

Literacy and Human Rights

By Caitlin McInnis

We were happy to host Kabu Okai-Davies as he spoke passionately about the relationship between literacy and human rights recently. Okai-Davies is a Ghanaian-Australian playwright, poet, theatre producer and novelist, who has lived on four different continents and chosen Australia as his home.

Through his studies and his experiences growing up in Ghana, Okai-Davies came to understand the importance of literacy in enabling people to protect and assert their human rights. Okai-Davies comes from a culture where history and knowledge has been passed down through generations by oral traditions. For some cultures, this oral tradition has meant that reading and writing has not been needed or used as a communication tool. Okai-Davies argues that this has left these cultures vulnerable to human rights abuses.

“The spread of literacy leads to the democratisation of civil liberties and human rights.” Indeed, Okai-Davies believes that without literacy, the democratisation of developing countries is impossible. Okai-Davies discussed the idea that knowledge is power, it enables self-empowerment and self-advancement and suggested that in a post-industrial society, illiteracy can be equated to a form of disability. The issue for disenfranchised groups is that they cannot fully participate in our increasingly globalised world and are vulnerable to red tape, discrimination and human rights abuses. He reiterated several times that the best way to empower Africa is not through aid, but through

books and the “quest for knowledge”.

Okai-Davies also argued that “we have to create a transnational understanding of other cultures”. This is what he calls the ‘new literacy’. As Okai-Davies described it, literature is one way to build bridges between cultures. He calls himself a ‘creative activist’ – achieving change through his writing, instead of through marching in protest.

For Okai-Davies, literacy is a life-long passion. He defines it as “what we build our foundation of understanding on. Literacy ... is the catalyst for human enlightenment and the impetus for stimulation or creative imagination.”

As well as discussing how literacy liberates, Okai-Davies spoke about his time in Ghanaian politics. He said the culture of politics in Ghana was so dangerous he eventually decided to leave. “I did not want to die for my country, I wanted to live for it,” said Okai-Davies.

Okai-Davies concluded with a comment on dealing with past atrocities. He asserted, “if you can’t rationalise past atrocities, you cannot forge a new future.” For Okai-Davies, literacy is not just about being able to enjoy the writings of great novelists; it is an important tool for asserting human rights and developing equally and peacefully as humans.

Solon Solomon: the refugee, the person behind the mask

By Caitlin McInnis

Before a dedicated crowd of Castan Centre supporters, UK-based academic Solon Solomon delivered an impassioned plea for the rights of those who, displaced by conflict, seek asylum in a world where fear and insecurity threaten to narrow minds and harden borders. Stretching across various philosophical and religious traditions, Mr Solomon implored his audience to reject those who cast compassion for refugees as a political misstep, and encouraged the use of restrained rhetoric when discussing the movement of refugees and national security.

As a noted international refugee law scholar at King’s College’s Dickson Poon School of Law, Mr Solomon reaffirmed the importance of the post-war order and the continued role the foundational documents of international human rights law ought to play in the legal and moral decisions confronting those in positions of power. Mr Solomon encouraged the audience to consider human rights law as an “evolving entity” which, born of the French and American revolutions, manifests itself in their respective bills of rights, and enshrines every person’s right to dignity and respect.

Declaring that refugee law must be seen as an embodiment of this language – a righteous point lying on the progressive end of a rights-oriented spectrum – Mr Solomon reinforced the importance of the right to freedom of movement. This right demands principled protection by both responsible governments and a morally active citizenry.

In pivoting to what he sees as the crucial binary challenge that refugee movement presents to the international community, Mr Solomon asserted that the legitimate human desire for security cannot silence individual compassion and deny our common humanity. In this challenge, Mr Solomon affirmed the inherent complications of refugee law, in which the contradictory desires - toward compassion and for security - are uprooted from the internal life of an individual moral agent, to expose fissures within nations and in the international community.

For Solomon, the solution lies in transforming the personal desire for security into a collective commitment to freedom, where “real freedom is not freedom of choice, but the freedom to pursue one’s internal abilities”. As such, true security flows from a mutual trust, between refugees and the communities which ought to embrace them, where the freedom to move underscores collective security by guarding against individual insecurity of the person. In this sense, in uncovering the otherwise impersonal refugee ‘behind the mask’, Solomon encouraged his audience to disavow the rhetoric of fear, and instead secure a common humanity that reaffirms dignity and respect of the person and the righteous language of human rights law.

A video of this event is available on our [YouTube channel](#).