



The Institute of Ismaili Studies



## *A Short History of the Ismailis*

Traditions of a Muslim Community

**Farhad Daftary**

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A Reading Guide prepared by Aleem Karmali for the Department of Community Relations, 2012

The Ismailis represent the second largest Shi'i Muslim community after the Twelvers (Ithna'asharis), and are today scattered as religious minorities in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Despite their long history and contributions to Islamic civilisation, however, they were until recently one of the least understood Muslim communities. In fact, a multitude of medieval legends and misconceptions circulated widely about Ismaili teachings and practices, while the rich literary heritage of the Ismailis remained inaccessible to outsiders. The breakthrough in Ismaili studies had to await the recovery and study of a large number of Ismaili sources, a phenomenon that has continued unabated since the 1930s. As a result, modern scholarship in the field has already made great strides in distinguishing fact from fiction in many aspects of Ismaili history and thought.

Dr Farhad Daftary  
Preface, p. vii



*The Muslim world today is heir to a faith and a culture that stands among the leading civilisations in the world. The revelation granted to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) opened new horizons and released new energies of mind and spirit. It became the binding force that held the Muslims together despite the far-flung lands in which they lived, the diverse languages and dialects they spoke, and the multitude of traditions – scientific, artistic, religious and cultural – which went into the making of a distinctive ethos*

Mawlana Hazar Imam  
25th Anniversary of The Institute of Ismaili Studies  
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### Introduction

Understanding history is important to a community's sense of identity and helps the community to understand where they have come from, their core beliefs and the values that have endured despite changing social, cultural and political circumstances. *A Short History of the Ismailis* by Farhad Daftary is an excellent overview of Ismaili history and doctrines, which is thorough in detail yet broad in scope, written by the leading authority on Ismaili history of his generation. The book begins by explaining how the Ismailis have been studied throughout history and the research challenges faced by historians of Ismaili history and thought, followed by an account of historical events and doctrinal developments. The book is divided into four key phases of Ismaili history: the early Shi'a and early Ismaili period, the Fatimid age, the Alamut phase, and the post-Alamut phase up to modern times.

### Guiding Questions

1. How is the telling of history shaped by the context in which it is written and the perspectives of those who write it?
2. What role does context play in the understanding and articulation of doctrines and beliefs?
3. What are some of the enduring values that recur throughout Ismaili history and the teachings of the imams?
4. In what ways is the role of the Ismaili Imams in the modern world different in comparison to imams of the pre-modern world?

### Ismaili History and Historiography

In the book's introduction, Daftary explains the historiography of the Ismailis and the challenges faced by researchers today in studying Ismaili history. Historiography is the study of how history is written and looks at the sources used to tell an historical narrative including the biases of their authors. From this, one can see the way in which

the community has been studied through time and understand how context and individual perspectives affect the way historians of different periods wrote about the Ismailis. Daftary explains the challenges scholars have faced because of the relatively small number of Ismaili-produced works that have survived through the ages. In order to paint as complete a picture as possible, historians must rely on both Ismaili and non-Ismaili sources.

Non-Ismaili accounts provide valuable historical information and demonstrate how the Ismailis were perceived by others. However, since these works are often written by detractors of the Ismailis, they often misrepresent the community's own beliefs and practices, either intentionally or unintentionally. These non-Ismaili chroniclers, including historians from rival political empires or religious communities, such as the Sunni-led Abbasid Caliphate and the Christian Crusaders from Europe, "were often not interested in acquiring accurate information" (p.10) about actual Ismaili beliefs and practices. These writings led to two major legends that developed about the Ismailis, known as the "Black legend" and the "Assassin legends", which have continued to influence the popular imagination of how the Ismaili community is perceived today.

The shortage of Ismaili sources was caused in large part by the destruction of the extensive libraries in Fatimid Cairo and at the fortress of Alamut, which saw the majority of the writings from those time periods go up in flames. In the past century, a modern revival has uncovered many Ismaili texts that were believed to have been lost, but which had been preserved by Ismailis and others for generations. This has allowed access to genuine Ismaili sources, which has helped modern scholars to piece together a more complete and balanced understanding of Ismaili history and beliefs, and also to demonstrate that some of the legends about the Ismailis are in fact based on historical fabrications. Filling in some of these gaps in scholarship in Shi'a and Ismaili studies is an important part of the work of The Institute of



Ismaili Studies. Daftary's writings reflect some of the most up-to-date, comprehensive and balanced research of Ismaili history available today.

### The Early Shi'a

Following the introduction, the book shifts to the narrative of events and the development of Ismaili doctrines over time, beginning with the early Shi'a movement and the formation of the Ismaili tariqah. The early followers of Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, known as the *Shi'at 'Ali* or "party of 'Ali", upheld that Imam 'Ali was designated by the Prophet as his successor at the desert oasis known as Ghadir Khumm. The Shi'a "recognised the need for a religiously authoritative guide, or imam as the Shi'a have preferred to call their spiritual teacher and leader" (p.24). This imam, they believed, should be from the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*), starting from Imam 'Ali. This differed from the Sunni interpretation of Islam, which did not believe in the claims of the *ahl al-bayt* to the leadership of the Muslim community. In time, two communities of the Shi'a emerged: the Zaydis and the Imamis. Both believed that the Muslim community should be led by an imam from the Prophet's descendants, but they differed in their understanding of the nature of and succession to the imamate. The Zaydis claimed that "if an imam wished recognition, he would have to assert his claims publicly and sword in hand, if necessary" (p.30). Thus, the Zaydis did not believe in hereditary succession of their imams; instead they believed that the claim to imamate must be proven. The Imamis, on the other hand, believed that their imams were appointed by hereditary designation (*nass*) from among each imam's male descendants, usually his eldest son. They also claimed that "only the sinless and infallible 'Alid imams, belonging to the *ahl al-bayt* and possessing special religious knowledge or *'ilm*, were qualified to perform the spiritual functions of such guides or teachers" (p.132), thus conceiving of the imamate in a very different way from the Zaydis. The Ismailis would emerge from the Imami interpretation of Shi'a Islam.

