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THE DIVINE KINGSHIP OF THE AGA KHAN: A STUDY OF THEOCRACY IN EAST AFRICA

H. S. MORRIS

THE EAST AFRICAN TERRITORIES of Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, and Zanzibar have a population of just over eighteen and a half million people.¹ Of these just under eighteen millions are Africans and some eighty-three thousand are Arabs. These latter people are Muslims and have lived in the coastal cities of East Africa and the surrounding districts for at least fifteen hundred years. Today they are no less indigenous to the country than are many of the Africans, some of whom they have converted to Islam, though exactly how many is not known. In addition, Indian and European immigrants live in East Africa, the Indians numbering about 190,000 and the Europeans about 50,000. Of the Indians approximately 79,000, about forty-three percent, are Muslim.

The common bonds of faith among Indian, Arab, and African Muslims are less significant than might be thought; for the Muslims are divided not only by differences of appearance, language, and custom, but also by sectarian differences which have deep roots in Islam. Of the 83,000 odd Arab Muslims, about 20,000 belong to the Shafii and Hanafi schools, and the remainder at the census merely declared themselves to be Muslim, which probably meant that most of them also belonged to the Sunni division of Islam. Only 15,000 of the Indian Muslims (roughly one fifth) are Sunni, and the majority of these follow the Hanfi school, which commands a minority of the Arab and African Muslims. Most Indian Muslims belong to the Shia division of Islam and are divided among three main sects: the Shia Imami Ismailia sect, numbering 32,000; the Shia Ithnasheri sect,² numbering 6,700; and the Shia Ismailia Daudi Bohra sect, numbering 4,700. In this paper I am concerned with the Shia Imami Ismailia sect, the followers of His Highness the Aga Khan, who are often known in India and East Africa as the Khoja Ismailis.

THE SHIA IMAMI ISMAILIA SECT IN AFRICA

Under the guidance of His Late Highness the Aga Khan, until 1957 the sacred leader of the Shia Imami Ismailis, the members of that part of this sect which has

1 *A Report on the Census of the Non-native Population of Uganda Protectorate (1948)* (Nairobi, 1953); *A Report on the Census of the Non-native Population of Kenya Colony and Protectorate (1948)* (Nairobi, 1953); *A Report on the Census of the Non-native Population of Tanganyika (1952)* (Dar-es-Salaam, 1953); *Notes on the Census of the Zanzibar Protectorate (1948)* (Zanzibar, 1953); *Annual Reports (1952)* for Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, and Zanzibar.

2 In East Africa the Shia Ithna 'Ashariya or Twelver sect is usually known as the Khoja Ithnasheri or Islamsheri sect.

migrated from western India to East Africa have built themselves a political and social position there that differs in several important ways from that held by other groups, whether Muslim, Indian, Arab, or African. In his *Memoirs* the Aga Khan writes of his East African followers:³

They arrived there with Asiatic habits and an Asiatic pattern of existence, but they have encountered a society in process of development which is, if anything, European-African. To have retained an Asiatic outlook in matters of language, habits, and clothing would have been for them a complication and socially a dead weight of archaism in the Africa of the future.

One of the most marked features of Indian society in East Africa is its division into more or less well-organized groups locally known as "communities," which are based on differences of sect among the Muslims and differences of caste among the Hindus.⁴ The Khoja Ismailis are the most highly organized of these Indian communities; and like members of Hindu caste and other Indian Muslim sectarian communities, they are in practice an endogamous group, though, unlike the Hindus, they do not explain their practice in religious terms. As permanent residents in East Africa, they are anxious to assimilate as much as they can of the culture of the ruling European groups, and in theory they approve of marriages with Europeans or other people whom they recognize as their "cultural equals." As a rule they do not marry Africans. At the same time they wish to maintain amicable relations with the numerically overwhelming African groups, many of whom are also followers of Islam, though not, except for a few hundred recent converts, of the Shia Imami Ismailia persuasion.

Accompanying the changes of custom sponsored by the late Aga Khan, and perhaps more significant even than marriage preferences and changing habits of food and dress are far-reaching economic and constitutional changes which have been undertaken during the last quarter century, also under the guidance of the Aga Khan.

In some countries [His Highness writes⁵]—India and East Africa for example—the Ismailis have a council system, under which their local councillors are charged with the internal administrative policy, and report to me as to their doings.

As Imam or sacred leader, His Highness the Aga Khan is legally absolute owner of all communal property. His title to such property was established in a judgment

³ *The Memoirs of Aga Khan* (London, 1954), p. 190.

⁴ H. S. Morris, *Indians in East Africa: a Study in a Plural Society* (British Journal of Sociology, vol. 7, pt. 3, pp. 194-211, 1956).

⁵ Aga Khan, p. 185.

given in the High Court of Bombay in 1866;⁶ and since then every Imam has been exceedingly careful to let nothing derogate from his title.

