The Nizari Ismailis of Central Asia in Modern Times

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The Nizari Ismailis of Central Asia are scattered across the vast terrain of the high mountain ranges of Pamir, Hindu Kush and Karakorum known as ‘the roof of the world’. Six countries share borders in this mountainous area: Afghanistan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. The Ismailis mainly reside in the Badakhshan province divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Chitral district and northern areas of Pakistan, and Tashkorghan county in the province of Xinjiang in China. The Hazara Ismailis who live in the central part of Afghanistan are also included among the Central Asian Ismailis.

The Ismailis of Central Asia represent a distinct set of religious, cultural and social practices, values, achievements and challenges. In recent years they have moved beyond their traditional homelands and settled across the globe, in a fashion similar to the rest of the transnational Ismaili community. They now reside in Russia, Canada, the USA and Europe.

In a broad historical and cultural sense, Central Asia has always exhibited intellectual dynamism and cultural pluralism, a place where major religions – Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, Buddhism, Manichaeism and Islam, as well as major ideologies (such as socialism, nationalism and liberalism) – have encountered each other as the region shifted its status (from central to marginal and back again) during its rich history.1 The enrichment of the culture of Central Asian societies through these encounters can be observed in the diverse ethnic and linguistic features found among the Ismailis of the region: at present, covering some 15 ethnic and linguistic groups who inhabit the remote mountain valleys of Central Asia,2 which are predominantly Ismaili. Most of these languages and cultures are ancient and epitomize valuable sources for
understanding the linguistic, ethnic and cultural histories of the dominant ethnic groups in the region. With the spread of Islam in the region, the Persian language took over the local languages and became the lingua franca for communication, devotional literature and religious practices among the Ismaili communities, many of which, however, continue speaking their own particular dialects and languages.

The history of the Ismailis of Central Asia is one of the least recorded and explored areas of modern scholarship on Ismaili studies. The reasons for this are manifold: (1) an underdeveloped historiographic tradition among the Central Asian Ismailis; (2) the scarcity of materials on the early history of Ismailism; (3) the annexation of the community by the former superpowers, namely Russia and Great Britain; (4) the persecution and marginalization of the community by the dynasties of neighbouring lands which pursued their own political agendas and ideologies; and (5) an absence of the necessary conditions for critical scholarship independently of ideological and political pressures.

Since the second half of the 19th century these communities have been variously investigated by Russian and Western orientalists. The subjects of their studies have been quite diverse. With the exception of a few studies on religious beliefs and practices, the bulk was of a philological, socio-political and economic nature. The history of Tajik Badakhshan during the Soviet period, for example, has been extensively recorded by Soviet historiographers while the Soviet linguists discovered Pamir to be a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic diversity to be studied for its own merit. However, the community's religious tradition features negligibly in the ethnographic studies of the Pamir region. For studies of Ismailism in central Afghanistan, northern areas of Pakistan and western China the situation is even worse.

The last decade, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, has witnessed a resurgence of Central Asian studies, by both external and indigenous scholars, who have aimed not only to fill the void left by Soviet scholarship but also to re-examine the past and modern history of Central Asian societies. These studies have focused mainly on the socio-political and economic developments in the Central Asian countries. Thus the study of the religious life of the region's Ismailis remains marginal and wanting. The Institute of Ismaili Studies is one of the very few institutions that have managed to collect a considerable amount of archival and primary data on Central Asian Ismaili history and traditions in various languages. This chapter draws on these sources and presents the general trends and issues in the community's modern history from the end of the
19th until the beginning of the 21st century.

**Earlier History**

The Ismaili *da'wa* (mission) spread to Khurasan and Transoxania (*Ma wara al-nahr*) at the end of the 9th century. Between 903 and 954 a number of *da'is* (missionaries), such as Abu 'Abd Allah al-Khadim, al-Husayn b. 'Ali al-Marwazi and Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Nasafi, propagated the *da'wa* in the region. Under the Samanid amir Nasr II (914–943) the Ismailis achieved a degree of prominence and managed to convert influential dignitaries at the court, including the amir, his vizier and other dignitaries, and poets such as Rudaki. It was probably at this time that the Ismaili movement extended to Badakhshan proper at the frontiers of the Samanid state. The success of the Ismaili *da'wa* at the Samanid court soon brought forth a hostile reaction from the Sunni religious and military leaders who finally conspired against Nasr II and overthrew him. As a result the influential Ismaili *da'i* and philosopher al-Nasafi and his associates were executed in 943 in Bukhara while the Ismailis were harshly persecuted throughout Khurasan and Transoxania. Despite this tragedy the Ismaili mission was quickly revitalized by al-Nasafi's son Mas'ud, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani and others.

The subsequent revival of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia is closely linked with the activities of the famous Ismaili *da'i*, poet, traveller and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw (1004–after 1070), who was appointed as the *hujja* or chief *da'i* of Khurasan by the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir (1036–1094). Nasir-i Khusraw faced enormous challenges in spreading the mission and eventually ended up living in exile in the valley of Yumgan, a district in modern Afghan Badakhshan. There he found sanctuary in a land ruled by an Ismaili amir, 'Ali b. Asad. In Yumgan, he produced his main theological and philosophical works and a *Diwan* of poetry, while spreading the *da'wa* and the Ismaili interpretation of Islam among the inhabitants of Badakhshan and surrounding areas.

What forms Nasir-i Khusraw's activities took and how the Ismaili *da'wa* evolved in Central Asia after him remain rather obscure. From his *Diwan* one can only gather that he faced dangerous opposition and threats as he attempted to spread the *da'wa* in Balkh, and also Mazandaran in northern Persia. In Badakhshan, however, it appears that he achieved some measure of success: he is regarded as the founder of the Ismaili intellectual and spiritual tradition in Central Asia and is remembered as a *pir*, *shah*, *hazrat*, *sayyid* and *hujjat* by the modern community there. In time
Nasir-i Khusraw's image was transformed from historical to legendary; in Badakhshan centuries-old myths, stories, oral traditions and rituals performed by both Ismailis and non-Ismailis have become attached to his personality and life. Be that as it may, his theological and philosophical works have provided the doctrinal basis of Ismailism in the area. Owing to the remarkable presence of Nasir-i Khusraw in the oral, religious and intellectual traditions of the Central Asian Ismailis, their distinctive religious tradition is often referred to as the tradition of Nasir-i Khusraw.

Little is known about the subsequent medieval history of the Ismaili da'wa in Badakhshan. Though devoted to Nasir's mission, the Ismailis of Badakhshan remained outside the Nizari-Musta'li schism that split Ismailism into its two major branches in 1094. On the basis of oral tradition it is known that Nizari Ismailism was brought to Badakhshan during the later Alamut period by two da'is sent by the Nizari Imams. A certain Shah Malang was sent from Khurasan to Shugnan and took control of this area by ousting its ruler. Shah Malang was followed by another Nizari da'i, Sayyid Shah Khamush. According to tradition, these da'is became the founders of some of the local dynasties of mirs and pirs. Badakhshan was ruled by various dynasties, including not only local Tajiks but also Turkic people. These dynasties were led by shahs, mirs or beks – the wealthy landlords whose sovereignty depended very much on the internal and external political situation. As a minority group, the Ismailis were often persecuted by the region's Sunni rulers.

**Ismailis and the Great Game of the 19th Century**

The advance of the Russian and British colonial powers into Central Asia at the end of the 19th century resulted in a series of contests for control of the region which are known in history as the Great Game. In the course of defining their borders, these two empires organized a series of diplomatic exchanges, military expeditions and scholarly investigations designed to gather information on the history, languages and religions of these uncharted lands. During this period the interest of the 'players' of the Great Game in understanding and exploring the social, cultural and religious traditions of Central Asian communities increased significantly. Many of the Russian military officers who controlled the northern territories of the Oxus river had a background in oriental studies and intensively recorded the social, political and cultural structure of the local communities. Their diaries and reports included information about the relations between
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The Ismailis and non-Ismaili Afghans and Bukharians who ruled over some parts of Badakhshan until the beginning of the 20th century. These reports were sent to their Turkestan headquarters and were used, in due course, to define the Russian policy for these mountain regions.

