



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Remarks at the Opening of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, 2002

His Highness the Aga Khan

June 26, 2002

Washington, DC, USA

I am here to speak briefly about Central Asia. I wanted to share with you some of the reasons why the theme of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival this year is so important.

As you know, Central Asia has been an area of considerable concern and instability for the world. Over the past decade, Central Asian countries have come into existence in difficult circumstances. Frontiers have been changed, ethnic groups have been divided, old traditions have been modified by the Soviet presence, and all this has caused considerable difficulty in looking ahead in that part of the world. The period of deep change at the national and regional levels has prompted a search for new forces of stability. One that seems particularly important, I think, to the United States and to all of us, is the validation and vigorous promotion of human and cultural pluralism.

Historically, the Silk Route was a link that interconnected diverse aspects of human society and culture from the Far East to Europe, and did so on the basis of mutual interest. This suggests that for the new countries of Central Asia, the inherent pluralism of their societies can be regarded as an asset rather than a liability. In the wider sense, it can be a means of enlarging the frontiers of global pluralism. This is a goal with which we all can and should associate.

The remarkable work of Yo-Yo Ma has enthralled audiences from all the countries of the Silk Route and beyond. By his leadership and imagination, he has proved that the force of cultural pluralism to bind people is as necessary, powerful and achievable today as was the Silk Route in history. It is my privilege and honour to be associated with the founder of the modern Silk Route, a cultural journey that inspires people to unity and joy through art.

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