#### *The Ismaili - Ithna'ashari Split*

The Shi'a faced significant persecution under the first two dynasties that ruled over the Muslim community: the Umayyad caliphate and the Abbasid caliphate. It was in this climate of persecution during the early Abbasid period that the Imamis were divided following Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq's death in 765 CE. Most historical evidence suggests that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq had designated his son Isma'il as the next imam. However, there



*Calligraphy of Muhammad wa Ali, Imam Al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, Egypt. © Aleem Karmali*

was confusion as to Isma'il's whereabouts at the time of his father's death. Some believed that he had died before his father, while others claimed that he was alive but hiding from Abbasid persecution.

Many Shi'a eventually rallied around Isma'il's younger brother Musa al-Kazim as their imam. These individuals, later known as the Ithna'asharis (Twelvers), followed the descendants of Musa al-Kazim until their twelfth imam disappeared in what they believed to be a spiritual occultation (*ghayba*). The Twelvers, who are the world's largest Shi'a community today, formulated a doctrine whereby the Twelfth imam, or *Mahdi*, will eventually return to bring justice to the world.

There were two groups that would form the earliest Ismailis. The first believed that Isma'il was alive and in hiding, thus acknowledging him as their imam. The second group accepted that Isma'il had died, but argued that since he was given the *nass* from his father, the imamate should remain among his descendants. Ultimately, both groups came to accept Isma'il's son Muhammad as imam.

#### *Dawr al-Satr*

Due to Abbasid persecution, the Ismailis and their imams remained in hiding for almost 150 years during a time known as the *dawr al-satr* (period of concealment). During this time, the living imam's identity was hidden for protection and the community continued to operate under the authority of Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il. The hidden imams lived in Salamiyya, Syria, where they centrally organised the Ismaili *da'wa*, or mission, throughout the Muslim world. The *da'is* (missionaries) generally operated in secrecy and in dangerous circumstances in order to spread the Ismaili interpretation of Islam. In the



late 9<sup>th</sup> century, the *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i converted the North African tribe of the Kutama Berbers to Ismaili Islam and led a successful military campaign, taking power of the region known as Ifriqiya. In 909, the *da'i* established Imam 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi, the eleventh imam, as ruler of the new Fatimid caliphate.

#### *Ismaili - Qarmati Split*

Ten years earlier, in 899, Imam al-Mahdi became the first imam in four generations to openly proclaim himself, breaking with the imamate's policy of spreading the message in the name of Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il. However, a number of *da'is* did not accept Imam al-Mahdi's claim to the imamate and broke away from the main Ismaili movement. This group came to be known as the Qarmatis, named after one of their early leaders, the *da'i* Hamdan Qarmat. The Qarmatis established a state in Bahrain in which they "became notorious for their raids into Iraq and their regular pillaging of Meccan pilgrim caravans" (p.48), including an attack in 930 CE on Mecca itself, taking the sacred Black Stone of the Ka'ba back to Bahrain. Although the Qarmatis did not acknowledge the Fatimid imams, these actions shocked the Muslim world and gave anti-Ismaili writers a unique opportunity to "condemn Ismailism as a conspiracy to destroy Islam" (p.48) and to claim that the Qarmatis had received their instructions from the ruling Fatimid imam-caliph.

#### *Doctrines of the Early Ismailis*

The main doctrines of imamate were elaborated in the early Shi'a period by two imams in particular, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir and his son Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. These doctrines were essentially retained by the later Ismailis and Twelvers. This doctrine "was based on belief in the permanent need of mankind for a divinely-guided, sinless and infallible (*ma'sum*) imam who, after the Prophet Muhammad, would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of men in all their spiritual affairs" (p.32). The imams were said to possess special knowledge (*'ilm*), which was passed on through hereditary designation (*nass*), allowing a "perfect understanding of the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) meanings of the Qur'an and the message of Islam" (p.32). The early Ismailis believed "that the revealed scriptures, including especially the Qur'an, and the laws laid down in them, had their apparent or literal meaning, the *zahir*, which had to be distinguished from their inner meaning or true spiritual reality (*haqiqah*), hidden in the *batin*" (p.51). Other doctrines included *taqiyya*, which refers to a person hiding their true beliefs

under persecution or difficult circumstances, and the development of a gnostic cosmological system.

#### **The Fatimid Age**

In 909, the Ismailis succeeded in establishing a state in North Africa and Imam al-Mahdi became the first imam-caliph of the Fatimid dynasty. This was the first time since Imam 'Ali that "the Shi'a had witnessed the succession of an 'Alid from the *ahl al-bayt* to the actual leadership of an important Muslim state" (p.63). This presented a direct challenge to the political and religious authority held by the Sunni Abbasids. The dynasty was named after Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and Imam 'Ali's wife, through whom the imams traced their ancestry.

