The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Intellectual life in Fatimid Times

A Reading Guide

The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning
by Heinz Halm (I.B. Tauris, London and New York, in association with The Institute of
Ismaili Studies, London, 1997. xiii + 100 pp. ISBN 1-86064-434-1)

In less than a hundred pages Heinz Halm looks at the Fatimid caliphate from an angle
that allows readers to appreciate, more than ever before, the intellectual traditions
prevalent and encouraged during the Fatimid epoch. He offers a panoramic perspective
on the working of the *da'wa,* the promotion of learning through the establishment of the
al-Azhar and the Dar al-'Ilm (House of Knowledge), and the *majalis al-hikma* (sessions
of wisdom) held for instruction in Ismaili doctrines. He discusses intellectual endeavours
of the Fatimids both in the context of the sociopolitical conditions of the times as well as
in the light of the Shi'i emphasis on knowledge going back to the period of the early
Imams.

For those interested in history, and especially the history of the Ismailis, this book is
highly recommended. The emphasis on teaching and learning will appeal to teachers and
educators, particularly those concerned with religious education and the history of
education. With a jargonfree, lucid writing style, the book can make an educative reading
for any one with an interest in Ismaili thought and history.

The Structure of the Book
In the opening chapter, *The Ismaili Mission and the Fatimid Caliphate,* Halm provides a
concise outline of the Fatimid caliphate in order to equip the reader with a background in
Fatimid history. He begins with a synopsis of the situation in Syria in the ninth century
(where Imam al-Mahdi was staying) prior to the establishment of the Fatimid state in 909
CE. He then turns his attention to the Imam-Caliph al-Mahdi (d. 934 CE) and provides an
insight into the circumstances that surrounded the establishment of the Fatimid state. The
chapter provides an overview of the reign of the next three Imams, ending with a
reference to the peaceful conquest of Egypt under the fourth Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz (d.
975 CE).

The second chapter, *The Mission of the da'is and the 'Teaching Sessions'*, elaborates on
the activities of teaching and learning carried out by the *da'is* (summoners) within the
Fatimid state during its North African phase. Of particular interest is the discussion of the

initiation process used by the Ismaili *da'i*s to win over people of different persuasions. Special attention is given to two important *da'i*s of the period, Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i (d. 911 CE) and al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 974 CE).

The third chapter, *The Fatimids in Egypt*, offers a historical perspective on the acquisition of Egypt by the Fatimid general Jawhar. Though most of the chapter focuses on the reign and accomplishments of the Imam al-Hakim (d. circa 1021 CE), the rule of the Imams al-Mu'izz and al-'Aziz (d. 996 CE) are also given fair consideration. In discussing the reign of Imam al-Hakim, the author attempts to dispel some unfavourable views about the Imam generally held by historians.

The fourth chapter, *Ismaili Teaching and Learning: zahir and batin,* can be considered as the heart of the book. Here, the author explicates a cornerstone of the Fatimid Ismaili approach to religious knowledge and understanding: *zahir* and *batin,* or external and inner meanings. Through an analysis of the role of al-Qadi al-Nu'man he examines the complementary nature of these two ideas in the Fatimid times. Halm also explains the cosmological doctrines, literary activities and the function of the *da'i*s such as Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (circa 1020 CE), al-Mu'ayyad fi'l Din al-Shirazi (1078 CE) and Nasir Khusraw (circa 1088 CE).

The fifth chapter, *The Organization of the da'wa,* carries out a study of the intricate hierarchy within the *da'wa* system, inside and outside of the Fatimid state. Here it is important to note that the Fatimid caliphate was geographically widely scattered. Hence, the organisation as well as the teachings of the *da'wa* ensured consistency of doctrines and fostered loyalty to the Imams.

The sixth chapter, *Al-Hakim's 'House of Knowledge',* highlights the origins and development of an institution called the Dar al-'Ilm during the reign of Imam al-Hakim. The author sees this institute as unique in Islamic intellectual history for it united the teaching and learning of a large number of disciplines cutting across the boundaries of the 'religious' and the 'non-religious' spheres of learning.

