The Bohras as Neo-Fāṭimids: Documentary Remains of a Fāṭimid Past in Gujarat

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Abstract

This article traces the remains of Fāṭimid chancery documents, and the writing practices that surround them, among the Bohras of Gujarat. As Shiʿi Ismaʿilis, the Bohras consider themselves heirs of the Fāṭimid Imāmate (909–1171). Whereas other Ismaʿili communities, such as the Nizārīs, claim their genealogical link to the Fāṭimids through the presence of a living Imam, the Bohras legitimize their “Neo-Fāṭimid” identity through a living Arabic Ismaʿili manuscript culture. While the philological link between the Bohras and the Fāṭimids has hitherto been acknowledged through the mobility and preservation of these manuscripts, their use of documents, however, and its potential Fāṭimid influences, has remained unexplored. Based on ethnographic observations and archival research among the ʿAlawi Bohras of Baroda, I suggest that practices from the Fāṭimid chancery continued in Yemen and Gujarat in the post-Fāṭimid world, and continue to survive today in the Bohra community’s documentary culture.

Keywords
ʿAlawi Bohras – Neo-Fāṭimids – manuscript culture – document(ary practice)s – khizāna – sijill – ʿalāma – Shiʿi material culture

1 Introduction

This article traces one aspect of Fāṭimid material culture, chancery documents, and the writing practices that surround them, among the Bohras of Gujarat, India. The Bohras, or Mustaʿlī Ṭayyibī Ismaʿilis, are a contemporary Shiʿi Muslim merchant community of approximately one million and two hundred thousand believers, residing mainly in Gujarat and across the Western Indian Ocean littoral. While today the Bohras are divided into several sub-groups, notably the Dawoods of Surat and Mumbai, the ʿAlawis of Baroda, and the Sulaymanis in Hyderabad and Yemen, they share the same past, read the same books, and treasure them in their royal khizānāt al-kutub (s. khizāna), or book treasuries. In this article I focus on the ʿAlawis, the second biggest Bohra community after the Dawoods. The religious headquarters of the Bohra Alawis is can be found in Baroda (Vadodara) and the community consists of roughly 8,000 believers. As Shiʿi Ṭayyibī Ismaʿilis, the Bohras consider themselves heirs of the Fāṭimid Imāmate, an Ismaʿili empire that ruled over much of the Mediterranean and North Africa from the tenth to the twelfth century. To the outsider, the worlds of the secrecy-practicing Bohras of Gujarat of today and those of the Fāṭimid Caliph Imams of medieval
Cairo and might seem light years apart. Yet through the written word, materialized in manuscripts and documents, these worlds are intrinsically connected.

Despite the different temporal and spatial parameters, the manual copying and transmission of Fāṭimid manuscripts is as much alive today as it was centuries ago. Through the mobility and transmission of manuscripts between Fāṭimid Cairo, Yemen, and Gujarat, an Arabic Ismaʿili manuscript culture lives on in Bohra khizānāt today in Surat, Bombay, Baroda and in the Arabian Peninsula. I have documented the mobility and social lives of these manuscripts and their khizānāt as spaces of enshrinement elsewhere. To the Bohras, the manuscripts enshrined in these khizānāt are the material proof of their genealogical link to the Fāṭimids. As objects, they thus enjoy a sacred status in the community. Whereas other Ismaʿili communities, such as the Nizāris, claim their genealogical link to the Fāṭimids through the presence of a living Imam in the post-Fāṭimid world, the Aga Khan, the Bohras legitimize their “Neo-Fāṭimid” identity through their living Arabic Ismaʿili manuscript culture, and through its custodians, the Bohra sacerdotal clerical hierarchy.

Having had the rare opportunity of accessing one of these khizānāt, belonging to the royal family of the ʿAlawi of Bohras of Baroda, I observed that the material link with the Fāṭimid past is not only kept alive through manuscripts but also through documents. In this article I argue that the ʿAlawis’ Neo-Fāṭimid identity can be traced through their usage of sijillāt (s. sijill), a Fāṭimid imperial documentary form, which referred to the decree or letter of the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam. Sijillāt have survived materially both in codex manuscript form and as vertical rolls within the community. The aim of this article is to bring these sijillāt, which thus far have received little attention, to light, and to show their social embeddedness in the Bohra community today: how they are used, by whom, and for what purpose. In doing so, I suggest that, in addition to treasuring Fāṭimid manuscripts, Bohra khizāna culture is influenced by Fāṭimid diplomatic conventions through the community’s documentary practices. Conventions, protocol and performance which, in the process of their long transmission history, have made a crossover to the manuscript culture of the khizāna at large.

Based on extensive archival and ethnographic fieldwork, I describe, in what follows, the social meaning of sijillāt among the Bohra ʿAlawi community, while at the same time reading and reconstructing the material life cycle of these documents. The examination of these questions demands a perspective where both the social, through the observant eye of the ethnographer, and the material, through codicological analysis and archival work, are in conversation. Such a discursive approach, which I have called social codicology in a previous article, potentially provides an answer to the question how Fāṭimid documentary leftovers have survived up to the present day in Bohra khizānāt. Brining the materiality of Bohra sijillāt to the forefront as a part of this approach, I will explore the material metamorphosis from documents to manuscripts, as these documents gained a new unique social life as sacred objects, subject to commodification, veneration, and performance.

2 The Lost Fāṭimid Khizāna

The Fāṭimid Empire, and its written heritage, has occupied scholars for generations. Until quite recently, the dominant paradigm in scholarship was the systematic “destruction” by the Sunnī Ayyubids (r. 1171–1250) of the manuscripts of the royal Fāṭimid khizāna. According to this paradigm, the treasury of manuscripts of the Fāṭimid royal khizāna vanished for good after the fall of the Fāṭimid Imāmate in the late sixth/twelfth century. Scholars in Ismaʿili studies argued that the Sunnī-Ayyubid
The Bohras as Neo-Fāṭimids: Documentary Remains of a Fāṭimid Past in Gujarat

The conquest of Cairo, led, due to ideological reasons, to the systematic destruction of the books held in the Fāṭimid khizānāt and other institutions. The popular paradigm of the destruction of the Fāṭimid khizānāt and the vanishing of its cultural memory does not, however, reflect historical reality. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that centuries after the empire’s demise Fāṭimid books continued to circulate, a process which is recorded in various historiographical works of the post-Fāṭimid period. These works suggest that instead of their systematic destruction, the royal manuscript copies from the Fāṭimid imperial khizāna reportedly “flooded” the book markets of Ayyubid capital cities, such as Cairo and Damascus, and found their way into the private collections of scholars in Egypt and Syria.

While Fāṭimid Ismaʿilism gradually faded away in Egypt in the centuries that followed, a flourishing Arabic Ismaʿili manuscript culture continued to exist in Yemen and later Gujarat. In Yemen, the so-called “Ṭayyibī Ismaʿilis” had survived the fall of the Fāṭimid empire, having split off from the palace well before its demise, following a separate genealogy of Imams. Initially, the Ismaʿilis of Yemen had supported the Fāṭimid cause until the schism that followed Caliph al-Āmir bi-Aḥkām biʾllāh’s death in 528/1130. According to the Bohra narrative, it was the Ṭayyibīs who, upon leaving Cairo, took with them a substantial amount of Fāṭimid manuscripts from the royal khizānāt. These manuscripts formed the basis of the Ṭayyibī khizāna culture and intellectual history, which subsequently traveled to Gujarat via communal Indian Ocean networks in the tenth/sixteenth century. In this survival narrative, the Ṭayyibī Ismaʿilis and later Bohras are thus seen as the saviors of the Fāṭimid manuscript tradition and the transmission of its intellectual history.

