THE QUEEN WAS ACTUALLY A MAN: ARWĀ BINT AḤMAD AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION*

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Abstract

Arwā bint Aḥmad (d. 532/1137) ruled in Yemen for fifty-five years. She played an important political role and at the same time occupied the highest rank in the Ismāʿīlī religious hierarchy after that of the imam. Her religious policies, particularly her special relations with the Fatimids, led to the transfer of the Fatimid literary legacy to Yemen, and hence to its preservation following the fall of the Fatimid Caliphate. She likewise organized the new structure of the Yemeni Ismāʿīlī daʿwa, thus contributing to its survival after the fall of the Sulayhid dynasty.

The proposed paper investigates Arwā’s career from two different angles: the Fatimid Egyptian and the Yemeni Ismāʿīlī. The main point will be the way they dealt with the fact that she was a female ruler. The Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustanṣir first issued a decree stating that to follow her was a religious duty. He then appointed her to the rank of ḥuṣn, the highest after that of the imam, in order to give her rule a more emphatic legitimacy. The Yemeni Ismāʿīlī position is best represented in al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s religious tract Gīyāl al-maḥālib, where he argues that Arwā’s female body was no more than a body envelope covering her original male essence.

The fact that Arwā was a woman posed a serious problem for both the Fatimids and the Yemeni Ismāʿīlīs. In each case they tried to deal with it in a way that suited their political and religious interests.

Arwā bint Aḥmad al-Šulayḥiyya (r. 477-532/1084-1137) was not an ordinary person. She was an Ismāʿīlī woman from Yemen. In other words, she is a triply marginalized historical figure. Her fifty-five

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† The Sulayhid queen ruled for fifty-five years after the death of her husband, al-Mukarram Aḥmad. She first acted as her young son’s regent and later on became the actual ruler after his premature death. For more information on her life and career, see H. al-Hamdānī and H.S. Mahmūd, al-Šulayḥiyyān, 142-211; H. Hamdani, “The Life and Times of the Queen Saiyida Arwa, the Sulayhid of Yemen,” in Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society 18(1931), 505-517; and F. Faftary, “Sayyida Ḥurra [sic]: The Ismāʿīlī

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years of rule in Yemen could not secure her a mention in the annals of Islamic history. In fact, if it were not for ‘Alī al-Ṣulayḥī’s military intervention in Mecca, the medieval Islamic world would not have heard of the Sulayhids at all.²

The focus of the present study is not Arwā’s political and religious career per se but rather the contemporary reactions to it, especially from the Fatimids and the local Ismā‘īlīs. The fact that she was a woman occupying key political and religious positions caused much unease to both parties. As we shall see, their respective interests in Arwā’s career and their attitudes towards it were behind their different ways of dealing with the problem. I will try to show that Fatimid politics towards the Sulayhid queen would best be described as de facto politics. The Fatimids’ differing attitudes towards her rule were mainly shaped by the developments on the Yemeni scene. It is therefore necessary to go through the main events in Yemen at the time in order to understand the background to Fatimid interventions in Sulayhid Yemen. As one would expect, the local Ismā‘īlīs were strongly affected by Fatimid politics. Their religious obedience to the imam in Cairo was to lead to a new theological argument concerning Arwā’s sex. For them, the Sulayhid queen was in essence a male.

Problems started in 459/1066, when ‘Alī al-Ṣulayḥī, the founder of the Sulayhid state who had managed to impose his authority on the country, was assassinated with most of his family by his rivals, the Najahids. ‘Alī al-Ṣulayḥī’s son, al-Mukarram Aḥmad (d. 477/1084), was left with a huge and unexpected burden. His father’s state was crumbling, his mother was a captive in Zabīd, and most of Yemen was rising against him hoping to profit from the power vacuum created by al-Ṣulayḥī’s assassination. In short, al-Mukarram’s days were far from happy. However, he managed in a couple of years to regain control over most of the country before succumbing to partial paralysis. His continuous absence on campaign and his later sickness gave Arwā bint

