

Obituary

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Abu'l-Qasim Afnan (1919–2004)

Iraj Ayman

Abu'l-Qāsim Afnān, the last custodian of the House of the Bab in Shiraz before the recent revolution in Iran, was born in Shiraz on 19 March 1919 and passed away in England on 22 October 2004. He was the eldest son of Mirza Ḥabību'llāh Afnān and Āghā Bigum Afnān.

Keywords

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Family background

Mirza Habibu'llah's parents were both related to the Bab's family. His father, Mirza Āqā, surnamed by Baha'u'llah Nūru'd-Dīn (light of religion), was the son of Zahrā Bigum, sister of the Bab's wife. While most of the Afnan family are relatives of the mother of the Bab, Mirza Nuru'd-Din Afnan's descendants are the only branch of this family that is directly related to both of the parents of the Bab (Aqa Sayyid Muḥammad Riḍā and Fatimih Bigum). Mirza Habibu'llah's mother, Maryam Sulṭān Bigum, was the daughter of Mirza Abu'l-Qasim, the eldest brother of Khadījih Bigum, wife of the Bab.

His mother Agha Bigum was the daughter of Aqa Mirza and granddaughter of Haj Mirza Muhammad 'Ali and Haj Mirza Muhammad Taqi, surnamed Vakīlu'l-Ḥaq, who were the sons of Haj Sayyid Muhammad known as Khāl-i Akbar (the eldest maternal uncle of the Bab).

Early life history

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan grew up in the spiritual environment of this distinguished household in Shiraz. During his childhood he was honoured by receiving a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Baha. He completed his primary and secondary education in Shiraz and acquired spiritual development and a rich knowledge of history and literature under the tutelage of his paternal uncle, Haj Mirza Buzurg Afnan. He also continued his studies in the Baha'i Faith and other religions by studiously attending the study classes conducted by such well-known and prominent Baha'i teacher-scholars as Fāḍil Ṭīhrānī, Hand of the Cause of God Tarazu'llah Samandari and others who stayed in Shiraz for extended periods of time. As a result, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, who was endowed with an extraordinary memory, developed a special knowledge of the history of the Afnan family as well as extensive knowledge of the Baha'i writings, particularly the writings of the Bab.

After finishing high school he began serving as an assistant to his father in the affairs of the custodianship of the House of the Bab. At the same

time he was also engaged in agricultural and gardening activities on the hereditary properties of the Afnan family.

Custodianship of the House of the Bab

Baha'u'llah had delegated the custodianship of the House of the Bab in Shiraz to Zahrā Bigum, sister of the Bab's wife, and decreed that it would continue in that family. This is the only case of Baha'u'llah making such an honour hereditary in a family. After the passing of his father, Mirza Habibu'llah Afnan (in 108 BE, 1951), Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, according to the instructions of Shoghi Effendi (Guardian of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957), assumed the Custodianship of that House. Shoghi Effendi also instructed Abu'l-Qasim's younger brother, Hasan Afnan (who passed away on 28 May 2004 in the United States of America), to render assistance to and to cooperate with his brother in this service so that at all times, even when Abu'l-Qasim Afnan was away from Shiraz, one of the members of that household was present and performed the function of custodianship. These two brothers enthusiastically performed this duty and lovingly served and guided those visiting that holy site.

Hasan Afnan, in a short biography of his brother, 'Abu'l-Qasim, wrote:

The passing of our beloved father made the family members and the friends, and in particular Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, extremely sad and grieved. In those days Tarazu'llah Samandari was staying in Shiraz and noticed that Abu'l-Qasim was grief-stricken. He considered that the only way for my dear brother to be consoled would be to visit the Holy Land for pilgrimage and meeting the Guardian. So Samandari kindly requested the Guardian to grant permission for my brother's pilgrimage. The permission was immediately received and my brother together with our sister, Ferdows Khanum, and some other Baha'is of Shiraz proceeded to the Holy Land. They performed the pilgrimage and received the Guardian's infinite loving care and blessings. Thus, my brother's feeling of loss and grief completely disappeared and was replaced by a feeling of joy and cheerfulness. So he returned to Shiraz with a high spirit and feeling of confidence ready to assume the responsibilities and duties of custodianship.

