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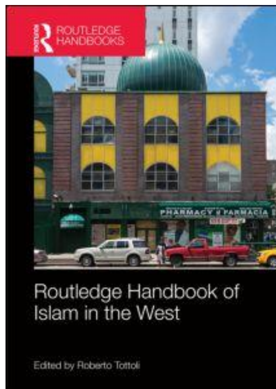

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Roberto Tottoli

A Muslim modernity

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A Muslim modernity

Ismaili engagement with Western societies

Karim H. Karim

Shi'i Nizari Ismaili Muslims (or "Ismailis" for short) are a branch of Islam who have engaged in a unique manner with modernity. Their hereditary leaders (imams) were prominent interlocutors with European colonialism and have been present in Western Europe since the early twentieth century. Following migration from Asia and Africa, Ismailis now have significant settlements in several parts of Europe, North America, and Australasia. This relatively small group of several millions located around the world has a form of communal (*jamati*) self-governance that has Western features of organization and whose structure is specified in a transnational "constitution." Many members of the community living in Western as well as non-Western countries have integrated modernity into their lives, while maintaining Islamic practice and identity. In producing new ways of engaging with the modern state, civil society, institutional organizations, international development, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, citizenship, and traditional and contemporary knowledge, they have produced a unique form of Muslim modernity.

Ismaili communities are currently located in some forty countries, with the oldest ones being in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, India, Iran, and China. They emerged in these places from conversion activities of earlier times. However, the community has not conducted active proselytization since at least the eighteenth century. Ismaili history, which spans more than a thousand years (Daftary 2007), is closely tied to the community's hereditary leadership (*Imamat*), which claims direct lineal descent from Ali ibn Abi Talib (sixth to seventh century CE), the first Shi'i imam and the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law. Aga Khan IV is the forty-ninth and present imam of the Nizari Ismailis. No Ismaili '*ulama*' exists; appointments to religious offices and *jamati* institutions are rotational and are made by the imam.

Engagement of the imam with matters of faith (*din*) as well as of the material world (*dunya*) is viewed as being central to his office (Aga Khan IV 2008c: 15–16). The history of the *Imamat* and its followers is punctuated by the rise of fall of Ismaili states, including the Fatimid Empire in the tenth to thirteenth century, and periods of severe persecution. The honorific title of Aga Khan was given to the forty-sixth imam by a Qajar shah in nineteenth-century Iran. Adverse political developments compelled Aga Khan I to move to India, which was then ruled by the British. Aga Khan III established himself in Europe by the mid-twentieth century and used

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the continent's international communications links to expand contacts with his transnational community. Aga Khan IV, who resides in France, became imam in 1957.

A primary characteristic of the Ismaili practice of Islam is the emphasis on the esoteric (*batin*) aspects of spirituality (Corbin 1993: 74–104). The religious quest of community members is to apprehend the inner significance of Islamic teachings. This involves an effort to understand the profound symbolism of the Qur'an and a quest for spiritual truth, an approach that has much in common with Sufi practice. Such an orientation to Islam differs from those adhering only to an exoteric understanding of religion. The role of the contemporary imam as the bearer of spiritual knowledge (*'ilm*) is vital in Ismaili theology and practice. In contrast to the majority Shi'i group of, whose imam is considered absent (*ghayb*), the living Ismaili imam is the primary interpreter of Islamic revelations for his followers – providing guidance according to the changing conditions of time. The community's members were often severely persecuted, occasionally to the point of genocide, because their beliefs were viewed as being heretical (Jamal 2002; Virani 2007).

The imam is not only a guide in matters of faith, but also provides worldly direction. Since *din* and *dunya* are intertwined in Islamic worldviews, it behooves the imam to be profoundly concerned with both aspects of life (Aga Khan IV 2008c: 95). Present-day Ismaili leadership has been intensely engaged in improving the socio-economic conditions of its followers and in this has conducted a longstanding dialogue with modernity. Given the community's attention to the inner aspects of spirituality, it tends not to have rigid attachments to theological formulations in the manner in which it approaches contemporary aspects of life. Ismailis seek to adhere to Islamic ethics and principles rather than dogma, which facilitates their engagement with modernity.

Over the last century, Ismaili imams have developed an infrastructure of institutions that address the needs of their followers and the societies in which they live. A number of *jamati* organizations tend to the religious, social, economic, educational, and health concerns of Ismailis. This group of institutions is transnational in scope, with the imam at its head. In addition to this communal self-governance structure, the current imam has established a group of organizations that are non-denominational, with their scope extending outside Ismaili communities and into areas such as architecture, aviation, and media. This Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is guided by a contemporary Islamic engagement with concepts such as development, democracy, civil society, and pluralism as articulated by its founder. In this, the Ismaili imam has emerged as a major Muslim interlocutor with Western societies on issues of modernity.

