

# Transmission of Knowledge and Book Preservation in the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī Tradition

*Samer Traboulsi*

University of North Carolina Asheville  
*straboul@unca.edu*

## Abstract

The transmission and preservation of knowledge in Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlism are constrained by the restrictions imposed by the state of *satr* (concealment) of the imam. During this period, until the return of the concealed imam, it is the duty of *daʿwa* officials to preserve the esoteric knowledge known as the *bāṭin*. As a result, only initiated believers are granted access to religious literature, and then, only to what is appropriate for the degree of knowledge they have reached. The preservation and dissemination of the religious heritage of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs is therefore intertwined with and determined by access to the literature as granted to students of the faith, depending on the student's level of religious education.

## Keywords

Ismāʿīlīs – Ṭayyibīs – Bohras – Yemen – India – anthologies – transmission of knowledge – book preservation – *Rasāʾil Ramaḍāniyya*

The preservation of the content of books rather than books as physical objects is the focus of this study. Codicologists and art historians have much to say about the value of certain manuscripts that would doubtless enrich our knowledge of the intellectual history of the Muslim world. However, because of the nature of the literary heritage of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī community and the difficulties of accessing manuscripts preserved by the community, the focus here will be mainly on the book as a text—which can be copied and preserved in various forms—rather than “the book” as a discrete physical object.

Several factors contributed to the choice of books that were produced and

preserved in the pre-modern Muslim world. Sacred texts and ritual compendia, such as the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth* collections, and supplication manuals were among the most sought after and thus the most widely preserved. Textbooks, such as the *Alfiyya* of Ibn Mālik, and standard legal compendia came next, followed by popular literature on magic and mysticism, among others. In a nutshell, the law of supply and demand determined which texts gained currency and which remained limited to the specialist few.

These factors also applied to the literary heritage of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs in Yemen and India. However, the special nature of the community, with respect to its religious beliefs, power structure, political challenges, ethnic composition, and geographical distribution, played an important role in determining the texts and the formats in which they were to be preserved. A quick review of the history of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlīs might prove helpful.

According to Ṭayyibī accounts, upon the assassination of the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Āmir in 524/1130, his cousin al-Ḥāfiẓ assumed regency to the throne on behalf of the slain caliph's infant son, al-Ṭayyib. When al-Ḥāfiẓ usurped power and proclaimed the imamate for himself, al-Ṭayyib was taken into hiding by trustworthy *dāʿīs* fearing for his life, initiating a new period of concealment (*satr*).

The Ṣulayhid queen Arwā bint Aḥmad (d. 532/1138) proclaimed her allegiance to al-Āmir, breaking ties with Fatimid Egypt. She later established a *daʿwa* hierarchy, independent of the Ṣulayhid state, under the leadership of a *dāʿī muṭlaq*, who ran the affairs of the *daʿwa* and was charged with preserving the communities in Yemen and India until the return of the concealed imam.<sup>1</sup> Preserving the true knowledge during the period of concealment became a matter of utmost importance, since direct contact with the immaculate imam was lost. The literature from the Fatimid period of revelation had to be preserved, while at the same time Ṭayyibī scholars were busy producing new literature addressing new doctrinal developments and the emerging needs of the community.

Unfortunately, the Ṭayyibīs have a poor record of preserving manuscripts. The majority of surviving manuscripts date back only to the last three centuries, mainly produced in India after the *daʿwa* leadership had settled in Gujarat, around Ahmadabad and Surat in the sixteenth century. With this relocation it was then possible to preserve books in a number of central locations, in addition to the private libraries of *daʿwa* scholars and dignitaries. Very few

<sup>1</sup> See ʿImād al-Dīn Idrīs, *Uyūn*, pp. 291–320. On the history of the establishment of the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī *daʿwa*, see Daftary, *Ismāʿīlīs*, pp. 238–269.

manuscripts survived from before the transfer of the *da'wa* headquarters from Yemen to India. The violence and persecution Ṭayyibīs faced in Yemen during and after the Zaydī wars against the Ottomans must have had catastrophic consequences for the community's book collections, which had to be hidden or transported to safer locations to save them from destruction.<sup>2</sup>

