A Respect for Difference: The Shiʻa Ismaili Khojas of Mumbai
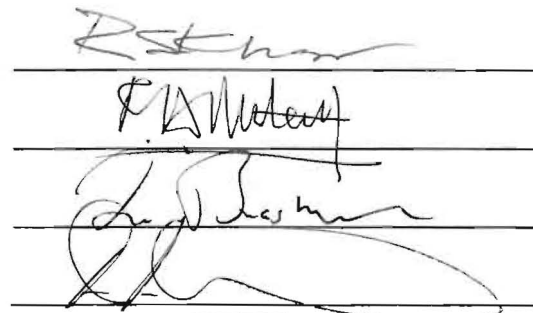

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how ideas about cultural and religious difference motivate members of the Shiʻa Ismaili Khojas community in Mumbai to erect social boundaries around their community and reach out to others through volunteer service. As a minority within India's Muslim minority, difference has been a particularly fraught issue for Ismailis throughout their history. Consequently, they have maintained strict boundary lines around religious institutions in their community, such as sharply restricting attendance at religious functions to Ismailis only. These strictures reflect a desire on the part of practitioners to create a space for shared devotion to their living Imam, the Aga Khan, as well as a belief that outsiders will likely not understand their esoteric religious tradition. As an act of devotion to their living Imam, Ismailis offer "service" (*seva*) by volunteering in schools, hospitals, and other civil-society organizations sponsored by the Aga Khan. In the process of serving others, volunteers develop dispositions like concern and care for those who are different in terms of class, religion, gender, and ethnicity. This dissertation responds to scholarly portrayals of othering and boundary making as processes marked by antagonism and aversion towards others by demonstrating that ideas about human differences help produce moral dispositions such as care, concern, and empathy.

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Chapter 1:
Introduction

<u>1. Overview</u>
This dissertation examines how models of cultural and religious difference motivate members of the Shi'a Ismaili Muslim community to both withdraw from society and to reach out to others through volunteer service. Social scientists have traditionally portrayed processes such as othering and maintaining boundaries as indicating peoples' aversion to or antagonism towards difference. I argue, however, that for Ismailis such processes figure prominently in developing community institutions that instill moral dispositions like care, concern and empathy. As such, this dissertation seeks to critically re-evaluate the role that peoples' attitudes towards cultural and religious difference play in shaping social interaction.

Attitudes towards cultural and religious difference play a vital role in the social life of the Shi'a Ismaili Khojas. As adherents of Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam, they have historically faced doubts from other Muslims about their commitment to Islam, questioning which has grown more pronounced in the context of Islamic revivalism in South Asia. Moreover, the rise of Hindu-nationalist movements over the last century has led to the marginalization and persecution of all Muslim communities in India. The convergence of these two movements has effectively made the Ismailis a minority within a minority in modern India.

How Ismailis have dealt with their status as a sometimes-persecuted minority has depended as much on their own models of religious difference as it has historical context. The Khoja Ismailis say they are the descendants of caste Hindus who were converted by the Ismaili "missionary" (*dā'ī*) Pir Sadruddin in the 14th or 15th century (CE), though

Ismaili missionaries may have been in South Asia as early as the 10th or 11th century (Asani 2003a: 291). These early converts to the Ismaili faith in South Asia, those who claimed to follow the *Sat Panth* ("true path"), are thought to have dissimulated their true religious identity by adopting the outward garb of Hindus just as their religious guides at times adopted the guise of Sufi teachers. Practitioners' attempts at blending were mirrored in the religious tradition itself, which contained a complex blend of ideas and themes from Hinduism, Sufism, and Shi'a Islam. Members of the Sat Panth sang a corpus of songs—not unlike Hindu devotional songs—which contained references to Hindu deities alongside Islamic personages. Yet if Ismailis restricted access to their religious spaces—the Jama'at-Khāna ("prayer hall," "house of congregation")— to members of their religious tradition, hiding much of their religious practice under the veil of secrecy. Ismailis continue to conceal much of their religious tradition and exclude non-Ismailis from their prayer halls.

In contemporary times, however, Ismailis have redrawn boundaries lines around their religious tradition, seeking to bring it more in keeping with what they see as its Islamic heritage. Much of this work has been done under the guidance of the Aga Khan, who Ismailis see as their living Imam. Following in the traditions of Shi'a Islam, Ismailis see the Imam as having the divine mandate and infallible wisdom to provide guidance in spiritual and temporal matters. Since the 20th century, the Ismaili Imams have expunged references to Hindu figures in their religious songs, encouraged Ismailis to adopt Islamic names, to recite prayers in Arabic, and to openly proclaim their faith in Islam (Asani 2001: 161). Yet in doing so, the Imams have also encouraged Ismailis to remain a distinct community within the worldwide Muslim community. Ismailis often see their

differences from other Muslims as stemming from their focus on the bātin ("hidden," "esoteric") or *rūhānī* ("spiritual") meanings of religious practice, which they contrast to what they perceive as Sunni Muslims' focus on the *zāhir* ("exoteric") form. Their focus on the inner meaning has consequently enabled the Ismailis to develop a repertoire of religious practices that differs in some key formal respects with the rituals of their Sunni and Shi'a counterparts. The ability to disconnect meaning from form has allowed Ismailis to follow a unique path of Islamization, even if it has at times led some Muslims to interpret Ismailis divergence from what they see as correct practice as un-Islamic.

But just as the Ismailis have famously sought to maintain a unique religious tradition and to maintain barriers around their community, they have also followed their Imams' guidance to respect other religious traditions and reach out to others in their society through volunteer service. For Ismailis, this volunteer "service," or *seva*, is an act of devotion directed towards the Imam that is done for the benefit of others, including other Ismailis and members of other religious communities. Over the last century, Ismailis have established a vast array of civil society institutions known as the Aga Khan Development Network ("AKDN"). This network is made up of a wide variety of volunteer-run institutions, including schools, hospitals, and rural development programs, all of which strive to provide development, build civil society, and foster a spirit of religious and cultural pluralism. The present Imam's push to promote an ethical version of religious and cultural pluralism has encouraged Ismailis to respect the religious traditions of others and tolerate differences between religious traditions.

Through an ethnographic study of the Ismaili community's efforts to both withdraw from and engage others around them, this project advances several broader

arguments about the nature of social and cultural boundaries, othering, and multicultural tolerance. First, this dissertation critiques trends within recent anthropological scholarship to use concepts like hybridity and liminality to explain diversity within the Muslim world by showing how even supposedly syncretic communities like the Ismailis draw boundaries around their religious tradition. Second, by demonstrating that ideas about otherness are critical components of moral dispositions such as concern and care this project provides a rejoinder to scholarly portrayals of othering as a negative aspect of social life. Third, this work responds to critiques of the discourse of tolerance that is characteristic of projects like religious pluralism and multiculturalism. Although some theorists argue that the discourse of tolerance undermines efforts to create a public dialogue that promotes mutual understandings of difference—ultimately producing isolated communities—I provide an example of outreach that is accomplished not through dialogue but through Ismailis' moral practice.

2. The Politics Religious and Cultural Difference in Modern India

Religious, cultural, and social differences are contentious and divisive issues in modern India. In this section, I outline historical shifts in the models that Indians have used to order cultural and religious difference. In particular, I am interested in the ways that colonial law, social movements advocating a Hindu-nationalist ideology, and movements by Muslims to promote a renewal of the Islamic religion have framed religious difference in ways that produce the Ismaili community as a minority within a minority. The Ismailis' status as double minority has figured prominently both in the ways that they portray difference and how they separate themselves from and reach out to others.

Ambiguity and Colonial Governance

The advent of political movements in South Asia that ideologically posited the existence of separate religious communities like Hindu and Muslim resulted from historical processes such as colonial administration and democratic governance. In many ways, these historical processes transformed local understandings of religious and social difference by constructing the categories Hindu and Muslim in ways that encompassed a diversity of practices, ideas, and communities of people under a single rubric. For instance, some scholars (Thapar 1989; Hansen 1999: 65) have pointed out that the idea of Hinduism as a world religion with a unified system of beliefs, myths, and practices resulted from efforts by scholars, missionaries, and colonial ethnographers to synthesize the complex and diverse array of indigenous religious practices of South Asian people. Likewise, Cynthia Talbot (2003) and Romila Thapar (2005) have shown examples from pre-colonial India in which understandings of difference did not always rely on broadly defined religious categories. For instance, in pre-colonial Andhra Pradesh, Muslims were often described using ethnic categories such as Turk, Persian, or Greek, that all lack religious referents (Talbot 2003: 91). And while the idea of a united community of believers (*ummah)* has historically been an important concept in most Islamic discourses, Francis Robinson (1983) argues that the idea of the ummah gained saliency among Muslims in the context of the Islamic revival. Others have shown that the notion of the ummah gained even greater saliency as religious and political leaders drew on the notion of pan-Islamism as part of anti-colonial struggles (Mandaville 2007; Esposito 1998: 50, 91; Metcalf 1982; Minault 1982).

The impulse to categorize not only extended to formulations of Hindu and Muslim religions, but also to categorizing the discrete, ostensibly "watertight,"

communities that made up the Hindu and Muslim community. Bernard Cohn (1990), and his student Nicolas Dirks (2001), have emphasized the ways practices of colonial rule, such as census taking, colonial ethnographic projects, and the codification of Hindu and Muslim law, played in reifying particular Hindu and Muslim communities. Both scholars argue that colonial administrators used the idea of caste to enumerate, describe, and govern a vast array of social groups on the subcontinent, in the process reifying and bounding what Sudipta Kaviraj (1993) has elsewhere called "fuzzy communities."

This tension evident in colonial ideology between eliding difference under the more encompassing categories of Hindu and Muslim and a more particularistic view that reified communities into watertight compartments played a crucial role in shaping the religious identity of the Ismaili community. The key events in this process were a series of 19th century court cases involving the Aga Khan and what was then known as the Khoja community.[1] The catalyst for these trials was the Aga Khan's arrival in Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1846 (Daftary 1998: 197). Some of the Khojas, as the people converted by Ismaili missionaries in South Asia were then known, disputed the Aga Khan's authority. The trials ostensibly focused on the Aga Khan's right to collect a "tithe" (*dassondh*) of 12.5% from Khojas and his right to excommunicate those members who did not pay it. The courts, however, repeatedly entertained questions about the Khojas' religious identity. One reason why the court returned to these questions was that those Khojas who refused to pay the tithe claimed that the Khojas were not Ismailis, and hence did not owe allegiance to the Aga Khan. As one Khoja testified, "some say we are Soonees, some Sheas. Our religion is a separate religion" (Asani 2001: 159; Masselos

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[1] Excellent descriptions of these trials can also be found in Masselos (1978) and Shodhan (2001). I discuss these trials in greater detail in chapter 2.

1978: 103-104). But the court could not take this sort of formula of religious identity seriously, because colonial law based itself on the customs and codes of strictly defined religious communities. The dissenting Khojas would later claim that they were and had always been Sunnis, pointing to their burial practices at a Sunni mosque as evidence. The Aga Khan ultimately prevailed in these court cases by claiming that the Khojas' religious practice seemed ambiguous because they had been following the Shiʻa practice of taqīya ("precautionary dissimulation") and that the British government's guarantee of religious freedom made such a practice unnecessary. The Aga Khan's victory marked the Khojas as Ismaili and secured the Aga Khan's position in the community as Imam, though other groups of Khojas would break away from the Ismailis to establish Ithna-Asharia or Sunni Khoja "communities" (*jamaʻat*).

The Aga Khan's arrival in Bombay and subsequent appearances before the British courts had a number of striking implications for how Ismailis would come to conceive of their differences with others and draw boundaries around their tradition. First, the British courts clarified any ambiguity—evident in the conflicting statements about the religion Khojas followed—about the precise nature of the religious identity of the Khojas. They would henceforth be identified as members of the Shiʻa Ismaili community, although Khojas did not describe themselves using the term "Ismaili" prior to that (Devji 2009: x-xi). Second, the British cemented the status of the Aga Khan as the Ismaili Imam. In subsequent generations, the Aga Khan and his successors embarked on a project of religious reform that would bring the Khoja Ismaili's religious practice in line with their vision of Islamic practice.

The Islamic Revival

The Aga Khan's program of reforming the Ismaili Khojas religious tradition has coincided with reform movements by other Muslims. During South Asia's recent history a number of movements seeking a "renewal" (*tajdīd*) of the Islamic tradition by encouraging return to the traditions of the Prophet and renewed emphasis on piety. In 1867 the well-known madrasah at Deoband (a city north of Delhi) was established to train religious scholars who would become "prayer leaders, writers, preachers, and teachers" disseminating a form of Islam that encouraged Muslims to turn to religious practices sanctioned by the Qur'an and accounts of the life of the Prophet (*Hadīth*) (Metcalf 1982: 100). In 1880, another movement espousing a renewed sense of Islamic piety, though one with that acknowledged the role of Sufi saints in interceding with god on the practitioner's behalf, emerged in the town of Bareilly (Sanyal 2001). In reaction to efforts by the Arya Samaj to "reconvert" Muslims to Hinduism, Maulana Muhammed Ilyas founded the Tablighi Jamat, a movement that sought to train Muslims to become Islamic missionaries (*dāʿī*) who would then travel the countryside with the aim of teaching Muslims to root out innovations (*bidʿat*) by returning to the form of Islam practiced by the Prophet (Sikand 2002).

Scholars have collectively termed these movements, and similar ones begun by Muslims around the globe, the Islamic revival. Perhaps the best-known theorist of the Islamic revival, Saba Mahmood (2005: 3), describes it as "a term that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed in contemporary Muslim societies." Many commentators on contemporary Muslim societies have pointed to factors such as increased attendance at Mosques, Muslim women donning the *hijāb* ("modest dress"), and the growth of religious

organizations promoting religious or social reform along Islamic lines (Esposito 1998: 42) as evidence of a renewed sense of Islamic piety. In contemporary Mumbai, one frequently sees advertisements for *ijtema*, large-scale gatherings of Muslims where preachers offer sermons on religious issues. Although there are distinctions in the approaches to theological issues among all of the above-mentioned groups, they all call for Muslims to lead pious lives through a return to the prophet's message.

Although the revivalists promote a unified idea of the Islamic religion, Muslims themselves are keenly aware of the distinctiveness of the various communities practicing Islam (Launay 1992: 7). By now, most Western readers are aware that Muslims conceive of a broad doctrinal distinction between Sunni and Shi'a, but there are further internal differences within these sects. For a time, anthropologists were interested in the difference between so-called *ashrāf* ("noble") and *ajlāf* ("non-noble") Muslims as a parallel to the Hindu caste system. In this thinking, ashrāf groups, such as Sayyid or Shaykh, claimed higher status than other Muslims because of their genealogical proximity to the Prophet or their historical origins as Arabs or Persians. In Mumbai, I found it much more common for Muslims to speak about sectarian differences—often expressed as differences between jama'at, zāt, tarīqah, castes, or communities—than ashrāf or ajlāf categories. Differences between jama'ats were less hierarchical in nature, and largely stemmed from differences in belief and practice. For instance, there are several birth-defined social groups, such as the Memons, Bohras, and Khojas, each tracing their ancestry back to Gujarat and each largely regarded as mercantile communities. Even within these groups however, there are sectarian allegiances—such as

the Shi'a Nizari Ismaili Khojas and the Ithna-Asharia Khojas, the Shi'a Mustali Ismaili Bohras and the Sunni Bohras, the Hanafi Kutchi Memons and Shafi'i Halai Memons.

In their effort to unite Muslims through a return to the ways of the Prophet and increased piety, though, revivalists have paradoxically alienated some Muslims whose traditions fall outside of the purview of what some Muslims deem proper Islamic practice (Hasan 2002; Minault 1984). For instance, Shail Mayaram (1997a, 1997b) writes about the conflicts occurring between the proselytizing Tablighi Jamat and the Meo Muslims in North India. The Meo, in her account, hold fast to their origin myths despite criticisms from Tablighis that those same myths contain references to Hindu deities and as such are un-Islamic. Peter van Veer (1992) notes how members of the Tablighi Jamat criticize the veneration of Sufi saints in contemporary Gujarat and Katherine Ewing (1995) has observed criticisms of Sufism among members of the Pakistani middle-class. In a similar vein, Ismailis often face criticisms from their co-religionists that their religious tradition deviates from Islamic norms and contains elements from Hinduism. The result has been that Ismailis, and other particular communities within the Muslim fold, have faced criticism from other Muslims. Many told me that the fragmenting of Muslim communities not only prevented Muslims from acting together in politics, but also from protecting one another during communal riots.

Hindu-nationalism and Anti-Muslim Politics
As India inched closer to independence from British rule in the 20th century, a complex array of political movements offered competing models of what shape an independent Indian nation should take. While much of the Congress Party envisioned the national community as one that transcended caste, sectarian and religious differences, movements promoting more religiously defined ideas of nation provided competing models. Most

notable among these new nationalist ideologies was the Hindutva agenda of V.D. Savarkar. Savarkar's notion of Hindutva, or "Hinduness," asserts that India is a Hindu homeland and that to be Indian one must be Hindu. A number of Hindutva-inspired groups, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Bajrang Dal, have demonized Muslims as a foreign, anti-national "fifth column" within the Indian nation-state (Hasan 2002). From the perspective of the Hindu-nationalist movement, Muslims are not only a dangerous element within the nation state, but also see the Islamic religion as something that is foreign to Indian culture, imposed on the population by Muslim conquest.

If Hindu nationalists exclude Muslims from Indian culture and question their citizenship in the nation-state, they are notably inclusive of a number of Hindu castes, sects, and linguistic groups. Even Peter van der Veer (1994: 52), who argues that Hindu nationalism draws on pre-colonial concepts of community centered on devotionalism, notes that Hindu-nationalist movements incorporate untouchable castes into their nationalist ideology as groups that need to be uplifted by the state. If Hindu nationalists conceive of untouchables as part of the Hindu-nation, they also incorporate disparate linguistic groups and obscure the sectarian differences between Shaivates and Vaishnavaites. Their aim is to pull together and mobilize people of very different social groups under the rubric of Hindu.

The career of Mumbai's most influential Hindu-nationalist party, the Shiv Sena, illustrates the tensions between caste, class, regional differences and creating a Hindu identity capable of encompassing those identities. The Shiv Sena, which portrays itself as the "army" (*sena*) of the 17th century Hindu warrior king Chattrapati Shivaji, promotes the idea that the Indian state of Maharashtra and its largest city Mumbai are the

rightful homeland of Marathi speaking Hindus. It is unsurprising, then, that one of the Sena's earliest campaigns encouraged Maharasthrians to kick South Indian Tamils out of Mumbai, whom their leader accused of conspiring to keep the working-class Marathi *manus* (that is the Marathi common "man") out of high paying jobs (Prakash 2010: 232-234). Yet while the Sena promotes a nativist agenda that protects the interest of Marathi Hindus, it at times appeals to a broader, pan-Hindu constituency. For instance, the sena has reached out to Mumbai's Gujarati Hindu community by sponsoring events during the Gujarati Dasserha festival and, more significantly, sent Sena volunteers (albeit at the last minute) on the *rath yatra* ("chariot procession") organized by India's largest Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, which resulted in the demolition of a Muslim mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 (Swami and Katakam 2001). The Sena's anti-Muslim agenda, most visibly displayed during the organized violence of the Mumbai riots in 1992 and 1993, often earns it the dubious distinction of being a defender of all of Mumbai's Hindus. In these ways, the Sena at times portrays itself as a specifically Marathi party and as a party that reaches out to the broader Hindu community.

Although pro-Hindutva organizations are sometimes fragmented in terms of their constituents and ideologies, they have effectively united against Muslims, whom they see as a common threat. Hindu-nationalist groups have pursued an anti-Muslim agenda through both legal and illegal means; their activities have ranged from agitating against the use of a separate body of civil law for Muslims (Das 1995) to organized violence in the form of riots. Most notable among the riots in areas where Ismailis live were the 1992 and 1993 riots in Mumbai and the 2002 riots in Gujarat. In each of these communal riots, extremists targeted and killed Muslims and Hindus based on their religious

affiliation. To this day, Muslims and Hindus alike remember the riots with fear and animosity. As I describe in many parts of this dissertation, such fears and animosity at times color the everyday interactions between Muslims and Hindus. As we shall see, Ismailis have a particularly difficult time navigating such interactions, especially given that they are considered to be outsiders by both Hindus and other Muslims.

More importantly, Ismailis' relationships to Hinduism and Islam have influenced the ways that they draw symbolic boundaries around their religious tradition. On the one hand, Ismailis have plotted a path towards reformulating aspects of their religious tradition that they hold are out of keeping with their Islamic heritage or bear too close a resemblance to the practice of Hindus. On the other, Ismailis have tried to redraw boundaries without alienating Hindus or drawing undue attention to themselves. In the next section, I turn to theorizing the social processes through which Ismailis define and re-define the distinctions between their own religious tradition and Hinduism and Islam.

3. Evaluating Difference

Thinking about boundaries has at times been a preoccupation for Muslim societies and those social scientists studying them. In this section, I offer both an emic description and etic analysis of the ways that Ismailis, and other Muslims have drawn and redrawn boundaries around the Islamic religion. Following Ira Bashkow's (2004) suggestion that cultural boundaries are "plural, perspectival, and permeable," I conceive of boundary making as part of larger conversations and debates in Muslim societies about what constitutes a proper Islamic practice or belief. I hold that these debates lead Muslims to develop certain discourses about the Islamic religion, which they in turn use as standards for evaluating the practices of other groups. My formula thus builds on Frederick Barth's (1998) idea that distinctions between groups involve certain "diacritical features" (in my

case religious practice) and standards for evaluating those signs. Because in some cases Muslims sharply disagree about what constitutes an Islamic practice, we should not think of the emic boundaries people draw around their religion as static barriers that ideas cannot flow across. Instead, boundaries are part of symbolic processes through which people define what constitutes their own and other religious traditions.

As an introduction to these debates among Muslims, I begin with a debate among several scholars of South Asian Islam. Although these formulations are not unique to the study of Muslim communities in South Asia (Geertz 1976; Lapidus 2001), I use as an introduction to this literature a critical review by Francis Robinson of Imtiaz Ahmad's four-part series of edited volumes on the Muslim communities of South Asia. In detailing this debate, I show that Imtiaz Ahmad's partial adoption of a nominalist position—that we should treat as Islam whatever Muslims say it is—closely mirrors the position of Ismailis, whereas Francis Robinson's essentialist position resembles the discourse of Islamic revivalists affiliated with movements like the influential South Asian madrasahs at Deoband or Bareilly.

To the best of my knowledge Imtiaz Ahmad, a noted anthropologist of Islam in South Asia, never responded to Robinson's critique of his work. I include, however, a discussion of the approach outlined in his edited volumes because they present an understanding of Islam in India that is relevant to the material in this chapter. Ahmad's (1978; 1976; 1983; 1981) four volumes made important contributions to the anthropological and historical understanding of Muslim communities in South Asia, if for no other reason that they drew scholarly attention to the lives of over 100 million people, but more often because of the richness and attention to detail involved in these studies.

The essays that make up these volumes portray the diversity of Muslims living in South and the diverse approaches they take to ritual and kinship.[2]

Ahmad is a nominalist insofar as for the purposes of analysis he considers anyone that self-identifies as a Muslim as a Muslim. However, he also theorizes the existence of diverse approaches to Islam in South Asia as the result of divergence from or ignorance of the great tradition of Islam. This divergence is the product of a religious syncretism that results from the "incompleteness" of Indian Muslims' conversion to Islam. Ahmad (1981: 7) argues that Islam in India "is heavily underlined by elements which are accretions drawn from the local environment and contradict the fundamentalist view of the beliefs and practice to which Muslims must adhere." Moreover, he writes, "even so, the corpus of the day-to-day beliefs and practices of the Muslims have been found to vary from place to place according to the circumstances in which they were converted to Islam, their pre-conversion orientations, and their historical experiences over time (Ahmad 1981: vii)." India's Muslim population, as a product of conversion to Islam at a specific time and place, retains some aspects of their ancestors' pre-Islamic life in India. This is part of the reason why Ahmad, and his collaborators, focus on the existence of caste among Indian Muslims, explaining that while Islam as a religion stresses equality, hierarchy exists among Indian Muslims because of the caste habits of their ancestors (Ahmad 1978). The position articulated in these volumes is that that Indian Muslims, as "converts," have continued un-Islamic, syncretic practices. It is immaterial, in this view,

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[2]   As the titles of these volumes reveal, each volume proposes to study a familiar category of anthropological inquiry "among Muslims in India:" *Family, Kinship, and Marriage among Muslims in India* (Ahmad 1976), *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India* (Ahmad 1978), *Ritual and Religion Among Muslims in India* (Ahmad 1981), *Modernization and Social Change among Muslims in India* (Ahmad 1983). The essays that make up these volumes are based on field studies carried out in numerous locales by a variety of anthropologists, contributing to the sense that Muslim practice in India is diverse.

that Muslims are the ancestors of people who converted to Islam many hundreds of years ago, because practices such as visiting the tombs of saints or the continued recognition of caste boundaries can be construed as evidence that Muslims never fully adopted an Islamic way of life.

In 1983, Ahmad's approach came under fire in a critical review essay by Francis Robinson, a historian of South Asian Islam, in one of the leading academic journals for South Asian studies, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Robinson criticizes the willingness of Ahmad, and contributors to his volumes, to describe as Islamic those practices and beliefs which Muslims hold, regardless of whether or not these practices find sanction in the Qur'an or in the work of Muslim jurists (*ulema*). His approach may fairly be described as essentialist (Das 1984: 294), because, as he claims, the epitome of Islam is embodied in the words of the Qur'an or traditions of the Prophet. "Islam," he states, "offers a pattern of perfection for man to follow. It is contained in the Qur'an, the word of God spoken to man through the Prophet Muhammad (Robinson 1983: 190)." It is also contained in the traditions which relate what the Prophet, who is believed to be divinely inspired, said and did (Robinson 1983: 190; Cf. Das 1984: 294)." According to Robinson (1983: 190), we should not be swayed from deploying this as an analytical construct just by the existence of several distinct schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*mazhab*), "for there is little difference between them." Nor should we be discouraged by the fact that "non-Islamic practices had acquired the force of law in many societies... for this is simply a matter of imperfect knowledge or temporary expedient (Robinson 1983: 190). As a historian Robinson (1983: 192) takes issue with the synchronic approach of Ahmad and his collaborators. He argues that when one looks at Muslim societies in South

and South East Asia over time, you see that Muslims are moving towards that pattern of perfection.   That a non-Muslim historian should take the position that scholars should engage in analyses that posit certain practices and ideas as being more or less Islamic is curious to say the least.

It would be easy to have a knee-jerk reaction to Robinson that rejects his thinking due to its insistence on an essentialized version of Islam. Nonetheless, Robinson's main point here, that Islam consists of a single pattern of perfection for Muslim to emulate is similar to the ways that many Muslims conceive of their religion and, for this reason, ought to be included in this discussion.   Indeed, the position that Robinson develops is a fairly accurate portrayal of what I describe in the in chapter 3 as Muslim discourses about orthopraxy. Moreover, his reaction to Ahmad's mostly nominalist position is similar to the reaction of many Muslims towards Ismaili practice, who see Ismaili practice largely as being close to Hinduism or resulting from ignorance of Islamic knowledge. Ismailis, for their part, follow something closer to the nominalist position, though some Ismailis are wary of their own religion's proximity to Hindu practice. As I develop further using the ideas of Talal Asad and others, one way out of this debate is to focus on what Muslims themselves say Islam is and the ways such talk reflects particular discursive formations within the Islamic tradition. These discursive formations, I argue, consider ritual practice to be indexes of practitioners' commitment to Islam.

Asad (1986: 14-15) argues that Islam is a discursive tradition, which consists "essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice." Islam can be said to be "discursive" to the extent that it is a patterned set of statements about the form and meaning of practice; Islam can be said to

be a "tradition" in that these discourses are historically produced by Muslims and that many Muslims see this tradition as having its roots in the past (Asad 1986: 14-15). Asad (1986: 14) links the discursive tradition of Islam to obvious, foundational textual sources, such as the Qur'an and Hadīth, in addition to scholarly commentary on those texts. In Asad's (1986: 15) view, "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized in the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims." This is a reflection of his conception of Islamic discursive traditions' connections to the "production of appropriate knowledges" (Asad 1986: 7). There are, however, different traditions within Islam and each constructs its own body of appropriate knowledge. We might, then, think about Ismailis' pluralist discourses on Islam and the Revivalist model emphasizing a single "pattern of perfection" (Robinson 1983: 190) as being products of different discursive traditions within Islam. Again, these traditions must be viewed on equal footing for the purposes of analysis, even if some Muslims do not acknowledge them as such.

It is important to note that Asad (1986: 2) does not accept a nominalist position that would treat as Islamic practice whatever Muslims say it is, but his comments do move us towards thinking about the ways that Muslims debate what constitutes Islam in their everyday live. He is worth quoting at length here:

> The idea... that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is...will not do, if only because there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all. This paradox cannot be resolved simply by saying that the claim to what is Islam will be admitted by the anthropologists where it applies to the informant's own beliefs and practices, because it is generally impossible to define beliefs and practices in terms of an isolated subject. A Muslim's beliefs about the beliefs and practices of others are his own beliefs. And like all such beliefs, they animate and are sustained by his social relations with others. (Asad 1986: 2)

While Asad here rejects the nominalist position, he opens up a possibility that "social

relations" might influence the way that Muslims imagine the ritual practices of other Muslims.

I disagree with Asad's rejection of the nominalist position, if for no other reason that as a non-Muslim anthropologist I find the idea of deciding what constitutes proper Islamic practice and belief untenable. But Asad's thinking does admit the possibility that questions about what constitutes Islam are the subject of debate among Muslims and that as anthropologists we should look at the social processes that inform Muslims' constructions of what Islam is. To presage my discussion in chapter 3, in Mumbai we see not only a number of discursive traditions of Islam, but that these discursive traditions contain different ideas about who properly speaking is a Muslim and what practices and concepts are truly Islamic. While it is true, as Ovamir Anjum (2007: 659, 662) suggests, that Islamic discursive traditions contain ideas about "foundational texts" and "interpretive techniques" based on Islamic traditions and that these ideas place constraints on what is considered Islamic, I think that we are better served by looking at how actors mobilize these ideas and the cultural politics that surround their being accepted, rejected, or perhaps just disputed. In other words, I believe that the constraints on what is considered a valid, or "Islamic," practice or idea are created socially, not by an internal logic embedded in the terms and assumptions of discourse. The analytical model I employ throughout this essay looks at the ways that social interaction informs the creation of Islamic discourses.[3]

One important feature of Asad's formulation of Islam as a discursive tradition is

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[3] I am influenced here by the work of William Graham (1983), John Bowen (1993, 1989), and Peter van der Veer (1992).

that it points to the way that different discourses consider ritual performance[4] as being a key indicator of one's status as a Muslim. Asad's formulation is in keeping with many anthropologists' assertions that Islam tends to focus on correct ritual and moral practice (or "orthopraxy"), in contrast to Christianity's emphasis on matters of belief or dogma (Asani 2001: 160; Asad 1986; Blank 2001). I would not suggest, however, that Muslims are automatons who merely follow a strictly laid out set of rules about ritual performance—indeed I am particularly interested in exploring the ways that practice interacts with discourse and this discourse is evidence of a great deal of interpretive thought—but I would point out that Islam emphasizes ritual performances as a key duty and that a number of discourses take these duties as their subject.

As I already noted, religious practice is often something that is visible and accessible to the public. This point is evident in that other Muslims are aware of some of the details of Ismailis' religious practice, despite the secrecy that surrounds these rituals. The public character of ritual is important, because in some versions of Islamic thought, adherence to ritual injunctions is itself a reflection of a moral model of society. Peter van der Veer (1994: 99) develops this concept by looking at how Islamic discourses often focus on "moral behavior in public space" and how this behavior in public space is part of a system of "ritual communication." Ritual communication points to the idea that ritual has important semiotic components that "say" something about the people that perform them.[5] For example, van der Veer (1994:99) cites the ways that, for Muslims,

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[4] I follow here William Graham's (1983: 59-60) definition of ritual, which I reproduce in abbreviated form: religious ritual is a "formalized, patterned behavior," with a "transcendent reference," which is "presumed to be representational...or symbolic," and even when conducted in private involves "some communal relationship."

[5] For instance, Edmund Leach's (1970) study of the Kachin advanced the idea that ritual communicated the "political status" of those performing the ritual. For more on ritual communication see Roy Rappaport (1971,1999), Joel Robbins (2001), and Stanley Tambiah (1985).

women's (ritual) practice of *hijāb* ("modesty" or "veiling") communicates their adherence to a moral code of Islamic behavior and the honor of the family.

If ritual is part of a system of communication, the meaning of rituals is always subject to multiple interpretations. In Mumbai, ritual is subject to numerous, sometimes conflicting, interpretations because of the diverse forms of the Islamic religion practiced by Muslims in India, and the debates engendered by such diversity. When people interpret the meanings of other people's practices, they do so by employing the terms and assumptions of particular discourses. When viewed through the lens of discourse, religious practice becomes an emblem of practitioners' commitment (or lack thereof) to Islam. For instance, John Bowen (1989: 612), in an analysis of public discourses about the daily prayer in Indonesia, says that "...Muslims take differences in the performance of the ritual as signs of social distinctions, without the ritual differences themselves taking on a semantic or representational value." In Bowen's terms this "ritual discourse" establishes worship as a "primary sign of Muslim identity" (Bowen 1989: 612); in a different work, Bowen (1993: 314) suggests that "worship styles…become emblems or indexes of group membership." In what follows, I suggest that a similar process is at work where a variety of ritual practices serve as emblems of individuals', and (by extension) social groups', status as Muslims or their commitment to Islam (Asani 2001: 160).

It is worth clarifying a number of points about my use of the terms index and emblem. First, following Silverstein's (1976: 33-35) discussion of indexicality, I argue that Islamic ritual is an indexical sign to the extent that it "presupposes" the idea that performing the ritual is constitutive of being a proper Muslim and "entails" that

practitioners who meet these ritual obligations are Muslims. Insofar as indexes "entail," they are perfomative, or "creative;" that is to say that they have the capacity to both mark and create group membership. For example, the performance of Islamic prayer is one sign of a Muslim's commitment to Islam; similarly, the wearing of the veil, or other forms of modest dress, signal the practitioner's recognition of Islamic notions about gender propriety. It is worth noting in all of this that the word "Islam" means "submission," and that the word "Muslim," a derivation of the word "Islam," refers to "one who submits." Personal practice is one way of indicating this submission to ritual obligations. Because Ismailis by and large have instituted a different style of prayer and women do not wear the veil, their personal practice indexes their difference from other Muslims.

In Peirce's semiotics emblems are iconic indexes (Agha 2007: 257; Singer 1984: 53). Practices are iconic to the extent that they bear a physical resemblance to what they signify (Silverstein 1976: 28). There are two senses in which emblems are important to this chapter. First, in an essay on linguistic style, Judith Irvine (2001: 33) argues that "linguistic differences appear to be iconic representations of the social contrasts they index—as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's nature or essence." I make a similar argument about ritual practices below. Second, as Agha (2007: 257) suggests, emblems "imply groupings and contrasts among persons based on the likeness or unlikeness of behavior." In this sense, people map the practices of individuals onto larger social groupings as a way of marking boundary lines.

I argue that Islamic ritual practices serve as emblems because the practices themselves are tangible acts of devotion, piety, and/or submission to the moral

obligations of Islam.   For instance, Muslims often see their style of prayer as bearing an iconic resemblance to the personal practice of the Prophet Mohammad; it is thus a tangible, physical sign of one's acknowledgment of the ritual obligations put in place by the five pillars of Islam. Similarly, veiling and modest dress bear a physical resemblance to the inner modesty and piety of practitioners. Such practices become emblems of practitioners' piety and commitment to Islam. That Ismailis' rituals differ physically in terms of form and style from the model of Islamic practice advocated by reformers marks Ismailis as different; as signs, practices come to serve as emblems of the Ismailis' difference from other Muslims.

4. Separation and Service

People not only draw conceptual distinctions between their own and other traditions, but also attempt to maintain symbolic boundaries through social practice. Ismailis engage in a number of practices that attempt to demarcate and maintain boundaries around their community.   I refer to these practices collectively as "separation" in an attempt to capture the feeling of inclusion and exclusion they produce (cf. Simmel 1906: 477). Ismailis separate from others by barring outsiders from entering their Jama'at-Khāna during prayer time. They forbid non-Ismailis from participating in collective rituals such as the prayer in the Jama'at-Khāna and the *dīdār* ("audience," "viewing") ceremonies where they see the Aga Khan. They attempt to restrict access to certain religious literature to members of their own community. They often refuse to speak with outsiders about their religious beliefs and practices. They prefer, as many Indian Muslims and Hindus do, that their children marry members of their own community. They dissuade people from converting to their religion, granting few exceptions. And finally, some

Ismailis live in "housing societies," what Americans might call apartment complexes, which are exclusive to their community.

Anthropologists have largely been suspicious of boundary maintenance because of the role such processes play in producing and reproducing inequality. This is precisely the sort of argument that scholars like Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) make about attempts to map cultural difference onto territory. Drawing on Appadurai's (1998: 37) notion of spatial incarceration, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) suggest that the use of national borders and immigration policy reproduces poverty and economic inequality. Turning from national borders to social groups, a tradition of thought emanating from Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work *Distinction* looks at the range of symbols and practices that people use to communicate their class membership. The French sociologist Michele Lamont (1992; see also Lamont and Molnar 2002; Milner 2010), for example, has argued that members of the French and American upper-middle class use a range of symbolic differences as the basis for avoiding relationships like marriage, friendship, or even acquaintanceship with working-class people. Excluding people from those relationships is significant in Lamont's view precisely because it is through those relationships that people gain access to high-paying jobs and other economic resources. More recently, Janet McIntosh's (2009) recent work in Kenya shows how dominant Swahili ethnic group refusal to recognize the Giriama as proper Muslims relegates the latter to poverty and ostracism.

Some might find the term "separation" a coy euphemism that masks the ways that boundary lines produce asymmetrical relationships between groups. Although the widening gap between rich and poor should be an urgent concern for scholars and

activists, we should remain clear that the boundaries people try to maintain around "us" and "them" do not necessarily promote inequality. While it is no doubt true that efforts by elites to maintain social boundaries produce and reproduce economic disparities, I contend that when we focus on the specific practices groups use to erect boundaries around their community, we see that processes of exclusion are, much like drawing cultural boundaries, value neutral. In fact, maintaining boundary lines is of equal importance for those groups that are marginal or subordinate as it is for elites. Ismailis' efforts to maintain boundaries do not so much seek to maintain economic or social privilege—though some might like to do that—as they seek protect the community's traditions. While we often think of people's efforts to enforce boundary lines as being primarily about excluding others from benefits or privilege of a particular group, Ismailis' separate from others for three distinct reasons: First, Ismailis have faced persecution throughout their history as a Muslim minority and hiding their religious tradition and enforcing residential segregation provides a modicum of security. Second, Ismailis are reluctant to talk with others about their religious tradition because their own models of cultural and religious difference include the idea that creating understanding across boundaries is difficult. Third, separating from others allows Ismailis to create the social and physical space for shared devotion to their Imam.

In large part, Ismailis' efforts to maintain boundaries around their community fall into the conventional anthropological category of secrecy and concealment. Ismailis have a long tradition of practicing taqīya, a form of precautionary dissimulation or prudential concealment practiced by other Shiʿa (Kohlberg 1995; Sachedina 2010; Daftary 1990, 1998; Virani 2007). In Shiʿa thought, taqīya allows practitioners to hide

their true religious beliefs when they fear persecution. The Ismailis' use of precautionary dissimulation prior to the mid-19th century fits well with established thinking about the ways that marginalized groups seek to keep messages that others might find controversial or threatening from circulating in wider society (Hugh Urban 2001; 2004) and for concealing the identity of group members from those who would seek to persecute them (Zagorin 1990; Simmel 1906). In contemporary times, the Ismailis' continued political quietism—which manifests itself in their general reluctance to publicly criticize other communities—mirrors broader trends among contemporary Shi'a (Sachedina 2010; Blank 2001).