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Aḥmad the opportunity to take part in the affairs of her husband’s state already before his death in 477/1084.3

**Fatimid intervention**

The Sulayhids in Yemen were the allies of the Fatimids in Egypt. No evidence has yet come to light that the Fatimids played a direct role in the rise of ʿAlī al-Ṣulayḥī in 439/1047. Al-Ṣulayḥī’s adherence to the Ismāʿīlī faith and the obvious interest in fostering strong relations with the super-power of the region were most probably the only reasons behind the Sulayhids’ allegiance to the Fatimids. Naturally, al-Muṣṭanṣir bi’llāh al-Fāṭimī (d. 487/1094) endorsed the nascent state and gave it his blessings. The Sulayhids provided the Fatimids with a great opportunity to expand their domains southward by establishing a direct connection with India. The development of Indian Ocean trade and the expansion of the Ismāʿīlī daʿwa were among the main results of this coalition. Preserving this cooperation was thus in the Fatimids’ own interests. This prompted them to play a more vital role on the local scene in Yemen in order to keep things under control. The death of al-Mukarram was surely a situation in which the Fatimid imam had to intervene in order to prevent any possible coup by an ambitious local ruler whose loyalty to the empire was not certain.

Arwā was initially forced to conceal the death of her husband, fearing that her state would be torn apart as it had been after the assassination of ʿAlī al-Ṣulayḥī. Al-Mukarram’s death was only announced a year later, after an official siguill had been received from al-Muṣṭanṣir appointing her young son al-Mukarram al-Aṣgar ʿAbd al-Muṣṭanṣir ʿAlī at the head of the state.4 The Fatimid imam also wrote to his younger brother, al-Muẓaffar Muḥammad asking him to obey and assist his older brother, and to his mother requesting that she supports her son and helps him gain the respect of the “people of the daʿwa.”5

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5 Al-Sigillāt al-mustanṣiriyya, a collection of letters and decrees sent by al-Muṣṭanṣir to the Sulayhids, contains eleven letters directly related to the appointment of ʿAbd al-Mustanṣir. One of the letters was even sent by al-Muṣṭanṣir’s mother. They were sent over a period of four years, 478-481/1083-1088. See, in chronological order, al-Sigillāt al-mustanṣiriyya, 58-62, 161-165, 90-93, 156-159, 69-71, 88-90, 118-122, 122-128, 171-173, 79-83. In fact, these years witnessed the most intensive correspondence between the Fatimids
As a result of this development, Arwā had to act as her son’s regent. She was mentioned in most of the sigills which were sent during this period and which emphasized the necessity of complete obedience to her authority and to that of her son. In order to further strengthen her position, Arwā was raised to the rank of ḥuğغا, the highest in the religious hierarchy in ǧazîrat al-Yaman. The decree announcing her new position mentions that she was raised to this rank after receiving the “wisdom and science of the imam” by the elite of the da’wa (abwâb da’watîhî), who were sent to Yemen following al-Mustanṣîr’s request. Most probably, these abwâb were none but the dâ’îs Lamak b. Mâlik who returned from Cairo after the assassination of al-Šulayhî. As a result, Arwā became the religious figure whose example was to be followed by the community of believers. She also became the ultimate authority for all the dâ’îs of her ǧazîra, since she was the official representative of the imam.

Thus the appointment of Arwā to the rank of ḥuğغا reflects the desperate situation that prevailed after the death of al-Mukarram. The Fatimids were aware that the succession of the young ʿAbd al-Mustanṣîr was not enough to secure the political situation in the country. The best, or possibly the only, step to be taken for the time being was to give Arwā ultimate authority over the Sulayhid domains. She was already known in the community and had some experience in ruling, which she had gained during her husband’s days.

This means that the appointment to the rank of ḥuğغا was political rather than religious, in the sense that it did not assign to her the duty of organizing the activities of the lower ranks of the da’wa and its policy in Yemen and India. In fact, there is no evidence that Arwā had previously occupied any of the da’wa ranks, nor is there any evidence that women were ever allowed to occupy such positions. Thus, she did not pass through the different ranks of the religious hierarchy before

and the Sulayhids. A total of twenty-four letters were sent by al-Mustanṣîr to Yemeni officials.

