For the Aga Khan, Building Are Bridges

By Dana Micucci

"The instability that we see around the world, from Afghanistan to Central Europe, is a consequence of the rejection of cultural pluralism," said the Aga Khan, a man who knows a great deal about cultural pluralism.

He blames that rejection on the enormous gulf of knowledge between the Islamic and the non-Islamic world, a situation that, he said, leaves him deeply saddened.

It is late September, and the Aga Khan is speaking to an interviewer in a Boston hotel suite, where he has come to introduce the latest brainchild of one of his favorite causes. Called ArchNet, a collaboration among the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it is billed as the world's largest online resource for the study of Islamic architecture, urban planning and landscape design.

But right now he is addressing the heightened perceptions of a post-9/11 world. The entire Islamic faith, which he describes as being as "diverse in its beliefs and practices as Christianity," is, he said, often wrongly identified with a single destructive element.

"No one would look upon" the Irish Republican Army "as representative of Christianity," he said. "The attempt by communal groups, be they ethnic, religious or tribal, to impose themselves on others aims to eradicate the cultural basis of group identity, and without cultural identity social cohesion gradually dissolves."

With tensions at a boiling point in the Middle East, the United States threatening war with Iraq and Muslim charities facing increasing scrutiny as potential underwriters of terrorism, the Aga Khan finds himself straddling a cultural divide in which his various roles as billionaire philanthropist, spiritual leader of 15 million Ismaili Muslims and globe-trotting businessman give him a perspective that is unusual, to say the least.

Garry Otte/The Aga Khan Development Network

WALKING THE WALK The Aga Khan, gesturing, on a tour of Stone Town, a historical site in Zanzibar being renovated by this foundation.

The hereditary title Aga Khan means great king. It was used as a term of respect in countries like Persia, India and Pakistan, where some of the Aga Khan's ancestors originated. Yet, by all appearances, he is a king without a country. That is both the advantage—and the difficulty—of the Aga Khan's role.

The man who now carries the title was born Prince Karim in 1936 in Geneva, the son of Prince Aly Khan and his aristocratic English wife, the former Joan Yarde-Buller. He would probably have remained Prince Karim into adulthood had his grandfather not conferred the title on him at age 20, bypassing his father, who was known as a playboy and was once married to the American actress Rita Hayworth. (A spokesman for the Aga Khan said that the grandfather's will stipulated that a younger imam would be more effective in dealing with a rapidly changing world.)

For this sect of Islam, the roles of globetrotter and imam are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Ismaili Muslims are a small minority within the faith, scattered among many nations but concentrated mainly in India, Pakistan, Central Asia and parts of North America. Their" roots go back a millennium, when there was a split among Shiite Muslims. Most Shiites believe that the line of imams, the Muslim religious leaders descended from the prophet Muhammad, ended in the ninth century. Ismailis believe that the line has continued to the present with the current Aga Khan, whom they consider to be the 49th imam.

Generally progressive and open minded, Ismailis have made contributions to Islamic thought and culture that are disproportionate to their numbers. For Ismailis, material success is no impediment to spiritual progress, and they see no contradiction in their spiritual leader being renowned for his stable of racehorses. Most Ismailis, like their leader, are cultural pluralists who deplore religious intolerance.

ISMAILIS also have a tradition of philanthropy. The Aga Khan presides over one of the world's richest charitable organizations, the Aga Khan Development Network, which says its assets are approximately $1.87 billion. The network joins all the Aga Khan's charitable ventures, including initiatives for economic and social development, universities in Pakistan and Tajikistan and a cultural trust.

The Aga Khan, a Harvard graduate who as a young man considered becoming an architect, has long been a champion of modern and traditional architecture and of historic preservation. He is the patron of the \yOr1d'srichest architectural prize, a $500,000 award given triennially to groups of architects whose projects contribute to social, economic and cultural development in the Muslim world. His new venture, ArchNet, is part of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, which he founded in 1977 at Harvard and at M.I.T.

To the Aga Khan, cultural and economic development are part of the same continuum. "Philanthropic initiatives cannot be contemplated exclusively in terms of economics," he said, "but rather as an integrated program that encompasses social and cultural dimensions as well"

As an example, he cites his work in Afghanistan. This year, the Aga Khan Development Network made a $75 million donation to reconstruction and long-term efforts in Afghanistan, including programs for distributing food, resettling refugees, providing social services and restoring historic buildings.

