

Traditions of a Muslim Community

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A Reading Guide prepared by Aleem Karmali for the Department of Community Relations, 2012

The Ismailis represent the second largest Shi'i Muslim community after the Twelvers (Ithnāsharis), and are today scattered as religious minorities in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Despite their long history and contributions to Islamic civilisation, however, they were until recently one of the least understood Muslim communities. In fact, a multitude of medieval legends and misconceptions circulated widely about Ismaili teachings and practices, while the rich literary heritage of the Ismailis remained inaccessible to outsiders. The breakthrough in Ismaili studies had to await the recovery and study of a large number of manuscripts.

Introduction

Understanding history is important to a community to understand where they have come from, their core beliefs and the values that have endured despite changing social, cultural and political circumstances. *A Short History of the Ismailis* by Farhad Daftary is an excellent overview of Ismaili history and doctrines, which is thorough in detail yet broad in scope, written by the leading authority on Ismaili history of his generation. The book begins by explaining how the Ismailis have been studied throughout history and the research challenges faced by historians of Ismaili history and thought, followed by an account of historical events and doctrinal developments. The book is divided into four key periods: the Ismaili period, the Fatimid age, the Alamut

The Doctrine of H U D`] a

Hasan Sabbah, in addition to being a strong leader and political strategist, was also a learned theologian. He began preaching the doctrine of *h U D`whi`cha` U] a Y X` h c` g \ c k` h \ Y`] b U X Y e i U W m` c Z`* human reason (*D U`* by itself in enabling men to understand religious truths and to know God; and the need for a single authoritative teacher (*a i` D U-i` sadiq`*) to act as a spiritual guide of a Y b I` f l d` "%' & L` " ` H \] g` X c W h f] b Y` g h f Y g g Y X` h \ Y` U V g c` i h Y` loyalty of the Nizari Ismailis to the imam and his appointed representatives (*hujjag` L`] b` h \ Y`] a U a N` g`* absence. This was important, as the Nizari imams were in hiding at that time, following Imam B] n U f N` g` Z U]` Y X` U h h Y a d h` h c` f Y [U] b` W c b h f c` ` c Z` h \ Y` Fatimid state. Hasan Sabbah was considered the] a U *ahija* in Persia, as were the two lords of Alamut who succeeded him, Kiya Buzurg-Ummid and his son Muhammad.

The Proclamation of Qiyama and the Imamate at Alamut

Following Muhammad ibn Buzurg-I a a] X N` g` death, Imam Hasan, held a ceremony in 1164 in which he read a message purportedly from the Nizari imam in hiding. In the message, Imam < U g U b` g h U h Y X` h \ U h` h \ Y` \] X X Y b` = a U a` I` \ U g` f Y`] Y j` Y X` you of the burdens of *g \ U a n` d` h s* brought you

1258. They were stopped in Syria by the armies of Baybars, the Mamluk Sultan ruling Egypt and Syria, with the assistance of the Syrian Nizaris. With the support of the imamate at Alamut gone,

d Y f a U b Y b h` m` g d`] h` h \ Y` H U m m] V] g`] b h c` h \ Y` 8 U Ñ i X] g` c`
India and the Sulaymanis of Yemen. Today, the
8 U Ñ i X]` 6 c \ f U` = g a U]`] g` b i a V Y f` U V c i h` + \$ \$ ž \$ \$ \$ ž`
with the *X U D* headquarters in Bombay, while the
Sulaymani Tayyibi Ismailis of Yemen number
around 100,000.

Modern Period

Following the murder of the forty-fifth Nizari
Ismaili imam in 1817, Imam Shah Khalil Allah
fl = = Ł ž` \] g` g c b` = a U a` < U g U b` Đ 5`]` G \ U \` g i W W Y Y X Y X` h c`
the imamate at the age of thirteen. In amends for
\] g` Z U h \ Y f Ñ g` X Y U h \ ž` h \ Y` E U ^ U f` a c b U f W \ ž` : U h \` Đ 5`]
Shah, made the young imam the governor of
Qumm, gave him properties in Mahallat, and
gave his daughter in marriage, as well as bestowing
the title of Aga Khan upon him and his
successors. However, during the reign of the next
monarch, Muhammad Shah, a disagreement
arose between the Qajar government and the
imam, resulting in several military confrontations
h \ U h` i` h] a U h Y` m` ` Y X` h c` = a U a` < U g U b` Đ 5`]` G \ U \`
being forced to leave Persia. He travelled to
Afghanistan and British India, where he finally
settled in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1848, ending
after centuries the Persian phase of the imamate.
H \ Y` f Y a U] b] b [` h \ f Y Y` X Y W U X Y g` c Z` = a U a` < U g U b` Đ 5`]`
G \ U \ Ñ g`] a U a U h Y` k Y f Y` g d Y b h`] b` = b X] U ž` Y Z Z Y W h] j Y` m`
initiating the modern period of Ismaili history.
While his position was strengthened and
stabilised during this period, there were
W \ U` ` Y b [Y g` h c` h \ Y`] a U a Ñ g` U i h \ c f] h m` V m` g c a Y`
members of the Khoja community. Due to long
periods of concealing their identity as Sunnis or
H k Y` j Y f` G \] Đ U ž`

authoritative teacher must be from the
D f c d \ Y h Ñ g ` Z U a] ` m 3

2. In light of the doctrine of imamate, why is it important to understand that the understanding and articulation of religious ideas is influenced by their historical contexts?
3. How has the understanding and articulation of the doctrine of imamate evolved over time and how is it understood in the contemporary period?

Discussion

substantially expanded the modernisation policies of his grandfather, also developing a multitude of new programmes and institutions of his own for the benefit of the community. At the same time,

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