

## **KASHIMISM: REPRESENTING VOICES**

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I would like to begin by expressing my profound gratitude to the organizers of this inaugural edition of the Kashim Ibrahim Tala Annual Lecture Series in particular and the Cameroon English Language and Literature Association (CELLA) in general for dedicating this Annual Lecture Series in honour of my significant contributions to scholarship. I wish to express my deep appreciation to the eminent Professors whose participation has made this occasion possible. I also want to thank all of you who have come from far and near to grace this solemn occasion. Finally, and above all, whatever I am, and whatever I have been able to do, I owe everything to the Almighty God. I thank Him for giving me the grace to live to see this day – the day that is memorable in the life of any academic.

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The academic gods and goddesses will not forgive me if I fail to acknowledge and pay vibrant homage to my academic godfather, master and guardian angel, the venerable and matchless Emeritus Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon. Great thinker scholar, and venerated teacher you transformed my life in many ways. I had my PhD under your tutelage. You arranged for me to do my Post-doctoral studies in Oral Literature at the Pennsylvania State University in the United States of America. I changed grade from Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer under your mentorship. I remember very vividly that whenever the going was rough, when roads appeared to be blocked, when cocks refused to crow, and when keys refused to open the door you were always there to comfort and encourage me. But, Shu Fai, you never lived to see or enjoy the fruits of your efforts. That is my only regret. In fact, if I had that audacity, I would have questioned God for taking you away from us, your disciples at such a crucial moment in our lives. But who am I to have the mettle to question the Almighty, let alone attempt to redirect your divine direction? Nevertheless, I am consoled by the fact that since you passed through transition in 1986, I have gone through the professional grades of Associate Professor, Professor and, finally, Emeritus Professor. I haven't matched your performance. But who can dare to have the audacity and intrepidity to match the exploits of such a giant colossus as your peerless self? To God be the Glory.

Events like the one we are inaugurating today are not necessarily limited to the recognition of merit or to the celebration of remarkable scholarly achievements. Rather, they also constitute a forum with the immeasurable potential for facilitating the vibrant exchange of ideas on the core values that should be animating our university community. Thus, as far as I am concerned, this ceremony is also an occasion for deep reflection and for making resolutions that

can guide our future actions as university dons and therefore as critical thinkers and opinion leaders.

In my thirty seven years of unblemished university teaching and two years into my well-deserved retirement and into my tenure as Emeritus Professor, I have had the singular opportunity of reading the works of distinguished thinker scholars and eminent philosophers. I will not bore you with the rather long list. Suffice it to say that I have read Bernard Nsokika Fonlon; I have read Victor Anomah Ngu and I have read Christian Cardinal Wigan Tumi. I have also been well grounded in traditional African philosophical thought and ideology. I have cogitated on the tenets of these humanist philosophies, and I have compared their elevated and inspiring ideas with the realities on the ground here in Cameroon before arriving at my own sedate conclusions on the present state of the educational system in Cameroon, and our roles and responsibilities as university Professors in the system. Thus, with your kind permission, I would like to share with you some of my personal views on the subject.

But, before delving into the heart of the matter, before going straight into the business of the day, I will like to begin with a clear unambiguous definition of my terms. Therefore, what is **Kashimism**? Etymologically, Kashimism originated from one of my names, Kashim. It was also a neologism coined by my former students at the University of Yaounde in the nineteen eighties to describe my esoteric, grandiloquent and mellifluous language which was in vogue at the time. But, with the passage of time, its connotation has been expanded to encapsulate my philosophy of life. Thus, the term Kashimism is an umbrella word which means different things to different people. It will be used on this occasion to refer to my eclectic, broad based, introspective and reflective humanistic philosophy. Kashimism teaches, among other things, the tenets of self-restraint, humility, modesty, tolerance, patience, understanding, altruism, and

transparency in our dealings with others. Above all, it exhorts us to put our intellectual and technical competence at the service of our society. It may interest you to know that thanks to Kashimism, I have personally learnt to rely on my own insight and foresight rather than on those of others. I have learnt to come to my own conclusions rather than slavishly accept the conclusions of others. Above all, I have learnt to take my own decisions in life for better or for worse and to live with the consequences of my own actions. Thus, Kashimism represents the voices of liberal and social humanism.

