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MURDEROUS ADDICTS: PERCEPTIONS OF THE NIZARI ISMA'ILIS

A Thesis
By
ADAM PAUL WARREN

Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

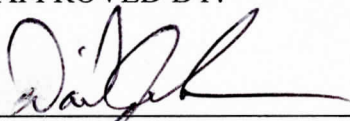
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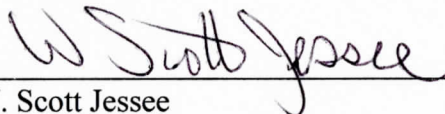
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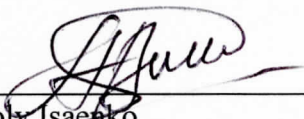
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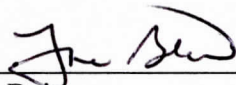
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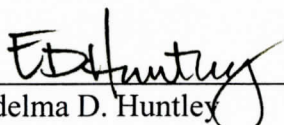
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ABSTRACT

MURDEROUS ADDICTS: PERCEPTIONS OF THE NIZARI ISMA'ILIS (August 2009)

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Islam, the Western World, and their interaction have never been a more relevant topic than in recent years. The West has a need to create and utilize an “other” to understand itself. Since the Crusades, the West has utilized Islam and the East as that “other.” Numerous groups in Islam have been used to create an “other” for the West. One of the most notable sects to be used for this purpose is the Nizari Isma'ilis, colloquially known as the Assassins.

The Assassins were an eleventh through thirteenth century Islamic sect that was frequently mythologized in Western and Islamic literature. Although a significant and important society in the medieval Middle Eastern world, the Assassins were largely relegated to the realm of fantasy and myth through the stories that were told of the sect. Legendary stories of the sect began to appear in the West through the documents of Crusading individuals. These stories were collected and further fantasized and eventually the Assassins began to obtain a place of myth and legend in the Western mind. Western writers from the medieval period to the present day have presented the sect in a very negative and fantastical manner.

Depictions of the Assassins as murderous individuals addicted to drugs began in the Middle Ages but persisted throughout history until the modern day. The description of the Assassins in this manner contributed to differentiating the West and Islam. Orientalist authors, operating under the idea that the West was inherently superior to the East, specifically Islam, published the Assassins legends as fact; and subsequent writers continued this tradition of presenting the sect as a fantastical, legendary organization. The depiction of the Assassins has led to a great misunderstanding of the true basis of the sect and distortions of the beliefs of the Isma'ilis. The commonly held belief that the Assassins were destroyed by the Mongols is not true, but is perpetuated to continue the fantasy associated with the sect. Modern day Isma'ilis are nothing like the representation of the sect and modern Islam cannot be understood through the use of medieval sources. The West and Islam are not as incompatible as believed by medieval and Orientalist writers, and an understanding between these two realms is needed.

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I would like to thank Dr. David Johnson, Dr. W. Scott Jessee, Dr. Birsen Bulmus, and Dr. Anatoly Isaenko for their help and assistance in completing the research and writing of the thesis. I would also like to thank my fiancé for her support and willingness to read and reread my chapters and my parents, family, and friends for their continued support during this process.

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INTRODUCTION

East and West and the Assassins

I stood even as the friar who is confessing
The false assassin, who, when he is fixed,
Recalls him, so that death may be delayed.¹

The first usage of the word assassin in European literature occurs in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, written in the early fourteenth century. The usage of assassin by Dante and subsequent writers gave the term, assassin, the meaning commonly associated with it today, “one who kills for money.”² While the word assassin has entered the lexicon as a term describing an individual who performs murders for money or personal gain, the term was originally applied to a specific group of people, the Nizari Isma’ilis of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. The Nizari Isma’ilis, Nizari, or Assassins were a sect of Shi’ite Islam that arose from the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt in the eleventh century. The founder of the faction was Hassan ibn Sabah, an individual that would factor prominently in the mythology and folklore of the medieval world. The etymology of assassin suggests that the term was a derivation of *hashishin*, in use in the medieval Arab world to apply to social outcasts. The term *hashishin* was applied to the Nizari Isma’ilis, who were known for their very public assassination attempts. Through centuries of interaction with Europe, *hashishin* was anglicized to assassin, and the term was used to refer to any person who killed for

¹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008) p. 143.

² Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 2.

political, personal, or monetary gain.³ Islamic terminology began appearing in European language and writings during the later middle ages due to increased interaction between the nations of Christianity and the nations of Islam.

Interaction between the medieval Islamic nations and the medieval Christian nations reached its peak with the Crusades to the Middle East, beginning in the eleventh century. The Crusades brought Europeans into contact with the various Islamic nations of the eleventh century. Among these Islamic nations could be found the domains of the Seljuq Turks, the lands of the Nizari Isma'ilis, and the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. The major interaction between the Europeans and the Muslims was undoubtedly one of conflict and warfare. Much of the literature written by both Christians and Muslims during the period of the Crusades consists of negative perceptions about the opposing group. The Crusades and the European chroniclers of these events established the practice of defining the Islamic nations as a singular whole, an "other" that stood opposite Christian Europe. The notion of defining the Islamic nations as "other" permeated the studies of the Middle East throughout the history of the West and even into the present era. By grouping the Islamic world into a singular whole, the medieval Western scholars created a geographical and political divide between the West and the East. In time, the East came to be called the "Orient," comprised of the Middle East, India, China, and Japan. A history of violence and conquest colored European, and later American, studies of the Orient and a particular bias to paint the Orient in a negative manner persisted until the present day.⁴

³ Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1994) pp. 90-93.

⁴ For further reading and understanding of the processes by which the West established the idea of "Orient" see: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

European studies of the Oriental “other” became a field of scholarship called Orientalism. Orientalist studies began as early as the eighteenth century. Orientalism, in the broadest sense, refers to historical studies of the East and can be traced back to the study of Oriental languages in medieval universities. In examining these Orientalist studies, Edward Said formulated a theory that would define his career. Said wrote a text explaining and expounding upon his assessment of the Orientalist studies in 1978 titled, *Orientalism*. *Orientalism* defined the method by which the Western writers created the field of Orientalism to not only study the Orient, but also to degrade, dominate, and colonize it. While Said’s theory has been critiqued by several scholars, the primary theory behind his text remains relevant, that scholars and authors have studied and written about the “Orient” as a method of understanding the East. In understanding the “Orient” and Islam as backwards and inferior, the West, or Occident, can know itself and understand why it has an opportunity to dominate and influence the East.⁵

Said’s understanding of the condescending nature of Orientalism is an accurate portrayal of much of the literature written about the “Orient” and specifically Islam. In the study of the Nizari Isma’ilis, Orientalism has extremely impacted the scholars conducting the research. Not only were the Nizari Isma’ilis painted in a negative and condescending manner in the medieval period, but these medieval studies influenced the study of the sect from the eighteenth century onwards. Orientalist studies about the Nizari Isma’ilis of the eighteenth and nineteenth century continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Modern Day Orientalism is as pervasive and powerful as it was in the early centuries of European imperialism. This study will examine the Orientalist perspective of the modern day, referring to the twentieth century until the present day studies of the Nizari Isma’ilis.

⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 1-9.

Orientalism: Western Interpretations of Islam and the East

“The antagonism between the West and Islam is not the expression of an eternal conflict between two separate and irreconcilable worlds.”⁶ Mahmut Mutman, professor of Sociology at Bilkent University in Ankara, wrote these words in support of the ideas held by Edward Said. For Mutman, as well as Said, the West and Islam were not diametrically opposed, but centuries of negativity directed at Islam by Western scholars established the antagonism found between the two. The most intriguing aspect of Mutman’s study is his understanding behind why the antagonism is between the West and Islam and not between Christianity and Islam. Mutman cites a quotation from Edward Said’s *Covering Islam*, when he says that the reason the West is referred to as “the West” instead of Christianity is by virtue of the fact that the Western world has transcended its primary religion. The nations of Islam, however, are dependent upon and defined by their collective religion.⁷ Several historical works deal directly with the issues of Western scholarship and interaction with the Islamic world.

In Albert Hourani’s *Europe and the Middle East*, the interaction between Western scholars and the Middle East as well as misconceptions about the Middle East and Islam are discussed. Hourani’s text is a series of his essays that span across his academic career. The essays in Hourani’s text “all spring, in one way or another, from a concern with the attitudes of Western thinkers and scholars towards Islam and those who call themselves Muslims, and more generally with the relations of Christians with those who profess other faiths.”⁸ Hourani related that the medieval writers about Islam created a system of legends to

⁶ Mahmut Mutman, “Under the Sign of Orientalism: The West vs. Islam,” *Cultural Critique*, No.23 (1992-1993) p. 165.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 166-167.

⁸ Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) p. xi.

understand and make sense of a completely different religion. The early stories about Islam place Christian values into the religion, revealing a great lack of understanding when it came to understanding different religions. Muhammed was depicted as the Islamic equivalent of Christ and occasionally presented as a “Christian apostate who had set himself up as the head of a Church, just as the Pope had done.”⁹ Hourani tackled the subject of Orientalism directly in his final essay when he discussed the forms of historical writing which have been done about Islam, as well as understanding the over-generalizations found when labeling the West and Islam.

Twenty years before the work of Albert Hourani, Norman Daniel tackled the same issues in *Islam and the West*. Daniel’s work is primarily concerned with how Christianity came to view Islam as a negative. The text deals with how Christians have applied Christian concepts to the understanding of Islam. In applying Christian concepts to Islam, the Western scholars created a mythos around Muhammed and the religion. As noted in the work of Hourani, Daniel also made mention of the perception of Muhammed as a divergent and heretical Christian priest; however, Daniel continued the investigation into the Christian sources by discussing how there was a belief that eventually Muslims would return to the Christian fold.¹⁰ The medieval perceptions of Islam, Daniel noted, are still influencing Western perceptions of Islam today. Daniel’s final suggestions dealing with Western condescending opinions and beliefs about Islam can be seen as an early understanding of the theory laid out in Said’s *Orientalism*. Concluding his text, Daniel suggested the idea that Christianity and Islam are not mutually exclusive but can exist and be understood by both sides without having to sacrifice any of the beliefs of their religion:

⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁰ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960) p. 122, 170, 262.

Christians may suddenly find that Islam is inherently attractive without there being a need to surrender (still less, pretend to surrender) any of their own beliefs. What in the past has frozen has begun at last to thaw; what the mediaevals studied we may study again, making use of what they did; but we may do it for its own sake, and without thought of propaganda, and without hatred.¹¹

While Daniel took a relatively hopeful view of the future of Christian and Islamic relations, a culture of Orientalism persisted when discussing the Middle East. Since the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 there have been several historical works published that critique Said's theory, but there is an equal amount of texts which expound upon and use Said's text as the basis of their argument. *Before Orientalism* is a work dealing with the literature about the Middle East from the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries. The author of *Before Orientalism*, Barbour pointed out how Said's theory was too oversimplified to be taken at face value. "To efface hybridity, and reduce multiple alliances and antagonisms to an overriding dualism, is also to miss what is essential about precolonial engagements."¹² Even if Barbour is critical of the extreme dualism of Said's argument, he nonetheless used the theory of Said to discuss how the West viewed the East.

Orientalism as a method of understanding the East continues to influence scholarship and beliefs about the Middle East. Documenting American understanding of the Middle East, Douglas Little, in *American Orientalism*, discussed how American scholars and popular culture explained and understood the Middle East. Little examined how American government officials "depicted the Muslim World as decadent and inferior" and "tended to dismiss Arab aspirations for self-determination as politically primitive, economically suspect,

¹¹ Ibid, p 307.

¹² Richard Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576-1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 5.

and ideologically absurd.”¹³ The concepts established in Said’s *Orientalism* have made their way not only into the historical and scholarly world of American Oriental studies, but into popular culture. Oriental studies across the world created a negative perception of Islam and the Middle East. These studies have relied heavily upon the medieval Western sources, who first established the concept of an Islamic “other.”

Medieval Sources on the Nizari Isma’ilis

While there is a primary focus in this study on the writings of modern day scholars about the Nizari Isma’ilis (Assassins), an understanding of the literature upon which these scholars relied is necessary. The texts written during the Crusading eras and the literature of medieval travelers are the primary documents upon which any work discussing the Assassins is based. It was these documents upon which the first attempt at uncovering the history of the Assassins was based, written in 1603 by Denis Lebey de Batilly.¹⁴ Subsequent scholars writing about the Assassins used, in large part, the literature of the Crusaders and Western scholars, essentially ignoring the Islamic sources discussing the Assassins. The usage of primarily Western sources to study and research the Nizari Isma’ilis led to a distinct mythology surrounding the religious sect. Such a mythology depicted the Nizari Isma’ilis as a sect of blind believers who would kill unwaveringly at the behest of their enigmatic lord. The Western medieval sources tended to focus upon the blind devotion and secret practices of the Assassins, and this perception of the Nizari Isma’ilis has continued well into the present day in popular culture as well as historical study.

In 1994, Farhad Daftary, current acting director of the Institute of Isma’ili studies, researched the mythology surrounding the Nizari Isma’ilis and attempted to explain the

¹³ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) p. 11.

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Assassins*, pp.9-10.

nature and meanings behind many of the legends commonly associated with the Assassins.

Titled *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, Daftary's text is essentially a historiography of medieval sources and the very earliest Oriental studies of the Isma'ilis.

Within his text, Daftary detailed the method by which the legends surrounding the Assassins came to be. By examining the Western medieval sources, Daftary analyzed the creation and proliferation of the legends surrounding the Assassins. The legends associated with the Assassins are clearly spelled out by Daftary and include the paradise legend, the hashish legend, the death-leap legend, and the legend of the Old Man of the Mountain. Daftary's account begins with the writings of William of Tyre.

Most of the medieval Western literature about the Assassins comes from individuals who did not live in the Middle East. William II, Archbishop of Tyre, was a lifelong resident of the Middle East and acting priest in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. William (1130-1185) lived during the time when the Crusader kingdoms were on the rise and their hold upon their territories was strong. The latter years of William's life saw the rise of Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (Saladin) and in his *Historia* there can be found a sense of foreboding for the Crusader kingdoms. William of Tyre's *Historia* is a chronicle of "political events – battles and the deeds of Kings. Other matters, such as the deeds of popes or the activities of traders from the Italian maritime republics, were only incidental to his story."¹⁵ Dealing specifically with political events, William of Tyre's *Historia* provides a fairly accurate portrayal of events occurring within the Middle East during the Crusading years in which he is writing.

¹⁵ Peter W. Edbury and John Gordon Rowe, *William of Tyre: Historian of the Latin East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 2.

The history of William matches well with the Islamic sources of the day, such as Ibn al-Athir, Ibn al-Qalanisi, and Kamal al-Din. While William of Tyre's history is fairly accurate, there is very little examination of Islam as a religion and Daftary notes that "...William's main objective was to show that the Crusade was a holy war against the Saracen infidels, and that its triumphs were, therefore, ... divine deeds done through the Franks."¹⁶ William's preoccupation with expounding upon the glorious deeds of the Crusaders echoed the writings of other Western chroniclers of the Crusades. It is in William's text that the first mention of the Assassins can be found in Western sources. Although focused on the Syrian Nizari Isma'ilis, William of Tyre's account is seemingly without the fantastical elements to be found in the later works of men such as Marco Polo and Benjamin of Tudela. A continuation of William of Tyre's history occurred in the thirteenth century that related the latter events of the Crusading time period and was completed entirely in France, without ever visiting the Middle East. The continuations of William of Tyre's history contain stories about the Assassins which begin to create the myths of the Nizari Isma'ilis. These continuations "related a variant of a story about the death leaps of the Nizari *fida'is* at the command of their chief; a demonstration supposedly designed to impress the Frankish king with the loyalty of the sectarians."¹⁷ In the Rothelin continuation, the beginnings of the paradise myth of the Assassins can be seen.

They [the Assassins] never left the palace until the day their lord sent for them in order to have someone killed....the lord would ask whether he wanted to obey his commands and through them achieve paradise....if they were taken and killed, they believed for certain that their souls would stand before God in paradise.¹⁸

¹⁶ Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, p. 56.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 74.

¹⁸ Translated by Janet Shirley, *Crusader Syria in the Thirteenth Century: The Rothelin Continuation of the History of William of Tyre with part of the Eracles or Acre text* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999) p. 36.

The excerpt from the Rothelin continuation shows how the Nizari Isma'ilis began to take on a legendary and mythical status. The mythical status of the Assassins was beginning to take shape.

Following the impact of William of Tyre, the writings of Jean de Joinville about the Crusade of Louis IX, St. Louis, provide further documentation of European knowledge of the Nizari Isma'ilis. The account of Joinville, however, adds more information about a Western understanding of the Assassins. The account of the Assassins in Joinville mentions the widespread nature of the Isma'ilis as well as the political place of the Assassins in the Middle Eastern world. However, Joinville contributes little to the creation of assassin legends; instead Joinville attempts to understand the Nizari Isma'ilis within their own framework. "One of the points laid down by Ali is that if a man is killed while obeying his lord's orders his soul goes into a more pleasing body than before."¹⁹ Although Joinville should be commended for attempting to understand the Nizari Isma'ilis using their own doctrine, his assumption that the Assassins followed Ali as opposed to Muhammed reveals the complete lack of understanding about Islam prevalent throughout the European sources of the medieval period.

The works of Joinville and William of Tyre introduced the Nizari Isma'ilis to the medieval European world. In Europe the Assassins took on a life of their own and legends and myths about this society began to travel throughout Europe. The legends were influenced and directed heavily by travelers who made mention of the "Old Man of the Mountain" in their travelogues. One of the earliest of these travelogues is the account of Benjamin of Tudela. Benjamin, traveling in the twelfth century, wrote short historical

¹⁹ Joinville and Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, Trans. M.R.B. Shaw (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1963) p. 279.

accountings of the places where his travels took him. Included in Benjamin's itinerary is a travel through Syria and an account of the Assassins. "In this vicinity resides the [Assassins], who do not believe in the tents of Mohammedanism...their devotion goes far enough to gladly risk their lies...if commanded to do so. They imbibe the substance hashish, from which their name Assassin comes."²⁰ Not only is the hashish legend seen in Benjamin of Tudela's account, but the continued declaration that the Assassins and Nizari Isma'ilis were not Muslim, but of a separate religion. A misunderstanding of the very nature of the sect, the scholarship on the Nizari Isma'ilis would label them as Islamic heretics and a separate religion well into the studies of the eighteenth century.

The most well known and powerful source of the assassin legends is undoubtedly the *Travels of Marco Polo*. Marco Polo, in a travel journal which traced his journey to the court of the Great Khan of China as well as his return travel home, "combined a number of such [assassin] legends in a fully integrated form, also adding his own original contribution."²¹ Marco Polo's account of the Assassins provided an extremely specific account of the Assassins that incorporated all the legends which had been circulating about the Nizari Isma'ilis and created the perfect combination of these legends. Not only did Polo's account provide a complete retelling of the legends, it also placed the Nizari Isma'ilis in Persia. Before Marco Polo, the western accounts of the Assassins are solely concerned with the Syrian branch of the sect, although some sources will mention that the Syrians give homage to a branch in Persia. Polo also names the Assassins as Muslim, instead of the assumptions of writers such as Benjamin of Tudela and Joinville that they were a separate religion. The legend addition that Polo added was the garden of paradise. "He [the Assassin's leader] had

²⁰ Sandra Benjamin, *The World of Benjamin of Tudela: A Medieval Mediterranean Travelogue* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995) p. 149.

²¹ Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, p. 95.

had made...the biggest and most beautiful garden that was ever seen.... And he gave his men to understand that this garden was Paradise.... So he had had this garden made like the Paradise that Mahomet promised to the Saracens.”²² Marco Polo goes on to describe how the leader of the Assassins would drug his follower and have them placed in the garden and when he needed someone killed, he would remove them from the garden so that they would do anything to return. The description of the Assassins by Marco Polo influenced later generations of European writers to a high degree. “Indeed, Marco Polo’s version of the Assassin legends came to be adopted, to various extents, by successive generations of European writers as the standard description of the ‘Assassins’.”²³ As noted by Daftary, these European misconceptions and descriptions about the Assassins permeated deeply into the conscious of the Western mind and impacted the study of the Nizari Isma’ilis into the eighteenth century.

While Daftary is primarily concerned with the Western medieval sources discussing the Assassins, the Islamic sources discussing the Crusades have just as much to relate. Overlooked by the Western scholars until the nineteenth century, the Islamic literature on the Assassins provides less fantastical description of the Assassins. Long known as the most important Islamic chronicler of the Crusades, Ibn al-Athir includes several references to the Assassins. Ibn al-Athir mentions the Assassins as Batinis, Qarmatis, and Isma’ilis, never labeling them as Assassins, or *hashishin*. The Isma’ilis appear in Ibn al-Athir’s text as simply another Islamic group, as prevalent in the affairs of the Middle East as the Seljuqs and others. Frequently, the Isma’ilis are committing raids and small-scale warfare, not

²² Translated by Ronald Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1958) p. 40.

²³ Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, p. 117.

assassination in Ibn al-Athir's history.²⁴ Another of the Islamic sources from the medieval period is Ibn al-Qalanisi. Ibn al-Qalanisi, a native of Damascus, was primarily concerned with the welfare of his city during the Crusades, and the happenings in and around Damascus make up the majority of his text. However, reference is made once again to the Batini. While Ibn al-Athir does not paint the Isma'ilis in a negative light, Ibn al-Qalanisi is quick to label the sect as "the evildoers and rejectors of God."²⁵ Ibn al-Qalanisi continues to speak of the Nizari Isma'ilis as a negative, outlaw, heretical sect that should be punished and wiped out. Even in the negative tones of Ibn al-Qalanisi, however, there is no allusion made to the legends so popular in the Western literature.

The true voice of the Assassin cannot be heard, however. After the fall of the Assassins' last stronghold, the documents and writings of the sect were largely destroyed. Some of the literature is cited in the historical writings of Islamic scholars such as Ala al-Din 'Ala-Malik Juwayni, Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, and Jamal al-Din Abu 'l-Qasim 'Abd Allah ibn Ali Kashani. The difficulty presented here is the bias of the individual chronicler. Juwayni was working with the Mongol invaders who destroyed the Isma'ili sect, so his writings would have been influenced with a desire to please his Mongol masters. Rashid al-Din drew heavily upon the history of Juwayni and his text would have been influenced accordingly. Kashani's history is similar to the history of Rashid al-Din but fuller and more in-depth, suggesting a usage of Nizari Isma'ili documents not used by Rashid al-Din.

²⁴ Translated by D.S. Richards, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-ta'rikh. Part 1. The Years 491-541/1097-1146: The Coming of the Franks and the Muslim Response* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) pp. 40-42, 92, 184.

Translated by D.S. Richards, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-kamil fi'l-ta'rikh. Part 2. The Years 541-598/1146-1193: The Age of Nur al-Din and Saladin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) pp. 73-111, 155-159, 436.

Translated by D.S. Richards, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-kamil fi'l-ta'rikh. Part 3. The Years 589-629/1193-1231: The Ayyubids after Saladin and the Mongol Menace* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008) pp. 52, 93, 156-157.

²⁵ Translated by H.A.R. Gibb, *The Damascus Chronicle of the Crusades* (London: Luzac & Co., 1932) p. 194.

Daftary remarked upon the Islamic texts in his *The Assassin Legends*, but largely focused upon the Western sources. Where Daftary ends, however, is the beginning of Orientalism in the eighteenth century with Silvestre de Sacy.²⁶

Orientalism and the Nizari Isma'ilis

Orientalism has colored the interpretation of the Nizari Isma'ilis from the seventeenth century until the present day. As Bernard Lewis has stated, the first scholarly attempt at understanding the Nizari Isma'ilis was an examination by Denis Lebey de Batilly in 1603. Following that study, Bartholome d'Herbelot published *Bibliothèque Orientale* in 1697, a work which attempted to categorize and systematize the entirety of the Oriental world known at the time. D'Herbelot's study was the first foray into Orientalism and marked the beginnings of continued Oriental studies into not only the Assassins, but Islam as a whole. Bernard Lewis, in an article published in 1952, lays out the Oriental sources used when discussing the Assassins of Syria. The list begins at Lebey de Batilly and ends in 1877 with a publication by Guyard.²⁷ Lewis also mentions the primary documents, consisting of Isma'ili inscriptions, the later Arabic sources such as Juwayni, and of course the Western Crusader sources. Lewis is essentially compiling a historiography of all sources dealing with, specifically, the Syrian Assassins before the twentieth century.

While Bernard Lewis and Farhad Daftary have dealt with the documents discussing the Assassins from the medieval time period up until the late nineteenth century, almost no work has been done in evaluating the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, in *The Order of Assassins*, lays down a short historiography of the study of Isma'ilis beginning with thirteenth century documents of Juwayni and the Western

²⁶ Farhad Daftary, "Persian Historiography of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis," *Iran*, Vol. 30, (1992), pp. 94-97.

²⁷ Bernard Lewis, "The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassin," *Speculum*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1952), pp. 475-479.

scholars and ending with W. Ivanow in the early twentieth century.²⁸ Hodgson pointed out that some scholars were negative in their portrayal of the Isma'ilis while others were more accepting, but overall Hodgson's short historiography was to provide a background for his text.

From the studies of Joseph von Hammer Purgstall to the recent scholarship of James Wasserman, there are numerous historical accounts of the Assassins written during the twentieth century. The studies of the Nizari Isma'ilis are almost always conducted with a particular bias in mind. Orientalism, as a system of knowing and a method of promoting the notion that the so-called West is somehow superior to the so-called Orient, has influenced and, in some cases, become the sole driving focus behind the twentieth century studies of the Nizari Isma'ilis. The place the Assassin has obtained within historical scholarship and the popular culture of the world can assist in an understanding with the misconceptions about the East. A study of how the West understands and interprets one particular aspect of Islam, the Assassins, can lead to a greater understanding of the relationship of the West's understanding and interpretation of Islam.

²⁸ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1955) pp. 22-33.

CHAPTER 1

Orientalist Perspectives of the Nizari Isma'ilis

Societies and cultures have a great fascination with myths and legends. Arising out of the literature of the crusaders and subsequent visitors to the Middle East, legends and myths pertaining to the Nizari Isma'ilis, the Assassins as known in the West, were spread throughout the West and entered into the realm of fact. Medieval and Renaissance scholars based much of their knowledge about the Nizari Isma'ilis from these myths and legends. Writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries using Western sources from the Medieval and Renaissance eras included these legends and myths into their scholarly works as fact. The scholarly efforts of these eighteenth and nineteenth century writers in regards to the East became known as Orientalism. A theme running throughout the Orientalist literature is one of negativity and denigration of the East. For the Orientalist writers, the Assassins were a fringe group, important to the understanding of Islam, which had been led astray by a succession of poor leaders. The motivation and bias behind histories of the Nizari Isma'ilis needs to be understood in order to determine why the Assassins are still perceived as a mythical group in the scholarly world of today.

