



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Keynote Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan
Concluding the Prince Claus Fund's Conference on Culture and Development
Amsterdam, September 7, 2002**

Your Majesty, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Directors of the Prince Claus Fund, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with gratitude and admiration that I participate in this event today. It gives me the opportunity to express publicly the enormous respect in which I hold Prince Claus, and the very great importance I attach to the work of the Prince Claus Fund. I am saddened that Prince Claus cannot be with us tonight, and I am sure that all of you will join me in requesting Her Majesty The Queen to convey to His Royal Highness our warmest regards and best wishes.

The founding purpose of the Prince Claus Fund of "expanding insight into cultures and promoting interaction between culture and development" has been fulfilled by means of a vigorous programme of grants, awards and publications. These actions recognise, stimulate and support activities that share the principles of equality, respect and trust, and have the highest levels of quality and originality. Through them, the Fund is making a very significant contribution in an area which I believe will be critical to the development of humankind in the 21st century -- the strengthening and enhancement of pluralist civil society, in all corners of the globe. The work that the Fund has accomplished has given legitimacy and stimulus to the broadest range of intellectuals, artists, and committed groups and organisations, frequently in areas of the world where the importance of such creativity is not recognised, and indeed, is often repressed. These initiatives constitute highly creative investments in the identification and premeation of forces working for the strengthening and enhancement of the pluralism of cultures that will provide strength into the future.

Within this same context the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has become a partner with Yo-Yo Ma in supporting his Silk Road Project and developing its own Central Asian Music Initiative, both of which involve some of the same performers who will delight us from this stage later this evening. This event therefore brings together three dynamic cultural institutions -- the Prince Claus Fund, the Silk Road Project, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture -- which singly, and together, are contributing to the global recognition of the importance of cultural pluralism. It also allows me to state my conviction that the strengthening of institutions supporting pluralism is as critical for the welfare and progress of human society as are poverty alleviation and conflict prevention. In fact all three are intimately related.

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The field of development has yielded more than its share of buzzwords. Phrases like, "civil society", "poverty alleviation", and "sustainable development" are familiar to many of you, as is "enabling environment" for which I must carry responsibility, since it was the Enabling Environment Conference in Nairobi sponsored by the Aga Khan Development Network, the World Bank and others which brought that phrase into common use. I hope that my remarks might release some more buzzing, because the essence of what I will say this evening refers to "enhancing pluralism".

I do not think it is necessary to spend time outlining the challenge that the process of globalisation represents vis-à-vis the cultural fabric of our world. But it is not the content of the new media, or even its domination by media giants, that is the real threat. The problem is that large segments of all societies -- in the developing world and the developed world -- are unaware of the wealth of global cultural resources, and therefore of the need to preserve the precious value of pluralism in their own and in other's societies. In this regard, there has unfortunately not been any development that parallels the recent acceptance by international public opinion of the imperative to preserve and enhance our natural environment and the world's cultural heritage as "public goods", worthy of general support.

I would go even further and say that the inability of human society to recognise pluralism as a fundamental value constitutes a real handicap for its development and a serious danger for our future. Since the end of the Cold War, a number of factors appear to have been common and significant ingredients, if not the primary cause, of many of the conflicts we have witnessed. Perhaps the most common of these ingredients has been the failure of those involved to recognise the fact that human society is essentially pluralist, and that peace and development require that we seek, by every means possible, to invest in and enhance, that pluralism. Those groups that seek to standardise, homogenise, or if you will allow me, to normalise all that and those around them must be actively resisted through countervailing activities.

Whether it be in Central Europe, the Great Lakes region in Africa, or in Afghanistan -- to cite just one example from three different continents -- one of the common denominators has been the attempt by communal groups, be they ethnic, religious, or tribal groups, to impose themselves on others. All such attempts are based on the principle of eradicating the cultural basis that provides group identity. Without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves and human groups lose their necessary point of reference to relate with each other, and with other groups.

A necessary condition for pluralism to succeed is that the general education of the populations involved must be sufficiently complete so that individual groups, defined by ethnicity, religion, language and the like, understand the potential consequences of actions that might impinge on others. This is, for example, one of the principal reasons why today there is so much uninformed speculation about conflict between the Muslim world and others. For instance, the historic root causes of conflict in the Middle East or in Kashmir are not addressed at any level of general education in the most powerful western democracies that dominate world affairs.