The final chapter, *Scientific Institutions under the Fatimids*, discusses the scientific endeavours in the Fatimid state against the backdrop of its political decline. "The deeprootedness of the Fatimid tradition of learning," can be gauged by the struggles over the survival of Dar al-'Ilm and the construction of an observatory that went on even during the days of military and political dissolution of the state. The chapter also brings out the wide range of intellectual interest of the Fatimid Imams as shown by the huge collections of books in palace libraries.

The Fatimid Caliphate
The intellectual activities of the Ismailis during the Fatimid period have been described by one author as analogous to that which took place in Europe in the 18th century.[1] This,

---

[1] Canrad, M. 'Fatimids', in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* New Edition, vol. 2, p. 861. (The 18th century is considered to be one of the most productive periods of intellectual activity in Europe. It was marked by the Enlightenment - an intellectual movement that inspired revolutionary developments in philosophy, art and

no doubt, leads one to ask what was it about the Fatimids that led to this flowering of intellectual life?

The history of the Ismailis can be understood as the embodiment of one response, among others, to the message contained in the Islamic revelation.[2] While in the Ismaili community's own tradition, the attitudes and beliefs that characterise the Ismailis can be traced back to the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the name 'Ismaili' came to be used in later centuries for the body of followers of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq "who remained faithful to the line of his descendants through his elder son and designated heir, Imam Isma'il."[3]

The next four Imams succeeding Imam Isma'il evolved an intricate network of agents and emissaries, which came to be known as the *da'wa*. The movement paved the way for the creation of the Fatimid caliphate in the early part of the tenth century, in North Africa during the time of the Imam al-Mahdi.

The Fatimid caliphate remained in North Africa during the reign of the first four Imams al-Mahdi, al-Qa'im, al-Mansur and al-Mu'izz - a period of 64 years from 909 CE to 973 CE. During their time, the Fatimids established and maintained a powerful army and navy.[4] The Imams al-Mahdi and al-Mansur founded the cities of al-Mahdiyya on the Tunisian coast and al-Mansuriyya just south of Qayrawan, respectively, which were named after them.[5]

> ...al-Mahdi went in person to Tunis; he visited Carthage and other places, and he went along the entire coast, looking along the sea for a site for a city which might make him and his sons after him invulnerable. ...He looked for a long time, and found no better location that that of [what is now] al-Mahdiyya. He therefore built the city there, and made it his capital.[6]

The city of Mahdiyya was a palace city which was inhabited by the royal family and also housed the administration and a naval base.[7] One can still find traces of Fatimid grandeur in the city, including the mosque Imam al-Mahdi built for himself and which was restored in the 1960s. During the reigns of the Imams al-Mansur, the capital city of the Fatimids was moved from Mahdiyya to Mansuriyya, which was to later become a model for the city of Cairo.[8]

---

politics.)
[2] Esmail, A. and Nanji, A. 'The Ismailis in History', in S.H. Nasr, ed., *Ismaili Contributions to Islamic Culture.* Tehran, 1977, p. 227.
[3] — —, p. 231.
[4] Canard, p. 854.
[5] Halm, H. The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning. London, 1997, pp. 12-13.
[6] Halm, H. *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids.* Leiden, 1996, p.214.
[7] Ibid., p. 215.
[8] Halm, 1997, pp. 12-13.

In 969 CE, Imam al-Mu'izz, "an excellent planner, an efficient organiser and a statesman amply talented in diplomacy,"[9] with the help of his general Jawhar, acquired Egypt peacefully. Jawhar, under the Fatimids, took up the governorship of Egypt from 969 CE to 973 CE.[10] During this time the building of the new city of Cairo began and in 970 CE the foundation for the al-Azhar mosque was laid. Around the same time the two holy cities of Makkah and Medina came under Fatimid control. The Imam himself arrived in Cairo in 973 CE.

