



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Speech at the Foundation Ceremony of the Aga Khan Academy, Maputo

His Highness the Aga Khan

June 25, 2004

Matola, Mozambique

Your Excellency President Chissano,
Your Excellency the President of the Assembly,
Your Excellency the Prime Minister,
Honourable Ministers,
Honourable Mayor,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

What event could express a greater aspiration than laying the foundation of a school that hopes to inspire its students to explore horizons beyond their own, develop their mental resilience and discover the bonds of mutuality that cut across differences of culture, ethnicity, religion or background?

I am, therefore, most happy and grateful that His Excellency President Chissano has accepted our invitation to lay the foundation stone of the Aga Khan Academy, Maputo, here in the city of Matola.

Your Excellency, you have been a most staunch supporter of the Academy and of the spirit behind its concept. Your presence with us today is, therefore, a source of great happiness to everyone associated with the Aga Khan Academies and what they aspire to achieve in the service of society.

I also welcome the presence of the Honourable Mrs Luisa Diogo, Prime Minister and Minister for Planning and Finance, and her cabinet colleagues, the Honourable Dr Leonardo Simao, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Honourable Mr Alcidio Nguenha, Minister for Education. I am also grateful to the Honourable Carlos Tembe, Mayor of Matola, for his presence here today.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge your vital support and consistent encouragement. The Aga Khan Development Network and I are also most grateful to the Government of Mozambique for its continued collaboration in the planning and development of the Academy.

For me, it is a special honour and pleasure to be in Mozambique at the time of her Independence anniversary celebrations. On this occasion, I extend my good wishes and heartiest congratulations to the people of Mozambique with whom the Ismaili *imamat* and community enjoy a long history of warmth and friendship. Our shared history goes back many decades to the middle years of the nineteenth century when Ismaili Muslims first began to settle along the eastern coast of Africa.

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This continent has experienced a painful history of crises and conflicts. Mozambique herself has had her own share of trauma from which the country emerged, twelve years ago, united in determination to apply her reserves of energy and creativity to the challenge of reconstruction. Indeed, under President Chissano's leadership, Mozambique is seen as one of the most open-minded, pragmatic and wisely-guided models of post-conflict reconstruction in the world.

This pragmatism and open-mindedness underlines the importance of specialist expertise in approaching the challenges of development. Postcolonial, national, economic and political philosophies, often linked to the Cold War, sought to indoctrinate, rather than educate, just as much in the former Soviet Union as in many developing countries of Africa and Asia.

The developing world now increasingly recognises that there are areas of national life, particularly economics and education, which require the dedicated leadership of professional specialists who are not burdened by the baggage of dogma. The economic challenges now faced by the former Soviet Union, and many developing countries, are a salutary warning against entrusting the direction of national economies to political ideologues rather than to professional economists.

After Independence, education in the developing world was often used to seek to foster a greater sense of national identity, with a particular tendency to focus on the promotion of national languages. But when this turned exclusionary, the resulting insularity became a severe handicap. How can one educate students for a global environment in a language that has no international reach? Lessons have been learned. Today, whilst the use of national languages has, in many cases, been retained at the primary level, increasingly, educational systems in developing countries provide for the teaching and use of English at the secondary and higher levels, so that students are able to access the world and its opportunities.

The triumph of pragmatism and professional expertise over ideology is now an accepted wisdom in the realm of education. A lifelong and necessary experience, education is, by common consensus, a powerful driving force in any strategy for national development.

Yet, given insufficient national resources and the vagaries of aid-flows, quality education remains a daunting challenge for most developing countries. Large class sizes, and the poor quality of teaching in schools, all too frequently reflect the loss of standards throughout national education systems including, in particular, in universities.

Fortunately, governments everywhere are now beginning to appreciate the contribution of not-for-profit private providers of social services to address the challenges of rising expectations that compound historically unmet needs. In this context, international partnerships in education are increasingly seen as vehicles for introducing best practices, tried and tested. Such partnerships also expand the pool of much needed resources to invest in quality, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels, so that educational institutions are able to form the best minds in their own countries.

