

## Opening Remarks

### *His Excellency Abdou Diouf*

*President of the Republic of Senegal*

First of all, personally as well as in the name of the Senegalese Government and people, I should like to express my sincere thanks to His Highness, Prince Aga Khan, for having established the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and having chosen our capital, Dakar, as the location of the seminar: "Reading the Contemporary African City".

This seventh seminar organized by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture which was created by His Highness "for the purpose of stimulating greater awareness of the vitality and the diversity of Islamic cultural traditions", touches on concerns that affect Muslims as much as non-Muslims

The creation of the Aga Khan Award is easy to understand, if we refer to what Paul Valéry wrote in 1921: "That architecture constitutes the most complete, the most absolute art, for not only does it occupy and define all space, but also it imposes itself on duration and on history". It is not just a matter of the art of building, but also of city planning, of the art of organizing human settlements in the interest of the greatest possible happiness for human beings.

The theme of this Seminar, "Reading the Contemporary African City", shows that the concerns of the Aga Khan Award go beyond promotion of Muslim architecture in the narrow sense, in the interest of a wider approach to other traditions and forms of cultural identities; to other human sensitivities.

An understanding of the contemporary African city, particularly to detect the manifestations of Islamic culture through city planning and the architecture, requires an analysis of the historical evolution of our continent.

Africa's relations with the Arab world date back to Antiquity and began with trade: gold, the main wealth of the empires of West Africa, was the principal product exchanged for salt, fabrics, copper, dates and other products

Islam as a religion was introduced into

Africa toward the year 1054 A D by the Almoravids, strong fighters for the faith, under the leadership of Ibn Yacine. It was the same Almoravids who propagated Islam in North Africa, in the West and the East, as well as in Central Europe and in Spain

Africa was a monolithic unit from an economic point of view between the 11th and the 15th centuries. Networks of trails linked the North with the South and the East with the West of the continent. The nodes of these networks were the markets, something like a heart maintaining the life of the African cities. As examples, we may mention the Kumbi-Saleh market in Ghana, the Timbuktu market in Mali, the Benin market (12th century), the Kano market in West Africa, and, in East Africa, the market of Kiloa in Tanzania, the Sofala market in Zimbabwe, the market of Mogadiscio in Somalia, and the Mombassa market in Kenya — all of which still exist, incidentally.

The urban centers appeared with the rise of empires and the development of an international trading system. These grandiose cities were the gateways of Islam and of Muslim civilization, centers of cultural exchanges of inestimable value. The architecture of the mosques and the palaces that still exist is the most brilliant proof of this. The present mosque of Jenné, built by Amadou Cheikhou in 1830, is not equal in any respect to the one that constituted its foundations and was constructed by Kombanou in the 11th century, when he had just recently been converted to Islam. These monuments were not Arab copies, but rather reflected an African culture, an African art in the service of Islam.

While the settlements along the east coast were founded and developed by Arab trade, the urban centers of West Africa grew out of Trans-Sahara trade with the Maghreb and the whole Mediterranean area. All of these cities had close connections to the rural environment. They were market cities, but were also very important political centers and cultural units

Timbuktu, for instance, was a university city that extended its influence, throughout the continent. Endowed with majestic libraries, it attracted students from the four cardinal points of the continent because of the learning of its professors

The cities of the Yoruba region (Ifé, Ibadan, Abeokuta, etc.) were radioconcentric in plan, with buildings constructed around a central courtyard with impluvium. At the start of the 20th century, these cities had attained a remarkable degree of urbanization

During their trips, the merchants had carried even the magnificence of certain settlements of this pre-colonial Africa beyond the limits of the continent

With the civil wars, the slave trade and the colonial conquests, some of these cities disappeared, while others were profoundly modified. But the Arab-African culture left more than traces; it is alive, and today the mosques, palaces and cultural centers bear witness to the early arrival of Islam and to its dynamism in certain regions

"Reading the Contemporary African City" also means observation of the problems created by a long colonial past, which was followed with technical progress and rapid industrialization, by a massive rural exodus, leading to increasing pauperization and a transformation of the traditional ways of life. The discovery of the Black Continent by the European navigators in the 15th century entailed new relationships in the trade fields. The majority of the African coastal cities were initially ports of call for the slave trade or military strongholds serving the needs of trade

But it was really starting in 1885, with the Berlin Conference — at which European nations decided how to carve up Africa — that the destinies of the Black Continent arrived at a great turning point. The colonial empires were built up, and Black Africa's commercial relationships with Europe became exclusive ones, with direct administrative management by the representatives of the colonial homelands.