> All the delegations which had greeted him, as well as his sons, brothers and uncles, and the other descendants of al-Mahdi made their entrance with him; he brought with him the coffins of his forebears al-Mahdi, al-Qa'im and al-Mansur ....[11]

Stanley Lane-Poole's description of Imam al-Mu'izz may aid one to understand his successful reign:

> He was a ...born statesman, able to grasp the conditions of success and to take advantage of every point in his favour. He was also highly educated, and not only wrote Arabic poetry and delighted in its literature, but studied Greek, mastered Berber and Sudani dialects, and is even said to have taught himself Salvonic ... His eloquence was such as to move his audience to tears. To prudent statesmanship he added a large generosity, and his love of justice was among his noble qualities.[12]

While the Fatimid period led to a flourishing commerce, agricultural advancements and political stability in Egypt and other areas under their influence, it was "in the sphere of intellectual life that Fatimid achievement seems most brilliant and outstanding."[13]

Intellectual Traditions in Fatimid Egypt
In the Shi'i interpretation of Islam and particularly in the Ismaili Tariqah there is a great importance placed on knowledge. The Fatimids' support for learning was a reflection of this importance. Further, in Shi'a theology the Imam is believed to be the possessor of a special *'ilm,* by way of which he interprets the Islamic revelation for his followers. This intimate link between the status of the Imam and knowledge provided a spiritual motivation for the encouragement of intellectual life. The Fatimids came to power through a movement with complex intellectual doctrines. The close relationship between the Fatimid state and the Ismaili *da'wa* provided another impetus for teaching and learning. Furthermore, the Fatimids were vying against the Abbasids for the leadership of the Muslims. A part of this competition was to patronise the best minds within Muslim societies. Thus, their rivalry with the Abbasids as well as with the Umayyad rulers of Spain provided another reason for their patronage of intellectual endeavours.

---

[9] Daftary, F. *The Ismailis: Their History and Do*ctrines. Cambridge, 1990, p. 169.
[10] Halm, 1996, p. 414.
[11] — —, p. 420.
[12] Poole, S. *History of Egypt in the Middle Ages.* London, 1914, p. 99.
[13] Esmail & Nanji, p. 237.

The al-Azhar mosque became the primary centre of learning in Fatimid Cairo. The author questions the generally held view that it was a centre for Ismaili *da'wa* teachings. Instead, he argues that al-Azhar was the place where the external meaning of the law *(shar'ia)* was taught according to the Ismaili interpretation.[14] These sessions were open to everyone, including women. The inner meaning of the law was taught at the *majalis al-hikma* which were held in the Imam's palace. These sessions were open only "to initiates who had already pledged their allegiance to the Imam."[15] All the lectures in 'sessions of wisdom' were reviewed and approved by the Imam prior to their presentation. The sessions were not only for teaching purposes, but they also provided an occasion for submitting charitable dues.[16]

The Dar al-'Ilm was founded by the Imam al-Hakim in 1005 CE. The breadth of disciplines studied there was its unique feature and made it stand out from other institutions of learning in its time. The facilities at the Dar al-'Ilm were accessible to all people. "...Lectures were held there by the Qur'an readers, astronomers, grammarians and philologists, as well as physicians."[17]

There was tremendous scientific activity as well under the Fatimids. It is best reflected in the life of Ibn al-Haytham. Born in Basra (in present-day Iraq) in 965 CE, he was polymath and a master of all the scientific fields of his time. He was invited to Cairo by Imam al-Hakim to lead the construction of a dam across the Nile. While this project did not materialise, Ibn al-Haytham went on to compose many works on physics, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics and medicine, including his greatest work the *Kitab al-manzir* (Treatise on Optics). In this work, Ibn al-Haytham refuted the theory of Euclid and Ptolemy that the eye sends out visual rays to the object of vision, arguing that the form of the perceived object passes into the eye through a transparent body (lens). The correctness of this theory was established several centuries later among European scientists.

