



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Ismailis and Empire: Politics, Religion and Culture, ca. 1800 to Present

Conference Programme

10–11 November 2025





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Name of Unit

Ismaili Special Collections Unit
– The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Convenors

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
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Welcome

Since the late eighteenth century, societies across Asia and Africa have undergone accelerated transformations, largely driven by European imperial expansion. These changes were multifaceted, reshaping local and global politics, economies, legal systems, technologies, communication networks, religious traditions, education, social relations and both individual and collective identities. Such transformations brought the European empires into dynamic relations with African, Asian and other societies, leading to sustained patterns of exchange, collaboration, colonisation and consequently resistance and movements for national self-determination.

In recent decades, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on Muslim societies in the contexts of late imperial rule and post-imperial nation-states. From around the mid-twentieth century – amid shifting global power structures and widespread decolonisation – many newly independent states struggled to assert autonomy from their former colonial powers, which often maintained influence through political, military and economic intervention. These ongoing hegemonic dynamics have been described as forms of ‘informal empire’, reflecting the persistence of imperial interests beyond formal colonial rule. Research on these issues has generated innovative perspectives, frameworks, methodologies and debates that cut across disciplinary boundaries.



Against this backdrop, the conference aims to examine Ismaili Muslim communities in their regional, political and cultural diversity from the turn of the nineteenth century (ca. 1800), in relation to modern empires and the post-colonial world order. A considerable body of scholarship has explored the contributions of the Ismailis to empire-building and state-building in pre-modern times, particularly in the cases of the Fatimid empire in North Africa and Egypt (909–1171), the Sulayhid state in Yemen (1047–1138) and the Nizari polity in Iranian and Syrian lands (1090–1256).

However, while these earlier periods have been extensively studied – save for a few exceptions – significant gaps remain in the research on Ismaili history, culture and identity formation within the contexts of modern imperial practices, discourses of rule and their enduring legacies. This conference, therefore, seeks to take an important step towards addressing this scholarly lacuna.

Over the past two centuries, Ismaili communities have encountered and engaged with a range of profound transformations shaped by imperial culture and both direct and indirect colonial rule. These developments were further informed by ongoing reconfigurations of the global political order before and after the end of formal empire. Notable episodes during this period include the relocation of Aga Khan I from Iran to India in the 1840s, which established a new socio-intellectual base for the reorganisation of dispersed Nizari Ismaili groups; the involvement of certain Ismaili sections in the geopolitics of the Great Game; and, in the twentieth century, the shifting socio-religious vicissitudes of Ismaili communities that came under Soviet rule.



Welcome

The last two centuries also witnessed major demographic changes driven by migration and the emergence of diasporic communities across the Indian Ocean, as well as in Europe, North America and beyond. Parallel transformations occurred within Ismaili populations in Ottoman and Mandate-era Syria, Afghanistan and the regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral in present-day northern Pakistan, shaped by local socio-religious and political forces. Moreover, many Ismaili communities became active proponents of educational and economic modernisation, socio-religious reform, legal and constitutional renewal and institution-building inspired by the vision of their Imams and other community leaders. While navigating internal tensions and divisions, they have also succeeded in cultivating transnational and global identities, remaining deeply rooted in a Shi'i Ismaili heritage attuned to the demands and opportunities of the modern world.



Many of these issues are not unique to the Ismailis and have affected colonised societies more broadly. Nonetheless, certain historical contingencies have had particularly lasting ramifications for Ismaili communities, especially in regions where they constituted a significant minority, or a majority such as in parts of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan. In many of these contexts, the imprint of the colonial legacy and the subsequent ‘neo-imperial’ world order have been more pervasive – if sometimes obscured or overlooked – than has been critically acknowledged.

This conference, therefore, seeks to foster dialogue and exchange by bringing together scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to examine Ismaili communities and various facets of their history, socio-religious traditions, identity formation and institution-building in relation to modern empires and the post-colonial world.

Convenors:

Wafi Momin

Amaan Merali

Schedule

Day 1: Monday, 10 November 2025

10:00 – 10:10

Welcome Remarks

10:10 – 10:30

Introductory Remarks

Faisal Devji, *University of Oxford (UK)*

10:30 – 12:30

Panel 1: Imperial Encounters, Identity and Communities

Chair: Omar Alí-de-Unzaga, *IIS*

The British Empire’s First Afghan War (1838–42) and the Ismaili Imamate:
The Untold Story of the Ismailis of Afghanistan amid Invasion and Resistance

Yahia Baiza, *IIS*

The Challenges of Interaction of the Central Asian Ismailis with their Imam
during the Colonisation Period

Hakim Elnazarov, *IIS*

Transimperial Ismaili Struggle and Resistance: Communities at the Nexus of Empires
and States (Late 19th–Early 20th Centuries)

Murid Shah Nadiri, *University of Oxford (UK)*

Between Empire and Peace: Religious Renewal and Identity Formation
in Gorno-Badakhshān

Zamira Dildorbekova, *IIS*

12:30 – 14:00

Health Break and Lunch



14:00 – 15:30

Panel 2: State, Sovereignty and Citizenship

Chair: Alex Henley, IIS

Heritage as Branding a Consciousness: Transforming the Khoja into Omani Citizens

Amal Sachedina, *University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley (USA)*

Delusions of Grandeur: The Political Ecology of Mountains, Land Rights and Social Protest in Gilgit-Baltistan

Nosheen Ali, *Raachi (Pakistan)*

Ismailis after Empire: Decolonisation without Sovereignty?