The Aga Khan intellectually and managerially leads the transformations wrought by Ismaili modernity. He has strong support from many of his followers who contribute financially and by providing their time, knowledge, and skills to the imam's vast institutional networks. However, the hierarchical organization of these structures does not appear to have provided for a formal articulation and theorization of Ismaili modernity, which is largely shaped by the *Imamat*. Nor has the community's articulation of concepts such as democracy, civil society, pluralism, and meritocracy been discussed in the context of its hereditary, male Shi'i leadership.

Muslim modernities

The response to modernity in many Muslim societies in the last two centuries has been in accordance with dominant Western models. Tight control was established over society and land through the intense bureaucratization of the state apparatus, the construction of centralized communications and transportation networks, the homogenization of educational systems, the

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imposition of European legal frameworks, and state expropriation of religious endowments (*awqaf*). All this had the objective of unifying the country and strengthening the power of central government. The last two hundred years have also been characterized by waves of intellectual activity: "While some Muslim elements were calling for a rapid and wholesale embrace of Western ideas and institutional models, and others were holding to the past, rejecting any form of change, reformist '*ulama*', intellectuals and statesmen sought to chart a way between accommodating the new condition and preserving the Islamic identity of society" (Nafi 2004: 39).

The broad range of reformers had a common purpose in safeguarding Islamic distinctiveness in the face of the forceful challenge of modernization and at the same time overcoming what they saw as the debilitating layers of questionable traditional practices. Their twofold mission sought to contain "the Western challenge by creating a synthesis between modern values and systems and what they perceived as eternal Islamic values and systems and questioning the credibility, even the Islamicity, of the dominant traditional modes of religion" (Nafi 2004: 40). Espousing the notion of progress, the reformers challenged what they saw as the blind adherence of Muslim society to juristic opinions developed over previous centuries and asserted the mutability of the *shari'a*. They urged the revival of the independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) as an integral aspect of Islamic methodology.

However, despite their noteworthy efforts, these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Muslim reformers (such as Afghani, Abduh, Rida, and Iqbal) were not able to influence the directions which Muslim majority states eventually took. While occasionally paying lip-service to reformist thought, governments mainly pursued policies of Westernization. By the late 1970s, the alienation that this approach had engendered in Muslim societies gave rise to a more dogmatic response usually termed "fundamentalism" or "Islamism." Nafi suggests that the work of reformists in breaking the dominance of the traditional '*ulama*' opened the way for Islamists, most of whom do not have theological training, to pursue their forceful challenge against the state. Their political activism would not have been made possible if the reformists had not "prepared the ground for the laymen, the modern Muslim intellectual and the Muslim professional, to speak on behalf of Islam" (Nafi 2004: 53).

Other contemporary heirs of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformists include Muslim scholars trained in the contemporary humanities and social sciences. Some of them also have traditional Islamic training. Many of them live and work in Western countries, often because of the greater opportunities these settings afford for free expression. They use the tools of contemporary scholarship to examine Muslim theology, history, and sociology. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment concepts are regularly employed when academic audiences are addressed, and also when the Muslim faithful are addressed.

Ebrahim Moosa states that whereas the reformists viewed modernity as an ally, "twenty-first-century critical Muslim scholars are much more apprehensive of its allure and offer a critique of modernity" (Moosa 2003: 118). While twentieth-century reformers supported women's rights and the study of contemporary sciences, most of them did not proceed to apply the intellectual tools of the day to scrutinize traditional Islamic sciences. Moosa says that Muslims need to move beyond apologetics that distort those aspects of history and theology which do not appear to conform to contemporary standards. He criticizes the tendency to look for corroboration of past practices:

> this desire to find justification in the past, in a text or the practice of a founder, suggests that Muslims can act confidently in the present only if the matter in question was already prefigured in the past. … Does this mean that Muslims can engage in discourses of justice,

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> egalitarianism, freedom, and equality only if there is some semblance that the scripture of the Prophet or some of the learned savants (imams) of the past endorsed, hinted, or fantasized about the possibility of such discourses?
>
> *(Moosa 2003: 122)*

Moosa states that these tendencies invalidate the actual experiences of Muslims in their efforts to construct the path to innovation, change, and adaptation. There is an increasing insistence among contemporary Muslim intellectuals, according to Tariq Ramadan, to take account of "the concrete realities of our societies" and "produce a *fiqh*, a legislation appropriate to our times" (Ramadan 2001: 324).

Ramadan, a prominent voice among Muslims in the West, has promoted the development of a "Western Islam" (Ramadan 2004). Muslim intellectuals living in North America, Europe, and Australasia are engaged seriously with Western modernity. There has been an attempt to give impetus to a movement of "Progressive Muslims" in the USA and Canada. Included in the "essential concerns of progressive Muslims," articulated by Omid Safi (2003), are: a critical review of the broad range of Islamic tradition; looking anew at Islamic scriptural teachings on social justice in the context of the contemporary world; striving for an "Islamic feminism"; and a pluralistic openness towards human sources of compassion and wisdom that goes beyond Islamic ones.

