



and forced it upwards. Some craned their necks, others squinted, and all focused on the dial, willing more and more diamonds onto the scale as the hand moved clockwise, very slowly towards its target - the weight of the regal person seated at the end of the platform, serenely awaiting the outcome. His weight in diamonds would represent a fortune and the weighing-in was a sumptuous display of wealth, power and charity in one spectacular event.

Ismailis from all parts of the world sat tense with suppressed excitement. Finally the weight on the scale matched the weight of the man and a tremendous cheer broke from their lips in praise of their leader on the platform, His Highness, Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan.

He had succeeded to the Imamate at the age of eight in 1886 and they were celebrating his sixtieth anniversary as Imam.

The Aga Khan, moved by this presentation, explained how the gift would be used.

*&quot;As everyone is well aware, the value of these diamonds*

*has been unconditionally presented to me on this occasion. I do*

*not wish to take this money for myself but to use it for any object*

*that I think is best for my spiritual children.*

*After long reflection, I have come to the conclusion that*

*the very best use that I can make of it is that after expenses*

*of these celebrations, in the wider sense of the word, have been*

*paid for, then the whole of the residue must be given as an absolute*

*gift to the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust. [\[2\]](#)*

He told them that the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust had been created to build up

*&quot;a totally new financial outlook among the Ismailis. Co-operative*

*Societies, Corporations, and, I hope and believe very soon,*

*Building Societies, too, will draw from the Investment Trust sums*

*equal to their capital but at a level of three per cent. And they are*

*not allowed to charge more than six per cent under any conditions*

from their borrowers.&quot; [3]

With this internal banking system, the Aga Khan was setting up the means to ensure financial security for all his people. Stirred by his wisdom and his concern to preserve the *ummah*, his followers there in Dar-es-Salaam felt reaffirmed in their faith and in their leader.

Just being in the presence of His Highness was an honour that each individual would cherish forever.

After the weighing-in, the Aga Khan joined his family on the dais where the ceremony continued with speeches and special acknowledgment of the outstanding work of individual Ismailis in the fields of health, education and economic development in various communities throughout the world. Among the Ismailis being awarded special titles of authority were two from the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria - Allijah Velshi Keshavjee and his son, Allibhai V. Keshavjee who became *Vazier* and received a diamond ring and gold medal.

When all the awards had been presented, a voice on the loudspeaker cut through the jubilation with an unexpected announcement. A very unusual announcement! The Master of Ceremonies read out the names of two people and asked them to come up to the dais.

The couple concerned were shocked to hear their names called out before a crowd of 70 000.

They were just ordinary people and being requested to come forward into the presence of the Aga Khan and his family - his son, Prince Ally Khan, and his grandsons, Karim and Aryn - was overwhelming.

For a moment the couple stood frozen.

On being urged forward by their relatives, they made their way to the dais.

Hardly aware of what they were doing, they mounted the platform and unsteadily approached their Imam.

When they were beside the Aga Khan nervously mumbling the characteristic Ismaili greeting *Ya Ali Madahd* (with the blessings of Ali), chairs were brought, and they were seated.

The Aga Khan then introduced Habib Chagan and Miriam Dearman, a couple from the Asiatic Bazaar, to the whole gathering.

The Aga Khan had singled them out from the huge crowd for a special reason.

Habib and Miriam with their four children lived as a family even though their union had not been consecrated.

Because Miriam was Coloured, the local Ismaili Council in Pretoria, believing it could not admit her into the community without authority from the Supreme Council in Nairobi, had not allowed a Muslim wedding ceremony.

Miriam was not taken into the Ismaili fold and she and her children had been left in limbo for ten years.

Such inconsiderate treatment, was disturbing and a cause for concern.

The Aga Khan, who had made a grand tour of Ismaili communities in Africa the year before, 1945, had stopped in Pretoria and spent several days with the Ismailis in the Asiatic Bazaar. He had visited the Jamatkhana on Boom Street, which had been specially decorated for his visit.

He had walked along Boom Street, taking note of the social, educational and economic enterprises of the Ismaili community.

