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A Glimpse into Fatimid Rule in North Africa and Egypt (909-1171 AD)

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The Fatimid Caliphate was the first Shia dynasty which ruled for two and a half centuries, from 909 to 1171 AD in North Africa and Egypt. They got their name **Fatimid** from Hazrat Muhammad's (pbuh) daughter Hazrat Fatima (r.a) as they claimed to be the direct descendants of Hazrat Fatima (r.a). The Fatimids ruled over various regions belonging to different religious backgrounds with the spirit of tolerance. Diversity, pluralism and meritocracy were the key features of their rule. Their effective governance helped in cultural and educational advancements which made the Fatimid era important and unique then and now. This study is significant because Fatimids history has been studied by scholars on the basis of results of fabricated information provided by heresiographies who were hostile towards Fatimids. Therefore, it becomes challenging to see the true correct picture. Recently Institute of Ismaili Studies London has recovered original manuscripts on large scale, which are being studied and translated. This has provided a different lens through which Fatimid history can be studied.

Key Words: Diversity, Pluralism, Knowledge society, Tolerance, Meritocracy,

Introduction:

The Fatimid era (909-1171) ruled by the Ismaili Fatimid caliphs over a vast region which stretched from North Africa to Palestine is considered as a glorious age history. The first three Fatimid caliphs had to face many challenges to stabilize and strengthen their power, for example Caliph Al-Mahdi the founder had to face internal and external rebellions like Abu Abd Allah al-Shii, and Caliphs al-Qaim and al-Mansur had to face

the revolt of Abu Yazid which had brought the new dynasty to the brink of destruction. It was in the rule of Caliph Al-Muizz that the state was stable with internal security and external expansion. It was during this time that cultural advancements, institutional development, research and literature attained their peak. The Fatimids developed effective administrative and financial systems, gave special attention to the study of Islam and expanded different branches of science, commercial and cultural activities. The Fatimid capital Cairo became an international conurbation of the Islamic world. It was during this time that the true Islamic spirit of tolerance, diversity and pluralism flourished. Ismaili literature was also at its zenith and Ismaili law was codified by al Qadi al-Nauman (d 363-975).

During the Fatimid era, great emphasis was placed on education and research, promoting the spirit of inquiry, firm governance, respect for sister communities and ethic of compassion and sharing.

Inspiring Values of Islam being reflected during the Fatimid Rule:

Understanding Other Communities through the spirit of tolerance:

One of the distinguishing features of the Fatimid Dynasty was tolerance which was promoted especially towards non-Muslim minorities as well as sister communities of Islam which followed different schools of thought. Although the Fatimids followed the Shia Ismaili school of thought and law, they were very considerate and understanding of the beliefs of the people they ruled. This could be clearly seen in the conquest of Egypt in 969, when Jawhar as- Siqili, the commander of the Fatimid army granted *aman* (pledge of security) on behalf of the Fatimid Caliph ai-Muizz, to the people of Egypt for approving and welcoming the Fatimid rule.

The *aman* highlighted:

- People of different faiths were allowed to gather in their religious spaces and practice their rites and ceremonies.
- Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) were bases of all Islamic Obligations.
- For treatment of the dhimmis former custom were followed.¹

The commitments Fatimids had made in the famous *aman* of providing security to the masses was well-kept. They gave religious freedom to all the communities including

Sunni Muslims and never forced their citizens to accept Shiism which was the state religion.

The establishment of the Fatimid empire in North Africa (909) and then in Egypt (969) was due to their missionary call (Ismaili *Da'wa*) by which people were invited to consider and to follow the Ismaili faith. The *da'wa* was an invitation to study the Ismaili doctrines and the esoteric and exoteric wisdom of the faith. It was promoted by Ismaili *Da'is* (Missionaries) who individually and collectively presented the faith through sessions of wisdom, also termed *Majalis al-Hikma*. According to Heinz Halm

“No one was compelled to attend.”²

Throughout the Fatimid era in Egypt peace, serenity, and respect among different nations and religions was observed. Harmony prevailed in the social and cultural relationships of the diverse communities. This is also documented in the “Geniza” documents of Cairo written by Jewish community between tenth to thirteen centuries, covering the Fatimid and Ayyubid period therefore are the primary sources of social and economic history of these dynasties. They described all sorts of legal cases, economic transactions, private correspondence, accounts, marriage and divorce proceedings, etc.

These documents portray how the Fatimid rulers presented general framework of laws within which different communities freely practised their religious rituals, ceremonies and customs whereas the laws of market were enforced and practised in accordance with the principles of Quran and Sunnah.

