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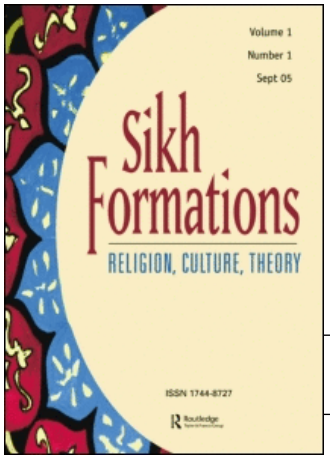

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Teena Purohit

READING GLOBAL ISLAM THROUGH MESSIANIC RENEWAL IN *DASAVATĀR*

In the Aga Khan Case of 1866, the Bombay High Court's redefinition of a caste group of khojas as 'Ismaili' resulted in the institution of a uniform religious identity that undermined the pluralistic character of Islamic practices in South Asia. The colonial court's monolithic understanding of khoja identity as 'Ismaili' has continued to influence the community's self-understanding to the present day. In this paper, I question this dominant narrative in which khojas were identified as 'Ismaili'. I argue that the early modern Gujarati poem of the ginān genre, Dasavatār*, became essential to the making of Ismaili Muslim identity in the nineteenth century. I read the* Dasavatār *ginān as a conduit of khojas' religious beliefs to produce an alternative history of Ismaili community formation. This discussion of* Dasavatār *explores the workings of global Islam in microcosm. It shows that the 'borrowings' which transpire within the Indo-Islamic ecumene cannot be conceptualized through notions of 'sect' or as an addendum to a Middle East-centered Islamic grand narrative, which is how the Ismailis continue to be described in authoritative accounts.*

Introduction

This article takes as its starting point the formations of the nineteenth-century Ismaili community of India, as a way of exploring the heterogeneous character of Islam as a global phenomenon. I will do this by showing how the beliefs and teachings of this group were firmly embedded within the diverse cultural traditions indigenous to South Asia. I focus in particular on the devotional literature of Ismailis to illustrate how notions of temporality reveal what is 'global' about global Islam. That is to say, I show how the very indigenousness and locality of Islam can be read through an engagement with the messianic imaginary of Ismaili religiosity – one that was both Muslim and South Asian. In the larger project from which this article is drawn, I examine how these complex identifications were undermined and reshaped in the nineteenth century, most notably as a result of this community's being categorized as Ismaili Muslims by the colonial state, replete with a religious 'identity' in the modern sense of the term. I contend that this modern identity works against the more capacious identifications of an earlier moment in the life of the community.[1] Instead of understanding Ismailis as Muslim in so far as they fit into an Arab-centred

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and pre-existing logic of Muslimness, I hope to argue for a recapture of an earlier moment in their identification as Muslim that incorporates, rather than abrogates, heterogeneity. To pursue the question of global Islam, then, calls for an engagement with the multiple strands and values of that earlier moment as they are in tension with current conceptions of modern religious identity.[2]

The stakes of my work become clearer by way of a brief digression into a history of scholarship on Islam. Islam has generally been studied by western scholars as a primarily Arab phenomenon, to the detriment of a more rigorous understanding of the religion's diverse constitution. A crude summary of such a history might start by noting how Islam came to be conflated with a narrowly defined and monolithic character as early as the Crusades.[3] The official and widespread European regard of Islam in the nineteenth century saw the rise of pioneering work in Arabic language and literature by famous European Orientalists.[4] This preoccupation with Arabic texts led to a particular tendency to prioritize the 'classical' age of Islam as a 'golden' yet static tradition. It is crucial to note that while the historical study of Islam has moved beyond giving exclusive primacy to Arabic sources and the Arab geographic epicentre espoused by Orientalists,[5] canonical western scholarship on Islamic theology (for want of a better word) continues to assert that Muslim beliefs and practices are exhaustively captured by a primarily Arab-centric socio-cultural framework, most notably, 'the five pillars of Islam'.[6] My work addresses this significant lacuna, and this is how my project is situated within the broader field of global Islamic studies: it challenges some of the basic presuppositions or biases informing scholarship in this field. My working assumption is that this valorization of 'origins' and the consequent reification of Islamic 'tradition' continue to give us a misleading and circumscribed picture of the cultural diversity within Islam – in short, effacing what has for long been 'global' about Islam. In order to reclaim that pluralistic and truly global Islam, let me start at the end, or the outcome, of a legal case.

Colonial identifications

In the ruling of the Aga Khan Case of 1866, the caste group of khojas was given an 'Ismaili' religious identity by the Bombay High Court. This judgment was decided after a twenty-four-day trial that commenced because a group of Bombay khoja caste leaders filed a suit against the Aga Khan, a Persian nobleman and exile who was recognized as a caste leader and object of devotion by some khojas in the mid-nineteenth century. The plaintiffs claimed that the property of the khojas belonged only to members of the khoja caste, and since the Aga Khan was not a khoja, he had no right to intervene in caste and property issues. Although the disagreements between the two sides centred specifically on control of caste affairs and property ownership, the property dispute of 1866 ultimately resolved the question of religious identity – of the khojas and the Aga Khan.[7] In the final judgment, the judge proclaimed that khojas were Shia Imami Ismailis, the Aga Khan was imam of this 'sect', and as such, rightful owner of khoja caste property.[8]

The judge decided that the khojas were Shia Ismaili through a particular reading of the khojas' religious text, the *Dasavatār* ginān.[9] Explaining that the first nine chapters of *Dasavatār* narrate stories of Vaishnava avatars, but the final chapter specifically

