

Introduction

One of the most remarkable transformations in Islamic studies during the twentieth century has been in the understanding of Ismailism. As a result of the pioneering work of many scholars, especially since the 1930s, there has been rapid progress in the study of Ismaili history and thought, and a fundamental re-evaluation of the Ismaili contributions to the intellectual and cultural development of Islam. But in spite of this decisive achievement, there are many aspects of Ismailism which remain obscure or have received insufficient attention in scholarly enquiry. One such area concerns the poetic tradition of the Ismailis, the investigation of which has been on the whole limited and fragmentary. This gap is surprising in view of the large corpus of Ismaili poetic literature which exists, and the fact that some of the foremost Ismaili thinkers were adept at writing in both prose and poetry.¹

To be sure, a promising start has been made in recent decades with the publication of critical editions of some Ismaili poetic works and specialized studies on the devotional poetry of Ismailis in the Indian subcontinent. But with the exception of a few poets such as Nasir-i Khusraw, whose works have been partially translated, much of this literature remains inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the original languages in which it was composed. It is to address this situation that the reader is offered here for the first time a compilation of Ismaili poems and verses from Arabic and Persian in English translation. This anthology is intended, among other things, to demonstrate the poetic achievements of the Ismailis in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Central Asia over a period of more than a thousand years.

The majority of the poems in this volume are religious and

devotional in character, although it should be noted that the Ismaili poetic tradition is not concerned exclusively with the expression of religious and moral sentiments. The predominance of the spiritual element, however, requires that any examination of Ismaili poetry be situated within the general context of religious poetry in Islam, for it is only in relation to the larger tradition that it can be properly assessed.

The earliest examples of religious poetry in Islam are to be found in the verses of a small group of poets who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. The most reputed of these was Hassan ibn Thabit (d. c. 50/669) whose poems in praise of the Prophet and his companions performed an important role in counteracting the hostile verses of the Qurayshi poets who were opposed to him. Hassan's poetry was motivated by a personal reverence for the Prophet, but it was also intended to champion the new social and religious order inaugurated by the Prophet and to denigrate the cause of his enemies and detractors, as was customary in the poetic discourse of pre-Islamic Arabia. In the years following the Prophet's death in 11/632, a number of his companions and their associates are also known to have composed eulogies in his memory or occasional verses inspired by passages of the Qur'an.²

With the rise of the Umayyad dynasty in 41/661, a kind of religio-political verse emerged among various social and religious groups who were disaffected by the new regime. The poetry of the Kharijis, which has survived only in a fragmentary form, is notable for its militant rhetoric and passion for martyrdom. A less combative and more devotional note is found in the poetical writings of the early Shi'i groupings, such as the Kaysanis and the Zaydis. Among their leading poets were Kuthayyir 'Azza (d. 105/723-4) and al-Sayyid al-Himyari (d. 171/787-8). But the most talented was al-Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Asadi (d. 126/743), who was imprisoned by the Umayyads and later murdered in mysterious circumstances. The poems of al-Kumayt are highly regarded by the Shi'is, in particular his lengthy composition, *al-Hashimiyyat*, which is among the earliest literary records of a distinctive Muslim piety focused upon devotion to the *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet and his family.³

Introduction

One of the interesting features of Arabic poetry in the first two centuries of Islam is that it was largely non-religious in outlook. Although most of the poets who flourished under the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid dynasties made occasional use of Islamic imagery and religious ideas in their verses, they were largely preoccupied by the themes typified in the main genres of classical Arabic poetry such as the panegyric or praise-poem (*madih*), love lyrics (*ghazal*), hunting poems (*tardiyyat*), wine songs (*khamriyyat*), polemics (*naqa'id*) and satire (*hija'*). In fact, religious or ascetical verses as such (*zuhdiyyat*) constituted a small portion of the enormous output of poetry in this period, and Arabic literary theory of the time does not seem to have recognized the religious element as a distinctive poetic motif.