As legendary as this narrative may sound, I observed how Fāṭimid authors such as Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. 360/971), al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), Muʿayyad fī Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 411/1021), are indeed read and copied in manuscript form in Arabic in Bohra centers of learning in Surat, Baroda, and Mumbai today. These Fāṭimid authors are enshrined in manuscript form in khizānāt in Gujarat, where their texts have been manually copied for centuries under strict conditions of secrecy. These texts, and their presence in Gujarat, are foundational for Bohra Ismaʿilism as it is practiced today in South Asia, and the transmission of its esoteric knowledge system. Their material survival ultimately defines the Bohra community’s identity and legitimizes their position and authority in the larger Shiʿi context, and the Muslim umma at large, as heirs of the Fāṭimids. To the Bohras, these manuscripts are thus a crucial element in the community’s Neo-Fāṭimid identity today.

In a similar way to how Marina Rustow has reconstructed the chancery of the Fāṭimids in her Lost Archive through the Cairo geniza corpus (see below), I demonstrate below that fragments of this same chancery, and its documentary practices, can also be traced among the Bohras in Gujarat, be it in a different format and context.

From Sacred Trash to Sacred Treasure

Fāṭimid documents, like Fāṭimid books, also had a rich social life beyond the empire, yet as their social usage was different so was their archival trajectory in the post-Fāṭimid era. Despite the “destruction” of the Fāṭimid state chancery archive, the dīwān al-inshā’, Fāṭimid documents, including decrees, missives, letters and petitions survived in corpora of communities which, in one way or another, interacted with the state through documents. Examples in this regard are the Rabbinic Jews of Fustat, and the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Mount Sinai, as the scholarship of Samuel Stern, Marina Rustow, Geoffrey Khan, and others has demonstrated. Rustow argues that the survival of these...
documents was specific to the special legal status of these communities as dhimmis (non-Muslims) in the Fatimid empire.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} A community, however, that was indeed Muslim and thus did not enjoy a dhimmī-status, were the Ismaʿilis of Yemen. Prior to their allegiance to Imam al-Ṭayyib, they formed a Fatimid enclave in South Arabia under the local ruling dynasty of the Šulayḥids (r. 438–532/1047–1138), who had sworn their allegiance to the Fatimids in 429/1037.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} Through Islamic sījillāt, the Fatimid Caliph Imams were in personal correspondence with the Šulayḥids. It seems that this form of diplomatic correspondence, referred to as "sījillāt", was by no means incidental, nor merely part of standard diplomatic protocol. The sījillāt reveal that the Šulayḥids were close allies of the Fatimids and represented their political and missionary interests in South Arabia and beyond.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} According to the narrative of the community, along with these imperial sījillāt, kutub (books), Dāʿīs (missionary officers), and emissaries were constantly sent between Cairo and Yemen. In addition to these doctrinal works, and the preservation of several Fatimid institutions, these and other Islamic sījillāt ended up outliving the Fatimids and Šulayḥids in Yemen far beyond their time of composition, as they were transmitted from Yemen to Gujarat as early as the 10th/16th century, and possibly earlier.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} Though the existence of these Islamic sījillāt is known to the academic community, the field of Fatimid documents has thus far been dominated by the Jewish geniza model, based on their preservation history as sacred trash.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} Yet the survival of Fatimid sījillāt in Bohra khizānāt tells a different story entirely. A story beyond the geniza repository as the final resting place of the material lives of Fatimid documents. The Bohra khizāna gives us a different perspective into the world of the Fatimids, not from the perspective of religious minorities vis a vis the state and their assumed subjectivity, but from a position of power, allegiance, and regional politics as the empire’s Ismaʿili representatives in Yemen.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} Simply put, as dhimmis Jews and Christians had a different relationship to the state than the Ṭayyībis as Ismaʿilis, and therefore their respective social practices of writing and storing documents differed. In the case of the Ṭayyībis and later Bohras, it is a story of correspondence, careful preservation, and enshrinement in khizānāt, instead of petitioning, storing, and discarding in genizot. Whereas the social lives of Fatimid decrees and letters thus ended in the Cairo geniza as sacred but nonetheless trash, the Fatimid sījill gained a new social life across Ismaʿili khizānāt in Yemen and Gujarat as sacred treasures.

It is perhaps not surprising, but nonetheless remarkable, that Fatimid documents, and copies thereof, survived among a community such as the Ṭayyībi Ismaʿilis and later Bohras. While the physical sījillāt did not survive in their original form as vertical diplomatic rolls, they were assembled and copied into manuscripts.\footnote{Akkerman 2020} In their transmission throughout centuries and continents, they thus took on the physical form of books, and therefore gained a special status. Albeit in a different material manifestation or codicological form, from decree roll to manuscript codex, these sījillāt are enshrined in the Bohra khizāna tradition, and treated like any another manuscript of the treasury of books: as sacred objects. To the ‘Alawis and other Bohras, the physical survival of these manuscripts is a fait accompli, there is no doubt that these documents are authentic and their existence in the khizāna strengthens the community’s Neo-Fatimid identity. Yet, as I immersed myself in the world of the ‘Alawi Bohras and its everyday life, I observed that the presence of these sījillāt pointed to a larger phenomenon within the community. Instead of laying around in the khizāna as old dusty books from the past, the sījillāt have a rich social life in the community. As such, they are part of living documentary phenomenon the ‘Alawis themselves are perhaps not even conscious of because it is how things are done: the phenomenon of how Fatimid documentary practices and their sījillāt have seeped over time into the community.
As I describe in my forthcoming study on the ‘Alawi Bohras, after gaining the trust of the community, the Dāʿī, the spiritual head of the community and guardian of its manuscripts, granted me the title “court historian”, which included cataloging the collection of the *khizāna*. One of the first things I observed in my capacity as improvised court cataloger, was that not all the manuscripts and documents from the *khizāna* were books. In fact, many of them did not look like codices at all. In encountered hand drawn inheritance charts in the shape of poster-format sheets, amulets, sermons, and notes in the form of loose single leaves, carefully documented registers and accounts in Gujarati in oblong *daftars*, and finally, there were the rolls, read vertically from top to bottom.

The *sijill*, manifested in the form of a vertical roll, or *rotulus*, has had a long historical presence in the Bohra and earlier Ṭayyībī Ismāʿili communities and their *khizānāt*. It was the preferred codicological form for both documentary practice, through letters and contracts, and in social usage as ritual objects used during communal services and ceremonies. To the academic community, these vertical rolls, and any other type of official Bohra communal documents, are unique as thus far only manuscripts have been made available outside their respective communities through the donation of private collections, such as the Goriawala, Hamdani, and Zahid Ali collections. Whereas these manuscript collections are private, copied and collected by generations of Bohra scholarly families in the privacy of homes and studies, the ‘Alawi *khizāna* has been maintained for centuries by the Alawi Bohra clerical hierarchy.