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focuses on Ali, the first Shia imam, the judge concluded that this particular theological division in the text attested to the history and identity of khojas as Hindu converts to Ismaili Islam.[10] I begin with a reading of this court judgment to illustrate how the juridical appropriation of *Dasavatār* as an 'Ismaili' text and Justice Arnould's official identification of khojas as 'Ismaili' have displaced the complex Indo-Islamic beliefs and ideas enjoined in *Dasavatār*.[11] I show how this same kind of identifying approach is replicated in sectarian understandings of *Dasavatār* as an 'Ismaili' text[12] as well as in syncretistic interpretations of Indo-Islamic literature more broadly. Finally, I offer readings of *Dasavatār* that underscore the ways in which foundational aspects of Islamic temporality – the Quranic message of supersession and imamate messianism – are uniquely configured through Indic idioms in the poem, thereby arguing that *Dasavatār* is best understood as an instantiation of global Islam and its practices of cultural accommodation and ecumenism.[13]

Amrita Shodhan has convincingly outlined how the legislative authority of the colonial state – through a series of legal judgments – transformed the identity of the khojas from a caste group to a religious sect in the mid-nineteenth century.[14] Her argument about the force of colonial law relates closely to what Bernard Cohn, Nicholas Dirks, and Kenneth Jones have shown about the ways in which categories such as caste and religion provided the means through which the colonial regime sought to identify and classify the Indian population as a form of governance.[15] It is apparent that the colonial court's constitution of Ismaili identity proved to be a rather dramatic example of the colonial state's 'ethnography' of caste and religious groups that Dirks describes:[16] by the second half of the nineteenth century, the official narrative about khojas and Ismailis in the colonial census of 1899 cites the Aga Khan Case of 1866 as its source about khojas as Hindu converts to Ismaili Islam.[17]

This reified understanding of sectarian Islam that developed in the colonial context has had lasting repercussions. The current Ismaili Imam, Karim Shah (Aga Khan IV), has made great strides in 'Islamicizing' the Ismaili liturgical setting by changing the language of service from the vernacular Gujarati to Arabic, mandating greater use of the Qur'an, and officially expunging all 'non-Muslim' forms of religiosity from Ismaili ritual practice.[18] Furthermore, the logic of this conversion story about Ismailis – in which Hindus became Muslims – has been naturalized in Ismaili studies scholarship starting with the first Orientalist, Wladimir Ivanow, until today, whereby Ismaili Islam is represented as a sect of Islam originating in Persia and culminating with the conversion of khojas in India.[19]

Sectarian readings of *Dasavatār*

In 1866, Justice Arnould officially pronounced that khojas were Shia Ismaili, and that *Dasavatār* was a Shia Ismaili text. In the opening of the1866 judgment, Justice Arnould introduced his discussion of the case with a series of questions that he found necessary to resolve before arriving at his decision:

> First: What are the Sunnis as distinct from Shias?
> Secondly: Who and What are the Shia Imami Ismailis?
> Thirdly: Who and what is the first defendant, the Aga Khan?

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> Fourthly: Who and what are the khojas and what are and have been their relations with the first defendant and his ancestors?
> Fifthly: What have been the relations of the first defendant, Aga Khan, with the particular community to which the relators and plaintiffs belong, viz., the khoja community of Bombay?[20]

In answering these questions, Arnould first outlined the differences between Sunnis versus Shias, explaining that while the Sunnis are the 'orthodox Mussulmans' whose profession of faith declares that 'There is no God but God and Mahomet is the Apostle of God', the Shias hold 'the elevation of Ali to an almost co-equal position with the Apostle of God himself'.[21] Pinning this doctrinal difference between Sunnis and Shias to the figure of Ali, Arnould provided textual evidence from the final chapter of *Dasavatār* to prove its Shia identity, explaining that 'no Suni could have composed, compiled, or adapted such a work as this; the idolatry of the first nine chapters, the semi-deification Ali implied the tenth chapter, alike are utterly impossible'.[22] By attributing the organization of *Dasavatār* to the workings of Ismaili missionaries who assume 'the standpoint of the intended (Hindu) convertite', Arnould affirmed the defence's position that *Dasavatār* 'supplements the imperfect Vishnuvite system by superadding the cardinal doctrine of the Ismailis'[23] – thereby identifying *Dasavatār* as Ismaili and khojas as Hindu converts to Ismaili Islam on the basis of this particular reading.

Scholarly discussions about *Dasavatār* and the ginān̄s as 'Ismaili' poetry reiterate this position. According to Azim Nanji, the most significant aspect of *Dasavatār*'s[24] status as a classic Ismaili text is its theological message. He argues that the poem's 'chief value' rests in its explication of 'Imam as Divine Epiphany', which he explains as a central belief of the Ismaili tradition whereby the arrival of the tenth avatar of Vishnu is announced under the name of Nakalanki ('Stainless One').[25] In this particular conception, the figure of Nakalanki is equated with Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet and the Mahdi who is expected, in the final eschatological moments, to arrive and kill the demon Kalingo, the embodiment of evil. This notion of 'Imam as divine epiphany' signifies, according to Nanji, *Dasavatār*'s identity as an Ismaili Muslim text. To support this interpretation, Nanji explains that the first nine avatars in the ginān̄s correspond to the names of the Sanskrit puranic order of Vishnu's descents. However, in the figure of the tenth avatar, one meets with a point of divergence in the ginān tradition, where the tenth avatar is not the traditional Kalki, but the Ismaili Nakalanki. Through the figure of the final avatar, Nanji's analysis claims an ultimate rupture and disjuncture between classical Vaishnava and Ismaili theologies. While Nanji acknowledges a similarity between the Vaishnava and Ismaili conceptions of time ('Hindu and Ismaili cyclical views') and of the avatar and imam as figures representing 'divine epiphany', the elements of Vaishnavism in the ginān̄s are ultimately relegated to a framework function that facilitates the integration of Ismaili thought.[26]