Hundreds of people from the Cape Location, the Asiatic Bazaar and Marabastad, regardless of religious affiliation and race had lined the streets to catch a glimpse of him. The Pretoria City

Council, waiving race restrictions, had permitted the Ismailis to hold a huge banquet for him in the City Hall. Jan Hofmeyr and General Jan Smuts were present among the dignitaries.

Habib Chagan, looking very handsome in his tuxedo, had attended.

Miriam, not accepted as an Ismaili, had not accompanied him and the matter of their marriage had not been brought to the Imam's attention during his visit. Born an Anglican, Miriam had converted when she married and wanted her children to take their rightful places in the community.

She had asked her sisters-in-law to instruct them in Ismaili beliefs, customs and traditions.

When Miriam heard that the city of Dar-es-Salaam had been chosen for the Aga Khan's Diamond Jubilee celebration, she convinced Habib that they should go to Tanganyika to put their case before their Imam.

Habib approached Mr Hasan Naran Keshavjee, a member of the Pretoria Ismaili Council and found him very sympathetic.

He agreed to speak to the Imam at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations and that is how the Aga Khan came to hear of their plight. As their treatment went against Ismaili teachings, reparation had to be made for their humiliation and frustration.

And His Highness, the Aga Khan took action. Right there in front of his followers from all over the world, he wiped out the injustice suffered by Habib and Miriam with one spontaneous and magnanimous gesture. He married them on the spot, on that dais in Dar-es-Salaam with members of the royal family in close attendance.

The wedding that had been denied them in their own tiny community became an international event in front of 80 000 Ismailis.

After he had pronounced them husband and wife, the Aga Khan performed chato (a ceremony similar to baptism).

He

gave Miriam a new name; she was to be called Amina after the Imam's own wife.

Her youngest son, Edward, who was with them, was renamed Aryn after the Imam's younger grandson.

The three children left behind in Pretoria, were also renamed. Sylvia, the eldest, would be called Layla, her sister would retain the name Miriam and their brother would be called Karim, after the Aga Khan's older grandson, who was destined to succeed his grandfather in 1957.

Telegrams were immediately dispatched to Pretoria instructing the local Ismaili Council to go to Habib's home, take the two daughters and the son to the Jamatkhana in Boom Street and perform chato . On that very day, Habib, Miriam and their children, by the grace of the Aga Khan, were immediately accepted as full members of the Ismaili community. According to Miriam's daughter, when the Aga Khan married Habib and Miriam, he said to his followers, &quot;Let this be a lesson to you.

You must go and look for my Ismaili children.&quot;

[\[4\]](#)

It was a warning to guard against prejudice.

Miriam and Habib's wedding took place just two years before the Nationalist Government came into power in South Africa. Among the first laws passed by this new government were the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* (1949) and *The Immorality Amendment Act* (1950).

Miriam and Habib moved through all the proceedings at the Durbar in an almost comatose state. The clearest impression that Miriam retained of her wedding and chato was that of the Aga Khan's grandsons, completely absorbed in their own little world, tickling each other and giggling throughout. The Aga Khan, who wanted to speak more with Miriam, invited her and Habib to a reception in his bungalow later that evening. But where they were the

streets were not paved, and after the celebration that day, it rained hard and the roads were muddy so they could not go.

they would have had to walk and would not have been presentable.

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Although it all turned out to be a brilliant triumph for Miriam and Habib, they had almost not made it to East Africa. Getting to Dar-es-Salaam had been a nightmarish experience. Miriam and Habib with Edward, their youngest, Habib's father and one or two of his sisters and brothers had obtained passports and set off for Lourenço Marques where they would board the boat, *The Kandala*.

When they embarked, though they were on a very old vessel, they had no qualms about their trip.

Once the journey was underway, however, the boat buffeted by the rough seas made them very seasick and they vomited copiously and ate nothing.

When the boat began to list dangerously and their luggage went flying all over the deck, they prayed that they would survive.

For at least two hours they travelled in a vessel that was sharply tilted to one side.

Meanwhile, having heard that a boat bound for Dar-es-Salaam had gone down with all its passengers, the children back home were crazy with anxiety. They tried desperately to get information from people in Lourenço Marques, from the authorities, from relatives.

Eventually, their parents got through to them, reassured them that they had arrived safely and had settled into the old refugee camp set aside for the South African contingent.