In this visit Shoghi Effendi asked Abu'l-Qasim Afnan some questions regarding the House of the Bab. He recommended that his brother, Hasan Afnan, should also reside in Shiraz and both of them be at the service of the House on his behalf. These two brothers devotedly continued that service for 30 years up to 1979 when the revolution in Iran forced them to leave the country.

Other Baha'i activities

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan became one of the first members appointed to the Baha'i Youth Committee of Shiraz. Subsequently he was appointed to serve on a number of committees such as Baha'i Properties, Baha'i Historical Sites and above all the Committee for the Custodianship of the Affairs of the House of the Bab. One of the duties of this committee was to carry out the necessary repairs and upkeep of the complex of the houses surrounding the House of the Bab and taking care of the historical relics belonging to the Bab and his family and the historic orange tree in that House which was planted by the Bab.

Thus for many years Mr Afnan used to go to the House of the Bab before dawn and take charge of guiding and serving the pilgrims and visitors.

Mr Afnan, for a number of years, was a member and secretary of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Shiraz until 1972 when he was appointed a member of the Auxiliary Board for Protection in the province of Fars. Through all these years he had to deal with various cases of attacks by the enemies of the Faith against the Baha'i community and the House of the Bab. In addition, he attended to the problems of the persecuted Baha'is in Shiraz and other localities in Fars who were seeking his assistance and advice.

Personality and character

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan was very jovial and cheerful. He had a smiling face, observing traditional Iranian etiquette in gestures and behaviour. He enjoyed a special popularity and was accorded special respect among both Baha'is and non-Baha'is. He had a vast knowledge of literature and history and was known to and in correspondence with prominent contemporary Iranian writers, poets and scholars such as Muhammad 'Ali Jamalzadieh, Mujtaba Minuvi, Freydoun Tavaluli, Dr Iqtidari and Mahdi Hamidi Shirazi. Mr Afnan had a unique knowledge of historical documents and manuscripts especially those belonging to the members of the Afnan household. He had admirable skill in reading various manuscripts and documents and identifying the writers of each one of them. He was keenly interested and engaged in collecting, classifying, organizing and preserving a large body of historical documents related to the members of the Afnans and the early years of the Babi and Baha'i dispensations. As a result, a large amount of such documents were saved and deposited in the Baha'i archives. He closely collaborated with Baha'i scholars. In particular he worked with Hand of the Cause of God Hasan Balyuzi, to whom he was related, in researching and locating documents and photographs for the books on the central figures of the Baha'i Faith that Mr Balyuzi was writing. In addition he arranged for the publication of the books that Mr Balyuzi authored in the Persian language.

After the passing of Mr Afnan, at a memorial meeting that was arranged in Oxford, one of the professors of Oxford University while eulogizing him and praising his vast historical and literary knowledge added that Mr Afnan had an amazing skill in reading old handwriting and identifying their writers. He was especially expert in reading the documents that included *siyāq* (a notation for writing numbers and keeping accounts which does not involve the use of the usual Arabic numbers). As a matter of fact Mr Afnan was so intimately familiar with *siyāq* that he used to keep his own financial accounts in the same method. He had developed this attachment to *siyāq* due to the fact that the Bab had kept his business accounts in the same notation.

Both Abu'l-Qasim Afnan and Hasan Afnan were endowed with special poetical talent and composed a large number of poems in Persian that are highly regarded by literary experts and some of them are published in various Baha'i periodicals.

