









Ja'far took place at this time.⁸ Imam Ja'far also appears to have significantly influenced the development of the mystical interpretation of Islam.⁹

After the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, the body of his followers who remained faithful to the



by the middle of the tenth century CE, the Fatimids were able to re-assert their dominion over the North African region.

From North Africa, the Fatimids steadily expanded their realm of influence and authority. The most dramatic achievement in this regard was the conquest of Egypt, carried out in 973 CE by the great general al-Jawhar, during the reign of the fourth Fatimid Imam, al-Mu‘izz. The rule of the Fatimids in Egypt marked the climax of their military, political and religious achievements. Politically, the new capital of al-Qahira (Cairo) founded by the Fatimids in 969 CE became the centre from which a far-flung empire was conquered and ruled. It needs to be noted here that the strength of Fatimid rule was to a significant extent dependent on its naval power. Islands such as Crete, Corsica, Malta and Sicily were brought under Fatimid control, thus giving it a precious degree of suzerainty over the Mediterranean. The Fatimid rulers took advantage of their strategic hold over the Mediterranean to build ports like al-Mahdiyya, which acted as a gateway to a flourishing maritime trade. Simultaneously, the Fatimids were able to extend their authority and influence far beyond Egypt to Palestine, Syria, the Hijaz, Yemen and Sind. Indeed in 1058 CE, the Fatimids came near to wresting power from the Abbasids by occupying Baghdad for a short time.

Running parallel to the military expansion of Fatimid power was the steadily extending consolidation of influence through the work of the da‘i, chiefly in Iran, India and Transoxiana. The achievements of the da‘i in different regions where the ‘Alid sentiment came to be more or less firmly rooted and where sources of material and moral support for the ruling dynasty in Egypt came to be established, acted as a vital factor in the survival of Ismaili influence even when its political supremacy outside Egypt was imperilled or destroyed. It is important to note that the Fatimid empire was widely scattered, and that its various parts were separated in some cases by vast distances. The lack of geographical contiguity had therefore to be compensated for by means of abiding ideological loyalty and support, which were ensured chiefly through the unflagging perseverance of the da‘i s committed to the Fatimid cause.

In the 11th century CE, the Fatimids suffered a number of severe political and military setbacks. The forces of Mahmud of Ghazna, who was fiercely anti-Ismaili, caused considerable havoc



and destruction in Sind, where large numbers of Ismailis were brutally massacred. Around the middle of the century, Ifriqiya too was lost to the Fatimids as a result of a local rebellion in favour of the Abbasids, which was accompanied once again by the massacre of several Ismaili communities in the area. But these losses were to a certain extent offset by the gains established by the



the *wazier*, under whose direction worked a whole series of officials concerned with the administration and supervision of internal institutions and outlying imperial provinces. The military forces were subjected to a similar hierarchical and centralised form of authority, as was the civil service.²¹ In the context of that period, it can be said that the administrative



an important feature of Ismailism from the very beginning, provided that the term ‘rationalism’ is here understood in the context of the times. The most advanced form of a rational thought in that time was exemplified by the heritage of the ancient Greek philosophers, a heritage which became available to the Muslims following the Arab conquests. The more intellectually advanced minds amongst the Muslim community were considerably impressed and stimulated by Greek rationalism, and tried to make use of it in such a way that the methods of Greek philosophy could be reconciled with the tenets of the Islamic revelation. Like the great non-Ismaili philosophers who attempted to harmonise Greek philosophy with Islamic faith, a number of Ismaili intellectuals were also inspired by a similar desire and tried to use speculative reason for their own purposes. However, Ismaili intellectuals on the whole tended to define the limits of the scope of free rational inquiry with a greater degree of strictness than that observed by some non-Ismaili philosophers. In the case of the Ismailis, the principle of the authority of the Imam had to be given primacy, for the Imam derived his authority directly from God - a concept which, as mentioned above, was understood by the Shi‘as in a predominantly spiritual sense. Thus, while Ismaili intellectuals immediately before and during the Fatimid period showed a keen interest in speculative reasoning, this interest was balanced against the principle of authoritative transmission of knowledge from the Imam. The generally cautious approach to Greek philosophy on the part of some Ismaili intellectuals is exemplified in the arg



major sciences to which the Ismailis devoted their energies. The monumental work of the great Fatimid jurist, Qadi al-Nu'man, entitled *Ma'adin al-Islam*



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the *batin*, his mission was to proclaim the former and, therefore, to establish the foundation on which a community of believers could come into being. The task of drawing out the inner meaning, the *batin*, and explaining it to the fortunate few who were capable of receiving this profound knowledge was entrusted by the Prophet to the Imam.

