



The Institute of Ismaili Studies



## *A Short History of the Ismailis*

Traditions of a Muslim Community

**Farhad Daftary**

Edinburgh University Press, 1998

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  
October 19, 2003

### Introduction

Understanding history is important to a 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 periods: the 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

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 reflect their own beliefs and practices, either intentionally or unintentionally. These non-Ismaili chroniclers, including historians from rival political and religious communities, such as the Sunni-led Abbasid Caliphate and the Christian Crusaders, often portrayed the Ismailis in a negative light. These writings led to two major legends that developed about the Ismailis: the legend of the Assassins and the legend of the 'Black Hand'. The legend of the Assassins, which was popularized by the Crusaders, depicted the Ismailis as fanatical murderers. The legend of the 'Black Hand' depicted the Ismailis as a secret society of assassins. These legends influenced 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 our knowledge is an important part of the work of The Institute of



= g a U ] ` ] ` G h i X ] Y g " ` 8 U Z h U the most up-to-date, comprehensive and balanced research of Ismaili history available today.

H \ Y ` 9 U f ` m ` G \ ] Ð U

Following the introduction, the book shifts to the narrative of events and the development of Ismaili doctrines over time, beginning with the Y U f ` m ` G \ ] Ð U ` a c j Y a Y b h ` U Ismaili tariqah. The early followers of Prophet A i \ U a a U X Ñ g ` W e i r i ` g U ] k b ` = U a b U X a ` ibn Abi Talib, known as the G \ ] Ð U f ` Ð Ð U c Z ` Ð 5 ` ] ` İ ž ` i d \ Y ` X ` h \ U h ` the Prophet as his successor at the desert oasis \_ b c k b ` U g ` ; \ U X ] f ` ? \ i a a " the need for a religiously authoritative guide, or ] a U a ` U g ` h \ Y ` G \ ] Ð U ` \ U j K U g d ` f W c Z Y Z if g ] X c b h ` c U g W U h ` c ` = h g \ a Y U ] Ð f ] ` g d ] f ] h i U ` ` h Y U W \ Y f ` U b X ` h ] Ya U Y X Y c f Z I ` ` \ f ] d g " & Z ( U e h " \ Y H Ñ ] g g ` X ] Y a U U h a ` z ` h \ Y m ` V Y ` ] Y j Y X ž ` g \ c i ` X h a d V i e d b e Z o f e h i s f a t h e r , w h i l e o t h e r s c l a i m e d y h Ñ g ` family (ahl al-bayt ž ` g h U f h ] b [ T h i s f c t h a t h e a w l a a l i v e b u t h i d i n g f r o m A b b a s i d p e r s e c u t i o n .



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

These individuals, later known as the = h \ b U Ð U g \ U f ] g ` f l H k Y ` j Y f g Ł ž ` = h \ b U Ð U g \ U f ] g ` f l H k Y ` j Y f g Ł ž ` descendants of Mgsā al-Kazim until the twelfth imam disappeared in what they believed to be a spiritual occultation (ghayba). The Twelvers, who U K Y f h W Y [ k ] c f ] X Ñ ž ` \ U f ] k & g h X ` G \ formulated a doctrine whereby the Twelfth imam, fl d ` M a s o d ` w i l l e v e n t u a l l y r e t u r n t o b r i n g j u s t i c e t o X ] g ` X ] X the world.

A U b m ` G \ ] Ð U ` Y j Y b h i U ` ` m ` f U ` ` Y u n g g e r b r o t h e r M u s ā a l - K a z i m ] Ð t h e i r Y m a n y . f [ Y X . . . These individuals, later known as the = h \ b U Ð U g \ U f ] g ` f l H k Y ` j Y f g Ł ž ` = h \ b U Ð U g \ U f ] g ` f l H k Y ` j Y f g Ł ž ` descendants of Mgsā al-Kazim until the twelfth imam disappeared in what they believed to be a spiritual occultation (ghayba). The Twelvers, who U K Y f h W Y [ k ] c f ] X Ñ ž ` \ U f ] k & g h X ` G \ formulated a doctrine whereby the Twelfth imam, fl d ` M a s o d ` w i l l e v e n t u a l l y r e t u r n t o b r i n g j u s t i c e t o X ] g ` X ] X the world.