The myths of the Nizari Isma'ilis, spread during the medieval era, eventually made their way into modern day writings and influenced the understanding of the sect. From a Western viewpoint, the myths and legends pertaining to the Assassins are all of a negative nature. As illustrated in Farhad Daftary's study, *The Assassins Legends*, several negative ideas about the Nizari surfaced as a result of interaction with the Crusaders. Many of these

ideas revolved around certain myths that formulated about the Assassins, such as the myth that they consumed *hashish*. While the existence of the myths makes sense in the medieval period, the continued presence of such myths in the literature of modern day scholars merits a response. The medieval world of Europe was dominated by a centuries long conflict to conquer the “holy land,” referred to as the Crusades. During the Crusades, Islam was painted as the great enemy, the ultimate evil and for many European Christians during the Middle Ages, the embodiment of the Devil.¹ Medieval negative images about Islam and its sects, including the Nizari, can ultimately be attributed to a desire to vilify one’s enemy.²

Modern day scholarship should be free of medieval misinformation. Primary sources that did not include any of the myths surrounding the Assassins were uncovered early in the twentieth century, yet the Assassin myths continue in much of the modern day literature. Not only does the inclusion of the myths persist, but negative views of the Assassins continue and they have even been labeled as the “first religious terrorists” by some authors.³ While there are some scholars who point out the negatives surrounding the Nizari Isma’ilis, there are several who are working to paint them in an entirely different light. Scholars whose works seemingly clear the Nizari of any wrongdoing are equally guilty of bias. Both groups of scholars employ, to some degree, Orientalism in their work.

Orientalism as a field of study has been around since the eighteenth century, but accompanying that field of study has been a tendency to denigrate the East. Orientalism, as an historical field of study, began with the notion of understanding new areas of the globe

¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972) p. 73.

² For more on the medieval interaction between Islam and the West see: Shahrugh Akhavi, “Islam and the West in World History,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3(2003), pp. 545-562, Daniel, *Islam and the West*, and Dana Carleton Munro, “The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades,” *Speculum*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1931), pp. 329-343.

³ J.P. Larsson, *Understanding Religious Violence: Thinking Outside the Box on Terrorism* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2004) p. 40.

with which the West was interacting. Over time, the Western nations began having a heavy presence in the East, often colonizing Eastern countries and regions. Orientalism as a field of study became a way for the colonizing nations to legitimize their efforts by describing Eastern peoples as backwards, mythical, and in need of a civilizing hand. Through portraying the East, specifically Islam, in a condescending manner, the Orientalist scholars were defining Islam as separate and in opposition to the West. Though some of the most recent scholarship about the Assassins contains far less negativity towards the sect, there are still areas in which the Nizari Isma'ilis are portrayed as an "other." Scholars attempting to defend Orientalist studies even use methods which place Islam in a negative realm and depict the West as the pinnacle of humanity. "Whatever the complexities of the total picture...this [Islamic] unhumanistic centrality cannot be wished or hoped away....Broadly speaking, the Islamic way of life...does not have a...basis for charity or objectivity towards the non-Islamic."⁴ In defense of Orientalist studies, the author states that the studies depict Islam in a negative way because Islam is negative.

The modern day literature of the Nizari Isma'ilis includes several texts which use Orientalism to depict the sect in a negative manner. Through the usage of deprecatory words, such as terrorist and heretic, or through the representation of the Assassins as depicted in the medieval myths, scholars continue to separate the East and West. The Nizari exist today and to define the medieval sect as terrorists implies that the modern day religious society is comprised of terrorists as well. The history of scholarship on the Nizari Isma'ilis is a history of negative interpretations and depictions. A thorough understanding of these histories and the motivation behind their bias is necessary in order to comprehend why the

⁴ G. M. Wickens, "Western Scholarship on the Middle East," in *As Others See Us: Mutual Perception, East and West*, Edited by Bernard Lewis, Edmund Leites, and Margaret Case (International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, 1985) p. 70.

Assassins are still upheld as a mythical group in the popular culture, as well as in the scholarly world.

A Short History of the Assassins

A short introduction to the Assassins and their place in history is necessary to understand and interpret how historians and scholars have depicted the sect in various periods of time. The Nizari Isma'ilis are a continuation of the Shi'a, one of the two main branches of Islam. Shi'a Islam and Sunni Islam are two differing Islamic belief systems. One of the major differences is in the view of the interpreters of the religious texts.

This difference was rooted in their different orientations. For Sunnis, God and human beings have a direct relationship; the *ulama* are not intermediaries but scholar-interpreters of religion. Thus, belief in saintly intermediaries was often viewed as heretical or, more precisely, dangerous deviation (*bida*). For Shii, intercession is an integral part of the divine plan for salvation. Ali and the other Imams were divinely inspired models, guides, and intermediaries between God and the believers....This belief developed later into the notion that, in the absence of the Imam, a distinguished cleric (or clerics) might serve as the supreme guide and authority on law, the source of emulation.⁵

The history of the Nizari Isma'ilis truly begins with the split between Sunni and Shi'a. The Nizari were a result of the centuries of religious and political unrest and upheavals caused by the rise of Islam in the Middle East. The founding and early years of Islam kept the Islamic community (*umma*) together under a single individual, the Prophet Muhammad. The death of Muhammad in 632 AD, caused a rift between early Muslims and difficulty arose regarding who should succeed the Prophet. There were two distinct beliefs about who should succeed; some Muslims believed that 'Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, should succeed, while other Muslims felt that Abu Baker, father of Muhammad's wife A'isha, should become the caliph (leader of the Islamic *umma*). Abu Baker was chosen in favor of 'Ali, and thus the beginnings of Shi'a Islam were formed.

⁵ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd Ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. 109-110.

Sunni and Shi'a accounts differ even on the matter of Muhammad's death. Some Sunni accounts tell of Muhammad dying with his head in A'isha's lap, while Shi'a accounts detail that Muhammad died with his head resting on 'Ali.⁶ After the death of Muhammad, Sunni and Shi'a communities generally supported the caliphate of Abu Bakr and his successors; Omar, Uthman, and 'Ali, commonly referred to as the *Rashidun* or rightly-guided caliphs.

Eventually 'Ali became caliph in 656 AD, but there were several Sunni who contested his succession to the position, the most notable being A'isha, the former wife of the Prophet. 'Ali's reign was plagued by civil wars (*fitna*) between those who supported 'Ali and those supported A'isha. 'Ali, the last of the *Rashidun*, met his end at the hands of an assassin, who supported neither the claims of 'Ali nor A'isha, in 661 AD. The death of 'Ali left a fissure in the leadership of Islam, a vacancy at the head of the *umma*, and a need for a succession. The son of 'Ali, Hasan, was widely acclaimed as caliph but surrendered the title after a tenuous six month reign to Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria. Mu'awiya ended the tradition of the *Rashidun*, moved the capital of Islam to Damascus, and effectively split the *umma* between those who supported Hasan (Shi'a) and those who supported the Sunni dynasty of Mu'awiya.

The Shi'a community has continually upheld an Imam, or spiritual leader. In Shi'ism, the *Rashidun* were revered as not only the caliph, temporal leader of Islam, but also the Imam. However, the Shi'a community chose not to regard Mu'awiya as their Imam, but instead the family of 'Ali, his sons Hasan and Husayn. The Sunni community flourished under the Umayyad caliphate (Mu'awiya and his sons) from 661 AD until a rival dynasty appeared in 750 AD, while the Shi'a community faced oppression and ridicule. To highlight

⁶ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 11 and Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of Muhammad: Islam's First Century and the Origins of the Sunni-Shia Split* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2007) p. 31.

this, Hasan and Husayn perished during the reigns of the first two Umayyad caliphs, Mu'awiya and his son, Yazid. "The tragic martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, al-Husayn, and his small band of relatives and companions at Karbala, near Kufa, where they were brutally massacred by an Umayyad army in 680, played an important role in the consolidation of the Shi'i ethos..."⁷ The opposition between Sunni and Shi'a was solidified by this act.⁸

The progression of a united Shi'a Islam into sects, including Nizari Isma'ilism is a tortuous road. With the death of Hasan and Husayn, the imams retreated from the majority of public life. Shi'ism, during this time, split due to differences in who should succeed to the imamate. Ismaili Shi'a, for instance, believe that the imamate passed, in 765, from Ja'far Sadiq, a descendent of Husayn, to his son Isma'il, while the Twelver Shi'a believe the imamate passed to Isma'il's younger brother Musa al-Kasim. The followers of Isma'il and his progeny eventually founded a dynasty to support their claims, the Fatimids of Egypt, in 909. Descendents of Isma'il ruled from Cairo and spread the Isma'ili teaching or mission (*da'wa*) throughout the Middle East. The Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty continued intact until the succession of the Fatimid Caliph and Imam al-Mustansir became a question in 1094.⁹

The Fatimid dynasty of Egypt and the succession question following the death of al-Mustansir are also the origins of the Nizari. One of the Fatimid Isma'ili *da'was* had been preaching his message in Persia. A member of Twelver Shi'a family, Hassan ibn Sabah heard the message of the *da'wa* and converted. Hassan traveled to Egypt to study under the

⁷ Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2005) p. 12.

⁸ For further reading on the Shi'a notion of imam see: Mahmood Shehaby, "Shi'a" in *Islam: The Straight Path: Islam interpreted by Muslims*, edited by Kenneth W. Morgan (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1958) pp. 180-223.

⁹ 'Ala-ad-din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, Translated by John Andrew Boyle, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958) pp. 641-664.

imam, al-Mustansir, and learn from him. The eldest son of al-Mustansir, Nizar, was to inherit the throne upon his death. In the mind of Hassan, and those he would later teach, Nizar was to become the imam of the Isma'ilis. In 1092, Hassan left Egypt and traveled back to Persia where he obtained the fortress of Alamut and began preaching his *da'wa* in support of Nizar. The situation in Egypt, however, changed. At the death of al-Mustansir, Nizar was passed over in favor of a younger son al-Musta'li. Regardless of this fact, Hassan continued to preach in support of the imamate of Nizar. The rise of Hassan's version of Isma'ilism highlights the internal conflicts within Islam. The Fatimids, and their successors the Nizari Isma'ilis, were an answer to the question of who should be in charge of the Islamic religion.¹⁰

Hassan established the individuals referred to as the Assassins in Orientalist scholarship. During his reign from 1092 until his death in 1124, Hassan spread the *da'wa* of the Nizari Isma'ilis across Persia and into Syria. Hassan, though, never claimed to be the imam and was merely serving as the teacher (*da'i*) until the imamate, Nizar and his offspring, was revealed. Facing a domineering society in the Sunni-dominated Seljuq Turks of eleventh and twelfth century Persia, Hassan created one of history's most feared and mythologized groups, his devotee (*fida'is*), the Assassins. Hassan, having both of his sons assassinated, was succeeded by one of his officials, named Kiya Buzurgamud. Kiya Buzurgamud and his son after him, Muhammad, continued the teachings and policies of Hassan ibn Sabah, using the *fida'is* to a heavy degree. The history of the Nizari takes a strange turn in 1162 when Muhammad's son and successor Hassan II was declared a descendent of Nizar and thus, Imam.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 666-675.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 686-689.

Hassan II's link to the imamate marked a change in the Nizari doctrine. Hassan ibn Sabah had no such claim to be the Imam, he was simply a *da'i*, or teacher, until the Imam arrived. The link of Hassan II to the imamate was very tenuous. Nizar, who the Assassins believed to be the Imam, had fled to Alexandria with his two sons after being disinherited. The story is recounted in various manners, with Nizar and his sons dying in prison or dying in rebellion to the Fatimid dynasty. Nizari Isma'ili tradition holds that one son of Nizar survived to later propagate offspring which would result in Hassan II. Although Hassan II's reign lasted a mere four years (1162-1166), he is credited with instituting the doctrine of *Qiyama* (Resurrection), specifically a "... 'rising' of the dead, and allegorically, it implies an idea denoting the rising to the next spiritual stage, and qiyamat-i qubra (great resurrection) means an attainment of the highest degree when a man becomes free from the ties of external laws..."¹² The doctrine of *Qiyama* continued through the reign of Hassan II's son Muhammad II. Muhammad II made the claim to the imamate and declared that his father, Hassan II, was a descendant of the prophet Muhammad through 'Ali, through Isma'il, and finally through the son of Nizar. The belief of *Qiyama* was ultimately denied in the reign of Muhammad II's son, Hassan III, also known as Jalal al-Din, who told his followers to return to Sunni Islam.¹³

Hassan III's return to Sunni Islam is largely attributed to the Shi'a doctrine of *taqiyya* (dissimulation of religion), wherein followers of Shi'a religion could outwardly practice the orthodox religion and secretly practice their true religion. Jalal al-Din Hassan III, as Imam, was followed explicitly and his "return to Sunnism" was followed completely by the Nizari

¹² Mumtaz Ali Tajddin Sadiq Ali, *History of the Ismailis*. 1998. <http://ismaili.net/heritage/node/17803>.

¹³ For more on the history of Nizar and his sons see: Juvaini, p. 663, Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1991) p. 48, and Carl F. Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol.1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 148.

Isma'ilis. Jalal al-Din was succeeded by his son Ala al-Din Muhammad III. Ala al-Din, only a child when Jalal al-Din died, continued the practices of his father until his death in 1255. It was during Ala al-Din's reign that the Mongols had moved into Samarkand and were pushing into Persia to conquer the Islamic world. Ala al-din was succeeded by his son, whom he tried to disinherit, Rukn al-Din Khurshah. It was during the reign of Rukn al-Din Khurshah that the Mongols conquered the Nizari Isma'ilis.¹⁴

One of the grandsons of Genghis Khan, Hulegu Khan, was given the task of conquering what is known in the modern day as the Middle East by the Great Khan, Mongke Khan. Rukn al-din is recorded as attempting to negotiate with Hulegu Khan, but the negotiations fell through. In 1257, the Great Khan ordered the eradication of all the Nizari Isma'ilis. Hulegu began with Rukn al-din and contemporary histories would have us believe that Hulegu destroyed the Nizari to the last woman and child. The history of the Assassins does not end in 1257, however, but several of the texts written about the Nizari Isma'ilis consider the sect to have been destroyed on that date.¹⁵

The original Nizari *da'wa* was started by Hassan ibn Sabah in Persia, but throughout his reign and that of his subordinates, Hassan sent out several of his own missionaries to spread the Nizari Isma'ili *da'wa*. One of the Nizari *da'i* traveled to Syria and set up a sect of Isma'ilis in the castles around Aleppo, specifically the castle at Masyaf. The most well known of the leaders of the Syrian Assassins is Rashid al-din Sinan, who is mentioned in all the western sources and a number of the Arabic sources concerning the Crusades. The early literature on the Assassins has a preoccupation with the Syrian division of the sect, due to

¹⁴ Juvaini, pp. 701-712. For more on the doctrine of *taqiyya* see Momen, p. 183, Morgan, *Islam*, p. 337, and Esposito, p. 49.

¹⁵ Juvaini, p. 723 and Rashiduddin Fazlullah, *Jami'u't-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols*, Trans. by W.M. Thackston, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1998-1999) p. 447-512.

that group's close interaction with the Crusaders. Of most importance is the assassination of Conrad of Montferrat during Rashid al-din's reign as *da'i* of the Syrian Nizari in 1192. The Assassins in Syria were considered to have been working with either the crusader, Richard I of England, or the Muslim Salah al-din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, known to Western sources as Saladin. The Syrian Nizari are even considered to have worked with and influenced the Templars. After the destruction of the Assassin stronghold of Alamut in 1257 by the Mongols, it was thought that the sect had been eradicated. The Syrian sect continued to exist until the Egyptian sultan Baybars destroyed their strongholds in 1271-1272. The Nizari ceased to exist as a major power anywhere in the medieval world and became the stuff of which legends were made.¹⁶

The history of the Nizari make it clear that the sect was a marginalized fringe organization arising and enduring due to the internal conflicts of Islam. Even in today's world, Isma'ilis make up a small number of the vast majority of Muslims across the globe. Although consistently occupying the fringe of Islamic religion, several of the scholars writing about the sect have used the Nizari to demonize Islam as a whole. By defining first the Assassins and then making note of the fact that the sect held Islamic beliefs, however divergent from mainstream Islam, the Orientalist writers denounced and made an enemy out of Islam.

Assassin Literature in the Orientalist Era

Knowledge and culture was dominated by Islam in the medieval period. Several Westerners who traveled to the Middle East on Crusades ending up staying in the Middle East and founding Crusader kingdoms due, not only to an interest in the Holy site of

¹⁶ Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) pp. 238-245, Kenneth M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958)pp. 120-131, and Petry, p. 266.

Jerusalem, but to the ability to obtain wealth and prestige. The Western fascination with the Middle East was so great that even the German Emperor Frederick inquired and was fascinated about the tenets of Islam. Frederick went so far as to work closely with the Muslims and set up a colony for Muslims in Sicily, for which he was excommunicated.¹⁷ Eventually the power of the Islamic nations began to wane and the power of European nations grew. As early as 1492, the Western move to dominate the world began with the Reconquista in Spain and the journeys to the New World.¹⁸

The domination of the New World by Europe ushered in an era of colonialism and expansion. Colonization truly began in the seventeenth century with the Portuguese and Dutch dominance overseas. Although originally involved in the “Orient” merely as traders, the European nations began exploitation of the Oriental peoples with which they traded. Eventually the British, as well as other mainland European nations, joined Portugal and the Netherlands in trading with the Oriental world. After time it became necessary for European nations conducting trade in other countries to set up a base of operations in that nation. European nations began sending out individuals to colonize their trade interests. Control of trade became very important to the European nations and a policy of dominance over the Orient started to develop. The policy of control extended beyond the political and military, at the time minimal, and into the cultural, which would impact the minds of not only the colonized but the mother nation as well. Scholarly works were published which described the denizens of colonized lands as backwards and needing the guiding hand of a more

¹⁷ For more on Frederick’s interaction with Islam and his eventual excommunication see: John Victor Tolan, ed., *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2000) pp. 176-190.

¹⁸ Gabrieli, p. 280-285 and Marcel A. Boisard, “On the Probable Influence of Islam on Western Public and International Law,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1980) pp.429-450.

civilized nation. Defining the colonized lands of the East as the Orient, the scholarly effort to write about the colonized became known as Orientalism.¹⁹

Orientalist studies often had a tendency to portray their subject matter in a negative or condescending manner. Often Europe was portrayed as a society that had transcended its religion and could perceive the world without using a religious lens while the Middle East was portrayed as still completely dependent upon Islam for their understanding of the world. "... 'we' [Christians] are discerning, civilized and rational enough to see through the preposterous claim of the Prophet, but 'they' [Muslims] are incapable of any such insight, because they are childish barbarians."²⁰ The notion of the Muslim and the Middle Easterner as a backwards and barbarian type permeated several of the studies of the Assassins during not only the Orientalist period, but even into the present day.

Silvestre De Sacy, writing in the early 1800s, is one of the first authors to compile an entire treatise on the Assassins. Originally a lecture, De Sacy's text is his explanation of the origin of the name, Assassins. Drawing largely from Marco Polo's *Travels*, De Sacy expounds upon what he believes to be the etymology and basis of the term assassin. Assassin was traced to the word *hashish* or *hashishin*. In attempting to ascertain the reason why the Assassins were called *hashishin*, De Sacy mentioned that "*Hashish* means herb, forage....among the simple or compound substances used by the Orientals to achieve a more or less advanced state of intoxication, there is one that is known by the name of *hashish* or *hashisha*."²¹

¹⁹ For more on the dominance of culture through imperialism see: Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), and Said, *Orientalism*.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and their Impact on Today's World*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2001) p. 491.

²¹ Silvestre de Sacy, "Memoir on the Dynasty of the Assassins, and on the Etymology of their Name," in *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1994) pp. 160-161.

The detailed descriptions and thorough accounting of how the drug is ground up for use portray De Sacy's infatuation with the drug, *hashish*, and its derivation, hemp. De Sacy's accounts of drug use are used to paint the Nizari Isma'ilis as a drug-fueled organization who used the *hashish* to lure recruits into the sect. De Sacy takes as fact the story of the Old Man of the Mountain, or Sheikh, as described by Marco Polo.

The Sheikh was called in their language Alaodin. He had had made in a valley between two mountains the biggest and most beautiful garden that was ever seen, planted with all the finest fruits in the world and containing the most splendid mansions and palaces that were ever seen, ornamented with gold and with likenesses of all that is beautiful on earth... There were fair ladies there and damsels, the loveliest in the world, unrivalled at playing every sort of instrument and at singing and dancing. And he gave his men to understand that this garden was Paradise.... No one ever entered the garden except those whom he wished to make Assassins... The Sheikh kept with him at his court all the youths of the country from twelve years old to twenty, all, that is, who shaped well as men at arms.... He used to put some of these youths in this Paradise, four at a time, or ten, or twenty, according as he wished. And this is how he did it. He would give them draughts that sent them to sleep on the spot. Then he had them taken and put in the garden, where they were wakened.... And when he wanted emissaries to send on some mission of murder, he would administer the drug to as many as he pleased; and while they slept he had them carried into his palace.... They went forthwith to the Sheikh and humbled themselves before him, as men who believed that he was a great prophet... When he asked them whence he came, they would answer that they came from Paradise, and that this was in truth the Paradise of which Mahomet had told their ancestors... they longed for death so that they might go there [Paradise], and looked forward eagerly to the day of their going. Thus it happened that no one ever escaped when the Sheikh of the Mountain desired his death.²²

De Sacy takes the mention of the draught used to make the initiates sleep as a reference to *hashish*. The usage of the Polo text, as well as others, furthers De Sacy's point of the use of *hashish*, as well as the blind devotion paid to the "Sheikh." For De Sacy, the devotion to the leader of the sect was due to his control over the drug *hashish* as well as over the notion of Paradise. The "Sheikh" was therefore portrayed as a mere drug pusher who drew followers and kept them in line with promises of ecstasy.

²² Latham, *Travels*, pp. 40-42.

De Sacy's explanation of the name, Assassin, not only linked the sect to *hashish* but also depicted the Nizari as blind devotees to the words of their leader. Very little mention was made of the place religion played in the life of the Nizari, nor the ideas behind the movement. A short accounting of the Nizari includes their exploits as murderers, but does not mention the vast library and wealth of knowledge possessed by the Assassins. De Sacy's text matches well with the views of his time period. In the 1800s the Middle East was largely controlled by the Muslim Ottoman Empire, based in modern-day Turkey. However, the Ottoman Empire at the time was in decline and susceptible to the political and economic influence of Europe. De Sacy's text, degrading the scholarship of the Isma'ilis and presenting them as mere zealots, revealed a need to condescend to those with which the West was dealing. Orientalism, especially De Sacy, is not merely used to understand and define the East, but also to understand the West. By revealing the East to be mere zealots, De Sacy understands that the West, as the Orient's opposite, is a knowledgeable and reasoning civilization.

The lecture given by De Sacy has been used, or at least mentioned, in nearly every single text written concerning the Assassins. In 1835, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall published a seminal text in the study of the Assassins, *Die Geschichte Der Assassinen* or *The History of the Assassins*. Purgstall's text was a thorough history of the Assassins using a variety of sources, specifically Oriental sources, as stated by the author. Although Purgstall does use a variety of Oriental sources such as Ibn Khaldun, a vast majority of his information comes from histories written by Orientalists. Several of the texts now available to historians were not available in Purgstall's time, such as the histories of Rashiduddin Fazlullah and Juvayni, and left Purgstall to have to decipher a wider range of sources, often merely

mentioning the Assassins. Purgstall's text, even without important sources, contains a valuable amount of information about the Nizari.

The history of Purgstall is not without its faults. Writing in the early 1800s, Purgstall's text is fraught with Orientalist negativity towards the Nizari. From the very beginning of his text, Purgstall presents the Assassins as a highly divergent, heretical sect of Islam. At the time, though, Isma'ilism was not merely a different sect, but also the basis of one of the most powerful dynasties in the world, the Fatimids. Regardless of these facts, Purgstall displays the Assassins as bent upon mindless slaughter and violence. The assassinations committed by the sect during the reign of Hassan ibn Sabah are understandable due to Hassan's murderous nature, without regard for the political situation of Iran at the time. The case of Hassan's assassinations of his own sons is taken to reveal the extent of Hassan's evil nature.

Without proof or measure of guilt, he[Hassan ibn Sabah] sacrificed them [his sons], not to offend justice, but apparently to mere love of murder, and that terrific policy, by virtue of which the order snapped all ties of relationship or friendship, to bind the more closely those of impiety and slaughter...Human nature is not usually so diabolical, that the historian must, among several doubtful motives to an action, always decide for the worst; but, in the founder of this society of vice, the establisher of the murderous order of the Assassins, the most horrible is the most likely.²³

Within this short excerpt, it can be determined that the leader of the Assassins was an evil diabolical individual who conducted murder as a means of uniting his immoral and heretical organization. The negative portrayal of the Assassins does not cease with a condemnation of its leader.

The entire sect of Isma'ilism, with its divergent form of Islam, was portrayed in a negative light. Writing in an age where the West was either colonizing or at war with the

²³ Joseph Von Hammer-Purgstall, *The History of the Assassins: Derived from Oriental Sources*, Translated by Oswald Charles Wood (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968) p. 72

Islamic world, Purgstall's portrayal of a highly violent and terrorist-like sect must have fallen upon eager ears. The Nizari were shown to not only be violent, but also holding atheist beliefs. The return to Sunnism of Hassan III is the greatest event in the history of the Assassins, according to Purgstall. As a Catholic, Purgstall was seemingly preoccupied with labeling the "true" form of Islam. Purgstall's text consistently upholds Sunnism as the "correct" form of Islam, while condemning Isma'ilism. "In this manner, their [Sunnis] obstinate zeal...succeeded in accustoming the ears of the infidels [Isma'ilis] to...prayer...and sowed the good seed of the true doctrine of Islamism on the waste field of infidelity and atheism."²⁴ There is a great need in the writings of several Western histories of the Assassins to label the true form of Islam, whether it be either Sunni or Shi'a.

The theme of labeling Isma'ilism as a heresy to Islam is consistent in the Orientalist, as well as modern, literature about the sect. The beliefs of Isma'ilism are tested against the "true" doctrine of Islam. The need to separate and ultimately delineate between correct and incorrect, right and wrong, true and heretical goes hand in hand with the need to separate Orient and Occident, Catholic and Protestant, Science and Religion in the Western mind. Drawing upon European examples, Sunnism was like Catholicism, the original, and Shi'ism was much like Protestantism, a divergent, often heretical sect. Although Nizari and Shi'a Islam are shown to be an Islamic heresy, in opposition to mainstream Islam, the Western writers still manage to employ negative portrayals of the Assassins to degrade Islam itself. The emergence of religious fringe sects such as the Nizari reveal a lack in Sunni Islam, believed to be the "mainstream," to fulfill the spiritual needs of the inhabitants of the Middle East, those less civilized than West. Purgstall's text ends with the author noting the destruction of the Assassins by Hulegu and of his reasoning for conducting such a study.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 205.

“...To present a lively picture of the pernicious influence of secret societies in weak governments, and of the dreadful prostitution of religion to the horrors of unbridled ambition.”²⁵ Thus, Purgstall declares the Assassins as essentially a religious murder group, bent on destruction and chaos in the medieval Middle East.

