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**A Conversation with Dr. Sumaiya Hamdani on Islamic
History, Shiite History, and Ismaili Studies***

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Dr. Sumaiya Hamdani is an Associate Professor in the History and Art History Department of George Mason University, Virginia. Hamdani received her B.A. from Georgetown University, and her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Islamic History from Princeton University specializing in medieval Islamic and Fatimid history. Her research has also included articles and reviews in the fields of Shi'i thought, Islamic history, and women in Islam. Her teaching interests include Islamic, Middle East, and world history. Her current research examines the construction of identity in Muslim minority communities in South Asia during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

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Hamdani comes from a Dawoodi/Tayyibi Ismaili family. Her grandfather Husayn Hamdani¹ (d. 1962) and father Abbas Hamdani² have contributed to this tradition with their academic studies. On May 9, 2019, we had an interview with S. Hamdani, as a scholar who comes from the Shi'i Ismaili tradition, who had lived in Egypt before immigrating to America. So, she knows both East and West cultures due to her family tradition and her life experience in America. This interview is on her life, as well as Islamic history, Shiite history, Ismaili tradition, and academia. The aim of this paper is to bring the view of an academician who is living in America, on tradition, Islamic history, Ismaili history, and academic studies to the reader.

Betül Yurtalan: *Thank you, Professor Hamdani, for agreeing to speak to the Turkish Journal of Shiite Studies. Firstly, I would like to ask you about yourself. Can we briefly talk about your interest in Islamic History? Why are you more specifically interested in Shia and Ismaili History?*

Sumaiya Hamdani: So, you ask me about my interest in Islamic history and more specifically in Shia or Ismaili history. My interest in Islamic history developed slowly over time actually. I had come to the US from Egypt as a child. Soon after, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, and a hysteria and Islamophobia gripped the country in ways that have sadly repeated since then. As a child at the time, I was made aware that my religious identity was viewed as problematic, and this stuck with me. I was also made aware that the place (Middle East) from which I had immigrated was problematic, and this stuck with me as well. And it contrasted with what I understood about both the Middle East and Islam, from what I remembered of my childhood experiences in Egypt,

¹ He has a publication on the genealogy of Fatimids: Husayn Hamdani, *On the Genealogy of the Fatimid Caliphs*, Cairo, 1958.

² Professor Abbas Hamdani was born in Surat, India in 1926, received his B.A. (Hons.) and L.L.B. degrees from Bombay University in 1945 and 1947 respectively and his Ph.D. from the University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies) in 1950, in Arabic and Islamic Studies. He taught Islamic History at the University of Karachi from 1951-62; at the American University in Cairo from 1962-69, and since then at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee until his retirement in 2001. Some of his publications are: Abbas Hamdani. *The Beginnings of the Isma'ili Da'wa in Northern India*. Cairo, 1956; "The Dā'ī Ḥātim Ibn Ibrāhīm Al-Ḥāmidī (d. 596 H./ 1199 A.D.) and His Book "Tuḥfat Al-qulūb". *Oriens* 23/24 (1974): 258-300; "Evolution of the Organisational Structure of the Fatimi Da'wah: The Yemeni and Persian Contribution", *Arabian Studies*, 3 (1976), pp. 85-114; "An Early Fāṭimid Source on the Time and Authorship of the "Rasā'il Iḥwān Al-Ṣafā". *Arabica* 26, no. 1 (1979): 62-75; Abbas Hamdani and François De Blois. "A Re-Examination of Al-Mahdi's Letter to the Yemenites on the Genealogy of the Fatimid Caliphs", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1983): 173-207.

and also from my home environment, where an emphasis was placed on learning about Islamic intellectual heritage and espousing anti-imperial and liberal politics (an outlook that characterized many Muslim intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century like my father). These were experiences and attitudes that I carried with me into university, where I took the opportunity to further explore both Islamic civilization and the history of the Middle East, through the larger frame of international relations and politics.

