



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Da‘i”

Encyclopaedia Iranica

Farhad Daftary*

The Use of the Term
‘Da‘i’

(He who summons), a term used by several Muslim groups, especially the Ismailis, to designate their missionaries. It was adopted by the ‘Abbasid *da‘wa*, or mission, in Khurasan and by the early Mu‘tazila, but it soon became particularly identified with certain Shi‘i groups, for example, the Zaydis and some Shi‘i extremists (*ghulat*), notably the Khattabiya. The term acquired its widest application in connection with the Ismailis, though early Ismaili authors in Persia sometimes substituted other designations, like *janah* (pl. *ajniha*: see the excerpt from Abu Hatim Razi, *Kitab al-islah*, in Hamdani, p. 109; Sijistani, pp. 91, 100, 128). The term *da‘i* (pl. *du‘at*) came to be applied to any authorised representative of the Ismaili *al-da‘wa al-hadiya* (rightly guiding mission), a missionary responsible for spreading the Ismaili doctrine and winning followers for the *imam*. Different ranks of *da‘is* emerged during the history of the Ismailis and among different branches. In fact, the *da‘i* was the unofficial agent of the Fatimid state (297-567/909-1171), operating secretly in many territories outside Egypt and Syria in efforts to promote recognition of the Ismaili Fatimid caliph as the Ismaili *imam*.

The Organisation of
the Pre-Fatimid
Ismaili *Da‘wa*

No information is available on the organisation of the pre-Fatimid Isma‘ili *da‘wa*, but it is known that the movement was reorganised in about 260/973-74 around a hereditary line of leaders, later recognised as *imams*, who were then residing at Salamiya, in central Syria. During the second half of the 9th century, these leaders initiated the Isma‘ili *da‘wa* through a network of propagandists in a number of regions of the Muslim world. In Jibal, Khurasan and Transoxania, as elsewhere, a chief *da‘i* appointed subordinate *da‘is* to the various districts under his jurisdiction. The chief *da‘is* of Jibal resided at Ray, of Khurasan and Transoxania initially at Nishapur and later at Marv al-Rud. Some of the early Persian *da‘is*, notably Abu Hatim al-Razi and Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani, were among the foremost early Ismaili theologians and provided important doctrinal links between the pre-Fatimid Ismailis and the Fatimids.

Jaziras

The hierarchical Fatimid *da‘wa* organisation (*hudud al-din* or *maratib al-da‘wa*) was fully developed by the time of Mu‘ayyad fi‘l-Din al-Shirazi, chief *da‘i* in Cairo for twenty years

This article was originally published in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VI, p. 590-93, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, New York, 1993. An electronic version appears on the website of The Institute of Ismaili Studies at <http://www.iis.ac.uk/research/encyclopaedias/dai.htm>.

* Farhad Daftary is Head of the Department of Academic Research and Publications at The Institute of Ismaili Studies.

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.



until his death in 470/1078. It mirrored the ideal situation when the Ismaili *imam* would have come to rule the world, and thus many of the ranks mentioned in Fatimid sources were not actually filled at all times. After the *imam* himself, the administrative head was the chief *da'i*, designated *bab* or *bab al-abwab* but *da'i al-du'at* in non-Ismaili sources, with his headquarters in Cairo. He was responsible for appointing the provincial *da'is* within the Fatimid domain and also outside it and was assisted by a number of subordinate local *da'is*.

According to Fatimid Ismaili authors, for purposes of the *da'wa* the world outside direct Fatimid control was divided into twelve *jaziras* (lit., 'islands'), one of which was Persia, designated as Daylam (see Qadi Nu'man, 1967-72, II, p. 74, III, pp. 48-49; Sijistani, p. 172). Ibn Hawqal (p. 310; cf. Nasir Khusraw, 1341/1923, p. 397), however, mentioned Khurasan as a separate *jazira* of the Fatimid *da'wa*, adding that the Ismaili Baluchis of eastern Persia belonged to it. Each *jazira* was in the charge of a chief *da'i*, called *hujja*.

