

**THEORIZING THE NECESSITY FOR
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN CAREER
DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF CAMEROON**

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In this presentation I will do three things: give a rationale of today's meeting; emphasise on the theme of today's lecture, and lastly reiterate on the importance of professional associations to us as scholars in Cameroon.

Distinguished scholars, today we have met to initiate and to preserve the conditions under which collaborative intellectual and critical enterprise is possible. We have met to provide a stringent base for the promotion of scholarship and intellectuality without prejudice of any form, type or idea. We have met to give impetus to our thoughts, to pump new vim into our philosophies and to inspire and sustain new vibrant currents of verve in our discussions of

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language, literature and culture. We have not met to form a theoretical or critical school of thought or to persuade each other to accept the suitability of our individual critical or theoretical methods and techniques. Even if the *raison d'être* of this meeting was to form such a theoretical school of thought; we would only be mimicking the footsteps of other great academics since the beginning of scholarship. We, as intellectuals, are by the nature of our choice supposed to be people of sublime imagination and intelligence; of keen sensibility and originality, and of rare compunction and independence. It is through genuine collaborative efforts that we can weather the storm and strain of the ruthlessness of the political machinations of 20th and 21st century Cameroon as well as define new and improved directions for higher education in Cameroon. It is therefore a necessity for us to welcome the initiative of Cameroon English Language and Literature Association (CELLA) and to participate in preserving it for posterity.

The choice to launch the activities of the CELLA with an annual lecture in honour of a distinguished Cameroonian academic finds it's rational in the need for a professional association. I want to thank Emeritus Professor Kashim Ibrahim Tala for accepting that this lecture should be named in his honour. It takes both humility and courage to accept to be projected into such high scholastic horizons. As the first Cameroonian to earn a PhD from/in a university in Cameroonian, Emeritus Professor Kashim Ibrahim Tala is emblematic of the generations that would work tirelessly to build the prestige of a University system in Cameroon. The lecture series is therefore an honour to a generation, and not only to an individual. In the circle of young Cameroonian scholars, a PhD Thesis Defence in Literature without Professor Kashim Tala on the panel is almost anathema. This is the iconoclastic personality that he has created for

himself by doing what Oscar Wilde describes in the *Picture of Doreen Gray* as what makes a genius. He avers that,

It is a sad thing to think of, but there is no doubt that genius lasts longer than beauty. That accounts for the fact that we all take such pains to over-educate ourselves. In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures, and so we fill our minds with rubbish and facts, in the silly hope of keeping our place. The thoroughly well-informed man--that is the modern ideal. (Wilde, 8)

While nature has left its ravages on Kashim's towering and elegant figure, his genius is enduring. Even as he enjoys his retirement and Emeritus-ship, he continues to supervise PhD Theses, serve on editorial/review teams, teach courses in the PhD program, mentor young colleagues, and serve on PhD defence panels. Like his friend and colleague Professor Bole Butake would say "he is retired but not tired". They together with others like Emeritus Professor Paul Mbagwana continue to be pillars on which younger generations of Cameroonian scholars and researchers in literature, language and theatre lean for direction. This is an effort to make sure that posterity does not hold them responsible for their failure. As the venerable scholar and researcher, Professor Anomah Ngu notes "Let every Professor, Associate Professor, Lecturer or Assistant Lecturer remember that all young men and women are looking up to them for their example. Let not the fault of the next generation be placed on our doorsteps". The creation of the CELLA is therefore a means of creating a more professional setting, beyond the classroom or the corridors of the amphitheatre, through which these seasoned scholars can share not only their sound academic knowledge but also the basic moral and

ethical principles that have guided them through their long and successful careers.

This therefore accounts for the choice of the theme of this inaugural edition of the lecture series -“Kashimism: Representing Voices”. It is the representation of the voices of the generation of scholars, teachers and philosophers to which Kashim belongs, and their philosophies. It also represents the voices of the generations they have painstakingly trained. Kashimism is therefore an act of self-actualization, and this is the bases of scholarship. While Kashim will be remembered in terms of the humanistic precepts of the philosophy of Kashimism, a scholar of his generation like Anomah Ngu will be remembered for his tireless research for a cure of HIV/AIDS while Bole Butake will be remembered for his endless search for solutions to the problems of grassroots populations via the concept of Theatre for Development. These are people who have spent an entire lifetime doing what Noam Chomsky describe as “trying to understand things, trying to work things out, maybe trying to articulate and express that understanding to others and so on” (Chomsky, 7). It is these self-actualizing acts that make scholarship a divine activity as David Brooks postulates:

Self-actualization is what educated existence is all about. For members of the educated class, life is one long graduate school. When they die, God meets them at the gates of heaven, totes up how many fields of self-expression they have mastered, and then hands them a divine diploma and lets them in.
(*Bobos in Paradise*)

From my understanding, self-expression is the ability of the scholar to live ineffaceable marks on the path of scholarship either through dedicated attention to the field and/or

students or through the provision of solutions to the problems of the masses or the postulation of some philosophical doctrines that transforms civilization. Through such acts the scholar receives eternal existence in the minds of civilisations. ‘Representing Voices’ is therefore a call for scholars in Cameroon to stretch a hand of fellowship across generations and build the towers of knowledge required for the improvement of the existential conundrum of humanity. I want to thank Fr. Michael Suh Niba – the Associate Professor of Theology and Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University of Cameroon; Professor Nol Alembong of the African Literature Department of the University of Yaounde 1; Professor Shadrach Ambanasom – the Deputy Director of ENS Bamenda, University of Bamenda; and Associate Professor Kizitus Mpoche – the Vice Dean in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Douala. They have honoured the invitation of the CELLA and will through their lectures be contributing to this act of divine self-actualization that intellectuals are called to perform.