As I mentioned earlier, this ceremony is not only for jubilation. It is also for reflection. This is where Kashimism as a humanistic philosophy comes in. That is, I will use the kashimistic periscope to focus, however briefly, on the relevance and adequacy of the Cameroon educational system and our roles and responsibilities as elders and teachers in it.

### **The Cameroon Educational System**

Generally speaking, education is the process of establishing habits of critical thinking, intellectual development and independent appraisal of human values and qualities. Bernard Fonlon defines education in a similar vein as “the physical, the aesthetic, the intellectual and the moral upbringing of man” (Fonlon, 1965:15). Seen from this perspective, education is meant to develop the individual intellectually and morally and prepare him to function effectively in society. Fonlon goes further to state that if education is to perform its fundamental function of nurturing the individual, it must, of necessity have a system. The nature of this system of education,

will depend, in the main on what sort of individual that particular society wants to produce, on what is their idea of the perfect

man. And their idea of the perfect man will depend, to a large extent, on the problems that beset the society; for their ideal man will be the man best equipped, best able to meet these problems. (Fonlon, 1965:14)

Thus, Fonlon is saying that an educational system is established by a particular society to meet its specific needs. J. B. Agbase (2000:54) reinforces Fonlon's point when he affirms that:

No educational system stands apart from the society which establishes it. It has purpose that must be achieved if that society is to continue in the right direction. Education is meant to be embedded in that society, drawing inspiration and nourishment from it, and in turn contributing to societal opportunities for growth and renewal.

Agbase's statement above raises the following questions: From where did the education system originate? What is the philosophy behind it? What are its guidelines? By whom is it managed? What and whose social vision is it setting out to serve? The obvious answers to these questions are that the Cameroon educational system originated from imperialist Europe. It was managed in the first instance by the Europeans themselves and later by their Cameroonian surrogates for the purposes of imperialist domination and cultural oppression. That explains, in part, why the education system in Cameroon today concentrates on imparting cognitive, linguistic and vocational skills which transform young Cameroonians into efficient machines designed exclusively for the labour market. At the same time, it ignores the teaching of indigenous knowledge and humanistic values contained in our oral literature which help in the creation of socially responsible individuals. Hence, the serious incongruities which exist between what is being

taught in our schools, colleges, and universities today and what is socially and politically relevant. This is a matter for regret because oral literature has been used in the past and is being used in the present to teach among other things, the importance of togetherness and group solidarity; to inculcate the necessity for mutual respect, tolerance and moderation; to reiterate the need for appropriate action; to ensure compliance with religious norms; to remind the people of the necessity of circumspection, and the importance of recognizing and accepting one's limitations. As the distinguished former Secretary General of the United Nations Organization, Kofi Anan affirms:

We have African traditions to draw on, traditions that teach us the values of democracy based on consensus. Our traditions teach us to respect each other; to share power, to give every man his say and every woman hers. Consent and consensus achieved through long and patient discussion are at the heart of these traditions. (qtd. in Tala, 69)

The point being made by Anan is that before the advent of colonialism, Africans had a viable traditional system of education. It was informal. That is, through watching and imitating the examples of grown-ups and by participating in the daily life of the community. In other words, cultural content and cultural behavior were passed on to the young through oral literature. This oral literature is neither antiquarian nor antediluvian. Rather, it remains ever changing and dynamic. Its thematic content is being constantly broadened to reflect the important issues of the day. Above all, it maintains, as Austin Bukenya (1994:2) asserts, its educational relevance.

