

The Esoteric Symbolism of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat
A Personal Interpretation of Khalil Andani
(December 7, 2008)

This weekend marked the official opening of the newly established Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat building in Ottawa. While many of us have heard about this project throughout the year, it is important for us to understand its inner significance¹.

In Shia Islam, the Imam of the Time² is responsible for both the exoteric and contextual as well as the esoteric and mystical interpretation of Islam and the Holy Quran. Today, the primary medium for this interpretation is his verbal commands (*faramin*) and guidance (*hidaya*)³. However, the Imam can also deliver his teaching in other forms. One of the mediums by which the Imam communicates esoteric knowledge to both the *Jamat* and the world at large is Islamic architecture. Certain forms of Islamic architecture may fall into the category of “traditional art” about which Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes the following:

“Traditional art is inseparable from sacred knowledge because it is based upon a science of the cosmic which is of a sacred and inward character and in turn is the vehicle for the transmission of a knowledge which is of a sacred nature.”

- Seyyed Hossein Nasr,
(*Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York 1989, p. 253)

Traditional art is based upon sacred or esoteric knowledge – not just by its subject but also by its very appearance. This type of art, even by its physical form, expresses the spiritual truths and rhythms involved in the relationship between the Divine and the Cosmos.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Azim Nanji and Dr. Fahmida Suleman of the Institute of Ismaili Studies whose remarks made at a presentation held in Toronto about one year ago directed my attention to the symbolic architecture of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat.

² In Shia Islam, the term *Imam* refers to the hereditary spiritual leaders directly descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Imam, and Hazrat Bibi Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter. His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imam Ismaili Muslims, tracing his descent from Hazrat Ali through Hazrat Ismail ibn Jafar. As the current Imam, the Aga Khan is referred to by his disciples (*murids*) as the “Hazar Imam” and “Mawlana Hazar Imam”.

³ The guidance (*hidaya*) of the Imam also includes the interviews and speeches he gives to the world at large.

The Delegation of the Ismaili Imam is an architectural masterpiece and has sparked the interest of many scholars and architects in recent years. It may appear strange that the title of this article suggests that the Delegation has an “esoteric symbolism”. But when the Imam first requested the design of the Delegation, he wrote a letter to the architects which described his vision⁴ of the building:

“The goal is to create a building which causes the viewer to wonder how different elements and different planes relate to each other, how they work together to tickle the eye...In a rock crystal the cuts and angles permit both transparency as well as translucency. It pleases and confuses the eye by its internal planes running at different angles, creating a sense of visual mystery. The building in a sense should be somewhat mysterious and visually nearly esoteric. It should not be blatant but ethereal, not obvious but difficult to captivate.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Letter to Fumihiko Maki, quoted in Maria Cook, *An Essay in Glass*,
The Ottawa Citizen, December 6, 2008)**

Clearly, the purpose of the physical form of this building is to evoke the wonder and mystery of the esoteric. The Ismaili world-view, as articulated and expressed in the last 1,400 years, is an esoteric one which views all things that exist in both the realm of faith (*alam al-din*)⁵ and realm of the natural world (*alam al-duniya*) as symbols expressing hidden truths. In Ismaili thought, the process of uncovering the meanings embedded in the symbols is called *tawil*⁶ and was used specifically to interpret the verses of the Holy Quran. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam has been designed to serve as an expression of esoteric

⁴ The article where the below passage is quoted from is available at:

<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/observer/story.html?id=62eba74e-c926-4291-9d69-a863f011e5ae>

⁵ Further reading on the Ismaili concept of the ‘world of religion’ (*alam al-din*) can be found at Simonetta Calderini , ‘*Alam al-din*’ in *Isma’ilism: World of Obedience or World of Immobility?*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Vol. 56, No. 3 (1993), pp. 467

