

eternal guiding spirit of the people, the symbol of interdependence between the material and the spiritual world and of the transmission of knowledge from the world of spirits to the world of persons. The second is the Qurʾān school where the children receive their early schooling and develop a sensitivity for the recited or spoken "word," the tool for expression of knowledge in an oral culture. Equating intelligence and learning with the spoken word, Laye states, "if intelligence seemed slower it was because reflection preceded speech and because speech itself was an important matter."<sup>7</sup> The Qurʾān as the revealed and spoken word of God thus enters into the child's consciousness as embodying three aspects of traditional wisdom and learning—reflection, speech and intelligence. The verbal meaning of the revealed word cannot be separated from the behavior it engenders.

Such a concept of traditional learning as reflected in actual practice is traced in a description that Laye gives of his father's work as a goldsmith. This memorable episode takes on the significance of a religious ritual reenacting the cosmic event of Creation. There is an insistence on the idea of harmony and beauty that emerge out of the smelting and the chaos, echoing many a Qurʾānic verse. The ritualistic aspect of the episode is emphasized in the incantations and chanting that accompany the forging of the gold in ornament, the spiritual world participating with human hands in the process of transformation. The praise-singer composes his most powerful songs at this moment, the transformation impelling him to greater creativity while the gold is moulded into beautiful patterns. It is also significant that the craftsman working with gold must purify himself through ablutions and abstain from sex during the whole time of what is described as a "ceremony." After the completion of the work and the general offering of good wishes and congratulations, the craftsman makes an offering to all present of cola nuts, the token of courtesy, good will and solidarity.

A different type of transformation is traced in the events that mark the boy's initiation into adulthood. Among Muslims, the act of circumcision generally follows soon after birth or when the boy is fairly young. As described in Guinean Muslim society, this act is postponed until just before the boy is ready to undertake the responsibilities of adult life. The circumcision is, however, preceded by a preliminary initiatory act associated with *Konden Diara*, a frightening mythical presence with whom the initiates must come to terms. During this ceremony, boys join the society of the uninitiated comprising all the uncircumcized youth of twelve, thirteen and fourteen years of age. The event takes place on the night before the feast marking the end of the month of Ramaḍān, ending the Muslim month of fasting. Among the Muslims of Guinea it is called the "ceremony of lions," because the boys spend a night on the outside in a sacred spot, surrounded by the terrifying roars that appear to be those of lions, the event is described as a "test, a training in hardship, a rite...."<sup>8</sup> The elements inherent in the ceremony, which are of course of great symbolic import as well, are remarkable for their juxtaposition of the ritual of initiation and the ritual of fasting during Ramaḍān, both involving notions of

testing, of discipline, of community solidarity and above all of strengthening the capability of the human will for the responsibilities, fears and traumas of adult and community life. The initiation ceremony reaches a climax the next day in the feasting that follows Ramaḍān, marking an end to the period of trial and evoking a sense of celebration and even triumph.

Later on comes the actual circumcision ceremony. In its various phases, it follows a pattern common to several African societies: the public ceremonies of communal dancing and feasting and the private ceremonies involving the separation and sequestering of those to be circumcized in a hut. Finally after the actual operation, there follows a period of healing accompanied by secret instruction and training for adult life. In summing up the impact of the event, the author refers to the alternating rhythms of joy and gravity and observes that all was overshadowed by the fact that the "event which is commemorated was the most important event in life: to be exact, the beginning of new life.... Life itself would spring from the shedding of our blood."<sup>9</sup>

This new beginning prepares the youths through "secret" knowledge which has revealed to them a code of conduct and conferred on them capabilities for undertaking adult responsibilities; it also means that they now have a commitment to the religious and social organizations that support the group. The intermingling of Islamic symbols, such as the feast of Ramaḍān, the role of the teacher (or "Shaykh" to use the Sufi term), in the initiation and circumcision rituals, represent one illustration of how Muslim and Guinean world views are fused in the cultural milieu and provide a broader frame of reference within which the young African Muslim responds and acts.

### The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Ceremony of *Ghaṭ-Pāt*

The traditional literature called the *gināns*, which has been preserved among this group over several centuries, makes reference to certain rituals that became established in the community after its conversion to Islam. The process of conversion which took place in the Subcontinent from the thirteenth century onwards was carried out by Ismāʿīlī *dāʿīs* [missionaries], known in the community as *pīrs*. One of the rituals that became established was a ceremony called *ghaṭ-pāt*.<sup>10</sup> As described in the ancient literature, those who had converted from Hinduism into Islam participated in a group ritual where they drank a sip of sacred water after having given up the *janōi* (*janeʿū*), a sacred thread worn by Hindus. When some of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs migrated to East Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they established *jamāʿāt-khānas*<sup>11</sup> in the new centers of settlement. These *jamāʿāt-khānas* functioned as a house of assembly and prayers, much the same as they had among both Ismāʿīlīs and Sufis in the Subcontinent. Though several specifically Indo-Muslim aspects of the community's life became altered in the new land, the ritual of *ghaṭ-pāt* continued to play an important part in their religious life centered on the *jamāʿāt-khāna*.