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 ] W U ] b h [ ` d ] Y a U a I W g ` h ] X b b h b i X m f k b g Y and the community continued to operate under h \ Y ` U i h \ c f ] h m ` c Z ` = a U a ` A i \ U a The hidden imams lived in Salamiyya, Syria, where they centrally organised the Ismaili X U Ð k U or mission, throughout the Muslim world. The Z U f ` U ` Ð U s A s i o n g a r e s ) g e n e r a l l y o p e r a t e d w i t h s e c r e c y j ] X Y b W Y U Ð a z o u i n d a n g e r o u s c i r c u m s t a n c e s i n o r d e r t o s p r e a d t h e I s m a i l i i n t e r p r e t a t i o n o f I s l a m . I n t h e h \ Y f Y

The Ismaili ] = h \ b U Ð U g \ U f ] ` G d ` ] W U ] b h [ ` d ] Y a U a I W g ` h ] X b b h b i X m f k b g Y 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 h \ Y ` = a U a ] g ` k Y f Y ` X ] j ] - X Y G U X ] e Ñ g ` X Y U h \ ` ] b ` + \* ) 7 Ð U s A s i o n g a r e s ) g e n e r a l l y o p e r a t e d w i t h s e c r e c y j ] X Y b W Y g i [ [ Y g h g ` h \ S a d i q h a d d e s i g n a t e d U Ð a z o u i n d a n g e r o u s c i r c u m s t a n c e s i n o r d e r t o s p r e a d t h e I s m a i l i i n t e r p r e t a t i o n o f I s l a m . I n t h e h \ Y f Y



late 9<sup>th</sup> century, the X U D V i ' D 5 V X-G \5] D Udder persecution or difficult circumstances, and 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 X U established = a U a ' D 5 V X Maḥdī, 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 d f c W` U ] a ' \ ] a g Y` Z ž` V f Y U a ] d c [ f h U b h \ A i h g ` Y ] a ] ag U a U h h Y I Ń g f l d " direct challenge to the political and religious authority held by the Sunni Abbasids. The number of X U did not accept Imam al-A U \ X ] X g n b U g h m` k U g` b U a Y X` U Z h Y f` : U h X U i [ \ h Y f` U b X` = a U a ' D 5` ] Ń g` k` ž` imams traced their ancestry.

*Doctrines of the Early Ismailis*

The main doctrines of imamate were elaborated ] b` h \ Y` Y U f` m` G \ ] D U` particular, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir and his g c b` = a U a - Sadiq. The doctrines were essentially retained by the later Ismailis and H k Y` j Y f g " H \ ] g` X c W h f ] the permanent need of mankind for a divinely-guided, sinless and infallible (a U D g r i m a n who, after the Prophet Muhammad, would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of men in all their g d ] f ] h i U` U Z Z U ] f g I` f l d " possess special knowledge (D ), which was passed on through hereditary designation (nass), U` c k ] b [ U` I d Y f Z Y W h` i b (zahir) and esoteric (batin) meanings of the E i f Ń U b` U b X` h \ Y` a Y g g U [ Y U f` m` = g a U ]` ] g` V Y` ] Y g W f ] d h i f Y g ž` ] b W` i X ] b [ 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 (haqiqa), hidden in the b a t i n` f l d " ) % Ł " C h \ Y t a q i y a X c 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 k U g` h \ Y` Z ] f g h` h ] a Y` g ] b W Y` = a \ U X` k ] h b Y g g Y X` h \ Y` g i W W Y g g ] c l a h l a l - b a y t to the actual leadership of an U a ] d c [ f h U b h \ A i h g ` Y ] a ] ag U a U h h Y I Ń g f l d " direct challenge to the political and religious authority held by the Sunni Abbasids. The number of X U did not accept Imam al-A U \ X ] X g n b U g h m` k U g` b U a Y X` U Z h Y f` : U h X U i [ \ h Y f` U b X` = a U a ' D 5` ] Ń g` k` ž` imams traced their ancestry.

