

North America

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For almost thirty years, the Shi'a Imami Isma'ili community in Canada has been remarkably active and diverse in terms of countries of origin, ethnicities, and languages. However, at issue is the backdrop of the Canadian policy of multiculturalism, which has incited assimilatory threats to the Isma'ili collective identity, despite its role of establishing the community in its pluralism. The following deals with this paradoxical positioning of the minority Isma'ili community in the construction of multicultural Canada.

The Canadian policy of multiculturalism, first promulgated in 1971, means that 'although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other'. In other words, the federal government does not see multiculturalism as a threat to national identity but rather believes that cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity. This protection is set within the provisions of the Citizenship Act (1947), which provides that all Canadians, whether by birth or by choice, enjoy equal status, are entitled to the same rights, powers, and privileges, and are subject to the same obligations, duties, and liabilities. Moreover, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) provides that every individual should have the equal opportunity to create the life that he/she is able and wishes to have, consistent with the duties and obligations of that individual as a member of society. To what extent this policy holds true in practice is a highly debatable question. Yet, it is perhaps this Canadian policy of multiculturalism that has played a critical role in both the establishment of and the threat to the assimilation of the Isma'ili community in Canada with its many transnational linkages.

Isma'ilis in Canada

Since the first influx of Isma'ili immigrants to Canada, the community has established its own community centres, *jama'at khana's*, throughout Canada, and has also maintained institutional contacts with other Isma'ilis and Isma'ili institutions around the world as a transnational community. The Isma'ili community in Canada itself is remarkably diverse.

Two broad groups, categorized according to origin, constitute the community. In the first group are those Isma'ilis who first made Canada their home in the 1970s. This group traces its origins to either India, Pakistan, or East Africa. Those coming from East Africa are second- or third-generation migrants from either India or Pakistan. Consequently, the members of this group, often referred to as Khojas, are conversant in various languages such as Swahili, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu, and Kutchi. More importantly, the Khojas share many of the same practices and traditions.

The second group is comprised of Isma'ilis who have immigrated to Canada in more recent years. Arriving mainly from Tajikistan and Afghanistan in Central Asia, with a small number from Iran and Syria, this group brings with it traditions and languages that differ significantly from those of the Khoja community. It was as a result of the recent war in Afghanistan and Tajikistan that the community endeavoured to negotiate an agreement with the federal government to allow the community to sponsor a certain number of Afghan and Tajik refugees for entry into the country. Consequently, in 1992, the Isma'ili community successfully negotiated an agreement between the government of Canada, the Isma'ili Council for Canada, and the Isma'ili Council for Québec to sponsor Isma'ili Afghani refugees. Ac-

ording to the Council Member and Chair of the Resettlement Portfolio, the agreement stipulated that the Isma'ili community would take full responsibility for the new immigrants for a full year, which includes financial responsibility for language training, housing, employment, education, and social and religious needs of the immigrants. Since then, further agreements and protocols have been signed by FOCUS Canada and the Isma'ili Council for Canada with the governments of Québec and Canada. As a result of these agreements, approximately 2,500 Afghans have entered Canada. Almost half of them have settled in Québec, the remainder throughout the rest of the country: Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta, notably in Calgary and Edmonton.

Paradoxical forces

The diversity of origins of Shi'a Imami Isma'ilis in Canada is obvious. Two paradoxical forces clearly emerge: the community's affiliation with religion, and a (forced?) obligation to adopt the multicultural society of Canada.

When considering the Isma'ili population in the face of plural cultures, several questions arise. Does adapting to a plurality of cultures mean integration into the largely dominant British culture in Canada? Does this integration into Canada's multiculturalism imply eroding one's religion? For Muslims in general, especially for the Canadian Shi'a Imami Isma'ilis, religion is what distinguishes them from 'the rest', the majority. Hence, does 'adapting' to the majority and 'adopting' multiculturalism mean forsaking their distinctive characteristic of religion?