We undertake it mainly because we are convinced that it is a valuable educational experience contributing to the total growth,

development and self-fulfillment of the person exposed to it. Oral literature imparts to the growing person useful cognitive and affective skills which enable the person to live a rewarding life and to be a useful member of society. Oral literature should make the learner more keenly observant, more sensibly and sensitively responsive towards her or his own self, fellow human beings and the environment. Above all, oral literature being a mode of communication should make the learner a competent, more skilful and more concerned communicator, especially through the oral mode.

Dona Rosenberg, on her part, is concerned with the moral capacity of oral literature to help members of a community to make sense out of the many imponderables of life and to create order out of chaos by providing moral answers to such philosophical questions as:

Who am I? What is the nature of the universe in which I live? How much do I relate to both the known and the unknown world? How much control do I have over my own life? What must I do to survive? How can I balance my own desires with my responsibilities to my family, my community, and the powers that control my world? How can I reconcile myself to the inevitability of death? (qtd. in Tala, 74)

Hence, by deliberately hesitating or even refusing to incorporate oral literature fully into the education system, the Cameroon government is indirectly pushing Cameroonians to commit cultural suicide.

It is obvious from the above that the fundamental problem facing educationists in Cameroon is the rapid and significant decline in the ethological aspects of the education offered in the country since the attainment of

political independence. The point must however be made that the Cameroon education system has been subjected to a plethora of transformations, transmutations, transmogrifications and reformations over the years, all in the crucial attempt to decolonize the system so that it can respond effectively to the realities and exigencies of contemporary Cameroon. But, the efforts of the Cameroon Government to revamp the system, though laudable and commendable, are, to say the least, grossly inadequate. The over-riding question therefore is: how can our policy makers supplement the obvious ethical deficiencies in the present educational system? There are several answers to this perplexing question. But, for the purposes of this paper, I will limit myself to three. The magister magnus and votary of the philosophia perennis Bernard Fonlon believes very strongly in religion as the basis of moral education. This is what he has to say: "I believe in God, as the fount and origin, the final end, the Alpha and Omega, of all Truth and Goodness and Sublimeness. I believe that no right-minded makers of universities should ignore (not to speak of spurn) that science which strives to make man's knowledge of Him more profound; they will be omitting the vital link, in the chain of college knowledge" (Fonlon).

The outstanding scholar and deeply religious Anomah Ngu, on his part, states:

Although technical competence is on the increase in the world, it is my personal opinion that the decline in the quality of University men and women as leaders in many parts of the world especially in Africa is due to a great extent, to the exclusion of religion from the University. This exclusion gives the impression that man has himself become a simple piece, an object without a soul. Since machines can do no wrong as they have no



soul, man has to equate his own actions with those of the machines. Morality is based ultimately on the conscious awareness of right and wrong, which in themselves are anchored ultimately on the knowledge of, and acknowledgement of the supremacy of God. The absence of religion which teaches and reinforces this morality must inevitably lead to chaos and anarchy.

Both Fonlon and Anomah Ngu are right in saying that religion and morality are two sides of the same coin and that religion should be fully integrated into our educational system. I agree with them that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I also agree with them that morality and a unified cultural ethos cannot be achieved or sustained in any institution of learning in the absence of religion. The only difference between us is one of degree rather than of substance. That is, while Fonlon and Anomah Ngu see morality from the perspective of the Christian religion, I as an Africanist, see the same phenomenon from the perspective of our oral literature which contains our indigenous knowledge, and which is anchored in our traditional religion. I therefore believe that since the educational system was not originally designed specifically for Cameroonians, it follows, logically that there is an urgent need to re-orientate and relate it to the rehabilitation of Cameroon's culture, tradition and value system. That is why I wholeheartedly endorse the view advanced by Olowo Ojoade that the "quality of instruction at all levels has to be oriented towards inculcating the following: moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations" (Ongoum and Tcheho 1989: 101). He adds that this instruction must be geared towards "self-realization, better human relationships, the right types of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the society" (Ongoum

and Tcheho, 1989:101). This return to a full understanding of traditional principles and a full grasp of how they can work especially in changing times and circumstances is what Cameroonians really need if they are to break away from the cultural limbo that is destroying the social health of their country.

