

**Aga Khan Academy, Mombasa**  
**Graduation Ceremony – Class of 2009**  
**Keynote Address: Dr. Azim Nanji**

Class of 2009, Congratulations!

Families of the graduates, faculty members and all those who have, in some way, enabled these graduates to get to where they are today, congratulations to you too.

Distinguished Guests, to be present at this Graduation Ceremony is not just an honour for me, it is also a very moving moment. When I graduated, many, many years ago, from the Aga Khan High School here in Mombasa, we did not have a graduation, so I vicariously participate in this event, hoping that I too will feel again like a graduate today.

Earlier Principal McMurray was kind enough to take me up to the second floor, from where I wanted to look across the channel and to look at where I spent my earlier student days, in Likoni. I used to walk from there with my brothers and sister and actually cut across where this school is, to get to my old school.

Kenya had not yet achieved its independence when I graduated. I did not mean to give away my age, but there we are! The world was a different place. It was different in the sense that those of us who were growing up and then subsequently going to university in what would soon be the new states of East Africa, felt a sense of excitement, a surge of commitment about serving our new nations, recognising that the resources of these nations were limited but the most important resource they had were its own citizens. And we felt that while we were committed to being citizens of our respective nations, our education was also preparing us to be citizens of the world.

I think from that perspective the role that we ask of these graduates is not very different. We ask them to be citizens, to be committed to the societies that have nurtured them, but we also ask them to be citizens of what is now a much more interconnected planet. But a planet that, at this point in history, seems on the verge of several crises. These are crises that are a result both of human action as well as human inaction, but also a part of what has become the downside of globalisation. Those of us who favour globalisation deserve the interconnectedness of people and the opportunity to travel, to move around and to mix freely across the world, also lament that this globalisation brings in its wake many problems that we could not anticipate at the time that it was beginning to take off.

Some of these issues are apparent, and I am not going to make a list of them. The economic crisis that we are going through is a direct result of globalisation in its most irresponsible form. The security tensions that we are going through are also part of a globalisation that has left certain parts of the world neglected and marginalised and has engendered what His Highness called, in his last Peterson Lecture, a notion of 'villagisation' that seems to have led to some societies to close in upon themselves. I think the other crisis, that of a sustainable environment, of the merits and demerits of technological progress are all unfolding. The world needs to be rethought and remade, and if the next generation has any important task to perform it is to inspire and to mend a planet under great stress.

One of the books that I think very often are read in African schools, I'm not sure if it is part of the present IB curriculum, is of course Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart*. And the title which he borrows from a poem written by W. B. Yeats, speaks volumes about what happens when the world is torn asunder. I do not mean to sound pessimistic, but living where I do, on the edge of the western borders of the United States, I am conscious, having returned after ten years of living in London, that there is a perception of great instability and deep crisis within the United States, but that also stretches across the Pacific and across Europe and into Africa.

In these troubled times, the responsibility that falls upon the Aga Khan Academy in its partnership with the International Baccalaureate, is to create student citizens and individuals who will take leadership positions. We cannot bring the whole world to the experience of these students, but through their imagination and their learning, we can take these students to the world. And therein lies the promise of the Academies initiative. It is grounded in a global network, the AKDN that is taking an innovative and comprehensive approach to improving the quality of life of citizens in many different parts of the world. The creation of a group of world-wide Academies is linked to a mission of creating an educated leadership, equipped to understand and engage the challenges of new and turbulent time.

Among the soon to be published works for the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, is a very important work written in the tenth century in what is modern-day Iraq that reflects an educational vision that may have some

