

THE ISMAILI SECT IN LONDON: RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Peter B. Clarke

The Ismailis in London are a community attempting to adapt the stock of Ismaili theoretical concepts to the explanation and control of events in a changed and changing social situation. This article is concerned with assessing the role of Ismaili religious institutions in this process of adaptation. It will be argued that because the Ismaili belief system emphasizes the irrelevant and transitory nature of Ismaili religious institutions, the true role, paradoxically, of these religious institutions is preserved, and as a consequence they remain relevant to Ismailis.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, INSTITUTIONS AND BELIEF SYSTEM

The main purpose of the following historical outline of Ismailism is to emphasize the effects of two legal verdicts on the structural development, community organization and belief system of the Ismailis.

The Ismailis today, it is estimated, number over twenty million and are found in forty different countries. Until recently, fifty thousand lived in East Africa (1). The Ismailis were, in fact, among the earliest Asian immigrants to East Africa and many families there are now in their fourth and fifth generation. In 1840, Aga Hassan Ali Shah, the first Aga Khan and forty-sixth Ismaili Imam, fled from Persia to India after an unsuccessful rebellion against the throne. He advised his followers to leave India and go to Africa where they would be provided with a better future (2). In East Africa, Ismailis such as Tharia Topan, who became an overseer of Customs in Zanzibar, and Allidina Vistram, a very successful trader and known as

London Ismailis

the 'uncrowned King of Uganda', soon made their mark.

In India, meanwhile, two events of great importance for Ismailism took place. During the Second Afghan War, the Imam of the Ismailis helped the British in the annexation of Sind and by way of reward was given a pension and more importantly the rank of hereditary prince (3). This title has proved to be of great significance for the Ismaili community in that it not only gives the Imam status in the eyes of his followers but also enables the community to regard itself vis-à-vis other organizations as a distinctive, autonomous social group whose leader can negotiate on equal terms with the leaders of other organizations and communities (4). The other event of even more significance in the making of modern Ismailism was the judgement of Mr Justice Arnold in the High Court in Bombay in 1866, which declared the above named Imam, Hassan Ali Shah, to be 'historically and in fact the acknowledged living Imam of the Ismailis in Bombay and elsewhere' (5). The judgement, along with that given in the High Court in Tanganyika in 1924 (6) played a vital role in the shaping and structuring of modern Ismailism.

The significance of the Bombay judgement of 1866 lies not only in the fact that it gave legal recognition to the then Imam's claim to be 'historically and in fact the living Imam of the Ismailis in Bombay and elsewhere', but also in the fact that all Ismaili communal property was legally vested in the Imam for his own absolute use without any responsibility of trusteeship (7). The court case had arisen over, among other things, the question of the ownership of the community's property. The Imam's position in Bombay was relatively weak, his authority being often disregarded. Frequent disputes occurred over the payment of the tithe (Zakat) to the Imam, the distribution of funds, and claims by some members of the community to own a share of the community property. The 1866 Arnold verdict decided the above issues in favour of the Imam, thus strengthening his authority considerably.

The 1866 judgement was important in two further respects. It laid down that the Ismailis were in no way Sunni, as some of the opponents of the Aga Khan claimed, and it also endorsed an organizational structure for the Ismaili community. Chief Justice Arnold declared that the Ismaili community had the following organizations: (1) a Jamat, a 'Congregation of the People', an assembly in Council of all the adult males of the Ismaili community of that place; (2) a Jamat Khana, a Council or Guildhall

of the community. He then went on to name the officials: the Mukhl, steward of the Jamat, and the Kamadia (pronounced Kamaria), an accountant of the Jamat, both of whom serve *diugum bun gesserint* (8).

