Ritual Ablution and Cultic Purity in an Ismaili Context: The Siǧistānian View

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Abstract
The paper, which is a continuation of my previous research on the Siǧistānian view of the pillars of Islam, aims at analysing the interpretation of ritual ablution (wuḍūʾ) and cultic purity (ṭahāra) according to the tenth-century Ismaili dāʾī Abū Yāqūb al-Siǧistānī. In the last of his works, the Kitāb al-ṭiḥār (The Book of the Boast), this outstanding Ismaili missionary also devoted attention to the Islamic ritual prescriptions. These obligatory duties, whose performance al-Siǧistānī fully recognised, conceal an inner meaning that can be unveiled through the tradition of the taʾwil, the esoteric interpretation that, according to the Ismaili doctrine, allows the muʾmin to achieve his salvation.

Key words: Ismailism, pillars of Islam, ritual ablution and cultic purity, taʾwil

1. Introduction
The Ismailis represent the second largest Shiʿi community after the İṯnāašariyya (the Twelvers) and, although they have greatly contributed to the developing of Islamic thought, their long history was almost unknown and not adequately understood until recent times.

Often persecuted, in particular outside their territories, the Ismailis were compelled to resort to the taqiyya, the precautionary dissimulation of true religious belief, especially in times of danger; this principle was also conceived by the Ismailis as the duty of observing secrecy (kitmān) on the doctrine and on the identity of the imam. The central position of this issue in the Ismaili doctrine is linked to the role assigned to the imam, who is the only one able to apply the spiritual exegesis (taʾwil) to the Quran, thus assuring the gaining of Truth. This is why the role of the imam was considered absolutely ‘necessary’.

This Truth, which is disguised in rites and prescriptions of the official religion and which is not available to those outside the Ismaili community (the exoteric people, ahl al-zāhir) nor to the ǧuhhāl (those who ignore the inner meaning of the Revelation), must remain hidden until the qiyyāma, that is the manifestation of the unveiled Truth through the Qāʾim; in waiting for this event, the Quranic prescriptions remain in force.

So, despite the common belief of the majority who, based on anti-Ismaili writings of polemists and heresiographers (notably those of Aḥū Muḥṣin, al-Bağdādí, Ibn Ḥazm and al-Ḡazālī), condemned the Ismailis as heretics, the Ismailis recognised, at least formally, that full value should be given to the obligatory duties prescribed by the sharia, including, especially, the pillars of Islam. On the other hand, these duties symbolise a Truth, one and unchangeable, that no muʾmin should disregard.
Starting from this premise, the tenth-century Ismaili dāʾī (missionary) Abū Yaʿqūb al-Siǧistānī wrote, towards the end of his life, the *Book of the Beast*, in which he gave an overall picture of the Ismaili teachings so as ‘to boast’ (hence, the title of the treatise) about the merits of the Ismailis, who were considered to obey the Quran to the letter as well as to the spirit.

2. Abū Yaʿqūb al-Siǧistānī: his life and works

The biographical details of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Siǧistānī (d. after 361/971) are very scarce and uncertain since he was compelled, like his predecessors, to perform his function of dāʾī clandestinely. From Sistān, where he was born, al-Siǧistānī moved to Rayy where he succeeded Abū Ἡاثίμ al-Rāzī (d. 324/934?) in directing the daʿwa (the ‘propaganda’). The date of his death is uncertain too; from a clear allusion contained in the Kitāb al-iftiḥār he was probably still alive in 360/971, a hypothesis that seems to be plausible since, according to some sources, al-Siǧistānī was killed when Ḫurasān came under control of Maḥmūd of Ḡazna in 392/1002. Thanks to his works, modern scholars have been able to reconstruct the first developments of philosophical Ismailism, although the details of its origins remain somewhat unclear.