**PLATE 8**

No. 4, part 4 (lines 8–10)
The presence of Imamic sijillāt in the Alawi khizāna is an important aspect of the Bohra Neo-Fāṭimid tradition and identity. This article is an argument in favor of taking the materiality of these sijillāt, and other such manuscripts and documents, seriously in addition to their content. Through my experiences of working in the 'Alawi khizāna, however, I learned that the materiality of manuscripts and documents as “things” is not limited to bindings and marginalia. It can only truly be understood through paying attention to social practice. As I worked my way through the collection of the khizāna, I learned that there is truth to the expression “never judge a book by its cover”: documents turned out to contain entire books, while manuscripts, taking the form of a classical codex, at times revealed entire documents. Moreover, not all rolls were sijillāt, and not all sijillāt were rolls as some of them, the Imamic ones attributed to the Fāṭimids, were preserved in manuscript form. Had I not observed social practice, how these manuscript-documents were used, copied, read, ‘consumed’, and how their materiality was performed by the ʿAlawis, I would not have known that Fāṭimid sijillāt were preserved in these manuscripts. I would have simply cataloged them as manuscripts, and that would be the end of the story.

4 The Materiality of Naṣṣ: the Sijill among the Bohras

The Fāṭimids, and their successors in Yemen, feature so prominently in the Bohras’ modern self-understanding that one would almost forget that the community has a rich history in the Indian subcontinent for over five centuries. In retracing the sijill and its social usage among the Bohras, we must therefore start in one of the communities’ historic centers in Gujarat, the city of Ahmedabad.

Ahmedabad is home to the largest Bohra qabaristān (graveyard), a large plot of polished-marble white tombs, which is situated on the outskirts of the city in a Dalit neighborhood, known as Saraspur or Bibipur. To the Bohras, the qabaristān embodies the final resting place of the physical remains of their Syednas (from the Arabic...
“ṣayyīdnā” (our master), abbreviated as “Sy.” or Dā‘īs, as the temporal and spiritual heads of the community in the absence of the hidden Imam, a descendant of the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam al-Ṭayyib (d. 524/1130). According to my ‘Alawi informants, the graveyard of Saraspur dates to the tenth/sixteenth century, when the first Indian Dā‘ī Sy. Jalāl Shamsuddīn b. Hasan (Dā‘ī no. 25, d. 975/1567) was buried in Ahmedabad. This sacred site of ziyāra (pilgrimage), along with its lavishly green peaceful gardens, and its rituals of commemoration and mourning, however, is as much a space of togetherness as it is of contestation.

Following several schisms in the community, it is the last Bohra qabaristān in history that the ‘Alawis, Dawoodis, and Sulaymanis share in Gujarat. While the complex is administered by the Dawoodi Bohras, Saraspur is nonetheless considered a sacred space for all three Bohra communities. For the Sulaymanis from Yemen, the small green-marbled mausoleum of Sy. Sulayman b. Hasan (no. 27, d. 1005/1597) is situated in Saraspur, built in an architectural style very different from the polished Dawoodi Taj Mahal-esque shrines. Perhaps even more than the Sulaymanis, however, Saraspur is an important site of remembrance for the ‘Alawi Bohras and the foundation of their community.

Every year, the ‘Alawis travel on a specially designated ziyāra bus to visit Ahmedabad for the ‘urs, a two-day event in which the death of Sy. ‘Ali Shamsuddīn (no. 29, d. 1046/1637) is commemorated as the founding figure of the community. ‘Ali Shamsuddīn is the namesake and first Dā‘ī of the ‘Alawi community after the ‘Alawi-Dawoodi schism in 1624–5. To the ‘Alawis, he is considered a martyr, due to his violent death, and his burial tomb in Saraspur was the last ‘Alawi grave that was ever built in Ahmedabad, as the community moved to Baroda following the split. The status of Sy. ‘Ali Shamsuddīn’s grave is precarious, as his tomb, which also used to house the graves of his father and grandfather, as I was told, was recently destroyed by the Dawoodis. The shrine of Sy. ‘Ali Shamsuddin, believers informed me, was not only demolished, but the tomb of another Dawoodi Dā‘ī was built directly on top of the old grave. The ‘Alawi shrine has thus become an invisible, and therefore liminal, space, only existing to the ‘Alawis who visit it.

Undaunted by the absence of a physical burial tomb, the ‘Alawis have continued to perform their annual ziyāra in Saraspur since the destruction of the grave. Their modest musāfir khāna (pilgrim lodge, see fig. 3), however, is situated outside the plot. All ‘Alawi rituals and commemorative gatherings other than visiting the grave can only take place outside the walls of the graveyard. Several months into my ethnographic fieldwork, I was allowed to travel with the ‘Alawi men to Saraspur. This was an honor, as the ‘urs was traditionally only carried out by the male mu‘minūn, and not the female mu‘mināt of the community, who stayed at home in Baroda with their families.

After my arrival in Ahmedabad, I immersed myself in the life of the musāfir khāna (travelers lodge), which by now was full of believers all dressed in white. I observed the community in the various sections of the concrete building, including its massive tented soup kitchen, the quarters of the royal family, and the courtyard where prayers were conducted and ceremonies were held (see fig. 3). On the auspicious night of the ‘urs, the commemorative gathering slowly moved from the musāfir khāna to the qabaristān. To the outsider, the scene was odd, as the “yā Husayn” lamenting crowd, while crossing the street, was met with street faqīrs, sadhus, and other mendicant holy wanderers, asking for donations. I observed how the group commemorated the death anniversary of their Dā‘ī, through recitation and self-flagellation led by the Mazoon Saheb, the highest cleric of the community after the Dā‘ī, in a tomb that was no longer theirs. What was unusual, was the fact that these lamentations were not sung in honor of the Dawoodi Dā‘ī who was buried here. Instead, the believers directed their prayers
and pious invocations toward one particular non-descript corner of the already very crowded shrine, standing in line to kiss the marble floor and covering it with rose petals. This small corner was the space that once was the grave of Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn: to the outsider completely invisible, yet to the ‘Alawis a sacred space.

While I observed how the rhythmic lamentations intensified, and crying turned into shrieking, I realized that the believers did not only mourn the death of Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn, and the hardship that followed, but also the destruction of the tomb itself, which somehow contributed to his status as a martyr. In this brief moment in time, the shrine dedicated to the Dawoodi Dāʿī thus transformed into a liminal ‘Alawi-only space where the marble grave of the Dawoodi Dāʿī who was buried on top of Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn, and his ancestors who were also buried here, did not seem to exist. The absence of a physical tomb, in its current immaterial form, I witnessed, thus made the ritual more powerful. As intense as the ceremony had been, the entire ‘urs gathering lasted no longer than ten minutes in total, and the ‘Alawis left as swiftly and quietly as they had arrived.

Upon their return to the musāfir khāna, a majlis (gathering/sermon) was held in honor of this auspicious night. The devotees, around two hundred of them, sat on their knees on the floor of the neon-lit courtyard around the Mazoon Saheb, and his brothers, the other members of the clerical heirachy, the Mukasir Saheb and the Rasulhodood. It was the yearly majlis dedicated to the story of the succession of Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn, conducted in lisān al-daʿwa, the community’s sociolect of Gujarati written in Arabic script. Despite the late evening hour, the uncomfortable seating arrangement on the concrete floors, and the unbearable heat to which the fans in the courtyard did little to help, there was a general atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. Something exceptional was about to happen.