Taushif Kara, *King's College London (UK)*

15:30 – 15:45

Health Break

15:45 – 17:15

Panel 3: Socio-Literary and Intellectual Imaginings

Chair: Nosheen Ali, Raachi (Pakistan)

Allama Iqbal and (Re)Tracing the Lineages of a 'Persian Metaphysics' in an Age of Empire

Soumen Mukherjee, *Presidency University (India)*

The Shangri La Diaries: Foreign Travellers in Hunza Valley

Shafqat Hussain, *Trinity College, Hartford (USA)*

Dilemmas in M.G. Vassanji's Novels: Examining Coloniality in Shaping the Identities of East African Khoja Ismaili Muslim Communities

Farouk Mitha, *University of Victoria (Canada)*

Schedule

Day 2: Tuesday, 11 November 2025

10:15 – 11:45

Panel 4: Law, Governance and Communities

Chair: Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, IIS

Land, Law, Loyalty: Syrian Ismaili Settlers and the Limits of Ottoman Colonialism

Amaan Merali, *Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies (Germany)*

Female Empowerment: ‘Khoja’ Engagement with their Imam’s (Aga Khan III)

Vision as Reflected in the Community’s Rules and Regulations

Laila Halani, *IIS*

The Constitutional Form in Ismaili Law: Modernity and Continuity

Arif Jamal, *National University of Singapore (Singapore)*

11:45 – 12:00

Health Break

12:00 – 13:30

Panel 5: Authority, Legitimacy and Empire

Chair: Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, IIS

Constructions of Religious Authority: Community, Legitimacy and Empire

Wafi Momin, *IIS*

The Da’udi Bohras and the Empire, 1800–1850

Vineet Gupta, *Vanderbilt University, Nashville (USA)*

Contemporary Ismailis and the Empire(s): A Counter-Intuitive Narrative

Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *IIS*

13:30 – 14:30

Health Break and Lunch



14:30 – 16:30

Panel 6: Ismailis at the Crossroads of Empires

Chair: Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *IIS*

‘Greater Khurāsān’ during the Period of British and Russian Imperial Rivalries and the Fate of the Ismaili Community

Dagikhudo Dagiev, *IIS*

An Exploration of Bohra-Ottoman Interactions across Empires, c. 1880–1924

Michael O’Sullivan, *University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (USA)*

The Ismailis of China: At the Crossroads of Empires

Amier Saidula, *IIS*

Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Colonial and Post-colonial Eras as Reflected in a Bohra Personal Archive

Sumaiya Hamdani, *George Mason University (USA)*

16:30 – 16:45

Health Break

16:45 – 17:15

Concluding Reflections: Ismailis and Empire

Farid Panjwani, *Aga Khan University (Pakistan)*

17:15 – 17:20

Closing Remarks

Abstracts and Bios

Delusions of Grandeur: The Political Ecology of Mountains, Land Rights and Social Protest in Gilgit-Baltistan

Nosheen Ali

Gilgit-Baltistan has a distinct dynamic vis-à-vis the Kashmir conflict, whereby people in the region have been kept in a constitutional limbo in lieu of the international dispute over Kashmir. While this Shi'a-majority region of Sunni-dominated Pakistan is ruled like a security zone, as I discuss in *Delusional States* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), it is striking to examine how the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan goes under-represented in national imaginings of the region as an ecological wonderland, as well as in larger understandings of the 'Kashmir issue' and Indo-Pak tensions. This paper will elaborate these concerns, and illuminate contemporary dynamics around land, social identity and political self-determination in Gilgit-Baltistan. Ultimately, it will shed light on indigenous articulations of despair and struggle in the face of continued imperial trauma, anti-minority sentiments and gendered political violence.

NOSHEEN ALI is a sociologist and co-founder of the independent press, Raachi. Her research is focused on state-making and border lives in Gilgit-Baltistan, Muslim poetic knowledge, and seed futures in South Asia. She is the author of *Delusional States: Feeling Rule and Development in Pakistan's Northern Frontier* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), which is the recipient of the 2021 Bernard Cohn Prize and the 2022 AIPS Book Prize.



Omar Alí-de-Unzaga

OMAR ALÍ-DE-UNZAGA (PhD, Cambridge, 2005) is a Research Associate at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. He is also the Academic Co-ordinator of the Qur'anic Studies Unit at the IIS and the Series Editor of the Qur'anic Studies Series published by Oxford University Press in association with the IIS. His critical edition and translation of the epistle by the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, *On Ethics and Character Traits: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 9*, has been published by Oxford University Press (2024). He has edited the volume *Fortresses of the Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic Studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary* (IB Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011) and is finishing a monograph titled *A Philosophical Reading of Scripture: The Use of the Qur'an in the Epistles of the Pure Brethren*. He is currently working on a project called 'Compendium of Qur'anic Citations in Works by Ismaili Authors'.

*The British Empire's First Afghan War (1838–42)
and the Ismaili Imamate: The Untold Story of the Ismailis
of Afghanistan amid Invasion and Resistance*

Yahia Baiza

The British Empire declared its first war on Khurasan (modern-day Afghanistan) in 1838 in order to occupy the country and strengthen the defence of India. For its wealth, rich culture and civilisation, India was viewed as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. Commanding the world's strongest naval forces, Britain was confident that it would not lose a battle at sea. However, Britain was concerned about a historical fact that India had always raided either through or from Afghanistan. To secure its economic and geopolitical interests in India, Britain launched its First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–1842) from Indian soil. The invasion soon faced nationwide resistance, and the British forces were attacked from all directions. Amid these developments, the Nizari Ismaili Imam Muḥammad Ḥasan, known as Ḥasan 'Alī Shāh Aga Khan I (1800–1881), escaped from Persia, ruled by Muḥammad Shāh Qājār (r. 1834–1848), and briefly settled in Afghanistan in 1841. His presence at this chaotic time provided the Ismaili communities of Afghanistan with a rare opportunity to rejoice in the presence of their Imam. While much has been written about the war, the Ismaili communities' life and history of this period have never entered mainstream historiography. However, the Ismaili communities of Afghanistan have preserved and orally transmitted memories of this period through oral narratives and devotional poetry. While the first part of this paper is dedicated to an analysis of the British war in Afghanistan, the second part presents pieces of these narratives.