A mere thirteen years after Purgstall, Thomas Keightley wrote in *Secret Societies of the Middle Ages*, about the Assassins. Keightley’s text is an investigation of three of the most well known secret societies; the Assassins of Persia and Syria, the Templars, and the Secret Tribunals of Westphalia. Writing in 1848, the work of Keightley is very reminiscent of the work of Purgstall. While generally accepting of the Assassins’ early leaders, Keightley’s estimation of later leaders of the Nizari is generally negative. “Dimly as we may discern the character of Hassan Sabah through the medium of prejudice and hatred through which the scanty notions of it have reached us, we cannot refuse him a place among the higher order of minds.”²⁶ Keightley regards Hassan ibn Sabah as a very intelligent and religious man. Hassan ibn Sabah is remembered and revered by Keightley for his ability to unite and lead his followers and inspire them to commit assassinations. The subsequent leaders fall under the scrutiny of Keightley, particularly “the reign of the vain, inconsiderate Hassan [II],” who Keightley describes as mad. Hassan II’s declaration of himself as the Imam is portrayed by the author as the ultimate evil of the Assassins. While much of Keightley’s description of the Assassins is in opposition to Purgstall, they do agree on one important note.

It was now manifest, beyond doubt, that the Ismailites were heretics who trampled under foot all the most plain and positive precepts of Islam; for, though they might pretend to justify their practice by their allegorical system of interpretation, it was clearly repugnant to common sense, and might be made the instrument of sanctioning,

²⁵ Ibid, p. 218

²⁶ Thomas Keightley, *Secret Societies of the Middle Ages* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1848) p. 65.

under the name of religion, every species of enormity. From this time the Moolahid (*impious*) began to become the common and familiar appellation of the Ismailits in the mouths of the orthodox Moslems.²⁷

Echoing the sentiments of Purgstall and the majority of Orientalist writers, Keightley described the latter leaders of the Assassins and their endeavors, save the reign of Jalal al-din Hassan III, as in opposition to mainstream Islam and heretical. Keightley, unlike Purgstall, acknowledges the continued existence of Isma'ilis in Persia and Syria. "At the present day...the sect is still in existence both in Persia and in Syria...but...it has lost its terrors and the Ismailite doctrine is now merely one of the speculative heresies of Islam."²⁸ The depiction of the Nizari as heretical allows Keightley to appeal to the Orientalist mindset that there must be two distinct spheres, the "true" and the heretical. The depiction of the Assassins by Keightley, although more accepting of Hassan ibn Sabah, is still a negative and condescending Orientalist text, meant to drive a wedge between the so-called Orient and the so-called Occident. For the West, Catholic heresies, such as Protestantism, become generally accepted and allowed to function side by side in the civilized Occident, where reason is allowed to dominate. For the Orient, however, the heresies of Islam are to be shunned and destroyed and cannot operate within an Orient dominated by religion. Comparisons of reasoned Christianity and backwards Islam are found throughout Keightley's text. Keightley even compares the Assassins with the Jesuits and states that:

Unlike this last [the Jesuits], however, its [the Assassins] object was purely evil, and its career was one of blood: it has therefore left no deeds to which its apologists might appeal in its defence. Its history, notwithstanding, will always form a curious and instructive chapter in that of the human race.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid, p. 98.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 167.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 168.

The remainder of Orientalist literature pertaining to the Assassins is comprised, most often, of mere mentions and asides within other bodies of literature. The Orientalist era was a time of discovery, adventure, and re-configuring for the nations of Europe. Knowledge of the Middle East, as mentioned previously, was largely found in accounts of the Crusades. Several Orientalist writers, therefore, decided to travel throughout areas that had fallen under the sway of European influence, such as the Middle East. Travelogues from the area are awash in descriptions of Muslim practices and what was perceived as strange customs. The travelogues were composed by nearly all of those individuals who traversed newly acquired lands and territory. One such travelogue, composed by Frederick Walpole in 1851, mentions the Assassins in its very title. *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels in the Further East* is Walpole's travelogue depicting his time spent in the Middle East in 1850-1851. Walpole, conceivably to sell more copies of his text, included the name Assassins in his document, although the historical Assassins have almost no mention. Usage of the Assassin name to sell continues to the present day with several books and games utilizing the Assassin name.³⁰ The author of the travelogue does, however, include a short description of the historical Assassins and relates them to the societal group of which he is writing, the Ansayrii. Walpole's linkage of the Ansayrii to the Assassins, even after a significant amount of time spent with the Ansayrii, reveals that the author wished to present the Muslims with which he was interacting in a negative light.³¹

The mythology of the Assassins had permeated the Orientalist era to influence areas of scholarship outside of history. Frederick Nietzsche, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, used the

³⁰ The video game, *Assassin's Creed*, used the Assassin myth and name to sell copies. Several books, including current texts about the Iraq war, also use the Assassin name to sell literature.

³¹ Frederick Walpole, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with Travels in the Further East, In 1850-51, Including A Visit to Nineveh* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851).

Assassins to illustrate a point of philosophy. Nietzsche, in stark contrast to Orientalist writers of his time, held the Assassins as a society which had uncovered the truth. Although not labeling the Assassins in a negative, Nietzsche does make the assumption held by many of his contemporaries that the Assassins were a lawless and violent order that could and did do anything they desired.

When the Christian crusaders in the Orient came across that unconquered Order of Assassins, that free-spirited order par excellence, whose lowest ranks lived a life of obedience of the sort no order of monks attained, then they received by some means or other a hint about that symbol and motto, which only the highest ranks kept as their secret, "Nothing is true. Everything is permitted." . . .³²

The Assassins were thus the embodiment of knowledge held in the form of anarchy.

The Orientalist depictions of the Assassins, although distinct, have several common elements. All of the writings mention the Assassins as a heretical sect, in violation of the common laws of the time. The notion of heresy and keeping within established laws was very important for the colonizing empires during the Orientalist period. If a country did not keep within the established laws of his colonizing nation, then it would mean rebellion, and this the colonial powers could not allow. Therefore the Assassins, being a divergent sect, were consistently portrayed as a negative and violent group, bent on disrupting and violating the natural order.

Modern Literature of the Assassins

For the purposes of this study, "Modern Literature" will pertain to the decades leading up to the Second World War. The time period of the early twentieth century includes the New Imperialism of America, England, and the other Western powers into Africa, Asia, and of course, the Middle East, the First World War, and the decades of increasing world

³² Frederick Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic, by way of clarification and supplement to my last book Beyond Good and Evil*, Trans by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 126.

power for Western countries before the Second World War. For the individuals writing about the Assassins during this time period, the motivation was largely the same as it was during the Orientalist era. The New Imperialism of the early twentieth century ventured into the Middle East with the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire, and began conquering and becoming increasingly involved with the inhabitants of that region. Understanding the mindset of Muslims being colonized in the Early Modern Period, the imperialist nations used the past as their guide to how to interact and understand these peoples. “Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present...This [appeal] animates all sorts of discussions—about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities.”³³

Writing at the turn of the century, Edward Browne compiled a very valuable and important text in understanding the history of Persia and its residents. Edward Browne’s text, *A Literary History of Persia*, is a thorough history of Persia and its kingdoms, using Persian poetry, from pre-Islam to Browne’s modern day. Volume II of Browne’s four volume history contains several references and stories regarding the Assassins. Browne reveals a very accepting attitude of the West for his time period. In the majority of *A Literary History of Persia*, and in the rest of his publications, Browne depicts Islam and the Muslims in an often favorable manner. The text of Browne’s work is concerned with understanding and linking the literature of Persia to the historical background of the time periods covered. A substantial work, Browne’s manuscript is the best known and most complete compilation of Persian literature. Although the author is kind and favorable to a majority of Islam and the East, Browne does reveal a small bias towards the Assassins.

³³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 1.

The early twentieth century, not significantly removed from the Orientalism of the nineteenth century, still held many of the same prejudices and biases as did the nineteenth century. For Browne and others, “the [Orientalist] tendency was to analyze the Islamic world as a decaying civilization whose only import, at least for the Western student of Islam, was either its obscure textual tradition or the...responses of Muslim intellectuals to the...modern world.”³⁴ Browne’s text falls into the category of writing about Islam’s obscure textual traditions. The work is presented in a fashion that does not overtly reveal Browne’s bias, but by looking at specific instances, especially about the Assassins, Browne is revealed to have a small bias of negativity towards, at the least, the Nizari Isma’ilis. The legend of the Assassins’ smoking of hashish is included as fact in Browne’s study. Purporting to write about Persian literature, Browne includes a myth contrived and created by purely Western sources, specifically Marco Polo. The inclusion of this glaringly Western source material seems strange with regard to understanding Persian literature. No mention is made of the hashish myth residing in the Persian, or other Arabic, sources pertaining to the Assassins, yet Browne includes the text regardless.³⁵

The remainder of Browne’s references to the Assassins appear in a short history wherein he recounts the deeds of the Isma’ilis. The assassinations perpetrated by the sect, the intellectual and wisdom seeking movements of the order through Nasir al-Din Tusi, and the eradication of the Nizari by the Mongols are all recounted in a fairly unbiased manner. Small biases appear throughout the recitation of the Isma’ilis’ history. Described as

³⁴ Ibrahim Kalin, “Roots of Misconception: Euro-American Perceptions of Islam Before and After 9/11,” in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*, edited by Joseph E.B. Lumbard (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004) p. 164.

³⁵ Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: Volume II, From Firdawsi to Sa’di*, 8th Reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) p. 204-211.

“formidable heretics,” the Isma’ilis were presented as the terror of medieval Persia.³⁶

Browne’s text, written during the New Imperialism, shows a surprising acceptance of Islam as a whole, but nevertheless, presents the Assassins with a negative bias, however minute. Browne’s text perhaps heralded a new form of writing about the Nizari Isma’ilis, which would appear in subsequent writings, in which the sect was presented as the epitome of intellectual and spiritual understanding.

Much like the nineteenth century, twentieth-century Europe was discovering and understanding more about the territories coming under its control. Several travelogues were released in this time period, much like the travelogue of Frederick Walpole. Some of these travelogues were composed as diaries of cartographers, anthropologists, and archaeologists whose purpose was to catalogue and categorize the new territories. Laurence Lockhart, writing and traveling in the 1920s, presented the Nizari in an article titled, “Hasan-i-Sabbah and the Assassins,” and subsequently by Freya Stark, writing and traveling in the early 1930s in her book, *The Valleys of the Assassins*. Lockhart’s short excerpt falls into that writing which presented the Assassins as without a fault.

Portrayals of the Assassins rarely fall into the purely historical category, but contain, almost without fail, a significant bias. Whether the bias is negative or positive, the Assassins are always shown to be an “other” which can only be understood by placing them in a different sphere than the West. For Lockhart, the Assassins were a sect of Islam that represented a vast amount of courage and personal strength, which not only created a viable state within the framework of medieval Persia, but extended power and thrived through two centuries. Largely influenced by the legends and myths of the Assassins, Lockhart feels the need to include Marco Polo’s account of the Garden of Paradise. Even though Lockhart

³⁶ Ibid, p. 313.

realized that Polo's version was undoubtedly incorrect, he continued to use the framework of Polo's legend, when no other text supported such a claim. "What really happened was that the Grand Master...would invite them [potential fida'is] to a feast....he would cause them, without their knowledge, to be drugged with hashish."³⁷ Lockhart's inclusion of the hashish myth, not only reveals the lack of knowledge about the sect, but the continued willingness to believe that the Assassins could only be motivated by a drug-induced ideal. The inclusion of the hashish myth, however, is the only negative portrayal of the sect by Lockhart.

Although not negatively portrayed, the sect is still categorized as inferior and extremely alien from the civilized West. By revealing that the Syrian Assassins, who came in contact with the Crusaders, and the Persian Assassins were essentially two distinct groups, Lockhart emphasized the split between the West and the Orient. The Syrian Assassins, presented to work closely with the Crusaders, are shown to be independent of the Persian Assassins and therefore less concerned with Oriental politics and more with the politics of the Crusading kingdoms, specifically the Crusading time of Richard the Lionheart. Lockhart's visit to Alamut further makes a split between the East and West and recalls the medieval portrayals of the sect when Lockhart searches for the site of "the famous garden of the Assassins."³⁸ The travelogue and short history given by Lockhart treats the Assassins as an intriguing, otherworldly sect, almost with a fantastical element. East and West, for all of these writers, had to stay separate.

Freya Stark, writing in the 1930s, used a tactic to sell her text much like what Frederick Walpole did in the 1800s. By including the name Assassins in the title of her text, *The Valley of the Assassins*, Stark was highly likely to sell several many books. The Western

³⁷ Laurence Lockhart, "Hasan-i-Sabbah and the Assassins," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 5 (1930) p. 682.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 691-692.

world was highly intrigued by this group of men who would commit murder in the name of a single man, who seemingly controlled them through the use of drugs. The infatuation of the West with the Assassins is what ultimately led travelers such as Lockhart and Stark to the fortress of Alamut and other Assassin castles. Stark's text is comprised of two sections; the first a report of her travels through Baghdad and western Persia with the second section an account of the Assassins and their castles throughout eastern Iran.

Stark's travels and account of the Assassins revealed a condescending view of the sect. Including the link of the Assassins to the drug hashish, Stark portrayed the Isma'ilis as a sect bent entirely upon murder and violence. Little mention of the Isma'ilis' religious beliefs was made, save that they "were a branch of the Shi'a, who still constitute practically the whole of Persia."³⁹ Stark links the inhabitants of the area around Alamut to the Isma'ilis and refers to these individuals as Assassins numerous times. Depicted as amiable, Stark nevertheless notes the natives' lack of intelligence and general backwardness, a tactic of Orientalism used to reveal the colonized people's need of a civilizing influence. Negative portrayals of the Assassins are furthered when Stark mentions that the profession of Hassan III to be the imam most likely included "some pagan survival of philosophy lingering as among the Sabaeans of Harran."⁴⁰

The travelogue of Freya Stark is a very interesting text, and highly entertaining, as she mentioned, "what I write here is for pleasure, for other people's, I hope, but, in any case for my own."⁴¹ Orientalist notions of otherness are portrayed prominently in Stark's travel literature. Although the "heresies" of the sect, as described by the nineteenth century writers

³⁹ Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins: And Other Persian Travels* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) p. 159.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 177.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 185.

are not prevalent in Stark's account, the Assassins are still portrayed as a group whose tenants are vastly different from the majority of religious teachings, even linking them with pagan philosophy. While not a history, Stark's text is influential in that it seemingly presented Assassins that had survived to the present day in Iran. Whether Stark's guides and acquaintances were actually Isma'ili is unknown, but their presentation as such, reveals Stark's desire to depict the inhabitants of Iran as backwards and uncivilized. The Assassins are shown to be a sect that has not died out and needs the guiding hand of a civilizing Western nation to point it the way to rightness.

The literature pertaining to the Assassins during the early twentieth century, does not contain a large amount of negativity towards the Assassins. Instead, there is a consistent attempt at portraying the Assassins as a societal "other." A.S. Picklay, a scholar of the 1940s, is one of the individuals who did not portray the Assassins in a negative light. Picklay's text is a general history of the Ismailis, and not simply an accounting of the Assassins of Alamut. Concerned with the sect from their beginnings, the Fatimid dynasty, to Picklay's present, Aga Khan III, Picklay's text, *History of the Ismailis*, portrayed the sect in a positive light. The bias of Picklay is laid out in his introduction when he discussed how much sacrifice had to be given in order to live the life of an Isma'ili.

The example of Hasan bin Sabbah, a Shi'ite of the "twelver sect" who in his own community might have risen to greatness but who as an Ismaili spurned all the efforts of enemies of the Imam to bribe him, and to the end of his life led a selfless existence discarding personal ambitions and domestic comforts, proves that there was some attraction in the religion which made people deny themselves worldly comforts and ambitions in favour of other ideals.⁴²

The description of the sacrosanct life of Hassan ibn Sabah reveals Picklay's desire to defend the Isma'ili sect and portray them as something other than a murderous society. Even

⁴² A.S. Picklay, *History of The Ismailis* (Bombay, India: Popular Printing Press, 1940) p. viii.

depicting the sect in such a positive light, however, Picklay still defines them as separate from the West.

While Picklay's text is concerned with the entirety of the Isma'ili history, the section on the Nizari Isma'ilis presented Hassan ibn Sabah and his successors as men who considered the greater good, not only for their society, but for humanity in general. Hassan ibn Sabah is shown to assassinate Nizam al-Mulk not out of a political need, but a desire to postpone all-out war. "Murders like those of Nizamul-Mulk have been misunderstood by many and Hassan bin Sabbah has been credited with having organised a band of assassins and terrorists. Nothing could be farther from the truth, however."⁴³ Hassan ibn Sabah's intentions, for Picklay, were nothing but the best. Depictions of the sect as a benevolent group, however, simply serve to portray them as an "other." While the Isma'ilis were presented positively, the rest of the Islamic world was portrayed in a negative light. By depicting the Islamic world as backwards, Picklay places the Isma'ilis in a world far different and extremely devoid of the civilized West. Islam as practiced by modern Muslims, for Picklay, is therefore degenerate and backwards when compared to Isma'ilism and Christianity.

Interaction between the West and the Middle East was not conducted before World War II on an equal basis, but with the nations of the West exercising their power and colonizing influence over the Middle East and the nations commonly referred to as the "Orient." In order to legitimate this type of interaction, it was necessary to portray the Orient, if not the complete opposite, then distinctly different from the West. From the writings of the nineteenth century until the 1940s, the Assassins were portrayed as belonging to a separate sphere of life, which could only be understood by placing them in a backwards

⁴³ Ibid, p. 40.

society. The portrayal of a backwards “Orient” was largely due to the Western belief that it had transcended the limits of religion into an era when history of the West could be understood without the need to view it in religious terms, whereas the Islamic world had to be defined and understood within the limits of its religion.

The literature before World War II is largely contingent upon the notion that the West and the Orient are two distinct “others,” with little shared influence. The history of the West and the East is one defined largely by conflict and Western depictions of the Assassins portray it, for the most part, as a sect largely dependent and driven by conflict. The Assassins are understood as the enemy of mainstream Islam, a heresy, which was either the friend or foe of the West at various points in history. Mainstream Islam, already an “other” to the Western world, contains the heresy of the Isma’ilis, which placed the sect even further away from the West. The myths and legends of the Isma’ilis with the attached idea of being separate from the West, continued long after the medieval works. Recalling the myths and legends in histories of the Assassins caused the Assassins to be thought of within those terms.

CHAPTER 2

Perspectives of the Globalizing World

World War II was a conflict that involved nearly every continent of the globe, save for Antarctica. Such a global conflict caused several cultures that previously had limited or no interaction to become acquainted with one another. An increased interest in foreign nations continued the notion that the so-called, civilized “West,” was more cultured and inherently superior to the so-called, backwards “East” or “Orient,” especially in the fields of education and politics. The notion of Western superiority was thrust upon the Western world through the works of anthropologists, sociologists, and, most importantly, historians who studied the Eastern nations. These scholars continued several of the negative and condescending ideologies of the Orientalist writers of the century and decades before World War II. The Nizari Isma’ilis were once again depicted as a fringe Islamic society, which could be easily linked to the problems of the Islamic world following World War II. Negative depictions by Orientalist scholars of the Nizari Isma’ilis need to be understood to determine why the sect is still perceived through fanciful and mythical eyes.

Orientalism as a historical field of study was already thoroughly in place from the eighteenth century. The underlying theme of Orientalism, of denigrating the Eastern world, did not disappear during the post-WWII decades; if anything, such a theme increased. While the literature of the early twentieth century generally took a more favorable, although romantic, view of the Assassins, the post-WWII era literature exhibited several works that portrayed the Assassins as the murderous, terroristic, fringe society that they had been

depicted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the major fallouts of World War II became what would be called the Cold War, between two of the world's superpowers, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. These two nations, industrial powers in a globalizing world, had a vested interest in the Middle East, the location of much of the world's oil. While the vast majority of scholarly writing about the Nizari before World War II was conducted by European writers, American scholars, post WWII, began obtaining a more profound interest in the Middle East, and therefore Islam and its sects.

American Orientalism regarding the Middle East stemmed from the creation of Israel following World War II through the Zionist movement. The conflicts between the newly-created Israel and the long established Arab-Islamic states of the Middle East cemented the notion in the American mind that the East was backwards and primitive.¹ Perhaps most intriguing about American Orientalism is the belief held by several Orientalist scholars that the West has transcended its primary religion, Christianity, in the secularization of societies but the East is perpetually stuck in the throes of Islamic idealism.

In this thousand-year-long process of thought, there is one factor which is almost constant. The attitude of western Europe towards Islam is one of judgement. Islam is being weighed in the balance against something other than itself, being assigned a place in a scale.²

Islam, originally, had been weighed against Christianity, but as the West progressed through the Enlightenment and into the modern era, Islam was weighed against the progression of Christian civilization. Islamic education, for instance, continued to be based on understanding and memorizing the Qur'an while in the West, education had largely moved past memorization of the Christian Bible. The West, though, had not fully progressed past

¹ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, pp. 25-30. Little notes that the portrayals of the Israelis and Arabs in National Geographic furthered the Orientalist stereotypes of the earlier centuries.

² Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*, p. 31.

the point of Christian versus Muslim. After World War II a nation was created in the Middle East that drew America's interest, Israel. The creation of Israel caused several consequences, not the least of which was war between the Middle Eastern states, but also drew American focus to the Middle East in a way that nothing else had before.

Zionism, the notion of a Jewish home state, was undoubtedly a lofty goal and greatly needed after the atrocities faced by the Jews during World War II. Begun in the late 1900s, the Zionist movement began in response to events in France which led to a call for executions of Jews. The response was to suggest that Jews would not be taken seriously until they had obtained their own country and were recognized as an equal on the world stage. However, the actual fruition of the Zionist movement, Israel, assisted in the Western world's attempts to demonize the Islamic world. After World War II, the eyes of the Western world were thrust open the Middle East to determine how this small Israel, David, would fare against the larger Islamic world, Goliath. Israel became the light in the Middle Eastern darkness, for several Americans and Westerners.

...the U.S. public and policymakers gradually came to see the tiny Jewish state's confrontation with its much larger Arab rivals as a reenactment of the biblical story of David and Goliath. Cast by much of the American media as a geopolitical underdog whose occidental values were anathema to its oriental neighbors, Israel relied on courage, ingenuity, and increasingly, Western weapons to defeat people whose Muslim faith and tribal culture seemed...more and more out of step with twentieth-century realities....photographs of Bronze Age skeletons and biblical ruins alternate with snapshots of Zionist irrigation projects that "Make the Desert Bloom" and sun-drenched Tel Aviv beachgoers clad in Bermuda shorts. The color photos at the end of the article...highlight the exotic and dangerous Arab lands to the east...a Jordanian desert warrior, sporting a rifle, a pistol, two bandoliers, and a silver dagger, stares menacingly at the camera from beneath his red-checkered kaffiyeh.³

³ Little, *American Orientalism*, p. 25.

The establishment of an Israeli state in the Middle East continued and emphasized the beliefs that the Islamic world was primitive and backwards through comparison with the civilized, Western-oriented Israeli nation.⁴

Increased Western involvement in the Middle East was also due to the desire for oil. “After all, PRC [Petroleum Reserves Corporation] geologist E.L. De Golyer pointed out in early 1944, ‘the center of gravity of world oil production is shifting from the Caribbean area to the Middle East—to the Persian Gulf.’”⁵ The Western world’s stake in oil increased dramatically both during and after World War II. Increased industrialization of the nations at war revealed the need for large amounts of oil, beginning a global effort to obtain oil from the Middle East. Oil, Israel, and the Cold War were all factors contributing to increased interest in the Middle East and the denigration of the Islamic world. The fear of the Domino Effect, where countries would fall to communism rhetoric like dominoes, spread throughout the Western world. The Middle East, where oil reserves rested, was a highly contested area between the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist Western nations. The policies of the West were largely that the primitive and backwards Islamic nations did not have the moral, religious, political, and cultural fortitude to stand up to the communist threat, and therefore increased involvement was a must.

Western attitudes towards the Middle East and the Islamic world were tempered by several motivating factors. Israel, oil, and the Cold War all played a major role in Western perceptions of the Islamic world. The Orientalist views of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were echoed by not only scholars, but American and Western policymakers.

“Perhaps the most pronounced orientalist views, however, were expressed by U.S. diplomats

⁴ Armstrong, *Holy War*, pp.503-503. Armstrong traces Zionism and reveals a link between Western interests in the Middle East and the establishment of Israel.

⁵ Ibid, p. 50.

serving overseas. 'If Arabs ever took over [the] world, they would start instantly to tear it down.'... 'Arab values of vengeance, prestige, and obsessions with feuding are not acclimated to urban society.'"⁶ These notions of Arabic inferiority and Islamic primitiveness influenced the literature on the Assassins.

Increased interaction with the Middle East caused several scholars to become interested the Assassins. For several scholars, the mere name of the sect allowed them to portray the society in a negative manner. Beginning with the name and progressing through the history of the Assassins, the decades following World War II produced several works devoted to a study of the Nizari Isma'ilis. The works on the Nizari during this time period all share a certain distinction with those same studies written during the Orientalist and early twentieth century eras. Nearly all of the studies of the Nizari Isma'ilis, whether negative, neutral, or positive, portray the sect in a mythical, Romantic manner, designed to separate the Assassins from the West.

Post-World War II Literature on the Assassins

The decades immediately following World War II were a time period where the West was increasing its influence and involvement in the Middle East and Islamic world. While the early twentieth century depictions of the Assassins and the Middle East were largely positive or neutral, the belief in Arab backwardness influenced by the formation of Israel, the dependence on Middle Eastern oil, and the communist Cold War efforts in the Middle East caused the portrayal of Muslims and specifically the Assassins to be once again negative and Romanticized. Writing about such a little known fringe organization in Islam, the Nizari, and depicting them as murderous terrorists cast a negative light upon all of Islam.

⁶ Ibid, p. 31.

Writing in 1947, Charles E. Nowell was one of the first scholars to conduct a study of the Nizari following World War II. Nowell's article, "The Old Man of the Mountain," discussed the Assassins and much can be gleaned about his bias through simply reading his title. The myth of the "Old Man of the Mountain," has influenced and pervaded histories of the Nizari from the time of Marco Polo onwards. Nowell's article begins with a derogatory statement pertaining to the Assassins. "The Assassins were probably in their heyday, the fiercest of the fanatical sects that have terrorized the Islamic world."⁷ Nowell's text reads much like the Orientalist work of Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall in that the Assassins are depicted as a fringe group that arose from and persisted in society due to the societal, political, and religious upheavals occurring in the Islamic world during the Middle Ages. Drawing upon the literature of De Sacy, Nowell also links the Assassins to the drug *hashish* and further denigrates them as not only murderers, but also drug-abusers.

Nowell's ultimate concern in studying the Assassins was their linkage to *hashish*. Devoting the introduction of his text to understanding the origin of the Assassin name, Nowell discussed *hashish* and made mention that "the connection between *hashish* and 'Assassin' was slow to penetrate the European mind."⁸ Acknowledging this fact and recognizing that several of the original European texts regarding the Assassins contain little to no mention of *hashish* should have allowed Nowell to raise the question of whether or not the sect were involved in drug-use, but he simply accepts the fact that madmen use the drug, the Assassins were madmen, therefore they used drugs.⁹ Linking the Assassins to drug use in the 1940s placed the sect in a negative connotation from the very beginning of his document. Drug use in the 1940s, although different from drug use today, was still viewed in a negative

⁷ Charles E. Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," *Speculum*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1947) p. 497.