Their accommodation was in large halls with many beds, like general wards in hospitals.

They had communal showers and toilets and the use of a kitchen.

Since large pots of food were brought to them for every meal, they had no real need of the kitchen.

They were very comfortably settled.

Their return journey to Lourenço Marques would have been trouble-free but Miriam had contracted malaria while in Dar-es-Salaam and was quite sick on the boat. In Lourenço Marques, she saw a doctor who prescribed quinine; she recovered temporarily but suffered a relapse some time after her return to Pretoria. On the day they arrived in the Asiatic Bazaar, however, they were heartily welcomed by the family.

Miriam's mother-in-law took off her gold bangles and gave them to her daughter-in-law, a traditional gesture signifying that she was now officially a part of the family.

And Miriam, now Amina, became an accepted member of the Ismaili community in the Asiatic Bazaar. She was offered a post at the crèche and the clinic that Habib and Sherbanoo Keshavjee, son and daughter of Velshi Keshavjee, had started at the Jamatkhana. Her dedication and commitment to her work, the children and the community won her great respect, and when Karim Khan, the new Aga Khan who had succeeded his grandfather, Sultan Mohamed Shah, came to visit the Asiatic Bazaar in 1957, members of the Pretoria Ismaili Council were very proud to introduce her to him. They recalled to him her wedding in Dar-es-Salaam at which he, still a little boy, had been present.

They also informed him that Amina's daughter, Layla, had achieved the distinction of being the first female in the Ismaili community, and one of the first women in the Asiatic Bazaar, to qualify as a teacher.

In 1995, Amina received further recognition for her services to the Ismaili community. The Pretoria Ismaili Council recommended her for Didar (conference)

that was being organised by the Ismaili Council of the United Kingdom in London. She was very surprised and honoured. When she received a ticket and found that travel and accommodation arrangements had been made for her, she felt even more privileged.

But a greater honour was in store for her. In London, she discovered that she had been granted an audience with the Aga Khan. This was beyond expectation - a second chance for a private conference with an Imam.

She had missed the first opportunity with Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan in 1946 but nothing stood in her way in 1995.

She so cherished her interview with Karim Aga Khan that she never revealed any part of their discussion to any one, not even her family.

The community of Shia Muslims to which Miriam and Habib belonged was small but very enterprising. Its founder, Jivan Keshavjee, had arrived in Pretoria in 1894, about the time the Coolie Location was set aside for Indian occupation. He was from Chotila, a village near Rajput in India, where his family was engaged in commerce.

He came to South Africa with a friend, Ganibhai Haji Cassim, who had relatives in the country.

Jivan and Ganibhai worked in Port Elizabeth for a short while before they left for the Coolie Location in 1894.

. In the next year, with the help of other Muslims already established in the area, Jivan started a business at 112 Prinsloo Street, *K.J. Keshavjee and Sons*, so named as he was known as 'Khoja'; Jivan Keshavjee. 'Khoja' means trader.

His relatives who were not Keshavjees, entered the country as 'Khojas,' adopted the designation as their surname and used it for their businesses.

At some point, Jivan Keshavjee dropped the term and when his brothers, Velshi, Manjee and Naran, arrived in Pretoria, they came in as Keshavjees.

In 1903, in an attempt to confine Indian trade to the location, the Coolie Location was given bazaar status and became the Asiatic Bazaar. This meant that Indians could own property, establish businesses and build places of worship.

So the Keshavjees, Jivan and his brothers, acquired a number of stands on which they built their homes and shops.

They had businesses on almost every corner of Bloed Street.

Jivan Keshavjee's shop was on the corner of Fifth and Bloed Streets; Manjee had a shop on the corner of Jerusalem and Bloed.

On the corner of Fourth and Bloed was KK Khoja and Company and there was another shop on the corner of Bloed and Sixth.

Velshi had a shop at the corner of Grand and Sixth Streets.

Other Ismailis, relatives of the Keshavjees, MA Khoja and HK Khoja, also owned general dealerships along Bloed Street and in other places in the location.

The Ismailis were hardworking and successful businessmen, and the location, as tiny as it was, was a fortuitous place to have a shop.