The early North African phase of the Fatimid dynasty consisted of the rule of four imam-caliphs: al-Mahdi, al-Fātim al-Manṣūr, al-Muḥammad al-Mahdī, and al-ʿAzīz. 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-A i D ] n n Ń g` reign, the Fatimids expanded from North Africa into Egypt, founding the city of Cairo as their new W W U d ] a h` U h` \ " U h H \ h Y` Y : U E H U ] f a a ] U X h g ] g \ U X U` X f d c k Y f` ] b h c` U` [ f Y U h` Y a d ] f Y I` be characterised by its intellectual and cultural achievements, as well as its spirit of tolerance.

*Intellectual Achievements and Spirit of Tolerance*

The Fatimid intellectual achievements included the development of a Fatimid Ismaili legal system, public and private educational sessions, the expansion of the Ismaili X U D land the establishment of prominent centres of learning. ] Y Z` ] b`



Imam al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, Egypt. © Aleem Karmali



The Fatimid chief judge, al-Qadi al-B i Ð a U b ž ... tasked with writing a major work called the ... was read carefully by al-A i Ð ] n n i U b X ... Similar to other Muslim communities of interpretation, the Ismailis now had a school of law (madhhab) that was based around the centrality of the imam. Al-Qadi al-B i Ð a U b 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 X U Ð was expanded, and despite continuing persecution of Ismailis in the territories of their political rivals, X U Ð 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, ] b W i X ] b [ = g U a Ñ g h \ f Medina and Jerusalem. This expansion was due to their military and diplomatic successes, as well as their X U Ð activities.

Perhaps most impressive of Fatimid intellectual achievements were their centres of learning, as h \ Y m i Z c i b X Y X i a U ^ c f through their efforts, the Fatimid capital became a flourishing centre of Islamic scholarship, sciences, U f h i U b X i W i h i f Y i - A l h a r mosque, where the majalis al-hikma were held, and Dar al-Ð = (the House of Knowledge). Al-5 n \ U f i ] g i f Y a Y a V Y f Y X earliest universities and remains one of the most important centres of learning in the Muslim world today. Dar al-Ð = was established in 1005 by the imam-caliph al-Hakim. A variety of subjects, both religious and non-religious, were studied there U b X i ] h i k U g i g Y X i V m i persuasions, and its library was accessible to Y j Y f m c b Y i i f l d " - \* k " A U Ð intellectuals and X U Ð were educated and worked during the Egyptian Fatimid period, including al-Kirmanî, al-Sijistani, al-Shirazi, Nasir Khusraw and Hasan Sabbah.

Dar al-Ð = Ñ ga d i V i ] W i U W W Y g g ] type of society the Fatimids sought to create. H \ Y m i d i f g i Y X i U i d c i ] While his revolution spread successfully to other religious and ethnic communities, a record hardly challenged under any other Muslim dynasty of the medieval period, not to mention h \ Y i W c b h Y a d c f U f m i 9 i f c 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 U Nizari-A i g h U Ð i ] G W i ] g a i U b X i 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-A i g h U Ð i ] ž i U a Ð a B ] n U f Ñ g a i W i m c i b [ Y f i \ power. Al-A i g h U Ð i ] 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 g d i ] h i U a c b [ g h i h \ Y i = g a U i ] g ž and Nizari branches. The Nizari Imams were forced into hiding for protection, while the Fatimids continued under the rule of al-A i g h U Ð i ] and his successors. However, the empire began a slow decline, losing territories and facing further succession disputes until virtually 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 X U Ð 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 impregnable by way of 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 X U Ð 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 Nizari secured a network of fortresses within Saljuq lands. While his revolution spread successfully to Persia, the Nizaris and Saljuqs failed to overthrow one another, effectively reaching a stalemate by h \ Y i Y b X i c Z i < U g U b i G U V U \ Ñ g i ] d h e U i d i successfully establish a network of strongholds that effectively formed an independent Nizari state in Persia. In addition, the Nizari X U Ð began making inroads in Syria, and found success in the late 12th century under the X U Ð 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 H U D ` ] a

Hasan Sabbah, in addition to being a strong leader and political strategist, was also a learned theologian. He began preaching the doctrine of h U D which a U ] a Y X ` h c ` g \ c k human reason (D U by itself in enabling men to understand religious truths and to know God; and the need for a single authoritative teacher (a i D U-i` sadiq) to act as a spiritual guide of a Y b I ` f l d " % ' & L " ` H \ ] g ` X c W d e f o n s t r a t e t h a t t h e s e s e e m i n g l y c o n t r a d i c t o r y p o l i c i e s p a r t o o k , i n e f f e c t , o f a s i n g u l a r s p i r i t u a l r e a l i t y , a s i n c e n e g c h i n f a l l i b l e i m a m a c t e d i n a c c o r d a n c e w i t h t h e e x i g e n c i e s o f h i s o w n h ] a Y I ` f l d " % ( , L " .

