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FARHAD DAFTARY, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd: London, 1994) 213 pp.

Farhad Daftary's *The Assassin Legends* offers the reader a brief yet provocative history *of* the history of the Nizari Isma'ilis, an important Shi'a minority sect whose exotic and sinister presence as the "Assassins" in the cultural imagination of the West extends from the time of the first crusades to the nineteenth century and beyond. By tracing the shifting triangular relations between Sunni Muslims, Isma'ilis, and the Christian West as they evolve through eight centuries of intercultural and intertextual contact, conflict, and collaboration, Daftary charts the evolution and dissemination of a series of 'black' legends that feature the politically significant Persian and Syrian Isma'ili Muslim communities. Drawing on the findings of modern Islamic studies (the pioneering work of Wladimir Ivanow, Marshall G. Hodgson, Bernard Lewis, Norman Daniel, R. W. Southern, and others) and previously unpublished, untranslated, and untapped Isma'ili texts, Daftary outlines a history of distortion and mystification, and critiques the collaborative invention of a tradition of terror that continues to surround, albeit to a far lesser extent, even modern-day Isma'ilis, who today "account for about ten percent of the entire Muslim society of around one billion persons" (2).

In *The Assassins,* published in 1968, Bernard Lewis proposes that the Isma'ili Shi'as "may well be the first terrorists." Lewis cites a "modern authority" to explain: "Terrorism...is carried on by a narrowly limited organization and is inspired by a sustained program of large-scale objectives in the name of which terror is practised."[1] With minimal semantic tweaking, such definitions can indict under their rubric too excessive a number of practices, policies, and institutions than is comfortable for certain ideological interests. Nevertheless, it emerges that the word "assassin" too is forged out of the same durable and (for those whose political vocabularies demand it) useful semiotic alloy in Western culture as 'terrorism.' Little, in effect, has changed in our understanding of the term since its coinage in the twelfth century. "Assassin," according to the Compact Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, describes "one who undertakes to put another to death by treacherous violence." The dictionary adds that "the term retains so much of its original application as to be

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[1] Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: a Radical Sect in Islam* (Octagon Book, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 1980), p. 129-130.

used chiefly of the murderer of a public personage, who is generally hired or devoted to the deed, and aims purely at the death of his victim." "Treachery" and "treacherous"—terms that recur throughout C.O.D's comprehensive definition as the proper adjectives for describing the deed—are translated as the "violation of faith especially by secret desertion of the cause to which one professes allegiance." Yet for the historical *fida'is* a strict adherence to their faith and an even stricter political allegiance to their sectarian cause was *de rigueur*. For both Sunni Muslims and the Latin Franks, 'assassin' denoted the person who committed homicide. The Nizari, however, regarded the deed as a supreme and necessary act of sacrifice for the greater good, namely as tyrannicide, committed with the noblest intent and always already political. 'The Assassins,' nevertheless, began to function as an all-purpose euphemism for an entire community of believers. At the same time, within the crusading-culture of a pre- and early-modern Europe, the Syrian and Persian Nizaris took shape as Muslim mercenaries-cum-fanatics who murdered their victims while high on opium or hashish. If this propagandist concoction of a 'stoned' assassin fails to fit the complex reality of the discipline and training required for committing what was always an explicitly political act, the popular notion of Nizaris as a community of killers also denies their rich, multivalent culture. Yet "by the middle of the fourteenth century," Daftary remarks, "the word assassin, instead of signifying the name of a sect in Syria, had acquired a new meaning in Italian, French, and other European languages: it had become a common noun describing a professional murderer" (121). Dante (1265-1321) first uses the word "Assassin" in this way in the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno* in his *Divina Commedia*.

The cult of distortion through which Isma'ilis were imagined owes its origins to the writings of majority Sunni Muslims. The Sunni Abbasids' ideological war against the Shi'a Fatimids helped produce a vast number of anti-Isma'ili tracts and treatises, some written by renowned scholars like Nizam-al-Mulk and al-Ghazali. The writers Daftary identifies as the creators of the most enduring 'black legend,' however, were the tenth-century Sunni polemicists, Ibn Rizam and Akhu Muhsin, whose elaborate treatises depicted Isma'ilism as an arch-heresy and "as a secret conspiracy for the abolition of Islam" (25). Isma'ilis were portrayed as, at best, extremist heretics and, at worst, perverse and murderous criminals who consumed hashish, drank wine, ate pork, and to cap it all, engaged in incestuous fornication. Mixing fact and fiction, writers helped forge a

