Transnationalizing Multiple Secularities: A Comparative Study of the Global Isma'ili Community

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Abstract: *»Transnationalisierung von Multiple Secularities: eine komparative Studie der globalen ismaʿilitischen Gemeinschaft«.* This article starts with and proceeds from empirical observations about the ways international Ismaili students at two institutes for Islamic studies in London draw boundaries between religion and other spheres in their everyday life. According to these observations, students from Ismaili communities in Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria tend to make more explicit distinctions between a religious domain and a secular one in comparison with their Khoja coreligionists of East African descent. In order to explain this disparity, structural, ideological, and social conditions in their respective countries and communities are analyzed using the framework of multiple secularities. It is argued that while Ismaili communities in Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria have each internalized a motif of secularity from its broader national context, Khoja Ismaili communities have developed their own form of secularity, which can be described in terms of internal secularization. This article makes a contribution to the multiple secularities framework by extending its application to the transnational domain and to the analysis of secularity within religious communities. Furthermore, the article offers a comparative approach to the study the role of religion in global Ismailism.

Keywords: Secularity, internal secularization, Isma'ilism, transnational religious movements, Khoja, East Africa, Aga Khan III.

1. Introduction: The Study of Secularization in Contemporary Ismailism

The contemporary Nizari Ismaili community, which belongs to the Shiʿi branch of Islam, consists of around two to three million Ismailis[1] who are distributed over more than 25 countries in five different continents. Depending on geo-

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[1] Due to the absence of reliable statistical data, the numbers of Isma'ilis mentioned in this article, whether worldwide or in individual countries, are only estimates.

graphic region, language, and ethnicity, Nizari Ismaʿilis can be classified into the following groups: Arabic-speaking Ismaʿilis in Syria; Persian-speaking Ismaʿilis in Iran and Afghanistan; Central Asian Ismaʿilis, who are divided among Tajikistan, northern parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Xinjiang region in China; and South Asian Ismaʿilis, the majority of whom are known as the Khoja, who descend from the Sindh-Gujarat area in modern day Pakistan and India. The latter group has established, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, diasporic communities in East Africa, Southeast Asia, and later in Western Europe and North America. These communities are connected to each other through a transnational network of institutions that provide a variety of religious and social services to their members. Khoja Ismaʿili communities are generally well integrated into this institutional framework and they constitute its financial and administrative base, whereas other communities vary in the level of their integration and participation in global Ismaʿilism.[2]

Khoja Nizari Ismaʿili communities in East African countries attracted considerable scholarly attention in the 1960s and 1970s at the heyday of modernization theories. Many authors saw in them an interesting, if not paradoxical, case of a religious (Muslim) community that has a very modern outlook yet continues to hold to its religious traditions and the authority of its spiritual leaders: the Aga Khans.[3] On the one hand, Khoja Ismaʿili communities are entrepreneurial, Western-oriented, and highly educated, with women having fairly good access to education, work, and leadership positions. On the other hand, religion apparently continues to be a central aspect for Khoja Ismaʿilis, with much of individual and social life centered on religious rituals and institutions. What made their case *paradoxical* – a term that one frequently encounters in studies about Ismaʿilis in general and Khoja in particular[4] – is that their modernity seemed to stem from a theological principle that may be perceived as irrational and anti-modern (in the Weberian sense); namely, unquestionable submission to the authority of a person who is believed to be infallible and divinely guided: the Ismaʿili Imam. Authors of these studies have reasoned that the latest two Aga Khans *happened to be* open to the West and modernity, and

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2   For an overview of contemporary Ismaili communities, see Daftary (2011). For a study of the interaction between transnational Isma'ili institutions and local communities (in this case in Central Asia), see Steinberg (2011).

3   The Aga Khan is a hereditary title that has been held by Nizari Isma'ili Imams since the Imamate of Hasan 'Ali Shah (r. 1817-1881). After the brief four-year Imamate of his son Aqa 'Ali Shah (Aga Khan II), Nizari Isma'ilis have been led ever since by two Imams only: Aga Khan III (r. 1885-1957), who took office at the age of eight, and his successor and grandson the current Aga Khan (or Aga Khan IV), who has already been an Imam for more than 60 years.

4   See for example, Morris (1958, 471-472); Anderson (1964, 22-3); Gellner (1973, 196); Keshavjee (1981, ch. III, 21); and Ruthven (1997, 382-4).

so they used their divine authority to implement extensive reforms institutionally and doctrinally to modernize the community smoothly and quickly.

This seemingly paradoxical nature of modernization in the case of Khoja Ismaʿilis extends to the question of secularization. Are Khoja Ismaʿilis highly secularized, as it may seem from their organizational structures, worldly orientation, and openness toward Western culture, or not, as the continuous centrality of religion in their daily life indicates? Or is the question itself irrelevant in their case since for them any distinction between the religious and the secular makes little sense, except perhaps when it comes to politics? If 'secularization' was initiated by religious authority itself, is it still meaningful to call it secularization? How do issues of secularization and modernization for Khoja Ismaʿilis differ from those for other Ismaʿili communities which are found in widely different contexts and are less integrated into the transnational, institutional, and ideological framework created by the Aga Khans? As Ismaʿili communities have become increasingly connected with each other in recent years, how are different perceptions of the definition and role of religion in the global Ismaʿili community arising in their social interactions?

Answering these questions requires a theoretical approach that takes into account different dimensions and constellations of the relationship between the religious and the secular, which will be implemented in this article using the framework of *multiple secularities* introduced by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt (2012; also in the introduction of this special issue, Dressler, Salvatore, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2019) together with the concept of *internal secularization*, which was first coined by Thomas Luckmann (1967). Furthermore, a comparative analysis of notions of secularity in different Ismaʿili communities is undertaken. The comparison begins with empirical observations taken from field research into social interaction between Ismaʿilis from different countries on a transnational level (in this case, international students at two postgraduate institutions for Islamic studies in London, which belong to the Ismaʿili community). The analysis of these empirical data in a previous study (Magout 2016, 145-69) has shown that Ismaʿilis from countries such as Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria tend to make clear distinctions between a domain that is religious and another that is secular compared with Khoja Ismaʿilis, for whom there seems to be a confluence between the religious and the secular in most spheres. In order to provide an explanation of this empirical disparity and provide an analytical picture of the *multiple secularities* of global Ismaʿilism, the structural, political, and social conditions in their respective home countries and communities are analyzed using the framework of multiple secularities and the concept of internal secularization. The focus in this article will be on the Imamate of Aga Khan III (r. 1885-1957), who laid the institutional and ideological foundations that still shape Ismaʿilism in the 21st century.

Through this comparative analysis, the article makes a number of theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of secularity, transnational religious

movements, and contemporary Nizari Ismaʿilism. First, it deals with the question of multiple secularities at multiple levels: from the micro-level of individual perceptions and practices, through the meso-level of religious communities, up to the national and transnational levels. It does so by combining the framework of multiple secularities with the concept of internal secularization to show that motifs of secularity that arise within religious communities may not be related only to notions of secularity within wider society, but also to internal dynamics within each community and its institutional and cultural links beyond the boundaries of the nation state. Contemporary Ismaʿili communities, as the analysis below shall demonstrate, present illustrative examples of both nationally bound and transnationally framed notions of secularity and of tensions and dynamics that may result from their interface. Finally, given the lack of comparative studies about contemporary Ismaʿili communities[5], this article could be the starting point for an academic discussion that examines their differences and similarities across the globe.

2.   Empirical Observations: Drawing Boundaries between the Religious and the Secular in Everyday Life

In 2013 and 2014, I conducted fieldwork on Ismaʿili postgraduate students at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) in London for my PhD dissertation (Magout 2016). The fieldwork consisted of in-depth, open-ended interviews about their life in London and in their home countries in addition to participant observation conducted at the two institutes, the accommodation of the students, and Ismaʿili community centers in London. The Ismaʿili community in London consists primarily of Khojas originating from East African countries that were under British colonial rule (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania), but later it received further immigrants from South Asia and more recently from Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria. Yet the community still retains its dominant Khoja East African character demographically and liturgically.

