



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Elemental: Ismaili Perspectives on Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether

Conference Programme

26 – 27 March 2026





Cover image: A folio from an Urdu commentary on Rūmī's *Mathnawī*
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Office of Communications and Development

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
www.iis.ac.uk



Welcome

The conference *Elemental: Ismaili Perspectives on Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether* brings into focus the rich heritage of Ismaili traditions through the lens of the elements – earth, water, air, fire and ether. It seeks to critically examine philosophical, literary, poetic and artistic works and ideas, alongside accounts of lived experience drawn from diverse historical and contemporary contexts. In foregrounding the elemental as both metaphor and cosmological framework, the conference aims to generate innovative research that reconsiders the relationship between religious understandings of the created world and the many dimensions of climate change and environmental degradation that call for a renewed commitment to mitigation efforts.

Addressing a notable gap in scholarship at the intersection of religious cosmology and material existence, the conference offers a platform for generative dialogue on how these elements have been imagined, articulated and interpreted across varied expressions of thought in Ismaili and related traditions. Such enquiry also invites reflection on how elemental conceptions may be situated within broader environmental and ethical frameworks informed by Muslim, humanistic and civilisational perspectives.



Over two days, scholars representing a wide range of disciplines and with expertise in various historical periods will engage with discursive, poetic and literary sources, and consider contemporary writings, stories, folklore and action-oriented initiatives. Through their diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches, presenters will collectively explore the intellectual, spiritual and ethical perspectives on the five classical elements so as to better inform our understanding of their natural and symbolic value.

Professor Zayn Kassam

Director of The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Schedule

Day 1: Thursday 26 March 2026

10:00

Housekeeping Remarks

10:05

Director's Welcome

10:15 – 11:45

Nature, Elements and Contemporary Challenges – Chair: Dr Zamira Dildorbekova

Maha Yaziji: **Turfah and Environmental Memory:**

A Reflection on Salamiyyan Literature and Stories



Qudsia Shah: **From Rain Amulets to Running Showers:**

Elemental Crisis and Moral Economy in Hunza



Dr Abdul Wahid Khan: **The Blessings of the Common Land (*muzhayo*):**

Conceptions of Earth and Stewardship among the Ismaili Communities of Chitral



11:45 – 12:00

Health Break

12:00 – 12:45

Keynote Address – Dr Paul Dhalla



12:45 – 14:00

Lunch (and group photo)

14:00 – 14:05


'Why Oceans Matter' – a short film



14:05 – 15:30

Water, Supplication and Governance – Chair: Dr Gurdofarid Miskinzoda

Dr Hasan Al-Khoei: **The Manifold Symbols of Rain** 

Sarah Aziz: **Prayerful Torrents:**
Perspectives on Water in al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya 


Dr Shainool Jiwa: **The Environment and Ethical Engagement:**
Glimpses from the Fatimid Period 


15:30 – 15:45


Health Break

15:45 – 17:45

Soil (Earth) and Water, Past and Present – Chair: Dr Aslisho Qurboniev

Dr Nourmamadcho Nourmamadchoev: *‘Ālam-i Ṣaḡhīr:*
Nature, Habitat and Human Beings among the Ismailis of Badakhshan 

Rizwan Karim: **Sing to the Fish and the Mountains Will Listen:**
Ecopoetry and the Prophecy of Environmental Loss in Burushaski 

Dr Morteza Karimi: **The Sacred Ecology of Water and Soil in Ismaili Jurisprudence:**
Insights from the Dā‘im al-Islām 

Dr Saeed Karbin: **Echoes in Stone:**
Natural Resource Management in the Ismaili Fortresses of Iran as a Model for Climate Adaptation 

17:45

Close/Networking

Schedule

Day 2: Friday 27 March 2026

10:00 – 11:30

The Elements and Ismaili Thought Across Cultures – Chair: Dr Toby Mayer

Dr Wafi Momin: **The *Ginān* Literature and the Elements** 

Dr Orkhan Mir-Kasimov: **Natural Elements and the Alchemy of Knowledge in the Works of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394)** 


Dr Muntazir Ali: **Elemental Geographies of the Sacred in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Safarnāma*** 


11:30 – 11:45


Health Break

11:45 – 13:15

Fatimid Thought through the Lens of the Elements – Chair: Dr Yahia Baiza

Dr Maria De Cillis: **The Concepts of *Aether* or *Quinta Essentia* from the Greek Heritage to the Islamic Context:**
The Cosmological Views of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistāni and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī 

Dr Alia Parveen and Currim Suteria: **Ether as Spirit/Space that 'Holds'** 

Dr Khalil Andani: **Neoplatonic Nature:**
Ismaili Philosophical Views of the Elements 

13:15 – 14:15

Lunch



14:15 – 16:15

The Elements, Adaptation, Stewardship and Ismaili Communities
– Chair: Dr Daryoush Mohammad Poor

Majida Thobani: **Ismaili Perspectives on Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether in the *Ginān* Tradition**



Dr Karim Javan: **Mapping the Ismaili Social Landscape:**
Environmental Narratives from Alamūt to Anjudān



Nazira Bibi: **The Integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Ismaili Religious Education in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan:**
A Pedagogical Approach to Environmental Stewardship



Dr Siddique Ullah Baig: **Bridging and Understanding the Interaction between Environmental Geography and Ismaili Demographics**



16:15 – 16:30

Health Break

16:30 – 17:15

Closing Keynote

Dr Aryn Sajoo: **From Ecological Aesthetics to Lived Ethics: Ismaili Pathways**



17:15

Dr Wafi Momin: **Wrap-Up and Next Steps**

Abstracts and Bios

Keynote Address (Day 1)

AKDN's Environment and Climate Initiative

Paul Dhalla

Climate change, and environmental degradation more generally, are affecting all the geographies where the AKDN works. We are seeing more frequent and extreme weather events – floods, droughts, heat waves, forest fires – as well as air pollution, freshwater depletion, biodiversity loss and coastal erosion. The world's poorest people are the most severely affected by environmental degradation and climate change, with impacts on livelihoods, agriculture, food security, nutrition and health.

In this context, the goal of protecting the environment and mitigating future climate change, while helping communities adapt to the effects of climate change, has taken on increased urgency and importance. The scale of the challenge is immense, and it is multi-dimensional. The Imamat, through the AKDN, is therefore taking a holistic system-wide approach, with an emphasis on practical solutions and actions.

This paper will explore both the Imamat's rationale for making environment and climate a core strategic priority and cross-cutting theme for the AKDN, and also how this decision informs the overall approach and specific policies that the AKDN is adopting. The paper will outline the guiding principles that underpin the AKDN's environment and climate initiative as well as the institutional capacities and experience that the organisation has developed to address one of the most critical and urgent challenges of our time.



DR PAUL DHALLA is the Director of Environment, Climate and Sustainability at the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), with global responsibility for AKDN's environment and climate initiative. As Vice-Chair of the AKDN's Environment and Climate Committee (ECC), he facilitates the Imam's objective of making the environment and climate a cross-cutting theme and common priority across all the AKDN's agencies and institutions. Dr Dhalla's role situates the AKDN's work on the environment and climate within the broader framework of sustainable development, linking it to poverty alleviation and quality of life.

Dr Dhalla received a BA in Law from Oxford University and an MA and PhD in Social Anthropology from Harvard University. He has worked extensively in the field in Africa and Asia with research fellowships from Harvard University, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), with funds provided by the Ford Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). He is a member of the European Council for Global Conservation, advising The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the Board of Directors of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR).

