Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 7/7: the hazard of a superficial, homogenised mega-culture

"The communications revolution is a two-edged sword, opening exciting doors to the future, yes, but also threatening venerable cultures and traditional values. On every hand we can see the rise of the global economy -- and with it the global career and multinational family life, international fads and intercontinental life styles. Some find this process exhilarating, but many others find it frightening. And some even fear that this new intermingling of cultures will someday lead to cultural homogenisation. Yet even as the waves of globalisation unfurl so powerfully across our planet, so does a deep and vigorous counter-tide. In every corner of the world one can also sense these days a renewal of cultural particularism, a new emphasis on ethnic and religious and national identity.

"What some have called a 'new tribalism' is shaping the world as profoundly on one level as the 'new globalism' is shaping it on another. Sometimes this new tribalism can be a liberating thrust, as was the case when national movements overthrew the communist empire. Sometimes it can express itself in terribly destructive ways, as in the former Yugoslavia, or in Rwanda or Burundi. Sometimes it means a radical casting off of foreign influences, as happened in Iran. Or it can take on a separationist personality, as has been the case from Quebec to Kurdistan, from Scotland to Sri Lanka, from northern Italy to East Timor. From the most developed to the least developed countries, we also see a resurgence of protectionism, a wariness about foreign immigration, a fascination with ancient languages, a rise in religious fundamentalism.

"It is not surprising, of course, that the global and the tribal impulse
should surge side by side. The desire to protect what is familiar intensifies in direct proportion to the challenge of what is different. Wherever we look, we find people seeking refuge from the disorienting waves of change in the tranquil ponds of older and narrower loyalties, in the warmth of familiar memories, in the comfort of ancient rituals. This recovery of cultural identity can be a nourishing and creative force, to be sure. But it can also mean a world where we define ourselves by what makes us different from others -- and thus a world of chronic conflict. Surely, one of the great questions of our time is whether we can learn to live creatively with both the global and the tribal impulse, embracing the adventure of a broader internationalism even as we drink more deeply from the wellsprings of a particular heritage. The communications revolution means either a growing 'homogenisation' that we know breeds its own hostile reactions, or we can search for a better course. We can hope that the spirit of the 21st century will be a spirit of Creative Encounter."

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"The second point I would emphasise today is that our Academy initiative -- in Dhaka and elsewhere -- is one that strongly affirms the integrity of local and national cultures. To be sure, this new Academy will connect its students to global perspectives. But it will also respect the central role of each person's particular heritage as a cornerstone of his or her identity and an enriching gift of the Creator. The beauty of Creation is a function of its variety. A fully homogenised world would be far less attractive and interesting. The roots we inherit from our history -- linking us to a particular past -- are a great source of strength and joy and inspiration. And a sound educational system should help nourish those roots...."
normalise any particular culture, to demonise 'the other', and to turn healthy diversity into dangerous discord....

"In the final analysis, the Academies project will face an age-old challenge as it moves ahead -- the challenge of balancing the universal and the particular, the global and the local as influences in human life. It is a challenge which becomes more important with every passing year. It has been said that the most important fact about modern communication technology is that it 'universalises the particular and particularises the universal' which simply suggests that local and global experiences are increasingly intermixed.

"Such an inter-mixture can give us the worst of both worlds -- hostile, defensive localism on one side and a superficial, homogenised mega-culture on the other. Or it can give us the best of both worlds -- proud local identities living side by side with creative international cooperation. How this issue will be resolved will depend on whether we can educate future leaders, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, to live creatively in such a setting. Our new program of Aga Khan Academies is one response to that challenge."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Aga Khan Academy, Dhaka, Foundation Stone Ceremony address (Dhaka, Bangladesh)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8787/

"In a world that claims to be globalised, there are some who might regard cultural standardisation as natural, even desirable. For my part, I believe that marks of individual and group cultural identity generate an inner strength which is conducive to peaceful relations. I also believe in the power of plurality, without which there is no possibility of exchange. In my view, this idea is integral to the very definition of genuine quality of life."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Address to the Avignon Forum ‘The value and importance of cultural diversity and its role in promoting peace and development’ (Avignon, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9065/
"[W]hat has worried me, frankly, is that one of the downsides -- at least from my point of view -- of globalisation is the disappearance of identity and I think disappearance of identity is very dangerous and I was worried that we would suffer disappearance of identity within the Ummah. And, therefore, in trying to enhance the pluralism of the identities of the Muslim world, it seemed important for us, amongst other things, to enhance the value of cultural assets that have come to us from history, but use them also as a trampoline so that people in the Ummah become creative in their own terminology, in their own value system, with their own symbols, and therefore we're working not only in looking at the past, but we're also trying to work with young people in various areas -- just tell to them 'Create according to your own value system.' You don't have to have to copy other people's value systems. Modernisation does not mean occidentalisation."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Syrian TV Interview with Reem Haddad
(Aleppo, Syria)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9004/

"As societies come to think in pluralistic ways, I believe they can learn another lesson from the Canadian experience, the importance of resisting both assimilation and homogenisation -- the subordination and dilution of minority cultures on the one hand, or an attempt to create some new, transcendent blend of identities, on the other.