  Data collected from my fieldwork in London indicates that there are systematic differences between how Ismaʿilis from different communities demarcate the boundaries of religion and determine its relationship with other spheres. For Khoja Ismaʿilis, religion seemed to interweave with most aspects of their individual and social life, and they made little effort to distinguish between a do-

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5   Contemporary Ismaili studies thus far have only examined individual communities or interaction between a local community and transnational Ismaili institutions. To take a number of Ismaili communities from different regions and traditions together and examine a certain social, cultural, or economic aspect from a comparative angle has – to the best of my knowledge – not yet been undertaken.

main that is explicitly religious and another that is not. In comparison, Ismaʿilis from Syria, Iran, and Tajikistan tended to make more clear-cut distinctions between religion and non-religion, defining religion as a clearly demarcated domain of their individual and social life. A good place to observe such differences between Khoja and non-Khoja Ismaʿilis are *jamatkhanas*[6] in London. Differences and contrasts in terms of behavior are obvious to the eye of the observer. Khoja Ismaʿilis tend to deal with these gatherings as religious as well as social events where one participates in congregational prayers but also spends some time afterwards socializing with fellow Ismaʿilis. This is also reflected in their clothing, which is meant, especially among women, to reflect social status.[7] Non-Khoja Ismaʿilis, on the other hand, express discomfort at what they perceive as an amalgamation of social and religious aspects, as the following quotation from an interview with a female student from Tajikistan indicates:

> In the *namaz* that we did in Tajikistan, we used to go there without any makeup, with closed hairs, and very humble and simple clothes. I don't know; I felt like it was some kind of initiation into prayer itself. But here I felt like you're preparing yourself for a social event rather than going to pray. I think it's, as we studied, the sacred part and the profane... I think the profane part is bigger than the sacred (laugh) Yeah, I got these impressions. So for myself, if I wear like my posh clothes, and I do my hairs and stuff, I really don't think about God (laugh) I don't know. I would not think, like for me personally, I would be like more social talking and doing something. Of course, I know that it's one part of the functions of *jamatkhana* here, because they don't have any other opportunity to meet. I understand it, but it's still like... this is the part I don't feel much comfort in *jamatkhana*.[8]

The above quote shows that for this Tajik student, *namaz* (ritual prayer) entails a clear spatial and temporal demarcation from the mundane part of the world. Hence moving from the mundane into the sacred side involves crossing boundaries, which requires some kind of "initiation," such as wearing simple clothes and covered hair. For her, wearing elaborate clothes and make-up belongs to the "social" or the "profane" domain, and so they should be left there as soon

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[6] *Jamatkhana* is an Anglicization of the Arabic-Persian term *jamaʿatkhana* (meaning "place of gathering" or "congregational hall") used by Khoja Ismaʿilis to refer to their community centers, which serve both religious and non-religious functions. The concept of *jamatkhana* can be traced to the idea of "caste-hall" in South Asia (Akhtar 2016, 90) and it has only recently been introduced into other Ismaʿili communities. Ismaʿilis from Syria, for example, still call their place of worship *masjid* (mosque), and it is almost exclusively for religious purposes.

[7] Khoja men are usually dressed in business suits, whereas many women come to *jamatkhana* in elaborate traditional South Asian dresses (such as *saris*) and jewelry. Non-Khoja Ismaʿilis, on the other hand, tend to show up in more casual clothing.

[8] Interview with an IIS student, 01 March 2013. The transcript has been minimally edited to improve grammar and readability. All Interviews cited in this article were conducted confidentially in London.

as one steps into the "sacred" sphere of *jamatkhana*. Taking them into *jamatkhana* is a transgression of the boundaries of the sacred that prevents one from "[thinking] about God." The cited student does realize that for Khoja Isma'ilis, *jamatkhanas* have social "functions," but she still feels uncomfortable mixing the two.[9] Interestingly, this custom of women showing up elaborately dressed in *jamatkhana*[10] was also criticized by two other Khoja female interviewees, but from a socio-economic, non-religious perspective.[11] For them, there is apparently no problem with *jamatkhanas* functioning as spaces for social interaction, but, as maintained by one of them, this custom generates excessive social pressure to live up to high expectations in terms of expenditure on clothing.[12] As a result, some less well-to-do families are refraining from attending important religious ceremonies because they cannot afford to buy new clothes every time. Thus, for Khoja Isma'ilis, the *jamatkhana* is not merely a religious space, and there is no clear-cut separation between its religious and social functions. As noted by Peter B. Clarke in his study of the Ismaili community in London, the *jamatkhana* creates a "spatio-temporal frame" that provides a seamless continuity between the social and the religious worlds (1976, 488).

Curiously, when examining behavior outside *jamatkhanas*, the picture is reversed; that is, it is Khoja Isma'ilis who tend to judge the behavior of others in reference to religion. In other words, for Khoja Isma'ilis religion seems more relevant as a normative framework for behavior outside *jamatkhanas* than it is for students from Syria, Tajikistan, and Iran. The latter group tends to go less frequently and spends less time in *jamatkhanas*, leaving shortly after performing prayers. They generally prefer to socialize more outside the confines of the Ismaili community, and religion seems to be less relevant as a point of reference in their behavior there, compared with Khoja Isma'ilis. This can be seen in moral judgements on personal behavior or even in small details such as everyday greetings. An ISMC student from Syria, for example, cited one incident in which a Khoja woman from the Ismaili community in London reproached him for greeting her with "good morning" instead of *ya 'Ali madad*[13] at the premis-

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9 Similar comments about the social aspect of *jamatkhanas* and how it contradicts their idea of a religious space were made by a male interviewee from Syria (interview with an IIS student, 10 April 2013). For more examples and quotations from interviewed students, see Magout (2016, 145-69).

10 According to Kassam-Remtulla, Friday evenings in Ismaili *jamatkhanas* in East Africa are perceived by other Asians communities, such as Hindus and Bohras, as some kind of "fashion shows" (2000, 70).

11 Interview with an IIS student, 14 April 2013; interview with an ISMC student, 26 April 2013.

12 Interview with an ISMC student, 26 April 2013.

13 The phrase *ya 'Ali madad* is an invocation for aid (*madad* in Arabic and Persian) from 'Ali that is common among Shi'is and Sufis in Iran and South Asia. It is used by Khoja Isma'ilis as an everyday greeting (an Ismaili equivalent to the common Islamic greeting of *al-salam 'alaykum*). For most other Ismaili communities, however, *ya 'Ali madad* is reserved primarily

es of his institute, reasoning that she is an "Ismaʿili," not an "English" woman. He also criticized another Khoja fellow student for serving food brought from *jamatkhana* (*nandi*)[14] only to Ismaʿilis. For this Syrian student, public spaces, such as the ISMC, are neutral places where social interaction occurs within a secular or non-religious framework of behavior, whereas for his Khoja coreligionists, religion continues to be a relevant framework for everyday interactions outside *jamatkhanas*, whether with Ismaʿilis or non-Ismaʿilis.

It should be stressed here that the above observations do not mean that members of one group are inclined to be more *religious* than members of the other, although they do sometimes make such normative judgments about one another. What is at issue here is not *religiosity* – as a normative comparative category of individuals ("more" vs. "less" *religious* individuals) – but differentiation between distinct social spheres in relation or in reference to religion (religious vs. social/cultural/political, sacred vs. profane, worldly vs. non-worldly, etc.). As the above examples indicate, non-Khoja Ismaʿilis are more careful to distinguish between spaces, time intervals, and forms of behavior that they consider specifically religious or for which they consider religion is a relevant framework, and those that are specifically secular or for which religion is not relevant. The Khoja, on the other hand, are observably less inclined to define a domain that is purely religious and another that is purely secular. To put it in simple terms for the sake of clarification: one group (that is, Ismaʿilis from Syria, Tajikistan, and Iran) is disposed to see religion and the secular more in terms of black and white – one domain is strictly religious (rituals, beliefs) and the other is strictly secular (e.g., social life, cultural identity) – while for the other group (that is, the Khoja), religion and the secular tend to merge into different shades of grey. This does not mean, however, that the religious-secular distinction is irrelevant for the Khoja. For example, when it comes to politics and the government, many Khoja would recognize a secular domain that is separate from religion. These observations pertain primarily to the social sphere, and they are comparative in nature; i.e., comparing Ismaʿili communities *relative* to each other rather than making statements about them in *absolute* terms.

