

**“Kukaylay Kukatonon: A Clarion Call for Bong and All
Liberian Citizens to Unite and Rebuild Liberia!”**

by



Rabbi Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba, Sr., Ed. D.

Keynote Speaker

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Salutations

Mr. President, officers and distinguished members of the National Bong Association in the Americas, Inc., platform guests, fellow Liberians, Americans, and citizens of the world:

Princess Ariminta and I greet you in the name of Almighty Kameh and the spirits of our forefathers and foremothers, the likes of Chiefs Kpangbai, Paye, Kuyon, Toto, Suacoco, Yanwapolu, and Superintendents James Y. Gbarbea, Sr., Augustus Korkoyah, Harry Augustus Greaves, Sr., Joseph Yowarteh, Bardeh Zaza, Ayun Cassell, Sr., Venecious Vorkpor, etc.

Special thanks also go to Honorable George Toto, officers, members, and convention organizers of the National Bong County Association in the Americas, Inc. for selecting me to be your keynote speaker.

The expression “Kukaylay kukatonon” means “We are all one” in the Kpelle language. It is the central theme of my message tonight to all Liberians and the people of Bong County who technically speaking are my surrogate brothers and sisters-in-law because my wife’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rameses A. Porte, Sr. were prominent citizens of Bong County. We were married at the St. Peter’s Episcopal Church nearly forty years ago. Three of our children were born as Bong County citizens at the Phebe Hospital in Suakoko District and my family and I lived on the campus of Cuttington University where I served as a professor in the Humanities Division from

1985-1988. Therefore, I share a lot of profound memories about Bong County that I will never forget.

Now, let us get started.

Barteen oh, Barteen!

Yor-yor!

Introduction

In your letter of invitation, you specifically requested me to speak on the topic: ***“Uniting Bong County Citizens to Contribute to the Social-economic, and political development Amidst Disunity and Corruption.”***

However, Bong citizens are not the only citizens from Liberia that are experiencing ***disunity*** and ***corruption***. Rather, disunity and corruption are widespread in the Liberian society—even beyond the borders of Liberia and around the world. This is the reason many Liberian organizations are dysfunctional, including the nation itself. Hence, there is a Liberian parable that states:

“They say Goat’s head got burned and then you are asking if Goat’s beard got burned too??”

Hence, to put your request into proper historical, cultural, and political context, please allow me to modify my title to read as follows: ***“Kukalay Kukatonon: A Clarion Call for Bong and All Liberian Citizens to Unite and Rebuild Bong County and Liberia!”***

Also, I advise that before you react to my message tonight, I want you to please listen to my message, read it many times and digest it first before you vomit your dislike or disagreement and/or express your content because it requires ***sober reflection*** but not ***emotional reaction***. And, after you have soberly reflected on my message, it is my hope you will be inspired to do something to remedy the deplorable condition of our people if indeed you and I are genuine and patriotic citizens of Liberia and as true Pan Africanists who believe in being forerunners of our own destiny.

Therefore, my “Kukaylay Kukatonon” message is a national and international call for concerted and deliberate political and social justice actions to curb mayhem, atrocities, lawlessness and long suffering of the Liberian people. Thus, as true warriors of peace and reconciliation, we must tell Satan “Enough is enough! We must tell Satan we want peace and we want justice now!” Also, one of the concerted actions we must take immediately is to redefine the citizenship of Liberia. Below is what I believe we should practice as Liberian citizens.

Redefinition of Liberian Citizenship



In my view, a citizen of Liberia is a person who was born in Liberia and/or was born in a different country but migrated to Liberia and acquired legal citizenship through the process of naturalization. Or, if the immigrant is a child, that individual may become citizen of Liberia after the child turns eighteen and opts to become a Liberian citizen. Hence, once you are a citizen, whether natural born or naturalized, you are entitled to all rights, privileges and opportunities thereto.

Therefore, I want to make it categorically clear to all Liberians moving forward, that you do not have to be a Kpelle man or woman or, you do not have to speak Kpelle, or Mandingo, or Mahn, Lorma and Bassa to become a Bong County citizen. As a citizen of Liberia, you can choose to live in any region of Liberia where your desire for self-preservation or pursuit of happiness can be fulfilled. This applies to all other counties and ethnic groups in Liberia.

