

# Ep. 15 | Reconstructing Alamut: New Approaches to the Study of the Nizari Ismaili Polity in Iran

## Transcript

[Audio: "Samarqand Blues" by Samandar Pulodov and the [Silk Road Trance Band](#) featuring: vocals: Samandar Pulodov; setor: Iqbol Zavkibekov; percussion: Zarif Pulodov; bass guitar: Rasul Khalilov; rhythm guitar: Davlatyor Gulomaidarov]

**Shiraz Hajiani** 00:03

You cannot conceptualize Islamicate thought without Shi'ism, without Ismailism, because much of the development of Islamic thought is dialogical. There are debates taking place. So if you are looking at just Sunni thought as it is transmitted, then you are missing a leg of the stool.

**Meryum Kazmi** 00:42

Welcome to the Harvard Islamica Podcast. I am Meryum Kazmi

**Harry Bastermajian** 00:45

and I am Harry Bastermajian. We are happy to be joined today by Dr. Shiraz Hajiani the Alwaleed Bin Talal Postdoctoral Fellow in Islamic Studies at Harvard University, and Research Associate in Transcendence and Transformation at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. Shiraz completed his PhD in 2018 at the University of Chicago, with his dissertation, "Reconstructing Alamut: New Approaches to the Study of the *Qiyāma* and the Nizari Polity in Iran." Welcome, Shiraz.

**Shiraz Hajiani** 01:19

Thank you, Harry. Thank you, Meryum. It is delightful to be here.

**Harry Bastermajian** 01:23

It is great having you here.

**Meryum Kazmi** 01:25

So to get started, we would love to hear about your background and how you came to the study of the Nizari Ismaili polity in Alamut.

**Shiraz Hajiani** 01:34

Let me start by saying thank you to the Alwaleed Program for this Postdoctoral Fellowship, which has allowed me to do the work that we will discuss, and the Transcendence and Transformation Initiative at CSWR, which has been a wonderful

home for me to do some amazing work and interact with some esteemed colleagues. So that said, my background, I have a degree in chemistry. And while I was at London University, I had the opportunity of branching out and I went and did a what would be considered in America, a minor in Islamic studies, the Fatimids, in particular, and I studied with one of the leading scholars in the field [Prof. Michael Brett at the School of Oriental and African Studies]. And about 15 years after graduating, I came back to the Academy, I started at the Harvard Divinity School and did a master's in theological studies, and ended up at Chicago for my doctoral work. And that is where the story of the research begins. So that is kind of my academic resume, if you will.

### **Harry Bastermajian** 03:01

To get us started, can you share with us a little bit about the Nizari Ismailis? Who are they and how was it that the Nizari polity in Alamut was founded and what is its significance in Ismaili history?

### **Shiraz Hajjani** 03:19

Today, the Ismailis probably number about five to six million. The majority of the Ismailis, the second largest Shi'i community in the world, are followers of the Aga Khan, and that is the Nizari line; and these differences occur because of succession issues. But if we now jump back in time, while today, 4 million, 5 million out of, or 6 million, out of a billion and a half Muslims, in the past that is not necessarily so. The time period that I look at, from about the 10th century—the 10th to the 11th centuries—are regarded as the “Shi'i centuries”. And, what was happening at that time? At that time the Ismaili *da'wa* [proselytic summons] which is—the Ismailis as a Shi'i community, they followed the line [of post-prophetic authority] from Ali as the first Imam and on down—there was a schism in 765 at the death of the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, which led to the two major Shi'i communities, that is, Ismailis and then the Ithna'asharis. The Ithna'asharis followed a different line of succession and they have 12 imams, Ithna-`ashar, hence Ithna'ashari. And the Ismaili line, basically, they went into concealment. The *da'wa*, the imamate, and the communities were in concealment until 909. In 909, the Fatimid Empire was established in what is today Tunisia. And at its height, the Fatimid Empire ruled by the imam who is also regarded as the caliph. The Fatimid Caliphate extended from the shores of the Atlantic in North Africa, all the way to Syria to the two holy cities, Mecca, Medina, the Hijaz. And they even had, for a while, an area of Punjab, Multan area, that was under suzerainty. And in 1058, they also took over Baghdad. So the Fatimid Empire was able to establish Shi'ism, was able to establish Ismailism, as a significant belief system. And, of course, they were opposed by the Abbasids from Baghdad and the Umayyads out of Spain.

In 1095, the Caliph al-Mustansir, the Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir, passed away and there was a succession crisis. The oldest son was Nizar. Apparently, al-Mustansir, who ruled for over 60 years, had, I think, something in the region of 17 sons, and the youngest of them was enthroned by the military governor and vizier, the Prime Minister. Nizar also was declared caliph, but not in Cairo, which was the capital of the Fatimids, but in Alexandria, and the two groups went into conflict. There were some victories for the Nizaris, supporters of Nizar, initially. Eventually Nizar's group was defeated. According

to the historical records, some of the chronicles state that he was killed. He was immured, basically, he was put into a room and the door was walled off.

So that is what happens in Cairo. But in Iran, without any known exceptions, the Ismaili *da'wa* in Iran, which was in Abbasid territory—lock, stock and barrel went for Nizar, and they remained loyal to Nizar, expecting a descendant of Nizar to emerge out of concealment, and to take up the leadership of the community as the imam. In the meanwhile, we had various *dā'īs* (summoners) who lead the communities. And the preeminent is one of the people who I focus on was Hasan-i Sabbah, he founded the polity at Alamut, he acquired the castle of Alamut. And that is the beginning of the Nizari Ismaili interpretation of Islam.

**Meryum Kazmi 08:16**

Thank you. So what are some of the main challenges in studying early Nizari Ismaili history and how do you seek to address them in your research?

**Shiraz Hajiani 08:27**

If you were to, for instance, go and look up the Battle of Wounded Knee [a massacre of 250 men, women and children of the Lakota by the United States Army on 29-December, 1890], you would find at least 400 hits on JSTOR. There are, of course, several movies made about “Custer's last stand” [268 US Army soldiers were killed by forces of the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho at the Battle of the Greasy Grass or the Little Bighorn on 25-26 June 1876], and that was one battle, one day, a few hours where some 200 of the US Army soldiers were killed by a force of 3000 Native Americans. And the story has been told up until the 1970s, from the view of the American perspective, if you will, not the Native Americans. It is only in the 1970s, that a grandson of Sitting Bull started writing the history, from the oral inherited history, and the writing is now accessible to us.

So, if we look at this situation, what happens is, in 1256, the Nizari polity was annihilated by the Mongols, and during this process of dismantling the fortress of Alamut, one of the ministers, 'Ata Malik Juwayni, according to his own writing, went into the library at Alamut, which is famed. He found there very scientific instruments; he found multiple copies of the Quran and various other holy texts; and he says that they had intermingled with the holy texts, their false beliefs. So, he took for the treasury, the Mongol treasury, he took the *Sarguzasht-i Sayyidina*, (The Biography of Our Master), “our Master” being Hasan-i Sabbah. And then he torched the rest of the library. So, what we have is, in 1260, he completed his *Tarikh-i jahan-gusha*, (the History of the World Conqueror). And in that he has a section on the Ismailis, the Fatimids and the Nizaris. And this is the first complete history that is available to us.

