



## EAST AFRICA IV. BAHAI COMMUNITIES

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### iv. BAHAI COMMUNITIES

The earliest contact of Persian Bahais with East Africa followed plans developed in 1950 by the then Guardian of the Bahai faith [Shoghi Effendi](#). The national Bahai community of Persia had direct responsibility for settling Italian Somaliland, one of twelve designated areas in East Africa, though Persian Bahais settled in other territories, including Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, the first areas in the world to experience mass conversion to the Bahai faith. During the formative years of Bahai communities in East Africa, the area received eighty Bahai settlers, “pioneers,” forty of whom were Persians. Forty percent of the Persian Bahais were women. In 1993 there were an estimated 223,000 Bahais in East Africa and 1,268 Bahai local governing councils (“Statistical Table, Six-Year Plan Final Figures,” in *The Bahá’í Encyclopedia*).

The Ethiopian Bahai community was established as early as 1933 by an Egyptian Bahai, Šabrī Elyās. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia caused Elyās to leave the country, only to return in 1944 with his spouse, Fahīma Yakot; they remained until 1954 when they left for Djibouti. Between 1953 and 1963, a large influx of Bahais from Persia, Egypt, and the United States resulted in conversions sufficiently numerous to undertake active Bahai work in many parts of the country. The area, however, attracted only two Persian couples, namely the Monajjems and Dr. and Mrs. Farhūmand; the latter donated land



and national and regional Bahai centers to the Bahais of Ethiopia. Formed in 1956, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Ethiopia was legally incorporated in 1992. One finds Bahais in several hundred localities at present.

*The Uganda Bahai community.* A leading center for Bahai expansion, the Uganda Bahai community was formed considerably later. In 1951 six Bahais, four of whom Persians, arrived in the country. Among the most notable Persian Bahais were Mūsā Banānī (1886-1971), in 1952 appointed a “Hand of the Cause” (*Ayādī-e Amr-Allāh*), his wife Samīḥa, his daughter Violette, and his son-in-law ‘Alī Naḵjavānī. Many Ugandans accepted the Bahai faith rapidly. A number of them traveled westward across Africa to open new territories to the Bahai faith. In 1956 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Uganda was formed. In 1961 the first Bahai House of Worship in Africa was dedicated in Kampala. During the 1970s the Bahai community of Uganda lost its legal recognition, as did many other religious communities during Idi Amin’s rule, but by 1979 recognition was restored. Uganda has several Bahai schools and in 1992 had more than 335 local Bahai governing councils (more properly known as “spiritual assemblies”).

*The Tanzania Bahai community.* Tanzania attracted the greatest number of Persian Bahais, namely eighteen. The foundation of the Bahai community was laid in 1951 by Jalāl Naḵjavānī (1917-1982), the first contemporary pioneer to settle in Africa, his wife Daraḵšanda Na‘īmī, his brother-in-law Farhang Na‘īmī, and ‘Ezzat Zahrā‘ī. The Egyptian Bahai Ḥasan Ṣabrī and the American Isobel Ṣabri were also influential in promoting the work of the new faith in Tanzania. Farzāna Yazdānī, her husband, and their family arrived in 1952 in Dar es Salaam, the former capital and chief port of Tanzania. In 1954 Dr. Farhūmand left Tehran and settled in the country with his three children; his wife followed. Dr. Farhūmand was particularly noted for his founding a multiracial clinic in Dar es Salaam and eventually served as personal physician to the first president of Tanzania. In the course of these early years, many Tanzanians became Bahais. The death of a Persian Bahai, Mrs. Afrūḵta, widow of a professor of medicine at Tehran University, provided the opportunity for the still emerging Bahai community of Dar es Salaam to establish the first multiracial cemetery in that city. Bahais can be found in 508 localities, of which 191 have spiritual assemblies (Yazdani, “Tanzania”).

*The Kenyan Bahai community.* Like those of Uganda and Tanzania, the Bahai community in Kenya started to take shape in the early 1950s. Kenya was the



recipient of the second largest contingent of Persian Bahais, namely thirteen individuals. This group included ‘Azīz Yazdī, a businessman from Tehran, and his family; the ‘Alā’ī family; the ‘Alizādas; Manūčehr Ma‘ānī; the Sohaylīs; and the Fanānāpaḍīrs. The Bahai presence is greatest in the Western Province. The national spiritual assembly of the Bahais of Kenya was formed in 1964. There are now over 700 spiritual assemblies (Sohaili, “Kenya”).

*The Somalian Bahai community.* The Bahai situation in Somalia is strikingly different from that in the four other East African countries. The growth of the Bahai community was much slower in Somalia. The notable Persians who settled in Italian and British Somaliland were Sohayl and Cyrus Samandārī (1934-58), Šīdān Faṭḥ-A‘ẓam, and Mahdī and Ursula Samandārī. The last couple stayed for twenty years. There were Bahais in only one locality (Smandari, “Somalia”).

Aside from activities that have led to a dramatic growth of the Bahai faith in East Africa, Persian Bahais, through the establishment of local and national Bahai governing councils, the donation of land and buildings, and support of the African Bahai Temple erected in Uganda in 1964, have made a significant contribution to the consolidation of the Bahai faith in Africa as a whole. Persians have also assisted Western Bahai “pioneers” in settling in East Africa.

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*The Bahá’í Encyclopedia* (forthcoming) is the source for the following references: Will. C. van den Hoonard, “Africa”; idem, “An Annotated Index of the United Africa Teaching Committee Minutes and Correspondence: Bahá’i History in 25 African Countries”; S. Samandari, “Somalia”; M. Sohaili, “Kenya”; and F. Yazdani, “Tanzania.”