

Divided in Death: Boundary Formations Through Control of Funerary Customs and Ritual Space in a Khoja Community

In this chapter, I examine the funerary customs and rituals among the Nizari Ismaili Shi'i Muslims, in Western contexts.¹ Since there are no published studies of death rituals of the Nizari Ismailis of Khoja origins from South Asia, as a scholar practitioner, I have relied on personal observations in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and on discussions with individuals who have generously probed their knowledge and in some instances, their recall, to shed light on distant events. The chapter is divided into four major sections: first, I begin by synthesising a framework of death and dying from seminal anthropological and sociological studies.² I map liminal states triggered by death as experienced, conceptually, by three sets of actors—the deceased (individual corpse and soul), the bereaved (family and friends) and the *jamā'at* (community; hereinafter, *jamat*). I present a biological framework followed by a discussion of spiritual perspectives to theorise death and dying. Second, I scrutinise the two key paradigms of Islamicate practices of burial and focus on conceptions of death and afterlife in the teaching of three imams and Nizari devotional literature—the *gināns*. Third, I describe Khoja Nizari Ismaili funerary rituals. Fourth, I survey prescriptions and proscriptions of funerary rites in ritual guides and rule-making documents spanning the twentieth century which bounded ritual space and as a result solidified boundaries between individuals, families and Khoja communities.³

¹ This chapter is based on a paper written in 2005 at the Harvard Divinity School and benefitted from conversations with and comments from Kimberley Patton and Ali Asani. The expanded paper was presented at the Inaugural Khoja Studies Conference held in Paris in December 2016. The chapter was completed while I was in Tajikistan on a US State Department Fulbright Fellowship. I am grateful to Dr. Nimira Samji for her review and comments on the final draft. I have assimilated theoretical approaches from a number of different disciplines. My undisciplined use of these sources from these disciplines neither condones nor condemns their broader approaches, methods and most importantly, the epistemological pre-commitments and biases of the scholars and their works. In the absence of specific commentary, excerpts from these sources should be seen as utilitarian towards advancing the arguments in this research.

² I am grateful to the editors, Iqbal Akhtar and Chayya Goswami, for agreeing that this section should remain in the chapter. In Islamic studies, anthropological and sociological analyses are often reserved for studies in those disciplines. In shorter studies, the focus is always on Islamicate particularities which is not the case, particularly, in the study of Christian and Jewish traditions. I hope, you the reader, will find that the theoretical frameworks provide useful and more holistic phenomenological syntheses to examine the Islamicate inter-factional discourses central to this research.

³ Overtime other sibling South Asian Nizari Ismaili communities have followed parallel practices to those of the Khoja; I have not attempted to differentiate between these communities and used Khoja as a collective term. Background information on the Khojas can be found in: Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 442–451 and 464–504; Ali S. Asani "From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim: The Articulation of Ismaili Khoja Identity in South Asia" in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in A Muslim Community* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Azim. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1978); H. S. Morris, "The Divine Kingship of the Aga Khan: A Study of Theocracy in East Africa," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 14 (1958); Amrita Shodan, "Legal Representations of Khojas and Pushtimarga Vaishnava Politics as Communities: The Aga Khan Case and the Maharaj Libel Case in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Bombay," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1995); Dominique

Anthropological and Sociological Frameworks of Death and Dying

The works of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Robert Hertz, and especially, Loring Danforth's framework based on van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* have been adapted and developed further to understand the different phases of the rituals and the roles of the different actors.⁴

RITUAL FRAMEWORK

Arnold van Gennep in his ground-breaking 1905 study wrote that so great "is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds that a man can not pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate state."⁵ On entering a different stage, the person becomes "sacred" while others who continue in their previous condition remain in a relative "profane" state. The changes associated with the transition may be dangerous and upsetting to the collective and the individual. The rites of incorporation moderate this disjuncture. Van Gennep subdivided the *rites* into: *rites of separation*, *rites of transition* and *rites of incorporation*.⁶ He stated: "I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal rites*."⁷ The liminal period is characteristically "ambiguous, paradoxical, and anomalous. As a result, things associated with it are often considered unclean, polluting, and dangerous."⁸ Victor Turner noted that "transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere ... liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, "inoculated" against them ..."⁹

Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors: Centre de Sciences Humaines, 1997); Soumen Mukherjee, "Being 'Ismaili' and 'Muslim': Some Observations on the Politico-Religious Career of Aga Khan III," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2011); Iqbal S. Akhtar, "Religious Citizenship: The Case of the Globalised Khoja," *African Sociological Review* 18 (2014). To list a few.

⁴ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom, and Gabrielle L. Caffé (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960). Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967). Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Aberdeen: Cohen & West, 1960). Loring M. Danforth, and Alexander. Tsiaras, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁵ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*. 1

⁶ Integration has preferentially been used instead of "incorporation" to avoid connotations of "embodiment".

⁷ Ibid. 21 – emphasis added

⁸ Danforth, and Tsiaras, *Death Rituals*. 37

⁹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*. 97. Examples of the "inoculated" are the healthcare professionals, funeral directors, priests who are used to dealing with people in transitional state—themselves having directly or indirectly experienced the transitions and being used to cushioning and guiding others. In the Ismaili context this role is played by the members of the Ghusal and Maiyyat Committees who handle the ritual washing of the body and other funerary rites and ceremonies.

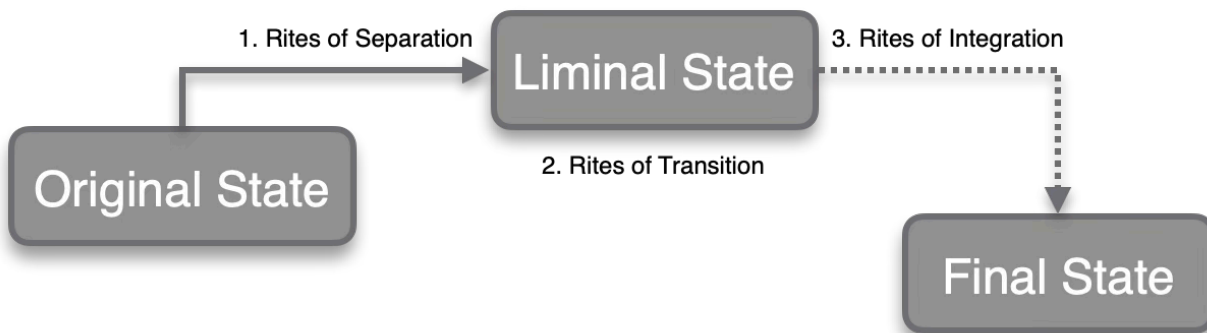


FIGURE 1: LIMINAL STATES IN VAN GENNEP'S *rites of passage*

Figure 2 represents van Gennep's tripartite states structure—Danforth's representation has been modified to reflect the fact that the final state is different from the original state.¹⁰ His diagram implies that the post-liminal stage is on par with and a return to the level of the original state. It is inconceivable, for instance, that a family having suffered a loss returns to a *status quo ante*. Van Gennep recognised that these states were not exclusively demarcated; that in "some cases the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased, and the termination of the first coincides with the termination of the second-of the dead."¹¹ The schema are representative of theoretical states and rites which may contain within them features of both rites of transition and incorporation.

Anthropologists have observed that, in many cultures, death is a shock that is seen as endangering the continuity and permanence of the society in which the person existed. Robert Hertz wrote that the relatives of the deceased

feel in themselves the blow that has struck one of them; a ban separates them from the rest of the community. They may not leave their village nor pay any visits; those most directly affected sometimes spend whole months confined to a corner of their house, sitting motionless and doing nothing. Neither may they receive visitors from outside, nor (should this be allowed) may they answer when they are questioned. They are forsaken, not only by men but also by the protective spirits; as long as their impurity lasts they cannot hope for any help from the powers above. The ban which is imposed on them affects their entire way of life. In consequence of the funerary contagion they are changed, and set apart from the rest of humanity; therefore they can no longer live the way others do. They may not share the diet nor follow the ways of dressing or adornment or of arranging the hair which are proper to individuals who are socially normal and which are the sign of this community to which (for a time) they no longer belong; hence the numerous taboos and special prescriptions to which people in mourning must conform.¹²

Death marks the beginning of a long and highly elaborated liminal period during which a person is neither fully alive nor fully dead and must undergo burial and post-burial

¹⁰ Danforth, and Tsiaras, *Death Rituals*. 36

¹¹ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*. 147

¹² Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*. 38

ceremonies to enable the transition from the liminal stage to a new stable state.¹³ Following Hertz, Danforth described “three *dramatis personae* who move on their journey through these rites (the corpse, the soul, and the mourners)”;¹⁴ he wrote that “the corpse, the soul, and the mourners are like three actors in a ritual drama, linked symbolically to one another as they move together through the three phases of the rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.”¹⁵ For the purposes of this study, the subject *personae* are revised as: the deceased (corpse and soul), the bereaved (kith and kin) and the *jamat* (*jamā‘at*, community). The deceased’s entry into a liminal state triggers the bereaved to enter a liminal state which in turn triggers the wider community to also enter a liminal state (Figure 3). Rituals and ceremonies are required and enacted to return all three affected *personae* to stability in their new states.

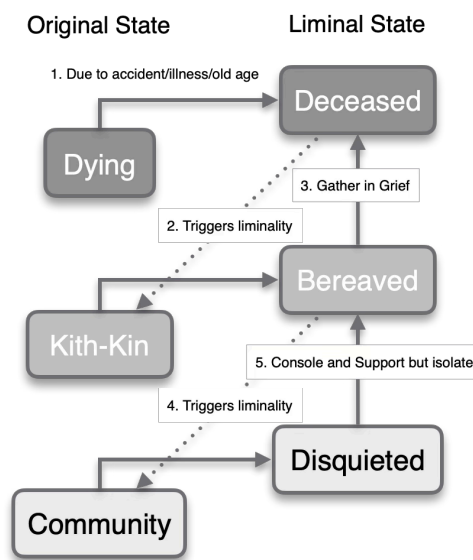


FIGURE 2: LIMINAL STATES OF THE DECEASED, THEIR KITH AND KIN AND COMMUNITY TRIGGERED BY DEATH

When the dying person dies—whether through old age, illness or accident—their family and friends gather and begin to grieve. As this news spreads to the wider community, they come to comfort those amongst them affected by the death. The bereaved gather and the wider community supports them, both to enclose and isolate the entity that caused them to enter their liminal state. The deceased is isolated and in certain contexts removed from contact with all others. The bereaved cease to carry out their routine activities and their social relations are limited to ritual and ceremonial contacts. In many societies the family does not cook at home and friends and neighbours provide food during the first few days of mourning. While the

¹³ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*. 95. Turner’s differentiation of ritual and ceremony is useful here: “... I consider the term ‘ritual’ to be more fittingly applied to forms of religious behaviours associated with social transitions, while the term ‘ceremony’ has a closer bearing on religious behaviour associated with social states, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance. Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory.”

¹⁴ Danforth, and Tsiaras, *Death Rituals*. 33

¹⁵ Ibid. 37

wider community is not drastically affected, the consequence of a death is nonetheless destabilising and a cause of general perturbation.

Since the liminal stages are highly volatile and the transitional beings highly polluting, rituals and ceremonies are enacted to ameliorate the instabilities. Turner observed that “... in all life-crises ritual changes take place in the relationships of all those people closely connected with the subject of the ritual. When a person dies, all these ties are snapped, as it were, and the more important the person the greater the number of ties there are to be broken. Now a new pattern of social relationships must be established...”¹⁶ Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s analyses from his studies of the Andaman Islanders very precisely outline these processes. He wrote that for society, a death is the loss of one of its members,

one of its constituent parts. A person occupies a definite position in society, has a certain share in the social life, is one of the supports of the network of social relations. His death constitutes a partial destruction of the social cohesion, the normal social life is disorganised, the social equilibrium is disturbed. After the death the society has to organise itself anew and reach a new condition of equilibrium. In reference to the small community of the Andamans we may translate the above statement into terms of personal feeling by saying that the death removes a person who was the object of feelings of affection and attachment on the part of others and is thus a direct offence against those sentiments in the survivors.

