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Farhad Daftary

Representing the second largest Shīʿī Muslim community after the Ithnāʿasharīs, or Twelver Shīʿīs, the Ismāʿīlīs have had a complex history dating back to the formative period of Islam. In medieval times, the Ismāʿīlīs established states of their own, the Fāṭimid caliphate and the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī state of the Alamūt period. They also made important contributions to Islamic thought and culture. In particular, while developing their theological doctrines, the Ismāʿīlīs elaborated an esoteric system of religious thought, with distinctive cosmological, eschatological, and soteriological doctrines, as well as a cyclical view of the sacred history of humankind.

In the course of their long and eventful history, the Ismāʿīlīs became subdivided into a number of major branches and minor groups. Currently, the Ismāʿīlīs belong to the Nizārī and Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlian branches, and are scattered as religious minorities in more than thirty countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America. Numbering several millions, they also represent a diversity of ethnicities and literary traditions, and speak a variety of languages. The majoritarian Ismāʿīlī community, the Nizārīs, have had a continuous line of imāms as their spiritual leaders, who in modern times have been internationally known as the Aga Khans. The imāms of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs have remained in concealment since 524 AH/1130 CE; in their absence, their community has been led by spiritual leaders designated as *dāʿī muṭlaq*, who have enjoyed absolute authority.

Ismāʿīlī historiography, as well as the perceptions of outsiders of the Ismāʿīlīs, in both Muslim and Christian milieus, have had fascinating trajectories. By and large, the Ismāʿīlīs were persistently misrepresented until modern times, with a variety of myths and legends – including the Assassin legends of the Crusader circles – circulating about their teachings and practices. This state of affairs was mainly due to the fact that until the twentieth century the Ismāʿīlīs were almost exclusively studied and evaluated on the basis of evidence collected, or often fabricated, by their detractors. The breakthrough in Ismāʿīlī studies occurred with the recovery and study of genuine Ismāʿīlī theological and other texts on a large scale – manuscript sources which had been preserved secretly in private collections in many regions, especially in Yemen, Syria, Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia.

Keywords: Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism, Fāṭimids, Nizārīs, Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlia, Aga Khan, Shīʿī Islam, Alamut, Imamate

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1 Origins and early history

The origins of Sunnism and Shīʿism, the two main divisions of Islam, may be traced to the crisis of succession to the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11 AH/632 CE). A successor was needed to assume his function not as a prophet, but as the leader of the nascent Islamic community. In practice, this choice was resolved by the Muslim notables, leading to the establishment of the historical caliphate. It is the fundamental belief of Shīʿī Muslims, however, that the Prophet Muḥammad had in fact designated his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), who was married to his daughter Fāṭima, as his successor – a designation (*naṣṣ*) believed to have been ordained by divine command. Be that as it may, a minority group originally upholding this view gradually expanded and became generally designated as the *Shīʿat ʿAlī* (Party of ʿAlī), or simply as the Shīʿa.

Originally, Shīʿism represented a unified community that recognized successively ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his sons al-Ḥasan (d. 49/669) and al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680) as their imāms or spiritual leaders. This situation changed subsequently, as different Shīʿī communities came to coexist, each with its own line of ʿAlid imāms (descendants of ʿAlī) and theological doctrines. It was under such circumstances that the Shīʿism of the Umayyad period developed mainly in terms of two branches, the Kaysānīs and the Imāmīs, with the so-called *ghulāt*, or exaggerators, attached to both branches, especially the Kaysānīs. The commonest feature of the ideas propagated by the early Shīʿī *ghulāt* was the attribution of superhuman qualities, or even divinity, to imāms. Some of the ideas emphasized by the early *ghulāt*, such as spiritual interpretation of the Day of Resurrection (*qiyāma*) and their cyclical view of religious history, were further elaborated by the early Ismāʿīlīs (Asatryan 2017: 137–161). Meanwhile, another major Shīʿī community, designated as Zaydī, had evolved out of the abortive revolt of Zayd ibn ʿAlī (d. 122/740), Imām al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī's grandson. The Kaysānī Shīʿīs were mostly absorbed either into the ʿAbbāsid movement or disintegrated soon after the victory of the ʿAbbāsids over the Umayyads in 132/750.

Imāmī Shīʿism, the common theological heritage of the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers, continued to develop under a particular line of ʿAlid imāms, descendants of al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī. By contrast to the Kaysānīs, the Imāmīs remained completely removed from any political activity. It was with Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. c. 114/732), their fifth imām, that the Imāmī branch of Shīʿism began to acquire its prominence as a Shīʿī community. But it was during the long imāmate of al-Bāqir's son and successor, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), that Imāmī Shīʿism expanded significantly and became a major religious community with a distinctive theological identity.

Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq elaborated the basic conception of the doctrine of the imāmate (*imāma*), which was essentially retained by the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers (Daftary 2005: 64–82). This central theological doctrine of Imāmī Shīʿism was based on a belief in the

permanent need of humankind for a divinely guided, sinless, and infallible (*maʿṣūm*) imām who, after the Prophet Muḥammad, would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of humanity in all their spiritual affairs. This doctrine further taught that the Prophet himself had designated ʿAlī as his legatee (*waṣī*) and successor; after ʿAlī, the imāmate would be transmitted from father to son among the descendants of ʿAlī and Fāṭima, and that after their son al-Ḥusayn, it would continue in the Ḥusaynid line until the end of time. This Ḥusaynid ʿAlid imām, the sole legitimate imām at any given time, was in possession of a special knowledge (*ʿilm*) and had perfect understanding of the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) meanings of the Qur'an and the message of Islam. Recognition of the sole, legitimate imām of the time and obedience to him were made the absolute duties of every believer (*muʾmin*; Jafri 1979: 235–300).

Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, the last of the early Imāmī Shīʿī imāms to be recognized by both the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers, died in 148/765. The dispute over his succession led to historic divisions in Imāmī Shīʿism, while also marking the emergence of the earliest Ismāʿīlīs (al-Nawbakhtī 1931: 34, 53–55; al-Qummī 1963: 76–78). Al-Ṣādiq had originally designated his second son Ismāʿīl, the eponym of the Ismāʿīlīya, as his successor to the imāmate. As reported by the majority of the sources, however, Ismāʿīl had apparently predeceased his father. At any rate, Ismāʿīl was not present in Medina, the residence of the ʿAlids, or in Kufa, the Iraqi centre of Imāmī Shīʿism, on al-Ṣādiq's death. As a result, three of Ismāʿīl's brothers now claimed the imāmate. Under the circumstances, the Imāmī Shīʿī followers of al-Ṣādiq split into several groups, two of which may be identified as the earliest Ismāʿīlīs. One group, based in Kufa, denied Ismāʿīl's death in the lifetime of his father and now awaited his return as the Mahdi, the restorer of true Islam and justice on earth. They were designated as *Ismāʿīlīya al-khāliṣa*, or the 'Pure Ismāʿīlīya'. A second group, designated as the Mubārakīya, affirmed Ismāʿīl's earlier death and now acknowledged his eldest son Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl as their imām. Both these groups operated on the fringes of Imāmī Shīʿism in Kufa (al-Nawbakhtī 1931: 57–58, 60–61; al-Qummī 1963: 80–81, 83; Daftary 1991: 220–223).

It is certain that for almost a century after Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl (d. after 179/795), a group of his descendants worked secretly for the creation of a unified, revolutionary Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī movement against the ʿAbbāsids. These central leaders did not openly claim the Ismāʿīlī imāmate for three generations, during the so-called period of concealment (*dawr al-satr*), in order to escape ʿAbbāsid persecution. The earliest Ismāʿīlīs referred to their movement as the *daʿwa*, the mission, or *al-daʿwa al-hādiya*, the rightly guiding mission. The religio-political message of the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* was disseminated by a network of *dāʿī*s, summoners or missionaries (Daftary 2007: 98–116).