The Arnold judgement thus clarified and gave legal backing to the quasi-absolute religious and political authority of the Imam which a few years previously was being challenged by a considerable number of more democratically and egalitarian minded Ismailis in Bombay. This verdict, as has been indicated above, was reinforced by that of the Chief Justice sitting in the High Court in Tanganyika in 1924. The Ismailis, the Judge declared, had established a distinctive political and social organization for themselves under the leadership of the Aga Khan and had never been absorbed into the general body of Muslims. This verdict again went a long way in providing the legal normative setting for the establishment of a 'benevolent theocracy' and bolstered what one authority has styled the 'divine kingship of the Aga Khan' (9).

Further constitutional and organizational developments took place in East Africa (10). A conciliar system of organization and administration is now operative which is similar to that of Calvinism: local councils are represented at the provincial, territorial and continental level. Their function is to carry out routine administration according to the policy laid down by the Imam, to promote the welfare of the community and to maintain uniformity in customs and religious practices. Tribunals at provincial, territorial and continental level deal in particular with violations of the constitution. The community's religious affairs are handled by the Ismailia Association which publishes literature, especially the Imam's firmans (authoritative and binding statements), admits converts and undertakes the religious education of the community.

In addition to the above organizations there is a Department of Health, of Education, of Housing, and a Community Insurance company. In 1966 the Industrial Promotion Service (IPS) was founded to encourage Ismailis to invest in industrial projects, especially in East Africa.

The nature of the organization and administration of the community tended to make of it in East Africa an autonomous, independent, self-reliant and somewhat exclusive body (11), albeit very successful in the spheres of education, entrepreneurship, and generally speaking, in all spheres of the middle sector of the economy (12).

The Ismailis are completely westernized in terms of dress. Women do not wear purdah, and young women wear the most up-to-date clothes. There are no arranged marriages, though marriage is usually endogamous. Exogamous marriages are permitted by the constitution to avoid the 'break-up' of the community and/or apostasy of the young by over-rigid insistence on endogamy. The majority of families are nuclear, but parental moral pressure and influence on the children, even if married, is strong. One Ismaili, in his forties, a university lecturer, who has virtually abandoned the practice of Ismailism, was very worried about what his father thought of him and his habits, such as drinking alcohol.

In terms of religious practices Ismailis are obliged, if it is possible, to attend Jamat (the community centre and mosque) twice daily - early in the morning and at sunset. Ismailism, however, does not stress the formal side of worship or emphasize ritual and symbolism to any great extent. Meditation is emphasized because it is the perfect prayer and leads to 'contact' with the Imam. Ramadan as such is not kept by Ismailis except for Lulu Kadar, the twenty-first and twenty-third day of the Ramadan fast. Again *hajj* to Mecca is not an obligation but *hajj* to the Imam is.

The Qur'an is of importance to Ismailis, but not so important to them as it is to Sunnis. Ismailis have the word of God incarnate in the Imam: 'It is the word of holy firman of Imam-I-Zaman which is the one, the only and the whole basic principle of Ismailism' (13). The authoritative statements of the Imam - the firmans - are binding on Ismailis and take effect immediately. Ismailis are people of 'degrees'. Religious practices, for example, are graded according to their different values: 'Prayer said in congregation excels prayer said alone by twenty-seven degrees' is an often cited verse of the Qur'an. The ethical and religious ideal of Ismailism, however, is absolute and unreserved obedience to the Imam and the doctrine which he preaches. The worst faults are disobedience and the shirking of one's duty. Failure to 'recognize' and obey the Imam carries the penalty of reincarnation.

The belief in reincarnation is very unusual among Muslims and is possibly, in the Ismaili case, the result both of the intensive 'mixing' between Ismailis and Hindus in India, and the attempt by Ismaili missionaries from Persia to convert Indians to Ismailism by the use of the

vernacular and the Hindu belief system. Pir Sadraddin, a fifteenth-century Ismaili missionary from Persia who worked in India, in his book *Das Avatar* attempted to clarify the divine sanctity of the Ismaili Imams by describing the incarnations of the Hindu God, Vishnu. Further, he translated the Qu'ran into Gujarati and helped to popularize the Ismaili faith by the composition of religious hymns, again in Gujarati (14).