In view of the foregoing, to discriminate against a Liberian citizen because he or she is not originally from any region of Liberia where he or she chooses to live in Liberia, or to discriminate against any Liberian based on ethnic, religious, political background, violates the Constitution of Liberia. Thus, I want to believe that there should be a law or statute in the Constitution that protects the interests of all Liberians against discrimination of any sort.

Further, we must put a STOP to tribalistic tendencies that impede socio-economic development in Liberia based on tribalism and/or ethnic cleansing. Instead, we must rebuild the new Liberia on the "Kukaylay Kukatonon" message and foundation. We must work collectively to rebuild Bong County and Liberia because Liberia will develop and become second to none on the continent of Africa if all its citizens, those of indigenous and settler descent, work together to make it happen. This is not impossible. I make this assertion because, if my wife who is Americo-Liberian and I an indigenous Liberian, can live in peace and harmony for nearly forty years, then it is possible that Liberians can live side by side as brothers and sisters if they learn to

respect one another. That's what the Kpelle expression "Kukaylay Kukatonon" manifests—
togetherness—national unity!

***Bong County's Contribution towards the Expansion of Liberia's Territory in the Hinterland
and National Social, Economic, Political Development in Liberia***



As a citizen of any county in Liberia, it is important to be aware of the history and culture of that region or county. Citizens of Bong County played a significant role in expanding Liberian government authority in the hinterland of Liberia. They also play a significant role towards Liberia's national social, economic, educational and political development.

For an example, during the founding of the First Republic of Liberia which initially consisted of three counties (Montserrado, Grand Bassa, and Sinoe) in 1847, the territorial confines of Liberia extended within a 45-mile radius from the Atlantic coast towards the hinterland. Therefore, any African living beyond the 45-mile radius was not a citizen of Liberia. So, Kpelle, Mahn, Mandingo, Bassa and Lorma people who at the time lived beyond the 45-mile radius of what is currently Bong County were not Liberian citizens. Instead, those ethnic groups were ruled by traditional kings and rulers who formed splinter kingdoms and principalities after the collapse of major African empires and kingdoms, such as Songhay, Mali, Ghana, Benin, etc.

Also, back in the day, the Kpelle kingdom extended as far as areas in Guinea before the Berlin Conference and the balkanization of the African continent. Thus, due to its central location in Liberia, Bong County and its citizens played a crucial role in the expansion of the Liberian government's authority in the hinterland of Liberia. For an example, Madam Suakoko is recorded as the first and only Kpelle female ruler in the hinterland of Liberia. She made significant contributions towards making Bong County a gateway to national socio-cultural, economic development in Liberia.



Portrait of Madam Suakoko

According to information on Madam Suakoko's tombstone in Suakokota in Bong County, Chief Suakono is believed to have lived from September 23, 1816 to April 11, 1927. She convinced her tribesmen to cooperate with the Liberian government and she is also credited with providing land to the government and other institutions for the establishment of the Central Agricultural Research Institute (CARI), Phebe Hospital, and Cuttington University. Suakoko is also regarded as one of Liberia's prominent feminists and one of the earliest notable advocates of gender equity and women empowerment in Liberia. Today, we have the first female Vice-President named Jowel Howard-Taylor who was once Senior Senator of Bong County.



Inception of Bong County and Why Bong and Liberian Citizens Must Unite and Work Together

To help you understand why Bong and Liberian citizens must unite and work together, it is crucial that I provide you some historical information about the inception of Bong County and other hinterland peoples who were integrated into the Liberian political system the same time as you were. This may provide some light for you to understand where you come from, where you are now, and where you must decide to go from here.



Tomb of Madam Suakoko in Suakokota, Bong County

In 1964 indigenous Liberians living in the hinterland from Bong, Grand Gedeh, Nimba and Lofa were given county status with full representation in the National Legislature of Liberia through President William V.S. Tubman's National Integration and Unification Policy. Before then, the government of Liberia exercised an indirect rule system whereby Liberian citizens mainly from other coastal counties like Maryland, Sinoe, Grand Bassa, Montserrado, and Grand Cape Mount ruled and represented the people in the hinterland without the citizens' input.