The situation was similar in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, where the British military strove to strengthen their dominance over these regions' mountain communities. Major surveys were conducted by British officers in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. These reports were mostly of a political nature and were drawn up to enable the British in India to develop their expansionist policy in the north. Among the most prominent military agents and travellers visiting Pamir was Captain John Wood, whose work is recognized as pioneering research in the systematic description of the Pamir and its people with a focus on the religious conditions, language and ethnicity of the inhabitants of the Ishkashim and Wakhan areas in Afghan Badakhshan.

On the Russian side the earliest information on the religious beliefs of the Tajik Ismailis of the Pamir mountains and their relationship with the Sunni Muslims of the area was provided by Count Aleksey Bobrinskoy (1861-1938). In 1902 Bobrinskoy published a report on the Ismailis of Central Asia, which was based on his interviews with three Ismaili pirs as well as observations of the life of their murids (followers) in the Russian territories of Wakhan, Ishkashim, Gharan, Shugnan and Rushan. It appears that the research on the various aspects of the life of the Ismailis of Central Asia was accelerated because of the rivalry between the British and Russian empires over the areas of Pamir and Hindu Kush. Subsequently, after the annexation of Pamir by Russia, two main scientific expeditions were organized to explore the area in depth. The famous Russian scholars on Pamir and Ismailism, A. Bobrinskoy, Aleksandr A. Semenov (1873-1958) and Ivan I. Zarubin (1887-1964), participated in these expeditions (1898 and 1914) and collected data on the history of the Ismailis, their customs, folklore, languages and religious practices.

Prior to these expeditions, an agreement was reached between Britain and Russia about the northern borders of Afghanistan along the Oxus river in January 1873, according to which Russia accepted the Afghan amirate’s domination over southern Turkestan and Badakhshan. This agreement limited the further advance of the Russians in Central Asia. The Great Game ended with many compromises from the Russian side, giving more strategic advantages in the region to the British. According to the 1895 agreement, Russia agreed not to advance its troops further than the present Murghab district of Tajikistan while Britain limited itself
to the Gilgit area (present-day northern Pakistan). In this treaty Russia lost the central junction point of Bazai Gumbed, from where trade routes crossed to China, Bukhara, Ferghana and India. The river Panj became the border between Afghanistan and Russia.\(^{13}\)

This fragmentation of Central Asia in the colonial era had significant implications for the native population, including the Ismaili community in the region. On the positive side, the annexation of parts of Pamir by the Russians and British freed the Tajik Ismailis from the oppression of their Sunni Afghan and Bukharian rulers who regarded them as heretics and forced them to convert to Sunnism. Suspecting that the Ismaili pirs were in alliance with the Russian and British agents, the Sunni rulers regularly exposed the populations of Shugnan and Rushan to ruthless persecution, often genocidal in nature.\(^{14}\)

As a result of the aforementioned delimitation, the already isolated but still religiously united settlements in the mountain ranges of Pamir, Hindu Kush and Karakorum lost their socio-cultural and economic ties. The artificial breaking of their spiritual ties was perceived as a good excuse by the colonial agents for penetrating each other’s sphere of influence. It was, therefore, important to gain the loyalty and sympathy of the Ismaili pirs and their murids. At the same time, the colonial powers, especially the Russians, remained suspicious of the services that the Ismaili pirs were offering. The Russian consulates in Kashghar and Bombay sent reports to their administrative centres in Tashkent and St Petersburg on the pro-British position of the then Ismaili Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III and his murids in Central Asia. The concern of the Russians was grounded in the tension and possible conflict between Russian and British forces, in which case the Ismaili population was expected to support the British.\(^{15}\)

At the same time, centuries of isolation from the centres of the Ismaili da‘wa had left the Nizari Ismaili communities of Central Asia to develop their specific literary tradition, practices, independent leadership and organizational hierarchy, headed by pirs and khalifas.\(^{16}\) When, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Ismailis of Badakhshan established formal links with their Imam of the time, Shah Aga Khan III, the pirs as the local hereditary religious authorities received the confirmation of their status directly from the Imam. The Russian rulers did not try to stop the Badakhshani Ismailis from sending their zakat payments to the residence of the Imam in Bombay. Despite their religious authority and leadership, the pirs were not regarded with favour by local and foreign rulers of Badakhshan, most of whom were not Ismaili.
In order to preserve their power and authority among the local rulers, the Ismaili pirs entered into a number of ambiguous alliances with the local and outside Sunni rulers of Badakhshan, Shugnan, Wakhan, Hindu Kush, Kashghar and the adjacent regions, including Afghan and Bukharan rulers, and even with the British and Russian colonial powers. Such alliances with local and neighbouring Sunni rulers included marriage between the families of Ismaili pirs and those of the rulers. In addition to paying taxes, the Ismaili pirs would also present the non-Ismaili rulers with various gifts. The available information suggests that there were a number of pirs at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century who had their own subjects. Interestingly enough, however, their followers were scattered across Badakhshan. Thus one could find followers of the same pir in the territories of Zebak, Munjan, Darwaz, Shugnan, Ishkashim, Rushan, Wakhan, Kanjut, Chitral and Kashgar (Yarkand), reflecting the movement of individuals from the community within the region and their continued adherence to the pirs with whom they were historically associated.

The role of some of these pirs in the socio-political developments in the Pamir was remarkable. While the pirs were classified as either Russophile or Anglophile by some writers,17 in reality many pirs led active, complex lives negotiating between the various internal and external forces in order to maintain the community, their own authority and fulfil their duty on behalf of their Imam. By the middle of the 19th century these positions had become hereditary, with pirs exercising significant influence upon their subjects. The murids consulted their pirs on all aspects of their lives. This status prompted many pirs to actively engage in political events.

Chroniclers noted the brutal atrocities enacted by Afghan rulers on the Ismailis: the Afghans had no mercy even for women, the elderly or the young.18 It is reported that the Shugnani Pir Sayyid Farrukhsho and his murids planned a rebellion against the Afghans in 1883. After taking over the centre of Shugnan their rebellion was quickly defeated by an Afghan army sent from Kabul. After the failure of the revolt, a number of Rushanis led by Khudodod Mingboshi sent a letter to the representative of the amirate of Bukhara in Darwaz in November 1883 indicating the submission of Shugnan and Rushan to Bukhara. Pir Sayyid Farrukhsho and other prominent individuals of Shugnan, however, appealed to the stronger Russian Empire to take Pamir under its protection. However, the representatives of Tsarist Russia withheld any concrete support from the rebels at that time. As a result, Pir Sayyid Farrukhsho changed his tactics and decided to seek a compromise with the Afghan rulers, and he married
his daughter to Abdullojon Sardor, the ruler of Khanabad. But this step neither helped the people nor saved Sayyid Farrukhsho’s life. He was invited to Khanabad and then executed for his disloyalty to the Afghan amir. Following his father’s death, Pir Sayyid Yusuf Alisho intensified his calls for the Russian annexation of the Pamir.\(^{19}\)

