

# AWAAZ

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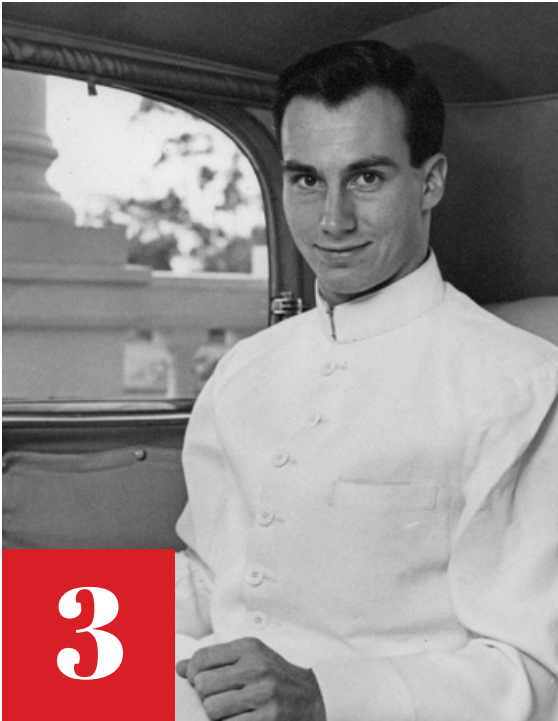
The Ismaili Centre:  
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PRINCE KARIM  
AL-HUSSAINI**

**(1936–2025)**

**A LUMINOUS BEACON IN THE GARDEN OF TIME**

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# **AGA KHAN IV (1936–2025)**

## **A LUMINOUS BEACON IN THE GARDEN OF TIME**

His Highness Aga Khan IV, Prince Karim al-Hussaini, was born on 13 December 1936, in Geneva, son of the late Prince Aly Khan and Princess Tajuddawlah, née Joan Yarde-Buller. He spent his early childhood in Nairobi, Kenya.

On 11 July 1957, at the age of 20, he succeeded his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III as the 49th Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community. At that time he was still an undergraduate at Harvard university. He led the Ismaili community for 67 years, a period of enormous change.

In the context of his role as Imam, Aga Khan IV's concern was to interpret the faith for the Ismaili Muslim community and to take a lead in improving their quality of life as well that of the people amongst whom they live.

To this end, and guided by the ethical principles of Islam, he established the [Aga Khan Development Network](#) (AKDN), a group of private, international, non-denominational agencies, working to improve living conditions and opportunities for people in some of the poorest and most vulnerable parts of the developing world.

The title “His Highness” was granted by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1957 following the practice of earlier British monarchs who had accorded the same title to Aga Khans I, II and III.

The hereditary title “Aga Khan” (meaning “Commanding Chief”) is an honorific title given by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Persian Qajar monarch, Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797-1834), to the 46<sup>th</sup> hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, Hasan Ali Shah Aga Khan I (r. 1817-1881).

Upon his accession to the Imamate, Aga Khan IV took a year away from his studies to visit his dispersed community, and then returned to education and graduated from Harvard University in 1959 with a BA Honors Degree in Islamic history.

Aga Khan IV is survived by his four children: Princess Zahra, Prince Rahim (now HH Aga Khan V), Prince Hussain (from his first marriage to Princess Salimah, née Sarah Frances Croker Poole) and Prince Aly Muhammad (from his second marriage to Princess Inaara, née Gabriele Renate Thyssen); his brother Prince Ayn Muhammad and their half sister Princess Yasmin; as well as four grandchildren.

In his private life, Aga Khan IV was an accomplished skier. He also inherited the race horse stables that had been a family concern for five generations. He also had a passion for yachting and was one of the founders of the Yacht Club Costa Smeralda in northern Sardinia which he developed as a model of environmentalism.

As the leader of his community, he pioneered development agencies in the fields of health, education and income generation and went on to create the first responsible press in East Africa with the founding of *The Nation* newspaper as early as 1959. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) today employs approximately 96,000 people and is active in 30 countries. In the field of education, the AKDN has established the Aga Khan University (with faculties in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the UK) and the University of Central Asia (with campuses in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), as well as over 200 schools (including the Aga Khan Academies in Africa and Asia) and more than 700 health facilities (including nursing schools, hospitals and associated facilities). Annually the AKDN generates electricity for 10 million people, provides healthcare to 5 million people, educates 2 million students and hosts 5 million visitors at its parks and gardens.

Through the work of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), Aga Khan IV established a museum dedicated to Muslim civilisations, the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, and founded one of the largest architectural prizes, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, now in its 16<sup>th</sup> cycle, distributing prizes totalling USD \$1 million, triennially.

The Ismaili Imamate's collaboration with national governments, international public agencies and non-governmental organisations stems from a common purpose and shared values and objectives to improve the quality of life of those most in need. Although having no territory, the Ismaili Imamate has diplomatic relations with various countries and partnerships with many international and national organisations.

In recognition of his exceptional efforts and contributions to human development and improving the social condition of societies globally, Aga Khan IV received numerous decorations, honorary degrees, and awards from institutions and nations across the world. He was also made an honorary citizen of Canada.

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***In his private life, Aga Khan IV was an accomplished skier. He also inherited the race horse stables that had been a family concern for five generations.***

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At the invitation of the Government of Portugal, Aga Khan IV established the Diwan of the Ismaili Imamate (global headquarters) in Lisbon in 2018.

### **Ismaili Muslims**

The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, commonly known as the Ismailis, belong to the Shia branch of Islam. The Shia form one of the two major interpretations of Islam, the Sunni being the other.

The Ismailis live in over 35 different countries, mainly in Central, East and South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia, and number approximately 12 to 15 million.

Throughout their 1,400 year history, the Ismailis have been led by a living, hereditary Imam from the time of the first Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him).

Upon his accession, Aga Khan IV reminded Ismailis to give their secular loyalty to the states in which they lived, and their spiritual loyalty to Islam and its Shia Imami Ismaili persuasion (*tariqa*). He also enjoined them to embrace pluralism by building bridges of peace and understanding; and generously sharing their time, talents, and material resources to improve the quality of life of the societies and communities amongst whom they live.

Ismailis affectionately refer to their incumbent spiritual leader by the title “Mawlana Hazar Imam” (Our Revered Present and Living Imam).



His Highness the Aga Khan IV on his way to Government House. Nairobi, Kenya, 1959. Image courtesy AKDN



Aga Khan IV meets President John F. Kennedy in the White House, Oval Office. Washington D.C., USA, 1961, on the eve of independence for various countries in Africa. They shared a common concern about development in post-colonial societies. Image courtesy AKDN.



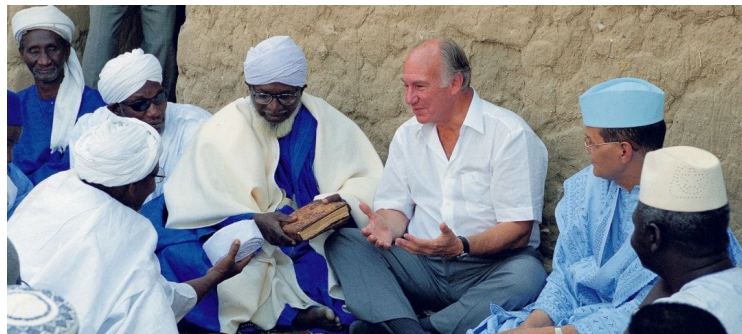
Aga Khan IV with President Kenyatta of Kenya at the Kenyatta Day celebrations, Nairobi, Kenya, 1966. Aga Khan IV committed the services of his development institutions to improve the lot of the citizens of the newly independent states of East Africa. He established *The Nation* newspaper in Kenya, which provided a platform for the aspirations of Black Africans. Credit: *Nation Foto*. Image courtesy AKDN



Aga Khan IV developed some of the best schools in Africa and Asia and made good education the basis of his vision for a more equitable future and better race relations. Here he greets students on a visit to the Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa, Kenya, 2006. Image courtesy AKDN



Aga Khan IV went on developing his educational vision that went beyond the political emancipation of the East African countries, and created two universities, one of which established faculties in East Africa and is today at the heart of human-resource training for the entire East African region. Here he is seen wearing the traditional robe of the Chancellor of the Aga Khan University (AKU) in Karachi, Pakistan, 1996. Image courtesy AKDN



Aga Khan IV and Ahmed Mohamed Ag Hamani, Prime Minister of Mali, at the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Djingareyber Mosque (designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988) in Timbuktu, Mali, 10 October 2003. Aga Khan IV's concern for preserving and restoring the heritage of Muslim countries included a strong educational component which is today embodied by institutions such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU) and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London inter alia. Credit: Gary Otte, Image courtesy AKDN



Aga Khan IV's concern for women's education extended to the remotest areas of the world. In this picture he is greeted by student midwives at the Bamyani Hospital, Afghanistan, 2005. The education of females was a commitment he inherited from his grandfather. Image courtesy AKDN.



