

# She Died for Women's Rights In Iran

Her “crime” was showing her entire face. Her mission was to stop the unfair treatment of women. In spite of fierce opposition, she openly defied Middle Eastern customs by becoming the first Persian woman to unveil herself before an assembly of men. She sacrificed her life for women's rights.

Born in 1817 in Persia (now called Iran), Tahirih grew up listening to her father's teachings of the Islamic religion and customs. But Tahirih wasn't allowed to see her father teach; she stayed behind a curtain so the male scholars couldn't see or hear her.



For her protection, the governor of Baghdad asked Tahirih to leave Iraq and return to Iran. Although sad to leave, Tahirih was exuberant to return to her homeland. She had quite a homecoming! Government officials, royalty and civilians had all heard of her warmth and intelligence and hurried to see her.

But even in her own country, many people still disapproved of Tahirih's teachings. A few priests submitted false reports about her to the city's mayor. The mayor threw Tahirih and her followers out of the city. They were forced into a wagon drawn by horses and driven out into the freezing desert without any food,

In the 19th Century, in the Middle East, laws didn't permit women to study, vote or own property. Women were considered less than second class citizens and were required to wear a veil that hid their faces in public. But Tahirih had a passion for theology and decided to explore it even though it was against the law. She studied books about the Baha'i Faith, which announced a new era where men and women were completely equal. She was deeply interested in these books and studied them thoroughly. Immediately, she began corresponding with one of the authors, asking many profound questions about religion. One day, Tahirih told her father about what she had been studying. Her father was angry. He didn't think his daughter should learn about the Baha'i Faith.

Tahirih asked her uncle, “Oh, when will the day come when new laws will be revealed on earth? I shall be the first to follow these new teachings and give my life for my sisters.”

Soon, Tahirih boldly traveled throughout the Middle East, giving public lectures that attracted large crowds of people. With her speeches, Tahirih empowered women to reject their oppressed status. While in Baghdad, she invited several priests to attend her talks but they all refused. Because the priests disapproved of a woman influencing other women, they reported her “inappropriate” actions to the local governor.

clothing or blankets. But Tahirih did not slacken. She struggled her way to a nearby village and contacted her brother who helped the group to escape and return home.

Even though many cities barred Tahirih from their streets, she promoted the liberation of women with more determination than ever. In the summer of 1848, Tahirih attended a Baha'i conference held in Badasht, a quiet city in northern Iran. Out of 81 attendees, Tahirih was the only woman. Even though Tahirih believed in women's equality, because of Islamic customs, she held conversations with men from behind a curtain.

But this was temporary. One day when the men had gathered in the lush garden, Tahirih entered and removed her veil. She had just performed the unthinkable! The men did not know what to do. But Tahirih did. She stood up and declared, “I am the word which shall make the chiefs and the nobles of the earth afraid...this is the day to be happy...the day when everything in the past is forgotten.”

After the conference, the King of Persia ordered Tahirih be put in jail for “acting promiscuously.” Tahirih's jail cell was a narrow, dark room in the mayor's house. During her imprisonment, two infuriated priests came to visit her and argued against her views that women should be treated equally. Since Tahirih would not change her views, they ordered for her to be put to death.

“You can kill me but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”

On her execution day, she wore an elegant white silk dress as if she were attending a wedding. After saying goodbye to everyone in the house, she apologized for her lengthy stay and for any trouble she may have caused.

At sunset, the guardsmen came to the house and took Tahirih to a garden. Here, she spoke her last words: “You can kill me but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”

An intoxicated servant was ordered to perform the vicious act. He strangled Tahirih with her own white scarf and flung her body into a well and filled it with stones.

It was August 1852. The 36-year-old Tahirih was martyred for women’s rights, just four years after New York held the first Women’s Rights Convention. News of Tahirih’s death spread rapidly across the world and thousands of women from Baghdad to Constantinople began removing their veils.

The great actress Sarah Bernhardt requested that a play be written about Tahirih.

Currently, there are two non-profit organizations in the U.S. honoring the great martyr. The “Tahirih Justice Center” promotes justice for women fleeing from intolerable human rights abuses, while the “Tahirih Association” grants educational scholarships to girls and women.

But the heroine’s true measure of influence and sacrifice is seen today with the astronomical progress women have made at home, school and the professional arena.

Tahirih not only made the first public move denouncing the oppression of women, she also became one of the great, early leaders of the Baha’i Faith, which today has millions of followers worldwide. Tahirih shunned wealth and prestige. Instead, she devoted her life to spreading this new doctrine. She inspired courage. Tahirih was a joyous woman, always bright and enthusiastic, even when in great danger.

Tahirih has become a legend. Today, when Iranian parents wish for their daughters to progress, they proudly say, “Be a Tahirih.”

—Celia Taghdiri, a Baha’i from Iran, lives in California. The article was also published in *New Moon Girls* (NewMoon.com) in 2008. Illustration by Laurel Wiebe, North Carolina.

## \* Potjiekos: Small Pot Food! \*

Imagine yourself in Cape Town, South Africa. 32° Celsius. It’s summer and that means three things: sun, fun and...good food!

So what do you want to do first? Take a dip in the cool, Atlantic Ocean where African penguins bob on the water next to you? Or listen to the ocean crash against the rocks and catch a majestic, Wandering Albatross in flight. But your trip would not be complete without gazing upon the Eighth Wonder of the world: Table Mountain. Watch how fluffy clouds form a tablecloth on this lovely, natural landmark!

But all this adventure is bound to make you hungry. So let’s take a journey into some scrumptious, South African cuisine and learn how to make “Potjiekos,” an Afrikaans word meaning *Small Pot Food*.

The first essential item you’ll need is a cast iron pot. It is the unspoken rule: you cannot make this tasty, traditional stew without it!

Gather around your friends and family. Let the adults get a good fire going, once those coals are hot, that’s the time to get cooking!

### Ingredients:

Oil, onions, mutton knuckles, diced carrots, green beans (cut into small pieces), potatoes, cauliflower, pumpkin or butternut, salt and pepper. Quantities depend on the number of people to be served.

### Recipe:

Add oil to the pot. Next, sauté the onions in it. Then add the mutton. The next step is to add the vegetables in a specific order: diced carrots, green beans, potatoes, cauliflower, pumpkin or butternut squash. After the vegetables, add water (as required) and salt and pepper (adjust according to taste).

It is important to remember that the mutton is on the bottom of the pot, and the vegetables are on the top. Also be careful not to add too much water.

The pot does not need to be stirred; heat is kept low with coals (no flame). A *Potjiekos* dish is traditionally served with rice and buttered rolls.

You can substitute any desired alternative for meat if you are a vegetarian. Also, any kind of vegetable can be used in *Potjiekos* like: mushrooms, tomatoes or zucchini. And fresh