YAHIA BAIZA is a Senior Research Associate at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, specialising in education, Islamic studies, and Central Asia. As Regional Editor for Afghanistan at *Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies*, he develops digital educational resources. He has over 80 multilingual publications, including *Education in Afghanistan* (Routledge, 2013/2017) and *Education in Troubled Times* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022). His forthcoming books are: *The Hazara Ismailis of Afghanistan and their History*; *At Home but without a Homeland: Tales of Migration of Ismailis of Afghanistan in Germany*; and *Schools in Afghanistan: A Lens on Education Facilities and Quality*.

‘Greater Khurāsān’ During the Period of British and Russian Imperial Rivalries and the Fate of the Ismaili Community

Dagikhudo Dagiev

From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Britain and Russia engaged in a geopolitical rivalry over the control and influence of what is now called Central Asia, historically known as Greater Khurāsān (covering parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and the western part of modern China), and the Indian subcontinent (specifically northern and western of Pakistan). The British Empire sought to protect India from Russia’s southward expansion, while Russia aimed to extend its territory and influence towards the warm waters and trading routes of South Asia and the Middle East.

Local powers, tribal confederations and diverse communities, including the Ismailis, were caught between these imperial ambitions. The British Raj consolidated control over India, bringing various religious and ethnic groups under colonial rule. The Ismailis, mainly based in Badakhshān, have since been divided by empires and later by the modern nation-states of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and China.

The Ismailis, historically marginalised or persecuted by dominant Sunni powers, are now divided into small groups, with Russian expansion into Central Asia causing some Ismaili populations to be displaced, resulting in migrations towards British India and other safer regions. The Ismaili communities in the area experienced significant and dramatic changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period characterised by rivalry between the British and Russian empires. Both colonial powers pursued their own interests but overlooked those of the local communities, which were divided politically, geographically and culturally. Despite their imperial ambitions, both colonial powers played some positive roles in preventing the ethno-cultural cleansing of the Ismaili communities by local rulers. However, it should also be recognised that an anti-Ismaili policy was enacted by the Russians prior to the October Revolution and by Soviet authorities after the revolution, from the 1920s until the 1940s.



Khurāsān, once the most prosperous region especially for the Ismaili *da'wa* activities from the mid-ninth to the eleventh centuries, was divided among colonial powers and was not only absorbed into various empires but also fragmented into several 'nation-states' in the European colonial style. The fate of the Ismaili communities in the regions of Khurāsān and historic Badakhshān involved them being divided into many small, loosely connected factions that could be easily manipulated and controlled not only by colonial powers but also by local rulers of the period. This presentation will examine these divisive policies and their effects on the lives and traditions of the Ismaili communities in this region up to recent times.

DAGIKHUDO DAGIEV is a Senior Research Associate at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. He has previously published *Regime Transition in Central Asia: Stateness, Nationalism and Political Change in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan* (Routledge, 2014) and *Central Asian Ismailis: An Annotated Bibliography of Russian, Soviet, Tajik and Other Sources* (Bloomsbury, 2022); co-edited a volume with Carole Faucher, *Identity, History and Trans-nationality in Central Asia: The Mountain Communities of Pamir* (Routledge, 2019); and edited the volume *Islamic Traditions in 'Greater Khurāsān': Ismailis and Sufis* (forthcoming 2025), as well as *The Tajiks of Khurasan: History, Geography and Culture* (forthcoming 2025). He is also the author of several book chapters, journal articles, and encyclopaedia entries. He teaches Islamic and Central Asian History at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

Faisal Devji

FAISAL DEVJI is Beit Professor of Global and Imperial History at the University of Oxford. He completed his PhD in Intellectual History at the University of Chicago in 1994. He was then elected Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows, after which he went on to run the graduate programme at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, which included schools in Tajikistan and Iran. Returning to regular academic life in 2003, Faisal Devji taught for two years at Yale as a visiting lecturer and another four at the New School for Social Research in New York as Associate Professor. His publications include *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Harvard, 2013) and *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Harvard, 2012).



*Between Empire and Peace: Religious Renewal and Identity
in Gorno-Badakhshān*

Zamira Dildorbekova

This paper examines the transformative role of faith in peacebuilding and identity formation within the Shi'a Imami Ismaili Muslim community of Tajikistan, with a focus on the mountainous region of Gorno-Badakhshān. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, after decades of enforced isolation, the community experienced two pivotal events that reshaped its historical trajectory and catalysed shifts in religious and, indeed, national identity: the reunion with their spiritual leader, the late Aga Khan IV, and the outbreak of the Tajik civil war (1992–1997). The war, marked by regional divides, saw the Ismailis, as ethnic Pamiris from Gorno-Badakhshān, broadly aligned with opposition forces against the pro-communist incumbent government. Amid this turmoil, the Aga Khan's ethical pronouncements on peace, pluralism, forgiveness and Muslim brotherhood (*ukhūwat*) offered a framework for religious renewal and reconciliation. These teachings, rooted in Islamic principles, were embraced by the community as acts of faith affirming the inseparability of worldly and spiritual life (*dīn wa dunyā*). They became central to rebuilding social order, nurturing reconciliation, redefining communal identity and navigating engagement with the state, while fostering a sense of cohesion and national belonging with the Tajik nation in a fragile post-conflict landscape.



