The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Muslim Spaces of Piety and Worship

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"(This light is found) in houses which Allah has allowed to be raised so that His name is remembered there, where He is glorified in the mornings and in the evenings."
(Qur'an, 24:36)

Introduction

Differentiating space and attributing it with special meaning is a universal feature of human cultures and societies. Spaces of gathering and worship play an important role in the social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual life of the members of a community or tradition. This is particularly true in the case of the role played by such spaces in Muslim history, religious life and identity. The following essay explores the nature and features of spaces of gathering in the Muslim context. It will highlight the evolution in form and function of these diverse institutional spaces as they emerged and developed in Muslim civilizations.

Variety of Spaces of Gathering

The Qur'anic revelation to Prophet Muhammad (*Salla-llahu 'alayhi wa alihi wa-sallam*) allows for a wide spectrum of interpretations across time, space, and cultural context. This has allowed for a plurality of interpretations, legal, theological and doctrinal formulations, as well as forms and expressions of devotion, piety and ritual action. This variety also extends to the spaces of gathering, interaction and worship. The presence of diverse persuasions and schools of thought in Islam has led to the coexistence of a wide range of spaces of worship. In addition to the *masjid*, they include the *ribat*, *khanaqah*, *zawiyah*, *tekke*, *husayniyah* and the *jamatkhana*. Together, these institutions have played and continue to play varied and significant religious and social roles in the lives of those associated with them and comprise an important element in the history and evolution of expressions of piety in Muslim societies.

The Masjid

The *masjid* (mosque; plural: *masajid*) constitutes among the most visible and prominent symbols of Muslim presence and can be found in almost all parts of the world. Literally meaning 'a place of prostration', the *masjid* was the formal institutional space established for the collective performance of prayer and ritual, and for meeting the social needs of the emerging *ummah* (community).

Origin

Most historians agree that in the early days of Islam (i.e. in early 7th century Mecca) the original Muslim community had no specific or special place of prayer and the arrangements for communal worship were informal. According to a famous saying (*hadith*) of the Prophet,

the "whole world is a *masjid*".[1] It is only after the *hijra* (migration) to Medina, that a specific house (space) emerged and evolved, where Muslims could collectively perform ritual prayers together as well as manage the affairs of the state. Thenceforth, wherever the nascent Muslim community became permanently established in large numbers (e.g., Basra, Kufa, Damascus, Al-Fustat), the mosque became a focal point for their religious and social life. In these 'new' Muslim lands, there were attempts initially to reproduce, in both form (design) and function, the first *masjid* of Medina. However, as the Muslim empire spread across geography, it came in contact with different cultures and traditions with their own forms of spaces and institutions. In addition, internal factors, such as the increasing availability of wealth and patronage, influx of new converts, the diversity in notions of piety, and the corresponding needs of the communities of users, collectively contributed to a rapid change and evolution in mosque design and usage.

Evolution of Form and Function

The first *masjid* in Medina served as both a place of communal prayer as well as a socio-cultural centre. Its functions included: communal and individual prayers, Qur'anic recitations, delivery of homilies (*qisas*), sermons (*khutbas)* on Fridays, recitation of *dhikr*, place of retreats (*i'tikaf*) and vigils – especially during the month of Ramadhan - and celebration of festivals. Mosques have also served as centres for collection and distribution of alms (*zakat*). The poor, homeless and travellers have often found shelter and sustenance there. The contracting of marriage and business agreements can also occur there.[2] An important development with regard to the evolving form and function of mosques revolves around the emergence of practices associated with building of shrine (tomb) mosques (called *maqbara, mashhad or maqam*) over the tombs of members of the Prophet's family (including Hazrat Imam Ali *'alayhi salam* and Hazrat Fatima *'alayha salam*) and of his early companions. Subsequently, with the growth and influence of Sufism, building and visiting of shrine-mosques (*ziyarah*) dedicated to sufi *shaykhs*, *pirs*, or sages for *barakah* and intercession became a regular feature of Muslim piety, devotion and religious landscape.[3]

