

Aga Khan, Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh, and Mīrẓā Aḥmad Viqār-i Shīrāzī. *The first Aga Khan: Memoirs of the 46th Ismaili Imam: a Persian edition and English translation of the ‘Ibrat-afzā of Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥusaynī, also known as Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh*. Edited and translated by Daniel Beben, and Daryoush Mohammad Poor. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2018. pp. xxviii, 150 (English), 87 (Persian).

In 1841, the Aga Khan and a contingent of his cavalry crossed from Iran into Afghanistan. Recognised by the Nizari Ismailis as their forty-sixth imam (r. 1817-1881) and son-in-law of the Qājār ruler Fath ‘Alī Shāh (r. 1797-1834), this Iranian nobleman had toiled for almost a decade in the service of the Qājār rulers (fl. 1789-1925). Now having unsuccessfully raised the banner of revolt against his nephew, Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1834-1848), he was destined for exile. His eastward journey coincided with the East India Company’s (EIC) failed attempt to occupy Afghanistan and their effort to pacify the Sindhi tribal leaders. The Aga Khan availed himself and his men to these endeavours—at times fighting and negotiating with local chieftains, at others informing the EIC of plans for an imminent ambush, and even suffering a massive attack in which all his possessions were plundered. In a matter of a few years, the Aga Khan had gone from being a trusted and powerful courtier charged with governing troublesome Iranian frontier regions to surviving on tithes from his followers and stipends for military service to the EIC. Analyses of the Aga Khan’s career have mostly relied on Qājār historiography, writings of European travellers, and officials of the British Raj. The Aga Khan’s account of his own career, the *‘Ibrat Afzā*, has also been used in some studies though its lithograph was difficult to obtain.¹ The present volume makes this primary source and its translation accessible to a wider readership.

The volume consists of an edition of the Persian text and translation of the Aga Khan’s account of events from his childhood to 1850. This *curriculum vitae* of his political and military exploits ghost-written by Mīrẓā Aḥmad Viqār b. Viṣāl Shīrāzī (d. 1881) is preceded by a foreword by Farhad Daftary, an Introduction by Daniel Beben with analyses of the wider relevance and import of the *‘Ibrat Afzā*, and the role of the Aga Khan. The foreword succinctly outlines the history of the Aga Khan’s career and tumultuous events of his settlement in India. Beben’s extensively footnoted 70-page Introduction analyses Western scholarship on the Aga Khan, surveys the history of Nizari Ismailism from its emergence in the 11th to the 19th century, details the life of the Aga Khan, and describes the textual history of the *‘Ibrat Afzā*.

¹ Studies include: Hamid Algar, “The Revolt of Agha Khan Mahallati and the Transference of the Isma‘ili Imamate to India,” *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969).; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). pp. 464–473

The Persian Text: The 82 pages of Persian text are accompanied by a minimal critical apparatus: 14 footnotes indicate corrections or preferred readings; one identifies a phrase omitted in a previous edition; one gloss identifies a person named in the text; and on the last page, the text of a variant colophon is provided in the footnote—which is not indicated in the translation. The remaining 78 footnotes mark the beginnings of the pages in the base MS. The pagination is not indicated in the translation; as a result the researcher has to hunt for the corresponding passages between the Persian text and translation. Numbered paragraphs in the Persian text tied to those in the translation would have been useful. The researcher also needs to refer to the Introduction (p. 65) to ascertain the manuscripts related to the *sigla* used in the citations. The Introduction states that previous editions of the text by Ḥusayn Kūhī Kirmānī (1946) and Muḥsin Sā‘ī (1951) are flawed and unreliable (p. 66)—barring the one footnote, no indications of these errors have been noted. Per the Introduction, a “significant section of the text is missing” in the lithograph published in 1862; however, this is not indicated other than in a footnote to the introduction (p. 65, n. 145).

