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MIDDLE EAST

KASSAM, TAZIM R. *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Ismā'īlī Muslim Saint, Pīr Shams*. McGill Studies in the History of Religions. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995. xviii + 424 pages. Map, illustration, appendices, bibliography, index. Paper US\$16.95; ISBN 0-7914-2592-4.

Very little research has been done on the narrative value of Islamic popular devotional literature. Analyses and translations of such Sunni or Shī'ī texts from the vernacular languages are still rare, as scholarly attention has tended to focus on the musicological and anthropological aspects. Recently, however, Ismā'īlī scholars have devoted increasing attention to religious hymns from the Indian subcontinent.

The Ismā'īlī (or the Shī'ā Imami Ismā'īlī Muslims, to give their full name) presently rank among the most progressive and prosperous of the Muslim groups, despite their relatively small numbers (some fifteen million people) and great geographical dispersion over approximately twenty-five countries, from their original base in the Middle East and Central Asia into South Asia, and in more recent times into East and South Africa, Europe, and North America.

The Ismā'īlī sect has had a long turbulent history. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, when their power was destroyed by the Mongols and Mamelukes, they were the most controversial and powerful Shī'ī splinter group; during the Fatimid caliphate they nearly achieved political and intellectual hegemony over the Muslim world. Because of the united efforts of their enemies they were pushed to the marginal regions of the Islamic world, that is, to South Asia and mountainous Central Asia. In the subsequent seven centuries of hiding and obscurity they managed to survive and even gain numerous converts, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, through their vigorous and astute missionary activities under the *Pīrs* and *Dā'īs* (chief propagandists). These figures linked the community with the Imam, who remained in occultation in Iran until the middle of the last century, when the Ismā'īlīs finally reemerged in India from their long *taqīyya* (religious dissimulation). They started their reunification under the spiritual authority of the hereditary Imams and claimed a legitimate place within the Muslim and the world community.

The long centuries of persecution and oppression have resulted in great secrecy concerning the religion, particularly its sacred literature. Their rich medieval intellectual tradition was revealed during the first half of our century by the scholarship of W. Ivanow and H. Corbin, but it was the new generation of Ismā'īlī scholars (Azim Nanji being one of the first) who started paying serious attention to a later development of their literature, the partly neglected, partly concealed heritage of *gināns*, the remnants of their Satpanth (True Path)

popular religious movement in India.

In her handsomely produced book the young Ismā'īlī scholar Tazim R. Kassam characterizes *gināns* as follows:

A heritage of devotional poetry, the *ginān* tradition is rooted in the musical and poetic matrix of the Indian culture.... Traditionally recited during daily ritual prayers, *gināns* have been revered for generations...as sacred compositions (*śāstra*). The term *ginān* itself has a double significance: on one hand, it means religious knowledge or wisdom, analogous to the Sanskrit word *jñāna*, on the other hand, it means song or recitation, which suggests a link to the Arabic *ganna* and the Urdu/Hindi *gānā*, both verbs meaning to sing. (1)

Gināns are attributed to the medieval Ismā'īlī spiritual guides, the *Dā'īs* and the *Pīrs*. They are sung in the *jamā'at khānes* (prayer halls) during morning and evening services, or on special occasions such as holidays and funerals. They are always sung to the traditional Indian *rāga* tune, but are not accompanied by musical instruments.

Gināns, in addition to their liturgical role, serve as repositories for the collective memory, bearing testimony to the history of the Satpanth community (manuscripts were even used as legal documents in the nineteenth-century, when they helped reorganize the dispersed communities under the spiritual authority of the hereditary Imam). Great emphasis is laid on their memorization, and oral transmission is stressed. Though believed to have originally been oral compositions, there is also a manuscript tradition and a special type of archaic Sindhi script, the Khojkī, used for their recording. The ancient manuscripts have been destroyed or buried; the oldest ones extant date to the eighteenth century. *Gināns* are found in many Indian dialects such as Sindhi, Multani, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Hindi. Recently the Gujarati language and script have played the principal role in the modern preservation of *gināns*.

It was a Gujarati anthology of *gināns* that the author used for her translations. The hymns are centered around the mysterious and complex figure of the great saint, Pīr Shams, who has come to symbolize early Ismā'īlī missions (*da'wa*) in Sind, or more precisely in the Multan area. He is sometimes identified with Shams-e Tabrīzī, Rumi's spiritual master. His activities are placed between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries by the author.