A second aspect of Shi'a taqīya is that it enjoins practitioners to avoid propagating teachings among those who should not be privy to it (Kohlberg 1995). In other words, taqīya encourages practitioners to keep esoteric truths from circulating among the non-initiated for fear that they might not understand. This approach to secrecy is similar to Roy Wagner's argument that Melanesian secrecy is part of a "politics of meaning," wherein cult secrets can neither be spoken about in everyday life nor, consequently, transformed through that talk (Wagner 1984; see also Bercovitch 1989). In similar ways, by restricting access to certain knowledge to the initiated, Shi'a taqīya protects religious teachings from criticism and being potentially transformed through misapprehension. For Ismailis, this approach is fundamental to maintaining a sense of integrity around their tradition, especially in light of criticism from outsiders who they suspect may be incapable of understanding their religious tradition.

In addition to protecting people and ideas, Ismailis' barring outsiders from performing prayers alongside them in the Jama'at-Khāna reflects the desire to create the

social and physical space for shared devotion. As Simmel (1906) long ago noted keeping others out is one way in which people create the space for intimacy and closeness. While it is clear that such practices deny others the ability to perform prayers in the Ismaili style, it does not preclude people from performing Muslim prayers in mosques. As such, it does not preclude other Muslims from performing prayers in mosques, which sometimes bar non-Muslims from taking part in prayer. Moreover, unlike efforts to by caste Hindus to keep Dalits from entering Hindu temples for fear of pollution, keeping people out of the prayer hall does not marginalize an entire group of people by reinforcing their low ritual status. Being denied access to the Jamaʿat-Khāna does not signal one's inferior status in the eyes of others, but instead their exclusion from a community centered on spiritual allegiance to a living Imam.   Thus it is one's allegiance to the Imam that determines whether or not one can enter the Jamaʿat-Khāna, not ritual or economic status.

A key feature of Ismaili secrecy is that rests on the idea that the boundaries between cultures pose challenges for mutual understanding and intelligibility (Barth 1998: 15; Bashkow 2004). In contemporary Mumbai, Ismailis have remained skeptical about non-Ismailis' ability to understand their religious tradition and, as such, rarely talk about it. Following Michael Lambek (1993), I have found it useful to consider this problem largely as one stemming from the difficulty of communicating and translating terms across discursive boundaries. Lambek analyzes three distinct traditions (what he calls "disciplines") of Islamic ritual specialists in the African nation of Mayotte, each with its own unique body of knowledge and specific practices of divination and healing. He conceives each tradition's body of religious knowledge as a discourse with its own

particular set of terms and assumptions. Consequently, people attempting to communicate across the boundaries of those religious traditions, say about spirit possession, find that the terms they use for "spirit" only approximate one another. Lambek (1993: 12) describes the resulting conversations, involving parties bandying about a hodgepodge of incommensurable terms, as conversations were people "talk past one another." In other words, the resulting conversations involve people ignoring the need to translate terms that seem deceptively equivalent to ideas from their own discourses.

Ismailis are unusually aware of the incommensurability of their own religious tradition from those of others. Many are keen to note that the difference of their own religious tradition's basis in an esoteric, spiritual search for the inner meaning of ritual practice with what they perceive to be the more literal, or exoteric, reading as an obstacle to creating mutual understanding. Although Ismailis may overstate the case—other Muslims' certainly do focus on the inner meaning of practice or the interiority of religious experience and Ismailis may well be able to create mutual understanding with others—their reluctance to speak stems from a conviction that others will misunderstand, misconstrue, or purposely criticize their religious traditions. This is why, as I explain in chapter 4, Ismailis often use terms from other religious discourses to create metaphors or analogies to explain their religious tradition to outsiders. Yet Ismailis remain aware that such metaphors have a limited capacity to convey the meaning of uniquely Ismaili concepts such as the Imamate, tarīqah, or specific ritual practices.

Voluntarism
While Ismailis are reluctant to speak others about their religious tradition and at times cut themselves off from others, they consider themselves to be well integrated into society.

In large part this is because so many Ismailis are actively engaged in volunteer service that extends to their own community and to others. Over last century Ismailis have followed the Aga Khan's guidance to build civil society and promote religious pluralism through development work in India and the rest of the world. This work is done through the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), an international organization engaged in building schools, hospitals, microfinance programs, and a host of other projects in the developing world. In Mumbai, there are branches of the AKDN running 2 schools, a hospital, and consulting services in the area of planning and building. Many Ismailis living in Mumbai also volunteer their time and services to rural development projects run by AKDN in the nearby state of Gujarat.

These organizations rely on individual Ismailis to volunteer their time, labor, and expertise to be successful. Voluntarism at AKDN is, in turn, part of a much larger culture of service within the Ismaili community. From a very young age, Ismailis are encouraged to perform a number of roles as volunteers (and I should be clear that people would use the English word "volunteer" even when speaking Hindi or Gujarati). Service in the Ismaili community includes activities such as bringing water to people during religious ceremonies, cleaning the Ismaili prayer hall, organizing sports events for youth in the Ismaili community, or working at the various organizations of AKDN. Ismaili volunteered their time and services to AKDN as consultants and board members, helping to design and implement the organizations' many programs.

Ismailis describe their volunteer work as an act of seva, or its English translation "service." This idea of seva has broader resonance in Indian society referring to the acts of care that young people perform for their elders, disciples for their Gurus, devotees for

the gods, and for activists on behalf of the nation (Watt 2005; Beckerlegge 2004). For Ismailis, however, seva is specifically linked to the Imam. It is a way of following Imam's guidance (*hidāyat*) to serve humanity or of indicating once spiritual allegiance to the living Imam (*bai'at*). As such, one serves the Imam by helping others. Many described seva a way of following what the Imam had articulated as a larger ethics of care and compassion within the Islamic religion. A crucial component of this service is that it should be directed not just at members of the Ismaili community, but also to people of other communities. Ismaili service projects help people regardless of caste or creed and they do not seek to convert those who benefit from their service.

More recently, the Aga Khan has linked the desire to build civil society institutions through service to a program of religious pluralism and multicultural tolerance. Religious pluralism is evident in Ismaili volunteer service in that their schools and hospitals served everyone in the local community, regardless of caste or creed. Moreover, Ismailis are keen to respect the religious values of those they help—they do not seek converts through their service work and they attempt to understand the cultural background of those they help in order to serve them better. The Aga Khan's promotion of religious pluralism has been tied to efforts to instill a sense of what Robert Hayden (2002: 205) has in other contexts referred to as an "active tolerance," in which one "recognizes and respects beliefs or actions with which one might disagree." Tolerance and religious pluralism find expression in the Ismaili community in a number of different ways. For some, religious pluralism consists of an active acceptance that although religious traditions differ from one another, each is worthy of respect. For others pluralism entails the idea that all religions equal and represent different paths to religious

truth. This latter idea of pluralism resonates with Ismaili conceptions of religion as a "path" or "way" (*tarīqah*) for acquiring deeper insight into hidden truths.

Although Ismailis respect the differences of others, their model of outreach privileges direct action over dialogue. Although many Ismailis seek to educate themselves about the other religious traditions and cultures (Asani 2003b), communication about their own tradition is largely relegated to official channels. It is the Aga Khan's speeches and media interviews, press releases from the office of the Ismaili Secretariat in France, and official websites that are largely responsible for communicating information about the community. While these sources contain wonderful stories about individual Ismailis, their accomplishments, and sometimes their service work, these websites do not necessarily delve into specific religious values or ideas (see chapter 6). The focus on direct action seems in keeping with the ideas of the Aga Khan III, who promoted voluntarism in the Ismaili community by telling his followers that the world needed "work no words" (Jamal 2008). In other words, the Ismaili method of reaching out to others focuses not on dialogue and communication but on action.

The Ismailis' joining of tolerance, pluralism, and volunteer outreach provides a useful rejoinder to Wendy Brown's (2006) critique of multi-cultural tolerance. Brown suggests that Western governments' use of a discourse of tolerance is ultimately a tool for "regulating aversion" towards people who are different. In her view, when states promote tolerance as a social value, they ultimately undercut effort by people to engage with human differences by encouraging them to privatize their differences. Because tolerance allows people to avoid actively engaging and understanding difference, Brown (2006: 88) suggests that discourses of multi-cultural tolerance ultimately lead to isolated

communities and cut off the potential for political coalitions built around mutual understandings of difference. What is central to Brown's critique, in my opinion, is that the discourse of multicultural tolerance undermines efforts to establish a Habermasian public, wherein parties can establish common understanding about religious, cultural, and social difference through dialogue. In short, Brown's view is that tolerance creates separate, isolated communities by undercutting the dialogue necessary to create understandings of difference.

Although Ismailis have adopted an attitude towards difference that is similar to Brown's description of tolerance, they are not isolated from others or averse to otherness. This is because the Ismaili model of outreach prioritizes non-linguistic social action over talk, a view that is premised on an idea of religious and cultural differences make mutual understanding difficult. More importantly, we should not think about the reluctance of many Ismailis to talk about difference as being characteristic of their aversion to difference. Instead, Ismailis see others as people who they can benefit through moral action rather than dialogue.

The Ismaili example of directing seva at otherness fits with more recent attempts to provide a positive view of otherness (Sax 1998; Bashkow 2006 12-13; Stasch 2009). Responding to works like Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* and Tzvetan Todorov's (1999) *The Conquest of America,* anthropologists like Ira Bashkow (2006) and Rupert Stasch (2009) have provided a viewpoint in which creating distinctions between self and other is a value neutral process—people can idolize or love others just as easily as they can make others inferior. Bashkow (2006), for instance, has shown that the Orakaiva of Papua New Guinea construct a particular other, "whitemen," in ways that mark them as

superior in terms of wealth and as the butt of jokes. Stories about whitemen ultimately allow Orakaiva to contrast their culture with another, enabling them to develop conceptions of their own culture and morality though those contrasts. Stasch (2009), writing on the Korawai of West Papua, suggests that otherness and alterity provide the basis of positive social bonds and relationships between people. The Korawai see otherness—expressed in oppositions such as male/female or child/adult—as the basis for enduring relationships between persons.

By performing seva, Ismailis develop moral dispositions directed at others and otherness. Their concern about otherness is evident in the ways that Ismaili volunteers often describe the beneficiaries of their service as being fundamentally different from them. They at times point to a whole range of distinctions such as male/female, urban/rural, wealthy/poor, Muslim/Hindu, in describing the differences between themselves and those they help. Indeed, it may well be the case that a concern for otherness may be a broader feature of seva in the Indian context, especially given that the participants involved in seva occupy a range of binary oppositions such as young/old, human/divine, and individual/society.

A final concern: my decision to describe Ismailis' practice of service in contrast to efforts to create mutual understanding across cultural boundaries may seem to undermine the very project of anthropology. This issue has followed me throughout my fieldwork experience. What I would argue here is that recognizing that some hold the view that it is difficult to create comprehension across cultural barriers—and that such a viewpoint has consequences for how people interact with others—is not the same thing as accepting this viewpoint. As an anthropologist, I believe that sustained intercultural

interaction can produce something like mutual understanding. But I also believe that people should be allowed to make the decision about whether or not they wish to speak about their culture or enter into dialogue. Moreover, I have come to recognize that a reluctance to talk about certain differences is not the same thing as cutting oneself off from humanity.

5. Fieldwork Methodology and Ethics

Like many research projects, this one has lived through several incarnations. My initial desire to research the Ismaili community stemmed from my undergraduate interest in syncretism and the process of historical change in South Asia. In the early stages of designing this research program, I was primarily interested in how Ismailis understood the disjuncture between their history as a small community practicing a religion that incorporated references to Hindu deities and Muslim religious figures and a century of change to their ritual and social practice brought about by the Aga Khans. I assumed at that time that people's stories about the past provided a symbolic resource for legitimating practice in the present. The projected aimed to find a middle ground between anthropological theories of history that emphasized the plasticity of historical discourse in face of social change and those that favored the idea that, as a form of local knowledge, peoples' memories and narratives about their shared past placed limits on the ability to reinvent those stories in the present. A secondary concern, however, was to understand what motivated Ismailis to embark on this project of reformulating their religious tradition and their social practice; I theorized that these changes reflected the Ismailis' unique position as a minority seeking a rapprochement with a more orthoprax model of Islam while maintaining a positive image with the Hindu majority.

After beginning a full-year field project in 2006, I quickly learned that many

Ismailis were less interested in discussing their community's history than the uniqueness of their religious tradition, their devotion to their religious leader, and the positive things the community was doing to help others in Mumbai and the rest of India. Indeed, it was in the early months of the full year project that I began to reflect back on my own puzzlement during preliminary research about the seeming contradiction between Ismailis' assertions that their community was tight-knit and aloof on the one hand and was tolerant and cosmopolitan on the other.

Much of the material in this dissertation was collected during open-ended interviews and conversations with "lay members" of the Ismaili community, volunteers at AKDN organizations, and community leaders in the official bodies that govern the Ismaili community. Although South Asian norms of gender propriety often precluded me from interviewing women outside of the presence of their husband and spouse, there were several women who I was able to interview independently at their place of work or in other public settings. I have tried to include their voices in this dissertation as much as possible. In the summer months of 2004 and 2005 I conducted preliminary field projects, during which I drew on friends, scholars, and journalists in Mumbai to gain introductions to members of the Ismaili community. These early contacts provided me with access to still more Ismailis and in some cases facilitated meetings with officials in the Ismaili community, a fieldwork methodology sometimes referred to as "snowball sampling." Interviews were conducted in Hindi-Urdu, English, and to a lesser extent Gujarati, depending on my informant's preference.

I also sought out ethnographic contexts for participant observation, something that was at times particularly challenging in an urban environment. The fact that Ismailis lived

throughout Mumbai, often in small apartment communities restricted to Ismailis, made living amongst the community nearly impossible. For the purposes of this study, participant observation largely of "deep hanging out" in Ismaili-owned shops. I met some Ismailis shopkeepers through friends, and others by "canvassing" neighborhoods and introducing myself to those owners of shops displaying pictures of the Aga Khan. Some of these latter people became fast friends, while others expressed little interest in participating in my research. My strategy was to visit shopkeepers during the early and late afternoon hours when fewer customers were around, though sometimes an unexpected spike in business required me to excuse myself. I typically tried to avoid the lunch hour, when employees would either take turns eating in shifts or perhaps eat together from a large communal meal, fearing that my informants would order me something from a nearby restaurant. During the afternoon doldrums, friends from the neighborhood would sometimes stop by to socialize with the shopkeeper. If no one visited, I would speak one on one, informally with the shopkeeper. If someone did come by, I was able to take part in impromptu conversations including the shopkeeper, employees or friends. The former provided a context for me to ask direct questions of informants, the latter a good opportunity to gauge what issues were important to my informants. Although I would occasionally pull out a small notebook to make notes during these conversations—to write down an unfamiliar term or to make notes of something to follow up on—I would stop along my way home to make write notes. There I would make jottings that I would write up as fieldnotes when I returned home.

I also had the opportunity to conduct formal interviews with officials, sometimes at their personal office, or the office of Ismaili institutions. These scheduled

appointments stood in marked in contrast to the informal meetings with shopkeepers both in terms of locale and the content of the interview. After scheduling an interview over the phone, I would have to have to explain my purpose to building's security guard—a ubiquitous figure in South Asia—and then introduce myself to the office's receptionist. Once inside, I was often struck by the combination of stylistic features from the modern office and evidence of religious diversity. These offices invariably had neatly arranged cubicles, where employees often decorated their workspace with the trappings of their own faith, and which had modest (though mostly current) computers. At the offices of organizations like ITREB, there were often pictures bearing examples of Islamic architecture adorning the walls of some of the cabins. Many offices incorporated a logo combining geometric features and Arabic calligraphy. For instance, one of the offices associated with Aga Khan Education Services had a large placard bearing a logo that, as an informant pointed out, when read properly, displayed the word Arabic word *iqra*, meaning "read." As I describe in chapter 6, in these settings, I interviewed officials associated with various Ismaili organizations, sometimes in an office or a conference room. These interviews were a unique opportunity to learn about Ismailis' volunteer activities. On some occasions, the interview took place in front of the communications director for AKCFI. During all of these interviews in organizational settings, I would dutifully take notes as I spoke with people.

The secretive character of Ismaili religious institutions limited some aspects of this research, just as the practices of concealment provided rich material for analysis. In large part, being an outsider meant that certain ethnographic contexts were simply impossible to observe. Because I could not enter the Jamaʿat-Khāna or attend religious

education classes, it was impossible to observe the details of religious life first hand. While doing fieldwork, I dealt with this problem by attempting to collect as many oral accounts of such activities as possible. Whenever possible, I verified this information by corroborating oral accounts among informants. In cases where individuals had differing or "outlying" accounts that differed from the dominant point of view, I have indicated the uniqueness of their description in the text.

In addition to posing problems in terms of data collection, my status as an outsider presented challenges for data analysis. As I describe in some detail in chapter 4, the large historical literature describing the esotericism of the Ismaili community and their recourse to precautionary dissimulation (*taqīya*) requires a researcher to treat seriously the possibility that there may well be many interpretations and ideas that remain available only to insiders. Moreover, if the members of the community have recourse to a tradition of dissimulation, the very sincerity of informants' testimony becomes an open question. Anthropologists, of course, are familiar with the problem of determining the inner states of informants, just as we rely to a large extent on the exegesis of religious practitioners to produce our analyses. For instance, Margaret Trawick (1992: 92) has noted that it is impossible for a researcher to determine their informants' intentions or sincerity. What social scientists can do, however, is learn enough about a given culture to offer interpretations of people's statements and actions that are in keeping with that cultural system (Trawick 1992: 92).

As Trawick's comment suggests, the relationship between insiders and outsiders is a broader methodological issue in anthropological research, especially in the ethnography of South Asia. The issue is finding the proper balance between a local

knowledge and the anthropological theory used to interpret that knowledge for a largely Western audience. For instance, Louis Dumont, who sought to provide a view of "India on her own terms" (Dumont 1970a; cited in Khare 1971: 849), argues that the anthropologist's task is to work from "within" and "without" (Dumont 1970b: 7; 1970c: 156). In other words, the anthropologist must learn as much about local ideas and values as possible and then subject the data to rigorous analysis to find the structural relationships between these ideas and values (Dumont 1970a: 7). In keeping with Dumont's comparative method, finding these structural similarities and differences allows the anthropologist to gain greater understanding of his own society by comparing it to another. Although he differs from Dumont in just how far one could depart from native categories in doing social analysis, M.N. Srinivas also values the perspectives that non-native anthropologists bring to the study of culture. In a series of reflexive essays (Srinivas 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 1979) examining his own career as an Indian anthropologist working on Indian society, Srinivas discusses issues facing insiders and outsiders alike in anthropological research. Most troubling for Srinivas was a statement by Edmund Leach, suggesting that an anthropologist working in her home country would have "preconceived ideas" that would prejudice her findings (Srinivas 2009a: 545; 2009b: 575; 2009c: 592; Leach 1982: 124). Srinivas notes, however, that both insiders and outsiders come to field research with their own preconceived notions and theoretical biases about their research subjects. Moreover, in Srinivas' view the distinction between insider and outsider in anthropological research is one more "of degree than kind" (Srinivas 2009a: 559); a researcher in South Asia will often work with people who differ in terms of caste, class, language, or religion. Srinivas suggests that both insiders and

outsiders will produce ethnographies that reflect their own particular cultural and theoretical perspectives, and hints that there is some benefit in comparing the views of scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds (Srinivas 2009a: 560; Srinivas 2009b: 587).

Srinivas' comments regarding perspective are particularly apt for interpreting a religious tradition that itself encourages a multiplicity of interpretations of religious texts and rituals. To address the complexities of such a system, I have indicated throughout this dissertation the diversity of perspectives that people take and the ways that an esoteric epistemic system can shape people's worldview. This approach is not unlike the anthropological project itself. Drawing on Donna Haraway (1991), Peter Metcalf (2002: 107) argues that one of the benefits of ethnography is that it enables a kind of "mobile positioning." He writes, "what the ethnographer can do, in a way that is very hard for any particular informant to do, is shift the vantage point repeatedly, placing first this ethnicity in the foreground, and then another, within some fairly restricted field" (Metcalf 2002: 107). (I think we can substitute virtually any aspect of culture for "ethnicity" in Metcalf's statement without distorting its meaning). In this way, anthropologists offer ways to think critically about cultural variation, casting into sharp relief both the ideas of our informants and of the researcher's own culture. The benefit of such research is to appreciate the culturally specific ways that people—both here and there—construct social reality.

While concealment obviously limited my ability to learn about Ismaili ritual practice and to collect data about religious attitudes, it also revealed much about the interiority of religious sentiment in the community and about Ismaili conceptions of religious knowledge. Moreover, anthropologists and scholars of religion have long held

(Simmel 1906; Barth 1975; Bellman 1984; Urban 2001) that the methods and practices that people use to keep secrets are more significant than the content of those secrets. My status as a non-Ismaili, white American gave me ample opportunity to observe patterns in the ways that Ismailis spoke with people of particular religious backgrounds. Observing face-to-face interactions, and speaking with other Muslims and Hindus about their experiences with Ismailis, allowed me to compare how Ismailis might draw boundaries differently depending on their audience.

In addition to the epistemological and methodological concerns presented by secrecy, the fact that much of the Ismaili religious tradition exists outside of the "public record" poses ethical concerns about research. Hugh Urban (1998) has written convincingly that researchers working with esoteric religious traditions that conceal much of their teachings from outsiders should limit themselves to discussing the manner in which people keep secrets and avoid revealing the hidden meanings of religious dogma, which as the above indicates one cannot speak with any certainty about anyway. I deal with these concerns in two ways. First, I followed what I imagine is by now standard anthropological practice by identifying myself as a researcher to my informants, explaining as best as possible the purpose of my research, and describing how its results would be communicated to the wider public. Second, I decided before beginning research that I would not publish information that I suspect would cause a scandal or put anyone in danger. To that end, I have given all of my informants pseudonyms and have tried to avoid giving any biographical details that would make them readily identifiably. In the text that follows, I have tried to the best of my ability to conform to these two guidelines.

6. Outline of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I provide the reader with a historical and ethnographic sketch of the Ismaili community in Mumbai. This chapter outlines relevant ethnographic information about marriage, language, occupation, and residence in the Ismaili community, in addition to detailing the complex array of organizations established by the Aga Khan to manage the community's social and religious life. This ethnographic portrait is set against the changing backdrop of communal politics in contemporary Mumbai.

Chapter 3 examines instances of Muslims' everyday talk in Mumbai to compare inclusive and exclusive models of the Islamic religion. Many Muslims employ discourses that treat religious practice as emblems of a person or community's commitment to the Islamic religion. As a consequence, some Muslims point to differences in religious practices as a way of questioning the Muslimness of other Muslims, especially people like Ismailis whose own ritual practice differs from the model of orthopraxy promoted by the Islamic revival. Ismailis, for their part, have had a fairly ambivalent response to such criticism. On the one hand, many Ismailis accept the idea that there are a number of valid approaches to the Islamic religion and recognize the practices of others as valid expressions of that tradition. On the other, some question the Ismaili faith's congruence with Islamic orthopraxy. In more recent years, Ismailis have sought to reform their religious practice in response to criticisms from other Muslims. The chapter considers Ismailis' decisions to reform several ritual practices as evidence that they have internalized many of the key terms and assumptions of discourses about Islamic orthopraxy.

Chapter 4 considers the ways that Ismailis' conceptions of religious difference inform the ways they talk (or remain silent) about religious matters with people of

different religious backgrounds. Ismailis, in keeping with an esoteric model of religious practice, see religious knowledge as something acquired through personal religious practice, not through rote learning. Moreover, they express a keen awareness that terms within their own religious tradition are incommensurate with similar terms in others' religious discourses. Consequently, Ismailis sometimes employ metaphors to bridge the gap between religious domains, though they remain clear that such terms only approximate one another. As such, Ismailis find it difficult to explain aspects of their religious to outsiders who may or may not be familiar with their religious discourse. This chapter ends by considering the larger implications of Ismailis skepticism about the possibility of inter-religious dialogue to traditional models of sociality and public discourse.

In chapter 5, I compare the historical and contemporary practice of secrecy in the Ismaili community. Ismailis strictly limit outsiders' access their *Jama'at-Khāna* ("prayer hall") and consider much of their religious literature to be outside of the public domain. Although this practice has the effect of concealing information and practices that outsiders might consider controversial, barring outsiders from the Jama'at-Khāna also provides a positive site for Ismailis to create intimacy. Many Ismailis see the presence of non-Ismailis in the Jama'at-Khāna as being disruptive of a moral community centered on devotion to the Ismaili Imam and sharing time with other families. As such, Ismaili secrecy should not be read as just as a tactic for ensuring their survival, but also as a meaningful practice that enables Ismailis to create a community centered on devotion to a central religious figure.

This devotion to the Aga Khan in turn provides the motivation for Ismailis to offer "service" (*seva*) to the Imam by volunteering in schools, hospitals, and other civil-society organizations sponsored by the Aga Khan. Chapter 6 examines the ways that social boundaries produced in part through devotion to the Aga Khan paradoxically create institutions through which Ismailis reach out to others. Through their volunteer work, Ismailis reach out to people of different religious and cultural backgrounds. I show how for the Ismailis, conceptions of otherness and difference are essential features of dispositions such as concern, care, compassion.

Of course, the focus of this research obscures and ignores many aspects of the community. While I do include comments from individual Ismailis criticizing the Imam or his institutions, I do not devote much time to discussing the politics of dissent in the Ismaili community. In large part, this is because my informants themselves were rarely interested in talking about these issues or considered them of much consequence. I also do not address the large body of criticism of development (Escobar 1995), nor do I consider more recent claims that AKDN is a "state-like" institution (Devji 2009; van Grondelle 2009). The critique of development is important, but my aims in this dissertation are not so much to assess the implications of development as to determine what motivates Ismailis to withdraw from and reach out to others. Similarly, I do not consider the transnational character of the Ismaili community, though there are other works dealing with these issues (Kaiser 1996; Steinburg 2006). Finally, this work only scantly deals with the Ismaili's involvement with ideas about modernity. This last issue will likely inform the future direction of this research. At this time I expect to consider the tension between Ismailis' simultaneous engagement with the universalizing

discourses of revivalism and modernity and their own religious discourse that demands

particularism.

Chapter 2:
Social and Historical Context

<u>1. Living Together, Living Apart</u>

This chapter describes the ethnographic and historical context of this research by detailing occupational, residential, and marriage practices among the Ismailis in Mumbai. These issues highlight the tension between representations of the Ismaili community as tolerant, open, and cosmopolitan on the one hand and exclusive, closed, and isolated on the other. I consider the tension between cosmopolitanism and exclusivism as being part of broader economic, political, and demographic trends in Mumbai.

The Ismailis of Mumbai are one of many Muslim communities living in a city that has increasingly been divided by differences in language, religion, regional origin, and class. Although population figures for Ismailis are not available,[1] they make up a small portion of the over 18 million people living in the Greater Mumbai area. Many of the Ismailis living in Mumbai are the descendants of people who migrated in the 18th and 19th centuries from what is now the state of Gujarat in western India. Those early migrants likely came to take advantage of new opportunities for trade in the emerging colonial entrepot in Mumbai (then Bombay).

The majority of Ismailis living in Mumbai can trace their descent to villages in Kathiawad (also known as Saurausthra) in Gujarat, though some people come from Kucch in Northern Gujarat or Sindh in what is presently Southeastern Pakistan. To an even lesser extent, Ismaili families identify their place of origin as Maharasthra, Andhra Pradesh, and more rarely far-flung places like Karnataka. Although some Ismaili

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[1] I discuss why figures on the Ismaili are not available in chapter 5. Hannah Papenek (1962: 11) gave the population of Ismaili Khojas in Mumbai at 25,000 based on her fieldwork with Ismailis living in Karachi from 1954 to 1958.

families have been living in Mumbai since the 19ᵗʰ century, others have migrated for economic purposes since India's independence. The latter have sometimes left behind working as small farmers in rural Gujarat or Maharasthra, where some Ismailis live in considerable poverty.

Consequently, Ismailis speak a variety of languages at home, including dialects of Gujarati—like Kathiawadi—or languages such as Sindhi or Kucchi. Most everyone speaks Hindi-Urdu, arguably Mumbai's lingua franca, fluently, though fewer Ismailis read the Hindi Devanagri or the Urdu Nastaliq. Many Ismailis speak English, a language associated with Mumbai's cultural and economic elite, fluently; in fact, for many economically prosperous families, English is the primary language used in the workplace and at home. While many Ismailis are proficient in the language of Mumbai's most populous ethnic group, Marathi, no one I met claimed that they spoke it regularly at home. The ability of my informants to switch seamlessly from conversations in Gujarati, Hindi, and English never ceased to earn my admiration and envy, though some people admitted that they had trouble speaking a particular language or dialect. This was often as much as a reflection of the person's class status as much as it was of the location of their ancestral village (*gaon)* and how long they had spent in Mumbai.

Though many Ismailis speak Gujarati and maintain links to their ancestral villages there, they often times do not describe themselves as being Gujarati. This is because the term Gujarati has, at the cost of excluding many Muslim communities, come to refer only to Gujarati Hindus. Such thinking came up in important ways in field and I think two examples will serve to make my point. The son of a friend was set to marry a girl from a Gujarati Jain family in a "love marriage." A family friend arrived in my friend's office

during an interview and my friend told him "Did you hear that my son is marrying a Gujarati? She is Hindu and doesn't eat meat but my son is total meat eater." I later asked another friend why some Gujarati-speaking Ismailis did not identify themselves as Gujaratis. He told me that the term Gujarati typically refers to Gujarati Hindus. Or perhaps more telling, a Gujarati Hindu friend of mine explained to me several times that Ismailis used to be Gujarati like he was, but that they became Muslims several hundred years ago. In the latter instance, my friend could not be persuaded that as Gujarati speakers and people from Gujarati villages they were in fact Gujarati.

Endogamous marriage continues to be one way that communities demarcate their boundaries in modern India. For all the talk about Mumbai's cosmopolitanism and the openness of modern families towards marriage across religious, class, or caste lines, it was rare to find instances of people marrying very far outside of their social group. For instance, one might find a twice-born (i.e., from one of the top three varnas of the caste system) Gujarati groom marrying outside of his specific jāti, but their marriage partner would likely be a twice-born Gujarati-speaking Hindu from a family with a similar class background. Often the preference for endogamous marriage was explained to me in terms of specific caste customs—that a boy raised in a Gujarati family would want a wife that cooked Gujarati food, spoke the Gujarati language, and performed rituals in a similar fashion to his own family.

Ismailis also expressed a preference that their sons and daughters marry within the community and many unmarried youngsters agreed that they would follow their parent's advice in marriage. I was always keen to ask my informants about their spouses and whether members of their immediate families had married within or outside the

community. This type of inquiry revealed that, by and large, Ismaili Khojas sought to marry other members of the Ismaili Khoja community and sought such marriages for their children. Even in cases where a child had decided to marry outside the community, their relatives might counsel the spouse to consider the ways that conflicting practices might cause problems. For instance, in the case involving a Jain and Ismaili that I mentioned above, my friend had mentioned to me earlier that he told his son to consider the implications of marrying a vegetarian and of the problems that a child of a "mixed" marriage might encounter. Ultimately, however, he left the decision in his son's hands.

But I should also mention that this marriage was not atypical in any respect, although many people trained in the social sciences in Mumbai suggested to me that it would be more likely that exogamous marriages occurred primarily between Ismaili Khojas and Ithna-asharia or Sunni Khojas. It was the case that I met informants who had relatives that married Khojas from the Ithna-Asharia Khoja community. But I heard of more cases in which Ismaili Khojas married non-Khojas, including marrying other Gujarati- speaking Muslims like the Bohras, an Arab Sunni, and Hindus. In many of these cases, they indicated that their families were quite accepting of their decision to marry outside of the community.

In all such cases of exogamous marriage, I encountered no stricture that the women marrying into the Ismaili community must convert to the Ismaili religion. This is surprising given that much of the literature on caste and kinship in South Asia assumes that women are assimilated into the lineage of the groom's family. In fact, I was told that, at least in theory, conversion to the Ismaili religion was an option for both men and women marrying into the group, if approved by the representatives at the Ismaili Tarīqah

and Religious Education Board.

More to the point, there were also plenty of instances of out-group members marrying into the Ismaili community and converting to the Ismaili religion while maintaining some of the practices from their former group. For instance, a woman told me about her cousin who had married an Ithna-asharia Shi'a woman who later converted to the Ismaili religion. The groom's family readily accepted the young girl, as did the members of the Jama'at-Khāna she attended. The woman relating the story told me that she suspected that this was because her cousin's wife was quite involved in religious activities at the Jama'at-Khāna and often did a considerable amount of volunteer work. This, in the opinion of the woman relating the story, had to do with fact that Ismailis were willing to accept people who gave their time in volunteer service to the Jama'at. The fact that this woman on occasion wore *hijāb* ("modest dress")—in contrast to Ismaili women who are all but forbidden to wear hijab—and participated in Ithna-Asharia rituals during Muharram was less important. The woman reported that her cousin's wife even once wore black into the Jama'at-Khāna during Muharram, though observing Muharram rituals and wearing black inside the Jama'at-Khāna is typically considered inappropriate by Ismailis (Khan 1997: 183).

Occupation, Class, and Residence
In addition to language and marriage, business practices and occupational preferences reveal both the separation and interdependence of the Ismailis and other communities. Ismailis were, throughout their history, merchants and traders, though the community now boasts a fair number of professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. By reputation, Ismailis are shoe sellers and there are certainly bazaars in the city dominated by their shops. But there is no limit to the types of shops that Ismailis run and there are

many shops selling readymade clothes, furniture, medicine, or everyday household items.

One place I frequented during my fieldwork was a small shoe shop located in the Western suburbs owned by a Hasan, a middle-aged man who grew in Mumbai. One often finds in Mumbai that particular bazaars or markets specialize in a particular product, such that if one wants to buy shoes there is a stretch of road where one would go. Hasan's shop is located in a market where there are many shops selling shoes, many of them Ismaili-owned, and a collection of roadside stalls. My friend's employees are both Hindu and Muslim; to my knowledge, only one of his full-time employees is Ismaili. In Hasan's shop, there are usually at least five people working on the sales floor and at least one person working in the stock room, which characteristically is located in the ceiling. There is a square hole in the ceiling, through which a worker throws boxes of shoes down at the request of the sales staff below. Hasan usually sits behind the counter, ringing up orders and endlessly shuffling through invoices, and occasionally barking out orders to the staff on the floor. There are a wide variety of products available: men's sneakers and dress shoes scattered willy-nilly on a table and women's high-heeled shoes neatly arranged on the wall. Behind the counter, as in most Ismaili shops, is a picture of the present Aga Khan, a reminder Hasan and others would say, that the Imam is always with you.

It is not just men like Hasan that work in business. Many Ismailis are proud to note that women work as merchants, entrepreneurs and professionals. In many Ismaili-owned shop, husband and wife work side by side (although the husband typically retains ownership of the business). There are also many women running small businesses from their own home, for instance selling homemade pickles or sweets in the Jamaʻat-Khāna.

Additionally, many women have taken to starting their own business, such as a friend's mother who owned and operated her own travel agency. And as with men, many women are continuing to seek professional jobs in technical fields. Many Indians find the Ismaili women's involvement in work outside of the home as peculiar, often pointing to it as evidence of the "progressive" nature of the community.

Because of their success in business and industry and the community's considerable efforts to promote social welfare, many of my informants felt that Ismailis were largely middle-class. Some of my informants proudly told me that you would never see an Ismaili begging for spare change[2] or hawking goods on the street. It is certainly true that many Ismaili-owned shops are quite prosperous—in fact several of the large chains of shoe stores in Mumbai are Ismaili owned—but I have also met Ismailis keeping stalls on the footpath selling small religious icons or costume jewelry. It is also the case that some Ismailis live in the slums, despite considerable efforts to build affordable housing for Ismaili families. Ismailis undoubtedly have a reputation within their own community, and in Mumbai more generally, for being wealthy, but this often obscures the fact that many of them live a more hand-to-mouth existence.

Class distinctions reveal themselves in the types of houses and flats where people live. Many of the people I met during preliminary fieldwork lived in posh flats in South Mumbai, especially in wealthy areas like Colaba and Kemp's Corner. The price of flats in these areas rivals the prices of areas like Manhattan or San Francisco, perhaps reflected by some newspaper's choice to adopt the term "SoBo" (a reference to New York's SoHo) for south Bombay in their lifestyle sections. Ismailis living here were often members of families whose ancestors had come to Mumbai over a hundred years ago and had done

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[2] For a similar incidence of this type of talk in the Parsi community of Mumbai see Luhrmann (1996: 41).

very well in establishing large shops and industrial concerns. But as I continued to meet people, I saw that despite the community's reputation for affluence, not everyone was wealthy enough to own even a modest flat in Mumbai. Some Ismailis live in Ismaili only "housing societies," though these complexes themselves vary according to the class status of the owners. These range from the tall, modern white buildings of the Yuvan Society near Carter Hill in Bandra to the more modest colonial-era flats of Hasanabad in Mazgaon.

The housing society is one of the more notable features of residential life in Mumbai. These housing societies, similar to American apartment complexes, consist of several apartment buildings gated in a low-walled enclosure with several watchmen (*chawkidārs*) guarding the gate. Housing societies are typically run by a board elected by and comprised of residents. These boards create by-laws for co-operative housing societies, which in turn allow the society's board of any to discriminate against potential residents on nearly any basis. For instance, I heard from several Muslim friends that real-estate brokers would tell them that they would not be able to find housing at certain societies, because the board would not approve it. Likewise, before leaving my own flat, I heard a member of the board tell two single males in their twenties that they could not move in because the society did not accept "bachelors" who might keep late hours or disturb young women living in the building. I also overheard another resident tell one of the two men that he would have trouble renting a flat there because he was a bachelor and a Muslim. This type of discrimination often results in housing societies that are dominated by a particular religious group, though with different sectarian, caste, and regional affiliations. Thus, while my own apartment complex was predominately Hindu

with only a handful of Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims, the Hindus were from a number of different caste and regional groups.

What sets Ismaili housing societies apart—and those of other ethnic and religious groups like Parsis, Memons, and Bohras—is that they are established for the sole use of a particular ethnic or religious community. Housing societies have long been a feature of social life in Mumbai for Ismailis—there are several housing societies in places like Dongri and Mazagaon that are over a hundred years old—and they remain so to this day, though their reasons for existence might have changed. In some housing societies the members own their own flats, while in others they pay rent to a central board. One informant pointed out to me that housing societies would have served an important function in providing housing to newly arrived migrants. Additionally, I learned of at least one housing society in the Western Suburbs built by the Aga Khan Council for India for the express purpose of providing housing to those Ismailis that live in slums. Most of the housing societies are owned and run by the residents, though the Aga Khan Council for India may in fact have established that building. For example, the ownership of the housing society built for slum dwellers was eventually handed over to the residents.

In addition to finding places for people to live in a competitive housing market, housing societies have increasingly served to ensure the safety and security of their residents. Just as Americans talk of red and blue states, the map of Mumbai is increasingly being divided in saffron (Hindu) and green (Muslim) enclaves. This has been especially true since the Mumbai riots in 1993 and was perhaps intensified following the Gujarat riots in 2002. Even within these Hindu or Muslim areas, however, one will find pockets of linguistic and regional affiliations are dominant. For instance,

even in the Muslim bazaars surrounding Mohammed Ali Road there are groups like the Ismailis, Bohras, and Memons are each separated into their own communities. Yet despite these distinctions, many Muslims related that they had increasingly banded together in the areas surrounding Mohammed Ali Road because they felt safer there should another riot occur.