⁸ Ibid, p. 499.

⁹ Ibid, p. 499-501.

light. Those who used drugs, such as *hashish*, modern day marijuana, were often nonconformists and degenerates of society.¹⁰ Written for a conventional scholarly world, Nowell's text placed the Assassins in the same realm as cultural revolutionaries, further placing the Isma'ilis in the realm of the fringe.

Nowell's text, after expounding upon the Nizari's usage of *hashish*, continued to discuss the life and rise of Hassan ibn Sabbah, founder of the Nizari Isma'ilis. Using the life of Hassan, Nowell portrays a typical Orientalist move of switching from a discussion of the homeland of the Nizari Isma'ilis and moved to a discussion of the Syrian Assassins. [This shift] occurred because of Nowell's choice of sources. All of the sources utilized by the author consist of Western documents, either from the Medieval period, or from the Orientalist literature.

The writings of William of Tyre are used extensively and a link is made between the Assassins and the Templars. From the Crusading literature, Nowell acknowledges an interaction between the Assassins and the European Crusaders and also the military monastic order of the Crusaders, a link that appears in several later texts as well. The Templars were largely based on the model of the Assassins and the two groups paralleled each other in a number of ways.¹¹ Nowell even acknowledges the notion that the Assassins denounced Islam, "although William of Tyre was mistaken about the exact scene of apostasy, the fact remains that a head of the Assassins had renounced the religion of Islam."¹² Nowell, incorrectly, links the doctrine of *Qiyama* to a renunciation of Islam, belying a misunderstanding of the sect.

¹⁰ Martin Booth, *Cannabis: A History* (New York: Picador, 2005) p. 193.

¹¹ Nowell, "The Old Man of the Mountain," pp. 503-506.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 506.

“The Old Man of the Mountain” is not merely an investigation of the Assassins, but also an investigation of how the sect became a mythological and Romanticized organization. Nowell mentions that the garden of paradise legend circulated by Polo was probably not fact, but mentions that “the paradise represented the imaginings of a drugged Assassin.”¹³ Concluding his essay, Nowell recognized that much of the “information” regarding the Assassins was mere legend. Noting this fact, however, did not stop Nowell from accepting several of the more conventional tales and customs attributed to the sect.

Although eventually resting on the notion that the Assassins are the creation of legends and myths, Nowell, nevertheless, attributes the use of *hashish* to the organization and likens them to the Templars, even mentioning that they denounced Islam. By describing the Assassin in such a manner, Nowell is clearly placing them in a extreme fringe region of Islam, and religion in general. In regarding the Isma'ilis in such a manner, Nowell is depicting the remainder of the Islamic world as backwards and primitive. The Assassins, for Nowell, were more progressive and had more in common with Christianity than with their fellow Muslims, Sunni or Shi'a. Originally on the fringe, and ultimately denouncing Islam, Nowell reveals how Islam itself does not have the means to sustain its adherents and inevitably fails its followers. Nizari Isma'ilis are depicted as a fringe sect, often mislabeled throughout history, yet still degenerative, due to the use of *hashish*, and divergent, by virtue of the *Qiyama*, from both Christianity and Islam. Using solely Western sources and depicting the Crusaders as righteous individuals, Nowell, intentionally or unintentionally, defined the West as a step above Islam, even those who denounced the religion.

While Charles Nowell relies heavily upon Western sources to differentiate the West and the Orient, Bernard Lewis accomplished the same task, multiple times, with Oriental

¹³ Ibid, p. 518.

sources as his material. Bernard Lewis is perhaps the most well-known of the modern-day Orientalists. Lewis's work stretches across the Islamic world and, admittedly, he is a very thorough and well-researched scholar. However, the issue rises in Lewis's bias towards the Islamic world. Often, the mere titles of his works can carry a bias.¹⁴ The negative portrayals of Islam in Lewis's texts and works are clearly intended to separate the "civilized" West, specifically America and England, from the "primitive" Middle East. Lewis's first foray into Islamic studies concerned Syria and one of his earlier articles is titled, "Saladin and the Assassins."

In "Saladin and the Assassins," Lewis gives a short account of the efforts of the Sunni Muslim general, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (Saladin), against the Syrian sect of Assassins. Lewis's text largely concerns the place of the Nizari within the wider Islamic world. Beginning largely as a general history with little bias, Lewis relates the three Assassin attempts on Saladin's life. Saladin, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty and leader of the Islamic armies against the Crusaders was a very powerful and enigmatic figure in medieval Islam. The title Salah al-din (anglicized to Saladin) literally means "Righteousness of the Faith," and he was well respected and feared throughout the Middle East by Muslim and Christian alike. Assassin attempts on the life of Saladin reveal, for Lewis, that the Nizari were a fringe group willing to attack other members of Islam. The fragmentation of Islam during the medieval era, which resulted in the rise of the Nizaris as a fanatic fringe organization, is clearly shown by Lewis. "...Saladin writes that he is engaged in a struggle

¹⁴ Bernard Lewis has published texts on the Islamic world and the Western-Islamic interaction under such titles as: *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004), *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

for Islam against a three-fold enemy – the infidel Franksih invader, the heretical and murderous Assassins...”¹⁵ Saladin was at the time struggling for the supremacy of the Sunni Caliph based in Baghdad over the Islamic world and the Middle East. Standing in Saladin’s way, however, were the Fatimid Isma’ilis as well as the Nizari in Syria. Lewis’ article ends in an explanation of the eventual truce between Saladin and the Assassins in Syria, under the command of Rashid al-Din Sinan. After attempting three unsuccessful assassination attempts, Lewis depicts the Assassins as giving up and sending an envoy to their enemy, Saladin.¹⁶

Ultimately the truce between the Assassins and Saladin allowed Saladin the personal security and freedom to battle the Crusaders and the Fatimid Isma’ilis of Egypt. Lewis’s text portrays the Assassins as supernatural, mythical, and an extremist organization. The Nizari are shown to have no ties to the rest of the Islamic world. “The suppression [of the Fatimid Caliph in 1171] in itself was of no consequence to the Nizari Isma’ilis, to whom Sinan and his followers belonged.”¹⁷ The Assassins, therefore, have no ties to the Sunni or the Shi’a and are separate and removed from the rest of Islam. In later works, Lewis would use the extremism of the Assassins, nevertheless, to discuss the terrorist activities of fundamentalist Sunni Muslims. Linking the Assassins, a fringe and extremist group shown by Lewis to have no ties to the rest of the Islamic world, to Islamic terrorists of the twentieth century, often Sunni Muslims, is an extreme and dangerous contradiction. In his 1953 article Lewis lays the groundwork for his 1966 book, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect In Islam*. The concept that

¹⁵ Bernard Lewis, “Saladin and the Assassin,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1953) p. 239.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 239-243.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 242.

Lewis developed of the Assassins as a terrorist group would continue to influence several later studies of the sect..

The decade following the end of World War II, while containing several negative depictions of the Assassins, also included the works of Marshall G. Hodgson and al-Muscati. Hodgson, a professor and scholar at the University of Chicago, was renowned for his histories on Islam and, later his extensive world histories. Most notably, Hodgson was in opposition to the prevailing Eurocentrism of his scholarly age and presented world history as originating from Asia and the East. Al-Muscati, an Isma'ili historian as well as a Muslim, portrayed the Isma'ilis in a positive light. Although primarily concerned with negative portrayals, there are a few depictions of the sect in direct opposition to the denigrating biases. There are some scholars depicting the Assassins as an upright, righteous beacon of hope in an otherwise primitive, backwards Islam has also been presented.

Positive portrayals of the Assassins appear very little, but when they do, they are often the publications of Isma'ili scholars. Jawad al-Muscati, a member of the Ismailia Association of Pakistan, published his *Hasan bin Sabbah* in 1953. Al-Muscati, a Pakistani Isma'ili, mentioned in his preface that the reason for his publication of *Hasan bin Sabbah* was to answer several of the questions about Hassan's life from earlier histories and was "about the life of al-Hasan b. as-Sabbah [sic] one of the greatest da'is that the Nizari community has ever had. He was one of the greatest Muslim leaders, who made the most powerful rulers bow before their will and who turned the course of history as they pleased."¹⁸ Al-Muscati's bias can clearly be gleaned from even this short introductory sentence. Al-Muscati presented Hassan ibn Sabah and his followers, the Assassins, as an upright and

¹⁸ Jawad al-Muscati, *Hasan bin Sabbah*, 2nd Edition, Translated by Abbas H. Hamdani (Kharadar, Pakistan: The Ismailia Association Pakistan, 1953) p. Preface.

virtuous organization, existing in a period of religious and political turmoil during the medieval period of the Middle East. The text begins with a short introduction into the historical background of the time period of Hassan's life and a short accounting of the biases of previous work done on the Assassins. Al-Muscati describes the time period of the Seljuq kingdoms as a time "when brothers did no hesitate to cut the throat of one another for power... There were also economic difficulties and the bureaucratic injustices which were hopelessly widespread... The injustice of the rulers for the people was indeed severe."¹⁹ By depicting the time period of the Seljuqs, in which the Nizari rose to power, in such a manner, al-Muscati was attempting to portray the arrival of Hassan ibn Sabah as a virtuous and joyous occasion, where a light arrived amid the mire of Seljuq rule.

The history of al-Muscati continued to discuss some of the myths and legends surrounding Hassan ibn Sabah and the Nizari Isma'ilis. Investigations of the "Paradise Legend" of Marco Polo and claims of the use of *hashish* are debunked by al-Muscati, something almost no other author had accomplished previously. The long held assumption that the leader of the Assassins was an inherently violent man was also contested.

Hasan hated war and avoided any commotion that would rob him of peace and disturb his life of seclusion, just as he objected to the shedding[sic] of blood and destroying innocent souls which the Amirs hurled in the fire of war, so that they might thereby obtain power and kingdom. It is because of this that Hasan resorted to removing the causes of disorder, uprooting them from their origins and killing the germs of mischief that infected the the[sic] selfish Amirs. He killed them and saved the believers from fight.²⁰

Hassan's life was depicted as one of quiet solitude and his planned assassinations of Sunni leaders described as a positive effort. Throughout al-Muscati's history of the life of Hassan,

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 18.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 28.

he is depicted as being a righteous individual concerned merely with the continuation of his religious beliefs.

The use of *hashish* and the commonly held belief that the name Assassins is derived from the name Hashashin, from the root *hashish*, is disputed by al-Muscati. “They [previous historians] based their theory on the presumption that Hasan used It [*hashish*] for exciting the spirits of his fighters at the time of crisis.”²¹ Al-Muscati introduced several readers and researchers to the word *Asas*, which means Imam. The Imam, or head of the Isma’ili community, was also referred to as *Asas*, and therefore the followers of Hassan ibn Sabah and the Imam became known as Assassins. For al-Muscati, the claims of Assassin drug-use are due to the link between the sect and the Sufis, the name given to Shi’ite mystics. Sufi mystics would use *hashish* to obtain a religious ecstasy and the usage of the drug was often held in contempt by mainstream Sunni. The belief in an inner teaching, *batin*, of Islam was held by both the Sufis and the Nizari. “It is therefore quite probable that the similarity between the Nizari and the Sufis helped the enemies of Hasan to describe the Nizari community by the name ‘al-Hashashin’...the name given to the Sufi initiates who were hated...”²² Al-Muscati is indeed successful in refuting several of the legends and myths held about the Assassins.

Although al-Muscati’s work did much to dispel the myths and legends held about the Assassins, it continued to present the sect as a fanciful organization. For al-Muscati, the Assassins were not a fantastical evil society, but a mythical and legendary beacon of virtuousness and Islamic strength. Although speaking favorably of the sect, al-Muscati is nevertheless operating within an Orientalist framework, by discussing the sect through

²¹ Ibid, p. 104.

²² Ibid, p. 120.

stylized means. Hassan is shown as a great, virtuous leader whose motivations and desires were nothing but wholesome. Al-Muscati portrays the Sunni Seljuq Emirs as base individuals bent on destruction and eradication of the virtuous and peaceful Assassins. “Hassan tried many times to dissuade the Sultan from his designs with much persuasion, tried to appeal to him in the name of peace and reminded him of the dire consequences of war.”²³ Not only are the Assassins depicted as an outstanding representation of Islamic righteousness, Hassan is portrayed as an individual with no faults.

Hasan b. as-Sabbah is one of those few great leaders who are very rarely born in this world and who astound the world and make it recognise[sic] their worth. He stands out unique by the pleasantness of his character among the other big Isma’ili leaders—may[sic] among the leaders of Islam generally. By virtue of his exemplary character, Hasan could form his Nizari state in the midst of Sunni political and theological storms.²⁴

The reverent, almost divine, portrayal of Hassan is contrasted with the evils of the Seljuq Sunni Islamic leaders and their designs upon the Isma’ili people. As an Isma’ili, al-Muscati’s depiction of the *Da’i* Hassan places him in a highly Romanticized and revered position from which al-Muscati can demonize and separate Islam. Although a Pakistani scholar, al-Muscati’s text does much to distance the West from Sunni Islam. The Isma’ilis, by depicting them as religiously tolerant and progressing beyond their religion to be able to interact peacefully with Sunni Islam, are easily identifiable and relatable to Christians while the depiction of mainstream Islam as a violent religion placed Sunni Islam at odds with Christianity and the West. The desire to differentiate between the primitive, backwards Sunni Islam and an “other” existed even in Pakistani Isma’ili studies.

In 1955, Marshall G. S. Hodgson published, *The Order of the Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma’ilis Against the Islamic World*. In his work, Hodgson describes the

²³ Ibid, p. 143.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 148.

Assassins as a religious organization first and a political organization second, very rarely done by previous authors. Earlier histories of the Nizari depicted the sect as a political organization with a religious background. Therefore the Nizari were thought of in the terms of a military organization or state. For Hodgson, however, the religious aspects of the sect are most important. Hodgson's work is largely a thorough investigation of Nizari beliefs and teachings with the history of the sect providing a backdrop for the sect's beliefs. The intellectual endeavors of the Nizari are also chronicled in Hodgson's study. Throughout Hodgson's version of the Nizari history, however, there is the underlying assumption that the Nizari represented the high point of Islamic culture and Sunni Islam was a negative influence. The Nizari are presented as one among many states of Seljuq controlled Persia, but the rest of the states were Sunni Muslims who could not band together. Interaction between the Nizari and the Seljuq Turks reveals that the Assassins were not, as suspected by most, a fringe organization operating on the outskirts of civilization, but a political power in their own right, with trade, diplomacy, and warfare with the surrounding regions.²⁵

The Nizari, for Hodgson, were not merely a group that dealt directly with the Sunni Seljuq world, but they were also influential and imperative in the religious and political consolidation of Sunni Islam. Heresies of the Nizari and the documents they distributed required an answer from Sunnis and one of the most well known Sunni theologians came to prominence by disputing Nizari Isma'ili beliefs. Al-Ghazzali was a preeminent scholar who turned Islamic philosophy through his writings.²⁶ Ghazzali, for Hodgson, would not and could not have attained such prominence in Islamic thought if it was not for his works in opposition to Nizari thought. In the political realm, the Isma'ilis helped to unite the various

²⁵ Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*, pp.79-142.

²⁶ For more on al-Ghazzali and his philosophies see: W.M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963).

Seljuq regions, if only in opposition to the Nizari threat. "It is expressed at its fullest in the recurrent massacres; which, being motivated by animal fear more than anything more refined, could extend to obvious innocents."²⁷ Although never fully uniting to create one single Seljuq kingdom, the Seljuqs nevertheless were all in agreement as to the Assassins, they had to be removed. The Assassins, therefore, were not merely a fringe sect, but the main reason Sunni Islam came to be united and consistent.²⁸

Although the Nizari were the main reason for Sunni unity, Hodgson used the Sunni response to Nizari Isma'ilism as a method of denigrating and condescending to Sunni Islam, the mainstream belief at the time of his writing. Hodgson is highly critical of Sunni Islam as can be seen numerous times in his text, and his very generous treatment of the Nizari implicitly casts the remainder of the Islamic world in a negative light. "The violent hostility which the Nizaris aroused merged in time with the general bigotry which Islam displayed toward all dissenting groups after the orthodox synthesis came to be taken as a matter of course."²⁹ The religious, intellectual, and political tolerance of Nizari Isma'ilism is contrasted with the bigotry and prejudice of Sunni Islam. The 1950s, as has been shown, was a time in which the West denigrated and defined the Middle East and the Islamic world, dominated by Sunni Islam, as a primitive, backwards region. Hodgson's text, although laudatory towards the Nizari Isma'ilis, is nevertheless critical and derogatory towards, what was in his time, the mainstream Sunni Islam.³⁰

²⁷ Hodgson, p. 121.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 121-133.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 133. Hodgson goes on to make negative statements about the religion of mainstream Sunni Islam throughout his text. See pp. 6-7, pp. 178-180, pp. 210-238, and p. 264.

³⁰ Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1993) pp. 90-93. Zubaida's example of Sunni-Shi'a political interaction in the Middle East is centered on Iraq, a mirror of Iran in the 1950s, in which Sunni politicians made up the majority over their Shi'a counterparts. Iran, however, did have a larger Shi'a population and administration core than the rest of the Islamic world.

Important to Hodgson's understanding of Nizari Isma'ilism as well was the reemergence of Isma'ilism on the world. In 1840, the Isma'ilis were a minor religious group in India, but by the 1950s the imam of the Isma'ilis of the 1950s, the Aga Khan, was very prominent on the world stage. "He [the Aga Khan] and his descendants have nourished their Indian community until it has not only become an important section of Islam, but one of the more alert and active commercial communities of the world."³¹ Aga Khan III had been educated at Cambridge University in England and had become known to English royalty and the Western world. For the majority of the West, the Aga Khan's education in Western schools made him easier to accept than the rest of the Islamic world. Aga Khan III's son, Aly, even married an English noblewoman. The fourth Aga Khan was the son of the union between Aly and his English noble woman. For Hodgson, the modern day Isma'ili, led by an Anglicized and Europeanized Aga Khan III with future Aga Khans having a Western heritage, was much more acceptable than the primitive, Oriental, Middle Eastern Sunni Muslim. Hodgson's text, although very fair and tolerant of the medieval Nizari and the modern day Isma'ili, presented Islam as a backwards, intolerant, violent religion that truly had little to no place in the modern world.³²

The writings of the post-WWII scholars on the Assassins depict the group as a highly divergent, fringe group living amidst a land dominated by Sunni Islam. All of the literature about the Assassins from this time period, regardless of whether the sect is portrayed in a negative or positive manner, describes the sect with a very mythical and stylized manner. For Nowell and Lewis, the sect was a mythical group surviving against the mainstream Sunni Islam through violence and subversion. For al-Muscatai and Hodgson the Nizari were the

³¹ Hodgson, p. 278.

³² Anne Edwards, *Throne of Gold: The Lives of the Aga Khans* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995) p. xiii, 3-30.

epitome of righteousness and faith surviving and thriving in the harsh realities of a world ruled by violent mainstream Sunnism. Both depictions of the sect, however, allow for the author to ultimately drive a wedge between the East and West by revealing the Assassins or their surroundings as a quintessential opposite to the accepting and peaceful West.

Assassin Literature of the 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of great societal upheaval and change throughout the world. Several revolutions rocked the planet, with the desire for societal and cultural change occurring in nearly every Western country. The climate of societal upheaval led several of the documents about the Assassins to be viewed as a great evil. Cultural changes were largely started by small groups organized around a central mission which slowly gained new followers and attacked the beliefs of those who held power. The Assassins began being viewed in a similar manner as an organization in opposition to the ruling power from which it sprung and therefore an evil to be linked to the current problem of cultural and social change. Discussed as a secret society, terrorists, and heretics during the 1960s and 1970s, the Assassins and, often through them, Islam were depicted as a converse to the natural order of things, making them anathema to the West. This time period was also fraught with increased interaction between the West and the Middle East. The question of the right of Israel to exist culminated in the 1967 Arab-Israeli, Six-Day war and Soviet influence in the Middle East began to increase. These factors caused the West to more actively pursue diplomacy in the area. The growing importance of oil on the Western world undoubtedly had a major effect upon Western attitudes towards the Middle East and Islam. The articles and texts regarding

the Nizari Isma'ilis reflect increasing Western interest in the Middle East, particularly in denigrating the region, thereby making it easier to validate Western intrusion.³³

Not all of the literature about the Assassins stem from historical research, some of the most poignant texts about the sect exists from travel journals and archaeological, political, and cultural expeditions through the Middle East. One such expeditionary journal is Peter Willey's *The Castles of the Assassins: The 1960 British Expedition to the Valley of the Assassins in Northern Iran*. Willey's text chronicles an expedition in 1960 by Willey and others to Iran to investigate the site of Alamut and attempt to find the Assassin castle of Maymun-Diz. In the introductory chapter Willey discussed the history of the Nizari and the general history of the sect. Largely giving in to the myths, Willey treats the Nizari Isma'ilis as a negative and degenerative group. "In order to seize and hold power, Hasan chose means that were not uncommon in his day—political intrigue and murder. What was uncommon was his complete ruthlessness and his ability to attract followers who would follow him blindly."³⁴ Surprisingly, Willey does not mention the modern day Isma'ilis within his text, but describes the Assassins as an otherworldly, ancient, ruthless, secret society. The majority of the text is concerned with Willey's travels throughout Persia in search of the Assassin's castles and has little exposition on the sect of Assassins themselves. However, the mentions he makes and the appendices about the sect describe the Assassins in a negative manner.

Isma'ili religion, for Willey, is a religion stuck in the past, much like the rest of the Islamic world. The Nizari are shown as being an extremist and fringe group in opposition for

³³ For more on the increasing Western influence and involvement in Middle Eastern affairs see: Little, *American Orientalism*, pp. 58-75, 93-115, 37-150, 181-191, 204-221 and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) pp. 262-287.

³⁴ Peter Willey, *The Castles of the Assassins: The 1960 British Expedition to the Valley of the Assassins in Northern Iran* (Fresno: Linden Publishing Inc., 2001) p. 20.

the more moderate Sunni Islam of the time. Willey explained that the Assassins wanted to obtain power, prestige, and a place within the Islamic world of the time.

But it was not only power for himself [Hassan ibn Sabah] that he wanted. It was power for the community. The concept of community permeates the whole of Nizari philosophy and is at the very base of its authoritarian hierarchy. His goal was that of a new Ismailism purged and purified from the decadence that tainted the Fatimid empire. This was puritanism in its most extreme form. Religion was to be severe, cold, all-embracing, centring round the doctrine of *ta'lim* or authoritative teaching.³⁵

For Willey, writing during the height of communism, the extreme focus on the community was a great fear. Hassan ibn Sabah is described as a controlling and forceful leader who controlled through violence, fear, and subversion. Sunni Islam is presented as the ordered and disciplined civilization of the medieval Middle East and the Assassins as the “other” intent upon changing and destroying the traditional order of things. Much like the cultural movements in his own day, Willey likened the Assassins, through implication, to the communists and social movements. The Assassins are therefore presented as a group in opposition to the traditional order.

Willey’s implications that the Assassins were like the Communists of his day revealed a need to denigrate and make a myth out of the Assassins. By buying into the myths and legends surrounding the Assassins, Willey makes the sect more of an otherworldly and fairy-tale institution. The Assassins are linked to the “otherness” of Communism, which was invading the nations of the Middle East and the West during his time. The fear of Communism and its “otherness” spread throughout the West. A connection between the modern day West, as the high point of civilization, and the medieval Sunni Islam was made to denigrate the East of Willey’s day. “The rest of the Islamic world realized full well that Hasan-i-Sabbah’s aim was to impose his faith on them. Basically, then, this was a religious

³⁵ Willey, *The Castles of the Assassins*, pp. 299-300.

struggle, similar to our own in the Western world, and if any judgments have to be passed they should be considered in this light.”³⁶ Willey thus links the struggle of mainstream Islam in the medieval period against an extremist Assassin group to the Western struggles against extremism in his modern age, against Communism as well as Islamic terrorism and Islam in general. The West and East are therefore two separate and distinct spheres for Willey. The West can be understood through an examining of Eastern problems.

Bernard Lewis, discussed previously for his leanings towards Orientalism, published in 1967 perhaps the most well-known text about the Assassins. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* appeared in a world fearful of Islamic extremism and terrorism. America was heavily involved in the Middle East and Israel in the 1960s and Islamic terrorist organizations such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and others were prevalent in the American consciousness. Nasser was in charge in Egypt and he was openly objecting to American influence in Israel and trading with the Soviet Union for weapons to fight against Western influence in the Middle East. The Middle Eastern opposition to Western influence often took the form of religious extremism and violence. For Nasser and the PLO this was open warfare against the West and a tentative alliance with the West’s greatest enemy, the communist Soviet Union. It was in a world gripped in fear of communism and the rising tide of Middle Eastern, Islamic unity and opposition to the West in which Lewis published his text.³⁷

The Assassins begins with a lengthy investigation into the origins of scholarship on the Assassins and their history. Lewis used a bevy of sources, a vast majority of which were Islamic, both from Sunnis as well as Isma’ili apologists. Regardless of his use of sources,

³⁶ Ibid, p. 301.

³⁷ Armstrong, *Holy War*, pp. 118-140.

Lewis still presented the Assassins in a very biased and negative manner. The theological and intellectual endeavors of the Assassins are glossed over or not discussed in order to describe the multiple murders committed by the sect. Assassination, as a political tool, is shown to be a device employed solely by the Nizari and the rest of the Islamic world is presented as the innocent victim of the subversive and secretive Assassins. The early leaders of the Nizari Isma'ilis are shown to be ruthless, violent murderers as is noted by Lewis's reference to the "role of honor" to which each of them were attributed. "The role of honour for the reign of Muhammad lists in all fourteen assassinations."³⁸ Much like Thomas Keightley, Lewis is forgiving towards the later Nizari Imams, especially Jalal al-Din Hasan III, during whose reign the doctrine of *taqiyya* was implemented and the Nizari "returned" to Sunni Islam. Lewis continued his history to reveal that the Assassins are still in existence to the present day, but are no longer the powerful, fearful sect they once were, due to the eradication of the sect in the thirteenth century by the Mongols. "From the mid-[nineteenth] century they [Isma'ilis] settled down as a peaceful rural population...At the present time [1960s] they number some 50,000, of whom some, but not all, have accepted the Aga Kahn as their Imam."³⁹ Lewis's numbers on the size of the Isma'ilis are different than most other scholars and it appears he was attempting to portray the sect as a little known fringe organization with no clear leader and little religious cohesiveness. By the middle of the twentieth century, though, the Isma'ilis were all under the authority of Aga Khan IV and numbered in the millions.

The Assassins as the world's first terrorists was another doctrine espoused by Lewis in his text. "In the skills of murder and conspiracy, the Assassins have countless

³⁸ Lewis, *The Assassins*, p. 68.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 124.

predecessors; even in the refinement of murder as an art, a rite, and a duty, they have been anticipated and prefigured. But they may well be the first terrorists.”⁴⁰ Lewis described the act of assassination for the Nizari as a religious experience, even depicting it as central to their faith. Not only was assassination an integral part of the Assassins doctrine, but the act of instilling terror in the political realm of Islam was practically invented by the Assassins. The diplomatic entreaties and intellectual discussions of the Nizari with the larger Sunni Islamic community are discredited or not mentioned by Lewis in favor of depicting the sect as a highly organized terror organization. The depiction of the sect as such an organization fit well with the time period in which Lewis was publishing his text. Much like Willey, Lewis likens the civilization of Sunni Islam as the seat of civilization to the modern West as the seat of civilization.