The development of a substantive tradition of religious poetry in Islam is associated with the emergence in the second half of the second/eighth century of a complex, widespread movement for moral and religious reform. It arose partly in reaction to what was generally perceived as the worldly character of the Umayyad ruling class, but essentially it was the outcome of the increasing integration of Islam in social life. This process intensified after the 'Abbasid revolution of 132/750, when different theological and legal schools began to be formulated and the various communities of Islam started to acquire their identities. Another important feature of the religious and cultural transformation of Muslim society during this period was the growing interest in the spiritual and mystical life of Islam which later came to be known as *tasawwuf* or Sufism. It is from the second century of the Islamic era that we have some of the early evidence of individuals seeking a more personal and interiorized experience of faith, and it was out of this engagement that there appeared amongst them a highly introspective, intensely personal kind of religious poetry.⁴

The new religious poetry was at first deeply austere and puritanical, reflecting the ascetical, self-denying lives of the poets. Their consciousness was dominated by the fear of God and renunciation of the world, as in the writings of Abu'l-Atahiya (d. 210/826), who is regarded as the first religious poet of genius in Islam. The same disposition is also found in the epigrammatic verses of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801), the famous woman mystic of Basra, although it was

tempered by a spirit of devotional love. In the next century, however, the fear of God and His wrath in the hereafter gave way to the personal love of Him and a quest for divine union in this world. The finest expressions of this development are found in the mystical love-poems of Dhu'l-Nun the Egyptian (d. 246/861), and the enigmatic verses of Mansur al-Hallaj, who was crucified in Baghdad in 309/922 on spurious charges of having claimed, among other things, divinity for himself.

In the last years of his imprisonment, al-Hallaj composed his famous prose-poem, the *Kitab al-tawasin*, which contains a eulogic description of the Prophet Muhammad as the pre-eternal light of prophecy issuing from the divine effulgence.⁵ This is considered to be the first reference in Sufi literature to a motif that was already well-established in early Shi'i tradition and poetic literature of the first century. It provided a fresh impetus to the development of the *na'itiyya*, poems in honour and praise of the Prophet, which later became perhaps the most popular genre of religious poetry in all the languages and cultures of Islam. It was partly through this medium that the veneration of the Prophet became an essential part of Muslim piety and a strong uniting force among Muslims to this day.⁶

In the two centuries after the death of Mansur al-Hallaj, there appears to have been a certain sparsity in the creation of exceptional mystical verse, although Sufism as a way of life began to spread widely in the Muslim world and some of the classical works of theoretical Sufism were produced in this period. It was not until the sixth/twelfth century that the Sufi poets, reinvigorated by new ideas and fresh creative impulses, began to compose some of the most original and outstanding mystical poetry in Islamic literature. This achievement is best depicted in the works of Ibn al-Farid (d. 632/1235) and Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240) writing in Arabic, as well as the Persian poetry of Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. c. 622/1225) and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 672/1273), the latter acknowledged as the world's greatest mystical poet.

Unlike the earlier period, the Sufi prose and poetry of the new phase has a pronounced theosophical and metaphysical outlook. While the quest for divine love and union continues to dominate everything

Introduction

else, there is an intensification in the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, who acquires a special ontological status as the perfect man, associated with the divine word and the primordial light of the universe. The major works of Sufi literature from this time also exhibit a profound resonance with Shi'i esoteric and spiritual ideas. The relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism is one of the larger issues of Islamic cultural history which has yet to be investigated fully. Although a number of specialized studies have examined the seminal role of the early Shi'i Imams, especially Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), in the formative period of Sufism, we know very little of the precise modes of interface and transmission between them.⁷

The close association of Shi'ism and Sufism was undoubtedly encouraged by the momentous political and cultural changes of the fourth and fifth centuries, when the 'Abbasid empire became fragmented into autonomous or independent states and a reconfigured, multi-cultural social order emerged in the Muslim world. The Shi'is gained political ascendancy in North Africa, Egypt and Syria under the Fatimid Ismailis, and in Iran and Iraq under the pro-Shi'i Buwayhid dynasty. These circumstances led to a renaissance of Shi'i learning and literature in Arabic and Persian, the intellectual and cultural significance of which is often not recognized in modern scholarship. The poetic expression of the Shi'i devotional spirit acquired its classical form in the works of the Ismaili poets Ibn Hani (d. 362/973) and Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072), and the eminent Twelver Shi'i poet and scholar, al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 406/1015). There also appeared a new genre of religious poetry among the Shi'is, the intensely mournful *marthiya* or elegy, to commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husayn, at Karbala in 61/680.