Now, how does one explain these different patterns of distinguishing between religion and the secular among students from different Ismaʿili communities in London? The fact that these patterns of behavior and perceptions have emerged frequently and systematically in empirical data (not only my own, but

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for religious contexts; for example, to call attention during a religious gathering or to greet someone who has just finished performing ritual prayers.

[14] Ismaʿilis bring food offerings (*nandi*) to *jamatkhanas*, where they are auctioned after ritual prayers.

also that of other researchers[15]) suggests that there might be reasons that lie beyond individual biographies; in social, cultural, and communal characteristics of these communities.

3.   Theoretical Framework

3.1   Secularization as a Multi-Dimensional Process

It has long been recognized among sociologists of religion that secularization does not simply represent a net reduction in religious beliefs and practices or the scope of religion in the public sphere but new configurations of the religious and the secular and new modes of structuring the relationship between the two. Furthermore, sociologists of religion distinguish between several levels, dimensions, or sub-processes of secularization. José Casanova (2006, 7-8), for example, speaks of *functional differentiation*, *privatization*, and *religious decline,* while Karel Dobbelaere (1987) and Mark Chaves (1993; 1994) refer to *micro-* (individual), *meso-* (organizational, communal), and *macro-* (societal) levels. The point of contestation in all of these perspectives is the exact relationship between these different dimensions, levels, or sub-processes. For the purposes of this article, we are primarily concerned with how individual cognitive and normative categories regarding religion are related to structural, political, and legal arrangements that govern religion and its relationship with other spheres in different social contexts. In the words of Peter L. Berger, we are concerned with how the "institutional 'location' of religion in contemporary society" is related to its "location in consciousness" (1967, 147-52).

Needless to say, the relationship between these two dimensions is complex. Living in a society where religion has been removed from public life does not automatically lead individuals in this society to internalize the notion that religion belongs to the private sphere (i.e., the "location" of religion in consciousness is not merely a *function of* its "location" in society). Conversely, individual conceptions of religion are not *independent of* structural arrangements in society. There are a variety of factors that may influence individual perceptions of religion as a category vis-à-vis others, such as socio-economic position, education, political and ideological orientation, social milieu, and so forth. Another important factor in this regard is the nature of the religion or the reli-

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[15] My observations here intersect with those made by Laila Kadiwal, who also dealt in her PhD dissertation with Ismaili students in London. She notes that faith for Khoja students tends to be "congregational" as opposed to their Tajik counterparts, for whom it is rather "private" (2015, 122). Clarke also notes that it is "well nigh impossible for an Ismaili [Khoja] to make a meaningful distinction between the religious and the social, the spiritual and the material role of the Jamat" (1976, 488).

gious community in question. One may observe that members of different religious communities within the same society develop different subjectivities of secularity, and hence there is a need to look at the meso-level as well as the macro-level to study the factors influencing the subjective location of religion. In this regard, transnational connections of a religious community might be, as in the case of Ismaʿilis, a significant factor in shaping their notions of secularity. In order for the analysis to take into consideration these multiple dimensions and levels, two complementary theoretical frameworks are implemented in this article: *multiple secularities* and *internal secularization.*

3.2   Multiple Secularities

Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt define s*ecularity* as "institutionally as well as culturally and symbolically anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres and practices" (2012, 881). The concept of *multiple secularities* is based on the recognition that distinctions between religion and other societal spheres, whether latent or explicit, are "charged with highly divergent meanings and linked to different political and cultural contexts and histories of social conflict." Accordingly, one may speak of *cultures of secularity*; i.e., certain dispositions and tendencies to draw, maintain, and negotiate the boundaries between religion and other social domains in different contexts and groups (ibid., 904-5). Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt propose four "ideal-types" of "motifs of secularity," which they formulate in terms of "secularity for the sake of...": 1) *individual liberties,* 2) *balancing/accommodating diversity,* 3) *social integration/national development,* and 4) *the independent development of institutional domains.* For each type, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt identify "guiding ideas" that serve to "set the basic terms for distinguishing religious and secular spaces in a given society" (ibid., 888). These motifs are not to be taken as boxes to which secularities in different countries would be allocated. There could be in any given country at any given period of time more than one motif of secularity competing or coexisting with each other, but it might also be that one motif becomes dominant over the other.

What concern us here are types 2 and 3: secularity for the sake of *balancing/accommodating diversity* and secularity for the sake of *social integration/national development.* For type 3, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012, 900-2) give Republican France, Kemalist Turkey, and former East Germany as paradigmatic examples, where a republican, statist, or communist ethos has respectively informed forms and arrangements of differentiation between the religious and the secular. In this type, secularity is guided by ideas of progress, enlightenment, and modernity, which are employed to separate the state from clerical and religious influence. Additionally, religious symbols and expressions are restricted in the public sphere, which becomes a secular domain that

is intended to unify members of the nation regardless of their religious affiliation. Religion, as a result, becomes limited to the private sphere and a few clearly demarcated social spaces (such as places of worship).

In the second type of secularity, *balancing/accommodating diversity*, which is guided by ideas of toleration, respect, and non-interference, the state aims at ensuring balance between different religious communities in order to maintain peace and public order. Here the state is not primarily concerned with protecting *individual rights* (such as freedom of worship or belief) nor with the creation of a secular public sphere that serves to integrate different individuals and communities within a *national political body*. Rather, it is more concerned with giving religious communities, especially minorities, autonomy to manage their own affairs without the interference of the state or the religious majority. This motif of secularity, according to Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, has become dominant in India in the past few decades. One of its major manifestations is the existence of different civil codes for religious communities, even though the Indian Constitution contains a provision that prescribes a uniform civil code in the country (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 896-900).

It should be noted here that the framework of multiple secularities has so far been applied on national/societal (macro-) levels; hence, its relevance for the meso- and micro-levels remains largely unexplored. While in some cases – as the example below of Ismaʿili communities in Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria shall show – religious groups may internalize a motif of secularity existing in their larger society, this cannot be taken for granted in all cases, as the example of Khoja Ismaʿili communities in East Africa will indicate. In other words, one cannot readily reduce secularity within a religious community (meso-level) to secularity in its national context (the macro-level). There is a need therefore within the framework of multiple secularities to expand the discussion deeper into the meso-level, for which purpose one might need to employ additional conceptual tools depending on the case. In this article, the concept of *internal secularization* serves to supplement the framework of multiple secularities in the analysis of secularity within Khoja Ismaʿili communities.

3.3   Internal Secularization

The term *internal secularization* was first coined by Thomas Luckmann in his book *The Invisible Religion* to describe the transformations whereby American church religion *adapted itself* to the values, needs, and organizational forms of industrial society in order to maintain a broad middle-class distribution (1967, 34-7). Its European counterpart, in contrast, kept its traditional forms, thereby limiting its social base to the peasantry and the remnants of traditional and petite bourgeoisie at the margins of modern society. On an institutional level, internal secularization involves "bureaucratization along rational business-like lines", according to Luckmann (1967, 35). In terms of ideology, it entails the

internalization of what Luckmann calls "the *secular* version of the Protestant ethos" (i.e., the "American Dream") while traditional theology and doctrines are relegated to the background (1967, 36-7, emphasis in original).

Peter L. Berger did not use the term *internal secularization* in his book *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), which, like Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion,* was published a year after the publication of their ground-breaking work *The Social Construction of Reality*. However, he describes the transformation of American church religion in similar terms to Luckmann's. Berger maintains that the pressure to *conform* to the preferences of consumers in the competitive, free American religious market has produced similar institutional and ideological developments across American denominations. These developments include bureaucratization, replacement of clergy with lay staff, decline of theological and supernatural legitimations, and the standardization of services offered by religious institutions, which have become more material or this-worldly than other-worldly or spiritual (Berger 1967, 139-47). The concept of internal secularization was later applied by Karel Dobbelaere (1987, 128-30), who argues that the "Catholic pillar" in Belgium *adapted itself* to the secularization of Belgian society by undergoing internal secularization, which he describes in terms similar to those of Luckmann and Berger.