The early North African phase of the Fatimid dynasty consisted of the rule of four imam-caliphs: al-Mahdi, al-Qa'im, al-Mansur and al-Mu'izz. These imams focused on consolidating their power despite several rebellions and challenges from political rivals, including the Abbasids, the Umayyads of Spain, and the Byzantines, the Christian empire centred in Constantinople. In 969, during Imam al-Mu'izz's reign, the Fatimids expanded from North Africa into Egypt, founding the city of Cairo as their new capital. The Fatimids had risen "from a regional power into a great empire" (p.75), which would be characterised by its intellectual and cultural achievements, as well as its spirit of tolerance.

#### *Intellectual Achievements and Spirit of Tolerance*

Fatimid intellectual achievements included the development of a Fatimid Ismaili legal system, public and private educational sessions, the expansion of the Ismaili *da'wa* and the establishment of prominent centres of learning.



*Imam Al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, Egypt. © Aleem Karmali*



The Fatimid chief judge, al-Qadi al-Nu‘man, was tasked with writing a major work called the *Da‘a‘im al-Islam* (The Pillars of Islam), “which was read carefully by al-Mu‘izz and endorsed as the official code of the Fatimid state” (p.77). Similar to other Muslim communities of interpretation, the Ismailis now had a school of law (*madhhab*) that was based around the centrality of the imamate. Al-Qadi al-Nu‘man also began conducting the *Majalis al-Hikma* (Sessions of Wisdom) after Friday prayers to publicly educate both Ismailis and non-Ismailis about the details of Ismaili law and doctrines. Meanwhile, the Ismaili *da‘wa* was expanded, and despite continuing persecution of Ismailis in the territories of their political rivals, *da‘is* operated in secrecy throughout much of the Muslim world beyond Fatimid lands. At their peak, the Fatimids controlled Palestine, the Hijaz and parts of Syria, including Islam’s three holiest cities of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. This expansion was due to their military and diplomatic successes, as well as their *da‘wa* activities.

Perhaps most impressive of Fatimid intellectual achievements were their centres of learning, as they “founded major libraries in Cairo, and, through their efforts, the Fatimid capital became a flourishing centre of Islamic scholarship, sciences, art and culture” (p.66). This included al-Azhar mosque, where the *majalis al-hikma* were held, and *Dar al-‘Ilm* (the House of Knowledge). Al-Azhar is remembered as one of the world’s earliest universities and remains one of the most important centres of learning in the Muslim world today. *Dar al-‘Ilm* was established in 1005 by the imam-caliph al-Hakim. A variety of subjects, both religious and non-religious, were studied there and it “was used by scholars of different religious persuasions, and its library was accessible to everyone” (p.96). Many prominent Ismaili intellectuals and *da‘is* were educated and worked during the Egyptian Fatimid period, including al-Kirmani, al-Sijistani, al-Shirazi, Nasir Khusraw and Hasan Sabbah.

*Dar al-‘Ilm*’s public accessibility demonstrates the type of society the Fatimids sought to create. They pursued “a policy of tolerance towards other religious and ethnic communities, a record hardly challenged under any other Muslim dynasty of the medieval period, not to mention the contemporary European experience” (p.65). Officials working for the state were generally selected on the basis of merit, without regard for religious or ethnic background, and religious communities were free to practice according to their own teachings.

### *The Nizari-Musta‘li Schism and the Later Fatimids*

Following the death of the imam-caliph al-Mustansir in 1094, the Fatimids were beset by a succession dispute. Al-Mustansir had designated his eldest son Imam Nizar as his successor, but the Vizier al-Afdal conspired with al-Musta‘li, Imam Nizar’s much younger half brother, to take power. Al-Musta‘li was installed as the Fatimid imam-caliph, while Imam Nizar fled to Alexandria, where he tried unsuccessfully to reclaim the caliphate. This caused an irrevocable split amongst the Ismailis, creating the Musta‘li and Nizari branches. The Nizari Imams were forced into hiding for protection, while the Fatimids continued under the rule of al-Musta‘li and his successors. However, the empire began a slow decline, losing territories and facing further succession disputes, until finally collapsing in 1171, when Egypt was returned to Sunni control in the name of the Abbasid caliph.

### **The Nizari Ismailis of Alamut**

Operating in Persia, the *da‘i* Hasan Sabbah captured the castle of Alamut in 1090 from the Saljuq Turks, a Sunni dynasty controlling much of the Abbasid lands at the time. Alamut was considered virtually impenetrable by weaponry, so Hasan’s strategy was to sneak into the castle posing as a school teacher, where he began converting people to his cause until he effectively controlled the fortress. He then peacefully deposed the Saljuq governor.

After the Fatimid succession dispute in 1094, Hasan supported the claims of Nizar as the rightful imam, thus breaking away from the Fatimids and forming an independent Nizari Ismaili *da‘wa* based at Alamut. The Saljuqs were of Turkic origin, so many Persians were unhappy being ruled by a foreign people. Hasan Sabbah drew upon this discontent to rally both Nizaris and non-Ismailis to his cause, adopting a revolutionary strategy aimed at overthrowing the Saljuqs. In time, Hasan and the Persian Nizaris secured a network of fortresses within Saljuq lands. While his revolt spread successfully early on, the Nizaris and Saljuqs failed to overthrow one another, effectively reaching a stalemate by the end of Hasan Sabbah’s life in 1124. However, he did successfully establish a network of strongholds that effectively formed an independent Nizari state in Persia. In addition, the Nizari *da‘wa* began making inroads in Syria, and found success in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century under the *da‘i* Rashid al-Din Sinan, who led a network of Syrian Ismaili castles from the fortress of Masyaf.



