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ROOTED IN TRADITION: SPACES OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTION OF THE NIZARI ISMAILI MUSLIMS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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This paper will focus on the Nizari Ismaili Muslim community of Gujarati ancestry who migrated from India to the United Kingdom, some *via* East Africa, beginning in the 1960s. In order to foster a sense of 'home', the Ismailis established temporary *jamatkhanas* that were not only places of worship, but social spaces that offered psychological, educational, economic, as well as networking benefits. The eventual establishment of permanent *jamatkhanas* is indicative of the community planting its roots in UK soil and making it their home. Taking the case study of the Ismaili Centre, London, this paper will discuss the ways in which *jamatkhanas* have evolved to create structures that have not been transplanted, rather they have been consciously designed such that they integrate in relation to their new locale. For these migrants, the *jamatkhana* was an arena where adherents could congregate and participate in rituals and liturgy, which were rooted in the familiar. An example of this is the *ghatpaat* ceremony, which, along with the *jamatkhana*, having been instituted by the *pirs* in Gujarat and adjacent areas, subsequently travelled with the community during their multiple migrations. It is these elements that have remained relatively unchanged and which continue to bind the community to their Gujarati ancestral culture, thereby creating a strong sense of ethno-religious identity.

Keywords: Identity, Nizari Ismaili Muslim, Mosque, Ismaili Centre, Architecture, *Jamatkhana*, Ritual, London, Britain

Introduction

> "…you must remember that you will always have two principal obligations. The first and paramount of these is your religious obligation to Islam and to your Imam. Your second obligation is a secular one. You must always be loyal to the country of your adoption and to whatever Government is responsible for your security and well-being." (*Speeches*, 1963-4: 35).

The Nizari Ismaili Muslims are a global religious community made up of diverse ethnic and national groups. A minority Shia community, the Ismailis reside in twenty-five countries including, India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, the former Soviet Union, China, East Africa, Europe and North America (Nanji, 1986; Daftary, 1998). Those of Gujarati ancestry were converted to the faith in the thirteenth century and whilst many still live in the state of Gujarat, others migrated to larger Indian cities, such as Bombay (present Mumbai) and Pune, in 1876, whilst others travelled further afield to East Africa. In the 1960s, Ismailis of Gujarati ancestry from India and East Africa began migrating to Britain, either for permanent settlement or as students[1]. Many East African Ismailis[2] migrated to Britain, not out

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of choice, but due to expulsion from Uganda in 1972. Having left their original home of Gujarat in the late-nineteenth century the Ismailis were to begin a new process of acculturation, which also included the establishment of community institutions, such as the *jamatkhana* (house of congregation), in their new places of residence. This paper will illustrate how the physical structure of the Ismaili Centre, London[3], acts as a visible representation of the religious and national identities of the Ismailis. It will also examine the manner in which the congregational worship rituals carried out within, further serve to bind the community in terms of their ethno-religious identity. Places of worship serve to mirror the ethos of a community and this paper will examine the pivotal role of the Ismaili Centre, London, in particular. As scholarly studies on *jamatkhana* architecture are scarce, this paper will draw on studies on mosque architecture in Europe and North America to shed light on how the architecture of mosques, and in turn, the Ismaili Centre, London, can serve as expressions of a community's identities. Before beginning the discussion it is imperative to note the difference between a *jamatkhana* and a mosque. The Nizar Ismaili *jamatkhana* consists of a prayer hall, which, during times of congregational prayer, is only accessible to adherents. A mosque, on the other hand, is usually open to all Muslims, even though there may be unwritten rules regarding access[4]. It is not the intention of the authors to equate the two types of buildings in any way; rather to examine the ways in which the ethos behind mosque architecture in the diaspora, in general, differ from or are similar to the principles of architecture employed in the Ismaili Centre, London. The paper will begin by analyzing how the architecture of a mosque in the diaspora is an expression of religious as well as national identities. The discussion will then focus on the Ismaili context and the Ismaili Centre, London specifically, to demonstrate how the building itself, the liturgical rituals conducted within the prayer hall, and the public spaces within the Centre come together to represent the ethno-religious and national identities of the Ismailis.