The organization of the Ismaili community in East Africa into a "highly developed and civilised system of councils . . . educational administrators, property agents, executive and judicial councils [performing] an immense amount of day-to-day administrative work, and under my general orders [i.e. those of the Imam] vast financial administration as well"⁷ is by no means uniformly developed throughout the Shia Imami Ismailia sect. His Late Highness also tells us:⁸

The leadership of a religious community spread over a considerable part of the world surface . . . cannot be maintained in accordance with any cut and dried system. . . . In Syria, Central Asia, and Iran, leadership . . . is vested in either hereditary or recommended leaders and chiefs, who are the Imam's representatives and who look after the administration of the various Jamats or congregations.

The problem that then arises is why there should have been so special a development in India and East Africa. How was it possible for this "highly developed and civilised administrative system of councils," which incorporates many of the forms of western political and business methods, to grow out of the traditional organization and relations of the methods of the sect with the Imam? Explanation requires some consideration of the history of the sect.

ORIGINS OF THE IMAMATE

The division in East Africa between Arab and African Muslims on the one hand and Muslims from India on the other roughly corresponds with the division between Sunni and Shia sects. Though there are Sunni Muslims from India, their numbers are small; and they are further divided from Indian Shias by the fact that they are Punjabis with their own language and regional customs, while most of the Shias are Gujeratis. The doctrinal division between Sunni and Shia is fundamental in Islam and goes back to the days immediately after the death of the Prophet.

In the belief of all Muslims, Mahomet was the Seal, the conclusion of a long line of prophets charged with revealing the divine purpose of the world to men. Mahomet's particular mission and its attendant religious authority ended therefore at his death. During his life he was also secular leader of the believers, and this authority did not end when he died. The Sunni section of the Muslim world, which comprises the majority of Muslims, believes that he did not appoint a secular leader

⁶ *Advocate General v. Muhammad Husen Huseni* (1866) *Khojah Case*, Bombay High Court Reports XII.

⁷ Aga Khan, pp. 184-185.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 185.

to succeed him; the Shias believe that he bequeathed both secular and religious leadership to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants by Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, until the day of final judgment and the establishment of the millenium. Out of this Shia belief arose doctrines concerning the person of the Imam which increased the rift between the Shias and the Sunnis; for the latter hold that the only legitimate leader of the faithful is the secular leader or caliph elected by the faithful themselves. The word *imam*⁹

→ | is used of a prayer leader by all Muslims, and also of the founders and leading jurists of the different schools. In addition it is used by some, and especially the Shi'is, for the leader of the whole Muslim community, whom the Shi'is insist must have been divinely designated and whom they regard as impeccable and infallible. In detail their attitude varies from sect to sect: the Zaydis are the most moderate, although even they consider their Imams as possessed of divine light substance, the "sole and permanent channel of sanctifying prerogatives and illuminative inspirations," while the Ismailis go even further.

In the factional disputes about leadership which took place after the Prophet's death, Ali did not at first succeed in becoming Caliph of all Muslims, though in the eyes of Shias today he was Mahomet's only successor, and was both Caliph and Imam. Eventually he became Caliph for Shias and Sunnis alike; but to the latter he is still merely the fourth caliph, and he and his wife and their descendants are invested with none of the mystical qualities attributed to them by Shias. Ali was assassinated during his tenure of office, and his sons and immediate descendants suffered misfortunes at the hands of Sunni rivals who seized the Caliphate. Thus, at a time when Islamic law and theology were rapidly developing in the cosmopolitan cities of Damascus and Baghdad, successive generations of Shia Imams and their followers were living in political eclipse. The differences between orthodox and heterodox theology which arose in this situation made doctrinal reconciliation between Sunni and Shia virtually impossible and undoubtedly poisoned social relations whenever these two divisions came intimately into contact. At the same time it is easy to overemphasize the differences between Sunni and Shia and to overlook their similarities, both of belief and organization.

The basic social unit in all parts of the Muslim world is a congregation united physically and metamorphically behind a leader in prayer.¹⁰ The ritual differences between one Shia sect and another are often not much greater than those among the orthodox Sunni schools, whose congregations, it has been noted, "in the ordinary law-books cannot pray behind the imam of another."¹¹ Shia sectarians, too,

9 J. N. D. Anderson, *Islamic Law in Africa* (London, 1954), p. 365.

10 D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammedanism* (London, 1936), p. 135.

11 *Ibid.*

judge orthodoxy and heterodoxy by a man's relationship to the sect's *imam*. In addition, all Muslims acknowledge five imperative religious duties: the witness of God's unity and the Prophet's mission, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. A sixth duty, the *jihad* or the waging of war against wrong belief, is often added. For Shias the duty of recognizing and obeying the Imam is paramount and encompasses all other duties. To escape damnation a man must find and acknowledge the Imam of the Age.

