

KHŌJĀ STUDIES

Florida International University

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The impetus behind this programme of study is to foster academic research into the historical origins of the Khōjā, preservation of their heritage, and examining contemporary forms of identity.

So, who are the Khōjā? They are an Indic Muslim merchant caste whose purported origins lie with the Lōhāṇā and Chakk people of medieval Punjab and Kashmir that migrated down the Indus river valley into Sindh and eastward into Cutch and Kathiwar. In the late 18th and early 19th century a great migration ensued throughout the western Indian Ocean littoral, particularly East Africa, and in the 20th century migration westward towards Western Europe and North America. Their story is both unique and emblematic of the creation of a transnational modern Muslim identity. Their ancestral languages span Sindhi, Kacchī, and Gujarati, while historically employing a caste specific script known as *khōjki* that became extinct in the early 20th century. The various colonial environments had a profound impact on the consolidation of Khōjā identities as primarily religious in orientation. Here I would refer you to Teena Purohit's recent book, *The Aga Khan Case*. The loss of those languages and death of script, particularly in the West in the age of globalization has had profound impacts on a definition on identity and articulations of authority.

In the 19th century there was a schism within the caste based on ideas of religious authority, fracturing the community into three communities- the Ismaili, Ithnā 'asharī, and Sunni Khōjā. Each has taken their own trajectory in defining a religious identity, but a common denominator is the authority that Near Eastern Islam has exerted over caste identity as to overshadow it and within the study of the Khōjā that contemporary Islamic identity is read back into the past of the Khōjā, isolating the fundamentally Indic nature of Khōjā religion prior to the 19th century. For this reason the study of the Khōjā needs a space to explore the complexity of this heritage within its own context. I was privileged to have been invited to the first [Ismaili Studies Conference](#) in Chicago hosted by [Shiraz Hajiani](#) in October 2014. It was a great meeting of a diverse array of scholars and some remarkable work being done in Canada on the preservation of heritage and the *ginānō*, for instance, by [Shumaila Hemani](#) in Alberta,

[Karim Tharani](#) in Saskatchewan, and [Karim Gillani](#) in Alberta. But the term Ismaili still puts a religious creedal identity at the forefront. What then about the non-Ismaili Khōjā, such as the Ithnā ‘asharī and Sunni communities who have their own perspective on Khōjā history and draw from different primary sources? The question then becomes how to coordinate these various efforts into an international academic dialogue.

The development of Khōjā Studies argues that the heritage of the Khōjā are intrinsically tied to their Indic heritage and must be a starting point to understanding the community. So, a pan-Khōjā perspective is necessary in reconstructing the history of the community that takes into account Ismaili, Ithnā ‘asharī, and Sunni perspectives on it. The early 19th century Khōjā had a diverse array of religious practices from recitation of the *ginānō*, which the Ismailis continued, to the *navhō*, which the Ithnā ‘asharī continued, and certain wedding rituals that the Sunni continued. With only one community’s perspective, our understanding of Khōjā history is incomplete. Additionally, the study of the Khōjā is intimately tied to that of other communities and the impact they had on their development, such as the Lōhānā, Bohra, Svāminārāyaṇ, Imām-Shāhī, and even the Jains, for which FIU is the world’s leading university of Jain studies and the department of religious studies holds the Baghvan Mahavir chair of [Jain Studies- Professor Steven Vose](#).

The development of Khōjā Studies at FIU aims to make FIU a world-leader in the study of the Khōjā and contemporary Khōjā communities through funding graduate students interested in studying Khōjā traditions, such as the *ginānō*, preservation and digitization of Khōjā texts, and public lectures such as these that will help to open discussion as to what accounts for the Khōjā experience. It is meant to be an egalitarian venue in which scholars and thinkers from around the world, particularly the Global South such as Pakistan, can come discuss their perspectives on the past, present, and future of the Khōjā people. This academic study of the Khōjā is meant to bring academic rigour to our understanding of Khōjā heritage and experiences in a respectful but analytical manner. It also wishes to bring in marginalized voices, such as the poor or historically of women into the fore. I hope that this will be the first of many such lectures on the past and present of the Khōjā peoples and encourage students wanting to study Khōjā manuscripts, material culture, or other facets of the Khōjā experience to apply to our master’s programme in religious

studies. We also want to reach out to community historians of the Khōjā who have an interest in the preservation of histories and oral traditions to engage with the programme. Our interest is in preserving the remarkable journeys of individuals, for instance the migration from East Africa to the West, and understanding that impact of movement on the construction of identity. The history and experience of the Khōjā people is diverse and has much to offer the academic study of religion through their search for a communitarian modern Islamic identity. It is our sincere hope that a spirit of inquiry and mutual cooperation will develop within the academic study of the Khōjā.

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