The Da'wa Organisation
In common with the other Shi'i groups, the Ismailis hold that spiritual knowledge and wisdom are revealed to humanity through Prophets, who imparted the exoteric law *(shar'ia)*. Thereafter, the knowledge is imparted through the Imam, who is always present to provide the esoteric meaning of the revealed law.[18] "It was on account of his superior *'ilm* that the 'Alid Imam was regarded by the Shi'a as the sole instrument through whom the divine purpose could be fulfilled on earth."[19]

As is evident from the work of Ismaili scholars, the principle of receiving knowledge from the Imam, however, did not rule out the use of rational or intellectual faculties on

---

[14] Halm, 1997, p. 41.
[15] — —, p. 45.
[16] — —, p. 46.
[17] — —, p. 73.
[18] — —, p. 17.
[19] Esmail & Nanji, p. 238.

the part of the believer. Thus, the acceptance of authority was not simply an act of blind obedience but of human reasoning, recognising its limitations in discovering spiritual mysteries and thus seeking to apprehend them through the mediation of the Imam. The dialectic of reason and spiritual authority thus underlies the intellectual history of the Ismailis.

The Imam used a network of *da'i*s, headed by a chief *da'i,* to "summon people to follow the true Imam and instruct the individual who 'responds to the summons'...in wisdom."[20]

The *da'i* Ahmad al-Naysaburi offers a concise outline of the talents, characteristics and qualities possessed by an ideal *da'i:*

> ...The good qualities of an expert lawyer.. patience, good theoretical education, intelligence, psychological insight, honesty, high moral character, sound judgement. ...a strong will, generosity, administrative talent, tact and tolerance. ...honest and reliable. ...ready to sacrifice his life and everything for the religion.[21]

The *da'i* was not only to be well versed in "the Qur'an, the commentary on the Qur'an, the Traditions of the Prophet, stories of the prophets and the Ismaili interpretation of these writings" but he was equally required to be knowledgeable in "logic and philosophy, history and geography."[22]

The *da'i*s had special methods that they tended to use during the propagation of the faith. According to the book, *Kitab al- 'Alim wal-gulam* (The Book of the Master and the Disciple)[23] this method included finding a worthy initiate, conducting the oath of secrecy and carrying out a step-by-step induction into wisdom.

The sources tell us that the *da'i*s chose their examples, metaphors and arguments according to their audience. Thus, it is said about a *da'i* that,

> To the artisan he spoke about his respective trade: to the tailor, for instance, about needle and thread, eyelet and scissors; to the shepherd about his staff and wrap, and the flock and shepherd's pouch.[24]

Thus, the *da'i*s followed a pedagogical principle enunciated in the Qur'an where the Prophet is asked to speak to each person according to his or her abilities.

---

[20] Halm, 1997, p.18.
[21] Quoted in Halm, 1997, p. 63.
[22] — —, p.64.
[23] Mansur al-Yaman, Jafar b.. *Kitab al- 'Alim wal-ghulam,* ed. and English trans. J. Morris, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue.* London, 2001.
[24] Halm, 1997, p. 27.

Conclusion

The traditions of teaching and learning in the Fatimid period should be seen as an integral part of Muslim intellectual traditions. On the one hand, they shared many aspects of learning with other Muslim societies. On the other hand, the Fatimid approach to knowledge had its distinctive features as well, which arose both from the particular socio-political conditions at that time as well as from the status of the Imam in Shi'i theology as the ultimate authority in religious knowledge. These distinctive features included, among others, its *da'wa* organisation, and its emphasis on *batin* and *ta'wil.*[25]

The intellectual life in Fatimid times, along with such traditions in other periods of the Ismaili history, is a clear testimony that Ismailism does provide a balanced and integrated approach to reason and faith. In its bold diversity of intellectual endeavours, the period provides a beacon of hope in a time when need for the appreciation of diversity of intellectual approaches is required perhaps more than in any other time. As the book demonstrates, the thinkers of the Fatimid times engaged with the cutting edge issues of their time and utilised the most advanced forms of thought available to them in this engagement. This venturesome spirit to the issues faced by the community is yet another form of inspiration that makes the period of the Fatimids relevant to our times.

Sharmina Mawani
Graduate Programme
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Farid Panjwani
IIS-ITREB Liaison Department & Department of Education
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Date: 27.06.02

---

[25] The Ismailis, along with some other groups in Islam, saw the Qur'an as having layers of meaning. Each and every verse of the Qur'an was believed to have meanings at different levels. Through *ta'wil* these meanings were brought forth.