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Satr

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Satr, “concealment”, a term used in a variety of senses, particularly by the Isma‘iliyya. The Isma‘ilis originally used it in reference to a period in their early history, called *dawr al-satr*, stretching from soon after the death of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq in 148/765 CE to the establishment of the Fatimid state in 297/909 CE. The Isma‘ili *imam*, recognised as the *qa‘im* or *mahdi* by the majority of the early Isma‘ilis, was out of the public domain (*mastur*) during this period of concealment; in his absence, he was represented by *hujdjas* (see Ja‘far b. Mansur al-Yaman, *Kitab al-Kahf*, ed. R. Strothmann, London 1952, 98-9; al-Shahrastani, 146). Later, the Isma‘ilis of the Fatimid period, who allowed for continuity in their *imamate*, recognised a series of three such *imams* between Imam Muhammad b. Isma‘il b. Ja‘far, their seventh *imam*, and Imam ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimid dynasty (see H.F. al-Hamdani, *On the genealogy of Fatimid caliphs*, Cairo 1958, text 11-14).

In the aftermath of the Nizari-Musta‘li schism of 487/1094 CE in Isma‘ilism, the early Nizari Isma‘ilis experienced another period of *satr*, when their *imams*, descendants of Imam Nizar b. al-Mustansir (d. 488/1095 CE), remained concealed for several decades. The inaccessible Nizari *imams* were now once again represented by *hujdjas*, starting with Hasan-i Sabbah, who also ruled over the Nizari state from Alamut. The period of *satr* in early Nizari history ended in 559/1164 CE with the open emergence of the Nizari *imamate*. Subsequently, the term *satr* acquired a new meaning for the Nizaris. As explained by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the Nizaris had by the late Alamut period formulated what may be called a new doctrine of *satr*. In this context, *satr* no longer referred to the physical concealment of the *imams*; instead, it referred to a time when spiritual reality or religious truths (*haqa‘iq*) were hidden in the *batin* of religion, requiring the observance of *taqiyya*.

The Musta‘li Isma‘ilis, who survived only in the Tayyibi form after the downfall of the Fatimid dynasty, have experienced a period of *satr*, since their twentieth *imam*, al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah, was murdered in 524/1130 CE. It is the belief of the Tayyibi Isma‘ilis that all their *imams*, starting with al-Amir’s son al-Tayyib, who disappeared in infancy, have remained



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hidden to the present day. In their absence, *da'i mutlaks*, or supreme *da'is*, have led the affairs of the Tayyibiyya.

Satr found expression also in the Isma'ilis' cyclical conception of religious history of humankind. The Isma'ilis believed from early on that this hiero-history was comprised of seven eras or dawrs, all except the last one being eras of *satr*, because the inner truths of religions or the *haqa'iq* remained undisclosed. In this scheme, only in the seventh and final eschatological era initiated by the *qa'im* before the end of the physical world, would the *haqa'iq* be fully revealed to humankind. This final age, designated as the *dawr al-kashf* or the era of manifestation, would be an age of pure spiritual knowledge when there would no longer be any distinction between the zahir and *batin* dimensions of religion, and between religious laws and their inner meanings. On the basis of astronomical calculations, the Tayyibis of Yaman introduced further innovations into this cyclical scheme. They conceived of a grand aeon (*kawr al-a'zam*) composed of countless cycles, each one divided into seven eras. This grand aeon would progress through successive cycles of concealment (*satr*) and manifestation (*kashf*), and it would be finally concluded by the Great Resurrection (*qiyamat al-qiyamat*) proclaimed by the final *qa'im*.

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