Multiple identifications

A juxtaposition of religion and the situational reality appears. This questions the collectivized identities of minority communities like that of the Isma'ilis in multicultural societies. Some adaptation and perhaps redefinition of cultures seem to be demanded. Yet according to some, 'integration' needs to be warded off because Canada is a multicultural society with a dominant culture ruling the roost. The concept of 'culture' is then problematic: earlier theoretical constructions of 'culture' were critiqued as homogenized, and 'identity' as fixed and allegedly anchored in discrete cultures. Today, in the face of massive social changes on global-local bases, perhaps it is no longer possible to continue to define oneself in discrete, definite, and bounded ways. Instead, multiple attachments encompassing plural and fluid cultural identities are desired. How then does the Isma'ili community situate itself in this pluralistic multicultural society and how well does the society accommodate it?

It has been observed that in the English-dominated multicultural Canada, faith and leadership have emerged to bring the Isma'ilis together. It is the Imam Karim Shah, better known as the Aga Khan (III) of the community, who has a firm policy on matters of diversity within the *jama'at*. His firmans stress strength in diversity and urge the members to learn from the diverse practices

within the *jama'at*. Also, for Muslims, religious ideology can provide a common vision that allows its followers to look beyond their individual cultures. In other words, it is the religious faith, and not culture, which becomes the primary mode of identification. For example, the author Rani Murji, who was born in East Africa and traces her origins to India, voices her identification thus: 'I used to identify myself as an "East African Indian Isma'ili Muslim". However, today I identify myself simply as a "Canadian Isma'ili Muslim", and when pushed, as a "Canadian East Indian Isma'ili".'

Within an ensemble of multiple identifications, religious identity remains constant as it holds a central defining value, collectively and individually, whereas the geographical, ethno-cultural, political, and linguistic affiliations are subject to change and adapt to new contexts.

Multiculturalism plays a critical role in the establishment of the Shi'a Imami Muslims. Initially framing the possibilities for the external definition of the group, the Canadian policy of multiculturalism permitted the negotiation of the frontiers between the community and the host society. Continuing to do so internally as part of the process of integration of recent diversity, the policy allows for the negotiation of the inner fabric of the community. As we have seen, the construction of collectivized identities and their recognition were both complementary and contradictory. Constructing itself with and against the dominant host society meant differentiating the community from the majority, while affirming its right of affiliation and sense of belonging. And yet, inversely, it also meant weaving itself from within, affirming its own cultural, political, and symbolic content, without allowing itself to simply be an undistinguishable Other for the majority. Thus, Canadian policy of multiculturalism has in a way strengthened cultural bonds.

As the community has resettled in its new homeland, the threats posed by multiculturalism and its 'assimilatory' implications have led to the re-establishment of many of the institutions that were a dynamic part of the community in the countries of origin. As a result, the community has organized local and national councils composed of volunteer professionals in charge of many portfolios such as youth, resettlement, arbitration, social welfare, and women's development. In consultation with the imam, these institutions address many of the issues facing resettlement within the community.

However, some critics do question the nature of this facet of Shi'a Imami Isma'ilipractice in Canada. This criticism highlights the fact that assimilation is perhaps a Canadian reality: critics question whether it is the conscientization of identity recomposition that allows for the creation of new hybrid identities in the Canadian context, with an integrative passage to English as the eventual language of prayer and of daily interactions both within and outside the community, and with sustained symbolic links to languages of origin, of their restricted use, rather than practical daily usage in all rites and rituals.

In response to these critics, it could be argued that the Canadian Muslims, including those of the Shi'a Imami Isma'ili community, are losing the language(s) of their home countries. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that by changing their language(s), the communities are losing their identity. As noted earlier, it is faith, and not language, that is the central collective identity-marker (characterized by its multiplicity) for these communities.

Multicultural Canada does appear to ask its citizens to identify with the community at large. There is a need to be Canadian, for pluralism, integration, and citizenship require very careful balancing if there is to exist harmony and solidarity in a society where members are free and equal. But given the significance of human rights, multiculturalism, and the role of Islamic community leadership, especially in the case of Isma'ilis in Canada, it is vital to emphasize the preservation of essential defining elements of personal and collective identities such as: language, gender, ethnicity, religion, and race; protection of the nature of communities without unduly burdening them; and allowing for differential identifications and permeable, movable boundaries, while supporting collectivities and emphasizing collective identities.