

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

The Ismaili Sect in East Africa

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8dm6j1pw>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 1(1)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Nichols, Woodrow W. Jr.

**Publication Date**

1970

**DOI**

10.5070/F711016348

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1970 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

## THE ISMAILI SECT IN EAST AFRICA

by Woodrow W. Nichols, Jr.

Several attempts have been made by geographers to study religions; most of these studies have put forth some type of methodological framework for other researchers to consider. For example, Sopher noted that the geography of religions "investigates the interaction between a culture and its earth environment and the spatial interaction among different cultures" - religion constitutes the main cultural component. (1) He further develops a framework within which religion, from the geographical point of view, can be studied. This framework consisted of four geographical themes: (a) the significance of the environmental setting for the evolution of religious systems and particular religious institutions; (b) the way religious systems and institutions modify the environment; (c) the different ways whereby religious systems occupy and organize segments of earth space; and (d) the geographic distribution of religions and the way religious systems spread and interact with each other. (2)

Sopher's framework is not all-inclusive, but it is the best one at the present time. What is needed to improve his methodology are more studies by geographers on micro-religious elements, i.e. not just the study of the geographical aspects of a religion as a whole, but the various components of the religion in a particular segment of earth-space. With proper work along these lines, new ideas will be generated and Sopher's methodology can be put in its proper perspective.

The purpose of this study is to take a component (sect) of a religion (Islam) in a particular segment of earth-space (East Africa) and apply Sopher's model, keeping in mind that his construct can be altered to fit the needs of the geographic religious study. More specifically, the study will look at the Ismailis, a sect of Islam and a branch of the Shia. It must be noted that this sect does not constitute the smallest component of Islam, it is subdivided into subjects; these subjects will demand a great deal of attention if one is to geographically analyze the sect as a whole. The primary region under study will be that of East Africa, although it will be necessary at the outset to look at the Ismailis in other portions of the Moslem world.

### The Evolution and Spread of Ismailism

The great diversity in the evolution of the Ismaili doctrine in various subdivisions of the movement make it impossible to give a clear and reliable picture; however, one might roughly distinguish between five main stages through which the doctrine has passed. The first stage might be called the Incubation Period; it covers the foundation of the sect from 765 A.D. until about 909 A.D. when the Fatimids rose to power. The second stage is called the Fatimid Period, from 909 A.D.

to the beginning of the twelfth century, when the movement attained full development. The Alamut Period, in Persia, from the beginning of the twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth century, constitutes the third stage of development. It has been called the "life and death struggle" during which great concessions were made to the popular tendencies, and to some extent, coalescence with Sufism was achieved. The fourth stage is the Anjudan Period, a kind of renaissance, covering the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was characterized by a revival of the spirit and activity in the Persian Ismaili community and the acquisition of many outlying communities. These communities remained under the rule of deputies who had in some cases formed veritable dynasties pursuing independent policies. The final stage is the Modern Period, since the end of the eighteenth century to the present time. This period was characterized by accelerated cultural development and reorientation, especially among the Khojas of India and East Africa. (3)

The first and second stages are of utmost importance here because it was in these periods that Ismailism originated and split into two major groups - Bohras and Khojas. Differences in religious belief initiated the founding of the Ismaili sect in Persia approximately in 765. Ali notes that Abd-Allah Maimun al-Daddah was the founder of the sect (4); but others have written that this belief is a legend, explaining that it is most probably a spontaneous development of the early Shi' esoterism. (5) However, Jafar B. Muhammad, surnamed as-Sadiq, has been regarded as the founder of Shi'ism as a theological school of Islam. After his death in 765, one group of followers acknowledged his younger son, Musa al-Kazim, while another group regarded the line of succession as passing through Ismaili, his eldest son, who, though he died before his father in 761, was thought by his partisans to be in concealment. They therefore acknowledged his son, Muhammad, as the seventh Imam. Thus, arose two main Shi'ite lines, the Ithna 'ashariyya, Twelvers, and the Sab'iyya, the Seveners, more generally called the Ismailis from the point of divergence since their line of Imams continues to this day.

Of major importance is the split which occurred among the Ismailis at the time the Fatamids occupied Cairo. Some followed Mustali (son-in-law of the Armenian commander) and were called Bohras (Mustalians), while others followed Nizar (the rightful heir to the throne) and were called Khojas (Nizaris). Both groups made penetrations into India during the twelfth century, the Khojas in Sind and Kutch and the Bohras in Gujerat. The Khojas are sometimes referred to as the Eastern Ismailis and the Bohras are referred to as the Western Ismailis because of the former's concentration in Persia immediately after the split and the latter's retention of the Egyptian throne in Cairo. (6)

The heart of this study lies in the spatial impact of the Ismaili sect on the East African landscape; it has been worth the effort to devote brief attention to the historical development because it gives one insight into the reasons for the present-day patterns. For instance,

it can be noted that the Ismailis became merchants in India and this factor in itself is reflected in their location in the trading towns. Delf notes:

*Most of the Muslims in East Africa belong to one of three sects of the Shias: the Ithna'ashri, the Bohra, and the Ismaili Khojas ...the Ismaili Khojas were originally Hindu traders living in the upper Sind area of North-west India. (7)*

Sequential core areas may be established as one recapitulates the general spread of the Ismailis through space; these areas shifted from Persia and Syria, through Yemen and North Africa, establishing finally in West India and East Africa. Underlining all these flows were not only religious factors, but also factors which are related to their overall economic, political, and social development. This can clearly be seen if one looks at the reason why the Ismailis migrated to East Africa. This migration started towards the end of the eighteenth century and reached its culmination during the middle of the nineteenth century. Unlike the Hindus who went to East Africa to trade for a couple of seasons, make enough money, and then return to India, the Ismailis settled permanently with their families and relatives. The Khojas, being victims of the Ghurid invasion during the latter part of the twelfth century, were forced to go underground and live in the guise of Hindus. When Ismailism was revived in India, it was a heterogeneous mixture of Ismailism, Sufism, and Hinduism. After a split involving the Imam's control over the various local pirs, or leaders, those who obeyed the Imams migrated South, basically to East Africa. Ivanow writes that "this probably was entirely due to the development of the sea route to India instead of the difficult, long and dangerous caravan route via Afghanistan and Persia". (8) It might be added that conditions were also made more favorable by the opening of the hinterland by the Uganda railway which many Indians helped to build. If these are the reasons, it is not difficult to relate both the Khojas and Bohras, who were of the trading class in India, to the coastal trading settlements in East Africa because the area represented similar economic pursuits.

#### The Impact of the East African Landscape

Basically, the intention of this section is to illustrate how geography and religion are related; or, a better way of stating it is to say that this section will undertake the task of answering the basic question regarding landscape modification by a particular religious community. The task of this section then is to determine that there exists a landscape in East Africa that can be termed "religious".

Using the historical data, it was apparent that the major reasons for a migration to East Africa by the Ismailis were religious, economic and social. As was mentioned earlier, an oceanic trade route existed that was better than the earlier overland route; also jobs were available in helping to build the Uganda railway. However, there was also a

willingness on the part of many Muslims to bring their families with them from India which indicates that they may have had prior notions about permanent settlement - especially if their families liked the area. Mangat in his treatise, *Asians in East Africa*, expresses these points well:

*The Indian merchants most responsible for spearheading...commercial revival in East Africa were members of the traditional seafaring and trading castes and sects from Kutch and surrounding districts ...They had enjoyed an abundance of business experience in the western Indian Ocean from the earliest of times, and familiarity with the traditional pattern of trade carried on with East Africa in small sailing vessels (dhows) - and with the aid of the monsoon winds...Among the Muslims, the Khoja, Bohra...sects appear prominently; and in the latter part of the 19th century their populations, especially that of the Khojas, far exceeded their Hindu counterpart. This was partly due to the readiness of the Muslims, in contrast to the Hindus, to bring their families along with them from India - apart from their apparent advantages in a Muslim Sultanate. (9)*

From Mangat's description, it appears that many of the skills developed in India were retained and implemented to the economic advantage of the sect and to East Africa.

The focal point for this early development on the coast was Zanzibar and the various port towns. Later Ismailis disseminated to the interior because of Zanzibar's commercial decline, again focusing on urban settlements. It should be emphasized that, with only a few exceptions, the sect has been an urban sect performing urban-economic functions; therefore, urban analyses must be used in describing their impact on the landscape.

#### Formal Positive Expression on the Landscape

The economic and cultural influence of Ismailism can be visualized, in part, by certain positive expressions on the East African landscape. These expressions fall into the following categories: (a) the location, intensity, and types of sacred structures; (b) general land-use patterns; and (c) specific names on the land.

One type of sacred structure of the Ismailis in East Africa is the mosque - its basic (but not only) function being for worship. It constitutes a most conspicuous portion of the landscape in terms of its intensity and location. Upon investigating land-use maps of several East African cities, it was obvious that Khoja mosques are more frequent than Bohra mosques. One reason for this is quite obvious, i.e., the population of the Khojas is greater than that of the Bohras - thus, more mosques are needed. Another reason lies in the fact that the Khojas are under the religious control of the Aga Khan, their living

Imam; he has played a great part in molding the directions of the Khoja Ismaili community. In fact, one of the keys to the analysis of the Ismaili sect in East Africa is the Aga Khan. One example of his influence on the sect and on the East African landscape can be illustrated by his East African Moslem Welfare Society, a program established in 1945 to foster economic development among the Ismaili community. In Uganda, between the years 1945-1957, the society was responsible for the construction of 75 schools, 63 mosques, 1 training college, 1 technical school, and 1 boarding house. (10) This type of influence is pervasive throughout East Africa and it provides one with a major key to understanding the Ismaili impact on the landscape.