This belief in reincarnation is by no means dead among Ismailis in London. Informants told me: 'Ismailis strive for perfection of the soul and imperfect souls return in human form until they can be united with Allah' (15). Ismailis read with interest accounts of reincarnation, and Ismaili pamphlets such as 'Read and Know, No. 38', published by the Ismailia Association, carried an account of a case of reincarnation, which many informants accepted as authentic. 'Though in origin the basic reasons for the existence of such a belief among Ismailis may well have been the ones indicated above, at present the belief in reincarnation is adhered to because it is considered to be part of the Ismaili belief system in its own right. Failure to believe in the Imam means that the Ismaili after death must pass through a cycle of rebirth in animal form before being reincarnated in the form of a man with another chance to believe in the Imam (16).

Ismailis see themselves idealistically as followers of the realistic advice of their Imam. 'The whole mystery of our faith', a secretary told me, 'is faith in, and obedience to, the Imam.' In Ismaili homes, shops and in the Jamat one will see a photograph or picture of the Imam. At prayers, prostration is made at the mention of the name of Allah and the Imam. It is to the Imam one turns at prayer, not as in orthodox Islam, to Mecca. Ismailis, further, regard themselves and their faith as 'logical, rational and founded on commonsense'. They are, they say, the elite of Islam; other Muslims fail to progress because they regard the word of the Qu'ran and that of the Prophet Muhammad as 'static'. Ismailis, on the other hand, emphasize flexibility and adaptability. No Ismaili institution is regarded as a permanent fixture, and every firm can be contradicted by another firm. The concept of the Imam and belief in the Imam alone are unchangeable.

The Ismaili community in London was established in the 1950s. Between 1953 and 1963 it was in the main a student body, in England to qualify and then in the majority of cases return home, immediately before inde-

pendence in Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia the number of Asians generally, including Ismailis, who came to Great Britain increased (17). The threat of stricter immigration control by Britain, the pending Immigration Act of 1968 and the expulsion of Ugandan Asians in August-November 1972, increased the number of Ismailis in Great Britain to around 10,000.

These factors changed the nature and composition of the Ismaili community in Great Britain. The student body became less numerous than the 'business', professional and semi-professional Ismailis. Further, from being simply a place of transit, the London Jamat became a permanent settlement. Two changes, therefore, occurred in the Ismaili community in the late 1960s and early 1970s: diversification of occupation and permanency of settlement. As yet, the Ismaili community in London is only a community in 'embryo', facing a different landscape from that of East Africa, with its institutions and socialization agencies either non-existent, impaired or simply in the process of becoming.

THE ISMAILI BELIEF SYSTEM: BASIC VALUE ORIENTATIONS

Ismailism encourages, indeed implicitly commands and outlines as an 'article of faith', the pursuit of economic gain. The Ismaili ethic is positively this-world orientated; the 'tragedy of the idea' of Ismailism would be an introverted, God-orientated asceticism. In this context what is meant by the Ismaili ethic is principally the duty to work, and guilt about not working (18). Ismaili character structure is based on literacy, self-improvement, conscience, saving, thrift, paying one's way, preparing for the future, personal control, honest dealing and veracity. It is pragmatic and empirical to a point, dedicated to practicality, utility and hard fact. An Ismaili saying runs, 'Business is prayer, sleep is prayer, everything is prayer.' It appeals to commonsense. The London situation requires these virtues more than ever; there is little risk in the new environment of them becoming otiose with welfare and affluence.

Ismailis are an example of a status group in the Weberian sense. Weber's idea of a society as 'an arena of competing status groups, each with its own conflicting interests, status, honour and orientation towards the world and man' (19), together with the Weberian concepts of varying rationalities provides a suitable context within

Ismailism does have some of the Weberian 'values' associated with economic activity. There is the desire to accumulate material goods rather than consume, and a desire to maximize one's material prosperity. These desires and/or tendencies would be categorized by Weber as acquisitive rationalities: 'when the limitation of consumption is combined with the release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through the ascetic compulsion to save' (20). The fore-mentioned two attitudes complement each other and in combination result in financial rationality.