The most organized and energetic of the Shi'i communities in the third and fourth centuries were the Ismailis who, as reported by historians and heresiographers of the time, commanded popular support in many parts of the Muslim world. The Ismailis offered a dynamic and progressive vision of social reform, with a sophisticated system of religious and philosophical thought based upon an esoteric understanding of the inner meaning of the Qur'an. The vigorous expansion

of Ismailism was largely due to the *da'is*, the missionaries of the Ismaili *da'wa* organization. Although not much is known about its earliest history, the *da'wa* was centrally directed from Syria in the middle of the third/ninth century and thereafter spread rapidly in Iraq, eastern Arabia, Iran, Transoxania, Yemen and North Africa. By 297/909, the Ismailis had successfully established the nucleus of a Fatimid state in Ifriqiya, which was subsequently extended to the whole of North Africa, Sicily, Egypt and the Hijaz.

In the meagre volume of Ismaili literature that has survived from the early period before the Fatimids transferred their headquarters to Egypt there is very little poetic writing. An example of the few pieces that have remained is a series of poems by the *da'i* Ja'far ibn Mansur al-Yaman celebrating Fatimid victories in North Africa in 335/947. There is also a long philosophical *qasida* composed by Abu'l-Haytham al-Jurjani in the first half of the same century, which is among the earliest examples of religious verse in Persian literature. The fact that this poem consists of a series of questions on doctrinal issues, which a century later inspired Nasir-i Khusraw to write one of his major philosophical treatises, indicates that poetry was an important medium of intellectual discourse among the early Ismailis.⁸

From the beginning of their rule and in particular after the occupation of Egypt in 358/969, the Fatimid Imam-caliphs concerned themselves with social reform, the promotion of the arts and the sciences, the construction of mosques, colleges and libraries, and other public projects. The centerpiece of this programme was the foundation of Cairo which became the new capital city of the Fatimids, and the establishment of al-Azhar as its principal mosque and educational complex. The Fatimid encouragement of intellectual and cultural expression attracted numerous scholars, writers, poets and artists to Egypt. Indeed, at the height of its power and prosperity, Fatimid Cairo rivalled 'Abbasid Baghdad as much in the vitality of its cultural life as for political supremacy in the world of Islam.

Among the arts, the cultivation of poetry was especially encouraged by the Imams, several of whom are known to have composed their own poems. As was customary with most ruling Muslim dynasties, the Fatimids maintained a retinue of professional poets, ranked

Introduction

according to their skills, who performed an important role in court ritual and public ceremonial. The most famous of the court poets was Muhammad ibn Hani al-Andalusi who entered the service of the Fatimids in 347/958 after fleeing from anti-Ismaili persecution in Umayyad Spain. Ibn Hani was reputed as the foremost Arabic poet of the Maghrib and his poetry was widely admired by Ismailis and non-Ismailis alike from Cordova to Baghdad. As the official poet-laureate of two Imams, al-Mansur and al-Mu'izz, Ibn Hani was called upon to expound upon a variety of political, military and religious themes in support of the Fatimids. But he had a strong religious conviction and the devotional spirit runs deep through all his poetry. As the following lines demonstrate, Ibn Hani was well-versed in Ismaili thought and he was devoted to the house of the Prophet, in whose honour he composed poems of remarkable power and beauty:

Command what you will,
not what the fates ordain,
for you are the one,
the overpowering one...

You are the one through
whose love and affection,
salvation is foreseen
and our burdens removed.

You are the one on whose
intercession we depend
when tomorrow brings forth
the Day of Resurrection.

You are the one in whose
presence the fire of hell
would at once flicker out
if it were to see you.

All glory belongs to
the progeny of Ahmad:
what is not ascribed to them
is empty of glory!

There is scarce information about the other court poets who flourished under the patronage of the Fatimids. A large portion of their works seems to have perished in the destruction of Cairo's famed libraries

which followed the collapse of the Fatimid state in 567/1171. But there survives the collection of another poet who was a contemporary of Ibn Hani, namely Amir Tamim al-Fatimi (d. 374/984), the eldest son of Imam al-Mu'izz and brother of his successor, Imam al-'Aziz. The poet-prince was a highly accomplished composer of romantic as well as religious verses, which are notable for the way they combine a celebration of human life, love and nature, with deep loyalty and affection for the Imams.