The Ismailis also believed that each of the great Prophets who brought a new revelation



betrayal of the Islamic ideal of social justice on the part of the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers and their material and ideological supporters. With the accession of the Fatimids to power, the idea that each Imam contributed his share to the eventual establishment of a reign of universal peace and justice came to receive emphasis. Thus, a firm conviction that history was laden with a divine purpose and that this purpose would be fulfilled through the divinely ordained institution of *Imamah* provided spiritual reassurance to the Ismailis, besides motivating them to make active efforts to achieve their ends whenever the circumstances proved to be suitable.

Lastly, we need to devote some attention to the cosmology of the Ismailis which, particularly during the Fatimid period, occupied a fundamental place in their doctrinal system as a whole.³⁵The Ismailis had a coherent view of the structure of the universe. Their cosmology was based on the principle that the universe was composed of well-defined constituent parts which were linked together to form a harmonious totality. Moreover, the various components of the cosmic structure were also regarded as constituting a hierarchical structure: the planets and the abstract principles which governed them were ranked one above the other, just as the Prophets, the Imams and the officials of the also formed a hierarchy with clearly defined ranks. The cosmology of the Ismailis contained elements from the Greek Ptolemaic system and a variety of other influences, including Neoplatonism. But the Ismailis did not indulge in cosmological speculation out of disinterested intellectual curiosity. They utilised the prevailing picture of the universe in order to articulate their own religious conceptions. Cosmology, metaphysics and religion were thus closely interlinked. This interlinking was made possible by the tendency to regard various aspects of existence as mirroring each other, so that for each element in the chain of cosmic principles or entities, there was a corresponding figure or personality in the politico-religious sphere. In this way, the universe appeared intelligible and composite, while the religious tenets of the community were at the same time given cosmic dimensions.

Allah, in His majestic unity, stands totally above and aloof from the chain of cosmic and spiritual entities. The principle of *tawhid*, or the unity of the Divine Essence, was not only



fertile and far-reaching, can grasp His unique nature, and no analogy, comparison or resemblance can be drawn between Him and His creatures. Indeed, Allah is asserted to be beyond even the categories of being and non-being, of existence and non-existence. The concept of Divine Unity in Ismailism is thus articulated in highly abstract, metaphysical terms, but in the last analysis it is a reflection of a principle which emphatically pervades the entire text of the Qur'an.³⁶ By the timeless and transcendent act of will or command (*amr*), the Supreme Being created the *aql al-kull*, the universal intellect, sometimes also called *al-awwal*, the first intellect. From this, by a process of emanation, the *nafs al-kull* or universal soul, comes into existence. Sometimes the *nafs al-kull* is substituted by the *-thani*, the



have helped considerably in the correction of the old image and in the emergence of a new understanding which attempts to take account of the historical realities of the movement as well as the hopes and aspirations which inspired it and contributed to its lasting vitality.⁴³

The origin of Nizari Ismailism has been indicated above. Following the death of Imam al-Mustansir, those who remained loyal to Imam Nizar organised themselves locally in various parts of Iran, establishing strongholds in which they could ensure their own survival and the furtherance of the principles and ideals of the Nizari Ismaili faith. In securing a strong and viable position for themselves, the Nizari Ismailis were not working in a vacuum. Already, during the period of Fatimid rule prior to the Nizari-Musta'lian schism, Ismaili settlements had produced outstanding intellectuals who were received with great hospitality and treated with honour at the headquarters in Cairo. The history of the Nizari Ismailis can thus be regarded as an extension of the groundwork which had already been accomplished in the Fatimid period. In Iran, however, the new movement had to function in markedly changed circumstances, which were due not only to the severance of ties with Cairo, but also to the presence of the powerful, militantly Sunni, Turkish dynasty, the Saljuqs, which had established hegemony over various parts of Iran. The Nizari Ismailis, scattered in various fortresses and strongholds as well as the towns and cities of Iran, thus found themselves in an increasingly hostile environment, which prevailed not only in the political and military sphere but also at an intellectual level. The most well-known attempt to combat Ismailis through the articulation of