Pamir was officially annexed to Russia in 1895, but it was in 1905 that Tsarist Russia actually established direct rule over the areas of present Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). Although the Russian colonial authorities were primarily motivated by their own geopolitical interests, nonetheless they introduced a number of positive measures, including abolishing the enslavement of the Ismailis by their Sunni neighbours, banning their religious persecution and cancelling their tax payments. These steps led to the stabilization of political and economic conditions and the return of many refugees driven away by the Afghan and Bukharan repressions. Thereafter considerable changes took place in the region as a result of the Russian military presence in the western Pamir, with Khorog emerging as its centre. With the support of the ishans (pirs), the Russian military personnel reorganized the region’s system of irrigation canals, and planted new types of seeds and crops in place of opium cultivation. The service of Russian officer E. K. Kivikes (1866–1939), who openly confronted the Bukharan officials in order to protect the Shugnani people from them, is an example of commitment to the indigenous cause. His frequent appeals to the Governor-General of Turkestan played a substantial role in the dismantling of Bukharan and Afghan militias and ultimately the placing of western Pamir under a Russian protectorate.\(^ {20}\)

Ismailis in the 20th Century

The division of the Ismaili-populated region of Central Asia between Russia, Afghanistan, China and the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century initiated a new era in the political and social development of the now divided Ismaili communities. These developments were contingent upon the social and political orientations of the countries of which they became a part. The separation led to the severance of the historical ties between individuals, affecting the continuity of the unified Ismaili traditions within the community. One such major change was in the institution of the pir. The relationship between the pirs and the murids, a backbone of the tradition, began to lose its prominence as many pirs were unable to maintain contacts with their former murids, who as a
result of the new political divisions now resided in new countries.

The political developments in Russia, British India, China and Afghanistan in the course of the 20th century have shaped the social and economic infrastructure of the region, making the disparity in the living conditions of Ismailis in different parts of the region strikingly vivid. A brief survey of the developments of the region, outlined in the subsequent sections, will illustrate the general trends in the social, economic and religious situation of the community in their respective nation-states.

Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan

The toppling of the Russian tsar and the revolutionary upheavals of 1917 resonated throughout the mountains of Badakhshan as early as 1918. The Russian military garrison located in Khorog, which was loyal to the interim Russian government, was dispersed after receiving news of the Communist revolution, and the fragile security situation in Badakhshan was left in the hands of the locals. The Bukharian amirs took advantage of the situation and with the help of their local appointees captured Khorog fortress in March 1920 and declared Pamir part of the amirate of Bukhara. Their rule, however, did not last long; soon the Shugnanis revolted, disarming the Bukharian soldiers, and eventually the power was transferred to the Soviets. The first Soviet soldiers sent to guard the border arrived in Khorog in November 1920 and were welcomed by the locals who had already developed friendly relations with some of the Russian military. Later in 1921 the new Soviet-led military expedition headed by T. Dyakov, a special representative of the Soviet Turkestan Republic and in charge of the defence of its borders in the Pamirs, entered Khorog. This was the beginning of reinforcing their strategic position along the upper bank of the river Panj, thereby putting an end to the centuries of intervention by Afghan and Bukharian rulers.

Under the protection of the new regime with its political and economic promises the local people were encouraged to participate in the development of the country. The Soviet structures were established in each district; these structures, which entailed the presence of local activists in government administration, brought about radical transformation of the existing administrative and cultural systems, replacing the traditional ruling groups such as kazis, arbabs, aksakals and mingbashis in the localities with elected organizations of peasants and farmers. The changes engendered a mixture of feelings in the local population: some were content with the Soviet presence and their intention to empower the peasants
and oppressed classes, others were weary of the changes in the traditional structures of governance and administration, including the religious ones. In particular, the authority of the pirs and the wealthy landlords was undermined by the revolutionary reforms of the Soviets. The Soviets were persistent in their reforms and campaigned locally against the traditional norms and structures of power. They later gained the support of the majority of the population as more locals joined sides with the Soviets and as the Soviet Red Army successfully fought against the Basmachis across the region.21

From 1921 to 1924 Tajik Badakhshan was part of the Soviet Turkestan Republic. In January 1925 it became part of the newly established Tajik Autonomous Republic. The establishment of the Badakhshan Autonomous Region was prompted by geographic, linguistic and ethnic considerations. Some historical sources and early ethnographic studies suggest that the people of Badakhshan or Pamir, regardless of their linguistic diversity and ethnic differences, referred to themselves as Tajiks of the mountains. This was seen as a major factor in the active participation of many Badakhshani or Pamiri Tajiks in the process of national delimitation in Central Asia, leading to the establishment of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic independent of the Soviet Uzbek Republic in 1929. A crucial role in founding the Tajik Republic was played by Shirinsho Shohtemur (1899–1937), who was originally an Ismaili from Badakhshan.

The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) was divided into several administrative units or districts including Shugnan, Rushan, Vanj, Ishkashim, Darwaz and Murghab, with some variations within these categories. Khorog became the administrative centre of the GBAO. With the exception of Murghab, Vanj and parts of Darwaz district, the rest of the region is predominantly Ismaili. In all of Badakhshan the Ismailis constitute around 80 per cent of the total population, with the remainder comprised of Sunni Muslims of Tajik and Kyrgyz origins.

During the Soviet period, the population of Tajik Badakhshan increased significantly. By the end of the 20th century the number of Tajik Ismailis exceeded 200,000, with approximately 100,000 living outside the province, mostly in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, and in the Khatlon region. The modernization projects launched by the Soviets proved advantageous for the economic and social development of the community. Within two decades, the Soviets had managed to create developmental infrastructures which covered a variety of institutions and establishments related to education, social, cultural and economic activities.

Developments in the spiritual and religious spheres were more
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complex and elusive. Initially the Soviets were less aggressive towards the religious beliefs of the mountain dwellers, cooperated with the local pirs, and even allowed them to send the tithes (sarkor) to the Ismaili Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah, in India. The priority was to engage the local population in the political life of the country. At the end of the 1920s the authorities took a harsher stance against the religious activities of the community and its religious leaders. Propaganda by the Soviet authorities against the religious functionaries, accusing them of manipulating the local poor population, and disloyalty to the Soviet system, having instead allegiance to their Imam, the Aga Khan, was on the rise. In 1936 the border along the river Panj was completely closed in order to put an end to contacts with the Ismailis living across the border and to prevent delegations carrying the annual tithes to the Imam. Prominent religious authorities or pirs who still exercised some influence over the community were exiled or killed. Such was the tragic fate of the most influential pir of Shugnan, Sayyid Yusuf Alisho, who was killed in front of his murids. As the Soviet repressions increased, this sort of treatment was handed out also to other distinguished members of the community, many of whom were loyal Communists; under various pretexts they became the victims of Stalinist oppression, such as being petty-nationalists, agents of foreign powers and members of the local bourgeoisie.

Meanwhile the Soviet authorities had become aware of the difficulty of eradicating Ismaili religious traditions. Thus they began to accommodate these traditions in a way that would not only undermine the religious establishment but also serve the Soviet system, resulting in many campaigns against religion, superstitions and even traditional culture. With the abolishing of the institution of pirship, the khalifas undertook the role of the religious authority. In the past they had been appointed by the pirs as their representatives in specific localities and their duties included performing various religious ceremonies. Although they did not possess the same status and position as the pirs, they increasingly became the sole religious authorities versed in the religious knowledge which enabled them to fulfill the community's basic religious needs. The authority of the khalifas was also reinforced by their lack of contact with the Ismaili Imam and the local Ismailis' lack of awareness of their history. Aiming to have full control over the khalifas, the state streamlined the office and their appointment became subject to approval by the Soviet governing bodies. At the same time, the khalifa's job was narrowed to merely carrying out the basic religious ceremonies, such as funerals, marriages and other rites of passage where the presence of the khalifa was deemed traditionally indispensable.
The practice of the religious ceremonies, especially the funeral ceremony with its coherent and complex set of rites and rituals infused with Ismaili content and teachings such as the Charogh (or Chiragh) Rawshan, ensured the continuity of the Ismaili traditions in the region during the Soviet era. At the same time, the Soviet authorities were hoping that with the passage of time, educational activities and secularization of society, the religious beliefs would increasingly give way to their atheistic world view. Local members of the Communist Party were expected to act as role models, and their attendance at religious ceremonies was discouraged by the party committees or governing bodies. However, the Soviet authorities fell short of offering alternatives to replace the established religious customs and to meet the spiritual needs of the Ismailis. The spiritual elevation experienced during the Charogh Rawshan ceremony, the recitation of maddoh (devotional poetry) with its philosophical, doctrinal and ethical messages, were significant elements of the people’s Ismaili identity and served as indispensable elements of their existential reality. These religious practices were, moreover, devoid of overt political motivation and did not pose any challenge to the existing system. Indeed, at times, the Soviet system was praised during these ceremonies for the good it had brought to the Ismaili community.