The religious ethos underlying Fatimid court poetry was intimately linked to the spiritual status of the Imam-caliphs and the devotional attitude of the poets towards them. In keeping with their general policy of intellectual and religious tolerance, the Fatimids saw no reason to dictate literary taste to the population at large, but it seems that the poetry which flourished under their rule had a more pronounced devotional spirit the nearer it approached the domain of the court. This aspect is less conspicuous in those poets who were only peripherally attached to the court, such as Abu Raqa'maq (d. 399/1008) who wrote panegyrics for his patron, Ya'qub ibn Killis, the famous *wazir* of Imam al-'Aziz, and Zafir al-Haddad (d. 529/1135), the blacksmith-poet whose verses were much admired by the governor of Alexandria. There were also other poets popular in the streets of Cairo and Damascus who were concerned mainly with non-religious themes of the kind commonplace elsewhere in the Muslim world.⁹

The most significant development in Fatimid poetry after Ibn Hani came not from the environs of the court or the bazaars of Cairo but from the ranks of the Ismaili *da'wa*. In the Fatimid state, the *da'wa* constituted a centralized religious organization parallel to the administrative and military hierarchies of government. Only men of outstanding personality, intelligence and loyalty to the Imam would become *da'is*, usually after intensive training in the Islamic sciences and Ismaili thought. The fact that virtually all the major thinkers, writers and poets in Ismaili literature were associated with the *da'wa* is a measure of the immense intellectual strength and creativity of this institution.

We know very little about the programme for training of the *da'is*

Introduction

in the higher institutions of learning established by the Fatimids, such as al-Azhar and the Dar al-'Ilm. But since a mastery of Arabic language and philology was an essential requirement for the *da'is*, it is likely that poetics too featured in their studies. There is some evidence that the *da'wa* regarded the poetic medium as an important means of religious and moral education. This is indicated by the existence in Fatimid literature of a number of popular versified treatises called *urjuza* on the basic tenets of the Ismaili faith. Indeed, the most prominent judge and jurist who served under four Fatimid caliphs, al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363/974) himself produced a book on the principles of Ismaili jurisprudence in verse.

But this is not to say that the *da'is* who composed poetry were primarily concerned with instruction or that their main purpose, as some scholars have presumed, was to spread Fatimid political and religious propaganda. These poets were not really concerned with the expression of a systematic, doctrinally modulated account of Ismaili religious and political thought. Unlike Fatimid scholastic literature which usually conformed to well-defined norms of doctrinal acceptability, the poetry was essentially shaped by the personal feelings and responses of the poets, above all by their devotion to the Imams. It was rooted in and grew out of their encounter with questions of life, faith and destiny, and their quest for spiritual enlightenment.

This point is illustrated by no less a figure than al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 470/1078), the distinguished chief *da'i* of Imam al-Mustansir, whose writings include a *Diwan* of religious poems. Like Ibn Hani, he too had escaped persecution in his native Persia to serve the Fatimids in Egypt. Al-Mu'ayyad is more renowned in Ismaili studies for his theological lectures and diplomatic skills than for the poetry he composed, which is probably because it has not yet been studied seriously. Al-Mu'ayyad's poems are significant for the thoroughgoing religiosity by which he sets them apart from the political and ceremonial poetry of the court, as well as from the hedonistic inclinations of the plebeian poets. The deeply personal and devotional character of much of his poetry is evident in verses such as these:

Shimmering Light

Alas, my intellect
has become overcome
and oppressed by
the evil of desire.

Woe to me because
I have wronged myself;
I am beyond neither
blame nor reproach.

O why did I waste
my life when the path
of guidance was open
and spacious to me?

And why did I lose
the light by which
I am related to
the close and noble ones?

Another outstanding Ismaili poet, one who became a close friend of al-Mu'ayyad, was his fellow countryman Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072) who visited Cairo for a few years, but spent most of his adult life as a senior Ismaili *da'i* in a remote part of Badakhshan in Central Asia. Here, he wrote his major philosophical works as well as the poems for which he is equally celebrated. Nasir is considered one of the pioneers of Persian prose and poetry, and his writings have had a profound and lasting influence to this day on the Ismaili communities of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and northern Pakistan.

It is in the *Diwan* of Nasir-i Khusraw that we find perhaps the quintessential expression of Ismaili religious sensibility in poetic form. It is at once contemplative and moralistic, spiritual and philosophical, esoteric and rationalistic, ascetical and mystical. There is also a certain melancholia and world-weariness in his poems, probably arising from his bitter experience of religious persecution over many years. In this attitude as expressed in the following lines, Nasir's work is reminiscent of the critical discontent of the blind poet-philosopher Abu'l-'Ala al-Ma'arri (d. 449/1057), with whom Nasir became acquainted while on his way to Egypt and who later engaged in a vigorous correspondence with al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi on the subject of vegetarianism.¹⁰

Introduction

O do not make business with this world
which takes from you a cloak for a needle!

I sought its company but found no profit
from it because it wore me down.