Treatment with Diverse Populace:

The Fatimid established their rule in 909 in North Africa and in 969 in Egypt. At the time both North Africa and afterwards Egypt had a diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious populace. All these groups were given freedom of speech and religion to practice their own rites and rituals.

As mentioned in the *aman*

“You shall continue in your *madhab* you shall be permitted to perform your obligations according to religious scholarship”³

During the reign Caliph al-Aziz all communities were allowed to practice their religious rites and ceremonies. The Fatimids were fond of building mosques and vast spaces like al-Azhar and al-Anwar. In addition, they also constructed such spaces for Sunni Muslims, re-built Christian churches, and gave funds for the maintenance of their

worship spaces. ⁴ Celebration and practise of religious rituals became one of the essential traits of Caliph al-Aziz's regime, as mentioned by the Christian writer Mawhub. b. Masur that churches enjoyed peace and security in the era of Caliphs al-Muizz and al-Aziz. ⁵

The Criterion of progress based on ability and talent :

Meritocracy was also a unique feature of this dynasty. People with intelligence, talent, vision and creativity were considered for appointments at the highest offices without any distinction for colour, creed, nation or religion and there are several examples of such appointments.

During the reign of Caliph al-Aziz, a Christian individual, Quzman b. Mina, was appointed as a member of chief advisors' team in financial area and then as officer in *Kharaj* bureau in Egypt Abu al-Faraj Yaqub bin Killis (d 99 CE) who was Jewish but converted to Islam was appointed as the first *vazir* of the Fatimid dynasty.

Caliph Al-Aziz's personal physician was also a Christian doctor, Abul-Fath Mansur b Muqashir. The Caliph Al-Hafiz (1130-49) had a Christian *vazir*, Bahram, who received titles like Sayf-al-Islam, Taj-al-Dawla, Taj-al-Muluk , which had never been awarded to a non-Muslim before. ⁶

The head of the office of Caliph al-Mustansir's mother was a Jew, named Abu Sa'd al-Tustari, ⁷ Other than Christians and Jews, many Sunni judges were included in the legal system of the Fatimids. Caliph Al-Mansur appointed a Maliki administrator Muhammed b. Abi'l Manzur over Qayarwan rather than an Ismaili or a Shii one. ⁸ This act was practised in other Fatimid regions where Sunni *qadis* were appointed over towns which had a Sunni majority population. When al-Muizz came to Egypt and took control he continued the services Chief Justice Abu Tahir from the Ikshidid administration as Chief judge of Egypt, whereas Caliph al Muizz had an equally talented Qadi Numan at his side but continued still he appointed Qadi Abu Tahir. ⁹

Essence of diversity and pluralism in practice:

The Holy Quran says:

“O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another indeed the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is knowing and Acquainted.” ¹⁰

The above verse best explains the concept of diversity and pluralism in Islam. Islam accepts differences of culture and religions and rejects making fun of others' identities

or putting down others. In fact, it encourages Muslims to help others regardless of their background. The Fatimid masses included diverse nations of multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups. Their rulers created positive healthy environments through their good governance, so that the masses live together in peace and harmony. By joining hands with different groups under the principles of diversity and pluralism, the Fatimids created an atmosphere for learning and advancement of cultural and economic activities. This is why the Fatimid regime was a pluralistic era.

Principles of Good Governance observed:

The Fatimid governing principles of equality and social justice paralleled the Islamic principles taught and practised by Prophet Muhammad. Just like Muslims were a minority in the city of Medina, the Fatimids were a minority in the Fatimid state which had a Sunni majority and Kharji majority in North Africa. The Charter of Medina drafted under the Prophet was founded on the ethics of inclusiveness and just governance. Similarly, the *aman* issued by the Fatimid general Jawhar on behalf of the Fatimid Caliph al-Muizz upon entering Egypt demonstrated peace and acceptance.

The *aman* document highlighted and guaranteed the following:

- Authority of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs
- Just governance for all
- The duty of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam which was to take care of the needs of the populace
- Protection of life and property
- Social welfare of the masses
- Provided a legal framework

The promises which were pledged in the *aman* document were fulfilled by the Fatimid rulers. Furthermore, the departments they set-up for smooth running of the state represented best practices. They did not hesitate to employ former officials from the former regimes in their *diwans*.

