- News |How East Africans can build one common destiny for and by themselves, step by intelligent step

PETER MWAURA spoke to the founder and chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network, who is also the spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, on a wide range of issues — from media ownership in developing societies to religion, development and the quality of life, as well as the risks that wealth disparities pose to regional economic and political integration

Q. You founded Nation newspapers before Kenya's Independence and championed the cause of the African majority. Today, nearly 52 years later, we are embroiled in internal jockeying for power in a new political dispensation. This often takes the form of inter-tribal rivalry. How do you see the place of journalism in this new political reality?

A. Maybe I should go to the pre-Independence situation in East Africa. If you reflect back over those years, one of the conclusions that everybody would have reached was that these areas of Africa were going to be pluralist societies – pluralist in linguistic terms, pluralist in tribal terms, pluralist in ethnic terms. Therefore, one of the questions just before and after Independence was how these areas of Africa would become successful pluralist states. So my concern with the newspapers at that time was to try to put into the public domain questions about how you build a successful pluralist society.

And that question remains today. It's not gone away. But I think that people are much more aware of it than ever before. They recognise the risks, they recognise the consequences of things going wrong, So there is greater public concern not to let this happen again. The recent crisis in Kenya has shown that the people of Kenya, not the politicians, but the people of Kenya didn't want internal conflict among themselves.

Did you see a particular role that the Nation newspapers were going to play in this?

Yes, definitely. At the senior levels of management and editorial policy we've done everything we can to ensure that the people of East Africa add value to the notion of pluralism rather than see it as an element of weakness. So, certainly, the Nation and others within the Group have to continue on that road. Indeed, that is one of the fundamental editorial policies of the Group.

So there is no question of your taking sides with a particular political bloc?

No, not at all. The goal of the Nation Media Group is to remain independent. Most countries in East Africa have multiple political parties. If every political party were to have its own publication, I think, first of all, there would be confusion in the public domain. Secondly, experience shows that political party papers are never very successful economically. So it's more important that the independent newspapers should cause intelligent reflection on national issues, arms-length evaluation of goals – what are the goals that each party wants to achieve, what success has been achieved in the past — so that there is a serious, intelligent debate about where the country is going.

The phone hacking and police bribery scandal involving Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* has attracted global attention. As a major investor in the media yourself, what concerns you about this scandal, particularly in the context of emerging democracies such as East Africa's?

In the past in Africa, there has been a tendency to look at the role of the journalists but not that of owners. And, in fact, in the proposed Graduate School of Media and Communications [of the Aga Khan University, initially to be based in Nairobi], we are specifically going to aim at educating the owners because ultimately, it is the owners who are responsible for the products they put on the streets. And they have a clear responsibility to behave in a responsible manner, which in Africa is not the same thing as it would be in the United States, or Canada, or elsewhere in the industrialised world. We are dealing with different problems, different societies, different levels of development, different electorate capacities. So there is a very serious question to be asked about the role of media owners in the developing world.

The question of media ownership and media concentration has been controversial in Kenya, as you are aware. So too is foreign ownership of the media. What are your views on this?

Well, I personally would prefer to see a profile of owners whose ultimate goal is to serve the people and the countries in which they operate. And the unilateral or exclusive quest for profit is not in my view, frankly, conducive to that. So I am not concerned about the nationality of the ownership. I am concerned about the purpose of the ownership. I think that's more important.

You said one of the things you want to do at the Graduate School of Journalism is to educate owners of the media. What else do you want to do with the School?

Modern societies are much more sophisticated than they were 50 or 100 years ago and journalists now have to have the capacity to write well. But they also have to have the capacity to understand the subject they are addressing. So a journalist who writes about constitutional issues, who has never dealt in the domain of comparative government, or a journalist who has to write about the results of a major national corporation and doesn't know how to read a balance sheet, or a journalist who writes about faith issues and has never looked at faith issues as an area of intellectual endeavour, these are journalists who are not sufficiently prepared. So, in the Graduate School, we hope to be able to develop capacities that are not readily available in Africa at the present time.

Media freedom is a very delicate issue in Africa. What do you see as the priority areas that your media should be paying attention to?

The priorities clearly are the issues of national interest, which we should be looking at from different points of view. We should be assisting the electorate to evaluate various solutions. We have a new Constitution in Kenya, how is that new Constitution going to impact on good governance, economic development, pluralism in society? The more the electorate is exposed to serious discussion on these issues, the more it will express itself.

Taifa Leo was the first newspaper you published in Kenya. Its circulation and advertising have been declining over the years. The question many people ask is why do you still keep it?