In each *jazira* the *hujja* was assisted by varying ranks of *da'is*, as many as thirty in some instances (Nasir Khusraw, 1356 S/1977, p. 178). Three different categories of such *dai'is* were distinguished in the Fatimid sources: *da'i al-balagh* (lit., *da'i* of initiation), *da'i al-mutlaq* (lit., *da'i* with absolute authority), and *da'i al-mahdud* (or *mahsur*; lit., *da'i* with limited authority), apparently in that order. It is not clear what their specific functions were, through the *da'i al-balagh* apparently acted as liaison with the *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo. There were also two categories of assistant *da'is* or *ma'dhun*, who might eventually rise to the rank of *da'i* (for this hierarchy and the idealised functions associated with its ranks, see Kirmani, pp. 134-39, 224-25, reproduced with commentary in Corbin, pp. 90-95)..

Despite the importance of the *da'is*, almost nothing seems to have been written about them by Ismailis. Qadi Nu'man (d. 363/974), the most prolific author of the Fatimid period, devoted only a short chapter in one of his books ([1948], pp. 136-40) to explaining the virtues of an ideal *da'i*. A more detailed discussion of the qualifications required of a Fatimid *da'i* is contained in what is evidently the only independent Ismaili treatise on the subject, *al-Risala al-mujaza al-karia fi adab al-du'at*, written toward the end of the 10th century by the *da'i* Ahmad b. Ibrahim Nishaburi. No manuscript of this treatise has survived, but the work was quoted extensively in some later and still unpublished Ismaili works by Hatim b. Ibrahim Hamidi (d. 596/1199) and Hasan b. Nuh Bharuchi (d. 939/1533). He could be appointed only with the imam's permission, or *idhn*, and, once despatched to a locality, he was to operate fairly independently of the central headquarters, which would provide only general guidance. Both authors emphasised that the *da'i* had to be personally acquainted with the individual initiates; the Ismailis never aimed at mass proselytisation and indeed sought to maintain utmost secrecy in their activities. Only those candidates possessing advanced educational qualifications and moral and intellectual attributes were to be designated as *da'is*. Beside being familiar with the teachings of different religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and other non-Islamic religions, as well as non-Ismaili branches of Islam), the *da'i* was expected to know the language and customs

Attributes of an Ideal
Da'i



of the region to which he was assigned. Many *da'is* received extensive training in such specialised institutions as the Dar al-hikma and al-Azhar in Cairo. As a result they often became outstanding scholars in theology, philosophy, jurisprudence and other fields of learning.

Methods and Pedagogy

Because of the self-imposed secrecy, almost nothing is known about the actual methods by which Fatimid Ismaili *da'is* won new converts (*mustajibs*). Many Sunni authors, deriving their information mainly from anti-Ismaili polemical works by Ibn Rizam and Akhu Muhsin, mentioned a system of seven or nine distinctly named stages of detaching the initiate from his previous religion and initiating him into Ismailism (e.g., Nuwayri, pp. 195-225; Ghazali, pp. 21-32). There is, however, no evidence of such stages in the extant Ismaili literature, though certainly the preparation of the new converts must have been gradual (see Daftary, pp. 188, 189, 192-93, 224-32).