Castle of Masyaf, Syria. © Aleem Karmali

### *The Doctrine of Ta'lim*

Hasan Sabbah, in addition to being a strong leader and political strategist, was also a learned theologian. He began preaching the doctrine of *ta'lim*, which “aimed to show the inadequacy of human reason (*'aql*) by itself in enabling men to understand religious truths and to know God; and the need for a single authoritative teacher (*mu'allim-i sadiq*) to act as a spiritual guide of men” (p.132). This doctrine stressed the absolute loyalty of the Nizari Ismailis to the imam and his appointed representatives (*hujjas*) in the imam's absence. This was important, as the Nizari imams were in hiding at that time, following Imam Nizar's failed attempt to regain control of the Fatimid state. Hasan Sabbah was considered the imam's *hujja* in Persia, as were the two lords of Alamut who succeeded him, Kiya Buzurg-Ummid and his son Muhammad.

### *The Proclamation of Qiyama and the Imamate at Alamut*

Following Muhammad ibn Buzurg-Ummid's death, Imam Hasan, held a ceremony in 1164 in which he read a message purportedly from the Nizari imam in hiding. In the message, Imam Hasan stated that the hidden Imam “has relieved you of the burdens of *shari'a* and has brought you to the *qiyama* or resurrection” (p. 138). Hasan was given the title of *khalifa*, which was later equated with God's caliph (*khalifa*) on earth, similar to the function of the Fatimid imam-caliphs. This effectively proclaimed Hasan as the returning imam, and he became known by the honorific expression *'ala dhikrihi'l-salam* (on his mention be peace). The *qiyama* was not understood literally as the Day of Judgment, but rather was taken symbolically and spiritually to mean “nothing more than the manifestation of unveiled truth (*haqiqqa*) in the person of the Nizari Ismaili imam” (p.139), who had now returned

from hiding, and was “a spiritual resurrection reserved exclusively for Nizaris wherever they existed” (p. 139).

The doctrine of *qiyama* was elaborated further by Imam Hasan's son, Imam Nur al-Din Muhammad, whose teachings emphasised the central role of the imam, particularly the teachings of the present imam. The doctrine of *qiyama*, he explained, “implied a complete personal transformation of the Nizaris, who, henceforth, were expected to perceive the imam in his true spiritual reality” (p.141). However, seeking to establish better relations with the Sunni Muslims, the next imam, Jalal al-Din Hasan, publicly repealed the doctrine of *qiyama* and ordered the Nizari Ismailis to follow a Sunni form of the *shari'a*. The Nizaris forged closer ties with the Sunni Abbasids, which strengthened them and helped many Sunnis find safe refuge in Nizari lands from the Mongol invasions in eastern regions. These changing policies were accepted by the Nizaris without opposition, because it was seen as the imam contextualising the interpretation of the *shari'a* as he saw fit. What appeared to be contradictory strategies were explained by the scholar al-Tusi, who “sought to demonstrate that these seemingly contradictory policies partook, in effect, of a singular spiritual reality, since each infallible imam acted in accordance with the exigencies of his own time” (p.148).

### *The Mongol Invasion*

The imamate of Imam 'Ala' al-Din Muhammad, from 1221 to 1255, saw the flourishing of intellectual life, but also significant political turbulence. The Mongol armies had begun destroying towns in the east as they desired to conquer all of Persia. Hulegu Khan led the Mongol armies west, where they laid siege to the fortresses and surrounding lands of the Nizari Ismailis. In the midst of this fighting, Imam 'Ala' al-Din Muhammad died in December 1255 and was succeeded by his son, Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah, who was lord of Alamut for exactly one year before being forced to surrender. The Nizari castles eventually all surrendered to the Mongol assault, and the great fortress of Alamut and its extensive library were destroyed. In 1257, Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah travelled to see the Great Khan in Mongolia, but was killed on the return journey. In the meantime, thousands of Nizari Ismailis were captured and put to the sword, signalling the end of the Nizari state in Persia.

The Mongols then continued west, seizing Baghdad and killing the last Abbasid caliph in



1258. They were stopped in Syria by the armies of Baybars, the Mamluk Sultan ruling Egypt and Syria, with the assistance of the Syrian Nizaris. With the support of the imamate at Alamut gone, Baybars was able to encroach on Nizari independence, taking taxes but allowing the Nizaris to remain in their traditional lands as loyal Mamluk subjects. Along with the fall of the Nizaris in Persia, this effectively led the Nizari Ismailis into a long and obscure period in which they lost their political independence and prominence.

### Later Developments: Continuity and Modernisation

The post-Alamut period is marked by significant challenges for historians, as this is the longest period of obscurity in which relatively little is known about the Ismailis. The imams were in hiding for over two centuries and thus the community lacked the centralisation provided by the direct leadership of the imams. In addition, very little literature was produced by the Nizaris, due in large part to them practicing *taqiyya* and hiding their true identities, instead blending in with the religious and cultural practices of communities surrounding them. Therefore, significant gaps in our knowledge exist and more research needs to be done on this period.