Subsequently, two other histories, based on the sources that potentially were acquired at Alamut, were written. Rashid al-Din Fazl-Allah who was a prime minister (vizier) of the Mongols—he was executed in the 13 teens, 1318—he wrote the *Jami' al-tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), which is regarded as one of the earliest universal histories. And in this history of the Mongols, of the Indians, of the Jews, of the

Europeans, ... he also included a volume on the Ismailis. Again, [records] prior to the Fatimid period, the Fatimid period, and the Nizaris. And one of his researchers—this must have been a very busy vizier, he had a team of researchers, and one of the researchers on his team—Kashani he also wrote a history in which he included a history of the Ismailis, both Fatimid and Nizari. So we have three, chronicles that are extremely important because what they did is, they used the sources that they acquired at Alamut.

Part of my challenge has been to look at these sources and analyze them at what I call DNA, “double-narrative analysis” level. Because they wrote in the Persian historical writing paradigms, in which apparently, the Ismailis were construed as heretics. This was almost advice literature for the patrons—the historian basically wrote that if the ruler did not stamp out heresy, then his dynasty would lose God's favor, and somebody else would come in and replace, and another dynasty would come and replace them. So writing within this historical paradigm, they [used what they] had extracted from *da‘wa* literature.

What was this *da‘wa* literature? It was a totally different genre. It was not historical writing, *per se*. It was something that was written for the study amongst the *dā‘īs*, the trainees, and community members on how to understand what their faith was; how to basically conceptualize the cosmos, and their place in in the cosmos. Within this, we have biographical mentions, because there is a hagiographical construction of sacred individuals. So Hasan-i Sabbah was one of these individuals and the *Sarguzasht-i Sayyidina* was probably written in that manner. It has not surfaced, yet. I am hopeful that the burnt library trope is just that. There were other libraries. And one day somebody will find the text and say, "Aha, this is the *Sarguzasht*." Several people have done that, but the results have been unsatisfactory. So the challenges: we have three chronicles that were based on Nizari sources. Then we have a couple of other chronicles that the authors were [personally] familiar with the Nizaris, either having traded with them or having diplomatic relations. And then we have writings from distance, distance geographically and distance in time.

But most of this writing that comes down to us is written by Sunnis. And the Sunni construction, as I mentioned, was denigrating, but also demonizing. And so we have the challenge of saying, Okay, let us do a forensic analysis of this, take off the first layer of the narrative, and look at the frameworks in which these Persian historical writers and Arabic historical writers were writing, and then try and look at the fragments of the Nizari writing that is available, and analyze that, to try and get at least an idea of what past actuality might have been in the analysis of the authors of the time.

### **Harry Bastermajian 15:51**

You already started this discussion on Hasan-i Sabbah, and he is the topic of your first book, book project, *The Life and Times of Our Master*. Could you expand on some of the sources you mentioned these three, the three accounts? Can you discuss some of the challenges with these sources? And also, could you touch on accounts of conversion? What do these accounts have to say about conversion to Nizari Ismailism and how do you then sort of interpret these narratives within this context?

**Shiraz Hajjani 16:27**

So if I can tie the Wounded Knee example that I gave you. Over 300, 400 mentions in JSTOR, if you just put in that battle. We have literally four major studies on the Nizari Ismailis.

The first was done at University of Chicago by Marshall Hodgson, and his book was titled—and he regretted this a decade later—but his book was titled, *The Order of the Assassins*. His dissertation, completed in 1951, was published in 1955. And the subtitle was, “*A Struggle Against the Islamic World*”. So you can see the framing of how this was done.

Another work was written by Wladimir Ivanow. According to Marshall Hodgson, Wladimir Ivanow—who was a Russian scholar, and after the Soviet Revolution remained in Iran and then made his way to India—is considered to be the ‘father of Ismaili studies’, modern Ismaili studies. He collected resources, manuscripts, and made several texts available in editions and translations and has written a large body of writing. The important text about the Nizaris, I think is, *Alamut and Lamasar: Two Strongholds*. Again, we are talking about conflictual, war, warring issues.

The third study has been done by Bernard Lewis. Bernard Lewis had started his work studying the origin and published *The Origins of Ismailism*, I think, way back in the 40s. In 1967, he published *The Assassins: A Radical Sect*. Okay, so you can see the construction that is taking place.

Finally, the fourth major work is part of a massive volume produced by Farhad Daftary in which he synthesizes essentially all the writing that had been done in sources as well as in modern Western academic writing into his *The Ismailis: their History and Doctrines*. So there are only four books, major books in the English language on this topic. Others are derivative, so you will find lots of writing about the “Assassins” and the “legends of the Assassins” and so on.

Hasan-i Sabbah as the individual is very interesting. In the chronicles we have his biography, or snippets of his biography. He might have been born somewhere around the 1050s, the mid 1050s. And he says that from the age of seven, I wanted to be a scholar of religion. And around 17, he was looking here and there for where “Truth” can be found. And in the town of his birth, Rayy, which is [near] present-day Tehran in Iran, he came across an Ismaili *dā`ī* (summoner, somebody who calls to, in this case, the Ismaili *da`wa*). Amira Dharrab, this person he met, challenged his beliefs. The chronicles tell us that [Hasan] told us his faith was that of his father's, he was an Ithna`Ashari.

Amira Dharrab challenged him, and in these discussions, they got into debates and arguments. But while he was defending his perspectives, he was seeing the light of what the *dā`ī* was speaking to him. And then this *dā`ī* left Rayy. His name is “Dharrab”, he was a minter. So his assignment in Rayy might have terminated and he had gone

somewhere else looking for work. In this time, he (Hasan) fell sick—so this is part of the conversion narrative that is the “standard narrative”—he fell sick. And he says that in their books—we do not know what the books are—he found evidence supporting the legitimacy of the Ismaili imams. And he noted that the imamate is based on *naṣṣ*, a process of designation, a very important doctrine in Shi‘ism, and there is a series of succession. “But I don’t know who they are,” he says at this moment. But he had been preached to by a *dā‘ī* who was preaching in the name of the Fatimid caliph, al-Mustansir. So there is some ambiguity here, which I try and exploit and explore and see what are the layers.

So while he is in absence of Amira Dharrab, he falls sick. And then he comes to a conclusion that “Oh, my gosh, this [path] is the ‘Truth’! And if I am to die, I will die not having known the ‘Truth’.” So when he gets better, he reaches out to another *dā‘ī*, and is shown the intricacies of faith, and then he goes to another *dā‘ī*. So we are looking at a hierarchy. He is going up the hierarchy of *dā‘īs*, and he reaches out to this *dā‘ī*, Mu‘min—Mu‘min meaning believer and asks for the administration of the oath, the oath of allegiance to the imam. The chronicles state that the *dā‘ī* responds, “How can I, who am just a believer [Mu‘min], administer the oath to you who are Hasan [meaning good]?” So it is a play on the names and the words. Clearly, the biographer of Hasan-i Sabbah was elevating this new convert to be higher than the high official of the *da‘wa*. So eventually, in things Persian, or this is very common throughout Asia, you always decline, and there is that urging, and you have to do it three times. Third time lucky, he was administered the oath, and now he is living in Rayy, in Iran, and in Abbasid domains, Abbasids are Sunni, but he gives allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-Caliph, who is in an Ismaili Shi‘i and rules the polity that is opposed to the Abbasids.