During the Second World War, 1941–1945, the religious gatherings of the Ismailis turned into congregational prayers for the victory of the Soviet army against the German invaders, while many Ismailis fought against the Nazis on the battlefield. The khalifas practised a form of traditional da’wa (summons) to call the people to support the Soviet army against the German fascists. In the post-war period, religion remained a separate domain in the life of the Ismaili community, not interfering with the social and political trends of the state.

By and large, this state of religious affairs remained unchanged until the end of 1980s when the new Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced his perestroika (restructuring) and glastnost (openness) policies. His policies stimulated the restoration of religious influence within the wider social and political domains of society.

The Ismaili community of Tajikistan actively participated in the political developments of the years that led to Tajik independence and in the civil war between 1992 and 1997. They supported the nascent democratic and Islamic parties in Tajikistan, both of which recommended Davlat Khudonazarov, a prominent Ismaili figure, as a candidate for the presidency of an independent Tajikistan. The defeat of the Islamo-democratic forces in the election and the deepening economic and political disparities
between various regions of Tajikistan were used by the extremist groups to radicalize vulnerable elements amongst the country's youth and instigate a civil war in 1992.24

The civil war devastated the economy of Tajikistan and had a human cost of over 50,000 lives. It also led to the displacement of half a million Tajiks from their homes in the southern and central parts of Tajikistan. There was no significant military action in Badakhshan, but the effect of war on the region was overwhelming. In order to escape the conflict and killings, over 60,000 Ismailis living in the central parts of Tajikistan took refuge in Badakhshan, the land of their ancestors. Thousands of other Ismailis were forced to leave their homes and flee to Russia and other former Soviet republics. The influx of refugees from other parts of Tajikistan into Badakhshan put further strains on the tenuous economic state of the region which was cut off from central Tajikistan and its food supplies. A humanitarian crisis spread unchecked throughout Tajik Badakhshan until the Aga Khan Foundation mounted an intervention in 1993, bringing relief supplies and aid. Thereafter a new phase was ushered in with the development and transformation of Tajik society and the history of the Ismailis of Tajikistan, which is inextricably linked to the activities of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

Ismailis of Afghanistan

The Ismailis of Afghanistan can be categorized as two groups. The first includes those who inhabit the Badakhshan province in northeastern Afghanistan and are referred to as Badakhshani Ismailis. They reside predominantly in Shugnan, Wakhan, Zibak, Yumgan, Jurm, Rushan, Kiran-Munjan and Darwaz wuluswalis (districts). In other settlements of the province the Ismailis constitute a minority. In terms of ethnicity and languages they resemble their co-religionists in Tajikistan. Numbering around 200,000, the Ismailis constitute approximately one-third of the total population of the province. The second group of Ismailis, known as the Hazaras, are settled in an area called Hazaristan (formerly Hazarajat) in the central parts of Afghanistan. The Hazara Ismailis live predominantly in the provinces of Bamyan, Orozgan and Ghur and in Kabul city. The Hazara Ismailis are the second largest group of Hazaras in Afghanistan, after the Ithna‘ashari Shi‘is. The number of Hazara Ismailis is not known, but the total Hazara population is estimated at around 5 to 6 million.25 There are several legends about the origins of the Hazaras. According to the most common one, they are said to be the descendants of
Mongols from Genghis Khan's army who settled in Afghanistan.

The present territory of Afghan Badakhshan was a quasi-independent part of the amirate of Bukhara before it fell under Afghan domination in the middle of the 19th century, when the Pashtun rulers of Afghanistan occupied the north with the military and political assistance of the British, then the colonial rulers of India. In reality, however, the area remained semi-independent but endured frequent incursions from outside powers. The occupation of Badakhshan by Afghans and Bukharans clearly demonstrated the ideological nature of their oppression since their rulers claimed to serve Islam by 'exterminating and subjugating the Ismailis living in this region'.

During the reign of King 'Abd al-Rahman (1880–1901), Afghan Badakhshan lost its quasi-autonomous status. His government also kept the Ismailis in subjugation and they endured the coercive policies of the state. They were obliged to attend Sunni mosques and they practised taqiyya (precautionary dissimulation of faith). But the Afghan repression drove the Ismailis of Shugnan and Rushan to protest and they organized rebellions. The major Ismaili rebellion against the Afghan authorities occurred in 1925 when, due to increased taxation and conscription, the tribal chiefs protested against the policies of King Aman Allah (1919–1929). The rebels, led by Mahrambek from Rushan, detained the local administrator at the centre of Shugnan. But they were quickly defeated by government forces sent from Faizabad and fled across the Panj river to Soviet Badakhshan. In Khorog these refugees petitioned the Soviet government to provide them with support and grant them safety and citizenship. Having established friendly relations with the Soviets, the rulers of Afghanistan negotiated with them to resolve this crisis through diplomacy. The refugees were returned home and severe penalties were imposed on those who engaged in anti-state activities. Subsequently the Badakhshani Ismailis in Afghanistan were further marginalized and they continued to be ruled by the Sunni majority who maintained their dominance over the Ismailis in the political, economic and legal domains. The situation of the Ismailis of Afghan Badakhshan remained largely unchanged until the establishment of the pro-Soviet government in the 1970s. The Ismailis supported the pro-Soviet government and acquired prominent positions in the bureaucratic apparatus of the province, and within a short period of time managed to improve their social and economic conditions. Their support of the socialist model of development and pro-Soviet government may have been influenced by the comparatively better quality of life enjoyed by the Ismailis living in Soviet and Chinese territories.
With the collapse of the Soviet-backed government of Kabul, the Ismailis of Badakhshan were again caught up in the factional fighting between different groups led mainly by the Sunni warlords. From 1989 to 2001, the Mujahedin government of Afghanistan led by the former president Burhanuddin Rabani and Ahmad Shah Mas'ud maintained its control over the Badakhshan region. There was, however, internal fighting among various groups who tried to control different parts of the province and in this the Ismailis were actively involved. During this turbulent period Ismaili leaders constantly changed their allegiance from one powerful commander to another.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing civil war in Tajikistan weakened border control between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, resulting in illegal crossings from both sides and illegal activities, such as drug trafficking into Tajikistan. In recent years a stronger control along the border on the Tajik side has led to a decrease in drug trafficking into Tajik Badakhshan. The current Afghan government with the help of the NGOs, such as the Aga Khan Development Network, has attempted to resolve the problem by encouraging the establishment of alternative sources of livelihood, improving the communication systems, and promoting the legal trade of goods and commodities between the two countries.

While the Ismailis living in the Soviet Union remained isolated from the central leadership of the Ismaili Imamate, different forms of organization developed in Afghan Badakhshan. The traditional Ismaili leadership through pirs retained its significance and the connection with the Ismaili Imamate remained more or less intact. However, owing to the political situation, the Ismailis frequently practised taqiyya. As a minority group, they tried to avoid any confrontation with the Sunni majority. But under the local leadership of their pirs and khalifas, they continued to observe their religious ceremonies and ensured the passing on of their religious traditions.

The Hazara community experienced a different set of changes in the modern period. Their history is inextricably linked to that of their highly revered pirs. Apart from those on the genealogy of the Ismaili pirs or sayyids of Kayan valley, there are no studies on the history, traditions and rituals of the Hazara Ismailis. The origin of the Kayani clan itself is traced back to the so-called ‘Sayyids of Medina’. Subsequently the sayyids moved to Iran and in the second half of the 18th century one of the leaders of this clan, Sayyid Shah Sadeh, left Iran with his family and numerous followers to settle in Hazarajat in central Afghanistan. Sayyid Shah Sadeh became popular among the local populace for his piety, devotion and knowledge
and was recognized as the leader of the Hazarajat Ismailis. The Ismaili da’wa had already spread among the people of Hazarajat before the sayyid’s arrival. Around the 1830s one of the successors of Sayyid Sadeh travelled to Iran to see the then Ismaili Imam, Hasan ‘Ali Shah, Aga Khan I, and was granted the status of pir of the Ismailis of Afghanistan. He subsequently settled in a place called Kayan in Baghlan province and the title of ‘Kayani’ was attached to the names of his heirs. The appointment of his son Shah Abdul Hadi as the pir further legitimized the leadership of the Kayanis over the Hazara Ismailis. In the course of time, the Kayani sayyids succeeded each other as pirs and were involved in the national politics of Afghanistan, supporting and opposing different rulers. Some of these pirs were also talented poets, writers and scholars.

The nature of the relations between the pirs of the Hazara Ismailis and the Ismaili pirs in other parts of Central Asia in this period remain obscure. It can be assumed that the geographical and political isolation of the various groups of Ismailis in Central Asia did not permit the establishment of meaningful links between the Hazara Ismailis and the Badakhshani Ismailis. One of the Hazara pirs, Sayyid Temur Shah, is believed to have travelled to Badakhshan to meet the Ismaili pirs of Shugnan. He allegedly attempted to establish contact with some Ismaili pirs and sayyids there in 1921 in order to mount a rebellion against the Soviets and to gain their allegiance for the Pashtun rulers of Afghanistan.³¹ Pir Sayyid Temur Shah was succeeded by his brother Sayyid Nader Shah Kayani (1897–1961). In 1929 the coup of Bachayi Saqa (‘son of the water deliverer’) overthrew King Aman Allah. Bachayi Saqa, also known as Habib Allah Kalakani, took a strong line on what he regarded as dissident or non-conformist religious views and persecuted the Ismaili leaders, forcing some of them into exile in Tajikistan. But during the reign of the last Afghan king, Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933–1973), the Hazara Ismailis and their pirs were favoured for their loyalty and enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence. The situation of the Ismaili community in that period resembled that of a mini-state with its own legal, economic and administrative systems secured by armed forces. The city of Puli Khumri served as the capital of this Ismaili mini-state under the Kayani family.³²

In contrast to the Ismailis of Badakhshan, who were generally supportive of the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan, the leaders of the Hazara Ismailis were initially reluctant to accept the Communist regime in Kabul. As a result some of them were arrested, persecuted and executed. The history of the Hazara Ismaili pirs of Kayani origin indicates that they were not only religious leaders but also prominent politicians who actively
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participated in the conflicts and politics of Afghanistan to ensure they retained a relative degree of autonomy.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989) and the Afghan civil war, the Ismailis tried to maintain their neutrality, but established close contacts with the Kabul government. As a result of successful negotiations with the Kabul authorities, the Soviet army was not stationed in the areas of Afghan Badakhshan populated by Ismailis and emigration from the province was almost negligible. The advance of the Taliban in the late 1990s resulted in a considerable number of Ismailis fleeing the country and taking refuge in Pakistan, while others migrated to North America and Europe.

The situation remained rather uncertain for the Badakhshani and Hazara Ismailis until the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001. The work of the Aga Khan Development Network in Afghanistan and the establishment of Ismaili institutions in the country laid the foundation for new developments, not only in the economic and social spheres but also in the religious domain. These Ismaili communities now have an opportunity to develop and revive their identity. New jama'atkhanas have been established across central and northern Afghanistan. In most places, former khalifas and pirs have assumed the roles of mukhis and kamadias in the established jama'atkhanas, and they continue to perform their religious rites and ceremonies.

Ismailis of China (Xinjiang Province)

Like the Ismailis of Badkhshan, the Ismailis in the Xinjiang Province of China are a minority within the broader Muslim population of the province. Furthermore they are ethnically defined as Tajik and speak mainly the Sariqoli and Wakhi languages which are spoken also by some of the Ismailis in Tajikistan. They are also linked to Badkhshan by close religious ties, since, according to tradition, the Ismaili da'wa spread in this part of Pamir through the disciples of Nasir-i Khusraw. Their history in the modern era is dealt with in detail by Amier Saidula in the next chapter of this book.

Ismailis of the northern areas of Pakistan and Chitral

The northern areas of Pakistan have historically been comprised of Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral territories located in the northernmost part
of British India. In 1895 for administrative convenience the British separated Chitral from the rest of the northern areas, and later it became a part of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. The settlements of the northern areas and Chitral are spread over the narrow valleys within the great mountain ranges of the Himalayas, Karakorum and Hindu Kush. The northern areas contain five districts, three of which (Gilgit, Ghezer and Diamer) are part of the Gilgit region, and two (Iskardu and Chache) constitute the Baltistan region. Chitral and Hunza, parts of Gilgit region, were historically the Ismaili populated areas. In Ghezer and the Hunza valley of Gilgit, the Ismailis represent the majority of the population, while in other areas they are minorities compared with other Muslims. All in all, about 22 per cent of the population of the northern areas of Pakistan are Ismailis, while in Chitral their number is less than 5 per cent of the total population.

Prior to the 20th century, each valley was independently governed by its own ruler or king. The kingdom of Hunza was considered one of the most powerful of the northern areas till the end of the 19th century. It was ruled by a dynasty of mirs for many centuries. They were referred to as ayasha – ‘descendants from heaven’. Most of the members of this dynasty, including the last seven mirs, were Ismailis. Unlike Hunza, in other valleys of the northern areas and Chitral political power remained in the hands of non-Ismaili rulers who were frequently caught up in internal fighting. By the end of the 19th century they had all been subjugated by the Sikh governor of Kashmir and eventually came under British control. With the demise of British colonial power in the Indian subcontinent, the northern areas and Chitral were incorporated into Pakistan.

After a series of unsuccessful negotiations with the mir of Hunza, the British deployed their army to the region and conquered it in 1892. Mir Safdarali Khan who had opposed the British fled to China with hundreds of his loyal subjects. To strengthen their influence over the local population, the British brought in the step-brother of the former mir, Muhammad Nazim Khan, and appointed him as the new ruler of Hunza. Henceforth Hunza functioned as a semi-independent entity where the external policy of the mir was determined by the British and later the central government of Pakistan. However, in internal matters, the mirs retained authority and exercised their power to settle domestic affairs. In 1976 Hunza’s semi-independent status was terminated by the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who abolished all such autonomous principalities in all parts of Pakistan.

The spread of Ismailism to the northern areas is traditionally associa-
ated with pirs who originated from Badakhshan. According to local tradition, the Ismaili da'wa was introduced into Hunza and surrounding areas in two phases. The earliest conversions to Ismailism apparently took place in the 14th century when an Ismaili ruler from Badakhshan, Tag Moghul, conquered Hunza. The subsequent history of the da'wa in the northern areas remains obscure until the conversion of the mir of Hunza to Ismailism at the beginning of the 19th century, marking the second phase of the da’wa in the northern areas and particularly in the Hunza valley. According to tradition, one of the mirs of Hunza, Prince Salim (or Salum), was exiled to Badakhshan where he was influenced by a local pir. When he ascended the throne he established relations with a da’i named Sayyid Shah Ardabil who subsequently converted the mir to Ismailism. When the mir died in 1823, the son of the da’i, Pir Sayyid Husayn Shah, came to perform his funeral ceremony according to the Ismaili tradition. This was reportedly the first time in the history of Hunza when the Charogh Raws han ceremony was held as part of the funeral ceremonies of a mir.

The subsequent initiation of the population of Hunza into Ismailism is associated with Pir Sayyid Yaqut Shah and his successors, Pir Sayyid Shah Abdul Hamid, Pir Sayyid Ghulamali Shah, Khwaja Shah Talib and other pirs from Badakhshan and Chitral, who in the course of the 19th century frequently visited Hunza and increased the number of their followers in the area. But these pirs did not stay for long in Hunza and they maintained their authority through the mirs and their representative khalifas who performed the practices of the faith for the community.

The Ismaili da’wa in Chitral started much earlier, probably due to its closer proximity to Badakhshan and frequent visits of da’is or pirs to the area. Chitral was also the permanent residence of some pirs who had followers in Hunza and China. However, the hostility of the Mehtar, or king of Chitral, towards the pirs and their religious activities forced them to leave the locality and settle in China, in the Xinjiang province, and Hunza. In the course of the 20th century, due to the lack of political protection, many Ismailis fled from Chitral to other parts of the northern areas, and their number in Chitral decreased significantly. The influx of Pashtuns from the valleys to the mountainous areas of the NWFP presented additional challenges to the Ismaili community.

In the aftermath of the Great Game, the Ismailis of the northern areas have witnessed a significant modernization of the religious institutions and their increased amalgamation with the traditions of the Ismailis of the Indian subcontinent. This process was facilitated by the
presence of the Ismaili Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah in Bombay and his active modernization of the community. In due course, a new institutional structure headed by mukhis and kamadias replaced the traditional system of pirship. Most khalifas assumed the roles of mukhis in the local jama'atkhana and continued to serve the community by performing traditional practices. The traditional rites and ceremonies are also performed sporadically by community members on their own initiative.

The strategic location of the northern areas of Pakistan favoured the construction of the Karakorum Highway, which runs through the region and links Pakistan with China. The improved internal communications network accelerated the development of the area and altered the community's centuries-old isolation. The Ismailis of the northern areas, who generally reside in the high mountain valleys, have been engaged in farming and animal husbandry. The growth in population in the last few decades and the lack of arable land prompted many Ismailis to move down to the major urban centres and in particular to Gilgit, the administrative and commercial centre of the northern areas, and further, to the south of the region. Many found alternative means of sustenance by engaging in small business, or joining the civil service and the Pakistani army.

In October 1960 Prince Karim al-Husayni, Aga Khan IV, visited the region for the first time in the history of the Ismaili Imams. The social and economic programmes of the AKDN and the Ismaili Imamate increased significantly in the northern areas in subsequent years resulting in a transformation in the quality of life for the people in the region. An emphasis on education in particular has enabled many Ismailis, especially women, to acquire skills and enter various professions.

Continuity and Change in the Traditions of the Central Asian Ismailis

The institution of pirship was the backbone of the Ismaili tradition throughout the medieval and modern periods in most parts of Central Asia. The role of the pirs was not only to ensure the adherence of their followers to the Ismaili faith, but also to summon others to Ismailism when opportunities emerged. This was probably one of the reasons that their murids were sporadically spread in various parts of Central Asia. Many pirs were not just exercising religious authority over their followers, but they were also political, scholarly and literary figures, contributing to the local and national heritage. The establishment of links with the Ismaili Imam in the second half of the 19th century further legitimized their
position within the community. By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the relations of the community with their Imam, who by then had moved from Iran to India with new headquarters in Bombay, had also become better established. The farmans of the Imam, which were delivered via hajjis, inspired the community to remain united. In addition to the written farmans, personal visits of the representatives of the Imam to Central Asia also commenced. They delivered the messages of the Imam and passed on new instructions regarding the religious affairs of the community. The most influential of these representatives was Pir Sabzali or Mashnari, who visited most of the Ismaili populated areas of Badakhshan in Tajikistan and Afghanistan as well as northern Pakistan in the 1920s. He attempted to introduce religious practices similar to those observed by the Indian Nizari Ismailis, including the appointment of mukhis and kamadias and replacing the Charogh Rawshan ritual with Tasbeh, etc. Among other influential visitors to the region was Agha Samad Shah al-Husayni, who visited Hunza, Chezer and Kashgar at the beginning of the 1920s and initiated the construction of jama'atkhanas in these localities.

The modernization policies initiated by Pir Sabzali in the religious sphere did not yield significant results in Badakhshan. This was partly due to the presence of the Soviets in Tajik Badakhshan, and also to the reaction of the local religious hierarchy who found it difficult to abandon their centuries-old traditions. The fact that these changes were also likely to undermine the leadership and status of some of the pirs was another underlying factor. Be that as it may, some of the practices introduced by the missionaries eventually became ingrained in the local religious tradition and practices in parts of Badakhshan, and more firmly in northern Pakistan.

The institutional changes proceeded steadily in the Ismaili communities of the northern areas and Chitral in Pakistan, who unlike the Ismailis of Badakhshan and China, had retained their contacts with the Imam in the course of the 20th century. The positions of pirs and khilifas were taken over by mukhis and kamadias who began to lead the religious ceremonies in the jama'atkhanas. Concurrent to this, the traditional structures and practices, such as the Charogh Rawshan ceremony, continued.

The isolation of the Central Asian Nizari Ismaili communities in mountain areas and in the narrow valleys and passes of the Hindu Kush, Pamir and Karakorum ranges resulted in the development of distinctive literary and oral traditions and religious practices centred on Nasir-i Khusraw’s works. The socio-political developments in the Central Asian
context throughout the centuries have led to many changes in the oral tradition and practices of the region’s Ismailis, who strove to preserve and negotiate their identity in a hostile environment where they were continuously persecuted by the different rulers. However, the theological, philosophical and didactic ideas of Nasir-i Khusraw, as reflected in his writings, have ensured the continuity of the evolving Ismaili tradition. It incorporates elements from the local practices and the prevalent Sufi teachings, with which the Nizari Ismailis established close connections in the post-Alamut period of their history. The bulk of the Ismaili literature that is preserved in Persian in the private libraries of the khalifas and other religious dignitaries in various parts of Badakhshan, Chitral, northern areas and among the Ismailis of China has been rather distinctive, enabling scholars to shed light on many facets of Ismaili teachings in medieval times.

A significant feature of the Central Asian Ismaili tradition is the very designation of Panjtan (literally, ‘five bodies’), which the Central Asian Ismailis use to distinguish themselves from the Choryoris or Sunni Muslims. The label Choryori (literally, from Tajiki for ‘four friends’) is used by the Pamiri Ismailis to refer to the Sunni Muslims who acknowledge the first four caliphs (Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman and ‘Ali). The Panjtan or pentad refers to the Prophet Muhammad, his cousin and son in-law ‘Ali, his daughter Fatima, and grandsons Hasan and Husayn. The Panjtan is symbolically represented by the five pillars inside every Pamiri house (chid) and is manifested also in certain local rituals and prayers. While the intellectual tradition was maintained through the compilation of treatises on Ismaili doctrine and history, based on the original works of Nasir-i Khusrav and other Ismaili thinkers, the practice of religion was transmitted through the oral tradition, observance of special rituals, holy days, rites of passage and visitations to sacred shrines or mazars.