Aziz Esmail of the Institute of Ismaili Studies refers to a "pluralistic, universal point of view" that safeguards the particularity of the Muslim community and moves "from the inside to the outside" to gain an awareness of humanity's ethical and spiritual aspirations (Esmail 1996: 487). He proposes a common project among communities, particularly of the Abrahamic faiths, which would also critically assess cultural assumptions among Muslims. Esmail promotes a search that goes past these historical accretions in order to understand the core of the vision that gave expression to the principles of Islam.

Whereas the orientations of these contemporary Muslim scholars vary, they all urge a critical intellectual approach when examining Muslim traditions, a non-adversarial engagement with Western societies, and respect for both pluralist and universal values. They reject the notion of modernization that grants a privileged status to Western understandings of intellectual and material development. Instead they uphold the necessity of truly universal values and the importance of inter-faith and inter-cultural explorations of the common heritage of humanity, while continuing to realize the particular significance and contribution of the Islamic vision. In this lies the recognition of the multiple paths to modernity, not just those marked out by Western societies. Among these multiple paths, Ismailis have charted out a fairly distinct trajectory which has enabled them to integrate the contingencies of the contemporary world and to seek to play a role in the future of humanity.

Ismaili engagements with colonialism

Ismailis in India (Khojas) had begun to experience the reorganization of their social lives under British norms before the arrival of Aga Khan I on the subcontinent in 1842. The Ismaili leader's settling in India provided for a situation in which the living imam was physically present among his Indian followers for the first time. There subsequently arose disputes over the control of community properties and the religious dues between the Aga Khan and some Khojas. Under British jurisdiction, "the state reserved all matters dealing with property within religious groups" (Shodhan 2010: 169; also see Purohit 2012). A series of court cases were launched against the imam, challenging his ownership of communal property and authority over Khojas. Orientalist

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understandings of Eastern religions informed the British judiciary in India. This was problematic for the Khojas since Western experts were not familiar with the religious pluralism that characterized their faith (Khan 2004). "The community was asked to answer for its own authenticity against the standard of orientalist scholarship *on* the community" (Steinberg 2011: 44). Following extensive proceedings, the cases were settled in favor of the *Imamat*. In particular, the judgment on the "Aga Khan Case" made in 1866 came to be presented as an authoritative legitimation of the imam's claims. Based on a modernist understanding of Ismaili history and faith, it became a vital element in the Aga Khans' engagement with the larger world. Even eighty-eight years later, Aga Khan III's *Memoirs* stated, "My grandfather had been confirmed in his rights and titles by a judgement of the Bombay High Court in 1866 … [which] contains a classic fully-detailed account of the origins of Ismailism and of the beginnings of my family" (Aga Khan III 1954: 9). If the British judge had become convinced of the authenticity of the Aga Khans' Ismaili leadership, then the *Imamat* seemed to be reciprocally persuaded about the value of modern Western scholarship. This view appears to have been important in the steps that the imams took in promoting Western education in their community.

The Ismailis had a centuries-long tradition of fostering education and scholarship (Daftary 2007). However, apart from a few privileged families, most Ismailis in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were small-scale farmers, shopkeepers, and laborers with little schooling. They were often socially marginalized in the countries where they lived and were frequently persecuted for their religious beliefs. Aga Khan III was a visionary who strived to modernize his community and raise its standing in the world. He sought to emulate his Fatimid forebears, who had fostered a progressive society that was at the leading edge of human civilization in its time (Aga Khan III 1955: 48). Al Azhar University, built a thousand years ago in Cairo by a Fatimid imam, has remained a primary seat of Islamic learning. Yet, formal higher education was rare among Ismailis in the nineteenth century. The travails of history, featuring bouts of severe repression and massacres, had shattered most of the community's social institutions. Consequently, Ismaili leaders and their followers had practiced concealment (*taqiyya*) of their religious identities (Jamal 2002; Virani 2007). With the public re-emergence of the Ismaili *Imamat* in Iran in the late eighteenth century there began a gradual process of social and economic development. However, it was the moving of the *Imamat*'s seat to British India that accelerated the community's transformation into one of the most progressive Muslim groups in contemporary times.

Aga Khan III is particularly credited with this change; he is viewed as bringing about the "metamorphosis of a moribund society from the depths of degradation to its proud position in modern civilization during the course of only about half a century" (Thawerbhoy 1977: 19). His *Imamat* was the longest in Ismaili history. Inheriting the community's leadership from his father at the young age of eight in 1885, he was the imam for seventy-two years, until his death in 1957. Living in a period that saw the end of the Muslim Caliphate, two world wars, and independence of the Asian and African colonies where his followers lived, he was an international figure who was elected the first president of the All India Muslim League, was honored by governments of European and majority Muslim countries, and served as president of the League of Nations.

