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## Music & Melodies of the Persian Ismaili Qasideh

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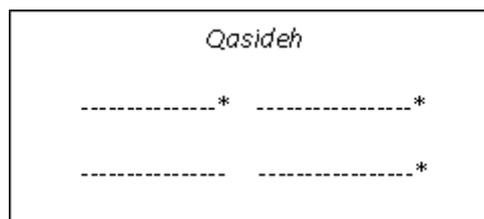
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### Qasideh Tradition among the Ismailis of Iran



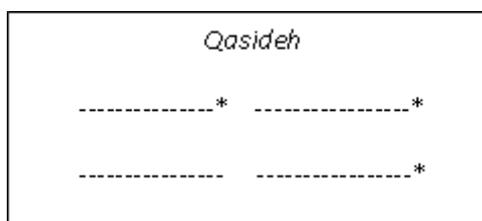
Oblong-shaped, lobed cartouche frames a panel of calligraphy executed in gold nasta'liq against a gold foliated background of cobalt blue. The inscription on the panel names the celebrated panj-e tan, or “band of five,” which included the Prophet Muhammad, his first cousin and son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, his daughter [Fatima](#) [7] ('Ali's wife), and his two grandsons (the children of 'Ali and Fatima), Hasan and Husayn.

Qasideh ([Qasida](#) [8] in Arabic) in Persian Ismaili tradition of “Qasideh Khani” (the practice of reciting Qasideh), refers to the poetry that is recited in communal gatherings of Iranian Ismailis as part of their religious practices. We do not know exactly when this tradition began to be called by this name, but it continues to be present in Persian speaking Ismaili communities to this day. Literally, Qasideh (Qasida) refers to a particular form of poem in Persian and Arabic poetry which is used for different purposes like praising (madh or manghabat) and mourning. Each line of this form of poem is made of two parts (mesra?), and the rhyme of the first line and the second pair of the rest of the poem are the same.

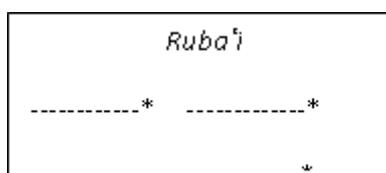


Traditionally, most poems in Persian devotional literature have been in the form of Qasideh. This could be the

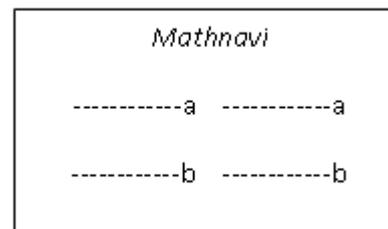
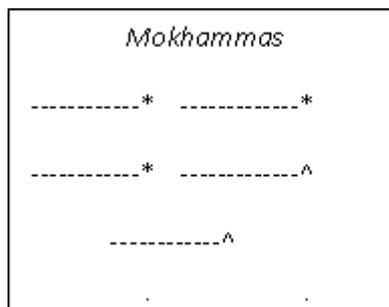
reason that the tradition has been named “Qasideh”, or “Qasideh khani”. However, it has not been the only poetic form of this tradition and other forms of poems have also been used along side. Different Ismaili poets and daʿis expressed their ideas and devotion in different forms. Nasir-i Khusraw and Hasan-i Mahmoud (the author of the Qaimiyyat) chose Qasideh as a form of expression, while other poets such as Nizari Quhistani inclined towards Ghazal instead. Ismailis in different localities have used different poems in their congregations, depending on which daʿi or Ismaili poet was more popular in their community. The way the tradition has been practised differs slightly from region to region, primarily because of the form of poetry used in this tradition. For example, in Southern [Khurasan](#) [9] or Quhistan area, they used to refer to the poem used in this tradition as “munajat”, which means praising or praying to God, and the practice was called “munajat khani”. In the munajat khani sessions, mostly poems of different Ismaili poets or daʿis, such as Mirza Husayn, Mirza Yaʿqoub and Mirza Kouchak were used. Some of them are in the form of Qasideh and some others are of other poetic styles, such as Ghazal and Tarjiʿ band. In the munajat khani sessions, one or two people recited the Qasideh and, after each line or section (band), the first line of Qasideh or the “matlaʿ” was usually recited by the whole congregation. The section which is repeated in the poem itself is the refrain. During the last few decades, the terms Qasideh and Qasideh khani started to replace munajat and munajat khani in south Khurasan, though these terms are still being used by some locals. However, the way in which Qasideh/munajat khani is practiced remains almost the same.



Another form of poetry found in Persian literature is called “rubaʿi” or quatrains (the form in which Umar Khayyam’s poetry is written) and is composed in a particular rhythm. Ismailis of Khurasan call this form of poetry “haqqani”, which are made up of couplets which express devotion, love for or praise of God, the Prophet and the [Imam](#) [10]. Its succinctness makes it easy for most people to memorise and recite in congregational settings. In congregational gatherings, individuals usually recite one or two haqqanis together.



In some areas of Khurasan, Jalal [al-Din](#) [11] Rumi's works like the Mathnavi and the Ghazaliyyat have also been used and, therefore, "Mathnavi khani" (reciting mathnavi) has been an important tradition. In this tradition, one of the stories of the Mathnavi is recited by the mathnavi-khan (or the singer) and the rest of the congregation listens. The Ismailis of Northern Khurasan predominantly used poems of their local Ismaili poets like Khaki Khurasani, Raqami and [Fida'i](#) [12]. Their poetry was mostly in the form of Qasideh and mokhammas. Mokhammas is a form of poem that has been composed in commemoration of another poet, by inserting a poet's composition and words in the new poem.



Ghazal is another form of poem which has been part of the Qasideh tradition in Iran. It is not different from Qasideh in form, but the content could be slightly different as it is mainly used for expressions of mystical love. Many of the famous Persian poets, like Rumi or ?Attar, are believed to have had Shi'i affinities as there are many Qasidehs attributed to these poets which contain Shi'i ideas, such as devotion to Imam 'Ali. These Qasidehs have been preserved and continue to be used by Ismailis. It is almost certain that these Qasidehs are not composed by Rumi or ?Attar since they do not appear in any of the published editions of their works which are widely recognised by Persian literati as the most acceptable editions. The identity of the poet(s) who composed these Qasidehs is not known. It is difficult to speculate on the period when the Qasideh tradition developed amongst the Ismailis as part of their congregational practices. Nasir-i Khusraw (d. 481 AH / 1088-1089 CE) wrote many Qasidehs in Persian, but we do not know how they were used in communal gatherings during his lifetime or immediately thereafter. The practice is likely to have been adopted when the Ismailis adopted Sufi traditions as [taqiyya](#) [13] to avoid persecution during the eighth (AH)/fourteenth (CE) century after the fall of [Alamut](#) [14]. In this period, Ismailis often lived under the guise of Sufi tariqas and gradually adopted their traditions, while retaining their allegiance to the Ismaili Imam. Poetry and music served as important elements of Sufi ceremonies in the form of sama? or mystical dance. The melodies used in Qasidehs are based on Iranian classical music. It seems that many of the Qasidehs which were composed by Ismaili da'is and used to form the bulk of the Qasideh tradition in Iran have either been forgotten or lost during a long period of communal upheaval, modernisation and mass migration to cities. Nowadays, most of the Qasidehs used in communal ceremonies in Iran are poems of Rumi, ?Attar, Hafiz and other Persian poets. There are no distinctly Ismaili elements in most of these Qasidehs either in their content or music.

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