#### *Early Post-Alamut Period*

Following the destruction of the Nizari fortresses, many Persian Ismailis survived by migrating to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, where there were existing Ismaili communities. Tradition holds that the imamate continued in Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah's young son, Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad, who is said to have been secretly taken to Azerbaijan, where he lived as an embroiderer. After his death, a little-known succession dispute occurred between his two sons, forming the Qasim-Shahi and Muhammad-Shahi branches of the Nizari Ismailis. The Muhammad-Shahi line of imams found some prominence initially and moved to India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, their line had ended by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Qasim-Shahi line of imams has

survived until today, and the last four imams have come to be known by the hereditary title of Aga Khan.

The Nizari Ismailis in Persia, practising *taqiyya*, adopted the guise of Sufism as a cover since the Sufis shared many esoteric concepts with Ismaili thought. They adopted Sufi terminology, referring to the imam as *murshid*, the Sufi term for their spiritual masters, and calling themselves *murids* or disciples. Because of their close relations with the Sufis, what little literature was produced by the Nizaris at this time was replete with Sufi terminology, as “the Persian-speaking Nizaris have regarded some of the greatest mystic poets of Persia as their co-religionists” (p.167).

#### *Regional Developments*

For two centuries, the Qasim-Shahi Nizari imamate lacked the strong centralising power that it had during the Fatimid and Alamut periods, and was, therefore, marked by regional developments in Syria, Persia, Central Asia and South Asia.

While the Persian Nizaris hid their identities as Sufis, the Nizaris of Syria openly maintained their identity and did not resort to *taqiyya*. They remained in their traditional strongholds and were watched closely by the Mamluk rulers, occasionally being used in the Mamluk fight against the Mongols.

In Central Asia, Ismaili Islam had initially been brought to the isolated mountains of Badakhshan by Nasir Khusraw, a Fatimid *da'i* living during the imamate of Imam al-Mustansir. He is considered today to be among the great theologians, philosophers and poets of medieval Ismaili history. Following Nasir Khusraw's death, the *da'wa* eventually converted the majority of Badakhshanis to Ismailis, establishing dynasties of *pīs* and *mīs* for their political and spiritual leadership, and developing their own distinct practices rooted in the teachings of Nasir Khusraw.

In South Asia, the Nizari *da'wa* began operating in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century during the Alamut period,

*Yet it is not a simple matter for any human society with a concern and appreciation of its history to relate its heritage to its contemporary conditions. Traditions evolve in a context, and the context always changes, thus demanding a new understanding of essential principles. For us Muslims, this is one of the pressing challenges we face. In what voice or voices can the Islamic heritage speak to us afresh - a voice true to the historical experience of the Muslim world yet, at the same time, relevant in the technically advanced but morally turbulent and uncertain world of today?*

Mawlana Hazar Imam  
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and would later follow the Qasim-Shahi Nizari imams. There is little reliable historical information available from this time, and much of it is from the traditional accounts of the Nizaris of the Indian subcontinent, known as the *Khojas*. Much of what is known comes from the *gīnans*, which are hymn-like poems that “have attained a very special status within the Nizari *Khoja* community” (p.177) and that are central to the religious life and rituals of the Nizari *Khojas*. The term *gīnan* seems to come from the Sanskrit word *jñāna*, meaning sacred knowledge or wisdom. They were transmitted orally for several centuries and their authorship is ascribed to a handful of early *pirs*, as the *daʿīs* were called in the Indian subcontinent. The *gīnans* contain a diverse array of themes, including “ethical and moral instructions for the conduct of religious life and guiding the spiritual quest of the believer” (p.178). The *Khojas* referred to themselves by the term *Satpanth*, meaning “true path”. It was during this time that they appear to have established their first *jamaʿat-khanas*, which were *Khoja* houses of worship in the subcontinent. Similar to the interfacing of Sufism and Nizari Ismailism in Persia, the *Khojas* adopted Sufi terminology, such as *murshid* and *murid*, and found parallels in the mystical poetry of the *gīnans* and Sufi literature of the region. Using local Indian languages to successfully appeal to the largely uneducated and rural populations, the *pirs* adapted “Islamic and Ismaili tenets with myths, images and symbols already familiar to the Hindus” (p.183). The Ismaili *Satpanth* tradition eventually developed themes and theological concepts of its own through an interfacing between Ismaili Islam and Hinduism, as well as other traditions, such as Sufism, Tantrism and the Bakhti tradition. Thus, vast differences in practices and interpretations formed between *Satpanth* traditions and those of the Nizaris of Syria, Persia and Central Asia.

#### *The Anjudan Revival*

After roughly 200 years in obscurity, the Qasim-Shahi line of imams emerged at Anjudan in Central Persia, under the guise of Sufi *pirs* and ‘Alid Sayyids, descended from the Prophet. The first imam to settle there may have been Imam Islam Shah, although his grandson, Imam Mustansir bi’llah (II), was clearly established there by his death in 1480. This began a period of revival for the Qasim-Shahi Nizari imamate, with the imams reorganising and reinvigorating the *daʿwa* in order to reassert their authority, particularly in India and Central Asia. Imam ‘Abd al-Salam (or his successor Imam Gharib Mirza) is believed to have sent the *Pandiyat-i Jawanmardi* (Admonitions on Spiritual Chivalry), containing guidance for his *murids*. In order to gain control

over their hereditary authority, Imam ‘Abd al-Salam chose not to appoint a new *pir* in South Asia. Instead, the *Pandiyat-i Jawanmardi* occupies the 26<sup>th</sup> place on the traditional list of *Khoja pirs*.

