

“MY RANGE OF ACTIVITIES HAS GROWN”

Begum Inaara Aga Khan on her top society ranking:

Her Highness was at home on the international society circuit as the wife of Aga Khan. Today, following her separation from the spiritual leader of the Ismailis, this lawyer by trade bows to fewer social conventions—and is more popular than ever before.

Gala: A high-calibre jury elected you Germany’s most popular party guest. What does this distinction mean to you?

The Begum: I am tremendously honoured. But “party guest?”, I never attend parties. Art fairs, opera performances and concerts are not “parties”, and other public appearances are motivated by my commitment to various *aid projects* such as, most recently, the 2006 AIDS Gala.

Gala: Five years ago, you were already in first place with your husband Aga Khan. Remarkably, you held on to your top ranking after the separation. You must have done something right...

The Begum: Mmmm, you tell me. To some degree, it must have to do with my commitment to and presence on behalf of the *aid projects* I mentioned.

Gala: Conversely, did you find that you were no longer invited to some events or that some people turned their backs on you?

The Begum: The opposite is the case, both in Germany and elsewhere. Perhaps because my range of activities has grown and the professional freedom I now enjoy, I have a great deal more attention and interest directed at me.

Gala: How many invitations do you receive each week?

The Begum: I have never counted invitations, but one thing is certain: My favourite and most important events are those involving my children, such as school parties as well as theatre and similar performances. There I sit among all the other parents—proud, moved and convinced that my kids are the “greatest.” I always try to make time for invitations from some good friends. Otherwise, an event must be culturally significant or relevant to one of my charitable projects.

Gala: In your eyes, what constitutes a successful party?

The Begum: The most expensive and extravagant party can inspire lethal boredom. What counts is a cheerful and casual atmosphere, good conversation and a host who makes me feel welcome all around.

Gala: Which occasion impressed you most so far?

The Begum: That would be in the mid-90s when Juan Carlos, King of Spain and a good friend, came to visit my former husband, Prince Karl-Emich zu Leinigen, and myself in Amorbach. In his honour, we gave a concert in the family's own church and then a large dinner at Amorbach Castle. He wound up staying for another two days in our private home and hunting lodge along with a few friends. It wasn't just me who was impressed; the entire Odenwald town went crazy.

Gala: How important is the *dining companion*, and which are the DOs and DON'Ts of small talk?

The Begum: Be it host or hostess... What is important is that you enjoy a good conversation with the people seated next to you. One important "do": Keep your composure even in the face of the most difficult, least talkative neighbours. Stay friendly and patient and search for that topic that he or she will warm up to... otherwise, hang in there until the lunch or dinner is over. And an absolute "don't": bad table manners. And don't pack your plate to the bursting point or loosen your belt when the pants start feeling tight. Also, no picking teeth and coughing on the neighbour's plate...

Gala: How do you prepare for such a night?

The Begum: Just like any other woman... by setting aside a sufficient amount of time. Unfortunately, there isn't always enough.

Gala: How important is a suitable wardrobe and how do you select the right outfit?

The Begum: The outfit should reflect the occasion and your type. One has to be comfortable in it, and I don't believe in masquerading.

Gala: How would you characterise yourself as a hostess?

The Begum: I think I am an unobtrusive hostess who tries to make her guests' stay as pleasant as possible. There is a lot of advance preparation, and I personally attend to every detail. It makes me happy to see that my guests are comfortable.

Gala: Who would be your favourite guest?

The Begum: Bill and Hillary Clinton, whom I've already met on several occasions. I couldn't say who of the two is more engaging to talk to.

Gala: You have made a name for yourself in the world of private charities. What is your motivation and which are your most important projects?

The Begum: On motivation: My parents taught me that charity begins in your own family. My mother's aid organisation not only supports people and animals in need, she also looks after all members of her own family. For us children, she served as an example of compassion and fair play. This is why she has always been a role model for me. And I suppose "charitable spirits" mustn't forget to keep their own slates clean, to address problems and inequities within their own four walls with decency and fairness before trying to make the world a better place. People who aren't willing to do that are not sincere in their claim to benevolence.

To what causes have you committed yourself?

My organisation has invested in giving women and children in the developing world access to education and jobs. Women play an important role in the development of countries because they raise the children and thus exert great influence over their education and future careers. For many years, I have supported micro-credit projects in India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Thailand and other countries. Micro-credit stands for interest-free loans extended to needy women to enable them to create their own existence and sources of income, so they and their children can leave the vicious circle of poverty. In developing countries, women are often the sole breadwinner of their families. Loans range between € 5,000 and € 50,000. In effect, we may be giving the equivalent of € 150 to each of 200 women in a village, who then go out, buy seeds, sowing machines, fishing nets or similar goods and build livelihoods of their own.

[Caption]

Two years ago, Inaara Aga Khan became the patron of the Berlin AIDS Gala.