



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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## **The Shi'a Ismaili Muslims: An Historical Context**

Professor Azim Nanji

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### **Abstract**

In this article Professor Azim Nanji provides a brief overview of the history of Islam, tracing the origins of the Shi'a and the Sunni perspectives. Within this context, we learn of the emergence of Shi'a Ismaili Muslims and their history, from the foundation of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate in North Africa in 909 CE up to the contemporary period.

### **Introduction**

The last in the line of the Abrahamic family of revealed traditions, Islam emerged in the early decades of the seventh century. Its message, addressed in perpetuity, calls upon people to seek in their daily life, in the very diversity of humankind, signs that point to the Creator and Sustainer of all creation. Revealed to Prophet Muhammad in Arabia, Islam's influence spread rapidly, bringing into its fold, within just over a century of its birth, the inhabitants of the lands stretching from the central regions of Asia to the Iberian Peninsula in Europe.

A major world religion, Islam today counts a quarter of the globe's population among its followers. All Muslims affirm the absolute unity and transcendence of God (*tawhid*) as the first and foremost article of the faith, followed by that of Divine guidance through God's chosen messengers, of whom Prophet Muhammad was the last. This affirmation constitutes the *shahada*, the profession of faith, and is the basic creed of all Muslims. In its essence, Islam refers to the inner struggle of the individual, waged singly and in consonance with fellow believers, to engage in earthly life, while rising above its trappings in search of the Divine. This quest is only meaningful in tandem with the effort to do good for one's kin, for orphans, the needy, the vulnerable; to be just, honest, humble, tolerant and forgiving.

### **Shi'a Islam: Historical Origins**

Within its fundamental unity, Islam has evoked, over the ages, varying responses to its primal message calling upon man to surrender himself to God. Historically, these responses have been expressed as two main perspectives within Islam: the Shi'a and the Sunni. Each encompasses a rich diversity of spiritual temperaments, juridical preferences, social and psychological dispositions, political entities and cultures. The Shi'a Ismaili Tariqah is one such response from within the overall Shi'a perspective which seeks to comprehend the true meaning of the Islamic message.

During his lifetime, Prophet Muhammad was both the recipient and the expounder of Divine revelation. His death marked the conclusion of the line of prophecy, and the beginning of the critical debate on the question of the rightful leadership to continue his mission for the future generations. In essence, the position of the group that eventually coalesced into the majority, the Sunni branch, which comprises several different juridical schools, was that the Prophet had not nominated a successor, as the revelation contained in the Qur'an was sufficient

guidance for the community. There developed a tacit recognition that spiritual-moral authority was to be exercised by the ulama, a group of specialists in matters of religious law, or shari'a. The role of the caliph, theoretically elected by the community, was to maintain a realm in which the principles and practices of Islam were safeguarded and propagated.

The Shi'a at 'Ali or the 'party' of 'Ali, already in existence during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, maintained that while the revelation ceased at his death, the need for spiritual and moral guidance of the community, through an ongoing interpretation of the Islamic message, continued. For them, the legacy of Prophet Muhammad could only be entrusted to a member of his own family, in whom the Prophet had invested his authority through designation. That person was 'Ali, the Prophet's cousin, and the husband of his daughter and only surviving child, Fatima. 'Ali was also the Prophet's first supporter who devoutly championed the cause of Islam. Just as it was the prerogative of the Prophet to designate his successor, each Imam thereafter has the absolute right to designate his successor from among his male progeny. Hence, according to Shi'a doctrine, the Imamat continues by hereditary descent from the Prophet through 'Ali and Fatima.

In time, the Shi'a were sub-divided. The Ismailis and what eventually came to be known as the Ithna'Ashari or Twelver Shi'a parted ways over the succession to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, the great great grandson of Imam 'Ali and Fatima. The Ithna'Asharis transferred their allegiance to al-Sadiq's youngest son Musa al-Kazim and after him, in lineal descent, to Muhammad al-Mahdi, their twelfth Imam who, they believe, is in occultation and will reappear to dispense perfect order and justice.

Today, the Ithna'Asharis are the largest Shi'a Muslim community, and constitute the majority of the population in Iran and Iraq. The Ismailis gave their allegiance to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq's eldest son Ismail, from whom they derive their name. They trace the line of Imamat in hereditary succession from Imam Ismail to His Highness the Aga Khan, who is currently the forty-ninth Imam in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad through Imam 'Ali and Fatima. The Ismailis are the second largest Shi'a Muslim community, settled in over 25 countries, mostly in the developing world, but now also with a substantial presence in the industrialised nations.

### **The Ismaili Imamat from the Time of the Division in the Shi'a Community: An Overview**

The foundation of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate in North Africa in the 909 CE was the culmination of a long and sustained commitment of the descendants of Imam Ismail to promote the Islamic ideal of social justice and equity.

