



ISMA'ILISM XVI. MODERN ISMA'ILI COMMUNITIES

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The Isma'ilis consist of two main branches—the Nezāri Isma'ilis and the Musta'lian Ṭayyebi Isma'ilis. Both have their roots in the Fatimid period of Isma'ili history and differ primarily over their respective belief in the Imamate, spiritual leadership of the community. The Nezāri branch believes in a living physically present Imam, Ḥāẓer Imam. Their present and forty-ninth Imam is Prince Karim Aga Khan. The Musta'lian Isma'ilis believe that their twenty-first Imam, al-Ṭayyeb went into physical concealment (*satr*) and that while the Imamate continues in his line, authority in his physical absence is fulfilled by a vicegerent, *dā'i moṭlaq*, who acts on his behalf. In their encounter with modernity therefore, the two communities reflect a different pattern of historical and institutional development.

THE MUSTA'LIAN ṬAYYEBI ISMA'ILISM

From the 10th/16th century onward the Musta'lian Ṭayyebi community became divided into Dā'udi and Solaymani factions over allegiance to a particular line of *dā'is*. The present *dā'i* of the major group, the Dā'udi Ṭayyebis, also known popularly as Bohras, is Sayyednā Borhan-al-Din, the fifty-second in a line of authorities. They are found mostly in South Asia, to a



lesser extent in Yemen and in small immigrant communities living in Britain, North America and Sri Lanka.

The other group, called the Ṭayyebi Solaymānis, followed a different line and their present fiftieth *dā'ī* is al-Ḥosayn b. Esmā'il al-Makrami, headquartered in the Yemen. Following the annexation of Najrān from the Yemen to Saudi Arabia a community of Solaymānis is also to be found there and an even smaller number lives in India.

Two major *dā'īs* have played an important role in the modern Dā'udi Ṭayyebi community. Sayyednā Ṭāher Sayf-al-Din became leader in 1915 and was succeeded in 1965 by the present leader Sayyednā Moḥammad Borhān-al-Din (b. 1915). They have continued to emphasize the strong tradition of learning in the community, as reflected in the further development of the two major libraries in Mumbai and Surat; and the enlargement of the seminary, Jāme'a Sayfiya in Surat, an academy of studies and training for religious scholars of the community. There are well established madrasas for the religious education of all followers as well as schools for secular education. The tradition of preserving the heritage of learning through manuscript study has been well preserved and scholarly and literary works, primarily in Arabic, continue to be developed within the community.

The Dā'udi community is organized under the leadership of the *dā'ī*, with its headquarters in Mumbai, and with the assistance of the brothers and sons of the *dā'ī*. The 'Wazarat al-Safiyya', the central administrative office, appoints local representatives called *'āmel*, throughout the world. Each *'āmel* heads the local community, organizing religious and social life, including maintenance of places for religious worship and ritual, as well as communal buildings. The legal framework of practice is based on the *Da'ā'em al-Eslām* of the Fatimid jurist al-Qāzi al-No'mān (d. 363/974). Bohra congregational religious practices include sessions called *majāles*, where sermons are given, religious poems are recited and other practices distinctive to the tradition are performed. The majority of the Dā'udi Bohras are in business and industry and have a well-deserved reputation for entrepreneurship and public service. They also run many charitable organizations for the welfare of their communities worldwide.

The Solaymāni community, of predominantly Arab origin in the Yemen, is found in both urban and rural areas, with strong tribal roots. The community of Najrān in Saudi Arabia, has often found it difficult to practice its faith



openly and freely. The community in India has produced noted public officials and scholars, the most prominent was Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899-1981), a lawyer, diplomat, and scholar.

THE NEZĀRI ISMA‘ILIS

The modern Nezāri Isma‘ili community which is more numerous has a global presence. Historically, the community reflects the geographical and ethnographic diversity based on the various cultural regions of the world, where its members originated and lived. These heritages are Central Asian, Persian, Arab and South Asian. They are found in some thirty different countries ranging from Iran, Afghanistan, various countries in Africa, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Syria and Tajikistn. During the 19th and 20th centuries many Isma‘ilis from South Asia migrated to Africa and settled there. In more recent times there has been migration from all the parts of the Isma‘ili world to North America and Europe. The shared values that unite the Nezāris are centered on allegiance to a living Imam, at present the forty-ninth hereditary Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan. The role and guidance of the Imam provides the enabling framework for the development of the community and for the continuity of its Muslim heritage.

The modern phase of the Nezāris Isma‘ili history, as in general with other Muslims, can be dated to the 19th century and to the significant historical changes arising from the growth and enlargement of European presence and power in the Muslim world. Following a period of change and turmoil in Iran during the 1840s, the forty-sixth Imam, Āgā Ḥasan-‘Ali Šāh (Aga Khan I, q.v.), went to India, where he was the first Imam to bear the title of Aga Khan, granted by the Persian ruler Faṭḥ-‘Ali Shah Qajār. His leadership enabled the community in India to lay the foundations for institutional and social developments and also fostered more regular contacts with Isma‘ili communities in other parts of the world. He was succeeded on his death in 1881 by his son Āgā ‘Ali Šāh (Aga Khan II, q.v.) who continued to build on the institutions created by his father, with a particular emphasis on providing modern education for the community. He also played an important role in representing Muslims in the emerging political institutions under British rule in India and encouraging philanthropic efforts to enlarge opportunities for them in social and educational fields. Following his early death in 1885, he was succeeded by his eight-year-old son, Imam Solṭān Moḥammad Šāh, Aga Khan III. He was Imam for 72 years, the longest in Isma‘ili history and his life spanned dramatic political, social and economic transformations among



Muslims, as in much of the world at large.

Aga Khan III's long term involvement in international affairs, including the Presidency of the League of Nations, his advocacy of Muslim interests in troubled times and his commitment to advancing education, particularly for Muslim women, reflect his many and varied contributions. It was however at the level of his leadership as Imam that he was able to transform the modern history of the Is-ma'ilis, enabling them to adapt successfully to the challenges and changes of the twentieth century.

Particularly in the Subcontinent and Africa, where enabling conditions existed for the development of the community, the Isma'ilis established administrative structures, educational institutions, health services and built on economic opportunities in trade and industry. The educational institutions included instruction from early childhood through secondary schooling, with scholarships made available for advanced studies. Schools for girls were established separately, where necessary and female education was given a high priority.

In 1905, the Nezāri Isma'ili community in East Africa adopted a constitution which laid the basis for an organized framework of institutions and governance at local, national and regional levels. Similar constitutions became part of other Isma'ili communities and appropriately revised over time, provided guidance for the conduct of personal law and its relationship with other communities in the context of the laws of the land. In 1986, the present Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, extended the practice to the world-wide community. The revised Constitution which serves the social governance needs of the Isma'ilis facilitates a united approach to internal organization and external relations, while taking account of regional diversity and local differences. As in the past, Nezāri Is-ma'ilis continue a strong tradition of voluntary service, contributions and donations of time, expertise and personal resources to the Imam and the institutions.

The present Imam assumed his role in 1957 at a time when much of the developing world, including the Muslim world, was going through an important period of transition, often marked by political change and upheaval. These continued throughout the 12th century, making it particularly vital that the Isma'ilis were guided appropriately through periods of crises and tumultuous changes, as in the case of East Africa and then later Tajikistan, Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. Dislocation often meant that humanitarian



concerns for refugee rehabilitation and resettlement took priority, and a significant number of Isma‘ilis also immigrated to Britain, Canada, Europe and the United States. More recently, many refugees have returned to Afghanistan to contribute to nation-building there.

While the internal institutional organizations of the Nezāri community continued to be strengthened and variously reorganized to respond to changing conditions, the Imam also created new institutions to better serve the complex development needs of the community as well as the societies in which the Isma‘ilis lived. This gave rise to the establishment and growth of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), an international and inter-denominational group of agencies with the goal of pioneering values and strategies for sustainable human development conducive to the fulfilment of cultural, economic, social and spiritual needs and aspirations of individuals and communities. A number of institutions within AKDN pursue a variety of non-denominational programmes in economic development, education, social development, culture and the environment and poverty eradication, across the world, in rural and urban settings, with a particular emphasis on populations that are disadvantaged.

The Nezāri Isma‘ilis and their Imam view the entire spectrum of their engagement in the world as an expression of an encompassing ethic of Islam and a long standing faith and historical tradition going back to the teachings of the Prophet and the early Imams as reflected in various periods of history, such as that of the Fatimids. Some of these institutions, which work closely with international agencies, national governments, local communities and charitable organizations, have become acknowledged world-wide for successfully addressing critical developmental needs through programmes in Architecture and the Environment, Education and in particular childhood and girls’ education, Economic Development and Health Services. This has enabled the Isma‘ili community and the Imamate to become catalysts for innovative approaches to problems of society, without losing the grounding in their Muslim traditions of ethical commitment and interpretations of faith and practice.

The creation of an Institute of Ismaili Studies (q.v.) in London in 1977 has enabled the development of a significant program of research, publications and education to promote scholarship and learning on Islam, Shi‘ism and Isma‘ilism. The Institute is increasingly becoming an important international academic forum and reference point for Isma‘ili studies in Arabic, Persian,



English and several other languages as well as an important resource for Isma'ilis for the preservation and study of their heritage.

Each Isma'ili Jamat, or congregation, is generally served by an Isma'ili Center called the *Jamatkhana*, an institutional category of religious spaces common to many Muslim communities. It is a space reserved for tradition and practices specific to the Isma'ili *tariqa* of Islam. In several cities around the world, such as London, Vancouver, Lisbon, Dubai and Dushanbe, Isma'ili centers built in the recent past became well-known for their architectural design and for the promotion of cultural, educational and social programmes serving Isma'ilis and the larger society.

In their modern historical development, the various Is-ma'ili communities, Musta'lian and Nezāri, represent a case among cases, of how Muslim religious communities might through appropriate interpretation of their heritage create new opportunities to affirm and further some of the positive gains of modernity.

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