The imam adopted a step-by-step process of raising his socio-economically disadvantaged followers through various stages of development over several decades. He recognized that wealth creation would be vital for acquiring the personal and communal means for advancement. Hence, advice for the successful establishment and operation of businesses was an important theme in his guidance. He also advised his followers to share resources, information, and ideas. Conceptualizing the community's progress in generational terms, the imam stressed

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the proper care and education of young children. Among the earliest institutions to be established were clinics that provided pre- and post-natal care, as well as schools catering for the youngest in the community. Priority was also given to women's education and their social standing as early as the 1920s:

> In paving the way for Ismaili women to go to school, to receive both the quality and length of education that would make it possible for them to enter the professions and to strive for financial self-sufficiency, Aga Khan III laid the groundwork for moving the community away from its inherited cultural patriarchal mores and attitudes towards a partnership model where women worked alongside men to meet the challenges the community would face in the 20th century.
>
> *(Kassam 2011: 259)*

He also promoted these values in the larger Indian society and among Muslims worldwide. Institutions such as kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, libraries, and youth hostels, as well as clinics, hospitals, housing societies, and sports facilities, were built in South Asia and Africa, where the Indian Ismaili diaspora had settled and which was then also under European colonial rule. The Ismaili imam contributed significantly to Muslim causes such as the establishment of Aligarh University in India, and also supported the building of Hindu universities (Aziz 1998: 410–15). He was a founding member of the East African Muslim Welfare Society, which constructed educational institutions for indigenous Muslims in the region.

Most colonial regimes permitted the development of communal institutions that did not threaten their power. This provided the space for groups like the Ismailis to organize their religious and social affairs as well as to develop modes of self-governance. Applying a Weberian analysis, Jonah Steinberg notes that "the Ismaili central leadership engaged in a progressive process of bureaucratization, a discernible transition from 'traditional' forms to more 'modern' ones" (Steinberg 2011: 42). A structure of *jamati* councils was developed to address the needs of communities from cradle to grave. In the course of the twentieth century, Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV established a series of regulations specifying community institutions and their governance. These rule books and constitutions were produced in the context of the *Imamat*'s interactions with Ismailis in India and Africa; later documents reflect the growing contact with other parts of the transnational community. Promulgated or appearing in 1905, 1925/1926, 1937, 1946, 1954, 1962, and 1986, they articulated the imam's authority and the nature of the institutional bodies. This provided for the structure of internal organization as well as the modality for interactions with governments and other communities (Hirji 2011). The contemporary organizational and bureaucratic forms characterizing Ismaili institutional structures have also facilitated effective engagement with states and international bodies (Karim 2014).

Settlement in Western countries

Aga Khan III lived for extended periods in Europe in the early twentieth century and eventually settled there. Upon his death in 1957, his grandson, Karim Al-Husseini, was designated as the next imam of Ismaili Muslims. He combines attributes of both the East and the West. Claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad and Fatimid caliphs, Aga Khan IV was born in Geneva of an English mother and an Italian grandmother, and was educated in Switzerland and at Harvard. The twenty-year-old imam inherited not only the religious leadership of a transnational Muslim community but also the responsibility for its material well-being in locations that are increasingly within Western societies.

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Individual Ismailis had begun to settle in Europe in the 1930s. One of the earliest was Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji, the Zanzibar-born father of the renowned British actor Ben Kingsley (Krishna Bhanji), who went to study in England for a medical degree. However, the first official Ismaili congregational house of prayer (*jamatkhana*) in London was not established until 1951, when a significant number of community members were present in the city. Instability in post-independence Congo (Kinshasa) prompted some of its French-speaking Ismailis to migrate to Paris. The intensification of apartheid caused emigration from South Africa, as did the nationalization of private property in Tanzania. But it was the expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972 that prompted the largest exodus of Ismailis from Africa to Western countries. Many settled in Canada, the United States, Australia, the UK, and various other parts of Europe. Mozambique's long-running war led to the growth of the community in Portugal. These settlements in Western countries were later augmented by significant additions from other parts of Africa, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Some Ismailis from Syria, Iran, and Tajikistan have also settled in Europe, North America, and Australasia.

Ismailis' acquisition of European languages and Western education in their previous countries served significant numbers of the migrants in seeking employment and in integrating into their countries of settlement. Many members of the relatively small community have been successful in the professions and in business. Some have distinguished themselves with notable achievements in various fields such as politics, public service, journalism, literature, academia, corporate business, and banking. Among them have been a mayor in Calgary, members of the provincial and federal assemblies and the senate in Canada, officials of the White House staff, a member of the British House of Lords, prominent journalists in American, Canadian, British, and Portuguese media, an author who has won multiple Canadian and Commonwealth awards, internationally acclaimed scholars in Canada, the USA, and the UK, the head of a major Canadian media corporation, and a high-profile British banker. However, a number of Ismailis in Western countries also are on the lower socio-economic rungs of society.