durable myth. For example, certain Isma'ili groups were reported to have formed Waco-type fortress-communes in which they indulged in dubious activities under the influence of a millenarianist psychosis. And to be sure, Isma'ili leaders in Syria and Persian infrequently despatched highly trained and disciplined devotees, or *fida'is* (literally, martyrs), for the purpose of eliminating problem-leaders. But it was primarily their secret efficiency and spectacular self-sacrifice in the 'removal' of their mostly Sunni enemies—*fida'is* exhibited a rare *enthusiasmos* for execution rather than escape—that rendered Isma'ilis the object of unfriendly and often unfair attention by various writers. The fact that the majority of the targets of the *fida'is* were Sunni political and religious leaders explains much of this enmity. Sunni slaughter of entire communities of Isma'ilis did little to help matters. In any case, the uninterrupted flow of contributions to what had become an anti-Isma'ili canon was such that, despite an impressive literary counter-production by philosophers and theologians in Persia and elsewhere of Isma'ili historiographies, scientific treatises, theological and jurisprudential tracts, most of the world was to apprehend Isma'ilism through a tradition of defamation.

Who, then, were the 'Assassins'? To attempt an answer, Daftary provides us first with a compact yet cogent history of the Isma'ilis, starting with the early schism in Islam and the subsequent "formation of a Shi'a ethos and the eventual consolidation of Shi'ism as a dynamic movement with a distinct ideology" (10). We are then provided with a manageably detailed synopsis of the emergence, around the middle of the eighth century, of Isma'ilism as a distinct Shi'a community and culture. From the midst of a bloody history of persecution by primarily a Sunni majority, but also Twelver and Zaydi Shi'as, the Isma'ilis twice founded states of their own. The Fatimid caliphate (910-1171), centered in Egypt, expanded into an Isma'ili-led empire that "at its peak included all of north Africa, Sicily, Egypt, the Red Sea Coast of Africa, Yaman, the Hijaz, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Syria and Palestine" (20) and, loosely if not technically, also the Nizari Isma'ili state in northern Iran. "In 1094," writes Daftary, "the Isma'ili movement, which had enjoyed unity during the earlier Fatimid period, split into its two main branches, the Nizaris and the Musta'lians" (20). In 1097, seven years before the arrival of the first Crusaders in the Levant, Hasan Sabbah, a Persian Isma'ili-convert born into a Twelver Shi'a family in Qumm, seized, with the help of Persian sympathizers, the once-stunning castle of Alamut and constructed several other mountain

strongholds in northern Persia and southern Khurasan, establishing, in effect, a Nizari Isma'ili state. Nizar was the dispossessed heir to the Fatimid state, usurped out of power in a palace coup d'état in the name of Musta'li and executed in 1095. From this schism on, Musta'liyyah Isma'ilis were centered in Cairo while the Nizaris, headed by Hasan Sabbah, consolidated their positions in Iran and Syria. Under Hasan, the Nizaris quickly evolved into a highly organized, secretive, disciplined, and dedicated community of believers whose elite corps of *fida'is* specialized in tyrannicide, namely the overthrow of the repressive Abbasids and their later overlords, the Saljuqids. The Nizaris were not a purely militant sect. Their active pursuit of different branches of learning and the Islamic sciences explains why, as Daftary observes, "so many Muslim scholars, both Sunni and Twelver Shi'i, and even Jewish scientists, availed themselves of the Nizari libraries and patronage of learning. Some, like the celebrated philosopher, theologian, and astronomer Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201-74) converted to Isma'ilism" (40). Master-craftsmen and architects of not only some of the most impressive mosques and libraries in Persia, Syria, and elsewhere in the Levant, but also of some of the most highly coveted (because virtually impenetrable) castles of the medieval world, Isma'ilis utilized "highly ingenious techniques in their water supply and fortification systems" (40).