The closing lines of the *Dasavatār* of Imam Shah reveal the simultaneity of Vaishnava and Shia idioms in the description of the tenth avatar:

> *Tāre dasamun rupa tiaṁ nakalaṁkī nārāyena rupa sāra:*
> *Tīaṁ deve dhareyo sirī molā muratajā alīnuṁ avātara*

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(Then the tenth form is truly the form of Nakalanki Narayana. There the deva has assumed the form of the blessed Maula Murtada Ali)[27]

This kind of juxtaposition of epithets with seemingly disjunctive objects is a frequent occurrence throughout the poem that plays out in different ways. Here, the honorific titles and references to the tenth avatar – 'Nakalanki,' 'Narayana,' and 'Maula Murtada Ali' – clearly force the reader to dislodge the figure from conventional Vaishnava/puranic associations. In this particular example, the names deployed to describe this figure produce a kind of tension that precludes the possibility of ascertaining the 'identity' of the avatar along sectarian lines, as the multiple appellations are positioned side by side, and names such as 'Nakalanki', 'Naryana', 'deva' and 'Ali' all appear at equivalence.

Despite this concurrence of Vaishnava and Shia references to the tenth avatar, Nanji singles out the reference 'Nakalanki' among all others and posits this figure as representative of Ismaili thought.[28] As such, 'Nakalanki' is given primacy among all other subjects, and so, for example, with the above verse, the other possible subjects, such as 'Narayana', would be relegated to the 'framework' apparatus that facilitates the integration of this 'Ismaili' figure 'Nakalanki'. Regardless of the infrequent appearance of 'Nakalanki', scholars appear to have focused on this specific epithet as the tenth avatar's 'identity' because a particular etymological analysis of the word has provided support for larger claims about *Dasavatār* as an Ismaili conversion text. According to this argument, 'Nakalanki' is a formulation based on the Sanskrit, 'Kalki', which is rendered as 'stain' or 'blemish' and refers to the final Vaishnava avatar, plus the ni or na, the Sanskrit negating prefix. This leads to the conclusion that 'Kalki' plus 'na' is equated to a 'non-Kalki', the non-Vaishnava 'Stainless One', or Ali.[29]

Ginān poetry and the issue of syncretism

Although the above scholarly analyses of *Dasavatār* effectively situate *Dasavatār* as an expression of Ismaili Islam, there are approaches to gināns that move from a sectarian to a more syncretistic approach. Tazim Kassam's analysis of the ginān 'Brahma Prakasha', for example, operates on a syncretistic model – one that claims to equalize the significance of the diverse components in the ginān. Her approach is based on an analytical structure which acknowledges, first, the 'coexistence of diverse elements', second, 'coherence of their combined configuration', and third, the 'retention of self-identities'.[30] Although her position attempts to move beyond the prioritization of an Ismaili component and, instead, emphasizes 'the tolerable co-existence of separate identities', her study nevertheless operates on the assumption of an identity-based separation between 'Hindu and Ismaili viewpoints',[31] both of which represent distinct ontological entities. What distinguishes Kassam's approach from straightforwardly sectarian interpretations of *Dasavatār*, however, is an acknowledgment of an overlap between different semantic domains – what she describes as a 'dynamic aspect' to syncretism.[32] This 'dynamic' feature of syncretistic literature that Kassam addresses has been taken up in other studies of Indo-Islamic literature. Tony Stewart has made strides in rethinking traditionally

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syncretistic approaches to religious expression in Bengali Sufi literature. Stewart argues that studies of Bengali Sufi literature have tended to conceive of the tradition as either deviant or hybrid, both of which, for him, come down to a perspective of an 'unholy alliance of religious entities that should be kept apart in an ideal world'.[33] In attempting to rethink notions of syncretism, Stewart proposes understanding the process by which religious vocabulary and, in turn, the shape of Bengali vernacular language develop in light of Nida's theory of 'dynamic equivalence'.

In demonstrating the relevance of this theory, Stewart provides an example of this phenomenon from the Bengali Sufi text *Nabi Vamsha*, where the author, Saiyad Sultan, adopts the term avatar to describe the Prophet Muhammad. This choice to describe Muhammad as an avatar is what Stewart explains as a search for a 'term of equivalence' on the part of the author.[34] Stewart argues that deploying the term 'avatar' to describe Muhammad is a process that transpires between two opposing linguistic idioms, Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit-based Bengali, which he situates as two clearly demarcated linguistic loci of the source language (Arabic and Persian) and the target or receiving language (Bengali, with Sanskrit as its 'parent' language).[35] In his opinion, since both terms, nabi and avatar, share a common meaning of divinely inspired guidance – although from different language sources – they can be drawn together as terms of equivalence.[36]

Since the nabi/avatar idiom appears frequently in *Dasavatār* as well, one might be inclined to think about applying the 'dynamic equivalence' reading to Indo-Islamic idioms in ginān poetry. In the *Dasavatār* of Imam Shah, for example, 'Nabi Muhammad' appears in the opening lines of the poem in the following way:

> The true guru Brahma has said the truth of truths,
> So the guruji spoke.
> The true guru, the Prophet Muhammad has said the Truth of Truths,
> So the guru Hasan Shah's son, Pir Imam Shah spoke.[37]

In another representation of 'Nabi Muhammad', he is described as an incarnation of 'Guru Brahma':

> Then, saintly one, today in the *Kali* era, accept the *Atharva Veda* as the true authority:
> Today the guru Brahma has assumed the name of the Prophet Muhammad.[38]

According to Stewart's theory of dynamic equivalence, the above references to 'Nabi Muhammad' as an avatar could suggest 'divinely-inspired guidance' as a possible interpretative understanding of the figure. However, 'Nabi Muhammad' appears several times and in changing positions, as the above verses illustrate. Similar to the earlier examples of the tenth avatar, here too, the reader encounters the epithet 'Nabi Muhammad' somewhat interchangeably with other divine figures – guruji, Brahma, and the author, Imam Shah – all of which equally stand in as the subject of 'speaking' in the first example. And in the second passage, 'Nabi Muhammad' is introduced in relation to the authority of the *Atharva Veda*[39] and within a particular temporal context of the Kali yuga. While these representations of 'Nabi Muhammad' could generally be defined as 'divinely-inspired guidance', the possible range of interpretations

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activated by the connection between 'Nabi Muhammad' and a particular teaching, a specific temporal reference, or association with other divine figures would be undermined by the diffusing and eliding structure of the 'equivalence' model.

While the above point provides only one example of the limitations of 'dynamic equivalence', there are other reasons why this approach is inadequate for understanding concepts that emerge from texts such as the gināns. First of all, the 'search for equivalence' approach is predicated on an equal division of two linguistic idioms. This kind of dichotomous structural division Stewart delineates for Sufi literature would not work with the composite linguistic makeup of the gināns, where both Sanskrit and Perso-Arabic words occur with the same frequency, in addition to Gujarati and Hindi and the combination of the two serving as about half of the language contribution (with 'other' various languages contributing eight per cent).[40] And second, it seems that while Stewart's 'search for equivalence' attempts to undo and challenge paradigms of syncretism, this method ultimately operates on an essential diametric opposition. That is to say, each word must first be understood as ontologically distinct from its 'counterpart' before any kind of equivalence is drawn. In this way, the 'search for equivalence' method shares the same binary premise of sectarian and syncretistic approaches.[41]

There are other scholars who claim that syncretistic readings of concepts such as 'nabi/avatar' undermine the significance of Islam as its own independent idiom.[42] Richard Eaton, for example, comes to a very different set of conclusions about texts such as the *Nabi Vamsha*. He states, unequivocally, that it would be wrong to consider *Nabi Vamsha* syncretistic at all. Eaton claims that although Bengali deities and Hebrew prophets figure equally in *Nabi Vamsha*, this story of 'the family of the prophet' (its literal translation) draws primarily from Judeo-Islamic ideas, most important of which is its proclamation of the finality and superiority of Muhammad's prophetic mission.[43] Eaton's analysis of the centrality and finality of Muhammad's prophecy in the *Nabi Vamsha* argues against any kind of syncretism model altogether, on the grounds that the text fundamentally expresses normative Islamic theology that 'fully accords with the Quranic understanding of prophecy and God's role in human history'.[44]

Beyond sect and syncretism: temporality in *Dasavatār*

I follow Eaton's counter-syncretistic position and argue that *Dasavatār*, like *Nabi Vamsha*, ought to be understood, unequivocally, as an expression of Islam. Eaton specifically emphasizes the point that *Nabi Vamsha* ultimately prioritizes the final authority of the Prophet. The language of supersession central to the Qur'anic understanding of 'finality' is exercised in *Dasavatār* as well. Whereas the Qur'an conveys the 'finality' and 'superiority' of its theology in relation to the authority of earlier prophets and traditions, *Dasavatār* articulates its authority in relation to earlier Vedic and puranic traditions.[45] As such, *Dasavatār* replicates the particular dialectic of Quranic theology that is wholly dependent on its theological antecedents on the one hand, yet abrogates the ultimate authority thereof.

The second reason why I choose to situate *Dasavatār* as an expression of Islam is because of its message of messianic renewal. It is here that I diverge slightly from

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Eaton's position. Eaton's argument about the continuity of Islam is centrally squared within a specifically Sunni conception of time, as his argument about *Nabi Vamsha* rests on the assumption that all prophetic possibility concludes with Muhammad's death – the geographic context of which is Arab or 'Judeo-Islamic'. From a Shia perspective, however, divine intervention in history does not come to an end with Muhammad's revelation. Muhammad's spiritual and temporal power, according to Shia theology, needed to be sustained, and therefore, transferred charismatically.[46] This belief developed into the idea of hidden messiahs, or the doctrine of imamate, which brought with it the notion that imams possessed divine knowledge and powers of prediction, most notably, the 'proper time for the messianic Imam to strike'.[47]

In *Dasavatār*, the anticipation of the messiah's arrival, his actual appearance, and confrontation episode provide the narrative elements through which this Shia 'imamate paradigm'[48] is activated. The opening lines of the *Dasamo Avatar* (the final section of *Dasavatār*) introduce the protagonist of the poem, the tenth avatar, who is 'hidden' in an 'Araba desha':