The third attitude towards work is the most obvious similarity between Ismailism and the Protestant ethic. Weber wrote about the Protestant attitude towards work: 'the evaluation of the fulfillment of the duty of worldly affairs as the highest form which the morality of the individual could assume... gave everyday worldly activity a religious significance' (21). The result of this belief for the Puritan was that mundane toil itself became a kind of sacrament. And here one reveres to a theme running through Ismailism and also noted by Weber as appertaining to 'Puritans', namely, the belief that material work is intrinsically good. Perhaps as a consequence of this belief there is a bias towards 'physical' work, that is, buying and selling. The rationality of work, then, is an Ismaili attitude.

Innumerable firmans can be quoted which stress the maximization of material prosperity, acquisitive rationality, financial rationality and the rationality of work. One firmán runs thus, 'the good now way is to start as in East Africa... the capital should go into the pockets of the Ismaili community with safety for their trade, commerce and their own advancement' (22). Again, 'Insurance is not a form of gambling as many people are perhaps inclined to think. Indeed it is no more gambling than locking up an iron safe at night in order to protect its contents.' Constant advice is given on spending, saving, house buying, investing, etc. The Constitution lays down the amount of money which can be spent on weddings, including the number of guests who can be invited and the quality of the food. There must be no ostentation, no extravagance (23).

Extravagance and ostentation are only permissible on 'religious' occasions as manifestations of belief in and loyalty to the Imam, occasions such as the weightings

Ismailis bear witness to the 'Kingdom of Order' constructed in the material world. One reason for the great value placed on material goods is that increasing wealth is symbolic of an increasing glorification of the Imam. The *Nairobi Gazette* indicates that business success is most pleasing to and a way of emulating the Imam. Again, another quasi-religious value which is congruent with the accumulation rather than the consumption of material goods is the idea of gaining and retaining wealth because past wealth is seen as proof of one's spiritual fidelity (24).

Other firmans indicate the emphasis placed on the fore-mentioned rationalities quite clearly:

On hearing a request from a man for an amulet of prosperity Hazir Imam said, 'There cannot be an amulet of prosperity but you should economize and spend less on new shoes, clothes, etc.... Keep your expenses lower than your income and surely Mowla will give you prosperity' (25).

This simple, clear advice is read out and meditated upon daily in the Jamat or in the home. Ismailis are informed by the firmán that 'economy in daily life as part of religion is necessary... that constant attention to economy in life... not to spend more than necessary even if rich so as not to show superiority over others is vital' (26). Three Ismaili businessmen, in their late forties and early fifties, told me that they remembered the advice given them when they were members of the Ismaili Youth League in Nairobi in 1937: 'We were told', they said, 'that we must learn three things: the beauty of Ismailism, the means to good health and the principles of sound economics.'

Alongside these commands to economize there is constant emphasis on health (27), welfare, hygiene and education, on the spirit of adventure, on business - 'We are business people' - on individualism: 'Don't live in a lump, spread out, leave home and town for the bush if you can be materially successful there.' Money, moreover, is sanctified, sacramentalized, made symbolic: 'The money that I give is holy money and it must be spent with care and if you spend Sh 1/-, it should derive the benefit of Sh 2/-' (28).