Architectural Expressions of Identities

Certain symbols, over time, have come to represent a specific religion, such as, the cross, the Star of David and the crescent. The buildings in which adherents of a particular faith group congregate almost always exhibit the symbols attached to their traditions. The performance of congregational rituals also reflects adherents' religious beliefs and reinforces an individual's communal identity (Geertz 1973). Myth and symbols, alongside language, offer pre-coded information diffused with implicit messages (Douglas 1975). This means, therefore, that the space of worship is imbued with material symbols, which can be deciphered by the adherents and which may also influence the perception of their own identities. In Europe and North America today, the mosque is often one of the most visually identifiable features of Muslim identity in general. It is not only a place for congregational worship but also a space where marriage ceremonies, classes on Islamic education and other social and cultural events are held (Kahera *et al.* 2009).

The construction of a space of worship, especially amongst diasporic communities, often tends to draw on the familiar, thus resulting in the replication of spaces as they exist in their countries of origin. This is also the case for many Muslim communities outside the Middle East, where mosques are re-created in a fashion similar to one of the first mosques in Islam, the Prophet's mosque in Medina. In the case of mosques outside of the Muslim world, it can be argued that they are often constructed using anachronistic forms, rather than appropriating local architectural design, in an effort to re-create the historical memory of the community. Such re-creation evokes symbolic ties to one's historical past, be it recent or remote. In addition to the building itself, are the textual inscriptions found in nearly all mosques. Not surprisingly, these are also based on those found in religious buildings in the Muslim world. The textual inscriptions are in Arabic, even if the *lingua franca* of the congregation is a language other than Arabic and/or if the mosque is situated in a location where most of the adherents do not speak or understand Arabic. Given the fact that the language of obligatory prayer in Islam and the original language of its scripture, the Qur'an, is Arabic, textual inscriptions in Arabic within the mosque should not really be a point of astonishment. Nevertheless, it does raise some questions, and, whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to address them, they are significant and, therefore, need to be mentioned: Is the purpose of the inscription a matter of spirituality or a decorative feature? Which members of the congregation read the text? Does the congregation comprehend the text? Is a mosque lacking such inscriptions less sacred than a mosque with inscription? (Kahera 2002). There are no clear-cut answers to these questions and in many cases they are context specific. However, research regarding the retention of heritage languages in Britain shows that young adults from minority ethnic communities have weak literacy skills in Arabic (McPake *et al.* 2008). This may then be evidence that many Muslim communities in Britain cannot actually read the text and that the inscriptions do in fact become decorative and symbolic; this is also likely to be the case in other parts of Europe as well as in North America amongst second and subsequent generations.

Reading the above discussion may lead one to infer that all mosques within and outside the Muslim world are constructed in the conventional manner. However, it is important to point out that this is not always the case, as is evident in places like Indonesia, Malaysia, China and sub-Saharan Africa, where mosques combine Muslim architectural styles with regional designs, thereby blending into the local milieu (Hillenbrand 2011). Examples of mosques in these regions include the Grand Mosque of Xian in China, in which the walls of the prayer hall are inscribed with the entire Qur'an in both Chinese and Arabic (*Emel* 2010). Another example is the Great Mosque of Djenné in Mali made of mud bricks, a feature characteristic of

West African architecture, known as the Sudan style (Petersen 1996). Perhaps it is not as simple as stating that there are mosques built in the conventional sense, that follow a particular pattern and consist of certain features, and others which take into consideration the environment in which they are being built. Goode, *et al.* (2009) have identified five styles in which mosques are built: 1. vernacular, an example of which is the Great Mosque in Niono, Mali; 2. vernacularist, a style found in the New Gourna Mosque in Egypt; 3. modernist, a design used in the Sherefuddin White Mosque in Visoko, Bosnia; 4. historicist, as seen in the Mosque and Islamic Centre in Rome; and 5. postmodern, an example of this style is found in the al-Ghadir Mosque in Tehran, Iran.

Mosques built in the conventional manner do not take into consideration the context in which the mosque is being built. What they do, however, is reinforce historical memory, and thus, one's religious identity. The mosque itself, therefore, is a physical structure that symbolises the collective religious identity of the congregants, who hold the same beliefs and pray as one in a specific building (Kahera 2002). In addition, perhaps one can even go so far as to say that mosques that look similar, or at least have some of the same features, for example, a minaret and a dome, also have the potential for symbolising identification with the *ummah* (global Muslim community). Arkoun (2002: 4) raises the question as to whether the various features of a mosque are Islamic, and therefore unalterable, or possess elements that have calcified over time: 'Are the main components of the mosque—*mihrab, minbar*, minaret, courtyard, ablution fountain—intrinsically Islamic and therefore unchangeable, or are they arbitrary forms and signs made orthodox by theological definitions and made sacred by rituals established over centuries?'