Abstracts and Bios

Keynote Address (Day 2)

From Ecological Aesthetics to Lived Ethics: Ismaili Pathways

Amyn Sajoo

A dominant social imaginary frames climate change and environmental justice in jural norms within a secular political modernity, shaped by techno-capitalist vectors. The landmark Paris Climate Accord (2015) regime seeks to apply scientific parameters from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change across 196 sovereign nations. Today, the 1.5°C global warming threshold is imperilled, flash floods and wildfires are rife and climate-driven displacement quickens – with the burdens falling hardest on disadvantaged communities. Populist polarization overturns pledges on carbon taxes, net-zero emissions and fossil fuel transitions, alongside intense extraction of critical minerals and brazen use of ruinous munitions in conflicts.

A faith-inspired social imaginary, informed by Islamic eco-centred ethics rooted in Qur'anic and *ḥadīth* tenets, finds aesthetic expression in the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's 'Case of the Animals', Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, and 'Aṭṭār's *The Conference of the Birds*. More explicitly, the conservation of water, flora and fauna is seen in esoterics and praxis, from *gināns*, *qaṣīdas* and *farmāns* on an integrative nexus of stewardship and spirituality, to the Imamāt's privileging of eco-ethics in development and cultural initiatives. Evident here is a congruence with indigenous peoples' practices in a decolonial stance beyond the anthropocentric. This resonates especially with the Ismaili diaspora in 'settler' Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US. Rather than a binary of secular/faith-inspired imaginaries, I argue for symbiosis. Illustrative is the 2013–2018 Aga Khan Garden project in Edmonton (Canada), an 11-acre modern Islamic imprint that enhances wetland and woodland ecology at 53° north.



Community engagement is embodied in spatial dialogue with indigenous (Néhiyaw, Niitsitapi), Japanese and alpine traditions, and active hosting of guests. Eco-aesthetics imbue a social imaginary centring the ethics of belonging and citizenship, against modernist alienations. In this vein, courtyard gardens anchor a coupling of civic and faith sensibilities in diaspora Ismaili Centres, geared for net-zero by 2030 while harkening to an ideal of human flourishing embedded in the elements.

DR AMYN SAJOO is Scholar-in-Residence at Simon Fraser University's Centre for Comparative Muslim Studies (CCMS) – and lectures on Middle East politics, human rights/civic culture, and international law and environmental politics in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences.

Dr Sajoo served as the Canada-ASEAN Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, with fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia – followed by academic affiliations at Cambridge and McGill universities, and The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). His early career was with the Canadian departments of Justice and Global Affairs, and he was the latter's Visiting Academic in the Middle East in 2010.

He is contributing editor of the IIS' Muslim Heritage Series, in which the fifth volume, *The Shari'a: History, Ethics, and Law*, was selected as a 2019 Choice Outstanding Academic Title by the American Library Association.

Dr Sajoo is currently working on the sixth volume in this series, *Muslim Belonging in the West: The Ethics of Citizenship*. His earlier books include *Muslim Ethics: Emerging Vistas* and the edited collection, *A Companion to Muslim Ethics*, both of which are now 'open access'.

Since 2018, Dr Sajoo has hosted a series of public conversations on 'Identity & Citizenship', co-sponsored by SFU and the Ismaili Centre, Vancouver. His onstage guests have included former chief justice Beverley McLachlin, John Ralston Saul, Prof Anver Emon, Dr Ulrike Al-Khamis, and the celebrated activist Monia Mazigh.

Abstracts

Elemental Geographies of the Sacred in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's Safarnāma

Muntazir Ali

Nāṣir-i Khusraw's 5th/11th-century *Safarnāma* is usually read as a straightforward travel account – valuable for its firsthand descriptions of pilgrimage routes, cities and the architectural splendour of the Fatimid empire. This paper offers a different way of approaching the text: as a kind of elemental sacred geography. In this reading, the environments Nāṣir describes are not passive settings but active mediums through which religious knowledge, authority and orientation are sensed and understood.

Using geocriticism and ecocriticism as contemporary analytical tools – while avoiding the projection of modern environmental concerns onto the text – the paper explores how Nāṣir organises sacred space through recurring elemental themes. Earth (terrain, elevation, enclosure) grounds moral and ritual direction. Water (springs, canals, cisterns) represents purity, movement and just governance. Air (climate, atmosphere) shapes both bodily and spiritual receptivity. Light and fire (radiance, reflection, illumination) make sacred authority visible, most vividly in Nāṣir's account of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. Across cities such as Mecca, Jerusalem and Cairo, these elements appear again and again, suggesting what this paper terms a 'polycentric sacred geography', rather than a world organised around one spiritual centre.

Through close readings of key passages and attention to Ismaili notions of *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, the paper argues that the *Safarnāma* portrays the world as a multilayered tapestry of meaningful places, where environmental forms invite interpretation and ethical orientation under Imam-guided knowledge. By highlighting the text's elemental poetics as a way of thinking about space, the paper contributes to conversations in literary studies, Islamic history and spatial theory, showing how a premodern Islamicate travel narrative theorises the sacred through land, water, air and light.



DR MUNTAZIR ALI (GPISH 2014) directs the Islamic Studies programme and teaches in the departments of Religious Studies and International & Global Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His research engages with questions of sacred geography, textual transmission and the representation of space and place across genres and languages. He is currently developing projects on Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Hawāmil wa'l-shawāmil*, Kalīm Allāh Shāhjahānābādī's *Maktūbāt*, and on indigenous spatial imaginaries and frontier thinking in the Chitral region of Northern Pakistan. His work draws on interdisciplinary approaches across Islamic studies, comparative literature and postcolonial thought, integrating classical textual analysis with contemporary theoretical insights. At UNC Greensboro, he teaches courses on Islamic humanities, Sufism, the Qur'an and global studies, and is actively involved in fostering cross-disciplinary conversations on religion, culture and the environment.

The Manifold Symbols of Rain

Hasan Al-Khoee

Invocations for rainfall attributed to the early Shi'i Imams form a consistent feature of the early Shi'i written tradition from the 2nd/8th to 5th/11th centuries.

Variouly attributed to the Imams 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-'Ābidīn and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, such invocations appear alongside broader dicta and discourses pertaining to water and rainfall. Whether preserved in liturgical texts that provided the extended invocations (sing. *du'ā'*) for rainfall, or in broader literary corpora including most notably the *khuṭbas* of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, these discourses weave a dense repertoire of imagery and conception in which rainfall becomes a distinct locus for the elaborations of the relationship between humankind and God. There, they critically situate humankind within the order of creation and particularly in relationship to the environments in which they live. Such ecological discourses – which have pertinent relevance for contemporary discussions regarding early Muslim conceptions of nature – develop sustained reflections on rainfall's intricate role in human life.

They appeal to the correlation between precipitation, fertility and agriculture as core dimensions of the human experience on earth, and trace how fluctuations in rainfall register in the communal space, whether in changes in market prices or more destructive outcomes. Focusing on a corpus of transmitted invocations for rain attributed to the early Shi'i Imams, together with related dicta and narratives on water, this paper demonstrates that rainfall in early Shi'i liturgical texts functions as both element and symbol, mediating between the Creator and His communities, and that it emerged as the principal avenue through which early conceptions of the natural world were expressed and refined.