So you can see the complexities of how the communities would have lived, and there is a term John Woods [Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern History, University of Chicago]—whom you know very well Harry! John Woods coined a term or [rather] used the term which has existed in the study of Christianity—his students have followed up and used it a lot—that is “confessional ambiguity”. That these communities were existing in a state of confessional ambiguity. I develop that a little bit further and when I was last talking to John, was saying [that the concept is] not quite satisfactory, but we got to keep working at it. I state that the notion of “confessional ambiguities” is from the scholarly perspective analyzing the past, but these people were living in “confessional fluidity” where, outwardly, they would manifest whatever the [prevalent] religious beliefs and practices were, but internally, practicing *taqiyya*, (dissimulation, a concept of common in Shi‘ism), they would practice their true faith, they would adhere to their true faith. So in this case, the communities of Ismailis who were widespread in Iran, Central Asia, Iraq, and parts of India as well, outside of the direct Fatimid domains, they practiced in this context of “confessional fluidity”. So Hasan exists in that. That is the “standard narrative” of how he becomes Ismaili. And we are talking about possibly the 1070s.

Richard Bulliet from Columbia in the 1970s, before the computer age, studying the legal scholars in Nishapur, was able to establish that by about the 900s, Iran had become

over 50% Muslim. So there were Zoroastrians, some Christians and Jews, and the majority now was tending towards being Muslim. So here the conversion is telling us that it is not necessarily going from one faith to another faith, but this is an intra-faith, adoption. And as you know, in modern study of religion, the idea of conversion has been problematized and looked at in different ways. So it is not just a switch that you flip, and you go from one to the other, but it is a gradual process. So this “standard narrative” very clearly demarcates for us a gradual process through which Hasan-i Sabbah went through, and more importantly, it also gives us an understanding of the *ḥudūd-i dīn*, (the hierarchy of the *da‘wa*), that existed in Iran. So ultimately, in 4075 [1072], the head of the *da‘wa*, Abd al-Malik ibn Attash, who lived in Isfahan had escaped persecution there and come to Rayy. He favored Hasan-i Sabbah and deputized him. This term, *niyabat, na‘ib*, does not really exist in Ismaili hierarchies. So is this something that the chroniclers are inserting? We do not know. But what the end result is that he is raised up in the *da‘wa*, and when things get better in Isfahan, [in 1075] he accompanies him back to Isfahan. From there he is sent to Cairo to the headquarters of the Ismaili establishment, to the center of the Fatimid Caliphate, potentially to meet the imam. So that is the “standard narrative”. And he comes back and carries out his mission.

Within this narrative, I analyze a second narrative, what I call the “miraculous narrative”. So when we look at his sickness, when he was separated from Amira Dharrab, he is deathly sick, fearful that he will die. In Kashani, rather than saying that when he got better he went to another *dā‘ī* and acquired the intricacies of the faith, [Hasan] says that God wanted him—this invokes a *hadith* in which it is said that ‘if God wants to heal someone, he will change his blood to another blood, and he will change his breath to another breath’. So this hadith is quoted and the chronicler states that it is during this moment that he attained the intricacies of faith—So the agent of this conversion is not a *dā‘ī*, but is God. This narrative has not been noticed by anybody, I pull it out of the text. And for me what this implicates is, this is a theological construction, that an average individual is now becoming sacralized, that he is going from just a regular convert to becoming somebody who is ‘grounded in the mysteries of the faith’, [grounded] in the knowledge of the faith, and has acquired Gnosis, the knowledge of God, *ma‘rifa*. So I think this is a very important discovery that that I made.

There is a third narrative, which I called the “defection narrative”. And this narrative is known in the West because when The *Ruba‘iyat* of Omar Khayyam was translated [by Edward Fitzgerald in 1859], the “Three School Fellows story” was picked out and was [appended into] the preface. The three school fellow story goes that has Hasan-i Sabbah, along with Nizam al-Mulk, who was a great vizier of the Saljuqs, a very powerful vizier of the Saljuqs, and the poet Omar Khayyam, were students together in a *madrasa* in Nishapur. And they made a blood oath, that if any of them succeeds, they will help the other two to rise up. So the narrative goes on, that is Nizam al-Mulk attained this great high status of being the prime minister for Alp Arslan initially and then Malik Shah, the great Saljuq rulers. And Omar Khayyam goes to him says, "Hey, remember from childhood you promised ...?" And he says, "Take Nishapur take Rayy, whatever you want." And Omar Khayyam says, "No, I am a lowly poet, I just need to



have a comfortable life." So he assigned, I think something like 12,000 gold coins, dinars from the revenues of Nishapur to him, and he was happy.

Hasan-i Sabbah hears about Nizam al-Mulk's good fate and he goes and says, "Remember the promise that you had made?" And he [Nizam al-Mulk] tells him, "You can have Isfahan or Rayy!"—You know, the narratives are really interesting in this way. I mean, just imagine a prime minister offering in the capital city. It is not going to happen, but we have got to flow with it!—Hasan was not satisfied with that. He wanted a share of what Nizam al-Mulk had. So grudgingly, [the vizier] invites him into the entourage and brings him to the sultan and he is appointed in the administration of the bureaucracy. Nizam al-Mulk has been in power for a while, and the ruler, Malik Shah, for whom he was the tutor, is now feeling that his tutor is a little bit too overbearing, and maybe even corrupt. So he demands an accounting of certain transactions and Nizam al-Mulk responds, "Well, that might take a couple of years." Hasan-i Sabbah says, "I can do it in 40 days." So Hasan was assigned, and sure enough, he had completed it. On the day that he was going to present the reports to the Sultan, Nizam al-Mulk had their slaves divert each other, and he went and disarranged the report. So when Hasan-i Sabbah goes to give the presentation, he is unable to give the evidence. The Sultan becomes angry, and seeing that he was in jeopardy, this narrative states that Hasan escaped and joined the Ismailis.

Scholars have rejected [this story]. They have rejected it because those three individuals could never have been in a *madrassa* at the same time. They lived in different places, they are of different ages. I asked the question, but whenever the history of the Nizaris is written, whether by Nizaris or others, along with the biography that comes from the *Sarguzasht*, the 'three school fellows' narrative is accompanying. So why for 800 years have these two narratives been tied?

I started thinking, you know, who is it targeting? What is the purpose? And this leads me to two major conclusions that kind of permeate through my work. ... I postulate that this was written after Nizam al-Mulk was assassinated, possibly by the Nizaris, but there is collusion from others and 34 days later, the Sultan Malikshah passed away, in very questionable circumstances, possibly poisoned. There was tumult and factions supporting his sons were vying for power. His oldest son at the time, Bark-yaruq, was kind of sidelined because Malikshah's wife, Tarkan Khatun, was very powerful, and she had brought a lot of power and wealth to emplace her infant son on the throne. I postulate that this [story] is trying to reach out to Bark-yaruq. The reason why is that he was surrounded by the sons of Nizam al-Mulk and the supporters of Nizam al-Mulk. And possibly this text is saying, "Remember, Nizam al-Mulk was a power-hungry, corrupt individual. And these ministers of yours are leading you astray." To the point that when we read the chronicles, there is a strong alliance, at times, [between the Nizaris] with Bark-yaruq and Bark-yaruq's commanders—one in particular, fields 5000 Ismaili soldiers in favor of Bark-yaruq. The text says "*Bark-yāruq dustdār-i Rafīqān būdī*"; *Rafīqān* meaning the Nizari Ismailis, the brothers, the comrades... And the term *dustdār* is used—*dustdār* in regular Persian, *dust dāshtan* is "to love". So this text says 'Bark-yaruq loved the Nizaris'. And that is what led me to this conclusion that this was



propaganda to reach out and ally or create relations with Bark-yaruk. And then it just has a life of its own all the way to the translation of Omar Khayyam in the 19th century. And it is still being written today. In the same vein that 'Oh look, Hasan-i Sabbah went to school with the great Nizam al-Mulk and with the great poet, Omar Khayyam'. But the [original] narrative had different purposes.

