

Take Me to “Gbassajama Land”: “Traditional Liberian Culture Will Never Be Extinguished; Not on My Watch!” Rabbi Gbaba Assures the World



*Female Sande dancers of the Liberia National Cultural Troupe*

Dear Fellow Liberians and Citizens of the World:

Several years ago, the Liberia National Cultural Center was destroyed by the present government of Liberia under the watch of Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf; and in place of our national cultural shrine at Kendeja was built a brothel (not a hotel) owned by a foreign businessman. I do not know why all the men and women of indigenous descent in Liberia that work in government and those of us in the diaspora could not resist the destruction of our national heritage. Surprisingly as well, many Indigenous Liberians are law makers, interpreters, and executors of the law when our traditional culture and history was being destroyed, but no one said a word or did anything to prevent this gross disrespect of our blessed heritage from happening.

Instead, lawmakers, politicians, and the international community watched bulldozers dig out and destroy the Sande and Poro bushes and our sons and daughters in government conducted business as usual without any resistance. Even the zoes, dazoes, the Bodiohs, and Bah-gwions, they did not say a word either; and if they did, it just was not loud enough to be heard by a leader who pays deaf ears to the woes of her people! But ironically, she wears fancy lappa suits at public forums to impress the world that she is a true African stateswoman. No, that is no statesman or stateswoman ship: it is called “Selling your Cultural Heritage and people to gain favor from your slave masters”!

This is a very sad story and a disgrace to all Liberians to have our cultural heritage vehemently attacked and destroyed without those in authority in Liberia standing up to defend and protect the sacred traditions of our forefathers. Thus, every time I think about it, I shed tears

because the culture of a nation is its image and once a nation and its people do not have an image they can be proud of, they are doomed to fall as a nation and people.

It was in this state of mind, one of nostalgia, that one day I found myself lamenting and thinking of those good old days as youths in Monrovia when we traveled across the bridge to Vai Town, to purchase a bowl of cassava leaves and rice from Ma Miatta's Cold Bowl Shop. Consequently, I thought to scribe a poem entitled: "Take Me to Gbassajama Land" to relieve me of the nostalgia or homesickness I was experiencing; and to promise all Liberians and citizens of the world that traditional Liberian culture will never be extinguished—not on my watch!

Also, this year is the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, as it was established at the University of Liberia in 1977. Since then we have been upholding the flames of our rich and diversified Liberian and African cultural Heritage through the performing and visual arts so that generations yet unborn may learn about the rich traditions of our forebears. The event will be held at the African Cultural Center, 5000 Springfield Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19143. We invite all of you to attend in numbers to make a strong statement to the world that Liberia is not dead; she will rise again and will always be the Lone Star of Africa and the Israel of the Black Race. I now conclude my brief discourse by asking you to travel with me as we read the poem: "Take Me to "Gbassajama Land"!"

"Take Me to Gbassajama Land"

Look at you! As soon as I said: "Gbassajama Land"

Your mouths started to water up!

Because you know the deal

When I say "Gbassajama"!

As I told you before

Foods we eat may unite us

So you do not have to be Vai

To know what "Gbassajama"

Or "Cassava Leaf" is in Liberia

Even the baby still in his ma's stomach

Leaps with joy when he hears the word: "Gbassajama"!

“Gbassajama” is a delicacy  
From the home of the Manjahs and Majahlins  
A people of great culture and pride  
And they are believed to be intellectually inclined

But man oh man!  
Those Native Vai, Gola, Mende  
And Americo-Liberian women  
They can burn their fingers like hell!  
Go to Vai Town in Monrovia  
And what do you see—  
So, so, Vai cook shops!

Vai cook shops here  
And Vai cook shops there  
Ma Bendu’s Cook shop here  
And Ma Miatta’s Cook shop there!



*A view of Vai Town on Bushrod Island, Monrovia, Liberia*

And those days  
When “cold bowl” was “cold bowl”

And when it only cost twenty-five cents  
You could eat three bowls Of Ma Yatta's "gbassajama"  
And still want some more!

Sometimes we asked her for "dash"  
So we could have extra to eat  
And after we had our fill  
The old folks say:  
"Belly full and butt drunk!"

Instead of heading home  
We hanged around Vai cook shops  
To wrap the fine Vai chicks!  
The little fresh ones from the Sande Bush  
That served their mothers in the kitchen  
But Ma Yatta had "to dig" your speed first  
Before you could hang around her Sande girls  
For this reason we got glued to Vai cook shops  
Because the Vai old moms  
Knew how to give us "yatnonnh"  
To run our guts!

"Yatnonnh" is the African voodoo  
The Vai old moms put in the food  
To give you the "go-come-back" stroke!  
And when you ate "yatnonnh"

You could go to the medicine man  
And it would not work  
Because the string of the “yatnonnh”  
Was tied beneath Lake Piso  
And only the Vai old moms knew  
Where to go to get it out of the lake  
So you were juked by “Jessie Jane”  
Even if you went to a molly man to undo  
The Vai old moms’ “yatnonnh”!

That was how “Fast Peters” collected  
That Vai chick named Musu  
Right in front of my damn two big, big eyes!  
And why did that “gboo-gor” cut my throat?  
It was because he knew how to say:  
“Yah-kooneh” (“Good morning”) in Vai  
But I did not!