It is important here also to note that even during this formative stage of Muslim history, along with the 'chief mosques' (in the centre of town with residence of the commander in chief), other 'types' of mosques soon began to evolve. There was a tendency for communities belonging to different schools of thought and interpretation to establish their own distinctive mosques. Thus there emerged mosques that were frequented largely by the Shi'a or the Sunni communities associated with specific legal schools such as the Shafi, Maliki, etc.
In addition to the above functions and roles of the *masjid* in the religious domain, there also emerged significant enlargement in the use of the mosque for intellectual and educational purposes. Mosques as places of religious and ethical learning took on a more formal educational role with circles of religious scholars and students gathered to study the Qur'an, *hadith*, law, etc. For instance, the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs established Al-Azhar, both as a mosque as well as a place of learning. Some mosques, such as those of Baghdad, Isfahan, Mashhad, Qum, Damascus and Cairo, became major centres of learning for students from all over the Muslim world.

[1] *Sahih Muslim*, trans. by A. Saddiqi (Lahore, 1976), vol. I, section on 'Masajid'
[2] J. Pedersen, 'Masdjid', in *The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 337-8
[3] 'Mosque', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic world*, ed. John Esposito, Vol. 3, 1995, p.134.

Needless to say, the above evolving and expanding **functions** of the mosque impacted the **form** or physical design (architecture) of the mosque. Rapidly, ancillary buildings evolved such as *madrasas,* (schools) libraries, residence quarters, baths, etc., which often formed part of a mosque complex. The multiplicity of the mosque function (already evident in the first mosque at the time of the Prophet) reached a pinnacle in the Ottoman complex known as the *Kulliye*. The majestic Sulemaniye *Kulliye* (16th century) in Istanbul, by the famous architect Sinan, for example, consisted of a very large congregational mosque, five *madrasas*, two schools, a hospital and medical school, a *sufi* lodge, a hostel or caravanserai, a public bath and fountain, a public kitchen, housing for mosque teachers and caretakers, a wrestling ground, cafes, shops, imperial mausoleums, and a cemetery.[4]

It is interesting here to mention in the context of the evolution of "forms" that many of the architectural features of a mosque such as domes, minarets, *minbar* (pulpit), etc., which have come to be normatively interpreted as 'essential' and unchanging requirements of a mosque, were also a product of historical evolution and were not present in the 'prototype' mosque in Medina. Thus, from the beginning, there have not been any specific forms determined by religious injunctions, other than the indication of the direction of prayer (*qibla*). Architectural shapes were rather defined by extra religious factors such as influence of different cultures, traditions, environments, patrons, materials, technology, etc. [5]

The transformations brought about by colonialism, independence and modernization in Muslim societies have resulted in some shifts and changes in the uses of the mosque today. As in the past, the mosque remains the hub and symbol of intense social and cultural activity, whether Muslims are a majority or a minority in the region.[6]

In Muslim societies, the mosque, particularly the large 'national' or 'state' mosque has remained a highly visible feature serving to proclaim their 'Islamic' identity, while in non-Muslim lands, where millions of Muslims now live and work, it announces a Muslim presence to non-Muslims and signifies 'home' to the faithful.[7]

The above discussion on the evolution of functions and forms of the *masjid* and its relation to the changing needs of the community may also apply, in part, to other Muslim places of piety (e.g. *zawiyahs, khanaqahs, jamatkhanas,* etc).

The Ribat, Khanaqah, Zawiyah and Tekke

These places of gathering are generally associated with the rise and institutional development of Sufism, and are an important element in the history and evolution of Muslim societies. Over the years, these establishments and institutions have played (like the *masjid*) diverse and significant religious and social roles in the lives of Muslims. Over the course of many centuries, Sufi *tariqas* (orders) have multiplied and spread all over the Muslim world, from North Africa to the Indian subcontinent. The spread of these *tariqas* was accompanied by the construction of specific spaces of gathering and their particular forms and expressions of