If you cannot escape its friendship,
how can you be liberated from yourself?

Woe to the one who is imprisoned by himself!
May he be bankrupt in both the worlds!

This world is the internment of hearts:
throw away the trapdoor from your hearts!

Your abode is not here but in another
world which is brilliant and everlasting.

The Fatimid state entered a period of terminal decline in the fifth/eleventh century as a result of recurrent economic crises, increasing military interventions in the political and religious affairs of the state, and a major schism among the Ismailis over succession to the Imamate which led to the division of the community between the Must'alis and the Nizaris. At the same time, the eastern Ismailis of Iran and Syria were coming under severe persecution from the Seljuqs, who had taken effective control of the 'Abbasid state. It was in these circumstances that towards the end of the century the Persian Ismailis, who were then under the leadership of the *da'i* Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 518/1124), acquired the fortress of Alamut and a number of other mountainous strongholds in Iran and later Syria, which came to constitute the territories of an Ismaili state. The long military struggle that ensued for almost a century between the Ismailis and the Seljuqs was one of the most turbulent periods in Ismaili history and later became a focus of fabulous stories and legends in medieval European literature.¹¹

It is typical of the intellectual concern of the Persian Ismailis that in spite of the difficult and precarious circumstances of their lives, they maintained libraries at Alamut and other fortresses, encouraged scholarly and literary activity, and provided refuge to many non-Ismaili Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers fleeing from the Mongol invasions of Central Asia. However, almost all the literature of this period was lost when the Mongols overwhelmed the Ismaili fortresses of Iran in

Shimmering Light

654/1256 and set their libraries ablaze. The writings which have survived from the Alamut period include some verses such as the following lines by Ra'is Hasan, which provide a fleeting and poignant testimony to the extraordinary times in which the Ismailis lived, their experiences of hope and despair, their reflections on individual acts of heroism and collective tragedy, and the inspiration of the faith which sustained them:

O brothers! When the blessed time
comes and the good fortune of
both the worlds accompanies us,
the king who possesses more than
a hundred thousand horsemen will
be frightened of a single warrior.
But it is also possible that when
our good fortune is on the wane,
our spring will turn into autumn
and the autumn into – spring!

In the aftermath of the Mongol invasions, many of the Ismailis who survived the widespread persecution which followed the destruction of their fortresses were obliged to flee Iran or to conceal their identities by associating themselves with diverse Sufi groups. Hence, it is not surprising that there is almost a complete dearth of Ismaili literature in Persian for almost 200 years. The only substantial work by an Ismaili from this bleak period is the poetry of Nizari Quhistani (d. 720/1320). As an educated and ambitious man, it seems that Nizari was able to adapt himself quite successfully to the new social order, since he worked for many years in a local Sunni court as a professional poet and administrator. His poetical works, consisting in the main of a *Divan* and several long *Mathnawis*, have barely received any scholarly attention except in Russia. Leaving aside the panegyrics he composed for the local rulers, Nizari's poetry is notable for its expression of Ismaili religious sentiment in the mystical vocabulary of the Sufis. It is sometimes compared to the verses of the great lyrical poet of Persia, Hafiz (d. c. 792/1390), because of the metaphorical ambiguity of its love and wine symbolism.

Nizari's writings are the earliest literary example of what Ivanow called the "coalescence" of Persian Ismailism and Sufism that com-

Introduction

menced after the Mongol invasions. In this period of over 600 years, the Persian-speaking Ismaili writers of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia resorted to forms of expression which were more closely associated with the Sufis. If Nizari was the first Ismaili writer to make extensive use of Sufi terminology, his case anticipated the even more intensive convergence between Sufism and Shi'ism in Persian culture that occurred in the following centuries. This relationship is reflected not only in the writings of Ismaili authors but also in the poetic and philosophical literature of Twelver Shi'ism. The interface of Shi'ism and Sufism was an elaborate and complex process, of which no detailed study has been undertaken to date. Indeed, so all-pervasive and mutually enriching was this association that, as noted by both Ivanow and Corbin, it is sometimes impossible to tell whether a particular text is of Sufi or Ismaili origin. This is the case, for example, with one of the most popular versified manuals of Persian Sufism, the *Gulshan-i raz* (*Rose-garden of Mystery*) by Mahmud-i Shabistari, a contemporary of Nizari Quhistani whose work incorporates many Ismaili ideas.¹²