For effective administration many departments were discontinued and new *diwans* were setup like *diwan al-Kashf*.¹¹

Spirit of Inquiry:

The Fatimids Caliphs were patrons of knowledge. For them knowledge was to be shared and not to hoard. Therefore, they established educational, scientific, and research institutions and libraries to promote knowledge creation and sharing. Cairo

during the Fatimid rule became a centre of learning and knowledge seekers and scholars from all over the world were attracted by it. After the conquest of Egypt, General Jawhar upon the instruction and supervision of Caliph al-Muziz who then was in North Africa, laid the foundation of al-Qahira al-Muizziyya (the victorious one of the al-Muizz) and a first mosque called 'Jami-al-Azhar'. By 378/984 al-Azhar became a university where sessions were held both for men and women.

Following the pattern of Al-Azhar, Fatimids constructed additional mosques like Jamia Hakim, Jamia Rashida, Jamia Maqqas, Jamia Qarafa, Jamia ul-Rasad, Jamia-al-rila, Jamia-ul Qamar. Most of these mosques carried on educational activities also. To this day, al-Azhar continues to remain a prestigious institution of imparting education.

Dar al-Ilm:

Another significant institution of learning established by Fatimids was Dar al Ilm (House of Knowledge) it was established in 395/1005 by Caliph al-Hakim A variety of disciplines were taught there as today in modern universities. Students opted to learn wide range of subjects at the same time ranging from astronomy, mathematics, lexicology, medicine, religions and many more under same roof. It was also a training institute for Ismaili dais who within Cairo and outside were involved in Ismaili dawa.

Al-Musabbhi, the famous Court historian of the Fatimid Caliph al Hakim provides a detail account of the opening and working of Dar al Ilm.

- The building was well furnished
- Experts of all domains were hired and were well remunerated.
- Visitors to Dar al Ilm were provided free paper, ink and reeds.
- People of all walks of life visited and studied here
- Personal collection of books of Caliph al-Hakim on different domains were donated to Dar al Ilm and were of great use to scholars

Salaries of the lecturers at Dar ul-Ilm were comparable to those of al-Azhar's. Other expenses of Dar al Ilm came from *waqaf* which was established by al-Hakim for the maintenance of the al-Azhar Mosque, the mosque of Rashida and Dar-al Ilm. Al-Maqrizi the famous Mumluk historian has also mentioned how this money was used for different purchases.

One of the many accomplishments of al-Hakim's Dar al-Ilm was the preparation of an astronomical chart *Zij* (named after its patron, al-Hakimi) by al-Yunus who prepared

the chart without an observatory at his disposal.¹² This *Zij* replaced the previous *Zij* prepared by the astronomers of al-Mamun in astrological observatory at Shamasiya.

Ibn al-Haytham served the Caliph/Imam al-Hakim at Dar-al-Ilm. He was an accomplished scientist and is known today as the “Father of modern Optics” for his work. His book *Kitab al-Manazrat* is an important contribution in the field of optics.¹³

It is important to note that all the chief dais who were responsible for Ismaili missions in different Jazeeras had spent some time at Dar al-Ilm learning different disciplines. It is evident that this institution taught a range of different disciplines. Dar al Ilm was directly managed by Caliph al-Hakim himself who designed the institution’s objectives and guidelines.

Many formal and informal educational institutions existed in Fatimid period which aided in educational development and encouraged a spirit of inquiry in the masses.

Cultural Development:

The Fatimid were also patrons of arts and culture. Since the establishment of their rule in 909 in North Africa, they constructed cities like Mahdiya, Khalisa and Mansuria. The Fatimid art and architecture reached its zenith when they conquered Egypt in 969 and constructed the new capital city of al-Qahira al-Muizziyya. (The victorious One of al-Muizz). This well- planned new capital city of the Fatimid had two palaces, one for the Fatimid Caliph and another for his heir, which were separated with a large area for public gatherings and ceremonies called Bayn al Qasrayn.

A grand mosque of al-Azhar (the Radiant) was built in Cairo and the gates Babul Fatuh and Bab Zuwayla were added to this city¹⁴. The city included educational institutions, palaces, mosques and libraries. Other than architecture, decorative arts on different mediums were commonly used such as stone, stucco and wood carving, glass crystal, ivory and textiles.

The Fatimid coins (*Dinar* and *Dharam*) were said to be artistically designed and famous for their purity and style. The Fatimid aesthetic taste and ideology could be observed in their coins¹⁵. These coins were of such high quality and number that they became the most widely used coins in Egypt and surrounding vicinity. When the Crusaders captured Palestine, they copied the contemporary Fatimid coins instead of striking their own for their currency.

The details of cultural development presented by eye-witnessing accounts of al-Musabhi, Maqrizi and Nasir Khusraw places Egypt at an outstanding position within and outside the Islamic regions. It became a great manufacturing centre during the Fatimid rule. There were all sorts of artisans working in Fatimid Egypt. The number of artisans excelled as compared to ancient Rome.

