



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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**By Nadia Eboo Jamal**

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### A Reading Guide by Fayaz S. Alibhai\*

#### Introduction

*It is well that you should follow the Imamate,  
For the Light of God is within his pure heart.  
Through that Light you will be freed from darkness.  
Follow that Light and may peace be with you!*

Nizari Quhistani, *Dastur-nama*

Thus begins Nadia Eboo Jamal's book entitled *Surviving the Mongols: Nizari Quhistani and the Continuity of Ismaili Tradition in Persia*. Presented in two parts, this moving and highly readable book cannot but evoke not only a proud memory of Ismaili history, but

also a sense of the place of the Ismailis in, and their contributions to, the developments of Muslim history, thought, cultures and traditions. Jamal's work demonstrates the courage, the resilience, the determination, the intellectual heights, and the abiding faith of the Ismailis over the course of their history. This is especially the case with her account of the Nizari Ismailis of Persia and to a lesser extent, Syria, who in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century under the

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community's sense of historical purpose, but also came to be embodied

...the Ismaili *da'wa* had a profoundly intellectual and spiritual character whose primary concern was to invite people to seek knowledge and the salvation of their souls...

later in the central religious organisation of the Ismailis, the *da'wa*.

As mentioned earlier, the author then skilfully proceeds to lead the reader through a history of the *da'wa*, discussing key aspects of its development over time and reviewing the schism amongst the Shi'a following the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq.

The origins of the Ismaili movement are highly complex, if not obscure, but scholars generally agree "that Ismaili

surrounding areas of Persia to preach in the name of the hidden Imam. However, it was during the Imamate of ʿAbd Allah (also known as al-Wafi Ahmad), the son and successor of Muhammad b. Ismaʿil, “that the *daʿwa* began to achieve a measure of success” (p. 18-19).

This resulted in further Abbasid persecution, and so the Imam moved to Iraq before going on to settle in Salamiyya, Syria, around 257 AH/870 CE. Far from the major urban centres, al-Wafi Ahmad and his successors, Ahmad (also known as al-Taqi Muhammad), al-Husayn (also known as Radi al-Din), and ʿAbd Allah al-Mahdi, not only found anonymity and security, relatively safe from detection by the Abbasids, but were also “able to establish the headquarters of the Ismaili *daʿwa*” (p. 19).

The formative period of the Ismaili *daʿwa* may be seen to have taken place during the *dawr al-satr* when

there was a gradual structuring and expansion of the organisation, resulting in the conversion of large numbers of people in different parts of the Muslim world to the Ismaili cause during the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries (p. 21).

Indeed, by the end of this period and with the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 358 AH/969 CE, events were set into motion that transformed “local dynasty into a major political, economic and military power” (p. 25). The Fatimids were thus able to seriously challenge the Abbasid hegemony of the Muslim world.

During this time, the *daʿwa* became a major institution of the Fatimid state, “parallel to [its] administrative and military hierarchies” (p. 26).

It is important to note, for it is often overlooked, that the Ismaili *daʿwa* had a “profoundly intellectual and spiritual character...whose primary concern was to invite people to seek knowledge and the salvation of their souls” (p. 28). Internally, amongst the Ismailis themselves, the *daʿwa* was an institution of learning and scholarship. Indeed, it was no coincidence that out of its emphasis on intellectual and spiritual accomplishments, there arose jurists, theologians, philosophers and poets of such calibre as to make significant contributions to Ismaili thought and general areas of Islamic culture.

**Quick Review**  
**Who was Hasan-i Sabah and why is he such an important figure in Ismaili history?**

For the majority of Ismailis in different parts of the Muslim world, the *da'wa* enabled them

to confirm and perpetuate a spiritual bond with the Imam whom they were never likely to meet physically in person. In other words, the *da'wa* personified and embodied the living presence of the Imam and his teachings (p. 30).

As such, Ismailis from every walk of life, peasant to scholar, could consider himself or herself as a member of the *da'wa*.

The chapter concludes with a brief account of the events leading up to the Nizari – Musta'li schism of 487 AH/1094 CE, which divided the Ismailis into two factions, each following different lines of Imams.

### **The Nizari Ismaili**

Prior to the schism, Ismailism had “operated as a unified, centrally organised movement” (p. 32). But after 1094, most Ismailis in Egypt, Yemen, India and Syria acknowledged Imam al-Musta'li as the Imam-caliph, whereas those in Persia, Iraq and parts of Syria accepted Nizar. As a result, the Nizari *da'wa* came to develop “its own

distinctive intellectual and literary traditions” (p. 32).