The Christian religion rivaled Islam,

especially in Central Africa. In many different areas, a conquering and demanding European civilization tried to establish itself. The colonial cities developed from port, railroad and road installations. This marked the birth of the modern European districts alongside the medinas, which constituted the native districts that were most often left to their own devices. The modern African cities were born at that time and developed primarily as a function of the needs of the European economies.

History gained rapid momentum until the decade of the 1960s, with the political independence of the colonies. With the attainment of freedom, one witnessed the conquest of the European districts by the Africans. The mirage of the city grew stronger and the rural exodus increased, adding to consumer needs and to the creation of shanty-towns around the outskirts of the cities. The problems of housing, infrastructure, and physical planning took on enormous proportions. There was an unprecedented growth of the population in the developing countries everywhere (unparalleled rates of urbanization, 5 to 7 percent a year in Dakar, and nearly 10 percent in Kinshasa, for example, may be noted). However, human and above all material means were lacking to cope with this galloping urbanization.

Various forms of international solidarity came into being, especially with the former colonial powers, which took charge of the training of management personnel, supplied skilled personnel for staffing the young governments, and granted financial loans. So much building had never before been witnessed. However, the breadth of the phenomenon made these efforts inadequate, and in addition, there is no solution to the urbanization of the cities without development of rural regions. It is an overall problem of development and of society.

Architecture, or rather city planning, is seeking a path in our countries of today. The emergence of this awareness is painful. For the authorities, it is a matter of preventing high degrees of segregation,

arranging for mass production while avoiding monotony, and integrating some styles, an art, and cultural concepts adapted to each human milieu into modern construction procedures.

At the outset of political independence in Senegal, the Government focussed on the problems of regional and city planning and architecture:

- In 1964, the law on the nationalization of land was voted — urban and rural territories that were not registered — accounting for more than 95 percent of the country's area — were transferred to the community with a view to allowing them to be distributed fairly by the local communities;
- A plan for regional development was set up. It is to be replaced now by a national plan for regional development that is being worked out and which is intended to guarantee balanced development of the whole national territory;
- A thoroughgoing territorial reform launched in 1972 has just been completed, giving the rural and urban communities the responsibility of managing local affairs;
- A law constituting the City Planning Code was promulgated and approved in 1966. This law sets the rules and requirements that are to govern the urbanization of the Senegalese cities. Since our civilization is essentially an oral one and the "discussion tree" constitutes one of the most important points in the city, the development plans must take this fact into account and the public squares, which are meeting or trading places or prayer centers, will have to be carefully created in the center of the districts, around the mosques, the religious altars, and the youth centers.

In addition, two basic laws for the future of architecture in Senegal were promulgated in 1978. They were:

- Law 78-43, concerning the orientation of Senegalese architecture, which declares architecture to be of public concern and institutes free architectural assistance through public offices for people of modest means,

- Law 78-44, which creates an Order of Architects in Senegal and organizes the architectural profession.

Finally, we must mention the creation of several training schools capable of contributing to the harmonious development of the environment. We may mention, among others

- 1) The School of Architecture and City Planning,
- 2) The Institute of Environmental Sciences at the University of Dakar;
- 3) A polytechnic school with a Civil Engineering section;
- 4) A National School of Applied Economics, which includes a section for the training of town planners.

As you can see, the Government of Senegal, with the help of international cooperation, is trying to go in the same direction as the Aga Khan Award by installing the structures and the means for organizing and improving physical surroundings. Young Senegalese professionals and public servants are going to take part in this seminar in the quest for architecture and city planning conforming to each cultural identity. Along with you, they are going to understand the need for protecting our landscapes, for safeguarding certain natural balances. The organizers of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture have managed to assemble, for a few days in Dakar, scholars from several disciplines, and eminent professors from several continents: America, Europe, Africa, Asia — offering an invitation to one of the most fascinating cultural exchanges possible, to a dialogue of civilizations.

I am sure your seminar will be able to contribute to knowledge of the contemporary African city, in its historical relationships and in its relationships with its economic, cultural and human environment.