Since Ivanow's early researches in Persian Ismailism, it has been taken for granted that the Ismaili writers resorted to Sufism as a means of camouflaging their doctrines in accordance with the age-old Shi'i principle of *taqiyya* or dissimulation of faith. However, this argument fails to discriminate *taqiyya* as a precautionary measure for survival from its function in preserving the *haqa'iq* or esoteric teachings of the Ismailis from those who were unprepared for, or likely to misunderstand, this knowledge. As a general rule, the Ismailis, in common with most Sufi *tariqas*, eschewed the recording of their doctrines in the exoteric sense and revealed the esoteric to only those who had reached the appropriate level of understanding. It is in this sense of *taqiyya* as esoteric prudence that the following lines by Nizari Quhistani are to be understood:

O Nizari! You have forgotten the secret of
the "deaf and dumb",
otherwise you would not read such discourses
to one born blind.
How is it possible to open an oyster before
the blind,

Shimmering Light

as if you are offering saffron with hay to
a herd of cows?

It is indeed the case that often in times of political persecution the Ismailis were obliged to conceal their identities, but there is no evidence that their application of *taqiyya* in the literary domain ever involved the deliberate interpolation of texts with an extraneous vocabulary. Thus, Nizari Quhistani's compositions in the Sufi style can be explained in terms of the deep and lasting transformation of poetic language in Persian that took place after the Mongol invasions. This premise is supported by the fact that when Shi'ism later became the state religion of Iran and the Ismailis were able to reassert their identity more openly, they continued to retain the mystical lexicon of Sufism in their literature.

In a more substantive sense, the Shi'i-Sufi association can be understood in terms of the fundamental unity and continuum of esoteric Islam. The esoteric tradition entered Islamic intellectual thought and spiritual life from a very early period through a variety of sources and subsequently emerged in the form of an ecumenical mysticism acceptable to a majority of Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'i. The close inter-relationship between the Ismailis and the Sufis may therefore be viewed as a re-convergence of springs arising from the same spiritual fountainhead. Doubtless that is why the works of some of the outstanding poets of Persian Sufism, such as Sana'i, 'Attar and Rumi, have been appropriated by the Ismailis into their tradition. This spiritual affinity is demonstrated in the following lines by Rumi:

The sovereign of wisdom and religion was Ali,
the one prostrating to God and prostrated to by
the angels was Ali.

The light-spreading sun and king of the two worlds,
the moon in the sphere of gift and generosity
was Ali.¹³

It was not until the tenth/sixteenth century when Shi'ism became widespread in Persia under the Shi'i Safawid dynasty that the Ismailis were able to declare their religious allegiance openly and emerge once

Introduction

The complex origins, authorship, transmission and recording of the *ginans* have been subjected to intense research by Ismaili and other scholars in recent years.¹⁴ Clearly, the eclectic and syncretic nature of the *ginans* cannot be understood outside the particular features of medieval Indo-Muslim culture. The spread of Ismailism was part of a much larger advance of Islam throughout the Indian subcontinent that was spearheaded by Sufi orders and a regular influx of poets, writers and thinkers from Persia. The intensive cultural interface of Islam and local religious cultures led to the growth of a substantial body of popular religious poetry in the vernacular that intermingled Sufi and Bhakti elements, and was often shared by various local groups, including the Ismailis, as a collective folk tradition.

The Ismaili poetic literature, whether in Arabic, Persian or Indic languages, is generally of limited value as a source of information about the history, doctrines or liturgy of the community at particular times and places. But as is well known in the field of cultural anthropology, the poetic tradition of a people can provide useful insights into their perceptions of social reality and their self-image in relation to others. If Ismaili poetry is thus conceived as an expression of shared communal experience, then it must reflect the fundamental structures of that experience. The uncovering of these patterns and relationships, especially through phenomenological and structuralist modes of enquiry, can help to shed new light on the development of Ismaili religious life and thought.

Indeed, it is by way of the intrinsic study of Ismaili poetry that we may be able to address one of the central questions that has engaged modern scholars in Ismaili studies. Given that the Ismailis have always been a minority community of Islam, often subject to political and religious persecution and unable to practise their faith openly, what was it that enabled them to preserve their individuality and integrity as Ismailis? How were they able to sustain their identity and consciousness through the vicissitudes of history?¹⁵ In this connection, the Ismaili poetic tradition must surely represent a primary area of investigation because of its pivotal role in the formation of various Ismaili communities and as a continuing source of inspiration in their spiritual life to the present day.

Shimmering Light

as if you are offering saffron with hay to
a herd of cows?

