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 Shi'i Isma'ilis, the Bohras consider themselves heirs of the Fāṭimid Imāmate (909–1171). Whereas other Isma'ili 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 Isma'ili 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 'Alawi 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

'Alawi Bohras – Neo-Fāṭimids – manuscript culture – document(ary practice)s – *khizāna* – *sijill* – *alāma* – Shi'i material culture

1 Introduction¹

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 Musta'li Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis, are a contemporary Shi'i Muslim merchant community of approximately one million and two hundred thousand believers, residing mainly in Gujarat and across the Western Indian Ocean littoral.² While today the Bohras are divided into several sub-groups, notably the Dawoodis of Surat and Mumbai, the 'Alawis 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 'Alawis, the second biggest Bohra community after the Dawoodis. The religious headquarters of the Bohra Alawis is can be found in Baroda (Vadodara) and the community consists of roughly 8,000 believers.³

As Shi'i Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis, the Bohras consider themselves heirs of the Fāṭimid Imāmate, an Isma'ili empire that ruled over much of the Mediterranean and North Africa from the tenth to the twelfth century.⁴ 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.⁵ I have documented the mobility and social lives of these manuscripts and their *khizānāt* as spaces of enshrinement elsewhere.⁶ 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 Nizārīs, 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.⁷

Having had the rare opportunity of accessing one of these *khizānāt*, belonging to the royal family of the ʿAlawī 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.⁸ In this article I argue that the ʿAlawīs’ 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 ʿAlawī 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*.⁹ 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

conquest of Cairo, led, due to ideological reasons, to the systematic destruction of the books held in the Fāṭimid *khizānāt* and other institutions.¹⁰ The popular paradigm of the destruction of the Fāṭimid *khizānāt* and the vanishing of its cultural memory does not, however, reflect historical reality.¹¹ 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.¹²

While Fāṭimid Isma'īlism gradually faded away in Egypt in the centuries that followed, a flourishing Arabic Isma'īli manuscript culture continued to exist in Yemen and later Gujarat.¹³ In Yemen, the so-called "Ṭayyibī Isma'īlis" had survived the fall of the Fāṭimid empire, having split off from the palace well before its demise, following a separate genealogy of Imams.¹⁴ Initially, the Isma'īlis of Yemen had supported the Fāṭimid cause until the schism that followed Caliph al-Āmir bi-Aḥkām bi'llāh's death in 528/1130.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ In this survival narrative, the Ṭayyibī Isma'īlis 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 Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 360/971), al-Qādī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974), Mu'ayyad 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 Isma'īlism 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 Shi'i 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 *genīza* 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.¹⁷

3 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.¹⁸ Rustow argues that the survival of these

documents was specific to the special legal status of these communities as *dhimmīs* (non-Muslims) in the Fāṭimid empire.¹⁹

A community, however, that was indeed Muslim and thus did not enjoy a *dhimmī*-status, were the Ismaʿīlis of Yemen. Prior to their allegiance to Imam al-Ṭayyib, they formed a Fāṭimid enclave in South Arabia under the local ruling dynasty of the Ṣulayḥids (r. 438–532/1047–1138), who had sworn their allegiance to the Fāṭimids in 429/1037.²⁰ Through Imamic *ṣijillāt*, the Fāṭimid Caliph Imams were in personal correspondence with the Ṣulayḥids. It seems that this form of diplomatic correspondence, referred to as “*ṣijillāt*”, was by no means incidental, nor merely part of standard diplomatic protocol. The *ṣijillāt* reveal that the Ṣulayḥids were close allies of the Fāṭimids and represented their political and missionary interests in South Arabia and beyond.²¹ According to the narrative of the community, along with these imperial *ṣijillāt*, *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 Fāṭimid institutions, these and other Imamic *ṣijillāt* ended up outliving the Fāṭimids and Ṣulayḥids 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.²²