By describing the Assassins as the fringe organization in direct opposition to the most powerful society of the day, Lewis draws a parallel between the West and its most feared enemy at the time, Communism and extremism, particularly in the Islamic Middle East. Urbanism and modernization are shown as the enemies of Isma'ilism, a parallel to the Islam of Lewis's day. Ultimately Lewis links the Isma'ili Assassins of the medieval era to terrorists, extremists, and Islamic fundamentalists of his day.

Concerning the place of the Assassins in the history of Islam, four things may be said with reasonable assurance. The first is that their movement...was regarded as a profound threat to the existing order, political, social, and religious; the second is that they are no isolated phenomenon...and from time to time exploding in outbreaks of revolutionary violence; the third is that Hasan-i Sabbah and his followers succeeded in reshaping and redirecting the vague desires, wild beliefs and aimless rage of the discontented into an ideology...organization which...have no parallel in earlier or in later times. The fourth, and perhaps ultimately the most significant point, is their final and total failure....Yet the undercurrent of messianic hope and revolutionary violence which had impelled them flowed on, and their ideals and methods found

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 129.

many imitators. For these, the great changes of our time have provided new causes for anger, new dreams of fulfillment, and new tools of attack.⁴¹

Linking the Assassins to modern day Islamic extremists exhibited a general need to denounce and denigrate Islam as a whole. Lewis, no doubt, knew the modern day extremists as Sunni Muslims while the Assassins of the medieval period were a sect of Shi'ism. By attempting to create a link, Lewis is describing the whole of Islam as a religion that could easily fall to the notions of extremism. Denigration and derision of the Islamic faith through the negative depictions of the Assassins and their supposed links to modern day Islam occur throughout Lewis's text. Once again the negative portrayals of the Assassins serve to drive a wedge between the civilized, reasoned West and the backwards, extremist Orient.

Many additions to Assassin literature occur in short excerpts in books and articles. Two of these excerpts occur in the 1967 text, *The Book of Grass* by George Andrews, and the 1969 text, *A History of Secret Societies* by Arkon Daraul. *The Book of Grass* is an attempt to present marijuana and its use as not necessarily a negative. "Although the use of marihuana[sic] is widespread, the subject is enshrouded in ignorance. I hope this book will dispel at least some of the misconceptions about this plant."⁴² A product of its time, *The Book of Grass* was a thorough refutation of several of the major concerns about marijuana and its negative effects. Written during the revolutions of the 1960s, *The Book of Grass* embraced the counter-culture movement and the publishing company from whence it came was involved in the publication of counter-culture literature from the 1960s.⁴³ Phillip K. Hitti contributed to Andrews' text with a short excerpt on the Assassins.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 139-140.

⁴² George Andrews, *The Book of Grass: An Anthology on Indian Hemp* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p. 1.

⁴³ Grove Press published several works of radical political leaders as well as works pertaining to the American Sexual Revolution. Several works of Malcolm X and Franz Fanon were published in the political realm while the sexually explicit works of the Marquis de Sade were distributed by the publishing house.

Hitti's short discussion of the Assassins includes the acceptance of several of the myths about the Assassins and depicted the sect in a negative light. The majority of Andrews' text is in defense of marijuana and its use, but the inclusion of the history of marijuana use throughout history contains several instances in which the drug was used for negative purposes, such as the assassinations of the Nizari. Hitti, a renowned scholar on Syria and Islam, was negative towards the Assassins and it is clear that, even in a text about the virtues of marijuana, he wanted to portray the organization as devoid of the virtues of the West and a negative Islamic organization. Born in Syria, but raised as a Christian, Hitti perceived Islam in the terms described by historians before him.

... 'As regards the spiritual, social and dogmatic aspect of Islam, there has been neither progress nor material change. Such as we found it in the days of the Caliphate, such is it also at the present day. Christian nations may advance in civilisation[sic], freedom, and morality, in philosophy, science, and the arts, but Islam stands still. And thus stationary, so far as the lessons of the history avail, it will remain.'⁴⁴

The description of the paradise garden and the usage of *hashish*, or marijuana, in the initiation process of the Assassins, as described by Marco Polo was treated as fact by Hitti. Even the motivation of the Assassin sect is thrown into question and is not a matter of political importance or religious tolerance but a mere personal matter. "The motives [of Hassan ibn Sabah] were evidently personal ambition and desire for vengeance on the part of the heresiarch."⁴⁵ Surprisingly, in a text on the acceptance of marijuana, the Assassins are still revealed to be a derogatory and negative organization.

⁴⁴ C.F. Beckingham, "Islam and the West: Some Examples of Myopia," in *As Others See Us: Mutual Perception, East and West*, edited by Bernard Lewis, Edmund Leites, and Margaret Case (International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, 1985) p. 57.

⁴⁵ Phillip K. Hitti, "The Assassins," in *The Book of Grass: An Anthology on Indian Hemp*, edited by George Andrews (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p. 22.

Fringe societies and extremist groups were at the forefront of the Western consciousness during the 1960s and Arkon Daraul's 1969 text, *A History of Secret Societies*, capitalized upon this focus. Arkon Daraul's text is an investigation of several of the world's most well-known secret societies and a look into the obscure doctrines and beliefs held by each. The Assassins exist as the first organization discussed by Daraul and several of the conventional myths of the sect as accepted as fact by Daraul. The myth of the paradise garden and the initiation of young Assassins is presented as fact. The intellectual attempts of the sect, through inviting prominent scholars to study at the extensive library at Alamut are portrayed by Daraul in a negative light. "Another subsidiary activity which the Assassins delighted in was the holding captive in Alamut of useful, rare and distinguished personages who could be of value to them in educational, military or other spheres."⁴⁶ Daraul then places the Assassins in the Oriental sphere and far away from the civilized West by comparing them to the Thugs of India. The Thugs, or Thuggees, of India were a religious society who worshipped the Hindu goddess of death. The Thugs would commit assault and murder on travelers in India as religious sacrifices. Both societies are depicted as secretive and ultimately violent. The Assassins, for Daraul, are the original secret society, upon which all subsequent secret societies, especially those in the West, are based. Therefore the Assassins, and Eastern and Oriental organization, are the cause of the Western secret society problem and can thus be described as other and in opposition to the civilized, reasoned, and moderate West.⁴⁷

The 1960s were a period of increased interest in the Assassins, as is shown by the number of documents released about the sect. 1969 witnessed not only the publication of

⁴⁶ Arkon Daraul, *A History of Secret Societies* (New York: Pocket Books, 1969) p. 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 31-33.

Daraul's investigation of extremist and secretive organizations, but also the publication of Enno Franzius's, *History of the Order of the Assassins*. Franzius falls into the category of scholars which attempt to depict the Isma'ilis in a positive light and define them as a force of tolerance and learning within a negative Sunni Islamic world. Linkages between early Christians and the Assassins appears in Franzius's work in an attempt to unite Isma'ilism and the West and distance the mainstream Sunni Islam from the West. "These prospective young martyrs must have been imbued by a spirit similar to that of those early Christians who confronted death and torture in the name of Christ with equanimity, if not delight..."⁴⁸ Although linking the Assassins to Christianity and thus the West, Franzius still relied upon the traditional myths of the Assassins. The paradise legend and the consumption of *hashish* are accepted, although the *hashish* legend is tempered with the idea that the name Assassin was derived from the Arabic term, "Asas."

Although generally positive towards the Nizari Isma'ilis, Franzius's work was composed by a lack of comprehensive interpretation. Instead of describing the Nizari fight against the mainstream of Sunni Islam, Franzius' work breaks the Assassins fights into mere clashes of personalities. Hassan ibn Sabah versus the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, Kiya Buzurgumid against the Sultan Sanjar, and other personal battles are chronicled and interpreted by Franzius. These individual, personal battles, however, were not placed into a larger context of Nizari versus the mainstream Sunni Islam. Important and a first in Assassin literature is an investigation of the Isma'ili Imams after the destruction of Alamut and the eradication of the Nizari by Hulagu Khan.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Enno Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969) p. 45.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 121-224.

The history of the Assassins presented by Franzius described a disinherited and despised group that was struggling to survive in a world controlled by a powerful and corrupt religious doctrine. By linking the Assassins and early Christianity, Franzius was driving a wedge between the mainstream Sunni Islam of his day and the West. The depiction of the Isma'ilis today describe the economic, educational, developmental, and cultural progresses made by the sect from the reign of Aga Khan III until his present day. Isma'ili prosperity is presented to show that the "extremist" sect of Islam is more in keeping with the modern Western world and the mainstream Sunni Islam is still backwards and primitive by comparison.

In comparing Assassin advances and prosperity in the twentieth century with those of other Muslims, it would appear that an omnipotent Imam, who is regarded as the embodiment of God's Will and who is wisely counseled, renders it easier to adjust to modern developments than strict adherence to tradition or sacred scriptures.⁵⁰

Franzius's conclusion is ultimately that the Isma'ilis are more in keeping with the Western world, in that they have modernized and moved forward, while the rest of the Muslim world is stuck in an age of tradition, superstition, and reliance upon outdated texts to interpret the modern world. Thus, the Isma'ili are linked to the West and the modern world while subsequently separating the West from the remainder of Islam by virtue of Isma'ili acceptance of modernization.

The remainder of the 1960s and 1970s literature on the sect is largely presented through excerpts in larger texts and articles regarding the Assassins. The counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the, almost, uninhibited usage of marijuana caused a great interest in the uses and history of the drug. The myth of the Assassins' use of *hashish* was, almost without fail, included in these investigations into marijuana and its history.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 226.

Franz Rosenthal, a Jewish professor of Semitic languages at Yale, published in 1971 a text solely devoted to the understanding of marijuana and its place in medieval Muslim societies. *The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society* was published as an attempt to understand the place of marijuana in the Middle East and its place within the Middle East of Rosenthal's age.

Ultimately, Rosenthal depicts the Assassins as having little to do with the drug *hashish* and the legends compiled by Marco Polo are discredited. Holding the Assassins in a higher level of society, the term *Hashishin* (*Hashishiyya*) was applied to the lower ranks of medieval Muslim society. Rosenthal revealed that the term *Hashishiyya* was applied to the lower ranks of society, often Sufi mystics, who employed *hashish* to obtain either a religious ecstasy or a more base form of euphoria. Over time, the term was applied to the Assassins due to their hated and despised place in Islamic civilization. "The condemnation of hashish eaters as low-class rabble might conceivably have already led to giving the sect of the Assassins their name."⁵¹ The association of Assassins with the lower classes reveals that the Sunni Muslims held a negative view of hashish, although still allowing the usage of the drug to occur. The greatest contribution to Assassin literature achieved by Rosenthal was his assertion that the name Assassin had little to do with actual use of the drug *hashish*. While Rosenthal's text does little to degrade the Assassins, it does depict the mainstream Islam of suppressing and curbing the usage of *hashish*, much like the modern West. Rosenthal is one of the few authors whose work does not potentially separate East and West.

An article in 1973, however, was in direct opposition to the conclusion of Rosenthal, that the Assassins had little to do with the drug *hashish*. Kevin McCarthy, an etymologist, traced the evolution of the word assassin from usage towards the group of Nizari Assassins to

⁵¹ Franz Rosenthal, *The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) p. 158.

include killers on a more general level. McCarthy's article, "The Origin of Assassin," was an attempt to defend the belief that the name assassin was originally linked the root word *hashish*. Being an etymologist, McCarthy's history of the Assassins is short and wholly concerned with the usage, or lack thereof, of *hashish* by the Nizari. McCarthy's one attempt at conciliation towards the Nizari is one of condescension,

As for the derogatory connotation of *assassin* in the etymological meaning 'ones addicted to hashish,' adherents of the Ismaili sect can point to the fact that the term was probably first applied to the group by the local Syrians who were not members of the sect and who disapproved of the group's ideas and actions.⁵²

McCarthy's article, although an examination of the word assassin, still portrayed the Assassins in a negative manner, through linking them with *hashish* and in an earlier mention, "the murderous hashish eater."⁵³

The 1960s and 1970s literature pertaining to the Assassins reveal a general view of the Assassins as a Romantic and mythical organization. Although more reasoned, researched, and less Romanticized histories of the sect were compiled by such men as Bernard Lewis and Enno Franzius, the Assassins were nevertheless used to distance the West and the East. Multiple methods were used to accomplish this, but the continuance of Orientalist ideals and motives can be seen in nearly all the literature of the Assassins during these decades. The cultural, societal, and political movements of the time period made many in academia revert to the traditional, which, sadly, included the usage of derogatory representation to delineate between modernization in the West and traditional, dangerous religious beliefs in the East.

⁵² Kevin McCarthy, "The Origin of Assassin," *American Speech*, Vol. 48, No ½ (1973) p. 83.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 78.

Assassin Literature of the 1980s

The literature of the 1980s is influenced heavily by the overall acceptance of the cultural movements of the preceding decades. Many of the writers of the 1980s were heavily influenced and accepting of the cultural changes occurring in the 1980s and much of their literature suggests a move towards a more accepting approach. It is in the 1980s that one of the non-biased histories of the Assassins appears, and it is also in this study that the Assassins and their links to several myths are disputed and disproven. Although several scholars moved towards a more accepting view of Islam and the Assassins, there were still many dependent upon the traditional views of Orientalism and derision towards these groups. Thus the decade of the 1980s, like decades previous, contained various versions of the Assassins, although there was a greater shift towards a more unbiased interpretation of the sect which would continue into the 1990s.

One of the first mentions of the Assassins in the decade of the 1980s occurs in an article by David Rapoport in 1984 titled, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions." Terrorism and extremism, in the time of Rapoport was still at the forefront of the Western mind. The PLO and Islamic extremists were still heavily active in the Middle East and influenced Rapoport's work. Rapoport is a political scientist whose focus is upon terrorism. It is important to understand Rapoport's background in order to understand his extremely negative views of the Nizari. Much like Lewis before him, Rapoport neglected to discuss the religious and intellectual endeavors of the Nizari Isma'ilis and focused solely upon the military, particularly assassination strategies of the Nizari. For Rapoport, religion is often the instigator of terrorism, and this was certainly the case for the Assassins. "The Assassins apparently interpreted the injunction prohibiting swords against other Muslims to

mean that the true believer could use other weapons, or perhaps even that he should do so in order to expedite the arrival of the *Mahdi* [Shi'a messianic figure]."⁵⁴ Rapoport also discussed the Thugs of Hinduism and the Zealots-Sicarii of Judaism. Rapoport cleverly dodged a discussion of terrorism within Christianity and was attempting to reveal the terrorist organization in three religious traditions associated with the East to reveal that the West was largely above the use of terrorism to achieve its religious goals.⁵⁵

The establishment of a Nizari state within the politically unstable Seljuq lands was not understood as a move to create a viable nation by Rapoport, but was shown to be created merely as a terrorist effort. "For the first time in history, perhaps, a state found its principal *raison d'être* [reason for being] in organizing international terror."⁵⁶ Although depicting the Assassins as a terrorist group, Rapoport must take a pause when he tries to establish the organization as a true terrorist state. The Assassins used a very specific style of attack, assassination of political leaders, and for Rapoport terrorists should use multiple methods of attack, potentially against vast majorities of the population. Eventually Rapoport depicts the Assassins as martyrs intent upon perishing during their mission in order to prove their point. The Assassins, as a millenarian organization revealed them to be the antithesis of moderation and restraint, which can clearly be seen in the modern West. Rapoport thus depicted the Assassins as a millenarian group and links them to mainstream Islam by discussing the usage of assassins by the prophet Muhammad. All of Islam is therefore linked to the extremist views of the Assassins and capable of terrorism itself, placing it at odds with the moderate and reasoned views of the West.

⁵⁴ David Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (1984) p. 665.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 659.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 666.

The late 1980s revealed a more moderate interpretation of the Assassins by several writers. One of the most unbiased of these studies was *The Assassins*, published by Edward Burman in 1987. Burman's history of the Assassins contains very little, almost no, bias towards the sect. Viewing the Assassins as merely one religious and political organization among many of the medieval period, Burman portrayed the Assassins as a very influential and involved organization in the medieval Middle East. Often depicted as a fringe organization that had no dealings with the rest of Islam, except through murder and violence, the Assassins as depicted by Burman, are merely one of the multitude of Islamic religious and political groups existing in the Middle East. The usage of assassination as a means of diplomacy was also explained by Burman. The right to rule, in Islamic civilizations, was shown to be held in one personage, and killing that individual thrust those under his rule into chaos. "This is one of the reasons why Assassin techniques proved to be of limited success when used against Christians in the Holy Land. Military authority in crusading forces was hierarchical, so that assassination could not undermine or unbalance it."⁵⁷ Assassination, then, was a political tool intended to divide and conquer, but once used against the Crusaders, the tool ultimately failed. Burman's revelation that assassination could weaken the Islamic civilization but not the Christian Crusaders could be viewed as creating a separation between the East, Islam, and the West, Christianity. Hassan ibn Sabah, although understood as a leader of assassins is also defended as a scholar and religious leader. Hassan ibn Sabbah and the Nizari are thus seen as neither an evil religious organization, nor the great beacon of light in the darkness of Islam, but simply one sect among many in the Middle East.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Edward Burman, *The Assassins* (Great Britain: Crucible, 1987) p. 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 37-38.

The main argument of Burman's text is that the Assassins were depicted as a secret society, perhaps upon which all subsequent secret societies would be based. Links between the Assassins and the occult are analyzed and the Nizari Isma'ili place within secret societies are examined. Modern day secret societies are largely based upon and influenced by the Nizari. Burman, unlike Darual, did not quietly imply this connection but openly stated and attempted to refute the connection. The Assassins were seen as an occultist sect because of the influence and power which the small society of Nizari was able to employ against a much larger Islamic world. "The absolute power of the Old Man over his *fida'i*, their blind obedience, and their spirit of sacrifice, which were the real conditions behind the power of the sect, were incomprehensible both to their enemies and to the [European] chroniclers."⁵⁹ Burman ultimately makes note that the Assassins could be described as occult only in the sense that several of their doctrines were hidden from the lower ranks of the society.⁶⁰

The history of Burman ends with an investigation of the Isma'ilis community in his present day and of the Aga Khans. Burman's text concludes with the idea that the most interesting aspect of the Isma'ili sect is not the perceived violence and legend associated with the sect, but their theological beliefs.

The story of the Aga Khans serves to illustrate that it is the spiritual and doctrinal beliefs of the Nizari Isma'ilis which are ultimately the most interesting aspects of their history. In fact, Isma'ilism can be said to have exerted an important influence on Persian mystical thought....Similarly the Gnostic aspect of Persian Islam often bears an Isma'ili stamp. The theology and politics of the revolutionary of genius Hasan-i Sabbah can in fact be seen as the first original creation...of a specifically Persian ethos after the conquest...by the Arabs....This legacy is shared both by the Aga Khans and by contemporary revolutionary groups in Lebanon and Persia.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 163-164.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 164.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 184-185.

The Assassins are presented as an organization arising from the turmoil and political upheaval of the Islamic world. Even though moderate towards the Assassins, Burman revealed, in his final descriptions of the sect, that Islam itself, by the mere emergence of the Assassins, was somehow lacking and thus the East, dominated by Islam, was lacking in comparison to the West.

Burman's article appears to be the beginning of a trend in studies about the Isma'ilis to portray the Nizari without bias and cease to utilize the sect as a method of separating East and West. The late 1980s and the 1990s were witness to several texts which were, if not favorable, at least moderate towards the Nizari. One such study was published by Juliette Wood in 1988 was titled, "The Old Man of the Mountain in Medieval Folklore." An investigation into the rise of Assassin myths and legends, Juliette Wood's article on the Old Man of the Mountain, discussed the links between truth and myth in the tales of the Assassins. Wood's article was an investigation into the rise of Assassin myths throughout the medieval documents. At the forefront of Wood's study, is the Assassin's purported usage of *hashish*. The medieval writers portrayed the Assassins as using the drug in an unrestrained and unlimited manner. The purported usage of drugs was contested by Wood, but *hashish* and the negatives associated with its use were important for an understanding of the Assassins.

The Old Man of the Mountain in Arabic folklore is not invariably the wicked magician figure which he appears elsewhere [Western folklore]. He is evil, but it is the evil of the religious heretic and radical politician that is stressed. The use of hashish by the sect gives the leader a certain awesome and mysterious dimension, however....The frequency of [drug] use has undoubtedly been exaggerated, since a large group of drug addicts would not make a very effective terrorist organization. However, its importance on the perception of the Assassins and their activities is undeniable.⁶²

⁶² Juliette Wood, "The Old Man of the Mountain in Medieval Folklore," *Folklore*, Vol. 99, No.1 (1988) p. 82.

Hashish use colors Wood's understanding of the histories of Assassins. Mentions of the Assassins as drug users are teased out of the medieval European and Arabic writers. The stories regarding the Assassins as *hashish* users are utilized to reveal that the sect was often portrayed inaccurately throughout its history.

Wood's study is perhaps one of the most unbiased pieces written about the Nizari. The history of medieval interpretation of the Assassins by Wood is without prejudice and does not depict the Assassins in either a negative or positive light, but treats the sect as simply another historical group. Perhaps most notably, Wood, unlike several authors of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s denied to buy into the myths of the Assassins presented by the medieval sources. Contradictions between the portrayal of the Nizari in popular literature and the actual recorded interaction of Christians with the sect revealed Wood's true motive, debunking the myths and legends pertaining to the sect. "Clearly the perception of Assassins, particularly in Christian sources, was often at variance with the actual experience of contact."⁶³ The perceptions of the Assassins by other groups was shown by Wood to be an answer to the problems those groups were facing. For Muslims, the stories about the sect were used to resolve and understand the struggles within the Islamic world. For Christianity, the folklore about the Nizari Isma'ilis were presented as merely a political organization and were used to denigrate drugs, magic, and Islam itself. Wood's article reveals how the material about the Assassins, over time, came to represent the dangers of the "other," not necessarily the sect itself.⁶⁴

The histories of the Assassins after World War II, from the 1940s until the 1980s, exhibited a vast array of understandings about the Nizari. Generally, the Nizari in these

⁶³ Ibid, p. 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 85-86.

decades were presented in the same Orientalist terms in which the sect had been understood during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Negative portrayals of the Assassins were often used to belittle the Islamic world as a whole. While the 1940s through the mid-1980s was fraught with negative portrayals of the sect, the late 1980s was witness to a general shift into a more moderate interpretation of the Nizari. The time periods in which scholars research and write about the Isma'ilis influence, to a great degree, their understandings about the sect.

CHAPTER 3

Recent Scholarship and Perspectives of the Global World

The fall of the communist Soviet Union in the late 1980s caused the Western world to shift their main focus from Russia to the Middle East. Several of the nations of the Middle East had been in alliance with the Soviet Union and the fall of that country thrust these countries into political upheaval. The Middle East of the 1990s and the present day was and is fraught with conflict. Islamic fundamentalism and Middle Eastern conflict became a staple of world thought, and Western policy decisions, during the final decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Western intervention in the Middle East continued, largely based on the beliefs perpetrated in the post-WWII decades, that the West had a right and a need to be in and to be influencing the Middle East. Middle Eastern dependence upon religion as a governing principle contradicts the Western knowledge and acceptance of democracy. A trend grew in the mid-1990s to deal on a more equal footing with Islam, but was quickly forgotten as the new millennium began. The scholarly works about the Nizari Isma'ilis during this time period, as in decades previous, depict the sect as a Romantic organization, largely on the fringe. Links are made, implicitly and explicitly, between the Assassins and Islamic extremists. The histories of the Assassins undertaken by scholars of this time period need to be analyzed and interpreted in order to ascertain the reasons behind the stylized representations of the sect.

The 1990s began, in earnest, with a war between America, involving several Western nations in the United Nations, and Iraq. The Gulf War, as it came to be called, began in late

1990 and concerned Iraq, one of the more secularized and “modern” nations in the Middle East, and a vast majority of the Western World. The dependence upon Middle Eastern oil largely motivated the move to attack Iraq, which had invaded one of the Middle East’s few oil producing nations on good terms with the West, Kuwait. Saddam Hussein, an individual Americans would come to know intimately, was at the forefront of this assault. Dependence upon Middle Eastern oil, first occurring in the post-World War II decades, would greatly influence American and Western interpretations of the Middle East.¹

Although the 1990s began in a very negative manner, with the Gulf War and a fight for oil in the Middle East, the latter years of the decade exhibited potential hope for Middle Eastern-Western relations. The presidency of William Jefferson Clinton, from 1994 until 2000, opened up the possibility of working with the Middle East as equals and moving away from notions of Western superiority and Islamic, Middle Eastern inferiority.

The civil rights movement, the decline of racism and the recognition of the important contributions of immigrant Muslims in America have all contributed to greater tolerance of Islam. The years under President Bill Clinton were a measure of the growing American acceptance of Islam in fits and starts. President Clinton sent greetings to Muslims during the fast of Ramadhan from 1996. We should also note how Hillary Clinton hosted a celebration of Idd el Fitr (the Festival of the End of Ramadhan) in the White House in April 1996 and 1998....This friendliness was also apparent in the larger population. Generally speaking, there was acceptance of American Muslim women wearing headscarves or *hijab* in their day-to-day live, unlike in France.²

From the mid-1990s to the new millennium American, and in general Western, interactions with the Middle East were tempered with a general move to accept and tolerate Islam, although abhorrent towards extremist movements. The notions of tolerance and acceptance exhibited by President Clinton would impact the studies of the Nizari undertaken during his presidential term.

¹ Little, p. 73-75.

² Ali A. Mazrui, “Islam and the United States: Streams of Convergence, Strands of Divergence,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2004) p. 802.

The new millennium, the year 2000, witnessed a new president and a general shift in American attitudes to Islam, echoed throughout the rest of the Western world. Islamic terrorist attacks upon the United States on September 11, 2001 galvanized the attitudes of Americans towards Islam in a negative manner and influenced, to a great degree, the Western policies towards the Islamic Middle East. American and Western Orientalism surfaced to define the Middle East as a violent, inferior, primitive other, held in the thralls of a dangerous religion. "Islam, in these discussions [about Orientalism], is assumed to be a specific, essential, unchangeable system of thought, beliefs, and non-beliefs, one which is superior or inferior (according to Muslims or non-Muslims) to the Western (or Christian) system."³ Islam and the West are shown to be inherently incompatible and therefore essentially at odds. Often times this notion plays out much in answer to the hypothesis of a "clash of civilizations." In a post-9/11 world, the West and Islam are almost essentially at odds, even though this may not be the case.⁴

...today's criticism of the West in the Muslim world, frequently accompanied by a rejection of Western secular culture, seems to be positively correlated with the Muslims' sense of weakness and vulnerability in the face of powerful Western states and economic domination. This suggests that if the relationship between the Muslims and Western worlds were to become more equal in the future, Muslim rejectionism could be expected to be transformed into more tolerant attitudes and behavior....Meanwhile, those who maintain that Islam and democracy are incompatible are unconvincing. Indeed, depending on actual political developments, prospects exist for an increasing valorisation[sic] in the Muslim world of trends all democrats value...Democracy can grow under these conditions, but it will be institutionally different from the Westminster model. This difference, far from being fatal for the relationship between Islam and the West, would be liberating for both.⁵

³ Mohammed Arkoun, "Rethinking Islam Today," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 588, No. 1 (2003) p. 19.