Aga Khan IV, with the bust and medal of the Andrew Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy Award. He saw philanthropic work as the central remit of his role as Imam. Photographed in Edinburgh, Scotland, 2005. Image courtesy AKDN.



Aga Khan IV with His Highness Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan (left) and His Highness Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum (right) at the opening ceremony of The Ismaili Centre, Dubai, 26 March 2008. Image courtesy AKDN.



University of Cambridge Chancellor, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, and Vice Chancellor, Professor Alison Richard, with Aga Khan IV and other honorary degree recipients. Cambridge, UK, June 2009. Cambridge University and the University of Central Asia have a partnership that includes a scholarship programme for master's and doctoral students. Image courtesy AKDN.



Aga Khan IV, wearing the robe of the Imam at his Golden Jubilee visit to London, UK, 2008. Image courtesy AKDN.



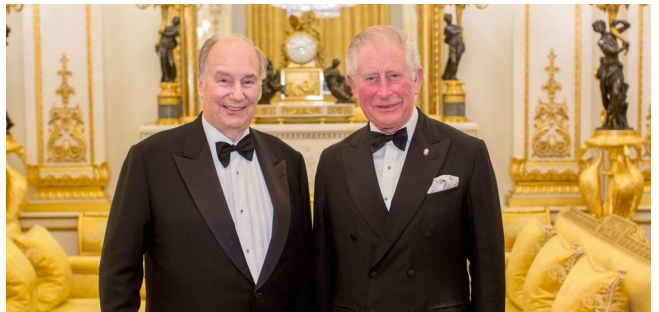
Aga Khan IV delivers a historic address to a joint session of the Parliament of Canada. Ottawa, Canada, 27 February 2014. Aga Khan IV called Canada "an exemplary leader in the global effort to foster peace, prosperity and equality through pluralism. Image courtesy AKDN.



Aga Khan IV meeting with United Nations Secretary General António Guterres at the UN offices. New York, USA, 18 October 2017. AKDN enjoys partnership with a number of UN organisations. Image courtesy AKDN.



Aga Khan IV with Queen Elizabeth II at a function hosted at Windsor Castle in honour of his Diamond Jubilee. London, UK, 7 March 2018. Credit: Gary Otte. Courtesy AKDN.



HM King Charles III, then Prince of Wales, and HH Aga Khan IV at Buckingham Palace, London, UK, March 2019. The two shared a passion for architecture, pluralism and faith. Image courtesy AKDN.

## Message From Secretary General of the Hague Conference on Private International Law



*Christophe Bernasconi*

We mourn the passing of such a remarkable leader — one who dedicated his life to the pursuit of knowledge, unity and the betterment of humanity. May his wisdom and legacy continue to inspire and guide.

In July 1957 when Prince Karim Aga Khan IV succeeded his grandfather Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan 111 as Imam (spiritual leader) of some 15 million Ismaili Muslims worldwide, massive changes were taking place in the world. In Africa the “Wind of Change”, referring to the decolonisation process, was blowing across the continent. The Soviet Union had launched Sputnik 1 which ushered in the space age giving rise to a major geopolitical rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union- a factor that was going to have a major impact on Africa in the years to come.

The Ismailis in East Africa spread out in 4 countries, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar were part of the larger Asian minority numbering some 360,000 whose fate was undecided in the new unfolding political drama. Here the Aga Khan's remit as Imam was to secure the wellbeing being of his followers both spiritually and in terms of the quality of their lives. His advice was simple: they owed their secular allegiance to the countries responsible for their wellbeing while their spiritual allegiance was to Islam and its Shia Imami Ismaili persuasion. At a micro level his advice to parents was pragmatic. “Put your children to bed by 7pm each day”, reminding them of the value of good sleep and rest for growing children. He exhorted good education for their children (both boys and girls) and stressed that particular attention be paid to basic health care. The years ahead were spent in upgrading the numerous initiatives and institutions in social and economic development which were pioneered by his grandfather under the old colonial systems and which needed revamping to meet the requirements of the new nation states yet to be born. In this process education played a key role.

New multi-racial, co-educational secondary schools were built staffed by some of the best teachers from everywhere. Aga Khan IV built the first multi-racial hospital in Kenya which would go on to become a leading teaching hospital in the years to come.

What is remarkable is that during his immediate sabbatical from Harvard University, Aga Khan IV visited his far flung community across the world even going to Hunza in the Northern Areas of Pakistan bordering on China. In certain inaccessible areas he went on donkey back. His concern did not stop just with the Ismaili community. He realised that the plight of marginalisation was endemic to the whole region and as Imam his remit extended to all those among whom his community lived and who were in need. Over the years he established the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) which went on to become the model for rural development in many countries of the world.

A global visionary who thought in mutigenerational terms, Aga Khan IV underpinned his vision with practical action combined with deep philosophical reflection. He was a great listener and was always ready to consult, realising—that people themselves were the best judges of their needs and that giving them agency was the most effective way of guaranteeing their progress. He ignited their spirit of hope and determination. All his programmes embraced this hallmark in addition to basic care for the environment.

Aga Khan IV did not view human developments in simple binary terms and approached the decolonisation process in East Africa with great empathy throwing his lot in with the African governments by trying to understand their predicament in dismantling the colonial systems that they had inherited in which the Black people were systematically deprived on the basis of their race. At the same time, he saw the predicament of the Asian minority communities as a fault line issue to the extent that they were unfairly seen as prosperous middle men in the economy, imported by colonial governments and perceived as blocking the upward mobility of the aspirations of the majority of the indigenous people. Here, he was adept at thinking in pareto-optimal terms in enlarging the pie so that more people could benefit from it. He did this firstly, by ensuring greater African articulation of their political aspirations on a platform which they could genuinely call their own. For this he established the Nation Newspaper Group in 1959 in response to an observation made to him by the then leading political activist in the Kenyan freedom movement, the late Tom Mboya. Aga Khan IV was not sparing in introducing the state of the art printing technology, the web offset, making Kenya the first Black African country to have access to this technology at that time. The Nation Group thus became an important

regional media organisation ready to play its role in nation-building activities. He gave local shareholders a stake in the enterprise and the newspaper went on to play an important role in the engendering of a culture of responsible reporting in East Africa. The media endeavour also became a fore runner to the Graduate School of Media and Communications of the Aga Khan University which he developed in the years to come.

Secondly, and importantly, Aga Khan IV advised his followers to relinquish the retail trade which was the main bone of contention with the majority of the populace. He encouraged his followers to go into small scale industrial enterprises through the Industrial Promotion Services (IPS) which he then set up and which went on to become part of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) which today is the main arm of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) with regard to economic development activities globally.

Thirdly, and equally critically, he advised his followers

***The Nation Group thus became an important regional media organisation ready to play its role in nation-building activities.***

to take up local citizenship and make each of these countries of East Africa their home which a large majority did. He advised his followers to access the best education they could muster locally and also aim for higher education overseas. A longitudinal thinker he encouraged pluralistic dialogue from the beginning and shared a common concern about just and equitable development with leading global thinkers of the time, one of whom happened to be a Canadian visionary called Pierre Elliott Trudeau whom he befriended over the years.

