

Amin Banani

(1926-2013)



Amin Banani¹ was born in Tehran on September 23, 1926. He received his elementary education at Jamshid Jam Primary School and completed the first three years of high school at the Alborz Secondary School. In 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, he joined a number of young Persian Bahá'ís who came to the United States on board a U.S. troopship arriving in February 1944 to complete their education. Due to the more advanced curriculum of the Persian schools at the time, he was able to graduate from high school by June of 1944 as the valedictorian of his class. In September 1944 he was admitted to

Stanford University and graduated in 1947 with a major in history. He obtained his M.A. from Columbia University in 1949 and returned to Stanford University to receive his Ph.D. in 1959.

His academic career began with teaching history at the Overseas Program of the University of Maryland in Athens, Greece, in 1956-58. Then he taught for one year as an Instructor at Stanford University, 1958-59; two years as an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Reed College, 1959-61; two years as Research Fellow and Assistant Professor at Harvard University, 1961-63. In September 1963 he was invited to UCLA by Professor Gustave von Grunebaum to start the program of Persian studies. From the start his teaching was not narrowly focused but covered both history and literature. This broad encompassing of Persian cultural history was reflected in his research and scholarship. From his first book, *The Modernization of Iran*, published in 1961, to his latest contribution to the volume published by the Danish Academy of Sciences in 2008 entitled *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages*, he concerned himself with vital aspects of a living and continuing cultural tradition.

Some of the more significant writings of Amin Banani are chapters entitled "Ferdowsi and the Art of Tragic Epic" in *Islam and its Cultural Divergence* (1971); "The Conversion of a Self-Conscious Elite" in *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam* (1977); "Ahmad Kasravi and Purification of Persian: A Study in Nationalist Motivation" in *Nation and Ideology* (1982); and "Rumi, The Poet" in *Mysticism and Poetry in Islam* (1988). His collaborative translation with Jascha Kessler of the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad was published in 1982 under the title *Bride of Acacias*. The same collaborative effort in 2005 yielded a beautiful volume of translation of the poems of Tahereh, the nineteenth century heroine of the Bábí movement, who sounded the clarion call of emancipation of women and equality of rights of men and women, entitled *Tahereh: A Portrait in Poetry*.

In the course of more than thirty years of teaching at UCLA he laid the foundation of a broad and integrated program of Iranian Studies culminating in establishment of the first Undergraduate Major in Iranian Studies at any American university.

Amin Banani served on the Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, the Executive Council of the Society for Iranian Studies and as Vice President of the American Association of Iranian Studies.

Unlike some academicians who seek their fulfillment exclusively in their academic career, Amin Banani from the beginning led a rich life of service in the Bahá'í community world-wide. His global-level Bahá'í service began in the 1940s, when he accepted assignments to represent the Bahá'í community at a UN conference of nongovernmental organizations and a human rights commission. In the early 1950s he also served as a member of National Bahá'í Youth Committee in the United States.

In 1953 he and his wife, Sheila Wolcott, responded to the call of Shoghi Effendi to move to countries and territories without Bahá'ís. They moved with their first child to Greece, where they spent five years fostering the beginnings of the Bahá'í community. His first university teaching post was in Athens with the Overseas Program of the University of Maryland.

During this time Amin was called by Shoghi Effendi for further work in the United Nations to protect the rights of Bahá'ís in Iran, ultimately being appointed in 1956 to an international committee for defense of the Faith.

After the family's return to the United States in 1958, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed Amin at various times, from the 1960s through the 2000s, to serve on the Community Development Committee, Publishing Committee, Persian Reviewing Board and *Payam-e-Doost* Governing Board. He was

a delegate to the Bahá'í National Convention several times in the 1950s and 1970s.

Over the years he was elected to Local Spiritual Assemblies serving Bahá'í communities in California, Greece, Oregon, Massachusetts and California again. He taught at various sessions at Bosch, Louhelen and Green Acre Bahá'í schools; of summer schools in the United States, England, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Switzerland and Germany; and of the 'Irfán Colloquium.

He was elected to the Bahá'í Assemblies of Palo Alto, California; Athens, Greece; Portland, Oregon; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Santa Monica, California. He made presentations at the 'Irfán Colloquium sessions held at Bosch and Louhelen Bahá'í Schools in North America and at Acuto Center for Bahá'í Studies, Italy, in Europe. He also taught at the Bahá'í Summer Schools in the United States, England, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Switzerland and Germany. From 1980 to 2006 he served as the Deputy Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, a global Bahá'í philanthropic fund.

Amin Banani was a passionate lover of music both eastern and western, and found much of his spiritual fulfillment in enjoyment of that art.

He passed away on Sunday, July 28, 2013, in Santa Monica and is buried in the Woodlawn Cemetery, Santa Monica.

The Universal House of Justice in a message of tribute praising Amin Banani's services says:

Whether in the pioneering or administrative fields, he served with distinction — a service that was ever characterized by humility and self-effacement. ... [W]e recall with heartfelt admiration and gratitude his staunch and effective defense of the Faith, the signal contributions he made to the advancement of both Bahá'í and Iranian studies, and his twenty-six years of service to the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. In all respects,

his was a life that exemplified unwavering devotion to the Cause and abiding commitment to its high ideals.

NOTE

¹ For more information on the life history and academic achievements of Professor Amin Banani see Professor Ehsan Yarshater's article on Amin Banani, *Journal of Iranian Studies*, Vol. 47, 2014.