Jamal discusses two main themes in this chapter. The first delineates the rise, consolidation and expansion of the Nizari Ismaili *da'wa* and the major role of Hasan-i Sabah (d. 518 AH/1124 CE) in these developments. A leading organiser of the Nizari *da'wa*, Hasan-i Sabah completed his early education in Ray. He converted from the Twelver Shi'i faith at the age of 17 and travelled to Cairo in 469 AH/1076 CE, during the reign of the Imam al-Mustansir. After three years there, he returned to Persia and spent the next nine years travelling to Ismaili centres in his capacity as a *da'i*.

His travels convinced him that the Ismailis were vulnerable and “dangerously exposed” (p. 33) to persecution by their enemies. In order to secure their protection, he began to look for a base out of which he could operate, and which would be both strong and defensible. He settled on Alamut, which he seized without bloodshed in 483 AH/1090 CE, from forces loyal to the Saljuqs. This success,



After the Mongol invasion, the Ismailis "were never again able to exercise the same



river into Khurasan. Tun was recaptured and Hulegu ordered that all of its inhabitants be slaughtered, with the exception of younger women and children. This led the Ismaili governor of Quhistan to surrender to the Mongols. It also forced the Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah (ca. 627 AH/1230 CE – 655AH/1257 CE) to despatch his brother with a message of submission to Hulegu. Hulegu, however, demanded that the Imam “surrender in person and instruct his followers to demolish all their fortresses in the country” (p. 47).

Jamal then goes on to detail the captivity and murder of the Imam under the Mongols, and the brutality and destruction visited upon the Ismaili strongholds.

fragmented and displaced, they became one of many communities who moved en-masse from rural to urban areas, seeking security and a better life.

## Part Two: Nizari Quhistani: The Search for Meaning and Identity

We turn now to the second part of the book, where Jamal attempts to examine “some of the strategies the Ismailis may have used to maintain their beliefs and sense of identity as a distinctive Muslim community” (p. 53). She does this through an analysis of the life and writings of the poet Nizari Quhistani, “who lived in the years immediately after the fall of Alamut and whose writings constitute the main source of information on the Ismailis of this period” (p. 53).

### The Poet Nizari Quhistani

Apart from the fact that the poetical works of Nizari Quhistani remain one of the few major Ismaili source materials to have survived Mongol rule, Jamal’s study of Nizari is important for at least three other reasons:

1. His *Safar-nama* (*Travelogue*) enables us to explore how the

Nizari Ismailis survived and were able to continue their traditions under Mongol rule.

2. His writings provide a fascinating insight into how Ismailism and Sufism interfaced with each other during this time.
3. Nizari’s works are largely unknown to the English-speaking world. As such, this study is particularly useful in introducing the general reader to his life and poetry.

#### Quick Review

1. Who was Nizari Quhistani and why are his writings an important resource of study?

Nizari Quhistani’s life was spent almost entirely under Mongol rule in Persia, where he was witness to the enormous destruction caused by the Mongol invaders of his homeland, including the massacres of his own community of Ismailis. Nizari was born in 645 AH /1247 CE in Birjand, the south-eastern part of the mountainous region of Quhistan in the province of Khurasan. He seems to have gained poetic fame at the courts of the local rulers governing Khurasan and Quhistan on behalf of the Mongols in the second half of the

7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, however, his dissatisfaction with and criticism of the policies of the ruling classes resulted in his dismissal and exile to the countryside. Poverty-stricken, Nizari became an obscure figure, writing until his death in 720 AH/1320 CE.

Despite the high quality of Nizari's poetry, his work is neglected partly because of its rarity and inaccessibility until recent times. Also, the political and religious milieu of his time "was extremely hostile towards the Ismailis, [and] discouraged the study and dissemination of his works" (p. 58).

The author delves into great detail about the origin of Nizari's name and the debates surrounding his identity and religious affiliation. Most scholars today, however, agree that Nizari Quhistani was definitely an Ismaili.

Using what is available in the sources and in his writings, Jamal also attempts to reconstruct Nizari's early life and education, his career in Harat and later in Birjand, before concluding with an

account of the final years of his life. All of these sections are interspersed with extracts of his poetry, "which is substantial, multifaceted and of a high literary quality, deserving a separate study of its own" (p. 83).

