

Embracing Change Is Key To Success in Today's Multi-Cultural World

Keynote Address at the launch of the Ismaili Professionals Network

By Ali A. Mufuruki - Dar es Salaam 19th June 2013

Distinguished organizers of this event

Members of the soon to be launched Network of Ismaili Professionals

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure and it is indeed a privilege for me to be invited to make a keynote address at this very historic event for the Ismaili community in Tanzania and the wider East Africa.

In preparing for this task, I realized how little I knew about my fellow citizens and was compelled to educate myself very quickly. I therefore beg your indulgence if some of what I will say tonight will come across as uninformed or even worse as ignorant. I just want you to know I tried because I wanted to approach my role tonight with the seriousness it deserves.

You may wish to know if you do not know already that not many indigenous Tanzanians like myself can tell the difference between the numerous communities to which our fellow citizens of Asian origin belong. We see all Ismailis, Khoja Shia Ithnasheri, Hindus, Bohoras, Goans, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Baluchis, etc, as one community known as Wa-Hindi. You too probably do struggle telling the various Tanzanian tribes apart, so maybe the phenomenon is universal.

This should not come as a surprise because for many years, tribe, ethnic or religious affiliation did not matter much in the Tanzanian social discourse and even now I believe it matters less to us than it does to people in other countries.

The problem this causes however is that whenever any single group tries to organize itself as a distinct entity seeking to secure its

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interests particularly those of a political or economic nature as you are intending to do, it arouses all manner of speculation and even suspicion as I will shortly explain

Before I do that however, let us take a look at the history of the Ismaili community in Tanzania.

Today, there are about 4,000 Ismailis in Tanzania and a little under 10,000 across East Africa. This is down from an all time high of more than 100,000 at the time of independence. Ismailis regard East Africa, Tanzania in particular as their adopted home and global headquarters.

The political events of the sixties and seventies in East Africa saw big numbers of Ismailis, along with members of other Asian communities leave East Africa. Many lost their businesses, money and properties as a result of nationalisation in Tanzania and even worse policies in Uganda. Wars, economic troubles during the seventies and eighties and the political changes that swept across East Africa in the nineties also contributed to the exodus of Ismailis from this region.

It is nonetheless amazing to see that the few Ismailis who stayed behind have managed not only to survive but also to thrive despite their dramatic decline in numbers. Economic data shows that the 4,000 Ismailis living in Tanzania today account for 1% of Tanzania's annual GDP.

Their business acumen, experience and strong community network has enabled them to maintain a stronghold on many sectors of the economy including but not limited to hospitality and tourism services, financial services, manufacturing, ICT, retail trade, real estate, etc. Ismailis in Tanzania also play a significant role in the provision of education and health services.

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To understand the significance of the role played by the Ismaili community in our social and political economy, one needs to understand the meaning of 4,000 people of a single community accounting for 1% GDP. What it means is that we only need 400,000 Ismailis to generate an output equal to the annual GDP of Tanzania today. This is hugely significant.

Ismailis have also produced some of the most highly respected political leaders of our country, the most notable ones being former ministers Jamal and Al-Noor Kassam. But there are many others both in the past and today, both men and women.

The point of telling you all this is to assure you that your role in the wider community of Tanzania and your status as citizens of our country is well recognised and appreciated. However, if you want to achieve your goals going forward including the goals and aspirations of your network, you will need to take into consideration a number of changes in our country

One key issue that I want to dwell on tonight is what I think needs to be done so that the Ismaili community, led by institutions of young, well educated and well endowed professionals like yourselves, can shape a more prosperous future for its people in the wider context of an evolving Tanzanian society.

As I have pointed out before and without glossing over that fact that extreme poverty exists even within the Ismaili community in Tanzania, the economic power of the Ismailis is significant and given their small numbers, it is seen by many to be disproportionately so. The same goes for the political clout they derive from their dominance of the economic space. This too is seen by many as being skewed in their favour, very often at the exclusion of other social groups. This situation will require careful management to ensure it does not grow into a problem in years to come and your

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network will have a special role to play in this.

While speaking to the Khoja Shia Ithaasheri Youth at a community event 21 years ago, distinguished businessman and leader Mohamed Sumar of Sumar & Varma Associates said and I quote:

".....we must understand and accept the fact that the youth in all parts of the world, in all communities, colors and shade, have some basic characteristics which are universal.

Thus, all young men and women have dreams, ambitions and hope, vigour and enthusiasm to change the world. These characteristics are common and universal.

What differentiates the youths in different parts of the world are the cultural values inculcated in them by their micro-environments and cultural backgrounds."

He went on to say that ***".....In the olden days, the community was built purely on traditional values and experience. Today, the world is far more complex for the community to depend on tradition alone. Our community must now be built with modern technology and materials."***

Speaking about the enduring culture of prejudice and exclusion by his Khoja community particularly against local Tanzanians, he said: ***".....We in Tanzania have had the wisdom to build our houses, but I am not sure if we have the understanding to establish our home"***

He warned his community that their long-term survival would depend very much on their ability to adapt to change by embracing it, shedding their prejudices and seeking a greater integration into the Tanzanian social fabric.

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Two decades on, I am not sure how successful Mr. Sumar was in convincing his people and I would very much love to have a chance to talk to him about that today.

If you ask me, his community, like the Ismaili, has continued to thrive but their embrace of change and social integration in Tanzania remains tenuous at best if not absent altogether.

Some may say that Mr. Sumar was unnecessarily alarmist when he said what he said but I personally think that was a very wise and visionary reading of changes that are taking place in our society, albeit slowly but steadily.

The challenge for the Ismaili Professionals Network will be to learn from the lessons of history in order to shape a better future and this will include preparing the community for change as the world around them changes.

Deeper social integration into Tanzanian society must be a priority for the network. You must look at the endless stream of opportunities that come with opening up your community to other Tanzanians, beyond welcoming them to your mosques.

Think about having them in your homes, in your businesses and other social engagements. Think about being involved in local politics and being representatives not only of your community's interest, but of the interests of all of us. Let your economic power serve the interest of the wider community of Tanzanians

Needless to say racial prejudice is an outdated concept that has no room in today's multi-racial world. The incident a few years ago that made headlines in local newspapers involving an Ismaili man who was denied permission to bury a child he had with an African woman in the community cemetery sent shock waves across the non-Asian Tanzanian community and is a demonstration of how

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much work still needs to be done in this area.

It is not enough to aspire to be as you say in your manifesto: ***the shape shifting, protean businesses dominating key segments of the East African economy.***

You must aim higher, first because you can and secondly because that is the only way you will be able to sustain your success in the long term.

I wish you all the best in the launch of this important group and thank you for listening to me.

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