The efforts of the central leaders of the early Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* began to bear fruit by the 260s/870s, when numerous *dāʿī*s appeared in southern Iraq and other regions, notably

Yemen, Iran, and Central Asia (Stern 1960: 56–90). Indeed, by the early 280s/890s, a unified Ismāʿīlī movement had replaced the earlier Kufan-based Ismāʿīlī splinter groups. In 286/899, ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī, the future founder of the Fāṭimid caliphate, who had succeeded to the central leadership of the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa*, claimed the Ismāʿīlī imāmate for himself and his ancestors, the same leaders who had organized and led the early Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa*. ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī's doctrinal reform, which allowed for continuity in the Ismāʿīlī imāmate after Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl, split the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* and community into two rival factions. One faction, which remained loyal to ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī and his ʿAlid ancestors, acknowledging them as imāms, in due course became the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlīs. On the other hand, a dissident faction continued to acknowledge Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl himself as their seventh and last imām, whose imminent reappearance as the Mahdi was expected. This explains why the Ismāʿīlīs were also later referred to as the Seveners (*Sabʿīya*). Henceforth, this dissident Ismāʿīlī faction became more specifically known as Qarmaṭī, named after Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ, the local chief *dāʿī* in Iraq. The Qarmaṭīs did not recognize any imāms after Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl, including ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī and his successors in the Fāṭimid dynasty (Hamdani and de Blois 1983: 173–207; Daftary 1993: 123–139).

The early Ismāʿīlīs developed the basic framework of a system of religious thought, which was further elaborated or modified during the Fāṭimid period. This system was based on a fundamental distinction between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of the Qur'an and other sacred scriptures, as well as the religious commandments and prohibitions of the *Sharīʿa*, the sacred law of Islam. Accordingly, the Ismāʿīlīs held that the Qur'an and other revealed scriptures, including their laws (*sharāʿi*s), had their apparent or literal meaning, which had to be distinguished from their inner meaning hidden in the *bāṭin*. They further held that the *ẓāhir*, or the religious laws enunciated by the prophets, underwent periodical changes, while the *bāṭin*, containing the spiritual truths (*ḥaqāʾiq*), remained immutable and eternal. These hidden truths, in effect, formed an esoteric world of hidden spiritual reality. The *ḥaqāʾiq*, representing the message common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition, were explained through the methodology of *taʾwīl*, or the esoteric, symbolical, and allegorical interpretation that became the hallmark of Ismāʿīlism (Poonawala 1988: 199–222; Steigerwald 2006: 386–400; Bar-Asher 2008: 257–295).

Taʾwīl, literally meaning to lead back to the origin or educe the *bāṭin* from the *ẓāhir*, should be distinguished from *tafsīr*, which means to explain and comment upon the apparent meaning of the sacred texts, and from *tanzīl*, which refers to the revelation of the religious scriptures through angelic intermediaries. The *taʾwīl* practised by the Ismāʿīlīs, particularly in the early phases of their history, was often of a cabalistic form, relying on the mystical properties and symbolism of letters and numbers. *Taʾwīl*, translated also as spiritual hermeneutics, presented an elaborate understanding of true reality and faith that developed into a metaphysical system of thought. One of the earliest Ismāʿīlī sources

containing an allegorical exegesis of the Qur'an, with some passages in cipher, is the *Kitāb al-Kashf* (The Book of Unveiling). This work, comprised of six short treatises written in pre-Fāṭimid times, was assembled by Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. c. 346/957; see Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman 2024). The chief purpose of *taʾwīl* was indeed to manifest the hidden, gnostic truths (*ḥaqāʾiq*) so as to unveil the true spiritual reality. In short, the passage from *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin*, from *sharīʿa* to its inner spiritual dimension, or from *tanzīl* to *taʾwīl*, entailed a passage from appearance to the hidden true reality, from the letters of the revelation to the inner message behind them (Hollenberg 2016: 40–49; Walker 2021: 137–150).

In every age, esoteric truths would be accessible only to the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) of humankind, as distinct from the ordinary people (*ʿawāmm*), who were only capable of perceiving the apparent, literal meaning of the revelations. Thus, in the era of Islam, the eternal truths of religion could be explained only to those believers who had been properly initiated into the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* and, as such, had acknowledged the teaching authority of the Prophet Muḥammad and, after him, that of his *waṣī*, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the rightful ʿAlid imāms who succeeded him. These authorities were the sole possessors of *taʾwīl* in the era of Islam. Although similar processes of exegesis or hermeneutics existed in earlier Judaeo-Christian as well as Gnostic traditions, the immediate antecedents of Ismāʿīlī *taʾwīl*, also known as *bāṭinī taʾwīl*, may be traced to the extremist Shīʿī milieus of second/eighth-century Iraq. By exalting the *bāṭin* and the truths contained therein, the early Ismāʿīlīs came to be regarded by the rest of Muslim society as the most representative Shīʿī community expounding esotericism in Islam, hence their common designation by outsiders as the Bāṭinīya, or Esotericists. It was in this context that the early Ismāʿīlīs were also accused of *ibāḥa*, or antinomianism, by their adversaries.

The eternal, esoteric truths (or *ḥaqāʾiq*) formed a gnostic system of thought for the early Ismāʿīlīs, representing a distinct worldview. The two main components of this system were a cyclical history of revelations or prophetic eras (*dawr*s) and a mythological cosmological doctrine. The Ismāʿīlī cyclical conception of sacred history, which was also applied to Judaeo-Christian as well as several other pre-Islamic religions, was developed in terms of eras of different prophets recognized in the Qur'an. This view was also combined with their doctrine of the imāmate. Accordingly, the Ismāʿīlīs held that the religious history of humankind proceeded through seven prophetic eras of various durations, each one inaugurated by a speaker-prophet or enunciator (*nāṭiq*) of a divinely revealed message, which in its exoteric (*ẓāhir*) aspect contained a religious law (*sharīʿa*). The *nāṭiq*s of the first six eras were Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. Each *nāṭiq* was, in turn, succeeded by a spiritual legatee (*waṣī*), who explained to the elite the esoteric truths (*ḥaqāʾiq*) contained in the *bāṭin* dimension of that era's message. Each *waṣī* was, in due course, succeeded by seven imāms, who guarded and interpreted the true meaning of the sacred scriptures and laws in their *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* aspects. The seventh imām of every era

would rise in rank to become the *nāṭiq* of the following era, abrogating the *sharīʿa* of the previous era while enunciating a new one. This pattern would change only in the seventh and final era of history.

As the seventh imām of the era of Islam, Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl was initially expected to return as the Mahdi or *qāʾim* (Riser), as well as the *nāṭiq* of the seventh eschatological era when, instead of promulgating a new religious law, he would fully divulge the esoteric truths of all the preceding revelations. In the final, millenarian age, the *ḥaqāʾiq* would be completely freed from all their veils, and there would no longer be any distinction between the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* in an age of true spirituality before the physical world is terminated. This original cyclical view of hierohistory was somewhat modified after ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī's doctrinal reform, which allowed for continuity in the imāmate. As a result, the advent of the seventh era lost its earlier messianic appeal for loyal Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlīs, for whom the final eschatological age was postponed indefinitely into the future (Corbin 1983: 30–58).

The second main component of the early Ismāʿīlī *ḥaqāʾiq* system of thought was a cosmology. The early Ismāʿīlī cosmological doctrine represented a gnostic cosmological myth, which was espoused by the entire Ismāʿīlī movement until it was superseded in the fourth/tenth century by a new cosmology of Neoplatonic provenance. The early cosmological doctrine explained how God's creative activity brought forth letters and names; with the resulting names there appeared simultaneously the very things they symbolized. This early cosmology also had a soteriological purpose. It aimed at showing that man's salvation depended on his acquisition of a specific type of knowledge (Greek, *gnosis*) imparted by God's messengers (*nāṭiq*s) and their legitimate successors in every era of sacred history (Stern 1983: 3–29; Halm 1996b: 75–83).