The Proclamation of Qiyama and the Imamate at Alamut

Following Muhammad ibn Buzurg-I a a ] X N g l o n g o l a r m i e s w e s t , w h e r e t h e y l a i d s i e g e t o t h e f o r t r e s s e s a n d s u r r o u n d i n g l a n d s o f t h e N i z a r i = g a U ] ` ] g " ` = b ` h \ Y ` a ] X g h ` c Z ` h a l - D i n M u h a m m a d d i e d i n D e c e m b e r 1 2 5 5 a n d w a s s u c c e e d e d b y h i s s o n , I m a m R u k n a l - D i n ] Y j Y X ` K h u r s h a h , w h o w a s l o r d o f A l a m u t f o r e x a c t l y o n e y e a r b e f o r e b e i n g f o r c e d t o s u r r e n d e r . T h e N i z a r i c a s t l e s e v e n t u a l l y a l l s u r r e n d e r e d t o t h e M o n g o l a s s a u l t , a n d t h e g r e a t f o r t r e s s o f A l a m u t a n d i t s e x t e n s i v e l i b r a r y w e r e d e s t r o y e d . I n 1 2 5 7 , I m a m R u k n a l - D i n K h u r s h a h t r a v e l l e d t o s e e t h e G r e a t K h a n i n M o n g o l i a , b u t w a s k i l l e d o n t h e r e t u r n j o u r n e y . I n t h e m e a n t i m e , t h o u s a n d s o f N i z a r i I s m a i l i s w e r e c a p t u r e d a n d p u t t o t h e s w o r d , s i g n a l l i n g t h e e n d o f t h e N i z a r i s t a t e i n P e r s i a .

Z f c a ` \ ] X ] b [ z ` U b X ` k U g ` i U ` g d reserved exclusively for Nizaris wherever they Y I ] g h Y X I ` f l d " ` % ' - L " .

The doctrine of qiyama was elaborated further by = a U a ` < U g U b N g ` g c b z D i n = a U a ` E Muhammad, whose teachings emphasised the central role of the imam, particularly the teachings of the present imam. The doctrine of qiyama z ` \ Y ` Y I d ` U ] b Y X z ` i ] a d ` ] Y personal transformation of the Nizaris, who, henceforth, were expected to perceive the imam ] b ` \ ] g ` h f i Y ` g d ] f ] h i U ` ` f Y U ` 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 g \ U . T h e N i z a r i s f o r g e d c l o s e r t i e s w i t h t h e S u n n i A b b a s i d s , w h i c h s t r e n g t h e n e d t h e m a n d h e l p e d m a n y S u n n i s f i n d s a f e r e f u g e i n N i z a r i l a n d s f r o m t h e M o n g o l i n v a s i o n s i n e a s t e r n r e g i o n s . T h e s e c h a n g i n g p o l i c i e s w e r e a c c e p t e d b y t h e N i z a r i s w i t h o u t o p p o s i t i o n , b e c a u s e i t w a s s e e n a s t h e i m a m c o n t e x t u a l i s i n g t h e i n t e r p r e t a t i o n o f t h e g \ U a s h e s a w f i t . W h a t a p p e a r e d t o b e c o n t r a d i c t o r y s t r a t e g i e s w e r e e x p l a i n e d b y t h e s c h o l a r a l - H i g ] z ` k \ c ` i g c i [ \ V g c ` i h Y d e m o n s t r a t e t h a t t h e s e s e e m i n g l y c o n t r a d i c t o r y p o l i c i e s p a r t o o k , i n e f f e c t , o f a s i n g u l a r s p i r i t u a l r e a l i t y , a s i n c e n e g c h i n f a l l i b l e i m a m a c t e d i n a c c o r d a n c e w i t h t h e e x i g e n c i e s o f h i s o w n h ] a Y I ` f l d " % ( , L " .