It consisted of a grid of a dozen streets that housed about twenty thousand people. So business boomed.

By 1920, the Keshavjees, having established flourishing general dealerships, began to diversify and expand their interests. Velshi Keshavjee acquired the ABC Bakery, a tiny business in a tin shanty that made deliveries by horse and cart. He bought out the owner, a Chinese man who had gone bankrupt, modernised the bakery and put in the latest equipment and machinery. Under Rajabali, Velshi's eldest son, it became the eleventh most advanced bakery in the country.

Rajabali was an enterprising businessman and a progressive thinker. As a young boy, he had lived at Tolstoy Farm, the satyagrahi settlement that Mahatma Gandhi had established in 1910 at Lawley on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

So he was interested in the political movements of the time and in social upliftment and supported the work of the Indian Congresses.

His large, spacious house behind the bakery became a guesthouse for many prominent political figures. As there was no hotel accommodation for people of colour in the area at that time, when the Kajees (A.I. Kajeer was chairman of the Natal Indian Congress in the 1940s) came to Pretoria, they went straight to Rajabali's home at the bakery. In 1952, Rahemtullah, Rajabali's son, took part in the Defiance Campaign and marched to Germiston Location in Patrick Duncan's batch, which also included Mrs Thayanayagie Pillay. His involvement in politics brought people like Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu to the bakery.

Though their visits were very discreet, the police were aware of the activities at the bakery and raided it frequently.

But the Ismaili community, in general, did not become involved in political activities; it concentrated its efforts on business and building a sound economic base for social services. Among the most successful Ismailis, were the Keshavjees whose various branches comprised many enterprising individuals. In the Velshi Keshavjee family for instance, in addition to Velshi himself there were his sons, Rajabali and Habib, and his daughter Sherbanoo.

They took on interests as diverse as the bakery business, the film industry, social work, education and the building of the Jamatkhana, the white mosque in Boom Street.

In the 1920s, when the Ismaili community was ready for a new mosque, Velshi Keshavjee, made that his special project and headed up a committee that undertook to replace the little tin

shanty set up as a mosque by Velshi's pioneer brother, Jivan, with a magnificent jamatkhana. The committee commissioned an architect who drew up plans for a fine building with interior décor of wood panelling and plush carpeting. When work on the building in Boom Street was completed in 1928, the Asiatic Bazaar had a new landmark - a beautiful white mosque, the Jamatkhana. A black plaque proudly displays the legend that Velshi Keshavjee laid the foundation stone. As fate would have it, Velshi Keshavjee died in an accident right at the doors of the mosque in 1954.

He was crossing the road when a Putco bus hit him and dragged him to the gates of the Jamatkhana where he died.

The Jamatkhana, the pride of the Ismaili Muslim community in the location, became renowned among Ismailis throughout Africa.

It still stands on the corner of Boom and Fifth Streets and is now a national monument.

During their time in the location, Velshi's son, Habib, and his daughter, Sherbanoo, a social worker, turned the Jamatkhana into a community centre. Habib helped Sherbanoo establish a clinic on the premises with visiting doctors who came in on a regular basis and more frequently when there were epidemics of one sort or another.

In 1944, their aunt, Mrs Manjee Keshavjee, donated a plot of land behind the mosque for a crèche and enabled Sherbanoo and Habib to start the first nursery school in the location.

Habib recruited Glennie Tomlinson, a teacher from Cape Town, and went from door to door to encourage people to send their children to the crèche.

The response was good and they employed several teachers for whom they provided training in Montessori methods. Habib was also something of a dietician and insisted on healthy nutrition at the school.

In 1949, after donating a plot of land on Barber Street for a madressa, Habib recruited Mowlana Sadruddin Khimani and his wife, Malek, from Pakistan, to induct Ismaili children in the Shia understanding of Islam. The Jamatkhana, with the madressa on Barber Street, became

the hub of Ismaili community life.

It was a multipurpose community centre, with its clinic, nursery school, madressa, a Council Room downstairs and a prayer area upstairs. With the exception of the prayer area, which was restricted exclusively to Ismailis, the venues at the Jamatkhana were open to all.