The burial customs of the Andaman Islanders, however, are not to be regarded as simply the expression of natural personal feeling. They are a collective and ritual expression of a collective feeling. This is evident from the fact that they are regulated in every detail by custom. It is the duty of the relatives and friends to mourn, whether they feel sorrow or not, and it is equally their duty to mourn only for a certain period.¹⁷

The restoration of stabilities proceed in several stages. The immediate priority is the removal of the deceased. In most societies where burial is the primary means of disposal and in the absence of capacities to refrigerate the dead body, the time from death to burial rarely exceeds three days. In traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic communities, the deceased, ideally, would be buried on the same day as death or early the next day in case of a death late in the evening or night.

After the confirmatory post-burial ceremonies, the wider community would exit its liminal state having disposed of the dead body and carried out rites for the separated soul to continue its disembodied journey. Over the next few days (three to seven days after death and burial) most of the extended family and friends from among the bereaved would return to their normal lives within their communities. After forty days, the immediate family and the deceased’s loved ones would return to routine life and thus theoretically all three

¹⁶ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*. 8 - emphasis added

¹⁷ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders; A Study in Social Anthropology* (Anthony Wilkin Studentship Research, 1906. (Cambridge: The University press, 1922). 285–286. See also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948). 29ff for a strikingly similar account despite their different contexts of study and Malinowski’s problematic epistemology and use of the term “savage”.

personae—the deceased, the bereaved and the wider community—exit their liminal states and attain new normalcies.

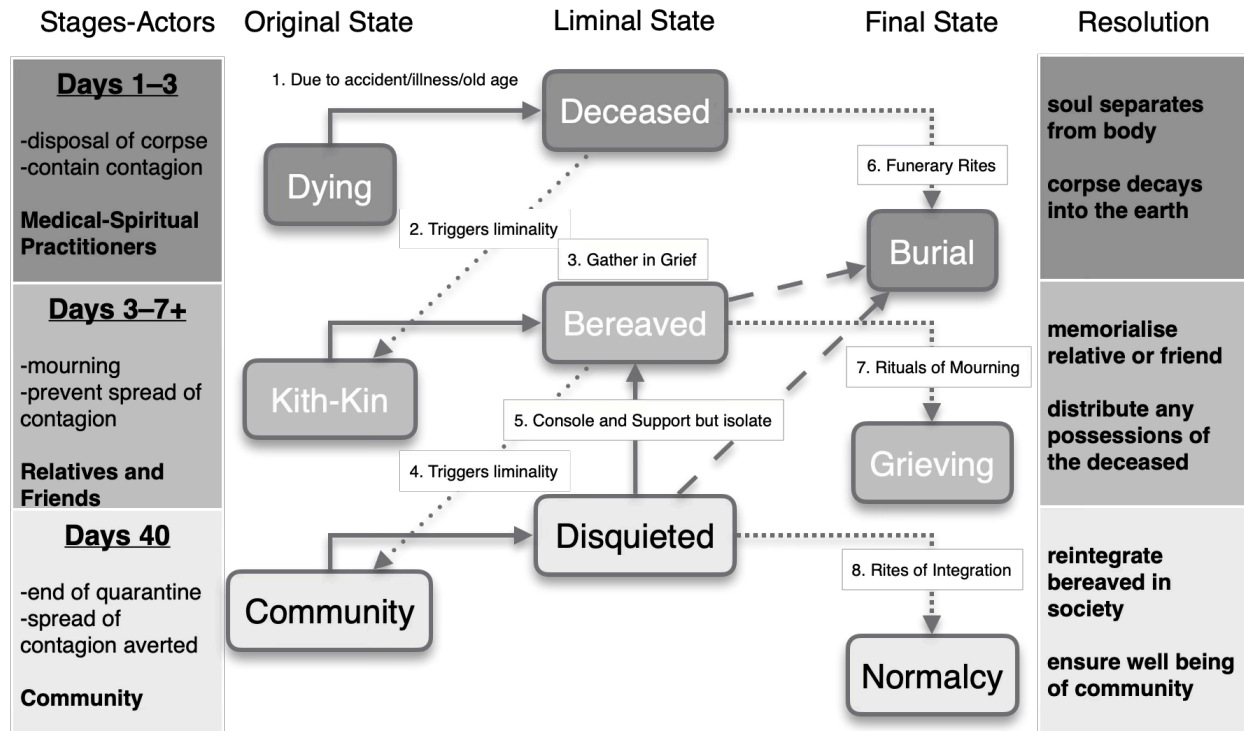


FIGURE 3: TRANSITIONS THROUGH LIMINAL STATES BY THE DEAD, THE BEREAVED AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Returns to normalcy are mediated by the wider community that—depending on the stature of the deceased within the community—would theoretically be least precarious in its disquieted liminal state (Figure 4). The community rallies its material and human resources to aid the bereaved to dispose of the deceased into its final state with the burial and post-burial rites. By removing the most unstable liminal entity through burial and funerary rituals, the wider community is also able then to draw the bereaved out of their liminally unstable state of intense bereavement towards a long-term new reality of dealing with their loss and re-integrating into daily life. Let us turn to the biological aspects that underlie the ritual framework of analyses outlined here.

BIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The periods of one to three days; three to seven days and forty days are totemic. They repeat in multitudes of cycles in human life and across cultures around the world. In the context of death rituals, spiritual connotations are attached to the stages such as the separation of the soul from the body upon death; followed by the journey of the disembodied soul away from material attachment towards its afterlife and then the affirmation, in a ceremonial sense, of

detachment from this soul by the family of the deceased for its unimpeded spiritual journey. Scholars have described elaborate ritual and ceremonial practices in numerous cultures that include the periodisation mapped here and the many lengthy extensions of these phases.¹⁸

I argue that these periodisations have underlying biological significations. The isolations of the deceased and in-turn of the bereaved, have the function of containing contagion that may have been the cause of death or would result from the decaying corpse. After burial, the social interactions of the bereaved are restricted to moments of ritualised contacts with well-wishers for three to seven days. If there are no further illnesses or deaths due to a virulent contagion, they can be cleared for re-integration into society. The forty-day sequestration of the deceased's intimates also amounts to a quarantine to ensure that the wider community is secured from a spread of any contagion associated with the death.¹⁹ The forty-day period has specific ramifications in the case of a deceased whose female partner has child-bearing capacity. The female partner of the deceased would normally experience menstruation within the forty days. A break of the menstrual cycle and pregnancy would invoke issues of paternity and influence the partner's attachment to the deceased's family and the potential child's inheritance.

At each of the three stages—one to three days, three to seven days and forty days—during the moments of greatest threat, the transitions and confirmations are mediated by individuals—formal or informal officiants and caregivers—who are considered to have a level of inoculation to be able not only to withstand overpowering harm but to also provide succour for those affected by the traumatic events directly and by facilitating the transitional rites.²⁰ The funerary rites at their basis have functional purposes to enable all those affected to be able to achieve new equilibria after the disruptions and rupture caused by death. These “rituals of separation and integration” are multi-layered compactions of material and spiritual activities and meanings summed up in Lawrence Sullivan's observation that “funerals reveal the ability of ritual to compress experiences and evaluations of existence in

¹⁸ Danforth, and Tsiaras, *Death Rituals*. Danforth's study of mortuary practices of a small Greek village, for example, frames the mourning period as a time of liminality and transition for both the bereaved and the deceased and how members of the community maintained relationships with the dead over extensive periods of time while ultimately severing those bonds in order to rejoin the community of the living.

¹⁹ “Quarantine.” Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/quarantine> (accessed: November 14, 2016). Gives the word origin and history for quarantine as: 1520s, “period of 40 days in which a widow has the right to remain in her dead husband's house.” Earlier *quarentyne* (15c.), “desert in which Christ fasted for 40 days,” from Latin *quadráginta* “forty,” related to *quattuor* “four” (see [four](#)). b. Sense of “period a ship suspected of carrying disease is kept in isolation” in 1660s, from Italian *quarantina giorni*, literally “space of forty days,” from *quaranta* “forty,” from Latin *quadráginta*. So called from the Venetian custom of keeping ships from plague-stricken countries waiting off its port for 40 days (first enforced 1377) to assure that no latent cases were aboard. The extended sense of “any period of forced isolation” is from 1670s.

²⁰ At the time of death, these may be doctors and medical personnel aiding the dying person and their near ones; the religious officiants administering rituals of absolution.

time into abrupt symbolic shorthand. These dense symbolic ciphers and complexes can then be linked together into a single performed, reflective set of acts.”²¹ Ultimately, in all societies, the primary function of funerary rituals is biological—to preserve the health of the kith and kin and the wider community. The dense symbolic ciphers of funerary practices encapsulate complexes of emotional, social, economic, political, and religious factors which are framed within spiritual conceptions of life, death and afterlife.

SPIRITUAL TURN

Bronislaw Malinowski described that the bereaved operate in a binary of attachment to the deceased and repugnance of the corpse. He wrote that in the rites

there is a desire to maintain the tie and the parallel tendency to break the bond. Thus the funerary rites are considered as unclean and soiling, the contact with the corpse as defiling and dangerous, and the performers have to wash, cleanse their body, remove all traces of contact, and perform ritual lustrations. Yet the mortuary ritual compels man to overcome the repugnance, to conquer his fears, to make piety and attachment triumphant, and with it the belief in a future life, in the survival of the spirit.²²

The rupture created by the death is traumatic. The rituals and the changes of perspective in regard to the deceased—as well as to life in general—shift the awareness from the “recently-dead-living person” to their eternal soul and correspondingly from the material to the spiritual realms. Through this shift the bereaved might grapple with and tolerate their loss while maintaining continued relationships with the deceased. Peter Berger argued that the integration of death within the reality of social existence is important whether done through mythological, religious or metaphysical interpretations. He wrote that such legitimations of death must carry out the same essential task in that

they must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as not to paralyse the continued performance of the routines of everyday life. It may readily be seen that such legitimation is difficult to achieve, short of integrating the phenomenon of death within a symbolic universe. Such legitimation, then, provides the individual with a recipe for a ‘correct death’. Optimally, this recipe will retain its plausibility when his own death is imminent and will allow him, indeed, to ‘die correctly’.²³

The symbolic shorthand of the rituals has the dual purpose of informing the participant’s views of cosmology and at the same time forming and re-forming them.²⁴ Death rites, Danforth noted, “are concrete procedures for the maintenance of reality in the face of death.

²¹ Lawrence Sullivan, *History and Rituals: The Case of A National Rite of Mourning* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1991). 16

²² Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*. 32

²³ Peter L. Berger, and Thomas. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). 118

²⁴ Ibid. 84

Through the performance of these rituals, those who have confronted death are able to resume their reality-sustaining conversation.”²⁵ After these discussions of ritual, biological and spiritual frameworks, let us now examine the manifestation of these perspectives in Muslim funerary practices and particularly those among the Nizari Ismailis of South Asian origins.

Islamicate Death Rituals and Outlooks on Death and the Afterlife

The Islamicate practices of burial originate in a purported scriptural memory of jealousy, fratricide, murder and perhaps lust, incest, and bodily mutilation. Jewish exegetes have elaborated hermeneutical explanations of the controversies in the narrative of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. For almost two millennia some Jewish commentaries have construed the biblical narrative such that Abel was born with a twin sister whom he would marry and that Cain desired Abel’s twin and intended. Adam suggested that the two sons make offerings to God and abide by the Divine solution. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and Cain out of a rage killed his brother.²⁶ The Midrash Rabbah (commentary) states

... Cain spoke to Abel his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field...” (Genesis 4:8) What were they arguing about? They said: come let’s divide up the world, one will take the land and one will take the moveable property. This one said: the ground you are standing on is mine. The other one said: what you are wearing is mine. This one said: take it off! The other one said: fly! Because of this “...Cain rose against his brother Abel and killed him.” (ibid.) R’ Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of R’ Levi: they both took the land and the moveable property. What were they arguing about? One said: the Holy Temple will be built in my boundary. The other said: the Holy Temple will be built in my boundary. As it says “...when they were in the field...” (ibid.) and the field only refers to the Holy Temple. This is what it says “... Zion shall be plowed as a field...” (Micah 3:12) Because of this “...Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.” Yehudah bar Ami said: they were arguing about the first Eve. R’ Ibo said: the first Eve returned to the dust. Then what were they arguing about? R’ Huna said: an extra twin sister was born with Abel. This one said: I will take her because I am the first born. The other one said: I will take her because she was born with me. Because of this “...Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.”²⁷

The Qur’anic narrative, illustrating that the Muslim scripture, in part, is a commentary (Heb. *midrash* Ar. *tafsīr*) on the Torah, alludes to Genesis 4:

And recite unto them, with truth, the account of Adam’s two sons, when they each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them, though not accepted from the other. One said, “I will surely slay you!” [The other] said, “God accepts only from the reverent.