"In Afghanistan, he's using his resources to benefit both the Ismailis and the larger community," said Vartan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, of his friend the Aga Khan. "The Shia Ismaili Muslims are an enlightened, inclusive group who believe in education and progress, self help, and equality between men and women. He's an example of a modern Islamic leader who's building bridges between cultures,

dispelling the notion of Islam as a monolithic faith and rightly presenting it as a mosaic of many different voices."

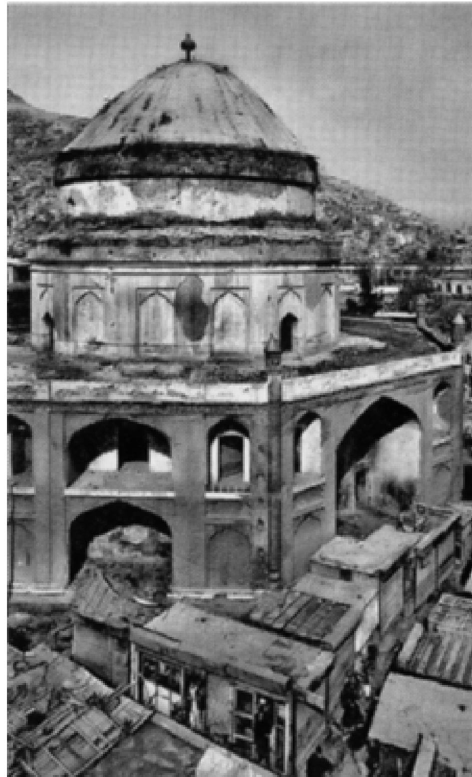
If the Aga Khan seems to be a king without a country, he is in reality a, citizen of the world. He lives in Switzerland and in France, but carries a British passport and a French diplomatic passport. Recent global events have left him caught between Islamic and Western viewpoints. The Aga Khan said that his middleman position allows him to cultivate an East-West dialogue. But his situation can isolate him from other Muslims. Because of age-old tensions between Shiite arid Sunni Muslims, he is not as active in his philanthropic efforts in Muslim countries that have large populations of Sunni Muslims, like Saudi Arabia.

The Aga Khan lives in Geneva and near Chantilly, in France, the capital of French racing, where he breeds racehorses. He has three children from his first marriage, to an English society figure, Sally Croker-Poole, and one child from his second marriage, to Princess Gabriele zu Leiningen of Germany. His three older children work for his network, which has offices in Geneva and in Gouvieux, outside Paris. His half-sister, Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, the daughter of Prince Aly Khan and Rita Hayworth, is also active in philanthropy, raising money for Alzheimer's disease, the illness from which her mother suffered.

The size of the Aga Khan's personal fortune has been the subject of conjecture, especially in the British press, where he appears frequently. Though estimates cannot be confirmed (even by Forbes' Magazine), a spokesman for the Aga Khan would only say that "he is a billionaire."

The basis of the Aga Khan's wealth is contributions from Ismaili Muslims, who are required to donate up to 10 percent of their yearly income to the imam, in addition to his personal inheritance and investment income from that money.

The network is financed by the Aga Khan's personal resources, additional contributions from Ismaili Muslims and others, and from a range of international and governmental agencies, like the United States Agency for International Development and the European Union.



Stefano Bianca/Aga Khan Development Network

IN KABUL The Aga Khan's group is restoring the tomb of Timur Shah.

"He puts his money where his beliefs are," said James Wolfensohn, the president of the World Bank, which has joined with the Aga Khan to finance programs in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

IN some cases, however, money is not enough, no matter how carefully he treads or how unimpeachable the project. Last month, he canceled plans to build an Islamic museum and cultural center in London, on a choice site along the Thames River, opposite the Houses of Parliament. He offered King's College, the owner of the 1.8-acre parcel, an estimated £24 million (about $39 million) for the land, but was turned down in favor of a neighboring hospital, which wanted to expand but was offering less than half that price. The year before, he was also unsuccessful in his efforts to buy a site owned by the Royal Army Medical College. (On the other hand, in 2001 he established the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations in London, a branch of the Aga Khan University in Pakistan.)

Instead, the Aga Khan chose Toronto as the site for the Islamic museum and cultural center, which will house his collection of art and historical manuscripts. He cited Toronto's tradition of inclusiveness as one reason for his choice.

The project is an example of his crusade to "build unity in diversity." Strengthening pluralism in all corners of the globe, he said, "is critical to the development of peace and humankind in the 21st century." But, he added, "We must educate for it."