The Translation: As typical with Persian literary writing, the text is peppered with poetry—47 quotes from 20 poets. The Introduction mentions that the translators have indicated the authors of these verses following Muḥsin Mūsavi Garmārūdī’s 2015 edition of the *‘Ibrat Afzā* (p. 69). Twenty of the verses are by Ḥazīn Lāhījī (d. 1766). Mīrzā Aḥmad Viqār changed the first quoted verse of Lāhījī from the second person to the third person, and from an interrogative to a declarative construction (p. 1 Tr: 77).² See:

Dīwān-i Ḥazīn-i Lāhījī	Where is the power of our speech to praise You? [How can] we describe the perfection of Your divine majesty?	یارای زبان کو که ثنای تو کنیم؟ توصیف کمال کبریای تو کنیم؟
<i>‘Ibrat Afzā</i>	But language does not have the capacity to express praises to Him Or to describe the perfection of His majesty	یا وصف کمال کبریايش گویم یا وصف کمال کبریايش گویم

Does this mean that he was quoting from a variant edition or more likely, from memory? The author’s predilection of quoting Lāhījī and other such explanations would have been illuminating. Given easy access to online repositories of Persian poetry, attention to such technicalities and exact locations of the quoted verses in each poet’s corpus would have been useful for researchers and readers. The editor-translators also did not indicate instances of Arabic passages—for example in the saying attributed to the imam-caliph, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (r.

² Ḥazīn Lāhījī, Zabīḥ Allāh Ṣāhibkār, ed. *Dīwān-i Ḥazīn-i Lāhījī*. (Tehran: Sāya, 2005). p. 795; also available at <https://ganjoor.net/hazin/robaee-hz/sh198>

632-661; 656-661) immediately following the above verse. This text: لا اثنى ثناء عليك كما اثنيت is translated as “I am incapable of praising you; rather it is you who praises you” (p. 77) is more correct as “I cannot praise You with praise befitting You, as You have praised Yourself”. Similarly the first hemistich of the next quoted Persian verse: از عکس رخش گلشن جان پیدا شد is translated as “The garden of the soul is a reflection of his face” (p. 77) but is more correct as “From the reflection of His face, the garden of the soul came to life”.

Beben mentioned that the “author or scribe of the work appears to have been less familiar with the place names of the Indian subcontinent, and accordingly, several locations mentioned in this section of the narrative could not be identified with absolute certainty” (p. 69). Maddā’ī, tentatively surmised (p. 120, n 161), is the Kutchi port which in Gujarati usage is called Mandvi. The cartographer (map on p. 73) and the translators; however, erroneously rendered Kutch and Kathiawar as cities (p. 120, n. 160; p. 131, n. 216). These are the names of the largest district in present-day India and a peninsula in Gujarat. In addition to geography, the translators curiously appear to have had trouble with Indic usages. For example, *ṣāhib* (companion, associate) in South Asian usage is a title of courtesy (Mr., honourable) and during the colonial era was applied to Europeans. *Major Rawlinson Ṣāhib* should be translated as “Major Rawlinson” not “Sir Major Rawlinson” (p. 53 tr. 113 and elsewhere)—he was knighted much later in 1889; *ṣāhibān-i angrīz* should be “the British” or more correctly “the English” rather than the “British Lords” (p. 54 tr. 115 and elsewhere); “Sir General Charles Napier” (p. 56 tr. 116 and elsewhere) should be “General Sir Charles Napier” as in the Persian text; and “Sir Outram” (p. 56 tr. 116 and elsewhere) should be “(Mr.) Outram”—he was awarded a baronetcy in 1858.

There are other issues with translations and conversions of dates; for example: *kārkhāna-yi Dādū Miyān* (not *Miyān*—this Indic “n” is semi-otiose) should be translated as “printing house of Dādū Miyān” rather than his “factory”; the date of printing: Ramaḍān 1278 converts to March 1862 not “March-April 1862” (pp. 81-82 tr. 134). Despite a number of such textual and technical issues—which reviewers such as this writer, invariably find it incumbent upon themselves to point out—the translators have produced a readable and useful translation which follows the text.

The Introduction: Beben’s Introduction strives to correct conclusions of earlier studies and endeavours to contextualise the role of the Aga Khan not only in relation to Nizari Ismailism but on a wider scope of Islamicate notions of socio-political and religious authority as well as in terms of the factional geo-politics of Qājār rule and British colonial occupation of India. He engages with earlier studies of Zawahir Moir née Noorally, Hamid Algar, Farhad Daftary, and Teena Purohit, and draws on the approaches of Peter Brown, Devin DeWeese, Nile Green, and others. There are many interesting topics one would scrutinise at length in conversation with

the author who is a colleague and friend; in this writing I will outline four inter-related issues.