²⁵ Danforth, and Tsiaras, *Death Rituals*. 31

²⁶ H. Freedman, et al., *The Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1977). 22:7

²⁷ Ibid. 22:7. The *midrash* are collections that contain mostly stories, parables, and homilies classified as *midrash aggadah* (narrative commentaries). The Midrash Rabbah (The Great Commentary) is a collection of several such commentaries compiled between the fifth and twelfth centuries CE. Also found at: The Midrash Rabbah 22:7 retrieved January 2018 https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.22?lang=bi . Also cf. The Jewish Encyclopedia 8, 8. 1964. New York: KTAV. 550ff.

Even if you stretch forth your hand against me to slay me, I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you. Truly I fear God, Lord of the worlds.

I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin and so become one of the inhabitants of the Fire. Such is the recompense of the wrongdoers.”

Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and thus came to be among the losers.

Then God sent a crow, scratching the earth, to show him how he might conceal his brother's nakedness. He said, “Oh, woe unto me! Am I not able to be even as this crow and conceal my brother's nakedness?” And he came to be among the remorseful (Q5:27–31).²⁸

In the Qur'anic narrative, God sent a raven to show Cain a way to hide the *sau'at ākhī* which most translators translate as “his brother's shame” or simply “his brother's corpse”—here the term “*sau'at*” is translated as “nakedness”. Adding a twenty-first century hermeneutic layer, can it be surmised that the remorseful murderer was ashamed of his brother's exposed genitalia? Can this be read not simply as an attempt to hide the defrocked victim but evidence that the attacker having mutilated his victim's genitalia—the root cause of the jealous rivalry and now sought to hide the misdeed?²⁹

The second paradigm for Muslim funerary practices is also problematic. The death and burial of the prophet, Muhammad (fl. 610–632), are shrouded in the controversies that would, in time, give rise to the Shi'i-Sunni divides. All interpretations of Islam, in common with Jewish and early Christian practice, prefer that the funeral take place as early as possible and preferably before sun-down on the day of death. Both the Ithnā'asharī Shi'i and Sunni manuals specify that the body should be washed as soon as it is cold and thereafter burial should take place forthwith.³⁰ This is a departure from the funeral of Prophet Muhammad who purportedly serves as the paradigm *par excellence* in matters governing the lives of Muslims. The Prophet died in the middle of the day on Monday on the 12 Rabi' al-awwal 11 AH/10 June 632 and was buried at night on Wednesday—that is a three day separation between his death and burial.³¹ It is sufficient to note that since the *sunnah* (paradigm) of the Prophet's burial is not followed; a varied set of customs and rituals from local contexts have developed and are present in the death rituals and ceremonies of Muslims around the world.

²⁸ “*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*,” edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, New York: HarperOne, 2015. 289–291

²⁹ A more thorough examination is beyond the scope of this analysis.

³⁰ AR Gatrad, “Muslim Customs Surrounding Death, Bereavement, Postmortem Examinations, and Organ Transplants,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 309 (1994). Resource Guide: Last Rituals for Indian American Community in Massachusetts (Burlington, MA: Desai Family Foundation, 2008). 16–26

³¹ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk)* Vol. 9 *the Last Years of the Prophet*, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). 201–209. Ṭabarī included a report on the authority of 'Ā'ishah bt. Abī Bakr that her husband, the prophet, was buried in the night of Wednesday and that they did not know of this until they heard the sound of pickaxes. After his death on Monday 10 June, 632, his immediate family members including 'Alī, 'Abbās and some close associates prepared the body for burial while Abū Bakr and 'Umar were engaged in the discourse of succession and wrested the power over Muḥammad's polity. The reports suggest that Muḥammad was buried by his family after three days without the knowledge of some of his leading associates. These fissures which existed during the lifetime of the prophet, would manifest the Shi'i-Sunni divisions in the succeeding centuries.

The funerary practices of the Nizari Ismailis of Khoja origins are manifestations of rituals infused with pan-Islamic practices and local customs that fluctuated based on multiple navigations of authority, authenticities and boundaries. These practices are informed by views of life, the afterlife and the cosmos, and are governed by the ceremonial associated with the rites of passage. These notions are derived from the Qurʾān, mediated in the Khoja context by the teachings of the *pīrs* (Per: elder, spiritual guide) in the corpus of *gināns* (Sk: *gnān*, contemplative knowledge, corpus of Nizari devotional literature, recitations of these texts) and more immediately in the teachings of the imams—found particularly in their *farmāns* (Per: decrees, guidance).

Death and Afterlife in Nizari Ismaili Teachings

This section gives brief analyses of the teachings related to death and the afterlife among the Nizari Ismailis of Khoja origins, located in the *farmāns* of the imams and the *ginānic* tradition are mapped to the ritual frameworks we have detailed.³²

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE IMAMS

The teachings of three imams are principally drawn upon for the purposes of understanding death and the afterlife. The *Kalām-i Mawlā* (*Words of our Lord*) is recited at home and during the funeral ceremonies. This text in Hindustani believed to be *farmāns* of Imam Ali (r. 632–661) translated from a collection in Persian; however, is recognised by some scholars as a pious forgery.³³ A few verses will illustrate the spiritual turn and the metaphysical view of existence in which life is merely a passage and death a threshold.

O Believer, news of death has come to you
since your head (lit. hair) has turned white
Now you should prepare
for the journey ahead of you
Now you must leave this abode of your home
your new home will be the grave
You will depart in the evening or morning

³² Parin A. Dossa, “Ritual and Daily Life: Transmission and Interpretation of the Ismaili Tradition in Vancouver,” PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1983). ii. “Ismaili tradition is explicated through history and a recourse to documentary materials including the Qurʾan, *gināns* or compositions, firmans or guidances of the Imam (spiritual leader), and the rituals of the community. The chief feature of tradition may be identified as an overarching cosmology dichotomized as *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, glossed respectively as material (multiplicity and activity) and spiritual (unity and repose) in strict complementarity, the parts of which are activated through a spatial and a temporal movement from and to exteriority (*zāhir*) and interiority (*bāṭin*). Daily life, family, kin, community rituals and prayers at Jamāʿat Khana (place of assembly), and the firmans reflect the complementarities and mediate them.”

³³ Christopher Shackle, and Zawahir Moir, *Ismaili Hymns From South Asia: An Introduction to the gināns* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1992). 28; Also cf. <http://iis.ac.uk/library/kalame-mawla> retrieved 24-Jan-2018; Fragner, “*Farmān*” in P. Bearman, and Marc Garborieau, eds. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition Online* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

and will remain in that grave³⁴

The *Kalām-i Mawlā* is melodiously recited maintaining rhyme and meter by the practiced reciter. When the reciter repeats the last hemistich of a poignant verse members of the jamat familiar with the text would join in the recitation with the reciter. The verses continue

The angel of death comes upon everyone
and takes away every creature
If one dies before such a death
then s/he will attain the eternal abode (*amar makān*)
Dying such a death
s/he will attain Truth (*ḥaqq*) and complete renunciation
One who attains this station becomes a *wali* (friend [of God])
so says Ḥaḍrāt ‘Alī (lit. His Majesty ‘Alī)³⁵

The homiletic and hortative nature of the text reminds the bereaved of the ephemerality of this existence. The message of patience and forbearance is cathartic to the ones suffering great loss and exhorts the living to piety.

Similarly, teachings of the forty-eight imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah (r. 1885–1957) play a significant role in the Nizari Ismaili understanding of death and the afterlife. For example, his *farmān* of 1899 called the *Uṣūl-i Dīn* (*Foundations of Faith*) taught that his ancestor, Imam ‘Alī, once uttered a prayer in which he declared that he was not in the least afraid of the tortures of hell, nor did he have any lust for the pleasures of paradise. He was simply intoxicated with the love of God. He taught that the rain when it pours onto the earth, gathers, drop by drop, to form a river, which finally merges into the sea. All rain-water eventually reaches the sea once again. The same is true of the soul. The soul too has its abode and the abode of the soul is infinite.

In discussing the notion of *pul-i širāt* (Pers. *pul*, bridge; Ar. *širāṭ*, crossing) the bridge—that must be crossed after death—which is thinner than a hair and sharper than a sword’s edge with the fires of hell beneath. The deceased has to cross this bridge laden with the sins and lifted by the good works of this life. The imam taught that life in this world is in fact the *pul-i širāt* and one’s actions here determine whether the bridge into the afterlife can be crossed.³⁶

The teachings of Karim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan IV (r. 1957–2025) have been paramount for the community.³⁷ He taught that life is but a short passage in eternity and it must not be believed

³⁴ *Kalām-i Mawlā* verse 229 freely translated. The timing for burials is noted above is mentioned in the last verse.

³⁵ *Kalām-i Mawlā* verse 245

³⁶ *Kalam-e imam-e mubin*, holy firmans of Mowlana Hazar Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah, the Aga Khan, Ismailia Association for India, Bombay, volume I from 1880 A.D. to 1910 A.D. (sic), volume 2 from 1911 to 1951, published in 1950 and 1951 respectively.

³⁷ This chapter was completed before the passing of the the imam on 4 February 2025. The community is now led by his son and successor, Rahim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan V.

that since we are here for this one existence and thereafter have to account for nothing.³⁸ He had remarked that many followers (*murīds*) come to him grieving about the loss of a loved one; if only they knew of the tranquillity of their loved ones in their existence beyond this world, they would not sorrow.³⁹

This strand of teaching, while contemporary Nizari Ismailis may be unaware of its derivations, dates back several centuries at least. I have edited and translated from the Persian a Nizari doctrinal treatise, purportedly, dating from the twelfth century which records an analogous conversation between a certain village headman (*dihkhudā*) ‘Alī [A]Bū Shuj‘ā and the Nizari imam Ḥasan ‘Alā *dhikrihi*’l-*salām* (r. 1162–1166).⁴⁰ The imam noticing a commotion and grieving below the castle called for and comforted the Dihkhudā upon hearing of the death of his uncle and the immense grief that he was feeling. When the Dihkhudā was called,

he presented himself before the Illustrious Majesty and kissed the ground. He appeared distressed. ‘Alā Dhikrihi’l-Salām by grace and mercy asked him “What is the cause of this mourning?” He continued: “They say you are distressed because your uncle has passed away, may you endure.” Mawlānā (the imam lit. our master), by his grace, had mercy on him.

Dihkhudā said: “Khudāwand (Lordship), he has an illustrious son, may [God give him] good fortune and the fortune of servanthip among the believers (*bandagāna-yi taufiq-i bandagi*).”

Then ‘Alā Dhikrihi’l-Salām said: “Know that it is said that the character of this world coming into being and decaying is set on: “He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed” (Q67:2).”

The question-response continues and the grieving Dihkhudā describes how the deceased took him in as a son and that his own father who had previously died could not have treated him better and that this was the cause of his distress. In reply,

‘Alā Dhikrihi’l-Salām said: “Dihkhuda, if your sadness were to reach the Heavens (*ba-dargāh-i pādshāhi* lit. Royal Palace) and due to the long distance, there was no way for you to see him;

³⁸ Aga Khan IV, *farmān* excerpt in: *Ilm*, July 1978, Volume 4, Number 1. The imam made the *farmān* during his visit to the Jamat in Lahore, Pakistan on November 25, 1964. It was published in *farmān Mubarak*, Pakistan Visit 1964, Ismailia Association for Pakistan.