For Ṭayyibīs, the main concern was to preserve the text contained in the book rather than the book itself. Books are only a medium for the preservation and diffusion of knowledge and ideas, which are preserved when books are copied. Accordingly, the Ṭayyibīs have a strong scribal tradition, which lasted until the late twentieth century. Some of the manuscripts were copied by scholars for their personal collections while others were copied by students for their educational needs. The Ḥizāna al-Muḥammadiyya al-Hamdāniyya, which consisted of manuscripts copied by or for Šayḥ Muḥammad 'Alī and Fayḍ Allāh Hamdānī, and the Zāhid 'Alī collection are good examples of private collections preserved outside the direct control of the central *da'wa* authority.<sup>3</sup> Luckily, both collections—at least most items from them, since the Hamdānī collection was divided among various heirs—are now catalogued and housed at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, where they are easily accessible.<sup>4</sup>

One important collection (or collections) of which we have a record but are not aware of its whereabouts is the one recorded by Šayḥ Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Rasūl of Uḡayn, commonly known as al-Maḡdū', in his *Fihrist al-kutub wa-l-rasā'il*.<sup>5</sup> A scholar of renown at the time, in 1175/1761 Maḡdū' ended up supporting his son's claim over the *da'wa* leadership, which resulted in the amputation of the son's nose at the hands of angry supporters of the *dā'ī*, hence the derogatory nickname al-Maḡdū', "the mutilated".<sup>6</sup> Two interesting features mark this bibliography: first, it is mostly descriptive, thus shedding light on the subject matter of the books listed, especially valuable, given that some are either lost or not accessible to outsiders. Second, the books are listed according to subject matter and in the order to be followed by students of the faith, shedding light on the course of study followed by neophytes at the time of the author.

2 On the final years preceding the relocation of the *da'wa* to India, see Traboulsi, "The Ottoman Conquest," pp. 41–60. On the transportation of books to safer locations, see *Qarāṭis al-Yaman*, fol. 46v.

3 On the history of the Ḥizāna al-Muḥammadiyya al-Hamdāniyya, see Hamdani, "History," in De Blois, *Manuscripts*, pp. xxv–xxxiv.

4 See De Blois, *Manuscripts*, and Cortese, *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts*.

5 Ivanow based his *Guide* on Maḡdū's *Fihrist*.

6 See Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, pp. 204–206.

The *Fihrist* is divided into two sections: one for the *ẓāhir* books (“outward” or “exoteric”) and the other for the *bāṭin* (“inward” or “esoteric”). The *ẓāhir* books begin with universal literature, such as grammar and general ethics, the Torah, the book of Psalms, *Waṣīyyat Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib*, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, and *Bilawhar wa-Būdāsf*, the last two of which are important writings composed during the Jesus cycle (*dawr*).<sup>7</sup> The bibliography continues with books more specifically on Islamic law, poetry *dīwans*, another ethics collection, this one mainly by Ismāʿīlī authors, and finally history books.

The second section of the *Fihrist* is devoted to *bāṭin* books, which are divided into two main groups: *bāṭin* books that should be read in order and those that do not require a specific order. These are categorized into lower-level *bāṭin* books and higher-level ones. At the top of the list is the *ḥaqāʾiq* literature, dealing with Ismāʿīlī cosmology and cosmogony, culminating in *Kitāb Zahr al-maʿānī* by ʿImād al-Dīn Idrīs, the nineteenth *dāʾi mutlaq* in Yemen.

Apparently, Maḡdūʿ’s goal was to present a bibliography of Ismāʿīlī literature that would double as a course of study for neophytes. His devised plan of study might have been a realistic representation of an actual curriculum, however, it was probably not a standard one, since other sources provide us with alternative courses of study.

Additionally, the author acknowledges that he did not have access to all the books listed in his bibliography. If a senior scholar such as al-Maḡdūʿ did not have access to some *daʿwa* literature, then neophytes could not have been expected to fare any better, especially if they did not have access to books classified beyond their grade of knowledge or simply if the books were not available at all. The lack of a central repository of books before the establishment of the Dars-i Sayfī in Surat in 1810 made access to specialized literature difficult. We know from *Qarāṭīs al-Yaman*, a record of correspondence exchanged between *daʿwa* dignitaries in Yemen and India, that specific titles not available in India were requested from Yemen.<sup>8</sup> Indian Bohra traders commuting between Gujarat and Yemen would take responsibility for the delivery of requested literature and other correspondence. Some of the merchants settled temporarily in Yemen to pursue studies with prominent *daʿwa* dignitaries. The Indian students were known as the *muhājīrūn* (immigrants) and resided in specially arranged dwellings.