So one of the things that I do in this 'double layer analysis' is go to the original source, the fragments that we have and look at what was the purpose of it. A second purpose [of this story], I think, was that the head of the *da'wa* in Isfahan, Abdul Malik ibn Attash, his son probably succeeded him and Hasan-i Sabbah's camp is saying, well, those guys achieved nothing. Look at Hasan, he is a powerful individual. And at that time, he already had the fortress of Alamut and was expanding the Ismaili polity, the Nizari Ismaili polity. So the conversion narratives are fascinating in this way, that they give us multiple layers of understanding of what was going on. The "standard narrative" gives us the understanding of the hierarchy of the *da'wa* and how it operated. The "miraculous narrative" gives us a sort of theological understanding of the individual Hasan-i Sabbah and his rise from a convert to a high official of the *da'wa*. And this "defection narrative" gives us some understandings of intra-factional issues between the Nizaris, as well as relations with the Saljuqs. Long answer, but it is a fascinating topic for me as you can see.

#### **Harry Bastermajian 38:48**

I am just curious, you know, these competing narratives I just wonder, you know, it almost sounds like, it is not the same, but similar to kind of a mirror for princes. And thinking about, you said propaganda, but also, this is a period of time in Islamic history, whether it is not just in the region we are talking about, sort of the Iranian plateau into, you know, the northern Iraq and Anatolia, but also just across the Islamicate societies, this is a period of a lot of tumult. And, you know, going back to Professor John Woods' point about confessional ambiguity, I mean, it speaks on many different levels. So it is fascinating to see how you are able to bring together and analyze these very, very competing narratives. It must have been a challenge.

#### **Shiraz Hajjani 39:49**

It is a challenge. And I think it is an opening, because the four major studies that I talked about, and whatever else that has been written, in the 19th century and onwards, the Ismailis and the Nizaris, in particular, are written in this conflictual sense... that they were in conflict with a) the Saljuqs and then the Mongols, and b) there was this theological conflict, constant conflict between the Sunnis and the Nizaris. To the point that when the *Qiyāma* was enacted in 1164, the Nizaris "turn away from the world", effectively, abandoning—they considered themselves the chosen, the ones that are the saved—and the rest of the world is cast to hell effectively, right? And in this transition, the scholars have seen a dialogical conflict. I see it, but I want to look at the different components. So, the intra-factional competition and debates are important. And that is also happening amongst the Saljuqs. And it is also happening amongst the Sunni '*ulamā*' (scholars of religious sciences). So your point about the tumult being there, and within this tumult there is the writing of 'mirrors for princes'. It is because the rulers are

being called to justice and righteousness. And you have to say, why is this being written? Because there is a lack of justice and righteousness amongst the rulers and the ruling establishment. So the writers are basically calling for that. And this may be—you have a very good point that the three school fellows could be read as part of the 'mirrors for princes'.

**Meryum Kazmi 42:04**

Thank you. So moving along in the history of Alamut, what was the event of the *Qiyāma* and what are different interpretations of this event?

**Shiraz Hajiani 42:15**

So in the process of acquiring the fortress of Alamut and then a series of other fortresses, the Ismaili polity was expanding. Meaning that, first of all, conflict with the Saljuqs was significant, and it was significant because of the location of the fortresses. I believe that the major challenge was trade, that they are on or near trade routes, so they could have choke points, and control the trade. And that is why they were a major challenge. They were up in mountains, fortresses high up in mountains, very secure; there is not much agricultural wealth that could be acquired. So why were the Saljuqs so vehement in opposition to them? Because of possible trade control.

So the polity expands. Their territory is expanding, but the territory expansion is also related to the expansion of the communities of followers. The emphasis that Hasan-i Sabbah had brought and he is, doctrinally, associated with the concept of *ta'lim*, which is a Shi'i concept of the authority, the interpretive authority of the imam. And this had been, perhaps how the Nizari *da'wa* was operating. Each one of these fortresses or regions are in northwestern Iran or in the Caspian region, and then in the eastern regions, present-day borders of Iran and Afghanistan, as well as parts of Syria. This was a large polity. At one point around 150 installations spread out through Abbasid domains. And you can imagine that each one of these regions had relative independence. While by about 1107, Hasan-i Sabbah had acquired supremacy, he dies in 1124, he and his successors were trying to contain divergence; they were trying to contain breaking away, both politically, but more importantly, religious defections, if you will. There was an active Zaydi movement in the Caspian region. There were resurgent Zoroastrian movements throughout Iran and the chronicles link this type of religious tumult happening and the Ismailis basically were stamping out, the Nizari Ismailis were stamping out these breakaway groups.

In 1164, there is an event that is held in the middle of the month of Ramadan. This is the *hijri* calendar year 559. On the 17th of Ramadan—this is halfway through the month, at midday. The people around Alamut are gathered and the ruler of Alamut, third in succession after Hasan-i Sabbah, mounts the pulpit and says, "I have a message from the imam." He reads out a letter from the imam believed to be the descendant of Nizar who had been killed in Cairo. And he reads out this missive, this message, and after this message is read, all the gathered recite a two-rak'at prayer, which is the festival prayer, the Eid prayer, and they break their fast and have a major celebration. Subsequently, this was enacted again, in eastern Iran, in the fortress of Mu'minabad, and possibly also

in Syria. And as I mentioned earlier, that scholarship has looked at this moment as a turning away, that the Ismaili *da'wa*, feeling that the rest of society is not receptive, were saying, "Okay, we are done with you," and turning inward.

And at this moment, Ḥasan [‘alā dhikrihi’l-salām] effectively said [to his followers] that, "You are in the presence of God." It was a complete realignment theologically and cosmologically, if you will, that rather than awaiting Resurrection at another time, you are at the *Qiyāma*. And this term *Qiyāma*, meaning Resurrection, has literally nothing to do with the Resurrection described in the Quran. It has very little to do with the notions of the Resurrection in Islamic thought up until this time. So it is a shift that is being made. Eventually this ruler is recognized as the descendant of Nizar, as the imam. It is the manifestation of the Nizari imamate. And from here on, continuing on to present day, Nizaris are going to look at a continuity of imamate going back to Ali. So this was a major transformation in society.

But if we look at the different layers, what is happening? There are competing authorities within the Nizari polity who might claim to be superior to others. And is it at this moment that this individual, Hasan, who happens to be the ruler of the most important region and the important fortress of Alamut, is he claiming supremacy overall? That is one. But in the declaration, he also says that, especially in the second declaration in Mu’minabad, the ruler of the fortress of Mu’minabad in eastern Iran says that the imam commands, the ruler, Ḥasan, commands, that whatever I say is tantamount to what he says. And he is the Imam he is the *dā’ī*, the Imam, the caliph. So were the Nizaris trying to establish a counter caliphate, a Nizari caliphate?