[4] R. Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh, 1994)
[5] Dogan Kuban, *Muslim Religious Architecture.* Part I (Leiden, 1974), pp 2-10
[6] Mohammed Arkoun, 'The Metamorphosis of the Sacred', in *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity,* eds. M. Frishman and H. Khan (London, 1994), p. 271
[7] Oleg Grabar, 'The Mosque in Islamic Society Today', in *The Mosque*, p. 244

rituals. The names of these centres or 'convents' have varied according to location: *zawiya* and *ribat* were used largely (though not exclusively) in the Maghrib; *khanaqah* in Egypt; *khanagah* from Iran to India (the term *dargah* is also used); and *tekke* in Turkish-speaking areas. Support for the above institutions by the ruling elites gradually broadened and led to significant patronage in building them and endowing stipends for the Sufis living there. As a result of the above, these parallel institutions to the *masjid* became widespread and today, in many Muslim countries, such institutions are found in all major cities and even in remote villages.[8]

In these various residential teaching centres, Sufis gathered to practise acts of devotion, piety and meditation. Chief among these were the performance of *dhikr* (remembrance, invocation) and *sama* (poetry recitation accompanied by music). Also, through teachers (referred to as s*haykh, pir* or *murshid*) and disciples, individuals were educated to learn the Qur'an and its spiritual meaning, to cultivate an inner life, and to read the writings of great poets and writers in the Sufi tradition.[9] Elaborate initiation rituals developed in which the disciple had to pronounce the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) to the *murshid* and be invested with symbols of their entrance into the order (e.g., cloak, hat, etc.). As it was common for many Sufi *shaykhs* to be buried in their 'place of residence' (*khanaqah*), these spaces have become popular pilgrimage sites (*ziyarat*) to seek *barakah* and *shafa'a* (intercession).

Admission to such spaces is usually open to all, but this is not universally true. For instance, *khanaqah*s of the Shurawardi Order in India are known to restrict participation to those who have given their *bay'ah*, pledge of allegiance, to the *pir* or *shaykh* of the Sufi Order.[10] With regard to the issue of the exclusivity of such spaces, Sunni jurists have viewed it to be a matter dependent on custom.

As with the *masjid* and other similar spaces of gathering, these largely Sufi institutions not only served religious roles, but also encompassed socio-economic functions. For example, as places to which people take offerings, the *zawiyah*s and *khanaqah*s also contribute to the redistribution of social wealth. The needy and disabled are catered for and assured of food and lodging. Socio-religious activities and festivals, for instance, the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid*) are also organized in these establishments at specific times of the year.

While the names and functions of these Sufi institutional spaces came to resemble each other, they manifested considerable diversity in terms of location, structure, size and organization. Sometimes these buildings would be isolated but more frequently were connected with a mosque. In some *khanaqah*s, the dervishes lived in small cells while other 'convents' had only one large room in which all the dervishes lived, studied and worked together. The architecture also varied in size, layout, and materials used, and reflected local cultural elements and manifestations. The organisation of these institutions was also not alike everywhere. Some *tariqa*s lived on *futuh* (unsolicited gifts or donations) whereas others enjoyed generous patronage of the rulers and regular stipends from other benefactors.[11]

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[8] *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic World*, p. 371
[9] Azim Nanji, ed., *The Muslim Almanac* (Detroit, 1996), p. 413
[10] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Aligarh), 'Some Aspects of Khanaqah Life in Medieval India', *Studia Islamica*, 1952.
[11] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (North Carolina, 1975), p.232

