

The Aga Khan: a man of his time

That means shedding all princely glamor
and refusing to be either political or colorful

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EVEN AT 7:15 on the morning after a banquet, with breakfast and an interview to be got through before an 8:30 meeting with Premier William Davis, the Aga Khan easily lives up to the promise of his own press release: "A man who possesses in full measure the charm and wit shared with the rest of his family."

He is the 49th Imam, or spiritual leader, of the Ismaili Moslems. He is heir to the legendary Aga Khan III, his grandfather, to the Kajar dynasty of Shahs of Persia, celebrated for their military prowess and their ferocity, and to the leadership of that celebrated medieval order of Ismaili Moslems known to history as the Assassins and their contemporaries on both Christian and Moslem sides of the crusaders' wars as the followers of Sheikh al-Jabal, the Old Man of the Mountains, "terror of the Arab peoples".

But before breakfast on a bleak November morning in Toronto it would be hard to tell him from any other unusually capable, unusually successful Western European leader of international finance and commerce, with British aristocratic connections, a Harvard education, and some experience of diplomacy.

The handshake is easy and asks for no deference. He indicates a seat, flattens the press with a question about the trade, "Is The Times going to pull through?", and pretends that he

doesn't know enough about that story to know that "That's a good question" is not a good answer.

The Aga Khan answers questions about the Ismailis in a way that makes it clear he has learned not to assume that westerners are aware even of such rudiments of Islamic history as the distinction between the orthodox majority, the Sunni, and the Shia, a minority with many subdivisions of its own (there are 72 Islamic sects in all) of which the Ismailis are one, or the fact that the difference between Sunni and Shia is not primarily doctrinal but concerns the succession of divinely appointed leadership following the death of the Prophet.

(The Shia do not recognize Mohammed's immediate successors, Abu Bakr, Omar and Osman. They view the Caliph Ali, cousin of the Prophet and husband of his daughter, Fatima, as the first Imam. The Ismailis differ from other Shia sects in recognizing Ismail, the seventh in the line of succession from Ali. Other branches of the Shia do not recognize Ismail, on the ground that he was disowned by his father for drinking wine. The Ismailis have tended to be less unyielding than other Islamic sects about such taboos.)

(The pursuit of Ismaili history is hard to resist. After holding power in Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, they were defeated by Saladin and his heirs in the west and by the heirs of Genghis Khan in the east. After the Assassins had been backed into a remote fastness in the mountains of Northern Iran in

Uganda crisis. Apart from renewing contact with the community of perhaps 25,000 Ismailis in Canada, that is a main point of his visit. If pressed he will also recognize what Canadian experience has demonstrated: that his people turn out to be uncommonly valuable citizens of any country to which they go.

In much of the Third World they have established the best schools and the best hospitals, and not for themselves alone.

"All our schools are open to non-Ismailis. In none of our schools is the proportion of non-Ismaili students less than 30 per cent and in some it is up to 90 per cent."

"All our hospitals are open to non-Ismailis. Ours was the first non-racial hospital in Kenya. We were the first to insist that such barriers could not survive, that they were wrong from every point of view."

But he detours with great circumspection around any suggestion that Asians, and especially Ismailis, in Africa have been victims of jealousy inspired by their achievements.

For all the legendary glamor and glitter attached to his title, Prince Aga Khan is determined to be a man of his time as his grandfather, Aga Khan III, was in his.

In his grandfather's day, the late golden age of the British Raj in India,

He praises Canada's response to the Ugandan crisis

that meant being colorful, controversial, openly political — Jawaharlal Nehru saw him as a pillar of British imperialism — and magnificent. Aga Khan III, on his 60th jubilee, was paid his weight in diamonds. It looked like a revival of the opulent splendors of the Mogul Empire but the money went into a trust, the Diamond Trust, for investment in commercial and industrial development in the Third World.

For Aga Khan IV, being a man of his time obviously means refusing to be either political or colorful. The age of legends is over. This is the age of technocracy and the multi-national balance sheet.

So when he talks about the Third World, in which is invested much of the great wealth, nominally his that he administers in trust for the Ismaili community, he talks like what he is, a tough, capable and hard-nosed entrepreneur.

He has little patience with that growing school of thought, increasingly influential at the United Nations, that sees heavy capital investment in Western-style industrial development as a cause, rather than a cure, for the widening gap between the rich countries and the poor.

"My impression is that the fundamental cause (of economic slippage in the Third World) is the lack of political consistency and stability. Are we talking about free enterprise? Are we talking about socialism? Are we talking about Marxism?"

Shifting ideological winds, he believes, frighten away investment.

"No matter what these countries do, unless they have underground wealth — not just oil, but ores, diamonds, uranium — or are able to harness in an efficient manner their very cheap labor to an industrial machine, they can't overcome their problems. And an industrial machine requires access to capital, either self-generated or invested from abroad. So no matter how you approach it you come back in the end to the requirement of political stability and a climate attractive to investment."

Without waiting to be asked the Aga Khan answers what has come to be, for him, the stock question: How does he reconcile all this wealth, and economic leverage, with spiritual leadership. And his answer is that, in Islamic eyes if not those of the more materialistic west, there is no inconsistency there to be reconciled.

He could have added but didn't — nobody could hope to demolish all Western misunderstandings of Islam in one half-hour interview — that an Aga Khan is not an Islamic pope. Islam's leaders, as distinguished from its holy men, the ulema or mullahs, have tended to be political, the leaders of a society, rather than merely priestly. Before the first Aga Khan was recognized by Queen Victoria as a prince of her Indian Empire, His Highness the Aga Khan, he was known primarily as Hasan Ali Shah, an Iranian crown prince who took his cavalry to India and allied them with the British East India Company after he lost the struggle for the Iranian throne. Nineteenth century historians described him as a "king without a kingdom" and reported that he repeatedly informed Victoria that he would prefer to be with than without.



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the thirteenth century, the Ismailis virtually disappear from history until the Kajars, a people of mounted steppe warriors, take power in Iran in the late eighteenth century. But the Aga Khan, heir to a Kajar crown prince who lost a nineteenth century struggle for the succession, mentions none of this except a passing, almost self-deprecating, reference to the Kajar dynasty.)

What he does talk about is what the Ismailis are doing now and have been doing since what Arnold Toynbee called their "astonishing transformation into a nation of shopkeepers". The Ismailis are one of the smallest Islamic sects and one of the most widely dispersed, having branched out from India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to become businessmen and professionals, dotted around the world in thriving, cohesive communities with their own institutions and social services, from schools to hospitals and pools of venture capital.

In the nineteenth century they provided much of the commercial framework of such British East African colonies as Kenya and Uganda. They remained minorities, usually the best-educated and most successful, even among the Asian communities in Africa. And some of them came to Canada six years ago when Idi Amin gave the Asian community — including those who had chosen Ugandan citizenship — two weeks to drop everything and get out with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

The Aga Khan insists on praising Canada's "generous response" to the

His great-great-grandson has shed, resolutely, all the princely glamor of that era. But in an age in which kingdoms are international and economic, he heads, in the name of his community, an international structure of great economic reach and leverage.

And that, today, may be as close to a kingdom as anyone can get.

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