⁴ Little, pp. 311-317.

⁵ Shahrough Akhavi, "Islam and the West in World History," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2003) p. 559.

Islam, often depicted as the enemy and quintessential “other” to the West, could, if biases and prejudices are removed, become a friend and acknowledged equal.

The literature of the Assassins written during the 1990s up to the present day echo the time period in which they were written and were heavily influenced by what was occurring in the world around at that time. The Nizari are often viewed in a more moderate light throughout the majority of the 1990s in Western and Islamic literature. A general shift occurs, however, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 which cause depictions of the Assassins to return to negative and stylized portrayals. Numerous works on the Assassins were undertaken and published during the later twentieth and early twenty-first century and these histories all capitalize, whether they are moderate, positive, or negative, on Western interest in extremism and the “other,” notably, the Assassins.

Assassin Literature in the 1990s until September 11, 2001

Interaction between the West and the Middle East in the 1990s truly began with the Gulf War, a six month conflict between the United States, backed by the United Nations, and Iraq over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁶ Although the 1990s began with open armed conflict between the West and the Middle East, the remainder of the decade was filled with increased peaceful diplomacy between the two. The West, led by the United States, worked to be amenable and accepting towards the Middle East. Each nation of the West, whether in Europe or America, had their own desires for peaceful coexistence with the Middle East, not the least of which was oil and energy stability; and the pursuit of these desires changed the earlier policies of economic exploitation and post-WWII involvement into political diplomacy. Middle Eastern Muslim leaders were welcomed in Western countries and this

⁶ Robert Mantran, editor. *Great Dates in Islamic History* (New York: Facts on File, 1996) p. 344-346, 351-353, 356-358.

policy influenced the scholarly world. The 1990s, although not perfect, heralded an age of interaction with the Middle East in which old biases and prejudices were often overlooked by the West when dealing with Islam.⁷

Western scholarship and literature about the Assassins has been influenced, to a certain degree, by the foreign policies and procedures of the governments in which the texts were produced. The late 1980s, for instance, influenced the documents of scholars such as Edward Burman and Juliette Wood in their representations of the Nizari. The foreign policies of the 1990s influenced the scholars writing in that time period as well. Scholarship on the Nizari in the 1990s depicted the Assassins in multiple manners and the biases of the authors ranged from positive portrayals, as seen in the early twentieth century literature, to negative portrayals meant to demonize and denigrate Islam as a whole.

Not all of the documents pertaining to the Nizari were historical works, though. Published in 1990, Edward Rice's biography of a nineteenth century renowned British traveler, soldier, and explorer contains numerous remarks about the Assassins. Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton, the subject of Rice's biography, was a British explorer whose endeavors resulted in increased interaction between the East and West. Most significantly, Burton translated the Indian erotic text, the *Kama Sutra*. During Burton's travels he came across an existing community of Isma'ilis, under their leader, Aga Khan I in the 1840s. Burton's interactions with the Aga Khan are chronicled by Rice, and a short accounting of

⁷ Robert Satloff, "America, Europe, and the Middle East in the 1990s: Interests and Policies," in *Allies Divided: Transatlantic Policies for the Greater Middle East*, edited by Robert Blackwill and Michael Sturmer. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) pp. 7-40.

the history of the Aga Khan's Isma'ili sect is included. Rice discussed the Isma'ilis of Burton's time and linked them to the Assassins of the medieval period.⁸

Rice's accounting of the Isma'ili history discussed the Assassins and the doctrine of *taqiyya*. The biographer recounted the *hashish* legend as well as making mention of the secrecy and their murderous habits. While the Isma'ilis of Burton's time period appeared to be acceptable, the Nizari of the medieval era are depicted as a negative fringe society in opposition to the mainstream of Islam. "Throughout the Middle East, religious leaders and other divines, generals, prime ministers and wazirs, and heroic warriors, including the great general Saladdin, of views other than those held by the Seveners, faced death at the hands of the Assassins."⁹ The Nizari were described as individuals simply waiting for the opportunity to commit murder. Rice focused upon the assassinations perpetrated by the Isma'ili sect and not the intellectual and political endeavors of the Nizari. The notion that every single person who was not Isma'ili was going to die at the hands of the Assassins was and is an over generalization intended to portray the Nizari as a fanatical and fringe organization. Contradiction in the notion that the Assassins were completely feared by the Middle Eastern medieval world occurred when Rice mentioned that "under Sunni princes, their enemies, the Shi'as, could be forced under pain of death to denounce 'Ali and the Imams."¹⁰ If the major players of the Middle East feared death at the hands of the Assassins every waking moment, why would they provoke the sect by requiring a denouncement of 'Ali and the Imams. Either the Assassins did not have the overarching power described by Rice or mainstream, Sunni, Islam, never had the control to require Isma'ilis and Shi'i Muslims to submit to their rule.

⁸ Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton: The Secret Agent Who Made the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Discovered the Kama Sutra, and Brought the Arabian Nights to the West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990) pp. 1-25.

⁹ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 97.

Rice's portrayal of the medieval sect of Assassins revealed a bias that depicted the Nizaris, and their counterparts in Burton's time period as a fringe organization. For Rice, Sunni, Twelver Shi'a, and any other Islamic belief system not adherent to Nizari Isma'ilism was the mainstream and in opposition to the needs and wants of Burton's English superiors. Burton was encouraged by his superiors to incite the Isma'ilis to rebel against the eighteenth century monarchy in charge of Persia.¹¹ Political instability and strife in the Middle East favored the West due to the fact that Western merchants and politicians could exploit an unstable Middle Eastern economy and political situation. Rice used the medieval Assassins and their modern day counterparts to "uncover" the seeming naiveté of the Islamic world. Medieval Islam was naïve about the Assassins and the Assassins were naïve about mainstream medieval Islam. In the eighteenth century, the entire Islamic world was naïve about politics in general and easily influenced and cajoled by the more sophisticated and developed West. The early 1990s were a period of general conflict between the West and the Middle East, specifically Iraq. Rice's portrayal of a naïve Islamic world fit well within the early 1990 Western belief of how to deal with the West.

Not all of the negative depictions of the Assassins appear in Western sources, however. Akbarally Meherally, a former Isma'ili who worked closely with the Aga Khan and his community published *A History of the Agakhani Ismailis*, in 1991. Written as a series of short excerpts and explanations from the history and doctrine of Isma'ilism, *A History of the Agakhani Ismailis* contains several negative statements and depictions of the sect. Disillusioned by the Isma'ili belief system after discovering the origin of the Aga Khan's lineage, Meherally published a text in direct opposition to traditional Isma'ili

¹¹ Ibid, p. 87.

doctrine.¹² Meherally held some unhappiness and negative bias towards the Nizari Isma'ilis, and this bias appeared in his writings.

One of Meherally's major problems with Isma'ilism was the link between Aga Khan IV and the prophet Muhammad. The Isma'ili belief is that the line of Muhammad continued through the sons of his son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib up through the line of Isma'il to the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir's son Nizar. Nizar and his sons were said to have died in prison, but official Isma'ili doctrine records that one of these sons was smuggled from the prison and taken to Alamut. The grandson or great-grandson of Nizar's smuggled son, known in the sources as Hadi, is reported to have been switched at birth with the son of the *da'i* Muhammad, son of Kiya Buzurgamid. Hassan II, son of Muhammad, was therefore, according to Isma'ili tradition, the direct descendant of 'Ali and the Imam. The Aga Khans trace their lineage back to Hassan II, meaning modern day Isma'ili Imams are the direct descendants of 'Ali as well. Meherally, however, found this story to be full of holes.¹³

Meherally, being a former Isma'ili himself, was not merely pointing out an historical oddity, he was attempting to discredit an entire religious tradition. Doubt is placed upon the lineage of Hassan II as Imam in five points laid out by Meherally.

A chain of fabrication...1. It has been accepted by most historians...that al-Mustansir's eldest son, Abu Mansur Nizar together with his two sons were imprisoned by Nizar's brother al-Musta'li who had usurped the Fatimid throne. It is also generally recognizes [sic] by these historians that Nizar and his two sons perished in the prison....But, Nizari historians insist that Nizar's son Hadi and/or his wife escaped... 2....Hasan II was the son of Da'i Muhammad who had succeeded his father Da'i Kiya Buzurgummid...Hasan II...never himself during his lifetime made

¹² Akbarally Meherally, *A History of the Agakhani Ismailis* (Burnaby, Canada: A.M. Trust, 1991) p. 4-7. The text in which Meherally challenged the lineage of the Aga Khan was *Understanding Ismailism – A Unique Tariqah of Islam* (Burnaby, B.C., Canda: A.M. Trust, 1988).

¹³ Ibid, p. 114-117. A slightly differing version of the life of Hassan II is mentioned in other sources. Mumtaz Ali in *History of the Ismailis* records that the great-great-grandson of Nizar, Hassan al-Qahir ibn al-Muhtadi ibn al-Hadi ibn Nizar, was a different person than Hassan (II) ibn Muhammad ibn Kiya Buzurgamid. Ali noted that the two were united as one character in Juvaini's *The History of the World Conqueror* to discredit the claim of later Nizari Isma'ili Imams.

any claim to be an Imam....3. It was his son Muhammad II, who...elaborated the doctrine of the Qiya'ma and posthumously declared his father a full fledged Imam. As his son and successor, he automatically became Imam himself....4. In order to "prove" this direct descent from Nizar, there was no choice but to concoct the filmland scenario of two newly born sons being exchanged without Da'i Muhammad's knowledge...¹⁴

The son of Hassan II, Muhammad II, was portrayed as a manipulative and downright deceitful character by Meherally and each subsequent Imam received the same treatment. Muhammad II's son, portrayed by Isma'ilis as practicing *taqiyya*, was depicted by Meherally as being a Sunni Muslim not only in name but in practice and doctrine as well. Later Imams were depicted as homosexuals and weaklings that succumbed to the encroaching Mongol menace without any opposition.¹⁵ The Isma'ilis themselves were represented as the "dreaded Assassins" and the legend of the Assassins' consumption of *hashish* is recounted as fact by Meherally.¹⁶

A History of the Agakhani Ismailis is perhaps one of the most negative texts in regards to the Assassins. Written by a recalcitrant former Isma'ili, the text essentially became an attempt to refute and discredit the entirety of Isma'ili tradition and beliefs by the author. Meherally ended his text encouraging Isma'ilis to leave the incorrect and heretical beliefs of the sect and return to more mainstream forms of Islam. Negative portrayals of the Assassins are clearly not limited to Western scholars. However, while Western scholars often use the Assassins, regardless of their portrayal, to malign all of Islam, portrayals of the Assassins in the Middle East, specifically Meherally's text, are used to reveal the believed truth in mainstream Islam.¹⁷

¹⁴ Meherally, *A History of the Agakhani Ismailis*, p. 117-119.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 120-122.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 113.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 195. Meherally concludes his text with a section titled "Is There Any Way Out?"

Not all of the sources from the so-called East and the Islamic world are as demeaning to the Isma'ilis as Meherally. The mid-1990s, beginning with Farhad Daftary's publication of *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, was a time period which moved towards a more accepting view of the Isma'ilis, especially as seen within the Islamic texts. The leading scholar of Isma'ili studies and the current director of Isma'ili Studies in London, England, Farhad Daftary has published numerous articles and books on the subject of the Assassins. Daftary's texts are extensive, well researched, and comprise a vast majority of the literature on the Isma'ilis. *The Assassin Legends*, published in 1994, was one of the first texts to reveal the origin and formation of the legends about the Nizari Isma'ilis. Daftary's text was and is integral to the understanding of the mythos surrounding the Nizari.

Written with very little bias, Daftary's investigation into the origins of the myths about the Nizari reveals the origin of the legends as they appear in Western sources. Writing his text to dispel the myths about the Nizari, Daftary created a divide between the West and the East by mentioning that "it is, therefore, not surprising that none of the variants of the Assassin legends can be found in Muslim sources produced during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the period of the political prominence of the Nizaris in Persia and Syria which partially coincided with the formative period of these legends found in European sources."¹⁸ Daftary continued his text to reveal that the legends either did not appear in Islamic texts or were not present until centuries later. Legends and misconceptions about the Isma'ilis were defined as purely Western constructions, created solely by the medieval Western sources from the crusading era. However, the portrayal of the sect in several Islamic texts, notably the history of Juwayni, the Sunni chronicler of the Mongol successes, was negative and lends credence to the legends about the Assassins. The West and the East are therefore placed in

¹⁸ Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, p. 93.

two distinct spheres, at least with their interpretation and investigation into the Isma'ilis.

Daftary, although driving a wedge between the Islamic world and the West, ended his text by noting a rising trend in Isma'ili history to treat the sect as a legitimate religious society, not merely a murderous, dangerous organization.¹⁹

Missing almost entirely from Daftary's sect, the Islamic historians who discuss the Assassins feature prominently in a 1995 article by the Druze historian, Shakib Saleh. The Druze are a religious offshoot of Islam that can most easily be associated with Shi'a beliefs, as well as the Isma'ili movement. Druze and Isma'ili histories are very similar in that they were both heavily persecuted throughout their existence, giving the Druze an interest in Isma'ili history and vice versa. Saleh published an article in the 1995 edition of *Studia Islamica* titled "The Use of Batini, Fida'i, and Hashishi" in which he uncovered the extent to which the Assassins were known as heretics and *hashishin*, or drug users, in Islamic sources.

The general consensus of Saleh's article is the notion that "the Sunni Arab historians showed little interest in the Nizari sect and seem to have taken a moderate attitude towards its members especially those from Syria."²⁰ Saleh's work was an attempt to reveal that the Sunni Muslims of the eleventh through fourteenth centuries were not as negative or as fanciful in their portrayal of the Nizari as had been previously thought. Defining the sect in two separate degrees, Saleh noted that Persian Sunni historians had a greater tendency to portray the Assassins negatively than did their Sunni Syrian, Arabic counterparts. Nizari assassinations were glossed over by Saleh with Sunni Muslims depicted as the aggressors and the enemy, while the Nizari Isma'ilis were merely the innocent victims of religious intolerance.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 124.

²⁰ Shakib Saleh, "The Use of Batini, Fida'i and Hashishi," *Studia Islamica*, No. 82 (1995), p. 41.

The Sunni establishment, political and religious, could not possibly allow this sect to grow....The Nizari state in Persia had to defend itself against seljuq aggression...The Nizaris everywhere had to encounter Sunni hostility, especially in the cities....The Sunni authorities were determined to subdue the Nizaris and the Sunni 'Ulama sought to annihilate them as a separate religious community. One would expect to witness such attitude in the writings of the Sunni Arab historians of he[sic] time. Indeed, the Persian historians evince much hostility towards the Nizaris much more than is evident in the writings of the Sunni Arab historians.²¹

Throughout the article, Saleh mentioned the negative portrayal of the Assassins in Persian texts but the relatively moderate view of the sect in Syrian and Arab texts.

Saleh revealed not only that the Assassins were viewed moderately by Arab historians, he went to make the claim that several of the Arabic historians praised the sect in how they dealt with the Crusaders. Individual terms and how they were employed was an integral part of Saleh's article. The term *Ismailiyya* appeared in several of the Arabic histories and was perceived as being merely a name of the sect without positive or negative connotations. *Batini* appeared within the Arabic histories as well, but was often used in a negative manner. *Batin*, in Islam, is the esoteric or hidden meaning of the Quran. Several Shi'a groups believe in the right of the Imam to interpret the *batin*, notably the Isma'ilis. Sunni Islam follows the *zahir*, or apparent meaning, of the Quran. Believers of the *batin* were labeled negatively by Sunnis as *Batinis*. Another of the derogatory terms applied to the Nizari Isma'ilis was *Malahida*, or heretics. *Malahida* was very rarely applied to the sect by Arab historians, but fairly frequently by the Persian historians. *Fida'i* or *Fidawiyya* were terms applied to the Nizaris as well, occasionally carrying a negative connotation, for some writers. *Fida'i* "are those who undertake perilous adventures, more particularly for the destruction of enemies of their party; as they offered themselves as hostages or victims."²²

The term *hashishi* or *hashishiyya*, previously discussed as a pejorative name applied to the

²¹ Saleh, "The Use of Batini, Fidi'i and Hashishi." pp. 36-37.

²² Ibid, p. 41.

Assassins, was revealed by Saleh to have been applied to merely the Syrian Assassins in Arabic sources. Saleh mentioned that “none of these Arab historians claimed that the Nizaris has[sic] used this or any other drug.”²³

Saleh ended his article with the affirmation that the Sunni Arabic historians had very little to say and did not care to mention the Assassins. The notion of the Nizari as a fringe society is strengthened by Saleh’s text. While the Syrian sect of the Assassins were perceived as moderate, all of the Sunni sources described the Persian sect of the society in a negative light. Saleh’s article treated the Nizari as a righteous society threatened by the powerful and intolerant Sunni mainstream, but then went on to describe the Sunni as generally accepting of, at least, one section of the Assassins. The naming of the sect as Assassins, by Western sources, was strange for Saleh because of the lack of usage of the term *hashishiyya*. Saleh mentioned that the East had numerous names for the Nizari and understood the sect to a greater degree than the West; therefore, contrary to Western sources, portraying the West as unable to understand the delicate interactions between Sunnism and the Nizari.²⁴

Farhad Daftary, one of the foremost scholars of the Nizari, edited a compilation of Isma’ili histories in 1996. *Mediaeval Isma’ili History and Thought* was a collection of several articles about the Isma’ilis from several of the prominent names in the field of Muslim and Isma’ili history. Daftary’s article within the compilation discussed the rise of the Nizari and the life of Hassan ibn Sabah. The rise of the Isma’ilis was understood as an expression of Iranian nationalism and Shi’a rebellion against the Sunni, Seljuq, Turkish rulers of Persia. While several of the interpretations of the Isma’ilis view the sect as a

²³ Ibid, p. 41.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 35.

military organization, a covert secret society, or a fringe religious sect, Daftary's essay defined the sect as a politically rebellious movement mobilizing against an oppressive Turkish governing body.²⁵

The portrayal of the Assassins in Daftary's article was moderate and fairly lacking in bias. Nizari beliefs and teachings were not discussed in favor of attempting to ascertain the motivation behind the Nizari rise and subsequent extension of Nizari power in the region of Alamut and into Syria. The Nizari as a political revolutionary organization was tempered with numerous mentions of the religious tension between Sunnism and Shi'ism.

Hasan-i Sabbah seems to have had a complex set of religio-political motives for his revolt against the Saljuqs. As an Isma'ili Shi'i, he clearly could not have supported the ardently Sunni Saljuq Turks. Less conspicuously, but of equal significance, Hasan's revolt was also an expression of Iranian 'national' sentiments, which accounts for a major share of the early support extended to this revolt in Persia.²⁶

Defining the Nizari as a religio-political revolt against oppressive Seljuq dominance revealed that the Nizari were fighting for their nation, not merely committing assassinations out of murderous rage.

Daftary's portrayal of the Assassins as a religious political revolutionary movement fits well within the time period of the writing. Iran had experienced a revolutionary movement under the Ayatollah Khomeini in the late 1970s. The effects of the Iranian revolution were still being felt in the Middle East by the time of Daftary's publication. Concluding his text, Daftary mentioned that "it [the rise of the Nizari] was another Irano-Islamic revolutionary movement amalgamating aspects of Iranian 'national' aspirations with Isma'ili Islam in response to the challenges of the time."²⁷ By linking the Assassins'

²⁵Farhad Daftary, "Hasan-i Sabbah and the origins of the Nizari Isma'ili movement," in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, edited by Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 181.

²⁶ Daftary, "Hasab-i Sabbah and the origins of the Nizari Isma'ili movement." p. 189.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 200.

revolutionary movement, implicitly, with the Iranian revolution of 1979, Daftary was portraying the medieval Middle East as analogous to the modern Middle East and all the problems the modern Middle East contains. Although willing to describe the Nizari and the Islamic world in a fairly moderate manner, the implicit link of modern day Islamic society to medieval Muslim society placed the Middle East as a backwards, primitive land, unable to move from the past. Although the Nizari were portrayed positively, Sunni Islam was portrayed as a moderate governmental entity; the entirety of the Middle East was still viewed in opposition to the West.

Although the mid-1990s were relatively moderate toward the Assassins, the early 2000s witnessed a new American president with a differing viewpoint towards religious toleration than his predecessor. Writings on the Assassins beginning in the new millennium began by portraying the sect as they had once been portrayed. Negative portrayals and fantastical depictions of the Assassins resurfaced, notably in the Western works. James Wasserman, who published *The Templars and the Assassins* in April 2001, drew upon much of the Oriental and negative representations of the sect for his work. A member of Aleister Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis and a longtime researcher of mythology and religious spiritualism, Wasserman's text conveyed much the same message as did Arkon Daraul's work in 1969.²⁸ Daraul framed the Assassins as the quintessential secret society; from which all other secret societies are based and this is much the same message presented in Wasserman's work.

²⁸ Aleister Crowley was a 19th-20th century practitioner of modern magic. The Ordo Templi Orientis was influenced heavily by Crowley and his belief in the law of "do what you will." For more on Aleister Crowley's life see: Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002). For more on the Ordo Templi Orientis and other secret societies connected to Crowley see: James R. Lewis, *Witchcraft Today: An Encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan Traditions* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd, 2000).

Wasserman's text is an investigation into the histories of the Templars and the Assassins; the so-called secret societies most well-known in the West. Wasserman is primarily concerned with how the Assassins impacted the Templars and thus the entirety of secret societies. The usage of the term Assassins to sell material is hinted at by Wasserman.

Like sparks igniting a pile of kindling, words have power to conjure images. The name Hasan-i-Sabah immediately evokes the idea of the ultimate secret society, the Assassins or Hashishim, whose influence extended over a significant portion of Persia and Palestine a thousand years ago. Hasan's legend has endured in the West through modern times. He has been embraced by hip culture – a common reference in the writings of William S. Burroughs, he even made an appearance in the movie *Performance*, where the character played by Mick Jagger offers a tantalizing look at the Old Man of the Mountain.²⁹

Acknowledging the role the Assassins play in popular culture and the myths surrounding the sect, Wasserman nevertheless utilized and continued the traditional myths of the Nizari. The *hashish* myth was recounted and it was revealed that “the Assassins were known to Sunnis and hostile Shiites as *hashishim*.”³⁰ Wasserman's assertion differed greatly from the general consensus of other scholars. The terms *hashishin*, *hashishiyya*, or *hashishun* were used very sparingly to refer to the Nizari in Islamic texts about the society. Wasserman seemed to be highly influenced by the *hashish* myth and took the doctrine of Silvestre de Sacy, written 200 years before Wasserman's time with abundant resources discrediting that study, as fact. Assassinations committed by the sect were also examined and it was the examination of the sect's use of assassination that placed the West at odds with the East.

Although the teachings of the Nizari Isma'ilis interest Wasserman, the deeds of the sect were what was most important. The assassinations of prominent Sunni leaders throughout the Islamic world by the Nizari, and the relative lack of assassination attempts

²⁹ James Wasserman, *The Templars and the Assassins: The Militia of Heaven* (Rochester, VT: Inner Tradition, 2001) p. 63.

³⁰ Wasserman, *The Templars and the Assassins*, p. 111.

against the Crusaders mean much to Wasserman. For the Assassins, the Crusaders were not their greatest enemy and assault and assassinations against the Crusaders would have gained the sect very little; however, destroying Sunni leadership propelled the Nizari cause in the Islamic world. Wasserman presented the lack of assassination attempts against the West in a different manner.

Since Islamic culture placed a high premium on individual excellence, the leader who able to rise up and survive his acquisition of power was a tested and unusual individual. Thus his death was often sufficient to alter substantially the balance of power. On the other hand, the Assassins were generally uninterested in pursuing the same techniques against the Christian military orders such as the Hospitallers and Knights Templar. They reasoned that these orders were so structured that assassination of leaders would only lead to competent replacement from within the ranks.³¹

The implication of Wasserman's text is that the Western Crusading orders were in effect composed of more intelligent and competent individuals than their Islamic counterparts. The lack of good Islamic leadership meant that the West was inherently more sophisticated than Islam. Although utilized to denigrate the greater Islamic world, Wasserman tended to portray the Assassins as a highly intelligent, well organized, and extremely divergent religious society. Difference was placed between the Assassins being described as the "world's first organized band of terrorists..." and the modern "indiscriminate bomb-wielding kamikazes."³²

The Assassins as the world's first terrorist organization or the earliest and most well known secret society is a theme which continued throughout much of the literature on the Assassins. Links between the Knights Templar and the Assassins arose in numerous works of fiction and nonfiction. Nizari influences on the Templar range from their choice of dress, the Assassin *fida'i* are reported as wearing white robes with red sashes and the Templar wore

³¹ Ibid, p. 109.

³² Ibid, p. 148.

white garments with red crosses, to the nine level structures of the respective societies. The secrecy of the Knights Templar have led many to believe that the religious order was in fact a secret society harboring some great knowledge known only to themselves. Several subsequent secret societies based their beliefs and doctrines on the supposed heresy of the Templar. “The religious ideals that returned to Europe with the Crusaders are believed by many to have become the basis for the European occult revival...Thus the hand of Hasan-i-Sabah seems to stretch...well past the...first millennium.”³³ Wasserman’s very thesis that the Assassins directly influenced the secret societies of Europe, though, would seem to mean that the Crusaders, particularly the Knights Templar, understood the Nizari and their doctrine very well; however, the rise of the Assassin myths and legends seems to reveal this as false.

The final piece of Assassin literature to be written before September 11, 2001 was an investigation into the history of the society and the secrecy behind the sect. W.B. Bartlett’s *The Assassins: The Story of Medieval Islam’s Secret Sect* is a well researched and well documented text describing the general history of the Nizari. Bartlett’s work was very moderate in descriptions of the Nizari and addressed several of the issues discussed in this study. The legends pertaining to the sect are recounted and subsequently refuted or challenged in Bartlett’s final chapter. The common name of the sect, the Assassins, is even investigated in the early portion of his text. Bartlett draws from Farhad Daftary’s examination of the Assassin legends to make the point that, “...‘the term Assassins, with its aura of mystery and sensation, has acquired an independent currency’. He [Daftary] is

³³ Ibid, p. 149.

undoubtedly right and it is for this reason that this book carries the title it does.”³⁴ Bartlett herein acknowledged the use of the term, Assassin, to sell material, even his own text.