³⁹ Personal Communication—Haiderali Samji ca. July 2014

⁴⁰ Institute of Ismaili Studies Persian-MS 32 folios 40b - 44b. The tract is entitled *Ḥikāyatī az ‘Alā Dhikrihi’l-Salām* (A Story from ‘Alā Dhikrihi’l-Salām). I am grateful to Dr. Farhad Daftary and Professor Eric Ormsby for granting me access to the scans of MSS housed at the IIS Library in 2013; and to Shah Hussain, who was in charge of the Library at the time, for giving me access to a number of MSS scans from the Special Collection. Per-MS 32 is a collection of treatises in the hand of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ghufrānī copied in the earlier part of the 20th century. Neither the tract nor the manuscript have any dates or information of authorship. Cf Hajjani, Shiraz. *Concealment and Manifestation: Early Nizari Ismaili Treatises on Eschatology and Soteriology*. London: Institute of Ismaili Studies and Bloomsbury Publishing, Forthcoming; Treatise IX: *Ḥikāyatī āz ‘Alā dhikrihi’l-salām* (A Story from ‘Alā dhikrihi’l-salām). Ḥasan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātib, *Spiritual Resurrection in Shi‘i Islam: An Early Ismaili Treatise on the Doctrine of Qiyāmat*: Haft Bāb., trans. S. J. Badakhchani (I.B.Tauris, 2017). 40.

however, you heard that he is at peace and has two choices: to remain in that world or [would you prefer that he] move to a place to be near you?”

He said: “No, I would prefer that he stay in that realm and remain in that happiness. We would be proud if we were to be accepted, revered and favoured in this way at the Palace of the Sultan [God].”

The tract then continues to discuss the teaching of the imam and metaphysical aspects of existence. While this view of death and the afterlife is not unique, the recorded conversation in the twelfth century tract closely mirrors the twentieth century conversation between the imam of the time and his disciple reported by the participant in this research.

It is significant to note that the teachings and guidance of the imams in the last century have moved from discussing particulars and specific contexts to addressing universals. While the emphasis is on socio-economic aspects of the community and leading ethical lives, there is a special focus on meritocracy, pluralism and the role of the intellect. Death and the afterlife, when referenced, are increasingly spoken of not in terms of fear of the torments of hell but as possibilities resulting from leading a good life and undertaking a personal intellectual and spiritual search. Death is seen not just as the end of life but merely as a point of transition from the corporeal to the spiritual realm. It is not, therefore, something to fear. Indeed, believers are taught to see death as a continuity on the path towards God.

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN THE GINĀNS

The second major source of guidance and solace is the *gināns*.⁴¹ These hymns composed in a polyglot mix of Indic languages are believed to have been authored by emissaries of the imams in Iran who brought the teachings of the Nizari *da'wa* (summons) to India, dating back, according to some scholars, to the Nizari polity in Iran (fl. 1090–1256). They are sung by the congregation during the morning and evening prayer ceremonies led by a reciter. The *gināns* are loosely categorised to be sung at different times and occasions.⁴² Those with ‘*rūhānī*’

⁴¹ Numerous studies on the *gināns* have been published: Nanji, *Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition*. Asani, A. “The Ismaili *gināns*: Reflections on authority and authorship” In Farhad. Daftary, *Mediaeval Ismā'īlī History and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Shackle, and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns*. Tazim R. Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns by the Satpanth Ismā'īlī Saint Pīr Shams* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). Ali S. Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002). Zawahir Moir, Tazim R Kassam, and Françoise Mallison, *Gināns: Texts and Contexts: Essays on Ismaili Hymns From South Asia in Honour of Zawahir Moir* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010).

⁴² Esmail, Aziz. *A Scent of Sandalwood: Indo-Ismaili Religious Lyrics*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002). 14ff. Esmail is highly critical of categorisations based on doctrinal content or the utility of the *gināns*; however, his rhetorical question “one can only wonder whether the preference for classifying the poetry by doctrinal content or by practical organisation - rather than, say, by poetic attributes, or symbolic content - does not show the bias, peculiar to contexts different from that of the literature itself, for theological conceptualisation in the one case, and bureaucratic sociology in the other” illustrates precisely a bias to view the *ginānic* corpus as literature disembodied of its devotional use by the believers. The blocks that make up the edifice of this religious literature originated, after all, in the practices and related doctrinal developments not simply from

(spiritual, for the benefit of the soul) content are sung on occasions of death. The central theme of these *gināns* is the inevitability of death which is emphasised with imagery of the “lonely misery of the grave and torments of hell (Per: *dojak*).”⁴³ Sin (Sk: *pāp* Pers: *gunāh*) subjects the soul to cycles of return (Sk: *phera*) which are escaped by pious ethical action, by following the *satguru*’s (true guide’s) guidance and by accepting the salvation brought by the imam.⁴⁴ The verses excerpted from two *gināns* illustrate some of the themes.

E sabhaga isa duniyadhe vica kiya gina ave – authored by Pir Shams (d. 1276)

- O Lucky Ones (*subhagi*)! What did you bring with you into the world?
What are you going to take back with you?
- O Lucky Ones! You were born naked and naked will you die!
So be scrupulous in your trade and dealings.
- O Lucky Ones! **Bare were you born and bare-skinned will you die!**
You will take nothing along with you.
- O Lucky Ones! When you lie on the stretcher with feet extended,
Your family will neither keep you nor come with you.
- O Lucky Ones! They will **cover you with earth after the funeral rites;**
Thus will you be bundled off to the Lord (*hari*).
- O Lucky Ones! Your body will **crumble and turn into clay;**
Ants and worms will feast upon your flesh.
- O Lucky Ones! Grass will take root over the top of your body;
Cows will come and graze on this grass.
- O Lucky Ones! That for which you have earned demerit;
It will not endure nor abide with you.
- O Lucky Ones! When the **red-hot iron strikes your throat,**
You will scream and cry out to no avail.
- O Lucky Ones! When the Swami Raja (Lord of the Worlds) asks for an account,
Those who have toiled will be amply rewarded.
- O Lucky Ones! Pir Shams recited this wisdom (*ginān*) in essence supreme,
Those who are faithful will attain the **other shore** (*pahele par*).⁴⁵

Mal khajina bohataj bhariya - Sayyid Ghulam Ali Shah (d. 1792)

Though you may have filled many treasuries with riches
there is nothing there of yours.
Your **lovely palaces will all be forgotten**
and the jungle will be your abode.

Refrain: Why are you sunk in slumber, o my mind?
It is the time to remember the Lord
it is the time to remember the Master
Why are you sunk in slumber, o my mind?

Death hovers over your head

the quills of authors. Dissociating the two renders the *gināns* into a dead literary corpus rather than a living tradition of the communities of believers.

⁴³ Shackle, and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns*. 20; also cf Asani, A. “The Ismaili *gināns*”.

⁴⁴ Nanji, *Nizārī Ismā‘īlī Tradition*. 99ff

⁴⁵ Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom*. 203 Emphases added.

o pious and holy one, so now be alert in time
 If at this - time you forget
 you will suffer many cycles.
 This world is wholly false
 so do not think it is yours
 If you would abandon **delusion** -- **and reflect on the Divine**
 then search inside your heart.⁴⁶

These excerpts show the major themes of the punishment in hell, the delusory transitoriness of this life, the possibility of salvation and the eternity of the soul. The reader should picture these verses sung with deep emotion at the home of the bereaved and during funeral ceremonies or a *majlis* (special gathering, pl. *majālis*, Lit.: sitting) in the *jamatkhana* (place of worship, Lit.: community hall). The emotional outpouring is cathartic for the bereaved. The *gināns* present an ultimately optimistic view of the afterlife. Ethical piety, repentance, forgiveness and recognition of the imam and his intercession will allow the soul to reach the presence of the Great Mystery.

Khoja Nizari Ismaili Funeral Ceremonies

The historical and contextual developments in the Ismaili community have given rise to and affected the Jamat's general views of life and existence beyond, and in turn colour the individual rituals and practices. In a context where the ritual space is controlled, the symbolic ciphers and complexes manifest as a dialectic between ritual guidelines and traditional practices. Death rituals are performed for all Ismailis in accordance with the practices and guidelines extant for the region. The rituals of Nizari Ismailis originating in South Asia can be broken down into three segments: i) pre-burial rituals from the time of death; ii) funeral ceremonies; and iii) post-burial ceremonies.

PRE-BURIAL RITUALS

In the case of serious or terminal illness the members of the person's family contact the mukhi-kamadia (officiants appointed to lead each *jamatkhana*)⁴⁷ of the jamat and can request them to administer *chanta* (Gujarati: Lit.: sprinkling).⁴⁸ In this act, the individual or the

⁴⁶ Shackle, and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns*. 114–5. Emphases added.

⁴⁷ Daftary, *Ismailis*. 474

⁴⁸ The Kutchi variant: *chanddo*. See Ismailia Councils of Africa, *Rules of the Shia Imami Ismailia Councils of Africa* (Zanzibar: The Shia Imami Ismailia Supreme Council of Zanzibar, 1925). article 227. Syed Mujtaba Ali, "Origin of the Khojahs and Their Religious Life Today," PhD diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelm-University, 1936). pp 74-75 [It is jarring to see the eagle atop swastika of the Nazi insignia stamped on the cover sheet of the dissertation]. The Haji Bibi Case records the evidence of one of the witnesses: "In connection with death, the Mukhi Kamadia is [sic] sent for and the 10th chapter of the Dasavtar is recited. The Samar Chhanta is performed with reference to death. Some people have it done when they are alive. Money is paid then for the Hazar (present) Imam. After the body is buried, other payments are made at the Jamatkhana, namely, Samar money for the Hazar Imam alone. The object of the Samar payment is that the soul of the deceased may rest in peace and get Sawab

family on his or her behalf with palms together in a prayer position seek forgiveness of sins—the formulation includes: “if the jamat forgives, *Shāhpīr* (the imam—as the intercessor) forgives”. The mukhi or kamadia sprinkles water on which prayers have been recited—prior to the reforms enacted by the forty-eighth imam, *mati* (soil) from Kerbala would be added. While sprinkling this water on the face of the penitent, the mukhi or kamadia say “*Shāhpīr* forgives.” Two very important notions are associated with this practice; first, that the corporate jamat through the agency of the imam—through his physical representatives, the mukhi-kamadia—is called upon to intercede for the forgiveness of sins of a sincere penitent. Second, this reflects the immense importance of the Shi‘a notion of *ṭahāra* (physical and spiritual purity).⁴⁹ The soul, if possible, must journey having been purified. The *shahāda* (testimony): *lā ‘ilāha ‘illā llāh Muḥammad al-rasūlu llāh* (there is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God) is recited to the dying person.⁵⁰

Calling the mukhi-kamadia, in this situation, also triggers preparations for support of the family in the case of death and the arrangements for the eventual funeral. In the Western contexts, upon death, the body is removed to a funeral home to await preparation for the funeral and to allow relatives and friends to gather from different parts of the world. It is considered incumbent on all who can, to attend ceremonies of last rites. Members of the family may visit the funeral home and spend time in prayer near the corpse.

Meanwhile the home of the deceased becomes a hive of activity with comings and goings of family and friends for the purpose of condolence. Friends and relatives in some cases bring food for the grieving family and visitors. Often the extended family engages in supportive roles (of cooking, doing unavoidable daily chores and making preparations) while the primary bereaved individuals grieve. *Agarbatti* (incense) is lit in the house. The invocation on hearing of a death is *innā li-llāhi wa ‘innā ilay-hi rāji‘ūn* (from God we are and onto God is our return) and the message to the grieving is of “*ṣabar* (patience); the deceased’s soul is in a better place”.⁵¹ Selected chapters of the Qur‘an, *gināns* referencing death and the afterlife along with sections of the *Kalām-i Mawlā* and the repetition of the *ṣalāwat*: *Allāhumma ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammadin wa-‘alā āli Muḥammad* (O God, send blessings upon Muḥammad and upon the family/progeny of Muḥammad) are recited for the benefit of soul of the deceased and to console the

(benefit).” The case was a contestation of property and rights to revenues from the jamat—ergo the mention here of moneys which otherwise are symbolic contributions. Cf. Gulshan Khakee, “The Dasa Avatāra of the Satpanthi Ismailis and the Imam Shahis of Indo-Pakistan,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 1972). The Dasa Avatāra is no longer recited when a person dies.