2 The Fāṭimid phase

The Fāṭimid phase represents the 'golden age' of Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism, when the Ismāʿīlīs possessed an important state of their own and Ismāʿīlī theological scholarship and literary activities attained their summit. The foundation of the Fāṭimid caliphate in 297/909 in Ifriqiya, North Africa (modern-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria), marked the crowning success of the early Ismāʿīlīs. The religio-political *daʿwa* of the Ismāʿīlīya had finally led to the establishment of a state or *dawla* headed by the Ismāʿīlī imām, ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī (r. 297–322/909–934). It was also during the Fāṭimid period that the learned Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s, who at the same time functioned as the scholars and authors of their community, produced what would become the classical texts of Ismāʿīlī literature dealing with a variety of exoteric and esoteric subjects, as well as *taʾwīl*. As the earliest representative examples of this genre, mention may be made of al-Qāḍī Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān ibn Muḥammad's (d. 363/974) *Asās al-taʾwīl* (Foundation of Esoteric Interpretation), containing esoteric

interpretations of a large number of verses from the Qur'an on the prophets, from Adam to Muḥammad, as well as several treatises by Jaʿfar ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. c. 346/957) including his *Kitāb al-kashf* (The Book of Unveiling). The Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s of the Fāṭimid period elaborated distinctive intellectual traditions, while the *dāʿī*s of the Iranian lands amalgamated their Ismāʿīlī theology with different philosophical traditions into elegant and complex metaphysical systems of thought. It was during this period that the Ismāʿīlīs made their most important contributions to Islamic theology and philosophy in general, and to Shīʿī thought in particular. Modern recovery of Ismāʿīlī literature attests to the richness and diversity of the literary and intellectual heritage of the Ismāʿīlīs during the Fāṭimid period (Ivanow 1963: 21–50; Poonawala 1977: 31–132).

The ground for the establishment of the Fāṭimid caliphate in Ifriqiya was meticulously prepared by the *dāʿī* Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī, who had been active among the Kutāma Berbers of the region for almost twenty years. In 296/909, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī handed over the reins of power to the Ismāʿīlī imām, who had earlier travelled from Salamīya, Syria, to North Africa. On 20 Rabīʿ II 297/4 January 910, ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī made his triumphant entry into Qayrawan, capital of Ifriqiya, and was proclaimed caliph there. The new dynasty was named Fāṭimid after the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter, Fāṭima, to whom the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī imām-caliphs traced their ʿAlid ancestry.

Fāṭimid rule was established firmly only under the fourth member of the dynasty, al-Muʿizz (r. 341–365/953–975), who succeeded in transforming the Fāṭimid caliphate from a regional state into a flourishing empire. He was also the first Fāṭimid imām-caliph to concern himself distinctly with the propagation of Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* outside the Fāṭimid dominions, especially after the transference of the seat of the Fāṭimid state in 362/973 to Egypt, where he founded Cairo as his new capital city.

The imām-caliph al-Muʿizz also permitted the assimilation of the Neoplatonized cosmology elaborated by a number of the *dāʿī*s of the Iranian lands into the teachings of the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa*. In the course of the fourth/tenth century, certain *dāʿī*s operating in Iran and Central Asia, especially Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 332/943), Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934), and Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971), had set about harmonizing their Ismāʿīlī theology, revolving around the central Shīʿī doctrine of the imāmate, with Neoplatonic philosophy. This led to the development of a unique intellectual tradition of 'philosophical theology' in Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism. The last major member of this Iranian school of philosophical Ismāʿīlism was the eminent Persian poet, traveller, and *dāʿī* Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070), who spread the *daʿwa* in Badakhshan, now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan (Hunsberger 2000: 220–254). These Iranian *dāʿī*s wrote for the elite and the educated classes of society, aiming to attract them intellectually. In their metaphysical systems, the movement's earlier gnostic cosmology was replaced by a Neoplatonized

emanational cosmology (see al-Sijistānī 1961: text 1–97; Walker 1994: 37–111; Walker 1993: 67–142; De Smet 2012: 15–173).

It was also in al-Muʿizz's time that Ismāʿīlī law was finally codified and its precepts observed by a judiciary spread throughout the Fāṭimid state. Sunnī polemicists had always accused the Ismāʿīlīs of ignoring the *Sharīʿa*, Islamic law, supposedly because they had found access to its hidden meaning. The promulgation of an Ismāʿīlī *madhhab*, or school of jurisprudence, resulted mainly from the efforts of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, the foremost Fāṭimid jurist. The efforts of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān culminated in the *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* (The Pillars of Islam), which was endorsed by the imām-caliph al-Muʿizz as the official code of the Fāṭimid state. The authority of the rightful imām of the time and his teachings became the third principal source of Ismāʿīlī law, after the Qur'an and *sunna* of the Prophet, which were accepted as the first two sources by all Muslim communities. The *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* has continued throughout the centuries to be used by the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs as their principal authority in legal matters, while the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs have been guided in their legalistic affairs by their imāms (Madelung 1976: 29–40; Poonawala 1996: 117–143; Daftary 2009: 179–186).

The Ismāʿīlīs had high esteem for learning and under the Fāṭimids elaborated distinctive theological traditions and institutions of learning. The Fāṭimid *daʿwa* was particularly concerned with educating Ismāʿīlī converts in esoteric doctrine, known as *ḥikma* or 'wisdom'. As a result, a variety of lectures or 'teaching sessions', generally designated as *majālis* (sing. *majlis*), were organized over time for different Ismāʿīlī audiences, including women. The private lectures on Ismāʿīlī esoteric doctrine, known as the *majālis al-ḥikma*, or 'sessions of wisdom', were reserved exclusively for the Ismāʿīlī initiates who had already taken the oath of allegiance (*ʿahd*) and secrecy (Walker 1997: 179–200). Delivered by the chief *dāʿī* (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*) at the Fāṭimid palace in Cairo, these lectures were approved beforehand by the imām. The imām alone was the source of the *ḥikma*, and the chief *dāʿī* was his mouthpiece, through whom the Ismāʿīlīs received their esoteric knowledge. As the chief *dāʿī*, al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān held the *majālis al-ḥikma* on Fridays. Some of al-Nuʿmān's lectures on Ismāʿīlī esoteric teachings, prepared for the *majālis al-ḥikma*, were collected in his *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* (Esoteric Interpretation of the Pillars), which is the *bāṭinī* companion to his *ẓāhirī* legal compendium, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* (Pillars of Islam). These *majālis* gradually developed into an elaborate programme of instruction for a variety of Ismāʿīlī audiences, with separate sessions for women. This all-important Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī tradition of learning culminated in the *Majālis al-Muʾayyadīya*, a collection of 800 lectures by the chief *dāʿī* al-Muʾayyad fiʾl-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078). These lectures dealt with a wide range of theological, philosophical, and ethical issues as well as esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of the Qur'an (see al-Muʾayyad 1975–2011).

Another of the institutions of learning founded by the Fāṭimids was the Dār al-ʿIlm (House of Knowledge). Established in 395/1005 by the imām-caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 386–411/996–1021), a variety of religious and non-religious subjects were taught at this academy, which was also equipped with a major library. Many Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s received at least part of their training at the Dār al-ʿIlm (Halm 1997: 71–77). The Fāṭimid imām-caliph al-Ḥākim's reign also witnessed the genesis of what was to become known as the Druze religion. A number of *dāʿī*s who had come to Cairo from Iran and Central Asia now began to propagate certain extremist ideas regarding al-Ḥākim and his imāmate. By 408/1017, these *dāʿī*s declared the divinity of al-Ḥākim, also proclaiming the end of the era of Islam and its *sharīʿa*. However, the leadership of the Fāṭimid *daʿwa* organisation was categorically opposed to this movement. It was under such circumstances that the *dāʿī* Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), the most learned Ismāʿīlī theologian-philosopher of the Fāṭimid period, was invited to Cairo to officially refute the new extremist doctrine from a theological perspective. Although he had already argued for the legitimacy of al-Ḥākim's imāmate in his *al-Maṣābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma* (Lights to Illustrate the Proof of the Imamate), al-Kirmānī now composed a number of treatises, including *al-Risāla al-wāʿiẓa* (A Cautionary Epistle), reiterating the Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī doctrine of the imāmate in refutation of the new doctrine (al-Kirmānī 1983: 134–147). The Druzes eventually found their permanent stronghold in Syria (Poonawala 2000: 71–94).

The Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* activities of the Fāṭimid period reached their peak, especially outside of the Fāṭimid state, in the long reign of the imām-caliph al-Mustanṣir (r. 427–487/1036–1094), even after the Sunnī Saljūqs replaced the Shīʿī Būyids as overlords of the ʿAbbāsids in 447/1055. The Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī*s won many converts in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia as well as in Yemen, where the Ṣulayḥids ruled as vassals of the Fāṭimids from 439/1047 until 532/1138. The Ṣulayḥids also played an active part in the efforts of the Fāṭimids to spread the *daʿwa* on the Indian subcontinent. By the 460s/1070s, the Persian Ismāʿīlīs in the Saljūq lands were under the overall leadership of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn ʿAṭṭāsh, who was responsible for launching the career of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, the future founder of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī state. In Badakhshan and other eastern regions of the Iranian world, too, the *daʿwa* had continued to spread after the downfall of the Sāmānids in 395/1005. A major Persian dynasty, the Sāmānids adhered to Sunnī Islam and ruled over Central Asia and parts of Iran during the period 204-395/819-1005.

The organisation and functioning of the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* were among the most closely guarded secrets of Ismāʿīlism. Organized in a strictly hierarchical fashion, the *daʿwa* developed over time, reaching its full elaboration in the reign of the Fāṭimid imām-caliph al-Mustanṣir. The *daʿwa* was under the overall guidance of the Ismāʿīlī imām, who authorized its policies and doctrines. The chief *dāʿī* (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*), who was also referred to as the *bāb* (gate) or *bāb al-abwāb* (gate of the gates), acted as the administrative head of the

daʿwa organisation. He was closely supervised by the imām and assisted by a number of subordinate *dāʿī*s at the central headquarter of the *daʿwa* in the Fāṭimid capital.

The *daʿwa* organisation and its hierarchy of ranks (*ḥudūd al-dīn* or *marātib al-daʿwa*), alluded to in a few Ismāʿīlī texts of the Fāṭimid period, seem to have applied to a utopian situation when the Ismāʿīlī imām would rule the entire world, and not to any actual system. According to this scheme, the world, and particularly the domains falling outside Fāṭimid jurisdiction, were divided into twelve islands (*jazāʾir*) for the purpose of propagating the *daʿwa*. Delineated along a combination of geographic and ethnographic considerations, these islands included Rūm (Byzantine), Daylam (Persia), Sind and Hind (India), Sīn (China), and regions inhabited by Arabs, Nubians, and the Zanj (Africans), among others (al-Nuʿmān 1967–1972: 74 [vol. 2]; 48–49 [vol. 3]). Each island (*jazīra*) was placed under the overall charge of a high ranking *dāʿī* known as *ḥujja* (proof), also called *naqīb*, *lāḥiq* (wing), or *yad* (hand) in early Fāṭimid times.

The chief *dāʿī*, or *bāb*, followed by the twelve *ḥujja*s in the *daʿwa*, were in turn followed by a number of *dāʿī*s of varying ranks operating in every *jazīra*, including the *dāʿī al-balāgh*, who evidently acted as liaison between the *ḥujja*'s regional headquarters in a *jazīra* and the central *daʿwa* headquarters in the Fāṭimid capital. The appointment of all *dāʿī*s had to be approved by the imām. The *dāʿī*s, in turn, had their own assistants, generically designated as *maʾdhūn* (licentiate or authorized deputy). The lowest ranking official in the *daʿwa* hierarchy was designated *al-maʾdhūn al-mukāsir*, eventually being called merely *mukāsir* (breaker), whose main duty was to attract prospective converts and 'break' their attachments to previous persuasions. The ordinary Ismāʿīlī initiates, the *mustajīb*s (respondents), did not occupy a rank in the hierarchy. The *dāʿī* al-Kirmānī's depiction, referring to an ideal situation, distinguishes seven *daʿwa* ranks, from *bāb* (or *dāʿī al-duʿāt*) to *mukāsir* (al-Kirmānī 1953: 134-139).

In contrast to the early Ismāʿīlīs, who tended to emphasize the significance of the *bāṭin*, the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlīs insisted on the equal significance of the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*. Both were considered as complimentary dimensions of religion. There are numerous references in almost every work of Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī literature to the need for preserving a careful balance between the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* (al-Nuʿmān 1951–1961: 53 [vol. 1]; 1960: 33-49, 347-367; 1967: 69-71 [vol. 1]; Nāṣir-i Khusraw 1977: 77–83, 318–319). However, the *taʾwīl*, or esoteric exegesis required for deriving the truths hidden in the *bāṭin*, retained its importance in Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī thought. The *taʾwīl* was the exclusive prerogative of the Ismāʿīlī imām, who could convey such knowledge of the inner meaning behind the religious scriptures and prescriptions to the lower members of the *daʿwa* hierarchy. Thus, the *ḥaqāʾiq* could be conveyed to the Ismāʿīlī community, or the *ahl al-daʿwa*, only by the Ismāʿīlī imām and the hierarchy of dignitaries serving him, especially the *bāb*, the twelve *ḥujja*s, and the lesser *dāʿī*s.

In elaborating their doctrines, the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlīs paid attention to both the *ʿilm al-ẓāhir* and the *ʿilm al-bāṭin*, or exoteric and esoteric knowledge. Writings on *tafsīr*, the external philological exegeses and commentaries used for explaining the apparent meaning of Qur'anic passages, so important among Sunnī Muslims and Twelver Shīʿīs, are absent from the Ismāʿīlī literature. For the Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlīs, and the later Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs, the living imām was the repository of true knowledge and the sole authoritative interpreter of the literal and hidden meanings of the sacred texts. Therefore, they had no need for the *ẓāhirī* science of *tafsīr*. This is why the Ismāʿīlīs referred to their imām as the 'speaking Qur'an' (*al-Qurʾān al-nāṭiq*), in contrast to the actual text of the 'sacred book,' which was regarded as the 'silent Qur'an' (*al-Qurʾān al-ṣāmit*) (al-Nuʿman 1951–1961: 25–27, 31–37 [vol. 1]; 2002: 34–36, 41–49 [vol. 1]; al-Malījī 1947: 29–30). For similar reasons, the Ismāʿīlīs have produced very few works on hadith, since in that domain, too, the imām would provide the necessary guidance for the community.

In the area of *bāṭinī* sciences, which accounts for the bulk of the writings of the Fāṭimid period, the Ismāʿīlīs made their great contribution to Shīʿī gnosis and Islamic thought. It was in expounding the Ismāʿīlī esoteric doctrines that the learned *dāʿī*-authors elaborated their metaphysical systems of thought and produced their elaborate treatises on the *ḥaqāʾiq*. It was also in connection with developing their theological, philosophical, and metaphysical doctrines that the Ismāʿīlī scholars of the Fāṭimid period, such as Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, showed their originality of thought, mastery of pre-Islamic religions, including Judaeo-Christian scriptures, as well as their knowledge of Hellenistic and Islamic philosophy.

On al-Mustanṣir's death in 487/1094, the unified Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* and community split into two rival factions, as his son and original heir-designate, Nizār, was deprived of his succession rights by the all-powerful Fāṭimid vizier, al-Afḍal, who installed Nizār's younger brother to the Fāṭimid throne with the title of al-Mustaʿlī bi'llāh (r. 487–495/1094–1101). The imāmate of al-Mustaʿlī was recognized by the Ismāʿīlī communities of Egypt, Yemen, and western India. These Ismāʿīlīs, who depended on the Fāṭimid regime, later traced their imāmate to the progeny of al-Mustaʿlī. Nizār refused to pay homage to al-Mustaʿlī, however, and rose in revolt, only to be eventually defeated and killed in 488/1095. Be that as it may, the Persian Ismāʿīlīs, then already under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, supported the succession rights of Nizār and his descendants. The two factions were later designated as Mustaʿlian and Nizārī, named after the two sons of al-Mustanṣir who had claimed his heritage.