The main thrust of Bartlett’s argument is that the legends of the Nizari are false but the actual history of the sect is just as intriguing. The limited use of assassins is mentioned by Bartlett, a point very few other authors acknowledge. Although Bernard Lewis mentioned the Nizari “role of honor,” which recorded the number of assassinations which took place during the reign of each of Alamut’s leaders, he used the numbers to make it appear as though the Nizari were slaughtering innocents daily. However, Bernard Lewis mentioned that the “...role of honour for the reign of Muhammad lists in all fourteen assassinations.”³⁵ The reign of Muhammad I lasted nearly fifty years and the grand total of assassinations under his rule was a mere fourteen. Clearly, as Bartlett points out, there were numerous other forms of diplomacy and interaction with the larger Islamic world being used by the Nizari. Although favorable towards the Nizari as a religious and political organization, Bartlett’s text nearly treated the Nizari as an infallible organization unable to commit a wrong and Hassan ibn Sabah as the greatest of Islamic leaders.³⁶

The work of Bartlett has a limited amount of bias, but the majority of his text is concerned with the life and legend of Rashid al-Din Sinan of Syria. Sinan is a pivotal and important figure in Western accounts of the Assassins and is, after Hassan ibn Sabah, the most easily recognized member of the Isma’ilis. Sinan and his Syrian legacy occupy nearly half of Bartlett’s text on the Assassins. The extreme amount of attention given to the Syrian sect reveals Bartlett’s leaning towards Western sources and Western portrayals of the sect.

³⁴ W.B. Bartlett, *The Assassins: The Story of Medieval Islam’s Secret Sect* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2001) p. xi.

³⁵ Lewis, *The Assassins*, p. 68.

³⁶ Bartlett, *The Assassins*, pp. 71, 110-111.

Bartlett essentially ended his discussion of the Persian sect after the *qiyama* then moved to a discussion of the Syrian division of the sect. Western infatuation with the Assassins occurred largely because of Crusader involvement with the Syrian sect and it is this infatuation which influenced Bartlett's text. Bartlett even mentioned that "...for whatever reason, the transfer of power from Persia to Syria was only a temporary one. The pre-eminence of the former was soon re-asserted shortly after his[*Sinan*] death."³⁷ The focus upon the more Western division of the society placed an undue importance upon the West and the Nizari interaction with the Crusaders. The West was therefore, more important than the East, in Persia.

Bartlett's text is one of the last written before the events of September 11, 2001, which would change the methods by which the West interacted with Islam. Bartlett's acceptance of the society as a religious and political organization, without all the fantastical elements of legend, presented the Nizari as merely another group in society. The documents about the Assassins in the 1990s range from positive to negative, but nearly all of the texts define the West and the East in differing ways. Whether it is Shakib Saleh's portrayal of the West as backwards or Wasserman's implication that the West was inherently more intelligent and superior to the East, all the sources of the 1990s to 2001 contained an element of Orientalism.

Assassin Literature from September 11, 2001 to 2009

The vast majority of Assassin literature of the 1990s was relatively moderate in its portrayals of the sect and Islam in general. Nizari studies did tend to place the West at odds or as an opposite of the East, but there was a general trend of greater acceptance and toleration of Islam. The events of September 11, 2001 changed that belief system. On that day, Sunni extremists committed an act of terrorism on American soil which changed the

³⁷ Ibid, p. 145.

way Islam was viewed throughout the West. Islamic terrorist actions were not defined as being limited to an extreme group; but Western media outlets implied, however subtly, that all of Islam was to blame. Merely a few years later, the West had obtained such a negative view towards Islam that seemingly any Islamic country was ready for an attack. The American and Western belief in the evils of Islam would influence the literature about the Assassins from 2001 onward.³⁸

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, Islam and the Middle East was presented negatively in the media and throughout several texts about the society. Long refuted and challenged, the legends of the Assassins resurfaced in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the most popular legend of the Assassins, the *hashish* myth, appeared in numerous texts. The *hashish* myth had become so engrained in Western beliefs and psyche that it appeared as fact in several scholarly and academic works. One such text is Martin Booth's *Cannabis*, a treatise on the history and use of marijuana.

In 2003, Martin Booth published a work on the history of the marijuana plant and its uses. Describing himself as a child of the 1960s, an era of counter culture and nearly universal interest in drugs, especially marijuana, Booth published several texts on the nature and usage of drugs. Booth's text is essentially an answer to the West's War on Drugs, a decades long endeavor undertaken by federal governments to stamp out the drug trade. Continuing into the modern day, the War on Drugs disperses anti-drug public service announcements via television and radio on a daily basis. Booth is very accepting of marijuana and its usage and his text is essentially a defense of the plant. Within Booth's work, there is an investigation of the Nizari and their use of the drug.³⁹

³⁸ Little, *American Orientalism*, pp. 307-318.

³⁹ Booth, *Cannabis*, pp. 274-333.

Cannabis was concerned with the marijuana plant and group of individuals seemingly named directly after that plant, the Assassins, could not be forgotten within a history of the drug. The term *hashishin* had been applied to the Nizari in the Western medieval world for centuries and the term Assassins ostensibly evolved from the term *hashishin*. For Booth, the link between the Nizari and the drug *hashish*, however tenuous, is a viable reason to defend not only the sect but the drug as well. “The truth is, the Assassins have been given a reputation they did not really deserve and, through them, so has hashish.”⁴⁰ Booth made the argument that it was the assassinations committed by the Nizari which ultimately gave *hashish* its negative aspect. *Cannabis* does contain a thorough investigation of the effects of the drug, something largely missing from previous accounts of the Nizari and the *hashish* myth, in which Booth describes the effect as a hallucinogenic experience. For anyone using marijuana, a calculated and composed assassination would not have been possible. The supposed connection of the Assassins and *hashish*, for Booth, is more of a problem for the drug, than for the sect. Booth’s investigation into cannabis and the Assassins revealed a general negativity for the sect, because of the disapproving view of the drug. “And this grossly erroneous myth [*hashish* as murder-inducing] has been perpetuated ever since, right up to the modern day, by those who would proscribe or prohibit anything to do with cannabis.”⁴¹

The attacks of September 11 were not the only factors allowing the West to malign the Middle East and Islam. American intervention in Iraq, beginning in 2003, due to a supposed alliance with the terrorists and potential stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction, led to more negativity in regards to Islam. It should be noted, however, that Iraq

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 53.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 55.

was a Shi'a majority country while the terrorist organization which perpetrated the attacks were a Sunni extremist movement, so interaction between the two groups was highly unlikely. Several works were published detailing religious violence and the violent traditions of Islam. J.P. Larsson, writing in 2004, published a book titled, *Understanding Religious Violence*. In Larsson's text, the Assassins are dubbed the world's first terrorists and linked to the terrorists movements of the modern world.⁴²

Larsson is perhaps the most negative in his interpretation and examination of the Nizari Isma'ilis. Modern day terrorism is the main focus of Larsson's text, but the Assassins appear within his text as the "first (religious) terrorists."⁴³ The acknowledgement of the fact that only a few of the sect were *fida'i* did not appear in Larsson's work. For Larsson, the name

... 'Assassins' is the name by which this group of Nizari Ismailis (the Nizaris were a sub-branch of the Ismailis, which in turn is a sub-branch of Shi'ism, the second main branch of Islam, next to Sunni) came to be known in Europe by the above-mentioned accounts of returning Crusaders and travellers [sic].⁴⁴

Almost all of the literature regarding the Nizari acknowledges that the sect had a dedicated group of individuals which would perform the assassinations known as *fida'i*, but the name *fida'i* is curiously missing from Larsson's text. Admittedly, Larsson's text was written to discuss religious violence and terrorism throughout the modern world, but his assertion that the Nizari were the quintessential terrorists contains several problems.

Larsson mentioned several myths of the Nizari Isma'ilis and noted that a number of them have a basis in fact. *Hashish* and its links to the Nizari was noted in Larsson's text; and although he originally challenged the belief that *hashish* was used by the Nizari, Larsson

⁴² Larsson, *Understanding Religious Violence*, p. 37.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

eluded to their usage of the drug in his discussion of modern terrorist groups. The primary reasoning behind Larsson's section on the Assassins was to create a link between the Nizari Isma'ilis and modern day terrorists such as Hamas and Al-Qai'da. The *hashish* mythos of the Nizari was utilized by Larsson to lend credence to the paradise myth.⁴⁵ "Mock funerals' and images of paradise for the martyrs-to-be are common within Hamas, and are often used for 'educational purposes,' although today much use is made of video-imaging, rather than drugs."⁴⁶ Larsson links the alleged drug use of the Nizari to the propaganda of modern day terrorist groups such as Hamas. The notion of martyrdom also linked the Nizari to modern terrorists. Larsson noted that the Assassins knew there would be no escape and that they would die if they carried out their mission, much like contemporary suicide bombers. While there is undoubtedly an element of martyrdom in both the medieval Nizari sect and modern terrorists, there are substantial differences which make the Nizari much more than a mere perceived terrorist, freedom-fighting organization.⁴⁷

The Nizari Isma'ilis indeed committed assassinations for political and religious reasons and indeed instilled fear and terror throughout the Muslim world. However, labeling the Assassins as terrorists negates their role as active participants in the larger Islamic world. Modern day terrorists are relegated to the outskirts of society and very rarely utilize diplomacy to achieve their goals. The Nizari of the medieval era interacted with the larger Islamic world in several ways other than simple assassination. Religious violence did not begin with the Nizaris, nor did it end with the Nizari Isma'ilis' destruction. Even if the Assassins could be described as a terrorist group, they would most certainly not be the

⁴⁵ The paradise myth, as laid out by Marco Polo, mentioned that Hassan ibn Sabah placed new recruits in a plentiful and wondrous garden and removed them when he needed someone assassinated. The recruits truly believed they were in the Islamic paradise and would commit any act in order to return to paradise.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 39-40.

world's first. By describing the negative aspects of the Nizari and linking them to modern terrorist movements, exclusively Islamic organizations, Larsson placed a difference between the West and Islam. Acknowledgement of the myths and discussion of these myths revealed Larsson's bias towards Islam. "Even from a pious, God-fearing European perspective it was difficult to see how anyone would sacrifice their own life in such a way unless they were under the influence of drugs."⁴⁸ For Larsson, Europe is essentially a better, more intelligent and virtuous place than the Middle East and Islam.

While the majority of Islam was being interpreted in a negative manner throughout Western sources during the early twenty-first century, several authors who had previously written about the Nizari began to reevaluate their beliefs. The author of the 1963 text, *The Castles of the Assassins*, published a text in 2005, in which he addressed several of the misconceptions he held at that earlier time. Peter Willey's *Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria* investigated, using new archaeological and historical works, the Nizari Isma'ilis of the medieval Muslim world. Originally depicting the Nizari as a negative communistic society, Willey hopes that, "as a result of this work....that a more accurate picture of Ismailis will emerge, free of the burden of the Assassin legends."⁴⁹

Willey's investigation of the architecture and archaeological artifacts left by the Nizari at their castles began with an examination of their rise and fall. The sentiments that Willey presented about the Nizari are all of a positive nature. Although acknowledging the political murders of the sect, Willey recounted the religious and political endeavors of the Nizari to reveal that they were not simply, as had been previously depicted, a group of individuals bent entirely upon the destruction of the Sunni Islamic tradition. The Nizari are

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴⁹ Peter Willey, *Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005) p. xxv.

even presented as being far beyond Europeans in the realm of castle construction. “The style of military architecture employed by the Ismailis was well in advance of, say, the Normans of this period.”⁵⁰ Described as living almost exclusively within the walls of their fortifications, in fear of Sunni attack, Nizari Isma’ili castles had to be built to withstand siege and yet allow the population to survive. Placing the Nizari in the realm of Western castle-builders, Willey does equate the sect with the West than with the East. Although not as blatant as other scholars, Willey does reveal a small bias in linking the Nizari with the advanced West instead of the intolerant East. The struggles of Willey in acquiring access to Nizari castles and artifacts through the Islamic Iranian government are shortly recounted by Willey and allow him to paint mainstream Islam, whether Sunni or Shi’a in a negative light. Isma’ilis, often backers of Willey’s expeditions, are presented as extremely tolerant and likeable. Overall, however, Willey’s text is generally free of bias and merely related the history of the Nizari and their castles.⁵¹

Although the twenty-first century began with negative depictions of the Assassins, with some degree of acceptance towards previous legends, the work of Willey revealed that academia was willing and able to conduct impartial investigations into the history of the Nizari Isma’ilis. While Willey’s text seemingly heralded a new era of unprejudiced literature about the Assassins, the legends and myths about the sect continued in popular culture as well as in scholarly literature. The most recent major work on the Assassins appeared in 2008 in James Waterson’s text, *The Ismaili Assassins: A History of Medieval Murder*. James Waterson is a relative newcomer to the field of Middle Eastern history, and has a particularly

⁵⁰ Willey, *Eagle’s Nest*, p. 99.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 52-68, 262-266.

large focus upon the Crusading period. Waterson's background is clearly revealed in his text.

The Ismaili Assassins, being the most recent text entirely devoted to the Assassins, should, if anything, counter centuries of myth and be based in Eastern and Islamic sources. Waterson's work draws largely from Western sources, although a substantial amount of Middle Eastern and Islamic works are used in his research. The traditional myths of the Assassins are treated as just that, traditional myths, with very little credence given to any basis in factuality. *Hashish* and its purported use in the Nizari culture are largely refuted by Waterson and described as Sunni propaganda. While the majority of the myths about the Assassins are contested, the motivations and desires of the sect, as presented by Waterson, disregard the political and military situation of the Islamic world at the time. "If the murders and the sacrifices of the *fidai'in* were therefore entirely religiously driven, as I believe they were, then what of the myth of the Assassins being...addicts of hashish?"⁵² The Nizari are presented as religious zealots, either lacking the ability to understand or completely ignoring the political and military situation of the Islamic world during the time period of their assassinations. Waterson links the assassinations committed by the Nizari to the successes of the Crusading nations and the falls of the great Islamic dynasties of the time.

In many ways then, the Assassins were not only responsible in large part for the success of the First Crusade...They were also responsible for the counter-Crusade that brought Zangi, Nur al-Din and Saladin to the fray with the Crusaders. Equally the Assassins were...the direct cause of Hulegu's destruction of Persia.⁵³

Waterson attempted to acknowledge the Assassin's import upon history, but he merely succeeded in revealing the fringe, zealot nature of the society and their complex links with

⁵² James Waterson, *The Ismaili Assassins: A History of Medieval Murder* (Yorkshire, England: Frontline Books, 2008) p. 69.

⁵³ Waterson, *The Ismaili Assassins*, pp. 209-210.

the West. By presenting the Nizari in such a manner, the group is seen as unable to comprehend the consequences of their actions and inadvertently caused the downfall of classical Islam in the Middle East.

The most recent article on the Assassins appeared in early 2009. Farhad Daftary, the foremost scholar on the Isma'ilis, contributed an article to a compilation on *The Crusaders and the Military Orders*. Daftary's article in the text presents very little new material about the Assassins, but it does take a look at the potential involvement between the Nizari and Crusading military orders in the Middle East, a topic previously discussed by James Wasserman. Daftary's article traced the history of the Nizaris from their inception to their destruction. Within this history, the interaction between the Nizari and the Crusaders, at times hostile while at other occasions pleasant, was recounted as well. Ultimately, Daftary noted that the Assassins were viewed by medieval sources as the "the arch-heretics, the *malahida par excellence*."⁵⁴ The perception of the Assassins as heretics to Islam persists until the modern day. Daftary, however, noted that the Assassin legends are finally being refuted and denied in scholarly circles. Daftary ended his article with a message of hope for the future of Nizari Isma'ili studies. "Having circulated for more than eight centuries, the Assassin legends should now be essentially recognized as nothing more than imaginative medieval myths rooted in the Crusaders' misguided perceptions of the Isma'ilis and the nature of their struggle."⁵⁵

Assassin literature of the 1990s to the present day consists of a wide variety of sources. From extremely degrading to essentially praising, the texts discussing and

⁵⁴ Farhad Daftary, "The Ismailis and the Crusaders: History and Myth," in *The Crusades and the Military Orders: Expanding the Frontiers of Medieval Latin Christianity*, edited by Zolt Hunyadi and Jozsef Laszlovsky (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2009) p. 34.

⁵⁵ Daftary, "The Isma'ilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth," p. 38

investigating the sect are highly divergent in their views towards Islam and the Assassins.

Although it is difficult to generalize, the common perception in the 1990s was one of general tolerance and acceptance of Islamic cultures, notably the Nizaris. Perhaps less easy to understand, the interpretations and descriptions of the sect from September 11, 2001 onward largely present Islam and the Assassins in a negative view. From the Orientalist period, the 1800s, until the present day, the Assassins have almost always been presented in a negative and fantastic manner. The Assassin legends, refuted in numerous works, still persist in the modern Western mind.

CONCLUSION

Modern Day Isma'ilis and the Assassins

The Assassins have been denigrated and degraded since their inception. Negative portrayals of the Nizari Isma'ilis throughout the centuries have often pertained to several myths and legends of the sect. The mythos concocted in the Middle Ages has been denounced and criticized by numerous scholars, but still the Assassins are viewed as murderous individuals addicted to *hashish*. Legends about the Assassins were largely circulated as fact until well into the twentieth century. Nizari Isma'ilis were believed to have been eradicated upon the death of their Imam Rukn al-Din in 1257 AD. The Nizari, although defeated and largely silenced, persisted as a community to the present day and the spiritual descendants of the Assassins are a thriving Islamic community. The negative, Orientalist portrayals of Nizari Isma'ilis persisted along with the community and a mythical depiction of the sect continues in Western popular culture. The Assassins appear in numerous texts, novels, movies, and even video games and the mythos sustained by Orientalist literature color each of these appearances of the sect. Isma'ilis of the present-day are likely to be judged by the negative portrayals of their ancestors. Prejudiced works of the Assassins, while affecting their descendants, are also likely to be used to denounce the whole of Islam.

Hulegu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, was widely believed to have eradicated the Assassins in 1257 AD with the execution of Rukn al-Din and the destruction of Alamut. These events, believed to be the end of the Assassins, did not end the sect. A thriving community of Assassins existed in Syria until they were dominated by the Mamluk sultan of

Egypt, Baybars, in 1271 AD.¹ The castles of the Syrian Assassins were dominated by the Mamluks by 1273 AD, and the society as a political power was truly destroyed. Events were in motion, however, which would maintain the Isma'ili Imamate as well as the Isma'ili community. The sons of Rukn al-Din led revolts in Persia to retake their old fortresses and keep the Isma'ili community together. Although they went into hiding, the Isma'ilis continued to survive as a religious group, although they cease to appear in the larger political interactions of the medieval Islamic world. Isma'ilis as a community appeared on the world stage once again in 1840, with the appearance of Aga Khan I.² Since that time, the Aga Khans have been the spiritual, communal, political, and economic leaders of the Isma'ili community. The Aga Khans have done much to unite and improve the Isma'ili community, yet negative portrayals of the sect still appear in modern works.

Popular culture includes several references to the Assassins, from the works of William S. Burroughs to video games and movies.³ The very word "assassin" can be traced to the medieval Isma'ili sect, regardless of its links to *hashish*. Myths of the Nizari influence these popular culture appearances and the sect's leaders are often depicted as singular individuals. The appearances of the sect in popular culture merely continue the denigrating prejudices of the Orientalist scholars. Linked to terrorism and drugs, the Assassins are used in culture to discuss Islam as a whole, or the evils of extremism.

Depictions of the Assassins as murderous addicts continue to appear in Western culture, while very few depictions reveal the more spiritual and less legendary history of the

¹ Lewis, *The Assassin*, p. 122-123.

² Peter C. Clarke, "The Isma'ilis: A Study of Community," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1976) p. 484.

³ Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 103-129. The Assassins appear in numerous works by Burroughs, notably *The Western Lands*, published in 1988. The video game, *Assassin's Creed*, also relies heavily upon the myths of the Assassins.

sect. Although the modern day Isma'ilis are a peaceful, even philanthropic, community of Islam, they are seen by some to have a link to terrorism. Due to centuries of Orientalist and prejudiced scholarship about the Assassins, this link is not likely to change in the near future. The Aga Khans have worked hard to distance the modern Isma'ilis from their oft-maligned ancestors, but the sect still believes in the imamate of the line of Nizar, and the Imams of Alamut. While the Isma'ilis are a religious community, with little political power, the Aga Khan appears to the world as a sovereign leader and interacts with kings, presidents, and the upper tiers of society. The history of the Nizari surely does not end with the fall of Alamut, as many Orientalists would like to imply, but continues to the present day, where the community is small but very loyal to their Imam.

The History of the Assassins from Alamut to the Present

The history of the Assassins, previously discussed, began, truly, with the Sunni-Shi'a split in the first century of Islam. The followers of 'Ali, the Shi'i, became their own Islamic community, separate and distinct from the followers of the Umayyad Caliphs, the Sunni. Shi'a Islam had a belief in the Imam, the dualistic spiritual and political leader of Islam, and this belief led to numerous splits within the sect. Isma'ilism began due to a belief that the seventh Imam in the line after 'Ali, Isma'il, was the rightful Imam. Many other Shi'a believed Isma'il's brother Musa, should hold the imamate. The followers of Musa are modern day Twelver Shi'a while those that split to follow the line of Isma'il are modern day Isma'ilis. The history of the Isma'ilis from the split with the rest of Shi'ism onwards is one fraught with strife, turmoil, and struggle, leading up to the destruction of the last two bastions of Isma'ili thought in the Middle East, the Fatimid Empire and, later, the Assassins at Alamut.

In 1257 AD, Alamut, the stronghold of the Assassins since their inception in 1092 AD, was taken and destroyed by the Mongol warlord, Hulegu Khan. The destruction of the sect is recorded diligently by the Mongol court historian, Juwayni. Juwayni's text would have the reader believe that the Assassins were completely eliminated, down to the last child.⁴ With the death of Rukn al-Din, medieval sources believed that the base of the Assassins had been removed and they would cease to exist. A son of Rukn al-Din, Shams al-Din Muhammad survived and continued the line of the Imamate. As far as the rest of the medieval world knew, however, the Persian Assassins were destroyed.⁵

Isma'ilism, nevertheless, continued in several places. The Persian Assassins, due to the doctrine of *taqiyya*, had largely blended into the fabric of Sunni society. Imam Jalal al-Din Hasan III's "return to Sunnism" in 1210 had caused the Isma'ilis to begin practicing the mainstream Sunnism of the time period. Hasan III was in close contact with the Seljuq Turks in Persia and interacted with them as a Sunni Muslim. The Imam, being the spiritual, political, and communal head of the Isma'ili doctrine, influenced the Nizari as a whole. Nizari Isma'ilis, trusting to their Imam, largely practiced Sunni Islam. Whether this was heralded as a true return to Sunnism or simply the use of the doctrine of *taqiyya*, hiding one's true beliefs so as to avoid persecution and death, cannot be truly known. Isma'ili Imams after Hasan III continued the *taqiyya* doctrine and were a major part of Persian Sunni politics until the destruction of the Alamut in 1257. The destruction of Alamut may have ended the political power of the Isma'ili Imams, but the followers of the Imam continued to practice, whether through *taqiyya* or openly, the doctrines of Isma'ilism.⁶

⁴ Juvaini, pp. 723-725.

⁵ Nadia Eboo Jamal, *Surviving the Mongols: Nizari Quhistani and the Continuity of Ismaili Tradition in Persia* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2002) pp.44-50.

⁶ Juvaini, pp. 699-711.

The succession of Isma'ili Imams continued after Rukn al-Din with the Imam Shams al-Din Muhammad (the Sun of the Faith).⁷ Rukn al-Din was believed to have had at least two sons, one of which was Shams al-Din. The death of the Imam Rukn al-Din and the systematic attacks on Isma'ilis caused the community of Isma'ilis in Persia to retreat to the background of society. The famed *fida'is* of the Nizari Isma'ilis, their prestige and terror having faded in the reigns of Hasan III, ceased to exist. The devotees of the Nizaris, the actual members of the sect who had committed assassinations, ceased to be an important part of the community, at least in Persia. Syrian Assassins continued to reside in the area controlled by the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt and were even employed by the Mamluks against their enemies several times. However, by 1272, even the Syrian Assassins had ceased to be their own entity.⁸ The years after the Mongol destruction of Alamut proved to be a very difficult time for the Isma'ilis.

The few centuries after the fall of Alamut are considered the darkest period in Ismaili history, primarily because of the paucity of historical data about the community during this long span of time. From the Ismaili perspective of their history, this period resembled that which followed the end of the Fatimid state in that there ensued in both cases the beginning of a cycle of concealment (*dawr al-satr*), during which the Ismailis had little direct contact with their Imams. The young son and successor of Rukn al-Din Khurshah, by the name of Shams al-Din Muhammas, is reported to have been concealed by a group of *da'is* in a safe place before the Mongols occupied their fortresses, and was subsequently taken to Adharbayjan [Azerbaijan] where the Ismaili *da'wa* had been active for a long time.⁹

Although attempts were made to retake Alamut, presumably under the sons of Rukn al-Din, and regain the original seat of the Nizari, these attempts often ended in defeat and left the

⁷ Shafique N. Virani, *Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, A Search for Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 49.

⁸ Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260-1281* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 148-150 and Haha Lung, *Assassin! The Deadly Art of the Cult of the Assassins* (New York: Citadel Press, 2004) pp. 44-45.

⁹ Jamal, *Surviving the Mongols*, p. 51.

community reeling. Isma'ili history after the fall of Alamut is largely considered a vast, empty period.

Although Alamut had fallen, the Imam had fled to another country, and the political power of the Isma'ilis had vanished, Persia Isma'ilis continued to exist. Shafique N. Virani, a professor at Harvard University and the University of Toronto, in two published works examined the continued existence of Isma'ilism at Alamut. In an article in 2003, Dr. Virani mentions the retaking of Alamut by a son of Rukn al-Din, whether this son was Shams al-Din or not is uncertain, but the importance of this work is that the castle had to have been either rebuilt or never destroyed in the first place, for the son of Rukn al-Din to retake it from the Mongols. The continued existence of Isma'ilis in Persia was noted by Virani as well. "Indeed, Hulagu's great-grandson, Ghazan Khan, who succeeded to the Ilkhanate in 694/1295, refers to the continued presence of Isma'ilis in his time 'who have been in these lands from long ago,' noting that they had a practice of concealing their beliefs."¹⁰ The region of Iran where Alamut and much of the Nizari Isma'ili's former power resided was in the province of Daylam. Daylam was a region isolated from the rest of Iran and which allowed the Isma'ilis to remain relatively apart from the rest of the Islamic world. Isma'ilis at this time were either practicing *taqiyya* among mainstream Sunnis, or secluded in the isolated hills and valleys of the Daylam region. By 1368, the Daylamite region was controlled almost completely by the Nizari. Much of the information about this period comes from the poet, Nizari Quhistani.¹¹

¹⁰ Virani, "The Eagle Returns," p. 357.

¹¹ Virani, *Isma'ilis in the Middle Ages*, p. 30-33 and Shafique N. Virani, "The Eagle Returns: Evidence of Continued Isma'ili Activity at Alamut and in the South Caspian Region Following the Mongol Conquests," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 123, No. 2 (2003) pp. 354-360.

Nizari Quhistani was a poet of supposed Isma'ili origins who lived from 1247 to 1320 AD. Nizari's poems helped to continue the Isma'ili traditions and knowledge. The poems of Nizari Quhistani were often covert defenses of Isma'ilism.