The key value of a professional association is that it offers a strong and collective voice to the professionals in a domain, especially in terms of influencing or formulating policy. Janet Bray has observed that the basic truism about an association is that it is “a group of people who voluntarily come together for a common purpose or interest.” Therefore, membership to a professional association is made entirely on the basis of free will and this is guided by interest or purpose. Through professional associations intellectuals “form a community, bound together by a sense of mutual affinity, by attachment to a common set of rules and common identifying symbols” (Shils, 38). This is because as Bray further notes “one of the things that an [professional] organization does is to provide some stability and comfort in people's lives by bringing people together, by

providing a safe place for people to join” and by creating avenues for people to develop in their fields of study.

Professional associations are by the very nature and purpose an “effective source of professional development” (Bray). Associations have the potential to pull expertise in the field from different parts of the country and the world in order to raise awareness on relevant issues in the domain. Today we have expertise from all over the country that the association has pulled together to provide a basis of discussion on the representation of voices through the philosophy of “Kashimism”. Basically therefore, “it is a valuable source for your own professional development” (Bray). Our Cameroon setting and situation makes the necessity for such “a valuable resource” indispensable, especially in a world where professional collaboration in research has grown increasingly beyond national boundaries.

In a context like that of Cameroon where the dominant culture in academic circles is “characterized by ‘intellectual Darwinism,’ or the pursuit of excellence through competition and human sacrifice” (Bickel, 91), professional associations become even more instrumental because they provide the context for collaborative work and professional development. Janet Bickel situates professional association with the matrix of collaborative effort between and among colleagues by stating that “Professional societies form a living matrix where minds meet and engage and where trusted colleagues pool their knowledge, helping each other to glimpse and plumb larger forces at work, to see connections among events, and to imagine the future” (91). The professional association therefore creates an atmosphere not just for “minds to meet and engage” but more importantly it provides a convivial context for “trusted colleagues” to congregate and build connections necessary

for growth in professional life. It is the pool into which professionals pour and draw out new ideas, energizing philosophies and motivating ideologies. Janet Bray talks about this collaborative effort in terms of the professional awareness programs that the association provides. She says “collectively what we can do is provide programs that promote awareness of the profession, and that's done in a multitude of ways”. The KIT Annual Lecture which we are holding today can be situated in this context of awareness of trends in our profession. It is easy to talk to your supervisor, or to colleagues in your university but it is far easier to have access to information, and to colleagues who have expertise that you wouldn't otherwise have.

The need to network with more people in one's profession and other professions that are closely related to one's field of study is increasingly relevant, given the new dynamism and ever changing philosophies in almost every field of academic life. New trends show that we are living in an age in which “With knowledge exploding at an ever faster rate, it is impossible to be an expert in everything one needs to know” (Bickel, 91). Within most Humanity Departments in Cameroon, general trends show that junior colleagues feel undervalued, and sarcasm and distrust are more evident than cooperation and the upbeat attitude that should typify the world of scientific thinking. The professional association thus provides a more neutral ground for collaborative efforts through networking as members become part of a community of scholars willing and ready to share knowledge. Bickel points to the relevance of networking in an interesting and intriguing way,

An extensive network is like a sensory and intelligence system providing information on emerging forces. Thus, it is wise to build a diverse “constellation” or “mosaic” or “board”

of coaches, advisers, learning partners, peers, and junior and senior colleagues. Seek critical thinking partners who can ask great questions, see many sides of complex issues, identify hidden assumptions, offer new lines of sight, and challenge and expand your “mental models.” (Bickel 91)

The platform of networking either through meetings (like the one we are holding today) or through the medium provided by technological advances are fundamental for professional growth to both junior and senior colleagues. Bray puts it even more interestingly when she says “Now, you can pick up the phone and talk to people you know, but how do you reach those you've never heard of that have excellent information and ideas, who have done current significant research?” The association provides a common ground for such new connections with new people in your field of specialization. While email communication is an efficient means of sustaining the networking relationship, momentary phone calls can keep the relationship warmer and more operative. Coaching, advice and learning partnerships are generated in the meetings of associations and they are veritable learning mediums for both the mentors and mentees in the field or subfield of study. Associations bring key experts in the field and make them accessible to its members. This can be at a meeting, on-line, or through articles in a journal/magazine, but it allows you access to expertise. Within the context of a professional association, it is thus imperative to invest valuable energy creating networks with scholars in one's domain of scholarship.

