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## **From Disciples to Missionaries: The Trans-Continental Trajectory of the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Community from South Asia to Latin America**

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The presence and spread of Shia Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean have, outside the circles of security analysts, received only scant attention. The best-known studies involve historians and anthropologists tracing the historical roots of the Trinidadian Hosay festival to South Asian Muharram practices commemorating the martyrdom of the third Shia imam, al-Husayn (Korom 2003). These were introduced by indentured workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst the Shia heritage of contract laborers imported to Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica has been mostly lost over time or dissolved into local culture (Khan 2020; Shankar 2003), a new Shia presence was established in the region by the arrival of Shia migrants from Lebanon in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New Shia centers, at first catering almost exclusively to Arab Shia, were established in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Colombia, and Venezuela. From the 1980s onwards, these centers were most often supported by the embassies and cultural institutes of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region, and this fact has meant that Shia presence in the region has been viewed through the lens of security and counter-terrorism policies (Bruckmayr 2018). According to this logic, local Shia networks and their missionary efforts are, potentially, conduits to further the political agendas of the Islamic Republic and its ally, the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Since the 1970s, however, the Shia mission in the region has also received a strong impetus from a small, little known and comparatively young community, which has a disproportionate global influence: the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris. In this community, the earlier South Asian and later Middle Eastern imprints on Shia communities in Latin America and the Caribbean appear to coalesce, and are, moreover, conspicuously enriched by an Indo-African component. Below, we provide an overview of the development of the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community from its emergence in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India, via the beginnings of its missionary activities in East Africa a century later, to its current role in Shia proselytization in Latin America.

## The origins of the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community

Up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Khojas formed a cluster of castes, headed by groups of traders, dispersed over Gujarat and Sind in present-day India and Pakistan. Like many other groups in the region, the Khojas were, in religious terms, mostly linked to different *pirs* (Sufi saints or shaykhs) and *gurus* (spiritual teachers); their *panths* (spiritual paths) often synthesized Islamic and Hindu influences. Among the Khojas, the most prominent such path was the *satpanth* (“true path”), whose centrality in communal identity effectively rendered the group a “caste-cum-sect.” It is important to note, then, that the *satpanth* drew from a local religious repertoire, which not only included Sunni, Sufi and Hindu elements, but also clearly bore the distinct imprint of Shia influence, both in its Ismaili (so-called Sevener Shia) and Ithna-Asheri (so-called Twelver Shia) aspects. Certain *satpanthi* texts, rituals and doctrines reflect this, most famously, the text *Dasa Avatara* (The Ten Avatars) in which the belief of the tenth avatar of Vishnu as the awaited savior is linked to Shia doctrine, identifying this figure with the first Shia imam Ali and his successors following the line of the Ismaili imams (Boivin 2013).

The major turning point for the Khojas came in 1844, when the Ismaili imam and first Aga Khan, Hasan Ali Shah (d. 1881) relocated from Iran to India and began to assert his leadership. Through a number of measures aimed at standardizing and Islamizing the *satpanth* tradition of the Khoja community, and particularly by introducing Ismailism to the Khojas, the first three Aga Khans successfully established their religious authority over most Khojas. A key element in this success were several lawsuits at the British colonial courts in Bombay and Karachi fought out between the Aga Khans and dissenters from among the Khojas. The dissenters disputed his religious authority and status as living imam, his right to ownership of communal properties and their duty to submit the tithe to him. As a result of the Aga Khans’ success in a famous case in 1866, the Khojas were officially designated as adherents of Ismailism and followers of the Aga Khans by a British court (Purohit 2012). Certain parts of the community, however, still refused to submit to his authority and to having their religious identity decided by colonial courts. Consequently, there soon emerged Khoja factions professing adherence to Sunni and Ithna-Asheri Shia traditions. Whilst the Sunni Khojas have remained a very small community based in Mumbai, the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris Muslim Community (KSIMC) rapidly developed into an influential community currently numbering roughly 125,000 people spread over five continents (Jaffer 2014).

## **The formation of KSIMC and the beginnings of its efforts to spread the faith**

The formation of KSIMC from the 1860s onwards is credited in large part to the efforts of Mulla Qadir Hussain (d. 1902), an Ithna-Asheri scholar from Madras, who established himself for some time as a teacher in the Khoja quarter of Mumbai. Following a chance encounter between Khoja pilgrims and Mulla Qadir in the Iraqi Shia shrine city of Karbala in the 1870s, Mulla Qadir heard of their *satpanthi* beliefs in the divinity of Imam Ali. He quickly introduced individual Khojas to the highest Shia authority of his day (*marja al-taqlid*), Grand Ayatollah Zayn al-Abidin al-Mazandarani (d. 1892) and began to instruct them in Ithna-Asheri doctrine and ritual. The origins of KSIMC were thus strongly tied to the activities of non-Khoja religious authorities in and from Shia spiritual centers in the Middle East.

At the same time that the Khoja caste-cum-sect began its process of disintegration into Ismaili, Sunni and Ithna-Asheri branches, members also embarked on major migratory journeys. Large numbers of Khojas migrated to East Africa, primarily to Kenya and Tanzania, and to islands off its coast, especially to Zanzibar and Madagascar. The establishment of the first KSI mosque in Zanzibar in 1881 and the fortunes made by members of the community in East and (later) Central Africa were instrumental in spreading Ithna-Asheri tradition among the Khojas in both South Asia and Africa - and in the institutionalization of KSIMC. Following its early development, the community continued to rely on non-Khoja resident scholars from the Middle East and India for its religious leadership. KSIMC provided religious authorities with an important vantage point by bringing Shia traditions to East Africa (Akhtar 2016).