Referring to mosques constructed in the conventional sense as buildings expressing religious identity could be seen as essentialising Muslim identity in two ways: first, such mosques may be inferred to indicate that a Muslim identity today is the same as it was in the seventh century; and second, the diverse practices, traditions and interpretations that are evident in Islam are not accounted for, thus presenting Islam as one homogeneous faith. Whilst those belonging to the faith of Islam may identify themselves as Muslim, the characteristics and features that define this term are complex and manifold. In fact, one could say that there are as many definitions of the term as there are adherents. Islam itself promotes the notion of diversity: 'And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know' (Qur'an, 30: 22). How can one way of constructing a building be representative of all members of the *ummah*? Soon (1983: 47) takes the notion of identity through architecture one step further by stating that it can represent a community's cultural, as well as national identity: 'The role of architectural design therefore can assist in the heightening of national consciousness as well as draw attention to…cultural heritage.' In the case of mosque architecture, the dual identities that can be represented in its design may be the national and the religious. Whilst the portrayal of a religious identity through the structure of a mosque is apparent, how national identity is conveyed needs some explaining. One way to begin to incorporate aspects of national identity into a building is by using local material and/or by applying local colour and design techniques in the construction of the mosque to ensure that the building blends into the neighbourhood. The integration of a mosque into the national or regional environment is a visible sign of the acculturation of the community that utilises the mosque. Instead of making the statement that Muslims use the mosque, the statement transforms to declare that British Muslims, Canadian Muslims, etc use the mosque. The chairman of the northern branch of Milli Gorus Netherlands[5] expressed this representation of a hybrid identity through a mosque:

> We do not want an ugly big white pastry in our neighbourhood, as you sometimes see when they build a new mosque. Our mosque will be completely in the style of the "Amsterdam School," such that fits perfectly in the neighbourhood and becomes a real Dutch mosque. That should be the future of all mosques in this country: in line with the physical and social environment (Sunier 2006: 22).

The chairman's statement resonates with the ethos of Ismaili Centres globally, as will be discussed in further detail below, and clearly reflects the sentiment that 'cities and their buildings are…powerful instruments for the representation of national identity' (Markus and Cameron 2002: 145).

According to Holod and Khan (1997) mosques constructed in Europe and North America can be characterised by three elements. The first tendency is the modification of the design to make it context-specific, often based on pressures from the neighbouring non-Muslim community or regional laws and statutes. An interesting characteristic of this aspect is that even in cases where the external structure may conform to the local milieu, internal ornamentation often consists of distinctive Islamic designs to stress the Islamic nature of the building. The second aspect is the adaptation of traditional features, influenced by a popular model from a particular country, generally the majority group's original homeland. The third feature is one that has been prevalent since the 1980s, where attempts are made to synthesise traditional and contemporary forms of architecture. We will return to these three elements later in the discussion to reflect on their application to the Ismaili Centre, London. Speaking at the international seminar sponsored by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Jakarta, Arkoun (1990: 50) asks a very important question: 'How are Muslim societies going to express themselves during the next decade? In which international "order", in which intellectual and cultural context will the various expressions of different societies take place?' It is, therefore, the combined vision of the client and the architect, not only for the built form, but what it symbolises, that is imperative, as it is the end product that will facilitate the expression of the identities of Muslim communities in Europe and North America:

'The search for identity in our architecture lies in creating the buildings of the horizontal (contemporary) plane which will recognise and develop out of the historical (vertical) plane and not purely out of modernism' (Khosla 1983: 65). The question that arises then is how can an architect integrate modern notions of architectural design with traditional ones to create a mosque that portrays both national and religious identities? Lye (1983: 53) provides some direction:

> architecture alone, as an object has no identity. Its identity comes out of the timeless qualities of a society, whether they be religious, economic, ethnic or something else. Architecture per se has no identity. So in the creation of identity we must bring in those timeless qualities from culture and the other things that give identity to architecture.