Mark Chaves used the same concept in his study of the development of the organizational structure of American Protestant denominations over the 20th century, but rather than speaking of *adaptation,* as previous sociologists did, he explains internal secularization as the outcome of *competition* for resources within religious communities (1993). He maintains that denominations are organizationally "dual structures" consisting of a religious authority structure (clerical, controlling access to religious products) and an agency structure (lay, administrative), which are competing over organizational resources. He subsequently analyzes internal secularization as the outcome of conflicts between the elites of these two parallel structures, concluding that there has been a consistent trend in American denominations toward choosing their CEOs from outside the religious authority structure. Chaves characterizes this power shift in American denominations toward the agency structure as internal secularization. It should be asserted that the functional approach of Luckmann, Berger, and Dobbelaere to internal secularization as an adaptive strategy is not incompatible with the approach advocated by Chaves, which focuses on internal power dynamics. These two aspects may indeed be mutually reinforcing; the nature of American society probably favors a power shift toward the bureaucratic agency structure, while the dominance of bureaucracy within religious denominations can lead to greater pragmatism in dealing with its social environment.

4.   Cultures of Secularity in Iran, Tajikistan, and Syria

The Iranian modern nation state was established by Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941), whose modernization efforts followed the Kemalist-statist model (Abrahamian 2008, 72-91), including its *assertive secularism*.[16] Modernization continued during the reign of his successor Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941-1979), during which mass political movements such as the socialist Tudeh Party and the National Front of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddeq (r. 1952-1953) contributed to the creation of a nation-wide political sphere. Despite the radical ideological break with the Pahlavi past brought about by the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic, in the words of Ira Lapidus, "remains a national state in terms of its institutional bureaucratic structure and the kinds of economic and political policies it pursues" (1992, 20). Even in ideological terms, its efforts to Islamize society have not necessarily produced a population that is more religious than in the past. In fact, as argued by Khosrokhavar, the secularization "from above" under the Shahs, which centered around modernization and nation-state building, was followed by a second process of secularization "from below" under the Islamic Republic, which centered around individual rights and liberties. This second process of secularization has mainly affected the younger generations in large cities and manifested itself in a number of key events in the past two decades, such as the election of reformist President Muhammad Khatami in 1997 and the protests of the Green Movement in 2009 (Khosrokhavar 2013, 122-3). The Ismaʿili community in Iran, which numbers about 20,000 individuals, is ethnolinguistically Persian like the majority of the country. It largely hails from its state-dependent middle class and its members, like many middle-class Iranians, identify with Iranian nationalism and maintain a secular life-style and political orientation, which is further strengthened by their experience as a religious minority living under an Islamist regime.

   The majority of Ismailis in Tajikistan live in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), which makes up around 45% of the area of the country, but less than 5% of its population. Unlike their coreligionists in Syria and Iran, Tajik Ismaʿilis constitute an ethnolinguistic group (Pamiris) that is distinct from the rest of the country.[17] Modern state institutions in Tajikistan were established by the Soviets in the 1920s, when they initiated a massive project of social engineering to transform the region economically, culturally, and social-

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[16] For the distinction between assertive and passive secularism, see Kuru (2007).

[17] Ismaʿilis in Tajikistan speak a variety of Eastern Iranian languages and identify ethnically as *Pamiri* (a Soviet ethno-linguistic neologism) as opposed to *Tajik,* which refers to the Sunni majority in the country and their language (a Western Iranian language that is closely related to Persian).

ly. Under Joseph Stalin, particularly in the 1930s, the Soviets implemented a policy of violent repression of religion and extensive russification in Tajikistan. Among Ismaʿilis, religious books were confiscated, senior religious leaders were killed or exiled, and contact with the Aga Khan was forbidden. Eventually, Ismaʿilis were successfully integrated into the Soviet project of social engineering and ideological transformation, and they became an active part of the cultural intelligentsia of the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan and its middle and working classes (Bliss 2006, 293). By the 1980s, most Ismaʿilis of Tajikistan identified as *Pamiri*s, which had few religious connotations before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing civil war (1992-1997) undoubtedly changed the situation of Tajik Ismaʿilis drastically. The state institutions collapsed, which led to the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)[18] intervening to fill the gap, becoming thereby the major employer and provider of social and economic services in GBAO. Yet it cannot be said that Soviet secularization has been reversed, and Ismaʿilis remain secular in their political and social life, which can still be seen today in their liberal lifestyle, identification with the Soviet era, and cultural affinity with Russia (Steinberg 2011, 141).

The modernization of Syrian society and the establishment of modern state institutions go back to the reforms implemented by the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century. Salamiyya, the town where the majority of Syrian Ismaʿilis[19] reside, was placed under direct Ottoman administration in 1894 (Amin 1983, 227-8). The expansion of the state accelerated under French rule (1920-1946) and after independence. In the 1950s, the main economic activity of Syrian Ismaʿilis shifted from agriculture to public service, especially in the educational and military sectors, and many middle and working class Ismaʿilis became actively involved in secular nationalist and socialist parties. The few writings about Syrian Ismaʿilis from that period (Lewis 1952; Ghalib 1965) indicate that they became highly secularized, a development which has continued until recent times, as noted by Douwes, who describes Ismaʿilis as "among the most 'secularized' communities" in the region (2011, 19, 36). After al-Baʿth's coup of 1963, secularization intensified but Hafiz al-Assad, who became President after another coup in 1970, began to appease Islamic currents in order to strengthen his hold on power (Al-Azmeh 2008, 293). With the decline of the state's socialist economy starting in the 1980s and the turn to economic liberalization under Bashar al-Assad (2001-present), the regime relaxed

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[18] AKDN is an extensive network of institutions that work in social, economic, and cultural development in various parts of the Muslim world. It belongs to the Ismaʿili community and many of its projects take place in countries where Ismaʿilis live, but its services are not restricted to Ismaʿilis.

[19] Ismaʿilis made up approximately 1‰ of Syria's 22-million population before the outbreak of the ongoing civil war.

restrictions on religious organizations (Pierret and Selvik 2009). Consequently, AKDN entered Syria for the first time in 2001 and started delivering economic and social services to Ismaʿilis and other Syrians. These factors have doubtless contributed to the increasing visibility of religion and its relevance in everyday life, but there are no indications of a complete reversal of secularization in the case of Syrian Ismaʿilis.

In general, all of the three countries mentioned above followed a modernist model of nation-state building, whereby a centralized state was established and extended deep into society to exercise direct control over most of its political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. The state utilized means and measures such as military conscription, a national educational system, mass media, a massive public sector, and centralized economic planning to integrate individuals and communities into a uniform national culture. Furthermore, mass political movements, whether directed by the state or oppositional forces, helped create national political and social consciousness across a wide spectrum of the population. These measures involved exercising control over religious institutions and religious expressions in the public sphere, even though a specific form of religion may have been utilized by the regime to enhance its legitimacy. These transformations extended beyond the structural and ideological level to the epistemic and subjective levels. In other words, it was not only the boundaries of religion in the objective, external world that changed, but also how individuals perceived and defined religion itself on normative and conceptual levels. Religious institutions for different religious communities adapted to this situation by limiting its sphere of activity and claims to the domain of worship and belief. Accordingly, the motif of secularity that became dominant in these countries can be classified under the *societal/national integration and development* type of Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt's secularity framework.

It should be stressed here that these transformations at the individual and communal levels may not have affected the whole population equally; and even if for a time they had, conditions have changed in the past few decades (in Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979; in Tajikistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; and in Syria starting from the 1980s). In all of these countries, religion has recently become more relevant in the political, economic, and individual spheres. However, I would argue here that Ismaʿilis in Iran, Syria, and Tajikistan – especially when compared with the religious majority – were particularly susceptible to internalizing this motif of secularity and, despite changes in the past few decades, maintaining it. This can be explained by several factors. First, as in many countries, official secularism does not preclude the state from sponsoring and giving privileges to certain religions in the public sphere in order to benefit from their symbolic significance and exercise

measures of control over them.[20] This was the case with the Sunnis (and to a lesser extent Christianity) in Syria and the Twelver Shiʿis in Iran. Even in Soviet Tajikistan, the religion of the majority, Sunni Islam, received some official recognition and patronage.[21] Ismaʿilism, on the other hand, as a heterodox religious minority did not receive any such official recognition and patronage, effectively limiting it to the private sphere. This was further strengthened by the practice of *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation), which entails that individual Ismaʿilis maintain a strict separation between a private sphere, where they can express and practice their religion, and a public sphere, where they hide it (in order to conform to the principle of a secular public sphere and/or avoid unwanted attention to their different religious beliefs). Also, many Ismaʿilis saw in secularism an ideology that could unify them with the rest of society and integrate them into something larger than their small communities.