First, Beben stated that Mīrzā Aḥmad Viqār-i Shīrāzī was the author of the *‘Ibrat-afzā*; however, is ambivalent about the nature of the text. He explained that Viqār-i Shīrāzī wrote at: “the request of the Aga Khan, in a manner that is akin to the role of a modern-day ‘ghostwriter’”; and “his role constituted more than merely a verbatim rendering of the Aga Khan’s own words; after all, it was undoubtedly on the basis of his talents as an author, and not merely his ability to hold a pen”. Yet he argued that “there should be no doubt that the text constitutes substantially, if not literally, the words and thoughts of the Aga Khan ...” since the text was published with the latter’s sanction (p. 64). The text, for the most part, reads as a transcription of an oral account of a man reflecting on his past smoothed out by a skilled author.³ Might Viqār-i Shīrāzī have been employed to make entreaties and to convey the Aga Khan’s missive to the Qājār court? If he did not have such a role then would the Aga Khan himself or someone in his entourage not have been sufficiently able to commit the account to writing? Beben proposed that the *‘Ibrat-afzā* should be considered in the “genre of autobiography or memoir, and not that of biography written by a third party” (p. 64). The presented evidence of Viqār-i Shīrāzī’s role suggests it might be better categorised as an “authorised biography”. While the probable submission of the text to the Qājār court may be difficult to establish; the decade-long gap between writing and publication needs clearer resolution.

Second, Beben presented detailed syntheses to “reconcile the worldly and spiritual roles performed” by the imam and outlined a new framework (pp. 13ff) in which he argued that the socio-political and religious role of the Aga Khan might better be understood by taking into account the “political and mediational roles performed by *sayyids* and holy men in many Muslim societies, a practice which reached fruition in the career of the Aga Khan” (p. 18). The Aga Khan’s efforts of intercession, mediation, and conflict resolution, such as between EIC and the Sindhi *amīrs*, even his recognition by officers of the EIC, are attributed to his status as a *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad and ‘Alī, the first Shi‘i imam; in the line of the latter’s son, Ḥusayn). Similarly, the Aga Khan’s patronage of the commemorations of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn (pp. 61, 71, 73 tr: 121, 127, 129) are placed within this framework of

³ Farhad Daftary’s suggestion that the Aga Khan’s diaries might have been used for the writing (p. xxiii) seems unlikely since they would have had to have survived the devastating attack by Baluchi warlords and the looting of all his belongings in Jerruck (pp. 52-53; Per. pp. 58-59 tr. 118-119). Such sources might have yielded more precise dates and facts and perhaps these diaries would have been uncovered in the collection of Aga Khan manuscripts housed at the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

“his appeal to broader Muslim constituencies beyond the circle of his Ismaili followers” (p. 54 also p. 59).

These and other such exempla need amplification and critical evaluation. The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency listed some 35,744 sayyids just in Gujarat in 1899;⁴ clearly a great preponderance of them did not exercise any great status. In 1843 having lost all his property which he estimated at 2.3 million rupees in a surprise attack by the Baluchi chiefs while he was serving the EIC (p. 59 tr: 118); a few months later when he sent his brothers to capture Bamfahl, he “gave orders that even if it cost 10 lakhs (a million rupees), not to hold back” (p. 62 tr: 120). An average sayyid could never muster such a rapid financial recovery. In exile, the Aga Khan was surviving on a stipend from the EIC and revenues from his followers. What then was it about the Aga Khan’s charismatic persona that gave him these capacities to act?

Third, the focus on the Aga Khan, neglects the pronounced charismatic roles in the text of his mother and grandmother. When her husband relocated the seat of the imamate from Maḥallāt to Yazd “more conveniently for pilgrims from India” (p. 28) or perhaps to be better able to receive the substantial offerings from his followers from Central and South Asia, Bībī Sarkāra secured guarantees of safety for a village headman from the custodian of the family lands. Despite this, the headman was imprisoned and his properties were plundered. She went to intercede on his behalf but the custodian absconded (p. 4 tr: pp. 79-80). In 1817, when her husband was murdered she went to the Qājār court. Hearing her petition, the Qājār ruler, Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh was so enraged that one of his sons was complicit in depriving the imam’s family of their landholdings—had she not interceded, the prince’s life would have been in danger. She also responded with great refinement and diplomacy when the ruler offered one his daughters for her son (p. 5-6 tr: pp. 80-81). Similarly, in 1829, his grandmother was sent to India when a group of the imam’s followers refused to pay their tithes and sought to break away. Her exhortations and conciliation with the Khojas of Bombay brought the conflicting parties back to the fold, for a time.⁵ How much this was due to their sayyid pedigree and to what extent did their innate charisma enable their actions is difficult to parse. Most importantly, the role of women ought not to be overlooked.