For Ismailis, however, the sense of security others gained by living among their co-religionists was often absent. As one informant surprised me when he said, "David, we are caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea. When the riots come, the Muslims think we are Hindus and the Hindus think we are Muslims." In light of such concerns, the housing society can be seen as one way of providing a modicum of security in an occasionally perilous environment. Hasan, the shopkeeper mentioned above, told me as much when he told me he did not worry about local conflicts because Ismailis live in "batches," a term often used to describe a person's cohort at school. As Hasan suggests, living together is one way that people can give each other a sense of security.

2. A History of a Well-Organized Community

In addition to marriage, language, and occupation, historical factors have lead to the sense of separation and interdependence in the Ismaili community. In this section, I consider how the unique history of the Khoja Ismailis has lead to the development of institutions responsible governing and serving the community as a whole.

In contemporary Mumbai, one key indicator of the way that Ismailis conceive of their community is through their use of the terms *jama'at* ("congregation," "community"). Ismaili Khojas use the term *jama'at* to distinguish themselves from others who use the ethnonym "Khoja," as well as to distinguish themselves from people practicing the Ismaili faith in other parts of the world. In literal terms the jama'at may

refer to any gathering of Khojas or the people who typically attend services at a particular Jama'at-Khāna, such as a man who told me "*Main Hasanabad ki jama'at ka*" ("I [am] of the Hasanabad jama'at," Hasanabad being site of a Jama'at-Khāna in south Mumbai). It could also refer to geographical divisions among the Khojas, such as when Khojas refer to the Indian or East African jama'at. Jama'at also refers to the congregations of the communities that broke off during the schisms of the Khoja community in 19th and 20th centuries, i.e. the Khoja Sunnat Jama'at and the Shi'a Ithna-Ashari Khoja Jama'at. In the crowded streets of Dongri in southern Mumbai, the Ismaili and Ithna-Asharia Khoja Jama'at-Khānas are located down the street from one another and people refer to their members colloquially as the "big" (H/U: *baDī*; G: *moTī*) and "small" (H/U: *chhoThī*; G: *nānī*) jama'ats respectively.

Jama'at also has a way of distinguishing those Ismailis born in South Asia (i.e. the Khoja jama'at) from those living in other parts of the world (e.g., the Tajik Jama'at, Syrian Jama'at). Most Ismailis I met were well aware that there are other Ismailis living throughout the world and there are close kin links between these groups. Many of my informants would tell me about their siblings, cousins, or in-laws living in areas like Houston, Atlanta, or London, in addition to countries in east Africa like Tanzania and Kenya. As we will see below, there is worldwide structure of local and national councils established by the Aga Khan administering these communities, which in turn promote social cohesion among these jama'ats spread throughout the world. Moreover, there are very real ways in which these people scattered across the globe have meaningful interactions. For example, during the 2007-2008 Golden Jubilee year, many Ismailis traveled to attend *darbārs* (audiences) with the Aga Khan in different parts of the world,

meeting not just their kin, but also other members of the jama'at.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the notion of jama'at among Ismailis expanded as a consequence of easier communications with Ismaili communities living in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This opening of borders not only made many Ismaili Khojas aware of the existence of Ismaili communities other than the Khojas, but also brought many of these people into contact for the first time. For instance, an Ismaili official once related to me that during his childhood, he assumed that all Ismailis went to the Jama'at-Khāna and sang Ginān s, and that Ismailis who did not do these things were somehow not proper Ismailis. After the Imamate was able to reestablish contact with the central Asian Ismailis, Khojas found Ismailis whose religious practice and even their conception of the Imam were different than the Khoja Ismailis' own ideas on these subjects. I was told by several Ismaili officials that coming into contact with these communities prompted the discussions about pluralism that are central to the ways that many people discuss the Islamic faith in the community. This discussion of the pluralistic approach to the Ismaili, and by extension Islamic, faith is the subject of my discussion below. This pluralistic notion of the faith espoused by the Aga Khan and the institutions of his Imamate seems to have influenced the thinking of many Ismailis. One informant told a story about Tajiki Ismailis performing their own devotional hymns (*Qasīda*) in the same Jama'at-Khāna, albeit in a separate room, while Khoja Ismailis performed Ginān s.

Ismailis often acknowledge the Imam, currently Prince Karim Aga Khan, as a central, unifying figure in their religious tradition. Membership in the Ismaili Tarīqah is marked by *bai'at* ("allegiance") to the present (*hāzir*) Imam of the Ismailis, currently the Aga Khan IV. Shortly after birth, Ismailis are said to give *bai'at* to the Ismaili Imam

during a ceremony. This loyalty, or allegiance, given to the Imam continues throughout the life of Ismaili Khojas and many Khojas explain they demonstrate allegiance to the Imam by giving him *tan*, *man*, and *dhan* ("body, mind, and wealth"). Similarly, Ismailis consider it an obligation to obey the *farmans* ("orders" or "edicts") of the Ismaili Imam, who as Imam has the wisdom to interpret the revealed message according to the needs of the present age (Daftary 1990). These farmans provide guidance (*hidāyat*) in both the day-to-day affairs of the mundane, social world as well as for religious practice.

Yet how the Aga Khan came to solidify his position as the Imam and the Khojas came to identify as Ismaili, Sunni, and Ithna-Asharia is the product of historical processes. For instance, both Jim Masselos (1978) and Amrita Shodhan (2001) argue that colonial courts played a large role in defining Khoja religious identity as distinctly Ismaili. Shodhan (2001), in particular, analyses the shifting ways that the courts administered Khojas as a self-governing "caste" and as a sectarian community as way of governing and defining the community's religious identity respectively. I briefly revisit this history in what follows below. In so doing, I aim to provide a historical context for understanding the emergence of institutions founded by the Imam for governing the Ismaili community.

Khojas and the Aga Khan Trials
Although the historical origins and development of the Khoja community would be the subjects of dispute in 19th century Mumbai (then Bombay), most religious historians now attribute the creation of the Khoja religious community to sometime in the 14th or 15th centuries when Pir Sadruddin converted numerous members of the Lohanna caste in Sindh (Daftary 1998: 178; Nanji 1978: 74). Pir Sadruddin gave these new converts the

name Khoja, likely a permutation of the Persian word *Khwaja* ("master") (Nanji 1978: 74).

More importantly, Pir Sadruddin established Khoja Jama'at-Khāna ("congregation houses") as centers for religious rituals and regulating community affairs (Daftary 1998: 179; Nanji 1978: 74). The development of Jama'at-Khāna as communal meeting places for their new converts mirrors the organization of communities of Arab traders—brought to western India in increasing numbers due to the Delhi Sultanate's establishment of trade ties to the Arab world (Misra 1964). These traders centered their communities around communal organizations (*jama'at*), which were controlled by a headman, funded the construction of mosques, and regulated community affairs (Misra 1964: 7). Likewise, practitioners of Sufism, a devotional form of Islam taking root in western India at much the same time, established Jama'at-Khāna run by a "representative" (*khīlafa*), who represented the Shaykh, or head of the order; these Sufi Jama'at-Khāna represented a particular "order" (tarīqah) and possessed a territorial jurisdiction specific to that order (Nanji 1978: 47). While the full role medieval Khoja Jama'at-Khāna played in community affairs is not entirely clear, the organizations were apparently run by an elder (*mukhi*) and a treasurer (*kamaRia*) and served as centers for the daily performance of religious ritual (Nanji 1978: 205; Papanek 1962: 206).

Many Khojas settled throughout western India during the pre-colonial period, sometimes in response to persecution, but more often to take advantage of shifting trading opportunities, establishing Jama'at-Khāna in the process (Nanji 1978: 74). It is likely that the Khojas arriving in Bombay in the 18th and 19th century came to reap the benefits of trade in the growing colonial entrepot following the decline of the northwest

Indian port city of Surat (Tindall 1982: 85-86). The Khojas lived clustered in several neighborhoods (*muhalla*) in Bombay and, according to reputation, engaged largely in trade (Masselos 1976: 77).

The Jama'at-Khāna in Bombay served as a center for ritual activity for the Khojas. The Khojas met there three times daily for prayer (*dū a*) and performing other religious ceremonies, such as the singing of devotional hymns (Ginān) (Masselos 1978: 102-103). A mosque overseen by a Sunni religious specialist (*mulla*) and a burial ground were also on the premises of the Jama'at-Khāna (Masselos 1978: 103). Although the Jama'at-Khāna controlled who might be buried in the burial ground, the Sunni religious specialist was responsible for performing funerals, which he did according to the Sunni style (Masselos 1978: 103). Likewise, while marriages in the mosque required the consent of the Jama'at-Khāna, another Sunni religious specialist, a Qazi, performed them (Arnould 1866).

The Jama'at-Khāna had some power in determining the membership in the Khoja community. Adult male members met weekly to vote on the matters brought before them by congregation members (Masselos 1978: 100). Although conversions of individuals and mass conversions of Hindu caste groups continued to bring new members to the community, membership in the Khoja community seems to primarily have been established by birth to Khoja parents (Sachedina 1995: 424). The congregation at times sanctioned marriages by men to non-Khoja women, but it appears that the congregation never sanctioned marriages by women to non-Khoja men (Masselos 1978: 101- 102).

In addition to its ability to sanction or deny marriages by members, the male members of the Jama'at-Khāna could seemingly regulate their membership through

excommunication. A striking example of this came in 1828-1829, when the Aga Khan, still living in Persia, but perhaps aware of the growing prosperity of the Khoja community in Bombay, sent his grandmother and an agent to Bombay to negotiate with members of the Jamaʻat-Khāna about paying the traditional 12.5% "tithe" (*dassondh*) (Masselos 1978: 104). The Aga Khan's emissaries calculated the tithe at 100,000 Rupees, of which the Jamaʻat-Khāna's membership agreed to pay 20,000, asserting that while they regarded the Aga Khan as a "holy man," he did not have the right to collect regular contributions from the Jamaʻat-Khāna as a whole (Masselos 1978: 105). The Aga Khan's emissaries took the matter to the Supreme Court, which considered this an internal caste matter and refused to hear it; instead, the court referred the matter to the Jamaʻat-Khāna, which under the pressure of the Aga Khan, excommunicated 12 members for continuing to refuse to pay the tithe (Masselos 1978: 105). Once the members agreed to comply with the decision by the membership to meet the Aga Khan's demands, however, they were re-admitted to the Jamaʻat-Khāna (Masselos 1978: 105).

The excommunication and subsequent readmission of members provides a prequel for the series of disputes set off by the Aga Khan's arrival in Bombay in 1845. In discussing these disputes, I focus on three court cases involving the Aga Khan and the Khojas, through which the basis of membership in the Jamaʻat-Khāna was transformed. Ostensibly, these court cases stemmed from disputes between the Aga Khan and the Khojas over tithe and access to the Jamaʻat-Khāna; in court, British judges viewed these disputes as historical questions about the Khojas' customs and origins (cf. Shodhan 2001: 97). The outcome of these trials would give, for a time at least, the Aga Khan legally sanctioned authority over the Ismaili community.

After leading a failed uprising against the Persian Shah in 1838, the spiritual head of the Ismaili community, the Aga Khan[3], fled to India and so came into contact with the Khojas and the British Raj (Daftary 1998: 197; Masselos 1978: 105; Dumasia 1939: 27-28). By the time he arrived in Bombay in 1846, the Shah of Persia had deposed the Aga Khan of his considerable land holdings, reducing him to a meager British army pension of 3,000 Rupees per month (Daftary 1998: 197; Dumasia 1939: 45-46).

The Aga Khan became increasingly involved in Khoja's affairs following his arrival in Bombay. In 1847, the Aga Khan sided with a woman bringing forth a lawsuit in the Bombay Supreme Court, heard by the British judge Erskine Perry (Perry 1853). The woman's petition argued that the Khojas ought to follow the laws of succession set forth in the Qur'an, which divided a man's estate equally among all of his children (Masselos 1978: 106; Perry 1853). The Khojas customarily followed Hindu rules of succession, which delivered the entirety of a man's property to his first son (Lokhandwalla 1967). In his decision, Perry states that every "well ordered community" must have a body of rules, either written laws or customs, to maintain the peace (Perry 1853: 115-116). Perry noted the existence, since "time immemorial," of the custom of passing property to the first son among the Khojas, and, thus, ruled against the Aga Khan's side (Perry 1853: 121). Perry's decision to respect inheritance customs was in keeping with the dictates of the British legal procedure in India to follow established custom in any case where no body of written law was applicable. Perry's decision was also consistent with the British view that Indian customs had deep roots in the past and his decision served to fix those customs as legal precedent. As Dirks (1997: 202) notes

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[3] The Shah of Persia granted the 46th Ismaili Imam, Hasan Ali Shah, the honorary title of Aga Khan ("Great Lord") (Daftary 1990: 504-505). No Imam prior to him possessed the title. The title has passed to each succeeding Imam and remains the term by which the Ismaili Imams are known throughout the world.

about British procedures concerning custom, it "became something that was changed and transformed most when it was held to be both totalizing and invariant."

Despite Perry's judgment, there would be more disagreements between the Aga Khan and members of the community. While exiled to Calcutta in April of 1848, the Aga Khan ordered the excommunication of two members, and sought to take direct control of the Jama'at-Khāna when he returned in November of the same year (Masselos 1978: 107). The excommunicated members proceeded with a suit against the Aga Khan for readmission to the Jama'at-Khāna (Masselos 1978: 107). The case again found its way to Erskine Perry in 1851 in the Bombay Supreme Court. The excommunicated Khojas argued that the Aga Khan was neither a descendent of Pir Sadruddin nor a Khoja, and that he had taken over property held communally (Masselos 1978: 108). The Aga Khan and his supporters maintained that he was the community's pīr, or spiritual guide, and that he was entitled to control their property (Masselos 1978: 108).

Perry's second decision would seem in keeping with his belief in customary procedure as the basis for making decisions concerning the Khojas. In Perry's decision, the litigants' petitions concerning the Aga Khan and his relationship to the Khojas once again did not seem to have much impact. Perry laid out what he termed a "bill of rights," effectively denying the Aga Khan the right to interfere in Jama'at-Khāna elections, in the hopes that the Khojas would be able to elect their own officers and "manage their caste affairs among themselves, without rendering any further application to the court necessary" (Arnould 1866: 328, 353). To have access to the Jama'at-Khāna, following Perry's decision, meant having been born into the caste, thus emphasizing the role of birth in deciding membership in the Khoja community.

Perry's decision did more than settle an internal dispute within the Khoja community; it also offered a representation of the Khoja community in his decision, with a power akin to the representations produced in the census and ethnographic survey (Dirks 2001; Cohn 1987). The court, thus, became a site for the production of knowledge about the Khojas for the British Raj. Added to the power of these representations was the coercive aspect of British law because, in theory, the full power of Raj's police force would enforce Perry's "bill of rights."

This attitude towards property and caste affairs also resonated with the emerging British policy of relying on local institutions to regulate their own affairs. Indeed, as Amrita Shodhan (2001: 83) notes, the decision is in keeping with the British view of castes as self-governing institutions and the idea that caste disputes should be settled according to local custom. This emphasis on using local custom fit with colonists' historical understanding of their subjects and their subject's institutions. As the British judge, Henry Sumner Maine (2000: 153-154), writing in 1861, demonstrates, the British saw village communities in India as unchanged from their origins in deep antiquity, and believed that in these communities property was held in common and maintained through ties of blood. Perry replicates this view of Indian property ownership by making membership in the Khoja community, as determined by ties of birth, to the Jama'at-Khāna. Encapsulated in Perry's decision was the British policy of indirect rule in Bombay, whereby the British sought to maintain caste institutions to regulate community affairs.

The formerly excommunicated members were, thus, able to rejoin the congregation after Perry's decision in 1851 (Arnould 1866: 353). There seems to have

been little unrest in the community until the Aga Khan saw in print an article stating that the Khojas were Sunni in 1861 (Arnould 1866: 354). The Aga Khan responded by circulating a petition for signature among the Khoja community, asserting that the Khojas were Shi'a Ismaili and that he was their living Imam (Arnould 1866: 354). While the Aga Khan's sympathizers seem to have characterized him as their spiritual guide, the Aga Khan now asked them to "peremptorily" declare that they were both Ismaili Shi'a bound to him as their living Imam (Arnould 1866: 354). But more importantly, the petition declared that because the British promised the protection of religious expression, the Khojas could now openly embrace the religion that "their ancestors held secretly" and cease performing marriages and funerals in the Sunni manner (Arnould 1866: 354).

Once again members of the community were excommunicated in 1862 (Sachedina 1995: 425), eventually resulting in a court case heard by Joseph Arnould in Bombay High Court in 1866. The excommunicated members, as the plaintiffs, stated in their petition that:

> trust premises [*i.e. the Khoja Jama'at-Khāna*] are holden and ought to be applied to and for the original charitable, religious, and public use for which…[it] intended so to be; and for the sole benefit for the Khoja sect and none other; and that no person professing Shi'a opinions in matters of religion and religious discipline, is entitled unto, or ought to have, any share or interest therein, or any voice in the management thereof. (Arnould 1866: 324)

They added that Pir Sadruddin converted the Khojas to Sunni Islam, and that no Khoja abandoning Sunni practice could be admitted (Arnould 1866: 325). The move to claim that the Khojas were Sunnis is an inexplicable one, breaking radically with the dissenter's previous claims that they were neither Sunni nor Shi'a, but a separate religion entirely. Perhaps the plaintiffs wished to move closer to the Sunni majority in Bombay or were

defining their position in contradistinction to the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan, as a named defendant, argued that the case ought to be dismissed on the grounds that it was a caste matter and that, as such, the majority view must prevail (Arnould 1866: 325-326). The Aga Khan noted that of the 1,400 Khoja households or families in Bombay, only 400 sided with the plaintiffs (Arnould 1866: 347). If the judge decided against dismissing the case, however, the Aga Khan argued that if it could be proven that Pir Sadruddin originally converted the Khojas to Ismaili Shi'ism, then the defendants' side must prevail in court (Arnould 1866: 325-326). This counter-suit further alleged that the plaintiffs had adopted Sunni custom as matter of *taqīya* ("precautionary dissimulation", to protect themselves from persecution by the Sunni majority (Arnould 1866: 326).

Arnould did a fair amount of research about taqīya, noting that its "full-applied meaning is 'concealment of a man's own religious opinions and the adoption of alien religious forms'—either from a desire to avoid giving offence or from dread of persecution" (Arnould 1866: 337). Arnould quickly dismissed the possibility that Sunni religious practices allegedly carried out under guise of taqīya were actually institutionalized or authentic expressions of faith; in considering the argument that Sunni practices persisted in the Khoja community "long after their reason of their first establishment [i.e. persecution]," Arnould writes that this argument "has no appreciable bearing on the question as to what, from the beginning, were their religious opinions and tenets" (Arnould 1866: 363). The question of taqīya's influence over the Khojas instead led Arnould to consider the historical origins of the Khojas and to ascertain what their true religious beliefs were at the time of their conversion. On the one hand, this was an effort by a British agent to accommodate the colonial desire to distinguish between

authentic and inauthentic traditions as supported by historical texts, and the desire to return the Khojas to what he considered their authentic past (Dirks 1997: 204). On the other, this move relied on a curious logic, which stated that Khojas' beliefs at the time of their conversion were their true beliefs in the present.

As Shodhan (2001: 82) notes, Arnould's arguments that the Khojas' beliefs at the time of their conversion were really their true beliefs in the present relied on a peculiar idea about religion that discounted present practice and priveleged historical origins. This argument was consistent with the Aga Khan's pleadings, which stated that the Khojas were and had always been Shi'a Ismailis. The effect of both arguments constructed a symbolic continuity between the Khojas' past tradition and their changing religious tradition in the present (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 287). This continuity presupposed the naturalness of the Khojas' existence as Shi'a Ismailis.

Shodhan (2001) has also noted that the shift between British representations of the Khojas as a caste and then later as a sect. What I find striking is that this shift in categories coincided with a change from ties of birth to belief in deciding who could enter the Jama'at-Khāna. Arnould's decision relied on the religious beliefs of the Khojas at the time of their conversion, as he interpreted that belief from the historical record. Whatever the connections between the British Raj and Aga Khan's interests, one cannot dismiss the fact that both the plaintiff and defendants were able to renegotiate the terms of the judicial categories employed in court. By arguing for belief as the basis for entering the Jama'at-Khāna, all sides redefined what the term Khoja meant for the purposes of court; Perry had administered the Khojas as a birth-defined caste and Arnould administered them as a belief-defined sect (Arnould 1866: 363c).

Arnould concluded that given the historical record, that "from their beginning" the Khojas were and are Shi'a Ismailis bound by "ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary Imams of the Ismailis" (Arnould 1866: 363c). Arnould ruled that because, in his opinion, Jama'at-Khāna had been built with funds originally intended for the Imam, the Aga Khan had complete control over and legal ownership of the Khoja Jama'at-Khāna (Arnould 1866: 363c). Arnould reversed the language of the plaintiffs' petition, stating that anyone of the Sunni "persuasion…'is not entitled unto, nor ought he to have any share or interest in the public property of the Khoja community'" (Arnould 1866: 363d). For official purposes, the Khojas were now Shi'a Ismaili's under the Imamate of the Aga Khan (Masselos 1978: 112; Sachedina 1995: 424-425). Just as in Perry's court decision, Arnould's produced a powerful representation of the Khoja community backed by the full power of the Raj's police apparatus (Dirks 2001; Cohn 1990).

Even before the advent of indirect rule, the colonial courts sought to maintain order in the subcontinent through a reliance on indigenous institutions. The process involved not only solving potentially dangerous intra-community disputes, but likewise involved supporting and establishing indigenous institutions capable of resolving community affairs. For the Khojas, this meant a shift from the power of local leaders to regulate community affairs to the authority of the Imam in such matters. In the process, the history served as means of discursively legitimating the decisions made by British officers. Moreover, the internal politics of the past in the Khoja community, shaped the British officers use of history as a legitimating discourse.

Although Joseph Arnould's decision made it impossible for the Khojas professing beliefs outside of the Ismaili Shi'ism articulated by the Aga Khan to gain access to the

Jama'at-Khāna, the dissenters completed building a new Jama'at-Khāna in 1875 (Khoja Sunnat Jamat 1969: 6). Unlike the other Khoja Jama'at-Khāna founded by those dissenting from the Aga Khan, this new Jama'at-Khāna was explicitly for those professing the Sunni Islamic faith, reflected in the name "Khoja Sunnat Jama'at" (Khoja Sunnat Jamat 1969). Not surprisingly, the new congregation's depicted the Khojas as always having been Sunni. (Khoja Sunnat Jamat 1969: 1-5). The new Jama'at-Khāna contained a reading room, library, and a Mosque officiated by a Sunni Mulla (Khoja Sunnat Jamat 1969: 6)

A schism with broader impact occurred in early 20th century, when a large number of Khojas left the community to form a Jama'at-Khāna for Khojas adhering to the Ithna-Asharia branch of Shi'a Islam. In the years following the Arnould's decision, some Khojas became influenced by the teachings of a Ithna-Asharia mullah, Qadir Husayn, who in 1862 opened a religious school in one a Khoja neighborhood (Sachedina 1995: 425). By 1878, a British officer working on a bill of intestate succession for Khoja community noted that some 50 families secretly adhered to the Ithna-Asharia faith but "merely for the purpose of procuring sepulture for their dead, given an ostensible adherence to His Highness Aga Khan and his party, and would at once sever themselves from that party if a separate cemetery were obtained." (Judicial Department 36 of 1878). But it was not until later when the Ithna-Asharia Khojas finally declare independence from the Ismaili community, establishing a new cemetery, Aramabaug, in Mazgaon and, a new Jama'at-Khāna in Dongri. At present, the Ithna-Asharia Khojas number over 100,000 worldwide (http://www.world-federation.org/Misc/KSI+History/), and has gained adherents amongst Khojas living in North America and East Africa since its

inception. While many of the Ithna-Asharia Khojas are the descendants of families that left the Ismaili community in the early 20th century, I came across several instances of Khojas adopting the Ithna-Asharia faith more recently.

Community Institutions

In the years that followed the Aga Khan gaining legal-sanctioned authority over the Ismaili community, a number of local councils were established to oversee the social and spiritual welfare of the Ismaili community. The organizational structure of this array of councils has changed over time, but its current form is based on the Ismaili Constitution of 1986. The Constitution aimed to create as uniform structure of governance for the worldwide Ismaili community, especially given that many Ismaili leaders felt that there were inconsistencies in the way that the Jama'at operated in different parts of the world. In response to such inconsistencies, the constitution created a modular organizational structure that the Ismaili leadership could reproduce in all of the countries where Ismailis lived. Of particular note for this dissertation are the bodies that oversee the religious and social life of the Ismaili community: the Jama'at-Khāna, the Ismaili Religious and Tarīqah Education Board, and the Aga Khan Council for India.

It would not be an understatement to describe the Jama'at-Khāna ("house of congregation," "prayer hall") as being the central institution for Ismailis living throughout the world. As I mentioned in the introduction, the Jama'at-Khāna exists for the exclusive use of the Ismaili community. There are nearly 20 Jama'at-Khāna in Mumbai, each serving a congregation in a particular geographic area. Ismaili housing colonies often have their own Jama'at-Khāna on the grounds; others exist on separate property. The Jama'at-Khāna is the center of religious and social life. Ismailis attend services there three times a day. They go there to hear lectures elucidating aspects of

religious doctrine and practice by *waez* and *waeza* ("male and female preachers"). They may go to the Jama'at-Khāna seeking guidance about personal problems or questions about religious issues from its chief officer, the *Mukhi*. Ismailis also go there to socialize, spending time chatting, snacking, or playing cards with other families in the canteen.

While the Jama'at-Khāna is the most proximate religious institution for Ismails, a larger institution oversees the development religious curriculum and the training of religious educators. This organization is known as the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board (*ITREB*). ITREB produces and disseminates much of the religious materials to other Ismailis. For instance, it is through ITREB that the officers at various Jama'at-Khānas receive communications from the Aga Khan such as *farmans* ("guidance") and *talika* ("blessings"), which are then passed on to other Ismailis. Some of ITREB's employees also helped to develop the Ta'līm ("education") curriculum, a set of books and lesson plans for instructing Ismaili children in religious matters. ITREB is also in charge of training volunteer teachers who teach the Ta'līm curriculum as well as the preachers that speak in the Jama'at-Khāna.

Finally, the Aga Khan Council for India, helps to promote the social welfare of the community. In addition to managing trusts established to fund the building of Ismaili housing societies, the council also advises members of those societies on matters related to their health, safety, and the maintenance of their property. Historically, it has been the role of the local council to keep the Imam informed about local economic and political issues affecting the community as whole. Indeed, at times the Council may even offer suggestions to the Aga Khan about the community's needs (van Grondelle 2009: 92). Another important function for the council is communicating with members of the press.

To this end, they have a Communications Coordinator who is responsible for communicating information about the community and its service projects.

In summary, this chapter has described how Ismailis are connected to and separated from others though occupation, language, and marriage. I concluded by considering the history of the Ismaili community, especially their relationship to a transnational religious figure, has tied into the uniqueness and separateness of the Ismaili community. In the next chapter, I consider how Ismailis have drawn symbolic boundaries around their religious tradition.

Chapter 3:
Ismaili Religious Practice and the Islamic Revival

<u>1. Introduction</u>
Over the course of my conversations with Muslims living in Mumbai, I often heard

people use a "saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad" (*Hadīth*) to explain the

existence of many different Muslim communities living in Mumbai—the Deobandis,

Bohras, and Ismailis to name but a few—and their diverse approaches to the Islamic

religion. The Hadīth, as I most often heard it, is this: "The Prophet said that after his

death, the 'community of Muslims believers' (*ummah)* will be divided into 73 'sects'

(*firqa)*. Of these 73, only one *firqa* will follow Islam correctly (*sahīh*)."[1]

While this short Hadīth might at first seem unremarkable, at least to those of us

who do not practice Islam, it is notable because it neatly encapsulates ideas about the

composition of Muslim society and the nature of the Islamic religion. The idea is that

although there are many communities who are nominally Muslim, there is nonetheless a

single, proper form of Islamic practice, and yet many Muslims diverge from this model.

The meaning that individual Muslims give to this Hadīth does, however, vary depending

on their own views of the Islamic religion. I will return to the various interpretations that

I heard of this Hadīth throughout the chapter, but for the moment I will allude to two

major interpretive models: For some Muslims, this Hadīth explains the existence of

people whom claim to be Muslims but are in fact not, and reinforces the assumption that

there is one correct model of Islamic practice. This is true even if God alone will judge

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[1] A more authoritative version of this Hadīth reads: "The Jews after the prophet Moses split into 71 factions. The Christians after the prophet Jesus split into 72 factions. The Muslims after the prophet Muhammad split into 73 factions. All of them [are/will be] in Hell, except only one faction, that which follows my example. (Cited in Bowen 1993: 70)

who is a Muslim. For others, this and other Hadīth serve as evidence that Islam is a diverse religious tradition and that one ought to avoid judging others.

In this chapter, I explore the discourses that Ismailis and other Muslims create to evaluate the Muslimness of others. In particular, I am concerned with the ways that Ismailis respond to discourses—produced in the context of global efforts by Muslims to renew and reform the Islamic religion—that link Islamic piety and membership in the Islamic religion to following a single model of ritual practice based on the life of the Prophet. I refer to this attitude, one produced by some Muslim scholars and reproduced by Muslims in their everyday lives, as a set of discourses about orthopraxy (cf. Asani 2001: 160). Muslim discourses about orthopraxy are significant in that they treat religious practice—prayer, veiling, fasting, etc.—as signs or emblems of practitioners' commitments to the Islamic faith. For their part, Ismailis tend to view their religion from a pluralist perspective, a perspective both complemented and contradicted by the Ismaili religions' emphasis on finding the "esoteric"[2] (*bātin*) inner meaning of rituals and texts. This model of pluralism posits the existence of boundaries between religious traditions, noting the need to tolerate and respect their distinct approaches to seeking deeper truths. Pluralism and esotericism notwithstanding, the fact that many Muslims promote an exclusionary discourse that posits the existence of a single model of Islam is troubling for Ismailis, who as members of the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam, are a minority within Mumbai's Muslim minority. While their religious practice has been reshaped by years of religious reform by their Imam, the Aga Khan, who some see as a religious leader

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[2] "Esoteric" here is a term of art used by scholars of the Ismaili religious tradition, and Khojas themselves, to discuss the religious traditions' focus on finding the inner, sometimes hidden or metaphorical, meaning of religious texts. I do not wish the reader to mistake me as employing an everyday usage of the term "esoteric" to say that the Ismaili tradition is "mystical," "irrational," or "cryptic."

attempting to "Islamize" Ismaili doctrine and practice (Asani 2001; Mallison 2001; Ruthven 1997), their religious practice still differs from that of other Muslims and is the source of some controversy.

If redrawing the boundaries around the Ismaili religion has been one response to this controversy, the other response lies in the Ismailis' development of a pluralist discourse about the Islamic religion. It is worth considering, then, the potential of pluralist discourse to counter the assumption evident in the discourse of orthopraxy that there is only one proper way to practice Islam. In this chapter, I examine how Ismailis construct a pluralistic model of the Islamic religion that allows them to see their differences from other Muslims as part of a diverse array of Islamic traditions. This pluralistic approach to the Islamic religion stands in marked contrast to the a unitary model of the Islamic religion evinced by many Muslims, who have largely been successful in shaping the terms of the debate in Mumbai about what constitutes Islam. One consequence of this success is that Ismailis have internalized crucial aspects of the discourse of orthopraxy. I suggest in this chapter that Ismailis have reformed some aspects of their ritual practice in response to criticism from other Muslims not only as a way to create the social space to practice the Ismaili version of Islam unmolested, but also because some Ismailis accept the links that the discourse of orthopraxy makes between practices as signs and Muslimness.

One concern in this chapter is to disentangle the ways that Muslim discourses about Islam express moral and semiotic concerns. Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirshkind (2006) have both argued that religious movements attempting to reform the practices of Muslims throughout the world have encouraged them to return to the

traditions of the Prophet as a way of creating virtuous persons with pious habits. Mahmood in particular argues that Muslims view religious practices, like praying five times daily or wearing the veil, as ways of creating moral subjects with pious dispositions, not as public symbols of Islamic faith. While Mahmood's viewpoint captures the moral sentiments of Islamic revitalization, it also obscures the position of those groups following Islamic traditions that do not conform to widely accepted notions of orthopraxy. Moreover, it obscures the fact that when confronted with the diversity of Islamic practice, those who equate orthopraxy with Muslimness consider Muslims' divergence from that model as a diacritical commentary on their Muslimness. They do not ask, for instance, about how other routine practices might lead to different types of moral selves. Thus, from the perspective of minorities with the Islamic religion, the semiotics of religious practice is critical in gaining recognition as Muslims.

Allow me one quick note before I begin. In looking at how some Muslims raise questions about the Muslimness of Ismailis, I do not wish to give the reader the impression that Ismailis are somehow not "real" Muslims. It is my contention throughout this dissertation that we must put the Ismailis' religious tradition on equal footing with those of other Muslims. I cannot, however, ignore how others view Ismailis, because their religious tradition is in many ways shaped by and in reaction to other discursive formations within Islam.

2. Religious Practices and Discourses in the Ismaili Community

In this section, I use ethnographic examples to detail Ismailis' ritual practice and their discourses about their religion, which largely present a pluralist attitude towards the Ismaili and Islamic religion. In section three, I move to compare and contrast the Ismailis' approach to Islamic religion with the exclusionary model promoted by some

other Muslims. This sets the stage for a more detailed discussion of how the discourses of Islamic reform focus on Ismailis' ritual practice to question there Muslimness (section four) and a discussion of how Ismailis have sought to accommodate aspects of Islamic reform by changing certain ritual practices (section five).

Pluralism and Esotericism in Ismaili Doctrine and Practice
The official version of Ismaili doctrine, as espoused by the Aga Khan and as taught in religious night schools for Ismaili, explains divergences in Ismaili ritual from the Sunni model of Islam by asserting that the Islamic religion is a plural faith. The Aga Khan often points to the internal diversity of the worldwide Ismaili community (*jama'at*) as evidence for this plurality of the Islamic faith. In this view, while the Ismaili religion (*dīn*) represents one amongst many unique approaches to the Islamic religion, their version of Islam is no more authoritative, or "real," than any other. Paralleling the nominalist approach to Islamic studies, the Aga Khan advises that Ismailis treat as Muslims anyone that says "the proclamation of faith" (*kalima),* Arabic *Shahadah)*. Translated into English, the proclamation declares "there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his messenger."

Returning to the Hadīth that I began this chapter with, the one that claims that out of 73 firqas ("sects;" "divisions") only one will practice Islam properly, an important Ismaili leader, Jamil,[3] shed some light on the officially sanctioned reading of this text. Jamil is a vibrant man in his early 40s who holds numerous degrees from abroad, despite humble beginnings. His youth and youthful appearance aside, he is an important official at the Mumbai Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board ("Tarīqah Board" or

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[3] In keeping with my human subjects' protocol with the University of Virginia's Internal Review Board, this, and all other names of informants, is a pseudonym. Also, several people quoted in this chapter asked that I not reveal their names or other identifying information.

"ITREB" for short), an institution established by the Aga Khan with the mandate to organize the religious life of Ismailis in India and provide them with religious training and education. One day, while treating me to lunch at an Indian-Chinese restaurant, Jamil told me during a conversation in English that in keeping with the Imam's promotion of a pluralist approach to Islam, "We [Ismailis] no longer teach the Hadīth about the 73 firqas." He added, "we used to teach this Hadīth with the message that *we are the Muslims on the real path*, but we don't even teach that anymore, because we have come to see all religions as an approach to the same truth...I know this because my Imam tells me so [emphasis added]."

Another indicator of the Ismailis' plural approach to religion emerges from an earlier conversation with Jamil and is related to Ismailis' attitudes towards conversion. Ismailis do not readily accept converts to their faith, and indeed Jamil has told me that when people approach the Tarīqah Board about converting, officials make the would-be converts' lives "miserable for donkey's years." I had often pushed him for explanations of why Ismailis do not readily allow outsiders to convert to their religion, arguing that it seemed that Ismailis do not accept converts because, in India, groups conducting missionary activity often meet with violence. Not accepting converts seemed like a pragmatic strategy in my mind, because as a minority within the Muslim minority, they would be especially vulnerable to violence. He usually told me that it was not just in India that Ismailis did not accept converts, but that one would find this same attitude wherever Ismailis lived, whether in East Africa or Canada. I had planned to unveil a new rhetorical ploy on the day in question. I was going to argue that Ismailis did not accept converts in other parts of the world because there were structural parallels between

Ismailis' experience as a minority in India and Pakistan and as an immigrant minority in places like East Africa. After hearing me out, Jamil finally told me, again in English, that when other Muslims approach him about converting to the Ismaili faith, he can tell them that there is no need to convert since they are both trying to get at the truth. In his view, this ecumenicalism should be extended to religions outside of Islam; he told me that when Hindus approach him about converting to the Ismaili faith, he often tells them that he has "no problem with Ram or Shiva." Pluralism thus makes even conversion unnecessary.

But even if many Ismailis acknowledge that religions are all different paths to the same truth, they also see their religion as unique. In addition to their focus on the spiritual leadership of the Aga Khan, Ismailis express the uniqueness of the Ismaili faith by referencing its emphasis on the inner meaning of ritual practice.

Ismailis' sometimes compare their emphasis on the hidden, esoteric meaning of religious texts and practices to Sufism. Sufis have institutionalized their diverse approaches to Islam as "religious orders" (*tarīqah,* literally "path"), each organized around a "spiritual lineage" (*silsilah*) of teachers (*murshid*) and disciples (*murīd*). Ismailis often use this same terminology, referring to their approach to the Islamic religion as a path (*tarīqah*), in addition to describing their relationship with the Aga Khan in terms of disciple (*murīd*) and teacher (*murshid*). Moreover, Ismailis express their connection to the Sufi tradition through ideas about ritual (*ibādat*), by pointing to their distinctive meditative practice (*bandagi*). Ismailis describe their meditative practice as something they do together in the early morning at the Jama'at-Khāna and it involves the reciting of the names of Allah or concentration on a "sacred name" (*bol* or *ism-e azam)*. It

is through this and other meditative practices that Ismailis come to understand religious truth (*haqīqat*), yet another parallel with Sufism's gnostic epistemology

As such, Ismailis sometimes refer to themselves privately as "*bātinī* ('esoteric') Muslims" and they strike a contrast with Sunnis by labeling them "zāhirī ('exoteric') Muslims." Ismailis say Sunnis are "exoteric Muslims" because they focus on the literal meanings of religious texts and do not look for their hidden, inner meaning. Ismailis also point out that, in contrast to other Muslims, they do not follow the Sharī'a, or codified Islamic Law. Indeed, Ismailis sometimes replace the term "*zāhirī*" (again, "exoteric") with "*Sharī'ati*" ("of the Sharī'a") to describe the Sunni approach to Islam.

