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

So, who are the Khôjâ? They are an Indic Muslim merchant caste whose purported origins lie with the Lôhānâ 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 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} century a great migration ensued throughout the western Indian Ocean littoral, particularly East Africa, and in the 20\textsuperscript{th} 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, Kacchi, and Gujarati, while historically employing a caste specific script known as khôjî that became extinct in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The various colonial environments had a profound impact on the consolidation of Khôjâ 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 19\textsuperscript{th} century there was a schism within the caste based on ideas of religious authority, fracturing the community into three communities- the Ismaili, Ithnâ ‘ashari, and Sunni Khôjâ. 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 Khôjâ that contemporary Islamic identity is read back into the past of the Khôjâ, isolating the fundamentally Indic nature of Khôjâ religion prior to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. For this reason the study of the Khôjâ 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 ginânâ, for instance, by Shumaila Hemani in Alberta,
Karim Tharan 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 Khôjá, such as the Ithnâ ‘ashâri and Sunni communities who have their own perspective on Khôjá 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 Khôjá Studies argues that the heritage of the Khôjá are intrinsically tied to their Indic heritage and must be a starting point to understanding the community. So, a pan-Khôjá perspective is necessary in reconstructing the history of the community that takes into account Ismaili, Ithnâ ‘ashâri, and Sunni perspectives on it. The early 19th century Khôjá had a diverse array of religious practices from recitation of the ginâñâ, which the Ismailis continued, to the navhâ, which the Ithnâ ‘ashâri continued, and certain wedding rituals that the Sunni continued. With only one community’s perspective, our understanding of Khôjá history is incomplete. Additionally, the study of the Khôjá is intimately tied to that of other communities and the impact they had on their development, such as the Lôhâñâ, Bohrâ, Svâminäryâñ, Imâm-Shâhî, 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 Mahâvîr chair of Jain Studies. Professor Steven Vose.

The development of Khôjá Studies at FIU aims to make FIU a world-leader in the study of the Khôjá and contemporary Khôjá communities through funding graduate students interested in studying Khôjá traditions, such as the ginânâ, preservation and digitization of Khôjá texts, and public lectures such as these that will help to open discussion as to what accounts for the Khôjá 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 Khôjá people. This academic study of the Khôjá is meant to bring academic rigour to our understanding of Khôjá 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 Khôjá peoples and encourage students wanting to study Khôjkî manuscripts, material culture, or other facets of the Khôjá 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.

*Iqbal Akhtar (Edin.)*