The paper explores how religious directives shaped community behaviour and evolving perceptions of social responsibility, particularly within contexts marked by enduring Soviet legacies and constrained political pluralism. It interrogates locally constructed narratives of political neutrality and examines their impact on collective agency, including the unintended consequences of institutional dependency. Drawing on Johan Galtung's theory of 'positive' and 'negative' peace, the study reflects on the layered complexities of faith-based peacebuilding in socially and politically restricted environments. It invites reflection on how religious ethics and community discourse can cultivate subtle, yet resilient, forms of civic consciousness anchored in coexistence, ethical responsibility and social cohesion, even where formal civic space remains limited.

ZAMIRA DILDORBEKOVA is Co-Head of the Department of Education at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), where she leads the academic provision and strategic development of secondary teacher education. She is also an Associate Staff member at University College London (UCL). Dr Dildorbekova holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Exeter and an MPhil in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Her research focuses on contemporary Islam and Ismaili Studies in Central Asia, with particular attention to identity formation and post-imperial transformation. Her professional experience spans a range of roles across the education and development sectors, including appointments with the University of Exeter's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies and the Aga Khan Foundation (Education). She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), and a member of the Central Asian Studies Network at the University of Exeter.

The Challenges of Interaction of the Central Asian Ismailis with their Imam during the Colonisation Period

Hakim Elnazarov

The colonisation of Central Asian mountain communities by the Russian and British Empires brought new challenges and possibilities for the Ismailis residing in the area. The position of the Ismaili Imam, Aga Khan III, in British India and his amicable relations with Russian and British royals and officials seemed to be advantageous for the Ismailis of Central Asia, who became subjects of the two empires and their protectorates at the end of the nineteenth century. In reality, the Ismailis found themselves entangled in imperial rivalry, contestations and intelligence-gathering for the empires. The period of colonisation also tested the loyalty of the religious leaders (*pīrs*) who negotiated their roles as influential leaders and subjects of empires and the empires' vassals in the region. The scattered location of their murīds or followers across the region enabled the *pīrs* to maintain a network of communications which consolidated information and knowledge about the communities in the area. They were also engaged in constant negotiation with, and struggle against, the Afghans, Bukharans and other local rulers whose authority over their subjects was sanctioned by the two empires. The ongoing rivalry between the two empires was also detrimental to the communications and interaction of the Ismailis in the Russian domains with their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, in British India.

Drawing on archival materials and diverse sources in various languages, this paper will examine the complex interaction of the Ismailis with their regional rulers and with the two empires. It will focus on the challenges of interaction between the Ismailis in western Pamir and their Imams in British India, and it will highlight the role of the Ismaili *pīrs* in the socio-political life of the region during the colonisation period.

HAKIM ELNAZAROV is Head of the Central Asian Studies at The Institute of Ismaili Studies. He received his PhD from King's College London, in the history of empires, exploring the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia during the colonial period. Dr Elnazarov worked in various capacities in higher education in Tajikistan and East Africa before joining the IIS. He has edited books and has published articles on various topics, including the history and traditions of the Central Asian Ismailis, religious education, languages and gender issues in Central Asia. He is the Chief Editor of the IIS's Russian and Tajik publications and is a Series Editor of the *Endangered Languages Yearbook*, published by Brill in the UK. Dr Elnazarov is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Foundation for Endangered Languages and is engaged in various collaborative projects with academic institutions in Europe, Central Asia and Russia.

The Da'udi Bohras and the Empire, 1800–1850

Vineet Gupta

Between 1800 and 1850, the Da'udi Bohras (Tayyibi Ismailis) cultivated a durable patron–client relationship with the British colonial administration, characterised by pragmatic cooperation and mutual recognition. While recent scholarship has underscored the prosperity and stability that East India Company rule afforded the Bohras, it has been less attentive to the historical processes through which these political alliances were articulated and negotiated, and to their broader implications for communal leadership.

Drawing on early Orientalist ethnographies and colonial administrative records, this presentation reexamines one of the earliest recorded encounters between the Bohras and the British in the region of Malwa (present-day Central India) – a commercially strategic zone within the expanding East India Company empire. It argues that the British ‘discovery’ of the Bohras in the late eighteenth century inaugurated a new era in which colonial officials represented the community as industrious, loyal and well-suited for incorporation into the emerging political order. In turn, Bohra elites actively embraced British patronage as a means to secure communal autonomy, safeguard livelihoods and reinforce the authority of the *da'i*.



By tracing these reciprocal strategies of representation and accommodation, the paper contends that the Bohras were not passive subjects of colonial categorisation but active agents who leveraged imperial patronage to advance their own political and religious interests.

VINEET GUPTA is currently pursuing a PhD in the Graduate Department of Religion, specialising in Islam in South Asia, at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. His dissertation examines how modernity altered the virtues of the authority of the Da'udi Bohra leadership in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Female Empowerment: ‘Khoja’ Engagement with their Imam’s (Aga Khan III) Vision as Reflected in the Community’s Rules and Regulations

Laila Halani

Much has been written about Aga Khan III’s role in championing female empowerment, particularly through the promotion of female education. Less has been written about his advocacy for women’s rights with reference to personal law, civic engagement and economic independence, or the social development work he undertook in his role as a Muslim leader and the spiritual leader and guide of the Ismaili community. These efforts are well documented in his writings, speeches and *farmāns*.

Far less is known of the community’s understanding, articulation and implementation of his vision for female empowerment and women’s rights as reflected in the governance structures and regulations outlined in the formal Rules and Regulations for the community. Drawing upon archival work, this paper will review the Rules and Regulations (the predecessors for the Universal Constitution for the community) for various parts of India under colonial rule to analyse Aga Khan III’s vision and the community’s engagement with the vision.