The post-colonial hope in East Africa was severely undermined by local tensions engendered by geopolitical rivalries and the hoped for East African Federation which the various nations aspired for, never materialised. In 1971 there was a coup in Uganda with the emergence of Dictator Idi Amin who on 4 August 1972 passed an edict giving the 80,000 Asians of Uganda an ultimatum to leave the country within 90 days. Ismailis, who formed a minority of this group, were largely citizens of Uganda. Regardless of this fact, Amin's decree held and it was at that point in time that the Canadian

government, which had begun to change its immigration policy, decided to admit people from non-European areas of the world. Here, the Aga Khan was able to leverage his connection with Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and through the Ismaili community and its organisational structure in Uganda help the Canadian team in Uganda hasten the process of Ugandan Asian resettlement in Canada. The Ismaili volunteers in Canada, many of whom had only recently arrived in the country, were able to muster local support to help displaced persons who had just arrived. In this context what is not much known is the unique role the Aga Khan and his uncle Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the then UN High Commissioner for refugees, played in devising what the UN refers to today as "alternative pathways to resettlement". These endeavours over time helped Ismailis as well as other displaced Asians to settle mainly in the countries of the Western hemisphere.

Aga Khan IV advised his community in Canada on his first official visit to the country in 1978 to make Canada their definitive home. He advised his younger followers, both girls and boys, to take the best education that Canada was able to offer. But he also reminded them that in the years to come he would call upon them to play a contributory role in the development of societies which were less privileged than theirs. He told them that he will call upon their time through the institutions of the Imam. Today some 50 years later many Ismailis who arrived as displaced persons are playing an important civic role at the highest echelons of the Canadian government and are also involved with the Aga Khan University which has faculties in 6 countries- three of which are in East Africa. Ismailis and others also serve through the AKDN the global network dedicated to improving the quality of life of those in need mainly in Asia and Africa irrespective of their origin, faith or gender.

The Aga Khan IV's vision was always underpinned by a deep sense of self-effacement. Asked by one of the leading Canadian TV journalists Roy Bonisteel how he would like his legacy to be remembered one day, his response after a moment of deep reflection was categorical. "Not by face or by name" but if the projects he was setting up were to benefit those for whom they were meant, then his life will have been fulfilled. His successor, his eldest son, His Highness Prince Rahim Aga Khan succeeded him as the 50<sup>th</sup> hereditary Imam of the Ismaili Muslims worldwide. As Aga Khan V, Prince Rahim has committed himself to serve his widely dispersed community spread today in some 35 countries of the world through a network his late father built and with which he has been closely associated for the past two decades.

# PRINCE KARIM AL-HUSSAINI AGA KHAN IV — AN APPRECIATION



By **Malise Ruthven** (former journalist with the BBC World Service, lecturer at universities on both sides of the Atlantic and author of books on Islam, including *Islam in the World*)

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Prince Karim al-Hussaini Aga Khan IV was a man of remarkable paradoxes: a sultan without territory, a billionaire socialite and real-estate developer who eschewed a life of ease, a newspaper proprietor who permitted unconditional editorial freedom, a spiritual leader who urged his followers to seek questions rather than answers, and a polymath who mastered many disciplines without showing conceit or intellectual arrogance. What I believe set him apart from many other prominent figures in an era dominated by narcissistic celebrity cults was the unusual combination of personal modesty with his appetite for knowledge. Although he didn't preach or talk about it much, I believe his attitude to life and leadership were deeply rooted in the Ismail tradition that sees faith as being the quest for knowledge rather than just obedience to divine commands.

When setting up the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, for example, he did not just hire prominent architects. He sent two young researchers around the world to *interrogate* the idea of Muslim architecture in a cultural domain stretching from the arid realms of the Maghreb to the tropics of Indonesia. Rather than seeing architecture as the mere construction of buildings, he saw it as an engine of development that would serve as a remedy for problems of cultural and social dislocation afflicting not just Muslim countries, but many parts of the developing world.

Consistent with his questioning approach to architecture, he chose the art historian Oleg Grabar to steer the award rather than more obvious theorists such as the late Keith Critchlow or Seyyed Hossein Nasr who regarded the supposedly sacred dimensions of Islamic design as aesthetic expressions of faith. Unlike other architectural prizes, such as

the celebrity-stoking Pritzker whose laureates have been hired by the Saudi government to transform the north-west Arabian landscape with spectacular giga-projects, the Award relies on a network of architects, planners and sociologists who nominate projects anonymously using standardized dossiers to minimize bias. The dossiers, assessed by technical experts, not only document actual buildings, but supply the data base for what is now one of the world's leading online architectural resources. As Aga Khan IV himself explained the value of the Award was not so much to honour 'final, definitive solutions to be replicated', but to 'enrich debate' and generate excitement. Winners of the Award have included hi-tech buildings like the iconic Kuwait Water Towers or Jean Nouvel's Institute du Monde Arabe in Paris, but equal if not more attention has always been given to small-scale projects using local materials and enlisting the skills and energies of local people.

A project that received an award in Doha where I was present in 2010 was the Bridge School linking two parts of a village in western China. The village had long been divided by a deep gorge making communications between the two halves difficult and challenging. Constructed from steel with a cladding of local timber, the bridge-cum-building houses a primary school, public library and social centre beneath which the halves are now linked by a pedestrian bridge, while the school section can be adapted for public performances. As the Award citation stated: 'the result is a project that has successfully invigorated the entire community, encapsulating social sustainability through architectural intervention'.

One could cite numerous commendations of similar

calibre made to Award winners in the 45 years since the Award began. But the Bridge School seems especially emblematic, exemplifying as it does the multi-faceted dimension of the approach of Aga Khan IV. The building's emergence after anonymous evaluation by experts is the opposite of the custom of hiring celebrity architects that prevails in many oil-rich states. The evaluation process was devised by Prince Karim himself, who, after sending his researchers around the world to explore what might constitute Muslim architecture, devoted many hours to examining the dossiers. The process is in obvious contrast to what might be called the current culture of narcissism-flattery rampant in parts of the Muslim world, in which highly-paid consultants tell their wealthy clients what they want to hear and studios rake in millions making models, videos and replicas of these fantasies. Prince Karim was the opposite of many of today's mega-rich commissioners of consultants. A meticulous note-taker from his student days at Harvard, he was well-known for keeping consultants in every field on their toes, having briefed himself thoroughly about their projects.

The Bridge School's double function connects directly with two of his leading passions: bridging the social, religious and political boundaries that separate different strands of humanity, and creating a path to human flourishing through the acquisition of knowledge. His passion for bridging the political, social and cultural gaps that afflict human beings was exemplified by the construction in 2002 of a suspension bridge across the Panj River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan that for decades, (since the communist revolution of 1917) had marked the boundary not only between Soviet Tajikistan and Afghanistan, but the cold war division between the Eastern and Western blocs. The gap may now be widening, following the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in 2021, but the bridge remains a vital symbol of hope.

"The right to hope", Aga Khan IV declared, "is the most powerful human motivation I know." Beyond the construction of bridges, hope can be seen as the energy animating what will doubtless come to be seen as his most enduring legacy, the Aga Khan Development Network. Originating in the cluster of institutions established by his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan III to serve the needs of the Ismaili community in India and East Africa, the AKDN was vastly expanded under Aga Khan IV to provide health, educational and cultural services to people of all faiths and backgrounds in the countries where it operates, as well as to stimulate development through socially productive enterprises.

