

Supplement: Sources, Sunni and Shi'a: Succession and Imams

Minority groups amongst the Shi'a

Two groups within the Shi'a family have been seen to depart from the Ithna' Ashari majority position due to disputes about the rightful succession in the line of Imams: the Zaydis and the Isma'ilis. In history, there were other such minority groups but they either faded out or were re-absorbed into the others.

The Zaydis disputed the rightful fifth Imam and chose to uphold the claim of Zayd ibn Ali ibn Husayn as the fifth Imam. He was the half-brother of Muhammad al-Baqir, who was accepted as the fifth Imam by the majority. They claimed that the Imamate could pass to any of the descendants of Ali (the Alids), who was pious and learned and staked a claim to it "sword in hand." They disputed the doctrine of designation (*nass*), rejected the concept of the impeccables (*ma'sum*), did not accept the occultation of an Imam or the return of Imam al-Mahdi. They excluded the claim of an under-age boy to the Imamate. They accepted the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar, even though Ali was "more excellent," and so took a different position about the reliability of Companions as transmitters of Hadith, thus leading to their own Hadith collection. They founded a Zaydi state in Tabaristan in the 9th century, which endured until 928, was re-founded in 964 and lasted until the 12th century. A Zaydi state was founded in the Yemen in 901, based at Sa'da and later at San'a, which endured until it was overthrown in a republican revolt in 1962. Since the death of the last Zaydi Imam in about 1970, the Imamate has been vacant.

The Isma'ilis upheld Muhammad ibn Isma'il as the rightful seventh Imam. Over time, they developed an esoteric doctrine of Islam, claiming that there was a hidden (*batini*) meaning behind every apparent (*zahiri*) verse of the Qur'an. There was an Isma'ili state in part of Persia in the 10th century: the Qaramitans (Carmathians). The Isma'ilis founded the powerful Fatimid Dynasty (909-1171) in Egypt based on the newly founded city of Cairo, which, at its height, ruled into North Africa and down both sides of the Red Sea.

The Fatimids split into two groups in 1094 over a dispute about the rightful successor to the Imamate, to found the Musta'lian and Nizari branches. The Musta'lian Isma'ilis had a line of Imams until 1132, when the twenty-first Imam, Abu'l-Qasim Tayyib went into occultation leaving the leadership of the community in the hands of the Da'i Mutlaqs (Universal Missionaries). They then moved to the Yemen. The Musta'lian Isma'ilis again split over a question of succession in 1590, to found the Sulaymani Bohras, who remained in the Yemen, and the Da'udi Bohras, who spread out to India, the Persian Gulf, Burma and later East Africa and the West. Both groups were heavily influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy. They saw the seventh Imam as a law-giver in succession to Muhammad, who introduced a Shari'a based on esoteric knowledge and privileged allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an (*ta'wil*).

After the fall of the Fatimid Dynasty, the Nizari Isma'ilis moved to Iran and stayed in their fortress of Alamut, where they lived a hidden life until their re-emergence in the 19th century, when their leader, the first Aga Khan, moved to India. They claim a line of Living Imams until the present day Karim Aga Khan IV (b.1936, assumed Imamate in 1957). He is held to be the forty-ninth Imam in direct line of succession from Muhammad, through Fatima and Ali. They are the only group within the Shi'a that profess to have a living Imam and do not believe in occultation; there will always be an Imam of the Present Age accessible to the people. Because they stress the inner, hidden or *batini* dimensions of Islam and the importance of reasoning in every new age and situation, they have developed a more inward spiritual code of Islamic living. They are to be found in the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and East Africa, and in western countries to which they have migrated in recent decades.