which became a subsidiary centre of Ismaili power and influence. By the end of the century, Ismailis had established strongholds in a number of mountainous zones in the Iranian highlands. One of the ways in which the Nizaris extended their power was by striking up alliances with local princes or *amirs*, and through this means they were able to establish a sphere of influence for themselves in Isfahan itself, which was the centre of Saljuq power. In the meantime, Hasan-i Sabbah, the *hujja*⁴⁶ (literally meaning ‘proof’) or representative of the Imam, was giving active and overall direction to the Nizari campaign on behalf of the Imam. Ismaili tradition speaks of the Imam as having been secretly brought into Alamut by Hasan-i Sabbah, who emphatically made it clear that he was acting only on behalf of the Imam. In this respect, the situation was analogous to the period before the rise of the Fatimids, which was known as the *dawr al-satr*, as the Imams were hidden from public view.

In terms of political and military strategy, the Nizari programme differed in an essential respect from that of the Fatimids. Under the new circumstances, it was no longer realistic to aim at the subjugation of the enemy at



established by Hasan-i Sabbah, these strongholds were placed under the general supervision of an appointee from Alamut who usually resided at Masyaf.



Drawing their inspiration from this passage, in which *nur* is explained as the form in which the transcendent nature of Allah becomes manifest in the creation, the Shi‘a inter-developed the concept of *Nur-i Imamah*, signifying the innermost reality of the Imam. The Ismailis hold that *nur* is passed from one Imam to the other in direct, uninterrupted succession, and that all Imams are therefore one in essence. In this way, the real nature of the Imam is understood as lying beyond the world of time and place. Whereas on the plane of history the personality of the Imam is all important, on the metaphysical plane it is the reality beyond history which matters. To comprehend this reality is regarded as the highest goal attainable by the believer who receives divine grace.

Thus, to the two levels of the *zahir* (consisting of the) and the *batin* (where the inner meaning of the is understood), the Nizaris added the level on which the highest reality (*haqiqa*) manifested through the Imam is perceived in an all-consuming, mystical vision. The principle that the inner reality (*haqiqa*) of the Imam lies beyond the reach of sense-experience or logical deduction, but that it can become apparent, even in the period of *satr*, to those who are blessed with a spiritual vision of the Imam, was expounded above all by Nasir al-Din Tusi, who wrote during the last phase at Alamut.⁴⁹ One of the results of this new emphasis was that inward, personal vision of the spiritual reality of the Imam on the part of his followers gained added importance. This development in fact signifies the increasing interaction of Ismaili doctrine with the principles of Sufism. In the period following the fall of Alamut, this



By the middle of the 15th century CE, the Imams moved from Azerbaijan, and after settling for a while in the districts of Farahan and Mahallat, moved eventually to Anjudan, a large village in the vicinity of Sultanabad (now Aragh). The accession of the Safavids, a Shi'i dynasty, to power at the beginning of the 16th century CE contributed to the emergence of more tolerable conditions for the Ismailis. Ivanov goes so far as to label the 16th and 17th centuries CE, during which the Imams continued to reside in Anjudan, as a period of 'renaissance' for the Ismailis.⁵³ Certainly, the Imams took the opportunity, during this relatively favourable phase, of re-asserting their hold over outlying areas.