6 Each ḥuğغا, or proof, was responsible for the da’wa in his own ǧazîra (sector). The world was divided into twelve ǧazîras in order to facilitate and organize propaganda activities. The ḥuğغا was directly responsible to the central authorities in Cairo. For more information on the ǧazîras, see F. Daftary, The Ismâʿîlîs, 228.

7 Unfortunately, the decree survives only in quotations in ʿImâd al-Dîn, ʿUyûn al-ahbâr, vol. 7, 54b.

reaching that of huğga. She was appointed directly to this rank, having received the “wisdom and science of the imam”. This makes the appointment an unusually political one. The executive—and actual—head of the daʿwa was, of course, the dāʿī Lamak.

On the other hand, Arwā appointed al-amīr al-ağall Sabā’ b. Aḥmad al-Ṣulayḥī (d. 491/1097) as her son’s deputy. He was, thus, held responsible for the security of the state against its enemies.9 Sabā’ was not successful in this regard. His army was heavily defeated in 479/1086 by a Najahid-Zaydī coalition army.10 Shortly after this defeat, ‘Āmir b. Sulaymān al-Zuwāḥī (d. 492/1098), Arwā’s stepfather, decided to profit from this period of weakness and rose against Sabā’. Despite the silence of the sources on the causes and nature of this crisis, one can safely assume that the whole issue centered around the control of the Sulayhid state.11 The designated successor, ‘Abd al-Mustanṣir, was too young to rule; he was only the nominal head of the state. Arwā, being a woman, must have also been considered unfit for this position. This left Sabā’ and ‘Āmir as the two main candidates for the position, and violence seemed the only way to decide who would dominate.

Being aware of the dangerous situation, Arwā did not hesitate to write to the Fatimid caliph about the deteriorating conditions in Yemen. Unfortunately, her letter did not survive, but al-Mustanṣir’s response shows that she backed Sabā’ b. Aḥmad. It seems that Sabā’ did not have the upper hand since the caliph spoke of him as being tolerant in spite of the misconduct he was facing from al-Zuwāḥī. In fact, al-Mustanṣir showed a special understanding of the crisis. His rapid intervention was motivated by fear for the future of the Fatimids’ religious and economic interests in the region. The collapse of the Sulayhid state would have been catastrophic for the Fatimid empire.

In order to dampen the hostilities, the Fatimid imam sent a special siğill, dated Rabī’ al-Awwal 480/1087, to “the Sulayhid and Zuwahid sultans, the Ḥijāzī ṣayḥa, and the groups of blessed believers (lwā‘if al-mu‘minīn al-mayāmīn)”.12 This siğill reflects the official attitude of the Fatimids at this point, which was heavily linked to the dramatic developments on the local scene.

The sigill did not contain the usual rhetorical introduction in which the caliph invoked the Prophet and his family. Al-Mustanṣir was direct, ordering believers to abide by his wishes or face rejection as infidels, with the anger of God, the Prophet and the imams falling upon them. He reminded his Yemeni followers that he was the true imam, thanked them for their devotion, and ordered them to stay their course, emphasizing that strength lies in unity. He then spoke of the merits of ‘Alī al-Ṣulayhī, and of his son al-Mukarram Aḥmad, comparing their line to a plant destined to flourish with the young ‘Abd al-Mustanṣir at the head of the Sulayhid state. He asked all Ismā‘īlī believers to support and follow their new leader, and to obey his mother “al-Ḥurra, the Queen, the Lady, the Righteous, the Faithful, the Powerful, the Preserver of Religion (Dahīrat al-Dīn), the Supporter of the believers, the Cave for the followers (kahf al-mustaghibbīn), the Supporter of the Commander of the Faithful and the Protector of his Blessed Followers.” Only when he had become certain of her wisdom and faith, he tells us, did al-Mustanṣir give Arwā full responsibility. As a result, her orders were to be followed. The wrath of the imam would fall on those who did not obey her, for those who followed her and her young son were following their imam, and those who approached her were approaching him. He ended the sigill by asking his followers to unite and cease quarreling, because it was only when unified that their enemies would fear them, which would give them the upper hand in their country.