Falling within the larger theme of gender discourse and imperial policies, while overlapping with other themes, this paper will offer an in-depth exploration of, and insights into, the dialectical relationship between the vision, ideology and its translation as reflected in the Rules and Regulations. This scope will also provide an opportunity to situate the ideology and its translation within the wider context of colonial rule, modernisation and the adaptation and transformation of this modernity, resulting in developments specific to Ismaili communities in British India. The content of Rules and Regulations has not been analysed from a gendered perspective before and hence the paper will be a valuable contribution to an understudied part of Ismaili history.



LAILA HALANI has a wealth of experience in UK Higher Education, with over thirteen years in senior management roles. Currently on sabbatical to pursue her research, she has served as the Head of the Department of Graduate Studies, where she oversaw all academic aspects of the Institute's two graduate programmes – GPISH and STEP – as well as postgraduate preparatory programmes in various parts of the world. She designed modules and taught on both graduate programmes and other IIS programmes. Dr Halani is also a reviewer for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and has served as an assessor for Degree Awarding Powers (DAP). Prior to these roles, she was a Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. She was a member of the second class of GPISH and went on to complete an MPhil and DPhil in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford. Her research interests include contemporary Islamic movements, gender and representation in Muslim societies and Ismailis in contemporary times.

Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Colonial and Post-colonial Eras as Reflected in a Bohra Personal Archive

Sumaiya Hamdani

In her seminal work, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*, Seema Alvi explored personal archives of nineteenth-century Indian Muslim scholars to reveal important shifts in the cultural capital of these Muslim scholars. Utilising their biographies and memoirs, she explores how a new ‘cosmopolitanism’ infused their writings as well as their lives, connecting them to the central Islamic world through already existing and even new networks produced by empire. Nile Green had earlier identified some of the new networks of this era in his book *Bombay Islam*, wherein he argued that empire and industrialisation had not only facilitated the movement of people within and beyond the Indian subcontinent but had thereby created a religious marketplace of ideas that produced new forms of Islamic piety. I would like to build on the contributions of both in this paper, expanding the frame to include the Bohra community that experienced as yet unremarked similar changes. A personal archive luckily makes this possible. I offer three examples here: that of a ‘scrapbook’ compiled by a mid-nineteenth-century Bohra religious scholar; correspondence between a German orientalist and that religious scholar’s grandson; and a typescript of a narrative history of Ismaili Shi‘ism produced by his great grandson. In all, they provide insight into how personal archives not only illuminate the impact of historical events on individuals, but also of the context for how those historical events or developments occurred.



SUMAIYA HAMDANI is an Associate Professor of History at George Mason University. She received her BA from Georgetown University and MA and PhD from Princeton University in the field of Islamic history. Her book, *Between Revolution and State: The Construction of Fatimid Legitimacy* (IB Tauris, 2006), examines the development of legal and historical literature by the Ismaili Shi'i Fatimid state. Her research has also included articles and reviews in the fields of Shi'i thought, Islamic history and women in Islam. Her teaching interests include Islamic, Middle East and world history. Her current research examines the construction of identity in Muslim minority communities in South Asia during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Dr Hamdani has served on the advisory boards of the Middle East Studies Association, the American Institute of Yemeni Studies and the North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies, among others. She co-founded and was the Director of the Islamic Studies programme at George Mason University from 2003 to 2008.

Alex Henley

ALEX HENLEY is Programme Leader for the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH). He directs the IIS's flagship two-year scholarship programme, in partnership with SOAS. An anthropological historian, Alex is interested in the politics of religion in the modern Middle East. His research has involved extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and Jordan, looking at processes of institutionalisation, religionisation and sectarianisation. Alex is also an associate member of Oxford's Faculty of Theology and Religion, where he was a lecturer for four years prior to joining the IIS in 2020. He had spent the previous four years in the US, first as a doctoral fellow at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, then as the inaugural American Druze Foundation Fellow at Georgetown's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. In addition to these institutions, Alex has taught at George Washington University, Qatar University and Middlebury College. Alex gained his PhD in Arab World Studies from Manchester University; MA in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from Durham University; and BA in Theology and Religion also from Durham University. He studied Arabic at Edinburgh and Damascus Universities as part of a four-year graduate scholarship from the UK's Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World.



The Shangri La Diaries: Foreign travellers in Hunza Valley

Shafqat Hussain

During the 1980s and 1990s, Passu, a small Ismaili village located in the shadow of the majestic Passu Peaks, in Hunza valley in northern Pakistan, became a popular destination for western backpacker tourists. They stayed in local inns which provided budget accommodation and a chance to interact with local communities. These backpackers wrote extensive comments about their travel experience and interactions with local communities in guest books that were kept in these inns. Most of the comments are about instructions and information for fellow backpackers, but they also include fair amount of what I call ‘backpackers folklore’. This paper is based on the analysis of over two decades (1982 to 2001) of comments written by these western backpackers in which Passu emerges as an ideal society.

SHAFQAT HUSSAIN is George and Martha Kellner Chair in South Asian Studies at Trinity College, Hartford. He is trained in social and political ecology and is interested in understanding how human societies and environment shape each other. He is particularly interested in how geopolitical and intellectual changes effect the perception of nature, and human society’s relationship with it. His research is based in South and Central Asia, focusing on how local marginal communities and outside players interact with the environment of the region, and what role the region plays in world history.