The *Imamat*'s guidance is to maintain adherence to Islamic beliefs and practices while integrating into the countries where they settle. As with other religious communities, Ismaili places of worship serve as key religious symbols as well as places of social gathering. Upon arriving in the places of settlement, the community makes it a priority to establish *jamatkhanas* even in cities with a small number of Ismailis. Whereas some other Muslim migrant groups have maintained a conservative attitude to Western societies, Ismailis have generally sought to develop an Islamic approach to modernity (Karim 2011a). This has assisted their settlement and institutional development in various Western countries.

Canada has the largest Western Ismaili settlement, with around 70,000–80,000 community members. In addition to several *jamatkhanas* in places of significant settlement, the Aga Khan has established Ismaili Centres (incorporating spaces for worship, education, administration, and social gatherings) in Greater Vancouver and Toronto, a Delegation of the Ismaili *Imamat* building and the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa, and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Even though the UK has a smaller Ismaili population of 10,000–15,000, it has become a global center for the transnational community. In addition to its prominently placed Ismaili Centre, London is also the site for the Institute of Ismaili Studies, the Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, and a major Ismaili cultural institution. Lisbon has the landmark Centro Ismaili and a Delegation of the Ismaili *Imamat*, which has been accorded the status of a diplomatic mission by the Portuguese government. Other Ismaili Centres are planned in Paris and Houston. The prominent physical placement of these institutions in major Western cities is symbolic of the community's engagement with their public spheres (see Karim 2013). (Outside Western countries, there have long been high-profile Ismaili

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buildings in several South Asian and African cities; Ismaili Centres have been built recently in Bangladesh, Tajikistan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and another is planned in Singapore.)

Most of the agencies of the transnational AKDN are based in Europe. The Aga Khan's own secretariat is located on his estate in Gouvieux, north of Paris, and several major AKDN organizations are headquartered in Geneva. A key node in the network is the Aga Khan Foundation, which was established in 1967 in Switzerland; it has affiliates in Canada, Portugal, the UK, and the USA, and branch offices in eleven Asian and African countries. AKDN institutions are non-denominational; however, there is a strong involvement of Ismailis in these agencies. The international mobility gained by members of the community has enabled them to be involved transnationally in the work of the network, and in this to have a cosmopolitan engagement with the contemporary world.

The Aga Khan Development Network

Early in his *Imamat*, Aga Khan IV began to establish new institutions that were situated outside the communal Ismaili infrastructure. The Nation Media Group, which dates back to 1959, began as a newspaper company in colonial Kenya to give voice to African politicians, and has now expanded into an East African media conglomerate (Loughran 2010). Ismaili schools, hospitals, and financial institutions were increasingly opened up to non-Ismailis. The declared purpose, beyond tending to the needs of community members, was to contribute to the development of countries in Asia and Africa. Aga Khan III had been engaged in promoting the welfare of Muslims in India and in helping establish Muslim institutions in South Asia and Africa. His successor embarked on a course that began a broader engagement with the public sphere even in countries where his community did not have a significant presence.

In an address to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Aga Khan IV said:

> When I became imam in 1957, I was faced with developing a system to meet my responsibilities in an organized, sustainable manner that was suited to the circumstances, demands and opportunities of the second half of the twentieth century. In a period of decolonization in Asia and Africa, the Cold War and its disastrous impact on developing countries, and painful progress towards a global movement for international development, it became essential that the *Imamat*'s economic and social development efforts be broadened beyond the Ismaili community to the societies in which the community lived.
>
> *(Aga Khan IV 2008c: 16)*

In order to achieve this goal, a key aspect of AKDN's strategy has been to mobilize international resources, particularly from developed states.

The network's organizational chart (Figure 15.1) identifies the agencies working in the areas of economic, social, and cultural development. (However, it is not a comprehensive representation of all of the *Imamat*'s endeavors; for instance, it does not list the Ismaili *jamati* organizational structure nor bodies such as the Institute of Ismaili Studies and the Global Centre for Pluralism.) AKDN operates in over thirty countries grouped under eight regions: Eastern Africa; Central and Western Africa; South Asia; the Middle East; Central Asia; the Far East and Southeast Asia; Europe; and North America. It employs some 80,000 people, the majority of whom are based in developing countries.