Centred in Egypt, the Fatimid caliphate at its peak extended westward to North Africa, Sicily and other Mediterranean islands, and eastward to the Red Sea coast of Africa, Palestine, Syria, the Yemen and Arabia. The Fatimids encouraged intellectual and philosophical inquiry, and attracted the finest minds of the age to its court, whatever their religious persuasion. Al-Azhar, the Cairo mosque built by Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz in 972 CE, was a great centre of learning, and the Dar al-'Ilm, the House of Knowledge, established in 1005 CE, was the first medieval institution of learning, a precursor of the modern university, combining in its programme a full range of major academic disciplines, from the study of the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions through jurisprudence, philology and grammar, to medicine, logic, mathematics and astronomy.

In the same spirit, the Ismaili view of history, which accorded due respect to the great monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition, provided the intellectual framework for the participation of the followers of different faiths in the affairs of the Fatimid state. Christians and Jews, as much as Muslims of either branch, were able to rise to the highest echelons of state office on grounds of competence alone. The Fatimids' policies reflected a plurality of pious ways rather than a monolithic interpretation of the faith.

In the last decade of the eleventh century, the Ismaili community suffered a schism over the succession to Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir bi'llah. One part of the community followed his youngest son al-Musta'li. The other gave its allegiance to his eldest son Imam Nizar from whom the Aga Khan, the present Imam of the Ismailis, traces his descent. The seat of the Ismaili Imamate then moved to Alamut, in northern Iran, where the Ismailis had succeeded in establishing a state comprising a defensive network of fortified settlements.

These fortresses housed impressive libraries and study rooms whose collections ranged from books on religion and philosophy to scientific instruments, and the Ismailis did not abandon their liberal policy of patronage to men of learning of Muslim as well as non-Muslim backgrounds. However, the invasions by the Mongol hordes led to the destruction of the Ismaili state in 1256 CE.

After this, the Ismailis lived in dispersed communities and, under the direction of each succeeding Imam, centres of activity were established in the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, the mountainous regions of the Hindu Kush, Central Asia and parts of China over the course of several centuries. The modern phase of Ismaili history began when the forty-sixth Imam, Aga Hasan 'Ali Shah, emigrated from Iran to India in the 1840s.

He was the first Imam to bear the title of Aga Khan, bestowed by the Persian emperor, Fath 'Ali Shah. He established his headquarters in Mumbai (Bombay), and this marked the beginning of an era of regular contacts between the Imam and his widely dispersed followers. Aga Khan I was succeeded by his eldest son Aga 'Ali Shah, who assumed the title of Aga Khan II, and was honoured with the courtesy of His Highness, first granted to his father by the British government.

Building on the initiatives of his father, Aga Khan II set about the long-term task of social development of the community, with emphasis on education. He passed away in 1885, and the institution of the Imamate then devolved upon his son Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III, who was eight years old at the time of his accession. His life marks a remarkable era of momentous significance. From every platform, the third Aga Khan advocated free, universal, practically oriented primary education; improved secondary schools for Muslims, and a generous provision of government and private scholarships to enable talented Muslim students to study in Britain, Europe and America. It was in pursuit of his educational vision that Aga Khan III successfully transformed the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, India, into a leading university.

Aga Khan III's abiding concern, throughout his seventy-two years as Imam - the longest in Ismaili history - was the welfare of the Ismaili community. This period was a critical one in the modern history of the Ismailis, and it was his inspiring leadership as much as its enthusiastic response to his guidance that enabled the community to enter a period of remarkable progress in the areas of health, education, housing, commerce and industry,

leading to the establishment of a network of health clinics, hospitals, schools, hostels, cooperative societies, investment trusts and insurance companies.

### **The Contemporary Period**

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III passed away on 11 July 1957, having designated his grandson, Prince Karim - twenty years old at the time of his accession - to succeed him as the forty-ninth hereditary Imam of the Shi'a Ismaili Muslim community. Under the leadership of Aga Khan IV, the institutions and activities of the Imamatus have expanded far beyond their original scope. The Aga Khan has explained many times that the impulse that underpins these activities and shapes the social conscience of his community remains the unchanging Muslim ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

To give an operational structure to his humanitarian activities, the Aga Khan created the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a group of private, international, non-denominational agencies working to improve living conditions and opportunities for people in specific regions of the developing world. The Network's organisations have individual mandates that range from the fields of health and education to architecture, rural development and the promotion of private-sector enterprises. Together they collaborate in working towards a common goal - to build institutions and programmes that can respond in a sustained manner to the challenges of social, economic and cultural change. The Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan Education Services, Aga Khan Health Services, Aga Khan Planning and Building Services, Aga Khan University, and the University of Central Asia operate in the field of social development.

Economic activities are the province of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development and the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance with their affiliates in tourism, ecotourism, promotion of industry and financial services. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) implements cultural initiatives aimed at revitalising the heritage of communities in the Islamic world. One of the recent undertakings of AKTC is the project, set up in 2003, to establish an Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.