⁴⁹ Abū Ḥanīfah al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *The Pillars of Islam: Da‘ā’im al-Islām of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān*, trans. Asaf Ali Asghar Fyze, and Ismail K. Poonawala (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).pp 123ff; Daftary, *MIHT*. pp 127-128; Arzina Lalani, *Early Shi‘i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004). 75

⁵⁰ The Ismailis, in common with other Shi‘a add a third testimony regarding the status of ‘Alī: “‘Alī the Master of Believers is from God”

⁵¹ Q2:156 “who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, ‘Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return’”.

bereaved.⁵² Special efforts are made to attend prayers at the jamatkhana and *nāndī* (food offerings) for the benefit of the soul are taken there every day.⁵³

FUNERAL CEREMONIES

Ghusal (ritual washing) and *kafan* (shroud): On the day of the funeral, the *Ghusal* Committee where one exists or a group of individuals would undertake the ritual cleansing of the body. Men administer the *ghusal* to a male deceased and women to a female. In a situation where individuals of the same sex are not available the provisions stipulate that a spouse may perform *ghusal* on his or her deceased mate. Where enough individuals are available, one person pours the water and a second does the washing. The body is subjected to three washings: first with water containing lotus leaves (soap is substituted), then water with camphor and lastly, with plain water.

Incense is lit in the room to cleanse the air. Members of the committee also have to be in a state of ritual purity, having bathed, and cleared their minds of impious thoughts. They commence with an intention: “We perform this *ghusal* to bring the deceased nearer to God”. The deceased’s genitalia are covered throughout the washing with a cloth. The procedure requires washing of the head, torso, the right side and then the left side with each of the three washes. The body is turned to the right and the back is washed from the shoulders to base of the feet and similarly on the left side.

Having thus cleansed the body, it is enshrouded in the *kafan* (shroud) consisting of three pieces of clean white untreated cotton cloth.⁵⁴ The first piece covers the navel to the knees, the second covers the shoulder to half way down the thigh and third piece wraps the whole body allowing the face to be shown. Finally, a shawl is draped over the body. The committee, once again, is required to wash and if possible bathe to return to a state of purity.

Janāza (funeral procession): These ceremonies often take place in funeral homes or other such halls so that non-Ismaili friends and relatives may attend.⁵⁵ When the bier arrives, the family assembles along with the mukhi-kamadia in a private space or smaller room where *chanta* is administered to the deceased. After the *chanta*, the *maiyyat* (deceased) is brought to the main assembly hall and placed in the front of the room, on the ground, with the face exposed. The mukhi-kamadia officiate the ceremonies; in jamats with small populations, the mukhi-kamadia may not be familiar with the ceremonial so may be guided by the leader of the *ghusal* committee. The congregation, seated on the ground, listens to and participates in the recitation of selected chapters of the Qur’ān, *gināns* referencing death and the afterlife

⁵² The *ṣalāwat* is considered Divine “*sunnah* (practice)” commanded in: “Truly God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings upon him, and greetings of peace! (Q33:56)”

⁵³ Ali, “Origin of the Khojas.” 75

⁵⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī* Vol. 9. 203

⁵⁵ Entrance into the jamatkhana is restricted to Ismailis.

along with sections of the *Kalām-i Mawlā* and the repetition of the *ṣalāwat*. Finally, everyone walks past the bier while continuously reciting *ṣalāwat* to pay their last respects (*anjli*).

After the completion of *anjli* the face of the deceased is completely covered and the coffin is closed.⁵⁶ The *fātiḥa* (prayer for the dead, lit. opening, victory) consisting of several chapters and verses from the Qurʾān is recited. Upon completion of the *fātiḥa*, the male members of the family and friends, line up on both sides of the coffin. The immediate members of the deceased lift the bier slightly three times while reciting the *ṣalāwat*. The *janāza* (bier) is then lifted to the shoulders and the procession proceeds to the cemetery; often in a hearse due to the distance to the cemetery. It is customary, if not incumbent on all Muslim men to give their shoulder to a *janāza*. The *shahāda* is recited all the way to the cemetery.

Dafan (burial): At the cemetery, the *janāza* is placed such that the men lined up in rows face towards the *qibla* (direction of the Kaʿba in Mecca) and have the deceased's head at their right (north-south alignment). The coffin is opened and the *ṣalāt al-maiyyat* (Pers. *namāz-i maiyyat*, prayer for the deceased) is recited. The prayer consists of five *takbīrs* (recitation of *Allāhu akbar*, God is great) without *rukūʿ* (bending) or *sajada* (prostration) as in other prayers.⁵⁷ The coffin is closed after some soil is placed in it by close family members and lowered into the grave while those present continuously recite: *Allāhu akbar, Allāhu akbar, Allāhu akbar, lā-ʾilāha ʾillā llāh, Allāhu akbar* (God is great, God is great, God is great, there is no god but God, God is great).⁵⁸

Handfuls of soil, symbolising “dust to dust” are thrown into the grave by all present and the grave is filled in as the recitations continue. Once the grave is filled in such that a small mound is created, the shovels are placed on it and close members of the deceased and those helping with the filling in of the grave pour water over the grave. This act of libation actually has a practical purpose of washing the shovels and hands, and to settle dry earth into the grave. During the process of filling in the grave, some of the men would visit near-by graves of their dear ones and place incense and pour water over the graves of these acquaintances and relatives—this is often an opportunity for prayers over these individuals by their family and friends.

All the men line up facing the *qibla* and are led in reciting the *fātiḥa*. At the exit of the cemetery or just inside—after everyone moves back a few paces, a second *fātiḥa* is recited for *kul ruhānī* (souls of all the deceased). Finally condolences are extended to the members of the deceased's family by all present.

⁵⁶ Burial is customarily preferable in a simple shroud. Due to statutory requirements coffins are also used in Western countries.

⁵⁷ The Shia generally pray five *takbīrs*; Sunnis pray four—both claim Prophetic tradition. Lalani, *Early Shīʿī Thought*. 125; Algar, Hamid and Hamid Dibashi “Burial in Islam” in Ehsan Yarshater, ed. *Encyclopædia Iranica* Available Online At [Http://www.iranicaonline.org](http://www.iranicaonline.org) (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). 564–66

⁵⁸ Use of coffins is in compliance with local customary and legal requirements. Normative Islamic practice requires that the body be placed directly in the earth, with nothing interred except the body and its shroud.

The men go to the cemetery for the burial; the women generally repair to the deceased's home.⁵⁹ While no formal ceremonies are undertaken, a meal is prepared for all—despite the prohibitions against *bhanti* (a meal served to those attending the funeral). The men returning from the cemetery join the women and partake in the meal.

POST-BURIAL CEREMONIES

On the day of the funeral post-burial ceremonies take place in the jamatkhana and are therefore limited only to Ismailis. Two main prayers of *samar* and *ziyārat* are offered for the benefit of the soul of the deceased. In addition, a large number of offerings including new items of clothing, jewellery and a wide array of food dishes (especially the deceased's favourites) are taken to the jamatkhana and after the prayers are auctioned off as *nāndī*.

Over an extended period, the family endeavours to attend jamatkhana every day for prayers and food dishes are taken for *nāndī*. Members of the family may visit the grave on a daily basis for forty days. On the fortieth evening, a *majlis* is held.

Samar (memorial): The *samar* is performed immediately after burial or more often, just after the evening prayers. Relatives and other well-wishers make token offerings and partake in a small dish of sweet meal or nowadays, eat a raisin. A *tasbiḥ* of *ṣalāwat* is silently recited by the congregation. The jamat joins in a supplication on behalf of the deceased for *kul gunāh maf* (forgiveness of all sins); for *bāṭuni, nūranī didār* (spiritual and luminous 'vision-encounter') and their *aṣal me wāṣal* (reintegration into the original source). The *samar* is followed by *ziyārat* ceremonies—these ceremonies are not performed on days of festive significance.

Samarnama is similarly performed for the soul of the deceased in another town or location when news of the death reaches the jamat.

Ziyārat (journey or pilgrimage of the soul): The *ziyārat* which in the past was held on the third day after the burial has now been brought forward to the same day. It involves recitation of *ziyārat-i maiyyat* which consists of Qur'ānic suras: *Fātiḥa*; *Baqarah* verses 1-5 and 255; *Ikhhlās*; *Falaq*; *Nās* and *Aḥzāb* verse 56. On completion of this prayer a *tasbiḥ* of *ṣalāwat* is again recited. Relatives and other well-wishers again make token offerings and partake in a small dish of sweet meal or raisins. An announcement is made to the congregation seeking forgiveness from the jamat on behalf of the deceased. The supplication on behalf of the deceased for *kul gunāh māf* (forgiveness of all sins); *bāṭuni, nūranī didar* (spiritual and luminous 'vision-

⁵⁹ Women, with few exceptions, do not go to the cemetery. Hamid Algar notes: "The participation of women in the funeral processions and burials, strongly discouraged by feqh, seems to have become standard practice early on [in Islamic Iran]." Algar-Dibashi "Burial in Islam". 564. The majority of South Asian Muslims adhere to the Ḥanafī school of Sunni jurisprudence which does not permit women to be present at burial. Other smaller communities have tended to follow these practices.

encounter') and *aṣal me wāṣal* (reintegration into the original source) is repeated. With this the ceremonies come to an end and the *nāndīs* (offerings) of food and clothing are auctioned.

Chalismo (fortieth day) and annual *majlis*: A *majlis* is held on the fortieth day essentially to mark the end of the mourning rituals.⁶⁰ The daily routine is intensified; the bereaved may visit the cemetery and take a large array of food offerings for *nāndī*. Special prayers are recited for the soul of the departed. In most cases the *chalismo* is held within a few days of the burial to allow relatives and friends to participate in the *majlis* before returning to their distant homes. Annual *majālīs* are held in commemoration of the death. These memorials consist of essentially the same ceremonies as the *chalismo*.

The practice of *chalismo* is deeply rooted in human culture. The notion of separation (even incubation) of liminal entities for a period of forty days—a time for purification transcends religious and geographic boundaries. The Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions list many occurrences of the number forty: the deluge at the time of Noah lasted forty days; Moses spent forty days and nights on the mountain; the Arabic *abjad* system ascribes the numerical value of forty to the letter *mīm* which relates to the *ḥadīth qudsi* where Muhammad is purported to have said: “I am Aḥmad without the *mīm*” implying a separation of *mīm* or forty stages between humanity and divinity.⁶¹ Ultimately, the origins of a forty-day mourning period may be rooted in human biology. The modern notion of quarantine is derived from a forty-day isolation of the sick.

Within this context, the compaction of the *chalismo* ceremony only a few days after the burial, may have serious impacts on the psychological processes of letting go and transitioning from the liminal stage. This is an example of change of ritual for convenience and because of day-to-day realities. As often is the case, rituals are bureaucratically changed without regard of the underlying archetypes!

Mapping Khoja Nizari Ismaili Funerary Practices to the Ritual Framework

The funeral ceremonies described here have been mapped to the ritual framework developed earlier in the chapter. Figure 5 is a schematic representation of these practices. The dying person is administered a *chanta* and upon death the bereaved gather to offer condolences and assist the family suffering the loss. At such gatherings for condolences (*khakharo*) the female kin, in particular, sit together (*sādrī* lit. Tatami mat or a blanket spread for sitting) and mourn the deceased. The cycles of emotional outbursts and calming take place as new visitors arrive. The condolence gatherings (*khakharo* and *sādrī*) are held by relatives at the house of

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Dr. Shafique Virani for sharing his unpublished article on *Chalismo*.