> Today, in the tenth vessel, Hari is the Nakalaki incarnation.
> Today, he is sitting in the Arab country.
>
> So, how many of the important deeds of Hari could one tell?
> That Deva remains hidden today in the Kali era.
>
> So, in the Kali era, the guru Brahma is the incarnation of Pir Shams.
> That guru wandered as a mendicant in twenty-four countries.[49]

Although the tenth avatar is introduced at this time, he doesn't actually emerge from occultation until it is time to 'strike' the evil demon, Kalingo. The introductory verses leading up to this moment mostly focus on conveying the imminence of this event through the messenger, Pir Shams. Pir Shams arrives at the house of the evil demon Kalingo, in order to deliver a message to Kalingo's wife, Queen Suraja:

> Where Queen Suraja is sitting, at the very moment, assuming the form of a parrot, Pir Shams speaks:
>
> Listen, Queen Suraja, to the *Atharva Veda*, and the knowledge of Brahman,
> So that later you may attain a place in the eternal abode.
>
> Today, O Queen, you have come to the royal threshold of the house of the demon,
> but now your life is going to be wasted.
>
> On hearing such words, the queen was amazed;
> The queen went and touched the feet of Pir Shams, who was in the form of a parrot.

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Then Pir Shams spoke the truth.
Listen Queen Suraja, to the tale of the *Atharva veda*.

Queen, in the Krita era, the *Rg Veda* was current.
Then the devotee Prahlada attained liberation with five krores of beings.
In that era Hari assumed four forms, the deva, the Shah himself destroyed four demons.

Queen, know that in the second Treta era, the *Yajur Veda* was current.
Then the deva rescued the devotee Harishchandra with seven crores of beings.
In that era, the Shah himself destroyed three demons.

Queen, know the third era, to be Dvapara, when the *Sama Veda* was the basis of authority.

The Pandavas were rescued with nine crores of beings. In that era, the deva, the Shah himself, destroyed two demons. Then King Yudhisthira achieved liberation with nine krores – they attained a place in the eternal abode.

Today, in the Kali era, the place of Hari is in the *Atharva Veda*.
So, today, in the Kali era, Hari is the tenth incarnation.
That deva, the lord Murari, has assumed the Nakalaki incarnation.
He will kill your husband, Oh Lady[50]

It is apparent, from the above passage, that *Dasavatār* replicates the genre of the puranas, in which the heroic acts avatars perform for the welfare of humankind form the primary subject matter.[51] Although Pir Shams' message to the Queen deploys the language of the Vedas, yugas, and avatars, these particular traditions and concepts are invoked to emphasize the 'true authority' of the final *Atharva Veda* and its association with the final avatar. As Shams tells the Queen in this passage, understanding the words of the *Atharva Veda* will guarantee a place in 'the eternal abode' (amarapuri). In this way, Islamic supersessive theology in *Dasavatār* is expressed through the teaching of the *Atharva Veda*, that is the knowledge and belief in the tenth avatar's imminent 'strike' against the demon Kalingo.

In *Dasavatār*, the tenth avatar (referred to most frequently as the 'Shah') is the 'expected deliverer who is to come and humble or destroy the forces of wickedness and establish the rule of justice and equity on earth'.[52] This particular moment is depicted through the encounter between good and evil armies.[53] The figure of the tenth avatar, who sits in 'a place where nobody knows', is very much in accordance with Shia mahdi theology which rests on the idea not of a Christian 'second coming' but as an 'appearance (zuhur)' or a 'rise', to commence a 'great social transformation'.[54] This movement out of occultation is narrated through the mode of anticipation in the text, for the poem primarily employs the future tense to describe the imminence of the Shah's confrontation with the demon Kalingo and the establishment of his rule. Because of this mood of anticipation, it is not the actual event that is given the most attention, but rather, the details of the pre-confrontation, that is to say, the condition of the world prior to the establishment of the throne

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and the portrayal of the Shah's journey. For example, the poem explains that the arrival of the Shah and his confrontation with Kalingo's army will take place in the setting of the Kaliyug. This is a time, according to the poem, in which the world will turn upside down both physically, whereby the waters dry up and there is a shortage of food, as well as socially, where women will abandon their children, Brahmins marry shudras, and overall, people will be fraudulent and deceitful.[55] Most importantly, the believers will have been taken over by the evil power of Kalingo:

> Then, the minds of the believers will turn away from the scriptures.
> Then, the minds of the believers will be unsteady.
> Then, Kalingo will make the minds go astray.[56]

The series of inversions that transpire in the Kaliyug are the signs that the Shah is to arrive with his army:

> When all the signs are fulfilled, then know that the Shah is coming.
> Pir Imam Shah has spoken the truth, Brother, these are the last signs.[57]

While this physical and social overturning of order in the Kaliyug forms one subject of description in the anticipatory mode of *Dasavatār*, so too does the figure of the Shah himself. The text draws out the anticipation of the Shah's arrival to India through narrative details of his horse, clothes, and army. The poem states that Shah's horse is decorated in gold, the belt of its reins is studded with jewels and rubies, and even every hair on the horse is strung with jewels.[58] The Shah wears a jewel-studded suit, and his slippers glitter with gold as do his throat, from a chain of diamonds and rubies.[59] When the Shah mounts his horse, an army – described as having no limit to the number of weapons and so great that the earth can barely contain it – is followed by the gathering of musicians, where drums are beating and 'eighteen krores of war horns play'.[60] This scene is the build-up to the Shah's entrance into India: the poet explains that the army of the Shah is so vast that it cannot be contained between the Himalaya and Meru mountains.[61]