Dissenting Shia sects have never been able to deny the need of an infallible, impeccable Imam descended from Ali and the Prophet's daughter, for these doctrines were developed in Shia theology at a very early date. Instead they disagreed on the rightful successor to the office, and the certainty of his nomination as Imam by his predecessor. The reigning Imam, by reason of his innate qualities, has the right to designate any male of his patrilineal lineage to succeed him, and the divine incarnation, first embodied in Ali, will at his death pass with all its attributes into the new Imam. As a rule the Ismaili Imams have followed a principle of primogeniture, but a nomination made by the Imam may be withdrawn at any time before his death; and on occasions the late Imam's intentions have not always been clear, thus opening the way of dissent. Of all the Shia sects today only the Shia Ismaili Ismailis believe that a known, revealed Imam still walks among men. For them the Imam of the Age is Mowlana Hazar Imam His Highness Karim Aga Khan, the lineal descendant of Ali and Fatima, the forty-ninth Ismaili Imam.

THE SHIA IMAMI ISMAILIA SECT IN INDIA

When Islam was taken to India, Shia doctrines, which had been elaborated in the Near East, provided a congenial background for converts to Islam. Sacred leaders of Hindu sects, who were thought to be divine incarnations, and whose holy attributes were passed patrilineally, were prominent features of Hindu society, especially in Cutch, Sind, and western India generally, where Ismaili missionaries were most successful. The doctrines surrounding the Imam were not difficult for converts to accept; and the Shia practice of *taqiya* or permissible dissimulation of real belief in difficult situations allowed missionaries to clothe their message in ambiguous, half-Hindu terms that did not require converts to completely alter their traditional beliefs and practices.¹² A devotional book, *Dus Avatar*, attributed to a missionary of the fifteenth century and still in use, was written to demonstrate that Ali was the long-expected tenth incarnation of the God Vishnu, whose worshippers were particularly numerous in western India. In ways such as this Hindu beliefs and practices were intimately woven into the ritual and secular life of the

¹² The Khojah Case, *op. cit.*

Khoja Ismaili sect in India and have remained so to the present day. Moreover, periodical additions of new converts, especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Cutch and Kathiawad, have maintained the strength of Hindu ways and thought. Much of the life of the late Imam, the third Aga Khan, was occupied in altering the traditional habits of his Indian followers by a transformation of their economic, political, and social lives. As yet the process is by no means complete in either spiritual or material spheres.

In this task the Imam was both aided and hindered by the doctrines concerning his person, for these are still so much clothed in Hindu habits of thought that even an Ismaili living in East Africa and educated in England, who had never been to India, could explain the place of the Imam in his theology only in the following words:

Our Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, is like your Jesus Christ. Even Hindus believe that God will never leave the world deserted, and we believe that God, that is Vishnu, descended to earth in Ali and has never left us. When the Imam dies the Light moves on to his son: it follows the sacred blood—like the King. The King never dies.

Substantially the same views of the infallible, impeccable Imam, whose person it is proper to worship and pray to, are expressed in the following leaflet published in English by a small rural congregation.

His Highness the Aga Khan an Extraordinary Personality. In the reign of Queen Victoria.

Her Majesty Queen Victoria had held a Levy, which was attended by the Consuls of all Countries, and His Highness the Aga-Khan was also invited at the occasion. When the Aga-Khan went there, the Queen herself went to receive him at the door and welcomed him with great respects and made him sit on the Throne of their Pope. As soon as the Aga-Khan sat on the throne, the Queen said to all the Consuls, "What is the reason of your surprise, and what are you all thinking of?" The Consuls replied "Up to now how many Indian Kings have come to Europe but you have given more honours to Aga-Khan, and even made him sit on the throne of our Pope; what is the reason of this?" The Queen in reply said, "You are all wise, prudent and learned, and you know better than I the reason of this." "In short, I must tell you that we have never seen our religious leader Jesus Christ and without doubt, the Aga Khan is our same leader, and considering this I have made him sit on our Pope's throne." On hearing this all Consuls were greatly surprised and wired to their respective countries about the above fact. Consequently the Rulers of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, etc. sent telegrams to Aga-Khan from all over, requesting him to give them honour of visiting their countries, which the Aga-Khan accepted.

(Extract from: Saint Gazette 22.7.1898)

MODERN CONSTITUTIONAL AND ECONOMIC SOURCES
OF THE IMAM'S POWER

In 1840 the first Aga Khan and forty-sixth Imam, great grandfather of the present Imam, the fourth Aga Khan, fled from Persia after an unsuccessful rebellion against the throne. He suffered many vicissitudes and ultimately took refuge in Sind. Here he materially helped the British in their annexation of that country and in the Second Afghan War. For these services the Government of India awarded him a pension and the rank of hereditary prince prefixed to his Persian title, Aga Khan. He was prevented from returning to Persia, and eventually settled with his Persian retainers among the Khoja Ismailis of Bombay, whose Living Imam he was.