5. Khoja Ismaʿili Communities in East Africa

5.1 Origins and Early History of the Khoja

The origins of the Khoja can be traced to several Hindu sub-castes that over several centuries migrated down the Indus river valley and by the 18th century had settled in the Sindh-Gujarat corridor. Over the course of their centuries-long migration, they changed their main economic activity from agriculture to trade after absorbing members of the mercantile *Lohana* and *Bhatiya* sub-castes (Akhtar 2016, 33-5). Furthermore, they developed a syncretic religious tradition known as *Satpanth* (Sanskrit for "true path"), which was an amalgamation of Hindu and Islamic (including Ismaʿili) elements.[22] At the turn of the 19th century, an affluent Khoja community emerged in Bombay – a metropolitan city and a major trading port at the Indian Ocean – whose members worked in international trade. Although they acknowledged some form of allegiance to

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[20] Perhaps, the best example of this model of secularism is Kemalist Turkey; see Dressler (2011).

[21] The Soviets established the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Russian acronym: SADUM). It was usually chaired by a senior Naqshbandi leader and worked to oversee mosques, appoint religious officials, issue fatwas, and organize pilgrimage to Mecca. Under SADUM, a number of Islamic schools and institutes were opened and maintained, such as the Imam al-Bukhari Institute in Tashkent, which was established in 1971 (Epkenhans 2016, 182).

[22] There is another view within scholarship on the origins of the Khoja, which states that the Khoja were Hindus converted by Ismaʿili missionaries sent from Persia during the 14th and 15th centuries. According to this view, which is more consistent with the contemporary official Ismaʿili narrative, these missionaries used Hindu motifs and symbolism to communicate Ismaʿili religious ideas to the local population and dissimulate their message from persecution.

Ismaʿili Imams in Persia, which included sending alms and performing pilgrimage, they did not simply identify as Ismaʿilis, Hindus (itself a modern religious category), or Muslims either. However, after the Ismaʿili Imam Aga Khan I (r. 1817-1881) fled from Iran and arrived in Bombay in 1848, conflicts erupted between him and some leaders of the prosperous Khoja community in the city, which revolved around the right to determine certain traditions (such as rules of inheritance), the appointment of officials, and the management of the community's sizable properties and financial resources. These conflicts resulted in a series of legal battles in British-Indian courts, the most famous of which is the so-called *Aga Khan Case* of 1866, in which British judge Sir Joseph Arnould ruled that the Khoja were essentially Ismaʿilis of Hindu origins, confirming thereby Aga Khan I's spiritual and temporal authority over their community.[23] Resistance to the authority of the Ismaʿili Imams, however, continued among the Khoja until the beginning of the 20th century, which resulted in the community eventually splitting into three groups: Ismaʿili (the majority), Twelver Shiʿi, and a small Sunni community.[24]

In response to these continuous disputes and schisms, the Aga Khans initiated a series of organizational, doctrinal, and ritual reforms that aimed at asserting their direct and absolute authority over the Khoja Ismaʿili community and delineating its boundaries against other religious groups. The reforms situated the Khoja clearly within the fold of Islam, but distinct from Sunnis and Twelver Shiʿis, by gradually removing manifest Hindu elements and asserting an Islamic-Shiʿi-Ismaʿili identity (Boivin 1994, 197-8), which entailed transposing Khoja religious traditions from an "Indic" religious form (*panth*[25]) into a "Middle-Eastern" one (*dīn*). Nevertheless, as Iqbal Akhtar suggests, this did not mean that one religious form had simply replaced the other (2016, 44, 183), but that Ismaʿilism as a religious identity was layered over the Khoja caste social structure and cultural forms, resulting in a community that was defined by a Muslim faith yet retaining many of the social, religious, and cultural characteristics of its caste origins.

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[23] For an analysis of the Aga Khan Case and the arguments of the involved parties, see Purohit (2012, 35-56).

[24] Unless otherwise stated, the term *Khoja* in this article refers to Khoja Ismaʿilis or to the Khoja in general before schisms in the modern era. The term is used in English-speaking contexts both as a noun – to describe an individual member or the collective – and as an adjective. For a discussion of its etymology and an overview of the early history of the Khoja and their schisms, see Akhtar (2016, 33-47).

[25] The term *panth* refers to several South Asian religious groups that emerged in the late medieval and early modern period, which include the *Satpanth* (the pre-modern Khoja religious tradition). Some of the main characteristics of *panthic* religious traditions are affinity toward Bhaktism (Hindu devotional traditions), a vernacular literature (usually in the form of devotional songs), and an emphasis on performative aspects (Purohit 2012, 10).

The contrast between *dīn* and *panth* in terms of reification may shed some light on why Ismaʿilis from the Middle East as opposed to South Asian Ismaʿilis differ in the extent to which they are disposed to distinguish religion from its social and cultural context.[26] Ismaʿilism, as it developed in the Middle East during the Middle Ages, with its universalism, strong missionary character, theocratic aspirations, and rich theological tradition, is far more reified as an exclusive system of beliefs, laws, and practices (*dīn* in the Islamic sense of the term) compared with a *panthic* religion, such as that of the pre-modern Khoja, which is effectively inseparable from the caste as a social and cultural structure. Arguably, Ismaʿilis that grow up in countries such as Syria and Iran have a more reified understanding of religion in comparison with Khoja Ismaʿilis whose religion, as mentioned above, still retains many *panthic* features, even though their legal and normative definition as a branch of Shiʿi Islam (i.e., a *dīn*) was already established in the early modern period. In fact, the process of transforming the Khoja religious traditions into *dīn* is still underway, which can be observed in the efforts of Aga Khan IV to reform the Khoja religious traditions and their self-understanding, especially through the Institute of Isma'ili Studies and its religious education programs.[27]

5.1 Settlement and Social Organization in East Africa

Over the course of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, many Khojas, along with members of several other South Asian mercantile communities (which included Hindus, Parsis, and Bohras among others), migrated from South Asia to several regions around the Indian Ocean, such as East Africa, South Arabia, and Southeast Asia. Their commercial skills were valued by colonial powers and some local rulers, who encouraged their migration in order to support economic development and help integrate local markets into an expanding transregional capitalist economy. Under colonial rule in East Africa[28], Khoja Ismaʿilis were part of a hierarchical system of autonomous ethno-

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[26] Wilfred C. Smith points out that religious traditions differ in the extent to which each presents itself as a reified systematized entity, and that of "world religions" Islam has been the one with the strongest tendency toward reification (1964, 75-81). This may not apply to Islam everywhere and in every time, but in the context of the Middle East and a self-conscious religious movement such as Ismaʿilism, it might very well be the case.

[27] For studies on the efforts made by Ismaʿili Imams and institutions toward the "Islamization" (or what one may as well call *dinization*) of the Khoja, see Kassam (1995, 9-26); Boivin (2010); Purohit (2012, 111-32). For a comparable case, see Dressler's study of the conceptualization of Alevism in early Turkish-nationalist historiography as an Islamic, albeit "heterodox," religious group – a process he describes as *religionization* (2013, 1-23).

[28] Ismaʿili communities have existed in East African territories under British, French, Portuguese, and German colonial rule, which include modern-day Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Madagascar, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Burundi. There have also been communities in some

religious communities, with white Europeans at the top; South Asians in the middle, working in trade and local administration; and black Africans at the bottom, undertaking manual labor. Within this communalist system of social organization, Khoja Ismaʿili communities prospered benefitting from their proximity to Europeans by acquiring modern education and administrative skills. However, during decolonization in the second half of the 20th century, many Khojas left, or were forced to leave, East Africa for Western Europe (mostly Britain, France, and Portugal) and North America because of racial and economic tensions with the black African majority. Relying on their modern education and entrepreneurial skills, East African Khoja Ismaʿilis were able to prosper again in the West and establish successful communities with extensive financial resources.