What has happened in Kenya is that since Independence, English has become a more and more dominant language and Kiswahili has tended to lose its support at least in urban environments. In Tanzania, the situation is completely different, where the

language used is massively more Kiswahili than English. So we have to keep in mind that it's essentially the rural populations in Kenya that will be reading Taifa because they are not educated in English or not massively so. Secondly, at the time of elections, if you want to communicate effectively to the electorate you cannot ignore the national language; you have to publish in that language.

What's happening is that in Kenya the print market has changed in favour of English. In Tanzania, it's gone the other way.

But the central issue is the quality of publications in the national language. I am not sure that we know the answers.

In *Birth of a NATION: The Story of a Newspaper in Kenya*, it is revealed that Kenya's founding president Jomo Kenyatta tried to get you to appoint his nephew Ngengi Muigai chairman of Nation Newspapers, which you resisted. Have you had similar requests from other Kenyan leaders and politicians?

The first answer I would give is that Mzee Kenyatta was not the person who originated the request. The second thing I would say is that I have actually had the opposite happen. I have had Heads of State ask me to expand NMG into their countries. So I think what's happened is that as these countries have evolved, and they have been, let's say, quite frankly under pressure from the Western world to have a free media, they have preferred to work with existing groups that they have observed have one single interest and that is the national interest of the countries in which they circulate.

On your business and social investments in East Africa. Does this reflect a personal attachment to the region or is it institutional? Do you see these investments extending beyond your own reign as the Imam?

To start from the beginning, when I succeeded my grandfather, one of the responsibilities I had was to try to enhance the quality of life of the countries where my community lived, whether it was in Central Asia, East Africa or North America. So that commitment has been part of my life since 1957 and will continue during my lifetime. I cannot tell you what my successor will do. But the fact is that wherever members of my community live, and wherever I feel that my institutions can come in to support them, then that's what we will do.

You have interests in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, which are unstable and sometimes dangerous to operate in; some people would say you are flirting with danger. Is there something deeper behind that involvement?

It's just exactly what I mentioned to you. There are large Ismaili communities in these three countries and since these countries have been through periods of instability and even internal conflict, I have considered it part of my responsibility to assist them to overcome their difficulties and become countries of opportunity for all their populations, not just the Ismaili community. Whether you are dealing with a country which is a post-conflict situation or a post-independence situation or a country that's coming out of a Soviet environment, my responsibility doesn't change. I still have to find the appropriate means to contribute to their stabilisation and good governance.

Do you sometimes feel like you are competing with the United Nations development agencies?

Nowhere near, we are a completely different type of institution. I am not criticising the UN but I think we are probably a great deal more people-specific than the UN.

With the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, what lessons can the world learn from that whole experience?

I would go back to my first comment. Afghanistan, like East Africa, is a pluralist society, made up of a large number of different communities, different nationalities, different languages, different interpretations of faith. Therefore the first question one has to deal with is, what steps can you take to have a common purpose among all these communities?

This may be naive but I tend to think that most often the common denominator is quality of life. That no matter where the individual or family are living they are going to be concerned about their quality of life. So question number one then with regard to Afghanistan is how do you rebuild quality of life, within the value systems of those communities; you can't do it outside their value systems, but if you can do it within their value systems, then I think you have an opportunity of doing something worthwhile.

The second issue with regard to Afghanistan is civil society. The history of the developing world in the past 50 years has shown that where government is weak or simply not very competent, human progress is still made when civil society works. When people's institutions function well, societies continue to develop. So the question in Afghanistan is how you create civil society capacity.

The third issue is security. This obviously is critical. One of the priorities in Afghanistan is a massive increase in the capacity of the police. Civil society expects to see the police, it does not expect to see the military. In provinces of Afghanistan that are more peaceful, where civil society is beginning to be reconstructed, the presence of efficient, effective police is critical.

The global reach of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development suggests that you have taken a view on globalisation. How globalisation has helped your outreach and is globalisation good for Africa?

Globalisation is good for Africa if corrective procedures are available for products which are critical for Africa. African economies are clearly still heavily dependent on agriculture. If agricultural products and their global values vary massively from one year to the other, countries can find themselves in very, very great difficulty. So regulation in terms of global pricing for Africa in those situations would be very important indeed. AKFED as an institution has tended to look at the economies of individual countries or regions rather than at the global situation. We are not engaged in any way in South America. So there are parts of the world we have no contact with.

Because there is no Ismaili community there?