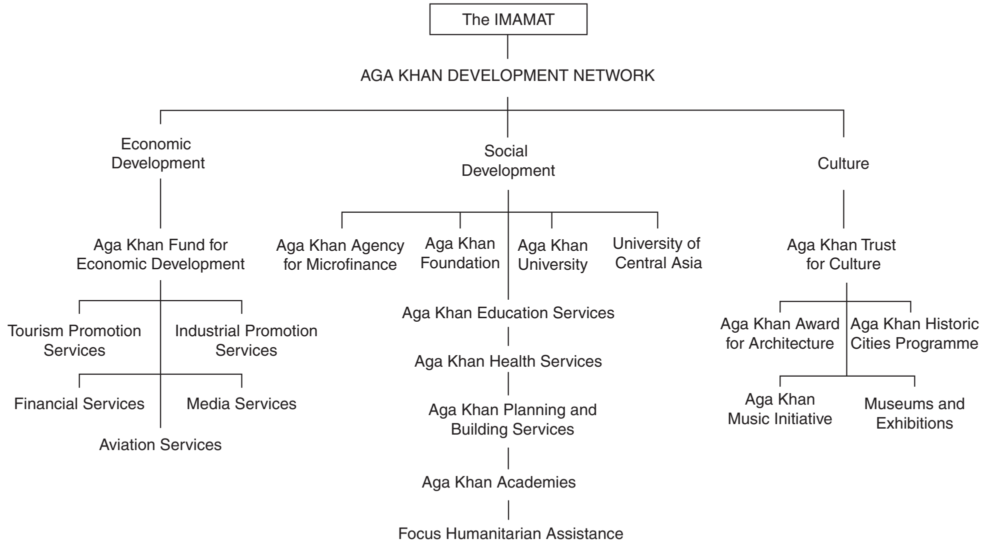

Figure 15.1 The Aga Khan Development Network's organizational chart

The Aga Khan Foundation is the lead agency engaged in the AKDN's social development activities. It describes itself as seeking "sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty, hunger, illiteracy and ill-health, with special emphasis on the needs of rural communities in mountainous, coastal and other resource-poor areas" (AKDN 2007: 23; see also Kassam 2003). The Foundation's affiliates in Canada, the USA, the UK, and Portugal have cultivated relationships with Western institutional partners, which have included governmental, non-governmental, and private sector entities in North America and Europe. Another major social development initiative of the Network is post-secondary education. The international Aga Khan University, which is headquartered in Pakistan, also has campuses in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and the UK. Its London-based Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations conducts research and offers instruction to graduate students and diplomats in various Western countries (Aga Khan University 2006: 41) and partners with institutions in the USA and Germany working on components of school curricula relating to knowledge about Islam and Muslims.

Agencies of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development are concerned with industrial promotion, tourism, finance, aviation, and media. This institution "works in collaboration with local and international development partners to create and operate companies that provide goods and services essential to economic development" (Aga Khan Development Network n.d.: 4). It employs 30,000 people around the world and has annual revenues "in excess of US$1.5 billion" (Aga Khan Development Network n.d.: 5). Similarly, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has several collaborators around the world (Aga Khan Trust for Culture 2007: 37), which contribute to its efforts in running a historic cities program, an award for architecture, a music initiative, museum projects, architectural research programs, and a digital archive in various parts of the world. The Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was established to improve education, understanding, and research relating to Muslim art and architecture "in light of contemporary theoretical, historical, critical, and developmental issues" (Aga Khan Trust for Culture 2007: 26).

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The AKDN is exhibiting a global transnationalism, which is simultaneously a feature of present-day global modernity and a reflection of Ismaili history. (A thousand years ago, the Ismaili proselitizing mission, the *da'wa*, and the Fatimid Empire had organized themselves transnationally.) The very barriers that European colonialism presented to national development also appear to have given impetus to and a social context for the emergence of contemporary Ismaili institutions. Similarly, contemporary regulatory restrictions in various countries, while placing administrative burdens on the AKDN, have not prevented its transnational growth. The European location of the network's head offices may have been a key factor in the success of the network's global operations – primarily due to the continent's centrality in terms of global communications connections. Furthermore, agreements with governments have enabled AKDN to emerge as a major transnational actor. For example, the accord between the Ismaili *Imamat* and the Portuguese parliament enables the *Imamat* to enter into agreements "internationally, particularly, but without restriction, within the European Union and in the Portuguese-speaking countries" (Government of Portugal 2010). As non-governmental transnational actors, the Ismaili *Imamat* and the AKDN appear to be producing contemporary innovations with respect to the relationships of institutions with states and non-state transnational organizations.

The Aga Khan's approach to modernity

The Aga Khan's approach to modernity is characterized by the view that faith and the world are intertwined and by a pragmatism that appears to be a function of ensuring a good quality of life for his followers. He has established strong working relationships with governments and NGOs around the world. That the *Imamat* has turned to Western societies for partnership, international development assistance, and as places for resettling some members of his community is incidental to the contemporary realities – this part of the world is currently the most technologically advanced and offers hospitable milieus for Ismailis. It is not necessarily Westernization that is the goal, but a modernity that ensures possibilities for a good quality of life. The two concepts are often thought of as synonyms, but each has a distinct way of conceptualizing societal advancement. Deepak Lal offers the following view: "Whereas modernization entails a change in belief about the way the material world operates, Westernization entails a change in *cosmological* beliefs about the way that one should live" (Lal 2002).