The task of the architect, therefore, is to attempt to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern; to draw from history and historical memory and select those images that evoke a sense of familiarity to provide a sense of cultural continuity (Ee 1983). However, this does not mean that the architect must remain in the depths of history and historical memory. Rather, that a historical framework is essential, to draw some links to the past. This can then be merged with individual creativity to produce new structures, which continue to incorporate traditional aspects, sometimes resulting in original constructions, or, to borrow Hasan's (2002: 126) phrase 'vernacular architecture', that convey multiple identities. 'Architecture is always a response to the culture of its time. The role of the architect is to accommodate and enrich his culture by innovation and the introduction of challenging ideas. After all, architects and artists register and document their era for future generations' (Diba 2002: 119). Diba's words are significant as they highlight the role of architecture in conveying the culture of a people, both to those living in the present, as well as to future generations. In the case of Muslims residing in Europe and North America, this culture is made up of two equally important aspects of their identity – religion and nationality.

The Ismaili Context

For the Ismaili community, the *jamatkhana* is the central built space for congregational worship, as well as social and cultural activities. The notion of the *jamatkhana* was initially established in Gujarat and was one that the Ismailis took with them when they migrated to their new homelands (Mukadam and Mawani 2008). The Ismailis in the UK have continued their tradition of congregational prayer and established *jamatkhanas* for the purpose of religious and social gatherings (Nanji, 1978; Daftary, 1990), as Aga Khan IV (the *Imam*, or spiritual leader, of the Ismailis) outlined in a speech in London in 2008: 'In 1957, there was only one Ismaili space here for congregational prayer – and that was on leased premises! Creating places of prayer as centres for community life was fundamental to ensuring the cohesion of the community' (Aga Khan 2008). Initially, Ismailis in the UK congregated in school halls and converted warehouses for the purposes of religious worship. However, so vital were these centres to their lives, both for religious and communal purposes, that they collected funds, philanthropy being central to the ethics of their faith, which led to the creation of purpose-built *jamatkhanas*, the most prominent of which is the Ismaili Centre, London in South Kensington. These Centres are not merely religious institutions, ‘architecturally unique, each one incorporates spaces for social and cultural gatherings, hosts intellectual engagements and serves as an ambassadorial hub, while representing a balance between faith and modern life’ (Esmail and Ahmed 2010). Today there are 44 *jamatkhanas* in the UK, with eight in Greater London. It is important to note that there are some spatial variations in the Ismaili Centre, London and *jamatkhanas* in Gujarat. One notable difference is the adaptation of social spaces; in Gujarat it is common for there to be an open courtyard in front of the *jamatkhana* where members of the community meet and socialise. In Europe and North America issues relating to the high cost of land and weather conditions have meant that the social spaces have been incorporated into the overall design of the building. As the Ismaili Centre, London was constructed as a venue where the Ismaili community and local non-Ismaili community could come together for social and intellectual gatherings, appropriate spaces have been incorporated into the building. Whilst such spaces are present in *jamatkhanas* in Gujarat, on the rare occasion that non-Ismailis are on the premises, it is the open courtyard that becomes the venue for socialising.

April 1985 saw the opening of the first Ismaili Centre, in London. Subsequent Ismaili Centres were built in Vancouver, Canada in 1985; Lisbon, Portugal in 1998; Dubai, UAE in 2008; and Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2009. At the time of writing this paper, the Ismaili Centre in Toronto, Canada is nearing completion; and Centres in the USA (Houston and Los Angeles), as well as in Paris, France are in the planning stages (theismaili.org, 2009). All Ismaili Centres are designed to incorporate traditional and contemporary architecture. At the opening ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, London, Aga Khan IV (1985) described the purpose of the building:

> This building is more than simply a place of congregation. Through the quality of its design and workmanship, it will be a bridge between the culture of the community’s roots and that of its future as well as a symbol of the hopes of people who have lived through change and turbulence and have ultimately found security here in Britain.