Aga Khan IV explained his Network's spiritual rationale at the opening of a housing centre I visited in Mumbai. The complex contained 2 and

3-bedroom flats with kitchens and bathrooms, overlooking pleasant communal gardens and a resident's centre with an extensive library of books, video-tapes and DVDs. Many of the Ismaili families and others who lived there were rural migrants from Gujerat who had previously been living in the baking-hot, fetid shacks of Dharavi, one of the most notorious South Asian shanty-towns, where the air was thick with dust and children played in streets full of running sewage. "There are those", Aga Khan IV explained, "who enter this world in such poverty that they are deprived of both the means and the motivation to improve their lot. Unless [they] can be touched with the spark which ignites the spirit of individual enterprise and determination, they will only sink back into renewed apathy, degradation and despair. It is for us who are more fortunate to provide that spark." To me Aga Khan IV's reference to the 'spark' suggested that it is a psychological boost of hope and enablement rather than material help in the form of charity that would help people raise themselves out of poverty. He always disliked being called a 'philanthropist' (although the word

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***People might ask how, as one of the world's wealthiest men, he could talk about poverty without having experienced it himself.***

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features in many media obituaries). He saw it as linked to the top-down dispensing of charity rather than creative engagement with people of different faiths and levels of development. While some religious traditions regard dispensing charity along with the renunciation of wealth and comfort as being spiritually desirable, honouring poverty as the antidote to crass materialism of modern cultures, Aga Khan IV saw the grinding squalor in which the poorest found themselves as fundamental obstacles to human — and spiritual — progress. He saw the alleviation of poverty as part of his remit as Imam.

People might ask how, as one of the world's wealthiest men, he could talk about poverty without having experienced it himself. "I'm very spoiled", Aga Khan IV once said to me when I complimented him on a Breughel painting in his Paris residence. In an era that demands equality of opportunity (without being able to deliver it) the charity-dispensing activities of the rich and famous may be easily be dismissed as a form of 'charity-washing' aimed at diverting public attention from the lack of symmetry between the ultra-wealthy and ordinary folk. The critique may often be justified, but it takes little account of the fact that in the real world wealth usually equals power, either directly

through the allocation of resources and power of appointment, or indirectly through the access to power that such wealth provides. As Adrienne Clarkson stated shortly after leaving office as Governor-General of Canada:

People would ask me ‘Who is the most remarkable person you have met?’ and I would say ‘The Aga Khan!’ People don’t really understand that, because there is the worldly side, there is the man who appears at Ascot, Chantilly, at the races, and has that life. But there is also this other side, and that is something which I think that Ismailis understand. You don’t have to give up the world in order to have a true spiritual foundation to your life’

As a wealthy individual with royal status, the Aga Khan had access to other world leaders, enabling him to cut through political or bureaucratic obstacles in furtherance of his aims and duties. The best-known example was the way he was able to get his friend, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, to assist resettling Ismailis in Canada after the dictator Idi Amin’s expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972. But there are numerous other examples, including the construction of the bridge across the Panj already mentioned. It could not have been achieved without enlisting the personal support of Tajikistan’s president, Emomali Rahmon.

The Aga Khan’s wealth enabled him to take ‘out-of-the-box’ decisions far beyond the means of other development agencies. For example, some of the network staffers who had been reared in NGOs with anti-tech or ‘small-is-beautiful’ cultures were resistant to his insistence on introducing helicopters (on his own account) in the Himalayan regions of Northern Pakistan, until they realised that being spared the debilitating drudgery of endless jeep drives on perilous mountain tracks enabled their organization — the AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Program) — to maximise its small cadre of highly

trained professionals. The Program which, typically, he adapted from a model pioneered in the former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) by Akhtar Hameed Khan and Shoaib Sultan Khan, is now seen as the world’s most successful system for bringing rural people out of poverty by empowering them through their own initiatives consensually crafted.

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***The Aga Khan’s wealth enabled him to take ‘out-of-the-box’ decisions far beyond the means of other development agencies.***

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Wealth and status did not just enable Aga Khan IV to cut through bureaucratic or political obstacles to his vision for human development. They made it possible for his Network to undertake projects that many people would consider far down the scale of priorities, especially in regions lacking food security, not to mention physical safety. The creation of a beautiful public garden from a Cairo rubbish pit — a project that required moving several million tonnes of earth, alongside challenging decades of government inertia — stands as a brilliant example, as did his risky decision to restore the Bagh-e Babur park in Kabul. The beautiful gardens that he engendered in Cairo, Kabul, Khorog (Tajikistan), Bamako (Mali), and other cities I have visited, as well as those surrounding the stunning Jamatkhana buildings I have seen in Lisbon, London and Burnaby-Vancouver, are — like all great Islamic gardens — foretastes of the vision of paradise promised to believers. But even to the sceptic they serve as calming oases of tranquillity and hope in our increasingly unstable and precarious world.

# FAITH LEADER AND HUMANITARIAN INSTITUTION BUILDER, AGA KHAN IV LIVED THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE OF ISLAM



By **Sada Cumber** — US-based entrepreneur, philanthropist and diplomat, First US Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

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Prince Karim al-Hussaini, known to the world as His Highness Aga Khan IV and the 49th hereditary Imam of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, the second largest Shia community in the world, passed away on 4 February at the age of 88. The world lost a preeminent Muslim leader, humanitarian, diplomat, scholar, and passionate advocate for humanity's potential. Aga Khan IV's death has been widely covered in world media, which may seem extraordinary considering he never held a formal political office or governed territory of his own. But Aga Khan IV led a remarkable life and has left an exceptional legacy.

Born in Switzerland in 1936, Prince Karim was educated at Harvard. His grandfather, Aga Khan III, understood how quickly the world was changing. He believed only someone who understood the post-Cold War's emerging challenges and opportunities could lead the Ismaili Muslim community and rise to the broader demands placed upon an Imam toward all humanity. From his succession in 1957, the newly minted Aga Khan IV quickly set about proving the wisdom of his grandfather's choice.

Readers may be familiar with Aga Khan IV for many reasons. He helped facilitate the historic 1985 Geneva summit between US President Ronald Reagan and the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, which was held at his residence in Geneva. Some may know him for leveraging his personal, moral, and spiritual authority to help tens of thousands of South Asians, expelled from Uganda by dictator Idi Amin in 1972,

find new homes and new lives in the West. And many may know him for his prominence in the days and weeks after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.

A lifelong advocate of [pluralism](#), tolerance and understanding, with special emphasis on the relationship between the Muslim World and the West, 11 September and its aftermath embodied all that Aga Khan IV feared in that relationship. Following the attacks on New York, he often went on record vociferously condemning the misuse of Islam to justify violence. This was not a new position for him, but one that gained new-found urgency. At the same time, he took aim at the broader context which had allowed the relationship between the West and Muslim World to grow so toxic.

Aga Khan IV became a leading advocate for the idea that a '[Clash of Ignorance](#)' was responsible for that troubled relationship, offering it in opposition to the 'Clash of Civilizations' idea that was much in vogue at that time. Later, when [Pope Benedict XVI made remarks](#) widely perceived as Islamophobic, Aga Khan IV worked to tamp down tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities, while [encouraging leaders to learn from the history](#) of the time when Islamic and European cultures "interacted constructively and creatively — to help realize some of civilization's peak achievements." Through support for initiatives such as the Amman Message, Aga Khan IV also reminded Muslims of the importance of tolerance and pluralism within their own faith. While never presuming to impose his position as Imam to

tell non-Ismaili Muslims how to interpret their faith, he enjoined all Muslims to approach their faith with reason, compassion, and understanding. Or, as he put it, to live the “social conscience” of Islam.

His spiritual duties carried an obligation to the whole of humanity, especially its most marginalized and disadvantaged. He created the [Aga Khan Development Network \(AKDN\)](#), an umbrella organization of agencies, to uplift the poorest of the poor through education, development, and

[schools](#), and 700 [hospitals](#) and health facilities.

In conformity with historical Shia Ismaili tradition and Aga Khan IV's decree, his son, [Prince Rahim al-Hussaini](#), has succeeded him as the 50th Ismaili Imam. Born in 1971, Prince Rahim Aga Khan V was educated at Brown University. He has held active leadership roles within the AKDN, including chairing its budget review and environment and climate committees, and across other institutions of the Imam.

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***Aga Khan IV understood that institutions are the primary structures through which society organizes, operates, performs essential functions, and effects meaningful change.***

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social justice. AKDN operates in 30 countries, employs nearly 100,000 people, and deploys a \$1 billion annual budget for economic and cultural development.

