



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Ismailis”

Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia

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Early Ismaili History

In 148 AH/765 CE, on the death of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq, who had consolidated Imami Shi‘ism, the majority of his followers recognised his son Musa al-Kazim as their new imam. However, other Imami Shi‘i groups acknowledged the imamate of Musa’s older half-brother, Isma‘il, the eponym of the Ismailiyya, or Isma‘il’s son Muhammad. Little is known about the life and career of Muhammad ibn Isma‘il, who went into hiding, marking the initiation of the *dawr al-satr*, or period of concealment, in early Ismaili history which lasted until the foundation of the Fatimid state when the Ismaili imams emerged openly as Fatimid caliphs.

On the death of Muhammad ibn Isma‘il, not long after 179 AH/795 CE, his followers, who were at the time evidently known as Mubarakiiyya, split into two groups. A majority refused to accept his death; they recognised him as their seventh and last imam and awaited his return as the *Mahdi*, the restorer of justice and true Islam. A second, smaller group acknowledged Muhammad’s death and traced the imamate in his progeny. Almost nothing is known about the subsequent history of these earliest Ismaili groups until shortly after the middle of the third AH/ninth century CE.

It is certain that for almost a century after Muhammad ibn Ismail, a group of his descendants worked secretly for the creation of a revolutionary movement, the aim of which was to install the Ismaili imam belonging to the Prophet Muhammad’s family (*ahl al-bayt*) to a new caliphate ruling over the entire Muslim community; and the message of the movement was disseminated by a network of *da‘is* (summoners). Observing *taqiyya*, or precautionary dissimulation, these central leaders concealed their true identities in order to escape ‘Abbasid persecution. ‘Abdullah, the first of these leaders, had organised his *da‘wa* (mission) around the doctrine of the majority of the earliest Ismailis, namely, the Mahdship of Muhammad ibn Ismail. ‘Abdullah eventually settled in Salamiyya, central Syria, which served as the secret headquarters of the Ismaili *da‘wa* for some time. The efforts of ‘Abdullah and his successors bore results in the 260s AH/870s CE, when numerous *da‘is* appeared in southern Iraq and adjacent regions under the leadership of Hamdan Qarmat and his chief assistant ‘Abdan. The Ismailis now referred to their activities simply as *al-da‘wa*, the mission, or *al-da‘wa al-hadiya*, the rightly guiding mission. Soon, the Ismaili *da‘wa* appeared in numerous other regions, notably Yemen, where Ibn Hawshab Mansur al-Yemen (d. 302 AH/914 CE) acted as the chief *da‘i*, Egypt, Bahrayn, Persia, Transoxiana, and Sind, as well as remoter regions in North Africa.

Fatimid Period until 487 AH/1094 CE

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By the early 280s AH/890s CE, a unified Ismaili community had replaced the earlier splinter groups. However, in 286 AH/899 CE, soon after ‘Abdullah al-Mahdi, the future Fatimid caliph, had succeeded to leadership in Salamiyya, Ismailism was rent by a major schism. Abdullah claimed the Ismaili imamate openly for himself and his ancestors who had organised the early Ismaili *da‘wa*, also explaining the various forms of guises adopted by the earlier central Ismaili leaders who had preferred to assume the rank of *hujja* (proof or full representative) of the hidden Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail. The doctrinal reform of ‘Abdullah al-Mahdi split the Ismaili movement into two rival factions. A loyalist faction, comprised mainly of the Ismailis of Yemen, Egypt, North Africa, and Sind, did recognise continuity in the imamate, acknowledging ‘Abdullah and his ‘Alid ancestors as their imams. On the other hand, a dissident faction, originally led by Hamdan Qarmat, retained their original belief in the Mahdship of Muhammad ibn Isma‘il. Henceforth, the term *Qarmati* came to be applied specifically to the dissidents who did not acknowledge ‘Abdullah al-Mahdi, as well as his predecessors and successors to the Fatimid caliphate, as their imams. The dissident Qarmatis acquired their most important stronghold in the Qarmati state of Bahrayn, founded in 286 AH/899 CE by the *da‘i* Abu Sa‘id al-Jannabi. The Qarmati state of Bahrayn eventually collapsed in 470 AH/1077 CE.