Though the existence of these Imamic *ṣijillāt* is known to the academic community, the field of Fāṭimid documents has thus far been dominated by the Jewish *genīza* model, based on their preservation history as sacred trash.²³ Yet the survival of Fāṭimid *ṣijillāt* in Bohra *khizānāt* tells a different story entirely. A story beyond the *genīza* repository as the final resting place of the material lives of Fāṭimid documents. The Bohra *khizāna* gives us a different perspective into the world of the Fāṭimids, not from the perspective of religious minorities *vis à vis* the state and their assumed subjectivity, but from a position of power, allegiance, and regional politics as the empire’s Ismaʿīli representatives in Yemen.²⁴ Simply put, as *dhimmīs* Jews and Christians had a different relationship to the state than the Ṭayyibīs as Ismaʿīlis, and therefore their respective social practices of writing and storing documents differed. In the case of the Ṭayyibīs and later Bohras, it is a story of correspondence, careful preservation, and enshrinement in *khizānāt*, instead of petitioning, storing, and discarding in *genīzot*. Whereas the social lives of Fāṭimid decrees and letters thus ended in the Cairo *genīza* as sacred but nonetheless trash, the Fāṭimid *ṣijillāt* gained a new social life across Ismaʿīli *khizānāt* in Yemen and Gujarat as sacred treasures.

It is perhaps not surprising, but nonetheless remarkable, that Fāṭimid documents, and copies thereof, survived among a community such as the Ṭayyibī Ismaʿīlis and later Bohras. While the physical *ṣijillāt* did not survive in their original form as vertical diplomatic rolls, they were assembled and copied into manuscripts.²⁵ 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 *ṣijillāt* are enshrined in the Bohra *khizāna* tradition, and treated like any another manuscript of the treasury of books: as sacred objects. To the ʿAlawis 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-Fāṭimid identity. Yet, as I immersed myself in the world of the ʿAlawi Bohras and its everyday life, I observed that the presence of these *ṣijillāt* pointed to a larger phenomenon within the community. Instead of laying around in the *khizāna* as old dusty books from the past, the *ṣijillāt* have a rich social life in the community. As such, they are part of living documentary phenomenon the ʿAlawis themselves are perhaps not even conscious of because it is *how things are done*: the phenomenon of how Fāṭimid documentary practices and their *ṣijillāt* 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 *Dā'ī*, 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*.²⁶ 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. I 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 Ṭayyibī Isma'īli communities and their *khizānāt*.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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)

FIGURE 1
Example of a Fāṭimid *sijill*
SOURCE: STERN, *FATIMID
DECREEES: ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS
FROM THE FATIMID CHANCERY*,
PLATE 8

FIGURE 2
The Mazoon Saheb reading a *sijill*
in his *khizāna* while others are
laying on the floor

The presence of Imamic *sijillāt* in the Alawi *khizāna* is an important aspect of the Bohra Neo-Fāṭimid tradition and identity.²⁹ 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 ‘Alawis, 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

"*sayyidnā*" (our master), abbreviated as "Sy.") or *Dāṭis*, 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 *Dāṭ* Sy. Jalāl Shamsuddīn b. Ḥasan (*Dāṭ* no. 25, d. 975/1567) was buried in Ahmedabad.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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. Ḥasan (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. 'Alī Shamsuddīn (no. 29, d. 1046/1637) is commemorated as the founding figure of the community. Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn is the namesake and first *Dāṭ* 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. 'Alī 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. 'Alī Shamsuddīn, believers informed me, was not only demolished, but the tomb of another Dawoodi *Dāṭ* 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.³²

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 Ḥusayn*" 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 *Dāṭ*, through recitation and self-flagellation led by the Mazoon Saheb, the highest cleric of the community after the *Dāṭ*, in a tomb that was no longer theirs.³³ What was unusual, was the fact that these lamentations were not sung in honor of the Dawoodi *Dāṭ* who was buried here. Instead, the believers directed their prayers

FIGURE 3
Believers in the *musāfir khāna*
waiting to share a communal *thali*
(tradition Gujarati sharing plate).

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 *Dā’ī* thus transformed into a liminal ‘Alawi-only space where the marble grave of the Dawoodi *Dā’ī* 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 Rasulhodoob. It was the yearly *majlis* dedicated to the story of the succession of Sy. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn, conducted in *lisān al-da‘wa*, 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

khizāna, I already knew what it was: it was a *sijill*, carefully photocopied and framed in a plastic golden frame. This *sijill*, I was told, was a secret document, and its public display among believers was to be a historic moment. I therefore waited with everyone else in anticipation, eager to observe the reaction of the believers.

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 *Dā'ī* of the community.