The Emergence of Musta'li and Nizari *da'wa* Structures

In 487/1094 the Ismailis split into the Musta'li and Nizari branches. The Tayyibi Musta'lis inherited control of the Fatimid *da'wa* hierarchy and after the collapse of the dynasty transferred their base to Yemen, where they remained for several centuries, also expanding into Gujarat (Daftary, pp. 298-99, 315-16, 321-22). The Nizaris, on the other hand, succeeded the Fatimid Ismailis in Persia and other eastern lands. For some time before the schism, Ismailis in the domain of the Great Saljuqs (429-552/1038-1157) had been led by a single chief *da'i* at Isfahan. In the early 1070s and perhaps earlier 'Abd-al-Malik b. 'Attash filled this role. The *da'i* at Isfahan may also have supervised the *da'is* operating in Khurasan and Iraq, though he received his own general instructions from Cairo. After the schism the Persian Ismailis, the Nizariya, severed relations with the Fatimid *da'wa* centered in Cairo and established a separate *da'wa* led by the *da'i* of Daylam, who resided in the mountain fortress of Alamut. Hasan Sabbah, founder of the Nizari state in Persia, and his two successors at Alamut were also regarded as the *hujjas* of the concealed Nizari *imams*.

The Nizari *Da'wa*

When the Nizari imam emerged at Alamut in 559/1164 he supplanted the *hujjas* as supreme leader of the Nizari *da'wa* and state. The supreme Nizari leader, whether *da'i* or imam, selected the local chief *da'is* to serve in the main Nizari territories: Kuhistan (Quhistan) in southern Khurasan and Syria. The chief *da'i* (often called *muhtashim*) of the Kuhistan Nizaris usually lived in Tun, Qa'in, or the fortress of Mu'minabad, near Birjand. His counterpart in Syria normally lived in the castle of Masyaf or Kahf in central Syria. The *da'is* of Daylam and the chief *da'is* of the Nizari territories, who often functioned as military commanders, were supported by subordinate *da'is* and assistants, though no details are available. It is clear, however, that the scattered Nizari communities of the Alamut period, which were often engaged in battles with Saljuqs and other enemies, had no use for the elaborate *da'wa* structure developed by the Fatimid Ismailis; there were apparently only a few ranks between the *imam* and his ordinary followers; in Persia the latter addressed one another as *rafiq* (Daftary, pp. 335-36, 350-51, 381, 394-95).



After the fall of the Nizari state in 654/1256 the *imams* again went into hiding in different parts of Persia, and for two centuries the various local Nizari communities developed independently of one another. During this period, the Nizaris observed the strictest form of *taqiya* (dissimulation), in Persia often disguising themselves under the mantle of Sufism. *Da'wa* activities seem to have been suspended almost completely and only local chief *da'is*, often called *pirs*, continued to operate. In most communities the position of *pir* gradually became hereditary.

The Revival of
Nizari *Da'wa*
Activity

When the *imam* of the Qasimshahi branch of Nizari Ismailism emerged at Anjudan, in central Persia, during the second half of the 15th century, there was a significant revival in *da'wa* activity. During the two centuries of the Anjudan revival the *imams*, who developed close relations with the Ni'matollahi order of Sufis, successfully extended their control over the Nizari communities of Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and Syria. They despatched trusted *da'is* to all those regions, in order to reassert central authority. For the purpose of *taqiya*, the Nizaris had readily adopted the master-disciple (*murshid-murid*) relationship of the Sufis, along with the associated terminology. To outsiders the Nizari *imams* thus appeared as Sufi *murshids*, or *qutbs*, and their followers as *murids*. The *imams* were further encouraged by more favourable conditions after the Safavids' adoption of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion of Persia at the beginning of the 16th century. They adopted the guise of Twelver Shi'is, as well as that of Sufis.