For some years before the Imam's arrival in Bombay, the organization of the Shia Imami Ismaili sect there and its relationship with the Imam had been in an unsettled condition. In western India generally most Khojas did in fact acknowledge the Aga Khan as their Imam and had long paid him tithe offerings and made visits of pilgrimage to him in Persia. At the same time they also adhered to a number of Sunni practices. In Bombay it was customary for them to marry before a Sunni official and to be buried according to Sunni rites.¹³ These customs, it was said, had been adopted in times of persecution and were allowable under the doctrine of *taqiya*. As early as 1829 the Aga Khan, at that time still living in Persia, was engaged in a dispute concerning tithes with a section of his followers in Bombay.¹⁴

In order to overcome their opposition [he] sent to Bombay [a] special agent accompanied by a very energetic lady, the Aga's maternal grandmother, Marie-Bibi, who herself appears to have harangued the Bombay Khojahs in Jurnat Khana assembled, and with very considerable effect.

In spite of his grandmother's oratory, the Aga Khan in 1830 was obliged to authorize his agents to file a suit against the malcontents in the High Court of Bombay. Later still the case was withdrawn and the dissenters were excommunicated; but the grievances were not settled and in 1866 the dispute was once more brought before the Court.

In presenting their case the dissenters maintained that the Khojas in Bombay were in fact Sunni and always had been so. The Aga Khan, they alleged, was an interloper who had persuaded the officers of the Bombay congregation to misappropriate funds and hand them over to him for his personal use, when they ought to have been held in trust for communal purposes. In bringing a suit against the

13 The Khojah Case, *op. cit.*

14 *Ibid.*

Aga Khan and the Treasurer and the Accountant of the Bombay congregation the dissenters asked the Court to direct that an account should be taken of all communal property, that it should be declared trust property held for the religious and charitable benefit of the community by the Treasurer and the Accountant. They also asked the Court to settle a scheme for the periodic and regular election of these two officials, and requested a direction to the Aga Khan to cease his interference in the management of the trust property and the affairs of the community generally.

Mr Justice Arnold in a most remarkable and learned judgment decided in favor of the Aga Khan, whom he held to be historically and in fact the Living Imam of the Khojas living in Bombay and of Shia Imami Ismailis elsewhere. He also held that all communal property belonging to the sect was vested in the Imam for his own absolute use without any responsibility of trusteeship. Finally he held that the Bombay congregation was a Shia Imami Ismaili body and that it was in no way Sunni.¹⁵

The effects of this judgment on the organization of the sect and on its relations with the rest of society in India and other places where English law prevailed were far-reaching, and almost a hundred years later the consequences are still being worked out. In delivering his judgment, Mr Justice Arnold described the traditional organization of the sect in India at that date.¹⁶

Wherever a Khojah community is to be found, however small, its organisation is the same: it has a Jummat, a Jummat Khana, a Mukhi, and a Kamria.

The "Jummat" is the "congregation of the people," the assembly in council of all the adult male members of the Khojah community in that place.

The "Jummat Khana" is the Council-Hall of the community.

The "Mukhi" is the treasurer or steward, and the "Kamria" is the accountant . . . these two functionaries . . . are not, according to the usage of the Khojah community, elected for any ascertained or fixed period but appear to hold their office as long as they give satisfaction. . . .

Besides these local Mukhis and Kamrias proof was given that in Scinde and Kattiawar (it may also be the case elsewhere) provincial Kamrias are appointed by and hold office under the Imam . . . the duty of these functionaries is to collect and forward for transmission to the Imam, wherever he may chance to reside, the contributions raised on his account by the Khojah community.

In many parts of the Ismaili world organizations similar to those described in 1866 still survive. The members of the sect belong to local organizations which are largely independent of one another, though in theory all ranged behind the Imam

15 The Khojah Case, *op. cit.*

16 *Ibid.*

in prayer. Each congregation is answerable direct to the infallible, impeccable, spiritual and secular leader to whom they pray and owe allegiance and tribute. In some places, as Mr Justice Arnold indicated, a wider though very loose administrative organization may also exist, often directed by hereditary chiefs. In East Africa and India, however, the organization of the sect, as was remarked earlier, has departed very far from these traditional forms.

The success of the first Aga Khan in establishing in a court of law both his Imamate and his absolute legal ownership of communal property immediately placed him in a position different from that of other sacred leaders in India, whether Muslim or Hindu; and in the years following the Khojah Case the Aga Khan, his son, and his son's widow (a most powerful character who administered the entire Imamate during the third Aga Khan's minority) established a large personal fortune for themselves. It was this fact which allowed the late Imam to rule his followers with more detachment and benevolence than other more financially pressed sacred leaders have found possible. The decision of the first Aga Khan to settle in Bombay was, his grandson wrote,¹⁷

not only a wise and happy personal decision, but it had an admirable effect on the religious and communal life of the whole Ismaili world. It was as if the heavy load of persecution and fanatical hostility, which they had had to bear for so long, was lifted. Deputations came to Bombay from places as remote as Kashgar, Bokhara, all parts of Iran, Syria, the Yemen, the African coast and the then narrowly settled hinterland behind it.

The consequences of this decision on the personal lives of the Imams have in turn affected the lives of ordinary members of the sect in ways that have increasingly set them and their Imams apart from their analogues.

