

# The Nizari Ismaili Community and the Internet

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For much of the Nizari Ismaili community's past, the study and writing of its history have been conducted based on sources produced by its enemies and detractors. Only since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century have significant strides been made with Shi'i and Ismaili studies to help reclaim a more accurate portrayal of the community's history, doctrines, and culture. This has largely been due to the recovery and publication of numerous manuscripts and the establishment of institutions that encourage and facilitate scholarly study of the community's past. Unfortunately, studies of the contemporary Ismaili community have yet to receive the same attention. The application of interdisciplinary studies, contemporary methodologies, and studies of Ismaili popular culture have not been given the same importance as studies of the pre-modern community and its literature. To add to this, a strong culture of documentation is lacking amongst many community members, placing the collection and writing of the community's contemporary history in potential jeopardy.

What makes the recording of the community's contemporary history even more urgent are the many changes that have occurred in the community's recent past. Migration and dislocation of Iranian, Tajik, and Afghan Ismailis and greater communal awareness of its own diversity have facilitated a much larger interaction amongst the community's cultural and ethnic groups over the last decade and a half. These encounters have resulted in a sharing, borrowing, and exchange of cultural traditions, devotional literatures, and other forms of expression, but have left some Ismailis to grapple with, make sense of, and adjust to changes in the community's ritual and liturgical repertoire and cultural constituency.

The Internet has been one mechanism that has assisted elements of the community in addressing these concerns. Community members have used varied computer technologies, from websites and e-mail listservs to weblogs

and IRCs, to discuss, negotiate, and debate the boundaries of community and identity. The majority of the first Ismaili users of what we now call the 'Internet' tended to be university students and immigrants to North America who were engaged in academia or engineering and scientific industries in the early 1990s. This soon expanded to include similar profiles of community members in Europe. Early participation by Ismailis on the Internet was through newsgroups, primarily those dealing with Islam and Sufism, indicating how many immigrant Ismailis constructed their own identities and worldviews in the absence of Ismaili-specific forums. In early 1994, the beginning of an organized attempt by members of the community resulted in the emergence of several private mailing lists or listservs dedicated specifically to the use

**The Nizari Ismailis are a global community of Shi'i Muslims living in more than twenty-five countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and Australasia. They are led by His Highness Karim Aga Khan, forty-ninth in a line of living hereditary imams. Increasingly, Ismailis become aware of the wide diversity within the larger community as well as of the vulnerability of various local groups and their particular traditions, in particular in Central Asia. Internet provides a means to address these concerns albeit that access to internet is as yet unevenly spread.**

of community members. Mailing lists that authorized membership based on questions of affiliation to particular *jamatkhanas*, or places of Ismaili social and religious congregation, were used by listowners to 'verify' Ismaili identity. Of the three earliest groups, the ISN (Ismaili Social Network), run by two dissentient Ismailis, dealt primarily with theological and doctrinal issues. Ummah-net and Ilmnet, based in the United States and Canada, respectively, tended to attract university students and young professionals and

dealt with a wider range of issues. All three groups, based in North America, and generally having overlapping members, marked the beginning of a very interesting process that paralleled to some extent discussions that were occurring offline, especially amongst university students and young professionals who were born or had spent the majority of their lives in the countries of Europe, Canada, or the United States.

## Responses to modernity

Many early dialogues on these lists were primarily concerned with responses of certain community members to issues of modernity and globalization and the particular ways in which these impacted the practice of the faith. Due to the nature of these discussions, they quickly gained the attention of local and international institutions of the community, who were weary of the Internet and its related technologies, primarily because they provided a forum for unmediated discussion and access to unauthenticated versions of the firmans, or private guidance of the imam to the community. Many users of these lists, however, constructed the Internet in very different terms: more so as a liberating, seminal tool allowing relatively open dialogue and providing a forum for discussions with other like-minded Ismailis.