After graduating, my thought was to continue learning about the modern Middle East and working in some way to help resolve the problems and conflicts there, perhaps through development or refugee work which I had already been involved with in university internships that took me to Palestinian camps and Indochinese camps in the Philippines. I enrolled in an MA program at the American University in Cairo, to consider my options, and while there I was encouraged by a faculty member to apply to Princeton for a Ph.D. in Islamic history. Although I had not considered such an option, I had enrolled in some courses on Islamic history at the AUC, and my performance in those courses led to this suggestion and subsequently to the change in plan that led me to Princeton.

I had much to learn and catch up on after arriving at Princeton. My education until that point had not exposed me yet to the historiographical and intellectual debates that were informing research in the field of Islamic history, and also had not exposed me to the wealth of sources in the pre-modern period. I took courses in my department of Near Eastern Studies that ranged from the social and economic history of the pre-modern Middle East with Avram Udovitch, to the Geniza archives of the Jewish community in Egypt with Michael Cohen, to the early periods of Islamic history with Michael Cook and Hossein Modarressi. I had also to develop my language skills in Arabic, and French as a research language, and attempted to tackle Hebrew. I attended seminars in the History Dept., and the seminars about the Late Antique world convened by Peter Brown. And was fascinated by debates over deconstruction that were animating research in Comparative Literature. My intellectual formation was rich and varied, but what most struck me was the general effort at revision that informed discussions in so many fields: literature, history, religion, politics and of course Islamic history in particular. Some of the “revisions” had to do with new approaches to text that were more sensitive to the subjectivity of their authors and audiences, some to do with methodology informed by a desire to consider other texts or non-textual sources, and some efforts aimed at recovering the voice of those left out of the master narratives whether they were about the west or the east. Ultimately, I was struck with the emphasis on “others”.

Of course, I also had to decide what topic I would research for my thesis. The “others” in Islamic history and society were many of course: minorities within the Islamic world (like Jews about whom I studied with

Mark Cohen), women and those of altered gender identity (whose history was being explored by Shaun Marmon in the Religion Dept.), the middle and merchant classes (whose experience was written about by Avram Udovitch), and of course the Shia (whose role and profile in Islam was being raised by Hossein Modarresi). One minority about whom important research was just being conducted was the Ismaili Shia, thanks to Paula Sanders. As an Ismaili Shi'i myself, I was naturally drawn to what she and others, like my own father (Abbas Hamdani) and grandfather (Husayn Hamdani, d. 1962), had contributed to understanding about the Ismailis. My grandfather and father's work had been pioneering and had laid an important foundation, but it was the intervention of another scholar, James Morris, a scholar of Sufism and Ismaili studies, that cemented my interest in Ismaili Shiism. In a course with him, I read the work of Qadī al-Nu'man (d. 364/974), the *Mecalis wa'l-Musayarat*, which consists of episodic accounts of al-Nu'man's conversations and meetings with the Fatimid Caliphs and particular with fourth Fatimid Caliph al-Muizz li-Din Allah (r. 341-365/953-975). I discovered a discourse that was both accessible and far less "heretical" or "sectarian" than the secondary scholarship about Ismaili Shiism had presented that this branch of Shiism to be.

So, I became curious about the disconnect between the Ismaili sources and what western scholars had said about them. That became the focus of my research project or dissertation, which became my book. It was precisely on this question of whether or not Ismaili Shiism was really outside the mainstream of the developments occurring in Islam in 2-6th/8-12th centuries. Because what we find especially in al-Nu'man's work, who is the main source of information on the early North African period of Fatimid History, are presentations of Ismaili Shiism that are very much in dialog with and very much comfortable with the kind of intellectual, religious, legal, philosophical developments that are happening in Islam as a whole in that period. As a result, I sought to explore how the master narrative about Islamic history in the period could include the experience of the Ismaili "other".

