



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### **The Ismaili Community**

The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, generally known as the Ismailis, belong to the Shia branch of Islam. The Shia form one of the two major branches of Islam, the Sunni being the other. The Ismailis live in over 25 different countries, mainly in Central and South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Europe, North America and Australia.

As Muslims, the Ismailis affirm the fundamental Islamic testimony of truth, the Shahada, that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) is His Messenger. They believe that Muhammad was the last and final Prophet of Allah, and that the Holy Quran, Allah's final message to mankind, was revealed through him. Muslims hold this revelation to be the culmination of the message that had been revealed through other Prophets of the Abrahamic tradition before Muhammad, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus, all of whom Muslims revere as Prophets of Allah.

In common with other Shia Muslims, the Ismailis affirm that after the Prophet's death, Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, became the first Imam - the spiritual leader - of the Muslim community and that this spiritual leadership (known as Imamat) continues thereafter by hereditary succession through Ali and his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. Succession to Imamat, according to Shia doctrine and tradition, is by way of *Nass* (Designation), it being the absolute prerogative of the Imam of the Time to appoint his successor from amongst any of his male descendants.

His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. He was born on 13 December 1936 in Geneva, son of Prince Aly Khan and Princess Tajuddawlah Aly Khan and spent his early childhood in Nairobi, Kenya. He attended Le Rosey School in Switzerland for nine years and graduated from Harvard in 1959 with a BA (Honours) in Islamic History. He succeeded his grandfather Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan on 11 July 1957 at the age of 20.

Spiritual allegiance to the Imam and adherence to the Shia Imami Ismaili *tariqah* (persuasion) of Islam according to the guidance of the Imam of the Time, have engendered in the Ismaili Community an ethos of self-reliance, unity, and a common identity. In a number of the countries where they live, the Ismailis have evolved a well-defined institutional framework through which they have, under the leadership and guidance of the Imam, established schools, hospitals, health centres, housing societies and a variety of social and economic development institutions for the common good of all citizens regardless of their race or religion.

During the course of history, the Ismailis have, under the guidance of their Imams, made significant contributions to Islamic civilisations, the cultural, intellectual and religious life of Muslims. The University of al-Azhar and the Academy of Science, Dar al-Ilm, in Egypt and indeed the city of Cairo itself, are testimony to this contribution.



Among the renowned philosophers, jurists, physicians, mathematicians, astronomers and scientists of the past who flourished under the patronage of Ismaili Imams are Qadi al-Numan, al-Kirmani, Ibn al-Haytham (al-Hazen), Nasir e-Khusraw and Nasir al-Din Tusi.

The Aga Khan, like his grandfather before him, has always been concerned about the wellbeing of all Muslims, particularly the impact on them of the challenges of the rapidly evolving world. Addressing as Chairman, the International Conference on the Example (*Seerat*) of the Prophet Muhammad in Karachi in 1976, he noted that the wisdom of Allah's final Prophet in seeking new solutions for problems which could not be solved by traditional methods, provides the inspiration for Muslims to conceive a truly modern and dynamic society, without affecting the fundamental concepts of Islam.

Since the present Aga Khan assumed the office of Imam in 1957, there have been major political and economic changes in most of the countries where Ismailis live. He has adapted the complex system of administering the various Ismaili communities, pioneered by his grandfather during the colonial era, to a world of nation states. In the course of that process, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, who was twice President of the League of Nations, had already provided a contemporary articulation of the public international role of the Imam. The Imam today, under the present Aga Khan, continues this tradition of strict political neutrality.

In designating his successor to the Imam in 1957, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan stated in his will:

"In view of the fundamentally altered conditions in the world...due to the great changes which have taken place...I am convinced that it is in the best interests of the Shia Muslim Ismailia Community that I should be succeeded by a young man who has been brought up in the midst of the new age and who brings a new outlook on life to his office of Imam".

Upon succeeding to the leadership of the Ismaili Muslims, the immediate concern of the Aga Khan was therefore to prepare his community, wherever they lived, for the changes that lay ahead. This rapidly evolving situation called for bolder initiatives and new programmes to reflect developing national aspirations.

In Africa, Asia and the Middle East, a major objective of the Community's social welfare and economic programmes, until the mid-fifties, had been to create a broad base of businessmen, farmers and professionals. The educational facilities of the Community tended to emphasise secondary-level education. With the coming of independence, each nation's economic aspirations took on new dimensions, focusing on industrialisation and modernisation of agriculture. The Community's educational priorities had to be reassessed in the context of new national goals.



Throughout much of the developing world, Ismailis were affected by radical changes in their respective countries. On the Indian subcontinent, and in South East Asia, major political changes followed the advent of independence, which gave rise to new nation states often followed by dislocation of populations.

In certain African countries, the Ismaili community was similarly affected. In 1972, under the regime of the then President Idi Amin, Ismailis and other Asians, despite being citizens of the country and having lived there for generations, were expelled. The Aga Khan had to take urgent steps to facilitate their resettlement elsewhere, and owing to his personal efforts most found homes, not only in Asia, but also in Europe and North America.

Most of the basic resettlement problems were overcome remarkably rapidly. This was due to the adaptability of the Ismailis themselves and in particular to their educational background and their linguistic abilities, as well as the efforts of the host countries and the moral and material support from Community programmes. Such programmes have continued and have, in fact, been given a new orientation so that the Community continues to play a fuller part in the development and progress of the countries of its adoption.

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan established social development institutions in the subcontinent of India and Pakistan, "for the relief of humanity". They include institutions such as the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust and the Platinum Jubilee Investments Limited which in turn assisted the growth of various types of co-operative societies. Diamond Jubilee Schools for girls were set up throughout the remote Northern Areas of Pakistan. In addition, scholarship programmes established at the time of the Golden Jubilee to give assistance to needy students were progressively expanded. In East Africa, major social welfare institutions were created, including the Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi. Economic development institutions were also established in East Africa. Companies such as the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust (now Diamond Trust Bank of Kenya) and the Jubilee Insurance company, which are today quoted on the Nairobi Stock Exchange, have become important national economic institutions.

In the early 1980's many new social and economic development projects were launched. These range from the establishment of the US\$ 300 million international Aga Khan University with its Faculty of Health Sciences and teaching hospital based in Karachi, and the creation of a girls school and a medical centre in the Hunza region, in one of the remote parts of Northern Pakistan bordering on China and Afghanistan, to the establishment of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat, India, and the extension of existing urban hospitals and primary health care centres in Tanzania and Kenya, in East Africa.

These initiatives form part of an international network of institutions involved in fields that range from education, health and rural development, to architecture and the promotion of private sector enterprise. Known as the Aga Khan Development Network,



its constituent institutions, all founded over the past thirty years, include the Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan University, Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, comprising the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and the Historic Cities Support Programme. The Network also includes the Aga Khan Health Services and the Aga Khan Education Services, providers of health care, schooling and other educational services in South Asia and East Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century. These institutions which are open to all, regardless of origin or creed, are described in greater detail in the brochure on the Aga Khan Development Network.

In view of the importance that Islam places on maintaining a balance between the spiritual wellbeing of the individual and the quality of his or her life, the Imam's guidance deals with both aspects of the life of his followers. The Aga Khan has encouraged Ismaili Muslims, settled in the industrialised world, to contribute towards the progress of communities in the developing world through various development programmes. In recent years, Ismaili Muslims, who went to the U.S. and Canada, often as refugees from Asia and Africa, have readily settled into the social, educational and economic fabric of urban and rural centres across the continent. As in the developing world, the Ismaili Muslim Community's settlement and the establishment of community institutions in the developed world have been characterised by an ethos of self-reliance, an emphasis on education and a pervasive spirit of philanthropy.

It is this commitment to man's dignity and the relief of humanity that inspires the Ismaili Imam's philanthropic institutions. Giving of one's competence, sharing one's time, material or intellectual wherewithal with those among whom one lives, for the relief of hardship, pain or ignorance is a deeply ingrained tradition which shapes the social conscience of the Ismaili Muslim community.