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The Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Review

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Famed for its charitable non-profit work in war-torn and poverty-stricken parts of the world, the Aga Khan Development Network funds, amongst others, a plethora of cultural initiatives coordinated under the umbrella of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Albeit guided by Islamic ethics and a focus on redeveloping cultural heritage in areas with Muslim populations, the organization brings together financial and technical resources to revitalize local communities regardless of their faith, and build cultural bridges between the Islamic and non-Islamic world.

Prince Shah Karim al-Husseini, the current holder of the Aga Khan hereditary title, is the 49th hereditary Imam of the world's estimated 20 million Shia Ismaili Muslims living in over 25 countries across the world (mainly India, Pakistan, Central Asia and North America). Charged with looking after the material and the spiritual needs of this small minority within the faith, Aga Khan IV presides over one of the world's most effective international charitable organizations, the Aga Khan Development Network, which he founded in 1967. Today, the network employs more than 80,000 people across thirty countries and apart from its non-profit work it also runs a huge portfolio of for-profit businesses operating in the fields of energy, aviation and pharmaceuticals.¹

The AKDN functions as a transnational umbrella organization for a number of private agencies that complement each other. These include economic and social development, universities, rural and agricultural infrastructure, water, sanitation and disaster management programmes as well as a cultural trust which was created in 1988. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) joins together different, multi-sector enterprises that seek to reinforce the network's overarching mission through the revitalization of tangible and intangible

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cultural heritage in, mainly, Muslim population communities.

To this purpose, most projects funded by the AKDN, such as the Historic Cities Programme (established in the early 1990s) which has restored several monuments across the world over the years, adopt a community-based, local-empowerment approach. For the Walled City of Lahore for example, one of the largest conservation projects in Pakistan which started in 2007 under a public-private partnership with the Government of Punjab, a large pool of local architects, art historians, engineers, fine artists, chemists, conservators and ceramists was recruited to carry out restoration and documentation works for major 16th to 18th Mughal period monuments.²

The involvement of the local community is integral to the philosophy of the AKDN, which mostly intervenes where it has a strong volunteer base: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Canada, Egypt, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Pakistan, Portugal, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Uganda, United Kingdom and United States.³ Through its (cultural) initiatives, it seeks to reinforce Islamic identity alongside traditional conceptions of the Ismaili faith and deliver activities that serve as a unifying force for minority Ismaili communities. In overwhelmingly Muslim Zanzibar for instance and despite minimal Ismaili presence on the islands, the AKDN has been funding substantial health-care, education and cultural rehabilitation programmes for over a century.⁴ The latest 1990s-2000s Zanzibar Stone Town program included interventions such as the restoration of the Old Dispensary at the city's sea front, the conversion of an abandoned telecommunications building into a hotel and the restoration of a series of open public spaces running along the water front. The projects were carried out in cooperation with local institutions, governmental authorities and non-governmental stakeholders while local Ismaili and non-Ismaili communities were empowered with oversight and decision-making authority. These projects were coordinated with an expansion of Ismaili social and health-care services on the islands and the delivery of a Madrasah project by the Aga Khan Education Services agency for enhancing the integration of Ismailis into the Muslim world in East Africa and beyond.⁵

The Trust runs an impressive Islamic architecture programme which includes the world-respected triennial Aga Khan Award for Architecture (established in 1977). The awards focus on parts of the world with significant Muslim presence to shed light on and promote building concepts from societies and communities that have been overlooked by Western critics and professionals. In its course throughout the years, it has awarded multiple architects, engineers, builders, artisans and municipalities and has documented more than 9,000 building projects across the world. The list of the 2019 winners (who shared a prize of 1 million US dollars) is reflective of the award's multi-dimensional and cross-cultural approach: a revitalization programme at Bahrain's World Heritage Site of Muharraq, the Arcadia Education Project in Bangladesh (a floating school which stays on the ground during the dry season but floats on water during the monsoon), the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, the Public Spaces Development Programme in the Republic of Tatarstan, the Alioune Diop University Teaching and Research Unit in Senegal, the Wasit Wetland Center in Sharhaj (a wasteland converted into a popular visitor-site wetland serving as a catalyst for biodiversity and environmental education in the area).⁶

The world visibility of Islamic-culture heritage is also enhanced by the academic Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (established in 1979), an endowment that supports the documentation centers at Harvard University and the MIT that collect material on Islamic art, architecture and urbanism. Based on a collaborative exchange between the schools, it sponsors research projects, seminars, workshops, conferences, publications, fellowships and activities such as surveying and photographing sites and buildings. The Trust's programme on architecture is complemented by Archnet, a comprehensive digital

open-access resource maintained since 2011 that combines visual and textual resources on Islamic Architecture, planning and landscape design.⁷

The multi-sector approach of the network towards cultural development is perhaps best highlighted by the least known agency of the Trust, the Music Initiative (launched in 2000). Originally created to preserve and revive the traditional musical heritage of Central Asia, the music initiative now spans countries such as Mali, Morocco, Xinjiang and Indonesia. It invests in interregional collaborations, partnerships with educational institutions and music distributors, residencies and workshops for musicians, music touring and festivals as well as documentation projects which all aim at transmitting and further developing musical heritage in contemporary forms. In 2019, the programme launched the Aga Khan Music Awards which were open to all musicians from countries with a significant Muslim population, without however excluding any religious groups.⁸

In an effort to strengthen cultural pluralism in all corners of the world, the latest project of the Trust is the opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada (September 2014), the first museum in North America exclusively dedicated to Islamic arts. Sharing the same site with Toronto's Ismaili Center and a landscaped park based on traditional Persian and Mughal-style architecture, the 10,000-square-meter museum presents an overview of the contributions that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage through an impressive collection drawn from the family holdings of the Aga Khan, an assemblage of more than 1,000 artefacts spanning three continents over ten centuries. Its permanent collection is complemented by temporary exhibitions, contemporary art shows and installations and a programme of performing arts and workshops relating to contemporary Muslim communities and diasporas around the world.⁹

With a focus on the alleviation of poor communities and the creation of economic opportunities and employment for the local population, the AKTC initiatives manage to maintain a secular front, a somewhat clear division between their founder's spiritual role and the foundation's nonprofit and non-denominational development work. Albeit pursuing the empowerment of Ismaili identity, the cultural program of the AKDN delivers inclusive initiatives that promote cultural pluralism and benefit both Ismaili and the larger community, regardless of religion. By introducing communities from other faith and cultural backgrounds to the history and the heritage of Islam, they also serve as bridges, built to create a dialogue between the Islamic and non-Islamic world.¹⁰

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