B. Yurtalan: *How did your father Abbas Hamdani figure in the formation of this interest, given that you are from the Hamdani family which comprises generations of scholars from the Dawoodi Bohra community in India and Yemen?*

S. Hamdani: Family history is interesting that way; sometimes it guides you, sometimes you depart from it. As far as I was concerned, it guided me on the whole. My work stands on the shoulders of my predecessors in the family, even if its focus is fundamentally different in some respects. Both my father and my grandfather felt their task was to establish the foundation of what we know about Ismaili Shiism. Coming as they did from a scholarly family, they were equipped with skills and able to continue the transmission of Ismaili texts preserved in family manuscripts in the new medium of English, and with the scholarly apparatus that enabled Ismaili texts to be more widely known and

studied. What had been preserved within the Bohra community was now available to those outside because of their efforts. As well, both my grandfather and father contributed to the understanding and interpretation of these texts; their work helped to reveal meaning, establish the contours of Ismaili doctrine, provide the connections between Ismaili texts, and in the case of my father in particular, to situate the history of the Ismaili Shia to the events of the 2-6th/8-12th centuries and beyond. In that respect, I, like others, benefitted greatly from reading their work. That said, I felt it was time to connect Ismaili Shiism to the knowledge produced in the larger Islamic frame. In other words, rather than present new information about Ismaili Shiism, I was more concerned to integrate what was known about it into something broader, hence the theme or argument in my book about the *zahir* in the *batin*.

More recently I have become more interested in my family history for a different reason. Influenced as we all are by the time and circumstances in which we live, I have been influenced by debates about identity, in particular, Muslim minority identity. Ismaili Shiism during the 2-6th/8-12th centuries was a going concern, and produced political success in the form of the Fatimid caliphate in the 4th/10th century, and contributed greatly to Islamic thought in a variety of ways. But the fall of the Fatimid Caliphate in the 6th/12th century reduced Ismaili Shiism to a minority community scattered across peripheral areas of the Islamic world, on the outs with an increasingly hegemonic Sunni Islam. Ismaili Shia survived as minorities within Islam thereafter. I wondered about how their identity was preserved, and whether it serves as a possible precedent for efforts to preserve Muslim identity among Muslim minorities today, albeit in the very different circumstances of the west, for example.

It was then that I started understanding the role that my family played in our community, and in our (Dawoodi) Tayyibi Ismaili history. They represented and were part of a scholarly elite that saw its role as preserving a textual legacy, connecting them back in time to the early Ismaili and Fatimid periods, and across space through the diaspora of Tayyibi Ismailis in India and Yemen. Their efforts to preserve and transmit texts, without state or institutional patronage, is one level a testament to their fidelity to the Ismaili Shii tradition, and on another level a testament to the dynamism of a civil society of scholars and the merchant families that supported them, in networks of trade and education that traversed a cosmopolitan Indian Ocean world. Their efforts contributed to the perpetuation of the Tayyibi Ismailis as a distinct community, and it resulted in the preservation of a rich intellectual heritage in their manuscript collections (such as those of my family that are housed at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London).³ The experience of such scholars, including those among my forebears, is

³ This collection has been catalogued in the IIS publication: François de Blois. *Arabic, Persian and Gujarati Manuscripts: The Hamdani Collection*. I.B.Tauris. London, 2011.

the focus of my research now, as I think about what it means to be Muslim in a non-Muslim world.

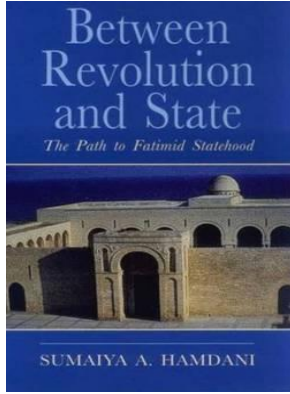
B. Yurtalan: *So, how do you express your identity? Eastern, Western, Muslim, Ismaili, American-Muslim...*

S. Hamdani: It is difficult for me to answer that question for two reasons. Identity changes over time. And identity is layered. One I think often experiences changes of what is most important to them as they get older. It depends not only on how one evolves as a person but also on circumstances that intersect with your life. For example, I am always amazed by the generation of my father in particular, who were affected by all the big events of the 20th century. My father was born in India in the 1920s, and as a result, was a British subject. In his early adulthood, India became independent and partitioned. And so, for a while, he became a citizen of the newly created state of Pakistan. Then he traveled to Egypt and discovered his Yemeni heritage and became a national of Yemen. Subsequently, he moved to the US and eventually became US citizen. Such were the consequences, in terms of national identity, of imperialism and post-colonialism for his generation.