DR HASAN AL-KHOEE was awarded his PhD (2021) from the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), where he focussed on early Arabic historiography and the symbolic and political communicative cultures of the early Muslim caliphates (1st/7th to 2nd/8th centuries). He also completed his earlier BA (Hons) in History and MA in African and Asian History at SOAS. He is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Dr Al-Khoee is currently a Research Associate at the IIS, having joined the Institute in 2007, where his work specialises in Fatimid history, historiography and the development of notions of authority in Islam between the 1st/7th and 4th/10th centuries. He is also a module leader lecturing in the IIS's graduate programmes on early Muslim history and Shi'ism.

Neoplatonic Nature: Ismaili Philosophical Views of the Elements

Khalil Andani

This paper explores how the Ismaili Neoplatonic philosopher-*dā'īs* understood the metaphysical and symbolic status of nature with attention to the four elements. We first argue, on the basis of Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, that Ismaili Neoplatonism, situates 'Nature' as a spiritual hypostasis that is both immaterial and immanent within the natural world. Universal Nature is the active projection of the Universal Soul within Prime Matter and is described by Nāṣir as the 'student' (*shāgird*) of the Universal Soul. Secondly, the Universal Soul through the mediation of Universal Nature inscribes the intelligible forms it receives from the Universal Intellect in physical reality, which begin to manifest as the 'four natures' or *principial qualia* – hotness, coolness, dryness and wetness. Following the tradition of Aristotelian physics, these four metaphysical *qualia* combine to form the 'four elements': fire (hotness plus dryness), air (hotness plus wetness), water (coolness plus wetness) and earth (coolness plus dryness). Overall, the four elements represent the immanence of the Neoplatonic principles within the natural world. However, the Ismaili Neoplatonic *dā'īs* enhanced this worldview with a religious or *dīnī* symbolism. In this framework, Sijistānī (*Kitāb al-Yanābī'*) and Nāṣir (*Wajh-i Dīn*) understood fire to symbolise the Universal Intellect and its *ta'yīd* (divine assistance); wind is a symbol of the Universal Soul with its life-giving motions; water symbolises the Speaker Prophet and his divine law; and earth symbolises the Founder (*asās*), or Legatee (*waṣī*), and his *ta'wīl*. Likewise, the four elements correspond to the four Arabic letters of the name *Allāh*.



Finally, I contend that an Ismaili Neoplatonic understanding of Nature and the elements retains a spiritual value today even amidst modern scientific understandings of the cosmos. The premodern Ismaili *ta'wil* of the four elements is premised on a more general claim that the spiritual-religious hierarchy of the Intellect, Soul, Prophethood and Imama are 'Imamate' within the natural world. Thus, Ismaili Neoplatonism situates the natural world as theophanic and 'in-formed' with the same spiritual essences that believers encounter through scripture and religious worship.

DR KHALIL ANDANI is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Augustana College, Rick Island, Illinois. He has a PhD and two Master's degrees in Islamic studies from Harvard University. He is an intellectual historian specialising in Qur'anic studies, Ismailism, Sufism and Islamic philosophical theology, and he is also a Muslim philosopher of religion. He has published articles in numerous journals and edited volumes including the *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies*, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, *The Journal of Islamic Studies*, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* and *Fatimid Cosmopolitanism: History, Material Culture, Politics and Religion*.

*Prayerful Torrents: Perspectives on Water from
al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya*

Sarah Aziz

This paper will investigate the discourse on water in *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya*, the prayerbook attributed to ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d. 712), the fourth Shi‘i Imam and the great-grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Through a close reading of the supplication for seeking rain (*du‘ā’ al-istisqā’*) and the supplication of ‘Blessing the angels’, I will explore how the Imam’s intimate discourse with God is rooted in a broader cosmological consciousness that emphasises the interconnection between the different spheres of existence, especially the natural and the spiritual, thereby enriching our understanding of central Islamic religious concepts such as *baraka* (blessing), *rahma* (mercy) and *rizq* (sustenance). My analysis will show how, in this tradition, prayer extends beyond mere petition and seeks rather to cultivate a contemplative attitude that is underpinned by a fundamental awareness of the natural order and appreciation of its subtleties. Finally, I will draw out the implications of the Imam’s teachings on fostering an integrative understanding of the relationship between human beings and the environment.



SARAH AZIZ is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. Her fields of interest include Classical Arabic literature, Islamic intellectual history, Shi'ism and Sufism. Her research examines the historical, literary and intellectual dimensions of early Islamic prayer literature and its commentarial traditions. Within the prayer genre, she is especially interested in the development, literary character and reception of the corpus of prayers and supplications attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*). Sarah received her MA in Islamic Studies from the University of Chicago Divinity School and her BA (Hons) in Religious Studies from Davidson College, North Carolina.

Bridging and Understanding the Interaction Between Environmental Geography and Ismaili Demographics

Siddique Ullah Baig

Environmental geography deals with the spatial aspects of the complex interactions between human beings and the natural world. The aim of the study is to understand the interaction between environmental geography and Ismaili demographics. The interaction is characterised by both the reliance of Ismaili communities on the environment and their spiritual connection to it, and, increasingly, the pressure from natural hazards and climate change on Ismaili demographics throughout the world. The spiritual connection of the Ismailis to natural resources like the cryosphere, boulders, and hunting in the mountains is highlighted. The methods by which information is obtained regarding Jamatkhanas, Ismaili populations and environmental geography include remote sensing and geographic information systems (GIS). About 1,300 Jamatkhanas distributed across 35 countries of the globe, are overlaid onto the environmental geography (e.g., pollution, climate change, land-use, mountains, natural hazards, etc.) using geospatial technology. Pakistan is the most Ismaili-populous country, with over 37 per cent of the world's Ismailis, followed by India with 27 per cent. About half of the world's Ismailis globally, live among the highest mountains, which may be due to the need to seek safety from persecution, danger, or other difficulties.



About 25,000 Ismailis who live in lowland areas are exposed to a high level of air pollution. About 20–30 per cent of Ismailis live on seismic fault-lines and are exposed to seismic induced natural hazards, especially those living in the high mountains of the Hindu-Kush, Himalaya and Karakoram ranges. In relation to spirituality, the results show that mountain peaks and glaciers are secret places, not for conquering. Rituals are followed for hunting wildlife. An increase in migration from high to lower lands in high mountain areas, within and outside the countries of migrant origin, is expected in the coming decades.

DR SIDDIQUE ULLAH BAIG has a Master's and PhD in Geoinformatics, and is a tenured Associate Professor at COMSATS University, Islamabad. He is currently a research fellow at NOVA FCT, Portugal. He specialises in geographic information systems (GIS) and remote sensing, studying the environment and communities through map-making and digital image processing.

*The Integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge into
Ismaili Religious Education in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan:
A Pedagogical Approach to Environmental Stewardship*

Nazira Bibi

This study aimed to integrate the traditional ecological knowledge and practices of the Ismaili community of Gilgit-Baltistan into the 'Faith and Practice in Islamic Traditions' module of the IIS SC. The intervention was implemented as an action research project in a secondary Religious Education classroom to examine its impact on nurturing the students' empathetic connection with the natural world over a period of six months. The ecological worldview of Gilgit-Baltistan reflects a deep symbiotic relationship between human beings and the natural elements. Some of the ecological practices, while cultural in origin, have been gradually adapted and infused with meaning by the Ismaili community over time.