⁶ The Arabic word *tawil* literally means “leading back to the origin” and comes from the word *awwal* which means “first” or “origin”. *Tawil* refers to the esoteric interpretation of the Holy Quran. The word *tawil* appears many times in the Holy Quran and most notably in the following verse: “He it is Who has sent down to you the Book, of which are clear (*muhkamat*) verses, they are the mother of the Book and others are ambiguous (*mutashabihat*). As for those in whose hearts is perversity follow that [part of] it which is ambiguous, seeking discord and seeking its *tawil*. But no one knows its *tawil* except Allah and those who are deeply rooted in knowledge (*rasikun fi’l-ilm*) saying: We believe in it, all is from our Lord” (3:7). In Shia Islam, the hereditary Imams are believed to be the ones who are firmly rooted in knowledge and therefore in possession of the *tawil* of the Quran.

knowledge rooted in Ismaili thought and tradition. This is confirmed by Mawlana Hazar Imam in his speech made at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation held this weekend:

“This new Delegation of the Ismaili Imam, like the Ismaili Centre and the Aga Khan Museum to be built in Toronto, reflects our conviction that buildings can do more than simply house people and programmes. They can also reflect our deepest values, as great architecture captures esoteric thought in physical form.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada, 06 December 2008)**

The architecture of the Delegation building is intended to express and symbolize concepts from Ismaili intellectual history and thought. This was expressed by the Imam in his speech at the initiation of the Delegation:

“The architectural planning has been entrusted to the capable hands of Fumihiko Maki, an architect of world standing. Maki and Associates have my enthusiastic admiration for addressing, with tact and empathy, challenges of design which are difficult and subtle. They call for translating concepts that have a context in our faith and our history, yet stride boldly and confidently ahead, into modernity; for expressing both the exoteric and the esoteric, and our awe and humility towards the mysteries of Nature, Time and beyond. The outcome is an inter-play of multiple facets, like rock crystal. In it are platforms of pure but translucent horizontality. Light’s full spectrum comes alive and disappears as the eye moves. In Islam the Divine is reflected in Nature’s creation.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Foundation Ceremony of The Delegation of the Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada, June 6, 2005)**

In this article, we would like to offer two distinct but complementary esoteric interpretations (*tawil*) of the architectural form and the function of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam. The first interpretation concerns the spiritual symbolism of the rock crystal architecture and the second interpretation, drawing upon the first, relates to the function that the Delegation symbolizes in the context of Ismaili history and tradition. In reference to Ismaili thought, these interpretations may loosely be called a personal *tawil*⁷ of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam.

⁷ The term ‘personal *tawil*’ may appear elusive and warrants further explanation. In Ismaili thought and history, there are two types of *tawil* (esoteric interpretation). The supreme *tawil* can only be disclosed by the Ismaili Imam himself and is entirely his prerogative. However, there is a second type of *tawil* which

“Rock crystal is only a metaphor. It has a very hard surface. It should be reflective to light.”

- Mr. Fumihiko Maki,
(quoted in Maria Cook, *An Essay in Glass*, The Ottawa Citizen,
December 6, 2008)

The defining feature of the Delegation is the use of rock crystal in its architecture, particularly in the dome of the building. Rock crystal holds special significance both because of its history and its form.

Rock crystal was used in the architecture of Fatimid times and its feature in the Delegation evokes a sense of historical continuity – perhaps symbolizing a renaissance of the Fatimid epoch of Ismaili history. But even more interesting is the symbolism and the subtlety of rock crystal itself. Rock crystal is appreciated with regards to how it facilitates the appearance and reflection of light. The Imam described the interaction between light and rock crystal in the followings manner:

“The outcome is an inter-play of multiple facets, like rock crystal. In it are platforms of pure but translucent horizontality. Light’s full spectrum comes alive and disappears as the eye moves.”

- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Foundation Ceremony of The Delegation of the
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Rock crystal has aspects that are transparent, opaque and translucent. Transparency means that the rock crystal allows light to pass through it. The opposite of transparency is opacity – which means that light cannot pass through. In between transparency and opacity is translucency – which means that some light is captured in the object while some light can pass through it (i.e. such as foggy glass).

“What was very interesting to us is that it's a very ephemeral object, it's constantly changing. What we observed is complete transparency in some areas and complete opacity in others. Then there are infinite numbers of translucency.”