Al-Siǧistānī represents, after Abū Ἡاثίμ al-Rāzī and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nasafi (d. 334/943), the last of the Ismaili dāʿūt (missionaries) of early generations, who were

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1 Lit. ‘the one who summons’, the Ismaili dāʾī was charged with the spreading of the Ismaili teachings (daʿwa) and with the recruiting of neophytes and their initiation into the secrets of the doctrines; moreover he was responsible for the oath of loyalty to the imam that every recruit must swear. As for the spreading of the Ismaili teachings, it was carried on through a highly sophisticated system of propaganda, which aimed to win followers to the imam. For an outline of the figure of the dāʾī and the organisation of the daʿwa see DAFTRY 1993; TAĐĐIN SĀDIK AĻI 2006; HALM 1996, esp. ch.1.

2 Information on the real functioning of the daʿwa is rather scarce, because in most cases the Ismailis were compelled to operate clandestinely, notably in regions outside the Fatimid dominion. As Farhad Daftary pointed out: ‘the daʿwa organization and its hierarchy of ranks (budād) alluded to in various Ismaili text of the Fatimid period seem to have applied to an idealised or utopian situation when the Ismaili imam would rule the entire world, and not to any actual system’. DAFTRY 1998: 97.

3 See footnote 15.

4 Besides the Kitāb al-iftiḥār, al-Siǧistānī also wrote Kitāb al-mawāzin, Kitāb iḥbāt al-mubaṣwa, Kitāb al-yandāb, Kaṣṣ al-maḥḍūb, Kitāb al-maṣqāʾī al-nilākitiyya and the Kitāb al-nuṣra fi ʿarāb mā qalalhu al-ṣāʾī al-Ḥamīdī fī Kitāb al-maṣqūl. This last-mentioned work was written in response to Abū Ἡاثίμ al-Rāzī, with whom he came into conflict with regard to some issues related to the duration of the prophetic cycles, in particular with the duration of the sixth era, the era of Isam.

5 The complexity of the studies on Ismailism is mainly due to the esoteric nature of its doctrine but also to the lack of primary sources, especially those antecedent to the Fatimid era (4th/10th century), a period that is supported by documentary evidence. The difficulty in gaining access to primary sources makes the reconstruction of Ismaili historical and doctrinal evolution very complicated. Notwithstanding, during the last decades, the studies of the most authoritative scholars (such as Ismail Poonawala, Wilferd Madelung, Heinz Halil, Paul E. Walker, Azim A. Nanji, Farhad Daftary and Daniel Smet, to quote the most recent generation of researchers) have greatly contributed in clarifying many aspects of Ismaili doctrine. For bibliographical details on Ismaili studies see DAFTRY 2004.
charged with political and doctrinal activities. On the doctrinal level, he can be considered a pioneer of philosophical Ismaïlism because he provided a relevant contribution to the shaping of a doctrine that Islamised Neoplatonism.  

On the political level, al-Sīghistānī became a high-ranking dā'ī of Fatimid propaganda. This important function of control implies that he acknowledged, despite his originally belonging to Qarmatism, the Fatimid al-'imma as legitimate representatives of the Qā'im (lit. he who will rise), probably in a formal way or, at least, until the Qā'im’s advent. This involves that, in waiting for his return, the Islamic sharia remained in force. Hence al-Sīghistānī recognised the full value of the obligatory performance of the Islamic rituals and prescription, first of all the pillars of Islam; at the same time, he supported a doctrine that considered rituals, prohibition and commandments the shell (qišr) that conceals and safeguards the Truth hidden in the Revelation.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Ismaïlism has its doctrine grounded in the immanent duality in all of the features of the reality, including the Scripture. This involves that the Word of God has two aspects, one manifest (zāhir) and the other hidden (bātîn): the first can be attained through the tanzîl, the second through the ta'wil. This spiritual exegeis, which can be performed only by the imam, is the only way to unveil the Truth that lies disguised in rites and prescriptions of the official religion: in other words, according to Ismaili teaching, the formal performance of the cultic practices is not sufficient to gain salvation.

This soteriological purpose can be achieved only through the understanding of the true meaning of what God prescribed in Revelation, as highlighted by al-Sīghistānī who, in the last of his works, the Kitāb al-iţthār (The Book of the Boost), interpreted esoterically the arkān al-islām, to which he devoted the last chapters of his treatise.