...a short [book of poetry] entitled *The Debate of Night and Day (Munazara-yi Shab wa-Ruz)*, said to be a metaphorical dispute between exoteric Islam, represented by the darkness of night, and esoteric Islam, represented by the light of day. Perhaps his most overt defense of Ismailism is an epic poem...Baiburdi, a Russian authority on Nizari, describes it as "the embodiment of the high ideals of the Ismaili Nizari. Mazhar, the hero, is a representative of Ismailism and esotericism and he is fighting the tyranny of Halil, who represents Sunnism and *zahir* [the exoteric]." ¹²

Although the poem of Nizari Quhistani advocate for the beliefs of Isma'ilism, it is his travelogue which truly exhibits his link with Isma'ilism. A poet in service to Sunni governors of Iran, Nizari Quhistani was often included on trips with the high-ranking officials. These travels allowed the poet to write his *Safar-nama*, or Travelogue. Acknowledging several links between Sufism and Isma'ilism, Nizari Quhistani's work mentioned several dignitaries with which he concerted and practiced an esoteric form of Islam. These dignitaries are believed to have been Ismailis, perhaps even the Ismaili Imam, Shams al-Din Muhammad. ¹³

Orientalist scholars chose to disregard or downplay the evidence of continued Isma'ili activity in the Middle East, preferring to paint the Assassins as a sect which had died out several centuries previous and could be displayed as legends and fanciful characters. Acknowledging a continuation of the sect without the traditional defining features of *hashish*, assassination, and heretical beliefs would have removed the stylized interpretation of the sect the West had created for the Isma'ilis. Isma'ilis Imams continued to exist and lead the

¹² Virani, *Ismailis in the Middle Ages*, p. 64.

¹³ Jamal, p. 108-111, Virani, *Ismaili's in the Middle Ages*, p. 64-70, and Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*, pp. 185-186. The link between Sufism and Isma'ilism was easy to make due to both sects focus upon the esoteric, or hidden meaning of the Qur'an. The *batin*, esoteric, meaning and personal understanding and interaction with this meaning is a basis of both Sufism and Isma'ilism.

Isma'ili community, no matter how little they were acknowledged by the Orientalist scholars. After Shams al-Din, the Imamate passed to his son Qasim or Kasim Shah, who continued to remain in Azerbaijan, as far from Isma'ili enemies as possible. The history of the Nizari Isma'ilis in this period is largely a genealogy of the Imams and merely traces the line of Imams from Kasim Shah down to the first Aga Khan.

Although the Isma'ilis did not have the prominence in society which they had cultivated during the ninth through thirteenth centuries, the period after the fall of Alamut did not spell an end to Isma'ili missions in the Middle East. At numerous points in the history of the Isma'ilis, missions, or *da'is*, were sent to several lands across the Middle East. These *da'i* appeared in, most notably, India, a place that would become very important to modern day Isma'ilis. The Isma'ili Imams are recorded as residing in various hidden places throughout Iran, either in Daylam, Azerbaijan (part of Iran at the time), or an area known as Anjudan. Each of these areas was more receptive to Shi'a Islam and was home to Twelver Shi'a Muslims. Thinking they would find a more ready welcome among Shi'a, the Imams moved to Anjudan, where they remained until the reign of the forty-sixth Isma'ili Imam. Isma'ili presence in the Anjudan region has been documented and the links between the current Aga Khan and the Imams of the Assassin era of Isma'ili history can be traced through this time period.¹⁴

Although little is known about the Isma'ili Imams regarding individual efforts from Qasim Shah until Aga Khan I, there are a few Imams worth mention. Imam Mustansir Bi'llah's death and mausoleum provides evidence of Isma'ili activity in Anjudan in the year 1480 AD. The son of Mustansir Bi'llah, Imam "Abd al-Salam, was also entombed in the Anjudan region. Mausoleums of the Imams prove the continued presence and activity of the

¹⁴ Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages*, pp. 112-116.

Isma'ilis in Iran.¹⁵ During the Anjudan period, though, Isma'ili activity did not center upon Iran but moved south to the Indian subcontinent. "While throughout this period [Anjudan] the following of the Imams was limited, and the *da'wa* (propaganda) suspended in Iran, efforts at proselytization were by way of compensation intensified in Central Asia, and still more in north-west India."¹⁶ Isma'ilism continued in Persia, which would become Iran, but it was in India where Isma'ilism would experience a revival.

Isma'ilism, after the fall of Alamut, had nearly completely abandoned its political motivation and focused solely upon the spiritual aspect of the sect. When Hassan ibn Sabah, a *da'i*, had wished to create an Isma'ili state which could function alongside the Seljuq Sunni states of his time, the Imams of the Azerbaijan and Anjudan period were content to lead their communities in spiritual matters and allow them to blend into the fabric of the nations in which they resided. Knowledge of Isma'ili presence in India is attributed to a form of poetry known as the *ginans*. "Composed in several Indic languages and dialects, these hymn-like poems have been strongly influenced by North Indian traditions of folk poetry and piety. They thus represent a distinctive regional strand within a larger corpus of Isma'ili literature that is mostly in Arabic and Persian."¹⁷ The Isma'ili *pirs*, or preacher-saints, arrived in India between the eleventh or twelfth centuries. *Pirs* are perhaps the Indian translation of the *da'wa* or teacher. The Indian *pirs*, however, were indeed missionaries sent to India to further the Isma'ili religion. Eventually the Isma'ilis in India began to become a solidified community and even developed their own literary script for recording spiritual documents such as the *ginans*. Khojki, the script of the Isma'ili Imams of India, has been analyzed and

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 116 and Hamid Algar, "The Revolt of Agha Khan Mahallati and the Transference of the Isma'ili Imamate to India," *Studia Islamica*, No. 29 (1969) p. 56.

¹⁶ Algar, "The Revolt of Agha Khan Mahallati and the Transference of the Isma'ili Imamate to India," p. 57.

¹⁷ Ali S. Asani, "The Isma'ili *ginans*: Reflections on authority and authorship," in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, edited by Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 265.

the only reason the writing system came into existence was due to a need for Indian Isma'ilis to understand and record spiritual documents. By the nineteenth century there was a strong community of Isma'ilis in India who used the Khojki script in their spiritual literature and who had become a cohesive community. Known as the Khojas, the Indian Isma'ilis, in the main, acknowledged the Imamate of the Anjudan Isma'ili Imams.¹⁸

The current Imam of the Isma'ilis worldwide is known as Shah Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV and claims to be the direct descendant of Muhammad through 'Ali ibn Ali Talib, Isma'il, Nizar, and the Isma'ili Imams. While the Isma'ili Imams have been known as Shah and called by honorifics in history (Shams al-Din translates to Sun of the Faith), the title of Aga Khan, a Turkish title, became tied to the Isma'ili Imams in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Isma'ili community, largely separate from the political world of Islam, reemerged as a political force under the first Aga Khan. Still residing in Persia, the Isma'ili Imams had continued to lead their community spiritually and generally stay out of the political realm. The Isma'ili community, though, was fiercely loyal to their Imam, believing him to be, in essence, their Messiah in living form. The murder of the forty-fifth Imam, Shah Khalil Allah, changed the political attitude of the Imams. Fearful of an Isma'ili uprising, the Persian ruler granted the son of Khalil Allah governance of "the rich province of Mahallat, granted him the title of 'Aga Khan' (Lord Chief), and gave him permission to marry his daughter, Princess Sarv-I Jehan Khanum. It was from this Persian princess that the sons of all the Aga Khans claimed the right to the title of Prince."¹⁹ Hasan Ali Shah had been

¹⁸ Ali S. Asasni, "The Khoji Script: A Legacy of Ismaili Islam in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (1987) pp. 439-444.

¹⁹ Anne Edwards, *Throne of Gold*, pp. 22-23.

granted lands and the Isma'ilis entered the political realm for the first time since the lords of Alamut.²⁰

The reign of the first Aga Khan was marked by the first military action of the Isma'ilis since the Alamut period. Hasan Ali Shah, Aga Khan I, was, unlike the Imams before him, a man involved in the Iranian military who boasted of his conquests of women and war. The reign of Aga Khan I was to be remembered due to his rebellion against the Iranian government beginning in 1840. Although rebellions against Iranian government during this period do not appear to be a rare occurrence, the revolt of Aga Khan I is significant because of the result of the transference of the Imamate to India. Hamid Algar, professor of Persian and Islamic studies at the University of California, in an investigation of the revolt of Aga Khan I noted that the revolt did not represent an attempt to win back secular power for the Imamate. Regardless of Algar's assertion, however, the revolt of Aga Khan I thrust the Isma'ili Imams into the political sphere once again. The failed rebellion of Hasan Ali Shah, Aga Khan I meant the removal of the Isma'ili Imam from Persia.²¹

Aga Khan I's flight to India, moved the seat of the Imamate yet again. After settling in the Indian province of Sind, in modern day Pakistan, the Aga Khan assisted British forces in subduing and conquering the province. From the annexation of Sind onwards, the Aga Khans would have a close relationship with the British. Although the Khojas were Isma'ilis and believed in the Imamate, the political background of Aga Khan I made them suspicious of his character and lineage. One of the Imam's privileges was the ability to collect the tithe of his Isma'ili people. The Khoja community of India, so long removed from the Iranian community of Isma'ilis had established their own community. "There was a good deal of

²⁰ Algar, pp. 55-61.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 64-71.

‘mixing’: Sunni officials conducted Ismaili marriage and burial services, for example....and disputes over payment of the tithe (*Zakat*) to the Imam were not infrequent.”²² The refusal of the Khojas to pay the tithe to the Aga Khan resulted in a lawsuit filed by the Aga Khan himself. Using the British court system established in India at the time, the Aga Khan defended his right to the tithe and, by extension, the entire communal property of the Khojas and all practicing Isma’ilis worldwide. The Aga Khan’s line of descent was defended and the family of the Aga Khan’s became very wealthy.²³

The final years of Aga Khan I’s life were comprised of consolidating his position in India among the Khojas and solidifying a relationship with the British. Aga Khan I, through his British ties, had been granted the title of “His Highness” and could collect a pension from the British treasury. Isma’ili connections with the rest of the Islamic world had caused the British to grant these concessions to the Aga Khan, but the assumption was that these two liberties would end upon his death. Aga Khan I petitioned the British government to continue the pension after his death and his son, Ali Shah Aga Khan II, petitioned the British government to maintain the title of “His Highness.” The links cultivated by these two leaders culminated in the life of Aga Khan III.²⁴

Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, is perhaps the most well-known of the Isma’ili Imams. Aga Khan III was invested with the Imamate at the age of eight, when his father, Ali Shah Aga Khan II died in 1885 at the age of 55. Although the Isma’ilis and their Imam were largely accepted, the Aga Khans had become known to the British and even

²² Peter C. Clarke, “The Ismailis: A Study of Community,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1976) p. 485.

²³ Mihir Bose, *The Aga Khans* (Kingswood, England: World’s Work, 1984) pp. 55-81.

²⁴ Bose, *The Aga Khans*, pp. 78-83, Edwards, *Throne of Gold*, pp. 24-25, and Sultan Muhammad Shah, His Highness the Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954) pp. 22-23.

acknowledged as important political and spiritual leaders in the British Empire, the myths and legends of the sect continued to persist.

...the tradition of the Aga Khan family was that each head of the family was assassinated in turn, and that the young boy she had met would, in turn, be killed to make way for a successor. The story neatly mixed the legends of strange Orientals and the ritual sacrifice of the Chief to be found in many tribes. Legends, of course, are part of the Aga Khan story.²⁵

The link to the medieval Assassins was never fully broken and even Aga Khan I was accused of employing assassins to do his bidding. The legends of the Isma'ilis continued to influence the perception of the sect, and the British involvement with the Aga Khans could be due to the fanciful interpretations of the Isma'ili sect. Although it is decidedly untrue that Aga Khan III had his father murdered at the age of eight, he did enter into an astounding amount of wealth. The guardians of Aga Khan III kept his estate in trust and essentially turned the Aga Khan into a multi-millionaire. "In 1885-90 he [Aga Khan III] was worth, at a conservative estimate, about £20 million."²⁶ Aga Khan III, eager to make the world a better place for Islam and Isma'ilis, utilized his estate to better the positions of Isma'ilis across the globe.

Isma'ili communities existed in India, Afghanistan, numerous Middle Eastern countries, Africa, and even Great Britain during Aga Khan III's reign. The community, although spread across the world, acknowledged the divine nature of the Aga Khan and continues to pay the tithe, to the current Aga Khan IV. The total number of Isma'ilis at the time of Aga Khan III is unknown and today the number is equally hard to ascertain. Believed to be around one to twenty million, the community represents, still, a small fringe

²⁵ Bose, p. 88.

²⁶ Edwards, *Throne of Gold*, p. 27.

sect of Islam. Although never a large entity, Aga Khan III did much in an attempt to remove the negative stigma of the Isma'ilis through philanthropic and political means.

What has been my policy with my followers?...There has never been any question of changing the Ismaili faith; that faith has remained the same and must remain the same. Those who have not believed in it have rightly left it; we bear them no ill-will and respect them for their sincerity.

What about political guidance? It has been the practice of my ancestors, to which I have strictly adhered, always to advise Ismailis to be absolutely loyal and devoted subjects of the State...of which they are citizens....All my teaching and my guidance for my followers has been in fulfillment of this principle: render unto God the things which are God's and to Caesar those which are Caesar's.

In matters of social reform I have tried to exert my influence and authority sensibly and progressively. I have always sought to encourage the emancipation and education of women...Everywhere I have always encouraged girls' schools, even in regions where otherwise they were completely unknown. I say with pride that my Ismaili followers are, in this matter of social welfare, far in advance of any other Muslim sect.²⁷

Aga Khan III obtained a more well known and respected position for himself and Isma'ilis through these efforts. Although making Isma'ilism more palatable to the Western world through his actions, Aga Khan III was also making the sect and his family become more Westernized.

Aga Khan III, while raised in India and in command of a Muslim sect, became a fixture of Western society. A few short years before the outbreak of World War II, the Aga Khan was elected president of the League of Nations, in 1937. He was a fixture at European horse-races and his horses competed and won several events on the European circuit.

Perhaps his greatest link to the Western world, however, was his second marriage to a Western woman, a ballerina in Monaco by the name of Theresa Magliano, known as Ginetta. Ginetta was the second wife of the Aga Khan and the grandmother of the future Aga Khan IV. The link between the West and the Imams was firmly sealed in the marriage between the Aga Khan and Ginetta. From that time on, the Aga Khans would be European as well as of

²⁷ Sultan Muhammad Shah, His Highness the Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, p. 27-28.

the line of Muhammad. The son of Aga Khan and Ginetta, Prince Aly Solomone Khan, was overlooked by his father in favor of Aly's son, Karim al-Hussayni Shah. The disinheritance of Aly Solomone Khan in favor of Aly's son Karim was the ultimate move to a more Western outlook.²⁸

The investiture of the Imamate in the person of Aga Khan IV meant a shift in Isma'ili tradition. For the first time in the history of the sect, a father had passed over the first-born son in favor of the next in line. Although this was largely the cause of several splits in Isma'ili history – Isma'il had been passed over in favor of his brother Musa and Nizar had been passed over in favor of al-Mustali – Aly graciously accepted his father's wishes and acknowledged his son as the true Imam. Karim al-Hussayni was European in every aspect but lineage on his father's side. The mother of Aga Khan IV was a British Baroness and his grandmother was a Monacoan ballerina. The young Imam had been raised almost exclusively in Europe and had attended school in Switzerland and university at Harvard, where he was a fixture on the rowing team. Educated in Europe and America and a child of a European heiress, Karim al-Hussayni Aga Khan IV had a place in the world of Islam as well as the world of the West. Aga Khan IV became a staple of European politics and interacted with dignitaries and monarchs, notably Queen Elizabeth II. Having married twice, both of the current Aga Khan's wives have been European and he currently resides in France. Aga Khan IV, through his ties to the West, has been influential in making Isma'ilism more agreeable to the Western world.²⁹

Aga Khan IV has preached Isma'ilism as a sect of Islam teaching tolerance, peace, and compromise. The focus upon education of women, openness of religion, and tolerance

²⁸ Edwards, pp. 68-70, 211-213. For more on the life of Aly and perhaps the reasons for his disinheritance see: Leonard Slater, *Aly: A Biography* by Leonard Slater (New York: Random House, 1964).

²⁹ Edwards, pp. 202-206.

of faith taught by the Isma'ili under the Aga Khan is different than what the extremist Islam teaches. Education for women first, and boys second, taught by Aga Khan IV's Isma'ili sect is almost directly at odds with mainstream Islam in all of its forms.³⁰ Aga Khan's social reformist efforts mirror his grandfather's and he has extended his hands to help impoverished individuals the world over. Modern day Isma'ilism, a continuation of the Nizari Isma'ilism begun by the singular individual Hassan ibn Sabah, continues the spiritual tenets taught by its founder, but separates itself from the myths and legends of the sect. Terrorism and extremism are prevalent in today's world and small sects of any religion are almost immediately labeled as extremists and potential terrorists. The Isma'ilis, a sect of a few million followers, have done all they can to separate themselves from extremist Islam and even mainstream Islam in its various forms. The leader of the Isma'ilis is perhaps the most acceptable Islamic leader to the Western world as his heritage is mostly European. The Isma'ilis of the modern day are indeed far removed from their medieval ancestors.³¹

Nizari Isma'ilism and Islam

While there has been a general focus to acknowledge negative portrayals of the Assassins in this study, the portrayals of the Assassins are often linked to a larger commentary on Islam as a whole. The Western world as seemingly been at odds with the Middle East and Islam since the Crusades. Karen Armstrong, in her book *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, traced the continuation of conflict between the Middle East and the West from interactions with the Crusaders. Several factors were mentioned, but the most important aspect of the conflict was misunderstanding and bias. For

³⁰ Shah Karim al-Hussayni, Aga Khan IV, *An Islamic Conscience: The Aga Khan and the Ismailis*, directed by Bill Cran and Jane Chablani, produced by Shamir Allibhai (60 mins, Big Dream Productions, 2008).

³¹ For more on the efforts of Aga Khan IV to improve the situation of impoverished peoples see the documentary: *An Islamic Conscience*. Also see: Philip Jodidio, *Under the Eaves of Architecture: The Aga Khan: Builder and Patron* (New York: Prestel, 2007).

several of the Orientalist writers, Islam represented the antithesis of Christianity and something to be reviled. The Assassins, who brought with them myths of using *hashish* and committing deadly assassinations for little reason other than terror, became one sect through which a demonization of Islam could occur. The demonization of the Assassins, and through them Islam as a whole, continued after the Orientalist period and into modern literature even up to the writings of twenty-first century scholars. Portrayals of the Assassins, regardless of their bias, almost always are used to demonize Islam.³²

Demonizing an entire religion based upon one sect of that faith is a mistake and should be avoided. To define all Christians by examining the Mormon beliefs would not only be inaccurate but undoubtedly controversial. Western scholars, however, have long demonized Islam through interpretations of one specific sect or even one specific aspect of the religion. The *jihad*, for instance, is often used to denounce Islam. Jihad, contrary to popular Western belief, may refer to an inner battle with one's self to stay pure and not to the supposed system of warfare against the infidels. Western scholars have also largely interpreted Islam as a singular whole, but this is also a misconception. Islam, as a singular whole, does not exist. The Islamic world is split into several sects as well as several various countries. As we can ascertain from our modern world, even nations of the same religious leaning will have disputes and not be completely united. The Isma'ilis are a part of the Islamic world, in that they inhabited and currently inhabit a place within the framework of Islamic thought and practice, but they cannot be judged based upon other Muslims nor can other Muslims be judged upon their actions.

What the scholars of the Isma'ilis largely leave out of the discussion of the sect, however, is the spiritual aspect of the sect. It is recorded fact that the Assassins committed

³² Armstrong, *Holy War*, pp. vii-ix.

murder for political gain during the medieval era. Actions such as these, however, have been conducted by countries and nations since time immemorial. The infatuation with the Isma'ili assassinations led to the usage of the word assassin to describe a murder for political gain. Linking the entire group to these assassinations is not plausible, however. Nizari Isma'ilis had a very profound and intriguing doctrine, attempting to understand the *batin*, or esoteric meaning, of the Qur'an and applying that to their everyday lives. The members of the sect who committed the murders, the *fida'i*, or devotees, made up a small number of the actual Nizari faithful. The Isma'ilis were much more than simply murderers and assassins. Several works of poetical preeminence and religious discussion arose directly and indirectly from the Nizari Isma'ilis themselves. Nazir al-Din Tusi and al-Ghazali both owe their success to the Nizari Isma'ilis. Regardless of the intellectual efforts or the religious doctrine of the sect, however, the Nizari Isma'ilis became known for their assassinations.

Popular Culture and the Assassin

The medieval infatuation with the Assassin myths did not end during the Middle Ages. Modern works of fiction include references to the Assassins and entire novels have been based upon certain myths of the sect. Even the very word 'assassin' harkens back to the medieval sect and the usage of this word in movies and novels recall shadowy figures, completely devoted and ultimately loyal to those who commissioned them. References to the sect exist in books, movies, video games, and television. The fanciful aspect, created by the medieval writers and perpetuated by the Orientalist scholars, of the Nizari Isma'ilis has caused them to continually occupy the Western mind since the medieval era.

Hassan ibn Sabah and the Assassins have obtained such a prominent place in the Western mythical landscape that they can be found from novels to comics to children's

books. Hassan ibn Sabah and his Syrian counterpart Rashid al-din Sinan have largely been the focus of Western fictions involving the Assassins. One Marvel Comics character, who appeared in 1990, was named Hassan ibn Sabbah.³³ The Marvel character was a leader of an order of assassins called the Hashishin. Magic powers were granted to the comic book Hassan ibn Sabbah and his followers were addicted to a drug which he administered. The Assassins have also appeared in popular culture via the currently popular medium of video games. In 2007, the video game corporation Ubisoft released the game *Assassin's Creed*. The game concerns a modern-day descendant of the Assassins who could interact with the memories of his ancestor, a twelfth century Syrian Assassin named Altair. Through these memories, the player is allowed to interact in a recreated medieval Middle East of the twelfth century. The setting is Syria, where the Assassins' castles in the region are recreated and numerous legends of the sect are incorporated into the game. The player is able to perform the death leap of the Assassins to escape Crusaders and pursuing individuals; and the player travels to an area designed to look like Marco Polo's description of the garden of paradise in order to save the game. The game ends with a suggestion of a continuing worldwide struggle between the still active Templars and the secret sect of Assassins. Representation of the sect in these terms, with no mention of their spiritual interests and depicting the sect as a mythical and fanciful group reinforces the myths of the medieval period.

Numerous texts have included references to the Assassins. Most notably, William S. Burroughs's text, *The Western Lands*, discussed the Assassins directly. Burroughs is known for recording, what he believed, were the infamous words spoken by Hassan ibn Sabah, "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." The phrase was also mentioned by Frederick Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*. Linking the phrase to Hassan ibn Sabah and the

³³ See: *Marvel Fanfare*, Issue 53.

Assassins reveals much about the popular view of the sect. The common assumption that the Assassins were *hashish* smokers and mere murderers can be further understood to mean that the Assassins could do anything that they wished. Although that notion may be commonly believed, it is patently untrue; the Assassins had a strict list of rules to follow. Hassan ibn Sabah had his sons assassinated for drinking and other sins deemed to be in violation of God's law. Even the declaration of the *Qiyama*, which meant a world of spiritual fulfillment where the Mahdi had returned had a series of rules to follow. Burroughs depicted the Assassins as a sect involved in drug use and mystical belief systems, linking the sect more with Sufism than mainstream Islam. The sect even appeared as drug users in a children's book.

The truth is, I was scared. I wasn't the only one afraid – all the people in this area live in fear because there is so much fighting between Christian Crusaders and Muslims, but in particular because of the threat of the Assassins. It was safer to travel under the cover of darkness. You see, ruthless killers could come down anytime from their inaccessible fortresses high up on the mountains. The Hashishin, or Assassins, blindly obey their prophet—the Old Man of the Mountain—and are willing to die for him. Their prophet sends them, while they are under the influence of hashish, to assassinate kings, Christian Crusaders, and even fellow Muslims.³⁴

Written for upper elementary age children, the text contains references to the Assassins as vicious murderers and *hashish* users, although one wonders if a child would even know the term *hashish*. Including such negative portrayals of the Assassins in a children's book reveals the extent to which the myths have permeated Western society and popular culture.³⁵

³⁴ Uri Shulevitz, *The Travels of Benjamin of Tudela: Through Three Continents in the Twelfth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005) p. 20.

³⁵ For more on the writings of William S. Burroughs please see: James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg editors, *Word Virus: the William S. Burroughs reader* (New York: Grove Press, 1998) and Allen Hibbard, editor, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

The Assassins and the “Other”

From the medieval era to the present day, the Assassins have been understood as a quantified “other.” Understood using the Orientalist definitions of Occident and Orient, the Middle East and its various denizens have been labeled as the opposite of the West. By defining the Orient the Western world was able to understand and define itself as the “other” of the Orient. Everything the Orient was, the West was not. The Orient was the embodiment of negativity, backwards thinking, and religious primitivism. The Assassins, understood in that context, allowed the West to know itself as a place which was not ruled by extreme political motivations or religious dogma.

The Assassins have been perceived as a mythical group since they arrived on the world stage in the eleventh century. Western writers of all time periods have denigrated the Assassins in order to differentiate the West as a land which could not contain such a secret society in thrall to its charismatic leader. Orientalist scholars have painted the Assassins as a fringe group of Islam, a place which the descendants of the Nizari occupy in the modern day. The history of the Assassins has often been viewed through the lens of “otherness” and they have been portrayed as society’s degenerates who bonded together and assassinated important individuals of the oppressive community. In order for bias to cease, the sect needs to be viewed without the myths and legends of the medieval period influencing the study. Once the myth of the “Old Man of the Mountain,” the garden of paradise, the death leap, and *hashish* are differentiated from the true Assassins, the sect can be understood as a religious group not unlike any other religion on the planet. Nizari doctrine, intact in the present day through the Aga Khan and his followers, promotes tolerance, intellectual pursuits, and personal introspective understanding of the religious texts. Surprisingly the sect has survived

centuries of denigration by Western and Islamic sources. Perhaps the sect should be understood as a study in survival.

...the erudite Islamicist, Marshall Hodgson, marveled at the dogged resilience and ardent spirit of the Ismailis. He mused: 'That this handful of villagers and small townsmen, hopelessly outnumbered, should again and again reaffirm their passionate sense of grand destiny, reformulating it in every new historical circumstance with unfailing imaginative power and persistent courage—that they should be able so to keep alive not only their own hopes but the answering fears and covert dreams of all the Islamic world for a century and a half—this in itself is an astonishing achievement.' If the successes of the Ismaili state centered at Alamut were an achievement, the continued survival of the community after the dramatic fall of their network of fortresses was an extraordinary feat.³⁶

Nizari Isma'ilism continued long after the fall of Alamut and is now a religion with several Western ideals merged with Islamic thinking. Perhaps the Isma'ilis could be understood not as the antithesis of Christianity and the Western world but a method by which the West and Islam may finally interact without conflict.

³⁶ Virani, *Ismailis in the Middle Ages*, p. 183.

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Adam is currently engaged to Laurie Beth Tate whom he will marry on July 18, 2009. Currently a resident of Boone, NC, Adam will be seeking a job teaching High School or Community College history after getting married. Adam plans to obtain a Ph.D. eventually, but is looking to teach for a few years before.