Western societies are guided along the path of modernity by their cultural and religious heritage as well as their intellectual orientation. However, their models of modernization may not serve non-Western communities well and may cause deep conflicts with their worldviews. For example, Western secular individualism, which has provided for several social benefits in European and North American cultural contexts, poses a stark contrast to the widely held communitarian values in Asia and Africa. As a Muslim religious leader, the Aga Khan is keen to ensure that his followers and Muslims at large maintain a conscientious adherence to core Islamic principles (and to the cosmological context from which they are derived). As a champion of development in Asian and African locations, including those that have large non-Muslim populations, he wants to ensure that local values are respected.

The Ismaili leader has emerged as a public intellectual in engaging with a variety of Eastern and Western institutions on the topic of improving contemporary standards of life. His views appear to have been shaped not only through reflection but also as a consequence of the practical experience of managing a transnational development network that contends with the social, cultural, religious, infrastructural, and political problems in the various locations where it

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operates (Karim 2011b: 215). The Aga Khan has been dealing directly for over five decades with the operations of states and organizations as they strive to maintain ethical ideals in the face of corruption. As imam of a transnational Muslim community seeking to contribute to modernity and simultaneously maintaining its religious traditions, he also has the experience of guiding his followers to face the material conditions of life in Eastern and Western societies.

The Aga Khan describes his involvement with worldly matters of development as an intrinsic function of the *Imamat*, which is concerned with faith and the world. He presents his interaction with modernity as carried out from an Islamic basis. Speaking to a gathering of German ambassadors in Berlin, he stated that, "as a Muslim, I am a democrat not because of Greek or French thought but primarily because of principles that go back 1,400 years, directly to the death of Prophet Muhammad" (Aga Khan IV 2008c: 61). But democracy is only a means to a better life, and he underlined the importance of being cognizant of its end purposes at a university symposium in in Portugal:

> Democratic processes are presumably about sharing power, broadening the number who help shape social decisions. But that sharing, in and of itself, means little apart from the purposes for which power is finally used. To speak of end purposes, in turn, is to enter the realm of ethics. What are our ultimate goals? Whose interests do we seek to serve? How, in an increasingly cynical time, can we inspire people to a new set of aspirations, reaching beyond rampant materialism, the new relativism, self-serving individualism and resurgent tribalism? The search for justice and security, the struggle for equality of opportunity, the quest for tolerance and harmony, the pursuit of human dignity: these are moral imperatives we must work toward and think about daily.
>
> *(Aga Khan IV 2008c: 109–10)*

He refers to some of the basic needs of people in promoting not only an Islamic modernity but one that would appeal to a broader range of views, including non-religious ones.

The Ismaili imam appears to have found the language of ethics to be one with which he can communicate his views to both Muslims and non-Muslims (Karim 2014):

> When we talk about the ethical realm, when we attack corruption, we are inclined to think primarily about government and politics. I am one, however, who believes that corruption is just as acute, and perhaps even more damaging, when the ethics of the civil and private sectors deteriorate. We know from recent headlines about scoundrels from the American financial scene to the halls of European parliaments – and we can certainly do without either. But the problem extends into every area of human enterprise. When a construction company cheats on the quality of materials for a school or a bridge, when a teacher skimps on class work in order to sell his time privately, when a doctor recommends a drug because of incentives from a pharmaceutical company, when a bank loan is skewed by kickbacks, or a student paper is plagiarized from the internet – when the norms of fairness and decency are violated in any way, then the foundations of society are undermined. And the damage is felt most immediately in the most vulnerable societies, where fraud is often neither reported nor corrected, but simply accepted as an inevitable condition of life.
>
> *(Aga Khan IV 2009)*

By giving examples from aspects of life that are common across the world, he appears to articulate "a universal ethical sensibility" (Clarkson 2008: 6) that he suggests is vital as a

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feature of modernity. In this he allies himself with other contemporary voices that urge serious reflection upon society through the perspectives of ethics (e.g. Taylor 1991; Appiah 2005).

The Aga Khan has frequently spoken of a "cosmopolitan ethic" (Aga Khan IV 2008c: 104), which refers to engaging pluralistically in a world where one comes across people with different backgrounds, views, and values. He sees it as an approach that rises above the limitations of ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue:

> There are several forms of proselytism and, in several religions, proselytism is demanded. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the principle of a cosmopolitan ethic, which is not an ethic oriented by faith, or for a society. I speak of an ethic under which all people can live within a same society, and not of a society that reflects the ethic of solely one faith. I would call that ethic, quality of life.
>
> I have serious doubts about the ecumenical discourse, and about what it can reach, but I do not have any doubts about cosmopolitan ethics. I believe that people share the same basic worries, joys, and sadness. If we can reach a consensus in terms of cosmopolitan ethics, we will have attained something, which is very important.
>
> *(Aga Khan IV 2008b)*

He views the ability of people of various ethnicities, cultures, and religions to be able to work and live together as being vital in improving the quality of life for entire societies. A wider acceptance of pluralism is of benefit to the head of a religious community that has often been under threat from others. The Aga Khan has established, in partnership with the Canadian government, the Global Centre for Pluralism to address issues of inter-ethnic conflict around the world.