Aga Khan III introduced organizational and ideological reforms to modernize and assert his authority over Khoja Ismaʿili communities in East Africa. These reforms became the basis of the contemporary transnational Ismaʿili community and its institutions. Starting in 1905, he issued a series of booklets titled "Rules and Regulations" for his *jamats*[29] in different countries to govern their internal affairs, which included detailed rules regarding administrative institutions, the appointment and mandates of officials, the management of financial resources and communal properties, personal law, welfare, membership, and different aspects of worship. Starting from 1946, these documents became known as *Constitutions,* which indicates the self-perception of the community as a self-governing corporate body (Hirji 2011, 146-7). Khoja communities in East Africa were accordingly organized in an elaborate network of administrative bodies (called *Councils*) operating on provincial, national, and transnational levels. They represented a comprehensive system of governance and welfare that included hospitals, schools, charities, clubs, and even gated residential estates. In matters of personal law, there were communal institutions (tribunals or arbitration boards) that resolved disputes internally without resorting to state courts. This corporate system of communal organization became the model for Ismaʿili communities worldwide and was gradually extended to other countries.[30] However, the extent of its application varied depending on various factors, such as political context and the wealth of the community. Thus, in countries such as Syria, Iran, and Tajikistan, Councils are

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central and southern Africa countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa.

[29] *Jamat* or *jamath* (pronounced *jamat,* from Arabic *jamaʿah,* meaning "group") is a term that was used by the Khoja to refer to the congregation of adult males in a particular locality (hence *jamatkhana,* i.e., the hall where they meet), before being adopted by the Aga Khans to refer to Ismaʿilis residing in a certain region or town. The adjective *jamati* (or *jamathi*) could be translated as "communal" or "denominational."

[30] In 1986, Aga Khan IV issued a universal Constitution for Ismaʿili communities around the world to homogenize their administrative systems.

far more limited in their scope and capacities than those in Khoja communities in East Africa and South Asia and, beyond worship and basic religious education, they offer little in terms of social and economic services.

The Councils are highly *bureaucratic* administrative institutions in the Weberian sense of the term (Weber 1978, 217-26). They are run according to written, abstract rules (the Constitutions), to which all members and officials are subject, with obedience due not to the person in a position of authority, but to the "impersonal order" represented by these rules. Furthermore, officials are organized according to a clear hierarchy with explicitly defined appointments, terms, mandates, and jurisdictions. These Councils are also *highly differentiated* into specialized committees and boards, most of which are concerned with social, cultural, and economic issues, such as health, education, economic planning, law, and women's affairs. The staff of all these administrations are *lay* individuals with no specific religious training or ordination required. Even when it comes to some typical clerical functions (such as conducting religious services), they are carried out by lay officials appointed by the Aga Khan for limited terms.[31] There is no lifelong ministry in contemporary Ismaʿilism and clergy in any meaningful sense of the term has been abolished and replaced with lay bureaucracy.

Another feature of this system of administration is its *business-like* character. Many rules and regulations in the Constitutions, including those related to rituals and religious ceremonies, are associated with the payment of a sum of money, such as a fee, deposit, or fine. The Constitution issued in 1946 for East African Ismaʿilis,[32] for example, prescribes monthly dues[33] (Constitution 1946, ch. VI, section 16); admission fees for filing a case, which increase depending on the number of defendants and witnesses (ibid., ch. V, sections 1, 4, 7); fees for registering birth (ibid., ch. IX, section 1); a permission fee to be buried in

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[31] Every Ismaʿili *jamatkhana* has two officials: a *mukhi* (chief, from Sanskrit *mukhiya*) and a *kamadia* (treasurer) who, along with conducting rituals, are responsible for collecting different types of dues and tithes during daily rituals and other religious ceremonies. Previously (among the Khoja), people occupying these posts were elected from among the wealthiest members of the congregation before the Aga Khans established their right to appoint them directly. For non-Khoja Ismaʿili communities, there were local priests (known as *shaykhs* in Syria; *khalifas* and *pirs* in Tajikistan) who were responsible for conducting religious services and transmitting religious knowledge. They usually ran in certain families, but the Aga Khans have gradually replaced them with directly appointed *mukhis* and *kamadias*.

[32] The document is titled *The Constitution, Rules and Regulations of His Highness The Aga Khan Ismaʿilia Councils of Africa* and was issued by His Highness The Aga Khan Ismaili Supreme Council for Africa. Henceforth, it is referred to in citations as "Constitution 1946."

[33] A regular contribution of one shilling per month entitles a member of the community to receive a letter confirming his membership, which is necessary to receive assistance from Ismaʿili Councils when traveling abroad. The booklet *Rules and Regulations* issued in 1914 by The Khoja Shia Imami Ismaili Council Rangoon (in modern-day Burma) speaks of "Jamat Taxes" (Rules and Regulations 1914, ch. II, section 17).

an Ismaʿili cemetery (ibid., ch. IX, sections 30-31); and a fine of one shilling per minute for arriving more than ten minutes late to a marriage ceremony (ibid., ch. IX, section 10). Also, to join the community, one is required to submit an application and in certain cases to make a deposit (ibid., ch. VII, sections 13, 15). Similarly, to leave the community one must give written notice in advance and complete "prescribed forms" (ibid., ch. VII, section 3a). Owing outstanding sums of money to the Council can have grave consequences for an individual member and his family, which include, according to the booklet of "Rules and Regulations" issued in 1914 for Ismaʿilis in Rangoon, halting a marriage or death ceremony midway through (Rules and Regulations 1914, ch. II, section 17).

This highly fiscal nature of Khoja Ismaʿili communities is reflected not only in their organization, but also in their ideological and economic values. Aga Khan III and his successor attempted to shift the economic and work ethics of Khoja Ismaʿilis from traditional commerce to rational capitalism, entrepreneurialism, and corporate enterprise.[34] They brought Western economic consultants to advise their followers and established a number of capitalist economic ventures, including an insurance company (Jubilee Insurance Group) and an investment trust (Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust, now called Diamond Trust Bank). The Constitution of 1946 encourages Ismaʿilis to "exercise the strictest economy in daily life" (Constitution 1946, ch. VII, sections 1-2) and to avoid extravagant spending on occasions such as marriage and betrothal ceremonies. Aga Khan III also instilled in his followers a Protestant-like sacralized notion of work – whether to earn income, as service to the community, or as charity for outsiders (Boivin 1994, 206-13).

This emphasis on economic values and worldly orientation is paralleled with a *declining emphasis on theological thought* within contemporary Ismaʿilism. While Aga Khan III used some classical Ismaʿili notions like the distinction between *ẓahir* (outer, exoteric) and *baṭin* (inner, esoteric) to justify his modernization reforms, he reoriented the latter toward worldly issues and personal well-being instead of gnostic mysteries or spiritual truths as in traditional Ismaʿili theology (Ruthven 1997, 382-84). The focus in his edicts, guidance, and institutional endeavors was generally on socio-economic development, communal service, ethics, education, health, and personal well-being rather than doctrinal and liturgical issues, which have been relegated to the background.[35] This is reflected in the Constitution of 1946, which contains hardly any reference to specific creeds and doctrines.[36] It seems that the most important con-

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[34] For an analysis of the economic ethics of Khoja Ismaʿilis in East Africa, see Bocock (1971).

[35] Aga Khan III states in his *Memoirs* that "[m]uch of the work of the Ismaili councils and of the Imam's representatives nowadays is *purely social*" (1954, 185, emphasis added).