Nizari's works are also interesting for anecdotal material about the social and economic conditions in Khurasan and Quhistan under Mongol rule. In these terms, says the author,

Nizari stands out among the Persian poets of his generation for the

#### Quick Review

If the Mongols had, in effect, a policy of religious tolerance, why did they persecute the Nizari Ismailis?

With this exception, the Mongol policy of religious tolerance resulted in “the gradual erosion of some of the tensions that had previously divided various religions and sects under the Saljuqs” (p. 85), a factor that contributed to the gradual resurgence of Twelver Shi'ism.

Indeed, as Nadia Jamal asserts,

The revival of Twelver Shi'ism in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century can be perceived as a direct consequence of the destruction by the Mongols of its two main rivals, the Sunni caliphate of Baghdad and the Ismaili state of Alamut (p. 86).

In addition to providing an account of the revival of Twelver Shi'ism, this chapter also discusses the transformation of Sufism into a mass, popular movement whose social and cultural impact “permeated every aspect of Persian culture, including the language and literature” (p. 87).

Sufism had a strong influence in the Muslim world well before the Mongols arrived on the scene. Indeed, “by the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century it was already a well-established feature of Persian intellectual and religious life” (p. 86). Soon, Sufism began to flourish even further, encouraged by the Mongol

policy of religious tolerance mentioned earlier, as well as by the

psychological response of the people to the immense human suffering caused by the Mongol conquerors. In fact, for the next three centuries Sufism came to dominate the religious and cultural life of all communities and classes in Pers(Pe87Eu)m.f110.06016 TD(intrs)6.4(

focusing on Nizari's relations with Sufism. This latter issue is an important one, for Sufism is a distinctive aspect of Nizari's poetry which "continues to remain a matter of much curiosity and obscurity" (p. 84) despite general scholarly acceptance of his Ismaili identity.

Nizari was the first Ismaili writer to move away "from the poetic styles and conventions of the earlier Ismaili literary tradition of the Fatimid period," (p. 93) such as those of al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi in Arabic and Nasir-i Khusraw in Persian. Furthermore, his familiarity with Sufi theory and practice has made it difficult to separate his Sufism from Ismailism. Jamal thus pauses to "review briefly how Nizari defines his own position vis-à-vis the Sufis and other religious communities among whom he lived" (p. 94). This she does by highlighting Nizari's references to *imamah*, and the notion of *wilaya* or spiritual authority, around which the Sunnis, Twelver Shis and Sufis have different views.

In speaking of the Imamate, Nizari speaks of the principle of direct hereditary descent of the Imams from the Prophet Muhammad and the condition "that the Imam must always be physically present in the world at any given time as a permanent vehicle of divine grace to humanity" (p. 96). Similarly, he refers to the notion of the Imam of the time (*imam al-waqt*), as well as the need for guidance "in every age according to the changing needs and circumstances of people" (p. 97).

The author concludes this penultimate chapter by citing and commenting upon Nizari's references to the principles of *zahir* and *batin*, and *ta'lim* and *ta>wil*, amongst others. She also explores how the principle of *taqiyya* was important to Nizari's career and development, as well as the increasing difficulty he faced in trying to conceal his faith, before outlining his connections with the Ismaili *da'wa*.

### **Nizari's : The Journey of a**

This last chapter of the book is dedicated to Nizari's first major composition, the *Safar-nama*. It is particularly prominent amongst his

works not only because its highly autobiographical content is a valuable source of information about his life and activities, but also because this 1,200-verse example of a *mathnawi* is perhaps his most explicit 'Ismaili' work, alluding frequently and throughout to Ismaili doctrines and ideas. Jamal contextualises Nizari's journey and compares and contrasts it in detail with the one made by Nasir-i Khusraw, "his more illustrious Ismaili forbearer of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, the Fatimid poet, theologian, philosopher and chief *da'i* of Khurasan" (p. 110). As mentioned earlier, she also discusses some of the motifs of the Sufi idiom of poetry, such as intoxication and paradise, which Nizari refers to in connection with his travels to specific places and in his encounters with particular people.

Nizari set out on his journey on 1<sup>st</sup> Shawwal 678 AH/4<sup>th</sup> February 1280 CE when he was about 33 years old. His companion on this journey was Taj al-Din Amid, "an official of the Mongol government" (p. 108). From Tun in Quhistan, they travelled westwards "through central Persia via Isfahan to Adharbayjan, Arran, Armenia and

Georgia, as far as Baku on the shores of the Caspian Sea" (p. 108). When he returned in 681 AH/1282 CE, he went back to Birjand, having resigned from the administrative post that he held in Harat. It is unclear, however, whether his resignation took place before he embarked on his journey or soon after he returned.