Therefore, what is imperative today is that Cameroonians both old and young must make a conscious effort to re-familiarize themselves with, and re-assimilate their cultural values. For that to become a reality, our educational policy makers must follow the advice of Oyekan Owomoyela (1989:414) and ensure that oral literature reassumes the educational and ethical roles it played in the traditional context:

The goal of policy makers must therefore be to ensure that a thorough grounding in the ways of our fathers is a mandatory and significant part of the upbringing of youth, and this can be done by making folklore in all its ramifications a central part of the educational curriculum, and a mandatory subject for all. By so doing we might in time achieve, once again, societies in which the observance of proper form translates into stability, harmony, and collective ease.

This section has drawn attention to the richness of indigenous knowledge contained in oral literature and has demonstrated how this knowledge can be used to resolve the post-colonial problems of governance in contemporary society. It has also highlighted the educational and ethical potentials of oral literature in order to encourage its vigorous promotion in our school system. The goal has been to demonstrate how the ethical and moral gap in the existing education system can be filled by the moral precepts embedded in oral literature.

## **The Roles and Responsibilities of Professors and Elders in the System**

The social organization of most Cameroonian societies it will be recalled is based on the philosophical assumption that age and the experience that goes with it are indispensable to the well-being of the community. Hence, the proverbs: “a village without elders is like a well without water”; “when there are no elders in a town, the town is disorganized”; and “an adult does not sit and watch while the she-goat suffers the pains of childbirth tied to a post”. These proverbs indicate that Cameroonians respect age because of the sagacity and the perspicacity that goes with it. They also believe that longevity is the best schooling in life. That is why they expect their elders to be responsible for their actions and to act responsibly. These convictions are again encapsulated in the following proverbs: “good palm-wine becomes better with age to a good drinker”; “a new broom sweeps clean, but the old broom knows better all the corners of the house”; “the youth may have as many clothes as the elder but he will not have as many rags”; and “what an old man can see sitting down, a child cannot see standing up.”

The substance of these proverbs is that elders and, by implication, university Professors are respected mainly because of their maturity and wealth of experience. But the prestige and privileges which Professors enjoy by virtue of their age and experience also impose certain obligations on them. For instance, they are expected to set the right examples for the youth to follow by always acting with propriety and behaving with proper decorum. This is contained in the following proverb: “the lead horse sets the pace for those following”. This point is substantiated by the fact that in order to earn the respect due to their superior years, these respectable and responsible citizens must demonstrate some wisdom and experience. They must be

prepared to discharge the responsibilities and duties of their status, and must show themselves to be morally worthy of the homage and respect paid to them.

It is a known fact that as a result of the rapid socio-economic, political and cultural change, which Cameroon has undergone and is still undergoing, various vices found their way into the society thereby weakening its unified cultural ethos. Consequently, Cameroonians in general and the older generation in particular began to be alienated from the traditional ways; to be marked by their extreme individualism and to develop a code of behaviour based on unmitigated egotism. This confusion of values, in my opinion, has prompted some well-meaning but misdirected university Professors to abdicate their responsibilities to the society in general, and to their students in particular. That explains why some of us who have been entrusted with the responsibility of advising the political leadership, prefer to safeguard our positions and privileges by giving the advice that we feel would be pleasing to the ears of the powers that be rather than risk their frown and anger by giving honest and well-informed advice. Some of our colleagues, by aligning themselves with corrupt political officials, deliberately turn a blind eye to the massive corruption and crass materialism around them, condone the wanton abuses and excesses they see, and become themselves puppets in the hands of Machiavellian puppeteers.