The Constitutional Form in Ismaili Law: Modernity and Continuity

Arif Jamal

The Nizari Ismaili community marked a significant milestone in 1905 with the introduction of formal constitutions as governance documents. This constitutional framework evolved over time, culminating in 1986 with the establishment of a single, unified Constitution for the global Ismaili community (Jamāt) – a system that continues to thrive today, representing a remarkable 120-year legacy. This constitutional journey has spanned the leadership of three Nizari Ismaili Imams: Aga Khan III, Aga Khan IV and, currently, Aga Khan V. Since 1986, these documents have been decreed with profound ceremony, their texts accorded deep respect and reverence.

At first glance, the adoption of a constitutional framework might appear to be a distinctly modern approach to community governance, potentially diverging from traditional Muslim legal structures. Some might view this embrace of a constitution as a supreme governance document as a departure from Islamic legal traditions. However, the Ismaili constitutions have actually served to reinforce crucial aspects of Ismaili historical tradition, firmly rooted in their centuries-old interpretation of Islam. This is particularly evident in how they address the role and authority of the Ismaili Imams – a cornerstone principle for the community. Notably, since 1986, under both Aga Khan IV and now Aga Khan V, the Constitution has been ordained – not merely enacted – under the authority, seal and sign manual of the Ismaili Imam as ‘Hazar Imam’ of the Jamāt.



This paper examines the adoption of modern constitutional governance within the Nizari Ismaili community and its integration with ancient community interpretations. It challenges the notion of a break from historical or broader Islamic legal traditions through the use of contemporary constitutional forms. Instead, it argues that the Constitution serves as a vessel for long-standing theological principles, offering them a modern voice while maintaining their essential character.

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Ismailis after Empire: Decolonisation without Sovereignty?

Taushif Kara

The historical moment of decolonisation posed a problem for minorities. The imperial context was often one of partial or *mediated* sovereignty – ‘sovereignty in a minor key’ – for many minorities. This was especially true for dispersed groups like the Ismaili Khojas of East Africa, who had achieved a remarkable degree of autonomy and self-governance under empire. Decolonisation, however, ushered in popular as well as new forms of state sovereignty that radically reshaped the status quo and privileged an *immediate* relation to sovereignty instead. In this context, decolonisation may have paradoxically signalled the loss of sovereignty for minorities as opposed to its retrieval. This paper shows how Ismaili Khojas in East Africa responded to this shifting context in a number of different ways in the moments before and after decolonisation, from ca. 1945 until their exodus and expulsion in the following decades. It argues that they deployed strategies of *disintermediation*, or the removal of mediation. They opened erstwhile ‘closed’ institutions, sought ‘direct’ relations with Africans and placed renewed importance on the grounding permanence of architecture. The paper concludes by showing how these practices of disintermediation were received and understood by national majorities.



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*Land, Law, Loyalty: Syrian Ismaili Settlers and the
Limits of Ottoman Colonialism*

Amaan Merali

The consensus is that Ottoman governance was informed by a politics of difference – religious, ethno-linguistic, socio-economic or otherwise. Scholarship is less unified on whether colonialism as an analytical concept best addresses late Ottoman discourses and practices of rule, given that all of the sultan’s subjects could potentially share in imperial sovereignty. This paper intervenes in the Ottoman colonialism debate by suggesting that, distinct from colonial rule, a modern Ottoman governmentality tried but ultimately failed to balance differentiation with integration. It thus explores the ways the Syrian Ismailis – a community long marked by religious difference – participated in the securitisation and sedentarisation of land. It uses archival sources to examine their 1850 settlement and later transformation of Salamiyya into a boomtown, effectively making the desert bloom. Ismaili participation in state-space making also rested on a logic of violence that justified the dispossession of the Bedouins. Ottoman discourses and practices of rule associated with agriculture, property rights and ethno-racial hierarchies paralleled other colonial settings, where reliable settler-cultivators advanced metropolitan interests at the expense of indigenous claims.

Yet the Ismaili settlers were neither outsiders nor were they considered reliable after Istanbul discovered they were followers of the Aga Khan III in Bombay. Indeed, the Ismailis had only been incorporated into the modernising state through their performance of violence against the Bedouins, and now they too came under threat. Between 1900 and 1911, authorities arrested the Ismailis, charged them with crimes against the state and seized land from them. The paper concludes that, despite the Ismailis' service to policies resembling colonial projects elsewhere, a politics of religious difference rendered them unreliable Ottomans.

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*Dilemmas in M.G. Vassanji's Novels: Examining Coloniality
in Shaping the Identities of East African Khoja Ismaili
Muslim Communities*

Farouk Mitha

M.G. Vassanji's award-winning novels, short stories and non-fiction writings are recognised internationally as making major contributions to the narration of the historical experiences of South Asian communities who had settled in East Africa since the nineteenth century, and then subsequently their diasporic experiences in North America. In Vassanji's more recent work, he also emerges as an author who portrays Indian themes and contexts, writing from the perspective of a Canadian East African Gujarati Muslim. This paper examines the early novels of Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994), which are set in colonial and post-colonial East Africa. The focus will be on examining how Vassanji's representations of the dilemmas facing his Ismaili characters in these novels (fictionalised as characters belonging to the Shamsi community) offer a rich source material for critically thinking about the types of identity negotiations and anxieties experienced by East African Khoja Ismaili communities. The dilemmas are framed around Vassanji's representations of: a) Inter-racial marriages and anti-black racism; b) Continuity and change in markers of Indian cultural roots in East Africa; c) Perceptions of Indian Khoja traditions and practices of the Ismaili Muslim community; d) Mixed attitudes toward British colonial institutions and the cultural heritage of Europe. Vassanji's fiction does not seek to resolve the related dilemmas but rather to illustrate and dramatise related anxieties and entrapments



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Constructions of Religious Authority: Community, Legitimacy and Empire