## Opening Remarks

### *His Highness the Aga Khan*

A little more than a year ago, the Sixth Seminar organized by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture met in China — first in Peking, where experts from throughout the world talked about rural architecture and such important questions as the role of the experts, financial and otherwise, in the creation of rural living environments suitable for the men and women there who produce the raw materials that are essential to our community life — and then in Urumqi, Turfan, Kashgar, cities bearing witness to the thrust of Islam eastwards. The general problems raised in Peking, without any specific ethnic or religious context, were here transformed into questions that were both urgent and immediate for the world of Islam, so vast and so diverse.

And now we are meeting at the other end of the Muslim world, at a point where it touches, not on age-old China, but rather on the vibrant world of an Africa seething with hopes and formulating — sometimes with difficulty — its own way in a dis-oriented and frightened world.

From our particular, and perhaps limited viewpoint — that of a search for Islamic factors in the architectural creativity of today — it is easy to justify this leap from Muslim China to the African shores of the Atlantic Ocean. It is quite logical to presume that it is easier at the periphery of the vast experience of Islam to identify those ways in which, and the degrees to which, this experience has inserted itself into such highly differentiated socio-cultural milieux as China and Black Africa. How does each national culture, and even each regional culture, manage not only to express but also to flower by means of the Muslim faith and the works of Islamic civilization? This is the great question that has particularly concerned the historians and the sociologists, but which must now be a focus of attention for the architects and the city planners in Islamic countries.

Our purpose is to learn, to understand and to explain, to find the new paths that would also be the age-old ways; to identify, in everything surrounding us and in every-



*His Highness the Aga Khan*

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thing being created around us, the forms, the mental attitudes, the exact techniques and the hopes that, on one hand, enable us to define ourselves and, on the other hand, offer us models to be adopted elsewhere.

Our first objective is to get to know our Islamic personality in a critical and intellectually responsible way. The second objective is to determine to what extent this knowledge can help to illuminate and support a new phase of Islamic civilization as dynamic and creative as the classical period of the initial centuries of the *Hegira*. I should like to concentrate on these two questions, these two processes, and to draw some conclusions from them.

The subject of this seminar is the “reading” of an urban world in West Africa. When Professor Arkoun proposed this subject, I was a bit surprised, since I thought that people *looked* at cities, that perhaps they *experienced* them, but I did not know that they could read them. So I should like to tell you about what I imagined — whether correctly or not — in connection with this idea of reading a city.

What kind of literature is under consideration? The city is a novel full of dramas, of tragedies, of comedies, of unexpected upsets and predictable outcomes. The city is a legal document, essential but also boring, by which it organizes itself, defends itself, and gives terse and precise expression to the balance of forces that enables it to function. The city is a book of history and of philosophy, since the layout of streets, the succession of districts, the large buildings along main arteries, the national or other symbols of large squares, the houses, the apartments, or else the hovels and the suburbs, are all signs recalling the past or implying group and individual choices. These were made knowingly or unknowingly, but always imbued with ideological positions, sometimes with human passions, often — alas — with strictly financial interests, and sometimes probably with fine and noble theories about the space that man needs. The city, finally, is a poem. Just as the poets rarely testify to original feelings (love, life, death), similarly each city has the same streets, houses, schools, govern-

mental and religious establishments. And yet, poets have shown great skill in giving forms and a quality to ordinary feelings that go beyond triteness; and similarly, whether in the heart of the inhabitants or in the imagination of strangers, many cities — perhaps all cities — have a poetic aspect, a quality that makes all of them unique, even if the statistics so often make them ordinary.

So the city is a novel, a legal document, an essay on history and on thought, and a poem. I am quite aware that it is also a sociological document and an architectural ensemble, but if I have taken the liberty of talking about the city as an object to be read, it is because that enables me to give a better definition of what can be expected from the very idea of “reading a city”

Having a book, and knowing how to read it, means first of all being able to re-read it. A book enters the memory, becomes an integral part of ourselves, and belongs to our collective heritage. Reading a city like a book also means sharing one’s personal experience with that of the people living in the city. It means the application of one’s own world, through the knowledge of these experiences, to the experience of thousands of unknown people. Hence being able to read a city means enabling the city to become a link between an individual and his environment.