Habib's involvement at the mosque consumed only a small part of his energies. His main interest was in the cinema business. In the 1920s, the Keshavjee brothers, Jivan, Velshi, Manjee and Naran, originally part of the firm of Keshavjee & Co. split up, formed separate companies and went into independent ventures. Some branches of the clan acquired sites that had been used for showing films, such as the Bombay Star Bioscope and the Nav Jivan. The new owners of these venues, converted the Bombay Star into a shirt factory and sold the Nav Jivan.

They left the development of cinemas to Habib and his uncles KK Khoja and Goolam Manjee Keshavjee.

Habib had been running film shows for African audiences at the Dougall Hall from about 1926. When, in 1928, his uncles built the Royal Theatre on Grand Street that was the start of a rivalry that gave rise to a thriving cinema industry in the location. Bioscopes were a lucrative venture for the Keshavjees because the entertainment business provided a world of make-believe that allowed people to escape the squalor of their surroundings. In Marabastad, there was a large population hungry for escapist fare. So stars like the young Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, Frank Sinatra, Betty Grable, Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald, Tyrone Power, Boris Karloff and Johnny Weismuller became icons in the locations.

At the Royal, KK Khoja and Goolam Manjee showed Warner Brothers movies. In order to outdo them, when Habib acquired the Empire Theatre around 1933, he obtained contracts with MGM, United Artists and Twentieth Century Fox. As a showman, he did everything he could to bring people into the Empire. He kept abreast of technological developments and ensured that his theatre offered the highest quality entertainment. He employed an African pianist to provide background music during the silent film era, and in the forties, he commissioned Omarjee Suliman, a young man with a passionate interest in film technology, to create special exhibits using animation. So there were flamboyant displays at the Empire to advertise new features such as

*David and Beersheba*

, *Samson and Delilah*

and

*Mighty Joe Young.*

Habib also used the cinema to promote local talent. In 1947, Miriam Makeba performed at the Empire for five pounds a show. Other African artists who appeared there were the Manhattan Brothers and the cast of the film, *The Magic Queen*, starring Dolly Rathebe.

Habib devised a promotion campaign for the film with photo sessions that took the stars to various venues and landmarks such as the Union Buildings.

At Easter, the bioscope was crowded mainly with African people. They came from Marabastad, Bantule, Lady Selborne, Newclare and locations all over Pretoria, to continuous showings of *The Life of Christ*. These performances, which began early in the morning and finished late at night, were always sold out.

In 1949, when Canada Lee and the young Sydney Poitier, stars of the film, *Cry the Beloved Country*, were on location in South Africa, Habib invited them to the Empire. From the stage of the bioscope, they encouraged the mostly African audience not to give up hope for freedom.

Though there were restrictions regarding the admission of African people to the bioscopes, cinema owners ignored them. With the coming of apartheid, however, the authorities began to fine cinema owners for admitting African people to 'violent' films, American gangster movies and such like. People like Habib could see the writing on the wall and believed that their progress would be stunted under apartheid.

Soon after the Nationalist government came into power in 1948, His Highness, Sultan Mohammed Shah Aga Khan, the Ismaili Imam, called on his followers in South Africa to leave the country.

As they saw no hope of a viable future in South Africa, the Keshavjees sold their cinemas to the Chetty brothers, the emerging cinema moghuls, and emigrated.

Habib, like his pioneer Uncle Jivan, was a charismatic figure. When he left in 1952, he drew people to Kenya in the same way that Jivan had drawn people from India to the Asiatic Bazaar. Almost everyone followed. Ten years later there was no longer an Ismaili Muslim community in Pretoria.

A few individuals remained but the majority had made their way to other parts of the world.

The 'Khojas,' as the Ismaili Muslims were called in the location, had always been something of a mystery to other Indians, who imagined that Ismailis practised peculiar rites. Absurd rumours spread amongst them. Some Hindus, believing that Ismaili Muslims were confused about their religion, assumed that their prayers were borrowed from Hindu texts.

This confusion arose from several factors.

One was the similarity between Hindu and Ismaili names.

Many Ismailis in the Asiatic Bazaar were Gujaratis from Kathiawar in India.