More recently, at the opening of the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe, he explained the role of the Centres across the globe:

> The continuing pluralism of human endeavour will be manifested in the life of this Centre. It will be reflected in an array of exciting activities, serving people of many different backgrounds. The Centre will have a space for congregational gathering, just like the array of Ismaili Centres in major cities across the world, both those which are now being developed and those that already exist, from London to Vancouver and Lisbon to Dubai. In addition, we hope and trust that people of all faiths and background will gather here for educational and cultural events — for seminars, lectures, recitals and exhibitions. We will seek to

> demonstrate that spiritual insight and worldly knowledge are not separate or opposing realms, but that they must always nourish one another, and that the world of faith and the material world are the dual responsibilities of humankind (Aga Khan 2009).

Whilst the Ismaili Centre, London is primarily a place of worship for the Ismaili community, it has also achieved its aim in reaching out to non-Ismaili Muslims, as well as those of other faiths, by inviting them to participate in lectures and visit special exhibitions. In the summer of 2007 a public exhibition with no admission fee, entitled *Spirit & Life: Masterpieces of Islamic Art from the Aga Khan Museum Collection* was housed in the Social Hall of the Centre. Since 2011 the Centre has opened its roof garden to the public during London's Open Garden Squares Weekend and as part of Open House London's celebration of the capital's buildings, the public was invited to visit the Centre where guided tours of the garden and the prayer hall had been organised. The Centre has continued to participate in both these events annually. The Centre's involvement in the Exhibition Road Music Day is also significant in bringing together people from the neighbourhood as Naseem Jivraj, an Ismaili organiser of the event at the Centre, explains:

> For me, Music Day has many outcomes. Most importantly, this free event attracts members of the public and foreign visitors to engage with Muslim Heritage by visiting the Centre, attending workshops on Muslim music, art and literature, and listening to concerts performing music reflecting our diverse musical heritage (Mawji, 2010b).

Other public events include talks on the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, as well as the annual lecture commemorating *Milad-un-Nabi* (the birthday of Prophet Muhammad). Participation in these events reflects the community's integration with and affiliation to Britain and British life. Realising Aga Khan IV's vision for the Ismaili Centre, London was a tall order for the architects whose task it was 'to create a physical environment readily identifiable by a society as its own' (Holod 1980: viii). In so doing, the architects were instructed to ensure that the Centre 'reflect, even if only discretely, an Islamic mood whilst being sympathetic to the character of its surroundings' (Aga Khan 1979).

The site, which was to eventually house the Centre, was somewhat ill-fated in its early days. In the 1860s high quality houses were built on it, but by 1912 heavy traffic made them unattractive and they were purchased by the Office of Works as the new home of the Royal College of Art. This plan was never actualised and in 1920 the houses were rented out to the Institute Français. In 1937 the Shakespeare National Theatre Committee intended to build a National Theatre on the site – this project, too, never materialised and there was a fear the land would house a petrol station (TheIsmaili 2010). The land soon became derelict, with a car rental and prefabricated office on site, what Long (1985) described as 'a hideous eyesore for as long as many of us can remember.' Nevertheless, the site was 'the most prominent and prestigious plot of development land in West London' (Long 1985). It was acquired by Aga Khan IV in the late 1970s to build an Ismaili Centre. However, there was always the question of how local residents would react to a small, little known Muslim community acquiring this eminent piece of land. According to Long (1985), two significant factors took place which limited any opposition to the Centre's construction. First was the appointment of Neville Condor, who was himself a local resident and whose offices were situated in Thurloe Square, as the architect of the Centre. The second factor was the World of Islam festival in 1976, which peaked British interest in Islamic art and culture.

Situated opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Museum of Natural History, the Centre's façade has been constructed so that it integrates into its surroundings. Its location is one that baffles many, as it seems in their eyes unfeasible for a minority immigrant community to be hob-nobbing in an upper middle class locale. Perhaps this example of a minority Muslim community finding its place in such an arena is one that others can aspire towards. If Britain is clear about its policies of integration and equality for all its citizens then the position of the Ismaili Centre is not something that should come as a surprise. On the contrary, it would be desirable in a multicultural city to see mosques, *jamatkhanas*, *mandirs* (Hindu temples), synagogues and *gurudwaras* (Sikh temples) in all areas of the city, not just the derelict and unwanted locations where immigrants are expected to reside. With this in mind, one can safely presume that integration has indeed occurred among the Ismaili community, as on several occasions we have been asked ourselves, or overheard others being asked, by tourists, whether the building is a cultural centre or houses exhibitions. To our knowledge, the question of whether the building is a place of worship has not been raised and given the rather plain façade, this is not surprising. However, the design in the octagonal entrance hall is evocative of a courtyard and immediately reveals the Centre's connection to Islam. Along with Arabic calligraphy on the wall facing the entrance, at its centre is a heptagonal fountain and the floor is tiled in geometric patterns, all drawing on traditional Islamic features. Geometric patterns are found throughout the building on the pillars, ceilings and walls and the rooftop garden is a modern version of the Islamic *chahar bagh* (four part) garden. Allinson (2006: 190) has described the Centre's design as one that 'strives for an Islamic spirit without obvious quotation'. The Centre is 'architecturally respectful of its surroundings while emanating a distinctly Islamic character' (TheIsmaili 2010).