- Mr. Gary Kamemoto,
(quoted in Maria Cook, *An Essay in Glass*, The Ottawa Citizen,
December 6, 2008)

can be performed by any individual member (*murid*) of the Ismaili *Tariqah*. Accordingly, there are many levels of this *tawil* and therefore many layers of meaning to be sought. Presented in this article is but one approach and one level of *tawil* and symbolic meaning. It is entirely natural and expected that others will interpret the same symbols quite differently.

Appreciating the architecture of the Delegation building requires one to understand the symbolism of rock crystal in Ismaili thought. This point was also realized by the architects of the Delegation as one of them stated:

“It was so critically important to fully embrace and understand the essence of the rock crystal ... to create a somewhat contemplative as well as emotional experience in the final building,”

- **Mr. Gary Kamemoto,**

**(quoted in Maria Cook, *An Essay in Glass*, *The Ottawa Citizen*,
December 6, 2008)**

Mawlana Hazar Imam stated in his speech that the architecture of the Delegation translates and brings forward “concepts that have a context in our faith and our history”. Therefore, exploring some of the rich spiritual texts from Ismaili history and tradition can serve to shed light on what the Delegation building is seeking to express – both to the *Jamat* and the world at large.

One such text is treatise known as “Six Chapters” (*Shis Fasl*) written by the great Ismaili theologian, Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw. In Chapter 4 of his “Six Chapters”, Sayyedna Nasir, nearly one thousand years ago, used the symbolism and example of rock crystal to explain the relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds.

In order to appreciate the words of Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw, it is helpful to summarize⁸ his understanding of the relationship between God and the Cosmos which was part of the Ismaili metaphysics and cosmology of that time. In Fatimid philosophy, God – conceived as totally transcendent and unknowable – first creates the Universal Intellect (*aql-i kull*), which in turn gives rise to the Universal Soul (*nafs-i kull*). The Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul together comprise the height of the spiritual world which also includes individual human souls. The Universal Soul creates the physical or material world into which individual souls are sent to attain knowledge and receive perfection. The physical world is continuously being supported and sustained by the Universal Soul – which is in turn inspired and informed by the Universal Intellect, the first and noblest of God’s Creation. The locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the

⁸ What follows is merely a summary as the subject of Ismaili metaphysics and cosmology is difficult and requires thorough study. There are several articles available on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website (www.iis.ac.uk) in the Lifelong Learning and Academic Papers section which shed further light on this subject.

Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul in the physical world is the Imam of the Time from whom individual souls can receive the true knowledge which leads to spiritual perfection. Just as the natural world (*alam al-duniya*) is supported by the Universal Soul, the world of faith (*alam al-din*) is supported by the Imam of the Time.

Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw uses the example of the sunlight shining upon crystal to describe how the Universal Soul influences and sustains the Cosmos in the following passage:

“The work (*athar*) of the Universal Soul (*Nafs-i Kull*) is like the light which shines upon the earth from the sun, so that the earth becomes lit by that light. And when the sun sets, the light also disappears. When the sun shines upon a crystal or upon a mirror which can collect an amount of the light of the sun, the light becomes so bright through action of the crystal or mirror that from it fire can be lit, from which one can get light at any time. Thus it would do the same work as the sun is doing, proportionately to its size producing light and warmth.”

- Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw,

(*Six Chapters [Shis Fasl]: Chapter 4* translated by W. Ivanow, The Ismaili Society, Bombay)

From understanding the above passage, one can realize that the rock crystal architecture of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam is expressing a spiritual concept taught nearly thousand years ago by Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw. This is the concept of the Universal Soul and its influence upon the physical world. In traditional cosmology, the form and qualities of the Cosmos are derived from and dependent upon spiritual realities – the physical world being a reflection of the spiritual world.

Sayyedna Nasir also uses the same example of the sun shining upon rock crystal to explain the relationship between the Universal Intellect, Universal Soul and the individual human soul which has been purified.

