The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Ismaili Studies: Background and Modern Developments

Farhad Daftary

Abstract

For most of their history, the Ismailis have been studied almost exclusively on the basis of evidence provided by their enemies, but the last few decades have seen significant changes. Dr. Daftary outlines the development of the myths surrounding the Ismailis and focuses on the deconstruction of these fabrications, emphasising the positive direction in which Ismaili studies has been moving in recent years. A new generation of scholars have continued to build upon the work of pioneering scholars and some key discoveries, generating new perspectives from which to study the history of Ismailism.

Key Words

Shi'i, Nizari Ismaili, Ismailism, Ismaili Studies, Sunni, Assassin legends, Black legend, Old Man of the Mountain, Marco Polo, orientalist scholarship, manuscripts.

The Origins of the Myths

In the course of their long and complex history, dating to the formative period of Islam, the Ismailis have often been accused of various heretical teachings and practices and a multitude of myths and misconceptions have circulated about them. This is mainly because the Ismailis were, until the middle of the twentieth century, studied and evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of the evidence collected or fabricated by their enemies. As a Shi'i community that upheld the right of the 'Alid imams to the caliphate, the Ismailis, from early on, aroused the hostility of the Sunni Abbasids. With the foundation of the Fatimid state in 909 CE, the Ismailis posed a challenge to the established order and, thereupon, the Abbasid caliphs and the Sunni *ulama* launched what amounted to an official anti-Ismaili propaganda campaign. The overall objective of this systematic and prolonged campaign was to discredit the entire Ismaili movement from its origins so that the Ismailis could be readily condemned as *malahida*, heretics or deviators from the true religious path. Anti-Ismaili writings provided a major source of information for Sunni scholars and heresiographers, such as al-Baghdadi (d. 1037), who produced another important category of writing against the Ismailis.

The Black Legend

A number of polemicists, starting with Ibn Rizam in the first half of the 10th century, fabricated travesties in which they attributed a variety of shocking beliefs and practices to the Ismailis. These forgeries circulated as genuine Ismaili writing and were used as source materials by subsequent generations. By spreading a variety of defamations and even forged accounts, the anti-Ismaili authors, in fact, produced a "black legend" in the course of the 10th century. Ismailism was now erroneously depicted as the arch-heresy of Islam, carefully designed by some non-'Alid impostors, or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, aiming at destroying Islam from within. By the 11th century, this elaborate "black legend" had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of Ismaili motives, beliefs and practices.

The emergence of the Persian Ismaili state in the 1090s, led by Hasan Sabbah (d. 1124), within the domain of the Saljuq Turks, the new overlords of the Abbasids, brought about another vigorous reaction against the Ismailis in general and the Nizari Ismailis in particular. Hasan Sabbah championed the cause of the Nizari branch of Ismailism and founded a state centred at the fortress of Alamut in northern Iran with a subsidiary state in Syria. The Saljuq vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, initiated a new anti-Ismaili literary campaign, accompanied by military expeditions against Alamut and other Nizari strongholds in Persia. He devoted a long chapter in his *Siyasat-nama* (*The Book of Government*) to the condemnation of the Ismailis.

The Syrian Nizaris attained the peak of their power and fame under Rashid al-Din Sinan, who was their chief leader for some three decades until his death in 1193. He was the original "Old Man of the Mountain" referred to in sources from the Crusaders and it was during his time that Western chroniclers of the Crusades and a number of European travellers and diplomatic emissaries began to write about the Nizari Ismailis. These writers, who were not interested in collecting accurate information about Islam as a religion and its communities of interpretation despite their proximity to Muslims, remained completely ignorant of Islam in general and the Ismailis in particular. It was under such circumstances that they produced reports about the purported secret practices of the Nizari Ismailis.