Contrary to Lewis's argument, the Nizaris practiced not so much terrorism but a kind of highly efficient guerilla warfare against their first and most powerful enemies, the Abbasids and the Saljuks, both on the battlefield and, in a more clandestine manner, through espionage, infiltration, and finally, assassination. "It was in connection with the self-sacrificing behaviour of the Nizari *fida'is*," writes Daftary, "who killed prominent opponents of their community in particular localities, that the main myths of the Nizaris, the Assassin Legends, were developed during the Middle Ages. The Nizaris...were not the inventors of the policy of assassinating religio-political adversaries in Muslim society; nor were they the last group to resort to such a policy; but they did assign a major political role to the policy of assassination" (34). Centered on mountain fortresses like Alamut in modern-day northern Iran, the Nizaris managed not only to survive centuries of persecution, but held their own in both Iran and Syria against the overwhelming and hostile forces of their Abbasid enemies, the Saljuk Turks, the Crusaders, and for a very brief period, the apocalyptic invasion of the Mongols in 1256. The latter event, however, not only ended Isma'ilism as a significant political

entity but "practically exterminated the entire Persian Nizari community" (36).

To complicate matters further, the history of both Sunni-Isma'ili and Latin West-Isma'ili relations is punctuated with tactical alliances and extended periods of collusion and peaceful coexistence. In 1173, King Amalric I of Jerusalem, wishful in his anticipation of the conversion of the Ismai'lis to Christianity, ordered the controversial imprisonment of a certain one-eyed and irascible Knight of Templar for intercepting and killing a returning Isma'ili messenger. Saladin's army raided Syrian Isma'ili strongholds in Masyaf in 1174, only to withdraw from its successful seige after a series of negotiations. In 1192, Saladin even persuaded King Richard II of England to preserve territories belonging to the Assassins. Moreover, Muslim, Christian, and Isma'ili leaders participated in a lucrative economy of exchange, gifts, reparations, and taxes.

Nonetheless, the image of the Isma'ili as assassin persisted. From the several epithets Muslim writers used to designate the Isma'ilis—most commonly as *malahida* (arch-heretic) or *batiniyya* (an esoteric, or one who allows personal interpretation to supercede the sacred law of the *Shari'a* and/or the Koran) and relatively seldom as *hashishiyya* (hashish-user)—Western writers (from chroniclers like William, Archbishop of Tyre, to novelists such as Baudelaire) opted for *hashishiyya* or Assassin. Their choice was apposite since the term helped the West explain the inexplicable—not unlike the way in which ahistorical tags like extremist, fanatic, or fundamentalist 'explain' for some so much of the political activities of the Muslim world today. "Westerners," Daftary writes, "were particularly impressed by the self-sacrificing behaviour of the Nizari devotees and had already begun to resort to imagination in order to explain to their own satisfaction the motives behind the unwavering devotion" (89) of the Assassins. Not surprisingly, authors from Burchard of Strassbourg to Marco Polo participated in a tradition of speculation on the reasons behind the *fidai*'s fearless and fearsome acts of self-martyrdom. Not until the early nineteenth century and Silvestre de Sacy's orientalist scholarship on the "Dynasty of Assassins" did the idea emerge that such sacrificial acts may have operated primarily from within the Shi'a ethos of martyrology, a sacred complex of beliefs and practices surrounding the all too proverbial resistance of the righteous weak against the tyranny of the powerful. Throughout much of history, however, narcotic intoxication, rather than political

ideology, religious beliefs, or simply a method of struggle, explain the *fida'i*'s behavior to the West

Fresh subscriptions to this constructed history of the Isma'ilis came from a crusading Europe. In the eleventh century, Europe begins to challenge Islam militarily with the Reconquistado by launching of a series of offensives that was to end in Granada, in the same year that Jews were expelled from Spain and Columbus brought Europe a fresh America. At the goadings of monarch, pope, and propaganda, medieval Europe mobilized a sizable army within whose ranks marched and fought everyone from the Knights of Templar to street-mendicants and the formerly incarcerated. Both the papacy and its monarchic commonwealth managed to speedily convert the fantastical (vernacular, half-invented narratives imagining rather than identifying a Muslim threat) for use in a fanatical policy of war. As Daftary writes, "altogether fewer than five Frankish personalities may have actually been killed by the *fida'is* during the entire period of the Crusader's presence in the Outremer" (94) but European writers who helped embellish the notoriety of the Assassins tended to ignore the embarrassment of such paltry numbers, and succeeded in making the Nizaris perhaps "the most feared community in the medieval Islamic world" (36) and beyond. By 1096, a motley Christian army of pilgrim-soldiers had answered the call of Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont by arriving at the Byzantine capital, ostensibly to help stop Constantinople from transmogrifying into Istanbul. By July 1099, Jerusalem was Europe's: "Thereupon the crusading pilgrims massacred practically the entire Muslim and Jewish populations of Jerusalem before giving thanks to God for their victory in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre" (52). Saladin's recapture of Jersualem, meanwhile, was still some eighty years away.