Implicit in many tributes to Aga Khan IV, which I wish to make explicit, was his gift as an institution builder. Aga Khan IV understood that institutions are the primary structures through which society organizes, operates, performs essential functions, and effects meaningful change. In this capacity, the AKDN is certainly his masterpiece, but it stands alongside many others created over seven decades and which he continued to refine and strengthen right up to his last days. These include [two university systems](#), 200

In recent years, Prince Rahim Aga Khan V frequently accompanied his father to high-level meetings and events. Later, he often served as the public face for his father's initiatives. Through those experiences, Aga Khan IV created a unique mentorship for his successor, preparing him for the duties and obligations which are now his. Through this preparation and through his own qualities, I believe Prince Rahim Aga Khan V will continue to make the office of the Imam a credit to humanity and a force for peace, pluralism, and human dignity.

As for his late father, after a remarkable life of 88 years, Aga Khan IV leaves us with a world that is better for his time in it.

# HIS HIGHNESS PRINCE KARIM AGA KHAN IV (1936–2025)



By **Masooda Bano**, Professor of Development Studies and Senior Researcher at Brasenose College, Oxford, Department of International Development

His Highness Prince Karim al-Hussaini Aga Khan IV, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, passed away peacefully in Lisbon on 4 February 2025 at the age of 88. His death marks the end of an era of exceptional leadership, philanthropy and dedication to the betterment of humanity. A direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) through his daughter, Hazrat Bibi Fatima, and the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali, Prince Karim embodied a lineage that has provided guidance to the Ismaili community for over 1,400 years.

Aga Khan IV succeeded to the Imamate at the young age of 20 in 1957, following the death of his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III. Under his stewardship, the Ismaili Muslim community flourished, embracing modernity while remaining rooted in their faith and heritage. His global influence as a statesman and spiritual leader saw him advocate for the role of Islam in fostering peace, pluralism, and human development.

In addition to being widely respected as a religious leader, Aga Khan IV's greatest legacy may well be the vast humanitarian and development initiatives he established. He founded the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), one of the largest private development organizations in the world. AKDN operates in more than 30 countries in Africa and Asia employing over 96,000 people and investing more than \$1 billion annually in programmes

aimed at improving healthcare, education, economic opportunities, cultural restoration, and environmental sustainability. The education and health care programmes run by the AKDN reach remote communities with limited resources, such as the mountainous terrains of the Northern Areas of Pakistan and the deprived communities in Zanzibar.

Furthermore, across these initiatives, Aga Khan IV was deeply committed to ensuring that women had equal access. The Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), a key agency within the AKDN invests significantly in

***The Aga Khan Education Services (AKES), a key agency within the AKDN network, invests significantly in girls' education, just as its primary health programme prioritizes maternal and child health.***

girls' education, just as its primary health programme prioritizes maternal and child health. As early as 1918, his grandfather emphasized the importance of educating girls, stating, "If you have two

children—a girl and a boy—educate the girl first. When you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but when you educate a girl, you educate a family." He dedicated the proceeds from his jubilee celebrations to building schools for girls. Aga Khan IV continued this commitment by expanding access to higher education for girls from remote areas through providing university access. As a result, hundreds of young women became nurses and doctors, many of them training at the Aga Khan University (AKU) and improving their families' quality of life.

Aga Khan IV's contribution to institution-building, however was not limited to the developing world. He was a strong advocate of pluralism. Recognizing

the fractures within societies due to sectarianism and intolerance, he championed institutions such as the Global Centre for Pluralism in Canada. At the inauguration of the Centre's headquarters in 2017, he remarked, *"Connection does not necessarily mean agreement. It does not mean that we want to eliminate our differences or erase our distinctions. Far from it. What it does mean is that we connect with one another in order to learn from one another and to build our future together."* His relationship with Canada was especially significant, dating back to the 1970s when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau welcomed thousands of Ismaili refugees from Uganda. This bond remained strong throughout his lifetime.

In an era when Islam is often misrepresented or misunderstood, Aga Khan IV sought to highlight its intellectual, philosophical, and artistic richness. He firmly believed that Islamic civilization had contributed immensely to world heritage and should be acknowledged as a source of beauty, wisdom, and knowledge. Consequently, exhibitions and conferences organized by the Ismaili Centres worldwide as well as by the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, highlight the deeply mystical, philosophical, rationalist dimensions of Islamic heritage.

Similarly, through the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), Aga Khan IV championed the preservation of Islamic architecture and urban regeneration projects, ensuring that historic sites and communities were revitalized rather than neglected. One of the most notable projects under his patronage was the development of the Al-Azhar Park in Cairo. Opened in 2005, this 30-hectare park transformed a former rubbish dump into a green oasis, providing much-needed recreational green space for the people of Cairo.

***In an era when Islam is often misrepresented or misunderstood, Aga Khan IV sought to highlight its intellectual, philosophical, and artistic richness.***

Aga Khan IV's leadership was characterized by humility and an unwavering commitment to service. He often described his role not in terms of power, but as a responsibility entrusted to him by his faith and community. He inspired generations of Ismailis to actively engage in voluntary service, a principle deeply ingrained within the community through institutions such as the Ismaili Volunteer Corps. As Imam, Aga Khan IV viewed the promotion of social justice as an essential duty of his office, not as an option.

On 9 February 2025, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV was laid to rest in Aswan, Egypt, in a private ceremony. Aswan holds deep significance for the late Imam's family, as it is the final resting place of his grandfather, Aga Khan III, and his step-grandmother, Mata Salamat Om Habibeh. Their bond with the people of Aswan remained strong through the years, sustained by the work of the Om Habibeh Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation.

With his death, the mantle of leadership has now transitioned to Aga Khan IV's eldest son, His Highness Prince Rahim Aga Khan, who as Aga Khan V has been named the 50th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims.

# HH AGA KHAN IV — A 50-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE BY AN INDO-AFRICAN DIASPORAN



By **Vinod Tailor** MBE (former High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, supporting various voluntary sectors for the alleviation of poverty, Trustee of Peace Child International)

It was July 1957 and I was yet to be born in a small village in Eastern Uganda called Kaberamaido which even today is not known by many. Its population then was no more than a thousand. My father was a humble tailor — hence my name “Tailor”. Like in many other towns of East Africa there was a small Ismaili jamatkhana nearby which had some very basic facilities. It was run by a teacher called Aly Mohamed Master who also happened to teach in the government school at which I was a pupil. Looking back as I grew up, I came to realise that 1957 was a significant year. The decolonisation process “Wind of Change” was taking place across Africa and the Soviet Union had launched its first satellite called Sputnik1. We had entered the space age. It was against this backdrop that Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, Imam (spiritual leader) of the world’s 12 million Ismaili Muslims, passed away having appointed his 20-year-old grandson Prince Karim, then an undergraduate at Harvard University, as Aga Khan IV, the 49<sup>th</sup> hereditary Imam of the Ismaili Muslims worldwide. Aga Khan III wanted a young man to succeed him as the Imam of the Atomic Age.

Our life in the village was simple. My father lived a hand to mouth existence. I was the eldest of two boys and we had three sisters. East Africa was beginning to feel the effect of the “Wind of Change”. The Asian minority felt extremely vulnerable as African nationalism became more strident and viewed the Asian shopkeeper as blocking their upward mobility. Aga Khan IV deferred his studies at Harvard University and took over a year off as a kind of sabbatical to reorient his life towards redeeming his pledge to his community whom he undertook to serve. In this retrospective, I reflect on how Aga Khan IV impacted my life as a non-Ismaili and my

multiple identities. I realise now that he was not only an Imam to the Ismailis but he was also the voice of the voiceless of whom I was one.

## **Aga Khan IV as one who navigated the “Wind of Change”**

At a time when some 360,000 Asians in four East African countries were wondering whether to stay in East Africa or to leave, Aga Khan IV advised his community to take up local citizenship. But this was not as an expedient. He advised them to live simply, educate their children, and contribute towards nation-building in the moment of post-colonial hope. In his vision for a new Africa he was not alone but found a kindred spirit in a dynamic Canadian whose cosmopolitan vision was resonant — Pierre Elliott Trudeau who would later serve two terms as the Prime Minister of Canada. As fate would have it they became good friends.