The Assassin Legends

In the event, medieval Europeans themselves began to fabricate and put into circulation a number of tales about the purported practices of the Nizaris, who were made famous in Europe as the Assassins. These so-called Assassin legends consisted of a number of separate but interconnected tales, including the "paradise legend", the "hashish legend", and the "death-leap legend". The legends developed in stages, receiving new embellishments at each successive stage, and finally culminated in a synthesis popularized by Marco Polo (see F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, London, 1994). The famous Venetian traveller added his own original contribution in the form of a "secret garden of paradise", where bodily pleasures were supposedly procured for the *fida'i*s (the Nizari devotees who were prepared to sacrifice their lives in the service of their community) under the influence of hashish by their mischievous leader, the Old Man, as part of their indoctrination and training. Marco Polo's version of the Assassin legends was reiterated to various degrees by subsequent European writers. Strangely, it did not occur to any European that Marco Polo may have actually heard the tales in Italy after returning to Venice in 1295 from his journeys to the East – tales that were by then widespread in Europe. Ata Malik Juwayni (d. 1283), an avowed enemy of the Nizaris who accompanied the Mongol conqueror Hulagu to Alamut in 1256 as a court historian and inspected that fortress and its library before their destruction by the Mongols, does not report having discovered any "secret garden of paradise" there, as claimed in Marco Polo's account.

By the 14th century, the Assassin legends had acquired wide currency and were accepted as reliable descriptions of alleged Nizari Ismaili practices, in much the same way as the earlier "black legend" had been accepted as accurate explanations of Ismaili motives, teachings and practices. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans still perceived the Nizari Ismailis in an utterly confused and fanciful manner.

Misinformed Scholarship

The orientalists of the nineteenth century, led by Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of the Arabic manuscripts which were written mainly by Sunni authors. As a result, they studied Islam according to the Sunni viewpoint and, borrowing classifications applicable to Christian contexts, generally treated Shi'ism as the "heterodox" (deviant) interpretation of Islam by contrast to Sunnism, which was taken to represent Islamic "orthodoxy" (correct or accepted interpretation). It was mainly on this basis, as well as the continued attraction of

…Please see copyright restrictions on page 1

the seminal Assassin legends, that the orientalists launched their own study of the Ismailis. Consequently, the orientalists, too, tacitly lent their seal of approval to the myths of the Ismailis.

Indeed, de Sacy's distorted evaluation of the Ismailis, though unintentional, set the frame within which other orientalists of the nineteenth century studied the medieval history of the Ismailis. As a result, misrepresentation and plain fiction came to permeate the first Western book on the Persian Nizaris of the Alamut period written by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856). Originally published in German in 1818, von Hammer's book achieved great success in Europe and continued to be treated as the standard history of the Nizari Ismailis until the 1930s. With rare exceptions, notably Charles F. Defrémery (1822-1883) who produced valuable historical studies on the Nizaris of Syria and Iran, and the studies of Michael J. de Goeje (1836-1909) on the dissident Qarmatis (who disagreed with the Fatimid Ismailis on the question of continuity in the Imamat and maintained their belief in a line of seven Imams ending with Muhammad b. Ismail), the Ismailis continued to be misrepresented to various degrees by later orientalists. Meanwhile, Westerners had retained the habit of referring to the Nizari Ismailis as the Assassins, a misnomer rooted in a medieval pejorative appellation.

A New Era in Ismaili Studies

The breakthrough in Ismaili studies occurred with the recovery and study of genuine Ismaili texts on a large scale – manuscript sources which had been preserved secretly in numerous private collections. A few Ismaili manuscripts of Syrian provenance had already surfaced in Paris during the nineteenth century, and some fragments of these works were studied and published there by S. Guyard and others. More Ismaili manuscripts preserved in Yaman and Central Asia were recovered in the opening decades of the twentieth century. In particular, a number of Persian Nizari texts were collected from Shughnan and other districts of Badakhshan (now divided by the Oxus River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan) and studied by Aleksandr A. Semenov (1873-1958), the Russian pioneer in Ismaili studies from Tashkent. However, by the 1920s knowledge of European scholarly circles about Ismaili literature was still very limited.