The study developed a pedagogical framework that wove together faith, ethics and human responsibility towards the natural elements, grounded in references to the Qur'an, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, the guidance of the Ismaili Imams, and broader literature. Published sources on the traditional ecological worldview were consulted; however, recognising that much indigenous knowledge is transmitted orally, interviews were conducted and guest speakers were invited to share the regional ecological worldview and lived practices. The impact of the intervention was evaluated through a systematic analysis of classroom activities, teacher observation, home tasks, and the students' reflections.

The findings of the study indicated a deeper reflective thinking, and a strengthened sense of environmental stewardship grounded in faith-based ethics. The students increasingly framed environmental responsibility as a moral and spiritual obligation rooted in faith. The study also observed the students' increased awareness of sustainable resource use and more empathetic understandings of human nature.



NAZIRA BIBI is an experienced secondary teacher and community educator, currently serving with the Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Board for Pakistan based in Gilgit-Baltistan. The role encompasses designing and delivering the interdisciplinary curriculum of The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in both classroom and camp settings, leading teacher training, overseeing portfolios such as professional development, educational camps and project management. Nazira Bibi completed the Secondary Teacher Education Programme at the IIS, and also holds a Master's in Muslim Societies and Civilisations from SOAS, University of London and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice from University College London. Deeply committed to advancing inclusive and transformative education, she has presented the findings of her research entitled *Representation of Women in Textbooks* at various platforms and looks forward to presenting a paper titled, 'Promoting Gender Inclusivity in Teaching and Learning', and another co-authored work titled 'Flipped Classroom Approach' at upcoming international conferences. Nazira Bibi's dedication to reflective pedagogy and action research continues to shape her contributions to education with a focus on an inter-disciplinary approach and inclusivity.

The Concept of Aether, or Quinta Essentia, from the Greek Heritage to the Islamic Context: The Cosmological Views of the Ikhwān al-Şafā', Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī

Maria De Cillis

In Classical Greek physics and cosmology, the notion of *quinta essentia* (πέμπτον στοιχεῖον) refers to a fifth element added, with its own peculiar characteristics, to the four Empedoclean elements (earth, water, air and fire). Albeit still debated, the origins and the role of this notion have been long discussed, indeed by the Pythagoreans and Presocratic philosophers, as well as by Plato and Aristotle. This presentation aims to look at the development of the notion of the 'fifth body' (πέμπτον σώμα) or 'aether' (αιθήρ) from the Greek philosophical context through to its perception and adaptation in the Islamic milieu. Particularly, by looking at the cosmological views of the Ikhwān al-Şafā' on the one hand, and the interpretation of the concept by some of the members of the Ismaili Persian school of philosophical theology (Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī), this paper aims to shed some light on this rather obscure, yet fascinating, subject.



DR MARIA DE CILLIS is an Associate Professor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies where she is also the Interim Head of the Shi'i Studies Unit and the Managing Editor of the Shi'i Heritage Series. Her publications include *Salvation and Destiny in Islam: The Shi'i Ismaili Perspective of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī* (2018) and *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī* (2014). She has co-edited *L'ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements/Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* (2016) and co-translated *The Proof of God: Shi'i Mysticism in the Work of al-Kulaynī (9th-10th centuries)* (2023). As well as writing a number of journal articles and encyclopaedia entries, she has taught on the Qur'an at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and on medieval Islamic philosophy and speculative theology at Birkbeck College, University of London. She continues to teach on Shi'i Islam and Islamic intellectual history at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. Her research interests include Islamic metaphysics, Sufism, Shi'i esotericism and Ismaili philosophy.

*Mapping the Ismaili Social Landscape:
Environmental Narratives from Alamūt to Anjudān*

Karim Javan

This paper investigates the environmental strategies of Ismaili communities in Iran, tracing their evolution from the mountain fortresses of the Alamūt period to the Safavid-era settlements of Anjudān, Kahak and Maḥallāt. Drawing on a combination of Ismaili textual traditions and recent archaeological discoveries, the study highlights how these communities transformed geographically difficult locations into liveable, sustainable environments.

While Ismaili studies has traditionally prioritised intellectual and literary history, this paper shifts the focus toward the ‘environmental turn’ by examining the social and material strategies of Ismaili communities in Iran. It argues that the Ismaili experience was defined by a sophisticated adaptation to marginal environments – mountainous and arid landscapes – necessitated by prevailing socio-political pressures.

Central to this research are the findings from a 2018 survey of the Haftād-Qulleh mountains, where over 150 rock inscriptions have been recorded and analysed. These inscriptions provide a rare window into the daily lives of Ismailis, detailing their practical engagement with agriculture, irrigation and hunting. Accompanied by visual evidence and images from these sites, the paper analyses the intersection of narrative descriptions and physical remains. It demonstrates how the Ismailis navigated environmental obstacles to sustain their communal identity and social cohesion, providing a more holistic understanding of the social history of the Ismaili Imams’ headquarters from the 5th/11th century through to the early 18th century.



DR KARIM JAVAN is a Research Associate at the IIS' Ismaili Special Collections Unit Unit (ISCU). He completed his BA and MA in Persian Literature at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran, in 1999, before studying under the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities at the IIS (GPISH, class of 2004). He received an MPhil in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies from University of Cambridge. After graduation, he taught Persian in the graduate programmes of the IIS and AKU-ISMC (Aga Khan University–Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations).

In 2014, Karim joined the IIS-Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU), producing a catalogue of Persian manuscripts. In 2018, he obtained his PhD on 'Qiyāma in Ismaili History: A Study on the Proclamation of Resurrection and its Historical Context' from SOAS, University of London. He is currently working on editing and translating a number of Persian Ismaili texts from the Alamūt and later periods. Further, his work with the Department of Graduate Studies involves teaching and supervision. Dr Javan obtained a fellowship of the Higher Education Academy in 2021 from Middlesex University.

*The Environment and Ethical Engagement:
Glimpses from the Fatimid Period*

Shainool Jiwa

Issues related to the environment feature in Fatimid literature in a variety of settings. These include eyewitness accounts of disputes related to the equitable use of land and water by local inhabitants presented to the Fatimid Imam-caliphs during their travels across their domains. They also include measures the Fatimid sovereigns took to ameliorate the water flow of the Nile to enhance the irrigation of Egyptian fields. Fatimid communication regarding the annual fluctuations of the Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt, aimed to alleviate the economic challenges faced by the Egyptian population. Fatimid efforts to channel the Nile and the participation of Fatimid rulers at Egyptian agrarian festivals held by the Nile are further examples of the vital intertwining of ecology and environment, which this paper aims to examine.



DR SHAINOOL JIWA is a specialist in Fatimid studies, and an Associate Professor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. Dr Jiwa's publication, *The Fatimids 2: The Rule from Egypt* (2023), is a World of Islam series title, for which she also serves as the series General Editor.

She is the author of *The Fatimids 1: The Rise of a Muslim Empire* (2018), and co-editor of *The Shi'i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity* (2015), *The Fatimid Caliphate: Diversity of Traditions* (2017) and *Fatimid Cosmopolitanism: History, Material Culture, Politics and Religion* (2025).

Dr Jiwa has edited and translated key medieval Arabic texts relating to Fatimid history, published as *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire* (2009) and *The Founder of Cairo* (2013).

She has a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Edinburgh, an MA in Islamic Studies from McGill University, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, leading to a fellowship of the Higher Education Academy.