The creation of networks is even more important because it helps in building bridges across generations of scholars. In fact, the congregation of junior and senior

members of the academy in the context of a professional association enables junior members to assimilate the highest professional norms, to become and remain dedicated to an academic career, and to navigate complex situations and career-building challenges and difficulties (Bickel 92). Professional associations create an “ecology of learning” within which the binarism or polarity of senior/junior colleagues is neutralized to produce a community where the senior mentors the junior on the possibilities of attaining a fulfilled academic career. The neutralization process is not intended to blur the lines of seniority or academic grade; contrarily it is intended to celebrate this and push for collaborative energy so that others can develop. Through various activities professional associations build an academic community where individuals incessantly learn from one another and seek to share new solutions or ideas as they are conceived and developed. This makes professional associations to be more of what Edward Said describes as “the cult of the certified expert” (*Representations*, 57) because it makes the individual members to become “marketable and above all presentable” (*Representations*, 55). Within this academic community, senior colleagues meritoriously and freely share the gift of their connoisseur and expertise and junior colleagues openly share their perceptions in interactive efforts at career development.

The final product of meetings on a common ground to share ideas, of creating new network possibilities, and building bridges of professional excellence to other generations is to make the result of such collaborative work available to the larger world of scholarship. This is attainable through publication. Cameroon provides a peculiar situation when it comes to publishing the product of our research because at moment there is apparently no neutral academic journal in the domain of English

Language, Literature and Cultural studies. What I mean when I talk about a neutral journal is a journal that is not attached to a particular university or university department. Experience has shown that the journals attached to universities or university departments most often justifiably serve the immediate needs of the university because much of what is published is research carried out by scholars of that institution. This is justifiable as I said because one of the aims of a university is to promote research and scholarship by its staff and to make the results of such finding available to the immediate and extended research communities.

In other domains in Cameroon, professional associations like the Cameroon Centre for Human Rights and Democracy publishes a scientific journal on issues of human rights and democracy in Cameroon. This means that professional associations are necessary for career development because they provide the opportunities for publication and distribution of research results. Within this backdrop the CELLA intends to provide such publication opportunity to its members and the scholarly circle nationally and internationally. The CELLA is working towards the publication of JELLiC: Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture. The formal procedures for registration have been completed. All that is left now is the publication of the first issue to authenticate its existence. We are also pleased to inform you that the first volume of the journal will be published soon beginning with a special issue made up of presentations from today's event.

It is our responsibility to be what Edward Said refers to as “functional scholars” – to diagnose the problems of society and to define a course for it. Alan Lightman summarises Said's discourse of what the public intellectual represents in terms of the mission an intellectual has to fulfil, which is “to advance human freedom and knowledge”

and this entails “standing outside of society and its institutions and actively disturbing the status quo” (“The Role”, Par. 9). While we are teachers in our various institutes and so fulfill the role of “traditional intellectuals” as defined by Anthonio Gramsci, the CELLA provides the possibility for us to understand that in today’s dynamic and information oriented world we must transcend this traditional function to become “organic intellectuals” (*The Prison Notebook*, 9); we must be involved in the life of the society in the constant struggle to change the mindsets of those who look up to us for solutions to the problems of the society. If we enter into this Annual Lecture and other activities of the CELLA without losing our sense of proportion, and without trying to save ourselves by embracing individual personality cults, and yet without abandoning the special individual values each of us bring, then we can accomplish much in the domain of scholarship in language, literature and culture. In other parts of the world today, the objective conditions for a renaissance in these domains are strong. We are profoundly conscious of the conditions in our context but we know what we are about, else we would not be here today. If we can leave from here with a consciousness of the solidarity of our purposes, with a cohesion we have not hitherto enjoyed, and, most important, if we can lay the foundations for other meetings and an academic journal which will be produced with stability, which will truly represent our scholarly interest, and which will address itself to the broadest possible audience, then the effort which has gone to the creation of the CELLA and to make this inaugural edition of the Kashim Ibrahim Tala Annual Lecture will not have been futile.

The intellectual’s power to change and/or influence society is enormous, and so s/he must be aware of the effect

of what is said or written or done. Thus, a major value essential to the intellectual's condition is respect - self-respect and respect for others. Apart from being individual thinkers, intellectuals are also public servants and so they represent forces and ideologies that are far larger than themselves and their specific disciplines. This means that the intellectual must be able to engage with the changing issues of society and still remains true to certain "unchanging principles". This is where one of the tasks of the intellectual - how to reform and improve society - comes out very clearly. The ability to define a clear stand and to take up the education of other citizens or to work towards the changing of the social and political mind-set is a defining feature of the intellectual.

In conclusion, therefore, professional associations are indispensable tools in career development. While providing a common ground for collaboration and creating avenues for sharing ideas and information, it also makes experts in the various specializations available to its members as well as encourages professional networking so that there can be clear academic links between the different generations of scholars. Most importantly, professional associations publish the results of members' research findings and keep them current professionally.

Note on Contributor

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