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6 In particular, al-Sīghistānī established a cosmology in which God was conceived as totally transcendent. Unlike the Neoplatonic cosmology, in the Si’ístanian system, God, because of His transcendence, did not emanate spontaneously but immediately created ex-nihilo (abda’a) the Intellect (also called the ‘first originated’, al-muḥba’ al-a’wâl). The Intellect, in its turn, emanated (inba’aja) the Soul, who produced (inba’qasa, lit. to gush out) Nature, from which Matter and Form came forth. The mixing of both was responsible for physical beings. For details on the Si’istanian cosmology see WALKER 1993 and 1996.

7 A branch of the pre-Fatimid Ismaïlism, this revolutionary movement of social reform and justice, which was based on a system of gradual initiation, carried on its doctrine in strict secrecy. Although its origin is obscure, scholars agree that the movement began its activity in southern Iraq in the second half of 3⁹/4⁰ century, when its partisans, led by Ḥamdān (the eponym of the group), founded a dīr al-hijra east of Kūfā in 277/890. Sweeping through the Muslim world from the 3⁹/4⁰ to the 6⁴/12th century, the Qarmatians established an independent State in Bahrain in 286/899, that is, after the split of Salamīya, which brought about the formation of the Fatimids and the Qarmatians. The reason for the schism was related to the idea of the imamate, that the Qarmatians considered an intellectual characteristic to which every Muslim can aspire rather than an inherited privilege for the chosen few.

8 This ‘messianic’ saviour, called also muḥdī (the rightly guided one), was charged, during the ‘period of concealment’ (dawr al-satr), with the soteriological function of restoring justice and true religion. For an outline of the role of this important figure for Ismaïlism, see DAFTARY 2010; TUCKER 2008.
3. **Wuḍū’ and ṭahāra in the Kitāb al-iftihār**

The Kitāb al-iftihār,\(^9\) probably written in 361/971, is an important primary source in the absence of other and earlier Ismaili works; moreover, it can be considered an epitome of Ismaili teachings, which al-Sīġistānī expounded in a systematic way, a very unusual behaviour for an Ismaili author as Ismailis were usually compelled to spread the doctrine with great caution.

Al-Sīġistānī explicitly maintained that the necessity for defending the Ismaili community from the accusation of professing doctrines in contrast to the true beliefs of faith induced him to provide the basic tenets of Ismaili creed so as to ‘boast’ the merits of the Ismailis who, unlike their opponents, obey the Word of God to the letter (zāhir) and the spirit (bāṭin), as the interpretation of the ritual practices, such as the pillars of Islam, shows.

The discussion of this issue was intended to prove that the pillars must be understood symbolically: as a matter of fact, al-Sīġistānī explained that, according to the Ismaili interpretation, prayer must be interpreted as the calling to the da’wa and to its spiritual and religious ranks,\(^10\) fasting involves the duty of observing secrecy about the imam’s identity and Ismaili teachings, almsgiving must be interpreted as the duty to bestow knowledge on those who do not possess it and pilgrimage represents obedience to the imam, who is considered the house of God (Ka’bat Allāh).

The analysis of the pillars begins with ritual ablution (wuḍū’) and cultic purity (ṭahāra), which is the topic of the present study,\(^11\) since they are considered ‘the first of the acts prescribed by the Islamic law’ (awwal a’māl al-ṣarī’a).

Chapter 13 of the treatise concerns ‘the understanding of ablution and ritual purity’ ( fête ma’rifat al-wuḍū’ wa’l-ṭahāra). At the beginning of the discussion al-Sīġistānī addresses the exoteric people (ahl al-zāhir) in a polemical tone, because, according to him, they perform mechanically the cultic practices prescribed by Revelation without understanding their true sense, that is, their esoteric meaning.

So, if ablution (wuḍū’) on the exoteric level is the cleansing (bara’a) of any kind of impurity, from the exoteric point of view it must be understood as the disavowal of those who did not recognise the necessity for the imam and the imamate. Those ‘renegades’, who seized legitimate power, are considered by al-Sīġistānī to be just like other material impurities from which true believer must purify. On the other hand, cultic purity (ṭahāra) is the metaphorical image of heart’s purity, which is indispensable to achieve the supreme goal, that is, the knowledge of Truth.