The question of *naṣṣ* is a delicate matter among the Bohras. In line with Fāṭimid tradition, it is the *Dā'ī* alone (in Fāṭimid tradition the Imam) who is responsible for designating his successor. The *Dā'ī*, 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 *manṣūṣ* (chosen successor), I was told, is without exception a learned individual, male, and often the brother, cousin or oldest son of the *Dā'ī*. The 'Alawi clerics explained to me that the identity of the *manṣūṣ* is manifested to the *Dā'ī* through the direct *ilhām* (inspiration) coming straight from God through the hidden Imam. It is thus not through reason, but through divine revelation that the *Dā'ī* 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 *Dā'ī*. 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 *manṣūṣ* is concealed through what is known as *kitāb sirriyya*, a secret and encrypted alphabet, which is only decipherable by the *Dā'ī* 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 *manṣūṣ* is thus multi-faceted: 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'wa* as it were, the encrypted nature of the identity of the *manṣūṣ* 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 *manṣūṣ* 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 *manṣūṣ*, 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 *manṣūṣ*. 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

al-da'wa 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. 'Alī Shamsuddīn, to *risālāt* (epistles) to *ta'rikh* (historical) works, to documents and references related to the court cases, which are kept in the *khizāna*.

The *sijillāt* in particular, are at the center of what I call *the materiality of naṣṣ*: 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 *sijillāt*, 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 *naṣṣ* by publicly appointing the *manṣūṣ* during the *Dā'ī*'s lifetime, through what is known as the *naṣṣ al-jālī* (explicit *naṣṣ*), 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 *sijillāt* and other documents.³⁸ As the schisms in Bohra historiography show, the *sijill* 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 *fātiha* 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 *Dā'ī* 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, were bribed by the Dawoodis, and finally, to the martyrdom of Sy. 'Alī 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 *sijill* (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 *sijill* he held in his hands was the one and only authentic *naṣṣ* document that proved the legitimacy of Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn's position as twenty-ninth *Dā'ī* of the community. In detail, he narrated that that Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn'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 *naṣṣ*. The Mazoon continued by stressing Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn'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 *naṣṣ*. The tone of his voice became more polemical as he juxtaposed the qualities of Shamsuddīn with those of his contemporaries, who illegitimately claimed *naṣṣ* based on a forgery of the original *sijill*. After the crowd uttered eulogies in remembrance of Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn, the *sijill* went back into the handbag and a communal *thali* (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 *naṣṣ*
sijill of Sy. 'Alī Shamsuddīn by the
Mazoon Saheb (bottom)

5 The Social Meaning of the *Sijill*

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. ‘Alī Shamsuddīn as the founding *Dā’ī* of their community. The type of document, and the practice of reading the *naṣṣ* out loud among believers is reminiscent of the *Hidāya al-Āmiriyya* (*The Epistle of the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Āmir*), 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-Musta‘lī, 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 *Dā’ī* instead of that of the Imam. Moreover, the ‘Alawis 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 *Dā’īs* to their deputies in Yemen up till as late as the nineteenth century, and possibly even later. For instance, the Dawoodi *Dā’ī* ‘Abd al-‘Alī 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. Ja‘farjī in Yemen on the first of *muḥarram* 1231/1815, and one year later on 30 *rabī‘ al-awwal*, 1231/1816.⁴¹ Another such instance, although not referred to as a *sijill*, was Ibrāhīm Wajīh al-Dīn b. ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥakīm al-Dīn b. Mawlākhān (d. 1168/1754), 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 ‘Alawis use different types of rolls or *rotuli* for public ceremonies and engagements, such as the ceremony of the *‘ahd* (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 *Dā’īs* 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

FIGURE 8
Two *sijillāt* laying on the floor of
the 'Alawī *khizāna* in Baroda

Central Asia, Safavid Iran, and the Ottoman Empire, the term survived, within a judicial context as a document containing the *qāḍī*'s decision, or as the *qāḍī*'s register or legalizing remark.⁴³ 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".⁴⁴ 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 'Alawī 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 '*alāma* (pl. '*alā'im*), 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 '*alāma*.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ This writing practice, which can also be found among the Dawoodis, is known as the '*alāma*.⁴⁷ The '*alā'im* are without exception hand-written by the *Dā'ī*, and the script it carries is considered to bring *baraka* (blessings) and *rizq* (prosperity). The '*alāma* of the *Dā'ī*, as I observed on a daily basis, can also have powerful qualities in its immaterial form.⁴⁸ As a medium, water is commonly used to dissolve the '*alāma*, 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 Lakshmi in such situations.⁴⁹