The Mazoon, who had seated himself on a plastic chair decorated with golden garlands and was wearing his ceremonial turban and matching golden spectacles, had brought along a leather handbag. The handbag carried a mysterious object of utmost significance, which was about to be revealed to the crowd. As it was an object from the
The particular sijill that was about to be revealed by the Mazoon Saheb in Ahmedabad, was a naṣṣ sijill. However, it was not issued by the dīwān al-inshā’, nor did it belong to one of the Fāṭimid Imamic sijillāt I described above. It was a naṣṣ sijill of Bohra provenance, which formed the basis of the schism between the ‘Alawis and the Dawoodis, and as such, a much disputed document. Dating from the period of the bifurcation, this seventeenth century roll, written in Arabic, was the official designation sijill, which, to the ‘Alawis, was the material proof for Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn’s receiving naṣṣ (divine designation of succession) as the twenty-ninth Dāʿī of the community.

The question of naṣṣ is a delicate matter among the Bohras. In line with Fāṭimid tradition, it is the Dāʿī alone (in Fāṭimid tradition the Imam) who is responsible for designating his successor. The Dāʿī, I learned, traditionally bestows naṣṣ upon the person of his choosing, a member of his family, under the divine guidance of the hidden Imam. The mansūṣ (chosen successor), I was told, is without exception a learned individual, male, and often the brother, cousin or oldest son of the Dāʿī. The ‘Alawi clerics explained to me that the identity of the mansūṣ is manifested to the Dāʿī through the direct ihlām (inspiration) coming straight from God through the hidden Imam. It is thus not through reason, but through divine revelation that the Dāʿī appoints his successor.

Naṣṣ is either transferred orally in private, or documented in a special type of sealed sijill, which is traditionally kept undisclosed until after the demise of the Dāʿī. Analyzing the genre of the designation sijill on a codicological level, royal seals insure the protection of the bifurcation rolls from being opened too early. Paleographically, the name of the mansūṣ is concealed through what is known as kitāb sirriyya, a secret and encrypted alphabet, which is only decipherable by the Dāʿī and his close confidants (see figures 4 and 5).34 Through the scholarship of Strothmann and De Blois, we now know that various variants of these secret scripts exist, and that their characters resemble, at least partly, ancient alphabets of South Arabia found in Yemen.35 The survival of these secret scripts into the khizāna could possibly indicate another paleographical link of the Bohras and their scribal practices to Yemen. In the sijill genre, the tradition of concealment of the identity of the mansūṣ is thus multi-facetted: it can be observed through social practice, but can also be traced through the materiality of the scripts and seals of sijill rolls. Functioning as the testament of the da’we as it were, the encrypted nature of the identity of the mansūṣ that is built-in these documents on so many levels, has led to various practical problems. What does one do when several candidates claim to be mansūṣ at the same time, based on the existence of different versions, or even forgeries, of the same document? It is therefore not surprising, that the Bohra tradition of the propagation of naṣṣ, and the secrecy around the designation of mansūṣ, has historically led to several crises of succession and, as we will see, continues to do so. It also explains why Bohra historiography, and Shi‘i historiography at large, is characterized by so many schisms.36

The sectarian history of the Bohras, and the legitimacy of its ruling royal families, is therefore not without controversy. The ‘Alawis, Dawoodis, and Sulaymanis have each developed a detailed narrative on the schisms that occurred in their communities, and their divinely designated mansūṣ. One can devote an entire monograph on these perspectives and claims, which is not, however, what this article intends to do. What the bifurcations among the Bohras naṣṣ cases have in common, however, is that they involved lobbies and juridical battles that were played out in the courts of Mughal Emperors. These stories are richly documented in Bohra khizānāt, and, as Samira
sheikh has demonstrated, in mughal imperial records. Moreover, these nāṣṣ cases are significant because they resulted in the spatial relocation of the Bohra communities. The Sulaymanis moved back to Yemen, the ʿAlawis to Baroda, and the Dawoodis subsequently moved to Sidhpur. The Dawoodi-ʿAlawi split and its aftermath, which I will briefly describe in the following section, lasted especially long (several decades) before the two communities officially parted ways and moved to different cities.

Among the ʿAlawis, the schisms that formed the three Bohra communities are preserved and transmitted in different forms of text: orally, in epigraphy, and through manuscripts and printed books. The rich oral traditions that narrate the bifurcations stories include the bayān (discourse) and the yearly recurring majālis held by the Bhai Sahebs. As we will see, these sermons are surrounded by protocol, rituals, and ceremonial performance. The bifurcation can also be traced in the material culture of the ʿAlawis in Arabic epigraphy found on gravestones and mausoleums, and in, what the ʿAlawis refer to as the “kutub of the nāṣṣ”. While some kutub are published in printed form in lisān
The Bohras as Neo-Fāṭimids: Documentary Remains of a Fāṭimid Past in Gujarat

...and are meant to be read by all believers, the majority are only available in Arabic manuscript form in the ‘Alawi khizāna. Various genres cover the topic: from lamentation poetry on the death of Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddīn, to risālāt (epistles) to taʾrīkh (historical) works, to documents and references related to the court cases, which are kept in the khizāna.

The sījillāt in particular, are at the center of what I call the materiality of nāṣṣ: through their material survival in modern times they have become the object of ritual and legitimation. A central trope in these bifurcation narratives is the claim that the designation sījillāt, and the seals, stamps, signatures, and secret alphabets they contained, were forged. This is, according to the narrative of the community, because various rolls circulated at the same time, and each party claimed to possess the original. While today the ‘Alawis have circumvented the issue of nāṣṣ by publicly appointing the manṣūṣ during the Dāʾī’s lifetime, through what is known as the nāṣṣ al-jālī (explicit nāṣṣ), contestations continue among the Dawoodis as the recent schism has shown between followers of Mufaddal Saifuddin, and his half-brother, Khuzaima Qutbuddin. Similarly to Mughal times, the conflict was brought to the Indian courts (at the time of writing, the community is still waiting for the verdict). A new development, however, is the fact that expert advice was requested from various academic scholars to validate the claims to the Dawoodi throne through the authentication of the sījillāt and other documents. As the schisms in Bohra historiography show, the sījill is thus much more than a historic document, it is a living relic of the community and object of heated political debate and polemics.

Returning to Ahmedabad, the crowd that had gathered in the musāfir khāna was patiently waiting for the Mazoon Shaheb to start the majlis. After reciting the fātiḥa through a crackling microphone, the Mazoon slowly and diligently started to narrate every detail of the bifurcation saga in Ahmedabad: from the death of the twenty-eighth Dāʾī and the crisis that followed, to how the case was brought to the Mughal courts as far as Lahore and Kashmir, to the inter-communal tensions and violence, to the house arrest and persecution of the community by Mughal rulers, who, according to him, where bribed by the Dawoodis, and finally, to the martyrdom of Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddīn. Just as during the visit to the qabaristān earlier that evening, the atmosphere in the musāfir khāna turned from excitement to collective gloom.