Around this time in India, Nur Muhammad Shah, the son of Imamshah, a prominent figure in the Nizari , renounced his allegiance to the Imam in Persia and instead declared himself the Imam. Remnants of his followers, who were named after Imamshah, to whom the secession came to be attributed, are now found in parts of Gujarat and Khandesh. The mainstream of the community in India stayed loyal to the Imam in Persia and maintained communications with him. From time to time, daring individuals or families in India undertook the hazardously long journey overland to Persia to meet the Imam, pay him homage and receive his blessings. Meanwhile, after the end of the period of Safavid rule, the Imams moved their residence to the neighbouring village of Kahak where the tomb of Imam Nizar II, who probably died around 1722 CE, is found. Shortly thereafter, the Imams moved on to Shahr-i Babak in south-east Iran, where an Ismaili community was already in existence. In 1817 CE, events took a new turn when the then Imam, Khalil Allah, who had shifted residence to Yazd, was assassinated at the instigation of hostile elements in the Qajar court. The Shah who ruled Iran at that time, fearing that this incident might exacerbate an already sensitive situation, granted the districts of Qumm and Mahallat, in addition to the title of Aga Khan, to Imam Hasan 'Ali Shah, the new Imam. Imam Hasan 'Ali Shah maintained good relations with the Shah, but later, owing to continued hostility from certain personalities in the court, he migrated to India, finally settling in Bombay in 1848 CE. Thus the headquarters of the *Imamah* now came to be situated in India.

The doctrinal expression of Nizari Ismailism after the fall of Alamut shows regional variations which are rooted in common loyalty to the principle of *Imamah*. In Syria, the Ismailis preserved the classical Fatimid tradition;⁵⁴ those inhabiting the Badakhshan region remained attached to



the memory and works of Nasir-i Khusraw; in Iran, the ideas which evolved continued to form the basis of the Ismailis' faith.⁵⁵ Henceforth, the individual search for inner, spiritual transformation received increasing emphasis in the articulation of the faith in all these areas. The cosmic or metaphysical stature of the Imam retained its overriding significance, but the goal which the individual Ismaili strove to attain was understood as a vision of the Imam's spiritual reality. The search for this kind of illumination involved, above all, a lengthy and laborious process of disciplining self-centred impulses and achieving inner purification. The Imam was revered as the *murshid* ('guide') who provided guidance for spiritual enlightenment to the *murid* ('disciple'). In India, the *ginan* literature exhibited the same quest for mystical illumination, and also advocated an inner mastery over temptations of worldly life through a state of mental detachment, rather than actual withdrawal from it by the adoption of an ascetic mode of life.

The Modern Period

The single most outstanding feature of the Islamic world in the last few centuries has been the impact of the West. Whether this impact has been felt through direct domination or indirect economic and political pressure, in all cases the expansion of Western power and influence has caused varying degrees of disruption of indigenous modes of life. The Muslim lands, however, have not been merely passive receptacles of the tide of Western culture. In a variety of ways, different sections of the population in the Islamic countries have attempted, in their own manner, to respond to the circumstances created not only by the upsurge of Western power, but by the pressing need for technological and industrial development. Some of the more learned and reflective Muslims in the *Dar al-Islam* have therefore devoted their energies to finding a solution whereby the Muslim people could organise their lives in such a way as to be able to cope with the pressures of modern life and also to benefit fully from the potential resources made available through the advancement of science. Prominent among these Muslim leaders of modern times have been two Ismaili Imams, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III (1877-1957), and [Imam Shah Karim al-Hussaini](#), Aga Khan IV (b. 1936).



As a result of the work of these two Imams, the Shi‘a Imami Ismaili community has developed in this century into perhaps the best example of a successful attempt by a Muslim group to create a new mode of life and a new form of organisation in accordance with the needs of a modern environment, while at the same time maintaining a sense of continuity with its religious history.⁵⁶ This process was initiated and given positive and active direction by Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, the 48th Imam of the Ismailis, who was a notable figure of the Muslim world and in international circles generally. His long life-span coincided with several important developments in history, such as the rise and fall of European imperialism, the two World Wars, and the upsurge of national independence movements in Asia and Africa. He was deeply concerned with the future of the Muslim world and searched for a solution to the predicament it faced in being confronted by the threat of political, economic and cultural domination of the West. His solution to this predicament, communicated as much to his Ismaili followers as to the Muslim world at large, was a continued adherence to the fundamental principles of Islam, and a judicious amalgamation of the classical heritage of Islam with the phenomenon of modernisation. While articulating his views on this matter, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah also involved himself in a wide range of political, cultural and philanthropic activities for the benefit of Muslims all over the world, irrespective of their specific persuasions in Islam. His philanthropy was particularly aimed at the development of Muslim education and welfare. At international conferences and gatherings, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah was the spokesman and champion of the Muslim world. His election in 1937 as President of the League of Nations is an indication of his international stature and public role, which was essentially that of a bridge