As for me, or those of my generation, the post-colonial dust has settled. Our national identity has become affected by globalization, and it is thus that I have had two different passports or national identities in my lifetime, one that I was born with, and one that I adopted as a result of immigration. At the same time, I, like others before and after me, have other identities as well: as a professional, in terms of gender, and ethnicity, and politics or political leanings, and lastly of course in terms of religion. The latter is a struggle though! It is a struggle to be Muslim in the west, especially as one strives, like I do, to not be forced into a homogenizing tendency imposed from outside and adopted from within as a survival mechanism. In the end, I strive to establish an identity that is comfortably at the intersection of many others, one that is layered, nuanced, and dynamic, as it must be for all of us, especially those who are often targeted as “others” in the west.

B. Yurtalan: *How old were you when you moved to the US?*

S. Hamdani: We came to the States when I was 7 years old. But we often went back to Egypt where my father had been teaching and where I was born, for reasons of research and study. My connection to Egypt is thus as a familiar place, a home away from home in the US, and in some ways more culturally familiar. But I have also lived, traveled and studied elsewhere in the Middle East, and South Asia. These experiences have contributed to my identity formation as an individual.



B. Yurtalan: Your book which is an expanded version of your Ph.D. dissertation, *Between Revolution and State: The Construction of Fatimid Legitimacy* (I.B. Tauris, 2006) examines the development of legal and historical literature by the Ismaili Shi'i Fatimid State. It is about al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363/974) who is one of the most important Ismaili figures of the Fatimid Period. You have already mentioned why you choose this subject but can we talk more about it?

S. Hamdani: After my initial exposure to al-Numan through my course with James Morris, I continued to read others of his works as had been edited and therefore available, like the *Iftitah al-da'wa wa ibtida' al-dawla* (his history of the early Fatimid period), *Da'ai'm al-Islam* (his seminal legal work) and *Kitab al-himma* (on protocol and etiquette). Each in their own way, to my mind, revealed a discourse that was in dialogue with the literature of other branches of Islam on the same topics. This said something important to me: not only that Ismaili Shiism did not develop in isolation from other branches of Islam, but also that because of that, Ismailis produced literature that was important to understand even if unique. To explain, Ismaili Shiism was successful politically in the 3-6th/9-12th centuries, but its political success was not matched by religious success (it remained the chosen faith of the few rather than the many, even as the many were sympathetic to many of its intellectual tendencies and political claims). So unlike other religious minorities, and Shi'i groups, who perceived themselves as standing outside history, and for whom preservation of a distinctive identity through an emphasis on doctrine and hagiography was the primary concern, al-Nu'man's works were not hagiographical, but historical (in the *Majalis* and *Iftitah*), he produced law (a necessary byproduct of achieving power in the *Da'a'im*), and prescribed a public culture for the Ismailis in his works on court protocol (in the *Kitab al-himma*). As such, al-Nu'man by definition shapes the development of Ismaili Shi'i literature in a way that is in marked contrast to for example, the Twelver or Imami Shia at the same time. And so, through these works of al-Nu'man, I was persuaded of the need to view Ismaili Shiism in the larger frame or context of Islam at that time.

Moreover, I also wanted to suggest that our understanding of the 2-6th/8-12th centuries in Islamic history needs to reconsider how we label and periodize the past. Ismaili and Fatimid contributions to Islam are often omitted from the master narrative about this critical period because of its being referred to as Abbasid. Although it is convenient to do so, and many would argue a corrective to the more problematic label of "the medieval period" - which is after all a borrowing from European history and therefore awkward - associating all the development with the Abbasids both privileges one dynasty over others that ruled equally