Echoes in Stone: Water Management in Ismaili Fortresses as a Model for Climate Adaptation

Saeed Karbin

Medieval Ismaili fortresses in Iran provide a remarkable example of how communities adapted to challenging mountain environments through careful management of scarce natural resources. Positioned on steep ridges and remote outcrops, these fortresses relied on limited rainfall, unpredictable climate patterns, and confronted difficult access to groundwater. Yet the Ismailis developed highly effective systems that supported long term settlement, sustained population needs, and ensured resilience during periods of siege. Archaeological evidence reveals a sophisticated approach to water harvesting and conservation. Carefully designed catchment surfaces, stone channels and terraces directed rainfall into underground cisterns that protected water from contamination and evaporation. These structures demonstrate a strong understanding of local hydrology, geology and climatic variability. The systems had in-built redundancy and flexibility, allowing the communities to withstand extended droughts and severe environmental stress. The principles guiding resource use within these fortresses extended well beyond technical knowledge. Water was regarded as a shared trust and a central element of communal life. Ethical values such as stewardship, restraint, fairness and foresight shaped how water was collected, stored and distributed. These values, rooted in Ismaili spiritual thought, supported a culture in which natural resources were managed collectively and with long-term responsibility. The Ismaili experience offers meaningful insights for contemporary climate adaptation efforts.

Many regions now face increasing water stress, rising temperatures and unpredictable rainfall. The adaptive strategies found in these fortresses highlight the importance of local solutions that work with environmental conditions rather than against them. Their emphasis on simple, low-energy, community governed systems provides an alternative to modern approaches that rely heavily on large-scale and energy demanding infrastructure. Connections can also be drawn to present-day development work by AKDN in mountain and coastal regions, where similar principles are applied to enhance water security and improve resilience to climate change.



These initiatives echo the historical practices found in the Ismaili strongholds by combining practical engineering with community engagement and long-term planning. The legacy of the Ismaili fortresses stands as a testament to how human communities can thrive in difficult environments through a combination of ingenuity, ethical responsibility and ecological awareness. Their resource management systems, preserved in both material remains and cultural memory, offer valuable guidance for building sustainable and resilient responses to the climate challenges of the modern world.

DR SAEED KARBIN is a Research Fellow working in School of Biological Sciences, in the Environmental Modelling Group at the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. His academic work was significantly supported by a scholarship from the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in 2011, which facilitated his doctoral studies at the University of Zurich. He successfully completed his PhD in Soil Ecology from the University of Zurich in 2015. Saeed's professional experience spans various prominent research institutions, including the University of Tehran and the Soil and Water Research Institute in Iran. Additionally, he has held the position of Senior Advisor for esteemed international bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), undertaking assignments across diverse countries including India, Tajikistan, Iran, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. His research expertise is primarily concentrated on the meticulous measurement and sophisticated modelling of carbon dioxide, methane and hydrogen fluxes across soil-atmosphere interfaces within a variety of terrestrial ecosystems. Ultimately, Saeed's overarching goal is to deliver actionable solutions for sustainable soil management, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions and fostering improved soil health. His research work furnishes crucial quantitative understanding, indispensable for forecasting climate feedback and formulating effective mitigation strategies.

*Sing to the Fish and the Mountains Will Listen:
Ecopoetry and the Prophecy of Environmental Loss in Burushaski*

Rizwan Karim

This paper will examine the emergence of ecopoetry in the contemporary Burushaski oral tradition from Hunza in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan, home to a significant and historic Ismaili population. Drawing on a theoretical framework of ecocriticism, particularly literary ecocriticism and ecopoetics, the study aims to examine how Burushaski poetry, though unwritten and ephemeral, operates as an act of environmental witnessing, warning of degradation induced by climate change and urging for a renewal of human–nature kinship in an environmentally critical region of the world.

In the absence of a fixed script for Burushaski, a vulnerable language-isolate, orality becomes a vessel for prophecy, where the poet, like a seer, expresses what is being lost and what still might be saved. Through metaphor and symbolism, the poems are a call to listeners to not only mourn but also to act. Notably, there has been little to no scholarly exploration of the poetic tradition in Hunza in relation to environmental issues, making this research a pioneering contribution.



Focusing on selected poems in Burushaski by a living poet, this paper will examine how these oral compositions give voice to the dramatic changes facing Hunza's fragile mountain ecosystem and reflect deep anxieties regarding environmental degradation in the form of melting glaciers, loss of biodiversity and the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge.

In line with the themes of this timely conference, the paper will engage with the elements of earth and water through an indigenous poetic heritage. It will attempt to reveal how ecopoetry can become a living archive of mountain memory and a prophetic call to environmental responsibility. In this way, it will contribute to the emerging discourse on environmental degradation and climate change by foregrounding mountain lifeworlds through an elemental and ecological lens using the tool of ecopoetry.

RIZWAN KARIM coordinates the Oral History Project at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. A 2016 graduate of the IIS's Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH), he is originally from Hunza and speaks Burushaski. Rizwan has a keen interest in the relationship between environment and human experience, especially in oral cultures with a focus on poetry and verse.

The Sacred Ecology of Water and Soil in Ismaili Jurisprudence: Insights from the Da‘ā’im al-Islām

Morteza Karimi

This paper explores the religious and ethical significance of the natural elements water and soil in Ismaili legal and spiritual thought, as presented in the *Da‘ā’im al-Islām* – a foundational legal text by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān. In this work, soil and water are not merely physical substances, but sacred elements imbued with theological, ritual and moral dimensions.

The soil is portrayed as a symbol of humility and mortality. Prostrating upon the soil in prayer signifies submission before God, while the burial of the deceased beneath the earth reflects both reverence for the human body and a spiritual return to the origin of creation. The soil thus emerges as an active participant in the human ethical-spiritual journey.

Water is emphasised as a divine means of purification and healing. It plays a crucial role in ritual acts such as *wuḍū’* (minor ablution) and *ghuṣl* (major ablution), and is described as a substance that cannot be rendered impure unless its very essence is altered. Contaminating water is prohibited, not only for human health but because water sustains all living beings – plants, animals and human beings alike. Water is also recognised for its healing properties and as the highest form of nourishment both in this world and the next. Denying others access to clean water is framed as a moral transgression.

The paper argues that al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s treatment of these two elements presents a rich resource for contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, sustainability and the Islamic understanding of ecological justice. By revisiting this classical Ismaili text, we can uncover a framework that connects ritual purity, human dignity and the collective responsibility towards nature – resonating deeply with the concerns of our current climate crisis.



DR MORTEZA KARIMI, born in 1981, commenced his formal religious education at the Seminary of Qom in 1995. Since then, he has engaged extensively in both the study and instruction of key Islamic disciplines, including Qur'anic studies, *ḥadīth*, Islamic philosophy and theology, Islamic history, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

Dr Karimi has a BA in Islamic Theology, an MA in the Abrahamic Religions from the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom and a PhD in Shi'i Theology from the University of Tehran. He is the author more than 60 scholarly books and articles in both Persian and English.

In addition to academic writing and teaching at various universities, he currently serves as a research fellow at the International Institute for Islamic Studies.

Dr Karimi has also served as a visiting lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, where he taught courses on Islamic history and beliefs for one year. He has actively participated in numerous international conferences on interfaith dialogue in countries such as Portugal, Nepal, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania and Iran. As a member of The International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) Alumni Network, he has taken part in various courses and workshops focused on interreligious dialogue (IRD).