One such trader/*muhājīr* was Ḥasan b. Nūḥ al-Bharūcī (d. 939/1533), who was involved in large-scale trade and was not reluctant to put his massive

7 See Maḡdūʿ, *Fihrist*, pp. 5–15.

8 See *Qarāṭīs*, ff. 8<sup>r</sup>–9<sup>r</sup>, 34<sup>v</sup>.

wealth at the disposal of the *da'wa*. In addition, he was a noted scholar, who compiled a seven-volume anthology of Ismā'īlī literature entitled *Kitāb al-Azhār wa-mağma' al-anwār al-malqūṭa min basātīn al-asrār mağāmi' al-fawākih al-rūḥāniyya wa-l-timār*,<sup>9</sup> whose content I will discuss later. What interests us here is the autobiographical section in the first volume, where Bharūcī provides a description of the course of study he undertook under two succeeding *dā'īs* in Yemen. The order of books he studied was different from the one listed in Mağdū's *Fihrist*, since instead of starting with the classic legal compendium *Da'ā'im al-Islām* by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, Bharūcī first read polemical literature (*kutub al-iḥtiğāğ fī itbāt al-ḥaqq wa-ibṭāl bāṭil ahl al-liğāğ*).<sup>10</sup>

Actually, Bharūcī's course of study is also not standard in that he was instructed by the *dā'ī* himself. If anything, this shows that he was so influential within the community as to have the privilege of acquiring knowledge straight from the source. The fact that he was considered a tycoon among Indian Ocean merchants and that he was fully devoted to the *da'wa* might have helped bolster his status. Still, the impressive number of books he had access to attests to his deep knowledge of Ismā'īlī literature.

Another possible explanation for the divergence between the two curricula is that Bharūcī had already covered the basic *zāhir* literature in India and was pursuing a more advanced course of study in Yemen.<sup>11</sup> Still, the order of books he lists does not match that of al-Mağdū'. One letter in the *Qarātīs al-Yaman* actually includes a basic curriculum, starting with the *Da'ā'im al-Islām*, followed by the usual introductory readings.<sup>12</sup> This supports the conclusion that, while a basic curriculum for students who had taken the oath of allegiance did exist, scholars devised an alternative, more advanced curriculum for promising students showing signs of distinction.

A natural consequence of this educational practice is that manuscripts of introductory texts are available in larger numbers than are the more advanced texts. This explains why manuscripts of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's *Da'ā'im al-Islām* are abundant, since it is a *zāhir* text that all students read.<sup>13</sup>

9 The manuscript collection at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London contains multiple copies of all seven volumes of *Kitāb al-Azhār*. See Gacek, *Catalogue*, pp. 37–40; Cortese, *Ismaili and Other Arabic Manuscripts*, pp. 9–14; Cortese, *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts*, pp. 63–66; and De Blois, *Manuscripts*, pp. 145–147.

10 See al-Bharūcī, *Azhār*, vol. 1, pp. 7–33.

11 See al-Bharūcī, *Azhār*, vol. 1, pp. 9f.

12 See *Qarātīs*, f. 41r.

13 This is probably why the esteemed scholar and editor of *Da'ā'im al-Islām* A.A.A. Fyzee was willing to part with a manuscript of the *Da'ā'im* and give it to the Egyptian scholar

While some books were preserved in separate volumes for their educational value and others for more specialized interest, some have survived as parts of larger works. These were in general shorter texts or epistles, such as *al-Risāla al-Muǧaza al-kāfiya fī adab al-du'āt*, by the fourth/tenth-century Fatimid author Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī. This work, considered seminal despite its short length, survived in its entirety in *Kitāb Tuḥfat al-qulūb* by the third Yemeni *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ḥātim b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī (d. 595/1199), and in Bharūčī's *Kitāb al-Azhār*.<sup>14</sup> In fact, several shorter Fatimid treatises have survived only in *Kitāb al-Azhār* and the earlier *Maǧmū' al-tarbiya*, a two-volume anthology of texts by the Yemeni *dā'ī* Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ḥārīṭī (d. 583/1188).

### Preserving Texts through Abridgement

So far, I have discussed the preservation of complete texts either in independent volumes or as parts of larger works. The demand for specific texts, mostly for religious instruction and to a lesser extent for scholarly research, was what motivated the production of new manuscripts within the Ṭayyibī community. However, not all texts needed to circulate in their entirety. Excerpts and abridgements of larger works are actually what most students of the faith had access to. This could be a result of the large size of the original work, to the variety of subjects covered in the original work, or to the specific subject matter needed in the work into which it was excerpted or abridged.

