



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Modern Ismaili Communities

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The Ismailis consist of two main branches – the [Nizari](#) Ismailis and the Musta‘lian Tayyibi Ismailis. Both have their roots in the [Fatimid](#) period of Ismaili history and differ primarily over their respective belief in the [Imamat](#), that is, spiritual leadership of the community. The Nizari branch believes in a living, physically present [Imam](#). Their present and forty-ninth Imam is [Prince Karim Aga Khan](#). The Musta‘lian Ismailis believe that their twenty-first Imam, al-Tayyib, went into physical concealment (*satr*) and that while the Imamat continues in his line, authority in his physical absence is exercised by a vicegerent, *da‘i mutlaq*, 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 Tayyibi Ismailis

From the 10th AH/16th CE century onward the Musta‘lian Tayyibi community became divided into Da‘udi and Sulaymani factions over allegiance to a particular line of *da‘is*. The present *da‘i* of the major group, the Da‘udi [Tayyibis](#), also known popularly as Bohras, is Sayyidna 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 Tayyibi [Sulaymanis](#), followed a different line of *da‘is* and their present fiftieth *da‘i* is al-Husayn b. Isma‘il al-Makrami, headquartered in Yemen. Following the annexation of Najran from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, a community of Sulaymanis is also to be found there and an even smaller number lives in India.

Two major *da‘is* have played an important role in the modern Da‘udi Tayyibi community. Sayyidna Tahir Sayf al-Din became leader in 1915 and was succeeded in 1965 by the present leader Sayyidna Muhammad Burhan al-Din (b. 1915). They have continued to emphasise the



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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, *Jame'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 Dau'di community is organised under the leadership of the *da'i*, with its headquarters in Mumbai, and with the assistance of the brothers and sons of the *da'i*. The 'Wazarat al-Safiyya', the central administrative office, appoints local representatives, called '*amil*', throughout the world. Each '*amil*' heads the local community, organising 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'a'im al-Islam* of the Fatimid jurist al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363 AH/974 CE). Bohra congregational religious practices include sessions called *majalis*, where sermons are given, religious poems are recited and other practices distinctive to the tradition are performed. The majority of the Da'udi Bohras are in business and industry, and have a well-deserved reputation for entrepreneurship and public service. They also run many charitable organisations for the welfare of their communities world-wide.

The Sulaymani community, of predominantly Arab origin in the Yemen, is found in both urban and rural areas, with strong tribal roots. The community of Najran 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 of whom was Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899-1981), a lawyer, diplomat, and scholar.

The Nizari Ismailis

The modern Nizari Ismaili 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



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countries ranging from Iran, Afghanistan, various countries in Africa, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Syria and Tajikistan. During the 19th and 20th centuries, many Ismailis from South Asia migrated to Africa and settled there. In more recent times, there has been migration from all the parts of the Ismaili world to North America and Europe. The shared values that unite the Nizaris are centred 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 Nizari Ismaili 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, Aga Hasan-‘Ali Shah (Aga Khan I), went to India, where he was the first Imam to bear the title of Aga Khan, granted by the Persian ruler Fath-‘Ali Shah Qajar. His leadership enabled the community in India to lay the foundations for institutional and social developments and also fostered more regular contacts with Ismaili communities in other parts of the world. He was succeeded on his death in 1881 by his son Aga ‘Ali Shah (Aga Khan II) 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, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III. He was Imam for 72 years, the longest in Ismaili 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 Ismailis, enabling them to adapt successfully to the challenges and changes of the twentieth century.



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Particularly in the Subcontinent and Africa, where enabling conditions existed for the development of the community, the Ismailis 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 Nizari Ismaili community in East Africa adopted a constitution which laid the basis for an organised framework of institutions and governance at local, national and regional levels. Similar constitutions became part of other Ismaili 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 Ismailis, facilitates a united approach to internal organisation and external relations, while taking account of regional diversity and local differences. As in the past, Nizari Ismailis 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 20th century, making it particularly vital that the Ismailis were guided appropriately through periods of crises and tumultuous changes, as in the case of East Africa and then later in Tajikistan, Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. Dislocation often meant that humanitarian concerns for refugee rehabilitation and resettlement took priority, and a significant number of Ismailis 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 organisations of the Nizari community continued to be strengthened and variously reorganised to respond to changing conditions, the Imam also



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created new institutions to better serve the complex development needs of the community as well as the societies in which the Ismailis 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 the 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 Nizari Ismailis 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 Prophet Muhammad and the early Shi'i 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 organisations, have become acknowledged world-wide for successfully addressing critical developmental needs through programmes in architecture and the environment, education, in particular childhood and girls' education, economic development and health services. This has enabled the Ismaili 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 The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London in 1977 has enabled the development of a significant program of research, publications and education to promote scholarship and learning on Islam, with a particular focus on [Shi'ism](#) and its Ismaili [Tariqah](#). The Institute is increasingly becoming an important international academic forum and reference point for Ismaili studies in Arabic, Persian, English and several other languages as well as an important resource for Ismailis for the preservation and study of their heritage.

Each Ismaili [Jamāt](#), or congregation, is generally served by an Ismaili space of gathering 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 Ismaili *tariqah* of



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Islam. In several cities around the world, such as London, Vancouver, Lisbon, Dubai and Dushanbe, Ismaili Centres built in the recent past became well-known for their architectural design and for the promotion of cultural, educational and social programmes serving Ismailis and the larger society.

In their modern historical development, the various Ismaili communities, Musta‘lian and Nizari, 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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This is an edited version of an article that was originally published in *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Columbia University, New York, Vol. XIV, pp. 208-210.