That changed when President Tubman declared Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh, and Lofa as counties. Honorable James Y. Gbarbea, Sr., was appointed the first Superintendent of Bong

County and Gbarnga became the county's headquarters. Some of the principal cities and towns in Bong County include but are not limited to Gbarnga, Suakokota, Salala, Palala, Weala, Konola, Totota, Playtota, Sanyei, Bong Town, Sanoyea, even including Ganta which is both a Kpelle and Mahn city.

Kpelle people call it Ganta and Mahn people call it Gompa, but this city is in Nimba County. This further suggests there was and is a very close tribal bond between the Kpelles and Mahns prior to and after the introduction of modern government structure in Liberia. Both ethnic groups were separated when the St. John River was declared the official boundary between Bong and Nimba Counties by the Liberian government.

Hence, it is worthy to note this political milestone occurred in the lives of indigenous Liberians in the hinterland almost *one hundred and seventeen (117) years after Liberia declared herself independent. Sixteen (16) years later, the 1980 military coup d'état took place and the first indigenous Liberian named Samuel Kanyon Doe from the Krahn ethnic group of Liberia became Head of State of Liberia.* This was after *one hundred and thirty-three (133) years of Americo-Liberian rule.* Therefore, it has only been forty-two years since indigenous Liberians have had access to political leadership in Liberia and look where we are today!

So soon, indigenous Liberians who now rule Liberia have forgotten the hardships their ancestors endured to gain them access to political leadership! In other words, we have indigenous Liberians starving their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters in Liberian villages and towns more than the indigenous peoples ever suffered during the one hundred thirty-three years of Americo-Liberian reign! What a damn shame!

In view of this critical analysis, it is safe to say the best way forward to remedy Liberia's ill economy and political problems is for Liberians from both sectors of our ethnic divide to work hand in hand. Liberia will be a better Liberia when the rights of all its citizens are secured and protected under the rule of law.

Bong County Is a "Vote-Rich" Political Supermarket in Liberia

Bong County is considered a "vote-rich" political supermarket in Liberia. It has twelve districts: Boinsen, Fuamah, Jorquelleh, Kokoyah, Kpaai, Panta, Salala, Sanayea, Suakoko, Tupahlee, Yallequelleh, and Zota. The 2005 Census estimated a population of 804,000 people but that number shrank drastically to 304,919 as per the 2008 Census, thus putting Bong in third place with Montserrado being first and Nimba second. Therefore, every Liberian politician or every Tom, Dick, or Joseph who has political ambitions in Liberia goes running to Bong County to earn the votes of Bong citizens.

However, instead of valuing the vital role so-called "vote-rich" counties citizens play in the socio-cultural, political, and economic decision-making process and development of Liberia, some citizens from so-called "vote-rich" counties seize the moment to sell votes and to profiteer. They use their citizens to lobby for government jobs and/or to fool Liberian citizens to put perpetrators of heinous war and economic crimes in power in Liberia. This criminal and inhuman practice must stop now!

‘Educated Liberians’ Role in Perpetuating Violence, Corruption and Suffering in Liberia

On a more critical note, I want to address the issues regarding corruption, lawlessness, and the wickedness that is taking place in Liberia. I am convinced the misfortune Liberia is experiencing is mainly due to the unconscionable and wicked acts of so-called ‘educated’ Liberians. Even though this may sound harsh, you will agree with me that the planners of the civil war in Liberia were mostly Liberians in high places with big degrees and international portfolios. In my opinion when a man or woman is educated, he or she must use her knowledge to improve the lives of his or her people but not to destroy lives and properties. If you are an influential Liberian with international connections, use your fame, connections and power to improve the lives of your people.

But sadly, and in most instances, this is not the case in Liberia. Most educated Liberians take advantage of the fact that the bulk of Liberians are unable to read and write and they are unable to freely and fluently express themselves due to high illiteracy rate in Liberia and because most Liberians, especially those in rural Liberia, cannot speak, read, write, understand the English language that is the official medium of communication in Liberia.

Live by Example



On the contrary, this is my suggestion to educated Liberians. Learn to be disciplined and learn to practice your craft to perfection. If you are a carpenter, live as a professional carpenter. Learn to give back to Liberia without making demands to be President. Most of the greatest Americans were not Presidents of the United States. They were ordinary citizens who gave back to their country. Due to lack of professionalism, most so-called ‘educated’ Liberians ask too much from our people while our performances when given the opportunity are not results-driven. Yet, we are quick to criticize someone who is more successful than we are. Instead, let us take up private

initiatives and stop depending on or blaming government for what we as educated Liberians can do for our people and ourselves.