When the Mazoon had reached the climax of the story, his leather bag was brought to him, from which he revealed to the audience a fragment of the framed sījill (see fig. 6–7). The crowd was in awe, some people began to weep, others listened carefully to the words of the Mazoon Saheb, waiting for an explanation of the significance of the mysterious object. The Mazoon, whose voice had become stern, continued his account explaining that the very sījill he held in his hands was the one and only authentic nāṣṣ document that proved the legitimacy of Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddin’s position as twenty-ninth Dāʾī of the community. In detail, he narrated that that Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddin’s predecessor had explicitly and clearly written down the laqab (title) of Shamsuddīn in the last lines of the document in kitāb siriyya, which was definite proof of his nāṣṣ. The Mazoon continued by stressing Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddin’s many qualities, including his truthfulness and patience during the difficult times that followed, which he used as an argument to emphasize the validity of his nāṣṣ. The tone of his voice became more polemical as he juxtaposed the qualities of Shamsuddin with those of his contemporaries, who illegitimately claimed nāṣṣ based on a forgery of the original sījill. After the crowd uttered eulogies in remembrance of Sy. ʿAlī Shamsuddin, the sījill went back into the handbag and a communal thāli (meal) was served. The day of the ‘urs had been long and soon after the kulfi ice cream was served, all believers went to their modest accommodation to sleep.
Figures 6 and 7
Believers in the musāfir khāna during the revealing of the nāṣṣ sijill of Sy. 'Ali Shamsuddin by the Mazoon Saheb (bottom)
As I removed my polyester rida (Bohra dress) from the back of the riksha that drove me from the musāfir khāna back to the center of Ahmedabad, I reflected on the events I witnessed. What I had just observed in Saraspur was the reenactment of a Fāṭimid documentary remnant from the past: the naṣṣ sijill. As the highlight of the ‘urs, an Arabic sijill containing naṣṣ had been ceremonially revealed among believers as the material proof of the naṣṣ of Sy. ‘Ali Shamsuddin as the founding Dāʿī of their community. The type of document, and the practice of reading the naṣṣ out loud among believers is reminiscent of the Hidāya al-ʿĀmirīyya (The Epistle of the Fāṭimid Caliph al-ʿĀmir), attributed to the tenth Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam al-Āmir (d. 524/1130). The Hidāya was the official state document which made public the naṣṣ of Imam al-Mustaʿlī, and is a refutation of the Nizāri claim to the Imāmate after the death of al-Mustanṣir.39 The only modification in this Fāṭimid documentary tradition is that, in the case of the Bohras, the sijill is meant to prove the naṣṣ of the Dāʿī instead of that of the Imam. Moreover, the ʿAlawis have made its revelation, display and performance into a yearly event. Yet the logic behind its social usage remains exactly the same: providing material evidence of the right to rule in times of crisis.

What is fascinating, is that while the Fāṭimid naṣṣ sijillāt were preserved in the form of a codex, presumably in Yemen, Bohra naṣṣ sijillāt were written down on vertical rolls as if they were decrees, following Fāṭimid tradition. In my opinion, the codicology of the Bohra naṣṣ sijill thus strongly points at a tradition of continuity, rather than a practice the Bohras introduced in Gujarat. I believe this is the case because in Yemen, the original Fāṭimid sijillāt were still present in rolls, before they were later preserved in manuscripts. The usage of Arabic in an otherwise Gujarati environment is also meaningful in this context. One cannot, of course, also rule out the influence of Yemeni documentary culture on the Ṭayyibī documentary tradition.40 Yet, the specific social usage, genre, and, as we will see below, terminology of the naṣṣ sijill, all point to a continuation of Fāṭimid tradition.

As I mentioned earlier, the Bohras did not only preserve the sijill, a documentary genre so characteristic of the Fāṭimids, for the purpose of writing down the naṣṣ. On the contrary, the sijill has had a long historical presence in the Bohra communities and their khizānāt, serving all kinds of purposes. In his biobibliography, Ismail Poonawala mentioned a considerable amount of autographed sijillāt of Indian, Bohra provenance. In the form of rolls, these sijillāt were sent from India continuously by the Indian Dāʿīs to their deputies in Yemen up till as late as the nineteenth century, and possibly even later. For instance, the Dawoodi Dāʿī Abd al-ʿAlī Sayf al-Dīn b. Abd al-Ṭayyib Zakī al-Dīn (d. 1232/1817) wrote at least eight autographed sijillāt altogether throughout his life, of which two were addressed to his deputy al-Ḥasan b. Jaʿfarī in Yemen on the first of muḥarram 1231/1815, and one year later on 30 rabiʿ al-awwal, 1231/1816.41 Another such instance, although not referred to as a sijill, was Ibrāhīm Wajīh al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Qādir Ḥakīm al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Ṭayyib Zakī al-Dīn (d. 1232/1817) who wrote official letters addressed to his deputy Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad al-Wazīr al-Ḥarāzī in Yemen in the form of rolls.42 In modern times, I observed that the ʿAlawis use different types of rolls or rotuli for public ceremonies and engagements, such as the ceremony of the ʿahd (covenant of allegiance). As such, I argue in my forthcoming study, sijillāt are thus not considered dusty old texts from the past, but rather play a central role in the lives of believers.

What these different types of sijillāt have in common is the fact that they are official, royal decrees, issued and autographed by the Dāʿīs as the heads of the Bohra clerical establishment in the absence of the hidden Fāṭimid Imam. They form the evidence of my argument that, the Bohras alone, have preserved the original Fāṭimid usage of the term sijill to refer to a decree-document. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, such as in
Central Asia, Safavid Iran, and the Ottoman Empire, the term survived, within a judicial context as a document containing the qādī’s decision, or as the qādī’s register or legalizing remark. As early as the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, we see that the sijill loses its charismatic status as a diplomatic document of the Caliph-Imam and enters the realm of bureaucracy, a development which continues until the late Ottoman Empire. This is significant, as so far only a philological link between the Bohras and the Fāṭimids has been acknowledged through the mobility and preservation of manuscripts, and not through documentary and other writing practices of the khizāna.

The Bohras have not only transmitted the Fāṭimid usage of the sijill to the present day and made it their own, they have also preserved the social practice that surrounds these sijillāt, the naṣṣ sijill in particular, which is at the center of the community today. Being an outside observer during the ‘urs in Ahmedabad, I became aware of the importance of the performative element of the unveiling of the sijillāt. I experienced the excitement, and how the ceremony was carefully choreographed. The materiality of the naṣṣ sijill as a roll, containing a text to be read out aloud, I realized, was crucial in this regard. Announcing something from a book does not have the same effect as ceremonially reading from a majestically long and intimidating roll. Its codicology invites to orate or deliver an official sermon from, and demands respect and a certain habitus. While it may be difficult to reconstruct the social usage of the Fāṭimid sijill as it was originally delivered from the pulpit, Marina Rustow, comes to the same conclusion as she describes the Fāṭimid rotulus (sijill) as an instrument of performance. She writes: “its grandeur induces a sense of the aura, the incommensurability, the inviolability of the text.” What adds an additional layer of aura to the Bohra naṣṣ sijill, is the fact that it is considered secret, its presence cannot be denied as it exists before the believer, yet its content, containing crucially important information, can only be revealed to a certain extent. Just enough is revealed to the audience for them to know that it exists. This controlled and performative way of unveiling the sijill in combination with its distinctive physical appearance, creates a tension that is inherent to the ‘Alawi Bohra community, and encounter between the believers, the clerics, and its documentary culture.
6 Fāṭimid Documentary Leftovers: the Writing of the ‘Alāma

Accompanying the ‘Alawis on their ziyara to Ahmedabad opened my eyes to the world of Bohra documents, Fāṭimid diplomatic traditions, and their survival in the community. As I continued my work in the khizāna, I started paying attention to documents; what they looked like, how they worked, who would write them, and who would receive them. What I observed was that the Dā‘ī has an omnipresent position in the lives of the believers through his personal charisma, and his authority is inscribed in the lives of the believers through documents, a practice which is closely linked to ritual and ceremony.