During its final decades, the Fāṭimid caliphate declined rapidly. The Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs themselves split into Ḥāfiẓī and Ṭayyibī branches soon after the assassination of al-Mustaʿlī's son and successor, al-Āmir, in 524/1130. Al-Āmir's cousin and successor on the Fāṭimid throne, al-Ḥāfiẓ, and the later Fāṭimid caliphs, were recognized as imāms by

the Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs of Egypt and Syria and by a portion of the community in Yemen. These Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs, designated as Ḥāfiẓī, did not survive the downfall of the Fāṭimid dynasty. However, the Mustaʿlian community of Ṣulayḥid Yemen recognized the imāmate of al-Āmir's infant son al-Ṭayyib, becoming known as Ṭayyibīs (Stern 1951: 193–255). Fāṭimid rule was ended in 567/1171 by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, founder of the Ayyūbid dynasty, who had acted as the last Fāṭimid vizier. He had the *khuṭba* read in Cairo in the name of the reigning ʿAbbāsid caliph. A few days later, al-ʿĀḍid, the final Fāṭimid imām-caliph, died. On the demise of the Fāṭimid state, Egypt's new Sunnī Ayyūbid rulers began their systematic persecution of the Ismāʿīlīs, also suppressing their *daʿwa* organisation as well as all the Fāṭimid institutions. Henceforth, Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlism survived only in its Ṭayyibī form.

3 The Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlian Ismāʿīlīs

The Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs rejected the claims of al-Ḥāfiẓ and the later Fāṭimid caliphs to the imāmate. In due course, they found their permanent stronghold in Yemen, with the initial support of the Ṣulayḥid dynasty. In fact, it was soon after 526/1132 that the Ṣulayḥid queen, Arwā, also known as Sayyida Ḥurra, became the leader of the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* in Yemen and broke off her relations with Cairo and its Fāṭimid regime (Daftary 1998b: 117–130; Cortese and Calderini 2006: 127–140). Nothing is known of the fate of al-Ṭayyib, who was probably secretly murdered on the orders of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ. Be that as it may, it is the belief of the Ṭayyibīs that al-Āmir himself had placed his infant son in the custody of a group of trusted *dāʿī*s, who managed to hide him, thereby making it possible for the Ṭayyibī imāmate to continue in his progeny. According to the Ṭayyibī tradition, their imāmate has been handed down throughout the centuries among al-Ṭayyib's descendants to the present time, with all their imāms remaining in concealment. The Ṭayyibīs also preserved a good portion of the Ismāʿīlī literature of the Fāṭimid period.

The Ṭayyibīs divide their religious history into succeeding eras of concealment (*satr*) and manifestation (*kashf* or *ẓuhūr*), during which the imāms are either hidden or manifest. The first era of *satr*, coinciding with the pre-Fāṭimid period in Ismāʿīlī history, ended with the appearance of ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī. This was followed by an era of *ẓuhūr*, which continued into the Fāṭimid period until the concealment of al-Ṭayyib, soon after al-Āmir's death in 524/1130. The Ṭayyibīs hold that al-Ṭayyib's concealment initiated another era of *satr*, during which all the Ṭayyibī imāms have remained hidden; this current period of *satr* will continue until the appearance of an imām from al-Ṭayyib's progeny. This current period of *satr* has, in turn, been divided into a Yemeni phase, extending from 526/1132 to around 997/1589, when the Ṭayyibīs were split into Dāʾūdī and Sulaymānī factions, and an Indian phase, essentially covering the history of the Dāʾūdī Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* and community during the last four centuries. In the absence of their imāms, the different Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī

communities have followed separate lines of *dāʿī*s and, for all practical purposes, there have been no doctrinal differences between the Dāʾūdīs and the Sulaymānīs.

As noted, the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* received its initial support from Queen Arwā (d. 532/1138), the effective ruler of Ṣulayḥid Yemen. It was soon after 526/1132 that Queen Arwā declared al-Dhuʾayb ibn Mūsā al-Wādiʿī as *al-dāʿī al-muṭlaq*, or *dāʿī* with absolute authority, to lead the Ṭayyibī Mustaʿlian *daʿwa* and community on behalf of the hidden imām, al-Ṭayyib. This marked the foundation of the independent Ṭayyibī *daʿwa*. Having already broken off relations with the Fāṭimid regime, Queen Arwā also made the new Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* independent of the Ṣulayḥid state, ensuring the subsequent survival of Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlism under the leadership of a *dāʿī muṭlaq*. As in the case of the imāms, every *dāʿī muṭlaq* has appointed his own successor. On al-Dhuʾayb's death in 546/1151, the learned Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 557/1162), belonging to the influential Banū Hamdān tribe of Yemen, succeeded to the headship of the Ṭayyibīs as the second *dāʿī muṭlaq*. Subsequently, the leadership of the Ṭayyibīs passed into the hands of *dāʿī*s hailing from the Banū al-Walīd al-Anf clan of the Quraysh, remaining in that family, with minor interruptions, until 946/1539. The Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* spread very successfully in the mountainous Haraz region of Yemen.

Many Ṭayyibī *dāʿī*s were learned theologians and contributed to the rich literature of their community. In the doctrinal domain, the Ṭayyibīs maintained Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī traditions, placing equal emphasis on the *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* aspects of religion. They also retained the earlier Ismāʿīlī interests in cyclical history and cosmology, which served as the basis of their gnostic, esoteric, *ḥaqāʾiq* system of religious thought with its distinctive eschatological and salvational themes. This system was, in fact, founded largely by the *dāʿī* Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī, who drew extensively on Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī's *Rāḥat al-ʿaql* (Tranquillity of the Intellect), synthesizing its cosmological doctrine of ten separate intellects with gnostic mythical elements. This Ṭayyibī system was first expounded in al-Ḥāmidī's *Kanz al-walad* (A Son's Treasury). Based on astronomical and astrological speculations, the Yemeni Ṭayyibīs also introduced certain innovations into the previous cyclical conception of religious history, expressed in terms of the seven prophetic eras.

Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī also introduced the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, generally translated as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, into the religious literature of the Ṭayyibī community in Yemen. Indeed, al-Ḥāmidī's *Kanz al-walad* is one of the earliest works in the Yemeni Ṭayyibī tradition to refer to these *Epistles*, an important Ismāʿīlī contribution to Islamic thought. As is well-known, much controversy has surrounded the authorship and date of composition of these *Rasāʾil*. The Ṭayyibī *dāʿī* Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468), reflecting the official view of the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* in Yemen, has a detailed account in which he ascribes this encyclopaedic work of 52 epistles to Imām Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh, the grandson of Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl and one of the hidden imāms of the early Ismāʿīlīs

(Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn, *ʿUyūn*, 2007: 525–564 [vol. 4]). However, some reliable authorities from the fourth/tenth century, notably the philosopher Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), name certain men of letters and secretaries of Būyid Iraq, all residents of Basra affiliated with the Ismāʿīlī movement, as the group of authors who composed the otherwise anonymous *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* – a view largely endorsed by modern scholarship. Be that as it may, the Ṭayyibī esoteric *ḥaqāʾiq* system of religious thought found its fullest expression in Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn's *Zahr al-maʿānī* (Flower of Meanings). Idrīs was the nineteenth *dāʿī* of the Ṭayyibīs as well as a major Ismāʿīlī historian. He wrote several historical works, including the *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (Selected Histories), a seven-volume history of the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* from its beginnings until the opening phase of the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* (Hamdani 1970: 258–300; Corbin 1983: 37–58, 65-76; Daftary 2007: 269–280).

Meanwhile, the Ṭayyibī *dāʿī*s in Yemen had maintained close relations with the rapidly growing Ṭayyibī community in South Asia, where Ismāʿīlī converts of Hindu descent became designated as Bohras. On the death of the twenty-sixth Ṭayyibī *dāʿī muṭlaq*, Dāʾūd ibn ʿAjabshāh, in 997/1589, dispute over his succession led to the Dāʾūdī-Sulaymānī schism in the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* and community, reflecting Indian-Yemeni rivalries. By then, the Ṭayyibī Bohras in India greatly outnumbered their Yemeni co-religionists. Henceforth, the Dāʾūdī and Sulaymānī Ṭayyibīs followed separate lines of *dāʿī*s. The Dāʾūdī *dāʿī*s have continued to reside in India, where the bulk of the Ṭayyibī Dāʾūdīs are located. On the other hand, the Sulaymānīs, accounting for a minority of the Ṭayyibīs, have remained concentrated in Yemen, where their *dāʿī*s resided until recent times. Subsequently, the Dāʾūdī Bohras became further subdivided in India due to periodical challenges to the authority of their *dāʿī muṭlaq*. The ʿAlawī Bohras represent one such splinter Dāʾūdī Bohra group. Since the 1920s, Mumbai (Bombay), with the largest concentration of Dāʾūdī Bohras, has served as the administrative seat of that movement, who use a particular form of the Gujarati language that, permeated with Arabic and Persian words, and written in the Arabic script, is designated as the *lisān al-daʿwat*.

The Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs believe that the entire corpus of their religious canon possesses a sacred nature, as it is held to derive directly from the Qur'an, regarded as the source of all knowledge. They also believe that their *dāʿī muṭlaq* somehow receives the concealed imām's spiritual guidance; for that reason the *dāʿī* is recognized as the highest spiritual and scholarly authority in the community. Ṭayyibī works may be classified in terms of ascending levels of learning. The lowest level, or the *ẓāhir*, exoteric knowledge, includes history, theology, jurisprudence, etc. The next level is that of *taʾwīl*, the deeper, allegorical meaning of the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the *Sharīʿa*. Much of the material in *taʾwīl* works is explained as a symbolization of the stations of the spiritual hierarchy. The third and highest level of knowledge relates to the *ḥaqāʾiq* (truths), covering metaphysical works focused on topics such as God's unicity (*tawḥīd*), the origin (*mabdaʾ*) of creation, and return (*maʿ*

ād) to eternal life. The second and third levels, *taʾwīl* and *ḥaqāʾiq*, are together termed as esoteric or *bāṭinī* knowledge (Qutbuddin 2011: 331–354).

The Dāʾūdī Ṭayyibī libraries in Mumbai and Surat contain large collections of Fāṭimid and Ṭayyibī manuscripts. The permission of the *dāʿī muṭlaq* is required for the study of all *daʿwa* texts, especially the *bāṭinī* ones. However, in the Dāʾūdī Bohra community, even devout believers are not permitted to explore esoteric texts without the guidance of a master sanctioned by the *daʿwa*. It is, indeed, his own unique access to *bāṭinī* knowledge – the true meaning of the Qur'an and all scriptures – that equips the *dāʿī muṭlaq* with his fundamental spiritual hegemony over his community (Blank 2021: 263–266). Akkerman has made similar observations regarding the ʿAlawī Dāʾūdīs based on her extensive fieldwork in that minority Bohra community, centred on Vadodara (formerly Baroda) in Gujarat (Akkerman 2022: 157–167).

Among their most important religious practices, the Dāʾūdīs make the *ḥajj* pilgrimage to Mecca and devote equal attention to visiting the shrines of Imāms ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī at Najaf and Karbala. They also hold elaborate mourning sessions (*majālis*) during the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imām al-Ḥusayn. On these occasions, sermons and lectures are delivered by the *dāʿī* himself or by members of his family, known as the Qaṣr-i ʿAlī, to large Bohra gatherings, especially in Mumbai. The Dāʾūdīs observe five daily prayers in their separate mosques. The names of their twenty-one manifest imāms are recited at the end of every prayer (Blank 2001: 53–110).

Unlike the Dāʾūdīs, the Sulaymānī Ṭayyibīs of Yemen have not experienced succession disputes and schisms. In Yemen, Sulaymānī leadership has remained hereditary, with few exceptions, in the same Makramī family. The Sulaymānī *dāʿī*s established their headquarters in Badr, Najran, in northeastern Yemen, and ruled over that region with the military support of the local Banū Yām. In the twentieth century, the political prominence of the Sulaymānī *dāʿī*s, checked earlier by the Zaydī Shīʿīs and Ottomans, was further curtailed by the rising power of the Saʿūdī house, adherents of the austere Wahhābī form of Sunnī Islam. Najran was, in fact, annexed to Saudi Arabia in 1934. Thereafter, the Sulaymānī *dāʿī*s and many Sulaymānī Ṭayyibīs have been persecuted intermittently by the Saudi government, which mistreats Shīʿī Muslims generally as 'heretics'. The religious practices of the Sulaymānī Ṭayyibīs closely resemble those of the Dāʾūdīs.

4 The Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs

The Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs have their own complex history and separate doctrinal development. The circumstances of the early Nizārīs, who lived during the Alamūt period, were radically different from those faced by the Ismāʿīlīs of the Fāṭimid state and the Ṭayyibīs of Yemen. From early on, the Nizārīs were preoccupied with a revolutionary campaign against

the Sunnī Saljūq Turks and with their survival in an extremely hostile environment. As a result, the early Nizārīs did not produce a substantial literature (Ivanow 1963: 127–136; Poonawala 1977: 251–263); the bulk of their writings, including the collections of manuscripts held at their famous library in the fortress of Alamūt, were either destroyed during the Mongol invasions or perished soon afterwards.

Nevertheless, the Nizārīs of the Alamūt period did maintain a sophisticated intellectual outlook and literary tradition, propounding their own theological teachings in response to changing circumstances; and they did produce a few scholars and poets, such as Ḥasan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātib (d. c.644/1246; Badakhchani 2011: 431–442). Muḥammad ibn al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), widely known as an Ashʿarī theologian, was also in all probability a crypto-Ismāʿīlī working on behalf of the Nizārī *daʿwa* (al-Shahrastānī 2021: 8–59). The Persian Nizārīs also maintained a historiographical tradition, compiling official chronicles in Persian recording the events of their state according to the reigns of the eight successive lords of Alamūt, who initially were *dāʿī*s before the Nizārī imāms themselves emerged and took charge of the affairs of their state, *daʿwa*, and community.

By the time of the Nizārī-Mustaʿlian schism of 487/1094, Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, who preached the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* on behalf of the Fāṭimids within the Saljūq dominions, had emerged as the undisputed leader of the Persian Ismāʿīlīs. However, he had already been following somewhat of an independent policy, and his seizure of the mountain fortress of Alamūt, in northern Persia, in 483/1090 had in fact signalled the commencement of the Persian Ismāʿīlīs' open revolt against the Saljūqs, as well as the foundation of what would become the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī state. This state, centred at Alamūt, with territories and networks of fortresses scattered in different parts of Persia and Syria, lasted some 166 years until it was destroyed by the Mongols in 654/1256.

Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ had a complex set of religio-political motives for his revolt against the Saljūqs. As an Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī, he could not tolerate the anti-Shīʿī policies of the ardently Sunnī Saljūqs. Ḥasan's revolt was also an expression of Persian 'national' sentiments, as the alien rule of the Saljūq Turks was intensely detested by Persians of different social classes. This may also explain why he substituted Persian for Arabic as the religious and literary language of the Persian Ismāʿīlīs, accounting also for the early popular success of his movement (Daftary 1996: 181–204).

It was under such circumstances that, during al-Mustanṣir's succession dispute, Ḥasan, who had already drifted away from the Fāṭimid regime, supported Nizār's cause and severed his relations completely with the *daʿwa* headquarters in Cairo, which had supported al-Mustaʿlī. With this decision, Ḥasan founded the independent Nizārī Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* in Persia on behalf of the imāms from the progeny of Nizār, who remained in concealment for several generations. The early Nizārīs were, thus, in another period of

concealment (*dawr al-satr*), when the absent imām was represented in the community by a *ḥujja*, his chief representative. Ḥasan and his next two successors at Alamūt were acknowledged as such *ḥujja*s.

The early Nizārīs were also active in the doctrinal field. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, a learned theologian himself, is credited with restating in a more rigorous form the old Shīʿī doctrine of *taʿlīm*, or authoritative teaching by the 'imām of the time'. He expounded this doctrine, which emphasized the autonomous teaching authority of each imām in his own time, in a theological treatise entitled *al-Fuṣūl al-arbaʿa* (The Four Chapters). The doctrine of *taʿlīm* became the central theological doctrine of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs who, henceforth, were designated as the Taʿlīmīya, the propounders of *taʿlīm*. The intellectual challenge posed to Sunnī Islam by the doctrine of *taʿlīm*, which also refuted the legitimacy of the ʿAbbāsid caliph as the spiritual spokesman of all Muslims, called forth the reaction of the Sunnī establishment. Many Sunnī scholars, led by Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), refuted this Ismāʿīlī doctrine.