At the death of the first Aga Khan in 1881 his son, the second Aga Khan, succeeded to the Imamate, but died in 1885. His heir, the third Aga Khan, was then a child, eight years of age. Sixty-nine years later he wrote: "My education for the responsibilities and tasks which I had inherited was serious and strenuous. . . ."¹⁸ Besides receiving a traditional education, the Imam was also taught to take his place in the westernized upper class society of Bombay, and when in 1897, aged twenty, he visited Europe for the first time, he was, as we have seen, invited to dine at Windsor. He also made the acquaintance of the English upper classes and governing circles, among whom so much of his subsequent career in international politics was to be laid. As he grew older he returned less and less to India and his mother, a woman every bit as formidable as his ancestress, Marie-Bibi.

17 Aga Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

18 *Idem*, pp. 11, 12.

THE SHIA IMAMI ISMAILIA SECT IN EAST AFRICA

In his judgment in 1866, Mr Justice Arnold noted that¹⁹

all or the overwhelming majority of the Khojah community in all parts of India and the East, except Bombay, are staunch adherents of the Aga Khan: to take an illustration (which seems to be a quite fair one) it appears that 445 out of the 450 families who compose the Khojah community of Zanzibar have recently signed a paper of adhesion to the Aga and the views he is understood to represent.

These five dissenting or abstaining families of Zanzibar represented a minority that played an exceedingly important part in the future of the sect in Africa.

The Khojah Case had not only clarified the position of the Imam and his relations with his followers, but it had also helped to clarify and fix Ismaili doctrines. Even so, doctrinal vagueness seems to have remained characteristic of so many Ismailis in Africa and elsewhere. A further sociologically more significant consequence of the Khojah Case was that it introduced a precedent for resorting to English law courts for the settlement of cases dealing with family law or the ownership of sectarian property, when the members of the community could not settle such cases among themselves. Cases brought before English courts of record are binding in subsequent cases, and in this way a body of customary law peculiar to the members of each sect which had resorted to litigation was gradually built up. In this way, too, the informal association in one *Jamatkhana* of varying and not very closely defined beliefs was rendered increasingly difficult. Moreover, the Imam, having once had his status and authority seriously challenged, was never again willing to allow his title to communal property to remain vague.

By 1924 the Khoja Ismailis in Zanzibar and other parts of East Africa had legally established the fact that they were a community different in law and custom from all other Muslims. In that year the Chief Justice sitting in the High Court of Tanganyika held²⁰ that

the Ismaili Khojas . . . had established a distinctive political and social organisation for themselves, and had never been absorbed in the general body of Muslims: so their "customary law," which they have done nothing to change in East Africa, still prevails in this matter [intestate succession].

Behind this acknowledgement by the High Court of the fact that the Khoja Ismaili sect in East Africa constituted a separate sect lay a long history of strife, assassination, and secession from the sect in Zanzibar and elsewhere in East Africa. The

¹⁹ The Khojah Case, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Anderson, *Muslim Law in Africa*, p. 326; see also in re Kassum Premji decd. (1924), I. T. T. L. R. 53; and Fatmabai d/o Jaffer Dhalha v. Mohamed Iadha (1928) I. T. T. L. R. 55.

Aga Khan first visited Africa in 1899 and attempted without success to heal the division which had grown in seriousness and bitterness since 1866 when only five families in Zanzibar failed to give unconditional allegiance to his grandfather. Since then relatively large numbers had seceded to the Ithnasheri sect, usually in protest against the Imam's claims to divinity or against his tightening control on the affairs of formerly independent congregations. The Shia Ithnashieris were, and still remain, the least organized of the Shia sects, and their congregations are practically independent of one another. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Zanzibar seceders to the Ithnasheri sect laid claim to the Jamatkhana and other property which had been used by the Khoja Ismailis and seceders in common. As the Aga Khan's visit did not close the rift, he was obliged in 1905 to execute a power of attorney in which he appointed three of his followers in Zanzibar to act as his agent in all matters of land and other property in East Africa. The main object of the appointment was to make sure that there would always be authorized local representatives ready to act immediately in any new dispute that might arise.

This arrangement served its purpose well enough; and in time the quarrels and the memory of them died away, except among individual Ismaili and Ithnasheri families who were still bound to one another by ties of kinship. Even so, unrest within the Ismaili community was not completely ended, either in India or Africa. Individual secessions continued, and occasionally a serious protest against the position of the Imam and the organization of the community convulsed the sect.

The appointment of legal attorneys in Zanzibar served for many years to safeguard the interests of the Imam against dissenters; and for a time also provided him and his followers with acceptable representatives for dealing with the political administrations of East Africa. The device eventually became inconvenient; for, as trade expanded into the interior regions, so the Ismaili community prospered and the extent and value of the Imam's holdings in Africa increased. His Highness would permit no transactions in communal property to be in any name but his own; and as these transactions grew in number, so the delays in completing them increased. In one instance ten years elapsed before documents could be properly executed.