The indigenous minstrel tradition of performing religious poetry is known as maddohkhoni and qasidakhoni (recitation of maddoh or qasida) among the Central Asian Ismailis. Maddohs are performed on various occasions, including funeral ceremonies and the ayam (holy events), in the home and sometimes in nearby mazars. Apart from its ceremonial function, maddohkhoni serves didactical, curative and preventive functions for health maintenance. Classical Persian poetical genres, such as the ghazal, rubayat, qasida, mathnawi and mukhammas, are performed as maddoh. Musically the maddoh is comprised of three sections: munajat, haydari and setayish. The maddoh is essentially a vocal composition accompanied by one or two musical instruments, rubabs and/or tanbur
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with rhythmic support from the *daf*. The *maddoh* (literally, ‘praise’) is an important means of expressing Ismaili thoughts and sentiments. The main themes of *maddoh* are praise of God, the Prophet and his progeny, contemplation on the purpose and meaning of life and death, and submission to the will of God, praising his benevolence and goodwill, etc. The poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw and Sufi poets such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, Sana’i, ‘Attar and others, forms a major part of the *maddoh* repertoire. The tradition of *maddohkhoni* survived the Soviet suppression of religious practices. The popularity of *maddohkhoni* increased as part of the religious revival in the latter years of Soviet rule and the post-Soviet period in Tajik Badakhshan.

Among the Ismailis of Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and China, the performance of religious poetry is known as *qasidakhoni*. The performance of *maddohs* and *qasidas* was an essential part of the religious tradition of the community. They have a significance as vehicles for conveying the messages of Ismailism and ensuring the continuity of the Ismaili tradition in Central Asia. One of the major occasions when religious poetry is performed is the ceremony of *da’wat*. In the course of their history, the Ismailis used different strategies to propagate their *da’wa* which served both political and religious functions.

At present, in the context of Central Asian Ismailism, the term *da’wat* refers mainly to specific religious rituals and ceremonies, such as *da’wati fana*, *da’wati baqa* and *da’wati qurbon*. These ceremonies are not observed on a daily basis but take place on designated occasions. *Da’wati fana* is also known as *Charogh Rawshan* (‘luminous lamp’) and *da’wati Nasir* (‘Nasir’s summons’). The ceremony is usually held at dawn on the third day after the death of an Ismaili in the presence of an assembly in the house of the deceased. *Charogh Rawshan* is the central element in the funeral ceremony and itself consists of a number of rituals accompanied by the recitation of *du’as*, *salawats* and a special text called *Charagh-nama* (‘The Book of Light’), also known as *Qandil-nama* in parts of Badakhshan. Oral tradition attributes this ceremony to Nasir-i Khusraw and, hence, it is also called *da’wati Nasir*. Copies of these texts are held by each *khalifa* whose duty it is to conduct the ceremony. Some differences are observed in the performance of the *Charogh Rawshan* ceremony across the region, but the ceremony has identical meaning and function for the Ismaili community living in different parts of Central Asia. According to oral tradition, this ritual was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Jibra’il to provide comfort for the Prophet at the death of his young son ‘Abd Allah. The Prophet wished the same colourful light that he witnessed during his
mi'raj (spiritual ascension) to be handed down through his progeny until the Day of Judgement.

Subsequently Nasir-i Khusraw allegedly introduced the tradition to Badakhshan as part of his da'wa activities in the area. Thus the ritual includes salawat and durud (praise) of the Prophet and his progeny. It is believed that the charogh symbolizes the divine light (nur) mentioned in the Qur'an (24:35), the Light of the Imamate illuminating the present world and the hereafter. The powerful metaphor of the charogh symbolizes the continuity of the Ismaili Imamate through the guidance of the successive living Imams.

In addition to da'wati fana, there are other ceremonies and rites which are also known by the name of da'wat. Da'wati baqa ('summons of eternity'), in contrast to da'wati fana ('summons of demise'), is held during the lifetime of an individual. Its purpose is to cleanse and purify the soul by tawba (taking a vow), not indulging in gunah (sin), refraining from the misdeeds of the alami jismoni (the physical world), and preparing oneself for the alami baqa (the eternal world). The participants are usually middle-aged people who are believed to be sufficiently mature to participate in this ritual. Performing the ritual is financially costly and it is not commonly held. It is therefore not incumbent, like da'wati fana which is held on the death of a person. Da'wati baqa is similar to the hajj pilgrimage, a journey that is not expected of the poor. Like the da'wati fana ceremony, da'wati baqa is a gathering or majlis which takes place at night, during which performances of maddoh or qasida also take place in the presence of a khalifa who leads the ceremony.

Like other Muslims in Central Asia, the Ismailis celebrate a number of festivals such 'Id al-Adha or Qurban, 'Id al-Fitr or Ramadan, and Nawruz. However, there are specific Ismaili ways of observing and interpreting these festivals. Among other festivals observed by Ismailis, mention may be made of Jashni Shah Nasir-i Khusraw and Jashni Diwana Shah Wali, believed to have been one of the great Ismaili da'is, which are popular in certain parts of Afghan Badakhshan.

As noted, centuries of isolation from the central leadership of the Ismaili community resulted in the development of a particular religious organization and hierarchy among the Nizari Ismailis of Central Asia. Traditionally the organizational hierarchy of the Ismailis of Central Asia had developed with the Imam as the supreme leader of community, followed by the ranks of hujjat or pir, mu'al lim (teacher), khalifa (deputy of a pir) and finally murid. Apart from the position of the Imam, the terms and hierarchy of the structure were not always fixed, but remained fluid.
and underwent modifications over time. As a result of the institutional changes introduced by the previous and the present Ismaili Imams, the authority shifted away from *pirs* and *khalifas* to the central or regional offices of the Ismaili Imamate. At the same time, the traditional forms of local leadership have maintained their symbolic presence among the Ismailis of Central Asia, in particular in Afghanistan and China.

**Present Times: Challenges and Developments**

The last decades have witnessed unprecedented developments in the social, economic, political and religious life of the Ismaili community in Central Asia. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the political and economic structure in independent Tajikistan were characterized by uncertainty, impoverishment and psychological dislocation. Following the civil war in Tajikistan, economic and political instability coupled with lack of opportunities for development impelled many Ismailis, in particular the younger generation, to leave their homeland for seasonal work in other parts of the former Soviet state, especially in Russia. The Russian Federation has become home to an increasing number of Tajik Ismaili migrants, now estimated at around 30,000. The bulk of these immigrants appear to have settled permanently in Russia.

Migration patterns emerged much earlier in other Ismaili populated areas of Central Asia, including the northern areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, due to a lack of arable land (in northern Pakistan) and prolonged war (in Afghanistan). The migration of Ismailis from northern Afghanistan to central Afghanistan and Kabul started as early as the 1970s, especially during the era of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. The subsequent war in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban to power forced the majority of the Ismaili community in central Afghanistan, including the Hazaras and the Badakhshani Ismailis, to take refuge in Pakistan. By the end of the 1990s, a significant number of Afghan Ismaili refugees had emigrated to North America and Europe. Many Ismailis from the northern areas of Pakistan and Chitral migrated to the southern parts of Pakistan, especially Karachi, which is home to the largest South Asian Ismaili community at present. More recently, Ismailis from northern Pakistan have tended to settle in Islamabad. This is prompted by the presence of the AKDN headquarters in the capital, increasing number of international and national non-governmental organizations, and a generally better quality of life.

Residing in an isolated mountain area with unfavourable climatic
conditions, the Ismailis of Central Asia have adapted to their environment, engaging in farming, animal husbandry and small-scale trading. The impassable mountainous terrain provides major obstacles to the economic development of the region. The governments of the region's countries and the international organizations working in the region are trying to address the geographic isolation of the region through the construction of new highways and bridges which it is hoped will promote the economic development of the region. The leading development agency in Central Asia is the Aga Khan Development Network which had already constructed several bridges over the river Panj at the outset of the new millennium, providing opportunities for the exchange of goods and services between the Tajik and Afghan populations of the region. There are also challenges specific to each country that are rooted in the internal social and political factors of that particular state and geographical locality.

