



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Speech at the Foundation Laying Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, Dubai

His Highness the Aga Khan

December 13, 2003

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim

Your Highness Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured by your presence this morning.

May I, at the outset, express my sincere gratitude to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed b. Rashid Al Maktoum for the kind courtesies and hospitality that have been extended to me since my arrival in Dubai. We fully understand that circumstances have prevented His Highness from joining us this morning. I am, however, delighted that His Highness Sheikh Ahmed is with us on this occasion and it is a joy to me that I am able to meet Sheikh Ahmed after twenty years on my first visit to Dubai.

Today's ceremony marks an event that I believe to be as significant for the contemporary landscape of this region as it is historic for the Ismaili Muslim Community worldwide. At a time when the search for mutual understanding remains essential to assuring peace and stability, the creation of spaces that will enable that search becomes a greater imperative than ever.

The Ismaili Centre in Dubai was conceived, and will be established, for that very purpose, amongst others. It is, therefore, a matter of great happiness for me personally to be present here today as the foundation stone of the Centre is laid on land most generously gifted by His Highness the Crown Prince.

On behalf of the Ismaili Muslim community worldwide and myself as their *imam*, I thank His Highness most sincerely for a noble gesture that epitomises attitudes and values which, for almost a millennium and a half, have defined the outlook and gracious disposition of an *umma*, historically diverse, yet bound by the ethics of a common faith.

Let me take this occasion to pay tribute to the experience of the Emirates which, like the lesson of Islam's history, illustrates admirably what heights are achievable, in realising human potential, when national interest and Muslim identity are anchored in values — our historical values — that widen intellectual horizons, and help to build bridges of friendship and understanding.

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.



Your experience demonstrates that a sagacious crafting of policies on these inherited value systems and projected wisely and creatively into the future is the soundest basis for building a dynamic modern civil society that will harness the creative energies of a pluralist citizenry for the common good of all.

The transformation of the small trading port that was once Dubai into a vibrant metropolis has paralleled its demographic growth and cosmopolitan evolution. The intermingling of cultures that so enlivens this thriving city is one of the strengths on which Dubai has built its renown as a point of global convergence.

It is precisely this notion of convergence that has characterised the Ismaili Community's successful endeavours to contribute, through the institutional framework of the Aga Khan Development Network, towards addressing critical development challenges of the day. The Centre will provide facilities to promote cultural, educational and social programmes from the broadest, non-denominational perspectives within the ethical framework of Islam. Amongst them will be an Early Learning Centre where the Aga Khan Education Services, a philanthropic agency, will draw on its own extensive experience in many parts of the world to offer broad, holistic, early childhood education on a secular and non-denominational basis at the highest international standards of excellence. The objective is to have a curriculum of proven calibre, taught by competent teachers, to help lay strong foundations for a child's continuing educational growth.

In the Middle East and the Gulf region, the Aga Khan Development Network is active in the areas of urban development, conservation, restoration, education, healthcare, microfinance, higher education, culture and rural development. The future Ismaili Centre in Dubai will serve as a resource to support these activities. Architect Rami El Dahan has seized the challenge of designing the Centre in a manner that will permit these interactions even as it preserves and revives traditions of architecture and spirituality.

At this juncture, perhaps, it would be appropriate to situate one of the functions of the Ismaili Centre in the tradition of Muslim piety. For many centuries, a prominent feature of the Muslim religious landscape has been the variety of spaces of gathering co-existing harmoniously with the *masjid*, which in itself has accommodated a range of diverse institutional spaces for educational, social and reflective purposes. Historically serving communities of different interpretations and spiritual affiliations, these spaces have retained their cultural nomenclatures and characteristics, from *ribat* and *zawiyya* to *khanaqa* and *jamatkhana*. The congregational space incorporated within the Ismaili Centre belongs to the historic category of *jamatkhana*, an institutional category that also serves a number of sister Sunni and Shi'a communities, in their respective contexts, in many parts of the world. Here, it will be space reserved for traditions and practices specific to the Shi'a Ismaili *tariqa* of Islam.

In the tradition of Muslim spaces of gathering, the Ismaili Centre will be a symbol of the confluence between the spiritual and the secular in Islam. Architect El Dahan has drawn inspiration from the Fatimid mosques in Cairo. Like its functions, the Centre's architecture will reflect our perception of daily life whose rhythm weaves the body and the soul, man and nature into a seamless unity. Guided by the ethic of whatever we do, see and hear, and the quality of our social interactions, resonate on our faith and bear on our spiritual lives, the Centre will seek to create, *inshallah*, a sense of equilibrium, stability and tranquillity. This sense of balance and serenity will find its continuum in the wealth of colours and scents in the



adjacent Islamic garden which the Aga Khan Trust for Culture will help to develop as a public park.

I spoke earlier of the Emirate's policies that enable different elements of its society to empathise as a united citizenry, working for the common good of all. A key aim of the Ismaili Centre in Dubai will be to enhance, facilitate and, indeed, encourage mutual exchanges and understanding, all of which are so critical to a country's sustained development. The Centre will offer facilities for lectures, presentations, seminars and conferences relating to the Aga Khan Development Network's areas of activity in social, economic and cultural endeavour. It will also host recitals and exhibitions that will serve to educate wider publics about the breadth of Islam's heritage.

This, indeed, is a central purpose of the major Ismaili Centres that have already been established in London, Vancouver and Lisbon, and of the others that are in the process of being established in Toronto and Dushanbe. Consistent with this aim, in October this year, the Ismaili Centre in London hosted an international colloquium on the Holy Qur'an that was attended by more than 250 scholars from around the world, both Muslim and of other faiths. They brought an impressive array of academic disciplines to bear on a reflection of how the revelation of Islam, with its challenge to man's innate gift of quest and reason, became a powerful impetus for a new flowering of human awakening and civilisation.

It is my hope that, *inshallah*, the future Ismaili Centre in Dubai will host similar programmes. Through its design and functions, this Centre, like its predecessors, will reflect a mood of humility, forward outlook, friendship and dialogue. Above all, this Centre is being conceived in the ethic of respect for human dignity. It will, therefore, aim to empathise with, and to expand our intellectual, cultural and moral horizons.

It is my humble prayer that, when built, the Ismaili Centre in Dubai will be a place for contemplation and search for enlightenment, where people come together to share knowledge and wisdom. It will be a place of peace, of order, of hope and of brotherhood, radiating those thoughts, attitudes and sentiments which unite, and which do not divide, and which uplift the mind and the spirit.

Thank you.