As the chief qāḍī of the community, the Dā‘ī is responsible for issuing decisions on legal affairs and settling conflicts. While these legal verdicts are generally expressed orally, without exception they involve manuscripts (used as reference works) and the writing, registering, and exchange of documents related to personal affairs such as inheritance, property and divorce. In his capacity as qāḍī, the Dā‘ī's verdict is unequivocal and his signature sacred. There is thus nothing in the community that takes place without his signature, which, as I observed, functions as a royal seal. Little did I know at the time that this seal, a humble calligraphed autograph known as the ʿalāma (pl. ʿalāʾim), provided another clear example proving the influence of Fāṭimid documentary culture on the Bohra khizāna tradition, documents and manuscripts included.

Many documentary practices among the ‘Alawis are embedded in the mercantile traditions of the community. One such practice is the ceremonial writing of the Dā‘ī’s ʿalāma. Upon opening new shops, businesses, or factories, the Dā‘ī gives the new establishment his royal seal of approval by performing various rituals, which include the recitation of several Qur’anic verses, abyāt (poetic verses, s. bayt) and the “dhikr ahl al-bayt” (praise of the family of the prophet), followed by the writing of a protective Qur’anic “taweez” (Ar. ta’wīz, talisman) which is attached to the wall. This writing practice, which can also be found among the Dawoodis, is known as the ʿalāma. The ʿalāʾim are without exception hand-written by the Dā‘ī, and the script it carries is considered to bring baraka (blessings) and rizq (prosperity). The ʿalāma of the Dā‘ī, as I observed on a daily basis, can also have powerful qualities in its immaterial form. As a medium, water is commonly used to dissolve the ʿalāma, or written verses of the Quran, which is used for the inauguration of shops, offices, or businesses by the Dā‘ī. This is reminiscent of the practices performed by most of the Hindu mercantile castes, such as the Lohanas, who perform special pujas—usually devoted to Lakhshmi in such situations.

As sacred objects, ʿala‘im are sought after items in the ‘Alawi community, being worth hundreds of Rupees on the black market. Whereas the ‘Alawis have their ʿalāma inscribed on a simple piece of paper, the Dawoodis use special wooden planks as a writing medium. The Dawoodis managed to commercialize the practice even further. Websites such as bohrashopping.com offer devotees “Good Quality Wooden Plank for Alamat Sharīfa by Aaqa Maula TUS [the Dawoodi Dācī] to be framed and Hanged at your Homes (on sale)”. One can thus speak of a commodification of the ʿalāma practice, which, in Dawoodi circles, has become a service, and therefore has a hefty price tag attached to it. Interestingly, the banner of the website, which sells a wide variety of devotional Bohra objects, contains the ʿalāma of Sy. Sayfuddin on the upper right side. The paleography of the ʿalāma is important, and clearly linked to social practice. The basmala looks like a humble scribble, and not a beautifully calligraphed piece, for the simple reason that it is not supposed to: it has to look like it was written during a busy congregation in a mosque. After all, the powers from the ʿalāma are not derived from its beauty, but from the sacred materiality that is attached to the book hand of its scribe: the Dā‘ī. The ʿalāma thus functions as the Dā‘ī's calligraphic seal on documents.
and decrees, yet at the same time it is a written object of sacred material culture, a talisman, subject to commodification and veneration.

The Bohras' modern usage of the term ‘alāma in the context of the calligraphic signature of the Dāʿī is significant, and should sound the alarm bells among medieval historians of the Middle East. As an imperial documentary practice, the ‘alāma was the distinctive signature used in the medieval Muslim worlds of the ‘Abbasids, Mamluks, and the Fātimids to authenticate official documents.51 These imperial ‘alāʾim consisted of a personalized pious expression or motto, instead of sultanic names or titles. After all, a name was superfluous as there was only one Caliph, or Caliph-Imam in the case of the Fātimids, and if anyone's signature was known, it was theirs. The Fātimids were known to used the ḥamdala, al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabbi ‘l-ʿālamīn, as their ‘alāma, which was written right under the basmala on decrees and other diplomatic documents.52

Based on the documentary practices I observed among the ‘Alawis, I suggest that the community’s ‘alāma ritual and the Fāṭimid imperial documentary practice are linked. In order to see how this Fāṭimid diplomatic convention continued in Yemen and Gujarat in the post-Fāṭimid world, and how it was preserved into a social practice among the Bohras, further research is required. Documents of ‘Alawi, Dawoodi, and Sulaqmani Bohra provenance, and earlier Ṭayyibī Isma’ili exemplars from Yemen need to be studied in detail, especially in regard to how they were authenticated through signatures and seals. Such an exhaustive survey would be going far beyond the scope of this study and will be subject of a separate study.

There is one corpus of documents, however, which provides at least a hint of how the ‘alāma survived in the post-Fāṭimid period in Yemen: the Sijillāt al-Mustanṣiriyya. The Sijillāt al-Mustanṣiriyya is a small corpus of sixty-six documents attributed to the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam al-Mustanṣir Billâh (d. 487/1094), his son and successor al-Mustaʿli (d. 494/1101), and several women of the royal family, have survived today in Bohra khizānāt and must have formed the basis.53 The documentary format of these sijillāt could be the missing link in understanding how the ‘alāma became part of Bohra ritual and scribal practice. Marina Rustow confirms that, given the fact that sijillāt were official imperial documents, the original documents must have contained an ‘alāma.54 Bohra manuscript culture confirms this, as becomes apparent from the facsimile printed in Majid’s critical edition of the letters.55 On the incipit of the manuscript, we clearly see that the Bohra scribe has added a marginal note above the ḥamdala, which reads "bi-khaṭṭ al-yadd al-sharīfa al-nabawiyya" (“in the handwriting of the noble Prophetic hand (of the Caliph-Imam)”, see fig. 9). Through this marginal note, the scribe indicates that this was the designated space where the original ‘alāma was written by the Caliph-Imam. While the phrase “bi-khaṭṭ al-yadd al-sharīfa al-nabawiyya” cannot replace the ‘alāma, it does refer to the hand of the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam as “sharīfa” (noble) and al-nabawiyya (prophetic), which attributes some kind of sacred materiality to the ‘alāma, even though it is not written by the Imam himself. Moreover, it explicitly links the Imamic hand of the Fāṭimid Caliph to the Prophet Muhammad.

The presence of this paratext on copies of works such as the Sijillāt al-Mustanṣiriyya among the Isma’ilis and later Ṭayyibis of Yemen is significant for two reasons. First, it proves that the ‘alāma practice was known, and second, that, as the calligraphic signature of the Imam, it was seen as something that had to be carefully enshrined in the later manuscript copies, while making a crossover to Ṭayyibi and Bohra manuscript culture.