Blessings of the Common Land (Muzhayo): Conceptions of Earth and Stewardship among the Ismaili Communities of Chitral

Abdul Wahid Khan

This paper investigates the conceptualisations of land as elemental earth among Ismaili pastoral communities in Chitral, Northern Pakistan. In this mountainous region, common land (*muzhayo*) is perceived not merely as shared property but as blessed earth (*khāk*) from which human beings are created and to which they ultimately return. Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories and poetic methods, the study explores how land (*zamīn*) and commons are embedded within a relational ontology that interconnects soil, spirituality, livelihood and communal governance.

Among the Ismaili communities of Chitral, the earth is frequently articulated as both a divine gift and a moral trust (*amāna*). Qur'anic notions of the creation of human beings from the earth frame the land as a reminder of humility, temporality and accountability before God. The high pastures (*ghari*) and shared grazing lands (*muzhayo*) are regarded not merely as economic resources but as foundational to four distinct earth-meanings: material (alpine *chiragāh* pastures provide fodder and firewood essential for sustaining agropastoralism); socio-communal (*sotsiri* rotations and clan assemblies promote solidarity); spiritual (*nangini* guardians and Qur'anic motifs, 'from soil...to soil', imbue the land with a sense of divine trust); and emotional-place (ancestral connections evoke a profound sense of loss, described as 'heart-burning', and highlight the freedoms women have in the pastures). These commons thus represent relational lifeworlds that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman entities. They are ethically significant landscapes linked to the ancestors, unseen beings (*shawanān*) and future generations. Seasonal pastoral practices, ritual invocations and collective decision-making foster an environmental ethic rooted in sufficiency, reciprocity and care, rather than extraction.



These elemental relationships, however, face intensifying pressures from state-led nationalisation, market-driven modernity, climate change, flash floods and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) that destabilise both the terrain and livelihoods. By foregrounding Chitral, an understudied region in Ismaili studies, this paper addresses a significant gap in scholarship. It argues that *muzhayo* embodies a distinctive lived conception of earth that links theology, gendered experience, pastoral practice and environmental stewardship, offering an alternative Muslim environmental imaginary rooted in humility before the soil and responsibility for an uncertain ecological future.

DR ABDUL WAHID KHAN earned his PhD in Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford (2026). He is an alum of the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) at the IIS and is a current Farhad Daftary Doctoral scholar. His research concerns climate change, land rights, theology and political ecology, focusing on the Northern Areas of Pakistan. He is the founder of Chitral Academics Circle and Chitral Heritage and Environmental Protection Society Youth Wing.

The Natural Elements and Alchemy of Knowledge in the Works of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 796/1394)

Orkhan Mir-Kasimov

The formula ‘alchemy is the sister of prophecy’ expresses the view that alchemy, together with other ‘occult sciences’, such as astrology or the science of letters and numbers, essentially addresses the same kind of knowledge as that obtained through prophetic revelation. More specifically, in some circles, the occult sciences were closely related to the practice of *ta’wīl*, understood as an authoritative hermeneutics of the prophetic revelation. Such a hermeneutics is essentially concerned with bringing the prophetic revelation ‘back’ to its metaphysical source. It therefore develops in the direction opposite to prophetic *tanzīl* and is based on a different kind of inspiration. The knowledge related to *ta’wīl* can thus potentially confer on its bearer all the power associated with direct inspiration without interfering with the authority of the prophetic message situated on the parallel line of *tanzīl*. Since knowledge of the ultimate *ta’wīl* is one of the attributes of the eschatological Saviour, it is not surprising that the potential of *ta’wīl*-related religious authority has been actively exercised by messianic leaders. In this paper, I will focus on the interpretations attributed to the natural elements, including earth, water, air and fire, and their relationship to the hermeneutical theory of *ta’wīl* in the works of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī, one of the most prominent messianic thinkers of 8th/14th-century Iran. I will also discuss possible similarities with the Ismaili doctrinal positions developed in the extant Iranian Nizari literature.



DR ORKHAN MIR-KASIMOV is an Associate Professor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is the convenor of the Islamic History and Thought Lecture Series and Series Editor of the Ismaili Texts and Translations Series. His teaching focuses on Islamic history, Shi'i history and thought and Islamic mysticism. He has published many journal articles and book chapters on Islamic mysticism and messianism. He has edited and co-edited several volumes and is the author of *Words of Power: Hurufi Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam* (2015) and *Christian Apocalyptic Texts in Islamic Messianic Discourse* (2017).

The Ginān Literature and the Elements

Wafi Momin

The *Gināns* have long played a central role in the lives of the Ismaili and other Indian ‘Satpanth’ communities. Their teachings and worldviews have shaped the beliefs, practices and identity of those who have turned to these compositions for guidance and inspiration on such matters as moral conduct and spiritual quest. But the *Gināns* are also replete with rich metaphysical and cosmological ideas, reflecting on the nature of creation and human life, the origins, structure and trajectory of the Universe, and the place of created beings in the world order. In doing so, the *Gināns* draw upon a rich pool of ideas from a spectrum of Indic and Islamic traditions and have produced a worldview which is rich and full of creative encounters and not without tensions.

This paper will examine various narratives in the *Gināns* which feature references to or discussions about elements. These elements – earth, water, air, fire and ether – either collectively or individually serve important physical, metaphorical and symbolic functions, for example, in the creation process, in the sustenance of life or in the hereafter or doomsday. But discussions about the functions of these elements in the cosmic process also depict tensions owing to the different sources upon which the *Gināns*, directly or indirectly, draw in weaving their narratives. The paper will also foreground these tensions and reflect on their implications for approaching select *Ginānic* narratives from the lens of the elements.



DR WAFI MOMIN is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Ismaili Special Collections Unit at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. He has a doctorate in South Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. His PhD examined the formation of the Satpanth Ismaili tradition in South Asia. His research interests include Islam in South Asia and its interaction with other religious traditions, Ismaili history and thought, and the literary and manuscript cultures of South Asia during the early modern and colonial eras. He teaches on the Institute's various educational programmes, and serves as Module Leader and lecturer for the STEP module 'Developments and Issues in the Contemporary Muslim World'. His publications include an edited volume, *Texts, Scribes and Transmission: Manuscript Cultures of the Ismaili Communities and Beyond* (2022).

*‘Ālam-i Ṣaghīr: Nature, Habitat and Human Beings
among the Ismailis of Badakhshan*

Nourmamadcho Nourmamadchoev

Badakhshan, a landlocked province in the foothills of the Hindu Kush and the Pamir mountains, is well known for its precious and semi-precious stones as well as for its harsh climate. The high mountains, remote from human habitation, are the source of landslides during the rainy season, avalanches during the snows in winter, and the site of glaciers. Although the glaciers are a source of fresh water, they are also a source of high risk for the arable land, irrigation canals and pastures.

The local population of the Shughnan, Rushan and Wakhan regions explain the relationship between human beings and their natural surroundings through the lived environment which is closely linked to the Ismaili teaching of microcosm and macrocosm. Various elements of nature are explained in the architectural design of the Pamiri house, also known as *‘ālam-i ṣaghīr* (microcosm) in the local context. Apart from this, we find interesting treatises on art and crafts such as *āhangarī* (blacksmithing) or *dihqānī* (farming) produced by local authors.

In this presentation, I will focus on the relationship of human beings with nature and how it is depicted in the local context. I will look at two case studies, the depiction of elements in the architecture of the Pamiri house, and the use of the human body in relation to eco-calendars which are used for marking the change of seasons, namely the start of the irrigation period in spring and gathering in the harvest in the autumn. I will bring examples from local treatises such as the *Risāla-i āhangarī* and the *Dihqān-nāma*.