In 1924 the Government of Uganda proposed setting up a central land holding for all Indian charitable, religious, and educational properties. A body of this kind would not only prevent long delays caused by consultation with the Imam and the extreme old age of his sole surviving attorney in Africa, but would also have the advantage that when the Imam died there would be no difficulties over Estate Duty. The question of property ownership was a familiar one to the Imam and his followers, and the importance they attached to it had in no way diminished

since 1866. Two years before, in 1922, the Aga Khan's solicitors in Zanzibar had written on his instructions to the Government of Uganda. The letter reminded the Administration that all communal property was vested in the Imam personally, and that the decision in the Khojah Case had not been modified by any subsequent judgment. No Government in East Africa at that time was willing to recognize the Imam as a corporation sole, capable of holding property in perpetuity, exempt from death duties. In any event it is not clear how far the Aga Khan would have been willing to allow his absolute personal rights to communal property to be defined by treating his Imamate and its perquisites as equivalent to an ecclesiastical entity delimited by law. In the circumstances he was obliged to find other means of preserving his rights unaltered and yet meeting the administrative requirements of the East African Governments.

The Ismaili settlers in East Africa had brought their traditional organization from India, and the early congregations in Zanzibar and the coastal cities were in the charge of their own separate *mukhis* and *kamriyas*. At least since the beginning of this century there had existed in Zanzibar an Ismaili Council, which not only began to take over the government of the local jamatkhana and to defend its interests against seceders, but also began to exercise not too clearly defined authority over all other East African congregations. Quarrels with dissenters and other internal disputes were not confined to Zanzibar, and it was only natural for the wealthiest and best-educated congregation in Africa to act as leader.

By 1924 the importance of Zanzibar as a commercial center had diminished. Khoja Ismailis had settled in Tanganyika and Kenya in large numbers, and the community in Uganda was growing in size and prosperity. It was a simple and obvious step to extend the council system which had already come into existence with its center in Zanzibar; and by 1926 His Highness had instituted an Ismaili Provincial Council in Uganda, which was paralleled in Kenya and Tanganyika by similar regional councils for coördinating communal activities in those territories. The members of these councils were carefully selected by the Aga Khan, who in addition personally supervised much of their work. Each new territorial council consulted with Zanzibar in matters of general interest, and though in course of time the "federal" center moved to the mainland, certain important functions have always been left in the hands of the Zanzibar Ismailis.

The Government of Uganda in particular welcomed the new Ismaili organization. Prolonged negotiations with many independent congregations of other sects predisposed administrative officers to welcome any labor-saving arrangement since all Indians had been united in resisting the foundation of a central organization for holding all Indian charitable property. No East African Government, however,

managed to persuade the Aga Khan to vest his property in the new Provincial Councils. Instead he executed a new power of attorney appointing a younger man with the title of estate agent.

During the next thirty years the system of councils was further elaborated. In 1935 the Aga Khan's Golden Jubilee as Imam provided a large sum of money in East Africa collected by his followers. This money the Imam returned to the community for its welfare. The Aga Khan's private fortune had long since made him more or less independent of the revenue produced by his followers, and he was therefore able to act as a kind of clearing house in redistributing most of the annual revenue or money collected on special occasions such as the different jubilees. The money collected in 1935 was invested in the specially formed Jubilee Insurance Company, which, as might have been predicted in view of its careful planning and supervision, proved a great success; and in 1946 a second company—a finance company—was floated with the money collected on the occasion of His Highness's sixtieth anniversary as Imam. The latter company was also associated with subsidiary bodies which made small loans to the lesser members of the community. These men were complaining that existing economic arrangements were producing a relatively narrow class of rich men whose wealth was being confirmed by recent internal changes in the political arrangements of the community.

The government of the Ismaili community in any one African territory is divided among five agencies:

- (1) Secular affairs are in the jurisdiction of *H. H. Aga Khan's Shia Imami Ismailia Supreme Council* for the territory. In their tasks the Supreme Councils are assisted by Provincial Councils and numerous subordinate committees.
- (2) Religious matters and propaganda are the field of the *Ismailia Association* for each territory.
- (3) Education is in the hands of the *Ismaili Minister for Education* in each territory. He is assisted by advisory committees, but is ultimately answerable only to the Aga Khan.
- (4) All communal property is managed by His Highness's attorney in Nairobi, known as his *Estate Agent*.
- (5) All communal funds are handled by a *Financial Committee* or *Treasury* in Zanzibar.

Above these agencies, except the Ministers of Education and the Ismailia Associations in matters of doctrine and propaganda, is a *Federal Council* composed of members of the various territorial councils, which meets periodically at Mombasa, the seat of the Finance and Insurance Companies.

In a system of government such as this one, where the various aspects of social life are carefully distributed so that no one individual or group can act without being checked by another, the position of the Imam as the final authority is well guarded. The number of people who run the elaborate organization is comparatively small, and on the whole it is the rich who succeed in making their way into the governing network of directorates, presidencies, and religious offices. They maintain their positions in the face of intense competition, since nomination to office is ultimately the prerogative of the Aga Khan. The late Aga Khan's personal knowledge of the small upper class, which was largely his own creation, was minute and extensive; and the element of uncertainty in gaining office intensifies local factional disagreements. If a deadlock between committees should occur, the solution is an appeal to the Aga Khan himself.