These are areas that have not been explored. And I am kind of working with this area and saying, what would be the multiple layers, as the theological aspects develop? And the way I approach it is by looking at the different factions. So since we do not have very detailed information, I, at least, bifurcate the Nizari community. And I say there was a group of people who were okay with the imam being concealed and there was a group of people that desperately wanted a soteriological salvific figure— somebody who would bring the community to salvation, bring them out of this world of injustice and inequality. And so they had pinned their hopes on the imam, and the name for this ruler, Ḥasan ‘alā dhikrihi’l-salām—*‘alā dhikrihi’l-salām* (on whose mentioned be peace), is an epithet that is attached to the Messiah.

So the question that you are asking has a huge resonance in this way—if we imagine the Jewish communities and we have Benjamin of Tudela, who passed through this area records that there were four [Jewish] villages in the Alamut area that were allied with the Nizaris. So there were Jewish communities in this area. So the expectation of the Messiah in Judaism, the second coming of Christ amongst the Christian communities, and the expectation of the Saoshyant in the Zoroastrian traditions, these are all informing the Islamicate notions of the *Mahdī*, of the *Qā’im*, the rightly-guided one, the Resurrector. And the Ismailis are drawing—Nizaris in this moment were drawing on old Ismaili theology, old Ismaili cosmology, and they are constructing the imam to be the locus of bringing the community to the presence of God. So it is a very,

very interesting bringing together of religious, political, and salvific notions of authority. And this is something that will resonate in other contexts. Ibn Arabi [born in Spain, is considered one of the most influential Sufi thinkers], who dies in 1240, comes close to claiming these types of roles, and, particularly, Timur [r. 1370-1405 Central Asian ruler and founder of Timurid dynasty] claims himself to be the *ṣāhib-i qiran*, the master of the conjunction, that he is this ruler who has this eschatological aspect—the end of the world is considered nigh, and he is the ruler at this time. Suleiman the Magnificent [r. 1520-1566 Ottoman Sultan] is also thought of in that way, and various others. I think these are resonances of the construction that was done at Alamut in one way, shape or form. So it is a vast area that needs 300 books to be written on.

### **Meryum Kazmi 52:39**

Okay, so this event of the *Qiyāma* is when Ismailism takes this antinomian turn. And when Ḥasan ‘alā dhikrihi’ l-salām declares himself to be the imam. So can you talk a bit about this treatise that you look at the *Ḥikāyat-i Sayyid Nāṣir-i Khusraw*, and how does it explain how the imam has manifested in Iran after going into concealment in Egypt?

### **Shiraz Hajiani 53:12**

So, let me just touch on the question. You said antinomian. So the chronicles, the three chronicles, they construct the Ismailis generally as *mulhid*, heretic. And the event of the *Qiyāma*, for at least two of them, is the moment at which ‘they went off the cliff’. And they constructed these events as antinomian and the community to be antinomian. What do we mean by antinomian? From whose perspective? Okay, *nomos*, the law. They are coming from a perspective of the *sharī‘a*. And even Juwayni who is frothing at the mouth, anti-Ismaili, anti-Nizari, anti-Shi‘i, in the last paragraph of the account of Hasan-i Sabbah, he says Hasan adhered to the norms of Islam, that he was diligently adherent to the *sharī‘a*, and so the two successors. And then heresy begins in full fledge. But what does that mean? From whose perspective, right?

If we turn to the Nizari perspective, the *nomos* is the imam. The *nomos* is dictated by the imam, the *sharī‘a* is something—there is no single interpretation of the *sharī‘a*. *Sharī‘a* is a body of laws and practices that are perceived to be from following the Sunnah of the Prophet. In the Shi‘i conception, the imam is the paramount authority who determines what the interpretation of the faith is—according to the Sunnah, because they are the protectors of the Sunnah in Shi‘i thought. So, while the construction was that this is antinomian, from the perspective of the Nizaris, this is absolute complete adherence to the *nomos*. It is a look beyond the *ẓāhir*, the outer, the esoteric, to the *bāṭin*, the inner, the esoteric, and looking at the inner realities and being aware of them.

So let us just think of that one statement that I made that it is said that Ḥasan ‘alā dhikrihi’ l-salām brought his community to the presence of God. What does that mean? The later [Nizari] doctrinal writing even comments on this. For instance, the five times prayer, it is not Quranic [obligation], it is an interpretation of the Sunnah of the Prophet that there is five times prayer. The Nizari commentators are going to say: “so what if you pray five times a day? then what? do you just go back to a state of hedonism?” You

know, go back to your shop and, and carry out your trade? They are saying that this notion that is central to the teachings of the *Qiyāma* is that you are in the presence of God. Now, if you are in the presence of God, that is 24/7, 365. It is a deepening of the awareness. It is that notion of *taqwa* that is so popular in Sufi thought, it is that 'God-centrism' as Professor Ali Asani talks about. So it is that shift of awareness from the worldly and that separation of, well, "this is my religious duty and then there is the world", to saying: "No, there is a continuum, that we are part of this cosmological continuum in which you have to see yourself within not just the cosmos, but within this notion of creation and more." You know, "in the beginning", what was there? What was there before the beginning? So this is that contemplation of taking us beyond that barrier that we have of our physicality.

So the text that I found, ... I began my research with one word. And this one word was from the biography of Hasan-i Sabbah. That, in the first line, the chronicles give his genealogy, his line about seven generations, that he claimed descent from the Himyari rulers of Yemen, and then there is a sentence which puzzled me. There was a word, when I started translating the *Jami' al-tawarikh* section on the Ismailis and the Nizaris, it puzzled me for several weeks. It was word *nakhalaf*. If you look it up in the dictionary, it says 'degenerate'. And most scholars have basically looked at it this way. In the sentence, Hasan-i Sabbah says, "I would prefer to be a loyal servant of the imam, rather than a *nakhalaf* son of the imam." What does this *nakhalaf* mean? So if you translated it the way scholars have done for 150 years, a 'degenerate son of the imam'. When I was translating, John Woods had started me as an assignment for; I had asked him, "So for my seminar paper, is it okay for me to translate 20 pages of the *Jami' al-tawarikh* section of the Nizaris?" He says, "Why don't you do the whole thing?" And I said, "Do you think I can?" He says, "Do you think you can?" I had two years of Persian at the time. So I am using these Persian-English dictionaries and they are just not satisfactory. So I make my way to *Dehkhoda*, which is the major Persian dictionary, the translation of *nakhalaf* is unsatisfactory. Then I go to the Arabic, the root *kha-la-fa*, *kha-la-fa*, from which we get *khalifa*, deputy, successor, and it clicked: "oh my gosh, this is saying that Hasan said, 'I would prefer to be a loyal servant of the imam rather than illegitimately the son of the imam,'" meaning that the group of people who are presenting him his biography, were constructing him as a descendant, possibly, of Nizar. And he was declining that, he was saying, "No, I am just a loyal functionary of the *da'wa*. I am not the imam". Meaning that there was a desperate need here, by that very small group, to say "we need an imam".