consequentially at the same time, as it also privileges a dynastic frame over a cultural one. (Efforts to refer to the period of the 2-6th/8-12th centuries as “classical” or “golden” of course also have their drawbacks, in that they diminish the importance and critical development of subsequent periods of Islamic history.) Whatever the solution to the question of periodization, I wanted at least to suggest that the Fatimids needed a seat at the table as an Islamic rather than merely sectarian or “other” phenomenon. In the end, what we celebrate about this period is something that is both participated in and shaped by Ismaili and other Shi’i Muslims. Debates about theology and its relationship or not to philosophy, justice, and the political order, law and its sources and means of derivation, production of literature and its themes and topoi, as well as sciences all drank from the same shared well. To the extent that distinctions could be made they had nevertheless not yet gelled into the rigid boundaries of later periods to become resolutely Sunni or Shi’i. And even then, boundaries could often be porous, as Devin Stewart has, for example, pointed out with regard to the development of Imami or Jaafari law and its methodological cross-fertilization with the Shafi’i madhhab.

B. Yurtalan: *It is noteworthy that there has been an intense academic activity aimed at finding and working on the manuscripts of Shi’i texts from the 19th century. New Ismaili manuscripts in different regions are constantly being discovered and published as well. What do you think about this interest?*

S. Hamdani: I’m not sure if these parallel phenomena stem from the same kind of interest or are driven by the same impulse. In any case, I can only speak of Ismaili manuscripts. Although there have been tremendous number of editions and translations of Ismaili manuscripts published, especially by The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, and although this has definitely raised the profile of Ismaili Shiism and has definitely created vast new repository of source material, I don’t know that there has been as much of an impact through these publications yet, outside of the smaller field of Ismaili studies itself. I don’t think they have been looked at enough in short.

And I think there are two reasons for that, at least in the western academy but also in the academies of the Islamic world. In both, there is a kind of sectarian understanding of Islamic history. In the west, the habit of relying on libraries that were collected by Sunni rulers like the Ottomans or by Sunni intellectual elites and libraries in Sunni institutions like al-Azhar, has resulted in a particular narrative about Islamic history which is difficult to deconstruct. It is hard to break the habit of thinking of Sunni Islam as the normative and other kinds of Islam as exceptional or non-normative.

As well, in the Islamic world, there is a very sectarian understanding of Islam. Universities and academies there tend to celebrate a particular kind of Islam. There is the celebration of Salafi understanding of Islam in the Gulf, the celebration of Shi’i Islam in Iran.

You have a celebration of Sunni Islam or generically Shafi'i-Hanafi Islam in Turkey or in Egypt, and on the other hand, a celebration of Maliki Islam in North Africa. This creates silos of the Islamic past. In this sense, Ismaili Shiism functions as silo of a very small and dispersed community.

Another reason that I think the publication of Ismaili sources has not yet had as much of an impact has to do with the tendency to reflect back, the realities of the present. Sunni Islam and Twelver Shi'i Islam dominate the religious and political landscape of the Islamic world today, and thus it is their role and interactions in the past that are investigated. This presentist tendency is understandable but regrettable as well, given that it leads to anachronistic conclusions, and more importantly to significant omissions from the narrative. Given that Ismailis are a minority everywhere and nowhere a majority, the attitude remains that they are evidence of an inherent failure, within Islam.

Obviously, this is unfortunate, for many reasons, not least of which it diminishes rather than celebrates the richness of Islam's heritage. More tragically the sectarian lens privileges loyalty over curiosity, further limiting appreciation of intellectual achievements of the past. And lastly, of course, sectarian constructions and reductions of the past have been, and continue to be, put to murderous use by state and non-state actors alike against other Muslims.

Academically-speaking, I think the value of Ismaili manuscripts can perhaps be better appreciated if efforts are made through research and conferences to integrate studies based on Ismaili manuscripts or put them in conversation with topically similar studies and investigations based on non-Ismaili sources. This kind of inclusion would result in a more sophisticated understanding of Islam and its global impact. But this kind of inclusion requires better access to sources online, better annotation of sources to indicate the subject matter, and a focus on the topic rather than the author, or less reliance on biographical dictionaries and hagiographical literature to determine who speaks for Islam. And all that is a tall order!