Finally, reading a city also means learning how to talk about it. This process is of particular importance, since we all know how difficult it is to express all of the intermediate nuances there are between a detailed but sometimes coldly statistical description on one hand, and easy but useless generalization on the other. When learning how to read a city, we equip ourselves with the means of bringing out its various elements and of finding the words, the sentences, the expressions that will enable us, on one hand, to identify the various levels of the meaning and of the importance of a particular city, and, on the other hand, to apply these terms to other cities.

Thus I imagine the reading of a city as a way of enriching our collective memory, of making it possible to have a dialogue between the city and the people, and finally of finding a suitable language by which to talk about cities

But in the final analysis, all this is only the technical side of the undertaking represented by this seminar, its methodological aspect, the development of its working instruments. The results actually have a much vaster purpose: we are actually dealing with a series of objectives or of hopes that are intermingled and that I should like to define on three different levels.

First of all, we want to learn and to understand. We want to come to know this world of West Africa where Islam is linked to another destiny, the destiny of an Africa freed from colonialism. We want to see and to understand the forms that you have created for your cities, and the ones that you have rejected. Over and above the forms, we want to hear the voices of the men and women who decide, who choose, who invent, who construct; and who live in your new cities and ancient villages. In West Africa, unique forms of collaboration among international organizations, national governments and local needs have been created, and one of their best-known result is a simple and original architecture in which we find both the inspiration of the African tradition and the modern use of new techniques. Two of these creations were given awards by the jury of the first Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and revealed this creative originality of Africa to all of us. We have come here to learn more about this, to obtain a better knowledge and understanding of a region that is probably among the most inventive ones with respect to original architecture, and yet among the least known.

On a second level, we have an obligation to integrate this knowledge, this appreciation of African originality, into our research on architecture and the environment. It is a matter first of all of learning how, and to what extent, the social,

personal and collective needs of African Muslims have played their role in new planning and construction. In other words, is there an aspect — physically tangible or symbolic — that can legitimately be called Islamic because it links up with the great tradition of Islam, or else because the African Muslim considers it as a sign of his faith or of his daily experience as a Muslim? The other aspect of this Islamic level of our research is its applicability to other regions of the Muslim world. To be sure, people have often exaggerated the cultural unity of Islam, which is actually so rich in the variety of its expressions and of its languages, whether visual or otherwise — but the question should be asked, since the same questions are raised and the same searches are going on in the entire world of Islam: how can people live in dignity, and with all of the means and aspirations of the late 20th century, while maintaining the rights and the values of each national community?

It is legitimate and fruitful to ask ourselves whether success in one region could not inspire and support other creative efforts in other countries.

And finally there is what I shall call the universal dimension of our quest. It is quite right for this seminar to emphasize a particular region of the world, for the region has received little attention and it is essential for its own development that it be spotlighted in order to be better appreciated. And it is certainly part of the very program of the Aga Khan Award to seek out and identify the real Islamic factors and forms in today’s architecture. But it seems to me that it would be neither correct nor really wise to consider the results of our reflections or the programs that we may be led to formulate as being limited to the regions that we study, or to Muslim culture alone. For the problems assailing us and the questions we ask ourselves all have a universal significance today. Whatever their specific nature may be, our responses have value and importance for the whole human race — and just as it was in Africa that, according to the

anthropologists, man as we know him took his first steps just as it was Islam in the 9th and the 10th centuries that transmitted ancient science and philosophy while transforming them, can we not imagine that at the end of the 20th century, a collective effort of Muslims and non-Muslims will enable us to find and apply the major solutions demanded by the ever more pressing challenges of our time?

That may still be too ambitious a dream; but it is essential to give free expression to the dreams haunting all contemporary minds. Talking about dreams already ensures an initial incarnation for them, a necessary stage in making them a reality in our daily behavior patterns, our institutions, our surroundings. All of the great works of civilization were initially dreamed, designed, put into expressive forms — plans, descriptions, calls, manifestos ... — before taking material form. That is why we have the firm hope that the dreams nourished within the framework of this Award for Architecture in the Islamic world will finally penetrate people's minds and motivate the concrete behavior patterns of everyone who has the difficult responsibility of constructing the living environment for the Muslims of today and tomorrow. But with this still imperfect vision, I am getting away from our immediate purpose, which is, more simply, to learn to read the cities of West Africa.

All of us together, teachers and students, architects, planners, sociologists or scholars, Africans or specialists from the rest of the world, Muslims or non-Muslims, can seek a response or responses to the basic question of how to relaunch the dynamics of national, regional and Islamic identities.