I must say that, as a Muslim, I stand here in front of you in amazement that the Western world had to experience the revolution in Iran to learn about Shia Islam, or the civil war in Afghanistan to learn about Wahhabi Islam. Please remember that we are talking about a religion followed by one-fifth of the world's population! This is the equivalent of Muslims being unaware of the distinction between Catholics and Protestants within Christianity. The point I wish to make is that the governments, civil societies and the peoples of this world will be unable to build strong pluralist societies with the present level of global cultural ignorance, and particularly about its pluralism. Even the most developed countries will need a massive effort to educate the world's youth in a more thoughtful, competent and complete manner for the global responsibilities which they will be expected to fulfil, and particularly so in the increasing number of functioning democracies where an informed public plays such a central role.

The actions to enhance pluralism have to be matched in the developing world by programmes to alleviate poverty because, left alone, poverty will provide a context for special interests to pursue their goals in aggressive terms. Urgent humanitarian assistance is indispensable, but should be conceived as part of a long-term strategy of helping the recipient community develop its own resources that can support the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the poorer segments of the population, and charitable support for those unable to work.

As you know, development is sustainable only if the beneficiaries become, in a gradual manner, the masters of the process. This means that initiatives cannot be contemplated exclusively in terms of economics, but rather as an integrated programme that encompasses social and cultural dimensions as well. Education and skills training, health and public services, conservation of cultural heritage, infrastructure development, urban planning and rehabilitation, rural development, water and energy management, environmental control, and even policy and legislative development are among the various aspects that must be taken into account.

To illustrate this approach, I would like to say something about the work that the Aga Khan Development Network has recently launched in Afghanistan. The scenario is dramatic: a country destroyed by decades of war, lacking basic infrastructure, economic resources, institutional fabric, and suffering from strong antagonistic social and religious forces. The government must also facilitate the return to the country of hundreds of thousands of displaced families, feed the population, restore agricultural production, provide essential social services, eradicate drug-related crops and their ancillary industries, and last, but most essentially, consolidate a culture of tolerance, based on the mutual understanding between peoples of different origins and languages.

In this context the Aga Khan Development Network has started work in Afghanistan based on an accord signed with the Government. In the first phase, priority is being given to responding to the most pressing problems. Activities that are underway include the provision of humanitarian aid to address the food shortage in the country and the needs of hundreds of thousands of displaced people, by facilitating the resettlement of refugees, and by undertaking the rehabilitation of buildings and public works required to provide basic social services.



Simultaneously, planning is underway to help address the country's needs in terms of building human and institutional capacity for social and economic development. Steps are being taken to revive and up date institutions for the training of teachers and nurses to meet the needs of urban and rural populations. Work is underway on the reform of school curriculum in accordance with the government's guidelines and current international experience, and making basic health services accessible to all. A microfinance facility is being established to provide financing for agriculture, micro-enterprise, small business including cultural enterprises, and the special needs of refugees returning to properties that have been destroyed.

In all of this work, the cultural dimension is pivotal because of the pluralistic nature of Afghan culture, and the severe stress it has endured in the recent past. As an initial undertaking the Aga Khan Trust for Culture is working in Kabul on the rehabilitation of the historic fabric of the ancient city, its monumental buildings, and traditional housing and decayed public spaces. These projects are centred around two significant historic sites: the Mausoleum of Timur Shah, considered by many to be the founder of modern Afghanistan, and the Paradise Garden of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent. The goals range from the lofty -- the preservation and restoration of symbolic monuments of Afghan history and cultural identity, to the very practical -- immediate employment opportunities and the rebuilding of marketable skills. All of them are essential to enable the people of Afghanistan to rebuild their country in peace and dignity.

I would like to leave you with a final thought, and some questions and conclusions that flow from it. Developing support for pluralism does not occur naturally in human society. It is a concept which must be nurtured every day, in every forum -- in large and small government and private institutions; in civil society organisations working in the arts, culture, and public affairs, in the media; in the law, and in justice -- particularly in terms of social justice, such as health, social safety nets and education; and in economic justice, such as employment opportunities and access to financial services.

- Is it not high time - perhaps even past time, that a systematic effort be undertaken to document "best practices" by looking closely at the array of public policies and structures that support pluralism in particular national settings?
- As lessons are extracted and models identified, should not a process be put in place to share them widely for replication?
- Should not this effort reach out to as many countries as possible, and in as many organisational and institutional settings as can be mobilised?

In addition each of us can help enhance pluralism in our own personal, professional and institutional domains. We could play our role in favour of pluralism as public opinion makers. We could participate in and support the efforts of groups and NGOs that promote that cause. We could volunteer our professional competences in a variety of fields, such as academic, technical or managerial. We could, also, serve the cause of pluralism simply through the conduct of tolerance, openness and understanding towards other peoples' cultures, social structures, values and faiths, and thereby set an effective example in our own society.



My hope is that society as a whole will not only accept the fact of its plurality, but, as a consequence, will undertake, as a solemn responsibility, to preserve and enhance it as one of its fundamental values, and an inescapable condition for world peace and further human development.

Thank you.