meaning for us today. The work consists of 52 Chapters written by a group of anonymous intellectuals, some of whom were teachers, some of whom were public intellectuals. They came together because they were concerned about two things. They were concerned that the power of the state had usurped the role of civil society by seeking to impose homogeneity on society. They were also concerned that they lived in an extremely cosmopolitan world and that a closed society would lose the opportunity to benefit from that legacy of cosmopolitanism. These Chapters point to the different legacies from where knowledge is drawn and how properly applied, they might inform a citizenry, better equipped to build the good society. The remarkable thing about the work is that it starts with a clear statement of purpose. In the pursuit of learning, they will turn to all known sources, dismissing none but recognizing that knowledge knows no boundaries. They cite a parable about how this knowledge is to be constructed. In the parable the King wishes his children to be educated to take positions of leadership in his kingdom after he dies, and in order to educate them in this broad, cosmopolitan and universal way, he creates a space somewhat reminiscent of the architectural vision behind this Academy. Each space reflects the subject matter that is to be learned, ranging from cosmology, the physical and natural sciences, to what we would call the human and social sciences. The curriculum is drawn from classical antiquity to the traditions of Persia, India as well as the traditions of Christianity, of Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. This definition of knowledge and its origins and potential offers a synthesis of the world and the knowledge of the time, and so while the students could not go to all these places, they could imagine them, and they could integrate them into their learning. It is the openness of mind and the desire to learn that forms a common thread. As I prepared for this talk, I tried to think of markers and symbols that might help inform the vision that can inspire our graduates. Just across from the school is a Lighthouse to guide the ships that come into the harbour. It looks out to the sea, and it invites those coming from the sea to be aware of it. One of the great values of growing up in Mombasa was to understand its role in history as a crossroads, because Mombasa like other places on the coast linked the Indian Ocean trade routes to the interior. With that trade came many different cultures and influences from India, from the Arab world and even China. All of these made the Indian Ocean a truly cosmopolitan space. And in that cosmopolitan space, Mombasa became emblematic both of the diversity of the Swahili culture but also the achievements of a pluralistic society. And many of these ruins and remnants still remain, many of the populations, the diversity of its people, its faiths, still continue to be found in Mombasa and along the coast, and it is justly that we think of it as one of the capitals of the Swahili corridor that goes all the way from Somalia down to Mozambique and into the interior. For my second marker I had to go a little further afield – an excavated site, now in present day Tanzania, called Laetoli. Laetoli contains some footprints, and those footprints have been dated to 3.5 million years. Many of you will have been to the National Museum in Nairobi, and you will have seen the excavation work that is on display there from many East African sites. Indeed, as Kenyans we are proud to imagine that we live in the cradle of human civilisation. Those human ancestors stepped out from what is now Laetoli and populated the world, making everyone a child of Africa no matter where they live. And Africa is where the human journey began. Similarly, you graduates will set out on your journeys across the world. Your footprints will take you to many places which have not been imagined yet just as many of us did.

The footprints at Laetoli, represent a journey, your 'safari', to use the Swahili word in its original sense, and your journey has just begun, and you have been provided with tools to be able to undertake that 'safari'. In the process you will also need the lighthouse to remind you that there is a guiding light, and that that guiding light is the source that will illuminate your path ahead.

Closer to the part of the world where I live now is a very large Accelerator facility, a Linear Accelerator that exists on the edge of a campus at Stanford University. When I first visited the university I went to see it. It is a project of enormous significance. Some of you may be familiar with one that is on the border of Switzerland and France called CERN. Both have cost millions of dollars. The Scientists at the facility explained what they were trying to do. They were running molecules, very small molecules, almost at the speed of light through the accelerator. 'So what do you hope to find out?' I asked. They indicated that their goal was to measure and analyze what happens when these molecules collide, just as at the beginning of creation. In a larger context this and other scientific data would allow the time honoured questions about the nature and meaning of the Universe to be answered.

Perhaps in the same way, the curriculum and the teachers of the Academy, let ideas run through students' minds with the hope that some small collisions take place in their minds, and that gives rise to insights and something gets deeply embedded, which will live with them for the rest of their lives. And what gets embedded is not necessarily subject matter or content because that will change as time goes on; what get embedded are perspectives about how to understand the Universe, the planet and life in it.

Those perspectives are also linked to the strands that run through the Academy's curriculum. Pluralism is probably the most significant challenges of our time. How do we live with difference? How do we live with the knowledge that we inhabit different worlds, we have different cultures, we have different national priorities

and are contending over different historical claims. How do we live with that difference in the quality of economic life, in the quality of our social development; how can we reconcile these differences at a time when our interconnectedness has become so much more pronounced?

Pluralism doesn't simply mean that there is human diversity: it is an acknowledgement that this diversity is a blessing not a burden. Pluralism is the value that enables you to negotiate that diversity and maintain differences in a balanced, harmonious manner.

Kenya grows and exports beautiful flowers all over the world. It takes however, human creativity and inspiration to convert this magnificent diversity of flowers into a garden, where each has a special place and yet contributes to enhance the whole.