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\(^9\) The Kitāb al-iftihār (hereafter Ḥāfiẓ) was edited twice. Firstly, Muṣṭafā Gālīb published the Kitāb al-iftihār (Beirut 1980) in an incomplete version in which he omitted the offensive passages of condemnation of the Ismailis’ opponents. Later, Ismail Poonawala published a new edition of the treatise (Beirut 2000), which he supported with a comprehensive introduction and commentary. In the following analysis, I shall refer to both versions. Translations of the passages quoted are mine.

\(^10\) Ismaili ‘propaganda’ (da’wa) provided for two kinds of hierarchies, heavenly and earthly, each of them divided in five ranks (ḥudūf). For details see below, p. 273 f.

\(^11\) This paper is a continuation of my previous research on the Siġistānī interpretation of the pillars of islam, in particular on prayer, almsgiving and fasting. For details see Straface 2016a; 2016b; 2017.
In performing wudu’ and ṭahāra, water plays a fundamental role, because cleanliness from impurities can be achieved only through it. According to the Ismaili interpretation, water too must be understood metaphorically: since the disavowal and denial of the imam are the worst of the impurities, as mentioned earlier, the only ‘water’ that can cleanse one from this kind of impurity is knowledge (’ilm). So, if water makes the muslim gain the cleanliness indispensable to perform prayer, knowledge allows the mu’min to achieve his salvation. Through knowledge the believer purifies his heart from doubts (ṣākūk) and quarrels (iḥtīlāfāt) that prevent the achievement of certainty (yaqīn) and truth (ḥaqqqa).12

In order to legitimise the esoteric interpretation of cultic purity and water, al-Sīǧistānī refers to the following Quranic verse:

Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness, to give you calm as from Himself, and He caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith.13

According to the literal interpretation, this verse alludes to the battle of Badr, a key struggle in the early period of Islam that ended in favour of Muḥammad, thanks to divine intervention.14

In al-Sīǧistānī’s view, this verse must be interpreted esoterically because the true meaning of this revelation goes beyond the importance of an historical event from which later generations do not learn (ḥikma) anything, ’since it occurred 350 years ago’.15 Moreover, if the water quoted in this passage must be understood literally why, al-Sīǧistānī asks, did God relate it to the ‘stain of Satan, the strength of the hearts and the planting feet firmly’? Hence, al-Sīǧistānī concludes, the verse must be interpreted metaphorically, as follows: God gave believers knowledge (= rain, mā’) by means of His messenger (= ‘from heaven’, min al-samā’) so as ‘to destroy the quarrels of the adversaries who changed religion and corrupted it through their illusions (ārā’) and conjectures (qiyyās)’.16 In this way, the hearts of believers should be freed from doubt (ṣāk) and ambiguity (ṣubha) because their intellects, strengthened by knowledge, should gain a foothold (= ‘to plant feet firmly’, yuqabbit bihi l-aqāḏām), ‘out of any feeling of uncertainty (rayb) and ambiguity’.17

This implies that only knowledge can remove any form of ignorance, doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity because, in unveiling Truth that is hidden in the revealed Scripture, it assures certainty and salvation. This is why knowledge is connected with the imam who, being its repository, is charged with the soteriological purpose of the Ismaili teachings.

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13 Quran 8:11. For the Quranic translation see al-Jī 2001.
14 On the authority of some versions, Muslims encamped on a dry, sandy and unstable terrain that God makes stable by making rain descend on it, so as to facilitate them in the struggle with their opponents.
15 See al-Sīǧistānī 1980: 111, 22; 2000: 233, 8-9. This biographical detail, explicitly mentioned by the author, helps to determine when al-Sīǧistānī wrote his treatise, that is, between 360/971 and 364/974 (since the battle of Badr occurred in 2/624).
As regards the drowsiness (nu’ūs) quoted at the beginning of the aforementioned verse, al-Siġistānī interprets it as the bāṭinī (hidden aspect of Revelation (just as the wakefulness is the ūzīrī (manifest aspect of Scripture), the knowledge of which is ‘a safety and a protection from the Torment, that is, doubt and confusion (hayra)’19 for believers.