One might argue that granting access to an excerpt of a book can hardly be considered a way of preserving the book. But, in the mindset of a restrictive *bāṭinī* culture that does not believe in open access to knowledge, providing access to specific passages from a book otherwise dealing with issues that are beyond the reader's level of knowledge is better than outright preventing any access at all. Ultimately, partial access to a book increases its chances of survival in its entirety, since knowledge of its existence is established and scholars at an advanced stage would be interested in reading the rest of the work and would thus create demand for it.

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Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn. I found this manuscript with the dedication written on the title page in a bookshop in Damascus a few years ago.

14 See al-Ḥāmidī, *Tuḥfat al-qulūb*, pp. 129–173, and al-Bharūčī, *Azhār*, vol. 2, ff. 53<sup>v</sup>–86<sup>v</sup>. Nīsābūrī's *Risāla* was also published separately in *A Code of Conduct*.

### Abridgement for Accessibility

While most excerpted books had their original format altered because of their content, some were abridged for more practical reasons. Longer texts, especially multi-volume ones, were obviously difficult and costly to copy. As a result, they circulated in an abridged format, in addition to the complete original, if the author or the book was deemed important.

A good example would be the massive *al-Mağālis al-mu'ayyadiyya*, an eight-volume set of eight hundred sermons of the Fatimid chief-*dā'ī*, al-Mu'ayyad fī l-Dīn al-Šīrāzī (d. 470/1077), which were abridged and rearranged by subject by the third Yemeni *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ḥātim b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī (d. 596/1199), in a two-volume work entitled *Ġāmi' al-ḥaqā'iq*.<sup>15</sup> Another example would be the multi-volume history of the *da'wa* by the nineteenth Yemeni *dā'ī muṭlaq*, 'Imād al-Dīn Idrīs (d. 872/1468), which spans three works; *Uyūn al-aḥbār*, *Nuzhat al-afkār*, and *Rawḍat al-aḥbār*. The *dā'ī* devoted significant parts of his books to the political developments contemporaneous to the Fatimid and Ṭayyibī history he covers, approaching Ismā'īlī history as an organic part of universal Muslim history.

This world view was not shared by the nineteenth-century Indian historian Quṭb al-Dīn Burhānpūrī (d. 1241/1826) in his expanded history of the *da'wa* entitled *Muntaza' al-aḥbār*.<sup>16</sup> Burhānpūrī believed in the exceptionality of the Ṭayyibī community, as evidenced by his incorporation of 'Imād al-Dīn Idrīs's history of the Fatimid and Ṭayyibī *da'was* in his *Muntaza'*, omitting the non-Ismā'īlī material. Burhānpūrī's "abridgement" of 'Imād al-Dīn Idrīs's books is obviously unlike that of *dā'ī* Ḥātim's abridgement of al-Mu'ayyad's *Mağālis*, since the latter only rearranged and cut the *Mağālis*, while Burhānpūrī edited the original sources, complemented the account with additional material, and expanded the history to his time. Both scholars wanted to produce a practical product without replacing the originals, which had been written by major figures in the history of the *da'wa*. The fact that the larger original works are still extant attests to this.

15 Al-Ḥāmidī, *Ġāmi' al-ḥaqā'iq*, edited as *al-Mağālis al-mu'ayyadiyya* by M. 'Abd al-Nāṣir (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭaqāfa, 1975).

16 Burhānpūrī, *Muntaza'* (Surat: al-Jāmi'a al-Sayfiyya, 1432/2010), and partial edition by S. Traboulsi (Beirut: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1999).

### Abridgement as a Censorship Tool

There are also cases of abridgement as a form of censorship, particularly as relates to the late-sixteenth century Dāʿūdī-Sulaymānī schism, following which original texts were expurgated, eliminating material that was deemed incorrect or unacceptable to the Dāʿūdī censor. Two Sulaymānī histories covering the period around the relocation of the *daʿwa* from Yemen to India are interesting examples of preservation by censorship. Ġābir b. al-Fahd al-Makramī's *Ibrat al-labīb* and the anonymous *Badīʿ al-aḥbār* were preserved by the rival Dāʿūdī faction, but the parts that were preserved were only those predating the Sulaymānī-Dāʿūdī schism.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, the Dāʿūdī censor/abridger was not interested in preserving the Sulaymānī side of the story. However, the book's coverage of the history of the *daʿwa* was important, as it filled a gap in the history of the period and was thus deemed worth preserving, even if the author was a rival Sulaymānī.<sup>18</sup>