It is perhaps pertinent to pause here for a moment to recall the three elements which, according to Holod and Khan (1997), characterize a mosque in Europe and North America and reflect on their relevance for the Ismaili Centre. It would appear that all three elements can be related to the Centre to some degree. The first factor, the modification of the design of the mosque to make it more context-specific, is applicable to the Centre – the building blends into the neighbouring architecture such that it is not immediately identifiable as a place of worship and it is only the small plaque on the outside of the building that gives away its identity. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Centre's design was influenced by or resulted from external pressures. The second factor, that is, adaptation of traditional features from, in this case, the Ismailis of Gujarati ancestry's original homeland, is inapplicable in terms of the external features, as, even in Gujarat, these vary from *jamatkhana* to *jamatkhana*. Nevertheless, one may infer that internal features, such as the social hall, may have been adapted from *jamatkhanas* in Gujarat. However, as noted above, the use of these spaces differ in both regions. There is ample evidence, as can be seen from the discussion above, that the third factor, the attempt to blend traditional and contemporary forms of architecture, is an element of the Centre.

In addition, the Centre also provides the Ismailis with a strong sense of loyalty to Britain, as Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of Britain, outlined in her speech at the opening of the Ismaili Centre, London: 'clearly the Ismaili community who made Britain their new home…have found here a new sense of security and belonging. This Centre is a powerful symbol of that feeling of belonging' (Thatcher 1985). Britain has not always been an enabling environment and many of the Ismaili immigrants who found themselves as refugees following the Ugandan exodus will attest to the hostility that many faced at a time of unprecedented racism and religious intolerance. A time when Conservative politicians, such as Enoch Powell, fuelled the publics' hatred towards those that they perceived as a threat to their jobs and housing. The journey has not been an easy one for the Ismailis, nevertheless they have weathered political storms and been inspired by the vision and *firmans* (edicts) of Aga Khan IV. For many, they and their families travelled from India to East Africa and then on to the UK and, as Shah (2012: 11) points out in relation to the Gujaratis in general,

> In the course of that journey through successive generations, they have been transformed, separated by time and space from their ancestors who left India some 60 to 100 years ago, having a new-found sense of nationality attached to the countries of their final destination, beyond concerns for immigration rights of entry and settlement. They feel they have arrived and want to belong there, both for themselves and certainly for the sake of their children. They are comfortable in their new environment and more ready to integrate into it...in this scenario, the nationality factor, which was insignificant at the start of their long saga, could prove to be crucial in their future development.

The Ismaili Centre, London is a permanent public statement in non-Muslim surroundings, which declares both national and religious affiliations. As the Ismaili community of Gujarati origin continue to migrate to and reside in London and present themselves through the presence of purpose-built *jamatkhanas*, they will be challenged to do so in a manner that establishes their religious identity and attests to their involvement and loyalty to Britain. Minaz Jamal, the head of the Ismaili Volunteer Corps[6] in 1985, when the Centre opened, highlights the impact of the Centre for the Ismaili community: 'When we think about the small and mobile Jamatkhanas that most of the Jamat [community] were gathering in at the time, the opening of the Centre gave us, for the first time, a real sense of identity, a sense of belonging and a sense of pride' (Mawji 2010a: 17). Having discussed how the architecture of the Centre, both external and internal, is an expression of religious, as well as national identities for the Ismailis, the focus will now move to the Centre's role in maintaining and promoting their ethnic identity through the use of liturgical rituals.