Family members

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan married Minou Bāzyār, a descendent of Allah-Verdi Khan, the famous minister of Shah Abbas the Great of the Safavid dynasty. Minou Bazyar is an accomplished artist and has produced a number of

valuable paintings and other art works. The couple had two daughters, Maryam Afnan and Laleh Afnan-Samandari.

The years in England

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan together with his family, his brother Hasan and his sister Ferdows left Shiraz for England in 1979 due to the severe persecution of the Baha'is by the new regime in Iran. They undertook this journey particularly because Ferdows Khanum had to have heart surgery. Three days after their departure from Shiraz, the enemies of the Baha'i Faith called on their residence in Shiraz to arrest them. When they did not find them, they confiscated all their belongings including all the historical documents that were in their home. Therefore at the recommendation of the Universal House of Justice they did not return to Iran. Abu'l-Qasim Afnan stayed in Oxford, England, for the rest of his life. During those years Mr Afnan frequently visited the Institute of Oriental Studies at Oxford University and associated with the professors and scholars there who invited him to deliver a number of lectures and also provide guidance to the graduate students in preparing their research papers, theses and dissertations related to the Babi and Baha'i Faiths.

After the passing of the Hand of the Cause of God Hasan Balyuzi, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan took a great interest in the development of the Afnan Library that was established by Mr Balyuzi in the memory of Fatimih Bigum, wife of the Bab. Abu'l-Qasim Afnan was deeply devoted to this project and was instrumental in finding a suitable venue for housing that collection.

Mr Afnan, during the years of living in England, was frequently invited to deliver talks at Baha'i summer schools and conferences. Many of those talks were audio-recorded. He also served as a member of the Editorial Board of *Payām-i-Bahā'ī*, a Baha'i periodical in Persian published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of France.

Mr Afnan had the privilege of making several visits to the Holy Land and received the loving hospitality and favour of the Universal House of Justice. During one of these visits that occurred after the passing of Hand of the Cause of God Hasan Balyuzi, Robert Balyuzi, Mr Balyuzi's son accompanied Mr Afnan. Together they managed to fulfill Mr Balyuzi's cherished wish by placing a copy of the book *Bahā'u'llāh: King of Glory* (authored by Mr Balyuzi) on the Threshold of the Holy Shrine of Baha'u'llah.

The last years

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan had a sudden stroke in 1998, became paralysed, lost his speech, was hospitalized and then lived in a nursing home in Swindon until he passed away in 2004. He is buried in Oxford. The Universal House of Justice sent the following message to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of United Kingdom:

We were deeply grieved to learn of the passing of Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, kinsman of the Blessed Bab, who will be remembered as a valiant promoter and defender of the Cause. His long record of distinguished service included devoted custodianship, for more than three decades, of the House of the

Bab in Shiraz; membership on the Spiritual Assembly of that same city; appointment as an Auxiliary Board member in the Cradle of the Faith; and valued contributions in the field of Baha'i scholarship through the articles and treatises he authored on the early history of the Faith.

We are offering fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold for the progress of his steadfast, noble soul in all the worlds of God and for the solace of the hearts of his beloved wife, Minu, and his cherished daughters, Maryam and Laleh, and their families.

Also, Hand of the Cause of God Dr 'Ali Muhammad Varqa addressed the following message to the family of Abu'l-Qasim Afnan:

Dearly loved Friends,

The soul-stirring news of the passing of your beloved husband and father, Abu'l-Qāsim Afnān, to the Abhā Kingdom engulfed my heart in an ocean of sadness and grief. After several years of physical illness, his precious soul is now released from the pain of this mortal life and has ascended to the realm of God. Sharing your sorrow, I offer my deepest sympathy to you and other members of your distinguished and noble family.

In the vicinity of the Holy Shrines I supplicate that the Ancient Beauty may elevate his rank in the realm of eternity and immerse his loved ones in the ocean of his blessings and confirmations.