In 1995, the appearance of the first 'Ismaili' website of a grand nature appeared. Heritage, later to be known as FIELD (the First Ismaili Electronic Library and Database) was run and operated by two Ismailis based in Montreal. Heritage and other less ambitious websites that had emerged began to provide a more public face than the earlier mailing lists and were seen as a welcome resource by many Ismailis. Providing community members (and others) access to devotional literatures, audio and video recordings, and a plethora of photographs and information about the activities of the imam of the community, Heritage soon became one of the most popular 'places' for Ismailis on the Internet and its success spawned many other sites that aspired to match its quality, breadth, and scope.

Beginning in 1996, the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the community, began to publicly address the role of the Internet and noted its importance as a modern tool. Since that time, several other speeches in varying public contexts have presented his understanding of the Internet and its role in promoting positive cultural and educational change and vocational collaboration. Soon after the first of these speeches, many of the institutions of the Ismaili community, primarily consisting of the member bodies of the Aga Khan Development Network began to emerge on the Internet. These, at one level, marked the first sanctioned institutional presence on the Internet of the Ismaili community

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and were seen by many members of the community as a progressive and welcomed move.

Today, the Ismaili Internet landscape is much more populated. There are sites, spearheaded by individual community members, dealing with everything from religious and social issues to professional interests and an increasing number of dating sites that provide a venue for single Ismailis to meet other Ismailis from around the world. A growing number of localized sites in languages ranging from French to Urdu have also begun to appear so as to more effectively deal with Ismaili populations that either are not English-speakers or who prefer to operate in an ethno-cultural sphere in addition to under a purely religious umbrella.

In the years since 1996, the demographics of Internet users have also changed. Issues of bandwidth and accessibility to the Internet, which acted as a gate privileging North American and European users, were no longer a significant concern with the online landscape of the community, reflecting the global changes in Internet use. Ismailis from the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia now form an integral part of the Ismaili userbase that is online. Whilst early users of the Internet tended to be under thirty-five years of age, the Internet today is used by a much wider age-range within the community, especially in eastern Africa, Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and North America.

## The last fifteen years offline

To fully appreciate and understand the value of what is happening on the Internet, it is necessary to begin to look at the history of the community over the last fifteen years to examine why the Internet has become such an important forum for negotiating and discussing what it means to be an Ismaili in the contemporary world. Up until that time, many Ismaili communities, primarily linked by geography and language, saw themselves in isolated terms and tended to refer to themselves in a vocabulary that associated or affiliated them with caste, tribe, linguistics, or communal progenitor rather than one that grouped them under the larger umbrella of 'Ismaili'. The community most in touch with and involved in leadership activities hailed from the Indian subcontinent and had a history that involved the migration of significant members to East Africa and the French African colonies, amongst other places, before settling in Western Europe or North America beginning in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

In 1988, the Aga Khan began to issue a series of firmans, which were made available to the various *jamats*, or communities, throughout the world, in which for the first time in a detailed manner, he raised the issue of Ismaili cultural diversity and pluralism of practice amongst and within the various communities. At this time, there had already been some migration and an attempt to settle displaced members of the Ismaili community from Iran and Afghanistan to Canada, but generally the community of Indian origin had tended to think of themselves in hegemonic terms, with their rituals and prayer, cultural practices, and places of worship as normative to the Ismaili tradition. The settlement of these non-Indian Ismaili communities raised an interesting paradox. In one sense, there was an increased sense of fraternity between the host community and 'new' community that they had come to encounter. However, an exoticism still existed and while there were attempts to appropriate certain cultural and religious practices, many of the Ismailis who had become accustomed to their own forms of practice saw their inherited rituals as threatened. On the other side, many of the 'new' communities did not have access to the symbol systems, the language, or the religious institutions that were so commonplace and established among the culturally Indian *jamat* – and this caused many to continue their own ways of practice privately, both individually and communally, outside the *jamatkhana* environment.

Over the last fifteen years, other communities have emerged and re-established contact with the imam of the community, namely communities in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and to some extent western China. Communities in the Arab-speaking world have forged closer relationships with the communal and institutional leadership of the community and attempts at creating an umbrella Ismaili identity through a common constitution, institutional structures, liturgy, and places of worship have facilitated and assisted this process. Of course, many rich and vibrant local traditions continue to survive and this diversity of practice is constantly stressed by the imam of the community as a strength rather than a weakness.

