



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Institute of Ismaili Studies”

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Paul E. Walker

Founded in 1977 by H.H. Prince Karim Aga Khan, the Institute functions today as a gathering point for the Ismaili community's interest in its own history and in its relationship with the larger world of Islamic scholarship and contemporary thought. Its stated mission is to promote the investigation of Muslim cultures and societies, both of the past and of the present, to explore the interaction of religious ideas within the broader aspects of modern life, but to do so with special attention to often neglected fields that contain the intellectual and literary expressions of esoteric Islam, including Shi'ism in general and Ismailism in particular, in the full richness of their diversity.

The Institute operates under the guidance of a Board of Governors, chaired by H.H. the Aga Khan; its current director is Professor Azim Nanji, who is a respected, published scholar in the field of religious studies, and many of its staff of professionals hold advanced degrees in relevant disciplines. In 2004, a position of Associate Director, responsible for monitoring all the academic activities of the Institute, was created; it is currently held by Farhad Daftary. Although the Institute was established through grants provided by the Aga Khan as the Imam of the Nizari Ismailis, the community also represents a major source of funding for it in the form of voluntary donations. The Institute has a principal objective to serve the same Ismaili community. In practice, however, the Institute is not meant to serve the Ismaili community exclusively, but rather to engage representatives of Islamic opinion across the spectrum. Its diverse constituencies include scholars and students of Islam and Ismailism, universities and educational establishments as well as the Ismaili community. Reflecting these constituencies, the Institute collaborates with several prominent institutions of learning in the West and in the Muslim world. It also maintains close relations with the Aga Khan Development Network.

One program that combines several of the Institute's functions at once is its Project Tajikistan, which has as its purpose the establishment of contact with the Ismailis of that region, to provide teaching and educational materials for that community, and to conduct research on the culture and traditions of the societies it represents.

A major component of the Institute's program is concerned with research and publications. The Department of Academic Research and Publications (DARP), for several years now directed by Farhad Daftary, the eminent scholarly authority on the history of the Ismailis, is very important for yet another aspect of the Institute's activities, namely encouraging the investigation of Islam, Shi'ism and Ismaili history by both

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Ismailis and non-Ismailis alike. To this end, fortunately, the Institute has assembled a fine Library, an invaluable collection of manuscripts, and has begun various series of publications of monographs and of texts and translations of major classics of Ismaili thought. Such programs obviously have value for Ismailis, whose history is thereby well represented, but they also aid in the recovery by scholarship at large of a historical record that helps immeasurably to explain many previously obscure areas of the Islamic past. The Institute as a whole follows a broad mandate, its program of academic research and publications services the interests of the wider academic community.

The publications of the Department of Academic Research and Publications fall into several categories such as occasional papers, monographs, editions and translations, conference proceedings, catalogues and bibliographical works as well as Ismaili studies. In the latter category special mention should be made of the Ismaili Heritage Series and Ismaili Texts and Translations Series, both under the general editorship of Farhad Daftary. The English language publications of the Institute are selectively translated into Persian and Arabic (for the range and scope of subjects treated in recent publications, see bibliography below).

In the long run if the Institute commits itself to the sponsorship of scholarly efforts to edit and translate Ismaili classics, particularly from the earlier periods, to facilitate the process of publication, and to ensure that the resulting work adheres to the highest standards, researchers everywhere will owe it a heavy debt of gratitude for this aspect of its many programs alone.

Supporting all its programs is the Institute's Library, which has one of the most valuable and comprehensive collections in the Western world of manuscripts, books and audiovisual materials relating to Ismaili studies in particular. This collection serves as a major resource centre for scholars and students and aspires to become the most significant central archive of Ismaili materials in the world. The Library has an automated catalogue, and it is intended to place this online in the future.

From the beginning the Institute made an attempt to gather all the Ismaili manuscripts available to it elsewhere and to house them safely and securely in this one place. Over time its holdings have increased significantly. From items assembled by the indefatigable pioneer in the this field, Wladimir Ivanow (1886-1970), and by the former Ismaili Society of Bombay, and with additions donated since then by the families of prominent Ismaili scholars, such as that of the late Zahid Ali (1888-1958), comprised of some 225 Arabic manuscripts, and of Sherali Alidina, there are now in excess of 1,500 manuscripts in its collections. The greater portion (of about 1, 000) of these are in Arabic of which approximately 750 are Ismaili works. Another 300 are in Persian (of which over 100 are Ismaili Texts) and over 200 in Gujarati and various other Indian languages written in the special Khojki script that was used by Ismailis there. The latter category consists principally of ginans, devotional hymns reflecting the indigenous literary tradition of the Nizari Ismaili Khojas of South Asia. Beyond its manuscripts and printed collections, the Library aims to acquire filmed copies of all the Ismaili works held by other institutions.



At present, the Institute has produced four volumes of a master catalogue covering its Arabic manuscript holdings and intends to make these catalogues and selected manuscripts available online in the future.

The Institute's Graduate Program in Islamic Studies and Humanities involves teaching by an international faculty of distinguished scholars, including members of the Department of Academic Research and Publications. Attracting students from diverse backgrounds and regions – from Central Asia to North America – the programme prepares individuals for important roles in academic, public and community life. Former students have gone on to obtain Master's and Ph. D degrees from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and the University of Edinburgh, among others. In addition, the Institute offers scholarships for postgraduate studies in pertinent fields.

The Institute's Department of Education produces a range of multimedia teaching and learning materials in eight different languages on religious and cultural education for the Ismaili community at all educational levels other than for advanced studies in its graduate programs. Drawing upon modern principles of education and curriculum design, these innovative materials are intended to make religious learning a creative and appealing process for young minds, as well as to bridge the gap between religious and secular education. The Institute's Department of Community Relations serves the human resource development and other relevant needs of Nizari Ismaili communities worldwide through a variety of programs and resource materials.

From its beginnings, the Institute has occupied a series of four sites in central London and for a while also maintained a small branch in Paris. With each move the main office grew in size and facilities. It is now located in spacious premises in Grosvenor Gardens, where there is room for a well-appointed library, conference rooms, classrooms, and offices.

## **Bibliography**

The best source of information on the Institute, including the various publications mentioned here, is its website: [www.iis.ac.uk](http://www.iis.ac.uk); see also The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Department of Academic Research and Publications, Catalogue of Publications, 2004-2005, London, 2004.

## **Recent Publications of IIS**

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