As sacred objects, '*alā'im* are sought after items in the 'Alawi community, being worth hundreds of Rupees on the black market. Whereas the 'Alawis have their '*alāma* 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 Dā'ī] to be framed and Hanged at your Homes (on sale)*".⁵⁰ One can thus speak of a commodification of the '*alāma* 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 '*alāma* of Sy. Sayfuddin on the upper right side. The paleography of the '*alāma* 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 '*alāma* 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 '*alāma* 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 *Dā'ī* 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 Fāṭimids to authenticate official documents.⁵¹ These imperial '*alā'im*' consisted of a personalized pious expression or motto, instead of sultan names or titles. After all, a name was superfluous as there was only one Caliph, or Caliph-Imam in the case of the Fāṭimids, and if anyone's signature was known, it was theirs. The Fāṭimids were known to use the *ḥamdala*, *al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabbi 'l-ālamīn*, 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 Sulaymani Bohra provenance, and earlier Ṭayyibī Isma'īli 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 Billāh (d. 487/1094), his son and successor al-Musta'li (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-nabawīyya*" ("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-nabawīyya*" cannot replace the '*alāma*', it does refer to the hand of the Fāṭimid Caliph-Imam as "*sharīfa*" (noble) and *al-nabawīyya* (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 Muḥammad.

The presence of this paratext on copies of works such as the *Sijillāt al-Mustanṣiriyya* among the Isma'īlis and later Ṭayyibīs 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 Ṭayyibī 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

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله رب العالمين
 من عبد الله ووليه معديني محمد الامام المستنصر بالله
 امير المؤمنين الامير تاج الدولة سيف الامام مظفر

FIGURE 9

Marginal note *bi-khaṭṭ al-yadd al-sharīfa al-nabawiyya* written on top of the *ḥamdala*, following the *basmala*

SOURCE: ABD AL-MUN'IM MAJID, *SIJILLĀT AL-MUSTAṢṢIRIYYA*, P. 28

FIGURE 10

Incipit of the *Sijillāt al-Mustaṣṣiriyya*

SOURCE: ABD AL-MUN'IM MAJID, *SIJILLĀT AL-MUSTAṢṢIRIYYA*, P. 28

his name, but with the *basmala*, often paired with the *ḥamdala*. The *Dāṭ* not only writes 'alā'im 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 Fātimids. Whereas the Bohras have thus ritualized this documentary practice through ceremony and protocol, one can thus speak of a continuity in the *ḥamdala* as a signature 'alāma from the Fātimid period. However, a seeming discontinuity, or novelty, is the *basmala* as an authenticating practice, which was never part of the original Fātimid '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 Fātimid '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.⁵⁶ I learned by doing that, regardless of whomever copies the manuscript, it is the *Dāṭ* who authenticates the codex after the scribe finishes copying the text. He does so by inscribing the *basmala* and *ḥamdala* 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 *ḥamdala*, 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 is 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 Isma‘īli 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 *Dā’ī*’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 Isma‘īlis’ 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

- 1 I wish to thank the 'Alawi Bohra community for their trust and hospitality. I am also indebted to Konrad Hirschler, Leon Buskens, and Zahir Bhalloo, whose scholarship and countless conversations on documents has influenced my work to a great extent. I would like to furthermore show my gratitude to my dear colleagues of the Parisian Shi'ism and materiality *silsla*, Annabelle Collinet, Michel Boivin, and Sepideh Parsapajouh in particular. Their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article are warmly acknowledged. All photographs unless stated otherwise are taken by the author.
- 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 on 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 Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī Daʿwa 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 Ismāʿīlis. 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 Fāṭimids. See Konrad Hirschler's remarks on the paradigm of library destruction in the medieval world in *The Written Word*, pp. 130–2.
- 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. (2016). *Medieval Damascus: Plurality and Diversity in an Arabic Library: The Ashrafiya Library Catalogue*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 34. See for a more detailed discussion Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books*, introduction.