The conviction that home-grown intellectual leadership of exceptional calibre is the best driver of a society's destiny, underpins the Ismaili *imamat's* endeavour to create catalytic centres of educational excellence. The first of these opened last December in Mombasa, Kenya. The Aga Khan Academy in Maputo will be the second in a planned network of what I hope will be residential schools of the highest international standards, from primary through higher secondary education. In due course other academies will be located not only in Kenya and Mozambique but also in Tanzania, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo,



Madagascar, Mali – and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh – and Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – and Syria.

Adopting internationally proven but flexible curriculum frameworks, the residential schools will evolve over time into an integrated system through which advanced students and faculty will be required to study at other campuses, and to be exposed to different social, ethnic and cultural environments. Students will specialise in the fields of knowledge most required for the development of their own and their neighbouring societies, within the context of a broad and meaningful education. This will embrace the sciences and the humanities, including music and art, while the teaching of history and world civilisations will seek to portray, in a more balanced and comprehensive way, the world's heritage. For example, the humanities programme will include a study of Muslim civilisations, all too often misrepresented or ignored, especially in the industrialised world. Corresponding to this global reach, the curriculum will include mastery of more than one language so that, while English will be the medium of instruction, the students will be encouraged to be bilingual, and perhaps trilingual. They will also excel in the use of modern information technologies to enable them to access the world's most sophisticated knowledge bases.

But above all, it is my hope that these schools will stimulate creativity, intellectual curiosity and honest inquiry so that their students can adapt and thrive in a world of rapid change; can make informed judgements on life's daily challenges, and place those judgements in an ethical framework.

The intellectual and moral quality of the Academies will therefore depend, not only on their curriculum design, but on the quality and dedication of their teachers. Teachers, in turn, must have the support of parents, school leaders and society itself. A major goal of the Academies is therefore to restore the public standing of the teaching profession so that future generations of educated men and women come to see in teaching a great, valid and rewarding opportunity in life. To sustain creative teachers in their desire for continuing self-improvement, the Academies will have in-built provisions to foster teacher development in association with the Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development.

Committed to excellence, the Academies will only admit students on the basis of their merit, that is, their intellectual promise, evidence of character, and capability and desire to learn. The schools must – and will – therefore have the capacity to select students without regard to the ability of their families to pay the school fees.

The buildings and spaces of the Academies will seek to provide an aesthetically well conceived environment conducive to reflection, study and enjoyment within an appropriate cultural context.

No school can thrive in isolation. Over time, these Academies will become resources one for another, and, through the Aga Khan Development Network, benefit from the intellectual and programmatic resources of the Aga Khan University and the University of Central Asia. In addition, the Academies will have access to the experience and curricular resources of such leading international schools as Philips Academy in the United States and Salem in Germany which are associated with institutions of the Aga Khan Development Network in an International Academic Partnership.

Among history's great truths is that a society is only able to advance to newer horizons of greater promise when it overcomes insularity, and recognises strength in difference. Despite,



therefore, the tensions and conflicts, which riddle our planet, the effective world of the future is one of pluralism, a world that comprehends, accepts and builds on diversity. The Academy in Maputo, like its counterparts elsewhere, will seek to demonstrate the instrumental role that education can and must play in building strong civil societies across the developing world. It is institutions such as the one whose foundations we are laying today that will be a driving force for progress and betterment around the world.

The education that the Academies will offer will make the case for a pluralist worldview. It is one which values differences of outlook, ethnicity, and religion and culture, yes in the interest of justice and fairness, but also because a temperament receptive to pluralism helps creativity, curiosity and inquiry, to thrive in sharing the best of human knowledge and talent from whatever individual, or group, it originates.

A thousand years ago, my forefathers, the Fatimid *imam-caliphs* of Egypt, founded al-Azhar University and the Academy of Knowledge in Cairo. In the Islamic tradition, they viewed the discovery of knowledge as a way to understand, so as to serve better God's creation, to apply knowledge and reason to build society and shape human aspirations.

The Academies are, therefore, a continuing articulation of this vision, a statement of great hope in the power of good education, and an investment in the development of the best minds who will enable future generations to take charge of their own destinies.