⁶¹ The *ḥadīth qudsi* are the prophet, Muḥammad's speech which conveyed the Divine word but was mediated by the Prophet's agency and articulation. The Qur'ān on the other hand is the Divine word conveyed without any agency on Muḥammad's part. Aḥmad is another name for Muḥammad drawn from the same Arabic trilateral root *ḥamada* (to praise). Without the *mīm*, this becomes Aḥad (the One)—one of the 99 names of God. (Q112:1)

the deceased. Such gatherings also take place when news of a close family member's death is received and the distance is such that the family and their well-wishers are unable to attend the funeral. The intense period of mourning (*sog*) would be brought to an end when the women gather after three to seven days and exhort the grieving relatives to have patience. Tea would be served (*sog-ni chai*) and the grieving women of the house would be encouraged to change their white *pachedis* (shawls) of mourning.⁶²

In preparation for the burial, the deceased's body is cleansed (*ghusal*) and shrouded (*kafan*), while prayers are recited. After *chanta* and the last viewing (*anjli*), the body is removed (*janāza*) to the graveyard (*qabrastān*). The burial prayers (*ṣalāt or namāz-i maiyyat*) are offered and the body is interred (*dafan*). The men returning from the cemetery would gather for a meal (*bhanti*). In the jamatkhana, the community participates in the *samar* and *ziyārat* ceremonies; as detailed earlier, the *chalismo* is now often symbolically held within a few days of the burial.

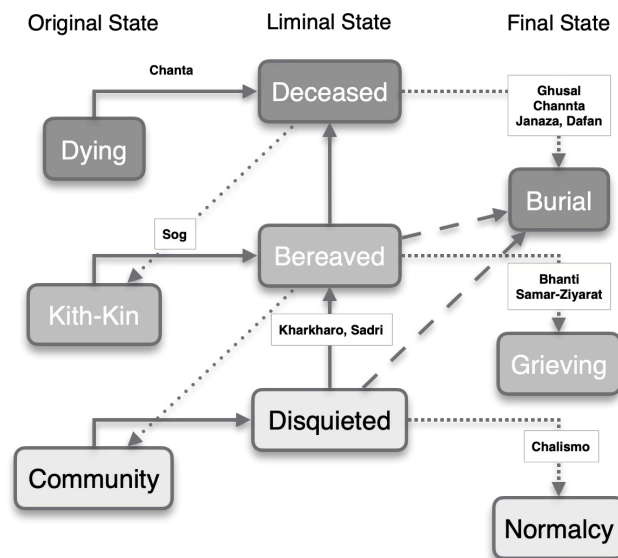


FIGURE 4: NIZARI RITUALS MAPPED TO TRANSITIONS THROUGH LIMINAL STATES

In Figure 5, the events of *kharkharo*, *sādrī*, *sog*, *janāza*, *dafan* and *bhanti* are communal and they bring together a panoply of friends, relatives and well-wishers who would be Nizari Ismaili, other fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. The *ghusal* is administered by a small committee

⁶² Dossa, "Ritual and Daily Life." 134 "White is specifically used as an attire during the initiation ceremony of newly-born children, marriage (white is only worn by women) and death. A newly-born child signifies the state of primordial purity as this stage entails minimal contact with the material world. The white cloth (unstitched) covering a corpse symbolizes a last attempt marking a series of ceremonial stages to 'purify' the soul of the deceased. The white dress of a bride and the white worn by women on other occasions provide a symbolic juncture for achieving spiritual rejuvenation. Through the symbol of white, women's role as mediators between the material and the spiritual receives further emphasis. The shift of meaning from birth to marriage and then to death relates to the two planes of unity (an attribute of spiritual life) and multiplicity (an attribute of material life). Birth marks an entry into material life, death marks an exit; from material life, while marriage signifies a climactic point of deeper involvement in material life (expressed in terms of family and kin ties)."

consisting of Ismaili volunteers—rarely including family members of the deceased—who give of themselves for this intimate of services to prepare the deceased body for its final earthly journey. The ceremonies of *chanta*, *samar*, *ziyarat*, and the *chalismo* and annual *majālis* conform to the rites of separation and integration which enable the deceased, bereaved and *jamat* to transition from their highly liminal states into equilibria of states of normalcy. In the sectarian milieu, these ceremonies began to be restricted to the *jamatkhana* where only the Nizari Ismailis could participate. Practices such as *sādrī*, *sog* and *bhanti* which would take place in the deceased's home, were proscribed to limit participation and to exclude all others, especially the Ithnā'asharīs. Below is a survey of rule-making which resulted in boundary formations among the Khoja communities.

Rule-Making to Control of Ritual Spaces

In 1892 Sachedina Nanjiani, the Ithnā'asharī scholar, wrote that

in sawant 1920 (1864 CE) the Honourable Aga Khan commanded that **the Khoja people should not resort to Sunni mullahs for happy or sad rituals (*shādī-gamī-nī kriyā*); rather to Shi'a [mullahs] according to Shi'i practice (*Shiyā rīti pramāne*)**. The *shethiyā* (merchants) opposed this order. From this the question arose: "Were the Khoja originally Sunni or Shi'a?" Its contest reached the High Court.⁶³

While this statement is valid, the multi-nodal sectarian discourse has a centuries-long history in India. In the early part of the nineteenth century the Nizari Ismaili imam Hasan Ali Shah, Aga Khan (r. 1804–1881) was attempting to assert control over the Khoja communities in India. In 1829 he sent an emissary and his maternal grandmother, Mari Bibi, to advocate for the imam's authority.⁶⁴ The contests of authority, the subsequent conflicts and cases litigated in the colonial courts precipitated fissures such that the Khoja communities were divided into a small group of Sunnis, a larger community of Ithnā'asharīs and the largest portion of the Khoja, the community which remained loyal to the Nizari Ismaili imamate.⁶⁵ These events have to be seen in the wider contexts of the collapse and devolution of the Safavid Empire in Iran (fl. 1501–1736), the encroachments of the East India Company (est. 1600) and the transition to British colonial rule of India (1858–1947), the challenging conditions of agricultural production and lack of economic opportunities in Kutch and

⁶³ S. Nānījānī, *Khōjā Vṛttānt* (Guj.: Chronicle of the Khōjā Community) (Ahmedabad: Amarasinhaji Printing Press, 1892). 7. Emphases added.

⁶⁴ Ali, "Origin of the Khojas." 45

⁶⁵ S.T. Lokhandwalla, "Islamic Law and Ismaili Communities (Khojas and Bohras)," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 4, no. 2 (1967): Aga Khan Case: Advocate General vs Muhammad Husen Huseni (1866), 12 Bombay High Court Reports. 323ff and Haji Bibi Case: Haji Bibi v. H.H. Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, the Aga Khan (1909), 11 Bombay Law Reports. 409ff; Mukherjee, "Being 'Ismaili' and 'Muslim'"

Kathiawad, which were concurrent to the rise of commercial power of the traders and migrations across the Indian Ocean from India to East and South Africa.⁶⁶

The Aga Khan had fled from Iran in 1841 after an unsuccessful revolt against his nephew, the Qājār ruler, Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1834–1848). When he was allowed to settle in Bombay, in the mid-1840s, the transference of the Nizari Ismaili imamate out of Iran was finalised.⁶⁷ Having left his estates and surviving on stipends given to him for services in Afghanistan and Sind to the British East India Company, he redoubled his efforts to assert control of the Khoja communities and their resources which some of the *shethiyas* resisted. In 1861 he initiated a register in which the Khoja would openly declare loyalty to him as their imam and agreed to adhere to precepts of Nizari Ismaili Shi‘ism, thus ending their long-enduring confessional fluidities and states of *taqiyya* (pious dissimulation).⁶⁸ This was done in the context of British protections of religious freedom but its real purpose was to demarcate the boundaries among those who accepted the imam’s authority and the smaller groups who refused to do so.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a group of Khoja pilgrims to Najaf encountered the future Ithnā‘asharī *Marja‘-yi taqlīd* (source worthy of emulation) Ayatullah Zain al-Abidin Mazandarani (d. 1897) and were drawn to Ithnā‘asharī Shi‘ism.⁶⁹ The Grand Ayatullah sent emissaries to India and East Africa who proselytised among the Khoja and endeavoured to win them over. By the end of the nineteenth century when Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan III (r. 1885–1957) became the imam, increasing numbers of the Khoja were tending to identify as Ithnā‘asharīs. The Nizari Ismaili leadership was reacting to stem this tide both in South Asia and Africa. During his visit in 1899 to East Africa, the imam gave a *farmān* (edict or guidance) to his followers in Dar-es-Salaam that

My faith is Ismailism and your faith is also Ismailism. For those who are not Ismaili, daughters [in marriage] are not to be taken from or given to them. It is forbidden (*harām*) to give daughters to them or take daughters from them. To any resident, he should not give a daughter to an Ithnā ‘Asharī or accordingly take a daughter from an Ithnā ‘Asharī. This I forbid you. Your faith and their faith is different. There is great difference between you and them. ...

You do not have any business with anyone else’s religion. Your duty is that, to those who do not give their allegiance, to them no daughter should be given or taken from them, do not attend their marriages, do not attend their funerals, do not eat from them, do not entertain them as guests, or interact with them socially in any way. If you must meet with them for purposes of business, speak only of business matters and nothing else. I trust that the entire

⁶⁶ Hamid Algar, “The Revolt of Agha Khan Mahallati and the Transference of the Isma‘ili Imamate to India,” *Studia Islamica* (1969). Nile. Green, *Bombay Islam the Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Morris, “Divine Kingship.” Iqbal Akhtar, *The Khōjā of Tanzania: Discontinuities of A Postcolonial Religious Identity* (2016).

⁶⁷ Algar, “Agha Khan Mahallati.” *Modern History of the Ismailis*. Daftary, *Ismailis*. 442–451 and 464–504

⁶⁸ Ali, “Origin of the Khojas.” 45. note variance from Najiani’s date

⁶⁹ Meir. Litvak, *Shi‘i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The ‘ulama’ of Najaf and Karbala’* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 90. Akhtar, *Khōjā of Tanzania*. 169.

community shall hear and observe my command. For those who disobey my command, he shall be stained with a mark of black ink.⁷⁰

This *farmān* demarcated a boundary to distance the Khojas who had adopted Ithnā‘asharī Shi‘ism from his followers. The analyses of rules related to funerary practices from rule-making documents, often referred to as “constitutions”, illustrate both how the social boycott was legislated and the extent of the Nizari Ismaili leadership’s alarm. The rule-making documents began to be issued in 1905 in Zanzibar, with rule-books published by the Ismailia Councils in other jurisdictions where the Khoja resided.⁷¹ The similarity in content clearly suggests that there was a centralised effort to codify and formulate these rules. Three impetuses are discernible for this process. The first was the continued effort by the British colonial powers to establish rules of governance so as to exercise jurisprudential control of Indian communities. The second was a reaction to the rule-book formalised by the break-away group. The *Khōjā Shī‘a Isnā‘asharī Jamāt-nā Kāyḍā Būk* (The Rule Book of the Khoja Shi‘a Ithnā‘asharī Jamat) published in 1901 in Bombay most certainly prompted the Nizari Ismaili leadership to publish their own rules. The third was the effort by the Aga Khan and his leadership to organise the Nizari Ismailis and centre them and their institutional activities around the person of the imam and to limit all religious and cultural practices to the exclusive space of the *jamatkhanas*. The preface to the “The Constitution, Rules & Regulations of His Highness the Agakhan Ismailia Councils of Africa” published in 1946 in Mombasa states that it is desirable that

the affairs of the Shia Imami Ismailia Jamaths (sic) of Africa be managed and conducted Systematically (sic) and regularly in the interests of all the Jamaths and that the Sarkar Sahebi Karsaji (revenues due to the imamate) be collected properly throughout Africa and all its important matters and affairs should be placed before the Ismailia Councils for its disposal by the said Councils at their meetings to be duly and regularly held in accordance with the rules enacted herein.⁷²

These texts were published in Gujarati or both in English and Gujarati where the English text would be governing and were designed to be presentable in public and legal fora to support the community’s positions. In the second half of the twentieth century, the rule-books were published only in English. Rules from five such rule-books spanning almost a century are analysed next to demonstrate the attempts to control ritual spaces and places of interactions among the Khojas who were creedally distinguishing each from the other.⁷³

RANGOON, 1910

⁷⁰ Akhtar, *Khōjā of Tanzania*. 39–42

⁷¹ Zulfikar Hirji. “The Socio-Legal Formation of the Nizari Ismailis of East Africa, 1800–1950” in Ed. Daftary. *A Modern History of the Ismailis*. 129–160

⁷² Ismailia Councils of Africa, *The Constitution, Rules & Regulations of His Highness the Agakhan Ismailia Councils of Africa* (Mombasa: His Highness the Agakhan Ismailia Supreme Council for Africa, 1946). 1

⁷³ I have used these five rule books because they are readily available to me.