This entire account of the Shah's army and the detailed descriptions of his physical form set the stage for the confrontation between the Shah and Kalingo, where, finally, the Shah takes his sword and slays the entire army of the demon.[62] The verses that follow this event describe the new condition in which the Shah will rule:

> Then all the gathered creation is recreated
> Here, the Shah causes all the believers to rule.
>
> There all sit together with guru Muhammad as the vizier.
> There, the Lord of the three creations will cause all the believers to rule.[63]

Ultimately, the poem closes by stating that those who follow the words of the *Dasavatār* will be spared from the cycle of reincarnation (samsara) and will avoid the fire of the great day (mahadin).[64]

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Conclusion

In the passages discussed above, temporality is articulated, first and foremost, in relation to the messianic event of the Shah's rise from occultation, the slaying of Kalingo, and the establishment of his rule. In the opening verses of the poem, this imamate theology of *Dasavatār* is introduced within the context of the Vaishnava cycle of descents and equated with knowledge of the supersessive authority of the *Atharva Veda*. In that same discussion, the subject of afterlife is also introduced, for the Pir explains to the Queen that knowing the tenth avatar will destroy her husband and will guarantee her a place in the eternal abode (amarapuri).[65] What is ambiguous about this reference to 'amarapuri' at this point is whether it refers to a post-cyclical or post-linear temporal state. In the closing lines of the poem, however, it becomes clear that the representation of the afterlife, as samsara/mahadin, is simultaneously twofold: as both judgment day and the cycle of reincarnation.

It is apparent that the simultaneity of samsara/mahadin cannot be made equivalent through syncretistic approaches, as no single definition or process of commensuration can account for both the cyclical and linear aspects of temporality. It is all the more obvious that concepts of temporality in *Dasavatār* cannot be relegated to understandings of sect that are premised on a teleology of conversion in which 'Vaishnava Hindu' components provide a framework through which 'Ismaili Islam' is 'superadded'.[66] This identitarian logic activated by the colonial state and assimilated into Ismaili studies scholarship not only effaces the poem's pluralistic notions of time, but, more significantly, occludes the messianic imaginary essential to *Dasavatār*'s message. By foregrounding the uniquely Indo-Islamic expressions of temporality that inform *Dasavatār*'s messianic imaginary, it is my intention to destabilize origins-centred discussions about what is and what is not Islam and engage instead with the workings of global Islam and its practices of cultural assimilation and appropriation.[67]

Notes

1 Purohit (forthcoming).

2 In this sense, then, 'global Islam' is neither a recent phenomenon associated with globalization, nor a religious formation that is uniform worldwide. Global Islam refers to the diverse modes of assimilation and forms of cultural expression through which Islam has manifested itself in various contexts around the world.

3 Said (1979).

4 Richard Eaton explains that with the rise of colonial domination in the Muslim world, starting in the eighteenth century, Asiatic societies were established in India and chairs for the study of Arabic were founded in European universities. Famous Orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher, Julius Wellhausen, Louis Massignon, and Reynold Nicholson studied Islamic civilization through philological mastery of Arabic. Eaton (2000, 10–11).

5 For example, through studies in Greek, Armenian, and Syraic sources, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone argued that followers of Muhammad regarded

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themselves as 'Hagarenes', (descendents of Abraham through Hagar) and that the movement originated in northern Arabia and not Mecca. Although their conclusions have been considered controversial, their reliance on non-Arabic sources as well as their understanding of Islam as an evolutionary movement continuous with pagan and Jewish apocalyptic traditions opened up the possibility of engaging with the diverse linguistic and cultural traditions of the early period (Crone and Cook 1977).

6 The key word here is 'exhaustive', as the five pillars do not touch upon the multiplicity and complexity of Muslim practices around the world. One can make a mild criticism of surveys and introductions to Islam for the western academy in this regard. While some of these books offer brief discussions on Shiism, Sufism, or 'popular' Islam, rarely are literary sources or rituals outside of the 'five pillars' frame represented as beliefs and practices of Muslims (see Rahman 1979; Denny 1987; Esposito 1994; Nigosian 2004; Rippen 2005).

7 For the most comprehensive analysis of how this property dispute was arbitrated through the terms of religious identity, see Shodhan (2001).

8 Arnould (1866), in the judgment of the case.

9 *Dasavatār* is a medieval/early modern Gujarati poem of the ginān genre. The gināns (from the Sanskrit jnāna, or 'knowledge') are a body of poems that were composed primarily in the languages of Gujarati/Hindustani/Sindhi, during the periods of roughly the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in the areas of Gujarat, Sindh and Punjab. For both literary and historical discussion of the poetry, see Asani (1991, 1–18); Shackle and Moir (1992); Kassam (1995); Esmail (2002).

10 Arnould (1866, 359–60). This official reading of *Dasavatār* as part of a continuum of Ismaili Islam was determined through a procrustean framework premised on a classical western division between church and sect – where 'church' represents a corporate centre and sects are understood as groups that break off from the official centre while retaining certain elements fundamental to the doctrines of the 'church'. See definitions of church and sect in Troeltsch (1931, 331–4). For an examination of the ways in which 'sect' has been applied in the Indian context, see Weber (1922) and Wilson (1904).

11 Let me be clear: I am arguing not that khojas were not Muslim per se, but that the requirement of their inclusion within the colonial understanding of who is and who is not a Muslim required the effacement of some of the fundamental ways that they *were* Muslim. That is, the less conventional aspects of khoja beliefs and practices were themselves aspects of an Islamic subjectivity, and the preoccupation with origins has denied the Muslimness of those aspects of khoja religiosity that did not fit into the procrustean framework.