The spiritual value of water and ablation is also restated in another Quranic verse: ‘[…] And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.’20 According to the esoteric interpretation, this quotation acknowledges the ‘pure and spotless’ condition only in the Ahl al-bayt,20 that is, the a’imma, laying emphasis on such a fundamental issue of the Ismaili creed that teaches the status of infallibility and impeccability (isma) not only for the messenger of God but also for the imam. This condition of purity is achieved only through a spiritual water (knowledge) that has nothing to do with the natural water of wells and springs,21 as maintained in the Quran, that quotes: ‘[…] and We send down pure water from the sky, that with it We may give life to a dead land, and slake the thirst of things We have created,—cattle and men in great numbers.’22

This verse, according to al-Siģistānī, implies that God revealed through His messenger (≡ ‘from the sky’) the knowledge (≡ ‘pure water’) that will remove (≡ ‘give life’) the impurity of ignorance (≡ ‘a dead land’). This knowledge will be granted only to those who deserve it, that is, the a’imma and the lawḥiq (Adjuncts), represented in the verse as ‘thirst of things […]’,—cattle and men in great numbers’. This is a further confirmation, according to al-Siģistānī, that the water here mentioned is not that of the natural springs that is destined, on the contrary, for all the creatures and not the chosen few.

Al-Siģistānī also applies the tradition of ta’wil to the body that is purified during ablation; as a matter of fact, its parts, which are washed during this ritual practice, represent the ranks (ḥudūd) of the Ismaili hierarchy.

As previously hinted at, Ismaili propaganda provided for two kinds of hierarchies: heavenly and earthly. The heavenly hierarchy, echoing Neoplatonic doctrines, included five ranks, namely: the Intellect (established by God through His divine command kun, ‘be!’), the Soul (emanated by the Intellect) and three hypostases, namely al-Ḡudd, al-Fath and al-Ḥayāl (which perform a noetic function).23 The earthly order provided five ranks too, namely: (1) the Prophet, called also ‘Speaking’ (Nāṭiq) because he was in charge of the revelation (tanzīl) of God’s Word, (2) the ‘Foundation’ (Asās), known also as ‘Silent’ (Sāmit) because he safeguarded the concealed meaning of the divine Word, and (3) the

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19 Quran 33:33.
20 Lit. ‘People of the House’, this statement refers to the family of the prophet Muĥammad, although in the course of time a debate arose on the people who belong to it. In shi‘i Islam the ‘People of the House’ consist of the Ahl al-kisā’, or the ‘People of the Mantle’ (that is the Prophet, his cousin and brother in law, ‘Ali, his daughter Fāţima and his nephews, al-Hasan and al-Husayn) and their progeny of a’imma who, being sinless and infallible, were qualified to perform the spiritual function they were charged with.
22 Quran 25:48-49.
23 For details see De Smet 2012.
Imam, the Prophet’s delegate, who keeps the secret of the esoteric interpretation (ta’wil) of the Scriptures in every generation, and preserves it. This triad was followed by the ‘Adjunct’ (Lâhiq), the imam’s delegate, and the ‘Wing’ (Ganâh), his assistant. The control of the Ismaili community and the recruiting of neophytes were carried on by a series of missionaries (du’ât) and licentiates (ma’âlim). The hierarchical structure of the terrestrial system, which reproduced the superior-celestial order on earth, aimed at ensuring support for the community, not just material, so as to assure the community its salvation.