Besides the solid rewards which high position in this system brings—rewards which are not directly financial, since the organization at most levels is run by unpaid volunteers—the honor and prestige which success in it also brings to an individual is more than enough to compensate for the discomforts of what the Ismaili leaders call "public life." These leaders are recruited from a relatively small class of wealthy families who are bitterly jealous of one another, but who are at the same time closely linked with one another by semi-dynastic marriages and a common interest in maintaining and furthering the system which they and the Imam have together constructed during the last half century, and which in terms of honor and material gain is extremely profitable to them all. On the other hand the advantages of a bureaucracy of this kind to the members of the sect as a whole are also clear. The men and women who successfully maintain themselves in the system are in general the shrewder business people. The training they receive in working a westernized bureaucracy which handles considerable power in the name of the Imam, as well as his business and property, teaches them how to negotiate with the government and its various departments in ways that European officials understand and appreciate. Moreover, these leaders are handling the Imam's affairs, as we have already noticed, under the critical eyes of other members of the sect, who would gladly replace them. They can, therefore, never relax in their efforts to obtain what the community needs. Principally for this reason, then, the Ismaili organization is efficient in a way that other Muslim sectarian and Hindu caste organizations are not.

If the Aga Khan had not undertaken to reform the social organization and customs of his followers in East Africa, they would probably still resemble those of other Shia Muslim sects and it is likely that secession to the Ithnasheriis would have continued. As it is, the spectacular success of the reforms in promoting the

material welfare of the members of the sect and in affirming the position and prestige of the Imam has made the community one of the most united and prosperous in East Africa. The position and powers of the Imam made it virtually impossible for anybody but him in name and often in fact to initiate changes. By undertaking them so effectively the late Aga Khan was able to satisfy his followers and at the same time preserve his position unaltered. Without such reforms there was also the risk that one of the East African governments, by administrative order or litigation might impose a measure of trusteeship on the Imamate.

CONCLUSIONS

In building this new system in East Africa there have, of course been difficulties. Elderly men and large numbers of women have disliked giving up what their Imam called "Asiatic habits." Many of those who have tried to assimilate European civilization in one generation have felt personally insecure and susceptible to mockery, either from other Indians or from Europeans. But the new organization is so evidently successful that even elderly men and conservative women are able to calm their doubts.

Doubt and possible dissent come mostly from small numbers of young men and women educated in the newer ways, who find that most of the positions in the bureaucratic organization are already occupied by their elders, whom they have been taught to consider old-fashioned, and who apparently prevent them from exercising their talents. The present organization of the sect, managed by a relatively small class of well-to-do men and women is a startling departure from the traditional organization described by Mr Justice Arnold in 1866. Other religious communities in western India were then organized in similar ways, and at least one of them, the Shia Daudi Bohra sect, today has representatives in East Africa. But none of them has adapted a traditional organization to western political and economic conditions as successfully as the Khoja Ismailis.

The conditions in East Africa were more or less the same for all Indians, and an explanation of the various responses of different groups probably lies in a consideration of the differences in their traditional organization. All the Shia sects differed slightly in structure. In particular the beliefs about the sacred leader varied from sect to sect. Moreover, in modern times the personal histories of these leaders have been widely different. Consequently the influence of a leader in bringing about changes in his sect was limited not only by tradition, but also by the success of his political, social, and legal activities in the wider world outside the sect. A careful consideration of factors of this kind goes a long way towards explaining the success of the Khoja Ismaili sect in East Africa, and may throw some

light on the conditions of social change generally. For convenience the more important factors affecting the Ismaili community in Africa have been grouped under the following heads for comment:

- (1) The structural position of the Imam.
- (2) The personal histories of the recent Imams.
- (3) The requirements of British colonial administration.
- (4) The adjustments in belief and organization which were structurally possible within the sect itself.

POSITION OF THE IMAM

The position of the Aga Khan as the hereditary, infallible, and impeccable Imam of the sect has already been indicated, and the fact mentioned that his inherited wealth has allowed him to behave more benevolently to his followers than most of his counterparts in western India have found possible.

PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE THIRD AGA KHAN

The late Aga Khan's migration to Europe and his subsequent career as an international statesman and European aristocrat increased, if that were possible, his prestige with his followers; and made them even more disposed to comply with his directions in adapting themselves to European civilization. His directions were invariably detailed and extensive, and ranged from matters of constitutional and economic policy to those of personal hygiene. It was assumed by his followers and other Indians in East Africa that since he was personally acquainted with many of the governing class in England he would always be able to influence a colonial administration in favor of his followers.