Ismailis' move away from the Sharī'a is a long-standing aspect of their doctrine, dating back to Hasan Sabah (d. 1166), an Ismaili missionary from the Alamut region of Iran, who declared the advent of a spiritual resurrection (*qiyama*) in 1164 (Daftary 1998: 138). This led to a doctrinal belief in the perfectibility of the human person and put an end once and for all to Ismailis' acknowledgment of the Sharī'a (Daftary 1998: 138-140). Hasan Sabah's proclamation encouraged Ismailis to look to the inner meaning of religious texts, to find religious truth (*haqīqat*) in the person of the Imam, and to find the "inner, spiritual meaning" of Islamic law (Daftary 1998: 139, 141). In contemporary times, Ismailis tend to see the distinction as this: while other Muslims are concerned with outward practice and public performance of certain legalistic guidelines, Ismailis focus on the inner meaning of ritual and practice. It is not necessarily that Ismailis lack any notion of following practical guidelines. The notion of *farmanbardari* ("obedience to the religious edicts [*farmans*] of the Aga Khan") includes following the Aga Khan's guidance as expressed in his religious edits and spiritual allegiance to the Imam. But even these

edicts are thought to contain the esoteric knowledge of the Aga Khan, whom Ismailis treat as a manifestation of Allah's light, with special access to the inner meaning of religious texts and worldly events.

While it might seem reasonable to search for the roots of the Ismailis' pluralist conception of Islam in the esotericism of their religious tradition, we start to notice that the esoteric approach is also a point of distinction on which Ismailis formulate their superiority to other Muslims. Their focus on the inner meaning of texts is compatible with pluralism to extent that one acknowledges that the same truth underlies all religious traditions and that the difference lies in how one accesses that truth. But it is also the case that one might view the esoteric path itself in way that privileges it over other traditions. What I am pointing to here is the tension between the Aga Khan's emphasis on pluralism and Ismailis' conception of themselves as the "esoteric Muslims."

I have already mentioned that Ismailis used to teach the Hadīth mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, but I have not mentioned that I first heard this Hadīth from an Ismaili man while training in Gujarati in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. I had met this man, who was a retired doctor, through a teacher's colleague. We had a short, hour-long conversation. On that day, he told me that Ismailis were the only Muslim sect that followed a living descendant of the Prophet— Ismailis consider the Aga Khan to be a living descendant of Imam Ali and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima— and were thus more closely aligned with the Prophet's wishes. But more to the point, he moved on to tell me the Hadīth about how only one of the 73 sects of Islam would be right, emphasizing that the Prophet intended Muslims to follow an "esoteric path" (*bātinī tarīqah*). This is in keeping with the assertion by some Ismailis, and some other Muslims, that they are

something of an aloof community that looks down on others. It is also evidence that some Ismailis have come to doubt whether their own religious practice is in keeping with the model of orthopraxy that has gained ascendancy during the Islamic revival.

This is not the only way that Ismailis articulate the exclusionary sentiments evinced in the discourse of orthopraxy, because some Ismailis are themselves influenced by the idea of single, unitary version of Islam. The following conversational exchange exemplifies how some Ismailis articulate the ideas of the discourse of Islamic orthopraxy. Near the end of my fieldwork, I was visiting my friend Ali's shop in the western suburbs of Mumbai. He and his uncle, Rafiq, were asking me questions about my fieldwork. Their questions reflected an interest in finding out what was "good" and "bad" about the Ismaili community, questions that as an cultural anthropologist I was accustomed to hearing, but nonetheless baffled about how to answer. Fortunately, my informants often took the role of teacher and usually preempted my attempts at formulating answers. This time, I began to answer by saying that I was impressed by just how many Ismailis were involved in volunteer service work and the ways that Ismailis did so as part of their ideas (*khayāl*) about Islam. Rafiq politely interrupted me, "But Ismailis do not know the proper way (*sahīh tarīqah*) of Islam. Other Muslims know about Islam and the Holy Qur'an. We do not." I was exasperated by this response, but it continued my interest in understanding how Ismailis, who were taught a pluralist conception of the Islamic faith, interact with discourse of Islamic orthopraxy. In this next section, I will turn to outlining how efforts by Islamic reformers have led some Muslims to espouse a discourse of the Islamic religion that equates the Islamic religion with a single model of orthopraxy.

3. The Islamic Revival and the Discourses about Orthopraxy

That the Islamic revival has led many Muslims to focus on particular reading of the Qur'an and Hadīth would not necessarily be a problem for Ismailis, except that it has come to inform the thoughts and actions of a number of Muslims in Mumbai and that, at times, these Muslims are important interlocutors for Ismailis. Many religious teachers in Mumbai promote religious discourse containing attitudes and assumptions about the proper practice of the Islamic religion that aim to encourage Muslims to follow a particular version of Islam that bases its notion of authoritative ritual practice on the Hadīth and Qur'an. While such discourses are propagated through the institutional support of seminaries like the Dar-ul Uloom at Deoband, in my view it is largely the way these discourses are made manifest in peoples' talk that is at issue. It is true that the emphasis on orthopraxy in Islam and perhaps the origin of seminaries that support and expound discourses about proper ritual practice in South Asia dates back to at least the colonial period, though many informants pointed to the Mumbai riots of 1993 as giving particular force to the public campaign to encourage visible signs of Muslim piety as a kind of identity politics; for instance, following the riots Muslims were encouraged to adopt orthoprax forms of dress, such as skull caps (*topī*) and growing out their beards, to assert the rights of Muslims to live openly in Mumbai. "They were saying that we cannot hide, that we should be proud to be Muslims," as one Muslim shopkeeper explained to me about the period after the riots. An emphasis on orthopraxy may have been meant to promote a sense of Muslim unity in the face of a violent onslaught orchestrated by some Hindu-nationalist groups, but it may also have led to an emphasis on internal divisions between Muslim communities.

Ismailis, and indeed other Muslims, recognize the existence of proponents of Islamic reform by imagining figures such as *miyabhāī* and *Wahhabi*.[4] Though Urdu-speaking Muslims from North India may have originally used the term "miyabhāī" as a term of endearment ("*miya*" means "noble," *bhāī* means "brother") it is now used by many Hindus and some Muslims as a pejorative. In everyday usage, when people call someone "miyabhāī" it is typically to refer to poor or working class Muslim migrants. Many of the working-class Muslims from northern India live together in areas surrounding Mumbai Central, areas sometimes associated with rough-and-tumble street politics and crime. The presence of migrant workers in Mumbai has been a source of constant tension for Mumbaikars, who often disparage their countrified ways and outlook. Middle or upper-class Muslims in Mumbai sometimes insult working-class migrant Muslim by painting a stereotypical picture of the miyabhāī, whom as one friend put it are both "illiterate" and "conservative" in their views on Islam.[5] This rather condescending stereotype of the miyabhāī obscures the existence of learned Muslims from the northern states, but it also serves as a way for many Muslims to contrast their own ideas with those of others.

The Wahhabi occupies a somewhat different space in people's minds. A friend of mine, Hussein, once neatly summed up what he means by the term Wahhabi. Hussein is

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[4] By raising the figure of the Wahabi, I do not wish to allow the idea of fundamentalism to enter through the back door. Despite a number of excellent efforts to develop fundamentalism as an analytical concept by looking to common emphases on textual literalism among certain religious movements (Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2001; Nagata 2001), I remain skeptical that we should lump together a variety of religious discourses as fundamentalist. For example, Judith Nagata's (2001) insightful discussion of Islamic fundamentalism as an approach to the Islamic religion that imagines itself as anti-hermeneutic would create a notion of fundamentalism applicable to any movement that sees itself as following the literal meaning of religious texts. This is a feature common to any number of movements, not only the particular Christian or Islamic movements cited in the studies above. I feel that in recent years "fundamentalist" has become too loaded a term, a dirty word used by some to describe movements they imagine as violent or backwards, to be used in this analysis. Not to mention that the ulema has long been engaged in developing a hermeneutic tradition (*tafsīr*) relating to the Qur'an and Hadīth.

[5] Hindus also use this as a derogatory term for Muslims in general and it was often used as part of inflammatory rhetoric during the 1992-1993 Bombay riots.

a young, recently married Ithna-Asharia Shi'a man, who was originally from Lucknow, but now owns a shop in Mumbai's sprawling Western Suburbs. While chatting in Urdu over coffee, he exclaimed "the problem in Mumbai was all the Wahhabis." When pressed for what he meant by Wahhabi, he explained that members of certain Sunni communities, the Deobandis or Ahl-i-Hadīth in particular, were very strict. "I know they look at me strangely," he said, "because I don't wear a beard and dress like this." At the time he was wearing a tight tee shirt and a pair of faded jeans. Although there are certainly some Muslims in Mumbai who self-consciously follow the schools of religious thought associated with Wahhabism, people rarely use the term Wahhabi to describe themselves in Mumbai. Instead, the figure of the Wahhabi serves a trope for people to assert a particular set of values and beliefs to others. It is not a term that clearly indicates a link to the Wahhabi's specific school of thought about Islamic jurisprudence, but rather describes some Muslims' stereotypes of those who they see as being more strict or conservative. I should add here that by attributing such views to Wahhabis, Muslims create a connection between these views and a globalized version of Islam, which is created and spread throughout the diverse places in the world where Muslims live.

The landscape of Mumbai is marked by visible signs of the existence of an increased awareness of creating piety through religious practice. I often saw bumper stickers affixed to the walls of shops reading "*namāz tark karna mana hai*," meaning "not saying (quitting) namāz is forbidden." Other stickers read "say *Inshallah* ('God willing')," encouraging people to mark sentences in the future tense with the qualification that it will be done if God wills it, creating a moral disposition through people's speech. Throughout predominately Muslim neighborhoods like Dongri or Muhammed Ali Road,

one finds bookshops selling beautifully embossed volumes of the Qur'an and Hadīth, in addition to a variety of pamphlets outlining the proper way to perform namāz. A friend who worked for one bookseller, where I often purchased collections of short stories in Urdu, encouraged me to buy several of these pamphlets, perhaps asking me to take my interest in Muslim culture to the next step by actually becoming a Muslim. The pamphlets, which sat prominently next to the register, contain diagrams laying out the exact positions where one should keep their hands while namāz, a subject of controversy among some Muslims.

Scholars of Islam in South Asia, and some Indian Muslims, commonly think that the emphasis on Islamic orthopraxy is primarily a reaction against the persistence of Muslims' pre-conversion practices as Hindus. This view is contradicted by van der Veer (1992), who shows that members of a reformist group, the Tablighi Jamat, do not object to Muslims attending festivals at Sufi saints' tombs in Surat, as is commonly believed, on the grounds that such shrines are a syncretic blend of Hindu and Muslim ideas. Instead, members of the Tablighi Jamat object to certain ritual acts committed by Muslims at saints' tombs, in particular asking for the saint's intercession and thus committing the sin of putting a personage before Allah (*shirk*). I am convinced by van der Veer's account. But while he may be right about the Tablighi Jamat, there are still important social commentaries on Muslim communities that focus on their status as converts and their failure to uproot putative Hindu practices.

I do not mean to portray the Islamic revival as part of an overly legalist tradition, one only interested that Muslims meet certain ritual obligations. There are also considerations about the inner-state of practitioners during ritual, most notably that

persons performing namāz or reciting the proclamation of faith must do so with sincerity (*ikhlās*). I might note, however, that this sincerity is primarily an issue in the performance of particular ritual actions, such as performing prayer or even reciting the proclamation of faith. For instance, we might view the proclamation of faith in two lights. On one hand, it is a reflection of Muslims' belief that there is only one God and that Mohammad is his messenger. And it is considered to be a belief that Muslims must hold sincerely. But on the other hand, it is a *proclamation*, more literally a witnessing, and as such ought to be considered an action or practice (Izutsu 1965: 58, 67, 92).

Scholars like Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) have convincingly argued that Muslims do not treat ritual practice simply as symbols of their commitment to Islam so much as they see practice as a means of creating pious subjects. Both scholars suggest that Muslims engage in ethical practices ranging from prayer to listening to audio tapes of sermons as a means of cultivating a moral habitus that leads the practitioner to do right and avoid wrong, to think constantly of god. Yet while Mahmood and Hirschkind are correct to note the importance that Muslims ascribe to creating moral dispositions through ritual practice, ideas about sincerity, ethics, or moral personhood rarely enter into discussions of Ismaili practice because Ismailis do not perform the rituals that others consider to be constitutive of being Muslim. For instance, those interested in Islamic orthopraxy rarely question the sincerity of Ismailis' performance of prayer, because the form of their prayers is different from those of others. Moreover, few are concerned with the types of moral subjectivity that Ismailis' performance of the prayer might create, because it is different from that of other Muslims. Ismailis do recite the proclamation of faith, but it is their devotion to the Aga

Khan that raises questions in the minds of other Muslims, who sometimes assert that Ismailis treat him as if he were God.

In regards to the Hadīth that I begin this chapter with, it is perhaps obvious that some Muslims insist that their community is the one sect out of 73 that correctly follows Islam. One reading I heard of this Hadīth was from Imran, my former Urdu teacher in Mumbai, who follows the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam and grew up in Saudi Arabia. Imran told me, upon my asking for his exegesis, that the Hadīth means that only those that follow the "example of the Prophet" (*Sunnat*) would go to heaven. He felt that this position was best exemplified by the Deobandi school of Islamic thought, though he would not claim that those following other schools would be excluded from heaven. In his view, only God can decide this.

Many other Muslims share such viewpoints and share an open and inclusive definition of the Islamic religion. Before leaving Mumbai, I paid a visit a small hotel that catered primarily to Muslims visiting from the Middle East and East Africa, where I had previously stayed and knew the owner and several employees. The owner asked me, after so many years, why it was that I spoke Urdu. I told him a bit about my project and he wanted to know what "I had learned." I told him that one thing puzzling me was that so many people told me that Muslims were one and yet so many people thought Ismailis were not Muslim. He stopped me before I finished my sentence and I heard the Hadīth about the 73 firqas one final time. When he reached the end, he told me that the lesson was that "no one could possibly know who was right or wrong, so why not treat the person in front of you (*sāmnewālā*) with love?"

While adherents of discourses of Islamic renewal are hesitant to engage in *takfir* ("the practice of branding other Muslims as heretics," "heretic" being a *kāfir*), as was Imran and the hotel owner, the effort to link ritual observance with what it means to be Muslim does spiral out into labeling others as un-Islamic. Consider as an example an incident involving the Indian Muslim actor, Salman Khan, which was widely reported in the Indian press (Cf. Ahmad 2007). On September 24, 2007, Salman Khan, along with the Hindu actress Preity Zinta, visited a site housing the Hindu deity, Lord Ganesh, during the Hindu Ganpati festival (*utsav*). Following the visit, a question was sent to a member of the Barelvi seminary asking if Muslims, like Salman Khan, who attended prayer (*pūja*) in front of idols (*mūrti*) during the Ganpati festival were still Muslims. The answer stopped short of calling such people infidels, but did say that they must again recite the proclamation of faith (*kalima*) in order to be deemed Muslim.

In the next section I detail how ideas about Islamic orthopraxy emerge in people's talk and everyday encounters to describe how some Muslims evaluate Ismailis' ritual practices and to detail what is at stake for Ismailis in these evaluations.

4. Everyday Evaluations

When people say that Ismailis are not properly speaking Muslims, they point to specific (ritual) practices to justify their claims. In this section I look at talk and instances of everyday encounters involving discussions of Ismailis' prayer, the presence of women in the Jama'at-Khāna, and keeping the fast during the month Ramadan. These examples reveal how other Muslims treat the performance, or non-performance, of certain rituals as indexes of Ismailis' Muslimness. I begin, as a point of illustration, with a discussion of three stories reproduced from my fieldnotes:

Encountering Prayer

While returning from an interview with an Ismaili leader, I was questioned by a Muslim rickshaw driver about why I spoke Hindi. Upon finding out that I was in living in Mumbai to conduct research on Islam, specifically about the Ismaili community, he proceeded to explain that Ismailis were not Muslims. He asked me if it was true that Ismailis neither perform namāz (*namāz paRHna*) nor face Mecca when they pray, namāz being the form of daily prayer common to Sunni Muslims. When I confirmed to him that Ismailis in fact do not face Mecca nor do they typically perform namāz, he shook his head and told me that they could not truly be considered Muslims. This was an oft-repeated criticism of the Ismaili community.

I heard a similar formulation from Jamshed, a man born into the Ismaili community, who left in it his early twenties. Now in his mid-thirties, he had since married a Sunni woman from another community and considered himself Sunni. I reproduce here a short exchange from our conversation in transcript form:

> DJS: "Why did you leave?"
> J: "They are like Hindus. You must know this already."
> DJS: "Why are they like Hindus?"
> J: "You know that they don't say namāz in Jama'at-Khāna? That they don't kneel when they pray? I have read the Qur'an. I know you should do this as a Muslim."

Two points emerge from these conversations. The first is that both the rickshaw driver and Jamshed consider the performance of namāz to be an index of Ismailis' commitment to Islam. Following Silverstein's (1976: 33-35) article on indexical signs, prayer operates as an index precisely to the extent that it "presupposes" the idea that performing the prayer is constitutive of being Muslim and "entails" that Ismailis are not Muslim if they do not perform the prayer. This is why Bowen (1989: 612) is able to say that the "obligatory, frequently performed, and sometimes public" daily prayer, "functions in

many Islamic societies as a primary sign of Muslim identity." Hence the performance or omission of certain ritual acts communicates to the broader public not just the commitment of Ismailis to the values of Islam as invoked in a particular discourse, but carries with it the capacity to serve as a visible emblem of their Muslimness.

A second point to be raised is that it is not just the performance (or non-performance) of ritual that communicates something of the Ismailis' Muslimness, but also the style in which they perform the daily prayer. A considerable amount of Islamic discourse focuses on the way that one ought to orient their body during the performance of prayer, believing that one should pray just as the Prophet did. In the case of the Ismailis, it is striking that two aspects of their prayer are pointed out in Jamshed and the rickshaw driver's discussion: that Ismailis do not face Mecca during prayer and that they do not prostrate themselves during prayer. That Ismailis do not face Mecca because, as I said earlier, their religion stresses the presence of God everywhere, not just in Mecca, hardly seems to matter. Instead, there is a particular discourse at work that takes stylistic elements to be emblematic of a practitioner's Muslimness.

Ismailis' also encounter discourses of Islamic orthopraxy when interacting with other Muslims. While conducting preliminary research during the summer of 2005, a friend introduced me to a female professor of French and suggested that I talk to her about my research. I was visiting her in her office and she said that although my research was interesting, she knew little about Islam as she was herself Hindu. She wondered if one of her Muslim students, Faizal, knew anything about my topic and called him to her office from the college's courtyard. He came up and said that he did not know much about Ismailis, but he did have an Ismaili friend. But the professor was curious to know

how he knew the friend was an Ismaili. His excited response, which he gave in English, is worth quoting at length:

> I had no idea he was Khoja! I just thought he was a *normal* Muslim. One day I came to him and said, 'It's Friday, let's go for namāz. He said that he couldn't come. So I said 'Come, it's Friday, let's go for a quick prayer, the Mosque is here only.' So he came with me and some other fellows. After we got back and were alone he told me he was Khoja and they had different prayers that they said. I didn't know this! I just thought he was *Muslim like the rest of us*. [Emphasis added]

When I asked his Ismaili friend, Karim, why he went for prayers with them, he told me that Ismailis do sometimes say namāz, but that they had a separate du'a that they recited at the Jama'at-Khāna. It was not a problem, then, for Ismailis to say prayers with other Muslims. This story shows, however, that other Muslims evaluate Ismailis' prayers as an emblem of their difference and as something that precludes their being "normal" Muslims "like the rest of us." That Karim went along with his friend to say prayers, but later told him in confidence that he was Ismaili, also reflects an interest in managing the impressions that he gives to others in his everyday life (Goffman 1959).[6]

Talk about Women's Obligations
Muslims also invoke aspects of ritual in discussions of the implications of Ismaili women's presence in the Jama'at-Khāna during prayer. Several Sunni men in Mumbai suggested to me that Ismailis did not properly follow Islam because, not only did they allow women in the Jama'at-Khāna alongside men during prayers, but also that women did not practice *pardah* ("veiling"). For instance, a Sunni shopkeeper inquired whether it was in fact true, as he had heard, that Ismaili women and men both went to the "Khoja Masjid" (i.e., the Jama'at-Khāna) together. I told him it was true, but he did not seem

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[6] Karim's story resonates with the Ismaili idea of *taqīya*, or "precautionary dissimulation," because one reading of this story is that he performed the prayer to appear more like a Sunni. I discuss dissimulation in more detail in chapter 5.

convinced by my initial answer and asked again in a more pointed fashion if women were present when Ismailis said prayers. When I reconfirmed his suspicion he told me "*is men koi dharma nahin*" (lit. "there is no religion in this."). It is worth noting here that strictly speaking there is no Qur'anic injunction against women attending prayers at Mosques, yet it remains the case that many Sunni Mosques in Mumbai do not allow access to women, nor do they set aside a separate area for women to pray. In fact, during the month of Ramzan it is not uncommon to see Muslim women gathering on the side of the street for prayer.[7]

In this case, the presence of women in the Jama'at-Khāna clearly indexes Ismailis' status as Muslims in the eyes of others. It also reflects the ways that the performance of certain ritual acts is tied to the acceptance of a moral order that ought to govern appropriate interactions between men and women (van der Veer 1994: 199). It is notable here that Ismaili women have been encouraged by the Aga Khan to accept key leadership roles in the Ismaili community and not to wear the veil. As Joel Robbins (2001) notes, "in performing a ritual…a person accepts the canonical scheme governing the ritual and agrees to be bound by the obligations the ritual puts in place" (595). He adds, "crucially the acceptance is not only something performers do in performing a ritual but also something they indexically convey to others, who can from then on consider them persons who have accepted that order" (Robbins 2001: 595). Women's presence in the Ismaili prayer hall thus threatens certain conceptions of a properly Islamic moral order. Their presence is threatening to some because, to the extent that it is interpreted as

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[7] I do not mean to treat the subject of women in such a cursory fashion. The aim here is to discuss people of different ideological backgrounds construe the activities of women in the Ismaili community. I shall have more to say about women's roles in the community throughout this dissertation.

an indexical sign, it presupposes the existence of a moral order governing appropriate interactions between men and women and entails that Ismailis do not accept that order.

Everyday Encounters during the Fast
In looking at what it means that such discourses portray Ismailis as non-Muslims, it becomes important to attend to what might be at stake in such formulations. There is a fair amount at stake for Ismailis in this issue. What underlies the annoyance of having to explain one's practices to others and concerns about what the neighbors might think, is the more serious desire to be recognized as Muslims by others. This becomes apparent during the Islamic month of Ramzan when, in conjunction with the duties outlined in five pillars of Islam, Muslims are expected to keep the fast (*roza rakhna*) during the daylight hours. Though there seems to be a yearly debate amongst some Ismailis on the subject, I most often heard that they did not view keeping the fast as compulsory. An Ismaili youth told me he always sensed that his neighbors found it strange that his family celebrated the *eid* ("holiday") that marked the end of fasting, because his family did not keep the fast in the first place.

Ameena, a young woman who works as a teacher, told me more pointedly that she always considered going to school during Ramzan to be something of an annoyance. "People would always say 'how can you be Muslim if you aren't fasting?' or 'You're a Muslim, why aren't you fasting?" She went on to say, "I would say to them, 'I could starve myself all day, but if I do something bad, or think bad thoughts, what's the point?' They never have an answer for that." I have heard stories from Sunnis that Ismailis often raise similar questions about the meaning of fasting by asking about the importance of other moral behaviors, perhaps indicating a generally held belief in the community or a collectively learned rhetorical strategy. Such questions are in keeping with Ismailis'

notion of "spiritual" (*rūhānī*) fasting, whereby Ismaili Khojas are enjoined to maintain a fast-like control over bad thoughts and bad actions. Notably, such incidents point to the ways Ismailis challenge in subtle ways the assumptions of Islamic discourses about orthopraxy as certain interlocutors deploy it.

What this section demonstrates are the ways that actors employ the assumptions and beliefs of specific discourses to evaluate Ismaili religious practice as an index and an emblem of Ismailis' commitment to Islam. This spurs the question of what is at stake in such interactions. While Ismailis like Ameena might reject some of the central tenets of the discourse of orthopraxy by refusing to see their own non-performance of the fast to index their lack commitment to Islam, other reactions are evident. We see here and in other instances that being called to account for your practice in face-to-face interactions may make your own ideas on the subject moot. In the final ethnographic section of this chapter, I look at an instance of ritual reform in the Ismaili community as an effort to eliminate a source of controversy with proponents of Islamic orthopraxy. In the process, we shall see that there is more at stake than having to explain your practice to outsiders, but that the existence of practices deemed un-Islamic may result in real violence. Finally, we shall see that through this dialogic interaction, Ismailis have come to reproduce some of the central tenets of the discourse about orthopraxy.

4. Ambivalence and Ritual Change

In considering the stakes for the Ismaili community in regards to Muslim discourses about orthopraxy, this section analyzes a particular incident of ritual reform. I aim to show two things: First, that Ismailis were motivated to change an aspect of their ritual practice to as a response to criticisms from other Muslims about their ritual practice. Second, and more importantly, that this incident of ritual reform points to the ways that

proponents of Islamic orthopraxy have managed to define the terms of the debate in such a way that Ismailis' ideas about pluralism become moot. Ismailis' response to criticism from outsiders about the form of their own ritual practice is one indication of their own anxieties about the proper practice of Islam.

These anxieties seem to have led to one of the more remarkable cases of religious "reform" in the Ismaili community: limiting pictures of the Imam in the prayer hall of the Jamaʿat-Khāna to the side walls, away from the direction that Ismailis face when praying. This event occurred around the same time as the institution, at the behest of the Aga Khan, of a new curriculum at religious night schools. This curriculum is known as the "Tālīm curriculum," *tālīm* being the Urdu word for "education." The curriculum seeks to teach students about important aspects of Islamic, and specifically Ismaili, history and doctrine, as well educate students about the diversity of the worldwide Ismaili community (*jamaʿat*). As one Ismaili leader, who was closely involved with explaining the changes to the community, told me and his Ismaili friend from England during a interview in English:

> At this point there was a problem with the Tarīqah Board. [8] First, there was the new Tālīm curriculum developed by the Institute for Ismaili Studies. The Aga Khan wanted to put the Tālīm into practice, but the people were unhappy with the curriculum. Then there was also the issue with the pictures. Ismailis used to bow before the picture of the Aga Khan, but other Muslims think that is idol worship. That is forbidden by other Muslims and they were upset. His Highness [i.e., the Aga Khan IV] is very sensitive to these things, so he wanted us to move the picture to the side. He knew that Indians would be especially vulnerable to this kind of thing.
> So no one wanted to be in charge of ITREB. It was a real hot seat. So the Aga Khan appointed Sultan. He really put me on the hot seat. [Turning to his British friend] You know, I had to go through a lot to get people to accept these changes."

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[8] "Tarīqah Board" here refers to the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board, also known as ITREB. As I wrote earlier, ITREB is responsible for organizing the religious education of the Khoja community.

This example demonstrates a number of things about the issue of changing the placement of the Aga Khan's picture. The first is that this change was brought about in response to criticism from other Muslims and constitutes a recognition on the part of the Ismailis and the Aga Khan of some of the tenets of the discourse of orthopraxy. For many Muslims, the presence of the Aga Khan's picture in the Jama'at-Khāna represents an instance of *shirk*, or the sin of putting others before Allah. This is related to the notion, held by many Muslims and Hindus, that Ismailis worship the Aga Khan as if he were a God, perhaps indicated by the presence of the Aga Khan's (sometimes large) photo in the shops and homes of many Ismailis.[9] Viewed in relation to the Islamic injunction against shirk, however, we see that the presence of the picture during prayers is particularly noteworthy. What is at issue here is that the Aga Khan's picture is present in ritual space, that Ismailis face it while offering the du'a, and face it while bowing during religious ceremonies. Other Muslims see this as an instance of Ismailis placing the Aga Khan before Allah. Moreover, this instance of reform recognizes the capacity for ritual practice to index Ismailis' commitment to Islam and serve as emblems of their Muslimness.

Second, this instance of reform indicates that some Ismailis are anxious about the proper performance of Islamic ritual, indicating an internal acceptance of the links that some Islamic discourses draw between orthopraxy and membership in the Ummah. This instance of ritual change was not merely "window dressing," as it was not just an effort to make a small change to give the Ismailis a more Islamic appearance in the light of criticism by others. This point comes through clearly in some of Sultan's other

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[9] Indeed, some Indians refer to Ismaili Khojas as "Aga Khanis."

statements about moving the photo in the prayer hall. Sultan told me on a different occasion that part of the problem was that Ismailis, as converts from Hinduism, were confused about the proper practice of Islam. One of the goals of instituting the Tālīm curriculum, according to Sultan, was to inform people about Ismaili history and the proper practice of Islam. A discussion with another informant, who had worked as a volunteer teacher imparting the Tālīm curriculum to students at the Jama'at-Khāna, revealed that major parts of the Tālīm curriculum detail Ismaili history and situate that within a larger history of Islamic theology. Notably, the first lesson of this curriculum is a discussion of the concept of *tawhid*, the Islamic principle of the oneness of Allah, a key tenet of Islam. As Sultan told me, "As you know, Ismailis are converts from Hinduism and they were more on the Hindu side of things then. The new curriculum was more on the Islamic side of things...people should know that they are Muslims." In keeping with some of the tenets of discourses about orthopraxy, which see certain practices as being a consequence of South Asian Muslims being converts from the Hindu religion, some Ismailis saw this instance of religious reform as a similar process of weeding out remnants from a pre-Ismaili, Hindu past.

Third, not all Ismailis welcomed this change or even accepted it. Sultan himself notes that accepting the position of chair at ITREB put him on the "hot seat." Sultan told me that he was called upon in his position to open up communications with the community (*jama'at*) to explain the change. "I told them that nothing happens in our jama'at without His Highness' approval," he said. This statement indicates that the effort to explain the change was through the Ismaili concept of the Imam, by linking the change to the prerogative of the spiritual leader, and not to appeal to ideas embedded in the

discourses of Islamic reform about the proper performance of Islamic ritual. As I have noted previously, according to Ismaili doctrine, the Imam has the infallible wisdom to reformulate ritual according to the needs of the present. Sultan's insistence that nothing happens in the Ismaili community with the Imam's approval is in keeping with this.

In a similar vein, Nasreen, an Ismaili woman in her early thirties, once said to me, "some months ago I had to go to Darkhāna [i.e., the main Jamaʻat-Khāna in India, located in Mumbai on Samuel Street in Dongri]. I was walking up the stairs to the prayer hall. I forgot that his [i.e. Aga Khan's] picture was at the top of the stairs. I bumped into a woman. She had stopped to bow in front of it...How many times has he [the Aga Khan] said in farmans [edicts] not to do that?" This points to the way that the command not to bow in front of the picture is considered to be part of the Imam's guidance and that not all Ismailis have accepted this injunction.

I was somewhat surprised to learn that this change was controversial within the Ismaili community. A large part of my early fieldwork was focused on examining how Ismailis understood ritual change in relationship to their history, but I abandoned this pursuit because the majority of Ismailis I met had accepted the changes instituted by the Aga Khan.[10] This seems to be the case because, as Sultan and others believe, "nothing happens in the Ismaili community without the Aga Khan's approval." But it also seems to be the case that ritual change poses less of a problem for esoteric religions, because the outward form of ritual practice is subordinate to the inner meaning of ritual practice. During a pre-field trip to Mumbai in 2004 an Ismaili woman explained to me in English that "external" changes, such as moving the Aga Khan's picture, did not matter because

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[10] I could also add that those that found Ismaili ritual practice controversial did so because the found it "un-Islamic."

the inner meaning of the ritual remained the same. She smiled, seemingly at my at my naiveté in questioning how she felt about such changes, and said, "But David, nothing has changed but the appearance!" This resonates with the Ismaili epistemic division of the inner, esoteric meanings versus the exoteric meanings of rituals and texts. Such a distinction enables the Aga Khan to reformulate ritual practice while appealing to the stability of the inner meaning attached to those rituals or perhaps gives Ismailis the ability to imagine a stable, core meaning to ritual.[11]

I would like to sum up this section with an analysis of why Ismailis have internalized certain aspects of the discourse about orthopraxy, a discussion that will touch upon ideas about knowledge and power. The various discourses I have outlined here as they emerge in people's speech are manifestations of different discursive traditions within Islam, each containing ideas about appropriate Islamic knowledge (Asad 1986: 7; Lambek 1993). Pluralist, esoteric, and discourse about orthopraxy are all statements about what constitutes valid Islamic knowledge (*ilm*) and these discourses contain ideas about how one should go about acquiring knowledge. As such, these discourses are culturally specific epistemologies, or ideas about what knowledge is and how a person acquires that knowledge. The esoteric (bātin) formulation of knowledge focuses on the hidden meaning of texts and ritual practice. In contrast, the discourses of many reformers has developed from a more exoteric religious tradition; as such, it tends to focus on the "literal" meaning of texts, even if religious scholars and other Muslims have developed different hermeneutic models of how to arrive at that literal meaning. Pluralism attempts to bridge the gap between these two forms of knowledge by positing that all religions are

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[11] This seems an odd formulation, though, given the Ismaili tradition's emphasis on the historicity of ritual and social practice, which ought to include a notion of change. I will return to this theme in the next chapter to analyze Khojas' ideas about changing aspects of volunteer service.

attempts to get at the same truth. But pluralism would seem to be irreconcilable with the discourse on orthopraxy, or even some formulations of esoteric discourse, which hold that there is one single path to gain proper Islamic knowledge.

When people talk about why they are on the esoteric path or a more orthopraxic approach, knowledge is an important subject of their talk. Allow me to briefly review some of these formulations. In this section, we saw Sultan's insistence that Ismailis should "know that they are Muslims." I provided a story where Rafiq, my friend's uncle, told me that the Ismaili community "did not know" (*jānte nahin*) the true path of Islam. Similarly, in section three I introduced Jamshed, a man who left the Ismaili community because his own knowledge drawn from the Qur'an told him that Ismailis deviated from Islam. These statements are more a reflection of Muslims' conceptions of valid Islamic knowledge (*ilm*) being a pre-requisite for proper Islamic practice (Asad 1986, Robinson 1983), than an indication of a Foucauldian connection between knowledge and power. Thus, the nearly simultaneous implementation of the Tālīm curriculum and changes to Ismaili prayer may not have been an coincidence, but instead a concerted effort to inculcate proper knowledge of Islam.

In drawing on ideas about Islamic knowledge, I should be clear that I see the appeal of discourses of Islamic orthopraxy (as knowledge) as resulting from specific historical and social processes. The perceived legitimacy of the discourse of Islamic orthopraxy perhaps lies in that discourse's relationship to a globalized version of Islam produced by scholars (*ulema)* in different parts of the "Muslim world" and a growing sense of the a worldwide Muslim community (*ummah*) that emerges from that discourse (Minault 1984). Similarly, one could argue that the present Imam, Shah Karim al-

Hussayni, was selected by his grandfather because of his closeness to the "Muslim world," evidenced by his degree in Islamic history from Harvard. In terms of social processes, I have detailed the ways that some Muslims deploy that discourse in talk and everyday encounters. Such social processes make discourses about Islamic orthopraxy something that is difficult to ignore. Moreover, these discourses make orthopraxy something that one must orient their own practice to and explain their departure from the model of practice promoted by those seeking Islamic renewal.

There is nonetheless evident tension amongst Ismailis' conceptions of the Islamic faith as pluralistic, their ideas about the esoteric path, and the tenets of discourses about Islamic orthopraxy. Ismailis have been encouraged to cease bowing before the Aga Khan's picture, yet some persist, perhaps in keeping with an esoteric tradition that sees the Aga Khan as a manifestation of the light of God. There may be symbolic power in the discourse of orthopraxy, and it may inform the ways that some Ismailis view their own religious practice, but it is not a hegemonic power.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown a complex array of ideas that members of the Ismaili community have about the Islamic religion and how those ideas are shaped by social interactions with others. To recap the chapter, I began this chapter by outlining two broad approaches to the Islamic religion: a pluralist stance exemplified by Ismailis and an exclusionary stance exemplified by the discourse of Islamic orthopraxy. Having described these two approaches, I turned to instances of talk and everyday encounters surrounding practices like prayer and fasting to look at the way that discourses treat ritual practice as indexes of Ismailis' commitment to Islam. This culminated in a discussion of the ways that one aspect of Ismaili ritual change, restricting the placement of the Aga Khan's picture in the

Jamaʻat-Khāna, was an effort to change the perception that Ismailis were not properly following Islam. This instance of reform also points to the ways that Ismailis have internalized some of the tenets of the discourse of orthopraxy. In all, this chapter reveals the ways that social relations with other Muslims have influenced the Ismailis' own conception of Islam, in ways that run counter to the espoused pluralist conception of the Ismaili faith.

A key argument in this chapter is that broader efforts by Muslims to reform the Islamic religion have largely been successful in defining the terms of debate about the proper practice of Islam. This perhaps indicates that the Aga Khan's efforts to promote pluralism are an insufficient strategy for achieving harmonious relationships with other Muslims. Ismailis' talk of pluralism and efforts to build civil society is rendered moot because it fails to address the key assumption promoted by some Muslims in the context of Islamic revivalism: that there is one proper way to practice the Islamic religion. Likewise, we have seen that certain Ismailis have accepted some of the assumptions of the discourse of orthopraxy and chosen to leave behind the Ismaili faith and join other religious paths. Finally, an instance of religious reform indicates that despite Ismaili leaders' pluralist stance, they have nonetheless accepted some ideas about Islamic orthopraxy in their efforts to accommodate other Muslims.

Chapter 4:
Religious Knowledge and Intercultural Communication

1.Introduction

In the last chapter, I examined how Ismailis conceive of the relationship between self and other largely in terms of differences in ritual practice. It argued that these differences have been part of a process through which the Ismailis have reconfigured cultural boundaries around their community. In this chapter I am concerned with thinking about the implications of ideas about cultural difference for communication in everyday life. Drawing on the work of Edward Sapir, Ira Bashkow (2004: 452) writes, "people's perception of a commonality of culture is founded more on relations of mutual comprehension than on actual sameness or identity." In this chapter, I examine how Ismaili ideas about acquiring and transmitting religious knowledge rely on a conception of culture based on mutual comprehension and explore the implications this has for their willingness to communicate with outsiders.

Ismailis are often reluctant to discuss religious matters with outsiders. Although many Indians (and others) attribute this reluctance to a desire to hide things, it is my argument that this reluctance is the product of Ismaili ideas about the acquisition and communication of religious knowledge. I contend that an important feature of Ismailis' esoteric epistemology is that knowledge is acquired through the personal search for the inner meaning of religious texts and ritual. Religious knowledge thus depends on the level of understanding achieved by individual practitioners. When Ismailis explain religious concepts to other Ismailis or outsiders, they are faced with interlocutors who have differing levels of familiarity with their religious discourse. This problem is

particularly heightened when discussing religious matters with outsiders, who Ismailis' own models about cultural and religious difference construct as having very different ideas about the meaning of religious practice. When Ismailis do communicate religious ideas to outsiders, they are required to find terms that are familiar to specific audiences. Consequently, Ismailis often employ metaphors that compare religious ideas to familiar concepts from everyday life or create analogies between the Ismaili religion and the religious tradition of their audience. I conclude this chapter by considering the limits of such comparisons to create mutual understanding between Ismailis and outsiders.

This chapter provides a bridge between the ways that symbolic boundaries created through symbolic differences between self and other and the more social process of maintaining boundaries through practices of concealment and secrecy.