12 It is important to remember that 'Ismaili' only became the normative reference to ginān poetry subsequent to the historical juncture of the 1866. This substitution must be understood as part of the state's official proclamation about the khojas as converted Ismaili Muslims and the status of the Aga Khan as Ismaili imam. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that not only were there khojas who did not agree to these new terms of participation, but more importantly, at the time and even today, there remain groups, such as the Imam Shahis of Gujarat, Meghval devotees of Ramdev Pir in Rajasthan, and the Mahamargi Meghvals of Saurashtra, who follow incorporate gināns into ritual practices but do not identify themselves as Ismaili (see Ivanow 1936; Khan 1997; Khan and Moir 1999, 133–54; Mallison 2001, 365–6).

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13 In this way, I follow Talal Asad's argument that the Islamic tradition 'is based on the notion of plural social groupings and plural religious traditions – especially (but not only) of the Abrahamic traditions [ahl al-kitab]. And of course, it has always accommodated a plurality of scriptural interpretations. There is a well-known dictum in the shari'a: ikhtilaf al-umma rahma [difference within the Islamic tradition is a blessing]' (Asad 1996).
14 Shodhan (2001).
15 Jones (1981); Cohn (1987); Dirks (2001).
16 Dirks (2001, 44–5).
17 In terms of how the Aga Khan Case codified the identity of khojas as Hindu converts to Shia Ismailism in the census, see Campbell (1899, 36–49).
18 Ali Asani explains that during the current Aga Khan's Imamate, Hindu rituals and practices, especially those connected to birth, marriage, and death, have been removed (Asani 1987, 37).
19 Ivanow (1952); Nanji (1978); Daftary (1990).
20 Arnould (1866, 330).
21 Arnould (1866, 331).
22 Arnould (1866, 359).
23 Arnould (1866, 359).
24 *Dasavatār* exists in three separate manuscript versions and is attributed to three different authors: Pir Shams, Pir Sadrudin, and Pir Imam Shah. Of these three, the longest version of *Dasavatār* is attributed to Imam Shah. Gulshan Khakee has translated the tenth avatar portion (*Dasamo Avatār*) of this particular version of *Dasavatār* into English. Khakee explains that her translation emerges from two manuscripts. The first is an Imam Shahi manuscript belonging to the pir of the Imam Shahi satpanthis of the Khandesh area, which is dated to 1823, and another older version found at the Ismaili Research Association at Karachi, which is dated to 1781. Since there is no published *Dasavatār*, I will be working from Khakee's transliteration and translation (Khakee 1972).
25 Nanji (1978, 111–13).
26 Nanji (1978, 113). Ali Asani also argues that the text demonstrates a process of 'integration' through which the doctrine of the Imam – the Ismaili component – is incorporated into a Vaishnavite framework. See Asani (1991, 14).
27 Khakee (1972, 472).
28 That 'Nakalanki' has assumed centre stage among all the various messianic images and epithets in *Dasavatār* is surprising to begin with, considering the name itself only appears a few times in the five-hundred-verse poem of Imam Shah (Khakee 1972, 14).
29 See Khakee (1972, 58), as well as Khan (1997, 413).
30 Kassam (1994, 231).
31 Kassam (1994, 241).
32 Kassam (1994, 241).
33 Stewart (2001, 261).
34 Stewart (2001, 281).
35 Stewart (2001, 274).
36 Stewart (2001, 281).
37 sīrī satagura bhramā ho vācā sācī re sāca
evī gurajīe bolī vāca

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sīrī sataguru nabī mahamada ho vācā sācī re sāca
evī guru hasana shāha suta bolea pīra imama shāha vāca. (Khakee 1972, 62)

38 Te munīvara bhai āja kalajuga māhe soi karo atharaveda pirimāna; āja gura bhirājī nabhī mahāmadha dharāveo nāma. (Khakee 1972, 68)

39 For further discussion of the significance of *Atharva Veda*, see p. 132.

40 In terms of grammar, Shackle and Moir contend that it consists of a 'loose mix of Gujarati and Hindi, i.e. the Kari Boli Hindustani which underlies both modern Hindi and Urdu, with only occasional use of Braj Bhasha forms' (Shackle and Moir 1992, 43).

41 Some scholars have found this approach of 'equivalence' theory relevant to studies of Islam in the Indian context. Jackie Assayag, for example, directly adopts Stewart's equivalence model for understanding relationships between Hindus and Muslims in India. Assayag explains that in order to understand the social history of Islam on the subcontinent, one should not focus on what separates Islam from Hinduism, but instead concentrate on what is shared culturally. As part of a seemingly secular impulse to call attention to shared religious sites, practices, and spaces among Hindus and Muslims, he argues for the relevance of Stewart's 'exchange equivalence' theory to understand the encounter of diverse traditions because it 'gives priority to the cultural context' (Assayag 2004, 42).

42 Metcalf (2005).

43 Eaton (1993, 288–90).

44 He explains further, 'By proclaiming the finality and superiority of Muhammad's prophetic mission, then, Saiyid Sultan's work provides the rationale for displacing all other nabi/avatars from Bengal's religious atmosphere' (Eaton 1993, 290).

45 See discussion, pp. 131–132.

46 This idea, the doctrine of the imamate, developed from a basic notion of a leader who would bring justice to the oppressed in the early years of Islam, to a highly complex concept of the eschatological hidden imam (Sachedina1981, 18).