So the division that I do of satrists and zuhurists: the people who are okay with the concealment of the imam, and those who want the [urgent] manifestation of the imam—the zuhurists were present right there at the beginning of Hasan-i Sabbah's supremacy.

This group grows. The next rulers put down a raft of movements that are claiming, oh, such and such is the imam. And the text that I found is very unique. It gives us an entree into this. It is textual evidence of this type of occurrence. So the third ruler of the polity—Hasan-i Sabbah, followed by Buzurg Ummid, and then his son, Muhammad b. Buzurg Ummid— Muhammad's son Hasan, who became Ḥasan 'alā dhikrihi' l-salām,

had a group of people gravitating towards him. He was learned, he was young, he was charismatic. And they were thinking, this is the imam Hasan-i Sabbah promised us. So his father, who is the [third] ruler of the polity, gathers together the people at Alamut and executes 250—according to the chronicles, executes 250 for believing his son to be an imam. He says, "I am not an imam, I am a *dā'ī* amongst the *dā'īs*, and this is my son. Whoever believes him to be the imam is irreligious." And he banishes 250 people from Alamut. The texts say that he made them carry the 250 dead. Alamut is a fortress—Wladimir Ivanow, in his study, surveyed the fortress—it cannot contain more than 300 people. It is just too small. So let us say it is from the periphery, the region around Alamut. 250 people executed and 250 banished. That is a huge number. There is not even a whisper in the other histories, regional histories, or broader histories of the time. But this is something that we get out of the Nizari chronicles that Juwayni picked up, Rashid al-Din wrote about, and Kashani wrote about.

In 2013, I went to the Institute of Ismaili Studies, thanks to a [University of Chicago] research grant, and I acquired some manuscripts from the Institute of Ismaili Studies collection. And one of them was the *Ḥikāyat-i Sayyid Nāṣir-i Khusraw*. I started reading it. And initially, it did not make much sense because it is in the voice of Hasan-i Sabbah, and he says, "Let me tell you a story that Nasir Khusraw [Central Asian philosopher, poet and Fatimid Ismaili *dā'ī* who (d. after 1072)] told me." Again, the two people could not have been in the same place at the same time. They did not meet and let alone exchange any religious, historical or other thought. So it is clearly a narrative here. So Nasir Khusraw was just there to kind of say, Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ is an important individual. Then it goes on to tell the story about the time when it was written. I believe the text was written by the community that was banished out of Alamut. And it was a Nizari who penned this. It is preserved amongst the Nizaris. There are two copies that I found one at the Institute, and one at the University of Tehran in manuscripts.

The narrative in this goes that; I will give you one short passage of it. There was a prediction that Hasan-i Sabbah had done about who the imam would be, there were three characteristics. One is he will urinate on the books, two is with one stroke of a sword, he will kill two animals, and three at this particular debate, which I am going to tell you about in a moment, at this particular moment, he would walk in, and he would have he would be throwing an orange from one hand to the other, and he'd be wearing boots.

So the second successor of Hasan-i Sabbah, Muhammad b. Buzurg Ummid is ruling. And apparently the next person who became the ruler, according to this narrative, was the imam. This Muhammad had killed the [previous] imam and his 18 companions. You have to read the paper. It is being published soon in the British Journal of Persian Studies Iran. The ruler, killed the imam and his 18 companions. His [the imam's] wife was pregnant. He [the ruler] says, "take her into my household! If she gives birth to a male, he is to be killed!" So the imam's wife was taken into the ruler's household. And, lo and behold, she gives birth on the same day as the ruler's wife gives birth. And she [the ruler's wife] was a believer in the imamate, so she came and swapped her daughter for the son of the imam. The pregnant wife of the imam had given birth to a son. And

they swap. So for all intents and purposes, the ruler had a son, he was told that he had a son, he is growing up.

When he is two years old, Daddy is in the library, he is working in the library, and the son comes in and he pees on the books. And Daddy says "Strange," and probably slaps the child and says, "Get out of here. These are precious books." Things go on. A few years later, he has gone hunting, the son; he is about 14 now—oh, actually, there are two versions: he comes and pees on the books when he is two in one narrative, and another manuscript, he is 10. Okay, at ten he would have gotten into serious trouble! So two years later, he is out hunting. And he takes down an onager, a wild donkey, if you will. And he, with one stroke, he kills her, and they find that it is pregnant. So, lo and behold, he has killed two animals with one stroke of the sword. So now, Muhammad b. Buzurg Ummid, the ruler is thinking, you know, that prediction... the *Raḥīqān*, (the Nizaris) are gathered and he is saying to them: "You know, that prediction that Hasan-i Sabbah made, ... my son, he came and peed on the books and now he has killed two animals with one stroke of the sword. ..." And they said, "You fool, you just don't know!"

He had killed the imam because he was unaware of the true identity of the imam. The imam had been brought, the descendent of Nizar had been brought secretly to Alamut. Hasan-i Sabbah knew it. His successor knew it. But his [second] successor, for some reason did not know [the secret of the imamate], according to this narrative. So as he explained this to the gathering, in walks in who? The boy. What is he got in his hand? He is throwing from one hand to the other. What is he throwing?

**Meryum Kazmi** 1:08:19

Orange.

**Shiraz Hajiani** 1:08:20

An orange. And what is he wearing?

**Harry Bastermajian** 1:08:22

Boots.

**Shiraz Hajiani** 1:08:22

Boots. Okay, so he comes in, and now Muhammad b. Buzurg Ummid, who is the ruler of the polity, realizes this is the imam. So he falls to his feet and grabs his tunic and says, "Forgive me." And he is told, "You are not worthy of forgiveness because you killed my father and his 18 companions," and he [the boy] uses the boot to crush [the ruler's] head and then becomes the imam and the Nizaris celebrated. And there ends the narrative. The narrative ends with: 'it is the height of piety when one believer is attuned to the belief of the other, and that is attuned to the teachings of the imam.'

So I looked at this text, which does not have a date. We do not have provenance, we do not have authorship information. And I am thinking, when could this have been written? And because of the very negative construction of Muhammad b. Buzurg Ummid, I



suggest that it comes from this time period, and is written by this community that was exiled out of Alamut. And they are basically saying, "Death to the ruler." So it is a "manifesto of *ḥuzūr*". I gave it a nice, catchy title, the "Manifesto of the Manifestation". They are advocating for the imam to be manifest. And their candidate is this Hasan. And, lo and behold, as the *Qiyāma* is enacted, these communities probably must have come together.

With these types of narratives, you have to look at the different aspects. So the chronicles state that when Hasan became the ruler, they talk about his eruditeness, his charisma, and the following that he had. And when he became ruler in his own right, the first thing that he did is, he freed all the prisoners. He showed mercy, which is a divine act. And he enabled all those prisoners to go back to their homes, if they wanted to, or stay if they wished, and he provided resources. So, the chroniclers, the Sunni chroniclers, are saying Hasan, before enacting the *Qiyama*, was an erudite, charismatic, merciful individual. And yet this Nizari source is saying the Hasan killed 'his own father'. So you have to reconcile the various differences. I think this is a major find. It illuminates this period, it illuminates how some members of the Nizari community construed the transference of imamate, from Cairo, where Nizar was killed, to northern Iran. And so the enactment of *Qiyama*, which is not mentioned in that text, I believe took place afterwards, leading to the manifestation [of the imamate], and the success of this group or their type of thinking, that the imam, the soteriological figure, the eschatological figure, needs to be manifest and at the helm of the community, and that is how things go aright! So the text is fascinating. And I also found a related manuscript tradition of this in Badakhshan. So the two papers that have come out of this research, eventually will become a book once I consolidate the research with the manuscript tradition in Badakhshan.