### Abridgement as an Educational Tool

As mentioned earlier, anthologies and chrestomathies were the main media for preserving shorter texts. However, these anthologies consisted mostly of excerpted texts. There are two types of anthologies in the Ṭayyibī tradition: the first consists of texts quoted consecutively without any context provided, and the second consists of texts provided with a clear context and with a clear purpose of answering specific questions or illustrating an idea. The two anthologies mentioned above, namely, al-Ḥārīṭī's *Maḡmūʿ al-tarbiya* and Bharūčī's *Kitāb al-Azhār*, belong to the first category. They are both textbooks intended for religious instruction. The first was compiled in the early formative years of the *daʿwa* in Yemen, while the second during the final years of the *daʿwa* leadership in Yemen, right before its relocation to India.

It is reasonable to assume that al-Ḥārīṭī wanted to contribute, through his *Maḡmūʿ al-tarbiya*, to the shaping of the newly established Ṭayyibī religious

17 For more information on *Ibrat al-labīb* and *Badīʿ al-aḥbār*, see Traboulsi, "Sources".

18 While finalizing the manuscript of the present article, a copy of the unabridged manuscript of *Ibrat al-labīb* was made available to me. The full title of the book turned out to be *Ibrat al-labīb al-muʿtabir wa-fikrat al-naḡīb al-muddakir*. The manuscript, dated 1271/1854, is considerably longer than the abridgement. Because of time constraints, I was not able to provide here a thorough analysis of the manuscript. However, I intend to do so in the near future with an annotated edition of the complete text.

identity and doctrine by providing neophytes with a basic curriculum that would prepare a new generation to administer the affairs of the *da'wa*. On the other hand, Bharūcī's concern in his *Kitāb al-Azhār* was the education of fellow students (*ilḥwān*), most of whom were, like himself, Indian immigrants seeking the *dā'ī*'s *ḥaḍra* to study *ʿilm al-zāhir* and *ʿilm al-bāṭin*.

In his autobiographical introduction, Bharūcī writes that despite the challenge of his foreign tongue (*a'ḡamī al-lisān 'adīm al-faṣāḥa wa-l-bayān*) and his fear of criticism by native speakers of Arabic, he proceeded to compile *Kitāb al-Azhār*.<sup>19</sup> Actually, Bharūcī's linguistic shortcomings, which are not evident in his lengthy introduction, might explain why he chose to compile an anthology based on excerpts from other authors' works rather than compose his own book. It should be noted, though, that he was following the example of al-Ḥārītī in his earlier *Maḡmū' al-tarbiya*, where no context for the quoted texts is provided, which is why most scholars of Ismā'īlī studies treated these two anthologies as depositories of Fatimid texts rather than as textbooks worthy of study as tools for understanding Ṭayyibī doctrines and world view. This is especially so in the last three volumes of *Kitāb al-Azhār*, where Bharūcī quotes extensively from Sunnī *tafsīrs*.

The choice of texts included is in itself an authorial contribution that deserves special attention, despite the absence of the compilers' contextualization of quoted texts. Actually, these textbooks are meant to complement an orally transmitted tradition, which would provide the context for the excerpted texts. It is unfortunate that we do not have access to this oral tradition, either because it was lost or because it is kept within the closed confines of Ṭayyibī educational circles. For the time being, we can safely assume that the Ṭayyibī educational oral tradition developed significantly between the days of al-Ḥārītī and Bharūcī, since the first author's work is in two volumes, while the second is in seven. The development in the educational oral tradition was most probably a result of the changes in the constitution of the Ṭayyibī community, with the increased Indian presence and demands resulting from the major political and economic developments in Yemen and later in India.