This open letter to the Yemeni Ismā‘īlīs gives some idea of the dangerous situation that prevailed in Yemen at that time. It was quite unusual for the Fatimid imam to send a sigill to a recipient other than a Sulayhid ruler. This is the only document among the sixty-six Mustanṣirī sigills to be directed to the general public.

The composition of the sigill, its length, and its forbidding tone clearly reflect its intended purpose. Al-Mustanṣir used in his letter two derivatives of the verb harama (to forbid), yuḥarrim and ḥurrima, and the verbs yafriḍ (to impose) and yaʿmur (to order). This kind of vocabulary aimed to shock the reader, or rather the listener—since the text was intended to be read in public—in order to create a sense of fear and respect for the author and his words. However, the sigill did not maintain its threatening tone throughout, lest the message lose its intended effect. Al-Mustanṣir started by forbidding his followers to disobey his orders. He then thanked them for serving the daʿwa and went on to order them to desist from quarreling among themselves. Then he praised their past leaders, ‘Alī al-Ṣulayhī and al-Mukarram Aḥmad, and ordered them
to obey ‘Abd al-Mustansir and not to disobey his mother. He ended his sigill on a positive note by asking his followers to unite. The aim of this alteration in tone was rhetorical: to create a strong effect on listeners by making them fear the dire consequences of civil war but, at the same time, to give them hope that they could correct the mistakes they had made. If al-Mustansir had employed a consistently threatening tone, the sigill might have lost its shock value or it might have provoked a negative reaction from those who did not appreciate the continuation of Sulayhid power.

This recourse to religious prohibition in order to settle a political problem is one of the more startling characteristics of this sigill. Disobeying the orders of the imam had always been considered an irrereligious act, but it was quite unusual to hear that disobeying the orders of a local ruler, let alone those of his mother, was also religiously prohibited. The one thing that we can be sure of is that the sigill served its purpose. The civil war between Saba’ b. Ǎhmād al-Šulayḥi and ‘Āmir b. Sulaymān al-Zuwāḥi ended, and the two factions were reconciled.\(^{13}\)

Shortly afterwards Arwā’s younger son, al-Malik al-Muẓaffar ‘Abd al-Imām Muḥammad, died. His older brother, ‘Abd al-Mustansir, met the same fate some time later, leaving both political and religious power to Arwā who, in ‘Imād al-Dīn’s words, “supported (kaflat) all the believers, the faithful dāʾīs, and the answering hudūd (al-mustaqbīn) in the best way.”\(^{14}\) Actually things were not as rosy as ‘Imād al-Dīn wanted them to be. The period following the death of Arwā’s sons could be characterized as one of the survival of the fittest.

The Fatimid handling of the “Yemeni file” was based on de facto politics. Al-Mustansir gave his blessings to Saba’’s proposal of marriage to Arwā by sending a high court official, an ustād, to inform her of the imam’s orders that she marries Saba’. Having no choice but to follow the imam’s orders, she agreed to marry Saba’. The latter headed hurriedly to Dū Ğibla, the capital of the Sulayhids, with his army, but

\(^{13}\) As mentioned above, the causes of this war, its nature, and its results are still unclear and need further investigation. Unfortunately ‘Imad al-Dīn Idrīs does not add much useful information to the text of al-Mustansir’s first sigill, while ‘Umāra does not mention the affair at all in his Tūrī(664,990),(798,999) al-Yaman. For more information on the Sulayhid-Zuwahid civil war, see ‘Imād al-Dīn, ‘Uyān al-aḥbār, vol. 7, 56a-58b; H. al-Hamdānī, al-Šulayhīyyūn, 154-156.