The newly emergent conditions in the mountain regions of Central Asia put strains on the self-sustaining cultural processes which had hitherto survived and nourished the community in its geographic isolation. Some aspects of the culture, the traditions and local languages are being challenged by rapid changes in the social and economic spheres.

**AKDN Activities in Central Asia**

The main driving force behind economic development in the mountain societies of Central Asia in the last decade has been the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), a set of non-political, non-denominational independent organizations which implement 'the social conscience of Islam through institutional action'. Building on the foundations laid by Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, these institutions have now gained international renown under the leadership of the present Imam, Aga Khan IV, for investing in developing human and material resources in the impoverished parts of the world.

AKDN institutions first began to operate in Central Asia in the northern areas of Pakistan. The earliest initiative here was the establishment of schools in 1946 during the Diamond Jubilee of Aga Khan III. Since then, over 100 Aga Khan Schools have been set up in the northern areas and Chitral operated by the Aga Khan Education Services (AKES). Other AKDN agencies such as the Aga Khan Health Services (AKHS) and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (ARSP) respectively operate an increasing number of health centres and promote agricultural productiv-
ity. Through its Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP), the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has begun the restoration of historical sites in the northern areas, including the famous Baltit and Shidar forts. The latest endeavour in the northern areas is the establishment of the Professional Development Centres (PDC) in Gilgit and Chitral which operates under the stewardship of the Institute for Educational Development (IED) of the Aga Khan University (AKU) in Karachi. It provides training for various stakeholders involved in the management and improvement of schools.

The provision of humanitarian assistance to impoverished Tajik Badakhshan became the primary objective of the Aga Khan Foundation during the Tajik civil war, enabling the community to survive through difficult times of war and crisis. In recent years the activities of AKDN institutions have moved from relief work towards sustainable development of the region with a special emphasis on rural development, community empowerment and improving the quality of education. Among other AKDN initiatives is the Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI) which provides technical and financial support to local musical projects to preserve and promote the traditional music of Central Asia.

The present Ismaili Imam, Aga Khan IV, paid his historic first visit to Tajikistan in May 1995. Since then he has visited Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries on several occasions. On all these visits the Imam has constantly emphasized the importance of peaceful coexistence between peoples of various faiths, the development of civil society, of education and living within the ethical framework of the faith. In 2000 Aga Khan IV signed a protocol of agreement with the presidents of three Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstanz and Kazakhstan) for the establishment of the University of Central Asia (UCA), a private secular university with campuses in the city of Khorog in Tajikistan, Naryn province of Kyrgyzstan and Tekeli in Kazakhstan. The primary objective of the UCA is to provide access to higher education for the isolated societies in the mountains of Central Asia and to develop knowledge, skills and abilities through a range of academic programmes at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Since 2001 the AKDN has been active in development projects in Afghanistan after the years of war and deprivation. AKDN institutions have reconstructed and built dozens of schools, hospitals and other social and economic facilities throughout the country. Special attention is paid to the restoration of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan. The AKTC works on the conservation and rehabilitation of traditional districts in Kabul and Herat. The conservation of the mausoleum of Timur Shah and
restoration of the Kabul Gardens are among the more recent endeavours of the AKTC in Afghanistan.

Together with programmes in the economic and social spheres, the Ismaili Imamate has launched a religious education programme to enable the Ismaili communities of Central Asia to revive their religious heritage and identity. Religious education for the community is provided through the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Committees (ITREC) and Boards (ITREB) which work with the local community. The ITREBs monitor the implementation of the Ta'lim or educational curriculum developed for primary schools by The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, to educate the Ismaili children in their faith, in the history and cultures of Muslims in general and of Ismaili Muslims in particular.

Notes

2. The Ismailis speak diverse languages which are believed to have been spoken by the Sogdians and Saks who inhabited Central Asia in ancient times. These minority languages, including Shugni, Rushani, Sarikoli, Wakhi, Ishakashimi, Brushaski, Chitrali, Sariquli, etc., are part of the Eastern Iranian group of Indo-European languages.
4. Ibid., pp. 121–122.
5. Ibid., p. 123.
6. Ibid., pp. 486–487.
7. See Bahadur I. Iskandarov, Vostochnaya Bukhara i Pamir v period presoedineniya Sredney Azii k Rossi (Stalinabad, 1960), pp. 36–37.
8. Most of this information comes from material held in archives in various countries and has been accessed in recent years by scholars. The critical analysis of this material will doubtless shed light on many aspects of the history, religious leadership, rituals and traditions of the Ismailis of Central Asia.
9. The first comprehensive document was prepared by a mission led by Colonel Lockhart which was authorized by the British Foreign Office of India to explore the then little-known territories at the northern borders of the British Empire in India. The exploration resulted in a report entitled 'Gilgit Mission' (1885) which dealt with the geographical, topographic, economic, social, political and cultural aspects of the Ismaili communities of the northern areas. Despite the valuable information on the economic
and political situation of the region and the geopolitical significance of the Ismaili populated areas that they collected, the expedition failed to provide reliable information on the religious belief system of the community, probably the result of their ignorance of Ismaili doctrine as well as their reliance on non-Ismaili informants who seem to have been hostile to their Ismaili neighbours. Prior to and even after the 1873 agreement, the British selected several experts-pundits from the local people in India and dispatched them from Chitral to Yarkand (Kashgar) via the Hindu Kush, Pamir and Sarikol. These experts were engaged in collecting material about the routes and settlements of the Pamir. For more details see Ghulam Abbas, *Critical Review of the Literature Evolved on the Ismaili Community of Northern Areas of Pakistan* (unpublished report, London, 2005).


15. The concern about the loyalty of the Ismailis of the Upper Oxus to their leader in India was well reflected in a message sent by the Russian representative in Pamir, Baron Cherkasov, to the Governor-General and the Russian Political Agent in Turkestan. See the appendix containing the text of a telegram to the tsar sent by a senior Russian consular officer from Bombay on 11 February 1904, in Bobrinskoy, 'Secta Ismailiya', and the appendix of the report by Baron Cherkasov in R. M. Masov et al., *Ocherki po Istorii Sovetskogo Badakhshana* (Dushanbe, 1985), pp. 456–470.


21. The term 'Basmach' refers to the anti-Soviet groups in Central Asia who considered the Soviets infidels and fought against the Communists until
the early 1930s. Currently there is an attempt to present them as a resistance movement against the Communist regime in Central Asia.


23. Davlat Khudonazarov, originally from Badakhshan, served as the chairman of the Union of Soviet Cinematography. He was also a member of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union, and served in various committees of the Supreme Council of the USSR during the Gorbachev era.

24. Much has been written on the civil war in Tajikistan; for details see Oliver Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York, 2000).


29. Ahmad Shah Mas'ud led the groups opposed to the Taliban in Afghanistan and was killed in September 2001 in a terrorist attack.


32. Ibid., p. 249.


36. The *hajjis* went to the Imam and delivered the tithe and brought back *farmans*. They were usually local people from a family of *pirs* who were designated to go to the Imam's headquarters in Iran and India.

37. 'Mashnari' was derived from the term 'missionary', which the local Ismailis used to refer to the Imam's representative.


40. Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*
(Delmar, NY, 1978).

41. According to a census conducted by the Ismaili cultural organization ‘Nur’ in 2002, the number of Ismaili migrants in Moscow and its vicinities amounted to 17,000 persons.

42. Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN): An Ethical Framework, available at www.iis.ac.uk