***He advised them to live simply, educate their children, and contribute towards nation-building in the moment of post-colonial hope.***

## **Connection with India**

Despite the Ismaili Imamate in the last millennium being a-territorial, Ismailis have a very strong sense

of belonging and deep bonds with their Imam regardless of how geographically scattered they may be. India for most diasporic Ismailis who lived in Africa was their cultural background. Aga Khan IV's great-great-grandfather (Aga Hassanaly Shah Aga Khan I) came to India in 1846 and established his residence first in Calcutta and subsequently in Bombay. His son (Aga Ali Shah, Aga Khan II) succeeded him and he in turn was succeeded by Aga Khan III who rose to eminence as India's representative to the various Round Table conferences between 1930-1932 that aimed to determine the future political shape of India. Aga Khan III left India in the 1930s and went on to become the President of the League of Nations (the forerunner to the United Nations) a position he held for two terms.

Aga Khan IV consolidated the social welfare activities of his community in India in 1980 when he established the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) India whose first Chairman was Indian diplomat Rajeshwar Dayal. Through the AKF, Aga Khan IV established the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) India that has for the past 40 years been serving the most marginalised sections of the population- mostly non-Ismailis. Enlisting the engagement of outstanding Indian visionaries such as the industrialist Sir Rattan Tata and the leading Indian architect Charles Correa, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the umbrella organisation under which all developmental activities are conducted today, has been involved in activities ranging from early childhood and general education, health care, rural development and economic activities to major cultural regeneration programmes such as the restoration of the tomb of Humayun and the Sunder Nursery in New Delhi. It must be noted that Aga Khan IV in 1969 donated the Yervada Palace, which was owned by his grandfather and where Mahatma Gandhi was once incarcerated, to the Indian Government. The building today houses the Gandhi Museum.

While Aga Khan IV was advising his own community to play a constructive role in East Africa, sadly, the conditions in post-independence East Africa changed radically as a result of various factors including Cold War politics in which the region became embroiled. Ideological differences became problematic, resulting inter alia in the 1972 expulsion by Idi Amin of some 80,000 Asians from Uganda with just a 90-day notice. I was a mere 15-year-old boy at the time. I did not have much education. Various countries to which the Asians were affiliated in some way or the other, renounced their responsibility for the Asians of East Africa who became in political economist Yash Tandon's words 'stepchildren of the colonial empire'. We were desperate, penniless. We had no

hope whatsoever. It was at that time that Aga Khan IV and his uncle Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the longest serving UN High Commissioner for Refugees, elaborated what is known as 'alternative pathways to resettlement' to help people like myself. Aga Khan IV was able to enlist the support of the Canadian Government through Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and Canada opened its doors to an unprecedented wave of non-white immigration. Prince Sadruddin on his part, ensured that all those persons displaced from East Africa were able to move to transit camps where they could wait for governments across the world to open a door for them. I was one of those to whom the Imam and his uncle gave hope and a new life. In Aga Khan's own words uttered in another context he 'ignited the spirit of human enterprise and determination' in me and my family. He inspired us not only to survive, but beyond that, to excel.

### **What I have learned as a Diasporan**

Despite the Aga Khan's followers being expelled from Uganda, the institutions he established in Uganda continued to operate. In 1988 Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni agreed to hand the properties of the Imam back to Aga Khan IV. When he met President Museveni, Aga Khan IV was touched by the Ugandan President's acknowledgement that these assets of the Imam had been unlawfully expropriated. In a gesture of supreme magnanimity, Aga Khan IV assured the President that he would use the Imam properties once again in the service of the country. According to Mohamed Keshavjee, one of the members on the delegation which accompanied Aga Khan IV when he went to see President Museveni some 36 years ago, "in accepting the restitution to the Imam of the jamatkhana building in Kampala (where his installation as Imam had taken place), Aga Khan IV ensured that the people squatting in the building were given reasonable alternative facilities." Today, Uganda is the sixth country where the Aga Khan University has a faculty, and every year hundreds of local citizens, mainly Black Africans, qualify in fields that are relevant to their countries' needs

A visionary par excellence, Aga Khan IV, who succeeded to the Imam before my birth, inspired me to serve humanity. About him I can only say, "vision without action is a dream. Action without vision is just passing time. Vision with action changes the world." Aga Khan IV was committed to changing the world, and he kept working for the betterment of this world right until the end of his life. His funeral reflected what he stood for- simplicity and elegance coupled with service before self.

# THE AGA KHAN RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME

## How the Lighting of a Candle on the Roof of the World (Bam-i-Dunya) Changed my Career Path



**Shabnam S. Lutafali, PhD (Notre Dame)** — specialist in Women in Development and online faculty at Grand Canyon University, Arizona

### Genesis

In the changing world of the mid-1950s, upon his accession as Aga Khan IV in 1957 the young Harvard-educated Imam of the Ismaili Muslims with a diverse global community took a year out from his studies to visit his various communities and to reflect upon what was needed to improve the quality of their lives and the lives of those among whom they lived. In the case of the Northern Areas of Pakistan, the terrain was inaccessible and the community there still lay outside the culture of national development. However, the Jubilees of Aga Khan III had given rise to schools for girls and medical centres for their basic health. It remained for Aga Khan IV to bring these communities into modern times. In this process Aga Khan IV had to embrace the culture of the area and work within the existing governmental and social developmental frameworks, as well as instituting new programmes that would meet the evolving needs of these isolated communities.

With the establishment of the Aga Khan Foundation, Geneva, in 1967, Aga Khan IV and a group of hand-picked global development specialists made a survey of social development programmes in South Asia and alighted upon a young Pakistani civil servant originally from Moradabad (India) who was on deputation from the government of Pakistan working with UNICEF in Sri Lanka. He had done some creative work under his mentor, Akhtar Hameed Khan (1914–1999), a world-renowned visionary in this area of development. This young man, Shoaib

Sultan Khan (born 1944) had completed some projects under the aegis of UNICEF and was brought to the notice of Aga Khan IV, who had decided to set up a rural development programme in part of the Bam -i- Dunya (Roof of the World), i.e. the Northern Areas of Pakistan. This programme was going to be transformative to the extent that it would be responsive to the needs of the people as they themselves visualized those needs. It would be flexible, adaptive, accountable and people-centred, and would give agency to the people for their own transformation. This was the ideal opportunity for Shoaib Sultan Khan to whom Aga Khan IV gave full operating freedom within the ethical principles of Islamic social governance that included accountability, inclusivity, a consultative process and gender equity. According to Masood-Ul-Mulk, Vice Chair of the Rural Support Network (RSPN) which is a collection of RSPs in Pakistan modelled on the AKRSP, the model that evolved blended beautifully with the environment and could be adapted to different

environments in other parts of the world. For Masood "It gave agency to the people themselves, tapped their potential for self-help and collective action through instilling in them the notion of good governance

at the very grass roots level of co-existence. It did this through encouraging them to jointly identify a common project which they chose themselves and

***He had done some creative work under his mentor, Akhtar Hameed Khan (1914–1999), a world-renowned visionary in this area of development.***

which they also agreed to implement themselves. Consequently, they took full ownership of it".

Early in his tenure with AKRSP, Shoaib Sultan Khan authored a book titled *The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme: A Journey Through Grassroots Development*, published by Oxford University Press. The book describes participatory development at a very practical level of operation involving people themselves in the decision-making process for the improvement of their lives.

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***I came across Shoaib Sultan Khan's book and was so inspired by it, that I decided to change my thesis to 'Development Strategies for Rural Women of Pakistan'.***

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While a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, I came across Shoaib Sultan Khan's book and was so inspired by it, that I decided to change my thesis to 'Development Strategies for Rural Women of Pakistan'. Shoaib Sultan Khan's book was an inspiration and valuable source of information for my work. His commitment to gender equality inspired by Aga Khan IV's ardent desire to promote women on an equal footing with men was decisive in changing the trajectory of my doctoral thesis.