2. The Path as Method and Metaphor

To this point I have focused on the Ismaili idea of *tarīqah* ("path" or "way") as a way that Ismailis understand their religion and in particular as a trope for creating a pluralistic model for ordering religious differences. Here I would like to expand on the metaphor of the path as it relates to Ismaili ideas about religious practice. Conceptualizing religious practice in terms of walking a path is important because it describes both a method for religious practice and because it marks religious practice as a deeply personal and at times individualized experience. As I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, what characterizes the religious path of the Ismailis is that they consider their religion to be *bātinī* ("esoteric") in contradistinction to the more *zāhirī* ("exoteric") traditions of Sunni Muslims. This distinction may also be described as one between religious practices that focus on the "inner" or "hidden" (*bātin*) meanings of text and practice versus the more "exterior" (*zāhir*) practice of other Muslims. For Ismailis, the metaphor of the path

encapsulates the personal search for knowledge through unveiling of the inner meanings of religious texts and practice. I begin with a short story reproduced from my fieldnotes as a focal point for analysis:

> I was standing drinking chai on the roadside with Ali this afternoon near a undeveloped lot in the western suburbs. The lot is actually a thoroughfare for some of the local residents going from their modest homes to the small local market. Their traffic had created a small footpath that avoids the hazards of the deep puddles and muddy ground produced by the monsoon rains.
>
> Ali and I were talking about the Muslim communities of Mumbai. During the course of our conversation, I asked him what the word "tarīqah" meant to him (*āp ke khayāl se tarīqah ka matlab kyā hai?*).
>
> "Ha, that's a good question. Look. I'll tell you," he said while pointing to draw my attention to the muddy field. He continued, "there is a lot of water here. You know to walk on the 'footpath' (*rāsta*). The footpath (*rāsta*) is the tarīqah. You teach children to walk this way. "You say, 'walk here, don't walk there or there,'" he said while pointing first to the footpath and then the puddles. "Hmm. Is that it?" I asked. "That's all," he replied with a slight grin.

Ali's metaphor aptly describes Ismaili ideas about religious practice being akin to walking on a path. The idea of the path is important to several Islamic traditions and encapsulates diverse meanings. Although we usually use the term Sharī'a to refer to Islamic law, the term's literal meaning is the "straight path to water." The idea of walking straight here concerns doing right and avoiding wrong; it also promises water, or perhaps heaven, as a reward to those who walk straight. Ali's explanation carries certain moral implications, though it is a negative formulation of the path: he tells us that children learn to walk the path by avoiding wrong (i.e. the puddles).

In addition to moral ideas, Ali's thoughts on the meaning of the path resonate with Ismaili (and Sufi) ideas about how religious practitioners acquire knowledge. The word used to describe this path has taken several forms in the history of Khoja Ismailis on the Indian subcontinent. The Khojas converted by Pīr Sadruddin in the 14th or 15th century

referred to their religion by the heavily Sanksritized term *Sat Panth* ("true path").

Indeed, an early 20th century predecessor of the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education

Board (ITREB) was known as the "Satpanthi Society." In contemporary Ismaili religious

discourse this path is described by using the term tarīqah ("path" or "way"), a term that

metaphorically describes religious practice. The Ismaili or Sufi practitioner is meant to

follow the path to achieve graduated stages of religious knowledge.   These stages

culminate in "enlightenment" or "gnosis" (ma'rifat).   Ma'rifat is often described as

fanafiallah, or union with God through the obliteration of the self in Allah (*fana-* means

"destruction," *-fiallah* means "in Allah").

Ali's explanation does not evoke the idea of enlightenment so much as it does the

sense of walking the path as a religious methodology.   Again, the term *tarīqah* itself

refers to either a "path" or a "way of doing things." Walking the path is, thus, a "know

how" or practical knowledge. In India people often describe religions like Hinduism and

Islam as "ways of life," and Ismailis are no exception when describing their own religion.

Religion then provides a basis for acting in everyday life and, when Indians describe it as

such, they create an implicit contrast with the notion, popular in many forms of

Christianity, that religion is a set of beliefs and tenets. Indian religious discourses

certainly contain sets of beliefs about deities and the nature of the universe, but when

Indians describe their religion as a way of life, they are suggesting that religion is

something that cannot be compartmentalized as per Western secularism. More to point,

walking the path evokes the idea that one does not learn a set of tenets or dogma from

their elders, but instead learns practical know how about the means of acquiring that

knowledge for yourself.

Ali's metaphor also touches on the subject of guidance, especially when he describes how parents teach their children to walk on the path. He suggests that one guides children by steering them towards the path and away from puddles. In fact, Ali's metaphor resonates with other metaphors Ismailis use to describe their relationship with the Imam, because Ismailis refer to themselves as the Aga Khan's "spiritual children." This is one reason that both Ismailis and the Aga Khan cite to explain why the Aga Khan or his children do not marry other Ismailis. But more importantly, the notion that the Aga Khan is the father of Ismailis in spiritual matters is a metaphor for understanding his role as someone who issues "guidance" (*hidāyat*) to the community in both religious (*dharmik*) and social (*sāmājik)* affairs. This guidance carries with it the idea that people's spiritual practice is their own and the Imam and the Aga Khan is there help. As Ameena once told me, "religion is such a personal matter that even you own parents cannot interfere."

The Aga Khan may guide Ismailis in their daily affairs, but like children Ismailis must also use their own mental faculties to incorporate this advice into practice. Ismailis would often remark to me that the *farmans* ("edicts") that the Imam issued to give his guidance tended to be very general. People would point out that farmans may advise people to "be good citizens of the country they live in," "to be kind to your neighbors," or "not to seek revenge," but they are short on specifics. As one man put it, you must think about each word in the farmans to fully absorb their wisdom. Other Ismailis consistently told me that one must make their own choices about whether or not to follow farmans. While this may seemingly resonate with the autonomous, modern individual derived from Christian thought (Dumont 1986), Ismailis form their own understandings of the farmans

in the context of a larger community. It is particularly important for their relationships with friends, family, and other community members that they do not disagree with the Imam's teachings. Likewise, some Ismailis consider it inappropriate to debate the merits of the Imam's guidance.

Interpreting farmans is one example of how Ismailis come to personal understandings as they proceed down the path towards spiritual knowledge may also be an official part of Ismaili pedagogy. Jamil, an official who has done work developing the education curriculum for Ismaili youth, told me as much when he said that unlike other religious education programs Ismailis do not teach children through "rote memorization." On another occasion he explained, "we don't give an idea about God to children. We teach them how to search." Jamil may overstate the case here—Ismailis have formal religious education classes and Ismailis hear sermons on a regular basis—but Ismailis are also responsible for acquiring religious knowledge on their own. One young Ismaili woman remarked with consternation that whenever she asked her parents a question about religion, they would often tell her "to look inside" (*andar mein dekho*). Whatever this might say about interior character of religious experience, the message was that she must find her own answers to her queries.

In this section I have argued that Ismailis' ideas about the spiritual path construct religious knowledge as a deeply personal matter. What I have described are examples of Ismailis telling me or other Ismailis about how Ismailis acquire religious knowledge, not necessarily what that religious knowledge is. In what follows, I explore Ismailis ideas about communicating religious knowledge. Before doing that, however, I want to offer a few final thoughts on the ethnographic examples given in this section. The examples of

Ismailis telling their children to look inside or simply not answering their questions might seem at odds with the Ali's decision to answer my question about the path fairly directly, but there is perhaps a similarity. It is notable that Ali chose to use a fairly concrete example of teaching a child to negotiate a path in a vacant lot. What Ali was doing was explaining a highly abstract concept in terms that would be understandable to me as a non-Ismaili. As it turns out, Ali's metaphor resonated with a lot of the other descriptions that I had heard about Ismaili ideas about spiritual practice. But figuring out what he might of meant required a lot of effort on my part to contextualize his statement and to find out how it might resonate with Ismaili ideas about the path. In the next section, I turn to an analysis of how Ismailis conceptualize the difficulties associated with communicating of religious knowledge.

3. Communicating Religious Knowledge
Although they have warm and enduring friendships with Hindus and other Muslims, many Ismailis are reluctant to discuss religious matters with outsiders. Ismailis often responded to my direct questions about religious practices with evasive answers or by changing the subject. Friends and colleagues have noted similar reactions from Ismailis. Several colleagues from Pakistan, for instance, told me that although they grew up around Ismailis and went to school with them for their entire lives, they know little about the community. My non-Ismaili friends in India also noted a similar lack of knowledge about Ismailis. For example, an older man from the Bohra community at my housing colony told me that although one of his adult son's friends growing had been Ismaili, he knew very little about the community. He explained, they "keep together" (*sāth sāth rahete hain*). On another occasion he stopped me on the street to ask what a large building was at the Ismaili housing colony at Mazgaon. When I explained that large

building marked the location where the first Aga Khan was buried, he replied, by saying that although he owned a business in that neighborhood for many years, he never found out what that building was. Many others who grew up around Ismailis would ask me questions about the community, saying that Ismailis do not talk about their religion. This lack of talk makes many outsiders curious about the Ismaili religion.

During my conversations with Ismailis, they would often construct boundaries around what they would or would not talk about. Many people simply told me up front that they would not discuss religious matters (*dharmik bātēn*). Others would say that religion is personal or private, sometimes using the Hindi *nijī* ("personal") or *andar kī bāt* (lit. "inner matter"). Still others would tell me that I should contact ITREB, because they had the proper knowledge on religious matters. In most cases, I respected these boundaries out of concern for respecting their wishes and, more cynically, building rapport with my informants. And when Ismailis did speak about religious matters, it was usually in very general terms. For instance, while interviewing one man, I asked him what he did at the Jamaʿat-Khāna and he gave me a very general description of the *dūʿa* ("thrice daily prayer"). He ended his description by saying that I should contact ITREB for proper information. Most people in fact would give similar descriptions of the ritual, though they might highlight other details of the dūʿa.

At the root of the reluctance to talk about religious matters is the idea that communicating religious knowledge is difficult because one needs a firm understanding of Ismaili concepts to speak on behalf of the community and because outsiders may lack not so much the willingness to understand Ismaili concepts, but the ability. I sometimes heard informants claim that to understand Ismailism one had to be Ismaili. This statement

mirrored ideas expressed by other Indians—I often heard Indians claim that one could not understand the caste system without being Indian. The idea seems to be that without proper knowledge of the Ismaili faith or Indian society, without a rich body of knowledge with which to contextualize new information, there is a potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding. Sultan once related to me that an Ismaili official in North America had spoken to him of his apprehension about inviting members of the local community and press to view the premises of the new Jama'at-Khāna built by the Ismaili community. The official despaired that it would be impossible to explain the practices and beliefs of the Ismaili community to outsiders. The leader was certain that they would "misunderstand" everything, though Sultan assured me that with his help the event was a success.

For Ismailis, communicating religious knowledge relies on the ability of the speaker to communicate that knowledge in terms that particular audiences can understand. As such communication depends both on the ability of speakers to explain Ismaili ideas and the audience's familiarity with specific religious discourses. This idea became clear to me first during a conversation with Jamil about secrecy. I shall have more to say about this interview in the following chapter, but for the sake of describing the context of Jamil's statements, the conversation occurred in his office after a lengthy interview over lunch at a nearby restaurant. Jamil was arguing against the popular perception that Ismaili were secretive and at this point in the interview was suggesting that what appears as secrecy may in fact result from reluctance of Ismailis to discuss ideas that they lacked the expertise to discuss. Consider the following excerpt from my fieldnotes, in which Jamil discusses how one might explain meditation to outsiders:

Jamil emphasized that Ismailis were like a Sufi order and that "initiation" is important. He said that when talking to outsiders you would have to find "terms that outsiders can understand. He then stopped for a moment to think about what sorts of things he might have to discuss with outsiders. After the pause, he mentioned that he does meditation in the morning and that during that time he focuses on the *ism-e azam* ("great name"). He suggested that I would probably be able to guess that the ism-e azam referred to one of the names of Allah because I was educated about Islam and Sufism. He continued by saying that Khojas might not understand Islamic history "so they'd say 'bol' (i.e., word used during meditation) instead of ism-e azam." Jamil concluded by noting that if he were taking to a stranger, he might tell them that he meditates, but he would not tell them the word he uses to meditate. "That is a relationship between me and my Imam," he said." He went on that it's not about an explicit injunction not to speak, but instead that people don't know how to explain things to others.

Before considering what Jamil's statements can tell us about how Ismailis think about communicating religious knowledge to outsiders, let me quickly explain the terms *bol* and *ism-e azam. Bol*, as I came to understand it, refers to a word or phrase that some Ismailis concentrate on when they perform meditation (*bandagi).* The Aga Khan is said to give the bol to individual Ismailis, perhaps directly as one Ismaili suggested or through a representative (Shackle and Moir 1992: 150), though details about how people receive the bol and who used it were hard to gather. If people in the community rarely discussed the bol, it is likewise seldom discussed in scholarly literature. Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir's (2000: 150) study of Ginānic literature describes the bol in an endnote as the "traditional popular term" for a formula used during meditation.

Jamil used the term ism-e azam, not bol, in describing morning meditation. Ism-e azam is a Perso-Arabic term that literally means "great name." Jamil suggests that if a person is educated about Islam, he or she might guess that the ism-e azam is one of the names of Allah.   Jamil thought that I would understand this term based on my familiarity

with Sufism, presumably because I would link the use of the ism-e azam to the Sufi practice of *zikr* ("remembrance of God"). When performing zikr, Sufis recite the names of Allah, out loud or to themselves to create awareness of God. Although the names of Allah are well known to most Muslims, the ism-e azam is not. The ism-e azam is a term given by a Sufi master to his disciples (Shackle and Moir: 150). Shackle and Moir (1992) note that in Pakistan the term ism-i azam is gradually replacing the use of the more traditional term bol. Jamil's comment may indicate that a similar phenomenon is evident in contemporary India.

What can Jamil's statement tell us about how Ismailis think about communicating religious knowledge? First, Jamil suggests that there are boundaries around religious knowledge, though with the exception of telling people the actual word for the ism-i azam, these boundaries are "soft." What I refer to here as "soft boundaries" are the gaps in understanding and background knowledge available to outsiders. This is what makes communicating religious knowledge to outsiders so difficult. Jamil suggests that the way to bridge this gap is to look for terms that someone else would understand.

In trying to describe the bol through use of another term (i.e., ism-e azam), Jamil's explanation mirrors Ali's use of metaphor to describe Ismaili religious practice. They are similar in that both explain Ismaili ideas by creating metaphors and analogies that are meant to convey religious knowledge in terms familiar to outsiders. These explanations do differ, however, in one crucial respect—they use terms drawn from different domains to explain Ismaili concepts. Ali explains the idea of the path by drawing parallels with experiences from everyday life (i.e., walking, teaching children). Jamil explains the bol by drawing parallels with terms from another religious discourse, specifically Sufism.

Ali's metaphor would likely make sense to most Indians, if not most humans; Jamil's metaphor is targeted at a specific audience, those familiar with Sufism.

This comparison fit the handful of other descriptions of meditation (again bandagi) that I elicited from informants. For instance, one woman told me that the Ismailis were esoteric like a Sufi order, saying that Ismailis do bandagi and Sufis do zikr. An older man explained, "we do bandagi in the morning. It is like the Sufis. We try to join our souls with God. But it's a very personal matter." In both these examples, Ismailis do not so much say what these practices involve for Ismailis or describe their personal experiences with them as they invoke a comparative framework for me to make sense of them.

Jamil's formulation of how Ismailis communicate religious knowledge depends not only on finding terms familiar to outsiders, but on the different levels of understanding possessed by Ismailis. When Jamil says that Ismailis use the term bol as opposed to ism-e azam, he points to the ways that Ismailis have differing conceptions of religious knowledge. In this specific instance, Jamil asserts that those Ismailis who use the term bol as opposed to ism-e azam do so because they do not have sufficient knowledge of Islamic history to understand the parallels between these terms. Later in my interview with Jamil, he mentioned that "not everyone has the ability to become a Mukhi or KamaDia," referring to the officers in the Jama'at-Khāna. Reaching those positions depends on "commitment" and gaining "higher levels of knowledge." He suggested that those people have progressed further in the "hierarchy." He emphasized this point by saying that not everyone is able to do the morning meditation. He said that when you join a meditation group you gain access to information and farmans.

Jamil's answer to my question of why people may be reluctant to speak on religious matters fits some of my experiences in the field. Ismailis would often make distinctions between their own private understanding of the Ismaili religion and the official discourse offered by authorities at the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board. "I could tell you that, but it would just be my personal opinion," one man said. He added, "You should go to ITREB for the official knowledge." A number of people told me that they would not speak about ritual and that I contact ITREB for the official explanations.

If Ismailis often evaded my questions about religious matters, they also at times asked *me* questions in return. For instance, I asked a woman once about the bol and she responded by saying that she had never heard of it and asked me to explain. A few people asked me why it was that they do not allow outsiders in the Jamaʿat-Khāna. And an informant recently emailed me after a family gathering, during which they had long conversations about the Ismaili faith, with questions about the Momna group within the community.

The idea that Ismailis have differing capacities for understanding religious matters and the need to tailor one's message to people with differing capacities are broader features of Ismailism's esoteric epistemology. As such, it invites comparison with other studies of the Ismaili community. The first comparison I would like to briefly examine is Rafique Keshavjee's (1998) ethnography of Iranian Ismailis. Keshavjee notes that Iranian Ismailis have developed an idea that people have differing innate capacities to understand things. The second example is drawn from historical studies of the Gināns of the Khoja Ismailis living in the Indian subcontinent. One recurring argument about the Gināns is

that they are the product of Ismaili missionaries expressing Ismaili religious ideas in an idiom that would make sense to potential converts living in South Asia.

Rafique Keshavjee notes that Iranian Ismailis see a "plurality" of meaning in religious practice and doctrine. Much like in the Khoja Ismaili case, the plurality of meaning results from the personal search for religious knowledge and practitioner's different levels of progression along the spiritual path. Iranian Ismailis explain this diversity of meaning as being the product of practitioners having different capacities to understand. They describe this innate capacity for understanding things using the term *zarfiyyat*, which actually refers to a "bowl" or "container" (Keshavjee 1998: 31). Just as bowls have different capacities for holding things, people have different levels of ability to understand religious ideas. Consequently, there is also a concern that those who have not reached higher levels of knowledge might misunderstand or misinterpret (Keshavjee 1998: 32) knowledge that they have not yet been prepared to receive. This requires expressing knowledge in terms that people are able to understand. Keshavjee's (1998) informants illustrate this point with a Hadīth:

> One of Prophet Muhammad's associates asked him why there were stars in the sky, and he answered that they were there to decorate the heavens. When another man later asked the Prophet the same question, he gave a complex elucidation of the principles of astronomy. A man who witnessed both incidents was flabbergasted. He confronted the Prophet with the stark contrast between the two explanations, and the Prophet said that the capacity (*zarfiyyat*) of the first man was such that he not able to understand more. (31-32)

Although I never found a term equivalent to zarfiyyat among Khoja Ismailis—they formulated similar ideas using the word "understand" or its Hindi/Urdu equivalent *samajhna*—the idea that one must tailor their message to suit your audience's ability to understand is evident in ideas about how Persian missionaries converted Khojas to the

Ismaili faith. From the 10th to 15th century (Daftary 1998: 181), "missionaries" (*dāʻī*, lit. "caller") were active propagating the Ismaili faith in areas like Sindh, Gujarat, Punjab. These dāʻī were communicators of religious knowledge par excellence. They were charged with becoming masters of the local language and learning as much as possible about the cultural and religious milieu in which they operated. As part of their *daʻwa* ("missionary activity," literally "the process of calling"), they composed a number of religious hymns (Ginān) as a way to propagate the Ismaili faith. The word Ginān comes from the Sanskrit *jnana* (knowledge) and Shafique Virani (2007) suggests that it is cognate with the word "gnosis." As I have already noted, the hymns composed by these missionaries incorporated many Hindu themes and deities. Azim Nanji explains "the signs deployed in conveying the ideas [of Ismailism] depend very much on the milieu in which the daʻwa was operating (Nanji 1978: 106). What Nanji means here is that the missionaries operating in South Asia used Hindu symbols as a means to express Ismaili ideas in a framework familiar that would be familiar to potential converts and early initiates.

Nanji argues that the authors of the Gināns employed a number of strategies to convey esoteric knowledge in terms that potential converts could readily understand. Much like Ali's metaphor of the path, Gināns often draw on "simple and evocative imagery from daily life," as a vehicle for expressing complex religious experiences (Nanji 1978: 124-125). I have reproduced below a short passage of a Ginān known as *Sloka Nano* ("The Little Verse"), which Nanji uses to illustrate this point. The Ginān uses evocative imagery familiar to most anyone (boats, traveling) to contrast the religious practices of those following false Gurus with those following the true Guide:

> The Master has a large bundle on his head
> and his disciple is carrying a burden as well.
> Both then proceed to cross the ocean in a
> boat made out of iron
> How can they ever reach the shore?

In contrast the seeker is urged to:
> Build your boat in the name of the Lord
> and fill it with the load of truth.
> If the wind that blows is one of love and devotion
> then the Lord will certainly guide you ashore. (Nanji 1978: 124)

In addition to metaphor, Nanji notes that Gināns make use of anagogy. Nanji's reference to anagogy is curious given that it explicitly draws on terminology employed by religious scholars to describe a mode of exegesis developed by Gnostic Christians. In Nanji's use, an anagoge is "mystic or esoteric in its broadest sense" in that "it thrives on the use of ta'wil to penetrate to the inner (*bātin*) signification of the Qur'an rather than the external (*zāhir*) aspects." *Ta'wil* refers to a system of exegesis that is usually guided by the Imam of a given epoch and is predicated on uncovering the inner meaning of religious symbols and texts. This system of exegesis exists in contrast the system of *tafsīr* used by Sunni and some Shi'a theologians to uncover the "literal," "external" (*zāhirī*) meaning of religious texts.

Nanji sees anagogic symbolism at work in a Ginān attributed to the 13th century Ismaili missionary Pīr Shams. Two remarkable couplets of this Ginān emphasize the focus on the inner meaning of ritual practice: "My mind is my prayer mat, Allah is my Qadi, and my body is my mosque. Within I pass my time in prayer, what can the vulgar and ignorant know of my Way?" (Nanji 1978: 121). In these two couplets the author creates a contrast between the external aspects of ritual practice (the prayer mat, the Qadi ["Islamic judge"] and the Mosque). The author of this Ginān tells the reader that God is

his judge and that his prayer mat and mosque are inside of his mind and body, where he spends his time in prayer. The final two couplets of this Ginān read, "only through complete concentration can one achieve illumination. Seek hard and you shall find. Heed what Pīr Shams says, how will you reach the shore without a Guide (Pīr)?" (Nanji 1978: 122). The emphasis here again is on internal contemplation with the assistance of a guide to help "reach the shore.[1]" As Nanji himself sums up this Ginān, "the emphasis in the Ginān... is on a path which is not based on formal outward acts of worship, but which stems spontaneously from a process of direct intuitive experience which through "illumination" brings about a new level of awareness" (Nanji 1978: 124-125).

In other cases, Gināns draw symbols directly from other religious systems, such as the use of Hindu deities to describe the Imam or references to the Ismaili Pīrs as yogis or gurus. For some scholars of Ismaili devotional literature these metaphors and symbols represent an effort to use a local idiom to convey Ismaili ideas. Nanji notes that Ismaili missionaries were meant to craft their messages in ways that would make sense to a local population unfamiliar with Ismaili or Islamic concepts (Nanji 1978: 102). Ali Asani (2002), differing slightly from Nanji, refers to this process as one in which missionaries presented Ismaili ideas in an "acculturated form" that drew on symbolism from Indic culture. Such a process would reverse the old Boasian insight that "traits imported into a culture were reinterpreted in a manner consistent with what was already there" (Bashkow

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[1]The phrase "reach the shore" occurs frequently in Gināns attributed to Pīr Shams and Ismaili scholars have recently offered diverse opinions of its meaning. Tanzim Kassam (Kassam 1995: 62-65) suggests that this phrase refers to a promise of "political liberation," a call to rebellion against Sunni rule in India and an offer of support from Ismaili Imam in Persia to Hindu rulers under Sunni rule in western and northwestern India. Conversely, Asani (2002: 15) holds that this phrase is a "standard metaphor for religious salvation in medieval Indian devotional literatures" and cites Nanji's argument that the Ismaili da'wa was essentially apolitical. I do not wish to take a side in this skirmish and choose instead to equivocate by noting the capacity for esoteric poetry to serve as vehicle for multiple meanings and diverse interpretations.

2004: 445).   Instead, what Nanji and Asani argue is that the Ismaili dāʿī did the reverse: the dāʿī imported a new interpretive framework to make sense of cultural traits that were already there.

There is another possible explanation, one more in keeping with the Boasian view perhaps, for medieval Khoja Ismailis' use of Hindu ideas to explicate their religious tradition: syncretism. In other words, it is possible that Khoja Ismailis were not creating metaphors so much as they really believed that the Imam was the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. Given that so many people, both in and outside of the academy, have been keen to describe the Ismaili faith as syncretic, a response to this potential objection is woven into the remainder of this chapter.[2]

My argument against this objection proceeds in two steps. The first step, which I take up immediately below, is to lay out a brief history of Ismaili efforts to construct boundaries around the Ismaili religion by purging it of practices and concepts deemed out of keeping with the Ismaili, and by extension, Islamic faith. The second step, which I take up in the following sections, is to show explicit discourse from Ismailis that references to Hindu concepts are approximations—not equivalents—of Ismaili terms.

Abdulaziz Sachedina has noted that during the years following the Aga Khan trials the Khojas experienced a "religious awakening" (Sachedina 1995). This awakening was both an affirmation that Khojas were Ismaili Muslims and an attempt to root out practices and ideas deemed un-Islamic. The changes to ritual practice was as much a part

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[2]Ali Asani (2002: 5) offers an unique critique of the notion of syncretism and its applicability to the case of the Ismailis. Asani rejects the use of the term "Hindu" to describe the use of deities and symbols presently associated with Hinduism in the Gināns. Asani feels that terms such as Hindu and Muslim became meaningful categories under British colonial rule and consequently using such terms to describe the past would be anachronistic. He favors the term "Indic" because it captures the way that Ismaili missionaries drew on local culture and does not carry as much baggage as Hindu would in this context.

of the Aga Khan trials raising questions about the religious identity of the Khojas as it was a reaction to the increasing salience of categories such as Hindu and Muslim, Sunni and Shi'a. Francoise Mallison (2001) notes that some years after these trials the Gināns underwent considerable revision to give the Ginānic corpus a more Islamic character. The Dasa Avatāra, the Ginān that equated the Ismaili Imam with Lord Vishnu, was banned (Mallison 2001: 369). Moreover, the vocabulary used in the Gināns changed: "Excessively Hindu-sounding terms were replaced by corresponding Islamic ones. Thus, Hari became Alī, Sāmī (Svāmī) became Maula (Mallison 2001: 369). Indeed one Ismaili publisher in Mumbai, Lalji Devraj, was given the task of collecting, editing, and publishing an "official" collection of Ginān texts. Intriguingly, after Lalji Devraj published the "official" version of the Gināns in 1915, the original manuscripts were reportedly buried (Mallison: 369; Asani 2002: 42).

Nothing I have said so far precludes the possibility that medieval Ismailis followed a syncretic religion tradition or that their outwards appearance as Hindus reflected their true beliefs. It does, however, render the religious identity of pre-19th century of Khojas inconsequential to my argument. The vigor of the religious reforms instituted by the Aga Khan's III and IV may be an indication that Ismailis really did hold beliefs associated with Hinduism, but this is a matter which historians are better equipped to handle. For my purposes, I want to note that the Aga Khans' religious reforms were an early effort to construct boundaries and that these efforts continue in the present. In other words, I wish to offer an emic, "folk" view of the boundaries between the Ismaili and other religious traditions and bracket the analytical question of whether the Ismaili faith is a syncretic blend of Hinduism and Ismaili Islam (Bashkow 2004: 445).

Ismailis themselves noted that they were gradually moving away from practices or beliefs that smacked of Hinduism. As one Ismaili man told me, "one hundred years ago my family did not even know they were Muslims." When discussing the idea of syncretism or religious practices done by some Ismailis that seem like Hinduism, Ismailis generally drew a distinction between the past and the present. For instance, I often heard memories of grandparents who prayed to Lord Krishna. Several older Ismailis told me about giving up fish during the Hindu festival of Diwali as children and one older shopkeeper told me that he used to wave incense over the account book during the same holiday. Another Ismaili man told me that as a child his daily prayers included references to Hindu deities. He admitted that others still did this, but that doing so was not "official." My point in all of this is that people were describing things they or their relatives used to do, but no longer did; moreover, those who continue such practices are seen as deviating from Aga Khan's guidance.

Boundary making is also evident in the use of terms drawn from Persian and Arabic words to replace Sanskritic terms used to describe Ismaili practices. I have already noted how the Persian word tarīqah has replaced the term Satpanth and the growing use of term ism-i azam to replace the bol. Other examples abound. Some informants referred to a ceremony in which Ismaili drink water blessed by the Imam by the Sanskritized moniker *ghat phat,* a term used by Ismailis throughout their history, or the more Arabic phrase *ab-e shafa* ("water of purity"). Similarly*,* religious specialists charged with educating the community and giving lectures in the Jama'at-Khāna were often referred to as missionaries, though now they were known by the Arabic terms *waez* (male lecturer) and *waeza* (female lecturer).

To briefly summarize the first two sections of this chapter, I have considered the ways that Ismailis use metaphor as a means for acquiring esoteric knowledge and a method for explaining their religious practice. Metaphor is thus an important feature of Ismaili's esoteric epistemology. I have also maintained that we should understand Ismailis' use of terms from other religious discourses metaphorically and that Ismailis are continuously re-constructing boundaries around their religious tradition.

In the final section of this chapter, I consider my informant's talk about the Aga Khan as examples of how Ismailis explain religious concepts to outsiders. Although Ismailis use these terms to efface differences between their religious tradition and those of outsiders, these metaphors themselves rest on analogies and reflect an effort by Ismailis to translate Ismaili concepts across religious discourses. As such, Ismailis present these metaphors as evidence of commonalities between religious traditions yet understand that there are clear distinctions between the Ismaili tradition and other religions. Because Ismailis see these metaphors as approximations, they mark the limits of creating meaning across cultural boundaries.

4. Communicating about the Aga Khan

A common feature at many Ismaili homes, shops, and offices is one or more framed pictures of the Aga Khan. When I asked people why they kept such pictures or what they meant, Ismailis usually told me it was because they believed that the Imam was always with them. On several separate occasions, Ismailis emphasized the point by pulling from their wallets or purses small laminated cards with the Imam's picture on one side and quotes to effect that the Imam was always with them on the other. Initially, it was difficult for me to escape the Orwellian feeling that Imam was watching over everything

that I said or did, but as fieldwork progressed I came to understand that for my informants the presence of the Imam was reassuring and loving.

There was another very real sense in which the Aga Khan's presence was felt during conversations with Ismailis—the Aga Khan was a frequent and recurring subject of talk by my informants. When meeting with an informant after several days or a week, conversations began with culturally appropriate questions about the health and condition of my spouse and parents. After exchanging questions and answers about our families, I was often met with talk about the Aga Khan. "Did you know that His Highness is in Dubai this week?" "Have you heard that the Aga Khan might come to India in April?" When I followed up on such statements with questions about what the Aga Khan was doing in these places, I usually received basic responses such as "[he is in Dubai] to open a new Jamaʻat-Khāna," or "[he is coming to India] to give us dīdār as part of the Golden Jubilee." I was often puzzled as to why my informants would tell me these things. My project, after all, was about *them* and not about the Aga Khan. But as several informants would tell me, you cannot write about the Ismailis without writing about the Aga Khan.

If the Aga Khan is an important subject of talk and devotional practices for Ismailis, many outsiders also see him as a symbolic representative of the Ismaili community. This is a synecdoche where the part (i.e., Aga Khan) stands for the whole (i.e., Ismaili community). So strong is the association of the Aga Khan with the Ismaili community that many people refer to Ismailis as "Aga Khanis." Many Ismailis find the use of this appellation insulting, because it implies that they worship the Aga Khan, though I have heard more than a few Ismailis refer to themselves as "Aga Khani." But such terms are symptomatic of widespread misunderstandings about the role that the Aga

Khan plays in the community. Outsiders, Hindu and Muslims alike, would tell me that Ismailis "worship the Aga Khan as if he was God." One Hindu woman insisted, despite my objections, that Ismailis had a different "Prophet," whom she believed was the Aga Khan. Given that the Aga Khan is such an important and visible figure of the Ismaili community, Ismailis are often called upon to explain this relationship.

The Ismailis have a rich set of terms to describe the Aga Khan and their relationship to him, many of which differ in both their denotative and connotative meanings. For the purposes of analysis, it is possible to classify these terms according to their semantic domain. We would thus have terms drawn from the domains of Islamic religious discourse, honorifics, and kinship. To be clear, this is an etic, analytical classification, not an emic one. Because all of the terms are used to refer to the Aga Khan, it seems reasonable that Ismailis would categorize all of these terms as having religious significance or associate them with an Islamic religious discourse. It is useful, however, to distinguish these domains because although honorific and kinship terms may have shared meaning across religious discourses, Islamic terminology often does not. The discussion that follows is not an exhaustive listing of terms used by Ismailis to refer to the Aga Khan, but instead a sample that reflects the range of meanings associated with the Aga Khan.

The terms that I label as Islamic typically originate in specifically Ismaili or more generally Shiʻa and Sufi religious discourses. Foremost among these is the term "Imam," which as I explained in the introduction refers to a specifically Shiʻa conception of the Aga Khan's status as a spiritual guide. Ismailis will often refer to Aga Khan as *Hāzir Imam* ("present Imam"), which conveys the sense that the spiritual guide's duty is

interpret the esoteric meaning of religious texts according to the needs of the present age. My informants used another specifically Shi'a term, *Imam-e-zamān* (literally "Imam of the present age or era"), with less frequency. Ismailis often refer to the Aga Khan by terms that other Muslims use as titles for religious authorities, especially the terms *Mawlā* ("lord, protector") and *Mawlānā* ("lord").

Ismailis also draw from the domain of kinship terms when they refer to the Aga Khan as their spiritual father. Many Ismailis simply referred to the Imam as *bāpa, bāpu,* or more often *bāpuji*, all of which mean "father" with the suffix *-ji* conveying respect. The use of kinship terms to describe politicians or religious leaders in India is not unusual and often carries with it the same sentiments one is meant to feel for their father. Many Indians, for example, refer to Mohandas Gandhi as *Bāpuji* ("father"), a term that reflects the love attached to the Indian leader as much as much as it refers to his status as the father of the Indian nation. Ismailis' references to bāpa carry with it that same loving sentiment, but perhaps also carries with it the sense of a paternal religious authority. This can be seen in the use the combined form *Mawlā Bāpa*, which connects religious deference with the endearment that people are meant to feel for their father.

Finally, there are many honorific terms used specifically to refer to the Aga Khan. In fact, the term "Aga Khan" (meaning perhaps "Great Lord") itself is a heredity title conferred on the 46th Ismaili Imam, Hasan Ali Shah, by the Shah of Persia in the 19th century. In certain religious literature and practices, and only occasionally in everyday life, the Imam might be referred to using terms like *Shah* ("king") or *Sāheb,* a commonplace honorific in South Asia that means something like "sir." Ismailis more frequently use English terms such as "His Highness," a term that likely originated in the

honors bestowed on the first three Aga Khans, "Prince Aga Khan," or the combined form "His Highness Prince Aga Khan." Terms such as "prince" and "princess" are also used to refer to members of the Aga Khan's family, for example his son Prince Rahim and his daughter Princess Zahra. These honorific terms convey the elevated status of the Aga Khan as well as denote a sense of royalty to him and his family.

These terms provide a rich repertoire for Ismailis to use when referring to or explaining their relationship to the Aga Khan in front of different audiences. Below I examine two ways that Ismailis use these terms in interactions with outsiders to make their religious tradition "understandable" to outsiders. The first set of examples examines Ismailis using terms most appropriate to the background of their interlocutors. In these examples, Ismailis rely on the shared denotative meanings of terms used to address the Aga Khan. The second set of examples considers the way that Ismailis create metaphors to explain the Aga Khan and Ismailis' relationship to the Aga Khan. All of these examples consist of Ismailis referring to or describing the Aga Khan in front of me or Hindu audiences. Hence I conclude this chapter by examining why Ismailis are reluctant to offer such explanations to Sunni Muslims.

Most often when Ismailis referred to the Aga Khan when directly speaking to me, they would refer to him as "His Highness" or "Prince Aga Khan." The use of honorific terms allows Ismailis to demonstrate the respect that they feel is due to the Aga Khan, but I think that the use of these specific honorifics stems from an effort to use terms that would make sense to me specifically. This is because as a native speaker of English who grew up in the United States, I would likely understand the denotative meanings of terms like "His Highness" and "Prince." I would add here that "His Highness" is the term most

often used when writing about the Aga Khan in press releases or in news stories on the AKDN website and the term that most dignitaries affix to the Aga Khan's name when referring to him in speeches.

Although I would not argue that terms like "His Highness" or "Prince" "foreign" to Ismailis—it is common in India to refer to men and women holding prestigious offices as "His/Her Highness" or "His/Her Excellency"—it is a term that is *primarily* used to refer to the Aga Khan in front of non-Ismaili audiences. In other words, Ismailis may refer to the Aga Khan as "His Highness" when speaking to other Ismailis, but when speaking with outsiders they use this term almost exclusively.

On several occasions, I would have an Ismaili speaking to me about "His Highness" turn to another recently arrived Ismaili interlocutor and explain that they were talking to me about "Hāzir Imam." In fact, on the few occasions when asked a question about "Hāzir Imam," my informants typically used the terms "His Highness" in their reply. This was not the result of Ismailis switching languages, because many Ismailis will refer to Aga Khan as "His Highness" even when speaking in Hindi-Gujarati.

The shift here represents, I think, an effort by Ismailis to use terms appropriate to their audience to refer to the Aga Khan. There is an implicit recognition that "Hāzir Imam" is a concept that is unfamiliar to outsiders, whereas "His Highness" is more likely to make sense to them. These varied terms resonate with concepts found in religious discourses of Ismailis' interlocutors. What is happening here is a process by which Ismailis seek to portray or explain concepts from their religious discourses in terms that are familiar to their interlocutors. This process of substitution highlights commonalities between these two discourses and obscures differences. The way such substitution works

will become clearer by analyzing the terms used by Ismailis to explain religious concepts to me in contrast to Hindus.

Although Ismailis never began routinely referring to the Aga Khan as "Hāzir Imam" or "Mawlā Bāpa" when speaking to me directly, people did gradually offer me explanations of the Aga Khan using ideas drawn from an explicitly Ismaili religious discourse. These explanations touch on ideas about the Imam that are already familiar to the reader, but they are worth re-hashing here for the sake of clarity. When discussing the idea of farmans with Sultan, he said, "we believe that he is the Hāzir Imam. Do you understand Hāzir Imam?" I responded that I was familiar with this term from reading about Shiʿa and Ismaili Islam. Sultan replied, "Hāzir Imam means that he is present to offer us guidance; unlike the other Muslims, we have a spiritual leader that is present in this world." A middle-aged Ismaili woman explained to me once, while showing me a picture of the Aga Khan in her vestibule, that they believed that the Aga Khan was the light (*nūr*) of Allah. She explained to me that this was why she kept the picture in the house and that she could not help having good feelings when she looked at the picture.

It seems plausible that Ismailis were willing to give me more in depth explanations of their thoughts about the Aga Khan than they would to others because I had established rapport and gained a certain amount of trust with my informants. I would not discount the role rapport played in this outcome. Yet, more importantly, I think that I was offered these in-depth explanations because I had demonstrated a certain amount of background knowledge about Ismailism and that these attempts at explanation were undertaken with "good faith" by my informants. In other words, I think my informants wanted to help me understand their religious tradition. Here my informants did not so

much draw boundaries around who could and could not know certain things as they sought to ground their explanations in terms that would be understandable to someone of my background. This point will become clearer if we consider how Ismailis craft their descriptions of the Aga Khan in front of different audiences.