Wafi Momin

The Ismaili Imams have historically exercised supreme authority as the religious leaders of their community. Their authority has extended beyond the spiritual and doctrinal realms to encompass political, military and socio-economic spheres. A critical, though often understudied, question concerns the ways in which this authority was articulated, contested, negotiated and performed in relation to diverse actors and shifting socio-political contexts. The modern ‘imperial’ phase in Ismaili history – from the early nineteenth century to roughly the mid-twentieth century – marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of religious authority, its diverse articulations and the construction of its legitimacy. During this era, the Ismaili Imams not only engaged with their followers in British India and other parts of the world in unprecedented ways – encounters that, at times, involved challenges to their authority through legal disputes and other forms of contestations – but also interacted with colonial and political authorities across diverse contexts and circumstances. These multifaceted engagements enabled them to redefine the parameters of their leadership and to enact their authority in ways that both reflected and responded to the changing historical and socio-political realities of the time. This paper explores the implications of these transformations, examining how the Imams articulated, negotiated, performed and legitimised their religious authority during the ‘imperial’ phase, employing multiple channels and engaging with a diverse range of social and political actors. It also considers how this authority was received, embraced and enacted by the community of followers and other interlocutors.



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*Allama Iqbal and (Re)Tracing the Lineages of a
'Persian Metaphysics' in an Age of Empire*

Soumen Mukherjee

While the bulk of European scholarship on Islam gravitated toward the thesis of its 'Semitic' provenance, there were, nevertheless, occasionally critical ventures that sought to rehabilitate certain 'Aryan' lineage. One of Allama Muhammad Iqbal's (1877–1938) relatively underexplored works, viz. his doctoral thesis submitted at the University of Munich, provides a window into this intriguing world of scholarship. Iqbal's project to retrieve a remarkably distinctive genealogy of early Islam with reference to its Persian metaphysical strand can perhaps be best understood with reference to his larger comparative project that focused on the Aryan/Semite interface at one level. At another level, however, it can be thought to reflect his urge to broach a wider scholarly discourse, not confined to the British Empire or the colonial space that he endeavoured to transcend. This paper strives to understand Iqbal's position, as a scholar, on early Ismaili history, with special reference to its religio-intellectual life and ramifications for an Islamic world whose history he committed himself to recover and (re)write. It examines simultaneously the global intellectual context that conditioned Iqbal's tour de force and the overarching South Asian exigencies. Along the way, it also gestures at an array of scholarly projects that, since at least the early twentieth century, informed academic and public intellectual discourse in the interwoven worlds of Islam and various Indic religions. In short, this paper offers a meditation on some aspects of the study of religion – Islam in particular – in modern South Asia.



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Transimperial Ismaili Struggle and Resistance: Communities at the Nexus of Empires and States (Late 19th–Early 20th Centuries)

Murid Shah Nadiri

While much has been written about the Ismailis' relationship with the British and Russian empires, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning their dynamics with other empires and states, such as Afghanistan, China, Persia and Oman. Existing narratives often suggest that Ismailis under British colonial rule benefited from imperial networks, whereas their coreligionists in the Russian Empire were 'isolated' and 'disadvantaged' – caught between Russian control and their Imams in British India. This paper aims to shift the focus from these dominant narratives to a transimperial perspective, exploring Ismaili communities situated at the nexus of empires and states. Drawing upon colonial archives, the writings of the first and third Aga Khans and local historiographies, it examines how Ismaili communities negotiated belonging and identity in contested geopolitical spaces. Through case studies of the Ismailis of Gwadar, Muscat, Chitral and Sirikol (China), the paper analyses their experiences of struggle, adaptation, participation and resistance amid the overlapping pressures of empire-building, state formation, communism, Islam and evolving Ismaili Imamatus authority. In doing so, it offers a more complex understanding of the Ismailis' relationship with modern empires and states – a relationship that not only afforded institutional and material advantages but also introduced forms of disruption, marginalisation and identity transformation. These transimperial entanglements, it argues, did not merely shape Ismaili communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but continue to influence their socio-political dynamics in the contemporary world.



MURID SHAH NADIRI is an Oxford Nizami Ganjavi Centre Scholar in History at Keble College, where his doctoral research focuses on the cross-regional networks of the Ismaili *da'wa* between Central and South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before going to Oxford, he completed the MSc in the Globalised Muslim World at the University of Edinburgh, writing a dissertation on the partition of Badakhshān during the so-called Great Game. He undertook the MSc at Edinburgh University as part of the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities at The Institute of Ismaili Studies, where he completed an MA in Islamic Studies and Humanities.

*An Exploration of Bohra-Ottoman Interactions across Empires,
ca. 1880–1924*

Michael O’Sullivan

This paper is an initial foray into the history of encounters between Ottoman government officials/private citizens and Mustali Tayyibi Ismaili Muslims – better known by their sobriquet, the Bohras – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Three threads run through the paper. The first thread is an inventory of what the Ottoman administration and intelligentsia understood of Mustali Ismaili Shi’ism, as expressed in the Ottoman popular press and archival documents. The second thread seeks to document episodes in which Ottoman officials and travellers interacted with Bohras in places like Yemen, Hijaz, Habesh, Iraq and India. The aim here is to analyse what commercial and legal disputes were produced by these exchanges, and how each side sought to mobilise the resources of the other party for their wider state or community aims. The third thread takes a more comparative tone, seeking to analyse Ottoman–Bohra relations against the backdrop of Ottoman–Nizari Ismaili relations. That latter relationship has been expertly dissected by Amaan Merali in recent years, and this paper is in some sense a conversation with his pioneering work.

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An academician with nearly three decades of experience in Pakistan and the United Kingdom, he holds a DPhil in Philosophy of Education from the University of Oxford and an MA in Educational and International Development from the Institute of Education, University College London, before which he completed his MBA and BBA from Institute of Business Administration, Karachi.