B. Yurtalan: *Do you think that the view of Western scholars is changing?*

S. Hamdani: I hope it does. I mean I hope that all of the publishing activity of Ismaili sources will eventually be exploited by people who are studying the pre-modern past. I think definitely this is the case when it comes to Twelver or Imami Shiism. Perhaps that is because this branch of Islam commands a majoritarian presence within Shiism and a presence in Shi'i states today and thus demands to be acknowledged. But it is ironic given its smaller role in the 2-6th/8-12th centuries than Ismaili Shiism for example.

B. Yurtalan: *But we know that important developments occurred in Imami Shiism in the 4/10th and 5/11th centuries through the works of scholars like Shaykh Mufid (d. 413/1022), Sharif al-Murtada (d.*

436/1044) and Abu Ja'far al-Tusi (d. 460/1067). How would you rank their importance?

S. Hamdani: That is true. These authors and the earlier al-Kulayni (d. 329/941), and Ibn Babuya (d. 381/991) for example established the foundations of Imami Shi'i doctrine, the raw material for its law, and the necessary hagiographical literature about the twelve imams, as well as developing ritual practice for the Imami Shia. However important they were for the founding of Imami Shiism, Imami Shiism itself cannot be compared in importance to Ismaili Shiism in the 2-6th/8-12th centuries, not only because the Fatimid caliphate existed and far exceeded in size the territories of Imami Shiism's Buyid patrons, but also because of the institutional, legal and intellectual prominence of Ismaili Shii thinkers within and beyond Fatimid territories. In short, in the 2-6th/8-12th centuries, Ismaili Shiism was far more important and dominant within and beyond Shiism.

That said, Imami Shiism obviously becomes far more important after the 6th/12th century with the fall of the Fatimid dynasty, and the dispersal of Ismaili Shia into numerous small enclaves throughout the Islamic world. It is in this latter period arguably also that equally important developments occurred for this branch of Shiism. Whereas the doctrine of *imama*, *ghayba* and *taqiyya* are shared heritage with Ismaili Shiism, the distinctive legal principle of *ijtihad*, for example, is developed in important ways in the works of al-Allama al-Hilli (d. 725/1325), and the synthesis of Persian culture and Imami belief during the Safavid period (907-1135/1501-1722) was important for further distinguishing Imami Shiism, and the development of the institution of *marji'a* in the Qajar period (1789-1906) constituted another fundamentally unique aspect of Imami Shiism. There are in short, a number of important milestones for Imami Shiism that exceed the 6th/12th century, and they deserve to be acknowledged. But I was discussing an earlier formative period for Islam as a whole, and in that context, I think one can agree that Ismaili Shiism was a more significant participant in Islam's formation.

B. Yurtalan: *The Institute of Ismaili Studies which was established in 1977 encourages academic study of Shiism. As far as I know, they supported your research and your book is part of Ismaili Heritage Series organized by this Institute. Do you think this Institute has advanced the academic study of Ismaili Shiism or Shiism in general? What about the impact of western scholars like Paul Walker?*

S. Hamdani: The Institute of Ismaili Studies has most definitely advanced the academic study of Ismaili Shiism. There is no question that without its publications, and its patronage of the research of scholars like myself, very little might have been produced in the way of academic study of Ismailism. The lion's share of that credit goes to Farhad Daftary, not only for having produced the first and still seminal master narrative of Ismaili Shiism (*The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrine*), and very

many important and foundational studies since then but as well in soliciting and overseeing the Institute's publication output.

But as I have mentioned already, despite all these new resources about Ismaili Shiism western scholarship still has not integrated or explored the sources in understanding the period of the 2-6th/8-12th centuries when Ismaili Shiism was an important phenomenon, in my view. Nevertheless, I think the publications and presence of scholars like Paul Walker have done a lot to publicize the importance of Ismaili Shiism in the American academy. Other scholars have also done a lot to publicize and establish the importance of Ismaili Shiism like Ismail Poonawala. There is a younger generation of scholars who have also begun to do some very important work either on the Fatimid period or Ismaili Shiism. These younger scholars have also created a vibrant new subfield in Nizari Ismaili studies in particular, which itself has emerged out of important debates about identity in that community.