The location of the mosques are of interest here because it helps bring out another important point, i.e., that the landscape reveals a fragmentation into exclusive, well-organized, endogamous groups. Except for the location of the central mosques, which are usually near the central business districts of various towns and cities, most Ismaili mosques are found in or near Ismaili communities. In Nairobi, where there are four mosques, the metropolitan mosque is found in the core of the city; whereas the other three are found scattered near Ismaili communities. This indicates that there is some type of land-use pattern relating Ismaili location and sacred places - a step towards establishing the existence of a religious landscape.

Another aspect of location relates to the frequency of mosques in large urban areas as contrasted to smaller ones. As Sopher noted, there has always been a contrast between these frequencies in Islam. (11) In investigating the frequency of Ismaili mosques in large urban areas in East Africa and in small towns, it was found that the tradition holds true; i.e., the number of mosques in the larger urban areas are more frequent on the landscape. This is probably related to population number (the total Ismaili population in East Africa is approximately 50,000) and wealth, as well as to religious tradition.

With regards to the form of the Ismaili mosque in East Africa, both the Khoja and Bohra mosques resemble each other architecturally - the style of which is heterogeneous. A rectangle-like form is exemplified in the smaller mosques, but usually in the large metropolitan mosques there is a more elaborate style of architecture. Therefore, as far as architecture is concerned, one particular pattern is not immediately evident. Had the data indicated a pattern, it might have been possible to form some propositions regarding diffusion. Still, there might be some geographical evidence related to the wood that was used to build the mosques. Most of the internal portions were made of mahogany imported from India; this might signify an important relationship between the homeland of the Ismailis, their beliefs, and economic geography.

Cemeteries are also sacred structures on the Ismaili landscape. There are both Khoja and Bohra cemeteries, usually one of each to a town or city. Ali notes that the Khojas never believed in going to

Mecca, but at one time they did send their relatives there to be buried. (12) If this is the case, then one can distinguish between three sequential burial sites of these East Africans: Mecca, behind the local mosques, and land vested in the Aga Khan by the government. (13) Before the population on the mainland increased, the Khojas buried their dead behind their mosques; but after these burial grounds appeared too small, land obtained from the government was used for this purpose. The size of these cemeteries ranges from three to four acres. Their specific location within major East African cities does not exemplify the pattern illustrated with respect to the mosques, i.e., they are not located in the Ismaili communities. The reason for this is that they are built on land given by the government and most of this land did not fall within the realm of their residential and religious locations. (14)

The key to the overall land-use pattern of the Khojas is the Aga Khan; all Khoja communal property is vested in him personally. In 1924 the government of Uganda proposed setting up a central land holding for all charitable, religious, and educational properties; the question of property ownership was made clear to the government by the Ismailis. They noted that Khojas do not share property and could not possibly build their mosques or bury their dead on ground that was not sacred or absolutely and permanently dedicated to God - and God is represented in the form of the Aga Khan. (15) Therefore, provisions were made whereas the property was vested in the Aga Khan's name.

Another key to the land-use pattern of the Ismaili communities is their wealth and engagement in commercial activities. These activities are reflected in their dominance of nodal commercial patterns and transport arteries. Banks, retail establishments, and wholesale concentrations are truly Asian - with the Ismailis constituting one of the major Asian components. Carrying this a bit further, there is an Asian community in the Upanga residential district and Kariakoo commercial district of Dar es Salaam. These districts are located within close proximity to each other, illustrating a point mentioned earlier about exclusive, self-organized communities; but it also depicts the idea of an organized commercial district with a clustering of Ismaili economic activities. This district, to a large degree, reflects religious solidarity since many of the shops, stores, etc. are owned by Ismailis. It is possible, then, that we might conclude from this that an economic-religious landscape exists.

The central part of Nairobi is another example of the contribution made by Ismailis to the economic-religious landscape. Here is found one of the largest supermarkets in East Africa, i.e., the Aga Khan Walk; it was the first supermarket opened in East Africa. It is owned by Ismailis and was formally opened by the Aga Khan while on one of his periodic tours to Kenya. (16)

Another significant aspect of Ismaili land-use patterns in East Africa is residential location. H.J. de Blij has done research on the

colonial imprint of East African towns, emphasizing residential segregation as an outstanding feature. To take two examples, Mombasa and Dar es Salaam are composed of four racial communities: Africans, Asians, Arabs, and Whites. The Asian community is of concern here, and de Blij notes that in Mombasa it is concentrated "east of Jomo Kenyatta Avenue in the second-class residential area". (17) In Dar es Salaam, the major Asian urban residential areas are the Upanga and Changombe districts; the former is partly first-class and partly second-class, while the latter is a second-class district. Of concern to this study is the fact that Ismailis are located in these well-delimited residential districts. Within these Asian residential areas there is a pattern which depicts a type of clustering among the Ismailis. These patterns illustrate a religious community living in a specific portion of earth-space with structures in the form of single-family and apartment dwellings.