By the final years of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, who died in 518/1124, Ismāʿīlī-Saljūq relations had entered a new phase of 'stalemate', which essentially continued under Ḥasan's next two successors at Alamūt, Kiyā Buzurg-Umīd (r. 518-532/1124-1138) and his son Muḥammad (r. 532-557/1138-1162; Daftary 2015: 41–57). Meanwhile, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs had been eagerly expecting the appearance of their imām. The fourth lord of Alamūt, Ḥasan II (r. 557-561/1162-1166), to whom the Nizārīs refer with the expression *ʿalā dhikrihi'l-salām* (on his mention be peace), declared the *qiyāma* or resurrection in 559/1164, initiating a new era in the religious history of the Nizārī community. Relying heavily on *taʾwīl* and earlier Ismāʿīlī traditions, however, Ḥasan II interpreted the *qiyāma*, or the Last Day, symbolically and spiritually. Accordingly, *qiyāma* meant merely the manifestation of unveiled truth (*ḥaqīqa*) in the person of the Nizārī imām; it was a spiritual resurrection only for those who acknowledged the rightful imām of the time and were, therefore, capable of understanding the truth, the esoteric and immutable essence of Islam. It was in this sense that Paradise was actualized for the Nizārīs in this world. The Nizārīs, like the Sufis, were now to rise to a higher spiritual level of existence, transcending from *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin*, from *sharīʿa* to *ḥaqīqa*, or from the literal interpretation of the law to an understanding of its spiritual essence and the eternal truths of religion. On the other hand, the 'outsiders', the non-Nizārīs who were incapable of recognising the truth, were rendered spiritually non-existent and irrelevant (Daftary 2007: 358–367).

The imām proclaiming the *qiyāma* would be the *qāʾim al-qiyāma*, 'lord of resurrection', a rank which in the Ismāʿīlī religious hierarchy was always higher than that of an ordinary imām. In due course, Ḥasan II himself was recognized as the imām as well as the *qāʾim*. Henceforth, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs acknowledged the lords of Alamūt, beginning with Ḥasan II, as their imāms, descendants of Nizār ibn al-Mustanṣir. Ḥasan II's son and successor,

Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad, devoted his long reign (561–607/1166–1210) to a systematic elaboration of the *qiyāma* as a doctrine. The exaltation of the autonomous teaching authority of the current imām became the central theological feature of Nizārī Ismāʿīlī thought. Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad also made every Nizārī imām a potential *qāʾim*, capable of inaugurating an era of *qiyāma* (Ḥasan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātib 2017: text 19-42).

Meanwhile, the Syrian Nizārīs had entered an important phase of their own history under the leadership of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān, their most famous chief *dāʿī* and the original 'Old Man of the Mountain' of the Crusader sources. He reorganized the Syrian Nizārī *daʿwa*, while also consolidating the Nizārī network of castles in Syria (Willey 2005: 216–245). Aiming to safeguard the security and independence of his community, Sinān entered into intricate and shifting alliances with the major neighbouring powers, notably the Crusaders, the Zangids, and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin of the Crusader sources). Sinān led the Nizārīs of Syria for almost three decades, taking them to the peak of their power and fame until his death in 589/1193 (Hodgson 1955: 185–209). It was also in Sinān's time that occidental chroniclers of the Crusades and certain European travellers and emissaries wrote about the Syrian Nizārīs, designated as the Assassins; they were also responsible for fabricating and disseminating a number of legends about the secret practices of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs, which culminated in a synthesized version popularized by Marco Polo (Daftary 1994: 88–127; Pagès 2014: 103–156).

Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad's son and successor, Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan (r. 607–618/1210–1221), who had become concerned with the isolation of the Nizārīs from the larger world of Sunnī Islam, attempted a daring theological rapprochement with Sunnī Muslims. He repudiated the doctrine of the *qiyāma* and ordered his community to observe the *Sharīʿa* in its Sunnī form, inviting Sunnī jurists to instruct his followers. In 608/1211, the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Nāṣir acknowledged the Nizārī imām's rapprochement and issued a decree to that effect. Henceforth, the rights of Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan to Nizārī territories were officially recognized by the Sunnī establishment, and the Nizārīs achieved some much needed peace and security. The Nizārīs themselves evidently viewed their imām's new theological policy as a dissimulating tactic, a restoration of *taqīya*, which had been lifted in *qiyāma* times. The observance of *taqīya*, or precautionary dissimulation, could imply any type of accommodation to the outside world as deemed necessary by the infallible 'imām of the time'.

In the reign of Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan's son and successor, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 618–653/1221–1255), the Sunnī *Sharīʿa* was gradually relaxed within the Nizārī community and the traditions associated with *qiyāma* revived. At the same time, intellectual life flourished in the Persian Nizārī community as numerous outside scholars fleeing the first waves of the Mongol invasions took refuge in the Nizārī fortresses. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), one of the most eminent Shīʿī theologians of all time, was foremost among

such scholars. He spent some three decades in the Nizārī fortress communities of Persia, converted to Ismāʿīlism, and made major contributions to Nizārī Ismāʿīlī thought, as reflected in his spiritual autobiography, entitled *Sayr va sulūk* (Spiritual Wayfaring), and the *Rawḍa-yi taslīm* (Paradise of Submission), a major compendium of Nizārī thought, which al-Ṭūsī compiled in some collaborative fashion with Ḥasan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātib (d. ca. 644/1246), an accomplished poet who also authored a substantial collection of poems entitled *Dīwān-i qā'imīyat* (Poems of the Resurrection).

The Mongols assigned a high priority to the destruction of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī state, a task completed with much difficulty by Hūlāgū, who led the main Mongol expedition into Persia. Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh, the last lord of Alamūt, who reigned for only one year, entered into a complex and ultimately futile series of negotiations with Hūlāgū. The fall of Alamut in the autumn of 654/1256 sealed the fate of the Nizārī state. Henceforth, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs lived secretly as religious minorities in numerous scattered communities, especially in Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia.

4.1 Post-Alamūt developments

In the aftermath of the Mongol debacle, many Persian Nizārīs migrated to Afghanistan, Badakhshan, and Sind, where Ismāʿīlī communities already existed. Meanwhile, the Nizārī imāmate continued in the progeny of Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh (d. 655/1257). However, the centralized leadership of the Nizārīs had now virtually disappeared, while the Nizārī imāms remained in concealment and inaccessible to their followers for several generations. Under these circumstances, various Nizārī communities developed independently under the local leadership of dynasties of *dāʿī*s and *pīr*s, espousing a diversity of religious and literary traditions in different languages.

During much of their post-Alamūt history, the Nizārīs were obliged to observe *taqīya* and dissimulate rather strictly to safeguard themselves against rampant persecution. To that end, they not only concealed their beliefs and literature, but actually resorted to Sufi, Twelver Shīʿī, Sunnī, and Hindu disguises in the midst of hostile surroundings in the Iranian world and across the Indian subcontinent. In this connection, it is important to distinguish between short-term *taqīya* practices used traditionally by the Ismāʿīlī and Twelver Shīʿīs and their long-term applications, which acquired near permanency among certain Nizārī communities during the post-Alamūt centuries. The latter phenomenon, with its lasting consequences, has not been sufficiently studied. Be that as it may, it is undeniable that extended dissimulating practices under different external guises would in time lead to irrevocable influences on the traditions and very religious identity of the dissimulating community. In time, these influences have manifested in different forms, ranging from total acculturation or full assimilation of the Nizārīs of a specific locality into the community chosen initially as a dissimulating cover, to various degrees of interfacing

between ‘Nizārī’ and ‘other’ traditions without the actual loss of Nizārī identity (Steigerwald 1998: 39–59; Virani 2011: 99-139; Virani 2020: 205–236).