“Similarly, when the effect (*athar*) of the (activity of) the Universal Soul (*Nafs-i Kull*) is manifested in the human body (*kalbad-i mardum*), and when the latter gets its "food" (*khwish*) from the Universal Intellect (*Aql-i Kull*), by acquiring the knowledge of its own origin (*asl*), by knowing and recognizing the oneness of God (*tawhid*), then, through all this, the (human) soul (*nafs*) in the body becomes similar to the Universal Soul (*Nafs-i Kull*), its origin, just as the effect of the sunshine in the crystal or mirror would appear similar to the sun itself.”

- Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw,

(Six Chapters [Shis Fast]: Chapter 4 translated by V. Ivanow, The Ismaili Society, Bombay)

In the above passage, Sayyedna Nasir refers to the reflective aspect of crystal or mirror. The human soul purified by the knowledge of God's Oneness (*tawhid*) comes to resemble the Universal Soul on high – in the same way that the reflection of the sun appears in rock crystal and there is resemblance between an image and that which it reflects. Such a purified soul, illuminated by the Universal Soul, also serves as a beacon of truth and knowledge to other souls. This is also evoked by the rock crystal architecture of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam. The rock crystal reflecting and shining with sunlight symbolizes the purified soul – both illuminated (by the Universal Soul) and illuminating (other souls). Such a soul serves as the *mazhar* – the 'locus of manifestation'⁹ – of the Divine Names and Attributes – in the same manner of a mirror or rock crystal with regards to the light of the sun. It must also be noted that the soul which serves as God's *mazhar* is completely submitted and humble before the Divine Presence – just as a mirror or crystal is empty and devoid in and of itself and must be illuminated from another source. In this sense, the Imam stated that the Delegation building is an expression of both enlightenment and humility:

“The building will be a metaphor for humanism and enlightenment and for the humility that comes from the constant search for answers that leads inevitably to more questions.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Foundation Ceremony of The Delegation of the
Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada, June 6, 2005)**

In Ismaili theology, the foremost example of this purified soul is what Sayyedna al-Muayyad fi'l-Din Shirazi calls the 'Absolute Man' (*al-insan al-mutaliq*)¹⁰. The Absolute Man, in Ismaili theosophy, was the Prophet Muhammad in his age, and then each Imam in his respective

⁹ The term *mazhar* often gets mistranslated by polemicists as “incarnation” or “copy” which is totally inaccurate. We have followed the translation of the word *mazhar* given by Dr. Reza Shah-Kazemi of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in Third Chapter of his book titled *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam 'Ali*. It is recommended that this chapter be read to fully understand the relationship between the *mazhar* and the Names of God. The late Henry Corbin has translated *mazhar* as 'epiphanic form' in his book *Cyclical Times and Ismaili Gnosis* but this meaning has the same conceptual implications as Shah-Kazemi's translation.

¹⁰ A detailed discussion of al-Shirazi's conception of the *insan al-mutaliq* can be found in the PhD Thesis entitled *The Sphere of Walaya: Ismaili Tawil in Practice According to al-Muayyad* by Elizabeth R. Alexandrin, April 2006, McGill University.

age. In this sense, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam is a symbol for the Imam – who is conceived as the *mazhar* (locus of manifestation) of God in Ismaili thought. Just as the crystalline architecture both contains and reflects the light of the sun, the pure soul¹¹ of the Imam both bears and reflects the light of the Universal Soul – also transmitting this light to his *murids* in the form of inspiration (*tayid*) and teaching (*talim*).

Another concept which is expressed by the physical form of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam is that of the microcosm and macrocosm. In Islam, the Cosmos and all of Nature reflect the Names of God. The various phenomena of the Universe are the various Signs (*ayat*) of God and the Cosmos in its entirety is His Primordial Book. Each existent in the Universe manifests one or more of God's Names and Attributes¹². As we study the various forms found in the Creation, we come to a greater appreciation of the Names and Attributes of the Creator. This process amounts to “reading” the Signs (*ayat*) found in the Primordial Book of the Universe which parallels that of reading the Verses (*ayat*) in the Revealed Book of the Holy Quran. Both these activities ultimately lead to a greater knowledge and recognition of the Names and Attributes of God. This was another reality spoken to by Mawlana Hazar Imam in his speech at the Inaugural Ceremony this weekend:

“But in Islamic thought, as in this building, beauty and mystery are not separated from intellect - in fact, the reverse is true. As we use our intellect to gain new knowledge about Creation, we come to see even more profoundly the depth and breadth of its mysteries. We explore unknown regions beneath the seas - and in outer space. We reach back over hundreds of millions of years in time. Extra-ordinary fossilised geological specimens seize our imagination - palm leaves, amethyst flowers, hedgehog quartz, sea lilies, chrysanthemum and a rich panoply of shells. Indeed, these wonders are found beneath the very soil on which we tread - in every corner of the world - and they connect us with far distant epochs and environments... And the more we discover, the more we know, the more we penetrate just below the surface of our normal lives -

¹¹ It must be clarified that when the Ismaili Imam is referred to as the *mazhar* of God, it is a reference to his sacred soul and not just his body – as the soul is the locus where the manifestation (*zuhur*) of the Divine Names occurs.

¹² This concept is well expressed by scholar William Chittick as follows: “Each and every attribute of God – knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and so on – manifests itself in varying intensities within the things of the cosmos... A stone manifests power in a certain passive way. A plant shows traces of life, knowledge, desire, and active power. At the top of the visible hierarchy of *wujud* (Being), human beings have the potential to manifest every Divine Name.” (William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*, p. 22)

the more our imagination staggers. Just think for example what might lie below the surfaces of celestial bodies all across the far flung reaches of our universe. What we feel, even as we learn, is an ever-renewed sense of wonder, indeed, a powerful sense of awe – and of Divine inspiration.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili
Imamat, Ottawa, Canada, 06 December 2008)**

But of all the creatures in the Universe, it is the human being who has the potential to reflect all of God’s Names¹³. Accordingly, the human being is the microcosm of the Universe (the macrocosm) and the Signs of God which are spread across the natural world are also present in the personal world of the human soul. In relation to this, the Holy Quran states that the Signs of God are shown in both the ‘horizons’ (outer world) and in the ‘souls’:

“Soon We will show them Our Signs (*ayat*) on the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth (*al-Haqq*).”

- Holy Quran 41:53

The purified human soul is one that has realized the status of microcosm. The human soul in its perfect state is the most beautiful and noblest of God’s creations. And this concept is also alluded to by the use of rock crystal. When the Divine Names and Attributes shine upon the perfect human soul they are reflected in the form of spiritual virtues – such that each Divine Name corresponds to a particular spiritual virtue. The Light of Divinity appears in the soul through a multitude of spiritual qualities and virtues – with each human soul being unique unto itself but all souls reflecting the one Light of the Creator. Mawlana Hazar Imam describes these qualities also being present in rock crystal:

“Why rock crystal? Because of its translucency, its multiple planes, and the fascination of its colours - all of which present themselves differently as light moves around them. The hues of rock crystal are subtle, striking and widely varied - for they can be clear or milky, white, or rose coloured, or smoky, or golden, or black.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili
Imamat, Ottawa, Canada, 06 December 2008)**

¹³ For a more detailed discussion concerning the notion of human beings and specifically the Holy Imams as the greatest ‘Signs of God’ (*ayatu’llah*), see our other article *Prostration and the Signs of God* – available upon request.

The diversity of reflection amid the unity of light is displayed by the appearance of light in rock crystal. The translucency and multiple facets of rock crystal allow the light of the sun to be reflected in many different colours and forms – and this diversity of forms serves to symbolize the numerous virtues of the human soul. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the beauty of the virtuous human soul as follows:

“Being a theomorphic creature, man himself is a work of art. The human soul when purified and dressed in the garment of spiritual virtues is itself the highest kind of beauty in this world, reflecting directly the Divine Beauty... Now man is a work of art because God is the Supreme Artist. That is why He is called *al-musawwir* in Islam, that is, He who created forms...”

- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 256)

Although the Delegation is an architectural masterpiece, it is but a symbol and expression of the greatest work of art – which is man himself. The Delegation of the Ismaili Imamate points towards the beauty and majesty of human dignity which is in turn a reflection of the Beauty and Majesty of the Divine Reality. As a form of sacred architecture, the Delegation serves as a reminder (*dhikr*) of the reality of Creation and the divinity of its Creator. This was also stressed by Mawlana Hazar Imam in his speech:

“It is because of these qualities that rock crystal seems to be such an appropriate symbol of the profound beauty and the ever-unfolding mystery of Creation itself – and the Creator. As the Holy Quran so powerfully affirms, "Allah is the Creator and the Master of the heavens and the earth." And then it continues: "Everything in the heavens and on earth, and everything between them, and everything beneath the soil, belongs to Him. ””

- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamate, Ottawa, Canada, 06 December 2008)

This concept of the microcosm is also present in the overall structure of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamate – as indicated by the Imam’s words:

“In Islam the divine is reflected in Nature’s creation.... The building will rest on a solid linear granite podium. Above it will be a glass dome through which light will illuminate, from multiple directions, two symbolic spaces: an interior atrium and an exterior courtyard landscaped in four quarters, recalling the traditional Persian – Islamic garden, the *Chahr-bagh*. Nature, through the greenery of trees and flowers, will be on

the site, but also in the building, just as we are sometimes able to see leaves and petals captured in rock crystal, but still visible through its unique translucency.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Foundation Ceremony of The Delegation of the
Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada, June 6, 2005)**

The rock crystal allows the trees and flowers – the Nature outside the building – to be reflected and therefore present in the building itself. The interior atrium and the exterior courtyard complement each other in the same way as the human soul (interior world) and the manifest Universe (exterior world). Just as the Delegation Building will reflect the various forms of nature which lie outside it, the human soul as microcosm reflects all of the forms of nature in the Universe. The pure soul of the Imam is the foremost example of the microcosm which contains “all things” in the Universe – and this is indicated in the Quranic verse recited three times each day in the Ismaili *Dua* – “And We have vested *all things* in the manifest Imam (*imamin mubeen*)” [36:12].

To summarize – firstly, the rock crystal architecture allows the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam to symbolize the way in which the Universe Soul sustains and gives form to the Cosmos. Secondly, this architecture symbolizes how the purified soul of the Imam of the Time, the microcosm of the Universe, both contains and transmits the light of the Universal Soul. In other words, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam serves as an architectural representation of the spiritual reality of the Ismaili Imam!

There is also a second interpretation of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam which concerns its function but which is also informed by the rock crystal architecture of the building. In his speech at the inauguration of the Delegation, the Imam of the Time stated:

“The Delegation, with its openness and transparency, will be a symbolic seat for the Imam’s permanent presence in Canada, and a platform for constructive exchanges that mutually broaden moral and intellectual horizons.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Foundation Ceremony of The Delegation of the
Ismaili Imam, Ottawa, Canada, June 6, 2005)**

The above words, along with the fact that the Delegation is located in an area which includes several embassies and the Prime Minister’s residence, imply that the building will directly represent the Imam of

the Time and the Institution of Imamatus in Canada. Besides the Imam's residence in Aiglemont, there is no other building on earth that is specifically designated to represent the Ismaili Imamatus. In this sense, the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamatus appears to be a sort of Embassy of the Imamatus in Canada. The Delegation of the Ismaili Imamatus is also intended to play a major role in the exchange of knowledge between Islam and the West. Mawlana Hazrat Imam referred to this function in the following passages of his speech:

“What we celebrate today can thus be seen as a new creative link between the spiritual dimensions of Islam and the cultures of the West. Even more particularly, it represents another new bridge between the peoples of Islam and the peoples of Canada.”

“It is our prayer that the establishment of the Delegation will provide a strongly anchored, ever-expanding opportunity for rich collaboration - in the devoted service of ancient values, in the intelligent recognition of new realities, and in a common commitment to our shared dreams of a better world.”

**- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili
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In Shia Islam, the Imam of the Time is the vicegerent (*khalifa*) and the proof (*hujja*) of God on earth. In classical and medieval Ismailism, there also existed a hierarchy of dignitaries who came after the Imam and represented him and his teaching to the *murids* and the world at large. These dignitaries were collectively known as the *hudud al-din* (the ranks of faith)¹⁴. Among these ranks were dignitaries known as *hujjas* who were the proofs and deputies of the Ismaili Imam in a particular geographic region referred to as a *jazira*. The classical Ismaili world-view was based on twelve regions (*jaza'ir*) – with each region containing one [manifest] *hujja* of the day and one [concealed] *hujja* of the night. The *hujja* received his knowledge from the Imam in the form of spiritual inspiration (*tayid*) as opposed to just teaching (*talim*). It is through the *hujjas* that the light of the Imam's knowledge reached the *murids* and the people of other faiths. Regarding the role of the *hujjas*, a classical Ismaili text states:

“Understand that for each Imam there are twelve visible diurnal *hujjas* and twelve concealed and hidden nocturnal *hujjas*...they are the veil of the

¹⁴ In contemporary times, the institution of the *hudud al-din* no longer functions as such. The notion of the *hudud* being associated with specific individuals was abolished during the Imamatus of Hazrat Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III.

Imam and are his mouthpieces and gateways, his deputies and the messengers from him to the *dais*, who in turn convey the message to the believers.”

- Ibn al-Haytham, (quoted in *The Advent of the Fatimids*, p. 97)

Just as the Imam of the Time is God's *khalifa*¹⁵ for the whole world, the *hujja* was the Imam's *khalifa* for a particular region (*jazira*). It is in relation to the concept of the *hujja* that the functional symbolism of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamatus comes to light.

In the first place, the Delegation building is intended to perform similar functions to that of the *hujja* in Ismaili thought. The Imam stated that the Delegation is the “symbolic seat for the Imamatus permanent presence in Canada” and this was exactly the role of the *hujja* who represented the Ismaili Imamatus and the Ismaili Summons in a particular region of the world. The Imam further stated that the Delegation will facilitate “constructive exchanges that mutually broaden moral and intellectual horizons” and serve as “a new creative link between the spiritual dimensions of Islam and the cultures of the West”. The Ismaili branch of Shi'ism is widely recognized as an expression *par excellence* of the spiritual and mystical dimensions of Islam. As such, the Ismaili Imam was the foremost mouthpiece of this esoteric Islam and his *hujjas* were the ones who delivered this spiritual teaching in their respective regions. Many Ismaili *hujjas* in history were renowned for their intellectual contributions to the societies of their times. For example, Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw is revered as a national hero in Persian speaking regions for his literary contributions alone and Sayyedna Hasan-i Sabbah is revered as a figure championing Persian nationalism – both of these personalities were the *hujjas* of the Ismaili Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Mustansir-bi'llah. These interactions were truly exchanges of knowledge as Ismaili *hujjats* incorporated the intellectual and scientific paradigms of their times into their articulation of Ismaili thought including Islamic philosophy, Greek thought, and Neoplatonism. In the same way, the Imam has stated that the Delegation is responsible for “the devoted service of ancient values” and “the intelligent recognition of new realities” – acts which were performed by the Imam's *hujjas* in ancient times.

The symbolism of the Delegation building also alludes to the spirituality of the *hujja* figure by virtue of the rock crystal architecture.

¹⁵ The term *khalifa* literally means ‘one who stands in the place’ of someone and is usually translated as ‘vicegerent’ or ‘representative’. The term is not used here in its political sense (such as the Abbassid or Umayyad caliph) but in its Quranic and spiritual sense. For example, in Verse 2:30 the Quran refers to Hazrat Adam – the first Prophet – as the *khalifa* of God.

As stated previously, the rock crystal both captures and reflects the light of the sun which shines upon it. While this sunlight symbolism was explained earlier in light of Ismaili cosmology, it also fits into to another symbolic framework. According to this second framework, the sun symbolizes the Imam of the Time – who conveys the light of knowledge and the warmth of love to the world of faith (*alam al-din*) in the same way that the physical sun shines light and transmits heat to the natural world (*alam al-duniya*). An ancient Ismaili text known as the *Kitab al-Ghulam wa'l-'Alim* (The Book of the Master and the Disciple) describes this symbolism as follows:

“In their different ranks, they are like the *stars of the heaven* (6:97): the actions of those they guide rise up to them and the symbols of the religion come to an end in them. Hence their Imam is like the immensity of the sun in comparison with the other heavenly lights: it is impossible for it to be veiled from people’s vision – indeed the sun is his symbol and outer aspect.”