It was against this political background and from within an intertextual legacy of error and exaggeration that the West wove the Assassins Legends into its cultural imagination. The figure of the Assassin was, after all, forged in the Western imagination out of a concordance of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sources. Yet, the fantastic repertoire of images surrounding the Isma'ilis, featuring brainwashed children as assassin-trainees, artificial paradises, drugs, alcohol, incest, show-and-tell suicides, and bizarre, secret rituals, was expanded upon even by those European writers whose proximity and frequent contacts with the people of "the Old Man of the Mountain"—the name alternately given to the Persian and Syrian religious

leaders of the Isma'ilis—implies they should have known better. But the intertextual parasitism of the works of writers like Arnold of Lübeck, Benjamin of Tudela, Odoric of Pordenone, Marco Polo, Denis Lebey de Batilly, and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall meant that such 'information' became a serious contaminant of the West's 'real existing' knowledge about the Isma'ili community—its religious practices, cosmology, philosophy, politics, art, and even their ethnicities. Clearly, not all writers harbored propagandist motives. Other factors also played a part. Few Isma'ili texts, for example, remained extant in the aftermath of the repeated destruction of their sizable libraries. And the Isma'ilis themselves participated in the sustainment of the lore surrounding them by maintaining an aura of secretiveness.

Nonetheless, it may not be too gross an oversimplification to say that the "Old Man of the Mountain" functioned as a political trope for early-modern Europe, and as an imperceptibly kinder, gentler 'Ayatollah' in the popular imagination. For the grand wizard of the Assassins was, in both fact and legend, similarly understood as a brutal demogogue who terrorized the West and its allies, hoodwinked his people, and led them to commit international, and often suicidal, acts of violence, while posing, despite a priori inferiorities, as a potentially global threat. The cultural persistence of the radical ethos of self-sacrifice and political and messianic activism that fueled the *fida'is*, still leads many Islamic and Orientalist historians in both the East and the West to speculate upon the Shi'a 'character.' Daftary's subject brings to the fore a particularly virulent and persistent aspect of the politics of representation, if only by pointing out the extent of the success with which certain fictions, tendentious speculations, and propagandist practices pose as 'legitimate' history by virtue of mere repetition, as a series of discursive *déjà-vus* that characterize the discourse of power. When fiction can pose as truth for so long by virtue of an intertextual legacy of (il)legitimacy that is left essentially uninterrupted from genre to genre and culture to culture, it draws our attention to the history of the way a subject is studied and not just that it is.

Daftary's study, however, is free from neither stylistic nor thematic hiccups. His attempt to unravel the history of the Assassins through eight centuries of bicultural misrepresentation recalls a certain grand, old-fashioned, if not orientalist, *gravitas*, which is, in any case, inappropriate in such a brief work. Moreover, since at least the 1930s, more rigorous scholarly accounts have replaced the most

egregious and fanciful narratives surrounding the Isma'ilis, a fact which renders at least some of Daftary's arguments as recapitulation rather than ground-breaking. Indeed, students of the subject might have preferred less counter-speculation and a more specific, detailed, and local historiographic study. In addition, nearly a third of the book consists of Azizeh Azodi's translation from the French of Silvestre de Sacy's landmark study on the Isma'ilis, originally published in 1818. While this is a useful document of orientalist scholarship to have included in the appendix, it draws our attention to the total absence in this book of even fragments of authentic Isma'ili texts, original archival sources Daftary claims are not only ample in quantity but also "critically edited, published, and studied" (123). This dearth can become embarrassing, especially on that handful of occasions when Daftary allows his language to swagger and yell from the podium a bit: "Now, finally, the time has come to recognize, once and for all, that the Assassin legends are no more than absurd myths: the product of ignorant, hostile 'imagination,' and not deserving of any serious considerations" (124). Nevertheless, *The Assassin Legends* represents the latest contribution to a more critical and contrapuntal scholarship on the Isma'ilis. It stands comfortably on the shelf as a generally persuasive critical foray into the history of East-West relations by its interrogation of a discourse of ignorance and fascination, awe and ideological enmity, through which a multiculture made up of Muslims, Jews, and Christians imagined Isma'ilism.

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