Their ancestors had been Hindus. When they became Muslims, their names were adapted to reflect their new faith. So Keshav became Keshavjee, Madhav became Madhavjee, Chagan is both a Hindu and an Ismaili surname and first names like Naran and Jivan are common to both Hindus and Ismailis. As Ismaili Muslims also retained some old cultural traditions from India, non-Ismailis were perplexed and thought the 'Khojas' didn't know what they were about.

Such confusion arises from the fact that outsiders do not easily understand .Ismailism, which is an 'esoteric interpretation of Islam that emphasizes the spirit and is akin to Sufism.'

[\[5\]](#)

According to Karen Armstrong, who gives an account of Ismailism in her book *A History of God*

:

*Their (the Shiis') piety was too abstruse for most Muslims, who*

*regarded this incarnational idea (the Imam) as blasphemous, so*

*Shiis were usually found among the more aristocratic classes and the*

*intellectuals. Since the Iranian revolution, we have tended in the*

*West to depict Shiism as an inherently fundamentalist sect but that*

*is an inaccurate assessment. Shiism became a sophisticated tradition. [\[6\]](#)*

But it remains a minority tradition. The majority of Muslims in the world are Sunni Muslims (Sunni from Sunnah meaning 'practice as prescribed by The Prophet').

About ten per cent of Muslims are Shia Muslims and Ismailis are a minority of this minority.

Sunnis believe Muhammad was the last Prophet to appear on earth and that no one succeeded him.

But according to Shia Muslims, the Prophet decreed that there always be a spiritual guide

(Imam) for Muslims and those appointed to take over leadership after the Prophet's death, fulfilled this function. Sunnis, however, believe that these Caliphs were administrators rather than spiritual leaders and their function was to preserve and protect the *ummah* and the principles and practices of Islam.

For Sunnis, there can be no spiritual leader after Muhammad; the Qur'an and the sunnah provide all the spiritual guidance needed by a Muslim

Consequently, some Sunni Muslims in the location could not accept the Ismailis as true Muslims because of their allegiance to the Aga Khan. These Sunnis believed that the Ismailis worshipped the Aga Khan and regarded him as divine.

It is true that Ismailis revere the Aga Khan, who holds a special place in their beliefs and in their hearts, but he is not regarded as divine.

According to Karen Armstrong:

*The veneration of the Imams was no mere political enthusiasm,*

*however. As we have seen, Shiis had come to believe that*

*their Imams embodied God's presence on earth in some mysterious*

*way. They had evolved an esoteric piety of their own which depended*

*upon a symbolic reading of the Koran. It was held that Muhammad had imparted a secret knowledge to his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Ali Talib and that this ilm [7] had been passed down the line of designated Imams, who were his direct descendants. Each of the Imams embodied the &quot;Light of Muhammad&quot; (al-nur-al-Muhammad), the prophetic spirit which had enabled Muhammad to surrender perfectly to God. Neither the Prophet nor the Imams were divine, but they had been so totally open to God that he could be said to dwell within them in a more complete way than he dwelt in more ordinary mortals. [8]*

Shia Muslims believe that "after the Prophet's death, Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, became the first Imam - the spiritual leader - of the Muslim community, and that this leadership (known as Imamate) continues thereafter by heredity through Ali and his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. Succession to the Imamate, according to Shia doctrine and tradition is by way of nass (designation), it being the absolute prerogative of the Imam of the time to appoint his successor."

[\[9\]](#)

The term Shia derives from Shi'at Ali (party of Ali) and Imams, being descendants of the Prophet, combine both a temporal and spiritual power

.

*A principle function of the Imam is to enable believers to go*

*beyond the apparent or outward form of the revelation in search*

*of spirituality and intellect. A believer who sincerely submits*

*to the Imam's guidance may potentially attain the knowledge*

*of self. The tradition attributed to both the Prophet and Imam*

*Ali: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord", conveys the*

*essence of this relationship between the Imam and his follower.*

*The Shia thus place obedience to the Imams after that to God*

*and the Prophet by virtue of the command in the Quran for*

*Muslims to obey those vested with authority. [\[10\]](#) □*

Hasrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet was the first Imam and his son, Hussain, grandson of the Prophet and martyr of Karbala, was the second.

Unanimous Shia acceptance of the dynasty continues to the fifth Imam, Jafar as-Sadiq.