After founding mosque communities in various African states, a major turning point in KSIMC's institutionalization occurred with the foundation of its Africa Federation in 1946 (Rizvi & King 1973). With a strong organization in the background, expanding rapidly from the late 1950s onwards, the relationship of KSIMC with the religious authorities in the Middle East underwent a crucial change. Thus, in the early 1960s, the then president of the Africa Federation, Ebrahim H. Sheriff (d. 1964), for the first time received a delegateship (*wakala*) from KSIMC's religious authority, the Iraqi-based Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim (d. 1970). With this *wakala*, the religious authority granted the Khoja leader the right to collect the Shia religious tax (*khums*) from the believers on his behalf and to allocate a substantial proportion of it for missionary work and other religious purposes at his own discretion (Jaffer 2009). This formed the basis for the Shia mission carried out by the Khojas, first in Africa and then

*inter alia* in the Americas and the Caribbean. In 1964 the local KSIMC leadership and the non-Khoja Indian resident scholar Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (d. 2002) established the Bilal Muslim Mission (BMM) of Tanzania to spread Shia traditions among the local population. The BMM quickly spread to other East African countries and eventually became the most widespread Shia organization in the region, with its membership of black Shia now outnumbering the local KSIMC (Ahmed 2009; Leichtman 2020).

### **The KSIMC and the Shia mission in Central and South America and the Caribbean**

In 1976 the BMM was integrated into the newly established World Federation of KSIMC. Shortly afterwards the BMM and its widely travelled leader, Sayyid Rizvi, were also responsible for the earliest missionary activities of the Khojas in Central and South America and the Caribbean. In 1979 the Pioneer Shia Association of Guyana was established by Latif Ali, who embraced Shia traditions a few years earlier through correspondence with Rizvi and the BMM. This formed the nucleus of Guyana's Shia community. The association with the East African BMM remained important in subsequent decades. In 1992, the Iranian Islamic Propagation Organization sent a former teacher of a BMM school in Tanzania as a missionary to Guyana, who then established a center in the country's second-largest city, Linden (Rizvi 2017).

In 1993, the Bilal Muslim Mission of Americas (BMMA) was incorporated in New York under the leadership of members of the Khoja Kermalli family of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. In the same year, the BMMA discovered, apparently by chance, the annual Hosay celebrations in Trinidad. Returning, then, to where we started this article, the BMMA sent a delegation to attend the processions in 1994 and to establish contact with Afro-Trinidadian converts. In 1996 the BMMA and the Afro-Trinidadian Imam-e Zamana Mission inaugurated the first Shia center of the Caribbean in Port of Spain (BMMA 1997). After more than a century, it was again South Asian influence which was instrumental in (re-)implanting Shia traditions in Trinidad.

In recent years, the missionary efforts of the World Federation of KSIMC, whose leadership is mostly Africa-born, have been intensified on an unprecedented scale in the region. The organization's 2019 *Khums Report* documents activities in Colombia, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and the Virgin Islands (World Federation 2020a). In 2020 the Islamic Education Board of the World Federation *inter alia* focused on the production of materials in Spanish and organizing online activities for Spain and Latin American countries. Accordingly, its External

Tableegh department produced 55 videos for the months of Muharram and Safar, with one video being broadcasted daily in twenty Latin American countries.

The World Federation, whose main languages are English, Gujarati and Urdu, seems so far to be lacking expertise and networks in Spanish language contexts. It has, to date, had to rely for this purpose on the already existing structures of Shia preaching in Latin America, mostly put into place by Iranian scholars and institutions. Among the four speakers appearing in the string of videos, the chief figures are Mohsin Rabbani and Mohsen Mujtahid Zadeh Qummi (World Federation 2020b). Rabbani spent 14 years in Argentina as a cleric before returning to Iran, where he became professor at Al-Mustafa International University (MIU), the most important Shia university catering to international students. He also founded the Islam Oriente cultural foundation as the prime organ for the propagation of Shia traditions among Spanish-speaking audiences. Qummi, commonly known among Spanish-speakers as Sheij Ali Qomi, is likewise affiliated to MIU and Islam Oriente.

Whereas the World Federation has enlisted the most experienced and proficient disseminators of Shia traditions in Latin America, this configuration may be problematic. The KSIMC are unique in their internal democratic structures, established first for the Africa Federation and then the World Federation. Moreover, they are characterized by their submission to the authority of the Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (b. 1930). At the same time, however, the World Federation keeps close relations to Iranian Shia organizations and institutions of higher learning. With Rabbani and Qummi, who are not only eloquent preachers but also ardent supporters of the Iranian regime and its supreme guide, the World Federation's missionary activities in Latin America are directly intersecting with the networks under scrutiny by U.S. and other security analysts and think tanks (Ottolenghi 2017). Even though politics are only a marginal aspect of the broadcasted lectures, Islam Oriente is clearly representative of a strand of Shia preaching infused with a distinctive Iranian anti-imperialist rhetoric. Such a message falls on fertile ground in Latin America, but potentially obscures the richness and diversity of Shia traditions in general and of the Khoja's embrace of it in particular in the region.

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