

## **The Annual Conference of Nigerian Association of Law Teachers: Cerebral, Jamboree or a Ritual?**

**By  
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

“Conference” is defined as the act of conferring: an appointed meeting for instruction or discussion<sup>1</sup>

And “confer” is defined as to give or bestow: to talk or consult together.<sup>2</sup>

Conference, therefore is synonymous with instruction, discussion, consultation or talking. It imports a gathering or convocation of like minds having a productive discourse and interaction on a given subject or subjects with the objective(s) and goal of reaching certain points of agreement. It is not unusual in a formal conference to harmonize positions and at the end of the debate, discussion and discourse come out with a position or agreement often referred to as the communiqué. The modern or formal conference especially that of professional associations is epitomized by the presentation of papers, workshop, symposia, robust, cerebral and seminal intercourse of ideas.

This paper seeks to examine the question whether or not the recent Annual Conferences of Nigeria Association of Law Teachers (NALT) have kept the flag flying, upheld, bettered or have let down or lowered the standards of such conferences. Ipso facto, whether or not the conferences are well organized, robust, agenda setting or the conferences have become ichabod-like, the glory having departed therefrom? These questions are asked particularly against the backdrop of the 2009 and 2010 conferences hosted by Abia State University, Uturu and the Kogi State University, Anyigba respectively.

Are the conferences still cerebral or have they become jamborees where law lecturers socialize, wine and dine; afford the hosting University the opportunity to showcase itself to the world to prove that it has come of age

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers English Dictionary, W&R Chambers Ltd, 1990 p. 298

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

in terms of infrastructure; or have the conferences become mere yearly rituals to fulfill all righteousness, to fulfill the expectations and quest of members that at least, the yearly rites of conferences have been held?

### **1.1 NIGERIAN ASSOCIATION OF LAW TEACHERS (NALTS) PREVIOUS CONFERENCES**

The Nigerian Association of Law Teachers organizes annual conferences for law teachers in Nigeria. Nigeria has as at 2010 not less than 36 Law Faculties excluding the Nigerian Law School and the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies.<sup>3</sup> At each annual conference, law teachers and researchers converge to present papers as well as to engage in robust discussion and analysis of the papers so discussed. Ideas are exchanged in vibrant, provocative, lively and sometimes heated debates and discourse.

In the past, at least at the Lagos Conference in 2004 and the Jos Conference in 2005, a participant upon registration is issued with a receipt, a name tag, and most importantly, a bag containing at least most of the papers to be presented in the course of the conference. The participant is given the opportunity to have in advance copies of the papers to be presented to enable him to go through to “sharpen his knives” to add value to those papers.

Prior to each conference, a university is assigned a topic flowing from the theme of the conference to prepare a paper for presentation. A different university on the other hand is assigned the task of doing a critique of the paper so presented as discussant and thereafter, the “real” interaction session commences as the floor is opened for all other participants to give their comments, questions and observations. The university assigned to prepare the main paper usually ensures its paper gets delivered or sent to the conference organizers or Local Organizing Committee (LOC) weeks before the conference to enable the LOC to mass produce copies of the paper for the benefits of participants at the conference.

Discussants and participants are afforded the opportunity to read the papers before presentation in order to enhance the quality of debate. The cardinal

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<sup>3</sup> Babalola, A.A “Legal Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Prospect and Challenge”, being keynote Address at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of NALT held at Kogi State University, Anyigba, 17<sup>th</sup> May. 2010. p.1

rule in civil procedure to wit: that “no surprise is sprung on the opponent”<sup>4</sup> is dully and fastidiously observed.

It is therefore, no surprise that law lecturers look forward to the yearly “pilgrimage” of the annual NALT conferences with eagerness and great expectation as the conferences, the papers, the discussion and the communiqué usually are so enriching that they provide literally for the legal profession, legal education as well as the nation the way forward and a road map for national development. Every aspect of the programme was usually challenging and agenda setting. This includes but not limited to the opening ceremonies, the chairman’s opening remarks, the welcome address, and the guest speaker’s address.

### **1.3 INDICES OF A GOOD CONFERENCE**

The indices of a good conference are by no means exhaustive. For an academic conference like that of NALT, good and superb organization is a sine qua non, and an indispensable variable to the success of its annual conferences. So what are the indices of a good academic conference or of good and superb conference organization? Below are some of them;

- a) Presentation of good, quality, sound papers;
- b) Good presenters, discussants and lively participation;
- c) Prior circulation of papers to be presented as well as other conference materials such as bags, conference brochure, information and writing materials;
- d) Convinient, airy or air-conditioned venues;
- e) Timely programming and timeliness;
- f) Appropriate information and coordination concerning registration, accommodation and other logistics;
- g) Timely food, refreshment, hospitality, tea and general breaks;
- h) AGM and accountability.
- i) Appropriate and timely recreation, entertainment, tours etc to break the monotony of the conference;
- j) Easy registration, early registration and early access to conference packages.