Then there is a split.

Jafar as-Sadiq had two sons.

His eldest son, Ismail, died before he did and his second son, Musa al-Kazim, claimed the title of Imam.

But those who felt that Ismail, designated Imam before he died, was the true Imam, became his followers and are known as Ismailis.

The other, larger group of Shia Muslims, recognising Musa al-Kazim as Imam, became known as the Ithna asharis (the Twelver Shia) as the line of descent ended with their twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi.

'A messianic strain appeared among the Twelvers, who believed that the Twelfth or Hidden Imam would return to inaugurate a golden age.'

[\[11\]](#)

The majority of Iranians belong to this Shia denomination.

For Ismailis, however, there is an unbroken line of descent from Ali, through Jafar as-Sadiq and Ismail to the present Aga Khan, HH Karim Khan. He is the acknowledged spiritual guide of Ismailis all over the world.

*An honest believer accepts the norms and ethics of the faith which*

*guide his quest, recognises his own inner capacities and knows that*

*when in doubt he should seek the guidance of the one vested with*

*authority who, in Shia tradition, is the Alid Imam of the time from*

*the Prophet's progeny. [\[12\]](#)*

In the time of the Islamic Empire, Jewish and Muslim scholars involved in profound philosophical inquiries into the nature of God, had amongst them many Shia scholars who were a powerful influence in developing new understandings and interpretations of the divine. According to Karen Armstrong, they exerted a powerful influence on the Islamic world in the tenth century.

*Although they remained a minority form of Islam, the tenth*

*century is known as the Shii century since Shiis managed to*

*establish themselves in leading political posts throughout the*

*empire. The most powerful of these Shii ventures was the*

*establishment of a caliphate in Tunis in 909 in opposition*

*to the Sunni caliphate in Baghdad...Their North African*

*caliphate became extremely powerful: in 973 they moved*

*their capital to al-Qahirah, the site of modern Cairo,*

*where they built the great mosque of al-Azhar. [\[13\]](#)*

When the Ismailis left Marabastad, Pretoria lost the contributions that fine minds make to enhance a society. Had the 'Khojas' remained in the Asiatic Bazaar, however, many avenues of development would have been closed to them. In other countries they had the freedom to fulfil their potential.

In Canada and the United Kingdom, they embarked on careers that carried the most gifted - among them the descendants of Velshi Keshavjee - to the top of their professions. In 1987, Murad Keshavjee, Velshi Keshavjee's grandson, who became a member of the Ontario Liberal Government of David Peterson, was deputy whip of the Liberal Party, Chair of the Committee of the Ombudsman and Parliamentary Assistant to the Ministry of Citizenship.

Shafique Keshavjee, Sherbanoo Velshi Keshavjee's grandson, is the leading heart-and-lung thoracic surgeon in Canada and director of the Toronto Lung-Transplant Programme.

The successes of Ismailis, even in diaspora, are clearly attributable to the cohesiveness of their community, a unity fostered through religious beliefs and the spiritual guidance of the Imam.

*The essence of Shi'ism lies in the desire to search for the true meaning of the revelation in order to understand the purpose of human existence and its destiny. □ This true, spiritual meaning can never be fettered by the bounds of time, place or the letter of its form.*

*It is to be comprehended through the guidance of the Imam*

*of the time, who is the inheritor of the Prophet's authority, and the trustee of his legacy.*

[\[14\]](#)

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**[1]** *H.B. Keshavjee, The Aga Khan in Africa, p. 192*

**[2]** *Ibid. p. 194*

**[3]** *Ibid. p. 194*

**[4]** *Interview, Miriam Moosa, 2001*

**[5]** *Mohammed Keshavjee*

**[6]** *Karen Armstrong, A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: Ballantine Books, p. 163

**[7]** *Ilm = true knowledge of God*

**[8] Karen Armstrong, 1993, *A History of God,: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: Ballantine Books, p. 177**

**[9] Mohammed Keshavjee**

**[10] *The Ismaili Imamat*, p 3**

**[11] *A History of God*, p 163**

**[12] *The Ismaili Imamat*,. p 4**

**[13] *A History of God*, p. 176**

**[14] *The Ismaili Imamat*, p.4**