### **Harry Bastermajian 1:12:16**

If we could maybe step out a little bit, zoom out, I should say, and we could discuss briefly the nature of the Nizari Ismailis' relationship with the Saljuqs. You know, what were some of the political, intellectual religious dynamics between the two?

### **Shiraz Hajjani 1:12:35**

So the biography of Hasan-i Sabbah in the chronicles, there are two as I told you. There are two narratives: the *Sarguzasht* narrative and then the "three school fellows" narrative, and they are kind of interlocked with the assassination in 1092 of Nizam al-Mulk. It is claimed by the Nizaris in these texts. But scholarship as early as the 1400s, of al-Dhahabi, is claiming that the Nizaris were not really responsible. A Nizari might have carried it out, but [the killing was due to] court intrigue. Nizam al-Mulk, in his last years, wrote, the *Siyar al-muluk*, *The Book of Government*, and this has been looked at as a "mirror for princes" and as a very important Islamicate book on government. In the text, he tells us that he had written about 40 chapters on the orders of his protege, Malik Shah, the Saljuq sultan. And then in the last days, he added 11 chapters. So 52 chapters in all, I hope the numbers add up—he added 11 chapters. In one of them, he says, "You should not follow the lead of the women." Tarkan Khatun might have been the target, Malik Shah's wife—very powerful woman—who was involved in political

decisions. And the other chapters are strongly anti-Shi'i and advising the ruler not to align himself with the 'ulamā' of Iran, but rather the 'ulamā' of from the east, from Central Asia, where the Saljuqs had come from, suggesting that the 'ulamā' in Iran and Iraq were probably colored by the association with Shi'ism. And he pointed at certain figures in the hierarchy of the Sultanate, who were heretical. Which tells us that there was a serious penetration of Ismailism in the Saljuq hierarchy, to the point that we can suggest now, with my research, that Bark-yaruq possibly might have dallied with Nizari Ismailis. Whether he accepted it or not, we do not have any evidence to establish but he had strong alliances and relations.

So I think the relations have not been looked at. There is only one article by Carole Hillenbrand from Edinburgh University that even talks about relations between the Saljuqs and the Nizaris. Mostly, the conflictual relationship has been focused on. And as I mentioned, the fortresses that the Nizaris had were on major trade routes. One of them, which I believe Bark-yaruq might have yielded to the Nizaris, was right outside of Isfahan, which is the Saljuq capital. So the Saljuqs were very much challenged by the threat of the Nizaris.

The Nizaris were trying to expand both their territorial and their socio-political reach. And that was a contention for the Abbasids, who, at this time, were just titular heads, and maybe just governed their palaces or the extent of Baghdad. The real rulers were the Saljuqs. So in all these interests, the 'ulamā' were opposed to the Nizari encroachments, the Abbasids were opposed to the Nizari encroachments, and the Saljuqs were threatened and challenged by this. Eventually, they do settle into a period of less violence, by the time of the Sultan Sanjar who dies in 1157. And the Nizari polity is going to exist with little exchange of territory for another 100 years, almost, until the Mongols come and destroy it. So there is a give and take in terms of territory, there is a push and pull in terms of political and military control, but there is also the socio-religious aspect that is negotiated.

### **Meryum Kazmi 1:17:31**

So how did the Nizari polity in Iran come to an end?

### **Shiraz Hajiani 1:17:35**

The Nizari polity came to an end in 1256. If we go back to the satirists and zuhurists, the Qiyama is declared in 1164, and Hasan is assassinated-- Ḥasan 'alā dhikrihi' l-salām is assassinated in 1166, and much of the doctrinal elaboration took place in his son's reign. But his grandson, interestingly, disavowed his Ismaili attachments and became a vassal of the Abbasids and adopted Sunni Islam. Jalal al-Din Hasan was his name. He allied with various of the Saljuq commanders and gained a lot of territory through this alliance and served their political and military interests. It is at this time that Genghis Khan was invading the Islamic domains, 1219 to 1221 is the time that Genghis Khan invaded. And Jalal al-Din Hasan was the first of the Muslim rulers on the west of the Oxus River, which is today called the Panj in Tajikistan, or the Amu Darya—as the forces of Genghis Khan were crossing the Amu Darya, Jalal al-Din Hasan sent emissaries and an alliance was formed. So in 1220, you can say that an alliance

existed. But in 1256, the Mongols destroyed this former ally. Most people focus on the end. I focused on the 30 years and try to establish what was going on. And being a student of John Woods at Chicago, who is the preeminent, one of the preeminent scholars of the Mongols, and the multidisciplinary approaches that we use, one of the things that is critical is to look at where trade takes place. The Ismaili polities, the castellan polity, is sitting along massive trade routes, and the Mongols were very interested in trade. The invasions of Islamicate domains was because the Khwarazmshahs had appropriated Mongol wealth and executed their traders. So is it possible that the Mongols were allied with the Nizaris because the Nizaris would provide protection for trade, plying through the Islamicate domains into the Mongol domains? Over time, this alliance declines. And in my work, I have mapped out how the Mongols were seeking to destroy the Khwarazmshahs and at a point the Nizaris become vassals of the Khwarazmshahs. There is a suggestion in my work that there was a double cross. There was a Nizari emissary accompanying the Khwarazmshah; he had sent a message to the Mongols of the location. It was intercepted. I think that is one of the *casus belli*, one of the major reasons. Then the Nizaris are supposed to have assassinated a Mongol official in Georgia. And there were continuous complaints from Sunni dignitaries in the Mongol administration to the Great Khan in Mongolia, against the Nizaris. So by the time of Mongke's rule, relations had collapsed already.

What I suggest is that the protection of the trade route was not necessary anymore, because the invading army was being replaced by forces of occupation. So Hulagu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, was sent out by his brother Mongke Khan, to invade the Islamicate domains and he was to destroy, first and foremost, the polity of the Nizaris and then go on to take the Lurs and he also went on to take the Abbasid capital. So Hulagu decapitated, in 1256, the Nizari polity, and in 1258, he decapitated the Abbasid caliphate.

The Nizaris had fought for 160 years with the Saljuqs and their fortresses were impregnable. They had been able to maintain their independence and expand. But they capitulated, the ruler at the time, Rukn al-Din Khurshah, capitulated without a major fight—only skirmishes. My thinking is that he and some of his advisors, some of the leading dignitaries, were expecting to reset the alliance, Hulagu accepted and received Rukn al-Din Khurshah. In fact, he allowed him to go to Mongolia. He went to Mongolia and the Great Khan said, "How can I accept--" the Great Khan declined to accept him in his presence and turned him back, saying, "Your two fortresses, Girdkuh"—which is a major fortress in Iran—"your two fortresses are still holding out, your vassalage is unacceptable." He was sent back and orders were given to kill him and to annihilate the Nizaris. So the chronicles report that he was killed in the Khangai Mountains on the way back from Mongolia to Iran, and, 10,000 here, 12,000 there, the Ismailis were massacred. And, again, this began a period of *satr*, of concealment. The imam, the *da'wa*, and the community were in concealment again.