Rituals: Modes of Identity Expression

The role of rituals in the life of an individual is significant as they determine the manner in which we greet one another; by way of a handshake, through eye contact, kissing on the cheeks, and other such recognisable behaviour. In addition, rituals are instituted to celebrate the union of two people, observe funerary rites and even to mark the changing seasons. A very important role of rituals is their influence in the manner in which we interact with those in authority, including, amongst others, the divine. Except for rituals enacted within the religious sphere, rituals associated with everyday life, such as greeting and courting, are rarely identified as rituals. A ritual is commonly understood to be a particular type of symbolic action, a kind of ceremonial behaviour or a peculiar cultural practice. In all these cases, rituals are seen as taking on more significant roles in the formation of both individual and communal identities. It is often through ritual that one negotiates, contests and asserts identity (Aune and DeMarinis 1996; Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998; Mawani 2006).

An essential characteristic of ritual is performance, for ritual cannot exist without performance. In the case of religious rituals, instructions on how they should be performed may be prescribed in scriptures and texts, but such records are simply descriptions and not the act itself. Rituals are realised only by being performed. And, like any performance, participating in rituals requires conforming to a particular script, though often, some form of personal interpretation is permitted. Furthermore, rituals are not left to happenstance. Alongside a well-defined script is a specific time, day or occasion when a ritual should take place (Rappaport 1999). For example, it is a well-known fact amongst Ismailis that the *ghatpaat* ritual takes place every Friday evening in the *jamatkhana*: '[ritual] brings about a union…or in any case an organic relation…with the collectivity of the faithful' (Levi-Strauss 1966: 32). The words of Levi-Strauss are applicable to the modern Ismaili community as the *ghatpaat* ceremony is a means by which the community is brought together as one, through their participation in the same ritual. *Ghatpaat* is a term that refers to the ceremony of preparing holy water for communal drinking. According to tradition, this ritual was established by Pir Sadr al-Din, a missionary sent by the *Imam* to the Indian Subcontinent in the early fifteenth century for the purposes of conversion. He is also credited with the establishment of the first *jamatkhana* in Kotdi, Sindh. Additionally, he is said to have bestowed the title of

Khoja[7] on the Ismailis, a name by which they are popularly known in South Asia. In order to understand how all these aspects are relevant in the preservation of the community's ethno-religious identity, they need to be examined in relation to the primary aspects exhibited by an ethnic group, as outlined by Smith (1986: 32ff): 1. A common proper name – which in the case of this particular community is the Khoja Ismailis; 2. A myth of common ancestry – the Khojas hold that they were converted by Ismaili *pirs* in the Indian Subcontinent; 3. Shared historical memories – these include conversion stories, episodes of migration, etc.; 4. Elements of a common culture – obviously the religion itself and for the purposes of this paper, the *jamatkhana* and the *ghatpaat* ritual; 5. A (symbolic) link with a homeland/ ancestral home – this link to Gujarat is evident through the factors outlined in 1 to 4 above; 6. A sense of solidarity – which manifests itself through the elements mentioned in 1 to 5 above. Therefore, the ritual of *ghatpaat* and the *jamatkhana* are a means by which the community is expressing their ethnic identity.