Unlike in the two above works, in the second type of anthology a context for the quoted texts is provided. This type of anthology is represented by the *Rasā'il al-Ramaḍāniyya*, which were published yearly on 17 Ramaḍān by the 51st *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn (d. 1965). A total of forty-seven *Risālas* were published, six of them posthumously. Access to the *Rasā'il* is strictly limited to

19 See al-Bharūcī, *Azhār*, vol. 1, p. 38.

members of the Ṭayyibī community, so only a handful of the *Rasā'il* is available in academic libraries. Each *Risāla* is given a title gematrically equivalent to the *hiġrī* year of its publication. Some had descriptive titles such as *Tamarāt 'ulūm al-hudā* for the year 1337/1919, *Balāġ al-du'āt al-fāṭimiyyīn* for the year 1375/1956, and *Rawḍat dār al-salām* for the year 1378/1959, while others seemed forced.<sup>20</sup>

With unrestricted access to the *da'wa* libraries in Surat and Mumbai, in addition to the support of the scholars of the Ġāmi'a al-Sayfiyya and elsewhere within the community, the 51st *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn, probably had more Ismā'īlī texts at his disposal than any other Ṭayyibī scholar before him. The wealth and variety of quoted texts make the *Rasā'il al-Ramaḍāniyya* a treasure trove of writings, which are otherwise inaccessible to non-initiates and low-ranking *da'wa* officials.

While the compilation of Ismā'īlī texts is the most prominent feature of the *Risālas*, *dā'ī* Ṭāhir was not only a compiler, like al-Ḥārīṭī and Bharūcī, but also an author. The context of the quoted texts is not left to the reader to determine, as in the two above-mentioned anthologies. Each text is preceded or followed by a commentary placing it within a specific theme or issue, such as the *da'wa* hierarchy under the imams and *dā'īs*, the nature of the authority of the *dā'ī* and the *da'wa* dignitaries (*hudūd*), and the role and place of the believers in this world. In addition, each *Risāla* begins with the traditional introductory *tahmūd*, original poems in praise of the Prophet and the imams, and extensive supplications showing a rhetorical mastery of the Arabic language. The *Risālas* typically end with opinions on legal matters by the author or by previous *dā'īs* and *da'wa* dignitaries.

The original intention behind the *Rasā'il* was not educational per se, in the sense of classroom use, like the *Maġmū' al-tarbiya* and the *Kitāb al-Azhār*, but rather, it was instructional on issues deemed important by the author or on timely matters, such as legal challenges to the authority of the *dā'ī* or internal strife within the community. Interestingly, the target audience of the *Rasā'il* consisted mainly of Gujarati-speaking Bohras, who are mostly not Arabic speakers. The language used by the *da'wa* leadership in official publications and public sermons is mainly *lisān al-da'wa*, an Arabicized form of Gujarati. A lay Gujarati-speaking Bohra would still find this hybrid tongue hard to comprehend because of the heavy reliance of the *lisān al-da'wa* on Arabic vocabulary and script. The complex rhymed prose of the *Rasā'il*, which could be challenging even to a native speaker of Arabic, makes these texts inaccessible to the majority of the non-Arabic-speaking community. Those who would be able to

20 A complete list of the *Rasā'il al-Ramaḍāniyya* is included in the appendix.

read the *Rasā'il* are mainly graduates of the Ġāmi'a al-Sayfiyya, the religious seminary where future *da'wa* officials are trained and where instruction is conducted in Arabic. The readership of the *Rasā'il* is therefore, in fact, limited to the religiously educated elite who are trained to comprehend advanced levels of religious knowledge. Thus, the target audience of the *Rasā'il* is for the most part not the same as its actual readership.

For the majority of the believers who do not read Arabic, the *Rasā'il* are not texts but objects of sanctity and veneration linking them to the author, the *dā'i muṭlaq* and deputy of the hidden imam. In a way, these believers are comparable to the lay Christians in medieval Europe, whose access to God was through rites and rituals conducted in Latin, a language they did not comprehend. At that time, religious knowledge was disseminated orally, since most believers were illiterate, while hardly any had access to a copy of the Bible or other Church writings.

The dynamics of dissemination and control of religious literature changed dramatically in modern times. It is almost impossible to withhold knowledge in this day and age of printing and digital media, and accordingly the *Rasā'il al-Ramaḍāniyya* have been printed and made available to the trusted members of the community outside the narrow circle of the religiously educated elite. As a result, more people have access to the *Rasā'il* as a book/object, but the choice of Arabic as the medium of writing ensures that access to the *Rasā'il* as a book/text remains limited to the select few who have mastered the Arabic language, thus showing their utmost devotion to the *da'wa* and its leader.

