



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### **Presidential Address at the First Anniversary of Mindanao University**

**His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan**

**November 24, 1963**

**Manilla, Philippines**

President Isidro, Senator Alonto, members of the Faculty, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how very honoured and happy I am to be with you on this great occasion. I appreciated enormously your kind words and wonderful receptions and hope that when I leave you this afternoon you will be sure that you have one more sincere friend and admirer of the University of Mindanao.

Strangely this will be the first convocation at which I will understand the address. When I graduated from Harvard, the laws required that the convocation address should be in Latin, so I had the unique honour of standing in boiling sun for forty five minutes listening to a speech of which I understood not one word. Maybe the Faculty did not appreciate the process of being slowly cooked to the rhythm of Latin words as the year after I left, it was allowed that the convocation address should be in English a more civilized process but even Harvard takes time to learn.

Having done my primary and secondary education in Switzerland and then gone to university in America, I have had perhaps a unique occasion to compare the standards of education of the Western world with those of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. As a result I am now deeply convinced that man's position in society, wherever he may be, will depend less and less upon his cultural or family heritage and more and more on the power and development of his mind.

In every society I have seen, it is the intellectual elite which is capturing the outstanding offices, the most interesting work, the best situations. This trend is, in fact, bound to be the case, so long as the world population continues to increase and we are forced to deeper and deeper specialisation.

The great Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates were created through the spread of the message of Islam and the conquering power of the Muslim armies, but once the waves of conquest were over, once the Muslim religion had spread from Arabia westwards to Southern France and eastwards to China, there arose the problem of organising and running the State.

If this state had been weak internally, I submit that it would have been rapidly overthrown. On the contrary it lived for centuries.

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What was the power, what were the centres of force which provided the Caliphates with the material to govern? From whence came the unifying force which allowed these immense empires to weld together peoples of different languages, ethnic origins and cultures?

The Caliphates drew administrative machinery from some of the greatest centres of learning which have ever existed. The Universities in Damascus and Baghdad, and later those of Cairo, Tehran Cordova and Istanbul were centres of learning unparalleled anywhere else. Even in those days, once the brute force of the armies had been withdrawn it was the power of the intellectual elite which took over and governed, ran and maintained the State.

During the two Caliphates, the Muslim Universities were producing the best scholars, doctors, astronomers and philosophers. Today where are we? Have we institutions of learning which can compare with the Sorbonne, Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, Oxford, M.I.T.?

Throughout my journeys I have been deeply pained to see the lack of initiative which my brother Muslims have shown in educational matters. In some circles there may have been a fear that modern education would tend to lessen the sharpness and deepness of our Faith. I am afraid that I must reject this with vehemence.

God has given us the miracle of life with all its attributes: the extraordinary manifestations of sunrise and sunset, of sickness and recovery, of birth and death, but surely if He has given us the means with which to remove ourselves from this world so as to go to other parts of the Universe, we can but accept as further manifestations the creation and destructions of stars, the birth and death of atomic particles, the flighting new sound and light waves.

I am afraid that the torch of intellectual discovery, the attraction of the unknown, the desire for intellectual self-perfection have left us. I fully realise that one needs today tools with which to extend the realms of man's knowledge, and that generally speaking these tools are the possessions of the more advanced essentially Christian parts of the world. But what is the point in undergoing untold misery for political independence if the result is no better than abject dependence intellectually and economically on one's old political masters.

Here you have at your disposal a tool which is being fashioned into an instrument for self-perfection. But it must never be thought, I submit, that this tool is or will become perfect. It will take all the vigilance of the founders, the faculty and the students to see that your standards are continually raised, that your instrument for learning is continually ameliorated so as to render you greater service at less cost in time and energy.

I hope that those students who came to this University, and that those students who will leave it for further studies, will approach their work with sharp vengeance - vengeance for the torpor and indifference of the past; vengeance for having temporarily lost their rightful position amongst the intellectual elite of the country.



We must, I suggest, use every opening available to us to make good the time and learning which we have lost, no matter if we turn to institutions steeped in foreign cultures so long as it is for our own improvement and in the process we do not lose our own identity. Not so long ago, after all, these cultures were turning to us.

If I have come to be with you today, it is to prove to you that you have brother Muslims in other parts of the world who are fighting the same battle as you if anything in more difficult circumstances under governments which are not always made up of *ahl al-kitab* or people of the Book, and that these Muslims are deeply conscious of the battle which you are waging. Their interest, however, is not limited to a simple consciousness of your difficulties; they wish to help you and to give you morally and materially all the support which they can muster.

Let us, therefore, put our backs to the wheel and show the state in which we live that we are determined to become first class citizens, nay leaders, not for the futile glory of leadership but to help this country become a better place in which to live and ensure that, even if we cannot reap the fruit of our labour, our children will be born to brighter horizons.