DR NOURMAMADCHO NOURMAMADCHOEV is a Research Associate and Projects Coordinator in the Ismaili Special Collections Unit at the IIS. He obtained his BA degree in Oriental Studies specialising in Arabic and Persian languages and literature from Khorog State University, Tajikistan. He taught Arabic and theories of translation at Khorog State University and worked as a researcher at the Institute of Humanities in Khorog. In 2002, he was one of the Khorog English Programme graduates to be enrolled in the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) at the IIS.

Nourmamadcho has an MPhil in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from Cambridge University and a PhD in History from SOAS, University of London. His doctoral thesis is an in-depth study of the history of Badakhshan entitled ‘The Ismā‘ilis of Badakhshan: History, Politics and Religion from 1500 to 1750’, which was supervised by Dr Heidi A. Walcher and Dr Konrad Hirschler. He has written a number of chapter contributions for collected volumes and encyclopaedia articles.

Ether as the Spirit/Space that 'Holds'

**Alia Parveen
Currim Suteria**

This exploration offers a discussion on 'ether' as the spirit/space that 'holds' everything that is material. Human bodies, plants and rocks are made of earth, fire, water and air. These elements make up surfaces, substances and bodies that constitute our tangible world. These elements/bodies are formed and exist within the sphere of ether. Situating the study in the cosmic/elemental structures presented by Ismaili thinkers, the discussion uses phenomenological tools and contemporary anthropological and environmental research to open up a discussion on the 'holding' properties of ether.

How may we acknowledge and live in ether as both spirit and space? And what implications does this nuanced and dual understanding of ether have on the way in which we experience weather, empathise, and 'be' with all that is natural around us?

Moving from the historical to the experiential and ecological, these questions guide the discussion and structure of the study. Using both textual and creative practice (qualitative research) as a method, this paper is coupled with a series of drawings that will aid in grounding the questions and ideas presented.



DR ALIA PARVEEN is a cell and molecular biologist with a deep interest in the resonance between science and the Qur'an. She completed her PhD from the University of Arkansas in 2019, and from 2020–2024 has been involved in several post-doctoral engagements in animal genomics and metabolomics at the University College Dublin. She is currently engaged as a Senior Analyst at Eurofins (BioPharma Product Testing) in Ireland. Dr Parveen hails from Khyber in the Gojal Valley of Northern Pakistan.

CURRIM SUTERIA is an architect and educator interested in how design and drawing can hold a space for spiritual inquiry. He completed his Bachelor's in Architecture from McGill University in 2011, and his Master's in Architecture from the University of Waterloo in 2018. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the Graduate Programme (MPhil in Critical and Creative Practice) at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, Pakistan. Currim's interest in the glaciers of Northern Pakistan, the passage of light and time, and the spatial order of Islamic gardens informs his present drawing practice. In his architectural practice, Currim works on housing projects with the Open Door Design Studio and serves as a consultant to the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat, where he has supported the development of low-income housing across Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

From Rain Amulets to Running Showers: Elemental Crisis and Moral Economy in Hunza

Qudsia Shah

The paper will examine the elemental role of water in the cultural memory, ecological imagination and political organisation of the Ismaili mountain settlements of Hunza, Gilgit-Baltistan. Through folklore, oral narratives, place-based legends, and ethnographic observations, it will explore how water, as both a material necessity and a spiritual force, has historically shaped local conceptions of leadership, legitimacy and community survival.

Drawing on the stories of local figures such as Silum Khan II and the epic hero Kisar, the paper situates water scarcity not merely as a developmental challenge but as a structuring principle of everyday life. These narratives converge with material transformations in the present, where unregulated tourism and luxury infrastructure increasingly divert water from agricultural and domestic use to serve visitor consumption. The once-sacred spaces of Altit in Hunza – its legendary polo ground, royal orchards and communal pools – have been diminished by construction, enclosure, and resource extraction, calling into question earlier relationships between human beings and their elemental surroundings.

The paper will explore the multifaceted environmental transformations in Gilgit-Baltistan, a region set between four of the world's tallest mountain ranges. As a vital freshwater source for populations downstream in Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan faces severe ecological threats due to accelerated glacial melt, climate change and unsustainable socio-economic development.



The narrative here critically examines how infrastructural expansions, monoculture farming, and tourism have contributed to environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and cultural disconnection. Drawing on both scientific insight and indigenous oral histories, the paper juxtaposes gradual ecological shifts with catastrophic changes, arguing for an urgent reconnection with eco-centric traditions. Through discussing stories such as those of the Diram Harai and Shri Badat, the paper underscores the agency of nature and the moral consequences of human actions, advocating a return to indigenous environmental ethics rooted in reciprocity, respect and intergenerational responsibility.

QUDSIA SHAH is a Senior Research Officer at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. She joined the Unit in 2013. In this role, she has worked on and coordinated research projects on a wide array of themes, including Muslim spaces of worship and gathering, Ismaili religious rituals and practices, Muslim bio-medical ethics, Muslim approaches to the environment, and interfaith marriages. She has a keen research interest in climate change, on which she has presented two papers ‘Between Expedient and Ethical: Muslim approaches to the Environment’ and ‘Manghs of Hyderabad: History, Social Change and Sustainability’ at academic forums. She is currently working on a book, tentatively entitled *‘Ismailis of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral* as part of the Living Ismaili Traditions Series of the IIS.

Before joining the IIS, she worked in the development sector in Pakistan with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, The First Micro Finance Bank and Save the Children. She is an alumna of the GPISH programme of the IIS and has two postgraduate degrees, in Economics (MSc, Quaid-i-Azam University) and Anthropology (MA, SOAS).

Ismaili Perspectives on Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether in the Ginān Tradition

Majida Thobani

This paper will attempt to discuss creation using elements in the Ismaili *Ginān* tradition composed by the *pīrs* and *sayyids*, focusing on the well-known *Gināns* ‘Eji Duniya Sirjine’ (Pir Sadardin) and ‘Marna hayre zarur’ (Imam Begum). The subject-matter of the *Gināns* is not confined to the creation, but also concerns how matter will decompose after its demise, returning to dust as in ‘Eh Sabhaga’, verse 15 (composer Pir Shams). In other words, all processes such as creation, growth, maturation, and finally decomposition, will be touched upon to complete a given cycle, as depicted by the *pīrs* in the *Gināns*. The purpose of the completion of this autonomous cycle is to understand the Lord as worthy of worship; the Lord is revered through worship in daily practice of the faith which acknowledges the power and majesty of the Creator.

The aim of this paper is to examine the creation of the solar system as well as human beings using the elements of earth, fire and water, seen in verses from the devotional literature of the Satpanth tradition. I will select and translate those verses that depict the theory of creation, growth, maturation and recycling of matter to transfer energy or conserve energy. The material in the *Gināns* will be used to show how habitats are formed to perpetuate the cycle for purity and purpose.



MAJIDA THOBANI is an alumnus of The Institute of Ismaili Studies and graduated from UCL with an MEd in 1985. She received an MA in Islamic Studies from McGill University in Montreal, Canada in 1987. Thereafter, she worked for ITREB for Portugal until 1992. Returning to United Kingdom she pursued a PGCE in Secondary Science teaching course and continues to teach A-level Applied Science and is the Quality Nominee at Rooks Heath School, Harrow. She supports the Association of the Study of Ginans in research and developmental work.

Turfah and Environmental Memory: A Reflection on Salamiyyan Literature and Stories

Maha Yaziji

Turfah literally translates as ‘witty anecdote’. It is a classical genre of Arabic literature that combines humour and wit to entertain readers while subtly offering a critique and a critical reading of existing social and political situations.