An additional factor within the collective consciousness is the Ismaili Centre, London itself, which consists of a micro society of Ismailis. Whilst entry into and exit from the micro society is permeable, there is a core group that makes up the micro society. The Centre, cognizant of the religious, national and ethnic identities of the Ismailis as well as the rituals that have been preserved, has incorporated these elements, emphasizing these identities into its collective structure and purpose. As the rituals within the *jamatkhana*, such as *ghatpaat*, whether in India or in the UK, are, on the whole, similar, with slight variations in sequence and language, Ismailis from, for example, Mumbai, attending congregational worship at the Ismaili Centre, London, would easily enter into the existing micro society, due to their familiarity with the rituals, and feel at one with the Centre's micro society. Ismaili students, who originate from a range of countries, including India and Pakistan, have frequently conveyed this sentiment to us. We are often told by them, especially when they are completing their final year of study, how, during their time in London, participating in communal worship at the Centre has given them a sense of belonging to the Ismaili community and a strengthened religious identity: 'For many, the Ismaili Centre is an intrinsic part of life; a home away from home' (Mawji 2010b). Such perspectives are clearly not unique to students, but also apply to other sojourners, like tourists, as well as new Ismaili migrants, for whom the Centre is a means by which they can create and build social networks, and which often also leads to initial employment or assistance in finding appropriate housing. For some new migrants these networks are useful in shedding light on the British way of life as they begin to integrate with the majority society. One of the primary functions of rituals in religion, therefore, is to bind a community together. By participating in set rituals members of a community are indicating that they agree to certain central tenets, such as belief in a divine being and a hierarchy of authorities. Furthermore, performing rituals within the framework of a long tradition provides a sense of social cohesion within the community itself and in the manner in which people perceive their historical past. It is these shared historical memories, as represented through joint participation in rituals, which provide the Ismailis with a strong sense of social cohesion and ethno-religious identity.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the manner in which the Ismaili Centre, London, acts as a significant emblematic building. It has examined the way in which the production, transformation and function of religious landscapes impact adherents' religious and national identities in new cultural contexts. Individuals from minority ethno-religious communities, particularly the younger second and third generations are greatly influenced by the majority culture and there is a fear of assimilation rather than acculturation. The Ismaili Centre, London acts as a reminder to the Nizari Ismaili Muslims of Gujarati ancestry of their multiple and fluid identities: they are at once British, Ismali Muslim and Gujarati. It allows them a space where these identities are not in conflict with one another but where they co-exist in harmony. This building serves many purposes and has evolved to adapt to the needs of the local Ismaili community. It is a sacred and serene environment where adherents participate in communal rituals (some of which, tradition states, were established in Gujarat) thereby strengthening their ethno-religious identities and creating a historical tie with the land and culture of Gujarat. In addition to being a congregational space of worship for the Ismaili community, the Centre has a central location where people of all nationalities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, from the surrounding neighbourhoods are invited to participate in seminars and discussions, and view exhibitions. The uses of the Centre are diverse and varied, serving religious, as well as social purposes. It, therefore, expresses a collective British Nizari Ismaili Muslim identity, and glimpses of that identity can be observed in the design, the participation of key national figures in its inauguration, and in the realities of its everyday use. The Centre's structure, both externally and internally, as well as its location in a prime area of London is an expression of the British Ismaili community. In addition to the physical place, it is the congregational rituals conducted within these premises that further reinforce community cohesion and the ethno-religious identity of the Nizari Ismaili Muslims of Gujarati ancestry. The Ismaili Centre London is exemplary in the manner in which it conveys to the world its position and that of those who worship in her – distinct yet accommodating, traditional yet contemporary, private yet public. The Centre, through its architecture and the rituals conducted within it, is an expression of the ethno-religious and national identities of this community, which are in line with the guidance of Aga Khan IV, cited at the beginning of this paper, where he urges the Ismailis to at once be loyal to their faith and the country in which they reside.

> 'Architecture is "built" meaning. It fatefully expresses who we are' (Jencks 1995: 153).

Notes

1. Early Ismaili migrants to Europe and North America were predominantly of Gujarati ancestry but the demography has changed with time and in recent years there has been an increase in Ismaili migrants from Central Asia and Syria but in the UK they are still a minority.
2. From this point on the term Ismaili will be used to refer to Nizari Ismailis of Gujarati ancestry.
3. Whilst the focus of this paper is on the Nizari Ismailis of Gujarati ancestry, it should be noted that Nizari Ismaili *jamatkhanas*, including the Ismaili Centre, London, are utilized by all Nizari Ismailis regardless of their ethnic background.
4. Aspects of the construction of the building, as well as, day-to-day functioning and financial support may be affiliated with one specific Muslim group.
5. Milli Gorus (National Vision) is a group that focuses on migrant issues in the Netherlands and encourages its members to be active citizens by, for example, participating in elections, thereby encouraging integration, but not necessarily assimilation.
6. The Ismaili Volunteer Corps is an organisation of individuals who volunteer their time to assist with the daily operation of the *jamatkhana*, as well as at non-religious Ismaili events, e.g., lectures, exhibitions, etc.
7. The term *Khoja* is derived from the Persian *khwaja*, meaning lord, master or honourable person. Prior to their conversion the Nizari Ismailis of the Indian subcontinent were members of the Hindu Lohana caste and were addressed by the Hindu title of *thakur* (master). The term *Khoja*, therefore, was a replacement for *thakur*.

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