\(^{14}\) The hudūd are the various ranks that form the dāʾwa hierarchy. See ‘Imād al-Dīn, ‘Uyān al-aḥbār, vol. 7, 58b. Unfortunately the sources do not inform us of the dates of the deaths of Arwā’s two sons.
on his arrival he was not allowed to enter the palace, and was kept outside it for some time. He finally returned to his fortress, embarrassed at having waited at the doors of Arwā’s palace for a wedding which did not occur.\textsuperscript{15}

This incident shows a major change in the Fatimid attitude towards Arwā. It seems that they were no longer willing to support her after the death of her sons. They must have thought that a woman could not remain in power on her own for long. It was therefore thought necessary for her to be married to Saba, an amīr of the Sulayhid line, who would then hold actual power. His marriage to Arwā was also necessary to give his rule legitimacy among the local sultans and tribal šayhs. However, the years 491/1097 and 492/1098 saw the death of both Saba and al-Zuwāḥī, the two major contenders to the Sulayhid throne. Thus, Arwā got rid of her two major rivals and was free of major threats.

The next and last Fatimid intervention during Arwā’s reign was in 513/1119 when imam al-Āmir sent Ibn Naǧīb al-Dawla (d. 524/1129) to help the Sulayhid queen re-establish order in her domains. His career in Yemen was not entirely successful and most probably was not appreciated by Arwā, especially after 519/1125 when he started showing signs of disobedience. His rebellious attempts were successfully subdued and he was sent back to Egypt in 524/1129. On the way, he was “accidentally” drowned by the captain of the ship. The role of Arwā in this “accident” remains unclear.\textsuperscript{16}

This is so far how the Fatimids dealt with Arwā’s reign. They backed her at the beginning by issuing supporting decrees and giving her rule a religious legitimacy. The death of her two sons and the resulting absence of a suitable male heir made them support Saba’s marriage proposal to Arwā. They must have thought that in this way they would establish a new Sulayhid line and thus secure their authority in Yemen. Arwā, however, managed to undermine their attempts and stay in power, which obliged the Fatimids to accept her as a de facto power on the Yemeni scene and later to send Ibn Naǧīb al-Dawla to support her. Fatimid eagerness to keep Yemen under their control is best shown in al-Āmir’s correspondence with Ibn Naǧīb al-Dawla, where he says:


Since the sector (غزنة) of Yemen is one of the regions all of whose affairs the Commander of the Faithful attends to, and whose major and minor problems he seeks to solve, for it was one of the places of migration of the Muslims in the early days and a place of the people of the faith from the establishment of the basis of Islam until now. It will never be without the sons of the Fatimid دعا and the followers of the “Alawī دعا.17

The Yemeni solution

The reaction of the Yemeni Ismā‘ilīs to Arwā’s rule was of a different nature for all that it was strongly dependant of the Fatimid one. Two main factors had a great influence on their attitude towards Arwā. First, the Fatimid empire was the main super-power in the region. Yemenis were therefore to an extent politically, economically and psychologically dependent on this empire. Securing good relations with the Fatimids was to everybody’s benefit. Second, the Ismā‘ilīs had a special relation with the Fatimids. For them Al-Mustanṣir, or any other Fatimid caliph, was an infallible imam. His words, in any form whatsoever, were religiously binding on all believers in any place and at any time. His rulings could only be altered by another imam. In our case, al-Mustanṣir issued two decrees in favor of Arwā. In the first he appointed her to the rank of ḥuwāqa, and in the second he stated that disobeying her was religiously forbidden. We do not know of any later decrees to the contrary. In the case of Saba’s proposed marriage to Arwā, the only instance in which the Fatimids changed their attitude towards her, a high court official was sent to inform the queen orally of the imam’s orders. The sources do not mention any decree issued on this occasion or afterwards showing signs of disenchantment with Arwā’s position at the head of the Sulayhid state or with her policies. In other words, the Yemeni Ismā‘ilīs were bound to accept Arwā as their religious and political leader.