**Meryum Kazmi** 1:24:18

Thank you. So, we started talking a bit about how you approach the sources that are available. Can you maybe expand a bit or say more about some of your digital humanities methods and your double narrative analysis?

**Shiraz Hajiani** 1:24:34

The two major approaches I have mentioned already that I look at factionalism within the Nizaris, which other scholars have not focused on. And the other aspect that I find that is very significant is, I look at the relations, so the relations between the Nizaris and the Saljuqs, the relations between the Nizaris and the Mongols, these are important. Another pillar of my work is that I look at the genre of the text, that historical writing at this time, especially Persian historical writing, was writing about dynasties. So each one of the rulers within the dynasty would have an account. And there was a particular framework and paradigm in which this type of writing was done. Much of it possibly was, as Harry you mentioned, mirrors for princes. I believe that the Nizaris, Ismailis generally, did not write history in this fashion, if they wrote history at all. And that is a point of debate and argument between myself and others, other scholars in Ismaili studies. They did not write history qua history, *tarikh*. What historical content we get is in *manaqib* and *sira*, biography, and talking about the greatness of certain individuals. So these are snippetized and taken and constructed into the Persian historical writing framework, that Juwayni, Rashid al-Din and Kashani did. And so I take those generic differences [into account].

The second important thing that I did is, as I was translating, I transcribed Rashid al-Din. And, looking at the patterns, I then subjected it to using qualitative research software, TAMS Analyzer, actually, a free software for the Mac environment. And what I did in there is go and break down narrative segments. So what is this sentence about? What is this section about, down to the word level? So when you look at the term "Assassin", it is there because "*qatala*" [to kill] is the most common, important word that occurs in word frequencies, because they have a hit list of 147 hits that were carried out in the first three reigns.

So if you put that aside, and you look at the narratives, I found that 50% of the narratives are about war, battles. And if you correlate with the doctrinal, that 50% is tied in. So the religious debates that are [recorded] are taking place in terms of conflict. So to give you an example, when a fortress is besieged, nearing the end of the siege—an '*alim*, a Sunni '*alim*, would be sent up to debate with the Ismailis. So you figure, you go out and besiege a fortress sometime in the spring, through the summer. And now things are getting difficult you do not have enough supplies and so on. And you are saying, all right, what do we do? So who do they send? They send a Sunni '*alim* up there to go and have a debate saying, "Your imam is illegitimate!" And the debate takes place. So we have some of those.

I started thinking, why are they doing this? [It made sense that] the '*alim* is going up there to do a reconnoiter. He is part of the military establishment, the Saljuqs have co-opted the Sunni '*ulamā*'. Okay, we know that the Ottomans co-opted the Sunni '*ulamā*'. This is in the 16th century, but here is an example, in the 12th century. So '*alim* is

checking out what is their morale? What is the supply of the food? What is the disease situation? Meaning, he is giving intelligence to the Saljuq establishment, Saljuq besiegers. Can they hold out? Or should we just pull back and come back next year? Right? So this was possible through the data analysis, because putting these narratives side by side, calculating the word frequency and looking at the patterns. So these types of things have been very, very productive. And I think this is the way of philology in the 21st century.

**Harry Bastermajian** 1:29:26

Thank you. Going back to the challenges—we talked a little bit about the challenges of studying early Nizari Ismaili history, you know, we talked about the paucity of sources, the biases found in both original sources and modern scholarship—as students of Islamic studies, what lessons can we learn from the reexamination of these assumptions and biases?

**Shiraz Hajjani** 1:29:54

So the biases exists there. And as you have seen, I have kind of done this forensic analysis where I look at the paradigmatic approaches and separate them out, and then go and analyze “what” and “why” is being said in the chronicles, and then in the fragments of Nizari sources that we have. We have a handful of doctrinal sources. And potentially, as the archives—individual archives as well as institutional archives—become available, and more scholarship focused on them, we will potentially have more. I have discovered or rather uncovered two or three [texts] and have edited and translated them. So one is the paucity of sources as you mentioned. But the biases that existed in the Persian and Arabic historical texts have been carried through into early scholarship. More recent scholarship has been a little bit more reasonable. Farhad Daftary, I think, is a turning point because a) he has been positive in his understandings of Ismailis and not negative, and b) he is a Muslim. All the scholars that I named before were not Muslim. So there is a shifting in terms of who is doing the work as well. There are Muslim scholars, there are Ismaili scholars, there are Nizari scholars who are studying their own tradition, as well as non-Ismaili scholarship. So I think this is a change in direction.

But in terms of the student coming at this, I think it is a very important area. Why? Because the Ismailis are, looking at the entire history of Ismailism, are a significant part of Islamicate thought. You cannot conceptualize Islamicate thought without Shi‘ism, without Ismailism, because much of the development of Islamic thought is dialogical. There are debates taking place. So if you are looking at just Sunni thought as it is transmitted, then you are missing a leg of the stool. It is unbalanced! So our scholarship needs to address that. And one of the things in my books I am trying to do is not just study the Nizari components, but I wish to place them in the wider tableau of the religious developments, the historical developments, the political developments that are taking place. So not an idiosyncratic separate, but part of the continuum of development. I think that is an important perspective that students coming to this field should take up.

**Harry Bastermajian** 1:33:01

So what is ahead for your research? What is coming up?

**Shiraz Hajiani** 1:33:05

Well, this year I am working on completing “translating from the dissertation to English”, the biography Hasan-i Sabbah, and I am hoping that I will have the opportunity to continue my research on *Qiyāma*, on eschatology, on Islamicate notions of eschatology, which will inform my next book on the *Qiyāma*. And I also hope to write a book on the *Ḥikāyat-i Sayyid Nāṣir-i Khusraw*, which I think has two components: the text itself, and its textual history, but the other element that I want to bring in, and this is something that I am very carefully navigating and need to do a lot of work on, is the concept that is very much explored in South Asian studies, post-colonial South Asian studies, this idea of subaltern studies. Because what I have described: the Nizaris and the Ismailis in general have been construed as subaltern in the same way that the colonials construed the Indians as subaltern individuals. They constructed an identity for the Indians. They then executed the policies accordingly. And then they wrote the history about the subaltern group, an imagined community, if you will. The same sort of thing is happening in premodern times. And I hope to introduce this type of approach of construing minority communities that are marginalized, demonized, and otherized. So I hope to do that. And the other thing that I want to do is also focus on my work in Central Asia. I did some ethnographic work there. And I hope to have the opportunities to be able to build on that.

**Harry Bastermajian** 1:35:19

Thank you.

**Shiraz Hajiani** 1:35:20

Thank you. This was delightful. I am grateful for your ears. And I am grateful, of course to the Alwaleed Program and CSWR.

**Meryum Kazmi** 1:35:43

You can learn more about early Nizari Ismaili history in Dr. Shiraz Hajiani’s upcoming book, *The Life and Times of Our Master*, and at his website, [islamicate.net](http://islamicate.net). This is the Harvard Islamica Podcast. I am Meryum Kazmi, thanks for listening.

[Audio: "Samarqand Blues" by Samandar Pulodov and the [Silk Road Trance Band](#)]