This paper will discuss this genre and its use in relation to the ecological changes that affected the Ismaili city of Salamiyya in central Syria during the 1940s and 1950s, with a specific focus on the floods and droughts of that period. It will explore the prevalence of *turfah* in remembering and describing these tragic events in the communal memory. It will also analyse how the Salamiyyan writer Ismail Tamir (d. 2007) employed this literary style in his anecdotes about the drought in the Salamiyya district and its severe impact on the social and economic life of the people there during that time.

The paper will conclude with remarks on the role of *turfah* in classical and modern Arabic literature, highlighting its ability to convey messages and critiques in a simple, entertaining and engaging manner, thereby reaching a wider audience. It will reflect on how these characteristics enhance the potential of *turfah* to preserve environmental memory and serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with climate-related tragedies, while fostering resilience and awareness.



MAHA YAZIJI is an Education Officer in the Constituency Studies Unit in the Department of Academic Research at the IIS. She has a BA in English Literature from Homs University, Syria, and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Goldsmiths College, London. She also completed the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) at IIS.

Previously, Maha worked with the Aga Khan Education Services (AKES) in Syria and Tajikistan. She also contributed to the two published volumes *Interpretations of Law and Ethics in Muslim Contexts* (2012) and *Cities as Built and Lived Environments: Scholarship from Muslim Contexts, 1875-2011* (2014). In her current role at IIS, she conducts research and develops academic and educational resources. Her work focuses on modern Syrian Ismaili history, Ismaili religious practices, and Ismaili spaces of worship. She also lectures in the IIS graduate programmes (GPISH and STEP).

Panel Chairs

Zamira Dildorbekova

DR ZAMIRA DILDORBEKOVA is Co-Head of the Department of Education at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), where she leads the academic provision and strategic development of secondary teacher education. She is also an Associate Staff member at University College, London (UCL). Dr Dildorbekova has an MPhil in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on contemporary Islam and Ismaili Studies in Central Asia, with particular attention to identity formation and post-imperial transformation. Her professional experience spans a range of roles across the education and development sectors, including appointments at the University of Exeter's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies and the Aga Khan Foundation (Education). She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), and a member of the Central Asian Studies Network at the University of Exeter.



Toby Mayer

DR TOBY MAYER is a Senior Research Associate in the Qur'anic Studies Unit at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. After completing his undergraduate degree in Indian Studies at the University of Cambridge, he went on to study medieval Arabic thought at the University of Oxford, where he wrote his doctoral thesis on the 'Book of Allusions (*Ishārāt*)' by the major Persian philosopher Ibn Sīnā.

In 2001, in conjunction with (the late) Professor Wilferd Madelung, he published a critical edition and translation of Shahrastānī's *Kitāb Muṣāra'at al-Falāsifa*, entitled *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (2001). He has also written articles for academic journals and contributions to encyclopaedias.

Until 2003, Dr Mayer was a lecturer in Islamic studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he taught courses in Islamic philosophy and mysticism. He has also worked for Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation and on various documentary film projects in India, Indonesia and other parts of the Muslim world.

Panel Chairs

Gurdofarid Miskinzoda

DR GURDOFARID MISKINZODA is the Co-Head of the Department of Education at The Institute of Ismaili Studies where she is also the Managing Editor of the Shi'i Heritage Series. Her academic background lies in the fields of the history of the Near and Middle East and of Islam, Islamic Studies, philology and the study of Arabic and Persian literatures. Having completed her doctoral studies at SOAS in 2007, with a thesis on medieval accounts of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, she joined The Institute of Ismaili Studies as a Research Associate. She is the editor (with Dr Farhad Daftary) of *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law* (2014). Most recently in 2019, she completed an MBA in Higher Education Management at the IOE, UCL. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.



Daryoush Mohammad Poor

DR DARYOUSH MOHAMMAD POOR is Associate Professor in the Department of Academic Research at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London, and Interim Head of its Constituency Studies Unit. A Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, he is the editor of the Ismaili Heritage Series and lectures in the Department of Education. His interdisciplinary scholarship spans Islamic philosophy, Shi'i studies, and political theory, with recent work on the ethical and social implications of emerging technologies, including AI. He has collaborated with UK Research and Innovation and Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council on initiatives examining the ethical, social, and faith-informed implications of AI and emerging technologies. He is the author and editor of several publications, including an edition and translation of al-Shahrastānī's *Majlis-i maktūb* as *Command and Creation: A Shi'i Cosmological Treatise* (2021) and serves on the Advisory Board of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* and the editorial board of the *Journal of Religious Minorities Under Muslim Rule*.

Panel Chairs

Aslisho Qurboniev

DR ASLISHO QURBONIEV is a historian of the premodern Islamic world, with a focus on scholarly communities and knowledge transmission in Arabic and Persian, especially during the Fatimid period (297–567/909–1171). After receiving his PhD from the University of Cambridge (2019) he worked at the ERC-funded KITAB (Knowledge, Information Technology and Arabic Book) project at the Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) as a postdoctoral research fellow (2020–2023). There he contributed to the OpenITI corpus and worked on subjects related to book culture. He is currently working as a Research Associate at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. He is completing a co-authored book about pre-modern writerly practices, and has published on Fatimid and Ismaili learning traditions, medieval Ismaili manuscripts and the digital humanities.



Exhibitions

Amanah

AMANAHA is a sculptural installation by Tanzanian artist Shafina Jaffer, whose practice bridges spirituality, ecology, and sustainable material traditions. A graduate of the Royal College of Art, Shafina works primarily with natural fibres, barkcloth, earth pigments, and mineral elements, grounding contemporary concerns within sacred cosmology and spiritual ecology. Her work explores humanity's role as *khalīfa* — guardian — and the moral responsibility embedded within creation. Rooted in Qur'anic cosmology and inspired by the verse, *'He raised the sky and set the balance – so that you may not transgress the balance'* (55:7–8), Amanah reflects the sacred interrelationship between the five primordial elements – air, water, earth, fire, and ether – through which all existence manifests. Each element appears not as a literal symbol but as a spiritual principle woven into material, geometry, and gesture. A contemporary Sufi garment rises from bark-cloth – the tree itself – bearing a barren Tree of Life, a spiral of becoming, Fibonacci geometry, and traces of water. The head suggests the Earth held in consciousness; the oversized shoe calls for decisive action. Filled with fragments of bark, it confronts the cost of overconsumption. The sculpture becomes both a warning and a prayer: a call to restore balance through stewardship, humility and urgent care.





Exhibitions

The Element of Water

THE ELEMENT OF WATER Sura 21 (al-Anbiyā'), verse 30, informs us that the heavens and the earth were joined together and that God made from water every living thing. A small photography display (Room 110) curated by Russell Harris accompanies the Elemental conference, and provides an overview of the role of water in the built Fatimid environment, particularly in Cairo (a city founded by the Fatimids in 969 CE). The photographs highlight recent excavations of 10th-11th century Fatimid gardens in Cairo, as well the role of water in Al-Azhar Park – a project initiated by the late Aga Khan IV, transforming an enormous rubbish heap in the centre of Cairo into a set of 'green lungs' for the metropolis. The display also includes some images of the Aga Khan Centre and its environs, showing how water continues to play a vital and elemental role in a 21st-century urban environment.



The Garden of Life

Aga Khan Centre, London.
Designed by Madison Cox
Design Inc. Photograph by R. Harris

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