[36] This changed in the following decades under the Imamate of Aga Khan IV. The universal Constitution of 1986 declares in its preamble the adherence of Nizari Ismaʿilis to the basic

cern of this document is not faith per se, but total submission to the authority of the Aga Khan and his institutions along with the fulfilment of fiscal obligations. The only specific reference to a creed in this Constitution is an article stating that the "ancient words [sic] 'LA-ILAHA-ILLAL-LAH MA-HOMEDUR-RASULULLAH'" (i.e., the Islamic *shahada*) are to be "recited publicly in all our Ismaïlia Jamaths" (Constitution 1946, ch. VI, section 14). Also in terms of rituals, the Constitutions speak only of some technical aspects, such as when and where to perform them, what to pay, and what food to bring.[37]

This corporate, comprehensive system of governance along with the colonial communalist policies of segregated self-governing ethno-religious communities meant that Khoja communities have been largely independent of the state institutionally as well as ideologically. The migration of the Khoja from South Asia took place long before the establishment of any nation state in the Subcontinent. In colonial and post-colonial East Africa, they were never integrated into a nationalist project of state-building comparable to those implemented in Syria, Iran, or Soviet Tajikistan.[38] Their trading networks were not limited to the boundaries of national economies, and they frequently migrated to countries that offered them a liberal economic environment. Wherever they settled, Khoja communities remained relatively autonomous. As many scholars have noted, for the Khoja, membership in the community is the primary marker of social identity, and social participation takes place largely inside the local community or transnationally between different Ismaïli communities, not on a national cross-confessional level. Some even suggest that the Khoja should be regarded as a de-territorialized nation with its own form of transnational *religious* or *communal* "citizenship" (Akhtar 2016, 67-83; Kadende-Kaiser and Kaiser 1998). If the nation state, to take the words of Ira Lapidus, is a "homeland of the mind," (1992, 22), a Khoja Ismaïli often knows no "homeland" of

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tenets of Islam (such as the *shahada*, finality of Mohammad's prophethood, and divinity of the Qur'an) and the Shiʿi doctrine of Imamate (Aga Khan IV 1986, sections A and B).

[37] Such highly fiscal and bureaucratic rules have attracted criticisms from outsiders that the Aga Khans have turned Khoja Ismaïli communities into revenue-generating machines, but some reason that such revenues are re-invested for the welfare of the community and for charitable work (Schacht 1965, 127-8). Even from within the community, some individuals have voiced criticism regarding this aspect. For example, Faisal Devji, who is one of the very few publicly critical voices within the community, warns that Ismaïlism has lost its substance as a form of religious thought and has become effectively an "NGO" with "a secular cult of personality" (2014, 54-5). Another example is Daryoush Poor, who is clearly positive in his view of the Aga Khans, yet he too warns of the "iron cage" effect (à la Weber) of having the community managed by a bureaucracy with no religious or intellectual credentials (2014, 218).

[38] Even when a nationalist project of social and economic integration was implemented, as in the case of Tanzania under President Nyerere (r. 1964–1985), most Khoja Ismaïlis resisted it (Bocock 1971, 374-76).

the mind; or, to be more accurate, their "homeland of the mind" is the Khoja transnational community, and not the nation states[39] under which they may *happen to* live. Hence, Khoja Ismaïlis of East African origins rarely develop a strong sense of territorial or nationalist identity (Akhtar 2016, 63-6), compared with Syrian, Iranian, or Tajik Ismaïlis.

5.2 Conceptual Distinctions between Religion and other Social Spheres

Theoretically, Ismaïlism knows no distinction between religious or clerical authority on the one hand, and temporal or lay authority on the other. Both authorities are united in the figure of the Imam who, according to Shi'i beliefs, is the legitimate leader of the community of believers and the inheritor of the Prophet's political as well as religious authority. It is within Sunni Islam that a differentiation has evolved over several centuries between the authority of the sultan (or in some cases the caliph), which was of a more temporal nature, and that of the *ulama*, who had the authority to interpret religious texts and issue religious decrees. For classical Ismaïlism, the ideal form of government is a theocracy, where the Imam is simultaneously the religious and the temporal ruler; a situation which was historically realized during the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171). In fact, the idea of re-establishing an Ismaili state was entertained as recently as the 1930s when Aga Khan III approached the government of British India requesting to be granted a princely state, where Ismaïlis "could practice all their customs, establish their own laws, and (on the material side) build up their own financial center" (Aga Khan III 1954, 285-6). Yet even though he acknowledged the theocratic nature of authority in Ismaïlism and his recent territorial claims, Aga Khan III ultimately surrenders, in his *Memoirs*, any claims to political authority or allegiance. Instead, he urges his Ismaïli followers to be loyal citizens in their respective countries, regardless of the form of the state, and asks them to "render unto God the things which are God's and to Caesar those which are Caesar's" (ibid., 187).

Aga Khan III thereby limited his claims to the *religious* and, insofar as that does not contradict the laws of the land in which an Ismaïli community exists, *social* realms (ibid., 187-91). In fact, one can distinguish between three spheres of activity in relation to religion in the thought of Aga Khan III and the institutions he created: *secular/political*; *jamati* (pertaining to Ismaïlis as a corporate community); and *religious* (related to worship and beliefs). However, from a practical perspective, especially when looking at the Constitutions and the reality of Ismaïli communities in East Africa as explained above, the scope of what is meant by *jamati* is quite extensive; it effectively comprises everything

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[39] Dual or even triple citizenships are not uncommon among Khoja Ismaïlis of East Africa or East African origins.

except agencies of physical coercion. In other words, in Khoja Ismaʿili communities, social, legal, and economic matters fall under the authority or at least the influence of the Imam. For example, even though the rules contained in the Constitutions do not override the laws of the country, they outline mechanisms and urge Ismaʿilis to resolve their legal disputes internally through community institutions (see, for example, Constitution 1946, ch. V, sections 9-10). This is confirmed by Joseph Schacht in his study of Islam in East Africa, in which he mentions that Khoja Ismaʿilis "always settle their cases out of court" (1965, 100). It should be mentioned here that exercising such an extensive scope of authority for a non-state agency or institution is possible only in a national context that is governed by communalism, as in colonial East Africa. This was not possible in countries such as Iran, Syria, and Tajikistan, where state institutions sought to integrate different communities economically, socially, and culturally into a unified national whole.

Another important point to note here is that while the term *jamati* implies that many social spheres of activity were overseen by institutions of the Ismaʿili community in East Africa, which is of course a community defined by *religion*, this does not mean that these spheres are organized and operated by *religious* rules. As mentioned above, Ismaʿili Constitutions rarely contain references to specific creeds or religious principles other than the absolute authority of the Imam and they are generally of a technical-bureaucratic nature. For example, in matters of law, such as the rules and regulations for the procedure of cases (Constitution 1946, ch. V) or family law (ibid., ch. IX), there are hardly any references to the Qur'an, traditions from the Prophet or previous Imams, writings of famous Ismaʿili missionaries, or any other possible authoritative source of law. The tribunals and arbitration boards instituted by these Constitutions are *not* staffed by specialists in Ismaʿili law[40], but by *lay* individuals who may have knowledge of local laws (such as lawyers) or experience in mediating and resolving disputes within the local community (such as elders).[41] This applies effectively to all committees, boards, and societies operating within the framework of Ismaʿili Councils, except for the Ismailia Association (now called the Tariqah and Religious Education Board), which is responsible for religious services and religious education. The fact that an institution of a *religious* community oversees a specific sphere of activity within this community does not necessarily imply that it operates according to a *religious* logic.

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[40] Ismaʿilis developed their own version of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which was achieved by renowned Fatimid jurist al-Qadi al-Nuʿman (d. 974) in his legal compendium *Daʿaʾim al-Islam* (*Pillars of Islam*). While this book is still the primary authoritative source for legal and ritual practices of Mustaʿli Ismaʿilis, its importance for Nizari Ismaʿilis remains largely symbolic as part of their heritage, but it does not serve as an authoritative source for their laws.

[41] For an overview of the development of Ismaʿili law in pre-modern and contemporary times, see Jamal (2000; 2013).