Education has become the point of confluence where he has sought to bring together the various ideas about modernity that he espouses. Speaking to the International Baccalaureate organization, he stated that

> In a world of rapid change, an agile and adaptable mind, a pragmatic and cooperative temperament, a strong ethical orientation – these are increasingly the keys to effective leadership. And I would add to this list a capacity for intellectual humility which keeps one's mind constantly open to a variety of viewpoints and which welcomes pluralistic exchange.
>
> *(Aga Khan IV 2008a)*

Pluralism, ethics, and humility are derived in this from his Islamic worldview, but they are not alien ideas to people of other backgrounds. He has sought to inculcate these values in his schools, academies, institutes, and universities located in Asian, African, and Western countries, where both the secular and religious parts of this vast educational enterprise deal with the contingencies of modernity.

Conclusion

The Ismaili engagement with the contemporary world has produced a particular form of Muslim modernity. Whereas many of its aspects are portable to other Muslim (and even non-Muslim) contexts, some key elements are specific to the Shi'i Nizari Ismaili worldview. The discussions in many other Muslim communities are wracked with debates about the seeming

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incompatibility of modernity with the *shari'a*, and in some cases with the literal interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith (Nafi 2004). However, in the Ismaili view, engagement with modernity is integral to the Islamic concept of the intertwined nature of faith and world and is therefore unavoidable if one is to live one's life as a Muslim.

The achievements of Ismaili modernity are significant. Not only has it raised the socio-economic status of Ismaili men and women, it has had a significant impact on many of the societies in which they live. AKDN's transnational institutions have enabled the transference of wealth and skills from developed to less developed countries. The network has produced numerous innovations in international development such as village organization-based decision-making and the multi-input area development model. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, through the intensive scholarly examination of the principles and practices of the traditions of Islamic architecture, has demonstrated the importance of rigorous intellectual reflection in order to engender a revival of Muslim material cultures. AKDN and Ismaili *jamati* institutions seek to emulate the progressive values of civil society in providing support for healthy societal development. They have also produced in Ismailis a sense of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. The imam's leadership is vital in this endeavor. He gives guidance to his adherents on maintaining a balance between the spiritual and the material aspects of contemporary existence. However, a number of unresolved points of discussion appear to arise from this situation.

There is a seeming paradox, on the one hand, in the Ismaili imam's encouragement to value the intellect and engage in personal search and, on the other, the extensive reliance of many Ismailis on the imam's directions. The Aga Khan appears to be the primary, if not the sole, source of innovative Ismaili ideas in dealing with modernity. Whereas he conducts extensive consultations, few adherents – including those in leadership positions in *jamati* and AKDN institutions – tend to proffer independent, and even more rarely contrary, opinions. A high level of deference to the religious leader, who strives to be knowledgeable about a vast range of theoretical and technical issues, tends to provide for a largely unitary set of views. Despite the existence of a highly educated Ismaili intelligentsia and apart from some thoughtful articulations by individual authors, a contemporary school of Ismaili thought does not appear to have emerged. This is anomalous to certain earlier periods of the community's history when philosophical debates raged among Ismaili intellectuals and with other Muslim scholars on the issues of the day (e.g. Daftary 2005; Landolt et al. 2008). Most members of the community – including many institutional leaders – appear not to involve themselves in reflecting deeply upon the intersection of the Ismaili faith and the contemporary world, even though they frequently come into contact with ideas that challenge their worldview.

Issues of democracy raise some important questions in Ismaili contexts. Dominant Western views of democracy seem to be at odds with the arrangements of Ismaili institutional governance. A hereditary leadership and hierarchical organization of the *jamati* councils do not appear to manifest a democratic structure. Regarding the AKDN, a former head of graduate studies at the Institute of Ismaili Studies has critiqued its involvement in the Ismaili-populated Gorno-Badakshan region of Tajikistan as being an impediment to the development of local politics (Devji 2012). Questions have also been raised about the Network's focus on programs that do not benefit Ismailis directly in countries like Tanzania, where members of the community currently face hardships (Jiwani 2013).

There exist a significant number of historical works on the role of the Ismaili imam (and Shi'i leadership generally) in medieval contexts, but almost no theorization has been conducted of his leadership and institutions in contemporary contexts. A rigorous articulation of Shi'i Islamic concepts of governance, in relation to the unique form of Muslim modernity produced by Ismailis, would afford a necessary framework for their current discourses on ethics, pluralism, and

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meritocracy. This would be an important step in developing a substantive theoretical foundation providing philosophical supports for the innovative activities of the *Imamat*'s institutions in the twenty-first century.

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