REQUIREMENTS OF BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATIONS

Since 1866 the Ismaili Imam has never permitted any infringement of his status as established in the Khojah Case. Whenever there has been danger of this occurring he has either taken a case before the law courts or has intervened as an interested party. It was by the Imam's intervention in Tanganyika in a case involving inheritance of property by his followers, that the Imam and his followers established a legal right to be regarded as a separate community, possessing their own customary law, and distinct from other Indians in East Africa.²¹ A sense of exclusiveness and identity is not unusual among Indians, whether Muslim or Hindu, but the tenacity of purpose with which the Ismailis have organized themselves as a community is most unusual. In a society where the European and African inhabitants

²¹ See footnote 20.

regard them simply as Indians with certain unimportant differences from other Indians, they could not afford to rest their assertion of separateness on the results of law suits; for as soon as they allowed themselves to be treated as other Indians then the position of the Imam was likely to be in danger. In a sense reorganization of the community was forced upon them, and involved far-reaching reorganization of their economic, political, and educational institutions. In each of these spheres the government and other members of East African society were apt to consider Ismailis as if they were the same as other Indians.

ISMAILI RELIGIOUS IDEAS

The general system of Ismaili religious ideas has been a factor as important as any of those already discussed in bringing about alterations in the social organization of the sect. Certain changes of emphasis and belief were possible for the Ismailis which were not open to other Muslims. By contrast, other sects were not committed to the defence of the fixed, unchangeable interests of an infallible, ever-present Imam. In the words of an East African Ismaili:

We are not like other Muslims. They are tied to the Koran which was written for a different kind of world, and they must follow it; they cannot change it. We follow our Imam who can interpret it [the Koran]. So we find it easier to live in the modern world.

Much of the late Aga Khan's life was in fact occupied in reforming the religious practices of his followers in India, Pakistan, and East Africa, always in directions away from Hinduism and towards what he himself called²² "those tenets of Islam which are professed and held in common by all Muslims of any and every sect or sub-sect." In his interpretations of holy and secular law the Imam could never permit views which might conflict with the doctrines supporting his Imamate; but as almost all aspects of the late Aga Khan's career were so preëminently successful, logical inconsistencies in the beliefs and practices enjoined by the Imam did not usually cause his followers discomfort. One young man who disliked what he called the "undemocratic" features of Ismaili organization and distrusted the supernatural qualities attributed to the Imam was nonetheless an exceedingly loyal follower. In his own words:

When His Highness came [to East Africa] my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, we all went to see His Highness to ask his advice. His Highness told my father how to manage his business, and forbade me to go for law. He told me to go for the engineering line in England or America. He knew all our names and everything about us. No ordinary man could have a memory like that.

²² Aga Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

If any follower should happen to find the burden of holding inconsistent views too onerous, the doctrine of *taqiya* or dissimulation is to hand. Occasionally, of course, the inconsistencies do prove too much for people, and they protest (usually anonymously) or secede from the sect at the sacrifice, perhaps, of much of their material well-being.

The personal authority and prestige of the late Aga Khan, which were the rewards of a long and well-spent life, combined with his position as Imam have allowed him to act as what one might call an "institutionalized prophet." The attributes of infallibility, impeccability, and perfect religious knowledge would allow any Imam to interpret the role with a great deal of latitude; nevertheless special qualities are probably necessary before the followers of such a leader are willing to permit him to bring about drastic alterations in their traditional status system.

The late Imam was confronted with a peculiarly difficult task. He wished to alter a whole traditional system of statuses and behaviors appropriate to them without disturbing his own position at the apex. His success in doing this was achieved by leading his followers in every sense of the word. He knew more than they did; he was at home in the world they were moving into; and he helped to make them so prosperous that it was easy for his followers to attribute to his unique wisdom all the good things that were happening to them. The doubts of elderly men and women about the wisdom of adopting so many alien customs and views of the world were brushed aside, and the men and women who arose to administer and benefit from the new organization had every inducement both from their Imam and from their own self-interest to further and to maintain the organization.

Other Indians in East Africa were more sceptical. They noticed and commented on the increasing secularization of Ismaili social and religious life. Ismailis, they said, worshipped property. Such rapid change, they also said, could not be wise or safe. In the words of a Hindu, educated at an English university:

When the Aga Khan dies it will all fall down. If it does not the Imam will become distant and unimportant like the King of England or the Imam of the Ishnasheris who has never been seen.

But, as in the past, the speed and direction of future social change among the Shia Imami Ismailis will depend only in part on the careers of future Imams and the ways in which they interpret their office. The late Aga Khan constructed a system which he could probably safely leave in the hands of an exceedingly capable class of men and women, who may, it is true, eventually find it expedient to dispense with an ever-present, active Imam; but if they do so they will have to find

other means as convenient as the present ones for reinterpreting the Holy Law in order to meet yet other changed circumstances. Divine Kingship, Professor Evans-Pritchard writes of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan,²³

is changeless and acknowledged as a supreme value by all the Shilluk. In that permanence and in that acknowledgement the unity of the nation is manifested.

The living Ismaili Imam in the persons of the last three Aga Khans has been a symbol of great power in the Shia Imami Ismaili sect and in no way equalled in effectiveness by the concealed, unknown Imams of other Shia sects, whose members in East Africa have, generally speaking, failed to accommodate themselves to the society they live in with success displayed by the Ismailis.

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23 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan* (Frazier Lecture, Cambridge, 1946), p. 38.

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