There is maximum stress put on insurance, investment and economic uplift; Ismailism itself is seen as a sound financial investment. The *Zakat*, *Dassondh* and other 'gifts' to the community are profitable investments. Most Ismailis in London will exclaim, 'Look what we have received

from payment of the *dassondh*, look at what the poor receive in return for their few shillings in terms of hospitals, etc.' Aga Khan III on the occasion of his diamond jubilee said that the amount he had been given must not be seen solely in terms of his own glorification but as a sound investment in the community, and, expenses apart, it would be given as a gift to the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust to avoid a downward trend for all Ismailis (29). He told Ismailis that the Platinum Jubilee is only the name 'but really there lies your own interest. I do not need to show it to the world but it is for all your benefit' (30). The object of the Jubilee was to form companies for mutual help for Ismailis. They are advised, too, to place money in the Ismaili Investment Trust 'because it will probably give you easier terms than those you can get from the bank on fixed deposits' (31).

A recent Ismaili gazette of wide circulation carried an article, 'About Insurance' (32). The first section was entitled, 'Protection of Your Dependents'. It was concerned with the question of estate duty and how best to cope with it. Section 'Two was concerned with 'Saving and Taxation': '...on every Sh 20/- of premium paid, you will save Sh 3/- in your tax liabilities on other incomes'. Section 'Three was about 'Saving on Estate Duty' and Section Four was on 'A Plan of Assurance'. The article is prefaced by an encouragement to take out Life Assurance with a view to avoiding 'fruitless expense', reducing costs, and the keeping of a family budget which will render the most profitable returns on one's income. The basic underlying principle which is repeatedly stressed with regard to householders and buyers is that 'one's desirability of an avoidable "want" counts more than the ability to pay' (33).

Ismailis, moreover, put a premium on education because as they point out: 'It is a well recognized fact that education holds the key to economic development' (34). 'There is a close relation between the degree of literacy - the numbers of school leavers and holders of higher certificates as well as graduates - and the annual per capita income of a nation, it is believed. Ismailis in London schools are noted for their effort, industry, competitiveness and desire to pass examinations (35).

Virtually every Ismaili involved in unskilled, skilled or semi-professional work is engaged in some type of part-time education mainly in the fields of accountancy, business studies, engineering or Islamic studies. Everyone is encouraged to study and girls are advised not to marry young in order that they may have a chance to study (36).

The Imam's guidance is certainly one source of motivation here: 'the problem of education is so very serious and important that it is a question of life and death for a Jamat' (37). There are other sources of motivation: success in business, an important role in the community as adviser and/or expert on doctrinal, financial and economic matters. An educated Ismaili may have the good fortune to travel widely in Africa, India and Pakistan, lecturing in Ismaili schools, colleges and Jamats. Further, the more practical forms of education are not overlooked; 'I am very pleased to know that girls are taught knitting, sewing and cooking. I strongly commend the managing board to give such type of education to girls so that they can become economically independent' (38).

Property is another major concern of Ismailis. '...a deeply committed, practising Ismaili the question was addressed, 'What is your most important concern and/or ambition in life?' The reply was, 'To have my own home and to do the best I can for my family.' 'Do you think very much about death and the after-life and your state and condition then?' I asked. 'How do you separate this life and the next? Surely if one works hard to achieve success in this life without harming others, this success will be rewarded by Allah', the informant replied (39). This is a typical Ismaili attitude. Many Ismailis have their own homes in Wimbledon, Palmers Green, South Kensington, Bayswater, Hendon, Earls Court, Chatham, Chelmsford and Romford. Many live in relatively poor areas such as Balham, West Kensington and Turnpike Lane, but intend to move into 'better' districts.

It was stated earlier that Ismailis are a status group in the Weberian sense. In Ismailism, wealth counts for a great deal, but persons of humble and lowly origins are not despised nor is their background a barrier to high rank, status or an influential role in the community. The concept of contested as opposed to sponsored mobility, if the distinction has any value at all, is held by Ismailis. Positions of Councillor, religious official (Mukhl) and status such as Knight, are not ascribed but open to all. Sir Eboo Pirbhai, Supreme Councillor and Knight, began as a labourer in East Africa. In theory any Ismaili can rise to any position or rank in the community. In practice, however, it does happen that the majority of the important and influential in Ismailism are wealthy men who have the time and money to look after the community's interests. This results in the criticism frequently voiced that the leadership is 'out of touch'.

of ordinary Ismailis, that it blocks the way to the Imam and misinterprets his wishes (40).

