

initiation process used by the Ismaili *da'is* to win over people of different persuasions. Special attention is given to two important *da'is* 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)

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'iz

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-Mansur¹¹

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 Doctrines*. 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

the part of the believer. Thus

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