According to al-Sîgîstânî, body’s limbs, which are purified by water during ablution, are related to the aforementioned ranks. So, the right hand is put in relation to ‘the teacher who guides to the right path’ (al-hâdi al-mu’âllim), the left hand is connected with ‘the one who searches for knowledge’ (al-tâlib al-murtâd) and the nostrils that inhale water during ablution are related to the Lord of Time (âhib al-zamân), who grants the Adjuncts (lawâhiq) his inspiration (ta’yiûd). Al-Sîgîstânî explains these correspondences in the following way:

Since the seeker (al-murtâd al-bâhiq) the features of his religion cannot do without a guide who leads him on the right path and shows him what he intended to know of it (sc. religion), the right hand provided evidence of the teacher who guides to the right path, the left hand [provided] evidence of the seeker who investigates and the water that passes between them, so as the one [hand] cleans the other, [provided] evidence of the knowledge that passes between them (sc. teacher and pupil) at the moment of disclosure (waqt al-mufsâha).24 [...]. After having washed the hands, the one who performs ritual ablution begins to rinse, that is to put water in the mouth, and the mouth is the locker of tongue and the tongue is the instrument of talking and of what the faculty of speech expresses. [...]. After having rinsed the mouth, the one who performs ritual ablution inhales, that is, puts water in the nostrils25 through which fresh air passes. This is why we said that the learned man (‘âlim), who benefits from the Lord of his isle [i.e. al-huǧǧa]26 must relate his

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25 Here al-Sîgîstânî seems to evoke al-Qâdî al-Nu’mân (363/974). Regarded as the founder of the Ismaili-Fatimid jurisprudence, al-Qâdî al-Nu’mân was also the most authoritative representative in the field of the ta’wil, to which he devoted the Ta’wil al-Da’â’im, the esoteric compendium to his masterpiece Da’â’im al-Islâm. In discussing the esoteric interpretation of the jahâra, he related the mouth to the imam and understood rinsing the mouth and inhaling water through the nostrils as the acknowledgment of the imam and of his ‘proof’ (huǧǧa). See al-Qâdî al-Nu’mân, Ta’wil al-Da’â’im, cit. in al-Sîgîstânî 2000: 417. For details on his concept of bâjin see SHAH 2005. For his contribution to the Ismaili jurisprudence see FYZEE 1934; POONAWALA 1974; POONAWALA 1977: 48-68; POONAWALA 1996; CILARDO 2012. For an outline of al-Qâdî al-Nu’mân’s view on the pillars of Islam see also HAŁM 1996: 370-374.
26 Lit. ‘proof’, this term indicated originally prophets and a’imma, who were considered the proofs of God on earth. Later, the term huǧǧa was assigned to chief representative of the imam who was charged with the control of a specific region, called ‘isle’, ga’zira. Since the Ismailis were scattered in a wide geographical area, they provided for an elaborated system of control so as to manage and spread their propaganda widely, especially in the territories outside Fatimid provinces, where the da’wa was directed in utmost secrecy. This is why the Ismaili world was divided into 12 ‘islands’ (ga’zâ’ir, sg. ga’zira), each of them under the control of a ‘proof’ (huǧga), who was assisted by several subordinate da’ût of a variety of ranks.
knowledge to the Lord [i.e. the Imam] of Time who, thanks to the subtnleness of his soul, ‘inhales’ the inspiration through which the Adjuncts, who are under him in rank, will have [enough] strength to receive it (sc. knowledge) in a common spiritual [way]. So the right hand, the mouth, the nostrils and the water put in them [are] among the customary practices of ritual ablation, although they [must be related] to those we named among the learned appointed men, each of them is above the other in rank.\(^{27}\)

Therefore, al-Sīqistānī maintains that the body needs water to remove its impurities so as to let the muslim perform the exoteric ablation; in the same way, the believer, mu‘min, whose search for knowledge is compared to the search for water by one who is thirsty,\(^{28}\) needs God’s messenger and imam, who are charged with the delivery of knowledge, in order to eliminate ignorance and unbelief so as to perform the esoteric ablation.