Officials, nevertheless, are in theory appointed by the Imam, can be dismissed by him and their offices are supposed to rotate and change hands every two to three years. Consequently, for those Ismailis whose perspective looks to Ismailism there is the belief that elite status is open to all. With this belief goes the view that to have time for community affairs one must have wealth and leisure. The spin-off from such attitudes is a stress placed on material possessions as credentials for elite status, important role, rank or position in the community. The less well-off, the striving middle class, tend to despise the top echelons of the Ismaili hierarchy. They will refuse to attend Kushiadi, describing it as an 'arena where the wealthy, the snobs, go to parade their jewels, ornaments and other paraphernalia...'. Consequently, status groups are a fact and often a divisive one in Ismailism.

Practicalism (41) In an important theme in Ismailism and there is, it would appear, unity and respect within the nuclear and extended family. There is not, however, in certain respects such as mobility, a tight rigidity and control. One Ismaili whom I met, a student, has two brothers in London whom he visits fairly frequently, on average once a week. Both brothers are professional people and work independently of one another. However, this Ismaili lives with neither; his parents are in Canada and he hopes after graduation to move there and establish himself professionally if the opportunity arises, otherwise he will stay in England.

Other examples of Ismailis living apart from their relatives in London instead of grouping together abound. Their leader has told them not to 'lump together...it is bad for hygiene and thwarts the spirit of independence and adventure' (42). The influx from Uganda has altered this trend, but only temporarily. Ismailis, it is said by independent observers, are not too proud to take on manual work, to live rough for a while. They will move wherever their chances of success are greatest (43). Some have moved to Edinburgh, away from kin in London.

The this-worldly emphasis in the Ismaili ethic is not considered to constitute an excessive concern with material gain or a negation of the transcendental since the achievement of material prosperity signifies hard work,

self-sacrifice and dedication, and acknowledgement of the transcendental consists almost exclusively in a firm belief in the 'Ever Living Guide'.

ADAPTABILITY OF ISMAILI INSTITUTIONS

As an 'explanatory' system adjusted to a particular set of social circumstances in India, East Africa and in London, the Ismaili belief pattern has considerable adaptive potential. Ismailis, when faced with an interpretative challenge of social change do not simply turn in on themselves, attempt to live in two worlds, splitting themselves in half, nor cling more intensely to faltering traditions, but try to re-work their belief system and traditions into more effective forms, until they acquire the explanatory role they possessed in the 'pre-change' period.

The Ismaili belief system is 'rational' and 'this worldly'. It is rational, following Weber, in the sense that religious beliefs are re-ordered in a new and more coherent way in order that they be more in line with what one knows and experiences (44). Successful Imams have emphasized that 'true faith is founded on intelligence', that even their infallible firmans can be altered, that the purpose of the firman is 'to give guidance which enables followers to live out their religion in a changing world' (45). Firmans have stressed the tenuousness of the links between religion and social organization: 'All institutions are temporal, capable of being modified or even eradicated' (46). All, that is, except the Imamat. The Imam has power to alter any ritual, form of worship, institution, or interpretation of the Qu'ran. Herein lies the potential for change and adaptation. The Imam's role is to adapt positively the Ismaili belief system to every situation.

Ismailism, further, unlike orthodox Islam and other Shi'ite groups such as the Daudi Bhoras and Ithnasheries who believe in a hidden Imam, emphasizes both the 'abstract' and 'concrete' presence of God. The 'theoretical' God is present by a ray of his light in the Imam. Consequently, the 'this worldly' aspect of the Ismaili belief system is not only 'theoretical' in the sense of providing a recipe for how the world really works, but is also 'emotional and/or personal', contact with the Imam is contact with a person of divine stamp.