There are other positive expressions on the Ismaili religious landscape; they represent educational, social, and medical activities. Dispersed throughout East Africa are Aga Khan schools, mainly responsible for Indian education in East Africa. Mangat notes:

*In Indian education, great credit is due to the various religious sects which have founded schools throughout the country...* (18)

This pattern is not a recent thing as indicated by Delf:

*By 1939 the number of grant-aided Indian schools (in Uganda) was forty-six, twenty-four of which were run by the Ismaili Khoja community.* (19)

He goes further:

*In 1939...the Ismaili Khojas, who allowed up to one-third of their pupils to be non-Khojas, built an excellent boys' secondary school in Dar es Salaam. Their girls' school in the same town was the largest in the country.* (20)

From these brief descriptions, it is evident that religion is deeply embedded in the educational expression on the landscape.

The landscape reveals other structures that are related to the Ismailis. For example, there are Aga Khan hospitals scattered throughout East African cities, i.e., approximately one to a large city or town. Aga Khan Clubs are usually a component of East African cities also; the Aga Khan Club will come into focus again in another part of this paper.

The street patterns in most Ismaili communities resemble that of a parallel street plan with long main streets and long blocks separated



by narrow transverse streets. Spatial variation in street patterns can be exemplified in Dar es Salaam, where in the Kariakoo commercial district, a grid pattern occurs; in the Asian residential area, i.e., Upanga, the aforementioned type exists. Whether these are of religious origins or whether of colonial origins is yet to be determined through research. Certainly though, as mentioned above, the more recent developments in the Ismaili areas are related to the religion.

Positive expressions on the Ismaili landscape are also represented in the form of toponomy. For example, in Dar es Salaam there is a Mosque Street, in Mombasa, an Aga Khan Road, and in Nairobi, a Bohra Road. These are only examples; no doubt there are many more religiously associated names. One might find various districts or communities and various physical features with names directly associated with Ismailism.

#### Negative Expressions

Looking at the Ismaili sect relative to taboos, it might be said that they follow the Koran as far as the eating of pork is concerned; most of them also refrain from drinking.

As far as work taboos are concerned, there are not any except for a few religious holidays; still there are many Ismaili merchants who work on the various holidays. Sunday is a day of rest for them, too, because there is no business throughout the cities. In this case, one business probably depends upon the operation of another, and since many other religions consider Sunday sacred, many of their operations are closed. There was a reference to the fact that Ismailis rest when a member of the community dies; however, this may not be true throughout Ismailism in East Africa.

All in all, this section has attempted to describe in part, the impact upon the landscape by the Ismailis. Certainly, one cannot refute the fact that positive expressions do exist; and one cannot make the statement that these expressions are not of religious origins. Therefore, it seems that, based on the evidence presented, one must seriously consider the hypothesis that a "religious landscape" exists in East Africa, i.e., an Ismaili landscape.

#### Religious Movement and the Organization of Space

In the former section, it was pointed out that the Ismailis, through the Aga Khan and their desire to engage in merchant activities, formed a religious landscape that could possibly be delimited. Very little was said about the religious ceremonies associated with these places and the religious and political organization of the sect. This section will describe these functions as related to the landscape.

The Ismailis do not find it as essential to go to Mecca or Medina as other Shia sects do. They have adhered to the precise meaning of the

Koranic prescription, which in essence means that if one cannot afford to make the trip he can fulfill his obligation by attending local religious ceremonies. (21) However, most Ismailis are financially capable of making the trip to Mecca.

Among the Khojas, the Immat Day (i.e., inauguration of Aga Khan) is probably the most important annual event. The Ismailis gather for a luncheon during the afternoon and enjoy Indian stick dancing in the evening. A fertility rite involving women who occupy certain positions by virtue of their husbands is a most conspicuous part of the event. (22) Of geographical importance are the distance one travels to an event such as this, and once there, the number of people concentrated in the sacred place used for such an event. A discussion with an East African revealed the following information: (a) the mosque and Aga Khan Club is the site of the Immat religious celebration; (b) the distance traveled by a participant is averaged at 10-15 miles; and (c) approximately 90% of the Khoja population will gather at the mosque and Aga Khan Club; but, of course, this varies depending on the density of Khojas and the number of mosques and Aga Khan Clubs. (23)

Along with the celebration of the Immat, another festive occasion, Nauraz (Persian for "New Day"), occurs on the 21st of March. This event represents the Persian (or Zoroastrian) New Year's Day. Wheat is a very important sacrament at this event; it is supposed to insure one of enough to eat for the remainder of the year. In addition, sugar, nuts, and raisins are distributed as part of the general festivity, but they do not have any particular religious significance. Wheat represents the most important part of the event; some will not eat it at the festival but will take it home and treasure it as a valuable that will bring prosperity - some even renew it the following year. (24)

The two Idds, i.e., when Muhammad received the message from Allah and the Idd marking the end of the Ramadan - the month of the fast - are celebrated by both Khoja and Bohra. During the month of Ramadan, many important nights (especially the 23rd, which they consider the Koranic Lailat al-Kadr) consist of special prayers. The tragedy of Kerbala is remembered with *majalises* (prayer meetings) and is due solemnly for the first ten days of *Muharram* (month of Hussein's assassination). Feasting, with the exception of the prayers, was once the most conspicuous part of the festivals; however, due to an increase in the cost of living, the number of feasts have decreased. However, luncheons are still given with money from special endowments and communal funds. The feasts form an important part of maintaining Ismaili solidarity and norms. (25)

A few words from Amiji's paper serves to illustrate the nature of one of the Bohra ceremonies:

*I Du'l Ghadir al-Khum occurs on the 18th of Dhu'l-Hijja and is*

celebrated as the day on which, according to Shiite belief, the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor. Every Bohra fasts on this day, and after the noon prayers the covenant or mithag with the Imam and the da'i is renewed. This is also the ceremony for initiating new members, usually...age of fifteen, into the ranks of the believers (maamin). The mithag is administered by the 'amil on behalf of the da'i. It consists of an oath of allegiance to the concealed Imam Taiyyib and all succeeding Imams in his line and the Imam's vice-regent on earth, the Dai'l Mutlag. The person taking the oath also swears to refrain from any act which would prejudice the interest of the da'i. (26)

From this brief description of one of the Bohra ceremonies, it appears that many important religious functions are performed. It is also apparent that these rituals act as an agent to maintain solidarity. There are more ceremonies, but they are not of major significance to this type of study.

What is significant are the human agglomerations of the Ismailis on *Khusyali* (days of happiness). These events certainly represent a pattern on the landscape, patterns that can be described as involving movement through earth-space and as involving sacred celebrations at a particular location in earth-space. In an interview with Miss H. Mohammedali, an Ismaili (Khoja) from Nairobi, it was ascertained that the distance traveled to the mosques on Fridays is very short compared to the distance traveled during the religious holidays or ceremonies. This would imply greater movement through space at specific times of the year with the overall movement characterized by a low frequency of long distance moves.

#### Religious Organization

It is important to emphasize aspects of Ismaili doctrine at this point. The Khojas believe in the *Arkan ad Din* (pillars of religion) of the Orthodox Moslems, but they attach *batini* (esoteric interpretations) to *hajj*; whereas fasting and prayer, though observed, are carried on in a different manner. They are obligated to say three prayers a day: evening, bedtime, and morning. Some Khojas participate in the meditation which takes place in the mosque from 4-5 every morning. Fasting is different in that the Ismailis only observe the one on the 21st of Ramadan, but they consider the entire month sacred. (27)

A Bohra prays in his mosque five times a day. He does not recite the sermon on Friday or even in festival prayers; only the Imam is allowed to recite it. And since he is in concealment, the da'i or *mulla* usually performs the duty. Various functions, such as marriage and mourning are held in specially constructed assembly halls in the Bohra community in contrast to the mosques in the Khoja community. (28)

The Khoja religious offices are usually held by older, wealthy

persons. These positions are filled through nominations influenced by outgoing officeholders, but the Legislative and Provincial Councils in a joint session make the final decision. The main religious office, i.e., in a local community, is the *Mukhi* of the metropolitan Jamat Khana and his assistant, the *Kamadia*; they usually have seniority over the religious officers of other Jamat Khanas. (29) Their main functions entail officiating at various religious ceremonies, performing funeral rites for the dead, and leading prayers on special occasions. They also collect the offerings and contributions to the Imam.

Ismaili women have their own officeholders relative to their religious ceremonies. Usually it is the wives of the male officeholders who will hold such positions. Since the society accepts the dominant role of the male, the joint ceremonies, i.e., male and female, are conducted completely by the men. (30)

A number of religious societies also exist, each having its own *Mukhi* and *Kamadia*, and most of the members are considered of a select group.

Missionaries are also found in the Ismaili religious hierarchy, their major duty being to instruct the followers of the faith. Usually they carry out their duties in Ismaili schools or local community groups. A very important point to note is that they do not attempt to spread their teachings among members of other religions, although in 1961-62 a few Africans and Europeans were converted. (31) As a rule very few Africans belong to the Ismaili sect. Dar es Salaam forms the center for missionary training in East Africa, where a two year course in Ismaili doctrines and Ismaili history is offered. Some of the trainees become instructors in Ismaili schools, while the more promising student is usually sent to study abroad. Women constitute a large percentage enrolled in these schools, which emphasized the Aga Khan's interest in bettering the lot of women.

The Bohra community has a religious hierarchy somewhat different from that of the Khojas. Table I indicates the hierarchy and major functions of the officers of the community.

Table I. Religious Hierarchy of the Bohras

1. <i>da'i</i>	Runs Da'wat, maintains discipline, appoints officials.
2. <i>ma'dhun</i> and <i>mukawir</i>	Heir apparent; breaks arguments, handles routine affairs.
3. <i>maaha'ikhh</i> ( <i>hudud</i> )	Well-versed in Arabic and Ismaili doctrines.
4. <i>'amil</i>	Handles religious affairs, found in every town where 50 or more Bohras live.
5. <i>mulla</i>	Teaches, leads prayers with permission.

As can be seen from Table I, five levels exist in the Bohra religious hierarchy. The *da'i* is the spiritual and administrative head of the community, handling all matters concerning the Da'wat; he is the authority, makes final decisions, and maintains discipline among the followers with the threat of excommunication. The *ma'dhum* and the *mukawir* are the next ranking officials of the Da'wat; the former is usually the *da'i*'s heir apparent while the latter arbitrates quarrels, i.e., he is in charge of routine affairs. Next comes the *mashaikh*, also known as *hudad* "who constitutes the 'ulema of the Bohra community". Each *da'i* appoints his own *mashaikh*; approximately eighteen are appointed and they are usually relatives or friends of the *Da'i* (they are well-versed in Arabic and Ismaili doctrines). In East Africa however, there is only one *mashaikh* (*Bha'i Sahib*), who resides in Mombasa. The *'amil* is the next ranking official. He is head of the local congregation and is found in every town of at least 50 Bohra families. Because he handles all the religious affairs of the community and some social and economic problems, no religious or communal ceremony is valid without his permission. Among the most important duties of the *'amil* are the collection of dues for the *da'i* and the administering of the *mithag* to the believers. The lowest rank of the Bohra hierarchy is the *mulla*. He is appointed by the *da'i* and is usually a local citizen with knowledge of Arabic and Ismaili rituals. They perform some of the same duties as the *'amils* and lead prayers in multi-mosque towns with the *'amil's* permission. Some *mullas*, those usually from India, also teach religious education in Bohra schools. (32)

Secular organization in the Bohra community deals with the social and economic affairs. In 1951, a constitution was written for all the Jamats in East Africa; and between 1953 and 1955 most of the towns were using it. Under this new constitution the local congregation forms the Da'udi Bohra Jamat Corporation consisting of all makes over eighteen. A managing council is elected every two years, with the *'amil* retaining his position in the local council. The council consists of four office bearers, five trustees and fourteen others. The trustees administer the mosques, schools, sports clubs, clinics, and real estate. Among the Bohras, unlike the Khojas, each local jamat corporation through the trustees is the *de jure* owner of its property. (33)

#### Territorial Organization of the Ismailis

Communities that are geographically separated can be united to form organized religious territories according to Sopher. (34) The Khoja Ismailis can be said to possess that characteristic. The early congregations in Zanzibar and the coastal settlements had their own treasurers and accountants, a tradition held over from early Indian tradition. However, a council in Zanzibar had taken over the administration of the local Jamat Khana. By 1920, with the opening up of the mainland by railways and the development of Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar lost its old importance and prosperity. The Aga Khan encouraged many Ismailis to migrate to Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Therefore, rule no longer

radiated over a widely scattered area from centralized Zanzibar, but was localized in the more prominent Ismaili centers. This localizing process was reinforced by the British, who preferred a strong local organization rather than a central group of Ismailis in Zanzibar. (35) The Zanzibar model was applied on the mainland which later evolved into a provincial council, including Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania; it coordinates community activities in the three areas.

The council was selected by the Imam who supervised their tasks. Zanzibar still retained a special function, i.e., it contained the oldest leader; he was consulted by each new territorial council on very special matters. Through the years the council was built up and worked out in detail; its first constitution was entitled "Rules of the Shia Imami Councils of the Continent of Africa" (between 1899 and 1905). (36) It has been revised several times, the last time being in 1954 when the Imam called a special conference to discuss the problems of the community. However, in 1962 the present Aga Khan revoked the old constitution and appointed Constitutional Committees in all the East African territories to draw up another constitution and synthesize the Oriental and Western ways of government. (37)

In this new constitution, the Imam is the highest administrative officer, below whom is a supreme council for East Africa. This second level hierarchical group is interterritorial; it directs, supervises, and coordinates the activities of the provincial and legislative councils. But, the legislative councils express a strong degree of autonomy in their affairs, while looking to the council in special situations. The council also can act as a judicial tribunal underneath the highest judicial authority, i.e., the Aga Khan. (38) All council members are nominated by the Imam with representation given to all East African countries.

Next in the hierarchy are provincial and legislative councils in all the three territories. After Zanzibar's merger with Tanganyika (1964), Dar es Salaam formed the seat of administration; this centralization in Dar es Salaam has emphasized the importance of the union. The provincial council functions to direct, supervise, and coordinate the activities of various district jamats within each territory; i.e. a congregation of Ismailis out of the metropolitan jamat (the metropolitan jamat). (39) On the other hand, the legislative council resembles the House of Commons in that it is entrusted with forming new laws and regulations and constitutes the third order judicial tribunal. Policy directives for various departments of Ismaili government such as health, education, and social welfare are functions of this council also; each department is headed by a council member.