Fourth, Beben construes the Aga Khan’s commemorations of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn as “beyond the circle of his Ismaili followers”. Paula Sanders and Paul Walker have documented such commemorations in the reign of the Fatimid Ismaili imam-caliph, al-Ḥākim (r.

⁴ British Government of India, Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Vol. IX, Part II. Gujarat Population: Musalmans and Parsis. (Government Central Press, 1899). p. 7

⁵ Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*. p. 474

996-1021).⁶ Taushif Kara noted that the “ritual long practiced by the Khoja as well as the wider Shia community – was altogether banned by Aga Khan III in 1910.”⁷ Syed Mujtaba Ali writing in 1936 confirmed that the Khojahs no longer “celebrate this great festival” (sic).⁸ The Aga Khan, therefore, was patronising a ritual that was part of the Ismaili traditions of the time and had been so for centuries. With the transference of the Nizari imamate to India and after the reforms introduced by Aga Khans II and III due to sectarian boundary formations, the practices related to ‘Ashūrā were proscribed. It is, perhaps, also because of the continuing schismatic under-currents that the *‘Ibrat-afzā*, composed in 1850, was published in 1862. In the previous year, the Aga Khan had required his followers to come out of *taqiyya* (pious dissimulation) and expressly declare their allegiance to him as the imam and attest their Nizari Ismaili identity. The schismatic groups were denying his authority over the Khoja. Four years after the publication of this text which details the historic links of the imams with their followers in India and Central Asia, these issues would be litigated by the colonial courts in the Aga Khan case. Over the next decades, the Khojas would be divided into Sunni, Ithnā‘ahsarī, and the much larger Nizari Ismaili communities.⁹ The publication was most likely part of this sectarian discourse. Edalji Dhanji Kaba’s partial Gujarati translation of the *‘Ibrat-afzā* is an interesting artefact of this discourse. He recorded that an Urdu translation upon which the original Gujarati translation (p. xxi and 65) was based, were both published by Bāwā Karīmdādji at the Oriental Press, Bombay in 1865 and had become hard to obtain.¹⁰ This pamphleteer and prolific author was generally opposed to the Nizari Ismaili Khoja; however, in this work he published in 1912, he sought reconciliation among the three Khoja communities.

While Daniel Beben’s proposed framework is laudable; however, it needs further exacting distillation. As he has detailed, the Aga Khan’s socio-political and economic acumen, not simply his *sayyid* and royal genealogies, allowed him significant capacities to act. However, the roles of the communities of the Aga Khan’s followers are of paramount importance to this calculus. Their actions were effectively occluded in the source and must be included in future studies. This English translation of the *‘Ibrat-afzā* makes available an important primary source for readers and researchers in Khoja, Ismaili, Shi‘i, and Islamic studies of Iran and South Asia during the colonial era. It also sheds light on the contests of authority among the Qājārs, the Ismailis, the Ithnā‘ahsarīs, the Ni‘matullahis, and on British colonial subjugation of India. Beben’s Introduction to the text is an exemplary assimilation of a breadth of

⁶ Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994). pp. 121ff; Paul E. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and Its Sources*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002). pp. 38 and 78

⁷ Taushif Kara, “Abode of Peace: Islam, Empire, and the Khoja Diaspora (1866 – 1972),” diss., University of Cambridge, 2021). p. 67

⁸ Syed Mujtaba Ali, “The Origin of the Khojāhs and Their Religious Life Today,” diss., Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1936). p. 76. The commemoration of the massacre of the Prophet’s family is not a “great festival”.

⁹ Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*. pp. 475–476

¹⁰ Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh Aga Khan, *‘Ibrat-afzā*. trans. Edalji Dhanji Kaba (Amreli: Edalji Dhanji Kaba, 1912). Neither the Urdu translation nor Kaba’s translation are mentioned in the present volume.

literature and sources, and as these few comments might suggest, will be generative for readers. It is hoped that future studies will continue to build on such approaches and methodologies of research.

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