The early Ismailis elaborated a distinctive gnostic system of religious thought, which was further developed or modified in the Fatimid period. Central to this system was a fundamental distinction between the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) aspects of the sacred scriptures, as well as religious commandments and prohibitions. They further held that the religious laws, representing the *zahir* of religion, enunciated by prophets, underwent periodical changes while the *batin*, containing the spiritual truths (*haqa‘iq*) remained immutable and unchanged. These truths, forming a gnostic system of thought, were explained through *ta‘wil*, esoteric exegesis, which became the hallmark of Ismaili thought. The two main components of this system were a cyclical history of revelations and a cosmological doctrine.

The early success of the Ismaili movement culminated in the foundation of the Fatimid caliphate in North Africa, where the *da‘i* Abu ‘Abdullah al-Shi‘i (d. 298 AH/911 CE) had spread the *da‘wa* among the Berbers of the Maghrib. The new dynasty, established in 297 AH/909 CE, was named Fatimid (Fatimiyyun) after the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima, to whom the Fatimid caliphs traced their ‘Alid ancestry. ‘Abdullah al-Mahdi (d. 322 AH/934 CE), the first Fatimid caliph–imam, and his successors ruled over an important state that soon grew into an empire stretching from North Africa to Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. During the Fatimid period, Ismaili thought and literature as well as *da‘wa* activities attained their summit and Ismailis made important contributions to Islamic civilisation, especially after the seat of the Fatimid caliphate was transferred to Cairo, itself founded in 358 AH/969 CE by the Fatimids.

The Ismaili *da‘wa* of the Fatimid times achieved its greatest successes, however, outside the Fatimid dominions, especially in Yemen, where the Ismaili Sulayhids ruled as vassals of the Fatimids, Persia, and Central Asia. The *da‘is* of the Iranian lands, such as Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, and Nasir Khusraw, also elaborated complex metaphysical systems of thought with a distinct emanational cosmology. The Fatimid *da‘wa* was particularly concerned with educating the new converts in Ismaili doctrine, known as the *hikma* (wisdom); and a variety of lectures, generally designated as sessions of wisdom (*majalis al-hikma*), were organised for this purpose. Ismaili law was also codified mainly through the efforts of al-Qadi al-Nu‘man (d. 363 AH/ 974 CE), the foremost jurist of the Fatimid period. Ismaili law accorded special importance to the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate.



The Ismailis experienced a major schism in 487 AH/1094 CE, on the death of Imam-caliph al-Mustansir, the eighth Fatimid caliph and the eighteenth Ismaili imam. Imam al-Mustansir's succession was disputed by his sons Nizar, the original heir designate, and al-Must'ali, who was installed to the Fatimid caliphate by the all-powerful *vizier* al-Afdal. As a result, the unified Ismaili *da'wa* and community were split into rival branches, designated later as Nizari and Must'ali (or Musta'lawi). The *da'wa* organisation in Cairo, as well as the Ismaili communities of Egypt, Yemen, and western India, also recognised al-Must'ali as his father's successor to the imamate. On the other hand, the Ismailis of Persia and adjacent lands supported the succession right of Imam Nizar and recognised his imamate. Imam Nizar himself revolted against al-Must'ali (d. 495 AH/1101 CE), but he was defeated and killed in 488 AH/1095 CE. Henceforth, the Ismaili imamate was handed down in two parallel lines among the descendants of Imam-caliph al-Mustansir.

Musta'li Ismailis

On the death of al-Musta'li's son and successor al-Amir in 524 AH/1130 CE, the Must'ali Ismailis split into Hafizi and Tayyibi branches. The Must'ali *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo endorsed the imamate of al-Amir's cousin and successor to the Fatimid throne, al-Hafiz. As a result, his imamate was also acknowledged by the Must'ali Ismailis of Egypt and Syria, as well as a portion of the Must'alīs of Yemen. These Ismailis, who recognised al-Hafiz (d. 544 AH/1149 CE) and the later Fatimid caliphs as their imams, became known as Hafizis. The Must'ali Ismailis of the Sulayhid state in Yemen, as well as those of Gujarat, recognised the imamate of al-Amir's son, al-Tayyib, and they became known as Tayyibis. Hafizi Ismailism disappeared completely soon after the collapse of the Fatimid dynasty in 567 AH/1171 CE. Thereafter, Must'ali Ismailism survived only in its Tayyibi form with permanent strongholds in Yemen.