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<sup>4</sup> See Overseas Const. Ltd V. Creek Enter. Ltd (1985) 3 NWLR pt.13 p.407; Orjiekwe V. Orjiekwe (2002) NWLR pt. 762 p. 31; and Order 17 Rule 7(1) High Court Civil Procedure Rules of Kaduna State, 2007

- k) Good vendor stands for books, journals, magazines and other relevant academic and intellectual resources.

#### **1.4 SOURCES OF INCOME/SPONSORSHIP FOR NALT ANNUAL CONFERENCES.**

The sources of income or sponsorship for NALT Annual Conferences include the following:

- a) Registration fees. This includes:
  - i) Individual registration by each participant; and
  - ii) Corporate registration by each institution-the universities, the Law School and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies;
- b) Annual membership dues by each member;
- c) Support from Federal/State Governments, especially, the State where the university is situate;
- d) Support from persons, corporate organizations, institutions, associations and individuals;
- e) Support from the hosting University;
- f) Support from the hosting Faculty
- g) Any other legitimate source.

#### **1.5 2009 AND 2010 CONFERENCES: CEREBRAL, JAMBOREE OR RITUAL?**

The last two conferences deserve a dispassionate assessment, not out of a desire to blame or praise the organizers of the conferences but to realistically situate the conferences to determine whether or not there is room for improvement. We shall assess the conferences on the following benchmarks:

##### **1.5.1**

##### **1. REGISTRATION**

All over the world, registration for conferences are now done on the internet well in advance of such conferences. Consequently, registration, accommodation details and fees are settled on the net and through e-payment. By the time a participant arrives the venue, his receipt, conference package, tag and hotel reservation (if opted for) would be ready. Arrangements are made for early bird registration attracting normal or less fees while late registration fees are higher.

The last two NALT conferences did not appear to have taken cognizance of these developments which have been made possible by developments in information technology. Participants had to queue up and manually register and at times had to supply certain information more than once, yet, the 2010 conference had the theme “Legal Education in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Prospects and Challenges” with topics such as “ICT in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Legal Education”! and “Legal Research Insights for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”!. It is difficult to reconcile such topics with the reality of 17<sup>th</sup> Century conference organization by NALT in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How could NALT be talking of ICT in Legal Education and yet be unable to organize its conferences taking advantage of developments in ICT?

For the avoidance of doubt, methods of registration vary. Web registration provides the most efficient means. Registration forms and other information such as hotels and rates can all be made available on line. Registration online affords the organizers the opportunity to keep detailed record/data of the people who have registered and to arrange their conference materials. A good conference website is not out of place here. A good online registration system eliminates much of the event organizer’s work by automating tasks that were once done manually like data entry reporting, mailing and payment processing work.

### **1.5.2**

## **2. CONFERENCE PACKAGE/MATERIALS**

NALT conferences are annual. The conference organizers have one whole year from the preceding to the succeeding conference to organize, to plan, to put in place necessary logistics for the success of the next conference. They have one whole year in the maximum and months in the minimum to demand for advance copies of papers to be delivered at the conferences.

Modern conferences ensure that conference bags contain all the registration, conference and writing materials. The conferees are usually given all the conference papers and materials on arrival. This is made also possible, thanks to development in technology. In some cases, the conference papers are bound for the conferees before arrival. Certainly, it will be scandalous for conferees to attend a serious conference with only an empty bag on

registration, or to be seen scrambling for conference papers like dogs on a hound or like kindergartens scrambling for sweets.

We are not unaware of the jaded, irksome and unacceptable excuse that paper presenters did not avail the organizers their papers before the conference. How did previous conference organizers in the days when information technology was not as available as now succeed? There is a trite saying that when a fish smells, it starts from the head.

In responsible and serious conferences all over the world, all paper presenters are given advance notice of the closing time for submission of presentation of their papers to the organizers. Any presenter who does not meet the deadline knows the stable door is bolted against him. It will be difficult for responsible presenters when given reasonable advance notice of theme and topic of their papers to default.

Let us assume a scenario of a conference taking place in May, 2011. The organizer has May 2010 – May 2011 to prepare for the conference. The organizer sends out the theme and topics in May, June or July 2010 and gives the presenters deadlines of up to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2010 to submit their papers. If there is any default, a small extension of up to end of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011 is allowed. The months of February to April will undoubtedly suffice for compilation and packaging of the materials. By May, happy conferees arrive the venue for a robust meeting.

The 2009 and 2010 NALT conferences with regard to conference papers and materials were a fiasco and completely scandalous. Several conferees left at the end of the conference with not even a single paper in their hands. Discussants were made to discuss papers they had not read or where they were availed copies had no prior opportunity to read same as they were served such papers at the discussion session in the venues or as legal practitioners lament “in open court”.

Papers to be presented should have the following minimum duration or deadline before the event i.e. call for papers-9 months; receipt of papers-6 months; registration 5-2 months before the conference; packaging of materials last 3 months, that way participants data would be adequately captured affording the organizers the opportunity to print name tags.

certificates etc. in addition to the conference materials already packaged. An attendee merely presents a secret code or proof of registration and his whole package is handed over to him.