The term *ghaṭ-pāt* is a compound derived from two Sanskrit words, *ghaṭ* (a vessel for water) and *pāṭa* (a low, long dais-like table on which the vessels are

placed). Within the community, the ceremony is also referred to in Persian as *Āb-i-shifā*<sup>3</sup> ("water of healing").<sup>12</sup>

The water placed in the vessel was generally mixed with that obtained from the well of *zamzam* or with small clay tablets from Shi'ite holy places such as Karbala. Special prayers may also have been said over the water by the Imam during a visit to the community. In this way the sacred character of the water is established. The vessels used during the ceremony are also cleansed ritually through recitation of prayer and use of incense. Within the community, a link is established between this ceremony and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have performed initiatory rites for the early converts to Islam. Parallel traditions of course also existed among many Sufi groups in the Subcontinent and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

The communal drinking of *Āb-i-shifā*<sup>3</sup> was related to both Muslim and Saṃvat (Northern Indian Hindu) calendars held on Fridays, the night of the new moon (*Āndraat*) and other major festival occasions when a larger congregation was present. The ceremony followed the completion of the formal prayer, called *Du'ā*,<sup>13</sup> among the Nizāri Ismā'īlīs, individuals lined up behind each other in front of the *pāt* and they drank from a small cup into which the *Āb-i-shifā*<sup>3</sup> had been poured from a larger vessel. The members of the congregation are also given an offering of a sweet food after having completed the ceremony. In the *gināns* reference is made to this offering and particular emphasis is laid on the symbolism of the five ingredients that are used for making it—milk, sugar, clarified butter, wheat flour and water. Each of these ingredients is said to signify a moral or spiritual trait such as purity, generosity, a spirit of cooperation, moral strength and spiritual seeking.

There are several aspects of the total ceremony that need to be considered, firstly in their initial context as representing a transition from a Hindu world view to a Muslim one, and secondly in an African context as establishing a continuity and adaptation of past practice. In the context of the larger process of conversion in medieval times from Hinduism to Islam in the community, the ceremony fulfills several important functions. It affirms a notion of purity, but also revises it, through a ritual form that has indigenous Indian roots. In the new and changed order, however, purity and impurity are projected as representing a new order which seeks to integrate a number of castes and relate their allegiance to an external figure—the Shi'ite Ismā'īlī Imam.<sup>14</sup>

The sources of the water, the well of *zamzam* in Mecca or the sacred places in Karbala, reinforce the symbolic and ritual link with Shi'ite Ismā'īlī Islam. The *gināns* also include many references which link the ceremony to Qur'ānic descriptions of the spring of *al-Kauthar*.<sup>15</sup> Classical Ismā'īlī works include *tahāra*, or ritual purity, among the traditional pillars of faith.<sup>16</sup> Thus an overarching frame of Islamic metaphors is used to establish the new religious and social order within which the ritual is seen to have significance. Several other functional characteristics of the ceremony can also be identified as elements that reinforce a new religious and social identity and also consolidate allegiance to an Imam as the pivotal figure of authority, in bonding the followers into a

It is however at the level of its esoteric and symbolic significance that the ceremony affords an opportunity for analysing a synthesis between Hindu and Muslim religious experience. This relates in particular to the aspect of transition and liminality at the level of individual religious life that has the most interesting implications in terms of esoteric Hinduism and Islam. As Victor Turner has shown on the basis of his analysis of metaphors in Hindu culture, the fourth stage of life in a Hindu's quest according to the prescriptions of *dharma*, the joining of an *ashram*, represents the antistructural element to the structural closures of caste.<sup>17</sup> Much of *bhaktī* and *sant* poetry also illustrate this. The ceremony of *ghaṭ-pāt*, interpreted in its esoteric or *bātinī* aspects in Indian Ismā'īlism, enables the individual follower to participate in one of the profoundest religious experiences possible. As described in various *gināns*, the drinking of the sacred water is the equivalent of the experience of unity, when the individual soul embraces the light (*nūr*) of *imāma*. The ritual merges the individual at one level into the new community, at another it frees him from the merely structural or *zāhirī* [literally, "exterior"] aspects of ritual and enables him to experience the dimension of *bātin*, the interior religion through which his individual quest for spiritual knowledge and understanding is attained.<sup>18</sup>

In its East African context, the ceremony established a continuity with past practice and also incorporated the full range of meanings and experiences already present in its practice. But in addition it became a vehicle for adapting to changed conditions and a means to effecting a degree of social and religious change. The community in East Africa, during the period of its full growth (from 1920 onwards), consisted of groups of Ismā'īlīs from many parts of what was then British India. As they sought to establish themselves in a colonial society, they were faced with problems of reorganization, adaptation and establishing structures that reflected the goals of a united, centrally organized religious community. One of the instruments that facilitated this process, as the Ismā'īlī Imam of the time sought to realize these goals, was the system of rituals that had linked various community groups under more disparate circumstances in the Subcontinent.<sup>19</sup> The ceremony of *ghaṭ-pāt* was made less elaborate by abridging the length of the prayers and recitations accompanying the ritual. In due course when the prayers among Ismā'īlīs of Indian origin were made uniform with other Ismā'īlīs elsewhere, the *ghaṭ-pāt* ceremony was made to blend with it. This also meant that the younger members of the congregation, who may have had difficulty mastering the Khōjki language used earlier, now were allowed to lead the prayers that preceded the ceremony. Prayers could also be led by women, a standard feature in contemporary Ismā'īlī practice, but one that only gradually came to be established, paving the way for a greater role for Ismā'īlī women not only in religious but eventually also in social life in the community. The *ghaṭ-pāt* ceremony is thus a useful ritual for analyzing, diachronically, how patterns of belief and of community organization are interdependent and a significant clue to how a religious community adapts its symbols and concepts in new and unfamiliar situations.

The sketch of the two groups described above is necessarily brief and even impressionistic. An argument could perhaps be made for not treating two such