It is indeed the case that often in times of political persecution the Ismailis were obliged to conceal their identities, but there is no evidence that their application of *taqiyya* in the literary domain ever involved the deliberate interpolation of texts with an extraneous vocabulary. Thus, Nizari Quhistani's compositions in the Sufi style can be explained in terms of the deep and lasting transformation of poetic language in Persian that took place after the Mongol invasions. This premise is supported by the fact that when Shi'ism later became the state religion of Iran and the Ismailis were able to reassert their identity more openly, they continued to retain the mystical lexicon of Sufism in their literature.

In a more substantive sense, the Shi'i-Sufi association can be understood in terms of the fundamental unity and continuum of esoteric Islam. The esoteric tradition entered Islamic intellectual thought and spiritual life from a very early period through a variety of sources and subsequently emerged in the form of an ecumenical mysticism acceptable to a majority of Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'i. The close inter-relationship between the Ismailis and the Sufis may therefore be viewed as a re-convergence of springs arising from the same spiritual fountainhead. Doubtless that is why the works of some of the outstanding poets of Persian Sufism, such as Sana'i, 'Attar and Rumi, have been appropriated by the Ismailis into their tradition. This spiritual affinity is demonstrated in the following lines by Rumi:

The sovereign of wisdom and religion was Ali,
the one prostrating to God and prostrated to by
the angels was Ali.

The light-spreading sun and king of the two worlds,
the moon in the sphere of gift and generosity
was Ali.¹³

It was not until the tenth/sixteenth century when Shi'ism became widespread in Persia under the Shi'i Safawid dynasty that the Ismailis were able to declare their religious allegiance openly and emerge once

Introduction

The complex origins, authorship, transmission and recording of the *ginans* have been subjected to intense research by Ismaili and other scholars in recent years.¹⁴ Clearly, the eclectic and syncretic nature of the *ginans* cannot be understood outside the particular features of medieval Indo-Muslim culture. The spread of Ismailism was part of a much larger advance of Islam throughout the Indian subcontinent that was spearheaded by Sufi orders and a regular influx of poets, writers and thinkers from Persia. The intensive cultural interface of Islam and local religious cultures led to the growth of a substantial body of popular religious poetry in the vernacular that intermingled Sufi and Bhakti elements, and was often shared by various local groups, including the Ismailis, as a collective folk tradition.

The Ismaili poetic literature, whether in Arabic, Persian or Indic languages, is generally of limited value as a source of information about the history, doctrines or liturgy of the community at particular times and places. But as is well known in the field of cultural anthropology, the poetic tradition of a people can provide useful insights into their perceptions of social reality and their self-image in relation to others. If Ismaili poetry is thus conceived as an expression of shared communal experience, then it must reflect the fundamental structures of that experience. The uncovering of these patterns and relationships, especially through phenomenological and structuralist modes of enquiry, can help to shed new light on the development of Ismaili religious life and thought.

Indeed, it is by way of the intrinsic study of Ismaili poetry that we may be able to address one of the central questions that has engaged modern scholars in Ismaili studies. Given that the Ismailis have always been a minority community of Islam, often subject to political and religious persecution and unable to practise their faith openly, what was it that enabled them to preserve their individuality and integrity as Ismailis? How were they able to sustain their identity and consciousness through the vicissitudes of history?¹⁵ In this connection, the Ismaili poetic tradition must surely represent a primary area of investigation because of its pivotal role in the formation of various Ismaili communities and as a continuing source of inspiration in their spiritual life to the present day.

Shimmering Light

This publication is a compilation of some of the shorter poems and verses of the leading Ismaili poets who composed in Arabic or Persian. It does not include a sample of devotional poetry from the Indian subcontinent, nor of the substantial poetic literature of the Ismailis in Tajistikan which has become accessible only recently and is largely in manuscript form. In selecting, translating and interpreting the poems, the aim has been to convey the spirit of Ismaili poetic sensibility in a manner accessible to both the general and the specialist reader in modern English, and in accordance with some of the poetic conventions of the English language. The anthology also contains brief biographical accounts of the poets, as well as explanatory endnotes which are confined mainly to allusions and references to the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and technical terms used by the poets.