In order to better contextualize her translations of the 106 *gināns* relating to Pīr Shams (about one-tenth of the estimated extant *ginān* corpus), Kassam devotes part 1, about one-third of the book, to a discussion of the history of Ismā'īlism, the development of the Satpanth movement in India, the problems of Ismā'īlī cultural identity, and the state of scholarship on the sect. She supplements her explanations of these difficult topics with extensive notes and appendices, the latter containing a translation of a prose hagiography of Shams and glosses of the mostly Hindu names, epithets, and local characters.

Part 2 consists of the English translations of the 106 *gināns* from Gujarati. Their unusual imagery is the relic of the long *taqīyya* period, when inner meaning (*bāṭin*) was enwrapped in a Vaishnavite surface structure (*zāhir*) for the twofold purposes of secrecy and propaganda. References to Hindu mythology and epics are abundant. It is certainly surprising that 'Alī, the first Shī'ī Imam, appears as the tenth Avatār and is addressed as "Swāmī Rājā" in addition to his usual Persian title "Shāh," and even appears on a chariot in Indian heroic fashion (No. 32). Pious Ismā'īlī women converts are referred to as *satī*, and the Pīr is addressed as Guru and *nara*.

Careful reading reveals the "hidden" recurrent theme of conversion and triumph over indigenous beliefs. Certain other hymns are in the traditional Muslim vein, depicting the fate of Everyman in his grave (an ancient and common motif well known from the Sufi literature [No. 23]) or the signs of the coming Last Judgment (No. 50). Others are simply didactic or

polemic songs. No. 25 is a very interesting and puzzling narrative that describes, according to Kassam, the death of Pīr Shams. It is a pity that the author does not provide here (as she usually does) the original term for the ambivalent English word “case,” which the congregation must prepare for the farewell ritual. Would this be a coffin or a bier?

Also some comment would have been desirable concerning the mysterious *ghatpat* ceremony of offering up holy water, to which there are many references in the texts. Modern scholarship pays much attention to Ismā‘īlī theology and philosophy but little to its ritual. Is this ceremony typical of the Satpanth only? Unfortunately, Kassam provides few details on the performance side, being primarily interested—like her predecessors—in problems of chronology and historicity, so that her focus is generally too much on the philological side. One wishes that she could have included more detailed anthropological or folkloristic accounts of the community.

The translation of the *ginān* anthology is concluded by twenty-eight *garbīs*, special songs actually sung by Pīr Shams himself as he began converting Hindus during a festival. *Garbī* originally meant a Gujarati folk dance, a circle dance (hence the title) around a lamp pot in honor of a deity (the goddess Mātā Bhavānī in the texts). According to legend, Pīr Shams saw such a dance during a Hindu festival, joined in and started to sing, calling the Hindus to abandon the worship of their idols. He worked many miracles and finally converted even the Brahmins, the local king, and his ministers.

Syncretistic traditions are not faring well nowadays. Fundamentalists are more than eager to extirpate them, and even liberals have started to view them with contempt. For the intellectuals of a religious minority to disclose and even cherish their controversial cultural heritage requires great moral courage and dedication. There is a tendency in Ismā‘īlī officialdom to discourage research on *gināns*; some of the *gināns* translated here (such as No. 32, the so-called Ten Avatār) are no longer in use. It is only individual scholars who still find them important for preserving the memory of the centuries-old life of the community with its great historical and emotional value. With the present loss and decay of traditional culture throughout the world, such efforts deserve our appreciation.

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PERKOWSKI, LILIANA DASKALOVA, DOROTEJA DOBREVA, JORDANKA KOCEVA, and EVGENIJA MICEVA. *Typenverzeichnis der bulgarischen Volksmärchen*. Edited and translated by Klaus Roth, Juliana Roth, and Gabi Tiemann. FF Communications 257. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1995. 424 pages. Glossary, indices, maps, bibliography. Paper FIM 190; ISBN 951-41-0771-3; ISSN 0014-5815. (In German)

This type-catalogue of Bulgarian folktales was produced and carefully introduced by Liliana Daskalova Perkowski, Doroteja Dobрева, Jordanka Koceva, and Evgenija Miceva, and has been provided with a German preface by the editors and translators. The work indicates Bulgaria's role as mediator between the Orient and the Occident, a position resulting from the Balkan Peninsula's five centuries under the Ottoman Empire and consequent separation from Occidental development, the late beginning of literary communication, and the centuries-long continuation of a vital orality.