- 13 See Traboulsi, S. (2016). Transmission of Knowledge and Book Preservation in the Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī Tradition. *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 4 (1), pp. 22–35.
- 14 The so-called “Ṭayyibī Ismaʿīlīs” followed Caliph al-Āmir’s infant son as the next Fāṭimid Imam. See Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, p. 238.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Akkerman O. (2021), *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books*.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 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 Fāṭimid 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.
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- 19 Rustow, M. (2020), *The Lost Archive*, pp. 6–7.
- 20 Hamdani, H.F. (1934). The Letters of Al-Mustanʿir bi’llāh. In *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 308. See for a short historical overview of the Ṣulayḥids: Traboulsi, S. (2000). Lamak ibn Mālik al-Hammādi and Ṣulayḥid-Fāṭimid 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. 221–7.
- 21 The Ṣulayḥids reportedly brought peace in Mecca, and spread Ismaʿīlism in Oman. See, Hamdani H.F. (1934), The Letters of Al-Mustanʿir bi’llāh, p. 307, 321.
- 22 *Aṣḥāb al-Yamīn fī dhikr al-duʿāt al-muṭlaqīn al-yamānīyīn*. Historical account published in Gujarati and English by the ‘Alawi Bohra daʿwa, 1432 AH, Baroda, pp. 131.
- 23 Hoffman, A. and Cole, P. (2011) *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*. New York: Schocken.
- 24 We of course know that Jews and Christians also enjoyed powerful positions in the Fāṭimid state apparatus, such as advisors to the Caliph Imams, yet as non-Ismaʿīlīs, 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.
- 25 See for the details of the existing manuscript copies footnote 27.
- 26 The Dāʿī is the spiritual and temporal head of the community’s sacerdotal cum clerical family. Even though this post is historically related to the Fatimid Dāʿī as missionary officer (see forthcoming book), in modern times it has gained a new meaning as vice regent of the hidden Imam on earth.
- 27 Not to be confused with the *volumen*, 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.
- 28 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 Ismāʿīlī Manuscripts: The Zāhid Ali Collection*. London: I.B. Tauris. See also Cortese, D. (2000). *ʿIsmāʿīlī 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.
- 29 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.
- 30 Before there we only Yemeni Dāʿīs, who are buried in Yemen.
- 31 See for a detailed description of this schism (and other smaller schisms and splinter groups, such as the Nagoshias), Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 280–2.
- 32 Special arrangements therefore had to be made, given that, as an unmarried woman, I could not stay at the *musāfir khāna* nor travel on the specially designated *zīyāra* bus to Ahmedabad. See for a more detailed account of the *zīyāra*, and a discussion on my positionality and gender my forthcoming monograph.
- 33 After the Dāʿī, 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.
- 34 De Blois, F. (1984). The Oldest Known Fāṭimid manuscript from Yemen. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 14, pp. 1–7, 5. f. 11, and Strothmann, R. (1943). *Gnosis-Texte der Ismaʿīliten. arabische Handschrift Ambrosiana H 75*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht.
- 35 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.

- 36 The notion of *naṣṣ* is also an important concept in Twelver Shi'ism, before the great occultation of the Twelfth Imam.
- 37 Sheikh, S. (2018). Aurangzeb as seen from Gujarat: Shi'i and Millenarian Challenges to Mughal Sovereignty. In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28 2018, pp. 1–25.
- 38 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.
- 39 The translation of the title *Sijill al-Hidāya al-Āmiriyya* is Sterns. Stern, Samuel M. (1950). The Epistle of the Fatimid Caliph al-Āmir (al-Hidāya al-Āmiriyya): Its Date and Its Purpose. *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 1/2, pp. 20–31.
- 40 See for 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.
- 41 Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 212, 213.
- 42 Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 199.
- 43 See Zahir Bhalloo's forthcoming monograph (2021), *Documenting Sharia Court Practice in Iran (Sixteenth–Twentieth Centuries)*. Leiden: Brill. See also Hallaq, W.B. (1998). The "qāḍī's dīwān (sijill)" before the Ottomans. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 415–36.
- 44 Rustow, *The Lost Archive*, p. 381.
- 45 Blank, J. (2001). *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Dawoodi Bohras*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 174.
- 46 <https://www.alavibohra.org/taiyebi%20rasm%20-%20alaamat.htm>.
- 47 Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, p. 174.
- 48 <https://www.alavibohra.org/Taiyebi%20rasm%20-%20Dhaaru.htm>.
- 49 I am indebted to M. Boivin for this observation.
- 50 <https://www.bohrashopping.com/product/alamat/>.
- 51 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.
- 52 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.
- 53 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 Ifriqiyān 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.
- 54 Rustow, Fāṭimid State Documents, pp. 221–77, 241.
- 55 Due to secrecy I am not able to publish a picture of the 'Alawi manuscript copies.
- 56 Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books*.
- 57 Rustow, Fāṭimid State Documents, pp. 221–77, 241.
- 58 Majid, *Sijillāt al-Mustansirīyya*, pp. 14–15.
- 59 Rustow, *The Lost Archive*, p. 382.
- 60 Ibid, p. 10.