Very often, as was pointed out by President Obama in a recent speech in Cairo, that the inability to reconcile a gulf in understanding can lead to severe consequences. He was of course referring to the differences between the West and the Muslim world, based on mutual ignorance; and the cost of that ignorance. Kenya too went through its own painful discovery of the dangers of not living within its pluralism. While Kenya did come through the crisis, the events remind us how fragile and vulnerable society can be and it is only deep commitment to pluralism that can protect its equilibrium. And the fact that we address it in the school's curriculum is the first step in moving towards a reconciliation of difference, over time.

Another strand relates to ethics. While it is also an academic discipline, ethics is also central to the lived life. If you read Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* you get a sense in his presentation of Kikuyu society, of the values and ethics that guided that society, and you see a society with deep and strong moral roots begun out of the experience of a group living together in a context where it was important to maintain a shared way of life. And that cuts across virtually every African society that I know. When those connections that provided the glue that held societies together disappeared, some of the social cohesion was shaken. We need to discover an ethical way of being, in our changing world. Ethics relate to critical and important consequences of the way in which we reshape our loyalties and our relationships. But it is important that these ethical values continue to be the Lighthouse that guide us, because without that level of integrity, without that compassion, without that sense of ownership of the well-being of society as a whole, we turn into mere self-seeking individuals. Which in turn lead us to the next strand, economics in a global context.

We need to rethink what economic life means in the era of globalisation, and whether economic life is simply something we get on a treadmill and it continues to move faster and faster or whether it is something that can be like those footprints, a slow march, sure, sustainable and protective of all citizens and not just for those who run banks or big businesses or sometimes even government. We have just gone through a severe, economic crisis, generally believed to be the worst in recent memory. It has called into question our assumptions and highlighted the need to bring discipline to an unfettered and reckless market economy.

The other major strand deals with governance and civil society. Across the world whether it is in so-called developed countries or in the developing world, one of the biggest problems we face is how to manage ourselves. On what basis do we create institutions, do we create networks, and do we create values that allow us to govern ourselves in a way that holds society together. And many labels have been used to define how societies should be constructed and how societies should govern themselves. There is no one model, but there is a sense that where each member of society feels committed, where each member of society seeks to improve the conditions under which they and the rest of their fellow citizens live, then you will have an investment in good governance.

For too long I think in the developing world but also elsewhere, ideological thinking ruled the day, and remember that in the past century we went through long period of many 'isms' including socialism, capitalism and communism. Over time many of these ideological frameworks have disappeared into the pages of history and we have learnt that the rhetoric of ideologies promised much but offered very little. Today these experiences suggest to us that every citizen needs to develop a commitment to building society. Whether you are part of the government or whether you are outside the government, you have the same responsibility to build society, and you may do it as part of your responsibilities in civil society, as a volunteer, as a public individual who cares about where you live and where you can create a kind of society that one would feel proud, secure, and comfortable. Jomo Kenyatta used to joke that when you become old in the Kikuyu tradition you are appointed to a body of elders given to wise thoughts; a group of **mzees**. We use the word **mzee** in Swahili as a mark of respect ... **Mzee** is not simply an old person but an elder with wisdom. And so it is important that we create through our Academies, the **mzees** of the future, because we will need to hear what they have to say in case we forget our values and tradition in our haste for unthinking development.

The final strand deals with cultures and in particular Muslim cultures and societies in their global contexts. If we don't understand ourselves as **one among others** we will have lost the capacity to look at each other in a respectful context. And as members of the human family first, to acknowledge our diversity and to recognise that teachings and values can come from many, many cultures and it is this heritage that locates us firmly in time and space, as one human family.

Within the Buddhist tradition it is said that the great teacher Siddhartha Gautama whom we know as the Buddha sought and achieved enlightenment. But in that state, according to Buddhist tradition, he is tempted by Satan to choose self-complacency and to avoid engagement with the world. But the Buddha responds to this temptation by choosing to become a Teacher, because he believed that if knowledge was not transmitted then the ethical purpose of achieving it, is not fulfilled. Similarly, in the Muslim tradition, there is a dialogue that is mirrored in this Graduation. The student has completed one stage of the journey and is about to graduate. In his farewell lesson to the student the Teacher recalls his own experience, when his ignorance was dispelled through learning. He now asks his student to remember that the sharing of that gift knowledge is what will complete the journey – so, Graduates, as you leave here today, remember that the *Safari* is not complete, until you learn to share what you have acquired here.

Thank you. Asante sana.