

Review of Ecstasy and enlightenment: the Ismaili devotional literature of South Asia, by Ali S. Asani

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Ali S. Asani (foreword by Prof. Annemarie Schimmel)

Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia

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The Nizari Ismaili tradition (and much the same could also be said of the Musta‘li-Tayyibi Ismailis as well), because of its unique cultural and geographical spread and diversity, offers a remarkable ‘microcosmic’ perspective on all the challenges facing the modern student of Islam and the study of religions more generally. Contemporary Ismaili communities, mirroring the fascinating historical spread of that branch of Shiite Islam, include the traditional centres in Syria-Lebanon; Iran; neighbouring regions of the four countries surrounding Badakhshan (Tajikistan); modern Pakistan and India—*plus* a flourishing ‘diaspora’ stretching from Africa and Southeast Asia to Europe (particularly the UK) and North America. The results of that diaspora mean that the cultural and religious background of the ‘Ismailis’ most often encountered in the West are especially rooted in the ‘Khoja’ Ismaili traditions of the subcontinent (Sindh, Gujarat, and Punjab), and as Dr. Asani points out, the devotional and ritual heart of those communities, for many centuries, has remained the ‘*ginân*’ songs attributed to the great Ismaili founding teachers (*pîrs*) there, composed and conveyed in a number of the local vernacular languages.

The six earlier studies by Prof. Ali S. Asani (Harvard University) brought together in this collection represent (together with his other related studies often cited here) a major scholarly contribution to an extraordinary flowering of *ginân*-studies that has suddenly

emerged in the past decade, almost all due to young Ismaili scholars offering complementary perspectives on that subject and its relations to wider Ismaili, Islamic and subcontinental (bhaktic and literary) traditions.¹ As Dr. Asani points out in the helpful historical Introduction ('The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in South Asia') added to this new volume, the *ginâns* and the Ismaili communities themselves are also of wider interest to many scholars dealing with three inter-related dimensions of their broader 'cultural contexts': the transnational Ismaili (and wider Islamic) community; Indo-Muslim Islam (particularly Sufism and popular literature and devotional music and ritual); and the broader 'Indic' contexts of shared devotional forms and culture (*bhakti*, sants, Nath yogis, poetic, music and dance forms, etc.). Today scholars interested in any of those contexts are at least somewhat aware of the terrible distortions and misrepresentations brought about by relatively recent communal, political and ideological currents, and happily one of the leitmotifs connecting all of these articles is the author's devotion not only to avoiding those pitfalls, but also to carefully mapping out the manifold ways related historical pressures have slowly altered the actual forms, contents and Ismaili conceptions of the *ginâns* in recent centuries.

Dr. Asani's studies are arranged approximately in order of their breadth of interest and accessibility, and the first essay on '*Ginâns* as Devotional Literature' is a concise, classic overview of all the subjects treated in these studies: the original and changing historical contexts and transmissions of the *ginâns*; their main subjects and themes; their poetic and

¹ For non-specialists, who are normally in particular need of translated *ginâns* and contextual explanations, we may mention three closely related studies: *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans*, tr. Z. Moir and C. Shackle (London, 1992); *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: An Anthology of Hymns by the Satpanth Isma'ili Muslim Saint, Pir Shams*, by T. Kassam (SUNY, 1995); and *A Scent of Sandalwood: Indo-Ismaili Religious Lyrics*, by A. Esmail (Routledge Curzon, 2002). The bibliography and some notes to these articles—all originally written and published in the late 1980s and early 1990s—have been 'updated' to 1999, but only the first of the above book-length studies is frequently cited here.

musical dimensions; and their actual ritual contexts of performance and community participation. The second article, on ‘Bridal Symbolism in the *Ginâns*’, is an at least equally accessible, and it provides an often creatively suggestive development of the many key themes a (such as the characteristic ‘feminisation’ of the poetic protagonist, as lover, bride, wife and mother)² connecting this Ismaili tradition with surrounding Sufi and Bhaktic poetry and popular devotional forms throughout the vernacular languages of the subcontinent. The third essay, ‘The *Gît* Tradition: A Testimony of Love’, is a hidden treasure, a remarkably original anthropological study of the fascinating creative developments of new, highly popular forms of Ismaili devotional music, poetry and ritual (such as devotional cassette playing during commuting!) throughout the contemporary ‘diaspora’, offering a richly concrete and detailed glimpse of what we can all see in so many cognate settings worldwide today: the rapid creative transformations and adaptations of older religious tradition in radically new social and cultural settings.³ Dr. Asani’s unique ‘case-study’ here reflects a remarkable wider, as yet unstudied world-historical phenomenon: the amazing way hundreds of local, often centuries-old, distinctively Islamic devotional forms of ‘music’ (i.e., *dhikr* in all its forms from chanting and drumming to elaborate musical and choral ensembles), always carefully restricted to a small group of initiates or local community members, have almost overnight (within little more than a decade) suddenly become readily accessible worldwide in recorded formats, and even increasingly in public forms of performance.

The final three studies, relating to the distinctive ‘Khojki’ script used to transmit the

² Dr. Asani’s remarks here, in particular, should eventually draw much more serious attention from the legions of recent Western scholars writing on gender, critical theory and related schools of literary criticism from culturally and historically limited perspectives.

³ As the author points out, cassette recordings of a wide range of *ginâns*, *gîts*, and related devotional music are now widely and publicly available from specialised stores and shops frequented by Ismaili customers, in most major Western metropolises.

ginâns until the mid-twentieth century, and to related questions of their actual processes of oral and written transmission, draw more deeply on the author's own philological and historical specialisations, but take up those questions in ways that clearly communicate their wider relevance to central questions of oral-written transmission, transmutation and performance and ritual contexts that must concern students of *any* of the subcontinental vernacular traditions (whether Muslim or other)—and indeed of their equivalents in many other cultures. The ongoing historical importance and multiple functions of such a distinctive 'communal' script, which Dr. Asani compares here to Sikh and other nearby Indian contexts, of course also highlights promising parallels, for example, in the multiple functions of the sacred Hebrew and Arabic scripts (likewise used to write a wide range of local languages) in so many different historical settings.

In short, what might appear to be a collection of highly specialised studies in fact provides a strikingly accessible, concise and useful illustration (even for the undergraduate classroom in Islamic or religious studies) of the wide range of indispensably complementary perspectives, interpretive approaches and concerns which anyone teaching or writing in the study of religion today must bring to bear on their own specialised areas of interest, whether contemporary or explicitly historical.

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