Through the lens of social practice among the ‘Alawis, we see that the inscribing the ‘alāma continues to fulfill the same function as the Fāṭimid ‘alāma: as a royal seal of the da’wa meant to officially authorize something. In the absence of an Imam in modern times, it is the Dā’ī, and not the Caliph-Imam, who provides his royal seal of approval in the community through his signature. As a proper ‘alāma, the Dā’ī does not sign with
his name, but with the basmala, often paired with the hamdala. The Dāʿī not only writes ‘alāʾim on the occasion of the new fiscal year. Believers seek his blessings through the inscription of the ‘alāma in all life events, from inhabiting a new home, to solving legal conflicts, to naming a baby. The ‘alāma, I witnessed, thus functions as a royal decree to the believers. Over a millennium old, the documentary practice of the ‘alāma has outlived the Fāṭimids. Whereas the Bohras have thus ritualized this documentary practice through ceremony and protocol, one can thus speak of a continuity in the hamdala as a signature ‘alāma from the Fāṭimid period. However, a seeming discontinuity, or novelty, is the basmala as an authenticating practice, which was never part of the original Fāṭimid ‘alāma protocol.

I would like to end this article with a brief note on Bohra scribal culture, and how it was possibly influenced by the practice of the Fāṭimid ‘alāma. My ethnographic and archival fieldwork in the ‘Alawi community included participating as a scribe of the khizāna, a story which I have documented elsewhere. I learned by doing that, regardless of whomever copies the manuscript, it is the Dāʿī who authenticates the codex after the scribe finishes copying the text. He does so by inscribing the basmala and hamdala at the beginning of the text. Upon starting the copying of a manuscript, the scribe thus leaves a blank space on the incipit. Only after the manuscript receives its basmala and hamdala, can the manuscript enter the collection of the khizāna. This small scribal rite of passage is also known as the writing of the ‘alāma.
It is thus because of this authenticating practice, unique to the Bohras, that unfinished or “unsealed” manuscript copies often contained a large blank space of the title pages, where the ‘alāma was supposed to be written. A parallel in this regard are unsealed decrees that we know of from the Fāṭimid period, known as a sijill manshūr (unsealed decree), waiting to be signed by the Caliph-Imam.57 Interestingly, it appears that the Bohras seem to copy their manuscripts as if they are Fāṭimid decrees: professional secretary-scribes of the chancery dīwān would write the sijill, and the Fāṭimid-Imam would sign with his ‘alāma (at least in the case of very important decrees, otherwise this would be carried out by the chief secretary).58 We could speculatively argue that Fāṭimid manuscript culture functioned in the same way: with professional scribes who would copy the text, and a chief copyist who would write a variant of the ‘alāma, and for very special manuscripts, the Caliph-Imam. If only we would have as many original Fāṭimid manuscript copies to our disposal as documents, we could put these speculations to rest. Given the fact that there are none available, we do not know, nor can we say if this is at all plausible, nor the extent to which Bohra manuscript culture is in any way representative of Fāṭimid manuscript culture.

What can be established, however, as I hope I have demonstrated here, is that through the modern practice of the ‘alāma, elements of the Fāṭimid chancery entered into the Ṭayyibī Ismaʿili and later Bohra khizāna tradition, and gained a new social life in Bohra ritual practice and ceremony in Gujarat.

7 Conclusion

Marina Rustow writes that, as an instrument of performance, the Fāṭimid rotulus has an element of evanescence to it, as it continues to enchant modern admirers, whether it be museum visitors or document enthusiasts.59 From the chancery dīwān of the Fāṭimid palace to the shrines and khizānat of Bohra Gujarat, I have shown in this article that the Fāṭimid sijill is indeed evanescent as its social life continues in the post-Fāṭimid world, or, perhaps more accurately Neo-Fāṭimid world of the Bohras.

In this article I argued that the ‘Alawi Bohra khizāna, and the unique living documentary practices and manuscript culture it enshrines today, is far more influenced by Fāṭimid diplomatic traditions practices than has been acknowledged thus far. We know that Fāṭimid diplomatic norms survived remarkably long in the Muslim world, among the Zaydis, the Safavids, Qajars, and Ottomans.60 Yet these documentary formats continued because they were effective, and not because the empires or communities that preserved them identified with the Fāṭimids through their scribal and documentary practice. Documentary leftovers of the Fāṭimid chancery, as I have demonstrated, can be traced among the Bohras on the material level through codicology, through the vertical roll of the sijill, and paleographically, through the ‘alāma. The remains of the Bohras’ Fāṭimid documentary past are also echoed in the ceremonies and rituals of the community, as the remarkable social life of the ‘alāma, written in the Dāʿī’s hand and venerated by devotees, has shown. Parallel to Fāṭimid chancery practice, we do not know what Fāṭimid manuscript culture, and the scribal practices of the royal khizānat and its institutions of learning looked like. Yet given the Ṭayyibī Ismaʿili’s and Bohras’ preservation of certain documentary features and practices that we were able to trace in comparison to existing Fāṭimid documents, we can ever so carefully hint at the fact that Bohra manuscripts too are influenced by Fāṭimid documentary protocol, and may contain codicological and paleographical traces of their original Fāṭimid exemplars. What is much more important, is that, to the ‘Alawis and other Bohras, through the sijill and the ‘alāma, and other documentary practices, they have kept, and continue to keep,
the lost world Fāṭimid khizāna alive. Except for the Bohras, this was never a world lost to begin with.

About the Author

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Notes

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2 Qutbuddin, T. (2013), Bohras, E.I. THREE. Leiden: Brill.

3 In this article I refer to “Vadodara” as “Baroda” as this is how the community refers to its city.

4 For an overview of the history of the Fatimid empire see Brett, M. (2017). The Fatimid Empire. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

5 The manuscript corpora in the Arabian Peninsula is scattered among the Sulaymani Bohra community in Yemen and Najran in Saudi Arabia, see Traboulsi, S. (2014), “Sources for the History of the Ṣayyibi Ismā‘īlī Da‘wa in Yemen and its Relocation to India”, Journal of Islamic Manuscripts 5: 246–74.

6 Akkerman, O. (2021). A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books. Arabic Manuscripts among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

7 Paula Sanders was the first to coin this term in the context of a revival of Fāṭimid architecture. Sanders, P. (1999). Bohra Architecture and the Restoration of Fatimid Culture. In: Marianne Barrucand, ed., L’Égypte fatimide. Son art et son histoire, Paris, 1999, pp. 159–65. See also Sanders, P. (2008). Creating Medieval Cairo. Empire, Religion, and Architectural Preservation in Nineteenth-Century Egypt. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, pp. 126–32.

8 Within the Bohra communities, the highest levels of the clerical establishment are seen as a royal family, see Akkerman O. (2021), A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books (forthcoming).

9 See Akkerman, O. (2019). The Bohra Manuscript Treasury as a Sacred Site of Philology: A Study in Social Codicology, Philological Encounters, 4 (2019): pp. 182–201 and See Akkerman, O., ed. (2021 forthcoming) Social Codicology. The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies. Leiden: Brill.

10 See, for instance, Daftary, F. (2007). The Ismā‘īlis. Their History and Doctrine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 253. Heinz Halm is more cautious and suggests Fāṭimid manuscripts were partly sold and partly destroyed, see Halm H. (1997), The Fāṭimids and their Traditions of Learning. London: I.B. Tauris, 1997, pp. 92–3.

11 The fall of empires and the violent destruction of its manuscript libraries is a tantalizing historical paradigm that is not restricted to the Fāṭimid. See Konrad Hirschler’s remarks on the paradigm of library destruction in the medieval world in The Written Word, pp. 133–2.