It is worth noting that this knowledge cannot be achieved by the common man because it does not derive from senses but it was inspired by God in the eminent (wağh) persons of prophets. This is why, according to al-Sīqistānī, washing the face (wağh) in ritual ablation must be understood as obedience to the messenger of God, as quoted in the following passage:

> Washing the face is the first of the religious duties of ritual ablation, hence we related it to the obedience towards the messenger [...]. So, we do not commit sin if we mention our messenger when we wash the face, because we think that the obedience to him is a religious duty, just like the religious duty of washing the face during ritual ablation. Is not the face the manifest [aspect] so as to distinguish a man from another? Similarly, the messenger is the virtuous chief known in his era, because he is the prominent personality of his community (wağh ummatihī) and [the word] wağh (i.e. eminent) derives from wağh (face). And God, be His mention exalted, called the Messiah, peace be upon him, eminent when He said: ‘ [...] held in honour in this world and in the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah’.\(^{29}\)

Hence, the true believer must obey the messenger, who is the mouthpiece of God’s word, as well as the imam, who is charged with the custody of Truth.

The religious duty to obey both, messenger and imam, is represented during ritual ablation in washing the face and the hands; according to al-Sīqistānī’s interpretation the true believer washes first his face and secondly his hands because he must first acknowledge God’s messenger and then his legatee.

As mentioned earlier, Ismailism recognises a double interpretation of the Scripture, one exoteric (manifest, zāhir) that pertains to the messenger, and the other esoteric (hidden, bāṭīn), which pertains to the imam. Both aspects, which are not antithetical, are represented


\(^{28}\) The relation between water and knowledge is evoked by the term murtād, which al-Sīqistānī uses to define who searches for knowledge, because the verb irtāda also indicates a place where food and water abound. See Freytag 1975 II: 208b, s.v. rūda.

\(^{29}\) al-Sīqistānī 1980: 114,7-15; 2000: 237,10; 238,1. For the Qur’anic quotation, see 3:45.
during the rite of ablution in the believer’s clothes and hands, which symbolise the laws of Scripture and their hidden Truth respectively.

When the one who performs ritual ablution finishes washing the face, that corresponds to the obedience towards the messenger, he begins to wash the hands that corresponds to the obedience of the believer to the legatee (wasiyy), who comes after the messenger, the prayer of God on him and on his family, because it is inevitable that the messenger appointed a legatee to his community so as to preserve his religion. And the hands are covered by the clothes because the call to Truth (dāʾwa) of this legatee is hidden and concealed in the laws, which are the visible clothes [that cover] the hands.

In order to perform ritual ablution in the correct way, the true believer must massage his head with water and then wash his feet. In al-Sīġistānī’s view, since the head is the seat of the senses to which the Soul is linked: ‘(God) ordered to pour water on head and to massage it from top to bottom [so as to provide evidence of] the acknowledgment of the noble level (murtaka) of the Soul by he who performs ritual ablution’. As for the feet, their being wiped and washed during the ritual ablution is considered as a deed of submission to the highest rank of the spiritual hierarchy, that is, the Intellect, as the following passage shows:

The feet were put in correspondence with the Intellect, that must be acknowledged through the wiping (mash) and the washing (gusl) of the feet, and this means that, although the Intellect is far from being achieved with regards to its essence, those who understand (ʿuqalāʾ) must obey it, lead up to what it has imposed and abstain from what is opposite to it. Hence, massage (mash) is associated to the acknowledgment of it (sc. the Intellect) from those who possess the lowest ranks while washing (gusl) is connected with the obedience towards it (sc. the Intellect) from those who are endowed with understanding (ulū al-nahā). In this way, according to al-Sīġistānī, the true believer, through the washing of the head and of the feet, recognises the superiority of the Intellect and the Soul, the spiritual ‘archetypes’ who have their counterpart in the messenger and his legatee, who are the religious ‘archetypes’.

