Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the 'living Imam' of the Ismailis

"The Ismaili Imamat is a supra-national entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet. But let me clarify something more about the history of that role, in both the Sunni and Shia interpretations of the Muslim faith. The Sunni position is that the Prophet nominated no successor, and that spiritual-moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law. As a result, there are many Sunni imams in a given time and place. But others believed that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor. From that early division, a host of further distinctions grew up, but the question of rightful leadership remains central. In time, the Shia were also sub-divided over this question, so that today the Ismailis are the only Shia community who, throughout history, have been led by a living, hereditary Imam in direct descent from the Prophet."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2014 address to both Houses of the Parliament of Canada in the House of Commons Chamber (Ottawa, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10724/

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**ITV:** What makes the Ismailis different from the mainstream Shiite Islam?

**Aga Khan:** Probably that there is a living Imam who traces his family back to Hazrat Ali. The majority of the Shia today are known as the twelver Shia and they believe in the hidden Imam.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1985 Independent Television (ITV) Interview
Antonio Marujo / Faranaz Keshavjee: In Professor Daftary's book about the history of the Ismailis [edited by the Catholic University], he writes that Sunni Islam is responsible for the notion that Islam is monotheistic. We know that Islam is plural, but what is specific about Ismailism?

Aga Khan: It is part of the Shia tradition, and not Sunni. It also has a living Imam, who is the Imam of the Time, as opposed to other Shia traditions, which presently do not have a living Imam.

Roy Bonisteel: You are called the living Imam, what exactly does that mean?

Aga Khan: Well the Shia history has followed the same sort of historical developments all hereditary offices have followed, where there have been differences of opinion on who was the legitimate successor to the predecessor, whether it was a secular or religious office. In the case of the Shia Muslims, the Shia branch of Islam split and one branch of the Shia Muslims accepted the concept of the Imam in hiding, the invisible Imam, because the twelfth Imam disappeared as a very young child, and our branch of Shia Islam, in that particular generation of the family, accepted the legitimacy of the eldest son, Ismail, as being the appointed Imam to succeed and that is why they are known as Ismailis. And that branch of the family has continued today hereditarily and that is why there is a living Imam for the Ismaili Muslims.
"The religious leadership of the Ismaili Imam goes back to the origins of Shia Islam when the Prophet Muhammad appointed his son-in-law, Ali, to continue his teachings within the Muslim community. The leadership is hereditary, handed down by Ali's descendants, and the Ismailis are the only Shia Muslims to have a living Imam, namely myself. The other Shia - the Twelvers - revere a 'hidden' Imam who will return on the Day of Judgement to take part in the final judgement. It is the presence of the living Imam that makes our Imamat unique. The Sunnis are completely different in that they do not accept the idea of continuity of religious leadership by members of the Prophet's family."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2010 Politique Internationale Interview with Jean-Jacques Lafaye, 'The Power of Wisdom' (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9473/

"Soon after the founder of Islam, Prophet Muhammad died, issue concerning the religious and secular leadership of the Muslim community arose. By and large, the Sunni Muslims maintained that after Prophet Muhammad's death each Muslim was left to interpret and practise his faith according to his understanding although every mosque has its own Imam to lead the prayers. The Shia Muslims, on the other hand, believe that the successor to the leadership of the Muslim community both in spiritual and temporal matters was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and that this leadership was to continue thereafter by heredity through Ali in the Prophet's family.

"Like any hereditary institution, the Shia Muslim Imamat has been subjected to the strains and stresses of family rivalry, hostile external pressures and the vagaries of time, and the Ismailis are today one of the few Shia sects led by a hereditary Imam."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1976 Address to the Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce, 'The Role of Private Initiative in Developing Countries' (Zurich, Switzerland)
"Khomeini is an Ayatollah (said the Aga Khan). He is not Imam of the Twelver Shias, whereas I am Imam of the Ismaili Seveners. He addresses himself to a different religious structure and a different religious community. Although we are very close to each other, in [sic] his position with regard to Iranian Shia Muslims is totally different from my own. When it comes to political objectives, the Ismailis must behave according to their consciences. If it comes to a question of their faith -- that is a different matter. But I see no likelihood of political developments on Persia interfering with the practice of the faith."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 Sunday Telegraph Magazine Interview with Anthony Mann (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1916/

Richard Engel: What is the role of the Aga Khan today?

Aga Khan: Well, I’m a Shia imam. I am the only hereditary Shia Imam within the Shia community of peoples. And an imam in Islam is responsible for the security of people who are referred to him. He is responsible for the interpretation of faith and he is responsible for their quality of life so those three areas are areas, which are my responsibility.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 NBC Interview with Richard Engel (USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9644/

Pierre Cochez / Jean-Christophe Ploquin: What experience can you bring, in your capacity as Head of the Ismaili Community?

Aga Khan: Ismaili Shiism has a living Imam, who lives in the world [and] has a great number of contacts. I observe the changes [in the
world] and, in so far as possible, I anticipate the manner in which to build institutions which meet the needs of Ismailis. We do not have, in the Ismaili Community, a sole ethnic group, a sole [spoken] language, a sole religious history. I pay attention to this pluralism of traditions. I situate my actions in the context of the [current] times. I have lived through decolonisation, the end of the Cold War, the creation of Bangladesh, the Iranian Revolution. In the face of these situations, it was necessary to reflect, to anticipate, to respond to necessities. My grandfather gave, and I have myself given, a certain interpretation to Shiism. The intellect is seen as a facet of faith, in the service of faith. Reason, reflection, form part of the process of decision making. This reflection is desirable, is necessary in the interpretation of religion. This means that we invest in the intellect of the community. This is one of the elements which has made it possible for the Ismaili Community to respond to the problems of ...

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2003 La Croix Interview with Pierre Cochez and Jean-Christophe Ploquin (Paris, France) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6592/

"If those who believe that Hazrat Ali was the rightful successor of the Prophet to be the 'Ulu'l-amr Menkom [then they] must accept the principle of that succession -- for the same reasons they accept in the case of Hazrat Ali -- his rightful Imam descendants.

"The Imami Ismailis maintain that the position of the 'Ulu'l-amr Menkom never dies out and this succession goes on till the Day of Judgement on Earth.... [T]he Spiritual Imamat remained with Hazrat Ali and remains with his direct descendants always alive till the Day of Judgement. That a spiritual succession to the Imamat makes the Imam the 'Ulu'l-amr Menkom always according to the Qur’an and though he has his moral claim to the Khalifat as well, always he can, like Hazrat Ali himself owing to the conditions of the world, accept and support such worldly authorities as the Imam believes help the cause of Islam."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's article 'The final reconciliation between the Shia and Sunni doctrines'