5.3 Secularity in Khoja Ismaʿili Communities in East Africa: A Case of Internal Secularization

While Ismaʿili communities in Syria, Tajikistan, and Iran have each internalized motifs of secularity from their respective national contexts, it would be difficult to derive or reduce secularity in each Khoja community in East Africa (meso-level) to secularity in its respective country (macro-level). First, Khoja communities show stark similarities despite their distribution over many countries with diverse cultures, political systems, and colonial histories. They were at any rate organized on a transnational level, with institutions in different countries operating within the framework of "His Highness The Aga Khan Ismaili Supreme Council for Africa" and governed by the same Constitution (1946). Second, even if we were to generalize a common motif of secularity for all East African countries, such as *secularity for the sake of balancing/accommodating diversity*, which at first glance seems to be consistent with the colonialist policy of allowing South Asian ethno-religious communities a great margin of autonomy, this would not explain why and how secularity among Ismaʿili Khoja communities is different from that, say, in the closely-related Bohra community.[42] A religious policy that is based on the principle of *balancing diversity* may allow a high degree of confluence between the religious and the secular within religious communities because of the extensive autonomy they enjoy in managing their social, cultural, and economic affairs, but it does not explain the specific form of secularity that becomes dominant in each community. Therefore, I intend to employ an additional conceptual tool, namely internal secularization, to examine the work of secularity at the meso-level.

Many of the above-mentioned characteristics of Khoja Ismaʿili communities in East Africa (bureaucratization along business-like rational lines, high functional differentiation of religious institutions, lay staff, worldly orientation, capitalist ethics, and decline of traditional theology) are consistent with internal secularization as described by Luckmann, Berger, Dobbelaere, and Chaves. These similarities notwithstanding, Khoja Ismaʿili communities are *not* internally secularized in the same way as American Protestant denominations, which form the "prototype" for the concept of internal secularization. In fact, one can distinguish here between two models of internal secularization: *adaptive* (as described by Luckmann, Berger, and Dobbelaere) and *top-down* (as in the case

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[42] The Bohras are a Gujarati trading community that follows the Mustaʿli branch of Ismaʿilism and shares with the Khoja many cultural and social characteristics, yet there are marked differences when it comes to the question of religion and secularity. There is, on the one hand, a conservative clergy that keeps strongly to traditional Ismaʿili theology and rituals and, on the other hand, a vocal oppositional faction (known as the "Progressives") that demands restriction of the power of the clergy and greater individual social and religious freedom (Amiji 1975).

of Khoja Ismaʿilis). For one thing, internal secularization in Khoja Ismaʿili communities did not develop in secular, pluralistic societies and hence it cannot be described as an *adaptation* to such a context. Rather, it was initiated *top-down* by the supreme religious leader, Aga Khan III, in response to continuous challenges to his authority from within Khoja communities. He sought to centralize religious authority and institutions in order to exercise direct and exclusive control over all religious, social, and administrative aspects within these communities. Bureaucratization and de-laicization enabled him to concentrate religious authority in his figure alone and to abolish any form of independent religious authority (charismatic or traditional). Furthermore, by de-emphasizing traditional Ismaʿili theology – effectively reducing it to unconditional obedience to his authority – he decreased the possibility for individuals to act as independent mediators, interpreters, or transmitters of religious knowledge.[43]

A second important difference between the two cases of internal secularization (the United States vis-à-vis East Africa) is their scope. By definition, *internal* secularization occurs *within* religious communities and their institutions; hence, how far processes of internal secularization may reach depends on the social role of religion in each context, which is in turn determined by the extent of secularization in the society in question. American society is highly secularized in terms of functional differentiation, even though religion continues to be relatively visible in the public sphere. Law, economy, education, and other social spheres are run by the state or the private sector, with limited influence by religious organizations. Additionally, on an individual level, the American religious market is quite open, with individuals having a wide margin of freedom to choose their denomination.[44] These factors restrict the influence of religious institutions in the United States on the affairs of the members of their communities, thereby limiting the extent to which internal secularization may unfold in this context.

The situation in colonial or even postcolonial East Africa, especially among South Asian communities, where most social, economic, and legal aspects have been undertaken within the framework of the religious community and its institutions, is rather different. These societies are arguably less secularized (in terms of functional differentiation) than the United States. Furthermore, ethnic-

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[43] Even if we compare it with the approach of Chaves, which is different than Luckmann, Berger, and Dobbelaere's *adaptive* model, internal secularization in Khoja Ismaʿili communities was not the outcome of a struggle between a lay and a clerical structure in religious institutions.

[44] Most sociologists of religion agree on the liberal character of the American religious market, but disagree on its implications for religious involvement. The thesis advanced by advocates of the "religious market theory" (also called "rational-choice theory"), such as Rodney Stark, that deregulation explains the vitality of religion in the United States compared with Western Europe, has come into question in the past few years. For an overview of this discussion, see Aarts et al. (2010).

ity and religion in this case are deeply entwined with each other; that is, religion is defined by birth and abandoning one's religion entails severing family and community ties, which enables religious leadership to exercise extensive control over the social and economic affairs of their communities. One may thus argue that within a context like the East African one, in which religious institutions carry a variety of social functions, the processes of internal secularization (such as bureaucratization, internal differentiation, laicization, and reorientation toward capitalism) can go to far greater lengths than within a secularized society like the United States.

6. Conclusion

Khoja Ismaʿilis, especially in East Africa, have lived in autonomous communities that are governed by a semi-comprehensive bureaucratic system. The life of an individual Khoja can be engulfed to a great extent by his or her religious community with relatively little dependence on or interaction with institutions of the state, or members of other religious communities. The housing estate where one lives; the school to which one goes; the hospital where one is treated; the business one runs; and the legal institution that solves one's disputes with fellow Ismaʿilis can all be tied to the institutions of the community without ever having to resort to the state. Yet this does not mean that the life of a Khoja person is necessarily filled with the sacred or that everything he or she does is justified theologically in reference to religious texts, traditions, and practices. On the contrary, most of these affairs are run according to a rational, pragmatic logic. Even though this type of community is based on a religious principle – namely, the absolute authority of the Imam – this authority itself is oriented toward achieving worldly goals such as better education, health, and economic efficiency.

Within this internally secularized religious system, it makes less sense for the Khoja to draw binary distinctions between a religious sphere and another that is secular. Distinctions are rather made in accordance with a tripartite system of classification (*secular*, *jamati*, *religious*) with the second sphere extensively defined and supported by elaborate bureaucratic institutions. Furthermore, the *jamati* sphere is not limited by the boundaries of the nation state; it extends beyond by means of a transnational institutional and cultural framework. This constellation of religious, social, and institutional factors produces specific dispositions and tendencies to draw, maintain, and negotiate the boundaries of religion in relation to other spheres. These dispositions and tendencies become embedded in the lifeworld of Khoja Ismaʿilis, resulting in a specific *culture of secularity* that informs how they conceive religion and its relevance for their everyday life. In this culture of secularity, religion serves as the overall umbrella under which most spheres of social life are organized, yet

the internal logics and rationalities of these individual spheres are largely autonomous and independent of any specific religious imperatives. This culture of secularity is markedly different than those of Ismailis from Syria, Tajikistan, and Iran, which have developed within the physical and ideological boundaries of the nation state. Accordingly, the latter cases are dominated by a binary distinction between a secular, nationally defined sphere that includes most aspects of social life, and a religious one that is limited to cultic aspects, with the boundaries between these two spheres fairly clearly demarcated. The contrast between these two cultures of secularity becomes evident in social interactions between members of different Ismaili communities on a transnational level.

On a general theoretical level, this comparative study of the global Ismaili community shows that secularity within a religious community is not necessarily a reflection, internalization, or even rejection of the dominant motifs of secularity in its national context. Secularity as forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres is also shaped by the organizational and religious particularities of each community and by its connections with institutional and cultural formations beyond the nation state. In order to shed light on these dimensions of secularity, the inclusion of the concept of internal secularization within the multiple secularities framework, as the analysis above has shown, can be fruitful. Furthermore, this article suggests that there is a relationship between different types of secularity on the macro- and meso-levels and different ways for individuals to draw boundaries between religion and other spheres in everyday life. This relationship could be articulated through the concept of *cultures of secularity,* which highlights that certain patterns of behavior, dispositions, and conceptual distinctions, produced and sustained by institutional, legal, and ideological structures, become embedded in the social milieu of the individual and exercise considerable influence on their thinking and behavior. This is not to deny individual agency and the influence of biographies in shaping unique views on the question of religion and secularity, but structural elements undoubtedly have a tangible effect.

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