30 As regards the relationship between the hand and the imam, it is worth noting that in the pre-Fatimid period the imam’s delegate, who was charged with the control of the ǧāzīra, was named ʿayd, that is, ‘hand’. See Daftary 1998: 98.
33 al-Sīġistānī 1980: 115,13-16; 2000: 239,6-10. As for the expression ulū al-nahā see Quran 20:54.
34 Both archetypes, spiritual and religious, are considered by al-Sīġistānī as the ‘four roots of Truth’, which al-Sīġistānī represented in the Kitāb al-Yanāḥī through the image of a cross. At the top of the vertical line there is the Intellect and at the bottom, which is planted in the ground, there is the Foundation, while on the horizontal line al-Sīġistānī put the Soul to the left and the Speaking-prophet to the right. See al-Sīġistānī, Kitāb al-Yanāḥī, 75-76. Each root is charged with a peculiar function: so, the Intellect is responsible for the inspiration (taʾyīl) that enables the Foundation to interpret esoterically (taʾwil) Scripture, on the other hand the Soul is responsible for the composition (tarkīb) of the physical
4. Conclusions

This paper, which is a continuation of my previous research on the Siyastani view of the pillars of Islam, has focused attention on the interpretation of cultic purity and ritual ablution that Abu Ya’qub al-Siyastani gave in the Kitab al-iftihār, an apologia written to reply polemically to the Ismailis’ opponents. Despite the exhaustive exegetical literature on the Sunni interpretation on wudu’ and ṭahāra,35 the present study has analysed the issue in the Ismaili context, focusing on al-Siyastani who, in summarising the basic tenets of Ismaili doctrine in his last work, provided an overview of Ismaili teachings during the more developed phase of their evolution.

As the analysis of some excerpts of the Iftiḥār has demonstrated, according to al-Siyastani the true meaning of ablution and cultic purity must be understood as the disavowal of the legitimate a’immah from those who seized legal power. In al-Siyastani’s view, this denial is considered the worst of the impurities that must be removed through an act of purification and ablution, both of them to be interpreted metaphorically.

The first step of this ritual requires the achievement of purification through symbolic water, namely knowledge that allows the unveiling of Truth so as to achieve the true understanding of Revelation. As for ablution, its ritual is a symbolic way to acknowledge the religious as well as the normative world,36 the double hierarchy that represents a basic feature of the Siyastani system.

Through ritual ablution and cultic purity, the true believer obeys the imam and acknowledges the necessity for him and for the imamate. This backbone of the Ismaili creed is also represented by the ritual of massage and washing the believer’s body,37 which

elements into material beings, this is why it is put in relation with the Speaking-prophet who is charged with the composition (ta’līf) of God’s Word in Scripture and laws. For a detailed discussion see WALKER 1996: esp. ch. 2.

35 For details on the exegesis of ṭahāra in Sunni context see, among the others, NAGUIB 2007; KATZ 2002: 75 ff. As for the state of the studies on this issue and on the interaction of theoretical and lived Islam in ritual and purity laws, see GAUVAIN 2005. I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous referees who gave me these bibliographical details.

36 Religious world (‘alām al-din) is the world created during the historical cycles of prophecy and religion, while normative world (‘alīm al-wa’d) is the domain of law, which gives religious world a ‘moral’ direction.

37 In the Kitab saqarat al-yaqin, a treatise of problematic authorship and date, the human body represents the three parts into which the universe can be divided; as a matter of fact, the head, the torso and the feet are related to the spiritual, the physical and the material world, respectively. In stressing that physical and material worlds cannot do without the spiritual world, the author maintains that: “There is no evidence that man can exist without head [on the contrary he can exist without a foot], similarly there is no evidence that the two worlds, physical and material, can exist without spiritual world. The first thing of the unborn baby that comes out in the material world is the head, and this provides evidence that the first thing that God, be exalted His mention, installed (abdula) was the spiritual world […] and the last thing of the unborn baby that comes out in the material world are his feet and this provides evidence that material world derives from the spiritual world through the mediation of the physical world.” ‘ABDAN (attributed to), Kitab saqarat al-yaqin, 66-67. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that the two extremities of the human body, namely the head and feet, can be also connected to the two aspects of the Revelation, that is, zahir and batin, which, in their turn, are the distinctive qualities of tanzil and ta’wil.
symbolises the religious hierarchy (al-ḥudūd al-ḡismānīyya) and its spiritual counterpart (al-ḥudūd al-rūḥānīyya).

These two hierarchies, linked together through a system of symmetric correspondences, assure the ‘reductio ad Unum’ (ta’wil) to which Ismailism aspires.

Bibliography

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Secondary works


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