This rule-book published in 1910 in Rangoon evidences that families and households were divided. The rule stipulates exclusion of the Ithnā‘asharī relatives from participating in the funeral and mourning (*sādrī*) of someone from their household.

74. In any house where Ismaili and Ithnā‘asharī relatives live together and an Ismaili dies, the bier will be lifted by the Ismailis. The Ithnā‘asharīs will not participate in this in any way. They will stay in a different part. In the matter of *sādrī*, only if the Ithnā‘asharī leaves, then the *sādrī* will take place. Else the ceremony will take place in any other house chosen by the Council,⁷⁴

KARACHI 1912 (REVISING RULES FROM A PREVIOUS CA. 1905? PUBLICATION)

The rules in the rule-book published in 1912 in Karachi, proscribed participation in rituals associated with Ithnā‘asharī Shi‘ism.⁷⁵ The implication here is that people did participate in such rituals and the Nizari leadership was placing a high penalty of excommunication for such breaches.

20. [Amendment of Rule 130 of Rule Book Part I] No Ismaili should follow practices of the Ithnā‘asharī faith nor should they partake in rites opposed to the Ismaili faith or **traditional practices** (*chālū rīt-thī ūlī* lit. opposed to continuing practices; emphasis in the original text). Anyone in breach of this rule will be punishable by the Council to the point of excommunication.⁷⁶

ZANZIBAR 1925

A decade later, the language of exclusion became severe.⁷⁷ The Ismailis were to cut all ties with the “seceders”; they were not to interact with them to the extent of not even chewing pan-sopari (betel leaf with a mix of spices and areca nut, chewed for stimulant and psychoactive effects—a social activity among communities of South Asian origins) together.⁷⁸ Mourning of a loved one or acquaintance who had joined the “seceders” was not permitted. Rites of passage conducted by officiants not appointed by the leadership was an offence and the participants could be excommunicated.

⁷⁴ Ismailia Council Rangoon, *Khoja Shi‘a Ismaili Council-Nā Kāyda-Nī Book* (Rangoon: Sri Kuber Bhandari Steam Printing Press, 1910). Original in Gujarati.

⁷⁵ Kara, Taushif. “Abode of Peace: Islam, Empire, and the Khoja Diaspora (1866 – 1972),” diss., University of Cambridge, 2021. 67. In 1910, Aga Khan III banned all ceremonies related to the martyrdom of the imam, Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (r. 669-680)—‘*Ashūrā*, the first ten days of the month of *Muḥarram*, is one the most important commemorations in the Ithnā‘asharī communities globally.

⁷⁶ Ismailia Council Karachi, *Karachi-nā Ismailia Khoja Jamāt-nī Council-nā Nawā ane Sudhārelā Kāyda* (Karachi: Manohar Press, 1912). In Gujarati.

⁷⁷ Ismailia Councils of Africa, *Rules of the Shia Imami Ismailia Councils of Africa*.

⁷⁸ While the language speaks of “seceders” there is no evidence that Ithnā‘asharīs of non-Khoja origins and not considered to be “seceders” would have been treated any differently.

175. None of our Co-religionists shall eat, drink, chew Pan-Sopari or keep any such intercourse with a Seceder. Any one doing so shall be punished to the extent of excommunication.
177. No Ismaili shall spread the Mat [*sādrī*, keep-mourning] for a Seceder's death or on receiving news of the event from elsewhere.
190. Whoever gets marriage and funeral ceremonies performed by persons other than those appointed by our Jamats in any of the African towns shall be an offender against the Jamat. The Council has the power to punish him to the extent of excommunication.

The locus of ritual practices was limited to the jamatkhana where non-Ismailis were not permitted. Rule 201 allowed for "*ginān-majlis*" to be held at home with official permission, presumably because such singing of *gināns* may have been viewed as contrary to the predilections of the Khojas who had oriented themselves to Iraqi-Iranian notions of Ithnā'asharī Shi'ism. Again the punishment for breach was excommunication.

193. Majlis in connection with a deceased person shall be held by men and women in the Jamatkhana.
201. Religious rites and prayers should not be performed in any body's house at any place except in the Jamatkhana. However, should anybody desire to hold *ginān-majlis* at home, it can be so done only with the permission of Council. Anybody, acting contrary to this, shall be punished by the Council even to the extent of excommunication.

Rules 214 and 216 defined a temporary status of excommunication. The person so excommunicated was left in limbo for a time—presumably this cooling-off period would give the offender a taste of the social and religious exclusion and allowed room for return. Continued breach of the rules would result in total severance of ties.

214. When an individual is prohibited by the Council to enter the Jamatkhana for a period he can not participate in any caste functions or religious ceremonies; but should he die within the period of punishment and be still in our Ismaili religion or not have acted against the laws of the Council, the funeral rites shall be performed in accordance with Ismaili faith.
216. No one shall keep any communication such as of eating and drinking together with or of giving a daughter in marriage during the period of excommunication to an Ismaili residing in Africa who may have been excommunicated. Such excommunicated individual shall not be entitled to the use of the Jamatkhana, burial grounds or any such things. He shall neither take part in any communal functions or religious ceremonies, but such of his relatives, as may be living with him previously, may eat and drink together with him. In case that excommunicated person has not been not admitted into another religion and he dies then all rights shall be given him as one from amongst Jamat.

These rules permitted last rites to the person in the state of temporary exclusion. Despite the harshness, such exceptions allude to the practical challenges and anguish in the rule-making.

MOMBASA 1946

The “Constitution, Rules & Regulations” applicable throughout Africa was published in 1946.⁷⁹ It affirmed the rules in the previous edition of 1925 and added several other proscriptions. The exclusionary rules and proscriptions came under a separate chapter entitled “Seceders”.⁸⁰

9. No one shall participate in any religious ceremonies with seceders nor invite such persons on such occasions. But on all other occasions including funerals seceders will be treated as members of other faiths or communities. ...
11. When Ismaili and non-Ismaili relatives live together, and an Ismaili member of that household dies, only such members who are Ismailis, shall have the right to bury the deceased. Non-Ismaili members of the household shall have no right to take part in any of the rituals.⁸¹

Serving of food and therefore eating together was proscribed.

28. No one shall be called at the feasts of *bhanti* (meal served to those attending the burial) and *ziyārat*. The feasts on the occasion of giving clothes and *majlis* (gathering [for prayers]) is are prohibited.

The role of mukhi-kamadia was made paramount since each congregation had these officiants appointed to manage all aspects of the local jamats’ activities.

29. No one shall have funeral or marriage ceremonies performed by persons other than those appointed by the Mukhi-Kamadia for such purposes.
30. Permission of the Mukhi-Kamadia must be obtained to bury any Ismaili.
31. Anyone may erect a grave with the permission of the Mukhi-Kamadia of the respective Jamath (sic). The permission fee shall be fixed by the respective Councils. The permission fee shall be paid to the Mukhi Kamadia within one year of the death and the grave shall be erected within a period of two years. Thereafter, erection may be allowed by the Council if the space is available and convenient.

Rituals such as *sādrī* and *ziyārat* that were previously held at the bereaved’s home were proscribed and others such as *samar* were now limited to the jamatkhana.

32. If any Ismaili receives any news of death of an Ismaili from abroad, he may perform the *samar* (memorial) ceremony in the Jamathkhana. The custom of *sādrī* (gathering to mourn the deceased) and *ziyārat* (prayers for the journey of the soul) on such occasion is

⁷⁹ Ismailia Councils of Africa, *The Constitution, Rules & Regulations of His Highness the Agakhan Ismailia Councils of Africa*.

⁸⁰ Ismailia Councils of Africa. 67–68

⁸¹ Personal correspondence with an anonymous respondent. December, 2016. The respondent’s mother recalled and regretted all her life not being allowed to participate in her own father’s funeral since the respondent’s mother’s family had adopted Ithnā‘asharī Shi‘ism. The lack of closure had been passed on to another generation and was vivid in our conversation over half a century later.

prohibited. In case of death in a place where no religious ceremony could take place, the religious ceremony may be performed by the persons receiving such news.

Ceremonies involving women at the home of the bereaved were specifically proscribed or limited to the *jamatkhana*.

33. The custom of providing teas for the *sog* (mourning) after the death is prohibited.
34. The custom of the ladies visiting the house where the death took place on the occasion of giving clothes all other ceremonies in respect thereof, is prohibited. All such ceremonies shall be performed only in the *Jamathkhana*.
35. The custom of changing *sogni pachhedi* (lit. shawl of mourning = when the bereaved women are encouraged to come out intense mourning) is prohibited.
36. The custom of ladies assembling at the house where death has taken place and then going together to *Jamathkhana* is hereby prohibited.
38. After the burial all should attend *Jamathkhana* for *samar* purpose.
39. No other ceremonies except those provided herein relating to the betrothals, marriages and deaths shall be performed. Any person contravening these *rilles* shall be punished.⁸²

The rules bounded the cultural and religious practices and death rituals to the *jamatkhana* to exclude non-Isma'ili participation. Eighty-five years earlier, the Aga Khan had initiated a shift away from Sunni *mullah*'s officiating burials to Shi'i practices; under his grandson Aga Khan III, all burials were to be carried out by Nizari Isma'ili officiants and all death rituals were restricted to the *jamatkhana* or proscribed.

NAIROBI 1976

This set of rules applicable to the Ismailis under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Council for Europe, Canada and the United States of America brought forward the rule-making of the preceding three decades and modified these somewhat to accommodate the Western contexts of the *Jamat* and their changing circumstances.⁸³

273. The funeral rites of an Isma'ili shall be performed by the Mukhi and/or Kamadia at the place desired by the relatives of the deceased.
274. There shall be no funeral ceremonies or rites other than those permitted by Holy Isma'ili Faith.
275. There shall be no burials in any cemetery other than those authorised by the Mukhi and/or the Kamadia.
276. The custom of "Bhanti" is strictly prohibited.
277. No person other than the immediate family members of the deceased shall be asked to partake in any meal on the day of death and/or *ziyārat*.

⁸² Use of rare term "*rilles*" (narrow channels) is remarkable.

⁸³ Shia Imami Ismailia Supreme Council for Europe, Canada, and the United States of America, *The Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismailis in Europe, Canada, and the United States of America* (Nairobi: His Highness the Aga Khan Shia Imami Ismailia Supreme Council for Europe, Canada, and the United States of America, 1976).

278. “ziyārat” shall be performed in the Jamatkhana after the first evening prayer or at such time as may be mutually convenient to the bereaved family and to the Mukhi and Kamadia.
279. “Samarnama” shall be performed in the Jamatkhana at such time as may be mutually convenient to the bereaved family and to the Mukhi and Kamadia.
280. Religious ceremonies on the death of an Ismaili shall be performed once only.
281. Such ceremonies shall as far as possible be performed at the place where the death occurs PROVIDED THAT if such ceremonies cannot be performed at such place the relatives may perform such ceremonies at the place where “Samarnama” is performed.

Observance and performance of all other ceremonies and customs whatsoever, including “Sadri”, “Sog ni Chai” and “Sog ni Pachhedi” is strictly prohibited.

By the 1970s the majority of the death rituals were located in the jamatkhana and there was no question of non-Ismaili officiants being involved. Due to the rule-making and enforcement, “sadri”, “sog ni chai” and “sog ni pachhedi” as formal practices receded into footnotes recalled by older members of the Jamat.⁸⁴ Bhanti remained, perhaps, the only proscribed gathering which the leadership continued to diminish without much success. Also by this time, the issues of Nizari Ismailis leaving the fold to join the Ithnā‘asharīs had almost entirely disappeared. Boundary lines cut across families—some were split up beyond any mutual recognition; while a minority of others overlooked the creedal differences and maintained the family ties. The Jamati Institutions no longer had to deal with any issues of “secession”. The “Constitution” which governed the Jamat in Western countries listed only three articles regarding apostates.

