

Mapping Out Race: How Afro-Iranian Migrations Redefine the ‘Aryan Myth’

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Abstract

If maps refer to geographies, the transing of cultural histories, and an arrival of migrant bodies, what might it mean to map out race in Iran? This paper examines the ethnocentric biases that stem from repertoires of whiteness, particularly due to the ‘Aryan Myth’. Political terminology of The First Persian Empire (550-330 BCE) that drew from an association with geography distanced Iranians from Afro-Iranian populations residing north of the Persian Gulf. The kindred ties between Iranian identity and homeland through the ‘Persian’ label under the Achaemenid rulership formulated a romanticized narration of race in Iran. In effect, the bridge between linguistics and geography due to aristocratic terminology uniformly synthesized racial affiliations between Iranians and whiteness. According to Mirzai, limited scholarship has been shown of the Afro-Iranian community’s presence in southern Iran after enslavement, yet archives from within Iran and England that connect to slavery have become highly critical to the study of Afro-Iranian migrations ("African presence in Iran" 230-231). This paper analyzes a reclaiming of multi-ethnic identity and a renovated epistemological lens when viewing migrations, diaspora, and race relations after the growth of Afro-Iranian heritage in southern Iran.

Keywords: Race; Migrations; Afro-Iranian; Iranian; Identity; Aryan; Indo-European.

1. Introduction

1.1 *The ‘Aryan Myth’*

The claiming of European ancestry comes from the ‘Aryan Myth’—the idea that Iranians are descendants of Indo-Europeans. Iranic origins and the Indo-Iranian subcategory stems from the Indo-European migrations to the north of the Caspian Sea from the 35th to the 40th century BC. “Aryan” comes from the Avestan word ‘*aryānām*’—meaning ‘[the country] of the Aryans.’ Achaemenid king Darius describes himself as of Aryan ancestry—and “Persian” (Ara, 2008). This ‘divine’ theocratic engagement with linguistics leads to nostalgic idealizations of race and ethnocentric biases—while unveiling chauvinist attitudes and contemporary zeal on behalf of the Iranian community at large. Linguistics state that Aryan was used to describe Indo-Europeans. However, the “myth of Aryan supremacy” resulted in misconstrued definitions of a linguistic idea, one that manifested into racist ideologies and political motives (Ara, 2008).



Figure 1. Map of Caucasus Mountains

Description: The map represents the Caucasus Mountains, the region separating Europe from Asia.

2. Area Descriptions

When understanding the connections of race with geography, it is important to note that ‘race’ is less connected with ancestral ties, and more so with physical characteristics. Throughout history, theorists have posited categories of race based on regions, ethnicities, and skin colors. Their labels for racial groups include suggested regions (Conerly et al., 2021). Think of ‘Caucasian’ as associated with the Caucasus Mountains. The geographic region of the Caucasus Mountains connects Europe and Asia, just West of the Caspian Sea. Due to Iran’s geographic proximity to Caucasia—the terrain quartering Europe from Asia, nineteenth-century European scholarship loosely defined Iranians as “Caucasian.” Not only was this terminology primarily utilized to separate from non-Aryan people— its alphabetized genealogy unravels Western retellings that are pedaled by sociopolitical interest in the Orient.

2.1 Afro-Iranian Populations and Diaspora

Scholarship on African communities residing within Iran remains limited, with “virtually no published materials available in English or French about African communities in Iran” (Mirzai, 2002). The rise in African populations within southern Iran is primarily due to actions of enslavement and happenings of diaspora. According to Mirzai (2002), the history of African diaspora is directly connected to the slave trade. The scholarship on archives from within Iran and England that connect to slavery have become paramount to understanding the renovated lens of race in Iran. Within the Iranian provinces and islands (Mirzai, 2002), most Afro-Iranians reside north of the Persian Gulf in Khuzistan and Bushihr. Afro-Iranians can also be found in the provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan—the region bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Figure 2. Map of Afro-Iranian Populations

Description: The map represents shaded provinces and islands that are populated by Afro-Iranians.

3. Conclusion

The mixed genealogies resulting from the Afro-Iranian migrations recenters discussions of fragmented epistemological repertoires of the ‘Aryan Myth’ and *white ethnonationalism*—one that ferments essentialist notions of “otherness” among Afro-Iranians existing after the 30th-century BC Aryan migrations to Iran. 19th-century travelers’ accounts of border crossings from east and northeast Africa highlights displacement present during the slave trade—consider African laborers in the southeastern province of Baluchistan, Iran. The scattering of Afro-Iranians and heritage into southern Iran repurposes a new cultural perspective and ethnic hybridity made imaginable, while synchronously planting the seeds for racial disparity within diasporic spaces uniformly appropriated by whiteness (Mirzai, 2002; 2005).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother and father for guiding me through graduate school. This work would not be possible without their support.

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