For an example, when the UN pulled out of Liberia it created a deep gap in the peace process. Instead of waiting for or criticizing the government about not promoting peace and reconciliation in Liberia, I decided to partner with college students in Liberia in 2019 to revive Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI). Together, we simultaneously established two DATI chapters in Liberia: 1. DATI Montserrado Dougbor Chapter with headquarters on Duport Road, Paynesville, Montserrado County; and 2, DATI Maryland Gbenelue Chapter located in Harper, Maryland County. The Montserrado Dougbor Chapter was then headed by Statesman Henry Garjay Brumskine but presently, Statesman Henry Fayiah Tamba is Acting DATI Montserrado County Director. The Maryland Gbenelue Chapter was and is still headed by Statesman Meshach Sieh Elliott.



DATI Maryland Chapter in Harper City, Southeastern Liberia

Subsequently, we launched the DATI Kukatonon Peace Project in Liberia in November 2019 after two-and-a-half-month training in conflict resolution, peace education and cultural awareness. Over forty-five Liberian college students volunteered. They took oath and vowed to promote peace and reconciliation throughout Liberia through Afrocentric literacy, the performing and visual arts and civic education. DATI Peace Advocates and youth leaders are very dynamic, credible, and prepared to promote peace and reconciliation against all odds.

However, though we have not received any funding from donor agencies and NGOs in Liberia and in the United States of America for this initiative, some patriotic Liberians and I raised over twenty thousand United States Dollars (US\$20,000) to promote peace and reconciliation in Liberia in the past three years. This year, we launched The Rabbi Joe Gbaba Peace and Cultural Festival from April 15-17 in Harper City, Maryland County, Republic of Liberia. Thousands of Liberian youths participated and attended the event and benefited from our peacebuilding program.



DATI Montserrado Chapter in Southcentral Liberia

Later, the video footages from the festival were shown on local and global television network by PhillyCAM, a local Philadelphia Community Access Radio and Television network in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Our work was honored by PhillyCAM. They aired it beginning July 4th (America's Independence Day) and throughout the entire month of July on every Monday at 1 AM or 2 PM. You can watch our cultural awareness program on PhillyCAM by logging on to www.phillycam.org/watch.

Recently, we signed a contract with a local FM station in Liberia called Radio Advent 93.7 FM to launch the DATI Kukatonon Civic and Peace Education Radio Program beginning the first week in August 2022. In other words, let us talk less and do more and stop making demands about jobs! Let our work speak for itself!

Finally, I would like to add that the incompetence of those who claim to be educated in Liberian communities has helped to prolong our national crisis that could have been resolved in several months instead of being dragged into almost three decades plus. Added to this process, the greed of some 'educated' Liberians and lack of discipline has shamefully turned them into political prostitutes. This is so common in diaspora Liberian communities where heads of organizations that should be seeking the interests of the people back home are too busy working as agents for the status quo in Liberia. Their function is to create chaos in diaspora communities and to distract critical and thoughtful Liberians in the diaspora from monitoring what is taking place in Liberia. The distraction emboldens their benefactors to loot the national coffers and resources of the country while our people suffer back home. This is what is trending in most Liberian organizations in the diaspora. If you are part of this cartel, I appeal to you to stop it! Let us be united so we can combine our resources to help our people back home.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to repeat that Bong County citizens are not the only group of Liberians who are in turmoil back home and in the diaspora. Grand Gedeh Association in the Americas is split and so are many other tribal and county organizations here in the United States. Therefore, I want you to know that by virtue of your and my inability to work together as citizens from the

same country and county, we are partly responsible for the ongoing deaths and suffering of our people back home in Liberia.

God will never forgive you and me for the wickedness being done to our own mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters due to our explicit or implicit silence with respect to the wickedness that is trending in Liberia. I can imagine how Kpangbai, Kuyon, Paye, Toto, Gbarbea, Suakoko, are all rolling in their graves because of our inability to lead a simple organization, let alone a county or the Liberian nation. Therefore, let us learn to dialogue as educated people and to put county, country and the interest of our people first before our egos! I thank you.

Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba, Sr., Ed. D.

Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

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