SOME EAST AFRICAN FIRMANS OF
H. H. AGA KHAN III

BY

A. K. ADATIA
(University of Bristol, U.K.)

AND

N. Q. KING
(University of California, Santa Cruz, U.S.A.)

His Highness Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III, was Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims from 1885 to 1957. He succeeded to the Imamate at the age of eight, being the forty-eighth in succession to Hazrat Ali, the kinsman and son-in-law of the Prophet. He was the spiritual leader of millions of Ismailis located in different parts of the world: to enable him with equal facility to reach all his 'spiritual children', as he loved to call them, he settled in Europe. Many people came to know him by his political and sporting interests as a rich prince whose name was connected with international organisations and important political and social events. Those who were more informed knew that his main preoccupation was his spiritual charge, the welfare of the Ismailis.

The contact of Islam with East Africa dates back a number of centuries, but Shia doctrine and particularly the Ismaili philosophy were almost unknown in East Africa until the advent of Ismailis from India during the nineteenth century. They came as merchants who contributed to the exploration of the East African coast and its hinterland and to the growth of trade with Europe and America. Sir Tharia Topan and Vizier Alidina Visram are well known names in the commercial history of East Africa. Others came as clerks and shop assistants and some of the others may have been recruited to help build, run and supply the East African railway.

1) Regarding transliteration and diacritical points: at first we used the system for Arabic of the Edinburgh Department of Islamics but then decided it was more historically correct to use the commonly accepted usages of East Africa of the period. In any case, a uniform system in connection with Gujarati has not yet established itself in East Africa.
These people of diverse interests and deep-rooted traditions came from different parts of British India (as it then was). In some cases they even spoke different dialects. It was their religion which they had in common. When His Highness the Aga Khan III assumed the Imamate their practice of Islam contained a number of rituals and ideas derived from the Hindu society from which they had come. Centuries before when Ismaili Muslim missionaries such as Pir Sadruddin had come to them from Persia, they had allowed certain elements from Hindu culture to continue amongst their converts, using them as examples to elucidate the evolution of Islam, by way of familiar ideas leading towards an ultimate understanding of the theology they had brought.

During the 48th Imamate this group of people, far from their motherland, was carried further towards understanding Islam, was given a sense of belonging to the land they had adopted, and was knitted into a highly organized community with its own schools, health centres, and social and commercial institutions which they share with their fellow-countrymen of East Africa. Little attention was paid to the conversion of others to Ismailism. Perhaps the Imam felt that this activity could not be encouraged until those who were already in the fold had become better informed and able to assimilate the newcomers. In view of the fact that the majority of the congregation were of a particular racial group there was the danger that the idea of the universality of the faith might be lost not only upon the members of the sect but also upon the population in East Africa. As we shall see later in this article the Imam took every opportunity to emphasize to his spiritual children that although as Ismailis they were brothers wherever they lived, their national allegiance nevertheless was first and foremost to the country of which they happened to be citizens. This point of universal brotherhood in religion of all Ismailis appears to have been grasped and one sees evidence of the Ismaili congregation, which as a result of historical coincidence was up to recently predominantly Indian and Pakistani in origin, incorporating members of other races.

The chief instrument of guidance to the community is the Firman or command from the Imam. Firmans are read and meditated upon by the Ismailis as spiritual nourishment and as a guide to the whole of their life. Islam is not only a religion, it is also a way of life. To have guided the Ismailis in East Africa to a way of life so admirably suited to the cosmopolitan society in Africa is an achievement in social history comparable to any great feat of emancipation anywhere in the world.