District Jamats are those mosques opened by shopkeepers in rural areas who opened *dukhas* in the 1940's, and who, as a consequence, formed

at a later date a District Jamat which was controlled by the metropolitan mosque in the nearest city. For example, in Nairobi, the District Jamats can be found in Machakos, Kitui, Kangundo, Thika, Navaisha, and Gilgil.

Table II. Administrative Hierarchy

Imam (Aga Khan)					
Supreme Council for East Africa					
Tanzania		Kenya		Uganda	
Provincial Council	Legislative Council	Provincial Council	Legislative Council	Provincial Council	Legislative Council
District Jamats	Laws	District Jamats	Laws	District Jamats	Laws
	Health Education Welfare		Health Education Welfare		Health Education Welfare

From this description, one can see that the Ismailis of East Africa are separated from each other geographically, i.e. Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda's different locations in geographic space; but through their administrative hierarchy, a united religious territory has been formed.

#### Geographical Aspects of Economic, Social, and Political Organization

The key to the geographical aspects of the economic, social, and political organization of the Ismaili community in East Africa is the Aga Khan. It was in 1935 when he began to reorganize the sect with large sums of money obtained from his Golden Jubilee. (40) Being wealthy in his own right, he has made a special effort to see that money obtained from such a thing as the Golden Jubilee is returned to the community. (41) By Ismaili law, (42) all money of the organization and all property are nominally the Aga Khan's; however, he has acted as somewhat of a clearing house for these revenues in that practically all of it goes back to the community in one form or another.

A specific example of how he has played a significant role in the economic organization and consequently the Ismaili economic impact on the landscape can be illustrated by his disposal of the funds from his Golden Jubilee in 1935. Searching for ideas regarding the use of the money, he called a conference of the leaders of the community. Most of the leaders wanted to establish a bank, but he vetoed this idea in favor of establishing an insurance company; this he felt was safer than banking because the risks could be re-insured with larger international companies. During this same period, a program was planned for the com-

mercial education of the Ismaili community - a necessity at that time since their overall level of wealth was somewhat lower than other communities in East Africa. The essence of the program consisted of teaching Ismaili traders how to use the Partnership Acts of the different territories in which they traded. One can see many of the geographical implications here because ultimately these programs would have a major impact on the landscape in the forms of commercial nodality, transportation, and communications. Spatial interaction can be used to describe the results collectively. (43)

Furthermore, the insurance company proved a great success, and in 1946 a finance company, the Diamond Jubilee Trust, was established with the money collected on the Imam's 60th anniversary. This trust company became associated with subsidiary bodies that made small loans to members of the community, most of whom had been complaining that the existing economic arrangements were producing a relatively narrow class of rich men whose wealth was being confirmed by recent internal changes in political arrangements of the community. In response to some of these claims, another organization was formed that has a direct impact on the landscape, i.e. the Ismaili Building Society which aided and commanded all Ismailis to own their own flats and houses by 1960. Although this program was not 100% successful, it did motivate home ownership, which created an impact on the landscape. (44)

These few economic developments during the early years of the Aga Khan's major interest in East Africa laid the foundation for other political and social changes that were being directed by him. By 1962 he had completed the political arrangements that are characterized as a system of "checks and balances". (45) The number of people running this elaborate organization is small; and on the whole it is the rich who have succeeded in making their way into the governing network of interlocking directorates, presidencies, and religious offices. Because nomination to an office is ultimately the prerogative of the Aga Khan, many of the officeholders maintain their positions in the face of intense competition from those seeking that office. They all realize that the Aga Khan has great knowledge of the upper class because it is his creation; and because no one is certain as to his decision relative to appointments, local factional disagreements often occur. Any time there is a community deadlock, an appeal to the Aga Khan results in the final decision - thus showing again his influence. (46)

The social structure of the community and the interaction between the Ismailis and other religious groups is also related to the Aga Khan. He has pointed out that the Ismailis will suffer many disabilities if they retain Indian habits and Indian patterns of life; and undoubtedly, he helped them organize themselves in a manner so that they can participate fully in the new societies which are developing in Africa. There can be little doubt about the theoretical status of the sect in East Africa; it is a corporate group whose organization extends to the remotest

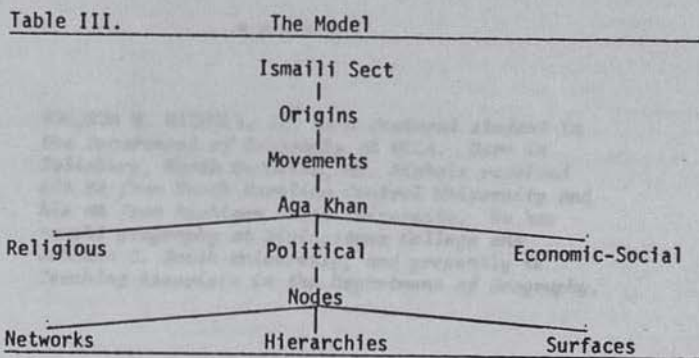


out-station where there may happen to be one or two Ismaili families and compels them to participate whole-heartedly in its activities. (47)