The Tayyibis believe that their imams have remained in concealment since the time of al-Tayyib himself, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. In the absence of their imams, the affairs of the Tayyibi *da'wa* and community have been administered by *da'i mutlaqs*, that is, supreme *da'is* with full authority. In the doctrinal field, the Tayyibis maintained the Fatimid traditions and preserved a substantial portion of the Ismaili texts of the Fatimid period. Building particularly on Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani's metaphysical system, they elaborated their own esoteric system of religious thought with its distinctive eschatological themes. The Tayyibi *da'wa* spread successfully in the Haraz region of Yemen, as well as in Gujarat. By the end of the tenth AH/sixteenth century CE, the Tayyibi Ismailis split into Da'udi and Sulaymani branches over the question of the succession to their twenty-sixth *da'i mutlaq*, Da'ud ibn 'Ajabshah (d. 997 AH/1589 CE). By that time the Tayyibis of India, known locally as Bohras, greatly outnumbered their Yemeni coreligionists. Henceforth, the Da'udi and Sulaymani Tayyibis, concentrated in South Asia and Yemen, respectively, followed different lines of *da'is*. Da'udi Bohras have subdivided into several groupings, with the largest numbering around eight hundred thousand. Since the 1920s, Bombay has served as the permanent administrative seat of the Da'udi *da'i mutlaq*. The leadership of the Sulaymani Tayyibis has remained hereditary in the Makrami family with their headquarters in Najran, in northeastern Yemen. At present the Sulaymani Tayyibis number around seventy thousand in Yemen, with an additional few thousand in India.

Nizari Ismailis

In Imam-caliph al-Mustansir's time, the *da'i* Hasan-i Sabbah succeeded 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Attash as the leader of the Ismaili *da'wa* within the Saljuq dominions in Persia. His seizure of



the fortress of Alamut in 483 AH/1090 CE had, in fact, marked the effective foundation of what became the Nizari Ismaili state of Persia with a subsidiary in Syria. In Imam-caliph al-Mustansir's succession dispute, Hasan supported Imam Nizar's cause and severed his relations with the *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo. By this decision, Hasan-i Sabbah also founded the Nizari *da'wa* independently of the Fatimid regime. The Nizaris acquired political prominence under Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 518 AH/1124 CE) and his seven successors at Alamut. Hasan's armed revolt against the Saljuq Turks, whose alien rule was detested by the Persians, did not succeed; and the Saljuqs, despite their superior military power, failed to destroy the Nizari fortress communities. In effect, a stalemate developed between the Nizaris and their various enemies until their state in Persia was destroyed by the Mongols in 654 AH/1256 CE. The Nizaris of Syria, who had numerous encounters with the Crusaders and reached the peak of their fame under the *da'i* Rashid al-Din al-Sinan (d. 589 AH/1193 CE), were eventually subdued by the Mamluks. The Nizaris elaborated their own teachings, initially revolving around the Shi'i doctrine of *ta'lim* or authoritative guidance by the imam of the time. The Nizari imams, who had remained in hiding since Imam Nizar, emerged openly at Alamut in 559 AH/1164 CE.

Disorganised and deprived of any central leadership, the Nizari Ismailis survived the Mongol destruction of their state. For about two centuries, while the imams remained inaccessible, various Nizari communities developed independently, also adopting Sunni and Sufi guises to safeguard themselves against persecution. By the middle of the ninth AH/fifteenth century CE, the Nizari imams emerged in the village of Anjudan, in central Persia, initiating a revival in the *da'wa* and literary activities of their community. The Nizari *da'wa* became particularly successful in Central Asia and India, where many of the Hindu converts were known as Khojas. The Nizari Khojas developed an indigenous religious tradition designated as Satpanth or the "true path", as well as a devotional literature known as the *ginans*. With the advent of the Safavids, who adopted Twelver Shi'ism as the religion of their state in 907 AH/1501 CE, the Nizaris of Persia also practiced *taqiyya* as Twelvers. The Nizaris of Badakhshan, now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, have preserved numerous Persian Ismaili texts of the Alamut and later periods. The Nizari Khojas, together with the Tayyibi Bohras, were among the earliest Asian communities to settle during the nineteenth century in East Africa. In the 1970s, the bulk of the East African Ismailis were obliged to immigrate to the west. Under the leadership of their last two imams, Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III (1885-1957) and his grandson, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the current forty-ninth imam, the Nizari Ismailis have emerged as a progressive Muslim minority with high standards of education and well-being. Numbering several millions, they are scattered in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America.

Further Reading

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