

Rabbi Gbaba Urges A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89 to Pray and Stick Together: Invites Them to Tripartite Anniversary in December



Last weekend was one of nostalgia when I served as guest speaker at the A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89 Reunion in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The gala was well planned and executed, and the dinner was delicious. The DJ rocked the evening away with great sounds and it brought out the Alligator spirit in attendees at the gala. The ceremony reminded me of back in the day in 1981 when I taught at Zion as an Eleventh and Twelfth-grade English Instructor for morning and evening sessions. It was also during the early days of the Armed Forces of Liberia coup d'état. Throughout the gig, the A.M.E. Zion alumni were vibrant, and they demonstrated a sense of purpose and love for their Alma Mater.

Further, it is noteworthy to state that the cohesiveness, sense of direction, and matureness of the members of A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89 reflected the Christian doctrine of being their brothers' and sisters' keepers. Their cordial interactions and comradery were also exemplary of the academic training that they received and that propels them to strive for excellence within and outside the walls of the Academy that is run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Liberia. Another reason the institution had high reputation back in the day was because of the devoted faculty the school employed and because their former Principal, Reverend Dr. Frederick Umoja, was an astute educational leader, a disciplinarian and a very caring man of God who wanted the best for his Alligator Family.

Reverend Umoja is also credited with establishing the A.M.E. Zion Community College and for laying the groundwork for the establishment of the A.M.E. Zion University. Overall, Reverend Umoja's contribution to the field of education and mentoring Liberian youth is immeasurable.

May God richly bless and keep you in his bosom, our esteemed elder, Reverend Dr. Frederick Umoja. Amen!

Launch of the Reverend Dr. Frederick Umoja Scholarship Fund



The Class of '89's evening dinner and ball began with an opening prayer by Deh-Zulu, and highlights of the event were the formal launch of the Reverend Dr. Frederick Umoja Scholarship Fund and the installation of the newly elected officers of the A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89. Those that were elected and sworn in as officers included William Ngombu, President, Sata Johnson-Kamara, Vice President, Olive Massa, Treasurer, Bablochu Chili James Sio, Secretary General. Mr. Thomas Farley, a member of the class, served as installing officer.



Mrs. Veta Umoja dressed in black.

The Class also presented a plaque honoring Reverend Umoja for his invaluable service to the school and the Liberian nation. His wife, Veta Umoja, received the plaque on behalf of her husband who was unable to attend. She expressed profound gratitude to Reverend Umoja's former students for the love and respect they have for her husband and she wished the youth success in their endeavors. More than twenty-three members of the class, including myself, pledged to pay the tuition of at least one A.M.E. Zion Academy student for Academic 2023-2024. The estimated cost of a student's tuition at AME Zion Academy is **Three Hundred and**

Fifty Dollars (\$350) per annum. An estimated Eight Thousand and Fifty Dollars (\$8,050) may be realized if all the pledges are fulfilled. Anyone wishing to donate towards the Reverend Dr. Frederick Umoja Scholarship Fund may contact the President, William Ngombu, at williamngombu@gmail.com.



Mr. Thomas Farley served as the swear-in officer for the night.

Other attractions of the evening included two talented members of the class of '89, