NIZĀRI ISMAILIS: HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND BELIEFS
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Nizārī Ismailis belong to a branch of Shiʿi Islam who believe in the continuity of the succession to the Prophet Muhammad through, Ismāʿīl, the second eldest son of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765). The early Ismailis went through several stages of evolution in their beliefs and political achievements, including a period of concealment (*satr*) (during which the Ismaili Imams operate clandestinely), leading to the establishment of the Fatimid state (in 909). The apogee of the Shiʿi Ismaili Imams' power was reached during the reign of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs.

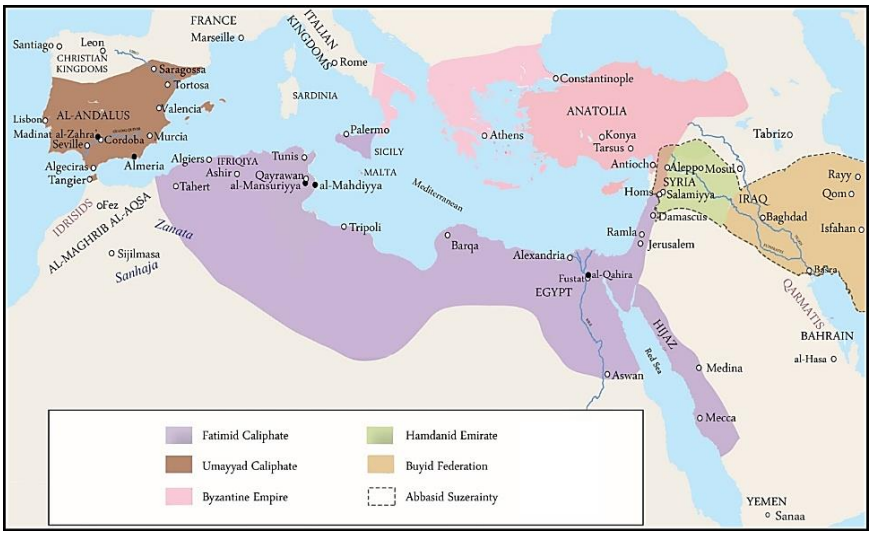

Figure 1. Map of the Fatimid Empire (Courtesy of Institute of Ismaili Studies)

The history of the Nizārī Ismailis practically starts with the dispute over the succession of the eighth Fatimid Imam-Caliph, al-Mustanṣir bi'llāh (d. 1094). At the centre of the dispute is Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (d. 1124), the senior Persian *dāʿī* who had arrived in Cairo at the suggestion of ʿAbd al-Malik-i ʿAttāsh, the chief of the Persian Ismaili mission (*daʿwa*) who owed their allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs. A few decades before the demise of al-Mustanṣir, Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. after 1070), another Persian figure, had arrived in Cairo and was despatched as the

most senior chief of the territory of Khurāsān (*ḥujjat-i jazīra-yi khurāsān*). Nāṣir-i Khusraw was the link that later on connected the Fatimid *daʿwa* to its Persian followers; he wrote almost entirely in a very Persian with a refined style that remains one of the pillars of Persian poetry and prose. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ is the continuity of the same tradition which became the centre of one of the most prominent remaining branches of the Ismailis: it is with these people that the Persian language – as opposed to Arabic – becomes the dominant language of the Nizārī Ismailis for many centuries until contemporary times. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ arrived in Cairo at a time of crisis. The Fatimid state had gone through a famine and the breakdown of law and order. Under these circumstances Badr al-Jamālī (d. 1094), an Armenian general in Syria, helped the Fatimids restore peace and order. Badr al-Jamālī's son, al-Afḍal, became the powerful vizier of al-Mustanṣir after the death of his father. According to Nizari sources, Nizar, born in 1054, the eldest son of al-Mustanṣir, was designated by his father to succeed him as the next Imam-Caliph. Al-Afḍāl, who favoured the youngest son of al-Mustanṣir, Abu al-Qāsim Aḥmad (al-Mustaʿlī), who was married to his sister. Following the death of al-Mustanṣir, al-Afḍal's swift action to obtain the allegiance of the Fatimid nobles and the Ismaili *daʿwa* in Cairo, led to the rise of al-Mustaʿlī to the throne of the Fatimid empire.

It is from this point onward that the history of Nizārī Ismailis begins and eventually it moves to Persia as its main centre of activity. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ favoured the cause of the dispossessed son of al-Mustanṣir, Abū Manṣūr Nizār (d. 1095). When he had visited Cairo during 1078-1080, Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ had already started emerging as the chief leader of the Ismaili community in Persia. By the time of the death of al-Mustanṣir, he was already the undisputed leader of Ismailis in Persia. He emerged as the chief defender of the right of Nizār to succession. The seizure of the Alamūt fortress in 1090 had already worked as a platform to strengthen the position of Ismailis in Persia as the most powerful opponent of the pro-Abbasid Seljuq rulers. The Nizari Ismaili state was primarily a series of strongholds and fortresses that were the safe havens of Ismailis during periods of raid and massacre by their enemies (for an extended list of all Nizari fortresses, see Willey, 2014, *The Eagle's Nest*). Under peaceful circumstances, populations of Ismailis lived in the vicinity of these fortresses and engaged mainly in agriculture and raising cattle.

From the time of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ until Ḥasan *ʿala dhikrihi'l salam*, the fourth ruler of Alamūt declared the spiritual resurrection and introduced himself as the awaited Imam descended from Nizār, there is another period of concealment. During concealment periods, there is almost very little known about the Imams of this period except through the *dāʿī*s who openly operate under their name. The oldest available source referring to the children of Nizār is a book written in Arabic in Alamūt, titled *Dustūr al-munajjimīn*. A facsimile edition of the book whose author is unknown is published by Mīrāṣ-i Maktūb in 2019. The book is written in Arabic and the subject is mainly astronomy but consists of significant historical references including reference to the sons of Nizār b. Mustaʿlī.

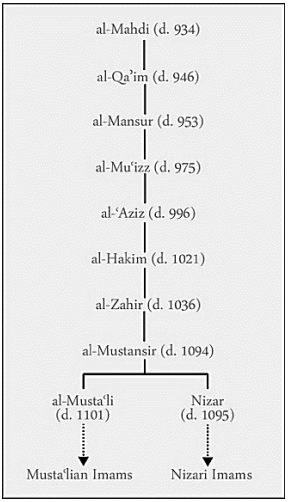

Figure 2. Fatimid Ismaili Imam-Caliphs

The oral traditions of Nizārīs speak about a son of Nizār taken secretly to Persia to live in the vicinity of Alamūt. This son is the one to whom Ḥasan *ʿala dhikrihi'l salam* traces his lineage to. The official genealogy of Nizārī Imams mentions three names: al-Hadī, al-Muhtdadī and al-Qāhir.

From the time of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāh until Ḥasan *ʿala dhikrihi'l salam* comes forward first as the deputy of the concealed Imam and then as his successor and son, there are several key developments in Ismaili thought which are of great importance.

The first one starts with Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ himself who is generally known as a military strategist and political leader, eclipsing his more important role as a chief *dāʿī* titled *ḥujjāt* (literally meaning 'proof' indicating the highest rank immediately after the Imam). Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's major contribution to Ismaili thought can best be summarised in the introduction of the doctrine of *taʿlīm* (literally meaning 'instruction'). The doctrine or principle of *taʿlīm* deals specifically with the subject of knowledge of God which is a critical element in Ismaili thought.

From the early Fatimid period, Ismailis consistently refused to treat the subject of God under prevalent theological categories of other Muslims or typical narratives of philosophers. God beyond being, beyond any attributes, became a category which was central to Neoplatonic Fatimid thought (see Madelung in Nasr, 1977:53-65; see also: Walker, 2008). Until the time of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, this principle was primarily referring to the central theme of establishing the legitimacy of the line of succession of Shiʿi Ismaili Imams in terms of leadership among other cosmological considerations in terms of the status of the Imam. The Alamūt period represents a major shift in the sense that the Nizārī cosmology had now woven into the belief in Imamat, elements of *tawḥīd*, and the perfection of ritual laws by emphasising their inner ethical contents. This emphasis was embodied in the declaration of *qiyāmat* (resurrection) as a marker of the specific Nizārī identity. The declaration of resurrection meant that for those people who have reached the higher stages of spiritual perfection (*ahl-i waḥdat*), and not for categorically everyone, adherence to ritual laws was not necessary, even though conditions for reaching that stage were quite strict (see: Ṭūsī, 2010:42-43; and 2005:115; for a detailed discussion of spiritual resurrection, see Shahrastānī, 2021:24-27).

As mentioned earlier, Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ was the founding figure of this shift in thinking and can be compared with the earlier pillars of Ismaili thought like al-Sijistānī, al-Kirmānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw. He not only represented a political break from the Fatimid empire, but he also introduced a shift from the densely Neoplatonic system of thought to a much more benign and diluted version which was now restructured around a basic idea of knowledge of God through an individual man. It is an error to reduce this new articulation to a mere belief in the authority of the 'infallible Imam' – as al-Ghazālī had summarised it in his

polemical works against Nizārīs (for a detailed study of al-Ghazālī's work, see Mitha, 2001). One of the key figures in the formulation and rearticulation of the principle of Imamat for Nizārī Ismailis is Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī whose impact and massive influence on all later Nizārī works is now very well established. Al-Shahrastānī lived during the later years of the life of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ until the early years of the life of Ḥasan *ʿala dhikrihi'l salam*. Among his works, there are at least three which contribute significantly to this shift: 1. His magnum opus, the *al-Milal wa al-niḥal*, which is the earliest source that offers a summarised Arabic version of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's *Chahār faṣl* on *taʿlīm*; 2. His *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa maṣābīḥ al-abrār* which contains the key elements and methodology of the esoteric exegesis vastly used by Nizārī Ismailis; and 3. The *Majlis-i maktūb* (now published under the title of *Command and Creation*; for a detailed discussion of these books, see Shahrastānī, 2021) which is delivered in Persian.

The continuum of Ismaili thought from the time of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ until the final years of the Alamut state with the contributions of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī crystalises a very distinct identity for Nizārī Ismailis from their sister Ismaili communities. The works attributed to al-Ṭūsī played a significant part in shaping the Nizari Ismaili thought and also articulating in further depth principles of *tawḥīd*, *imāmat*, *qiyāmat* and *taʿlīm*, which were central to Nizari Ismaili thought. The most prominent works of al-Ṭūsī on Nizari Ismaili thought are: 1. *Rawḍa-yi taslīm*; 2. *Sayr wa suluk*; 3. *Āghāz wa anjām*; 4. *Maṭlūb al-muʾminīn*; 5. *Akhlāq-i Muḥtashamī*; and 6. *Tawallā wa tabarrā*. Except for the *Akhlāq-i Muḥtashamī*, all these works are edited, translated into English, and published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

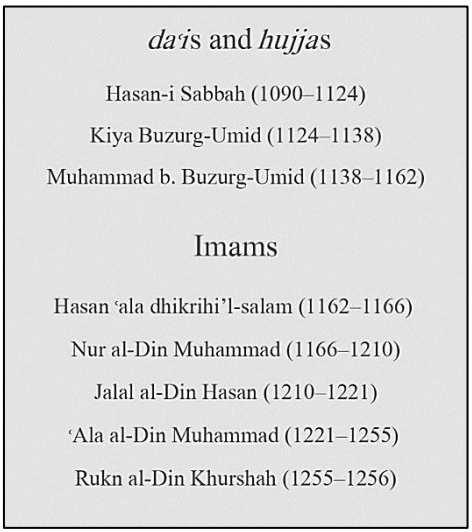

Figure 3. Rulers of Alamut and the Nizari Ismaili Imams.

Nizārī esotericism had now moved closer to a version

of Sufism that contained both rational elements and an emphasis on allegorical interpretations of faith. They had also slowly moved away from the densely philosophical Neoplatonism of earlier periods (see Mohammad Poor, in Mir-Kasimov, 2020: 219-245).

With the collapse of the Alamut state at the hand of the Mongols, another period of concealment began which lasted until a period which is known as the Anjudān revival period. After Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh (d. 1257), the 27th Nizārī Ismaili Imam, the oral traditions of the community mention four Imams who lived in concealment following the tragic massacre of Ismailis and the destruction of their intellectual heritage. The names are Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, Qāsim Shah, Islām Shah and Muḥammad b. Islam Shah. This concealment period also witnessed another schism among Nizārī Ismailis over the succession of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad (see Daftary, 2020). Those who adhered to the succession of Qāsim Shah are now the Ismailis who acknowledge the authority of their 49th Imam, Karim Aga Khan IV. Therefore, the precise name of this branch can be recorded as Nizārī Qāsim Shahī Shiʿi Ismaili Muslims. The other branch of Nizārīs is the Muḥammad Shahī branch. The most prominent figure of this line of Imamat was Shah Tahir al-Husayni (d. 1594) who propagated a form of Ismailism under the guise of Twelver Shiʿism. The line of the Muḥammad Shahī Imams discontinued in the final decades of the 18th century and the the Muhammad Shahī Ismailis either merged with the Qāsim Shahī line or assimilated into Twelver Shiʿism (Daftary, 2011:405).

From the time of Mustanṣir bi'llah II (d. 1480) who was the first Imam of the Anjudan revival period, Nizārī Ismailis slowly emerged from concealment cautiously asserting more visible roles in society. By this time, Twelver Shiʿism had become the official state religion in Iran under the Safavids. Nizārī Ismailis had also started a closer relationship with various Sufi groups including the Niʿmatullāhī order. This stage of Nizārī Ismailism lasts for about four centuries until the departure of the 46th Ismaili Imam, Aga Khan I, to India (in 1840). During this period, Ismaili thought closely intermingled with both Sufism and Twelver Shiʿism to the extent that until the time of the 48th Ismaili Imam, Aga Khan III (d. 1957), it would be difficult to distinguish Ismaili identity from that of Sufis or Twelvers.

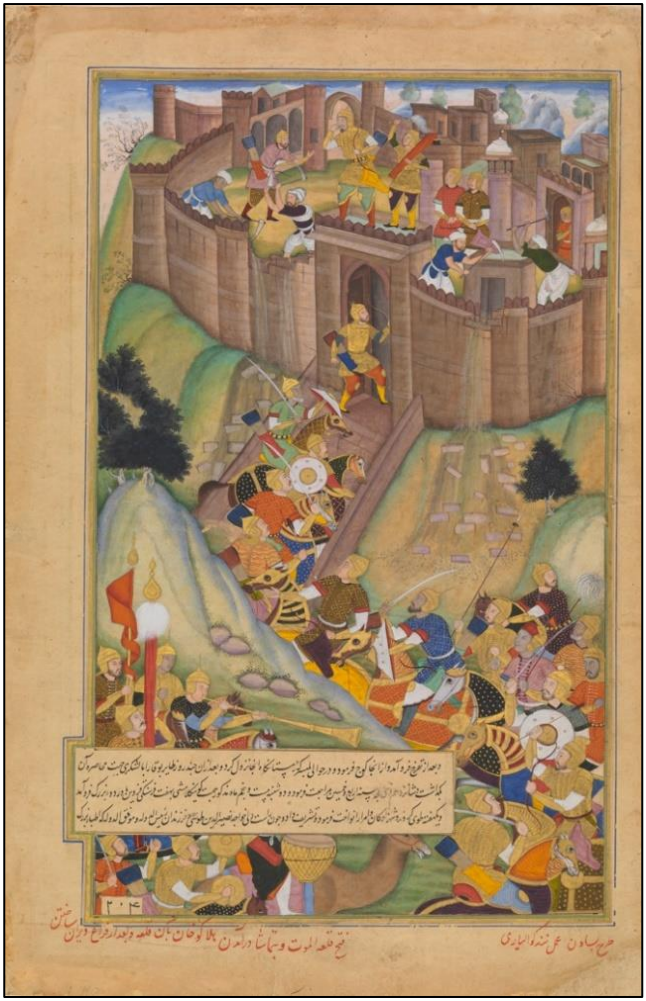

Figure 4.
Page from a Manuscript of the Chinghiz-nama: Hulagu Kahn Destroys the Fort at Alamut, ca. 1596 © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

By the time of the first Aga Khan (d. 1881), the Nizārī Ismailis who accepted this line of Imamat were spread in Iran, Syria, Central Asia, China and India with some early communities who had moved to East Africa, with Zanzibar being an important entry point for Nizārī Ismailis of the Indian Subcontinent known as the Khojas (see Hirji, Zulfikar, in Daftary, 2011:129-159). In his memoirs, the Aga Khan refers to 'India, Khurāsan, Turkistān and Badakhshān' as centres where Ismailis had sent aid to their Imam during the process of his fleeing Persia (see, *The First Aga Khan*, p. 93). Settlements of Nizārī Ismailis from the subcontinent are reported to have started during the time of the 45th Ismaili Imam, Shah Khalil Allah (d. 1817). The devastating Mongol invasion, their

massacre of Ismailis and the destruction of their intellectual and literary heritage did not uproot Nizārī Ismailis.

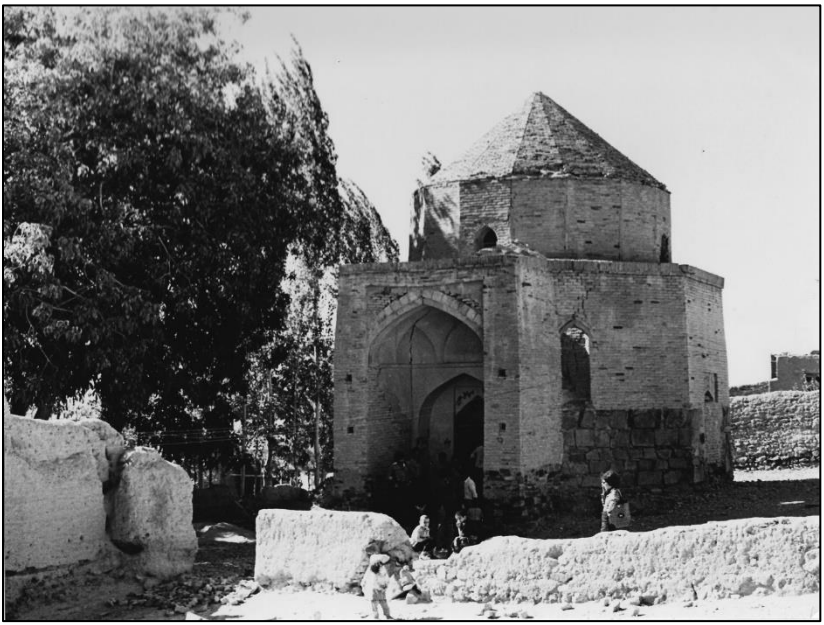

Figure 5. Mausoleum of al-Mustansir b'illah II (Shah Qalandar), Anjudan Farhad Daftary Collection.

They were scattered all around the globe while always maintaining close contacts with their Imams and the continued line of succession. The movement of Ismailis to East Africa during the Imamat of the first three Aga Khans was accompanied by major changes and developments in the social structure of the community and a shift in the way Ismaili Imamat exercises its authority over the vastly diverse community it had. The Uganda crisis during the rule of Idi Amin led to a migration of Ismailis to Europe and North America in larger numbers mainly among the Nizārī Ismailis from the subcontinent. Ismailis from Northern Areas of Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iran and Syria had linguistic and cultural differences with Ismailis from the subcontinent while sharing their allegiance to the line of Nizārī Qāsim Shahī Imams.

From the time of the migration of Ismaili Imamat to India, until the final years of the 20th century, one can argue that the dominant and leading force of the social, economic, and intellectual life the Ismailis were those from the subcontinent, who moved to East Africa and later

established themselves in Europe and North America. This was primarily because of their role in establishing the new structure of Ismaili institutions and their access to them.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the start of mass migrations in the global scene, Nizārī Ismailis, mainly from Tajikistan and Afghanistan were now growing in number and in presence in the European and North American societies. This migration trend continues to this date and has so far changed the face of the Nizārī Ismaili community compared to most of the years of the 20th century.

The modern phase of the life of Nizari Ismailis practically begins at the time of Aga Khan I, but only takes off in its full operation during the time of Aga Khan III when most of the early institutions of Ismaili Imamat in areas of health, education and economy are created. All these institutions were started during a period of relative political stability until the gradual collapse of colonial rule in various parts of the world. The end of colonialism brought a new phase to the life of Nizari Ismaili communities around the globe. By this time, the Imamat was led by the 49th Imam, Shah Karim al-Husayni (born in 1936, acceding to Imamat in 1957) and the institutions created during the time of his grandfather (the 48th Imam) were now being adapted to respond to a new set of problems in a fundamentally changed world. The period of the Imamat of Aga Khan IV has been an era of rapid change but also consistent institutional responses to these changes. The response of the Ismaili Imamat to changing circumstances have led to the creation of a network of institutions which were known until quite recently as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) but are now often referred to under the broader and more overarching umbrella of the Ismaili Imamat institutions.

The AKDN are those institutions in the areas of health, economy, education, culture (and areas which were not present during the Imamat of Aga Khan III) catering for the needs of the broader populations in countries where Ismailis were mostly present. Even though the AKDN sometimes operates in countries where there are no Ismailis, the primary mandate of the Ismaili Imamat is to improve the quality of life of Ismailis and the people among whom they live. There are other institutions, that broadly follow the example of the AKDN institutions but serve primarily the Ismaili communities. These are

institutions led and staffed by Ismailis themselves (primarily in a voluntary capacity) while the AKDN institutions are open to all denominations in their recruitment and staffing (and consists of paid staff). Both the AKDN and community institutions – known as Jamati Institutions – also cater for the needs of other segments of society and not just exclusively Ismailis but the primary mandate of the AKDN is the public while the primary mandate of the Jamati institutions are Ismailis in the territories in which they live.

As we refer to Nizari Ismailis in the modern era, we need to remember that we should look at them as one of the many Muslim communities who have faced challenges of the modern world starting during the colonial era continuing until our times. Nizari Ismailis – under the leadership of their Imams – represent one of the many responses to the current challenges faced by them. If we go back to the late 19th and early 20th century, there are primarily two major responses to the hegemony of the modern world represented by Europeans – or rather the Eurocentric modernity. These are the reformist and the revivalist movements.

The reformists maintained that whatever has gone wrong in the past, we have a problem in the here and now and we need to address the problems of today using methods of today. People like al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida are among these reformists. In India, prominent figures with reformist penchants are Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.

The revivalists facing the same challenge believed the solution is to go to the past and revive the presumed historical glory of a unified Muslim community. These were the early seeds of the revivalist movement, which sought a universal movement of all Muslims to rectify the problem of decline among Muslim communities. Some of the prominent figures of this movement are Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna and Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi (for a detailed discussion of contemporary Muslim thought in these areas, see Kersten, 2019). There are of course many other movements and figures spread in the Muslim world including in Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria alongside other Muslim countries in African and also in Southeast Asia. The revivalists mostly trickled down into a statist solution. Faced with challenges from both the capitalist camps and the communist ideologies dominant in the 20th

century, the idea of establishing an Islamic State with the laws of the Shariat seemed like an appealing idea to these Muslims. A range of theocratic and semi-democratic states were created with various degrees of success.

The Ismaili Imamat and the Ismaili community is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of these movements but visibly distinct from all of them. However, one can arguably locate it as part of the civil society in a broad sense. Ismailis are not 'reformists' in the strict sense of the word. There is a very strong element of tradition among Nizari Ismailis. They have remained open to change but reforms in the strict sense of breaking away from the past and inventing something entirely new is not one favoured in Nizari Ismailism. This is not, however, in conflict with their openness to change. Examples of the social policies of Aga Khan III in terms of the emancipation of women can be a good case in point (see Kassam, Zayn, in Daftary, 2011:247-264). On the other hand, the Ismaili Imamat does not seek to establish a state. There are no Nizari Ismaili nation-states. The Ismaili Imam does not govern any land. As the present Nizari Ismaili Imam has pointed out, in his speech addressing both Houses Parliament of Canada in the House of Commons Chamber on 27 February 2014:

> The Ismaili Imamat is a supra-national entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet…The role of the Ismaili Imam is a spiritual one; his authority is that of religious interpretation. It is not a political role. I do not govern any land. At the same time, Islam believes fundamentally that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected. Faith does not remove Muslims — or their Imams — from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs (see: AKDN website).

Following the establishment of the Seat of Imamat in Lisbon, Portugal, where the Ismaili Imamat is recognised within the legal framework of the Portuguese laws on the same level as the Vatican, for the first time in contemporary era, the Nizari Ismaili Imamat enjoys both real territory and jurisdiction albeit in a limited capacity (for an exploratory first theoretical study, see Mohammad Poor, 2014). The overarching legal instrument which defines the identity of Nizari Ismaili Muslims is the Shia Imami Ismaili Constitution, the most recent version of which was ordained in Lisbon in 1998 (now updated as of 11th February 2025, by the 50th Imam, Shah Rahim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan V).

Today, Nizari Ismailis live in more than 25 countries. The leadership of the community in each of these jurisdictions is appointed by the Ismaili Imam for limited terms and it consists of various councils and boards within the framework of the Ismaili Constitution with the mandate of addressing issues of the material and spiritual lives of the Ismaili community under the guidance of the present living Imam. Leaders of these institutions serve in a voluntary capacity and this service is a tradition in the Nizari Ismaili Community which forms the backbone of their social, civil and faith responsibility.

The activities of the Ismaili Imamat and its institutions follow certain ethical principles which are rooted in Ismaili thought and history. Some can be traced back to earliest stages of Ismaili history and some can very well be seen in the light of responses to emerging situations but also in keeping with the broad principles of their interpretation of Islam.

These principles are often articulated by the Imam of each time. In present times, balance between faith and the world, balance between faith and intellect, avoiding theological dialectics and polemical encounters, placing an emphasis on service to humanity regardless of their backgrounds, denominations and differences are some of the key guiding principles of Nizari Ismaili thought. For Nizari Ismailis, these principles are in line and in continuation of the fundamentals of the Ismaili interpretation of Islam from early ages. Openness to ideas from others different from their own tradition is seen as a sign of wisdom rather than a reflection of passive borrowing. The ability to rework and remodel solutions to problems based on the requirements of their own circumstances is an integral part of their approach to faith and to life in this world.

One of the other key themes of Nizari Ismaili thought in contemporary times is pluralism., which is a critical element in the Aga Khan's thought (for some of the relevant speeches, see Aga Khan, 2008; and also, the AKDN website). In very simple terms, diversity of people, their cultures, languages, traditions and ways of life are not just an accident of history; it is an undeniable and irreversible reality with which all people need to come to terms. No one should be denied their basic rights because of differences in their gender, denomination, background, level of education, social status, etc. But, as we can infer

from the Aga Khan's remarks at Evora University, an epistemological humility is signalled. Human beings should not forget their creaturehood. And the Aga Khan draws all of this from faith and not from a secular, modern European culture which actively seeks to marginalise any expression of faith. The Aga Khan has spoken about pluralism without even using the term itself as follows:

> In the ethical realm, as in the educational realm, one of the great stumbling blocks is arrogance. Even the resurgence of religious feeling — which should be such a positive force — can become a negative influence when it turns into self-righteousness. All of the world's great religions warn against this excess, yet in the name of those same religions too many are tempted to play God themselves rather than recognising their humility before the Divine. A central element in a truly religious outlook, it seems to me, is the quality of personal humility — a recognition that strive as we might, we will still fall short of our ideals, that climb as we might, there will still be unexplored and mysterious peaks above us. It means recognising our own creaturehood, and thus our human limitations. In that recognition, it seems to me, lies our best protection against false prophecies and divisive dogmatism. (Evora, 12 February 2006)

Pluralism is important. Yet, faith is also imperative in this way of thinking. How can one bring together being pluralist and adhering to a faith? Doesn't faith necessarily claim to offer the absolute truth in a dogmatic manner? Isn't pluralism at odds with faith? If we consider the ethical requirement of intellectual humility (which is one of the core themes of pluralism), then all people of faith can and should adhere to pluralism if they do not wish to put themselves in the shoes of God. Here, pluralism is distinct from both relativism and universalism.

In relativism, everything goes. Truth is irrelevant. Everyone can have their own truth. In a pluralistic approach, truth can still be important and singular. It can still be objective while not entirely subjective and open to conflicting interpretations. But the recipients of this truth are still human beings and therefore they are prone to errors. Even at the highest levels of our intellectual activity, to quote the Aga Khan's Evora speech: 'strive as we might, we will still fall short of our ideals, that climb as we might, there will still be unexplored and mysterious peaks above us'.

In universalism, common grounds of humanity are recognized and yet differences are elements that, if one had a choice, should have been avoided. In universalism, commonalities are highlighted, and differences are driven into the shadows, even though they may not be actively combatted. In the pluralism described above, differences are not to be erased or kept quiet (out of fear that they may lead to discord). The Ismaili Imam believes these differences should be highlighted, prized, and brought to the fore.

On 16 May 2017, at the Opening of the new headquarters of the Global Centre for Pluralism, the Aga Khan summarizes these points as follows:

> Let me emphasize a point about the concept of pluralism that is sometimes misunderstood. Connection does not necessarily mean agreement. It does not mean that we want to eliminate our differences or erase our distinctions. Far from it. What it does mean is that we connect with one another in order to learn from one another, and to build our future together.
> Pluralism does not mean the elimination of difference, but the embrace of difference. Genuine pluralism understands that diversity does not weaken a society, it strengthens it. In an ever-shrinking, ever more diverse world, a genuine sense of pluralism is the indispensable foundation for human peace and progress.

The above point demonstrates how the Ismaili Imam's vision is distinct from the mirror image of the Eurocentric dichotomies found in Traditionalist narratives that speak of the 'sacred' versus the 'profane' or 'mundane' (see Sedgwick, 2011). Theirs was a reaction to the modern world (parallel to the reaction we have seen among revivalists in the Muslim world). The vision of the present Nizari Ismaili Imam, the Aga Khan, is not a revolt against modernity; it is also not a total and passive reproduction of the past: when traditional methods fail to live up to our expectations, to the Ismaili Imam, it is merely a sign of wisdom that we should revise our solutions without jettisoning the entirety of our past.

In an interview with the Lebanese Broadcasting Company on 8 November 2001 in Aleppo, Syria, the Aga Khan reiterated the same point in simpler terms:

> And if there are organizational systems in the human society that work well today, or at least better than others, we would lack intelligence,

> not to say more, not to see what we can learn, what we can integrate, what we can remodel. Because we do not have to take everything. We should take what helps us. And that's where that relation with the West looks important to me. One does not lose his identity; one does not lose his religion …

As we can see, 'the intelligent use of our past', alongside the intelligent use of what we can learn from others — in this case from the modern European world — and what we can rework and remodel for our purpose, does not equate losing our identity or losing the spiritual element in one's life.

If we look back at history, we can clearly see a development, an evolution of Nizari Ismaili thought demonstrating a continuity and changes to adapt to new circumstances.

Belief in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran is the common ground for all Muslims including Nizari Ismailis. The continuity of spiritual authority, in an unbroken chain, through the descendants of ʿAlī and Fāṭima, is a belief uniting all Shiʿi Muslims. These are key principles in the preamble to the Ismaili Constitution. Also, Nizari Ismailis are the only Shiʿi community who believe in the guidance of a present living accessible Imam who represents that continued authority inherited from the first Shiʿi Imam until today.

Institution building around the model of civil society, albeit as the Aga Khan envisages it not exclusively in European terminology, has now become an integral part of Imamat institutions whose mandate is improving the quality of life for people. This theme is parallel to the principle of maintaining a balance between faith and the world.

The role of a present living Imam as the final authority in matters of interpreting faith, the prevalence of a rational and intellectual approach to faith (rooted in Ismaili tradition), ensures that Nizari Ismailis steer clear of normalizing faith and reducing it to legal and ritualistic manifestations only. As such Nizari Ismailis promote a vision of humanism which is neither a replication of European ideas of humanism nor is it a traditional or dogmatic view of humanity based on medieval metaphysical constructs.

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