through the establishment of schools, hostels, dispensaries, hospitals, housing societies, welfare organisations and financial institutions, as well as the creation of an administrative system of regional boards, associations and councils. One of the bold departures from the conservatism prevailing then in Muslim societies was his emphasis on female education. As a result of these innovations, the community's traditional social organisation and patterns of behaviour began to evolve in a direction which was more favourable to life in the new circumstances.

Under the leadership of the present (and 49th) Imam of the Ismailis, His Highness The Aga Khan, Imam Shah Karim al-Hussaini, the social and economic programmes initiated by Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah have been brought to fruition. Additional steps have been taken to consolidate existing facilities and to meet new communal and national requirements, primarily in the emergent nations of the world. Imam Shah Karim has directed further developments in the administrative machinery of the Ismaili community, chiefly through the progressive revision of Ismaili constitutions which govern it. Through his economic policies, the Imam has encouraged his followers not to confine their activities merely to the field of commerce, but also to enter wide areas of human endeavour including industry and the professions. Spearheading this movement are the community's new financial institutions and organisations, set up especially for the purpose. In the pursuit of their daily lives, the Imam has stressed the necessity for Ismailis to identify completely with the national aspirations and policies of the many countries of the world in which they reside. The greatest emphasis has been placed by Imam Shah Karim on the value of education, in particular higher, specialised training. A large number of young Ismailis have been encouraged, by advice and generous scholarship



charitable aims encompassing a wide range of humanitarian and cultural activities. The impact of the modernisation of existing institutions and the creation of new ones, and the harnessing of professional man-power on the lives of individual Ismailis, has been considerable enough to achieve for the community standards of living, health and education which are generally among the highest in the Muslim world. This development must be seen essentially as the expression of the Imam's long-term objectives for the Ismailis, and as representing the traditional Ismaili world-view, in which the material and spiritual aspects of life are regarded as inter-dependent. Both Imams, in their religious guidance to Ismailis, have placed as much stress on cultivating a spiritual life based on the principles of Islam, as on the necessity of good health, sound education and active involvement in the affairs of the world. The theme of progressive spiritual advancement through self-discipline to the point of self-realisation is very prominent in the teachings of both Imams. Equally important, on the other hand, is the idea of material progress through purposive and responsible action.

The present Imam, Shah Karim, has addressed himself to the question of the future of the Muslim world more often and with greater sensitivity than perhaps any other contemporary Muslim leader. He has time and again called upon Muslims to make a determined effort to build upon their rich cultural foundation. In identifying some of the factors which could bring this about, he has emphasised the understanding of the Islamic concept of human fraternity, the necessity of fostering a Muslim intellectual elite inspired by the Islamic heritage, and of promoting the development of Islamic art and architecture. While recognising the need for accelerated economi



come? And if, as I believe, the answer is uncertain, where else can we reach than in the Holy



⁸ Watt, *Formative Period*, Chapt



¹⁵ Besides the *Ifitah* and the sources cited in the *Rise of the Fatimids*, there are several excellent studies of the early activities of the



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²⁵ The work has been edited by A. A. Fyzee in two volumes (Cairo, 1951, 1967) and part of it has been translated by him as *The Book of Faith* (Bombay, 1974).

Fyzee,

²⁶ Fyzee, *Book of Faith*, 'Introduction', p. ix, and Azim Nanji, "Qadi al-Nu'man, an Ismaili Theory of Walayah" in



⁴⁰ The events that follow are detailed in Ladak, *The Fatimid Caliphate*, op. cit., pp. 87 ff. For Badr al-Jamali and al-Afdal, see C.H. Becker, “Badr al-Djamali”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition), I, pp. 869-70, and G. Weit, “Al-Afdal b. Badr al-Djamali” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition), I, pp. 215-16.