Little wonder, therefore, that the discussions at the last two conferences were not robust, provocative or lively. Some presenters were given just about 10mins for presentation of their papers in contrast to the elaborate opening ceremonies that took hours. The purpose of the conferences were inverted, the opening ceremonies replaced paper presentation. Jamboree replaced scholarship and pedagogy. Praise singing replaced analysis. Conferees who attended and were neither presenters, discussants or high table officials had no benefit of having the papers being presented to be able to add value to such papers or to be able to appreciate the contents and import of the papers. No wonder the conferences were bereft of intellectual contents and candour characteristic of such previous conferences.

### 1.5.3

#### 3. TIMING

Timing was another sore point at the conferences. At “owambe” functions, Mc’s have the habit of apologizing for starting late. NALT last two conferences were no exception. Glib and indisciplined people often attribute lateness to “African time”<sup>5</sup> insulting and assaulting our sensibilities. At the last two conferences, the programmes were not even followed. Sample from the 2010 conference programme:

“Day 1 Sunday, May 16, 2010, Arrival, registration and jazz fest”

Comment: there was no registration or jazz fest.

“Day 2 8:00am registration continues”

Comment: registration started around 10:00am.

“10.00am opening ceremonies...”

Comments: opening ceremonies started around 12:00 noon.

Throughout the conference that was the pattern. Dinner slated for 7.00pm was served at almost 10.00pm. There was no integrity or credibility with regard to time, programme or promises. Can you imagine breakfast at

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<sup>5</sup> “African time” is a cliché derogatorily used to capture lateness to functions.

3:00pm and lunch at 4:00pm the same day? No wonder dinner billed for 7:00pm was served at 10:00pm.

Yet, we are trying to raise or teach leaders of tomorrow. We purport to be persons of honor in pronouncements and words but not in action and deeds. For emphasis, the programme of the conference is one of the most important documents of the conferences as it sets the tone for success or failure. It is not enough to circulate one but to maintain integrity and credibility it must be followed. Departure from schedules where necessary, should be slight and minimal. The agenda is like a map, it is the blue print for the event.

#### **1.5.4**

#### **4. FOOD**

Let us veer from the intellectual to the seemingly mundane and material – food-yes food not books. Beside severe breaches of the order of the programme – not for good – but for worse is the fact that after a long session conferees are further subjected to long queuing for food, sometimes for close to an hour-long after others have finished eating food. Imagine about 200 people on one long queue for food from one serving point! Even the unlettered knows that the solution to this issue is simple. If serving 200 people from one serving point will take an hour, when you create five serving points, you serve the same 200 people in 12 minutes or better still create ten serving points and you shorten the time to 6 minutes. The conferees and caterers are less tired. The efficiency of the caterers is guaranteed since there is no monopoly as several caterers are engaged. The time wasted at the food point for the conference and conferees is saved. Stress is eliminated. Conferees refresh and their good spirit is maintained.

#### **1.5.5**

#### **5. THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)**

The AGM at least that of 2010 which held on 17<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2010 at Anyigba, Kogi State has turned out interesting revelations. That members have not, for about ten years paid annual membership dues; that there has not in the past 10 years been any form of account as to the income and expenditure of the hosting of NALT conferences or of the association; that accounts of the Association have not been regularly audited; that neither the minutes of meeting of 2005 nor that of 2009 conference was available and,

inter alia, the open secret that proceedings of the last two preceding conferences were not ready. What serious association runs its affair in such a lax manner? No, not even the butchers association of Ajegunle.

It must be noted that the AGM of NALT is a very important segment of the annual meet. The Association is expected to do stock taking and set in motion arrangements for the next conference. For the last two conferences, nearly two-thirds of the members depart before the AGM. The apathy to the AGM is not unconnected with the shoddy arrangements hosting universities make for the conferences. The poor attendance at AGMs eventually translates to lack-luster contributions at the meetings. Eventually, NALT is starved of the robust contribution and constructive criticism that will redefine the NALT and reposition it as an effective instrument for social change. Little wonder that rather than improve, the deterioration is worsening.

## 1.6 CONCLUSION

From the discourse undertaken, it is manifestly clear that the NALT Conferences are on the edge of the precipice, precariously tilted in a manner that if care is not taken will lead the Association from ritual lane unto jamboree rock and thence to the crevices and charlatan valley. The conferences may eventually sound the nunc Dimitis for the Association if the free descent is not urgently halted.

In conclusion, we stress that planning for any NALT annual conference should commence at least a year before the event. An event will always turn out to be disastrous if it is not given enough time and careful planning. There is an alliterative saying known as the "6P Rule", that is, *Prior Preparation Prevents Pretty Poor Performance*. The secret to successful conference organization is good planning and meticulous attention to detail. A hosting Faculty of Law where it does not have the ability by itself to organize such a conference should be encouraged to hire professional conference organizers, conference caterers etc. to help in organizing future conferences or to co-opt as conference planning committee members from other universities. A university that cannot individually host the conference can co-host with another university.