-for-knowledge public. They help open the way for a neglected but now emerging area of investigation—the presence of African-origin people in Persia and Iran. Director and historian of modern Iran Behnaz A. Mirzai explains the transporting of African slaves into the Persian Gulf and coastal settlements—that expanded in the late 1700s—and then onward into the areas of present-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. She also focuses on trade relations between Persia and Africa, with ships taking dates, ceramics, and salt to northeastern and eastern Africa and bringing back ivory and mangrove—for constructing the ceilings of mud homes. As a result of both Africans brought as slaves and trade in material items, the Afro-Persian population increased especially in the southern coastal areas. Even in Tehran, where Africans were put to work by shahs and the wealthy as servants, bodyguards, soldiers, eunuchs, nannies, wet nurses, and concubines, by 1869 some 3,300 people of African background lived in Tehran, constituting 2% of the population, according to Mirzai.

These films are particularly welcome due to the previous lack of work about this subject. Director and producer Mirzai's interests are not only with the historical influx and presence of Africans in Persia but also with the present-day descendants of these Africans and their economic, social, cultural, and religious lives. Although denial about African-Persian slavery and presence has been rampant, Africans and their cultures have influenced Iranian culture in a number of ways, such as the well-known examples of *bandari* (coastal, from the coast) style of music and dancing, so popular before LA-produced Iranian-American music took over, as well as the black-face *Hājji Firuz* figure who comes out at Nowruz.

Behnaz Mirzai's work joins some recent ventures into African-Iranian history, culture, and spiritual/religious practices. Gholām-Hosayn Sā'edi published his ethnographic study, *Ahl-e Havā* (People of the Wind), about African-Iranians, the "winds" thought to cause disturbances and illnesses and the *zār* practices aiming to expel and control these harmful winds in 1967 (Tehran University Press). Bahrām Beizā'i's acclaimed 1989 film, *Bāshu: The Little Stranger*, tells a story about an African-Iranian child orphaned by the Iran-Iraq War. With Ismael Musa Montana and Paul Lovejoy, Behnaz Mirzai co-edited *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora* in 2009 (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press). In November 2011, the Iranian Ethnographic Film Day at the British Museum featured films about southern Iranian coastal society, including Afro-Iranians and their cultures and *zār* performances. Iranian-German Mahdi Ehsaei has just published his photography book, *Afro-Iran: The Unknown Minority* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag).

Mirzai's two films are the result of both archival and ethnographic and interviewing research. In *Afro-Iranian Lives* we see the beauty of sea and land environments and men working in fishing and date harvesting. We observe *zār* ceremonies and hear directly from individuals as they explain concepts of illness and healing. Maps, drawings, and photographic portraits provide visual information about the history of Africans coming to Persia and their situations in the country. In voice-over description, Mirzai tells about the various situations and surroundings in which Afro-Iranians live and their different adaptations to their surroundings. In Baluchistan, they live in separate communities suffering from poverty and an inability to change their lives. Several different family lines are maintained. Those who count themselves as descendants of traders say they do not intermarry with the descendants of people who were bought and sold. Often Afro-Iranians live at the bottom economic levels of society.

The material about *zār* ceremonies in both films will be of particular interest to students of medical anthropology. Many types of "winds" may bother people, and each has its own *zār* ceremony, presided over by a *mama* or *baba*. The ceremonies combine music, dancing, singing, drumming, and wafting of incense smoke toward the afflicted. The person being treated sways back and forth, covered by a chador. A ceremony may go on for a day or several days and may include an animal sacrifice. The ceremonies combine aspects of African cultures—the unique string, wind, and drum instruments are shown as performers play them. Their African cultures also emerge in the singing and dancing. One man interviewed knew some sentences of

Swahili and said he had spent a year or two in Africa. Yet one can also note the similarities of the portrayed *zār* rituals with Iranian rituals, such as gatherings in honor of and to make entreaties to Shi'a martyrs.

Afro-Iranian Lives is a pioneering film about African-Persians and their present-day descendants and as such is a significant contribution to the field of Iranian Studies. The beauty of the environment, subjects speaking for themselves, the obvious attachment and caring of the director, and evocative African-Iranian music all serve to engage the viewer with the people and the subject.

The second film, *The African-Baluchi Trance Dance*, presents more information and footage of *zār* ceremonies in southeastern Iran. This film has a more amateur-like quality, and the voice-over and questioning are not always the best. However, we are able to watch *zār* ceremonies with the leader dancing and gently whipping those being treated. These people swing back and forth on their haunches and then tumble prone to the ground, where the leader then massages them and others gather supportively around them. According to Mirzai, Baluch *zār* ceremonies are a blend of African culture and aspects of Sufi practices. It would be intriguing to hear more from those under treatment about what their symptoms have been and to learn more about their lives in order to think about the possible backgrounds and cultural channeling of their disturbances.

Through her research and work in producing these films, Dr. Mirzai is joining the growing group of scholars who are tending to movement and influences among geographical areas, rather than staying inside the boundaries of nation-states. These films offer tantalizing tastes of African-Persian connections and the cultures and lives of Afro-Iranians. Many more areas of investigation remain regarding African-Iranians. For example, future work might focus on other types of rituals and the meanings they hold in people's lives. During Moharram, African-Iranian women and men in Bushehr and elsewhere, especially in the southern Gulf regions, are active in Shia Muslim mourning commemorations. African-Iranians have produced outstanding and sometimes famous Moharram ritual leaders. The famous "Bushehri" mode of chanting, dance-like movements in a circle, and self-flagellation is surely a result of influences from African ceremonial dance.

As the director has pointed out, Afro-Iranian populations interact with their environments and come to different behaviors and practices. The films thus not only emphasize cultural and ethnic diversity in Iran, but even cultural variations among people whom one might think of as a uniform group—the Afro-Iranians, depending on where and among whom they live and their socio-economic existence and organization. In less remote, economically challenged, and rural surroundings, higher levels of integration can take place, Mirzai notes. Hopefully in the future we will learn more about women's lives outside of *zār* performances and the lives of urban African-Iranians and modes of integration with others.

The films will be useful for classes. They will hold meaning for Afro-Iranians. Several poignant commentaries from African-Iranians were posted in response to Behnaz Mirzai's online interview, "We Are Iranians': Rediscovering the History of

African Slavery in Iran,” published by *Middle East Eye*, May 9, 2016 (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/they-are-iranian-discovering-african-history-and-slavery-iran-970665328>).

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