⁴¹ For the schism, in addition to Ladak above, see S.M. Stern, “The Succession to the Fatimid Caliph al-Amir and the Rise of Tayyibi Ismailism” in *Oriens* (1951), p. 193 ff.

⁴² Al-Hamdani, *Al-Sulahiyyun*, op. cit., and for the later history as it relates to India, see the survey based on the traditional Tayyibi accounts in S.C. Misra, *Muslim Communities in Gujarat* (London, 1963), Chapter 2.

⁴³ The most thoroughly researched is M.G.S. Hodgson’s *The Order of the Assassins* (The Hague, 1955). A summary account by him has been given in his article “The Ismaili State” in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 5, ed. J. Boyle (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 422-82. Other works are: B. Lewis, *The Assassins* (London, 1967); W. Ivanov, *Alamut and Lamasar* (Tehran, 1960); N. Mirza, *The Syrian Ismailis at the Time of the Crusades* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 1963). One of the major primary sources, al-Juvayni’s *–i Jahan Gusha*, has been translated as *The History of the World Conqueror*, 2 vols. by J.A. Boyle (Manchester, 1958). The Nizaris are discussed in Vol. II.

⁴⁴ A summary discussion on this will be found in G. Makdisi, “The Sunni Revival” in *Islamic Civilisation*, op. cit., pp. 155-68.

⁴⁵ The account below closely follows Hodgson’s description in “The Ismaili State” and *The Order of Assassins*, op. cit.



⁴⁶ For the significance of this term and its usage in Ismaili thought see “Hudjda” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition), III, pp. 543-45. For the role of Hasan-i Sabbah, see M. Hodgson, “Hasan-i Sabbah” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition), III, pp. 253-4.

⁴⁷ For the developments in Syria, see Mirza, *The Syrian Ismailis*, op. cit., and the relevant sections by Hodgson and Lewis.

⁴⁸ Hodgson, *The Order of the Assassins*, op. cit., and “The Ismaili State” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 5. The account of Nizari Ismaili history and doctrine in this article is based on Hodgson’s work.

⁴⁹ A comprehensive summary of his exposition of the principle of Imama is found in his *-Taslim*, ed., tr. by W. Ivanov (Leiden, 1950).

⁵⁰ W. Ivanov, “Tombs of some Persian Ismaili Imams” in *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2A (1988), pp. 49-62. A discussion of what is known about the Imams in this period is also found in H. Algar, “The Revolt of the Agha Khan Mahallati and the Transference of the Ismaili Imamate to India”, in *Studia Islamica*, XXIX, pp.55-81. The description which follows is based mainly on these two accounts.

⁵¹ W. Ivanov, “A Forgotten Branch of the Ismailis” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1937), pp. 57-9.

⁵² For the history and tradition of the in the subcontinent, see Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (New York, 1978), and W.Hoe404C7000.



⁵⁴ This is exemplified by the poem *Ash-Shafiya*, which is attributed to Shihab al-Din Abu Firas. The work has been edited and translated by Sami N. Makarem (Beirut, 1966).

⁵⁵ Works which were compiled during this period and which exemplify the state of the doctrine in the period after the fall of Alamut, include *Haft Bab-i Bu Ishaq* by Abu Ishaq Quhistani, ed., tr. W. Ivanov (Bombay, 1959); *Fasl dar Bayan-i Shinakht-i Imam*, ed., tr. Ivanov (Leiden, 1949); and the *Diwan* of Khaki Khorasani, ed. Ivanov (Bombay, 1933).

⁵⁶ Some of the studies which discuss the recent history of the Nizari Ismailis and their adaptation to modern conditions of life are: H.S. Morris, *The Indians in Uganda* (London, 1968), and “Indians in East Africa: a study in a plural society” in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VII (1956); Shirin Walji, *History of the Ismaili Community in Tanzania* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1974); H. Papanek, *Leadership and Social Change in the Khoja Ismaili Community* (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1962), which discusses the