Contemporary Role

It may be argued that the *zawiyah*, *khanaqah* and *ribat* today have become less important in social life than they were up to the nineteenth century. The economic and social transformations in Muslim countries that have accompanied the emergence of centralized states, massive urbanization, and the expansion of communication systems has led to the emergence of competing institutions of socialisation. The emergence of nation states that regulate functions historically associated with traditional Muslim social institutions (e.g. mosque, *zawiyah, khanaqah* and *ribat*) has contributed to the latter's weakening. Other forces, such as confiscation of the religious endowments (*waqf*; pl. *awqaf*) attached to institutions such as *zawiyah*s, as for example in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya (during French rule), drastically contributed to the erosion of the social role of these institutions. Finally, there have also been certain 'internal' forces that have contributed to the decline or destruction of these Sufi institutions. Central among these include certain intolerant 'reformist' movements which, from time to time, have interpreted the rich and diverse practices and expressions of piety associated with these institutions, particularly the visiting of mausoleums of saints or *awliya*s, as *bid'a* (innovation) and 'un-Islamic', and embarked on their curtailment, if not outright destruction - all with the ideological aim of imposing an imaginary pure and pristine Islam. Such accusations clearly reflect an attempt on the part of a dominant or vocal group to impose its own particular interpretation of Islam on what is actually a rich diversity of forms and interpretations.

In any case, Sufi orders and institutions continue to survive despite the restrictions of some modern governments and the opposition of extremist groups. They act as channels that both preserve the influence of saints of the past and encourage spiritual discipline. Furthermore, in some European and American cities where Sufi *tariqahs* are emerging and growing, one can find similar institutions (such as *zawiyah* and *khanaqah*), often in private, where adherents meet regularly to perform acts of worship that closely resemble *tariqah* religious practices.

The Husayniyah and Imambarah

Husayniyah and *Imambarah* refer to spaces of gathering where ritual ceremonies commemorating the life and martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Husayn *'alayhi salam* are held.[12] *Husayniyah* can be a temporary tent set up especially for the *muharram* mourning ceremonies or a permanent building that is also used for religious occasions throughout the year. The *husayniyahs* are found in all Shi'a Ithna'ashari (Twelver) communities throughout the world and are known as such in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. In Iran, the terms *husayniyah* and *takiyah* are used interchangeably, with local customs determining the relative usage. Among the Shi'a of Bahrain and Oman, such sites are called *ma'tam*, while among the Shi'a Ithna'asharis of India the terms *Imambarah* (literally 'enclosure of the Imams') and *ashur-khana* are used.

In Muslim cities, towns and villages with a significant community of Shi'a Ithna'asharis, *husayniyahs* are as common as mosques in popular religious practice. They are sites for the intensely emotional recitations (*rawzah-khvani*) of the tragic circumstances surrounding the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Husayn (A.S.) as well as the performance of *ta'ziyah* (passion

[12] Gustav Thaiss, 'Husayniyah', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islamic World*, vol.2, p.153

plays). The *husayniyah* are also used as a starting and culminating point for '*ashura dastah'* (mourning processions).

The *imambarah*s in the Indian Subcontinent acquired complex forms and meanings in the eighteenth century, during the rule of the Nawabs of Oudh. Besides symbolizing a shrine of Hazrat Imam Husayn (A.S.), with his *zareeh* (sarcophagus) as its central element, it was also built as the burial place of the Nawab. In Lucknow, which is one of the centres of Twelver Shi'ism in India, there are hundreds of *imambarahs.* Families may have their own *imambarah*, normally just a part of a room. Wealthier families have rooms set aside as *imambarah*s, richly decorated. In addition, every neighbourhood has its own *imambarah*. [13] *Imambarah*s, like other parallel Muslim spaces, are multifunctional. Along with the above devotional rituals and practices, they are also locations of community education and rituals for various rites of passage (i.e. marriage or funerals). The forms (architecture) of these spaces vary according to the geographical and cultural setting, size of the community as well as the symbolic intentions of the builders.

The Jamatkhana

The term '*Jamatkhana*' literally means 'a house of assembly or gathering'. Specifically, it has come to designate a gathering space for community activities and for devotional practice among a variety of Muslim groups such as the Musta'lian and Nizari Ismailis in certain parts of the world. In the predominantly South Asian Chishti order, the institution for Sufi activity was called *jamatkhana* and was centred on the residence of the shaykh.[14] The Shi'i *Bohra* and Sunni *Memon* communities of India also have private places of gathering called *jamatkhana.* The custom of meeting in closed sessions, at specially designated places, to learn about and practice their own interpretations of faith, has been part of the Ismaili tradition from pre-Fatimid times. During the Fatimid period, the Ismailis used to participate in *majalis al-hikma* (sessions of wisdom), which were accessible only to those who had pledged their allegiance to the Imam-of-the-time.