Doctrinally, the Nizaris of the Anjudan period essentially retained the teachings of Alamut times about accessing the imam’s “true spiritual reality” (p.174). They no longer had access to Fatimid writings and, therefore, “did not maintain any systematic interest in cosmology or cyclical history” (p. 174). They continued to practice as Sufis until the Safawids rose to power and began converting the Iranian population to Ithna’Ashari Shi’ism, forcing the Nizaris to change their *taqiyya* strategy to appear outwardly as Twelvers. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Qasim-Shahi *daʿwa* had gained the allegiance of the majority of the Nizari Ismailis over that of the Muhammad-Shahis, whose communities began to rapidly disappear, except for a small community still existing in Syria.

During the imamate of Imam Shah Nizar (1680-1722), he transferred his headquarters to the nearby village of Kahak, ending the Anjudan period. Due to political instability, many *Khojas* who travelled to see the imam in Kahak were being attacked or killed, so the imams again moved in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to Shahr-i Babak in Kirman in order to be closer to the route of the Indian pilgrims. The imams would gain increasing political prominence in Kirman, with the forty-fourth imam, Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ali, becoming the governor or the semi-autonomous region.

#### *Musta’li Ismailis*

Following a succession dispute in later Fatimid times, two Musta’li Ismaili branches had formed: the Tayyibis and the Hafizis. The Hafizi community died out following the Fatimid collapse, while Tayyibi communities carried on in Yemen and the Indian subcontinent. Believing their imams to be in a period of hiding (*sati*), the Tayyibis followed the leadership of a *da’i mutlaq*, a “*da’i* with absolute authority, to conduct and supervise the *daʿwa* on behalf of the hidden imam, al-Tayyib” (p.113). They have preserved much of the Fatimid Ismaili literature, maintaining their interests in cosmology and cyclical history, as well as using “al-Qadi al-Nu’man’s *Da’aim al-Islam* as their most authoritative legal compendium... down to modern times” (p.186). These texts are generally kept secret and withheld from outsiders. Their *daʿwa* headquarters remained in Yemen until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, when persecution forced its relocation to India, where the community was known as Bohras. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, two rivals claiming the position of *da’i mutlaq*



permanently split the Tayyibis into the Da'udis of India and the Sulaymanis of Yemen. Today, the Da'udi Bohra Ismailis number about 700,000, with the *da'wa* headquarters in Bombay, while the Sulaymani Tayyibi Ismailis of Yemen number around 100,000.

#### *Modern Period*

Following the murder of the forty-fifth Nizari Ismaili imam in 1817, Imam Shah Khalil Allah (III), his son Imam Hasan 'Ali Shah succeeded to the imamate at the age of thirteen. In amends for his father's death, the Qajar monarch, Fath 'Ali Shah, made the young imam the governor of Qumm, gave him properties in Mahallat, and gave his daughter in marriage, as well as bestowing the title of Aga Khan upon him and his successors. However, during the reign of the next monarch, Muhammad Shah, a disagreement arose between the Qajar government and the imam, resulting in several military confrontations that ultimately led to Imam Hasan 'Ali Shah being forced to leave Persia. He travelled to Afghanistan and British India, where he finally settled in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1848, ending after centuries the Persian phase of the imamate. The remaining three decades of Imam Hasan 'Ali Shah's imamate were spent in India, effectively initiating the modern period of Ismaili history. While his position was strengthened and stabilised during this period, there were challenges to the imam's authority by some members of the Khoja community. Due to long periods of concealing their identity as Sunnis or Twelver Shi'a, as well as adopting Hindu customs, there was confusion in their minds about Khoja religious identity. Aga Khan I issued a document specifying the beliefs and practices of the Nizari Khojas for community members to sign, and while most Khojas signed it, there were pockets of resistance. This resulted in a landmark court case, known as the "Aga Khan case," in which a British judge declared that the Khojas were indeed Shi'a Imami Ismailis and that Aga Khan I was the head of the community. He was successful in exerting control over the Nizari Khojas by the time of his death in 1881, following an eventful 64-year imamate.

After only four years as imam, Imam Ali Shah (Aga Khan II) died suddenly in 1885, and his son, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah, became imam at the age of eight. He began to travel to visit his followers in India and East Africa, as well as visiting Europe, where he would eventually move the seat of the imamate. Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah "was increasingly concerned with reform policies that would benefit not only his followers but other Muslims as well" (p.200). His

international involvement included the All-India Muslim League, involvement in Indian politics leading towards the independence of India and Pakistan, pushing for educational reforms at Aligarh University, and culminated in being elected president of the League of Nations in Geneva in 1937. Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah also worked towards reorganising the Ismailis "into a modern Muslim community with high standards of education, health and social well-being" (p.201), resulting in establishing new institutions and administrative organisations. He issued a series of written constitutions, containing rules and regulations, and changed certain religious rituals, both of which helped to create a distinct religious identity for the Nizari Ismailis.