- Sayyedna Jafar bin Mansur al-Yemen,
(*The Book of the Master and the Disciple*, transl. James W. Morris, IB Taurus and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2001, pp. 82)

It has already been mentioned that the *hujja* of the Imam receives knowledge through spiritual inspiration (*tayid*) as opposed to verbal teaching (*talim*). A medieval Nizari Ismaili poem of unknown authorship describes this reality as follows:

“A path exists from the *hujjat* to the Imam
He becomes aware by the divine support (*tayid*) of his heart.”
(quoted in Shafique Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages*, p. 74)

It is interesting to note that the architecture of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamatus also symbolically expresses the way in which the soul of the *hujja* receives *tayid* from the Imam of the Time. The metaphor of the light of the sun shining upon the soul has been used by many Ismaili theosophers in articulating how they receive spiritual knowledge from the Imam. Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw, who was the *hujja* of the region (*jazira*) of Khurasan, relates his own experience in the following words:

“I found help against the devil’s persecution and cunning
When I entered the sanctuary of the Imam of mankind.
When the Light of the Imam shone upon my soul,
even though I was dark as night, I became the shining sun.
The Supreme Name is the Imam of the Time,
through him, venus-like, I ascended to the heavens.”

- Sayyedna Nasir-i Khusraw,
(quoted in Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, *The Position of 'Aql in the
Prose and Poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw*, 2006)

The light of the sun shines and is reflected upon the rock crystal surface of the Delegation Building in the same way that the Light of the Imam shines upon the soul of the *hujja* – nourishing and supporting him with knowledge and wisdom. As the Delegation Building beautifully glows with the light of the sun and adorns the surrounding areas, in the same way the *hujja* of the Imam adorns the people of his region with spiritual teachings rooted in the Light of the Imam.

To summarize the second interpretation – the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam symbolizes the figure of the *hujja* – in that both represent the Institution of Imam in a particular locality and are responsible for the spread and exchange of knowledge and wisdom resulting in the enrichment of that particular society. The rock crystal architecture of the Delegation, which is illuminated by the sun of the natural world (*alam al-duniya*), symbolizes the spiritual connection and relationship between the *hujja* and the Imam – who is the sun of the world of religion (*alam al-din*).

It is hoped that the present article has shed some light upon the esoteric symbolism of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam. This building was purposefully designed, according to the wishes of the Imam of the Time, to evoke esoteric wonder and mystery – as the Imam himself recently stated:

“When I invited Professor Maki, a master of form and light, to design this building, I made a suggestion to him - one that I hoped would help connect this place symbolically to the Faith of Islam. The suggestion I made focused on creating a certain mystique, centred around the beautiful mysteries of rock crystal.”

- His Highness The Aga Khan IV,
(Address at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili
Imamat, Ottawa, Canada, 06 December 2008)

We conclude this article with the lines of an Ismaili Ginan. When Mawlana Hazar Imam announced plans in 1985 to establish the Darkhana Jamatkhana in Burnaby, these verses were recited by Missionary Sultanali Nazarali Walji. While they can be interpreted in

many ways, the verses¹⁶ that follow may be understood as a prophecy made hundreds of years ago by Pir Sadr al-Din alluding to the recognition of the Institution of Imamatus in North America:

Eji Uttar khand maa(n)he Shahni jot jaageva
Shahna purakh mile par keta, ho jire bhai.

“The Light of the Imam (*shah*) will shine in the Northern Continent. The brave *mumins* of the Imam will gather on that occasion – (and do you know) what kind of *mumins* they will be?”

- Pir Sadr al-Din,
(*Eji Utar Khand Maa(n)he Shahni, Verse 1*)

With Ya ‘Ali Madad, Khalil Andani, December 7, 2008
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¹⁶ I would like to thank Aly Sunderji of Vancouver for assisting with the transliteration and translation of this Ginanic verse. It should be noted that there are variations in the ways this verse is read and translated.