Community tradition, based on passages from Ismaili ginans, suggests that the earliest Ismaili *jamatkhana*s were established in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent during the 14th and 15th centuries. Situating the *jamatkhana* within the tradition of Muslim piety, His Highness the Aga Khan made the following remarks on the occasion of the foundation laying ceremony for the Ismaili Centre in Dubai:

> *"For many centuries, a prominent feature of the Muslim religious landscape has been the variety of spaces of gathering co-existing harmoniously with the* masjid*, which in itself has accommodated a range of diverse institutional spaces for educational, social and reflective purposes. Historically serving communities of different interpretations and spiritual affiliations, these spaces have retained their cultural nomenclatures and characteristics, from* ribat *and* zawiyya *to* khanaqa *and* jamatkhana*. The congregational space incorporated within the Ismaili Centre belongs to the historic category of* jamatkhana*, an institutional category that also serves a number of sister Sunni and Shi'a communities, in their respective contexts, in many*

[13] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. volume 3 (Leiden, 1979), p.1163
[14] *Muslim Almanac*, p.498.

parts of the world. Here, it will be space reserved for traditions and practices specific to the Shi'a Ismaili tariqa of Islam."[15]

Contemporary Role

In the Shia Ismaili community today, the *jamatkhana* represents the physical space in which the community gathers in a shared process of communal worship and expressions of piety. The Ismaili Constitution defines *jamatkhana* as a place designated by the Imam-of-the-time for Ismaili *tariqah* practices.

Consonant with the ethos of Islam, which welds together the 'worldly' and the 'spiritual', the *jamatkhana*s (like other Muslim spaces of piety and worship) are multifunctional and act as the religious, educational and social centres for the Ismaili community. These functions (and forms) have evolved, as in the case of all other Muslim spaces and institutions, reflecting the changing historical and cultural contexts of these institutions as well as the evolving needs of its users. Speaking on the occasion of the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon, His Highness the Aga Khan suggested that among the programmatic dimensions of the Ismaili Centre will be *"lectures, presentations, conferences, recitals, and exhibits of art and architecture."*[16]

The recently built high-profile Ismaili *jamatkhana* and Centres are 'representational' buildings. As His Highness the Aga Khan stated at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe:

> *"These Centres serve to reflect, illustrate and represent the community's intellectual and spiritual understanding of Islam, its social conscience, its organisation, its forward outlook and its positive attitude towards the societies in which it lives…Like its counterparts elsewhere, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will stand for the ethics that uphold the dignity of man as the noblest of creation. It will bring down walls that divide and build bridges that unite. ..It is my prayer that, once it has been built, the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe will be a place of order, of peace, of hope, of humility and of brotherhood, radiating those thoughts, and attitudes which unite us in the search for a better life."*[17]

In terms of form or architecture of the Ismaili *jamatkhanas*, again as with other Muslim spaces of gathering, there is no single 'monolithic' type or required norm. Rather, the forms vary depending on the cultural context, geography, materials available, technology and, of course, varieties of functions required. Reflecting this last criterion (of function), the larger *jamatkhanas* contain not only prayer halls, but also meeting areas, classrooms, libraries, recreation and social spaces, etc.

To conclude, beginning with the revelation of the Holy Qur'an and the historical experiences of Muslims over 1400 years (cumulative traditions), the devotional life of Muslims has

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[15] Except of speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Dubai, UAE, December 13th, 2003.
[16] Except of speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon, Portugal, December 18th, 1996.
[17] Excerpt of speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ismaili Center in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, August 30th, 2003

consisted of a rich variety of expressions, forms, interpretations and spaces. As a result, a *plur*iform rather than uniform culture has been characteristic of the reality of Muslim societies throughout history. Moreover, this cultural pluralism, rather than being a weakness, remains a source of strength and inspiration for millions of Muslims around the world.