12 Fozia Bora explores these historiographical works in her article Bora, F. (2015). “Did Salah al-Din Destroy the Fāṭimids’ Books? An Historiographical Enquiry”, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 25:1, pp. 21–39. See also Hirschler, K. (2006). Medieval Damascus: Plurality and Diversity in an Arabic Library: The Ashrafiya Library Catalogue. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, p. 34. See for a more detailed discussion Akkerman, A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books, introduction.
See Traboulsi, S. (2016). Transmission of Knowledge and Book Preservation in the Ta‘iyibi Ismā‘ili Tradition. Intellectual History of the Islamicate World 4 (1), pp. 22–35.

The so-called “Ta‘iyibi Ismā‘ili” followed Caliph al-‘Āmir’s infant son as the next Fātimid Imam. See Daftary, The Ismā‘ili, p. 238.

Ibid.

Akkerman O. (2021). A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books.

Ibid.

See on the Jews in Cairo through the Geniza corpus and the Eastern Orthodox Christians through monastery of Saint Catherine in Mount Sinai. Stern. S.M. (1960). A Fātimid Decree of the Year 524/1130. In Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 439–55.

Geoffrey A. Khan, A Copy of a Decree from the Archives of the Fātimid Chancery in Egypt. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London Vol. 49, No. 3 (1986), pp. 439–53.

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Hamdani, H.F. (1934). The Letters of Al-Mustanṣir bi’llāh. In Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 398. See for a short historical overview of the Sūlayhīds: Traboulsi, S. (2000), Lamak ibn Mālik al-Hammādī and Sūlayhīd-Fātimid Relations. In Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, Vol. 30, Papers from the thirty-third meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held in London, 15–17 July 1999 (2000), pp. 224–7.

The Sūlayhīds reportedly brought peace in Mecca, and spread Ismā‘ilism in Oman. See, Hamdani H.F. (1934), The Letters of Al-Mustanṣir bi’llāh, p. 377, 321.

Aṣḥāb al-Yamīn fī dhikr al-du‘āt al-muṭlaqīn al-yamāniyīn. Historical account published in Gujarati and English by the ‘Alawi Bohra da’wa, 1422 AH, Baroda, pp. 131.

Hoffman, A. and Cole, P. (2011) Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza. New York: Schocken.

We of course know that Jews and Christians also enjoyed powerful positions in the Fātimid state apparatus, such as advisors to the Caliph Imams, yet as non-Isma‘īlīs, their position was different. See, for instance, Rustow, M. (2014). Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

See for the details of the existing manuscript copies footnote 27.

The Dā‘ī is the spiritual and temporal head of the community’s sacerdotal cum clerical family. Even though this post is historically related to the Fatimid Dā‘ī as missionary officer (see forthcoming book), in modern times it has gained a new meaning as vice regent of the hidden Imam on earth.

Not to be confused with the volumes, which are horizontal rolls. See Déroche, F. (2005). Islamic Codicology: An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Scripts. London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, p. 13.

Respectively the Hamdani, Fyzee, and Zahid Ali collections. De Blois, F. (2011). Arabic, Persian and Gujarati Manuscripts: The Hamdani Collection. London: I.B. Tauris; Goriawala, M. (1965). A Descriptive Catalogue of the Fyzee Collection of Ismaili Manuscripts. Bombay: Bombay University Press; Cortese, D. (2002). Arabic Ismā‘īlī Manuscripts: The Zāhid Ali Collection. London: I.B. Tauris. See also Cortese, D. (2000). ‘Ismā‘īlī and other Arabic Manuscripts. London: I.B. Tauris, and Gacek, A. (1985). Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Vol. 1 and 11. London: Islamic Publications.

On the Bohra clerical institution see Blank J. (2001) Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Dawoodi Bohras. Chicago: Chicago University Press: 134–56 pp.

Before there we only Yemeni Dā‘īs, who are buried in Yemen.

See for a detailed description of this schism (and other smaller schisms and splinter groups, such as the Nagoshis), Daftary, The Ismā‘ili, 280–2.

Special arrangements therefore had to be made, given that, as an unmarried woman, I could not stay at the musāfīr khāna nor travel on the specially designated ziyāra bus to Ahmedabad. See for a more detailed account of the ziyāra, and a discussion on my positionality and gender my forthcoming monograph.

After the Dā‘ī, the Mazoon Saheb is the highest cleric of the community. In the ‘Alawi Bohra context clerics are also royals. They enjoy a special status among believers and govern the community both in religious and political affairs.

De Blois, F. (1984). The Oldest Known Fātimid manuscript from Yemen. Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 14, pp. 1–7, 5. f. 11, and Strothmann, R. (1943). Gnosis-Texte der Isma‘īliten. arabische Handschrift Ambrosiana H 75. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht.

According to De Blois, these scripts are “doubtless of Yemenite origin”, as they share a superficial similarity with Ancient South Arabian (ASA) writing. De Blois, p. 5. f. 11. Earlier work by Strothmann shows a possible combination of ASA letters, Indian numerals, and Arabic letters given arbitrary values.
The notion of naṣṣ is also an important concept in Twelver Shiʿism, before the great occultation of the Twelfth Imam.

Whether it is through the possession of manuscripts, or the opinion of scholars in succession disputes, there is a strong tendency among the Bohra clergy for the legitimation of their existence through academic scholarship. See for instance "Plea in Bombay HC on leadership of Dawoodi Bohra sect: American expert examined". The Indian Express. 29 November 2019. Accessed 01 May 2020.

The translation of the title Sijill al-Hidāya al-Āmiriyya is Sterns. Stern, Samuel M. (1950). The Epistle of the Fatimid Caliph al-Amir (al-Hidaya al-Āmiriya): Its Date and Its Purpose. The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, No. 1/2, pp. 20–31.

See parallels in Yemeni manuscript and documentary culture, rolls and spiral texts in particular Messick, B. (1992). The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society. Berkeley: University of California Press and (2018). Sharia Scripts. A Historical Anthropology. New York: Columbia University Press. See also Hollenberg, D., Rauch, Ch. Schmidtke, S. eds. (2015). The Yemeni Manuscript Tradition. Leiden: Brill.

I am indebted to M. Boivin for this observation.

Samuel Stern traced back this practice of sealing documents to as early as the Abbasid period, which continued until the early Mamluk period. Stern, S.M. (1964). Fatimid Decrees: Original Documents from the Fatimid Chancery. London: Faber and Faber, p. 123–65.

The pairing of the basmala and the ḥamdala can be seen Stern, Fatimid Decrees: Original Documents from the Fatimid Chancery, plate 17, Rustow, The Lost Archive, p. 368.

The women of the royal family included his sister and the mothers of both Caliphs. See for a short description of these, and the other sijillāt Husain F. Hamdani’s article, who was the first to publish the documents. Hamdani, H.F. (1933). The Letters of al-Mustansir Billāh. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 7 (2), pp. 307–24. Rustow, M. (2019). Fāṭimid State Documents. Jewish History 32, p. 247. See also Brett, M. (2010). The Ifriqiyan Sijill of al- Mustansir, 445/1053–4), in Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 6), ed. U. Vermeulen and K. D’Hulster (Leuven), pp. 9–16.

Due to secrecy I am not able to publish a picture of the ‘Alawi manuscript copies.

Akkerman, A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books.

Due to secrecy I am not able to publish a picture of the ‘Alawi manuscript copies.

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