The point that I am making here is that we, as elders and university Professors, have wittingly or unwittingly betrayed the trust which our country has placed in us. We have abdicated our moral responsibility for seeking lasting solutions to the spiritual, cultural, social, financial and other problems facing our country. Thus, we have either directly or indirectly contributed to the ethno-chauvinism, pervasive corruption, gross mismanagement, rising unemployment, unprecedented inflation, political chicanery and absolute

lack of restraint and tolerance that necessarily accompany good governance. In short, we are responsible in part for the imbroglio in which our country finds itself today. The youth, especially the university students, in turn are flabbergasted by the inanities of our servile conformism. That is why they are quick to retaliate by repudiating their obligations to society and to us their elders and Professors. That, to my mind, is at the root of the moral decadence and depravity which characterize contemporary life in Cameroon. Thus, it is common today to find our youth especially our university students indulging in such deviant behaviours as examination malpractices, heavy drinking and smoking, reckless driving, indecent dressing, sexual promiscuity, cyber criminality popularly known as scamming, lying and cheating in such a way that they get all the advantages out of life without giving anything back in return and, finally, in downright rebellion against authority and authority figures.

It is clear from what has gone before that the youth, especially our university students are increasingly exasperated by our nonchalance and philistinism especially our inability as their elders and teachers to be models of rectitude, for marginalizing them and for refusing to use their scientific knowledge and technical competence. As the Okedijis put it,

When, with the introduction of a foreign culture, problems become more complicated, varied and differentiated... It is the young people who are brought into immediate experience of the changed conditions. Hence a regime in which youth has no chance of making its wishes known is not likely to be best adjusted to meet situations as they present themselves from day to day, and consequently, is not likely to make progress. (qtd. in Tala, 86)

Our youth are painfully aware of this fact. That is why they are shocking us with calculated acts of rebellion. Therefore, if we, as elders and teachers who now control virtually everything in Cameroon want our country to make any meaningful progress on the path towards economic growth and modernization, we must appease the youth by incorporating them into decision making bodies and creating enough room for their inputs especially in the resolution of important social, political and economic issues. In doing so, we should bear in mind the proverb that says “when a sheep is old, it is suckled by the young ones.” Furthermore, if we as elders and teachers want to continue to influence Cameroon’s perception and sense of direction, we must go back to the ways of our fathers and re-assume the social and ethical responsibilities which we have so shamelessly discarded. That is, we should learn to live by example and by precept. We should also bear in mind that “the child of a snake is also a snake.” In other words, a child often takes after its parents especially their negative traits. The great but humble teacher, Anomah Ngu takes a similar stand especially when he says that:

I need not remind anyone that in this matter of preparing our future leaders the senior and academic staff have an irreplaceable responsibility of teaching by their good example and by precept. 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. If this appeal to the University to produce good leaders for our country is heard and heeded we shall all be pleased and perhaps a little proud when history will recall this day as the turning point in the history of Cameroon.

Edmund Burke has told us that “people will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors” (Burke, 1869: Para. 10). The great African philosopher, Ali Mazrui (1986:21) has emphasized this fact especially when he reminded us that:

Two broad principles should influence and inform social reform in Africa in the coming decades. One is the imperative of looking inwards towards ancestry; the other is the imperative of looking outward towards the wider humanity. The inward imperative requires a more systematic investigation into the cultural preconditions of the success of each project, of each piece of legislation, of each system of government. Feasibility studies should be much more sensitive to the issue of “cultural feasibility” than has been the case in the past. Africa’s ancestors need to be consulted through the intermediary of consulting African usage, custom and tradition.

This imperative of looking inwards towards our ancestors is the essence of Kashimism and the substance of this treatise. Therefore, if we are to assume our full responsibilities as elders, teachers and role models; if we are to help our country is to move forward in the right direction, then we must appease our ancestors. And there is no better time to do so than now. As the distinguished English playwright and dramatist, William Shakespeare has propounded,

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life,  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures. (Shakespeare, 1623: 269–276)

### **Note on Contributor**

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