With loving Bahā'ī greetings,
'A.M. Varqā

Works of Abu'l-Qasim Afnan

Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, when living in Iran and extremely busy with serving in various capacities, in addition to composing poetry, may occasionally have contributed some articles to periodicals. After transferring to England, however, he had ample opportunity to spend his time in reading books and writing articles and books. His main research was devoted to producing a three-volume book on the history on the Babi dispensation called '*Ahd-i-A'lā*'. He completed the first volume and managed to have it published in 655 pages in 2000 (Oxford: Oneworld). It is devoted to the history of the life of the Bab. The draft manuscripts and materials for the two remaining volumes remain to be published. The second volume will be devoted to the history of the Letters of the Living and the third volume will be on *Khānidān-i Afnān*, the history of Afnan family. These volumes include a wealth of documents that are of special historical value and have not been published before. They are the documents and photographs that Mr Afnan collected over the years while researching for the preparation of these volumes. Another book authored by Mr Afnan is *Black Pearls* (trans. Farzad Katira'i, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1988, 2nd edn. 1999). This is a small book of 55 pages on those serving the households of the Bab and Baha'u'llah who were of African decent. The third book is *Chahār Risālih-yi Tārikhī dar bārih-yi Tāhīrih Qurratu'l-'Ayn* (*Four Treatises on Tahirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn*) in 112 pages published in 1991 (Landegg, Switzerland: Anjuman Adab va Hunar). Except for *Black Pearls*, which is in English, all the other works of Mr Afnan are in Persian. The following is a list of the research

papers, articles and poems authored by Mr Afnan in various Persian-language Baha'i publications:

'Savāniḥa-yi zindigī va dawrān-i ḥayāt-i Jamāl-i Aqdas-i Abhā qabl az izhār-i amr-i khāfi-yi mubārak' ('Events of the life of Bahā'u'llāh prior to His covert proclamation').

In *Mahbūb-i-'Alam (The Beloved of the World)*, n.p.: 'Andalib Editorial Board, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of Canada, [1992] 181–20.

'Maqām-i Ḥaḍrat-i A'lā az naẓar-i Diyānat-i Bahā'ī' ('The station of the Bāb from the point of view of the Bahā'ī Faith'). In *Az Siyāh Chāl-i Tih-rān tā Vaḥdat-i 'Ālam-i-Insān (From the Black Pit in Tehran to the Unity of Mankind)*, n.p.: Payām-i-Badi', USA, commemorative volume for the Holy Year 1992–93, [1992] 227–31.

Payām-i Bahā'ī, (a Baha'i periodical in Persian, published in Paris)

'Yādī az Jināb-i Ḥasan Muvaqqar Balyūzī' ('Remembering Hasan Muvaqqar Balyuzi'), no. 171 (February 1994) 8–21.

'Daw khāṭirih azjināb-i Ḥasan Balyuzī' ('Two recollections of Hasan Balyuzi'), no. 171 (February 1994) 38–40.

'Dar rathā-yi jināb-i Ḥasan Muvaqqar Balyūzī' ('An elegy for Hasan Muvaqqar Balyuzi'), no. 171 (February 1994) 41.

'Bushihr dar zamān-i iqāmat-i ḥaḍrat-i A'lā dar ān shahr' ('Bushihr in the time of the Bab's residence there'), no. 175 (June 1994) 23–6.

'Dastān-i kutak khurdan-i Mīrzā Nasru'llāh Jahrumī' ('The story of the beating of Mirza Nasru'llah Jahrumi'), no. 182 (January 1995) 37–40.

'Safar-i Ḥaḍrat-i A'lā bih Hijāz' ('Journey of the Bab to Mecca'), no. 186 (May 1995) 15–19; no. 187 (June 1995) 18–22.

'Shuhadā-yi Abarqū' ('The martyrs of Abarqū'), no. 189 (August 1995) 28–30.

'Jilvih-hā-yi 'irfān dar andīshih-yi yik ṣaḥrāgard-i Bahā'ī' ('The manifestations of mysticism in the thought of a Bahā'ī nomad'), no. 197 (April 1996) 14–15.