Nizari's *Safar-nama* is a complex and enigmatic work. He is not forthcoming about major details of his journey; indeed, the poet has "a marked reluctance...to give the reader anything more than the barest information about the key events and personalities he encounters in various places" (p. 109). This

strongly suggests that when [Nizari] sat down to compose this work, he was observing the principle of *taqiyya* in order to conceal the true nature of his journey from all but a few of his readers, the exception being those Ismailis able to 'read between the lines' and understand the real significance of his narrative (p. 109).

Nizari does not at any time state clearly and unambiguously why he embarked on this journey. Nor does he indicate "whether he undertook it in his capacity as a government official or for some other, religious or private reasons of his own" (p. 111). Intriguingly, he

## Quick Review

1. Why is Nizari Quhistani's *Safar-nama* a particularly important work?

2. What are its key themes?

states that in writing this *mathnawi*, he aimed not just to tell an interesting story, but also, more importantly, as he puts it, “to remember appointments with my friends” (p. 111).

But who are these friends and why make a journey of several hundred miles without an apparent, “clearly-defined goal such as a pilgrimage, to search for knowledge, or for reasons of trade, government duty or some such specific need or assignation, etc.” (p. 111)?

In recounting the various stages of Nizari’s journey, from Isfahan to Tabriz, onwards and back, Nadia Jamal skilfully teases out his intentions and activities from the text. As such, we come to understand among other things that:

1. Nizari’s companion, Taj al-Din Ḳamid, was in all probability a *taqiyya*-practising Ismaili who

had risen to a major post in the Mongol government just as Nizari had done at the local level in Harat. Beyond their professional relationship, they “shared a common spiritual fellowship” (p. 113).

2. The ‘friends’ (*rafiqan*) Nizari wanted to “remember appointments with” (p. 111) were most likely to have been other

members of the *daʿwa* whom Nizari deliberately and purposively wanted to meet.

3. These ‘friends’ gave the appearance of Sufi shaykhs because the Nizari Ismailis of

Persia had organised themselves in a manner not unlike that of the Sufi *tariqas*,

and that this process was already well advanced in the latter part of the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, more than a century earlier than the time when, during the Safawid period, the Ismaili Imams and their *da'wa* organisation emerged in the public domain under the mantle of Sufism (p. 123).

4. It is highly likely that the meeting Nizari describes in Tabriz with a young man of "exceptional spiritual authority" (p. 131) was intended to offer homage to the Imam of the time, Shams al-Din Muhammad, especially since the Persian and Syrian Ismaili sources indicate that the Imam "was living somewhere in the vicinity of Tabriz at the time when Nizari Quhistani visited the city in the summer of 679 AH/1280 CE" (p. 134).

In so thoroughly analysing Nizari's *Safar-nama* and piecing together its subtext, Nadia Jamal reveals how it strongly demonstrates the continuity of the Ismaili *da'wa*, albeit in a changed form, but "with its characteristic

functions and sense of mission within the community" (p. 146). She also reveals the striking way in which Nizari illustrates how many Ismailis in Quhistan and other parts of Persia survived despite losing their political power and territorial independence.

More specifically, in the case of the poet himself, we find that throughout his poetic career, Nizari was forced to adopt various strategies to conceal his identity as an Ismaili. Indeed, in his efforts to reconcile being a rising poet in a Mongol court with being an individual remaining true to his faith, Nizari's attempt to 'survive' the Mongols ultimately fails, for his Ismaili identity is eventually revealed.

Nizari's life and writings thus illustrate the battleground in which the dynamics of these opposing forces in his life are played out. They also show him to be a "highly skilled and ambitious poet, a dedicated Ismaili *da'i* steeped in the Sufi tradition, and an outspoken social critic" (p. 146). Additionally, his works provide

an insight into the tension between writing and persecution, between secrecy and disclosure, and between conscience and conformity, that



characterises much of his poetry (p. 146).

Indeed, these tensions are reflective of the life of the Nizari Ismailis as a whole under Mongol rule. But even as Nizari's writings remind us of the tragic times faced by the Persian Nizari Ismailis, they serve as a beacon of hope and inspiration in the way they describe both the survival of the Ismailis as well as their commitment to the faith against all odds.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

The following suggestions constitute a small and rather selective sample. Many more, of course, may be found in the bibliography of the book.

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