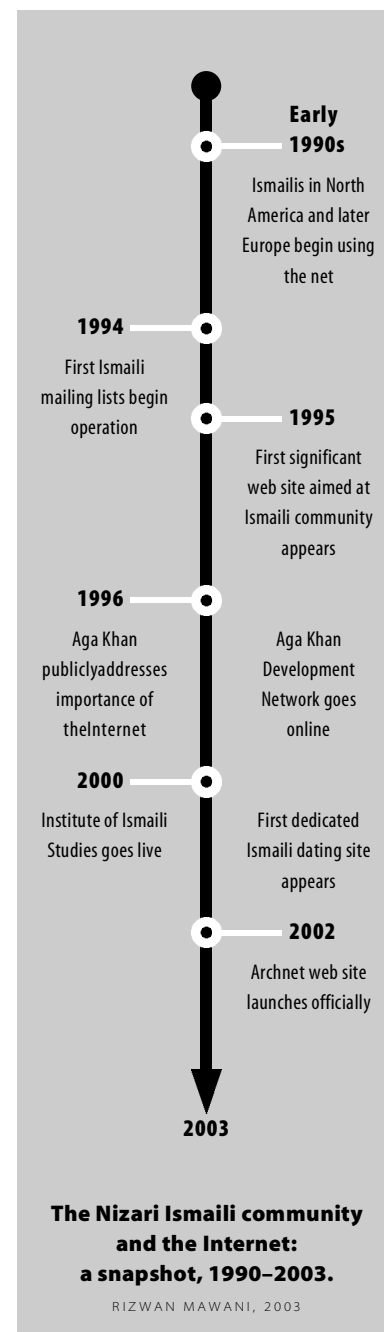
In the contemporary world in which the notion of a Muslim orthodoxy seems to assert itself more strongly than in the past, especially from within the *umma*, many Ismailis have had the challenge of defending their own pluralistic practice in the spectrum of Muslim diversity without seeming apologetic. Much of this is due to a lack of shared vocabulary and succumbing to the pressures of a perceived orthodoxy. Over the last fifty years, the community has seen several changes in its ritual practice, including an increased number of English, Arabic, and to some extent Persian terms in its rituals and an added significance on the use of the intellect in the interpretation, ethics, and practice of the faith, rather than the strong emphasis that was placed on ritual in the past. This is complicated further as there is a perceived notion amongst many community members that some aspects of the ritual and liturgical life of other Muslim communities are somehow more 'Islamic' than their own practices.

## Negotiating identity online

As a result of these factors many of the websites, and more so the discussion groups and listservs, are constantly brimmed with messages relating to what constitutes 'right practice', looking to those with knowledge and authority for answers. Prior to the Internet, there were very few outlets where community members felt they had a voice that could be heard. Critiques and debates about the community within the family or *jamatkhana* context were perceived to be disrespectful and unnecessary rather than fruitful. Amongst younger members of the community, the Internet has become a forum where their concerns have been given a voice and members of the community are able to discuss issues of common concern and apply contemporary critical tools to aspects of the faith.

Websites have quickly become spaces of research for personal understanding as well as for use in religious education classes and communicating Ismailism to non-Ismaili friends and colleagues. The downside, however, is that although there may seem to be a pluralism of practice that has developed, measures of authority online have quickly changed. Strident users are quickly imbued with authority by listmembers as they are often seen to have the most knowledge and debates usually continue to occur until something close to a consensus is established or one party leaves the discussion. While this gives a sense of satisfaction to many users, and irritates others, in the end, one can argue that pluralism of opinion within the community has been affected by these discussions. 'Unorthodox' views can be quickly dismissed or counter-argued using a whole series of devices to undermine opinions presented.

By exploring the interactions that take place on the Internet not simply as a distinct, disconnected forum divorced from individuals' offline realities, one can argue that the coherency and continuity that exists between people's off- and online worlds is key to understanding how identity negotiations take place on the Internet. For the Nizari Ismailis, the Internet has provided a 'space' where community members can enact discussions and engage with others in hopes to better understand their own history and evolving identity in the complex cultural and religious landscape they inhabit.



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