377. An Apostate shall not be allowed the use or benefit of a Jamatkhana, Mandli or any other Institution.
378. No religious rites or ceremonies shall be performed by any Ismaili for or on behalf of an Apostate.
379. An Apostate shall not be buried in a cemetery for the Ismailis.

There is no mention of Ithnā‘asharīs.

GENEVA 1986

On the 13th December, 1986 being the 10th Rabi‘ al-thani, 1407 in the thirtieth year of his imamate and on his fiftieth birthday, Shah Karim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan IV ordained a single “constitution” to govern all his followers worldwide.⁸⁵ This constitution no longer focussed on issues of “seceders” and “apostasy” was no longer a concern worthy of explicit rule-

⁸⁴ Dossa, “Ritual and Daily Life.” 230–231: Among the Ismailis, the ‘times of crisis’ recognized, are sickness and death. These are the times when all kin and other members of the community gather in the house of the afflicted family. Significantly, these are the only times when no food (except for a cup of tea) is served. This is an instance which reveals the spiritual qualities, given that the context of kin involves relationships which are material in nature. The spiritual qualities which come into play are those of simplicity, and the general attitude of kin to offer consolation and help. In Islam, these actions benefit the soul of the giver.

⁸⁵ Ismaili Imamat, *The Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims* (Ismaili Imamat, 1986).

making. Such provisions may have been removed to internal Rules and Regulations documents. Article 15 on Personal Law reads:

- 15.1 In this Article the term “personal law” shall mean the rules governing the personal relationship of an individual to others in the society in which he lives, and shall include, but without limitation, rules in relation to birth, infancy, marriage (including prohibited degrees of consanguinity, affinity or fosterage, and marriage with non-Ismailis), *mehr*, nullity, restitution of conjugal rights, divorce (including *iddat* and maintenance), care and guardianship, legitimacy, succession and apostasy.
- 15.2 Subject as provided in Article 15.4, the personal law applicable to Ismailis shall be such personal law as has evolved within the Shia Imami Ismaili School of Thought of Islam.
- 15.3 Mawlana Hazar Imam has the sole right to interpret the personal law evolved within the Shia Imami Ismaili School of Thought of Islam.
- 15.4 To the extent that the territory of domicile or residence of an Ismaili does not recognise and apply or allow the application of the personal law of Ismailis, he shall be governed in that territory by such personal law as is applicable to him under the law of that territory.

The issues of confessional contestations between the Ismaili and the Ithnā‘asharī Khojas had receded, by now, into the memories of the older members of both communities.

ANALYSES OF RULE-MAKING AND RITUAL CHANGE

Disaggregation of the Khoja: Van Gennep wrote that the rite of eating and drinking together “is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union, and has been called a sacrament of communion. A union by this means may be permanent, but more often it lasts only during the period of digestion.”⁸⁶ The Nizari Ismaili leadership, in their effort to stem what they considered as a disaggregation of their community in the face of Ithnā‘asharī proselytisation of the Khojas, enacted increasingly severe restrictions of rites of passage. In the first half of the twentieth century they effectively instituted a social boycott of the Ithnā‘asharī Khoja whom they considered to be seceders and apostates. The prohibitions of even eating together with Ithnā‘asharīs indicates the social ruptures in which families and local communities were sheared apart. These boundary formations distanced the Ismaili Khoja from their relatives and associates—Khojas who had shed their allegiances to the Ismaili imamate.⁸⁷ The severest of these controls were associated with the rites of passage and in particular, with death rituals.

⁸⁶ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*. 29

⁸⁷ The Christian abandonment of Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*) and circumcision are parallels of boundary formations. Mark 7:1–23—“Thus he (Jesus) declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19); Acts 15:19–29—The Jerusalem Council ruled that Gentile believers need not follow Mosaic law which signalled that Gentile Christians were exempt from *kashrut*. Acts 15:1–29—Jewish Christian Pharisees argued that “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). The council—with the support of Peter, James, and Paul—resolved that Gentiles were not to be burdened with circumcision. These changes in the rites effectively severed the nascent Christian communities from the Jews.

It is easy to dismiss and perhaps, to condemn these rules as draconian for the harsh impacts they had on individuals and families. However, it must not be forgotten that the actors, themselves were participants. The fear, anguish and even the humanity ought also to be discerned underlying the rule-books—for the leaders writing these rules were part of the *shethia* class whose trading partners and even very close relatives may have chosen the other path that they sought to forcefully turn back.

Unintended Consequences: While the intent of the intense rule-making was to prevent Ismailis from becoming Ithnā'asharīs and to isolate those Khoja who already were Ithnā'asharī; there were some unintended consequences. For instance, the relocation of the distribution of deceased's belongings—a function of letting go as well as of distributing property among near ones—to the jamatkhana had the intended effect of limiting these types of exchanges amongst Ismailis only. Socio-economically, inheritance and property were preserved within the community. However, used personal belongings in the ritually clean context of the jamatkhana were not tenable. A respondent told me that, as a *jamati* volunteer in the mid-1940s in Mwanza, Tanzania, he and others would give the used shoes and clothes brought for distribution to the *askārī* (Swahili: guard) and replace the items with new ones which would then be auctioned as *nāndī* and the proceeds would accrue to the jamat.⁸⁸ Another respondent recalled *nāndī* of furniture at Nairobi Jamatkhana in the early 1950s; a third respondent remembered being told of *nāndī* of a small flock of sheep in Karachi around the same time.⁸⁹ A fourth respondent remembered *nāndī* of a car at Garden Jamatkhana in Karachi in the early 1960s.⁹⁰ Today, bereaved families offer new items in memory of the loved one and these would be auctioned as *nāndī* and the proceeds would go to the jamat. A practical distribution of the deceased's personal effects had now become a symbolic provisioning for the soul. The bureaucrats who crafted the rules and changed numerous practices had little knowledge of ritual theory and could not have anticipated these types of consequences, whether intended or not.⁹¹

Divided in Death: It is worth repeating Lawrence Sullivan's statement that: "funerals reveal the ability of ritual to compress experiences and evaluations of existence in time into abrupt symbolic shorthand." Death rituals are quintessentially related to biology and survival of the community and among religious communities, adopt veneers of spiritual significations and metaphysical connotations. This symbolic shorthand of "rituals of separation and integration" studied here in tandem with the influence of teachings of death and the afterlife in *ginānic* literature and *farmāns* of the Nizari Ismaili imams, placed in a matrix of rule-making, defined socio-economic boundaries and demarcated ritual spaces among the Khoja communities. The ostracisms and exclusions of identity politics caused ritual changes and

⁸⁸ Personal communication—Abdul Rasul Damji ca 2005

⁸⁹ Personal communication—Hayderali Samji July 2016 and Aslam Vasnji October 2016

⁹⁰ Personal communication Farhad Ali October 2016

⁹¹ Effective 4 February 2026 under the direction of the new imam, Rahim al-Husayni Aga Khan, these practises of offerings of clothing, etc. are to be discontinued.

inadvertent consequences of bureaucratic actions. The rule-making intensity diminished over time; however, some families were left divided in death.

The Disaggregation of Khoja from a Persianate Studies Perspective

The division of the Khoja into the Sunni, Ithnā‘asharī and Ismaili communities is studied within several academic frameworks including confessional fluidities of premodern Indic religions, sectarianism brought about by British colonial rule, South Asian studies and most recently within Indian Ocean studies. Adapting Loring Danforth’s charting of van Gennepe’s notion of liminality to the trans-regional developments which resulted in the fragmentation of the Khoja into three communities (Figure 6) from the vantage of Persianate studies yields a uniquely interesting perspective.

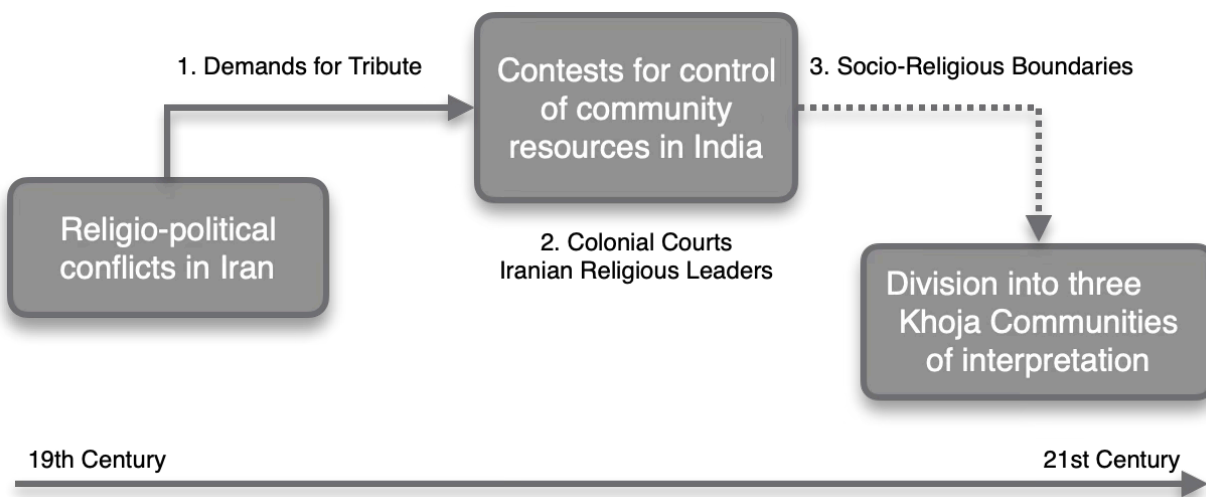


FIGURE 5: FRAGMENTATION OF THE KHOJA-A PERSIANATE STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

In the eighteenth century, the Nizari imams emerged out of a lengthy period of *taqiyya* (pious dissimulation) and enjoyed good relations with both Nādir Shāh Afshār (r. 1736–1747) who put an end to the Safawids and the Zand rulers (fl. 1751–1794) in the south. While the imams faced strong regional Ithnā‘asharī and political opposition, their sizeable following in eastern provinces of Iran and the immense amount of tribute brought to them by Ismailis from India and Central Asia, their relations with the Zand and Qājār courts were significantly strong.⁹² After the murder of Shāh Khalīlullāh (r. 1792–1817), recognised by the Nizari Ismailis as their forty-fifth imam, the Qājār ruler Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh (r. 1797–1834) sealed an alliance with the Ismaili imamate by giving his daughter in marriage and the title of Agā Khān (Great Lord) to Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh (r. 1817–1885), the forty-sixth imam recognised by the Nizari Ismailis. The Aga Khan’s declining relations with Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh’s grandson and successor, Muḥammad Shāh resulted in the collapse of the alliance, a failed rebellion and flight to British-ruled

⁹² Jean Baptiste Louis Jacques Rousseau, *Mémoire Sur Les Trois Plus Fameuses Sectes Du Musulmanisme, Les Wahabis, Les Nosāiris et Les Ismaélis* (Paris: Marseille: Chez A. Nepveu Chez Masvert, 1818). 54

India in 1841.⁹³ In India, some of the Khoja who had resisted the financial demands of the imam turned to the colonial courts to litigate the authority and nature of affiliation to Islam of the Khoja communities. Many of these *shethiyas* and those who joined them turned to Ithnā‘asharī Shi‘ism led by teachings of Iranian ‘*ulamā*’ such as the Grand Ayatullah Zain al-Abidin Mazandarani.

Viewed from the vantage of Persianate studies, the conflicts and contests of Iranian religious and political leaders were brought to India and contested in the lives of the Khoja mediated by opposing groups of *shethiyas* and their contests were adjudicated by the British colonial courts. In the twenty-first century, as members of these sibling communities excavate their pasts and seek more stable futures, will they let themselves continue the pernicious divisions of the past or choose paths of pluralistic engagement among each other?

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⁹³ Algar, “Agha Khan Mahallati.”

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