Nizari Ismailis as you know are the followers of Agha Khan and are for the most part Central/Persian and South Asian in ethnicity. (This is not to leave unacknowledged an Arab Nizari Ismaili community in the Syrian region.) As such they are part of what Marshall Hodgson referred to as the Persianate cultural world, as well as the Gujarati cultural region on the west coast of India. Among other things that means that their communal language has not been Arabic. Moreover, as Nizari Ismailis, they revere the Agha Khan as a living imam, and believe in his role to authoritatively guide the community, as understood through the doctrine of *ta'lim*. Given therefore that are not doctrinally bound to the Fatimid past, nor linguistically or culturally connected to the Arab world in which it emerged, there is less of an argument to privilege that past over the more recent religious traditions and texts they have developed in Central and South Asia. As a result, there has been a flurry of research and studies on the distinctive Nizari Ismaili traditions, that not only seek to present them but also to situate them in an even broader frame of Central, South Asian, and Indian Ocean studies.

For Tayyibi Ismailis, the debate over identity is far less acute, given their adherence to early Ismaili and Fatimid doctrine, and its transmission in the Tayyibi Ismaili community. In addition, fidelity to Arabic as a language of scholarship and religious practice, as supported by continuous interaction with Yemen since the 6th/12th century means that they view their identity as directly connected to the Fatimid past, even if some of their religious practice is inflected with Indian influence.

B. Yurtalan: *So, can we say that Tayyibi Ismailis feel more invested in the Fatimid heritage?*

S. Hamdani: Yes, because as I said of both ideological and geographical reasons. The absence of a living imam means the importance of adhering to received texts and traditions, and constant interaction between Yemen and the Indian Tayyibi community has also helped perpetuate continuity with the Fatimid heritage and past.

B. Yurtalan: *Are there any significant academic debates between Tayyibi Ismailis and Nizari Ismailis?*

S. Hamdani: Both Nizari and Tayyibi Ismailis meet comfortably on the issue of the Fatimids as a shared heritage. Where they diverge is on the issue of subsequent developments in their respective communities and whether or not they eclipse that shared past. But I don't believe this constitutes a debate between them per se.

B. Yurtalan: *At the present time, are the Ismailis who are studying Ismaili Shiism mostly Nizari Ismailis or Tayyibi Ismailis?*

S. Hamdani: That is a good question. Until very recently, most of those studying Ismaili Shiism were from the Nizari community, if only because of the presence of the Agha Khan's Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, and the tremendous efforts of directors like Farhad Daftary and Azim Nanji, to produce material for the study of Ismaili Shiism in general, and to encourage research of it. This I believe continues, but recently there is a generation of young Tayyibi Ismailis pursuing research on Ismaili Shiism beyond the traditional madrasa curriculum of the Saifi Dars or University in India, which has been reopened and revamped to provide rigorous religious training in the Tayyibi Ismaili tradition.

B. Yurtalan: *I have one more question, to conclude this interview: Do you think there is enough interest to their own heritage, in other words of Ismaili heritage among Ismailis?*

S. Hamdani: I think Nizari Ismailis have a tremendous interest in their heritage. They just are questioning which heritage is more authentically theirs, the more recent heritage or the glorious Fatimid past. They have certainly been much more energetic and enthusiastic about exploiting the resources that the Institute of Ismaili Studies has published, and for exploring how these resources can be approached through the methodologies of various disciplines in doctoral programs in various academies. As for Tayyibi Ismailis, relatively speaking, I think there are far less people who are interested in the critical and academic study of their Ismaili heritage. In part, this has to do with the relatively recent belief that such knowledge should be the monopoly of the family of the community's leaders, and in part, this is also due to socio-economic factors which necessitate the pursuit of more practical degrees and business rather than the arts. For many Tayyibi Ismailis in short, and sadly given a scholarly tradition that finally ended in the 20th century, Ismaili identity is performed through correct practice rather than transmitted through knowledge, as it had been centuries before when it defined this Ismaili community.