In conclusion, preserving the true knowledge of the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* during the concealment of the master of the faith has been an essential part of the Ṭayyibī faith. The Ṭayyibīs thus focused more on preserving books by copying the texts and less on preserving the books as physical objects. At the same time, it was important to limit access to true knowledge to those who had reached the appropriate stage in their learning process and who thus merited that access. Anthologies, it seems, are a convenient medium for this gradual dissemination of knowledge without the risk of divulging too much information and text to those who are not ready for it. The choice of Arabic as a medium for disseminating that knowledge also ensured that only the religiously educated elite had access to the inner truth.

## Appendix

List of published *Rasā'il Ramaḍāniyya* by the 51st *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn (d. 1965). The *Rasā'il* have been all published in Mumbai. The first eighteen were printed by a private press in Surat:

1. *Ḍaw' nūr al-ḥaqq al-mubīn*, 1335/1917.
2. *Ṭamarāt 'ulūm al-hudā*, 1337/1919.
3. *Zahr al-riyāḍ al-azaliyya*, 1338/1920.
4. *Durar al-biṣārāt*, 1339/1921.
5. *Al-Mašrab al-kawṭarī*, 1340/1922.
6. *Durar al-hudā al-muḍṛ'a*, 1341/1923.
7. *Rawḍ 'ālam al-quds*, 1342/1924.
8. *Ġurfāt ḡanna*, 1343/1925.
9. *Ġurraṭ al-ḥaqq*, 1344/1926.
10. *Ṭimār ḡannāt 'adn<sup>in</sup> ṭayyiba*, 1345/1927.
11. *Qaṭf šaḡara ḥuldiyya*, 1346/1928.
12. *Zubdat burhān al-šidq al-wāḍiḥ*, 1347/1929.
13. *Šibḡ nūr*, 1348/1930.
14. *Ġars al-ḡanna*, 1349/1931.
15. *Durar asrār āl al-Karrār*, 1350/1932.
16. *Nūr rawḍ al-ḡanna*, 1351/1933.
17. *Baḥr faḍl kabīr*, 1352/1934.
18. *Masarrat al-faṭḥ al-mubīn*, 1353/1934.
19. *Al-Bāb ḥazīrat al-quds*, 1354/1935.
20. *Karāmat al-'uqūl al-waḍiyya*, 1355/1936.
21. *Šafḥat 'arafāt al-ma'ārif*, 1356/1937.
22. *Anhār riyaḍ al-ḡanna*, 1357/1938.
23. *Suḥub barakāt al-ḥuld*, 1358/1939.
24. *Ḍāt al-baraka*, 1359/1940.
25. *Kawṭar ḥuld*, 1360/1941.
26. *Rawḍat firdaws*, 1361/1942.
27. *Dalw Ġadīr ḥaqq*, 1362/1943.
28. *Mašrabat tasnīm nūr*, 1363/1944.
29. *Salsabīl ḥikam ḡadaq*, 1364/1945.
30. *Surar rušd Marfū'a*, 1365/1946.
31. *Šuwar ḥawḍ mawrūd*, 1366/1947.
32. *Takbīr sakīnat faṭḥ mubīn*, 1367/1948.
33. *Falsafat fawz 'aẓīm*, 1368/1949.
34. *Taḍkirat labīb*, 1369/1950.

35. *Silsilat ni'ma 'uzmā*, 1370/1951.
36. *Ni'am al-ṣibḡa al-ilāhiyya*, 1371/1952.
37. *Ḥazā'in imām al-muttaqīn*, 1372/1953.
38. *Mafātiḥ al-yāquta al-ḥamrā*, 1373/1954.
39. *Nahr al-nūr al-ša'ṣa'ānī*, 1374/1955.
40. *Balāḡ al-du'āt al-fāṭimiyyīn*, 1375/1956.
41. *Aṣī'at al-fayḍ al-azālī*, 1376/1957.

The following *Risālas* were each composed during the corresponding year but were posthumously published under the 52nd *dā'ir*, Muḥammad Burhān al-Dīn:

42. *Amṭāl sidrat al-muntahā*, 1377/1958, Bombay, n.d.
43. *Rawḍat dār al-salām*, 1378/1959, Mumbai, 1430/2009.
44. *Tawḥīd al-milla al-bayḍā'*, 1379/1960, Mumbai, 1431/2010.
45. *Barakāt aṣḥāb al-taḥḥūr*, 1380/1961, Mumbai, 1432/2011.
46. *Kamāl al-ni'am al-sābiḡa*, 1381/1962, Mumbai, 1433/2012.
47. *Tasbiḥ dahab al-quds*, 1382/1963, Mumbai, 1434/2013.

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