In fact, Arwā’s occupation of the highest rank in the دعا hierarchy necessitated the writing of religious literature explaining the causes and “wisdom” behind the imam’s decision to appoint a woman to such a position. The غيات al-Mawālīd is one of the sources dealing with this issue. It was written by al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb (d. 533/1138), a high-ranking داً who played an important political and military role in the last days

17 The above quotation is the only fragment surviving from al-Āmir’s sigill. See ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd, Risālat lubb al-ma‘ārif, 24.
of the Sulayhid state. The focal point of his argument is the male/female distinction (al-dakar wa’l-unṭā).\(^\text{18}\)

According to al-Ḥaṭṭāb, “envelopes” (al-qumuṣ al-baṣariyya al-ġismāniyya, lit. the human bodily shirts), which are the human body, have no real importance and do not indicate the person’s sex. Rather, the actions and deeds that are realized by means of the body envelopes are the only criteria that show the real sex of any person. The proof of this theory, according to the Ḥimātī ḏāʾī, was that there had existed persons who occupied the highest ranks and who were in appearance women—such as Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Prophet, and his wife Ḥadiğa—while there also existed persons at the lowest levels who were also in appearance women. It is unjust, he wrote, to consider all persons with a female body envelope as equal since there is no relationship between being considered a dakar or an unṭā, and the person’s sex. The good deeds of the person show that he is a dakar even if his body envelope is that of a woman. The dakar is perfect in the interpretation of religion (ta’wil). He has reached the highest levels and can no longer progress in the religious hierarchy, whereas the unṭā is on a lower level of religious knowledge and can still progress in the religious hierarchy with the help of the dakar. Once a person reaches the highest level of interpretation, he immediately turns into a dakar even if his body envelope is that of a woman.

This theory was applicable to Arwā since she reached the highest level of religious interpretation when she was appointed to the rank of ḥuǧǧa by al-Mustansir. She then became a dakar regardless of her female body envelope. There was no contradiction between her sex and her rank. Al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb believed that a person had to be judged according to knowledge, and not according to appearance. In fact, the entire argument was devised in order to provide a theological escape from the problem of Arwā’s occupation of the highest religious rank.

\(^{18}\) Al-Ḥaṭṭāb devotes the first of the three chapters in his Gāyāt al-mawālīd to the issue of the ḥuǧǧa. He starts by showing the necessity of having a ḥuǧǧa in each of the 12 ḡazīras (sectors) of the da’wa. He then speaks about the three criteria that should be satisfied by all ḥuǧǧas. They should all have the nāṣ of the imam, show the most obedience in the ḡazīra to the imam, and be the most caring with regard to the religious and worldly welfare of the believers under their authority. According to al-Ḥaṭṭāb, Arwā fulfilled all of the three criteria. He ends the chapter with a discussion of the male/female nature. This section was published by Poonawala as an appendix to al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s Diwān. See Poonawala al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb, 433-436. A smaller section was included by al-Hamdānī in his al-Sulayḥiyyān, 144-145. For more information on the life of al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb, see H. al-Hamdānī, al-Sulayḥiyyān, 193-204; Poonawala, al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb, 73-145.
Al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s philosophy of the sexes is substantially original. It has however vague antecedents in earlier Fatimid and pre-Fatimid theology. Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), for example, warned the huğga, in his book Rāhat al-ʿaql, against “becoming unṭā after being ḏakar”.¹⁹ This came after a series of earlier warnings in which the huğga was reminded to remain faithful to the imam and his teachings, and to fulfill the duties of his rank in the best way. It is not clear from the text what precisely al-Kirmānī means by ḏakar and unṭā, but we can easily infer that ḏakar has positive connotations while unṭā has negative ones. We can also say that the ḏakar is the one who follows the orders of his imam while the unṭā does not.

