MODERNIZATION AND CHANGE IN THE NIZARI ISMAILI COMMUNITY IN EAST AFRICA—A PERSPECTIVE

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The aspirations and problems of contemporary Muslims both in Africa and elsewhere have been variously formulated as "the challenge of the Modern Age to Islam," the modernization of technologically backward and traditional societies, or in even broader terms as a tension that is by no means peculiar to Islam. 1) Whereas the varied uses of terminology to express properly the nature of the problem may be questioned, we can agree in principle that since the onset of the so-called period of modernization, there has come about in the minds of concerned Muslims a certain new motivation. 2) This has led them to consider and evaluate Islam, as they had come to believe in it and practice it, in terms of their ability to revitalize their faith, in dealing with the emerging existential situation. 3)

This essay, then, is concerned largely with analyzing this motivation as it has been reflected within the Nizari Ismaili community of East Africa and relating this to the wider issue of the processes by which a specific Muslim group has been able to effect change. The


2) The term "modernization" has perhaps been best defined in relation to tradition in Cyril E. Black, The Dynamics of Modernization... (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), as a process with a "continuous series of changes accompanying the growth of knowledge and its effects on man's way of getting things done." Traditional societies on the other hand are seen as "a pattern of inherited institutions or structure that is relatively static at the time modern knowledge makes its initial impact on it" (p. 55).

Nizari Ismailis of East Africa, also called Khojas, must be properly distinguished from other Shia groups in East Africa like the Ithna-ʾAshari and Bohora. All three trace their origin back to that group of Muslims who, on the death of Muhammad, held the view that his son-in-law Ali inherited the role of leader and guide of the Muslim community. This group, which came to be known as the Shiʿa, further developed this claim into the doctrine of Imamat, where this role would be perpetuated by a designated transmission through the descendants of Ali. In the course of Shiʿa history a number of splits took place over the issue of succession to the Imamat, and the Nizari Ismailis are one resulting group. They maintain that their present Imam, His Highness Karim, Aga Khan IV, is the rightful and legitimate heir to the position of Imam, while the Ithna-ʾAshari and Bohora give allegiance to a different set of Imams. The latter two groups believe that the last Imam of the respective time has gone into concealment, or occulation, to reappear towards the Day of Judgment. ⁴)

Since the question of modernization and development is one that has wide implications for the developing world as a whole, it is necessary to establish at the outset certain criteria for evaluating modernization. Karl Deutsch advocates the barometer of “social mobilization,” which he defines as the “process in which major clusters of old social, economic, and psychological commitments are eroded and broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior.” ⁵) This “social mobilization” would then be reflected in the various socio-demographic and structural corollaries of a modernized society, with all its well-known institutions. Such a limited and unilinear definition serves however to characterize only the separate external manifestations and fails to take into account a deeper, more significant dimension of modernization. Modernization needs to be seen as an ongoing process that generates a series of common and often similar problems, to which different responses are possible. The Ismaili response can be seen as an attempt to develop a society which, while creating a new system and generating continuous change, would also be able to absorb these changes without breaking at the center

⁴) Works on all aspects of Ismailism have shown a steady increase recently. For a general view on the various groups and the reasons for the splits, see Wladimir Ivanow, “Ismailiya,” in the Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, 179-183, and also A. A. A. Fyzeel, “Ismailis,” in Arthur J. Arberry (ed.), Religion in the Middle East... (Cambridge University Press, 1969), II, 318-330.