'Khāṭirātī az bārgāh-i Mahbūb' ('Memories of the court of the Beloved'), no. 204 (November 1996) 21–5.

'Yādī az ayyām-i tasharruf bih khāk-pā-yi mawla-yi mihrabān' ('Memories of a pilgrimage to visit Shoghi Effendi'), no. 208 (March 1997) 35–41.

A letter from Afnan also appears in Bahman Nīkandīsh, 'Jamālzādih va diyanāt-i Bahā'ī' ('Jamalzadiah and the Baha'i Faith'), no. 222 (May 1998) 40–1.

'Andalib Magazine (a Baha'i quarterly journal in Persian, published in Thornhill, Ontario, Canada)

'Dil maṭla' tajallī-yi Jānān ast' ('The heart manifests the Beloved'), no. 10 (Spring 1984) 65.

'Baytu'llāh al-akram' ('The most noble House of God'), no.13 (Winter 1984–5) 16–27.

'Taḍmīnī bar yikī az ash'ār-i Sa'dī' ('A poem in style of one of the poems of Sa'dī' [a poem]), no. 16 (Fall 1985) 88.

'Sawdā-yi 'ishq' ('The passion of love' [a poem]), no. 29 (Winter 1988–9) 20.

'Yādī az guzashtigān: khādīmih-yi bā vafā' ('Memories of departed friends: a faithful maid-servant of the Cause'), no. 28 (Fall 1988) 46–7.

'Khāṭirihī az musāfirat-i Muḥammad Baqir Khān Afnān va chikāmih-yi Shūrīdih (Fasīḥu'l-Mulk)' ('A memoir of the journey of Muhammad Baqir

Khan Afnan and an elegy of Shuridih'), no. 34 (Spring 1990) 48.
 'Yādī az guzashtigān: jināb-i Rūḥu'llāh Bihishtī' ('Memories of departed friends: Rūḥu'llāh Bihishtī'), no. 38 (Spring 1991) 47–8.

Khūshih-hā'ī az Kharman-i Adab va Hunar (volumes of the proceedings of the Society for Persian Arts and Letters, Landegg Academy, Switzerland)
 'Mujmalī az aḥvāl va āthār-i jināb-i 'Andalīb' ('A summary of the life and works of 'Andalīb'), 1 (1990) 25–34.
 'Damī dar bar-i aḥbāb' ('A moment with the Friends' [a poem]), 1 (1990) 169.
 'Ṭanz-gū'ī va ṭanz-nivīsī dar adabiyāt-i Fārsī' ('Spoken and written satire in Persian literature'), 2 (1991) 117–23.
 'Dar āriḍū-yi Shīrāz' ('Yearning for Shiraz' [a poem]), 2 (1991) 169.
 'Sharāb-i Ma'rifat' ('The wine of knowledge' [a poem]), 3 (1993) 159.
 'Murūrī bar ash'ār-i Varqā' ('A review of the poetry of Varqā'), 5 (1994) 35–44.
 'Ḥaqīqat-i 'Ishq va Junūn' ('The reality of love and madness' [a poem]), 5 (1994) 230.
 'Murūrī bar ad-Dalā'il as-Sab'ih' ('A review of the Seven Proofs'), 6 (1995) 147–56.
 'Murūrī bar ash'ār-i Nabīl Zarandī' ('A review of the poetry of Nabil'), 7 (1996) 58–75.
 'Khabar az dargah-i dūst' ('News from the threshold of the Friend' [a poem]), 8 (1997) 177.

Biography

Dr Iraj Ayman is currently the organizer/director of the 'Irfān Colloquia. He has held academic and managerial positions at a number of universities, research and training institutions, professional associations, and international organizations in Iran, the Philippines, Thailand, France, Switzerland and the United States of America. His publications cover a variety of topics in psychology, education and management.