The Mongol Invasion H \ Y ` ] a U a U h Y ` c D i n M u h a m m a d , D 5 ` U N ` U 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 = g a U ] ` ] g " ` = b ` h \ Y ` a ] X g h ` c Z ` h a l - D i n M u h a m m a d d i e d i n D e c e m b e r 1 2 5 5 a n d w a s s u c c e e d e d b y h i s s o n , I m a m R u k n a l - D i n ] Y j Y X ` K h u r s h a h , w h o w a s l o r d o f A l a m u t f o r e x a c t l y o n e y e a r b e f o r e b e i n g f o r c e d t o s u r r e n d e r . T h e N i z a r i c a s t l e s e v e n t u a l l y a l l s u r r e n d e r e d t o t h e M o n g o l a s s a u l t , a n d t h e g r e a t f o r t r e s s o f A l a m u t a n d i t s e x t e n s i v e l i b r a r y w e r e d e s t r o y e d . I n 1 2 5 7 , I m a m R u k n a l - D i n K h u r s h a h t r a v e l l e d t o s e e t h e G r e a t K h a n i n M o n g o l i a , b u t w a s k i l l e d o n t h e r e t u r n j o u r n e y . I n t h e m e a n t i m e , t h o u s a n d s o f N i z a r i I s m a i l i s w e r e c a p t u r e d a n d p u t t o t h e s w o r d , s i g n a l l i n g t h e e n d o f t h e N i z a r i s t a t e i n P e r s i a .



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 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. The Nizaris have regarded some of the greatest mystic poets of Persia as their co-f

*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* during the imamate of Imam al-Mustansir. He is considered today to be among the great theologians, philosophers and poets of medieval Ismaili *Iran*. He eventually converted the majority of Badakhshanis to Ismailis, establishing dynasties of *pirs* and *mirs* 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'wah* 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  
25th Anniversary of The Institute of Ismaili Studies  
October 19, 2003







India and the Sulaymanis of Yemen. Today, the 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... the imamate at the age of thirteen. In 1848, Imam 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... 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. Aga Khan I initiated the modern period of Ismaili history. While his position was strengthened and stabilised during this period, there were members of the Khoja community. Due to long periods of concealing their identity as Sunnis or Muslims, 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 case in 1857 which a British judge declared that the Khojas were Muslims. 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 issued policies that would benefit not only his followers but also the wider community.

International involvement included the 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 Ismaili standards of education, health and social well-being. 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 Aga Khan IV, the latter was chosen as the person brought up and educated in more recent times. Consequently, he designated his grandson Aga Khan IV as the 49th imam. He established 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...

Passages of Relevance

Historical writings by detractors of the Ismailis

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...

heresy (ilhad) of Islam, carefully designed by some non-Muslim Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, bent on destroying Islam from within. By the end of the 4th/10th century...

called Assassin legends consisted of a number of separate but interrelated tales, as Yaqubi stated for the first time in his book...

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 imam?
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...

including the Ismailis, often faced persecution and at times their beliefs were subject to derision. 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.

Imamate

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...

hereditary attributes of individuals and the as Yaqubi stated for the first time in his book...

imams, belonging to the ahl al-bayt and possessing special religious knowledge or D, were qualified to perform the spiritual functions of such guides or teachers... The doctrine of h U D emphasising the autonomous teaching authority of each imam in his own time, became the central doctrine of...

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...

Questions

- 1. K \ m \ X \ X \ h \ Y \ G \ ] D U \ ] b g ]





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

Questions

1. How and why are the modern imamate institutions different from historical imamate institutions, such as the Ismaili *X U D* and educational centres like Al-Azhar and Dar al-*D = ` a 3*
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 *d f Y j ] c i g ` m ` Y l ] g h Y X "* 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-*Alāmūt* period *l* in Syria, Persia, Central Asia and South Asia *l* 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. *H \ ] g ` ] b W ` i X Y g ` V c h \ ` h \ Y ` W c a a* 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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