Following a 72-year imamate, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah died in 1957. Despite being survived by two sons, Prince Aly Khan and Prince Sadruddin, he stipulated "that owing to the changing conditions of the world the Ismailis would be better served if their next imam were a person brought up and educated in more recent times. Consequently, he designated his grandson Karim, Aly Khan's son, as his successor to the imamate" (p.206). His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV has continued and expanded his grandfather's modernisation policies, developing a range of institutions that he controls from his secretariat at Aiglemont in France. These include a universal constitution, issued in 1986, that established a uniform system of councils and affiliated organisations, as well as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which has been active in social development for both Ismailis and non-Ismailis, primarily in Africa and Asia. The present Imam has also extended his educational reforms into higher education, establishing several institutions, including The Institute of Ismaili Studies and the Aga Khan University, and he has worked towards promoting a more balanced understanding of Islam.



*The Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan © Aleem Karmali*



As a Muslim minority group, the Nizari Ismailis have faced persecution and have been forced to disguise their identities during certain periods of their long history. Daftary concludes, stating that the fact that “the Nizaris survived at all and emerged in modern times as a progressive community with a distinct identity attests to the resiliency of their traditions as well as their adaptability under the capable and foresighted leadership of their recent imams, the Aga Khans” (p.209).

### Passages of Relevance

#### Historical writings by detractors of the Ismailis

“At any event, Sunni and other non-Ismaili Muslim writers, including historians who concerned themselves with the Ismailis, as in the case of the Christian Crusaders, were often not interested in acquiring accurate information about them...” (p.10)

“Ismailism was cleverly depicted as the arch-heresy (*ilhad*) of Islam, carefully designed by some non-‘Alid impostors, or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, bent on destroying Islam from within. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, this “black legend” with its sordid details had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of the Ismaili motives, beliefs and practices...” (p.10)

“These so-called Assassin legends consisted of a number of separate but interrelated tales, including the “training legend”, the “paradise legend”, the “hashish legend” and the “death-leap legend”. The legends developed in stages and finally culminated in a synthesised version popularised by Marco Polo (1254-1324)... Henceforth, the Nizari Ismailis were portrayed in medieval European sources as a sinister order of drugged assassins bent on senseless murder and mischief” (p.14).

#### Questions

1. Why were many non-Ismaili Muslim and non-Muslim writers not interested in acquiring accurate information about the Ismailis?
2. Why was it important for anti-Ismaili writers to discredit the hereditary linkage to the Holy Prophet of the Ismaili imamate?
3. To what extent have these anti-Ismaili sentiments persisted until today?

#### Discussion

From the earliest periods of Muslim history, there have been various communities of interpretation

within the Ummah, including the Shi‘a and Sunni, and their various subdivisions. The Shi‘a, including the Ismailis, often faced persecution and at times their beliefs were subject to derision from other interpretive branches. Throughout history, various individuals wrote anti-Ismaili works to discredit the community, often without any evidence for their claims. Many of these grew over the centuries into elaborate legends which may still shape how others see the Ismaili community today. Due to certain historical events, including the destruction of the Fatimid and Alamut libraries, a significant number of Ismaili texts have been lost to history. While modern scholarship has begun to recover many historical Ismaili works and to discredit some of the primary anti-Ismaili legends, there are still many periods of history in which little is known about the Ismailis. Therefore, many anti-Ismaili works are useful to historians, helping to fill gaps in knowledge as they have preserved details about the community and its writings, despite their obvious bias against the Ismailis.

#### Imamate

“From early on, the partisans of ‘Ali had come to believe that the Islamic message contained inner truths that could not be understood directly through human reason. They had, thus, recognised the need for a religiously authoritative guide, or imam...” (p. 24).

“... the Shi‘a from early on emphasised the hereditary attributes of individuals and the importance of the imam’s kinship to the Prophet as prerequisites for possessing the required religious knowledge (*‘ilm*) and authority” (p.24).

“For the Shi‘a, only the sinless and infallible ‘Alid imams, belonging to the *ahl al-bayt* and possessing special religious knowledge or *‘ilm*, were qualified to perform the spiritual functions of such guides or teachers... The doctrine of *ta‘lim*, emphasising the autonomous teaching authority of each imam in his own time, became the central doctrine of the early Nizaris” (pp.131-132).

“Al-Tusi provided an integrated theological frame for contextualising the policy declarations of the different lords of Alamut. He sought to demonstrate that these seemingly contradictory policies partook, in effect, of a singular spiritual reality, since each infallible imam acted in accordance with the exigencies of his own time” (p.148).

#### Questions

1. Why did the Shi‘a insist that the



- authoritative teacher must be from the Prophet's family?
2. In light of the doctrine of imamate, why is it important to understand that the understanding and articulation of religious ideas is influenced by their historical contexts?
  3. How has the understanding and articulation of the doctrine of imamate evolved over time and how is it understood in the contemporary period?

#### *Discussion*

While it is easy to think that Sunnis and Shi'as have existed since the death of the Prophet, these communities of interpretation actually crystallised their core beliefs and doctrines over the first two or three centuries of Muslim history and continue to evolve over time. While the Sunnis came to believe that the Prophet had not nominated a successor, leaving the Qur'an and his own example (*sunna*) as guidance for the Ummah, the Shi'a saw the need for ongoing guidance to navigate the community through the continuous changes brought by the unfolding of history. Following the Prophet's death, the early caliphs held both political and religious authority. In time, the caliphate became a political institution, while Sunni religious authority came to be vested in the *'ulama*, or the learned religious scholars. However, the Shi'a argued that the *'ulama* often had differing views and teachings, and therefore emphasised the need for a single spiritual guide from the Prophet's lineage, namely the Imams.