In the early post-Alamūt centuries, many Nizārī groups in the Iranian lands disguised themselves under the cover of Sufism, without affiliation to any of the Sufi orders then spreading in Iran and Central Asia. Thus, the imāms would appear to outsiders as Sufi masters or *pīr*s, while their followers adopted the typically Sufi guise of disciples or *murīd*s. Later, this practice also gained wide currency among the Nizārīs of Sind. In fact, a type of coalescence emerged between Persian Sufism and Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, as these two independent esoteric traditions in Islam shared common doctrinal grounds. This explains why the Persian-speaking Nizārīs have regarded several of the great mystic poets of Iran, such as Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. c. 627/1230) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), as their co-religionists, using their poetry in their religious ceremonies.

By the middle of the ninth/fifteenth century, the Nizārī imāms emerged in the village of Anjudān in central Iran; still dissimulating as Sufi *pīr*s, they initiated the so-called Anjudān revival in Nizārī Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa* and literary activities (Daftary 2007: 422–442). Among the doctrinal works of this period, mention should be made of the writings of Abū Isḥāq Quhistānī (d. after 904/1498) and Khayrkhwāh-i Harātī (d. after 960/1553). Many Nizārī authors of this period, such as Khākī Khurāsānī (1933: 14–30), chose versified and Sufi forms of expression to express their Ismāʿīlī ideas. Nizārīs essentially retained the teachings of the Alamūt period, especially as elaborated after the declaration of the *qiyāma*.

With the advent of the Ṣafawids, who proclaimed Twelver Shīʿism as their state religion in 907/1501, the Nizārī imāms and their followers in Iran and adjacent lands also adopted Twelver Shīʿism in addition to Sufism as another form of *taqīya*. By the end of the eleventh/seventeenth century, the revived Nizārī *daʿwa* had been particularly successful in Central Asia and several regions of South Asia. In India, Hindu converts, who became known as Khojas, developed an indigenous religious tradition known as Satpanth, or the ‘true path’ (to salvation), as well as a devotional literature, the *ginān*s, containing a diversity of mystical, mythological, eschatological, and ethical themes (Nanji 1978: 50–83; Asani 2011: 95–128).

Comprised of over 1,000 hymn-like poems in the various languages and dialects of Gujarat, Sind, and Punjab, the *ginān*s constitute the religious and literary heritage of the Nizārī Khojas of South Asia. Attributed to a few preacher-saints, or *dāʿī*s, designated as *pīr*s in South Asia, the *ginān*s form an important component of daily worship in the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī *jamāʿat-khāna*s (houses of congregation), not only in South Asia, but in other regions to which Khojas have migrated since the nineteenth century. For several centuries, the *ginān*s, in addition to playing a central role in daily prayer rituals, functioned as the

principal scripture of the Khojas. However, over the last 150 years, the contextual and functional relationship of the *ginān*s with Khoja communities has been transformed due to major shifts in Khoja identity, from 'Satpanthī Ismāʿīlī' to 'Shīʿī Imāmī Ismāʿīlī'.

Originally, the *ginān*s represented an officially sanctioned corpus that served as the scriptural text of the Nizārī Khojas, having greater appeal among the Khojas than the Qur'an. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, the *ginān*s had begun to serve as secondary texts generated in the vernacular for the transmission of the teachings of the Qur'an – the primary scripture – to non-Arabic speaking Muslims. This shift in perspective was noticeable also in the daily supplicatory prayer (*duʿā*) introduced by the last two Ismāʿīlī imāms, Aga Khans III and IV, in the 1950s. The new prayer was entirely in Arabic and included specific Qur'anic verses that the Shīʿīs evoke as proof texts for the authority of the imāmate, while also maintaining a distinctive Ismāʿīlī character through the reaffirmation of the authority of the present Ismāʿīlī imām in each of the six parts of the prayer. In the final part, to emphasize the continuity of the institution of the imāmate, the names of all imāms are invoked, from ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib to the present. This prayer is universally recited by all the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs of the world (Asani 2022: 169–193).

Meanwhile, modern Nizārī Ismāʿīlī history had commenced with the long imāmate of Ḥasan ʿAlī Shāh (1232–1298/1817–1881), the forty-sixth imām, who received the title of Agha Khan (Aga Khan), meaning lord and master, from the contemporary Qājār monarch of Iran. This title has remained hereditary among that imām's successors, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī imāms of modern times. Ḥasan ʿAlī Shāh, Aga Khan I, was appointed to the governorship of the province of Kirman in 1251/1835. Subsequently, after some prolonged confrontations between this imām and the Qājār establishment, Aga Khan I permanently left Iran in 1257/1841. He finally settled in Mumbai in 1265/1848, marking the commencement of the modern period in Nizārī Ismāʿīlī history. The Nizārī imām launched a widespread campaign in India to define and delineate the distinct religious identity of his Khoja followers. The Ismāʿīlī Khojas were not always certain about their identity, having often dissimulated for long periods as either Sunnīs or Twelver Shīʿīs, while their indigenous Satpanth tradition had been influenced by Hindu elements. The majority of the Khojas affirmed their allegiance to Aga Khan I and acknowledged their Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī identity, while some minority groups seceded and joined the rival Twelver Shīʿī Khojas.

Aga Khan I's grandson, Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1302–1376/1885–1957), led the Nizārīs as their forty-eighth imām for seventy-two years and became internationally known as a Muslim reformer and statesman. Aga Khan III, too, made systematic efforts to set the religious identity of his followers apart from other religious communities, especially the Twelver Shīʿīs, who for long periods had provided dissimulating covers for the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs of Iran and elsewhere. Large numbers of Nizārīs had, in fact, been assimilated into the dominant Twelver Shīʿī community. Aga Khan III spelled out Nizārī identity in

numerous constitutions that he promulgated for his followers. The figure of the imām, as the religious and administrative head of the community, was central to all the Ismāʿīlī constitutions. He also introduced certain changes in the religious rituals and practices of his followers, emphasising their esoteric significance and spirituality.

Aga Khan III worked vigorously to consolidate and reorganize the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs into a modern Muslim community. As well as developing a network of councils for administering the affairs of his community, he promoted high standards of education, health, and social well-being for both men and women. Indeed, the emancipation and education of women, including their full participation in communal affairs, received a high priority in his reforms (Kassam 2011: 247–264; Daftary 2007: 480–496).

Aga Khan III, who had established his residence in Europe, died in 1957 and was succeeded by his grandson, Shah Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV. The present Harvard-educated, forty-ninth imām of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs has substantially expanded the modernization policies of his predecessor. He has also developed a multitude of new programmes and institutions of his own for the benefit of his community. At the same time, Aga Khan IV has concerned himself with a variety of social, developmental, and cultural issues which are of wider interest to Muslims and developing countries. Indeed, he has created a complex institutional network, generally referred to as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which implements numerous projects in a variety of domains (Ruthven 2011: 189–220). The present Ismāʿīlī imām has been particularly concerned with the education of his followers and Muslims in general. In the field of higher education, his major initiatives include The Institute of Ismaili Studies, which is also responsible for producing materials for the religious education of Nizārī primary and secondary school students, the Aga Khan University, and the University of Central Asia.

In 1986, Aga Khan IV promulgated a new ‘constitution’ for all his followers worldwide. The preamble to this constitution defines the responsibility of the Ismāʿīlī imām as being to guide his followers by providing authoritative instruction (*taʿlīm*) and the esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of God’s final message, the Qur’an. Aga Khans III and IV also guided their followers through their *farmān*s, or oral and written directives. These *farmān*s on a range of issues, representing the embodiment of the imām’s authoritative instruction (*taʿlīm*), have become scriptural texts. It is through these *farmān*s that the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs have understood their faith and engaged with the Islamic revelation.

As a progressive Muslim leader, Aga Khan IV has also devoted much of his resources to promoting a better understanding of Islam, not merely as a religion with its theologies and multiple interpretations, but as a major world civilization with its plurality of social, intellectual, and cultural traditions. Benefitting from the enlightened leadership of their last

two imāms, and numbering more than ten million, the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs have emerged as a progressive global community of Shīʿī Muslims.

Attributions

Preprint: this text represents an accepted version of the article. A full published version is forthcoming.

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