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies was initiated in the 1930s in India, where significant collections of Ismaili manuscripts have been preserved in the Tayyibi Ismaili Bohra community. This breakthrough resulted mainly from the pioneering efforts of Wladimir Ivanow (1886-1970), and a few Ismaili scholars, notably Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899-1981), Husayn F. al-Hamdani (1901-1962) and Zahid Ali (1888-1958), who based their studies on their family collections of manuscripts. Ivanow, who eventually settled in Bombay after leaving his native Russia in 1917, collaborated closely with these Bohra scholars and succeeded, through his own connections within the Khoja community, to gain access to Nizari literature as well. Consequently, he compiled the first detailed catalogue of Ismaili works, citing some 700 separate titles which attested to the hitherto unknown richness and diversity of Ismaili literature and intellectual traditions (see W. Ivanow, *A Guide to Ismaili Literature*, London, 1933). This very catalogue provided a scientific frame for further research in the field. Ismaili scholarship received another major impetus through the research programmes of the Ismaili Society of Bombay, established in 1946 under the patronage of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877-1957), the forty-eighth imam of the Nizari Ismailis.

By 1963, when Ivanow published a revised edition of his catalogue (*Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*), many more Ismaili sources had become known and progress in Ismaili studies had been truly astonishing. Numerous Ismaili texts had now begun to be critically edited by scholars, preparing the ground for further progress in this new field of Islamic studies. In this connection, particular mention should be made of the Ismaili texts of Fatimid and later times edited together with analytical introductions by Henry Corbin (1903-1978), and the Fatimid texts edited by the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Kamil Husayn (1901-1961). At the same time, Arif Tamir (1921-1998) edited a number of Ismaili texts of Syrian provenance, and a few European scholars such as Marius Canard (1888-1982) and several Egyptian scholars, notably Hasan Ibrahim Hasan (1892-

1968), Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal (1911-1967) and Abd al-Mun'im Majid (1920-1999), made important contributions to Fatimid studies.

By the mid-1950s, progress in the field had already enabled Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1922-1968) to produce the first scholarly and comprehensive study of the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period, albeit mistitled as *The Order of Assassins* (The Hague, 1955). Soon, others representing a new generation of scholars, notably Samuel M. Stern (1920-1969), Wilferd Madelung and Abbas Hamdani produced major studies, especially on the early Ismailis and their relations with the dissident Qarmatis.

Progress in Ismaili studies has proceeded at a rapid pace during the last few decades through the efforts of yet another generation of scholars such as Ismail K. Poonawala, Heinz Halm, Paul E. Walker, Azim Nanji and Thierry Bianquis. The modern progress in the recovery and study of Ismaili literature is well reflected in Professor Poonawala's monumental *Biobibliography of Isma'ílí Literature* (Malibu, California, 1977), which identifies some 1300 titles written by more than 200 authors. Meanwhile, the Satpanth Ismaili tradition of the Nizari Khojas as reflected in the *ginan* literature provided yet another area of investigation within Ismaili studies. In particular, Ali Asani, A. Nanji and A. Esmail have made valuable contributions here.

The Role of the Institute of Ismaili Studies

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies is set to continue at an even greater pace as the Ismailis themselves are now becoming widely interested in studying their literary heritage and history – a phenomenon attested by an increasing number of Ismaili-related doctoral dissertations written in recent decades by Ismailis. In this context, a major role is played by The Institute of Ismaili Studies. Established in London in 1977, this institution is already serving as the central point of reference for Ismaili studies while making its own contributions through various programmes of research and publications. Numerous scholars worldwide participate in these academic programmes, and many more benefit from the accessibility of the Ismaili manuscripts held at the Institute's Library. With these modern developments, the scholarly study of the Ismailis, which by the closing decades of the twentieth century had already greatly deconstructed the seminal anti-Ismaili legends of medieval times, promises to dissipate the remaining misrepresentations of the Ismailis rooted either in hostility or imaginative ignorance of the earlier generations.

…Please see copyright restrictions on page 1