The question then becomes how would explanations to people of different religious or educational backgrounds differ from the explanations offered to me? At two shops, one owned by Hasan in the Western suburbs and a second owned by Jafar in South Mumbai, I was struck by the way that most of the Hindu employees at the shops referred the Aga Khan using the term Bāpajī (bāpa: father, -jī an honorific suffix). I should note that it was not the case that these employees were constantly discussing the Aga Khan, but instead this term was used whenever it was necessary to refer to the Aga Khan in other conversations. Employees often used the term Bāpujī to explain my presence at the shop or to explain how I knew the owner of the shop to friends or other employees. For instance, while at Hasan's shop one day, a Hindu employee was asked by an Ismaili employee that I had not met how I knew Hasan. The Hindu employee explained that I was "studying" (*paRH rahe*) "Bāpajī." On another occasion a Hindu employee at the second shop explained to me that Hasan had seen "Bāpajī" in Hyderabad some years previously.

Why did the employees use the term Bāpajī? Though "bāpa" literally means father, the term may also used as a honorific term used to describe Hindu religious leaders or people in high positions worthy of respect. These employees here were likely seeking to demonstrate their respect and deference for their employer's religion by using the term Bāpajī.

We should not, however, assume that the terms' meanings are commensurate in Hindu and Ismaili discourses. When I asked an Hindu employee at a Hasan's shop what he knew (*kyā samajhte hain?*) about the Aga Khan, he responded that he was "their (i.e. Ismaili) *Dharm Guru*" ("religious teacher") and the employee asked me if I understood what a Dharm Guru was. I told him that I lived in Gujarat and lived with a family that was part of the Swami Narayan "sect" (*sampradāy*) and had seen their guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in Ahemdadbad. The employee nodded with assent indicating that I perhaps did understand what he meant by Dharm Guru.

Here the employee creates an equivalence between the concept of the Ismaili Imam and a Hindu Guru, so it's worth examining how Ismailis themselves think about this. This conflation with of the Aga Khan with Hindu religious leaders (i.e., Dharm Guru) was perhaps an invention on the part of these shopkeepers' employees. It may also have been a reflection of how Hasan explained such concepts to outsiders. I once asked Hasan if people asked him about the pictures of the Aga Khan in his shop and what he tells them when they ask. He replied, sounding slightly annoyed, that people did ask sometimes, if not often, but that he just tells them that the "Aga Khan is our Dharm Guru." This statement struck me as being strange and I pushed by asking him what he if he thought the Aga Khan was a Guru. He shook he head and said with some irritation, "Na...I say that 'he is our Dharm Guru.' You cannot convince (convince *nahin kar sake*) them of anything more than that. They wouldn't understand."

At first glance, it appears that Hasan's statement "he is our Dharm Guru," equates the Ismaili Imam and a Hindu Guru. Hasan's employee asserts the same equivalence when he says that the Aga Khan is a Dharm Guru. One possible reading of the statement

is that it says that Imams and Gurus are the same thing. In this reading there is no distinction between Imams and Gurus in connotative or denotative meaning. Here one would assert an equivalence between the denotative meaning of religious teacher and the connotative meanings of being a spiritual guide and a person worthy of respect.

Hasan's answer to my question, however, reveals that he does not think that of the Imam is literally the same as a Dharm Guru. When Hasan suggests that he cannot "convince" people of anything beyond a certain point because they will not understand, he is telling me that the there is not an equivalence between Imams and Gurus. Hasan is also pointing to the difficulties of communicating religious knowledge, when he says that beyond that they cannot understand anything. He attempts to address this problem using a strategy similar to the one described by Jamil in that he draws on terms from a religious discourse familiar to his audience.

What is less obvious in his statement is that he is asserting that the comparison between Gurus and the Imam is a metaphor: Hasan is describing one thing (the Imam) in terms of another (Gurus). As David Sapir (1977: 6) notes, every metaphor has three parts: two entities that share some third quality with one another. For instance, when I write "Jill is a lioness," I am conveying that "Jill is like a lioness in that she is brave." Jill is not, however, actually a lioness—she neither has a tail nor does she hunt zebras at night (cf. Sapir 1977). Chris Crocker (1977a: 167) describes the ability of metaphors to create similarity and contrast by saying that "metaphor establishes connotative similarities through a recognition of denotative contrast." Much like lions and Jill, Imams and Gurus share certain connotative associations, but remain distinct entities. In other words, when Hasan says "he is our Dharm Guru," he is comparing the connotative

qualities of Imams and Gurus—they both are spiritual guides and they both are worthy of respect—while contrasting their denotative meaning. The Ismaili Imam, though he may be a guide like a Guru, is nevertheless not a Guru. When we read Hasan's statement as equating Gurus and the Imam, we are misreading a metaphorical statement for a literal one (Crocker 1977b, 60-62). It is interesting to note, however, that Hasan says that he describes the Imam as "our Dharm Guru," a statement ambiguous enough to make it seem that he wishes to be misread.

To follow Sapir a little further, we might also consider that Hasan's metaphor relies on an analogy and as an analogy the differences between Imams and Gurus becomes clearer. In Sapir's (1977: 24) terminology, analogies are external metaphors and he provocatively states that "analogy is a mode of thought and that metaphor is one product of this thought." If a metaphor states that "x is y," then it relies on the analogy "x is to x's semantic domain as y is to y's semantic domain (Sapir 1977: 24)." For instance, I could rephrase the metaphor given above as an analogy by writing "Jill is to humans as lions are animals   Restated as an analogy, Hasan's metaphor reads as follows: the Imam is to the Imam's semantic domain (Ismailism) as a Dharm Guru is to a Guru's domain (Hinduism). This can be diagrammed as:

<p align="center">Imam: Ismailism :: Dharm Guru: Hinduism</p>

When formulated as an analogy it becomes clearer that the terms Imam and Dharm Guru come from separate semantic domains. These separate domains represent emic cultural boundaries. Again, I should point out that Hasan himself draws these boundaries when he explains that the Aga Khan is not really a Guru.

Another notable feature of Hasan's metaphor is that it effectively cut off further conversation about the similarity of the Aga Khan to Gurus. Hasan's irritation at my question made me reluctant to ask further questions. But more to the point, Hasan says that continuing the conversation with a hypothetical outsider would be fruitless because one could not create deeper understanding. Ending dialogue in such ways is in keeping with some features of religious pluralism. He is in effect saying, that everyone has a religion and there are analogs between institutions in those religions. In this respect, Ismailism is like Hinduism and Imams are like Gurus. After making explicit what the analogs are between religions, one need not go no further to determine what the limits of the comparison are.

I regret that I did not question Hasan further. Because Hasan seems to assume that his potential interlocutor is Hindu when he says that he compares the Aga Khan to a Guru, I would have liked to know what he might say to a Muslim. At best, my comments on this point must remain speculative. First, I would point out that the Aga Khan's status as the Ismaili Imam is one point of difference among Ismaili and Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Ismailis note that they are the only Shi'a community with a living Imam and they regard the existence of a divinely guided leader as something that differentiates them from other Muslims. It is worth repeating here that the word Imam means something very different in Shi'a or Ismaili discourses than it does in Sunni discourses. Second, if we reconsider the explanations offered about meditation above and the range of terms used for the Aga Khan, there is a trend among Ismailis to create explicit comparisons between their religious tradition and Sufism. The problem here, perhaps, is that for many Muslims Sufism is a form of Islam that is unorthodox. One Ismaili student in the U.S.

related to me that she often tries to respond to criticisms of Ismaili religious ideas from Muslim friends by making comparisons to Sufism, but they have already decided that "Sufism isn't Islam." There is a twofold challenge here for Ismailis in making their religious tradition understandable to outsiders: finding points of comparison that do not emphasize their differences nor associate their religious tradition with one deemed unorthodox by their audience.

5. Conclusion
To briefly summarize, I have argued in this chapter that Ismailis see cultural differences as presenting an obstacle to their ability to communicate religious knowledge. People of different religious backgrounds have different abilities to understand Ismaili religious ideas, because they construct the Ismaili religion as being different from other religious traditions. To bridge this gap, Ismailis seek to create metaphors that draw on the similarities between terms, institutions, and practices in other religious discourses. This requires the speaker to have not just the ability to find terms in other religious discourses, but also to have to have gained religious knowledge to speak on various matters. We have seen some examples where Ismailis think that these metaphors only produce partial knowledge, because the meanings of terms from various religious discourses are incommensurate.

One might reasonably pose the question, "Couldn't Ismailis simply explain those things that people might not understand about their religious tradition to others?" People do after all write books detailing Ismaili philosophy and their religious history. It's true that if Ismailis conceptualize their religious tradition being difficult to explain to others because outsiders lack familiarity with their religious discourse, then this lack of familiarity is the product of their reluctance to explain. I would reply that many Ismailis

made good faith efforts to answer my questions about religious matters or to find those who could answer my questions. But there are other reasons that Ismailis may be reluctant to discuss religious matters with outsiders. For one thing, most people in their day-to-day interactions with others do not seek to create discord. Similarly, Ismailis in general do not wish to allow religious differences to interfere with their daily lives and seek to emphasize their similarities with others. This is one feature of the doctrine of religious pluralism. Another is that many Ismailis told me that they had respect for other religious traditions. Drawing analogies between these religions is one index of that respect. Finally, there is also the concern that some aspects religious tradition will be controversial, especially when speaking with Muslims.

Ismailis ideas about cultural differences thus have implications for how they communicate with outsiders. Conversation is inherently relational and is thus part of our social life. How else do ideas about religious difference influence the social life of Ismailis? In the next chapter, I turn to the subject of boundary maintenance through social practices of separation, concealment, and secrecy.

Chapter 5:
Concealment and Separation

<u>1. Introduction</u>
In the previous chapter I traced how Ismailis' reluctance to talk about religious matters

stemmed from models of cultural and religious difference. I argued that Ismailis see the

difference between their own and outsiders' religious discourses as posing a challenge to

the very possibility of creating mutual understanding. Because talk is a key feature of

social relationships, the reluctance to discuss specifically religious matters represents one

type of social boundary. In this chapter, I look at how practices of concealment figure in

Ismailis' efforts to maintain boundaries around their jama'at.

Concealment and secrecy are a recurring theme in the literature on Ismaili history,

especially in accounts of how the Ismaili religion spread and developed in South Asia.

The premise, expounded in the excellent historical work done by scholars like Farhad

Daftary (1990, 1998), Tazim Kassam (1995), and Shafique Virani (2007), is that as a

persecuted minority, Ismailis sought to hide potentially controversial aspects of their

religious tradition to ensure their survival. This concealment took a number of forms. On

the one hand, Ismailis hid the contents of their religious tradition by limiting outsiders'

access to their religious texts and to ritual spaces like the Jama'at-Khāna. On the other,

Ismailis are also said to have dissimulated their religious identity by adopting Hindu

names, forms of dress, and incorporating Hindu symbols and practices into their religious

tradition. Historians argue that these instances of concealment are examples of Ismailis

making use of the Shi'a concept of taqīya, which permits practitioners to either hide or

dissimulate their religious identity in the face of persecution. Although the Aga Khan's

1866 declaration that Ismailis should discontinue taqīya ostensibly ended the practice,

many Indians still hold that Ismailis are a secretive community. They point to the Ismaili practice of excluding others from the Jamaʿat-Khāna, keeping religious literature out of the public domain, and their reluctance to talk about religious matters as evidence that Ismailis hide things from others.

Although Ismailis say that they no longer practice taqīya, they do admit to concealing certain information out of a desire to protect the community. Yet were we to understand concealment solely as a means of ensuring the community's security, we would miss that Ismailis attribute new motives and meanings to these practices. Moreover, the practice of concealment is strongly linked to the process of boundary maintenance, enabling Ismailis to create a moral community centered on devotion to the Aga Khan.

I begin this chapter by outlining how ideas about taqīya emerged in the early Shiʿa community and how historians employ the concept to explicate Ismaili history. I then turn to an examination of contemporary instances of concealment in the Ismaili community—such as controlling access to information about the community or ad hoc attempts to pass as Hindu in everyday life—among Ismailis and their Muslim counterparts. Although the Ismailis (and other Muslims) I spoke with do not attribute such actions to taqīya specifically, they do admit to being motivated by a desire to ensure their own or their community's security. Though Ismailis rarely attribute this behavior to a self-conscious form of taqīya, their practices of concealment mirror those employed by other Muslims to guarantee their security. In the fourth section, I critically evaluate the idea that Ismailis exclude others from their Jamaʿat-Khāna out of a desire to conceal controversial religious practices. Through an analysis of Ismailis own discourses about

who can (and should) attend religious functions, I show that Ismailis see outsiders (both non-Ismailis and those internal others who doubt the Aga Khan's teachings) as disruptive of a moral order produced through devotion to the Imam. I conclude by analyzing the practice of restricting outsiders' attendance of religious functions at the Jama'at-Khāna and at community-wide audiences with the Aga Khan as being part and parcel of the process separation, wherein Ismailis maintain social boundaries around the jama'at out of a desire to join together with those who are like-minded in their devotion to the Aga Khan.

The creation of boundaries around the Ismaili community emphasizing collective devotion to the Aga Khan is crucial for my discussion in the next chapter of Ismailis' efforts to reach out to others. In that chapter, I look at how devotion to the Aga Khan, a key source of the motivation to exclude others from their communal practice, also encourages Ismailis to reach out to others through volunteer service at schools, hospitals, and other civil society organizations. I examine how the practice of serving the Aga Khan engenders dispositions of care and concern among Ismailis for others and otherness, and enjoins them to reach across the very boundaries that motivate Ismaili voluntarism.

2. Taqīya in Shi'a and Ismaili History

Much of the historical literature on Ismailis emphasizes the role of taqīya, a term alternately glossed as "prudential concealment" (Kohlberg 1995) or "precautionary dissimulation" (Daftary 1998), as an important tactic to ensure the Ismaili community's survival. Scholars of Ismaili history, such as Farhad Daftary (1990), argue that faced with persecution by hostile Muslim political powers, practitioners of the Ismaili religion concealed their true identity either by keeping outsiders out of ritual spaces like the Jama'at-Khāna or living outwardly as Hindus. I begin this section by outlining the history

of practice of precautionary dissimulation and concealment in among the Khoja Ismailis,

connecting it to a broader history of concealment by Shi'a Muslims. For Ismailis, the

historical practice of concealment and dissimulation ostensibly ended after the Aga Khan

trials of the 19th century, which culminated in the Aga Khan proclaiming the end of the

period of taqīya and encouraging Ismailis to throw off the cloak of dissimulation

(Masselos 1978; Shodhan 1995). I end this section by considering the analytical issues

raised by the apparent disconnect between scholarly claims that Ismailis have abandoned

taqīya and the continued practice of concealment by members of the Ismaili community.

Taqīya, meaning "fear" or "caution" (Kohlberg 1995: 316), is a practice specific

to Shi'a Muslims, including Ismailis. Paul Walker (1995) succinctly sums up the

practice, writing:

> All Muslims recognize the personal duty of affirming right and
> forbidding wrong, but they also admit that, when confronted by an
> overwhelming injustice that threatens the well-being of an individual, this
> obligation can be fulfilled secretly in the heart rather than overtly.
> Among Shi'a Muslims, who from the death of the Prophet onward
> considered themselves subject to persistent religious persecution by the
> Sunni majority and the holders of political power, a further extension of
> this principle allowed not merely passive or silent resistance, but an
> active dissimulation of true beliefs when required to protect life,
> property, and religion itself. (186)

As Walker indicates, taqīya involves the practice of outwardly dissembling one's

religious affiliation, while maintaining one's true belief in the heart. For instance, when

faced with the real or imagined threat of persecution, a Shi'a Muslim might disavow their

belief in Islam. That said, when practicing taqīya it was important that Shi'a held certain

"mental reservations" while dissembling (Momen 1985:183).[1] In other words, it was

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[1]Momen writes, "The following Qur'anic verse (16:106) is held to justify this belief: 'Whosoever
disbelieves in God after believing—*except for those who are compelled while their hearts are firm in*

acceptable for a Shi'a to disavow their identity as a Shi'a Muslim, or even their belief in Islam more generally, so long as their belief in the tenets of Islam remained firm in their heart and mind.

Etan Kohlberg (1995), a scholar of religion working on the early history of Shi'a Islam, provides a schema for understanding the forms of and motivations for concealment among Shi'a, which I extend to an historical analysis of taqīya in the Ismaili community. In terms of form, Kohlberg (1995: 346) notes that taqīya consists of the concealment of information [*suppresso veri*] and active dissimulation [*suggesto falsi*]. For instance, taqīya includes practices adopted by early Shi'a Muslims such as concealing the name of the living Imam in a given epoch and the practice of some Shi'a Imams of concealing their true identity (*satr*). Active dissimulation also included the ad hoc practice adopted by some Shi'a Muslims of performing prayers in the Sunni fashion to hide their Shi'a identity. Kohlberg also suggests that Shi'a may have had two sets of motives for practicing taqīya. First, "prudential taqīya" encompasses acts of concealment motivated by the desire to protect the community from persecution by hostile factions (Kohlberg 1995: 345). Second, non-prudential taqīya allowed members of the esoteric hierarchy to conceal information from initiates who had not yet advanced to the proper level of the hierarchy to receive that knowledge. Kohlberg (1995: 369) writes that this type of concealment is motivated by the desire to protect members of the Shi'a community from information they may find "emotionally or mentally unbearable."

The early community of Shi'a, especially the Ismailis, had many reasons to practice taqīya. Shi'a Muslims were both a minority and considered to be a political

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faith—and then finds ease in his disbelief, upon him will be the wrath of God." (Momen 1985: 183, emphasis in original).

threat by the Sunni majority (Momen 1985). This problem became particularly pronounced for practitioners of Ismaili Shi'ism after the destruction of the Ismaili state of Alamut (in modern day Iran) by the Mongols in 1256, because they were for the first time in their history deprived of support from an Ismaili state (Virani 2007:7-8, 48). Tazim Kassam (1995: 70-71) has argued that the destruction of Alamut put an end to aspirations for an independent Ismaili state in Sind (currently southwest Pakistan) and led the *da'wat* ("missionary network") to seek alliances with Hindus and others. She writes, "having become marginalized to the extreme, had the Ismailis in Sind clung to their much maligned Nizari past, they would have risked certain extinction. To survive, they legitimized the nascent Sat Panth community that had been built upon political alliances and intermarriage, and, by thus aligning themselves with Hindu elements, they were able to enlist native resources and sympathy (Kassam 1995: 71).

Although for Shi'a living in Central Asia and the Middle East taqīya sought to blend into a predominately Sunni milieu, Ismailis living in South Asia adopted a unique form of precautionary dissimulation. Historians (Nanji 1978; Daftary 1998, 1990; Virani 2007; Khan 1997) have noted that the incorporation of Hindu symbols and practices, such as singing and dancing, into the preaching of Ismaili missionaries served as cover to hide their affiliation with the Ismaili religion. Indeed, it is possible that missionaries went so far as to adopt the guise of Hindu Yogis or Sufi masters while seeking new converts to better blend into the religious milieu of medieval India (Nanji 1978: 68).

There may also have been non-prudential motivations for Ismailis missionaries (dā'ī) to adopt taqīya. As Farhad Daftary (Daftary 1998: 183) writes, "the Hindu cover of the Nizari Khojas, as expressed by Hindu elements in their Sat Panth tradition, in

addition to inducing conversion, served taqīya purposes and made the Khojas less conspicuous in their primarily Hindu and Sunni environments." I have noted in the previous chapter that historians have argued that Ismaili missionaries used Hindu themes and symbols as a way of communicating the Ismaili message in terms that potential converts would understand. It is likewise possible that Ismailis' reluctance to speak about religious matters has both prudential and non-prudential motivations. Avoiding misunderstandings about religious matters could well be one tactic for maintaining the security of the community.

In addition to outright dissimulation, a more generalized culture of secrecy may have prevailed among the early converts to the Ismaili religion in South Asia. For instance, Kassam notes that secrecy is a recurrent theme in the Gināns attributed to Ismaili missionary Pir Shams (d. 1277 CE)[2], who encouraged his followers to keep the teachings of the Gināns private (Kassam 1995: 91). Indeed, in one Ginān attributed to Pir Shams he exhorts his followers, "If you want to meet, then meet in secret [lit. between the curtains], But outside, perform the sacrifice [*yajna*]." A 15th century text instructs followers to "revel not our secrets to the unworthy" and to "sit in the assemblies of the truth (in which these maters are discussed"(Virani 2007: 163-164). Concerns for keeping religious teachings within the confines of the community may have even led to the development of Khojki, an early form of the Nagari script used to record the Gināns (Asani 2003: 303; Kassam 1995: 91), which may have served as a kind of "secret language." Ali Asani (2003: 300-301) notes that Khojki bears much in common with other commercial scripts used to keep records among early traders, and that recording the Gināns in this language likely had the effect of making them more accessible to early

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[2]See Kassam (1995: 93) on the difficulties of ascertaining biographical information on Pir Shams.

Ismailis. But more significantly, the use of Khojki, a script that was exclusive to the Ismaili community, may also have served as means of hiding esoteric teachings on a precautionary basis (Asani 2003: 303).

The issue of taqīya played a major role in the Aga Khan Trials of the 19th century. These trials occurred shortly after the arrival of the Aga Khan in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1846 and centered on whether the Khojas were Sunnis or Shiʻa Ismailis under the authority of the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan's argument in court in 1866 was that the those Ismailis resisting his authority by claiming that Khojas were Sunni were in fact practicing a form of taqīya out of fear of persecution by other Muslims in India. Moreover, the Aga Khan argued that the colonial government's guarantee to protect the religious freedom of its subjects entailed that Ismaili Khojas no longer needed to recourse to taqīya. The assertion that those Khojas that disputed the Aga Khan's authority over the community and favored a Sunni approach to Islam were merely practicing dissimulation factored heavily in Judge Joseph Arnould's decision to declare that Khojas were in fact Ismailis and hence under the authority of the Aga Khan. Perhaps more significant, however, was that the Aga Khan used this ruling to reach out to Ismailis living outside of Bombay who were continuing to live under the guise of Hindus (Khan 1997: 44; 165). Khan notes that many of these Ismailis abandoned taqīya practices, such as using Hindu names, following the Aga Khan's pronouncement (Khan 1997: 44).

Before providing an ethnographic analysis of secrecy and dissimulation in the Ismaili community, there are several analytical issues related to the study of secrecy in general and taqīya in particular that ought to be addressed. Many of the Ismailis I spent time with claimed that they do not know what the word taqīya means and generally

rejected the idea that the community practiced anything like concealment or dissimulation. Only a small handful of Ismailis said that they knew about the practice of taqīya, and they all claimed that the community abandoned the practice long ago. Such statements support the claim that Ismailis have abandoned the practice of taqīya, perhaps following the Aga Khan's injunction in 1866. Yet, it would be difficult to assert that Ismailis, or anyone else for that matter, do not dissimulate or conceal information, even if only occasionally, in their everyday lives. And if Ismailis still do practice taqīya, admitting to the practice would render it ineffective. In addition to making the practice less effective, admitting to taqīya would also open Ismailis up to controversy.

This creates something of an analytical quandary, one familiar to anthropological studies of secrecy, wherein it is nearly impossible to prove to prove the non-existence of something that, were it to exist at all, is hidden. If I were to support my informants' claims that Ismailis do not practice taqīya, then one might suggest that I was either duped by my informants or that I missed the existence of a hidden discourse about dissimulation. But were I to take the opposite approach, and assume that there was some degree of duplicity in Ismailis statements about taqīya, I would run the risk of both calling my informants liars and creating a line of analysis that does not even attempt to understand my informants' worldview. In many ways, this quandary mirrors the position of one of my informants, who felt that the scholarly emphasis on taqīya leads one to examine every aspect of Ismaili history by searching for potential secrecy. The only logical way out of this quandary, at least for the analyst, is to find Ismailis who can prove that there is a hidden discourse within the community about dissimulation. No such individual was forthcoming.

Bearing in mind that an analyst cannot say with any certainty that Ismailis do or do not practice taqīya, in the next section I describe some of contemporary instances of Ismailis concealing information out a desire to protect the community. I begin by detailing what Ismailis say about the word "taqīya" or the practice of concealment or dissimulation more generally. I then turn to a analysis of practices in the Ismaili community—such as regulating the dissemination of certain information about the community and ad hoc dissimulations of religious identity—that bear a striking resemblance to what scholars describe as taqīya in Ismaili history. Whether or not Ismailis understand such practices as a religiously sanctioned form of dissimulation, there has been a striking change in the ways that Ismailis dissemble in present-day Mumbai. Whereas in the past Ismailis practiced dissimulation by adopting a Hindu guise in all forms of their everyday life, Ismailis now seek to maintain a Muslim identity and largely dissimulate on an ad hoc basis. In fact, many of the forms of dissimulation described below bear much in common with practices adopted by Ismailis' Muslim counter-parts. I argue that for Ismailis, these new forms of dissimulation are a reflection of their desire to maintain the integrity of the Ismaili religion and its relationship to Islam.

3. Concealment Among Ismailis and other Muslims in Contemporary Mumbai

During my fieldwork, I encountered no active or widespread discourse about taqīya or dissimulation. That is to say that there was little talk about whether or not Ismailis practiced dissimulation, nor was there any active discussion of the existence of such practices in the past. Only a handful of Ismailis I spoke with understood taqīya to mean anything relating to concealment or dissimulation, and those people that understood the term all asserted that Ismailis no longer practiced it. Jamil, for instance, once went so far as to assert that the fascination with taqīya and secrecy was the product of scholarly

interest in the subject. He told me that one did not hear much talk about taqīya until the 1950s, when western scholars brought the idea to the forefront of scholarship on Ismailis. When I asked other Ismailis about taqīya, many people responded that they had never heard of the term. In fact, many people thought I was referring to *takīya* ("a pillow") and wondered why I was asking them about pillows.[3] This was also true for Sunnis and Ithna-asharia Shiʿa, who were likewise unfamiliar with the term and also thought that I must have meant the word for pillow. Such formulations are surprising given that the etymology of the term taqīya is from the Perso-Arabic term *taqī*, an adjective meaning "god-fearing or pious" (Platts 1988: 330).

When I got no response using the word taqīya, I would often take another tact and try to talk in more general terms about whether or not Ismailis "hide" (*chupāna*) information from others. Many Ismailis that I spoke to simply rejected the idea that they were a secretive community or that they hid anything, and on the contrary, asserted that the community was both open and honest. One middle-aged man who ran a small furniture shop claimed that Ismailis were the "most honest" community in Mumbai and attributed their success in business to that honesty. I remember complaining to another man during preliminary fieldwork about the difficulties I was having in getting a meeting with officials at the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board telling me, "They are very busy. But don't worry, they are not reticent at all." And, as we saw in the previous chapter, what I saw as the reluctance to speak about religious matters amongst my informants was often brushed aside by my informants, who often thought they lacked the

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[3]The "k" in takīya ("pillow") is pronounced similar to the "hard k" in American English, whereas the "q" in taqīya ("prudential concealment") is pronounced in the back of the throat and has the phonetic value of a "voiceless uvular stop" (Ryding 2005: 15). Often times in India, especially in Western India, this "q" sound is pronounced similar to a "k."

qualifications or proper knowledge to speak about certain information. Those people could always fall back on the fact that they could put me in contact with experts who they believed could and would furnish me with all of the information I needed.

That many Ismailis held that their community was open and honest stood in marked contrast to discourses that construct the community as both closed and duplicitous. Those Ismailis who were generally critical of the Aga Khan or the community's institutions, were especially critical of the closed nature of the community. One man repeatedly told me that the reason that I or other outsiders were barred from attending services at the Jamaʿat-Khāna was that Ismaili leaders did not wish people to see the vast sums of money being given to the Aga Khan. I heard others complain that the community was so secretive that it even hid information from its own members, such as how much money the Aga Khan received in donations or the details of Imam's religious practice. And outsiders were particularly given to criticizing Ismailis for sealing themselves off from others, often saying that they knew nothing of Ismailis because they did not speak about their religion or allow outsiders into the Jamaʿat-Khāna. Added to claims that Ismailis were a closed community were accusations that they were duplicitous. One Shiʿa man, during a conversation in Urdu, used the English word "chameleon" to describe Ismailis, saying that sometimes they seemed like Hindus and other times like Muslims. A Hindu man, upon finding out that I was doing research on Ismailis, alleged that "during the riots they ran to the Hindus saying 'we're Hindu' and to the Muslims saying 'we're Muslims.'" The idea of people collectively running hither and thither during a riot proclaiming their religious identity seemed unlikely to me, but the

statement does point to the ways that others see Ismailis as both ambiguous and duplicitous.

How then should we understand Ismailis' claims that they are open and honest in relation to claims about their reticence and duplicity? It is true that Ismailis do conceal certain information and do at times dissimulate. But in this respect, Ismailis are like nearly everyone else—secrecy and dissimulation are common features of social life in most, if not all, societies. I contend here that Ismaili practices of concealment and dissimulation are shared by other Muslims in Mumbai and that it might be more useful to think about concealment in light of Hindu-Muslim politics rather than as recourse to Shiʿa taqīya.

Ismailis do conceal some information on a precautionary basis. For instance, it was impossible for me to get any official information concerning the size of the Ismaili community in Mumbai, Gujarat, or India. From the earliest days of my fieldwork, I asked those Ismailis who I felt might be in a position to know such information based on their past experience with Ismaili community organizations, about the number of Ismailis living in Mumbai. I was repeatedly told that Ismailis did not have or keep such figures. Invariably, I was told that no one knew how many Ismailis were in Mumbai because members of the community were constantly moving to and from Gujarat, Mumbai, East Africa, Great Britain and North America. Given the breadth of Ismailis' diasporic connections, Ismailis claimed that it was virtually impossible to keep track of who was where and when. Of course, I found it suspicious that everyone gave me nearly the same explanation about why population figures were unavailable. When I related these stories to one Muslim activist, she scoffed at these claims, arguing a community as well

organized as the Ismailis—one with central organizations that can keep birth, marriage, and death records—must have some idea of how many people there were in the community. She suggested that Ismailis must be hiding this information because as a minority it would be bad for them to appear "too big or too small."

Conversations with two Ismailis indicate that there may be some truth to the claims that Ismailis conceal population figures. Although I had all but given up hope of gaining the official figure, I asked one Ismaili if he knew of any sources that could offer a "guess" or an "estimate" of the community's size. He told me that he knew the information, but that he could not give it to me or to members of the Ismaili community. He added, "People will tell you that they don't know, that people are always coming or going, but they know." He added that the reasons that people hide such information was because it could be troublesome for Ismailis' relationships with other Muslims, especially in places like Pakistan. A few weeks after this interview I met with another knowledgeable Ismaili, who confirmed that Ismailis do conceal certain information out of concern for how others might view the community. But in his view, Ismailis only concealed two types of information: population figures and financial information. He linked concerns about revealing population figures to the 2002 Gujarat riots, during which Ismailis were among the Muslims targeted by Hindu militants. Population figures and details about it were dangerous, he said, because Hindu militants used tax records to identify Muslims targets. He related the story of one Ismaili businessman whose factory was burnt down by a mob during the 2002 riots. The man's factory was burned down even though it had only recently been purchased from a Hindu owner and the factory had a name drawn from Hindu mythology. The only way they could have known that the

factory was Ismaili owned, he argued, was from government tax records and this he suggested was the reason that releasing demographic figures were so dangerous. On the second point, hiding money, he suggested that it was wise for Ismailis to hide information about how much money they collected in voluntary donations or even specifics about the finances of the organizations that make up the Aga Khan Development Network. "Obviously," he said, " as a minority, its not good to seem too rich."

That Ismailis do not divulge information about their population has both historical and contemporary parallels with other Muslim groups. Writing in 1953, J.N. Hollister (Hollister 1953: 319) notes that arriving at an accurate figure of the number of Shiʿa living in India was nearly impossible. He quotes a colonial era report from the Superintendent of Census Operations in Bihar and Orissa suggesting that Shiʿa were likely underrepresented in the census because "they refused to record themselves as such" (Hollister 1953: 320). Shiʿa 's refusals to include themselves as Shiʿa in the census may very well be tied to taqīya, based on fear that census enumerators could use that data to identify them as Shiʿa to others (cf. Walker 1995). One Shiʿa community, the Dawoodi Bohras, continue in the present day to give only rough estimates of their population extrapolated from the 1931 census, the last time the Government of India enumerated categories such as "Bohra" or "Khoja" (Blank 2001: 13).[4] Blank (2001) notes the potential for inaccuracy in the 1931 census, given that Bohras would have had the option of giving their religious identity as Bohra, Shiʿa, or Muslim. Blank does not note, however, that Bohras also have a highly centralized organization governing the community and that they might have more detailed census information. In a climate

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[4] After 1931, census enumerators no longer asked Muslims questions about sectarian affiliation and instead included all Muslims in one category.

where Muslims are accused of posing a demographic threat to the nation because they allegedly have a higher fertility rate than Hindus, Muslim population figures remain a politically controversial subject.

Another way that we might see concealment at work in the Ismaili community concerns architectural features in the design of Jamaʻat-Khāna. Although many Mosques are readily identifiable by certain stylistic features—minarets and large domes for example—Jamaʻat-Khāna have few, if any, stylistic features that would mark them as a Jamaʻat-Khāna to an outside observer. During my stays in Mumbai, I have observed a wide range of stylistic features in Jamaʻat-Khāna: from the large clock tower attached the DarKhāna on Samuel Street to the dome and minaret-like structures on a Jamaʻat-Khāna in Bandra.   Many Jamaʻat-Khāna blend into the surrounding area, such as a Jamaʻat-Khāna in a busy commercial district in south Mumbai that is flanked by rows of similar one-story buildings on either side of it. The only way that one might recognize that building as an Ismaili Jamaʻat-Khāna is the presence of a stone plaque near the door that identifies it as such. In other instances, the size of the Jamaʻat-Khāna might make it stand out from other buildings in the surrounding area, but in contrast to many other buildings used for religious purposes in India, one will find no sign identifying the building as a Jamaʻat-Khāna.   In fact, I lived in one neighborhood for two months before learning that an apartment complex I walked by literally dozens of times housed a Jamaʻat-Khāna.

I spoke with one architect familiar with the process of designing Jamaʻat-Khāna, and he noted that Ismailis and other Muslims had recently adopted more "secular" designs for Jamaʻat-Khāna and Mosques in reaction to religious violence. It is certainly true that many newer Mosques in Mumbai are virtually impossible to identify from their

architectural features. For instance, in South Mumbai I knew of two mosques—one in a small courtyard of a colonial era mansion and the other located on one floor of a building housing many businesses—which I might not have identified as Mosques were it not for the long lines of Muslim men arriving on Fridays to perform prayers. Although I always suspected that at least part of the motivation for the simplicity of style of such Mosques was that they catered to Muslim men working in areas with relatively small Muslim populations, it is notable that neither Mosque has a sign or broadcasts the call for prayer.

If Ismailis and other Muslims are actively engaged in concealment as a reaction to religious violence, they have also adopted new forms of dissimulation. For instance, I sometimes observed the ways that Ismailis gave either their first or last names depending on their audience during face-to-face interactions. To explain, many of the Ismailis that I knew had "Muslim" first names and surnames that might most readily be identified as Hindu. Because in India many people simply introduce themselves using their surname, especially older men, in face-to-face interactions Ismailis might give one or the other name to elicit a favorable, or at least neutral, reaction. As one man told me, after the riots he noticed that strangers on the street increasingly asked people what their names were. Describing a prototypical encounter with a passerby, perhaps at a chai stall or panwalla, he said, "People would ask my name and I would say "[last name]. But people would then say 'no, what is your name?'" He emphasized this last bit mimicking the intonation and facial expression of an interrogator. Another informant, Jamil, told me that often times when he did official work, he would use his last name, which would be similar to surnames from the Gujarati Hindu Lohanna caste, instead of his first name which would

be readily identifiable as Muslim. "When I tell people my last name they know what village I am from and they open up to me as one of them," he said.

As Faisal Devji (1992) has suggested, Ismailis are not the only sect of Muslims that engage in this form of dissimulation in reaction to the religious violence. He notes how one migrant Muslim cook in Delhi changed his name to "Ashok" for protection or how he himself changed his name "to be comfortable socially and secure politically" (Devji 1992: 13-14). I encountered similar precautions among Muslims during my fieldwork. For instance, I met one Sunni woman who had married a Hindu man. Her first name was ambiguous in the sense that it was a name common to both Hindus and Muslims, but her last name, which she kept, was unambiguously Muslim. She recounted a story about the challenges she and her husband faced in finding housing after their marriage in Mumbai, where it is notoriously difficult for Muslims to find societies willing to lease or sell flats to Muslim owners in some areas. The reluctance that many Muslim housing societies might have about renting to a Hindu made the dilemma all the more difficult for the young couple to resolve. She told me how the broker who was helping them find a flat told her to stop giving her last name when meeting with the board members who would ultimately decide if someone's application for membership was accepted or denied.

Of course, such tactics can only work for a short while or during brief encounters with strangers one is unlikely to meet again. Over time, others will learn your full name and assign you to a category based on that name. Many Ismailis reported that their friends, colleagues, co-workers, and classmates often put them in the generic category "Muslim." Sometimes, however, this lead to surprise from others learning that their

Muslim friend was in fact Ismaili. One woman told me a story about describing her experience as an "Ismaili woman" during a class leading to surprised reactions from her classmates, who knew that she was a Muslim, but did not know that she was an Ismaili Muslim. Likewise, a Muslim woman told me about being friends with an Ismaili woman for three years before learning that she was Ismaili. "I just assumed she was Muslim, but one day I went to her house and saw a picture of the Aga Khan. I never thought she was Ismaili," she said. But such stories do not necessarily indicate dissimulation—as one Ismaili woman reminded me, she was a Muslim and that other Muslims rarely discussed the various schools of religious law that they follow. "It's not as if everyone says, 'I'm Hanafi' or 'I'm a Salafi.'"

I have argued thus far that the manner in which Ismailis conceal certain information or dissimulate their religious affiliation are similar to actions undertaken by the Muslim community more generally in reaction to religious violence. This shift in practice represent a sea change from previous forms of dissimulation, which were both understood as taqīya and involved Ismailis adopting forms of dress, naming, and religious practice that mirrored those of the Hindu majority. The changes in the understanding and form of concealment and dissimulation can be illustrated by drawing on a small number of descriptions of those Ismailis that continue to practice dissimulation.

This distinction between Ismailis' current forms of dissimulation and those of the past is evident in the ways that a small handful of people pointed to the distinction between Gupti and Khoja Ismailis. Guptis, literally meaning "secret," refer to a small subset of the Ismaili community that continues to practice dissimulation (Khan 1997: 41). A few Ismailis, when asked about taqīya, told me that while Ismailis no longer practice

dissimulation, there were still some known as "Guptis" who did. Guptis, I was told, dress like Hindus, have Hindu names, and may even keep images of Hindu deities in their homes. Guptis also allegedly have their own, separate Jamaʿat-Khānas that other Ismailis neither know about nor attend. That said, the existence of Guptis is not well known in the community—as a I said only a handful of people were aware of the Guptis. And even then, people had little in the way of concrete information to describe the community. For instance, while speaking to one woman about Guptis, I asked her how one would even know if they met a Gupti. In reply, she related a second-hand story about a friend of hers, who met a Gupti at an Ismaili Jamaʿat-Khāna while visiting London. That woman's friend had met a third woman at the Jamaʿat-Khāna, who confessed at some point in the conversation to being a Gupti. When I asked her if she had ever met a Gupti, she recounted a story about attending a function where the Aga Khan would be present at the DarKhāna, during which she noticed a group of people that she did not recognize. She told me that they were "dressed like farmers or taxi drivers" and that she "would never have thought that they were Ismailis." In this second story, people are suspected of being Gupti, but there is little to corroborate this suspicion.