NOTES

1. The most comprehensive account of Ismailism and developments in Ismaili studies is provided by Farhad Daftary in his *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990). The standard bibliographical surveys of Ismaili literature are by Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Isma'ili Literature* (Malibu, Ca., 1977), and W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey* (Tehran, 1963).
2. On the beginnings of religious poetry in Islam and the Prophet's attitude to poetry in general, see Gustave von Grunebaum, "The Early Development of Islamic Religious Poetry", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 60 (1940), pp. 23-9; Francesco Gabrieli, "Religious Poetry in Early Islam", in G.E. von Grunebaum, ed., *Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development* (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 5-17; and James A. Bellamy, "The Impact of Islam on Early Arabic Poetry", in Alford T. Welch and Pierre Cachia, eds, *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 141-67.
3. A succinct review of the religio-political verses of the early Shi'i and Khariji movements in the time of the Umayyads and early 'Abbasids is given by Salma K. Jayyusi, "Umayyad Poetry", in A.F.L. Beeston et al., eds, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 387-432, and R. Rubinacci, "Political Poetry", in Julia Ashtiany et al., eds, *The Cambridge*

Introduction

- History of Arabic Literature: Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 185–201. See also Wilferd Madelung, "The 'Hashimiyyat' of al-Kumayt and Hashimi Shi'ism", in his *Religions and Ethnic Movements in Medieval Islam* (London, 1992), article V.
4. For a general account of the development of Islamic religious and mystical poetry, see Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York, 1982).
 5. An English translation of the *Kitab al-tawasin* appears in Louis Massignon's monumental and penetrating study, *The Passion of Mansur al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, tr. Herbert Mason (Princeton, 1982), vol. 3, pp. 279–327.
 6. The development of poetry in honour and praise of the Prophet is examined by Annemarie Schimmel in her *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985), especially pp. 176–215.
 7. On the connection between Shi'ism and Sufism see Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, tr. L. Sherrard (London, 1993), pp. 28–30, 188–90; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Shi'ism and Sufism: Their Relationship in Essence and in History", in his *Sufi Essays* (New York, 1977), pp. 104–120; and J.B. Taylor, "Ja'far al-Sadiq, Spiritual Forbear of the Sufis", *Islamic Culture*, 40 (1966), pp. 97–113.
 8. S.M. Stern, "Ja'far ibn Mansur al-Yaman's Poems on the Rebellion of Abu Yazid", in his *Studies in Early Isma'ilism* (Jerusalem–Leiden, 1983), pp. 146–152; H. Corbin and M. Mu'in, eds. *Commentaire de la qasida ismaélienne d'Abu'l-Haitham Jorjani* (Tehran–Paris, 1955).
 9. On aspects of Fatimid poetry, see the following articles by Pieter Smoor: "Fatimid Poets and the 'Takhallus' that Bridges the Nights of Time to the Imam of the Time", *Der Islam*, 68 (1991), pp. 232–62; "Wine, Love and Praise for the Fatimid Imam, the Enlightened of God", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 142 (1992), pp. 90–104, and "The Poet's House: Fiction and Reality in the Works of the Fatimid Poets", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 10 (1992–93), pp. 45–62.
 10. The most recent translations of Nasir-i Khusraw's poems in English are by Annemarie Schimmel, *Make a Shield from Wisdom: Selected Verses from Nasir-i Khusraw's Divan* (London, 1993), and Peter Lamborn Wilson and Gholam Reza Aavani, *Nasir-i Khusraw: Forty Poems from the Divan* (Tehran, 1977). See also E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia, from Firdaws to Sa'di* (Cambridge, 1906), pp. 218–46.
 11. The origins and dissemination of these imaginative narratives are investigated in detail by Farhad Daftary in his *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (London, 1994).
 12. See Mahmud-i Shabistari, *Gulshan-i raz*, ed. and tr. E.H. Whinfield (London, 1880), and the comments of Corbin, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 95, and Ivanow, *Isma'ili Literature*, p. 130.

Shimmering Light

13. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Kulliyat-i Shams Tabrizi* (Lucknow, 1930), vol.1, p. 219.
14. For a discussion of the historical and cultural matrix of the *ginans*, see Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent* (Delmar, NY, 1978); Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans* (London, 1992), which includes a selection of the poems in translation; as well as Ali Asani, "The Ginan Literature of the Ismailis of Indo-Pakistan: Its Origins, Characteristics and Themes", in Diana L. Eck and François Mallison, eds, *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India* (Gröningen-Paris, 1991), pp. 1-18, and "The Ismaili Ginans as Devotional Literature", in R.S. McGregor, ed., *Devotional Literature in South Asia* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 101-12.
15. See, for instance, Ivanow's introduction to his *Ismaili Literature*, pp. 1-16.