As for the human body envelopes, a similar concept appears in the pre-Fatimid epistles of the Brethren of Purity. They compare the body, in their Rasāʾīl, to a house, which is inhabited by the soul (nafs), and to a shop, which is owned by the soul.²⁰ According to the Brethren of Purity, the body is a temporary container for the soul. The epistles, however, do not compare the body to a qamīṣ (pl. qumuṣ), which is conceptually similar to a house or a shop but not identical. The qamīṣ (envelope) has the form and size of the body—meaning that al-qumuṣ al-bašariyya are in the form of bāṭin al-insān (the inside of man)—and therefore reflects the dimensions of what it is actually covering. This distinction is central to al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s argument. Al-qumuṣ al-bašariyya are not in themselves significant, but the deeds of the bāṭin that appear through them are. This is how the qamīṣ is different from the house or the shop, since neither of these reflects the nature of their owner.²¹

But clearly, al-Sulṭān al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s argument is based on general and pre-existent Ismāʿīlī concepts and is not an original innovation, which could be debated or refuted by those who might not appreciate Arwā’s role in the daʿwa.²² Such theological argumentation was necessary because

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¹⁹ Kimānī, Rāḥat al-ʿaql, 209.
²¹ A similar concept appears in the 36th epistle of the Druze canon, Kitāb fihi taqṣīm al-ʿulūm wa iḥbāṭ al-ḥaqq wa kaṣīf al-maknān, where it is stated that the body is nothing but a visible picture (ṣūra marʿiyya), a sarāb that could only be seen in its reality when looked at with the “eye of knowledge.” This argument was devised to show that behind the body of al-Ḥākim lay the divine being. Al-Ḥaṭṭāb made it clear in his Gāyāt al-mawāḥīd that al-qumuṣ al-bašariyya have nothing to do with reincarnation (taqammus), which is, according to him, against the Islamic creed. It is not possible to make a direct link between this concept and that of al-Ḥaṭṭāb, but one can infer that both originate in Ismāʿīlī theology. See Ḥamzah b. ʿAlī et al., Rasāʾīl al-hikma, 258-259.
²² It is mentioned in the anonymous Risālat al-taḥāmīd al-ḥams that the imam has two nāsūt: the first is the natural one (al-nāsūt al-ṭabīʿī), which consists of the perishable
the imam, the ultimate source of law and legitimacy, had by al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s time entered into concealment and could no longer be consulted. Thus the only way to deal with Arwā’s religious position was by explaining her as male in essence. If placed in a broader context, the significance of al-Ḥaṭṭāb’s theological argumentation exceeds that of the temporary issue of the reign of the Sulayhid queen. Actually, what we are witnessing here is the formation of a new post-concealment style of Ismā‘īlī religious thought, one which addressed contemporary issues from within the old Fatimid tradition. The contributions of the new Ṭayyibī da‘wa amounted to much more than just preserving the Fatimid heritage.

There is no doubt that Arwā bint Aḥmad owes her fame to the fact that she was a woman who ruled for fifty-five years in medieval Yemen. However, at the time, it was her sex that caused most of the trouble for those who had interests in keeping the Sulayhids in power. The Fatimids exhausted every possible political and religious means to cover the queen’s deficiency. Their politics of religion was behind the development of a new philosophy of the sexes by the people of the da‘wa who were religiously bound to follow her. The reign of the Sulayhid queen is a paradigmatic historical case of the inseparability of religion and state. Present day secularists would surely not welcome it, even though it led to the rise of a woman to the highest religious and political positions. On the other hand, it is hardly to be expected that Islamists, who believe that religion is an essential part of the state, would use the example of an Ismā‘īlī woman to back their claims. The marginalisation of Arwā is thus likely to continue.

REFERENCES


human body. The second is the special one (al-nāsūḥ al-ḥāṣṣ), which consists of a smooth body that cannot be seen by normal human beings (lā tudrikūhu al-abṣār, Q 6:103). One can almost be certain from the language of the text that it is of Syrian origin and of a much later provenance. As a result, we cannot be sure that this theological concept was known to al-Ḥaṭṭāb, at least in this form. See Risālat al-tahāmīd al-ḥams, 210.


*Rasā’il ilīwān al-ṣafā’.* Beirut, n.d.