AKRSP works in the fields of community mobilization, community infrastructure development, human resource development, enterprise development, social forestry and agriculture and livestock development. However, its major achievement is that it mobilized communities and provided a platform on which other AKDN institutions could work to improve education, health, social welfare, and economic opportunities, which they successfully did, serving all the people of the area regardless of class, gender or creed.

AKRSP thus is an institution that was decades ahead of its time in foreseeing the problems encountered by the world today. These include the problems of mass migration due to environmental degradation, and lack of opportunities in undeveloped and underdeveloped regions of the globe, as well as climate change induced by the exponential growth in the use of fossil fuels, to name but a few. In the Northern Areas of Pakistan, AKRSP has successfully enacted programmes that provide incentives for the local people (Ismailis and other communities) to exist peacefully with a rising standard of living, better schooling for children with opportunities for higher education, better health care facilities with world class maternity homes, and access to financial institutions to manage and grow wealth. AKRSP's agrarian programmes enhance food production. Cottage industries are also promoted to generate income for families. Such incentives bind people to their native lands and deter them from migrating. The World Bank has reported AKRSP's success in various fields of human endeavour including education, health, and wealth growth and management. AKRSP has successfully addressed the human issues that other institutions can emulate. As a model, AKRSP became globally respected and its principles were replicated in places such as Madhya Pradesh in India and in the high mountain valleys of Central Asia, most particularly in Tajikistan. Furthermore, AKRSP became the paradigm for other rural development programmes in Pakistan which Shoaib Sultan Khan went on to champion.

One of the most notable outcomes of the AKRSP is that young women from the Hunza district of Pakistan have begun to access further education opportunities through the Aga Khan University and other institutions of higher learning. Some of these young women now work in leading institutions in Pakistan, the Gulf area and in the Western World.

On a personal level, the journey I embarked on proved very valuable as I, myself, have been invited to lecture in Canada and in Japan on the whole notion of relevant rural support mechanisms — a field I continue to cherish today in the USA and in which I am deeply involved.

# THE ISMAILI CENTRE: A CROSSROADS OF CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS



*By Amin Abdulla-Pardhan, distinguished gallerist known for his specialisation in arts and music events, respected for his profficiency in curating exceptional exhibitions and offering tailored framing solutions.*

One of six global Ismaili Centres, inspired by Aga Khan IV, the Ismaili Centre, London, nestled in the heart of South Kensington, was opened in April 1985 in the presence of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Located amidst the rich architectural heritage of London's Art and Cultural centre, it harmonizes beautifully with the local building styles of the Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Ismaili Centres are not only a place of prayer for the Ismaili congregation but also a serene space for contemplation, arts, music, and cultural exchanges. They foster thought-provoking meetings and discussions on health, education, and development, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere for all who visit them.

The architectural design of the Ismaili Centre, London, is a blend of traditional Islamic and modern elements, reflecting the cultural heritage and contemporary outlook of the Ismaili community. The Centre features a stunning roof garden that offers a peaceful retreat in the bustling city, and its interior is adorned with exquisite calligraphy and intricate geometric patterns that pay homage to Islamic art and architecture.

The Ismaili Centre has become a vibrant hub for cultural and artistic activities, hosting a wide range of events, exhibitions, and performances that celebrate the diversity and richness of global cultures. It has established itself as a significant landmark in London, promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding through its various initiatives and programs.

In addition to its cultural and artistic contributions, the Ismaili Centre also serves as a place for community service and outreach. It partners with local organizations and institutions to address social issues and support initiatives that promote the well-being and development of the broader community. The Centre's engagement with the Nour Festival

of Arts by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) in 2014 marked a bold and vibrant celebration of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This Festival became a beacon of creativity and connection, a place where the rich tapestries of the MENA regions artistry came to life, igniting the imaginations and hearts of all who attended.

My journey with the Festival began when the Ismaili Centre Council invited me to join the festival's steering committee. This opportunity was not just a role; it was a calling. It allowed the Ismaili Centre to become a pulsating heart within South Kensington's arts and cultural hub. The Centre flourished as a venue for vibrant music events, thought-provoking exhibitions, and enlightening lectures, each event echoing the diverse heritage and profound stories of the MENA region.

The Festival's mission was clear: to weave a tapestry of artistic expression that resonated deeply with everyone involved. Collaborations, like the one with the Royal Geographical Society, were more than partnerships; they were symphonies of culture and history. The exhibition focused on the garments worn along the Silk Road, an evocative journey from East to West. A senior representative from the Society, Mr Alasdair Macleod, delivered a lecture that was not just informative but a heartfelt odyssey through the origins and influences of the Silk Road in the arts. The garments on display, hailing from Iran, Syria, Morocco and Egypt, whispered tales of ancient travels and cultural exchanges from the past to modernity.

The Music@One series at the Ismaili Centre, a radiant jewel of the Festival, brought people together through the universal language of music. These free lunchtime mini concerts were more than performances; they were soul-stirring experiences.

Musicians from the Middle East and North Africa, along with talent from around the globe, graced the Ismaili Centre with their enchanting melodies. The series continued to flourish, becoming a beloved feature that resonated with the community throughout the year.

One of the most magical moments was when in 2015 Australian Egyptian Oud soloist Joseph Tawadros performed at the Ismaili Centre. His music, rich with emotion and tradition, captivated everyone.

Having been invited by the Nour Festival team to perform at the Ismaili Centre, Joseph recalls:

“I had never heard of this place before but was very excited as I heard good things about it. My correspondence with the team was very professional and respectful which made me feel quite at home, which is what a performer wants. The space was lovely and inspiring, and the audience was very enthusiastic and loving which allowed me to present my music and storytelling with ease. I wasn’t sure what to expect, having just arrived a few months earlier to reside in London. This was my first big performance after moving to London and to an entirely different audience to what I was used to. The architecture and beauty of the building makes it a very inspiring place to perform, and I have many great memories performing at the Ismaili Centre. My storytelling and humour which usually accompanies my music was very well received and the concert was a great success. Years later I was invited by Amin for another solo performance in a different space, this time by the fountain. It was another success and great to be a part of such a wonderful series in a beautiful space for a beautiful audience.”

It was during one of Joseph’s spellbinding performances that Scottish Egyptian sisters Sarah and Laura Ayoub connected with the Centre. Their performances, filled with passion and artistry, became a cherished part of the festival. The collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society during the reimagined RBKC Summer Exhibition Road Arts Festival was a testament to the enduring spirit of creativity and cultural exchange.

Sarah and Laura Ayoub also cherish their experiences at the Ismaili Centre. They said:

“The Ismaili Centre first welcomed us to the community back in 2017. We were given a platform to showcase our music and our brand-new quartet for the very first time in London as part of the Diamond Jubilee Music Series, set up to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Aga Khan IV. Our debut performance consisted of a sold-out matinee and evening show, which enabled us to reach diverse audiences within London. Since that performance our quartet has graced festivals across the UK including Glastonbury, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival and concerts in

Latvia and Egypt. One thing we will never forget about the Ismaili Centre concert was the warmth and hospitality we felt. We weren’t just contracted performers; we were treated like one of the family. Music and food were the universal languages which brought us together, no-matter our background or ethnicity. Those concerts were very special to us and will be held in our hearts for a long time.”

The Nour Festival of Arts was not just an event; it was a journey of the heart, a celebration of the human spirit, and a testament to the power of art and music to bridge worlds and bring people together in the most profound ways. Through these artistic collaborations and heartwarming performances, the Ismaili Centre has successfully showcased the beauty

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***The collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society during the reimagined RBKC Summer Exhibition Road Arts Festival was a testament to the enduring spirit of creativity and cultural exchange.***

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of Islamic culture and its contributions to the broader community, building bridges of understanding and appreciation.

Besides London, the other Ismaili Centres are situated in Lisbon, Dubai, Toronto, Dushanbe, and Vancouver. With others under planning and construction, each centre reflects a unique blend of Islamic and local architectural elements, serving as a cultural bridge between Muslim civilizations and their host cities.