The Nizari *Da'wa*
Organisation and
Structure

Under these circumstances the Nizari *da'wa* organisation remained rather simple throughout the Anjudan period; there appear to have been only five ranks below the *imam*. The highest was the supreme *da'i*, or *hujja*, selected from among the close relatives of the *imam*. Next were the *da'is*, chosen from the better-educated Nizaris. They were no longer restricted to particular regions but were responsible for periodic inspections of the different communities, with reports to *da'wa* headquarters in the *imam's* residence and for conveying directives from the *imam* to local leaders. Furthermore, they were expected to propagate the *da'wa* in areas beyond the jurisdiction of particular Nizari communities. The next lower rank was that of *mu'allim*, or religious teacher, who was normally attached to a particular community or region, corresponding to the *da'is* of the *jaziras* in the Fatimid period. The *mu'allims* were appointed by the *hujja* in consultation with the *imam*, and every *mu'allim* was assisted by two categories of *ma'dhun*. By the middle of the 16th century, however, the term *pir* had replaced all these titles in the Nizari organisation. It fell into disuse in Persia after the Anjudan period, though it has remained in use until modern times among the Nizaris of Badakhshan and adjacent regions (Mustansir bi'llah, text pp. 41 ff., 62 ff.; Quhistani, text pp. 49-50, 59; Khayrkhah Herati, 1935, text pp. 44, 76-77, 93-94, 101, 110; idem. 1961, pp. 3, 23, 58, 113 ff.; Daftary, pp. 467-68, 475-76).

The *Da'i* in Modern
History

By the end of the 19th century the proselytising activities of the Nizaris had begun to lose their importance. The title *mu'allim* thus came to replace the generic title *da'i*, as the function of teaching Nizari doctrines to members of the community displaced that of spreading the *da'wa* and winning new converts. At present *mu'allims* and *wa'izin*, or



preachers, are active in Nizari communities in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America; selected groups receive regular training at The Institute of Ismaili Studies.

Bibliography

- H. Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, London, 1983.
- F. Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge, 1990.
- Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali, *Fadha'ih al-Batiniya*, ed. 'A. Badawi, Cairo, 1964.
- A. Hamdani, 'Evolution of the Organisational Structure of the Fatimi Da'wah,' *Arabian Studies* 3, 1976, pp. 85-114.
- H.-E. Hasan, *Tarikh al-dawla al-fatimiya*, 3rd ed., Cairo, 1964. W. Ivanow, 'The Organization of the Fatimid Propaganda,' *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, N. S. 15, 1939, pp. 1-35.
- Idem, *Studies in Early Persian Ismailism*, 2nd ed., Bombay, 1955.
- Muhammad-Reza b. Sultan-Husayn Khayrkhah Herati, *Kalam-i pir*, ed. And tr. W. Ivanow, Bombay, 1935.
- Idem, *Tasnifat*, ed. W. Ivanow, Tehran, 1961.
- Hamid al-Din Ahmad Kirmani, *Rahat al-'aql*, ed. M. Kamil Husayn and M.-M Hilmi, Cairo, 1953.
- Ahmad b. 'Ali Maqrizi, *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa'l-i'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat*, Bulaq, 1270/1853.
- Mustansir bi'llah II, *Pandiyat-i javanmardi*, ed. And tr. W. Ivanow, Leiden, 1953.
- Nasir Khusraw, *Zad al-musafirin*, ed. M. Badhl al-Rahman, Berlin, 1341/1923.
- Idem. *Wajh-i din*, ed. G.-R. A'wani, Tehran, 1356 S/1977. Qadi Abu Hanifa Nu'man b. Muhammad, *Kitab al-himma fi adab atba' al-a'imma*, ed. M. Kamil Husayn, Cairo, [1948].
- Idem, *Ta'wil al-da'a'im*, 3 vols., ed. M.-H. A'zami, Cairo, 1967-72.
- Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab Nuwayri, *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al-adab* XXV, ed. M.-J. 'Abd al-'Al Hini et al., Cairo, 1984.
- Ahmad b. 'Ali Qalqashandi, *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha'*, 14 vols., Cairo, 1331-38/1913-20.
- Abu Ishaq Quhistani, *Haft bab*, ed. And tr. W. Ivanow, Bombay, 1959.
- Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Ithbat al-nabuwat*, ed. 'A. Tamer, Beirut, 1966.
- S. M. Stern, 'Cairo as the Centre of the Isma'ili Movement,' in *Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire*, Cairo, 1972, pp. 437-50; repr. In S. M. Stern, *Studies in Early Isma'ilism*, Jerusalem and Leiden, 1983, pp. 234-53.