47 Sachedina (1981, 18).

48 Abbas Amanat explains: 'Contrary to the Sunni madhi, whose advent was aimed to enhance the foundations of Islam on a periodic (centennial) basis, Shi'i Islam essentially strived to invoked the Imamate paradigm so as to bring about the resurrection and an end to the prevailing dispensation. The Imam's advent will differentiate the forces of good from evil in two confronting armies and establish the sovereignty of the House of the Prophet . . .' (Amanat 2000, 238).

49 Āja te dasame harī pātra nakalakī avatāra; te āja baetha ārabha desa majhāra
Te ketāka calatra harīna kahe; te deva āja kalajuga māhe gubata hoi rahe
Te karajuga māhe gura bhiramā pīra samasa avatāra; te gur fakir firiā covīsa mulaka majhāra (Gulshan Khakee's translation of the Imam Shah *Dasamo Avatar* in the 'The Dasavatara of the Satpanthi Ismailis and the Imam Shahis of Indo-Pakistan', 70–2).

50 Te popata rupe gura pīra samasa thaeā: jīhā surajā rānī hotī tene sata khane tīhā popata rupe hoi pīra samasa bhane
Jīhā suraja rānī bethī che sata khanāe: tīhā popata rupe hoi pīra samasa bhanee
Tame suno suraja rānī atharaveda bharana ginānа: jethi tame pāo āgara pāo amarāpurīno thāma
Āja tu rānī rādya dhuāra daita ghara āi: have taro janama varāratha gaeo
Eso vacana sunīne suraja rānī acabī raheā: rānī te gura popatane pīra samasane lāgā jāi pāheāa

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Tabha pīra samasa boleā vasāta: tume suno surajā rānī athara vedakī vāta
Rānī amare karatā juga māhe rugha veda vepāra: te bagata pāmce korīese sidho pralhāda
Te juga māhe cāra rupa harīe dharea: deva chāra dānava sāhe āpe saghāreā
Rānī tame dujā tretā juga māhe jāna: tare jujara ved hotā paramāna
Tare deve sāte kirorīsu bhagata udhāreā hirīcadra: te juga māhe trana dānava sāhe āpe saghāreā
Rānī trīja duāpura jugano sehena jāna: tare sāma veda hotā paramāna
Nava kirorīso pādhava udhareā: te juga māhe deva doe dānava shāha āpe saghāreā
Te nave kirorīese sīdha jujosatara rāe: te pāmeā amarapurīnā thāma
Āja kalījuga māhe athara veda māhe thāra: te āja kalajuga māhe harī dasmu avatāra
Te deva nakalakī avatāra dhareo sirī murāra:
Te tone bharathāra mare ho nāra. (Khakee 1972, 75–86)

51 Dimmitt and Van Buitenen (1978, 62).

52 Sachedina (1981, 1).

53 'The Imam's advent will differentiate the forces of good from evil in two confronting armies and the sovereignty of the house of the prophet . . .' (Amanat 2000, 238).

54 Sachedina explains that the occultation (ghayba) and return (raj'a) form the two central beliefs of Shia messianism (Sachedina 1981, 2).

55 Khakee (1972, 153–62).

56 tāre te mumananā āgamathī mana uthase
tāre mumanana mana khasana hoere
tāre kārīgo cata cāra kare
bhai guru kaha have ata ehane jāese soere (Khakee 1972, 169–70).

57 ye nīshāni puri padase
bhai tare so nīshānī āvī jāna
tām pīra imāma shā sata vacanām bolyā sahī
bhai ye chelu che nīdāmna (Khakee 1972, 182–3).

58 sāhanā ghodāne lagāma jadī saravana tanī
ghodāne bahuta hīra manīka jadyā
te ghodānā gale hīra ratanamnī māla
te ghodāne mānaka motī purāyā bāro bāla (Khakee 1972, 194–196)

59 shāne rataman jadata peyera
tena paganī mocadī saravana jhalake āpāra
sāhāne māthe jharake hīrā ratananī māra (Khakee 1972, 228–30).

60 Bījo korī adhāra vādye rinitora (Khakee 1972, 265).

61 te sāmīnu sehena mehera sakhara vice na miāe: te sāmi cālatā sehena ghorā savā gaja dharatīe lāda carāe (Khakee 1972, 301).

62 te khādu manam vīcārī mele jādu rāye
te daītanu sarave dala māru tene thāra (Khakee 1972, 362–3).

63 tāre pache sirita sajoga sarave racanā thāe
tāre sarave rakhīāne sāhā rādya karāe
tām sarave bhelī bese gora mahamada sāthe vajīra
tām trabhavanamā svāmī rāja karāvase:
sarave rakhaīāne da sadhīra (Khakee 1972, 375–6).

64 te ā dasamo avatārnā vacanam mā cāle nara ne nāra
te āvagaman nā pade samsāra
je koī īmānasu srī nārāyena devano dasamo āvatāra puro sāmale bhane narane nāra:
tene māhadīnamni ācam nā lāge lagāra (Khakee 1972, 466–7).

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65 See above, p. 131.

66 This is the language deployed by Arnould (1866; see above, p. 27–28), but as discussed earlier, it also forms the logic of sectarian interpretations of gināns.

67 Muzaffar Alam argues how 'it was not simply in its earlier phases that Islam borrowed from and interacted with non-Islamic worlds. In its entire history, I suggest, Islam appropriated and welcomed ideas from the world outside. Islamic ideals and doctrines were open to interpretation.... Islam's history was far more a kind of dialogue with the worlds it reached – and reached out to' (Alam 2004, 24).

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