Yes, and because we are already heavily extended in Asia and Africa. We have plenty to do. We have tended to look at the pillars of economic development in each region or in each country. And there we have found quite a lot of similarities and differences between countries in Asia and Africa. We found similarities in the need to diversify economies, we found differences in the physical or geophysical environments. So there is really no absolute rule. What we do is we try to seek competence in those areas of need. If a rural economy is too dependent on agriculture, we will look at other things. If that rural economy can diversify itself through infrastructure, through the leisure industry, whatever it may be, we will try to help them.

Can you give us some measure of the successes of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development?

Well, we are looking at quality of life indicators — indicators that are not the same as those of the World Bank, indicators we have tried to develop through our own experience. We are looking at things like security, longevity, disposable income, access to education and employment. We are looking at what really affects people's attitudes to their own understanding of quality of life. We did discover that communities around the world don't have the same value systems. They will interpret their own qualities of life very differently from one part of the country to the other.

And this applies to the 25 countries or so in which you are involved?

Absolutely. And there are even differences within the country. Northern Pakistan is very different from Southern Pakistan.

You took over from your grandfather at the age of 20 and since then you have been balancing two things, your role as a spiritual leader and that of head of a vast business network with interests across many sectors. Is there a conflict between the two roles?

Well, this is a question I am going to answer quite frankly. This question is asked by a person who has not been exposed to the traditions and ethics of religious leadership in Islam. You come to this question from the point of view of the Christian. If you come to this question from the point of view of a Muslim, that question doesn't exist; there is no conflict, none at all.

How so?

The Prophet Himself (peace be upon him and his family) was married. He managed the assets of his first wife. Imams around the world have businesses, not just the Shia Ismaili Imam. We do not see a conflict and indeed if we lived in an attitude of conflict, I don't believe we would be living within the ethics of Islam. Islam doesn't say that a proper practice of the faith means you have to ignore the world. What it says is: Bring to the world the ethics of your faith. If you have wealth, use it properly. But the actual ownership of wealth is not in any way criticisable unless you have acquired it through improper means or you are using it for improper purposes. It is seen as a blessing of God. So this whole notion of conflict between faith and world is totally in contradiction to the ethics of Islam.

You are often asked this question?

In the Western world not in the Eastern world. Let me add, however, that the Aga Khan Fund is an institution I created but not for my personal benefit. The purpose of that institution is to sustain the economic performance of the countries in which my community lives. The reason is very simple: If the economies of these countries don't develop, the quality of life can't change. There wouldn't be the resources necessary to improve education, to improve health care, for all the things that people expect.

So the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development is not a personal asset, it's an institutional asset and its goal is to increase its capacities and to reinvest those capacities in the countries in which it works or in new countries. Secondly, it looks for areas where normal, capitalistic entrepreneurs would not go. Because our goal is not exclusively profit, we invest in high-risk areas where nobody else is going.

From what you've said, you are involved in complex economic and social activities; people must sometimes wonder why you don't prefer a simpler life, leaving the running of your businesses to members of your community?

Well, first of all, they do most of the work and I am very fortunate to have very talented, well educated people. But we have learnt over time that just impacting the economics of the country doesn't change the quality of life sufficiently. That you need what we call a multi-input process so that society has the capacity to grow its own institutions. So that's why we consider, for example, education absolutely critical, medicine absolutely critical, poverty alleviation absolutely critical, including things like micro-credit.

I want to draw your attention to the recent uprisings in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen. What is your prognosis of the sustainability of the change process in those countries?

I find it very, very difficult to answer that. There are an enormous number of unknowns and the forces at play are not yet fully identified. I think the forces at play are probably specific to the Islamic world itself. Between various traditions, between various ethnic backgrounds. And I would not be able to predict where this will go, I just don't know.

The Chinese are emerging as major players in Africa, especially in the construction, mining and telecommunication sectors. How do you see China changing the dynamics of the continent and what are your views on Africa turning to the East for investments?

Right from the pre-Independence days in East Africa and in West Africa — because we are also present in West Africa — I have always felt that these regions of the world had to have access to multiple resources. It is impossible to predict over 50 years or more where those global capacities are going to be located.

If you go back to the 1950s, we used to read that China was a basket case, India was a basket case; economists were telling us that those countries could never feed themselves, let alone industrialise. Today, those countries are global powerhouses. Why would one commit Africa not to benefit from those global powerhouses today? The question is whether Africa uses their capacities intelligently, so that it doesn't find itself exposed exclusively to one or several powerhouses. What you are doing in 2011 is likely to be very different from what you would do in 2061. So I think it's a question of being wise about the future.

Do you think what Africa is doing it right so far?