It is partly on account of the doctrine of the Imam and other aspects of the Ismaili belief system that very little emphasis is placed on the permanency of institutions in se. Many Ismaili institutions which existed in East Africa no longer exist in London, or if they do, they exist only in embryo. This has involved a weakening in the institutional control over the community along with institutional structural change on a large scale. However, the effects have not been traumatic. As indicated above, the symbols, institutions and rituals of Ismailism are less important than the values implicated in the religious culture: all roles, forms, institutions, ritual, traditions and commands are regarded as impermanent, excluding the Imam.

This relative lack of emphasis on the significance and importance of religious institutions has important consequences for Ismailism and helps one to understand the real significance of 'religion'/belief in an Ismaili's life. By emphasizing 'religious culture' as opposed to stressing the importance of religious institutions and structures, Ismailism is laying importance on the indispensable in modern society. In the changing situation which Ismailis are facing, the essence of the Ismaili message must be explicit, clear and intelligible. This is so to such an extent because the 'context' of the belief system has been altered and cannot therefore provide of itself comprehension of that system. Consequently communication per se of the message rather than reliance on institutional structures and context to communicate its meaning becomes vitally important. This is why Ismailis in London are reminded so frequently that their hearts are the true temples of worship, that institutions are ephemeral, transitory, alterable, even capable of being demolished (47).

In the London society in which Ismailis now operate religious institutions and roles cannot provide 'internalized', emotionally felt, unambiguously recognizable signs of identity as they did in East Africa. Thus Ismailis are now obliged to carry their 'identity' and religious beliefs with them, because it is not possible for a 'society' in rapid transition to locate these in religious institutions and structures. Because of the frequent upheavals, moves and changes which the Ismaili community has experienced, there is the recognition by Ismailis of the importance of their religious culture rather than institutions. Hence, perhaps, the decrease in the number of out-marriages in recent years (48).

As a result, however, Ismaili religious institutions, paradoxically perhaps, perform what would appear to be the proper function of such institutions. Though Ismailism is frequently attacked because it 'compromises' its institutions and to an extent its doctrines by making them fit with fashionable trends, nevertheless both would appear to perform a positive and enabling role. As has been indicated above, in the section on the belief system, Ismailis are encouraged to be independent and adventurous, not to tie themselves to particular forms of ritual or to believe in institutions per se. An Ismaili is advised to cope with the challenge of life by relying on his 'inner' resources. He is autonomous and dependent on what he has 'inside' him. He is also dependent on something 'outside' himself - the Imam, who represents the existence and presence of God. The Imam's role is not to encourage a passive dependence but is rather a re-enabling role: he will enable the believer time and again to maintain or regain where necessary his self-sufficiency and independence. Ismaili religious institutions have the same function. This whole process is symbolized in the 'Nyazi' ritual, when Ismailis drink 'holy' water blessed by the Imam. Here the object of dependence is 'internalized', and thus the believer is freed from dependence on 'external forces' or 'institutions'.

Thus Ismailis are not, by and large, caught up in a dependence on the Institution. Institutions are a starting point for a new autonomy, being in themselves transitory and subordinate to the essence of the belief system. Ismailis, therefore, can put a distance between their individuality and the religious institutions, and outgrow the need for a specific type or types of institutions as visible or invisible props. Institutions are not irrelevant in that they assist in the maintaining or regaining of self-confidence and independence. They are, however, considered to be irrelevant in the sense that they are not meant to provide a place to hide in or an object of belief. Ismailis, therefore, are not socialized into believing in the 'Institution' nor are they enslaved to it and dependent upon it.

Thus Ismaili teaching, worship and ritual concentrate on the essence of Ismailism: the unity between Imam and mo'min (follower). Through teaching, external symbols and rites there is created a belief in and an experience of contact with the Father of this brotherhood. The Ismaili is somewhat surprised by the idea of someone being simply a 'church-goer' or at the notion of someone practising