There are two key distinctions between the dissimulation undertaken by Khoja and Gupti Ismailis. First, Khoja Ismailis dissimulate their religious identity on an ad hoc basis, whereas the description of taqīya attributed to the Guptis pervades every aspect of their lives. Second, whereas Ismailis undertake ad hoc dissimulation to conceal their Ismaili and Muslim identity, Guptis practice a form of dissimulation that pervades every aspect of their lives and involves adopting a specifically Hindu identity. Ismailis thus reject, or perhaps more accurately have abandoned, previous forms of dissimulation that

allowed them to incorporate Hindu elements into their religious tradition. Moreover, the ad hoc forms of dissimulation they undertake in the present-day are in keeping with practices adopted other Muslims. Whether or not Ismailis understand such actions as part of the Shi'a practice of taqīya, they are in keeping with the Ismaili project of reforming those religious and social tradition that seem more in keeping with Hinduism than Islam. And because forms of concealment and dissimulation are motivated by a desire to protect Ismailis, as Muslims, from religious violence, they are in keeping with Ismailis desire to maintain the integrity of their religious tradition and its links to Islam.

4. Separation and Boundary Maintenance

In the previous section I detailed instances of Ismailis concealing information out of desire to protect the community, or themselves, from religious violence or discrimination. In this section, I examine how concealment facilitates the maintenance of boundaries around the Ismaili community. I consider the practice of restricting outsiders' attendance at religious functions at the Jama'at-Khāna and dīdār figure in the creation of a moral community centered on devotion to the Aga Khan.

As we shall see, Ismailis conceal many facets of their religious life by performing ritual activities behind closed doors, leading to allegations from some Indians that Ismailis seek to hide controversial practices. While there is likely some truth to claims that Ismailis restrict access to certain ritual practices because they are controversial, the practice of limiting outsiders' attendance specifically religious functions also plays an important part in maintaining social boundaries. Anthropologists have often noted that the flip side of excluding others is that it produces a sense of inclusion (Barth 1969; Simmel 1906). And as Georg Simmel (1906: 477) noted long ago, the secretive character of esoteric religious tradition produces a sense of community within the confines of that

religious tradition while rejecting community with the outside world. Hence, I prefer to think about the boundary lines drawn around the Jama'at-Khāna and other religious functions as separation, a process that involves Ismailis removing themselves from the outside world to gather collectively with friends, family, and coreligionists who are united by their shared devotion to the Aga Khan. I contend here that Ismailis own discourses about who can (or should) enter the Jama'at-Khāna are indicative of ideas about collective devotion. Perhaps ironically given Simmel's ideas on separation, these exclusionary practices are part and parcel of the intensely moral community created through devotion to the Aga Khan, that forms the bedrock of Ismailis' efforts to reach out to others (described in the next chapter).

The Jama'at-Khāna
Since Pir Sadruddin instituted the Jama'at-Khāna as the space for communal prayers and religious education in the 14th or 15th century (Nanji 1978), it has been the nexus of religious and social life for Ismailis. Although Ismailis may perform prayers away from the Jama'at-Khāna when outside circumstances make attendance difficult, Ismailis deem it preferable to attend communal prayers regularly. In fact, I heard some Ismailis complain that attendance at Jama'at-Khāna was low until there was a major event coming up on the calendar. Special occasions, such as prayers on Friday or the Imam's birthday celebrations, almost necessitate a visit to the Jama'at-Khāna. Important life-cycle rituals, such as marriages and funerals, are performed at the Jama'at-Khāna. The Jama'at-Khāna also serves as the location for a variety of social activities. People often meet after prayers to chat, socialize, play cards, or match-make at the Jama'at-Khāna. Ismailis go to Jama'at-Khāna for advice about marital problems or family disputes. The Jama'at-Khāna is so central to the social life of the community that I sometimes heard parents say

that they did not worry about their children going off to school or work in the US, because their children could always go to the Jamaʻat-Khāna and find help if difficulties arose or find a community to watch over them while they are away from home.

Another enduring feature, one dating back to the times of Pir Sadruddin, is that the Jamaʻat-Khāna exists for the exclusive use of members of the Ismaili jamaʻat. The clearest boundary is that non-Ismailis may not enter the Jamaʻat-Khāna while Ismailis are performing prayers. This boundary is non-negotiable. Although friends and colleagues familiar with ethnographic research sometimes suggested prior to fieldwork that I would likely be invited inside the Jamaʻat-Khāna after gaining community member's trust, at no point during my fieldwork did I imagine it as a possibility. Ismailis were unembarrassed in telling me that outsiders were not allowed in the Jamaʻat-Khāna. I remember watching Jamil vociferously shake his head "no" during one early conversation as I told him that because I knew that I could not enter the Jamaʻat-Khāna, I had tried to find other venues to meet with Ismailis. While I saw this statement as a way of indicating to Jamil that I both understood and respected the boundaries around the Jamaʻat-Khāna, the mere suggestion that I might transgress that boundary met with an emphatic negative response.

There is, however, some degree of latitude with entering the Jamaʻat-Khāna during times when prayers are not in session. For instance, non-Ismailis often perform work inside the Jamaʻat-Khāna, such as repairs or improvements. And while wedding ceremonies held inside the Jamaʻat-Khāna are limited to Ismailis (receptions held outside of the Jamaʻat-Khāna are open to non-Ismailis), I have heard of special dispensations made for friends of the deceased to attend funerals. It was also sometimes suggested that outsiders might be allowed inside the Jamaʻat-Khāna to sit in the canteen area while

people were socializing, though no invitations were forthcoming nor did I hear of others attending being permitted access to those spaces. It was also suggested that in other parts of the world, notably the U.S. and Canada, boundaries around social spaces within the premises of the Jamaʿat-Khāna might be more relaxed. It is also more common for the Ismaili community in places like North America and Great Britain to organize tours of Jamaʿat-Khāna for non-Ismaili community members.

It is not uncommon to hear people in India allege that Ismailis keep people out of the Jamaʿat-Khāna because they hiding something. As one man put it, Ismailis kept others out of the Jamaʿat-Khāna because they were "embarrassed" by the fact that they sang religious songs, which he deemed un-Islamic. It is certainly true that, as I have shown in a previous chapter, that Ismailis are skeptical of outsiders' abilities to understand their religious practices. Forbidding outsiders' attendance at such functions could plausibly be seen then as one way of keeping people from misunderstanding Ismailis' religious practices. Yet, many non-Ismailis are aware of the types of religious practices that Ismailis perform in the Jamaʿat-Khāna. Whether told directly by Ismaili friends or heard secondhand, many outsiders are aware of some of the details of Ismaili practice. Many people know, for instance, that Ismailis sing religious songs or say prayers at Jamaʿat-Khāna, even if they know few of the details about those practices. And if Ismailis are reluctant to talk about these practices openly with others, or they describe religious practice in very general terms, they do not lie about their religious practice. Ismailis tell the same stories, even if the details are muted. Were the social boundary around the Jamaʿat-Khāna intended to conceal controversial information from view, we might then expect people to lie about what they do. Moreover, we might expect people to

meet with censure for revealing information about what goes on in the Jamaʿat-Khāna, though I have never heard of an Ismaili being punished for revealing information or speaking to outside researchers or journalists.

If Ismailis are not necessarily motivated by embarrassment or a desire to avoid controversy, then why do they limit outsiders' access to the Jamaʿat-Khāna? The key criterion for entrance to the Jamaʿat-Khāna is that only those who have given their *baiʿat* ("spiritual allegiance") to the Imam may enter. Ismailis give their allegiance to the Imam of a given era during a small ceremony performed after shortly after birth and some Ismailis reportedly re-affirm this oath of allegiance after completing the religious education curriculum. Baiʿat often refers to the oath given by Sufis upon initiation into a particular order, and usually involves the completion of some program of spiritual training prior to its performance. Because one must get permission to give baiʿat from Ismaili officials, entrance to the Jamaʿat-Khāna is effectively limited to the children of one or more Ismaili parents or those permitted to convert as adults, usually after marriage into the community.

Many Ismailis did not see anything unusual in the fact that non-Ismailis could not enter the Jamaʿat-Khāna. They seemed at ease telling me that the Jamaʿat-Khāna was the "house of the Imam," or sometimes the "garden of the Imam," and that only the Imam's followers could enter there. As one man bluntly stated, "unlike other Muslims, we have a separate Mosque where we perform our duʿa ("prayer")." He did not seem embarrassed by this fact nor did he feel the need to elaborate further." Still others pointed to the fact that other communities had separate sites for performing religious practices. One woman told me, "no one complains that Parsis don't let people into the fire temple," referring to

the practice by India's Parsi Zoroastrian community of limiting access to their fire temple to those that are by religion Zoroastrian and "by race" Parsi. Another man told me that Ismailis were similar to Sufis and that Sufis always had special places to perform prayers. That Ismailis had separate spaces for performing prayers seemed a natural matter of course considering these other examples.

When explaining how one knows that a person entering the Jama'at-Khāna is not Ismaili, Ismailis generally asserted that there were (very generalized) shibboleths that marked a person as a non-Ismaili. I was told that outsiders "do not know what to do," "look lost," or "do not know where to sit." One man related a story about a small group of people that came unannounced into a Jama'at-Khāna in South Mumbai during the rainy season. "they were not known to us and they did not know where to sit. They kept looking around. So we went to them and politely asked them to leave. We gather there to perform prayers...If you don't know how to say the prayers, why do you want to be there?" The statement here reflects the idea that not only is know what to do a shibboleth of community, but that that knowing what do is important to the religious practice that takes place in the Jama'at-Khāna. And as he suggests, people who do not share in saying prayers have no real reason to be in the Jama'at-Khāna in the first place.

Another man pointed to the importance of attending Jama'at-Khāna with family and the potentially disruptive effects that outsiders might have. He said,

> "You see we go there with our families. So our women are there. But you...you are a bachelor. So if you came people would feel uncomfortable. They would think you are looking at the women...but I know that you do not want to disturb people."

Although I must admit to feeling slightly embarrassed at having been portrayed as someone with less than honorable motives, his statement emphasizes the importance

attributed both to attending Jamaʿat-Khāna with family and the sense of familiarity and comfort necessary to the religious practice there. It also points to the idea of disrupting a particularly moral order by attributing to outsiders intentions that are categorically different than those of Ismailis. Even the suspicion of less than pure motives might be enough to distract people from their religious practice.

Lest we assume that such examples are merely secondary rationalizations justifying the continued exclusion of outsiders, Ismailis' discourses about who should and should not enter the Jamaʿat-Khāna are particularly revealing of the sense of moral order produced by gathering communally.

Ismailis frequently told me that those Ismailis who disagreed with the Aga Khan should not attend Jamaʿat-Khāna. One man summarized things up with the pithy statement, "there should be no dissent in the garden of the Imam." Another man told me, "Some people disagree with what the Aga Khan says. That's okay, it's your decision. If that's how you think, then you shouldn't come to Jamaʿat-Khāna. If you change your mind, then you are welcome to come back." On the one hand, the practice of encouraging those with opposing opinions to avoid coming to the Jamaʿat-Khāna strikes me as a well-crafted strategy for dealing with dissent and the possibility of schism. Many people Ismailis cognizant of the fact that the community experienced two schisms in the 19th and 20th centuries, with Khojas leaving to form the Sunni Khoja and Ithna-Ashari Khoja communities, and that in the Hunza region of Pakistan a small section of the jamaʿat is splintering off to for the *Khāna-e Hikmat* ("House of Wisdom") movement. On the other hand, encouraging those with dissenting opinions not to attend attests to the centrality of

devotion to the Aga Khan as part of the worship and community created at the Jamaʿat-Khāna.

Ismailis also frequently told me that there should be concord and agreement within the jamaʿat. Time spent in the Jamaʿat-Khāna was meant to be joyous and free from social discord. As one man put it, you should not have any bad thoughts or feelings "in the heart" while at the Jamaʿat-Khāna. Nasreen told me that her mother complained that she sometimes did not want to go to the Jamaʿat-Khāna, saying "they go there for *ibādat* ('worship'), but they get *gheebat* ('slander, gossip')." Her point was that the Jamaʿat-Khāna was meant to serve the spiritual needs of the community, but that it often became the locus for gossiping about other members of the jamaʿat. Nasreen's mother clearly juxtaposes spiritual practice and assassinating the character of one's coreligionists. The statement was thus as much in support of the idea that the Jamaʿat-Khāna should be the site of serious religious practice as it was one of the deleterious effects that gossip and slander could have on those practices.

If religious practices performed at the Jamaʿat-Khāna were meant to be serious, spending leisure time with others of the same faith at the Jamaʿat-Khāna was not necessarily taken to be indicative of a lack of seriousness. People were quite clear that the Jamaʿat-Khāna had both a "religious" (*dharmik*) and "social" (*sāmājik*) aspects. Many Jamaʿat-Khānas have a small canteen and people routinely gather there to socialize after performing prayers. Ismailis often spoke happily of the types of community established by socializing at the Jamaʿat-Khāna. One man told me that the social aspects were so important, that some of the people who had moved away to the suburbs would come back to visit their friends at their old Jamaʿat-Khāna. Others spoke positively of the way that

the Jamaʿat-Khāna facilitated the growth of small businesses in the community, especially for women who often sold homemade goods there.

Thus far, I have examined the process of joining together for social and religious purposes at the Jamaʿat-Khāna as a means by which the community comes together as a jamaʿat devoted to the Aga Khan. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider examine how such attitudes and ideas inform the practice of gathering together as a jamaʿat for dīdār. I consider the practice of dīdār as one that crystallizes Ismailis' attitudes towards collective devotion as the basis for a particularly moral community.

Dīdār
If the Jamaʿat-Khāna is treated as a site for expressing collective devotion with friends and family, these attitudes are also readily apparent in the ways that Ismailis describe community functions with the Aga Khan. A number of functions, such as *darbār* (community-wide functions) and *mulāqāt* (smaller meetings), exist where Ismailis may have "an audience" (*dīdār*) with the Imam. Ismailis often refer to these events collectively as dīdār, a term referring to having a "glimpse of" or "audience with the Imam." One can have dīdār any time you see the Imam, but more often it refers to the highly organized, collective gatherings of Ismailis in the Aga Khan's presence.

These functions, much like prayers at the Jamaʿat-Khāna, are explicitly limited to members of the jamaʿat, though I was told that exceptions were sometimes made for non-Ismaili family members to attend. As Firoze, a middle-aged professional with a lot of volunteer experience, told me prior to the Aga Khan's Golden Jubilee visit, he would be responsible for helping to plan various "public and private" events that would occur during the visit. When I pressed him on his use of the terms public and private, he explained that private events were those that were only for members of the jamaʿat,

whereas public events would consist of the Aga Khan meeting with dignitaries and government officials. That Firoze divided the Aga Khan's time between time with the jama'at and time with various government officials is telling, for it explicitly marks dīdār as time when Ismailis come together to celebrate the Imam.

Although I was not in India during the Aga Khan's Golden Jubilee visits, the anticipation of those events was the subject of frequent talk and excitement for Ismailis. Ismailis typically greet the Aga Khan collectively, lining the route that his car will take from the airport in festive throngs.

These events are highly organized—after the dates of the Aga Khan's Golden Jubilee visit to India were announced, websites were set up for people to register for particular functions—and require a great deal of work for those Ismailis working in the Imam's organizations. In Mumbai, a large outdoor venue capable of accommodating thousands of people was chosen to host a community wide function for the Ismaili community to have an audience. I was told stories that at most dīdār events, volunteer staff was on hand to regulate attendance and to make sure that people were not bringing cameras or phones into the venue.   Although it is difficult to gather much information on what exactly happens at dīdār events, I heard that typically they consist of the Aga Khan making a short speech, receiving offerings from the Jama'at-Khāna, and the Imam slowly walking through the audience so that Ismailis could see him face-to-face. There are apparently strong injunctions requiring Ismailis to not speak to the Aga Khan during these events. Ismailis reported that it is common for members of the jama'at to weep as the Imam passes. Weeping is frequently a testament to the intensely emotional experience that accompanies an Ismaili seeing the Aga Khan in person (cf. Marsden 2005: 235). For

those that are critical of the Aga Khan's role in the community, however, tears are the source of criticism. Sameera, a young Ismaili woman in her twenties, complained "The Aga Khan is constantly telling people, 'use your *aql* ("reason")', but these people go to dīdār and everyone is crying…he won't even talk to them, but they're crying. How is this rational?"

These intense emotions are linked to the Ismaili concept of dīdār, a term that bears certain resemblances to the Hindu idea of *darshan*. Darshan refers to the practice of having a vision of the divine, often times involving a devotee viewing an image or likeness of a deity (*mūrti*) or meeting with a Guru. For Ismailis, dīdār similarly involves seeing the Aga Khan, though the Imam is not doctrinally considered to be divine. Instead, there is perhaps an esoteric component of dīdār that makes the connection to darshan clearer. In an analysis of a Ginān attributed to Pir Sadruddin, Virani points to an exoteric and esoteric component to such meetings. She writes, "The beatific vision is of two kinds: one a physical meeting with the Imam and the other a recognition of his essence, through which God is recognized" (Virani 2007: 181). On the latter point, he notes that a Ginān attributed to Pir Sadruddin describes seeing the essence of God in his vision of the Imam as an "imperishable light" (Virani 2007: 181). A similar esoteric understanding of the event likely still exists among some Ismailis; one man related that dīdār was an opportunity to see the "Imam's nūr ('light')" and others would describe it as a "spiritual" (*rūhānī*) event.

Ismailis consider seeing the Imam to be of great importance. Ismailis end their prayers by turning to those seated around them and saying "Shah jo dīdār," meaning "May you see the Imam." Ismailis also put a great deal of time and effort into attending

dīdār. I have mentioned at several points that Sultan, for instance, had traveled on several occasions to attend dīdār in East Africa and others would also fly to Dubai or London, on short notice, to attend functions at which they knew the Aga Khan would be present. For those with more limited means, it was not out of the question to travel to places like Hyderabad or Gujarat when they knew the Aga Khan would not be able to give dīdār in Mumbai. Such actions connote a certain piety for Ismailis. For example, one informant wanted to put me in contact with a nephew, who lived in the United States, so that I would have someone to talk to about Ismailism when I was gone. He told me, "He's a very good Ismaili. He recently drove all night to have dīdār in Canada."

But attending dīdār is not necessarily an individual activity, for Ismailis are keen to experience dīdār with close relatives and other Ismailis. People put a great deal of effort into making arrangements to visit with family members during dīdār. This is at least part of the reason that ITREB makes arrangements for non-Ismaili spouses to attend dīdār functions, even if at a separate location. And for those that did not closely follow the Ismaili religion, there was no question of not attending dīdār with their family. They were required to attend. As Sameera told me, "I know that when the Aga Khan visits I'll have to go with my entire family. I don't want to, but it will make them happy if I am there."

More to the point, dīdār is not only a time when Ismailis gather with their families, but also a time when they join together as a jama'at.   It is not uncommon for people to offer others congratulations, or say "mubarak" ("congratulations," "blessings"), when an Ismaili mentions that he has received dīdār from the Aga Khan. Even people that did not attend a specific dīdār event, would offer congratulations and warm wishes

on the internet to members of the jama'at in other parts of the world who were being blessed with the Aga Khan's presence. That dīdār connects Ismailis living in a specific geographic place and creates an awareness of Ismailis gathering with the Imam in other parts of the world bears testament to the claim, often repeated in news accounts and on Imams' own official website, that what binds Ismailis together is their shared allegiance to the Ismaili Imam. And much like performing prayers in the Jama'at-Khāna, the boundaries around who may participate in dīdār events speak to the centrality of Ismaili meeting collectively to express devotion to the Imam.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how practices of concealment, portrayed as a method for ensuring the Ismaili community's survival throughout history, also plays a central role in processes of boundary maintenance. Although Ismailis do admit at times to concealing information out of concerns about religious violence, their desire to maintain the integrity of the Ismaili religion and to assert the Muslim character of their religion have engendered new methods of blending into their surroundings. Moreover, Ismailis do not always understand apparent acts of concealment as being tied to protecting the community from controversy or violence. As I have shown, the practice of limiting outsider's presence at the Jama'at-Khāna reflects a desire to join together with others who are similar in their devotion to the Aga Khan. Hence, devotion to the Aga Khan serves as a key value for determining inclusion or exclusion in collective religious practice inside the Jama'at-Khāna and during dīdār.

While we often view the process of establishing and maintaining social boundaries as one that produces aversions to others and otherness, in the next chapter I turn to an analysis of how Ismailis reach across social and cultural boundaries through

volunteer service. If Ismailis maintain social boundaries on the basis of shared devotion to the Aga Khan, this same devotion provides the motivation for Ismailis to offer service to others. As we shall see, one serves the Imam by serving others, a practice that fosters concern and care for others and otherness.

Chapter 6:
Serving the Imam, Serving Others

<u>1. Introduction</u>
This chapter examines Ismaili volunteer service and how that practice engenders a sense

of moral obligation to others. In the previous chapters, I have detailed how Ismailis'

ideas about cultural difference inform social processes of boundary maintenance. I have

shown how Ismailis do not talk about religious matters with non-Ismailis because of their

skepticism about outsiders' abilities to understand. And I have shown how Ismailis

produce an exclusive, yet moral, community (*jama'at*) centered on devotion to the Aga

Khan. A theme running throughout these chapters has been the Ismailis' increasing use

of the rhetoric of an ethical religious pluralism, which holds that all religions are valid

paths to spiritual truth and deserving of respect. Many Ismailis see no contradiction

between religious pluralism and hiding aspects of their religious life from outsiders or

limiting access to the Jama'at-Khāna because their ideas about religious pluralism require

them to tolerate differences, but not necessarily to discuss or display those same

differences.

The relationship I just described between religious pluralism and maintaining the

exclusivity of religious communities is consonant with recent critiques of religious

pluralism in the West. As I discuss further in the conclusion of this dissertation, foremost

among these critiques is that of Wendy Brown (2006), who has argued that ideas like

multiculturalism and religious pluralism do much harm by making differences private.

Brown has persuasively argued that the discourse of tolerance characteristic of both

multiculturalism and religious pluralism encourages people to privatize their differences.

In her view, when people from different communities do not actively communicate with one another about cultural or religious difference, they lose the possibility of establishing "mutual understanding" or creating liberatory political projects centered on difference. She refers to multiculturalism as a strategy for "regulating aversion," because keeping difference private ultimately leads to isolated enclaves and communities that know little about each other.

Although I am quite taken by Brown's argument about multiculturalism in the West, in this chapter I would like to use the Ismailis as a counter-example to her critique of religious pluralism. It is certainly true that Ismailis seek to keep religious differences out of the public eye, but at the same time the emphasis on voluntarism in their community encourages them to reach across social and cultural boundaries. My argument throughout this chapter is that the Ismaili practice of *seva*, or volunteer service, is grounded in moral acts of devotion to the Aga Khan and that in turn these acts produce dispositions of concern and care for others and otherness. It is thus my argument that Ismailis' devotion to their Imam produces ideas about an exclusive moral community *and* the desire to reach out others. Because Ismaili voluntarism is rooted in a moral community produced and maintained through processes of boundary making, service is one example of how ideas about difference can be productive of positive moral obligations towards others. The Ismaili perspective on otherness, thus, focuses less on creating mutual understanding about religious difference and more on enjoining Ismailis to treat others with care and respect.

As I detail below, the Aga Khan and other leaders in the jama'at have encouraged Ismailis to reach out to members of their own community and society more generally

through volunteer service. The Ismailis community has created a number of venues at which members of the jama'at may perform service. These include the vast network of civil society organizations that make up the Aga Khan Development Network and organizations that govern the religious and social life of the community, such as the Jama'at-Khāna, the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board, and the Aga Khan Council for India. Ismailis likewise engage in philanthropic activities at organizations that are not specifically linked to the Ismaili community. During fieldwork, I was repeatedly struck by just how important volunteer service and philanthropy was to members of community and by the number of people who volunteered their time and money.

I begin this chapter by detailing how and why Ismailis become involved in volunteer service. In section 2, I provide relevant background information about some of the Ismaili organizations that rely on volunteers to accomplish their various goals. In particular, I detail the organizations of the Aga Khan Development Network and explain their role in promoting ideas like civil society and religious pluralism. In section 3, I discuss the religious values that motivate Ismaili volunteers. My aim in that section is to show how particular religious values, especially devotion to a living Imam, create in Ismailis moral dispositions like concern and care for others. In section 4, I detail how this attitude of concern and care for others emerges in volunteers' descriptions of the beneficiaries of their service.

2. The Values and Institutions of the Aga Khan Development Network

There is an abundance of organizations run by Ismailis where members of the community volunteer their time, labor, and professional expertise. At the broadest level, Ismailis divide these organizations into the institutions of the Aga Khan Development Network

(hereafter "AKDN") and community institutions, such as the Aga Khan Council for India and the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board. While I focus primarily on volunteers working at AKDN in this chapter, from time to time I will discuss voluntarism at community institutions. I begin by sketching out the vision of the Aga Khan Development network and the connection between ideas like development, civil society, and religious pluralism. I then turn to a discussion of the types of development projects that AKDN carries out in contemporary India, with a particular focus on Mumbai, and the types of values that these organizations seek to promote in Indian society. I aim here to acquaint the reader with a general picture of AKDN organizations and their visions of development and pluralism to provide background information for understanding the types of projects that rely on Ismaili voluntarism.

In explaining the raison d'être of AKDN, many informants referred to ideals like civil society, development, and religious pluralism. And in referring to these concepts, Ismailis often referred me to specific speeches made by the Aga Khan or to his vision for these organizations. In important ways, the Aga Khan is the spokesperson for AKDN and the Ismaili community as a whole. I would like to briefly explicate the ways that the Aga Khan connects such disparate concepts as civil society, development, and religious pluralism. To do so, I analyze a speech given by the Aga Khan in 2002 before the Prince Claus Fund's conference on Culture and Development in Amsterdam. In conjunction with the celebration of his Golden Jubilee, the Aga Khan released a collection of these speeches in the book *Where Hope Takes Root: Democracy and Pluralism in an Interdependent World* (The Aga Khan 2008). In this book, the Aga Khan makes clear his

vision of the role that civil society and development play in promoting religious and cultural pluralism.

The Aga Khan (2008) notes early in his speech that all human societies are "essentially pluralist" (8) and communal groups seeking to eradicate difference are destroying the fabric of social life (9-10). He says, "Without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves. Human groups lose their necessary point of reference to relate to each other" (Aga Khan 2008: 10). To protect this diversity, the Aga Khan (2008: 9-10) suggests that civil society and government must work together to inculcate practices that promote tolerance and a spirit of pluralism, because in large part intolerance stems from ignorance. Or in his own words, "developing support for pluralism does not occur naturally in human society. It is a concept that must be nurtured every day, in every forum—in large and small government and private institutions; in civil society organization working in the arts, culture, and public affairs; in the law, and in the areas of social justice, such as health, social safety nets and education, and economic justice, such as employment opportunities and access to financial services (Aga Khan 2008: 13)." Finally, civil society must eradicate poverty through development, because poverty provides "a context for special interests to pursue their goals" (Aga Khan 2008: 11). "Special interests," it would seem here, refers to communalists or religious extremists.

The Ismaili community has created a number of volunteer-run organizations as part of AKDN that work to carry out the work of eradicating poverty and alleviating its effects on members of society. As its name implies, AKDN is a network of organizations working in development. Volunteers and Ismaili officials often characterized these

organizations as having separate mandates or areas of expertise. These mandates include social, economic, and "cultural development." Although each organization has a separate mandate, all of the organizations are meant to work together to achieve their goals. This often requires employees or volunteers of one organization bringing their expertise to help another, or two organizations working together jointly.

I am most familiar with the organizations that work in the area of what Ismailis refer to as "social," or *sāmājik,* development. In Mumbai, three non-profit organizations—Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS), Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), and Aga Khan Planning and Building Services (AKPBS)—comprise the social development arm of AKDN. In talking about AKDN organizations, my informants typically described social development in terms of improving healthcare and education, mentioning the work done in civil engineering by AKPBS with much less frequency. This is perhaps because the work done by AKHS and AKES were much more visible in contemporary Mumbai.

AKHS is best known for running Prince Aly Khan Hospital in Mazagaon, a neighborhood in south-central Mumbai, where the first Aga Khan is buried. The hospital's services are open to all of Mumbai's residents and though it does charge fees, there are funds for subsidizing the care of those that can demonstrate financial need. The hospital enjoys an excellent reputation throughout Mumbai and Ismailis are particularly proud of the hospital staff's expertise in cardiac medicine and oncology. The reputation of the hospital extends outside of the city and I have met many people traveling from the Middle East, East Africa, and Great Britain to receive medical care at the hospital.

AKES oversees the operations of two schools in Mumbai—Diamond Jubilee High School in Mazgaon and Diamond Jubilee High School for Girls in Dongri, a predominately Muslim neighborhood in South Mumbai. As one informant explained, these schools charge a small fee, as do most schools in Mumbai, but these costs were far below the costs of operating the school. I met a number of Ismailis and others who sent their children to these schools. All of them were happy with the expertise of the teachers and students. AKES is also active in training teachers in Mumbai and developing curricula for use in schools throughout India.

Economic Development is handled by the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED), which unlike other AKDN agencies is a for-profit organization. With the exception of branches of the Development Credit Bank (DCB) in Mumbai, I am aware of no other AKFED organizations currently operating in Mumbai. Several Ismaili officials pointed out that even though AKFED was a for-profit organization, it was still done in such a way as to benefit the local community. For instance, I was told that AKFED had shares in a hotel in Uganda and that the project was undertaken with the local community in mind—locals were hired to work in the hotel and the design of the building was meant to incorporate architectural elements from the local culture.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) oversees "cultural development" and has its offices in New Delhi. Although I have no direct experience with this organization because of its location, some of the volunteers I spoke with referenced AKTC projects in India and the rest of the world. One project that volunteers seemed especially proud of was the restoration Humayun's Tomb, the resting place of a Moghul Emperor, in New Delhi. One volunteer pointed out that the restoration was particularly concerned with the

historical authenticity of the materials used and that the project focused on the public uses of the tomb. The monument's restoration included a park where New Delhi's residents could go walks and enjoy a picnic with their families. AKTC also oversees an award for Islamic Architecture.

Many Ismailis living in Mumbai were also active in development work through Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), which at the time of fieldwork was most active in the nearby state of Gujarat, and has since expanded its area of operations to include Madhya Pradesh in central India. AKRSP's main goal is to eradicate poverty in rural areas. It does so through a number of programs, such as those aimed at ensuring that villagers have access to clean drinking water, sanitary facilities for defecation, and ample water for irrigating crops. Other projects focus on sustainable development, such as giving villagers access to biogas to use in cooking (as opposed to firewood or dung) and eco-friendly fertilizer. AKRSP has also worked with AKPBS on projects to develop seismic-resistance housing, especially in the earthquake prone regions of Gujarat.

In the next section, I explore how and why Ismailis become involved in volunteer service at these organizations. As we shall see, service is grounded in religious values that connect Ismailis to their Imam. Yet if service connects Ismailis to their Imam, their reliance on the notion of religious pluralism enjoins them to treat members of their community and others members of society with care. I begin by outlining how Ismailis conceive of voluntarism through the notion of service, and then turn to a discussion of how Ismailis become involved in service as children and adults. The focal point of the analysis in the remainder of this chapter is to demonstrate how devotional practices

directed at the Imam leads Ismailis to reach out to others and the types of engagement with otherness that this entails.

3. Voluntarism as a Religious Value

Voluntarism in the Ismaili community involves practices ranging from cleaning the Jamaʻat-Khāna to serving on the board of large-scale development projects. In each case, Ismailis describe their voluntarism as acts of *seva*, or "service." As we shall see, Ismailis view the practice of seva as an indication of practitioner's devotion to the Aga Khan and their commitment to religious values that are part of the Imam's teachings. These religious values provide the motivation for Ismailis to perform volunteer service at AKDN and other community institutions. I begin by examining the meanings that Ismailis give to the word seva and its English equivalent "service." I then turn to detailing the ways that Ismailis come to be active in volunteer service as both children and adults. I contend that seva is grounded in moral practices of devotion directed at the Ismaili Imam, which in turn create moral dispositions like care and concern.

The Meaning of Service

Ismailis use the word seva, or its English equivalent "service," when discussing their volunteer activities. In everyday usage, one can "give service" (*seva dena*) or "do service" (*seva karna*). Ismailis in India call people giving or doing seva by the English term "volunteer." While the word seva is a term of Sanskritic origin and, as such, is often associated with Hinduism, Ismailis see seva as a specifically Ismaili or Islamic value. Although in places like Pakistan, Ismailis sometimes use more Persianized terms *khidmat* ("service") and *khidmatgar* ("volunteer"), I did not hear my informants use these terms. As one informant pointed out when I asked about *khidmat*, this Persianized vocabulary would be unfamiliar to many Indian Ismailis.

Seva is a common, everyday term with rich meanings in South Asia. It is a term that describes both a set of actions for the benefit of deity or another person. As van der Veer has noted, seva was crucial means of ritual communication in bhakti ("Hindu devotional") cults, a means of making devotion to one's guru visible through practices that objectify inner states such as "humility, equanimity and detachment" (van der Veer 1994: 51). This is apparent in the ways that Indians often use the term seva to describe acts of devotion and care to a particular deity or spiritual teacher (*guru*), including bathing religious icons or cleaning a guru's ashram. Seva may also refer to the care and deference that a young person shows towards elder family members. Finally, seva carries with it the idea of service to one's country or homeland. There is a sense of seva as patriotism, expressed in terms like *deshbhakti* ("devotion to the country"), seen as actions in defense of homeland (Watt 2005: 58). There is also the sense of nationalist activism: those who participated in the Hindu-Nationalist organized destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent campaign to build a Hindu temple on the grounds of the destroyed mosque are known as *karsevak* (often glossed as "activist" or "volunteer").

Ismailis' use of the term seva has much in common with Hindu understandings of the term, though as we shall see they understand service to be part of a particularly Islamic ethic. And much like other Indians, Ismailis attribute a variety of meanings to the word seva. This is apparent in both the variety of activities that constitute seva and the variety of persons that seva is directed towards. First, seva can describe practices as diverse as volunteering at a hospital, serving on the board of an Ismaili service company, cleaning the Jamaʿat-Khāna, or bringing water to people at the Jamaʿat-Khāna. Seva, thus, denotes a range of actions that in the West might be designated as forms of civic

engagement or religious devotion, yet for Ismailis all of these practices are grounded in religious principles. Second, Ismailis direct service at a number of different persons, including the Imam, members of the jama'at, and people outside of the Ismaili community.

Ismailis have strong religious motivations to participate in service because in many ways the practice of service connects them to the Ismaili Imam. Ismailis sometimes mark this connection linguistically by referring to their volunteer activities using terms such as "being in the Imam's service," "working for the Imam," or "serving the Imam." Ismailis also connect service to the Imam when they describe their involvement in volunteer activities as a way of following the Aga Khan's "guidance" (*hidāyat*). For Ismailis, following this guidance is an indication of their "spiritual allegiance" (*bai'at*) to their living Imam. So strong is the connection between the Imam's teachings and seva that personal initiative is sometimes obscured or forgotten. I remember questioning one informant about whether individual Ismailis had become involved in service work before the Imam, pointing to examples of schools built by Ismailis in Mumbai in the 19th century, prior to the Aga Khans' encouragement of voluntarism. I once asked Firoze if it was possible that the Ismaili Khoja community began building civic service organizations independent of the Aga Khan, but he seemed to genuinely think I was mistaken. He said, "You see, in our community people follow the Imam's guidance. We don't do anything without him. So when His Highness Sultan Mohammed Shah [i.e. Aga Khan III] began getting involved in service, you see other members of the community begin doing this work."

Because of the connection between service and the Imam, seva at times appears as a specifically religious duty. One volunteer described his service work using the Gujarati term *kariya*, ("duty" or "obligation"). He described this duty as something that dominated other areas his life at times, mentioning the challenge of running his personal business and flying back and forth to Paris to meet with the Imam. Others pointed out that service could take over your life, becoming even more important than personal obligations like spending time with your family. As Firoze once put it, people viewed volunteer work as an important "responsibility" because they were appointed by the Imam. He added on another occasion that service should be and usually is selfless. He said that Ismailis do not seek benefits from doing this work and he cited the fact that volunteers did not request certificates for the work they did; in India it is a common practice to get certificates indicating that one has received specialized training or gained work-related experience to include with job applications. Other volunteers mentioned how much professional expertise they had gained through doing service work and how that benefited them. As one man said, "I have learned so much doing this that sometimes I wonder who is serving who here."

Seva also connects Ismailis to members of their own jama'at, especially for those volunteering at organizations like Aga Khan Council for India. Community members working at Aga Khan Council for India are charged with looking out for the social welfare of the community. This might mean making health services available to members of the community or organizing youth sports programs. Serving members of the community also carries over to some of the work done at AKDN organizations, which in addition to serving non-Ismailis, sometimes do work for the benefit of the Ismaili

community. One informant working at an AKDN organization described his work in designing an apartment complex for poor Ismailis as a way to "build assets for the community." This same informant described the social bonds created by service in the community, "It's good. Everyone has served everyone else in some capacity."

If service connects Ismailis to the Imam and to other members of their community, it also ties them to others in society. This is evident in the ways that Ismailis describe service work as part of a specifically Islamic ethic, which they learn through the Imam's teachings. Many Ismailis told me that the Aga Khan's guidance has taught them that the ethics of Islam enjoin them to serve others. In describing this ethics of Islam, one informant emphasized the idea of using "reason" (*aql*) to solve human problems and sharing time, money, knowledge with others.   Firoze once said that if you have in abundance then you should give to the poor, adding "the Almighty has blessed you, so share with the lesser people." Although my informants did not elaborate on the ethics of Islam with reference to specific religious texts, these ideas are consonant with the importance of acts of charity, such as *zakat*, and an ethos of social justice within Islam. But as I was reminded on several occasions that for Ismailis, volunteer work is not so much about charity as it is about serving others. As one Ismaili responded to my use of the English word charity, "I wouldn't say 'charity.' We don't see this as charity. Instead it is service. His Highness tells us, *and we believe*, that the ethics of Islam teach us to serve all of humanity."

This talk of serving all of humanity resonates with another feature of the Imam's ethical guidance: religious pluralism.   A key feature of this ethic, my informants would say, is evident in the fact that Ismaili service organizations serve everyone regardless of

caste or creed. Volunteers highlighted that their development projects, schools, and hospitals did not just serve Ismailis or other Muslims. They served everybody. And although most of the volunteer positions were held by Ismailis, they were open to drawing on expertise from any community. As such, I was told that when these organizations hire salaried employees, they do so based on merit, not the applicant's religious affiliation.

I now turn to discuss the ways that Ismailis inculcate service as a practice among Ismaili youth and the forms that volunteer service takes as adults. I am especially interested in detailing how service is viewed within the community as a moral practice that links Ismailis to their Imam, jama'at, and society.

Learning to Serve
Most of the volunteers working for the institutions affiliated with the Aga Khan Development Network, as well as those volunteering in other settings, told me that they became involved in service at an early age and that these early volunteer opportunities created a habit of doing service work.   Ismailis have created a number of volunteer positions for young people that inculcate the habit of serving.   For instance, Firoze, a middle-aged professional that has held several high profile service positions, told me that people learn to serve from an early age, by having children watch the shoes of those who are performing prayers or watching the "ropes" used to keep people in queues at large functions. He would often tell me that this creates the "habit" of service among young people, who would later be called to serve as adults.

Taking on these roles bestows a certain amount of prestige and distinction on the volunteer, even a child, and perhaps explains the attraction that young people feel towards serving. An Ismaili man, who had lived in London for most of his life remarked,

told me that as a child he used to bring water to members of the Jamaʿat during services (as part of the "Pani Committee", pāni the Hindi word for "water"), sweep the Jamaʿat-Khāna, and watch peoples' shoes. As he told me, "I did seva when I was in school. When I was young I liked doing service, because we got to wear a uniform. You know this red and green uniform that Ismailis wear? I think it's the same all over the world. You wear it so that people know that you are a volunteer … I would walk people to their seats at certain functions. It's strange when you are 8 or 9 years old and you have to say, 'No Auntie, you sit here.'"