So far Africa is listening, it's observing, it will draw its own conclusions because this is a fairly new phenomenon. So I see no discomfort with that so long as it's in the interests of Africa.

As an investor you have engaged massively in East Africa for almost 50 years. Why do you have so much confidence in this region when attempts at integration have failed in the past and some people continue to say integration will fail again?

You know, in the old days you had Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and Uganda with a number of national institutions and a number of regional institutions – many of them very strong. Those institutions were nevertheless imposed on you because you were in a colonial context. Since then a number of countries have been through all sorts of changes of regime, of government structures, and I think the wisdom among politicians today is that if you can build a common destiny, you will be stronger, you will achieve your goals more quickly. But you need to build a common destiny in such a way that each step is taken intelligently. The European Common Market, and other similar regional organisations such as ASEAN, are all phenomena you can observe and learn from. So I am strongly supportive of the process so long as there is real wisdom and no forcing. But

disequilibrium is a real risk. If you bring into a consortium, or a context of multi-state situations, countries that are extremely wealthy and others that are extremely poor, that can be a risk; you can see what is happening today in Europe.

But you are fairly optimistic of the outcome?

Yes, yes.

In Uganda your network is involved in building the Bujagali hydroelectric dam, which is supposed to be the largest private investment in Africa. The project has come in for criticism for compromising the environment. Would you say that the goal of development has clashed with that of environmental concerns? Where should the balance be?

I don't think there is any absolute solution. You know the expression: You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. I would say that not just Uganda, but Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, are all in need of energy. Creating energy can be a source of environmental damage. The question is what is the most cost-effective way of creating this energy with minimum damage. I believe the partners in Bujagali have gone through massive environmental analysis and come to the conclusion that this is one of the least environmentally damaging initiatives in East Africa, because it impacts a very, very small area of land and a small percentage of the population, who were all relocated in good conditions.

I have seen situations where energy has been produced by windmills, by solar batteries and the damage that they have done to the environment is simply incredible. Because these types of energy creation don't work everywhere. And when they don't work, they get written off in three years but nobody pulls them down. So they stay there and they are awful. We still don't really know a great deal about the technology of these new energy sources.

There has been another criticism. Because the levels of the water in Lake Victoria are low, the dam is not going to operate to its maximum capacity and therefore the power it will produce will be very expensive...

I am not aware of those details frankly, but I am pretty sure that the economists, who have run the figures, know that it's a solid investment. What I can tell you is that it's likely to add over 40 per cent to Uganda's capacity. So it will make a massive contribution to resolving some of Uganda's energy problems. Now Uganda has oil, it may have gas, but whether the extraction processes are going to be environmentally better than hydro energy, I wouldn't bet on it.

Your institution's commitment to education and health has grown tremendously — the schools, the universities and the hospitals. What drives this particular investment?

Again, it's an issue of quality of life. We have seen in the past decades that populations that do not have access to good education are the populations that don't develop as quickly as they might. Africa in particular has suffered from some of the dogmatism that used to prevail in education. You remember the notion of universal primary education. That was a lovely idea but when it was put in practice, what did you find? You found a dysfunctional relationship between primary and secondary education because secondary education wasn't developed at the same speed as primary education. Then you found social economists who were telling you 20 or 30 years ago that you shouldn't invest in a university in Africa because in Africa a graduate would never justify the cost that he was

causing the country. So your African universities were decapitated. They were no longer funded.

All these errors in education planning need to be put right. And this can't be done only by governments. It has to be done in a joint planning process between the private sector and the public sector. So, on the educational front there are a number of corrective processes that I would like to see put in place.

What prompted your development network to set up a Heart and Cancer Centre and not focus on any other speciality?

In health care, what we are seeing is massive changes in the nature of need. Communicable diseases are disappearing from most of the world and now we are seeing non-communicable diseases becoming the major threat to populations around the world. When we set out to analyse the health needs of East Africa in the next 20, 30, 40 years, we found that these are swinging away from communicable to the non-communicable diseases. Now much work has been done in the industrialised world to address issues of heart problems, cancer, etc. East Africa did not have the capacities to deal with those issues. So many, many people from East Africa would go to South Africa, India and the Western world, for care that does not exist in Africa. We decided to bring that care to East Africa.

Why are you so much interested in horse racing and horse breeding? Most people don't expect you to be.

Well I didn't either. What happened is that my father died unexpectedly and it had been in the family for three generations. I felt it was a tradition I wanted to keep alive. It has nothing to do with my institutional responsibilities but it's a very interesting activity. So I kept it on as a family tradition.

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