He is driven to improve the quality of education, particularly in developing countries and in Muslim contexts. He has an interdisciplinary approach and has published widely in the areas of philosophy of education, citizenship, teacher education, imagination, religious education, hermeneutics and Islamic Studies. His recent publications have explored the role of imagination in fostering care, compassion and criticality amongst students.

He has worked on several educational projects around the world and has acted as a consultant to many research projects and organisations, including the International Baccalaureate, the Adyan Foundation in Lebanon, the Islamic Religious Council in Singapore, the Aga Khan Academies, and the government of Punjab, Pakistan. In 2016, He was appointed on the Commission on Religious Education, UK which was tasked to come up with policy recommendations for the future of religious education in the UK.

*Contemporary Ismailis and the Empire(s):
A Counter-Intuitive Narrative*

Daryoush Mohammad Poor

Contrary to the general perception of the detractors of Ismailis, the position of the Ismaili Imamate vis-à-vis ‘empire’ in its broadest sense has been one of prudence, yet principled dignity. In this paper, I will provide an overview of the relationships between the first three Aga Khans and the British Empire, giving rare and hitherto unnoticed examples of their objections to British expansionist desires. I will then offer examples from the legacy of Aga Khan IV on to delineate the delicate yet principled approach of the Aga Khans. The underlying idea is that in contemporary times, the Ismaili Imamate has quietly defied the dominant stereotypes perpetuated by Orientalism and its imperial and colonial apparatus. The examples include the relations of Aga Khan I with the British Raj, Aga Khan III’s role in the independence of Pakistan, his position on the nationalisation of Iranian oil and the multiple examples of similar positions by Aga Khan IV.



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*Heritage as Branding a Consciousness:
Transforming the Khoja into Omani Citizens*

Amal Sachedina

Based in Muttrah, a district of Muscat, the boundaries of the Khoja community of merchants and retailers, once called Hyderabadis (Sindh), have shifted over the course of the twentieth century: from the 1970s, the Shi'a trading families subject to Sultanate/British rule have become Omani national citizens. The very act of incorporating the Khoja or the al-Lawati into the history of a national people is an exercise of selectivity inasmuch as it is grounded in such categories as the 'Arab tribe' and a 'generic Islam'. It involves gaps, disjunctures and diversity at the core of what passes for a unifying history of a sovereign nation. But the historicism of a state pedagogy is contingent upon the conditions of its contextual enactment. At times, this has necessarily entailed the invocation of an alternative historical trajectory, one that orients the al-Lawati toward a historical difference forged on the basis of Indian caste, a Shi'i geography and British subjecthood. The informal governance of Oman by the British Raj becomes part of an alternative modality of history that has officially been expunged, thus opening up possibilities for the rise of social tensions and their irruption in the present day. These are not merely fissures in a nationalist project but tensions that affect daily social interactions, and forms of sociability, assuming an important ethical dimension of peoples' lives. The past lays bare a terrain of not only shared historical assumptions, but also provides a platform for debate and contestation



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The Ismailis of China: At the Crossroads of Empires

Amier Saidula

The Ismailis of China form a little-known religious and ethnic minority officially classified as Tajiks within the People's Republic of China. Since religion is not recognised as an identity marker, as a religious community, they are absent from official documents. Scholarly engagement with this community within China has been extremely limited, typically confined to brief mentions in broader discussions of Ismaili philosophy or history.

The overwhelming majority of China's Tajiks, most of whom live in Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang, identify as Ismailis. Tashkurgan occupies a unique geographical position at the intersection of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Pamir Mountain ranges. According to oral tradition, Ismailism was introduced to the region during the Samanid period by Pīr Nāṣir Khusraw, the renowned *Fatimid dā'ī of Khurāsān*. This oral history places the Xinjiang Ismaili story within the broader historical and spiritual narratives of Central Asian Ismailism.

Despite these deep historical roots, the community remained isolated from the broader Ismaili world until the late nineteenth century, when they established ties with the Bombay-based Imamate during the era of British–Russian rivalry in Central Asia. This connection, which lasted until China's border closure in 1948, brought direct guidance from the Imam, institutional reforms, the establishment of structures like the *Jama'at Khāna* and *Mukhi* system, and submission of religious alms, marking a transformative chapter in the community's history.



In short, it was the intersecting interests of empires at this strategic crossroads that ended centuries of isolation. Some Ismaili agents from British India stationed in the eastern Pamirs informed the Jamat of the Imamate's activities in Bombay, prompting the Imam's envoys to visit. Their engagement shaped a distinctive Ismaili identity in China, rooted in Central Asian heritage yet enriched by South Asian Ismaili cultural influences. The paper will shed light on these complex developments.

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Ismailis and Empire: Politics, Religion and Culture, ca. 1800 to Present

Conference Programme
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Cover Image Description

Guests for a 22 July 1909 Luncheon Party held for the Delegates of the Ottoman Parliament to the Inter-Parliamentary Union at the House of Commons, UK, headed by newly appointed Foreign Minister Talat Pasha (front row, furthest right) and comprising members of the Ottoman Parliament, including for Jerusalem, Ruhi al-Khalidi (front row, second from right), for Izmir, Nissim Mazliach (middle standing row, second from right) and for Baghdad, Ezekiel Sasson (tallest figure standing in the back row).

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (seated in front row, fourth from right) is flanked by Ottoman Ambassador Ahmed Tevfik Pasha (left of the Aga Khan) and intellectual Halil Halid (right of the Aga Khan), who worked together to establish London's first mosque.

British government officials and members of parliament also attended, including former Prime Minister and later author of the Balfour Declaration, Arthur Balfour (front row, fourth from left).

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