Ismailis have programs fostering not only service to the Imam and jamaʿat, but also encouraging youngsters to perform civic service. A good example of this is the Aga Khan's Scouts and Guides (AKSG). These organizations are modeled on and loosely affiliated with the scouting movement advanced by Robert Baden-Powell in 1907. Aga Khan Scouts and Guides will occasionally attend jamborees sponsored by Bharat Scouts and Guides ("Bharat" is one of several words used for "India") and AKSG are registered with the same body. Mohammad, a volunteer who worked on the Youth and Recreation Committee, told me the main difference between AKSG and other scouting organizations is small one: AKSG is for Ismaili children and they wear different colored scarves (red and green). Like other scout and guide services, the AKSG commemorates Republic Day and other national holidays. This is one way of instilling national pride in young Ismailis.

Mohammed told me that the goal of scouting was to put children on the right "path." The notion of putting children on a path is similar to the religious and spiritual conception of tarīqah ("path"), a key metaphor for understanding the Ismaili religion.

Mohammad's explanation of "putting children on the right path" includes instilling habits and values associated with civic service.   The aim, I was told, was to develop the "character" of young people and to instill a sense of "independence." This is done in familiar ways, such as having children earn badges for skills such as cooking (both boys and girls, I was reminded) and building fires. Similarly, children are given tasks that they must complete on a weekly basis and are asked to do one good deed per day. The group also instills civic virtues through work like cleanliness drives, planting trees in the city, and blood drives.

The result of efforts to build the character of Ismaili children came through in a story Firoze told me about his daughter. As I was discussing how AKSG brings together Ismaili children from around India together for functions Mohammed, Firoze interjected this story. He noted that his young daughter had recently gotten involved in AKSG and he wanted to mention a very "positive change" that he noticed in her. Firoze told me that because she was the child of a professional living in an affluent suburb of Mumbai, his daughter was quite privileged. As such, most of the people she went to school with and met at Jamaʻat-Khāna were also quite wealthy. After going to a jamboree in Gujarat, however, his daughter met many poor Ismaili children. His daughter then told him that, prior to going to this function, she was unaware that there were poor Ismailis. Firoze noted that he had observed a change in his daughter in the weeks after that conversation and that she was more inclined to help poor people. In this example, Firoze's daughter learns about the plurality of her community, but extends this newfound knowledge to her attitude towards others who are less fortunate.

Serving as an Adult

Many Ismailis told me that the service they offered as children was a form of training for the volunteer positions they would hold as adults. Here I would like to detail some of the types of service work that adult volunteers do within the Ismaili community, both inside and outside of AKDN. In particular, I am concerned with the ways that service connects Ismailis symbolically to their Imam and how serving the Imam enjoins Ismailis to serve others.

Although not everyone is able to serve as a volunteer at AKDN service companies, there are many opportunities for Ismailis, regardless of their level of education or professional expertise, to offer service directly to their Imam or jama'at. I have seen Ismailis at the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board's office in Mumbai stuffing envelopes of materials being sent off to Jama'at-Khānas throughout India. I have heard of Ismailis cleaning the premises of the Jama'at-Khāna as part of the *Safai Committee* ("cleanliness committee"). And I have met Ismailis who volunteered as teachers for Ismaili religious education programs. The Aga Khan's Golden Jubilee celebration offered Ismailis many opportunities to serve their Imam and community and the level of service offered by Ismailis was the subject of particular pride and awe for fellow Ismailis. Sultan offered this story after returning from East Africa to have dīdār ("audience") with his Imam: "You wouldn't believe how much work the volunteers did! When you get off the plane you are greeted and they take you through immigration. Outside they had set up tents. They would ask you what type of guest house you wanted. If you could afford a hotel, they would ask you if you wanted three star, four star, five star... They set up a business center so you could plug in your laptop, check your email."

What is different, however, is that those working at AKDN service companies are also expected to have a certain amount of professional expertise and often have specialized degrees. Many Ismailis I spoke to acknowledged that the community channels a considerable amount of their economic resources into AKDN service companies, and that these organizations rely on salaried staff for their day-to-day operations. But they were equally quick to point out that the real strength of the AKDN organizations was that the Aga Khan could draw on so many volunteers. And because these volunteers are trained professionals, this pride in the volunteers of AKDN service companies is as much about the number of people that offer service as it is the educational accomplishments of their fellow community members. More than one volunteer told me that the service companies had so many qualified people wanting to serve, that they had to set up a rotating schedule so that everyone would have the opportunity to volunteer.

This professional expertise is perhaps a prerequisite for being able to do the types of work that Ismaili volunteers do at AKDN organizations. Ismailis were quick to point that they were chosen for various positions because of their expertise. At AKDN organizations like Aga Khan Planning and Building Services and Aga Khan Health Services, much of the work done requires specialized training, such as a degrees in architecture or engineering in AKPBS or medicine in AKHS. Similarly, a background in management or experience dealing with an organization with a number of employees is useful for those charged with overseeing the activities of employees at AKDN organizations. Ismailis may be called upon to work as members on various boards necessary for the running of the organization; for instance, a background in Islamic

studies is useful if one were to work on the ethics board of Prince Aly Khan Hospital, which is administered by AKHS. In addition to the service companies, service might include serving as an officer at organizations like the Aga Khan Council for India, which is responsible for overseeing the welfare of the Ismaili community, or on the board at the Ismaili Tarīqah and Religious Education Board, which handles religious education in the community.

The key criterion in such discourses is that involvement in AKDN is based on merit. This extends to the ways that Ismailis are inclusive in terms of hiring non-Ismailis to work at the various institutions that make up AKDN. Those Ismailis who made decisions about hiring or selecting people for volunteer positions told me that they chose people based on their merit. A Hindu employee who was responsible for hiring at one AKDN organization told me that he had hired a few Ismailis, but they came in during "regular recruitment." No one told him to hire Ismailis he assured me, nor did he even know that the candidates were Ismaili prior to their joining the organization. Likewise a Parsi woman working at Prince Aly Khan Hospital spoke glowingly of how her job had offered more than career. She noted that she was able to serve on some volunteer boards at the hospital and that she felt like she was "part of the network." She added that the people she met through volunteering had become "like her family."

In addition to merit, however, I also noted that family relationships played a great role in service. Some of the volunteers that I met had families who had been active in service for a long while. These connections were often important indexes of a family's connection to the spiritual center. For instance, a history of service in a family was one way of pointing out the closeness of particular people to Imam. At one level, coming

from a family with a history of service was pointed to as way of learning to serve, something that they imitated their family in doing. Amir, an architect involved in Aga Khan Planning and Building Services explained that as a child he did things like watch shoes, but that he "knew" that he would become involved in service because his family had worked closely with the Aga Khan. He noted that before him three generations of his family had been in the Imam's service. He was unsurprised, then, that after completing his training as an architect, and receiving several awards as a student, that he was asked to server by the Aga Khan.

On another level, there is a sense of importance and prestige attached to the family lineage through high-profile service relationships. An Ismaili doctor employed at Prince Aly Khan hospital, who also served on a number of volunteer boards, began our conversation reaching into a desk drawer and pulling a printout of a short biography of his Grandfather from the book *100 Ismaili Heroes* (Tajuddin 2007).[5] I should read this, he explained, so that I would know more about "who he was." He added that because his Grandfather was so well known in the community and had worked very closely with the previous Imam, the Aga Khan III, this biography would likely be interesting to someone doing research in the community. Pointing to connections between the Imam and members of ones family, is one way that individuals assert their (and their family's) proximity to the Imam.

It is not merely through familial ties, however, that individual Ismailis are selected by the Imam for service. Sultan, for example, emphasized that he had held many positions with the AKDN and AKCI, yet in many ways he was the first in his family to do high profile service work. Sultan had done so much service work, in fact, that when I

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[5]This book is also available online at http://www.ismaili.net/heritage/node/20663, hence the printout.

asked him about seva, he began giving me an impromptu life history that stretched over two long interviews. While I do not have the space to elaborate on the entirety of Sultan's history of service here, there are two aspects of it that I would like to very briefly highlight: first, Sultan's narrated his life history as series of positions held in the Ismaili community and mentioned that each time he was given a new position it was because he was selected by the Aga Khan. Second, Sultan emphasizes that he was given his position because of his expertise on particular issues.

During his 30 years of service, Sultan was repeatedly "called" by the Aga Khan to serve. Sultan attributed these "calls" to service to his own professional expertise as a lawyer and the opportunities he had to expand that professional expertise through service. For instance, his own area of specialization as a lawyer was the result of his experiences with the Aga Khan; he explained to me that Aga Khan had been particularly interested in developing the Arbitration and Reconciliation model of dispute resolution to solve business or marital conflicts within the jama'at. He later developed this interest into his own highly successful law practice, which specializes in guiding clients through the arbitration and reconciliation process.

In telling stories about his service to the community, Sultan highlighted the fact that he was selected personally by the Imam to handle extremely difficult problems. He told his story in the fashion of a serial history, transitioning from each position he had held to the next with phrases such as "and then in 1981 we were building Aga Khan Baug and His Highness called me to help again." Aga Khan Baug is a large housing colony in Versova, an area in Mumbai's Western Suburbs, which was built with funds donated by the Imam to provide housing for poor Ismailis. As Sultan explained, many of these poor

Ismailis were people who had migrated from Gujarat and ended up living in some of Mumbai's many slums. Sultan played the role of a mediator with government officials, presenting to them the plan for development of the site and demonstrating that the developers had suitably established the need of the applicants.

Sultan's story emphasized his own skill as a problem solver and had the effect of directly tying him to the Imam. For instance, Sultan mentioned several times where he was called upon to effect legal transfers of some of the Imam's property in India over to charitable trusts that would be used for the benefit of the jama'at. This was challenging because although the property had been in the community for a long time, the legal records were sometimes difficult to find. Sultan also mentioned the difficulty of managing his own business and family obligations while doing service work, because he was constantly traveling from India to France to meet with the Imam. In short, Sultan's stories point to the difficulty of some of the work that volunteers do, and the importance of fulfilling commitments of service to the Imam.

4. Serving Others

In the preceding section, I examined Ismailis' motivations for engaging in volunteer work. We have seen that Ismailis see service as a religious value that connects them to their living Imam and that, in many ways, one serves the Imam by serving others. Here I discuss how voluntarism creates positive attitudes towards difference and otherness. I draw largely on interviews with Ismailis volunteering at ADKN and one Ismail-run school, which is not part of AKDN, to examine how Ismailis describe the beneficiaries of their service work. Ismaili volunteers described the beneficiaries of AKDN and other service programs as culturally other, drawing on a broad field of difference, including differences in class, gender, and religious affiliation. Service is thus a practice comprised

of acts of care that reach across social and cultural boundaries. I am particularly interested in demonstrating the dispositions of care and concern produced through service work.

Ismaili volunteers at AKDN and other organizations often expressed the desire to develop programs that serve the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. This is evident in the way that volunteers explained how AKDN chooses the various service programs that it conducts. As several volunteers told me, AKDN strives to conduct service programs where there is or lack of government programs to address a specific problem. When choosing where to conduct service programs, AKDN organizations do not target specific religious groups. Instead, they look to help people who have the fewest material resources to improve their lives. By focusing on helping the most vulnerable in society, Ismailis volunteers in Mumbai are active in helping people from a wide variety of communities whose lives are quite different from their own. And as we shall see, while Ismaili volunteers strive to have a positive impact in the lives of their beneficiaries, they do so in a way that respects cultural and religious difference.

This concern for others and otherness is also evident in Ismailis' service to members of their own community. To make this point, I would like to discuss Ismailis' activities at a volunteer-run school in the Western suburbs, which I visited towards the end of my fieldwork in 2008. This school, Fidai Academy, provides subsidized low-cost education to students of diverse backgrounds. These students include boys and girls from the local area, which includes middle-class families living in high-rise apartments and poorer Muslims living in more modest dwellings. Fidai Academy also has a hostel that houses Ismaili girls, many of whom have come from rural Gujarat to receive an

education.   The board that oversees Fidai Academy selects girls to live in the hostel based on a hierarchy of need—orphans, children of single-parent households, and "hutment dwellers" receive priority in that order. Many of the children living in the hostel came from poor families, the children of farmers, landless laborers, or small merchants.   The goal of Fidai Academy is to help the poorest children receive an education and ideally to break the bonds of poverty by finding a career. In the words of the school's website, poor children "must be provided every opportunity to survive with dignity, get good education and prepare to overcome their misfortunes so as to achieve a better future for themselves and their families. The purpose of Fidai Institutions is enabling children to recover and maintain their dignity as befitting their status as God's greatest creation (http://www.fidai.org/aboutusfidai.html, accessed 12/09/2009).[6]"

Although this school is not technically part of the AKDN, it does receive advice from the organizations associated with the Ismaili Imamate and also reproduces some of the rhetoric of AKDN organizations. More to the point, Altaf, a board member whom I interviewed, saw the organization as following the guidance of the Ismaili Imam to provide education to the community. This is reflected through the choice of the word *fidā'ī*, a word that refers to someone who sacrifices for God, in the organization's name. As I watched a short promotional video for Fidai Academy, the video explained that a fidā'ī is someone who is "committed to a cause." As Altaf later told me, they put the meaning of fidā'ī at the beginning of the video because people associate the term with terrorism. It is true that fidā'ī refers to one who sacrifices, but the term has also been associated with warriors and militias, ranging from the legendary Assassins associated

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[6]This same language is included in promotional materials for Fidai Institutions, released on November 23, 2002.

with Old Man in the Mountain to one of Saddam Hussein's most infamous militia groups (Daftary 1995).[7] But my informant said that fidā'i really referred to a "committed person" and that those working at the school were committed to education.

Fidai Academy, established in 1929, was funded through the efforts of many Ismailis to raise money, including women selling their "ornaments." I was also told about one elderly man who used to go from house to house to collect money from the "pēTī fund." Pētī here refers to a small lockbox in which families would collect money to give to the school. The man, who was quite old, used to go and collect the money every month and he was old and had to walk up and down the stairs to get the money. One day his son asked him how much money he collected. He said "about Rs 150 a month." The son said he would give him Rs 150 a month and he wouldn't have to walk up the stairs. The father said, "Ok, give me the money." So the son gave the money and he would go on collecting the pēTī fund. My informant closed the story by drawing out its moral, saying "The man couldn't let the children go without the money."

The concern and care for others pointed to in this story is also evident in the way that Fidai Academy describes its mission. I was told by Altaf that they encouraged the staff to treat the children with "grace" and "dignity." In part, he said, that he did not want the students to feel as if they were "dependent." But treating the students with respect was likewise part of the concern and care that my informant felt for the students. Altaf pointed out that the girls who lived in the hostel were looked after by a staff of female employees, who would ensure that they were safe. As we moved around the grounds of Fidai Academy towards the hostel where the girls lived, we paused for a moment to allow

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[7]I am referring here to the Iraqi Fedeyeen, which made headlines for a short time immediately following the U.S. Invasion of Iraq in 2003.

a female employee to escort us. As Altaf explained, whenever male board members visited the grounds, they were chaperoned by female employees. On one hand, this was part of a concern about issues of gender propriety and perhaps what those outside the school might think about two men, one a foreigner no less, hanging around a girl's hostel. On the other, it was also a reflection of the responsibility to protect the children under their care. Altaf made it clear that many of the families would only allow their children to stay at Fidai Academy if they were closely monitored. This attitude was sometimes a problem for the future of education of some of the girls. Altaf mentioned that he knew of several girls who would have been eligible to attend college, but their parents said they could only go if they were able to stay at the hostel provided by Fidai Academy. He said that they were likely "cutting grass" on their parents' farms, adding sadly "They are lost to us now."

Ismailis working and volunteering at AKDN are likewise proud of the profound effect that their service work has had on the lives of others. Volunteers sometimes expressed this pride by pointing to the cutting-edge work that AKDN organizations were doing or the prestigious awards that the organization won. For instance, one award that volunteers seemed particularly proud of was the Nirmal Gram, an award given by India's government to the nation's "cleanest village." This award recognized the joint work of volunteers with Aga Khan Planning and Building Services and Aga Khan Rural Support Services (AKRSP) in improving water sanitation and wastewater management in the Gujarati village of Karan.

It was not merely winning the award that was a source of pride for many Ismailis, but also the impact that it made in the lives of others in villages like Karan. One

volunteer, an architect, mentioned visiting a village in Gujarat to do work with AKDN. He mentioned that during on of these visits, AKDN officials had been walking through the fields and noticed the amount of human excrement in the fields. He said that they began referring to these walks as "the shit walk." He did not use this term in a joking manner nor did he so much as smirk when he said it. Instead, as he continued talking, he drew my attention the impact on people's health of not having wastewater management. In addition to improved health and wellbeing, access to clean water brings other benefits. When describing AKRSP programs that promote clean water, Sultan said, "It is often women who have to go collect water. They have to walk for an hour sometimes with buckets of water. So the girls cannot go to school." What Sultan implies here is that providing clean water enables girls and women to improve their lives by having access to school.

These examples demonstrate the type of concern that volunteers have for alleviating the deleterious effects of poverty, especially as they impact health, and providing people a way out of that poverty through education. Here the volunteers described the material benefits that their service could bring to others—e.g., clean water and education. As we shall see in the two examples below, Ismailis understand the people who benefit from their service as being culturally other.

Jamil once mentioned to me a woman who had received a toilet as part of an AKRSP program to provide clean water and sanitation services. As part of this program she had received a toilet. Jamil told me that this woman had said that, "having her own toilet was better than someone taking her to the Kumbh Mela," a particularly auspicious Hindu pilgrimage that might be difficult for a poor person to attend. Jamil went on to say

that "for people like us [a toilet] is a small thing, but for her it was a huge difference." If providing people with clean water and stoves improves the material circumstances of their lives, it also allows them to live their lives with dignity. For instance, volunteers sometimes spoke of the shame that villagers must feel from not having toilets in their own home. In the words of Firoz, "You must have ridden the train in India and seen people going to the bathroom in the field. You can imagine how embarrassing this is. Now imagine how it is for the women."

What is significant in both these statements is that both Firoze and Altaf not only make clear the otherness of the beneficiaries of their service work by contrasting their lives with ours, but also that Firoze and Altaf seek to create an empathetic understanding of others. Jamil makes clear that the woman who received a toilet is Hindu and Firoze cites an abstract other that we only see from the window of a train. They establish an empathetic connection to those people by encouraging me to imagine things from another perspective, whether that of someone who has to go to bathroom in a field with onlookers zooming by in a train or as someone that cannot afford indoor plumbing. By encouraging me to imagine what these sometimes abstract others' lives must be like, they seek to establish some sort of empathy with the circumstances of others. This empathy is important because it bridges the cultural and social distance between largely poor beneficiaries living in rural areas and the middle-class lives of Ismaili volunteers living in urban Mumbai. If empathy indicates the concern that Ismailis feel for others, then their service work indicates care. And these acts of care, evidenced in the work that Ismaili volunteers do to improve the lives' of others, reaches across religious, class, and even gender boundaries.

It is also notable that in many of the examples of concern and care I have given in this chapter, informants describe beneficiaries as being women. Even when formulating the general impact of service initiatives, Ismaili volunteers often highlighted the way that women in particular would benefit from those programs. At first I suspected that women were the topic of conversation because I was the interviewer; the people I interviewed knew that I was writing a dissertation or book for a Western audience and perhaps describing the impact on the lives of women would portray the community as modern. Later, I wondered if it was simply a matter of my informants imagining the cultural milieu of Indian villages. If AKDN service initiatives strive to help the most vulnerable people in society, then perhaps my informants were merely imagining that in rural areas, where many people think women work in the homes and that girls take a back seat to boys in terms of schooling, women were the most vulnerable. This apprehension was followed by an ironic third: if the volunteers imagined Indian villagers as patriarchal, then what should I make of Ismaili men's near obsession with improving the lives of women?

Although I would not claim that Ismaili service is free of paternalism, my early idea did miss one important point. Ismailis sometimes see the education of women as a point of difference between their community and others. When Ismailis pointed the role that played in the community, they usually referenced a *farman* ("edict") from the Aga Khan III. My informants paraphrased this farman to me as saying that if an if an Ismaili has a son and daughter, and they can only afford to educate one, then they ought to educate the daughter. As one Ismaili woman explained, the idea behind this farman was the that if daughters are educated, then her children will benefit also, because women

were traditionally responsible for educating the family. In contemporary Mumbai, women have equal opportunity to serve as volunteers as men and have attained some of the highest positions within AKDN and other community organizations. And while most Ismailis readily admit that there are educated women from many communities throughout women doing important work, they likewise see the position of women within their own jama'at as a something that makes them unique.

If Ismailis' concern and care for others transcends class, religious, and gender boundaries, it is also the case that Ismailis respect cultural differences in the work they do. In other words, although Ismailis try to change people's lives for the better, they do not try to change the way the religion or culture of those that they help. Ismaili service does not carry the overtone of religious reform characteristic of the voluntarism of Lebanese Shi'a described by Lara Deeb (2006), for Ismailis are not attempting to foster piety in those that they help . Ismaili service efforts are also dissimilar to those of religious revivalist of groups like the Tablighi Jamat. Ismailis avoid talking about religious matters with their beneficiaries and have no interest in converting the people that they help. In fact, as Jamil once told me, when Ismailis do work with others, they try not to let religion get in the way. "If they don't know that we are Muslims or Ismailis that's okay." Jamil said that really the only way that someone might know that Ismailis are involved in the project is from the "Khan" part of AKDN's name. He linked this desire not to promote these institutions as part of the Ismaili community to the fact that they do not seek converts through their work. He said that he felt that if people asked to become Ismaili after receiving aid, that the "something has gone wrong." Many Ismailis pointed to the fact that their voluntarism was different from that of some other religious

organizations because they provided service to every community and did not do so because they desired to expand their ranks.

One could object here that Ismailis avoid converting others not out of respect for religious difference, but because as a minority it would be politically unfeasible. It is certainly true that in contemporary India that conversions to religions like Christianity and Islam often meet with violence from militant organizations associated with the Hindu nationalist movement. And if we are to believe Pandit Anandapriyaji, leader of the Hindu Sabha in Gujarat, in 1924 Aga Khan III was actively seeking to convert untouchables with "offers of money," providing education, and claims that he was the Nakalanga, or tenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu (Yagnik and Sheth 2005: 213-215). It would be reasonable to suppose that such efforts stopped in light of the growing controversy over Hindu conversions to Islam, yet what then would we make of the fact that most Ismailis cite the community's commitment to pluralism as being the reason that they do not seek to convert outsiders? Are the Ismailis merely paying lip service to the ideals of religious pluralism?

I would urge here that we momentarily suspend such skepticism about the Ismailis' commitment to religious pluralism. Certainly it is true that it would be dangerous for Ismailis to accept converts or to actively proselytize in India, not to mention Pakistan or East Africa. Whatever reasons Ismailis may have had in the past for abandoning proselytization, it is clear now that Ismailis see themselves as a community that respects religious differences. Following the larger argument of this chapter, Ismailis actually do much more than respect difference: they see people of diverse cultural backgrounds of being worthy of aid and assistance. Though it would be imprudent for

Ismailis to actively convert Hindus or Muslims of other sects, it does not follow from that they should engage in a project of actively helping others. In fact, many religious charities in India help only members of a particular religious community or sect. Ismailis commitment to helping people regardless of caste or creed is a notable exception to this trend.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Ismaili volunteer service is the product of a positive moral disposition towards others and otherness. This disposition is all the more striking because of the importance that Ismailis attach to maintaining cultural and social boundaries. I have shown how Ismailis' motivation to volunteer stems from their devotion to the Aga Khan and how the community has developed institutions to inculcate the habit of service. The community funnels a considerable amount of its time and money towards helping others and their commitment to a religious and cultural pluralism leads to an active engagement with people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

That Ismailis help others and describe that project in connection to the ideals of religious pluralism provides a rejoinder to recent critiques of multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the West. Although Wendy Brown argues ideas like religious pluralism are strategies for managing aversion, Ismaili ideas about religious difference do not preclude moral obligations of care and respect. Moreover, Ismailis' reluctance to discuss religious matters with outsiders displays their own reluctance about the project of creating "mutual understanding," yet they do much more than merely tolerate the existence of others practicing religions different than their own. For Ismaili volunteers religious pluralism does not produce an aversion to others or otherness, because their conception of service involves acts of care that reach across religious boundaries.

Moreover, the concern that Ismailis feel towards others seems of a different character than the tolerance described by Brown. It is not merely that Ismailis tolerate others, but they care deeply for the health and dignity of other human beings.

Chapter 7:
Conclusion

I have argued in this dissertation that ideas about cultural difference play a crucial role in how Ismailis separate from and reach out to others. As I have shown, religious and cultural difference remains a particularly fraught issue in contemporary Mumbai, as evidenced by social segregation and political discord. Indeed, difference is such a polarizing issue in Mumbai that the minority Ismaili community has even faced criticism from their fellow Muslims. As I demonstrated in chapter 2, such criticisms stem from discourses about Islamic orthopraxy promoted as part of a global Islamic revival. These discourses treat ritual practice as emblems that signal one's moral commitment to Islam. I have explored the ambivalence of Ismaili's response to such discourses, varying between a pluralism that accepts differences in religious practice as valid expressions of faith to a internalizing some of the key tenets of the discourse of orthopraxy.

As I have discussed in the middle chapters of this dissertation, the ways that Ismailis construct cultural difference informs the ways that they interact with others. I have demonstrated that many Ismailis see differences between religious discourses as posing a challenge to the creating mutual understanding across religious divides. Consequently, they do not readily speak about their religious practice with non-Ismailis just as they restrict access to their religious gatherings to those who have been initiated into the tradition. Yet ideas about difference also underpin Ismailis' considerable involvement in voluntarism, as volunteers express attitudes of care and concern at those who differ from them in terms of class and religion.

The Ismaili model of privatizing differences on the one hand, and reaching out to those who are different on the other, provides a useful rejoinder to recent critiques of

multicultural tolerance. In the remainder of this conclusion, I examine David Cameron and Wendy Brown's recent critiques of tolerance. My comments here are less concerned with addressing critiques of multiculturalism as with drawing out larger themes raised in this dissertation, in particular ideas about the nature of cultural difference, social boundaries, and intercultural communication. The aim here, as elsewhere in this work, is to unsettle some of our common modes of thought that link social boundaries with asociality.

In a speech in front of the Munich security conference in 2011, British Prime Minister David Cameron (2011) said, "under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values." Given that Cameron cited the state's tolerance of cultural difference as a problem for the nation-state, it was perhaps unsurprising that he would go on to promote sameness and identity as a solution. He said, "instead of encouraging people to live apart, we need a clear sense of a shared national identity that is open to everyone." There are grave risks in not providing that sense of shared culture in Cameron's view. "In our communities," Cameron said, "groups and organizations led by young, dynamic leaders promote separatism by encouraging Muslims to define themselves solely in terms of their religion. All these interactions can engender a sense of community, a substitute for what the wider society has failed to supply."

Although Cameron's comments on multiculturalism are directed towards a

specifically Western audience in Munich, his words might not be out of place in some gatherings in Mumbai. Cameron's warning about the dangers associated with Muslims living separate lives in a multicultural state conjures up images of a Muslim other who rejects commonly held social values like freedom, secularism, and gender equality. Like Cameron, Hindu-nationalists in India accuse Muslims of rejecting the very project of building an Indian nation, through their practice of a supposedly foreign religion, their putative emotional ties to Muslim states, and their imagined rejection of Indian cultural values like non-violence. A vast chorus of intellectuals and public figures in South Asia and elsewhere has argued that these stereotypes of Muslims are not founded in fact. Indeed, in the preceding pages, I have painted a picture of the Ismaili community that provides a remarkable counter-example to Cameron's rhetoric. Ismailis are a Muslim community that have incorporated Western values like gender equality in an Islamic idiom, just as they remain loyal, peaceful citizens of the Indian nation-state. The importance that Ismailis give to kinship ties, their respect and curiosity directed towards other religious traditions, and their adoption of a particularly Indic notion of service are all evidence that they share a great deal in common with other Indians.

Another issue raised in Cameron's speech, one near to the heart of this dissertation, is the idea that people living apart from one another is a serious danger to the fabric of the multiethnic society. Lying beneath the surface of Cameron's words is the idea that Muslims living together, praying in Mosques together, and creating social circles with one another together represents a threat to their successful integration into a broader community. And the next step in this line of reasoning is that failure to integrate leads to radicalization, either through exposure to radical elements or through the

alienation produced through disenfranchisement. Cameron's solution to this conundrum is not to welcome Muslims and their differences into the communal fold. Cameron admonishes his fellow citizens for tolerating people with different values who live in the national community, when they should be encouraging them to adopt a uniform, common national identity.

Although she comes from the opposite end of the political spectrum as David Cameron, Wendy Brown's (2006) critique of multiculturalism shares the same fear of people living apart from one another. Whereas Cameron sees tolerating difference itself as a threat to the nation-state and valorizes sameness, Brown feels that merely tolerating difference keeps people from actively engaging with one another. In Brown's view, it is the failure of people to seriously engage with one another's difference that precludes them from being able to act together politically or to find common cause with one another. This results in communities that live in isolation, knowing and caring relatively little about one another. Thus, in both Cameron and Brown's accounts tolerance ultimately leads to communities where people lead separate lives. The result, they seem to believe, is an inability to find common cause, a generalized antipathy towards those who are different, and the inability to act in unison for the greater good.

At one level, this dissertation has intervened in debates about multicultural tolerance by shifting the focus from the state to the adoption of religious pluralism by a specific community. I have argued that Ismailis' own experience of pluralistic and multicultural thinking has not, despite some appearances, led to their isolation from the rest of society. Nor does their desire to at times separate themselves from others stem from a deep-seated aversion to the values of others or a rejection of the prevailing values

of the society around them. I have argued that Ismailis do not see difference in antagonistic terms because their ideas about cultural difference largely stem from sets of semiotic, not moral, contrasts. Ismailis have derived a model of religions as separate paths (tarīqah) or communities (jama'at), each with its own set of contrasting practices. For many Ismailis, each unique religious tradition is a valid approach to gaining religious truth and as such is worthy of their respect. While they evaluate other communities as being distinct from their own, most Ismailis do not readily offer judgments about other community's claims to inclusion within the fold of Islamic religion. Moreover, Ismailis extend this same inclusiveness to other Indians within nation-state as evidenced by their volunteer outreach. This inclusive type of thinking—one in which people evaluate the practices of others symbolically as opposed to morally—is quite different from the attitudes evinced by Muslim revivalists or Hindu-nationalists. For those Muslims, differences in practices can signal one's moral deviation from the Islamic religion. It's notable, however, that Ismailis are not the only Muslims, or Indians for that matter, that have such an open and inclusive attitude.

Scholars like Brown, of course, would be quite right to point out that in doing all of this Ismailis have both privatized their differences and have in significant ways separated themselves from others in society. Throughout much of their history, Ismailis have conducted many aspects of their religious lives apart from their neighbors. I have shown that the religious ceremonies and rites they perform in the Jama'at-Khāna are restricted to Ismailis only. And Ismailis do not, in general, discuss religious matters with those who are outside of their community. This reluctance to speak about religion has even been a characteristic of their volunteer outreach. Ismailis do not actively promote

their religious values as part their project of helping others nor do they seek to actively engage in dialogue or debate about religious difference. Their relatively recent adoption of the rhetoric of religious pluralism has given new impetus to old traditions of concealment and quietism.

Ismailis' concealment of religious doctrine and practice—what Brown might call a privatization of difference—is part of esoteric philosophy that holds that cultural boundaries are difficult to communicate across. This is much different than saying that Ismailis lack shared values, common causes, or a desire to belong to a larger community. Ismailis' attitudes about difference do encourage them to maintain social boundaries around their community, though not to cut themselves completely off from others. Ismailis primarily restrict access to religious aspects of their communal life. In large part, I have argued that this is because of a belief that others are incapable of understanding their religious tradition and a desire to protect its integrity from being misunderstood or distorted. Ismailis own models of difference as semiotic presuppose the idea that creating mutual understanding is difficult if not impossible. Ismailis recognize, as do many people in the world, that while it is possible to speak about similar values across cultural boundaries, people are speaking in terms that only approximate one another.

A second line of critique by Brown is that by keeping differences private, the discourse of tolerance ultimately masks the fact boundaries between groups serve to reinforce inequality. This has become a well-established strain of social scientific thought. There are those who hold that the idea of a distinction between the self and other presupposes a hierarchical relationship (Abu-Lughod 1993; Said 1994; Todorov 1999). There are others who hold that efforts to maintain boundaries around their communities,

social circle, or network are best understood as ways of reproducing class inequality (Cohen 1981; Lamont 1992; Milner 2010). It is no doubt true that economic elites reproduce their privilege by limiting their circle of friends to the he "right sort of people." But then what do we make of the uses that cultural or religious minority groups make of social boundaries? Although Ismailis have in many ways worked together to acquire wealth for their community—by developing institutions that provide scholarships, credit, and housing, healthcare for the community—they have also worked to extend some of those benefits to others. But more importantly, Ismailis primarily draw boundaries around specific religious values: most notably a sense of love and allegiance to the Aga Khan. Creating spaces where only the community can gather serves explicitly religious purposes. It also protects that religious tradition from scrutiny by those who disagree with the religions central tenets and condemned the community's practices. In the Ismaili case, keeping such practices away from the (often) unsympathetic eyes of outsiders is part of a larger politics of meaning (Wagner 1984) in which Ismailis seek to protect the integrity and sanctity of their religious tradition from those who would criticize it.

Some anthropologists have also grown wary of the ways that the culture concept's focus on human differences challenges the ability of people to act together. Such thinking is especially evident in the Kamala Visweswaran's comparisons of the culture concept to racism. Visweswaran (2010) writes:

> This differentialist racism insists that cultures can be neither composite, shared, nor held in common; it rather articulates *uncommon cultures* as forms of alterity and incomprehensibility, positing that adverse outcomes arise from such culturalist difference. Anthropology has been implicated in such differentialism, because it has taken its normative work to be the description of cultural difference, rather than the mapping of cultural commonalities. The line demarcating difference from commonality in un/common cultures is meant to emphasize that what is uncommon,

singular, or distinct about cultures can only be understood in relation to
the work of finding affinity or making common cause—what Levi-Strauss
might have meant when he spoke of a "coalition of cultures." (8)

Visweswaran holds that for too long anthropologists have worked to describe human differences, obscuring their similarities. One exciting aspect of Visweswaran's work is that she, perhaps more than nearly anyone else, sees the project of anthropology as making cross-cultural comparisons. Thus, she has returned to older, still unsettled questions about the comparability of racism and the institution known as "caste" in South Asia. Drawing on the works of the likes of Martin Luther King and B.R. Ambedkar, she shows how civil rights and anti-caste activists drew on each other's analyses in diagnosing social ills (Visweswaran 2010: 159-163). Despite such commonalities in the past, Visweswaran notes that Dalit activists failed to build a working coalition with other activists at the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001. She attributes this failure ultimately to a culturalist logic that sees categories such as race and caste as different, ignoring their similarities. The gap between race as a socially constructed form of inequality premised on biological difference and caste as a socially constructed form of inequality premised on differences in ritual purity ultimately led to a situation where Dalit activists could not find common cause with others. The emphasis on difference between the experience of inequality across spatial contexts that is characteristic of culturalist accounts, ultimately undermines the ability of marginalized groups to build coalitions. For Visweswaran (2010: 16, 224-225), the cultural concepts' emphasis on difference is troubling because it seems to preclude the ability to build political alliances around commonalities.

One problem with Visweswaran's argument is that she seems to presume that

everyone who comes to the table has an equal say as to which values we should act around. Would, for instance, Dalits have had the social capital necessary to their unique experiences part of program of social change among anti-racist activists from South Africa, Brazil, and the United States? For a minority culture like the Ismailis, who lack the power necessary to have their viewpoint understood, much might be lost in subsuming their particular viewpoint into that of the multitude. But as this dissertation has shown, even if Ismailis are skeptical about the possibility of creating mutual understandings about difference in broader society, they are capable of engaging others who are different and working with those who have shared, if incommensurable, values through moral action. For instance, Ismailis have employed a rhetoric of seva ("service") to explain and understand their own substantial activity in voluntarism. Their approach to seva shares much with broader Indic conceptions of seva or voluntarism, and particularly Muslim ideas about service (*khidmat*), their unique conception of this practice in the service of a living Imam is not wholly commensurable with them. Through seva, Ismailis have developed moral dispositions such as concern, care and compassion. Those dispositions are not only directed at others, but also at a whole range of human differences. Ismailis are able to empathize with those who differ in terms of gender, class, religion, and culture. And Ismailis actively involve not only the beneficiaries of their service in their projects, but also employ a wide range of professionals from a variety of different religious backgrounds.

That the Ismaili approach focuses on moral action instead of dialogue should force us to reconsider some of our own notions of sociality. Among the many models that we have of society and culture is the idea that sociality relies on the exchange of words

and ideas. That Ismailis consistently avoid speaking about their religious life with outsiders seems like an affront to that model of sociality precisely because of our own models of what constitute proper social interaction. In doing so we privilege the role that words play in establishing relationships to the neglect of those that moral actions play in creating enduring relationships among people. It is hard for us—especially anthropologists—to imagine a world where people are indifferent to those things that others wish to conceal. Yet it is possible for people to act morally towards others in their social life without knowing a great deal about them. Such a viewpoint may even be necessary in an increasingly global world in which people must remain strangers to one another. Kwame Appiah (2006) writes about just such an idea when he raises the idea of a cosmopolitan ethic. Although Appiah clearly celebrates the role dialogue about and familiarity with difference plays in creating harmony between different people, he also tells us that we cannot be intimate with some people, who will ultimately remain strangers to us (Appiah 2006). In Appiah's view we still have moral obligations to those people on the basis of our shared humanity. Not surprisingly, the Aga Khan (2011) himself has adopted this language of a "cosmopolitan ethic."

In writing this, I am not advocating that we emulate the Ismaili community in keeping differences or avoiding active dialogue about difference. While many Ismailis, and other people as well, are skeptical about the ability of outsiders to understand their religious tradition on its own terms, as an anthropologist I am committed to the idea that with enough time, patience, training, and funding we can begin to unpack the terms, categories, and assumptions that others use to make sense of their world. Pointing out that some people feel skepticism about having their tradition understood by outsiders is not

the same as saying that a religious tradition cannot be understood. That said, Ismailis are correct that communicating across cultural boundaries is difficult. We are mostly aware as anthropologists that we are privileged to have the resources and training made available to us to pursue the study of other people's conceptual systems. There are others too. Those with the luxury to travel often meet those people, sometimes poor and with little formal education, with the facility to learn other languages with little effort. These intermediaries can play a critical role in bridging the gaps between cultural boundaries. And there are real benefits to understanding other religious traditions. As I have argued here, an understanding of the Ismaili community enables us to appreciate that both symbolic models of difference and social efforts to maintain boundaries can instrumental to positive, moral obligations towards others.

Finally, in writing multicultural tolerance, I am neither encouraging others to emulate the Ismailis nor am I endorsing multicultural tolerance as a political panacea. Instead, I am merely pointing out the range of possible outcomes and experiences of peoples' engagements with pluralism. As anthropologists, it is not always necessary that we agree with the desires and hopes of our informants. Just as we can extend an enlightened understanding to, say, the anti-secularism of the piety movement in Egypt, we might also seek to understand the more classically liberal Ismaili pluralism on its own terms. What I suggest here is that we might accept that people's desires and choices for political action might differ significantly from our own. Those differences, among others, need not seem so threatening.

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