In the words of the late Aga Khan, whose vision for the Ismaili Centres extended beyond mere architectural beauty, and was about fostering mutual respect and understanding:

“This [Ismaili Centre, Burnaby] will be a place of congregation, of order, of peace, of prayer, of hope, of humility, and of brotherhood. From it should come forth those thoughts, those sentiments, those attitudes, which bind men together and which unite. It has been conceived and will exist in a mood of friendship, courtesy, and harmony.”

Aga Khan IV’s vision, as just stated, became a reality for me and members of the community as we saw the Ismaili Centre, London, grow to match and fulfil the aims set out for it by its founder who believed in pluralism, openness and a dialogue of cultures.

# HOW THE AGA KHAN AWARD FOR ARCHITECTURE HELPED ME TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM AND ITS MULTIFACETTED HUMANISTIC DIMENSIONS



By **Don Mowatt**, retired Canadian broadcaster and award-winning writer whose radio programmes, stage plays and stories have been seen and heard across North America and Europe

The passing away of His Highness Prince Karim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan IV, Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, in Lisbon on 4 February 2025 brings to the surface two decades of memories associated with his accomplishments and my first hand observations of them, particularly in the realm of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA).

In the spring of 1991, I was asked to meet a small group of Ismailis for lunch in Vancouver, BC, to discuss the possibilities of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) making a series of broadcasts on Islamic Architecture. At that time, I was a radio producer for the CBC in Vancouver and a major contributor to the acclaimed national series, called IDEAS, broadcast nightly across Canada.

As the discussion developed, it became clear to us all that the most workable possibility for such a series should focus on the buildings and sites connected to the Award which would serve as a representative reflection on the faith in action. Once the submission had been made to the IDEAS board in Toronto, my education in the history of Islam in general and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) in particular, began in earnest.

At some point, the idea of my attending the next Award prize giving ceremony in Samarkand,

Uzbekistan arose along with the possibility of my interviewing Aga Khan IV himself, who at that time had only given one interview to a Canadian broadcaster.

“Architecture is the only art form,” postulated Aga Khan IV, “with direct impact on the quality of life... And, in Islamic architecture, there is a spirituality that considers the impact on the welfare of the community and the natural environment.”

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture was established in 1977 to enhance the understanding and appreciation of Islamic culture as expressed in architecture. The prizes given by it are intended to identify and recognize projects that incorporate contemporary design, social housing, community improvement, restoration and area conservation as well as landscape and environmental issues. The object is to discover and encourage building concepts that most successfully address the needs and aspirations of societies in which Muslims have a significant presence, with a particular emphasis on building projects that employ local resources and materials in an innovative way.

Members of the local Ismaili community leadership were most diligent in providing me with references to relevant materials, access to prominent

architects, historians and theological experts for this assignment, culminating in a full-length interview in Toronto with Aga Khan IV and in the months following, I received an invitation to attend the 1992 AKAAs ceremony in Samarkand, and was commissioned with the eventual production of six hour-length radio programmes.

Samarkand in Central Asia, once a fabled city lying on the ancient Silk Route from China to Western Europe was founded around 700 BCE and occupied by an endless series of conquerors including Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. It has been a UNESCO world heritage site since the beginning of the 21st century. It is the perfect meeting place for some of the world's leading architects to attend the honouring of their colleagues with the most valuable and prestigious set of architectural awards. These awards, unlike most others in the field, are also given to people besides the actual architects — people who were involved in essential roles in the projects: builders, clients, artisans, engineers and municipalities. And the jury members include internationally recognized architectural experts, not just those from the Islamic faith or countries.

As guests of Aga Khan IV we were given tours of many of the historic buildings and complexes by experienced local guides in Samarkand as well as in the famed Uzbek sister cities of Bukhara and Khiva. In addition to these tours and the elaborate Awards Ceremony and Reception, we were participants in a series of lectures and presentations by the current winning architects.

All of these events were presided over by Aga Khan IV and members of the Master Jury, a totally independent board, who, as in previous years reviewed the hundreds of submissions for this prestigious award. Aga Khan IV introduced them and guided us through the presentations with a sensitivity and extensive knowledge of, as well as a passion for, building projects that substantially enrich the lives of the communities involved by addressing some of the critical issues of life that architecture is meant to address.



Don Mowatt outside a madrasa in Uzbekistan.

I was particularly moved by one example among many that were recognized in this Award sequence — the reconstruction of the Kampung Kali Cho-de in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which I was to visit three years later in 1995 at a subsequent AKAAs prize giving ceremony.

This location in the centre of Yogyakarta in the Island of Java had been a squatter settlement in a ravine refuse dump for decades, offering a home to the homeless, albeit in appalling conditions. The initiative to change all this came from a local parish priest who had approached the regional government with a proposal. The architect and builders came up

with a series of dwellings in a community complex, all constructed from a combination of timber and bamboo, an urban version of a traditional tribal house. The structures were illustrated by flag-like paintings on the outside walls with familiar plant, animal and monster motifs chosen by the inhabitants themselves — mostly the original squatters and their families. On my tour there in 1995 in the company of the chief architect, we visited the home of one of the inhabitants, a former squatter now in her forties with her family. She described how life had been and

how things now were, so radically safer and more secure. She was happy, gracious and eager to tell us of the success of the natural air conditioning in a notoriously hot muggy climate. This had been achieved not by electricity as in the West, but by the careful construction of rooms so that the air could flow

freely and achieve the desired cooling effect. Now, everywhere here, above the sounds of the traffic, were the voices of children playing happily.

In Samarkand, though we were surrounded in the Registan Square by a quadrangle of magnificent monumental madrasas, minarets, columns and portals, this presentation of a simple ravine complex of bamboo and timber dwellings in Yogyakarta, received equal international attention and recognition from the Master Jury of the AKAAs. So too, three years later, when the AKAAs was being held

***As guests of Aga Khan IV we were given tours of many of the historic buildings and complexes by experienced local guides in Samarkand as well as in the famed Uzbek sister cities of Bukhara and Khiva.***

in Yogyakarta, another folk-inspired architectural innovation, this time in Mauretania, received an award that caught all our attention.

In many parts of the world, technology has progressed more rapidly than can easily be processed or assimilated, particularly by rural populations. In too many cases, in Third World countries, as we call them, Western values have been imposed indiscriminately. In the architecture of facilities meant for common use, materials foreign to rural communities have been used: concrete, steel and glass, as well as shapes and concepts alien to their surroundings. These are just two examples of how the AKAA has encouraged the use of local resources that are relevant to the cultures and needs of different peoples.

Amid all these wonderful building sites, both ancient and modern, to which I was witness in my years of association with the AKAA as a radio broadcaster, one incident stood out for me. While I was wandering through the grounds of an immense madrasa in Bukhara, with my microphone in 1992, accompanied by a group of architects connected to the AKAA, I heard a student in a room of the madrasa chanting verses from the Quran in a strong clear expressive voice. I moved closer to catch the sound on my recording equipment. A young boy, who must have been no older than nine or ten, saw me and by hand signals indicated that I should go into the building to be closer to the source of the chanting. I attempted to decline his suggestion, thinking it would be an inappropriate intrusion for a non-Muslim, but he persisted. He went inside the classroom, the chanting stopped. I could faintly hear a conversation

going on, then the boy came back outside and led me inside by the hand and the student resumed his chanting while I recorded it all. The boys both refused any payment. In an ancient place of learning, lessons



Aga Khan IV makes a point in a meeting with Don Mowatt in Canada.

were still being taught.

Years ago, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia remarked: "Building bridges of understanding between Islam and the non-Islamic world is the vision of His Highness, the Aga Khan [IV]. His dedication to architecture for four decades is just one shining example of his commitment to promoting goodwill between people and cultures" In association with the AKAA, I was able to prepare and air six one-hour radio programmes for CBC IDEAS between 1991 and 2003 which the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the umbrella organisation under which the AKAA operates today, made available to schools in many countries across the world. A true bridge-builder, Aga Khan IV facilitated this knowledge transfer.