Conclusion

What concepts have been developed from this study of the Ismaili sect in East Africa? First, it was pointed out that, after originating in Persia, Ismailism established sequential core areas from Persia and Syria, through Yemen and North Africa, establishing itself finally in West India and East Africa. Underlining all these flows were political, economic, and social motivations. Second, there has been a positive and negative expression or impact on the landscape of East Africa, ranging from sacred structures, general land-use patterns such as commercial nodes, residences, street names, etc., to religious names on the land. These factors combine to produce what might be called a "religious landscape" in East Africa. Third, religious circulation or movement and human agglomeration are depicted in the various religious ceremonies held throughout East Africa by the sect; these create spatial interaction and a modification of the cultural landscape. Fourth, the religious and political aspects of the sect are interwoven to produce a separation in terms of geography, but a unified organized religious territory in terms of religious organization. And lastly, the key to the economic, social, and political aspects of the sect lies in the Aga Khan, the Imam, who has created a "checks and balances" system that can be characterized as both secular and spiritual.

A model could be developed here for further work on this sect in East Africa. This model would concentrate basically on the Aga Khan and the sect as an urban group. It would entail its origins, movements, networks, nodes, hierarchies, and surfaces. It would also take into account certain external influences that would explain patterns not resulting from the directives of the Aga Khan.



There are many ways to approach a study of the Ismaili sect; this

paper does not contend that this is the only way. However, it does show that religious landscapes do exist in East Africa and that the Ismaili landscape constitutes one segment out of several. More work is needed, not only in East Africa and on Islam, but in Asian and Latin American areas where different types of religious landscapes exist. Lastly, a universally acceptable typology has not yet been developed, although there have been many attempts. It is hoped that this paper will generate some ideas and propositions along these theoretical lines.

#### Footnotes

1. D.L. Sopher, *Geography of Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957), p.2.
2. *Loc. cit.*
3. W. Ivanow, *Brief Survey of the Evolution of Ismailism* (Holland: 1952), p. 29; and B. Lewis, *The Origins of Ismailism* (Cambridge: 1940), p.19.
4. Syed Mujtaba Ali, *The Origin of the Khojas and Their Religious Life Today* (Bonn: 1936), p.1.
5. Ivanow, *op. cit.*, p. 30
6. A. Amiji, "The Asian Minorities", in J. Kritzcek and W. H. Lewis, *Islam in Africa* (Van Nostrand: 1969), p. 145
7. G. Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, (Oxford: 1963), p.6
8. Ivanow, *op. cit.*, p. 30
9. J.S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa* (Oxford:1969)pp.12-13
10. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 143
11. Sopher, *op. cit.*, p. 28
12. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 114; Actually this statement should indicate that their dead were once sent to Kerbala.
13. This information was obtained in an interview with Miss Hamida Mohammedali.
14. There does not appear to be a funeral mosque associated with the cemeteries.
15. Delf, *op. cit.*, p. 7
16. Interview with Hamida Mohammedali.
17. H.J. de Blij, *Mombasa*, (Northwestern: 1963), p. 69
18. Mangat, *op. cit.*, p. 134
19. Delf, *op. cit.*, p. 8
20. *Ibid.*, p. 9
21. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 114
22. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 153
23. Interview with Hamida Mohammedali.
24. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 154
25. *Loc. cit.*; until 1956 the prayers were said in Gujarati dialect; afterwards Arabic with transliteration in Roman and Gujarati characters and translations into English and Gujarati. The purpose was to bridge the gap between East African Ismailis and Middle Eastern Ismailis.

26. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 164
27. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 114
28. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 150; also see S. Morris, "The Divine Kingship of the Aga Khan: A Study of Theocracy in East Africa", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 14 (1958), p. 454.
29. Amiji, *loc. cit.*
30. *Loc. cit.*
31. *Loc. cit.*
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159
33. *Ibid.*, p. 161
34. Sopher, *op. cit.*, p. 55
35. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 148
36. Morris, "Indians in East Africa: A Study in a Plural Society", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 7 (1956), p. 194
37. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 148
38. *Ibid.*, p. 149; and Morris, *The Indians in Uganda*, (London: 1968) p. 26.
39. Amiji, *loc. cit.*
40. Zakat (alms) amounts to 1/8 of the net income.
41. Morris, "Indians in East Africa", p. 194.
42. J.N.D. Anderson, "The Ismaili Khojas of East Africa", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 1 (1964), p. 21.
43. Morris, "Indians in East Africa", p. 194.
44. *Loc. cit.*
45. Amiji, *op. cit.*, p. 151
46. Morris, "Indians in East Africa", p. 194
47. *Loc. cit.*

\*\*\*\*\*

WOODROW W. NICHOLS, JR. is a doctoral student in the Department of Geography at UCLA. Born in Salisbury, North Carolina, Mr. Nichols received his BA from North Carolina Central University and his MA from Michigan State University. He has taught geography at Livingstone College and Johnson C. Smith University, and presently is a Teaching Associate in the Department of Geography.