Also “Fast Peters” was a “yanna boy”  
And he always had some “mile”  
In his last ass pocket  
To put Ma Yatta in the “zoe bush”  
But I was a broker

One good thing though  
Fast Peters” was bitter like “jologbo”  
But I had the looks of an angel  
Nevertheless, that damn “Charlie Gboo-gor” had speed

Anyway, he burned my wife with the younger sister  
Her name was Mymah  
And she was finer than Musu  
So our “Gbassajama” speed  
Was not only limited to food  
It extended to hustling  
The real, real “Gbassajama”!

Therefore “Gbassajam Land”  
Is not only about delicious Vai, Gola,  
Or Mende or Congor dishes  
And it is not only about beautiful Vai, Mende,  
Gola and Americo-Liberian women  
From Grand Cape Mount County  
Who burn their fingers like hell  
And that put “yatnonnh” in your food

Instead “Gbassajam Land”  
Is also the land where Momolu Duwalu Bukele  
A learned Liberian sage and legendary scholar  
Was inspired in a dream  
To create a writing system for the Vai language  
Thus, Bukele’s Vai script  
Proves our forebears were literate  
Long before the Settlers came  
Long before European explorers came to our verdant shores  
To what is now modern day Liberia



*Dehkontee Artists Theatre Cultural Ambassador Madam Kormassa Bobo, a professor of Traditional Liberian Sande dance. Madam Bobo will be honored during the 40th Anniversary Celebration of Dehkontee Artists Theatre on September 16, 2017 at the African Cultural Center in Philadelphia, PA.*



*A display of traditional Liberian culture*

Okay, let us put food business aside  
And talk about Vai, Gola, and Mende cultures  
What about the Sande Bush dancers  
And their awesome female masks!

Look at their “an-yan tay-tays”  
Beneath those white or red pieces of cotton cloths  
Vai, Gola, and Mende Sande Bush girls tie around their breasts  
To hide their juicy and bouncy tits  
They hide from the greedy eyes of Liberian men!

Look how the Sande girls bow  
Before their Manjahs and Manjahlins  
As they burst into an exuberant dance!  
And listen to the sasa,  
The country xylophone  
And the fast beat of the drums  
And see how those pretty Native girls conjure their audience  
All that is part of what I call “Gbassajama Land”! You dig!



*A beautiful view of Lake Piso in Robertsport, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia.*

Okay, suppose I add Lake Piso  
To the “Gbassajama” “gaylah”  
Then you will beat me?  
Suppose I tell you “Piso” means:  
“Pigeon holes” in Vai  
Because the pigeons came to Lake Piso  
From all spheres of the globe  
To drink the sacred water Of Lake Piso  
Or “Fisherman’s Lake” as it is also called  
Then you will “tar-bay” Or “dee-bee-die” me!  
Suppose I tell you  
The Vais, Mendes, and Golas  
Believe their ancestors live  
In villages and towns underneath Lake Piso  
And that there are times  
When you hear drum beats  
From beneath the lake  
As Vai, Gola, and Mende ancestors celebrate their feasts  
Then I must give you “quay-lay”  
Because you do not know your culture!

Anyway  
Whatever your case is  
Just remember that “Gbassajam Land”  
Comes with many attractions and flavors  
That is why I say:  
“Take me to “Gbassajama Land”

Where we can celebrate our history and culture  
With pride and dignity and in unison

Yes, no matter how turbulent the tides of history may be  
We have a binding force that will keep us afloat  
And that is our culture and history  
And the beliefs and precepts of our forebears  
Remember our forebears are urging you and me  
To cherish and keep our culture alive  
And to never allow rascals to flush our blessed heritage  
In the commodes of their filthy deeds!

***About the Author***



Rabbi Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba is a playwright, theatre director and actor trained at the prestigious School of Music, Theatre and Dance at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro where he obtained his MFA in Drama, with emphasis in Directing and Acting. He is also a constructivist pedagogue with a Masters in Elementary and Special Education and a Doctorate degree in Educational Leadership from St. Joseph's University, a Catholic Jesuit institution located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Gbaba is founder and Executive Director of Dehkontee Artists Theatre which was established in 1977 while he was pursuing his undergraduate degree in English Literature from Liberia College at the University of Liberia. His doctoral dissertation is entitled: “The Chiandeh Afrocentric Curriculum and Textbook Experience: Exploring Children’s Responses to an Afrocentric Curriculum”. You can read his dissertation on ProQuest. As an artist/scholar, his research interest lies qualitative research studies and Afrocentric curriculum development and textbook production, and the immersion of African studies in the school systems across the globe.

Rabbi Gbaba is a self-published author of three books: *Ah-zeo, Ma Garh*, a book about Liberian/African Feminism from the African perspective; *The Frogs and Black Snake in Frogsville* (an African children’s fireside fable which he also translated into a play), and *Conflict Resolution and the Concept of Change* that he will be launching at the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Dehkontee Artists Theatre on September 16, 2017 at the African Cultural Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The African Cultural Center is located at 5000 Springfield Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19143. The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala includes a book signing ceremony; dinner, talent and fashion show, fundraiser, and 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ball. Funds raised from the event will go towards the formal launching of the national peace and reconciliation and cultural awareness campaign in Liberia in 2018.

Tickets for the event can be purchased online at: [www.dehkonteeartists theatreinc.com](http://www.dehkonteeartists theatreinc.com) and click on the “Donate” button to pay for the ticket of your choice. The prices are as follows:

Grand Patron: \$100 (includes dinner and copy of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Brochure, and VIP seating)

Patron:\$50 (only includes dinner; have to purchase a 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary brochure at \$20)

Couple: \$35

Ordinary: \$20

Souvenir Brochure: \$20

Copy of Conflict Resolution and Concept of Change: \$30

Published by the Public Relations Office of DATI

April 25, 2017