

Mukherjee, Soumen: *Ismailism and Islam in Modern South Asia. Community and Identity in the Age of Religious Internationals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. ISBN: 9781107154087; 300 S.

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Soumen Mukherjee's long awaited monograph, titled *Ismailism and Islam in Modern South Asia: Community and Identity in the Age of Religious Internationals*, could not have come at a better time, following what seems to be a recent revival in Shia Studies.¹ Interestingly, Ismaili communities in particular, and their place in the modern globalized world order, have become the subject of study in academia.² This academic interest in globalized Ismailism, however, paradoxically comes at a time when diasporic South Asian Ismaili communities are in the process of reclaiming their local, vernacular heritage and traditions before the arrival of the Agha Khan in India.³ In this regard, Mukherjee's study, which deconstructs the Ismaili Khojas' development into an „Ismaili international“ and an „Ismaili subjectivity“, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the community's dynamics today.

With this book, Mukherjee offers readers a fresh and critically theorized modern history of the Agha Khani Khoja Ismailis, focusing on the development of a distinctive Shi'i Ismaili identity from nineteenth century colonial Bombay until the present time. Taking into account both the larger context of social-political change in Muslim South Asia and local, often contested, historical processes within the community, the author cleverly balances vernacular religious-cultural particularities with contemporary notions of pan-Islamism, decolonialization, and universal forms of authority, leadership and constitutionalism. Mukherjee draws on a wide array of primary source materials from state archives and repositories, many of them are yet unstudied, including literature produced by the Imamate (memoirs, speeches, *firmans*, and official publications), manuscripts and archival documents, court records, and private papers.

Mukherjee is particularly interested in the charismatic and messianic leadership of Sultan Muhammad Shah Agha Khan III (1877–1957), his intellectual profile, and what he considers his cosmopolitan and global aspirations. By focusing on the Agha Khan's writings and his ecumenical message of Ismaili universalism, Mukherjee's monograph indirectly is also a study in the intellectual history of the Imamate. A central part of this vision of Ismaili universalism he argues, is the shaping of the Ismaili subject, which he analyzes through a *longue durée* perspective: from the birth of a Shi'i Isma'ili identity in colonial times, to the creation of Ismaili subjectivity in South Asia and East Africa through a code of conduct, to branding and conceptualizing an Ismaili international in global times through governance and constitutionalism.⁴

Mukherjee's five chapters deliver a compelling account of how Khojas become Ismailis in the contemporary period. While previous anglophone researchers such as Nile Green, Amrita Shodan, and Teena Purohit have focused on similar questions, their research is mainly concerned with the nineteenth century context of colonial Bombay. Mukherjee goes a step further by offering a highly theorized deconstruction of Ismailism and the Ismaili subject and its Imamate, not only in the nineteenth century court room but

¹ Olly Akkerman et al., A Recent Revival of Shi'i Studies in Germany. Three Panels on the Field, in: *Shi'i Studies Review* 2 (2018), 372–380. In the United States, the Shi'i Studies Group has been active in rekindling the field (University of Chicago), followed by the Leiden Shi'i Studies Initiative.

² See for instance Johan Steinberg, *Isma'ili Modern. Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community*, Chapel Hill 2011; Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *Authority without Territory. The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate*, Basingstoke 2014.

³ See for example Samer Traboulsi, Conference Report. The 2nd International Ismaili Studies Conference (ISC), Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, March 9-10, 2017, https://brill.com/view/journals/ssr/2/1-2/article-p385_14.xml (24.01.2019). For a similar initiative from the twelve Khoja group see www.khojastudies.org.

⁴ While Mukherjee focused on the post-national, the denationalized and the cosmopolitan, Iqbal Akthar, focusing on the twelver Khojas, argues for the notion of globalized religious citizenship. See Iqbal Akthar, *The Khoja of Tanzania. Discontinuities of a Postcolonial Religious Identity*, Leiden 2015.

in particular in the present age of globalization. The role of both the colonial authorities and the Imamate in this complex process are analyzed.⁵

Moreover, through the writings of Agha Khan III, Mukherjee is the first to critically examine how „Ismaili Studies“ emerges as an epistemological entity and field of enquiry, responsible for the production and systemization of knowledge on Ismailism and Ismaili societies. In brief, *Ismailism and Islam in Modern South Asia* can be considered a critical intervention to the field of contemporary Ismaili Studies challenging normative narratives of Ismaili history by pointing to its discontinuities and breaks.⁶ It will be of considerable interest to students, academics, and general readers of Islamic and South Asian studies.

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⁵ Nile Green, *Bombay Islam. The Religious Economy of the Western Indian Ocean*, Cambridge 2011; Amrita Shodan, *A Question of Community. Religious Groups and Colonial Law*, Calcutta 2001; Teena Purohit, *The Agha Khan Case. Religion and Identity in Colonial India*, Harvard 2012. For similar research in French see Michel Boivin, *L'āghā khān et les Khojah Islam chiite et dynamiques sociales dans le sous-continent indien (1843-1954)*, Paris 2013. See the review of Zahir Bhalloo: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bcai/29/14/>.

⁶ In this regard, an area of research which requires further attention, according to Mukherjee, is the way in which Ismaili communities relate to a perceived common historical past, in particular, the heritage of the Fatimid caliphate. See Olly Akkerman, *Script, Archive, and Secrecy across the Western Indian Ocean. A Social Codicology of Bohra Manuscripts* (forthcoming).