“There is no doubt that the artists of Egypt under the Fatimids were skilled to a degree that found no parallel in the handicrafts of Europe....”¹⁶

Economic Activities:

The Fatimids in general enjoyed great prosperity. This was due to:

- The stability of the administrative and financial departments
- Rich revenues from effective tax system.
- Income from the state-owned shops of textiles.
- Custom duties on imports.
- Gold from the mines of Nubia.
- Enriched soil of the Nile enhanced agricultural activities
- Weaving, ship building, pottery, glass work, crystal work, mosaic work, leather work industries were flourishing among others
- Internal and external trade flourished and Egypt earned commercial relations with many countries.

The Fatimid extended their trading activities as far as India. The famous Ismaili *dai* and traveller Nasir Khusraw who visited Cairo in eleventh century mentions in his travelogue:

”..... There were no less than twenty thousand shops in Cairo -----
Every sort of rare goods from all over the world can be had there. I also saw
extremely fine crystal, with the master craftsmen etch most beautifully -----
---- In old Cairo they make all type of porcelain, so fine and translucent-----
----- They also produced a glass so pure and flawless that it resembles
chrysolite and it is sold by weight.” ¹⁷

The economic policies instated by the Fatimids enabled trade and commerce activities to flourish. Their policy to give freedom of enterprise resulted in economic upliftment, creativity and providing equal opportunities to all segments of populace.

Fustat and its bazaars in the Fatimid era:

The old city of Fustat was built on a hill to secure from the flood due to high water level in the Nile. Fustat remained famous in Fatimid era due to its markets. Fustat had houses which were seven to fourteen storeys tall. These buildings were so close that little light could get to the ground therefore lights were always lit at such places. One of the Fustat bazaars was located in such a place was called Lamp Market. Before we see into the facilities provided at Fustat let us see what today's shopping plazas offer us. Food courts, transportation, wide range of products under one roof, beverages, shopping bags trolleys and many more. Similarly, a thousand year back Fustat offered to its visitor's equivalent features as of today. The unique features of the Fustat *bazaars* as described by eye witness and *dai* Nasir-i Khusraw who visited it in eleventh century in his Safarnama as follows:

- To ease the travellers' number of caravanserais (inns) were available
- Water carriers carrying water bags on their backs handled drinking water facility.
- Saddled donkeys available for merchants to hire at a low price.
- Honesty is the best policy was the motto of the merchants of Fustat, if anyone was arrested for being guilty was paraded in city on a camel back with a bell in his hand.
- Wide range of products available at one place e.g., fabrics, fragrances, dried and fresh fruits, oils, soaps, books, materials for dyeing and many more
- Variety of fruits and herbs available which were out of season
- Warehouses built on the banks of Nile
- The streets and markets were named after the merchants found there, such as: the Street of Goldsmiths, The Bazaar of blacksmiths, The House of Wheat.¹⁸

Best minds working together in transferring of knowledge and skills:

The period of Fatimid rule brought forward and sustained great minds, creatives and leaders. These individuals not only helped the Fatimid empire flourish, but they also advanced their respective fields individually and set the global bar for innovation high. To produce a complete list of important personalities would not be possible, however a few important personalities of the Fatimid era and their professions are listed below:

Poet: Ibn Hani.

Author Da'wa Literature: Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani

Dai: al-Mayyad fi- din-al Shirazi

Author and Traveller: Nasir Khusaraw

Scientist: Ibn al Haytham

Qadi: Qadi al-Nauman

Vazier: Ibn Killis

Commander: Jawher as-Siqili

Administrator: Jawdar

Astronomer: Ibn Yunus

Historian: al Musabihhi

Physician: Abu Jafar Ibn al-Jazzar

Lexicographer: Abul Fazal Jafar

Hadith Expert: Muhammad Abdul Ghani bin Saeed

Musician: Abul Husayn Muhammad Ibn al-Tahhan

Conclusion:

By looking at the Fatimid era and its unique features, we observe how core Islamic principles were incorporated in the everyday lives of the rulers and their subjects to create a peaceful empire. The Fatimids deeply valued good governance, tolerance and acceptance of others, caring for traditions and working together with sister communities to make the world a better place to live in. Moreover, they also promoted knowledge creation, sharing and using it to improve lives of all, encouraged cultural advancements and enabled equal opportunities for all. These values helped the Fatimids improve the quality of lives of their citizens and promote peace. Muslims all over the world today can look to the Fatimids to gain wisdom and valuable lessons for our collective advancement.

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