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Satr

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Satr, “concealment”, a term used in a variety of senses, particularly by the Isma‘iliyya. The Isma‘ilis originally used it in reference to a period in their early history, called *dawr al-satr*, stretching from soon after the death of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq in 148/765 CE to the establishment of the Fatimid state in 297/909 CE. The Isma‘ili *imam*, recognised as the *qa'im* or *mahdi* by the majority of the early Isma‘ilis, was out of the public domain (*mastur*) during this period of concealment; in his absence, he was represented by *hujdjas* (see Ja‘far b. Mansur al-Yaman, *Kitab al-Kahf*, ed. R. Strothmann, London 1952, 98-9; al-Shahrastani, 146). Later, the Isma‘ilis of the Fatimid period, who allowed for continuity in their imamate, recognised a series of three such *imams* between Imam Muhammad b. Isma‘il b. Ja‘far, their seventh *imam*, and Imam ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimid dynasty (see H.F. al-Hamdani, *On the genealogy of Fatimid caliphs*, Cairo 1958, text 11-14).

In the aftermath of the Nizari-Musta‘li schism of 487/1094 CE in Isma‘ilism, the early Nizari Isma‘ilis experienced another period of *satr*, when their *imams*, descendants of Imam Nizar b. al-Mustansir (d. 488/1095 CE), remained concealed for several decades. The inaccessible Nizari *imams* were now once again represented by *hujdjas*, starting with Hasan-i Sabbah, who also ruled over the Nizari state from Alamut. The period of *satr* in early Nizari history ended in 559/1164 CE with the open emergence of the Nizari imamate. Subsequently, the term *satr* acquired a new meaning for the Nizaris. As explained by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the Nizaris had by the late Alamut period formulated what may be called a new doctrine of *satr*. In this context, *satr* no longer referred to the physical concealment of the *imams*; instead, it referred to a time when spiritual reality or religious truths (*haqa'iq*) were hidden in the *batin* of religion, requiring the observance of *taqiyya*.

The Musta‘li Isma‘ilis, who survived only in the Tayyibi form after the downfall of the Fatimid dynasty, have experienced a period of *satr*, since their twentieth *imam*, al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah, was murdered in 524/1130 CE. It is the belief of the Tayyibi Isma‘ilis that all their *imams*, starting with al-Amir’s son al-Tayyib, who disappeared in infancy, have remained hidden to the present day. In their absence, *da'i mutlaks*, or supreme *da'is*, have led the affairs of the Tayyibiyya.

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Satr found expression also in the Isma‘ilis’ cyclical conception of religious history of humankind. The Isma‘ilis believed from early on that this hiero-history was comprised of seven eras or *dawrs*, all except the last one being eras of *satr*, because the inner truths of religions or the *haqa’iq* remained undisclosed. In this scheme, only in the seventh and final eschatological era initiated by the *qa’im* before the end of the physical world, would the *haqa’iq* be fully revealed to humankind. This final age, designated as the *dawr al-kashf* or the era of manifestation, would be an age of pure spiritual knowledge when there would no longer be any distinction between the *zahir* and *batin* dimensions of religion, and between religious laws and their inner meanings. On the basis of astronomical calculations, the *Tayyibis* of Yaman introduced further innovations into this cyclical scheme. They conceived of a grand aeon (*kawr al-a‘zam*) composed of countless cycles, each one divided into seven eras. This grand aeon would progress through successive cycles of concealment (*satr*) and manifestation (*kashf*), and it would be finally concluded by the Great Resurrection (*qiyamat al-qiyamat*) proclaimed by the final *qa’im*.

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