"What the Canadian experience suggests to me is that identity itself can be pluralistic. Honouring one's own identity need not mean rejecting others. One can embrace an ethnic or religious heritage, while also sharing a sense of national or regional pride. To cite a timely example, I believe one can live creatively and purposefully as both a devoted Muslim and a committed European.

"To affirm a particular identity is a fundamental human right, what some have called 'the right to be heard.' But the right to be heard implies an obligation to listen and, beyond that, a proactive obligation to observe and
to learn. Surely, one of the most important tests of moral leadership is whether our leaders are working to widen divisions, or to bridge them.

"When we talk about diversity, we often use the metaphor of achieving social 'harmony.' But perhaps we might also employ an additional musical comparison -- a fitting image as we meet tonight in this distinguished musical setting. We might talk not just about the ideal of 'harmony' -- the sounding of a single chord -- but also about 'counterpoint.' In counterpoint, each voice follows a separate musical line, but always as part of a single work of art, with a sense both of independence and belonging.

"Let me add one further thought. I believe that the challenge of pluralism is never completely met. Pluralism is a process and not a product. It is a mentality, a way of looking at a diverse and changing world. A pluralistic environment is a kaleidoscope that history shakes every day.

"Responding to pluralism is an exercise in constant re-adaptation. Identities are not fixed in stone. What we imagine our communities to be must also evolve with the tides of history. As we think about pluralism, we should be open to the fact that there may be a variety of 'best practices,' a 'diversity of diversities,' and a 'pluralism of pluralisms.'"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 10th Annual LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture, Institute for Canadian Citizenship (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9601/

"This accelerating wave of interdependence is something we first defined as 'internationalisation' when the IB programme was launched 40 years ago. We refer to it now as 'globalisation.' It brings with it both myriad blessings and serious risks -- not the least of which is the danger that globalisation will become synonymous with homogenisation.

"Why would homogenisation be such a danger? Because diversity and variety constitute one of the most beautiful gifts of the Creator, and because a deep commitment to our own particularity is part of what it means to be human. Yes, we need to establish connecting bonds across
cultures, but each culture must also honour a special sense of self. The downside of globalisation is the threat it can present to cultural identities.

"But there is also a second great challenge which is intensifying in our world. In some ways it is the exact opposite of the globalising impulse. I refer to a growing tendency toward fragmentation and confrontation among peoples. In a time of mounting insecurity, cultural pride can turn, too often, into an endeavour to normatise one's culture. The quest for identity can then become an exclusionary process -- so that we define ourselves less by what we are *for* and more by whom we are *against*. When this happens, diversity turns quickly from a source of beauty to a cause of discord. [Emphasis original]

"I believe that the coexistence of these two surging impulses -- what one might call a new globalism on one hand and a new tribalism on the other -- will be a central challenge for educational leaders in the years ahead. And this will be particularly true in the developing world with its kaleidoscope of different identities....

"In the final analysis, the great problem of humankind in a global age will be to balance and reconcile the two impulses of which I have spoken: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. What this challenge will ultimately require of us, is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, an understanding that diversity itself is a gift of the Divine, and that embracing diversity is a way to learn and to grow -- not to dilute our identities but to enrich our self-knowledge."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 'The Peterson Lecture' at the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate (Atlanta, Georgia, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8435/

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"[W]hether it's this Imam or anyone else, I have to be concerned with the continuum of that cultural context, not just the continuance of the faith in terms of the strict theological issues. Because, as I said, Islam expresses itself in many, many different ways and this is where I am concerned about this because it's quite clear that we are increasingly tending to be a world culture that's driven by the fear of force of the dominant culture, in
terms of its economics, its range of communications.

"Now the whole process of globalisation seems to be in direct conflict with the recognition and enhancement of pluralism. That's another force which is at play. And so I think that it is a part of my role -- because this Ismaili community in itself is pluralistic -- is to try to establish the fact that there are hundreds of reasons to legitimise and accept and enhance the plurality of human society. And I am worried about that. I'm not against a culture which is a powerful culture. I am, however, worried that others will feel that they have to follow that culture because otherwise they're not part of the new world, or the wealthy world, or the creative world, or that sort of thing. So I'm worried about these issues and I'm also pleased that some of the things I've been trying to do are now resonating even in the major cultures of the world."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1999 interview with Pranay Gupte (United States, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5676/

"Governments everywhere should reflect the will and the aspirations of all their peoples. One central challenge here is that age-old traditions of the countryside often seem unrelated to the challenges of running a modern nation-state -- and plugging it into a changing global economy. Reconciling the global and the local, the urban and the rural, the regional and the national, is one of the great political challenges of our time -- and it is a challenge to which Canadians can speak with special insight."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2009 University of Alberta Graduation Ceremony address (Edmonton, Alberta)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9281/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 1/7: the 'death of distance'

https://www.facebook.com/notes/nanowisdoms-archive-of-imamat-speeches-interviews-and-writings/excerpts-his-highness-the-aga-khan-on-globalism-part-17-
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 2/7: competing in a global arena

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 3/7: the vital importance of high standards in the developing world

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 4/7: the pace of change

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 5/7: English: the ‘predominant global language’ & ‘of global connection’

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on globalism - Part 6/7: threat to culture and pluralism
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on identity


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