#### Intellectual Activities

"[The Fatimids] founded major libraries in Cairo, and, through their efforts, the Fatimid capital became a flourishing centre of Islamic scholarship, sciences, art and culture, in addition to playing a prominent role in international trade and commerce" (p.66).

"Functioning as a true academy, the Dar al-Ilm was used by scholars of different religious persuasions, and its library was accessible to everyone" (p.96).

"While Aga Khan III pioneered modern educational reforms in his community, his grandson has built upon that central interest of the Ismaili imamate and extended it to higher education and educational institutions... The present imam has also encouraged young Ismailis to aim for a balanced spiritual and worldly life, and to acquire specialised education and achieve academic excellence, thus preparing his followers for the meritocratic world of the twenty-first century" (p. 208).

#### *Questions*

1. How has an emphasis on the intellect and education benefitted the Ismailis and others throughout history?
2. What is the relationship between education and the spirit of pluralism and tolerance?
3. Throughout history, why have the Ismaili imams emphasised the link between the intellect and faith?

#### *Discussion*

Muslim emphasis on acquiring knowledge is rooted in the Qur'an, which calls on mankind to reflect on the signs (*ayat*) of God. This is echoed throughout history, in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and Imam 'Ali, and has continued as a consistent theme in the guidance and activities of the Ismaili imamate until today. This can be seen in the scholarship of the earliest imams, the building of educational centres and libraries in Fatimid and Alamut times, the intellectual activities of the Ismaili *da'wa* and the flourishing of modern educational institutions over recent decades, including the Aga Khan University, University of Central Asia, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, the Aga Khan Academies, Aga Khan schools, and most recently, in emphasising early childhood education. These seem to be linked with the policy of respect for diversity and the spirit of tolerance, as we find that even in circumstances in history that were somewhat challenging, such as during the Alamut period, the imams maintained a policy of openness beyond the Ismaili community.

This policy also seems to be rooted in the notion of balance between faith (*din*) and world (*dunya*), as emphasised by the present Imam at the inauguration of the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe in 2009: "We will seek to demonstrate that spiritual insight and worldly knowledge are not separate or opposing realms, but that they must always nourish one another, and that the world of faith and the material world are the dual responsibilities of humankind."

#### Modernisation

"... Aga Khan III worked vigorously for consolidating and reorganising his followers into a modern Muslim community with high standards of education, health and social well-being. The implementation of his reforms, however, required suitable institutions and administrative organisations" (p.201).

"The present Ismaili imam has continued and



substantially expanded the modernisation policies of his grandfather, also developing a multitude of new programmes and institutions of his own for the benefit of the community. At the same time, he has concerned himself with a variety of social, developmental and cultural issues which are of wider interest to the Muslims and the Third World countries” (p.206).

#### Questions

1. How and why are the modern imamate institutions different from historical imamate institutions, such as the Ismaili *da'wa* and educational centres like Al-Azhar and Dar al-'Ilm?
2. How has the modern imamate responded to the evolving challenges of industrialisation, colonialism, post-colonialism and globalisation?
3. Why have the two most recent imams focused so heavily on building institutions?

#### Discussion

Pre-industrial societies saw massive changes in the shift from agrarian to industrialised societies, which affected politics, human rights, religion and technologies. The modern world is often seen as a rupture from tradition and has been characterised by trends of secularism, rationalism, individual rights, democracy and globalisation. In addition, the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the rise of European and North American economic and military power and the decline of many Muslim empires, such as the Ottomans and the Mughals, which ultimately led to European colonisation and political intervention in many parts of Africa and Asia where Muslims, including the Ismailis, have been centred for centuries. Modern societies have also seen the creation of nation-states as more formally established political entities, replacing the historic empires that had previously existed. Following Europe's decolonisation of Africa and Asia throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nation-state became firmly entrenched as the political model throughout the world. At the same time, technological advances in travel and communications have allowed for greater mixing of diverse peoples throughout the world, contributing to the pace of globalisation.

For the Ismailis, this has meant a number of

transformations, guided in particular by the two most recent imams. First, Ismaili communities have been forced to adapt to living under various political regimes, including foreign rule, and have had to deal with often-turbulent political circumstances. Second, the de-centralised, regional development of communities in the post-Alamut period – in Syria, Persia, Central Asia and South Asia – had to be adapted into a globalised and unified Ismaili community. This was particularly necessary as Ismailis from different traditions began to interact for the first time, particularly as they began settling in the West, including in Europe, Canada and the United States. Third, modern approaches were adopted into the Ismaili institutions in an attempt to provide the community, and often those surrounding them, the ability to develop out of the economic and political subjugation that had been suffered by most nations in Africa and Asia. This includes both the community's institutions and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). In addition, as these institutions took on a seemingly secular character, they needed to be understood as a reflection of traditional ethical values of the community, including compassion, charitable giving for the less fortunate, and nurturing the intellect.

*Nor does respecting the past mean copying the past. Indeed, if we hold too fast to what is past, we run the risk of crushing that inheritance. The best way to honour the past is to seize the future .*

Mawlana Hazar Imam  
Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2010



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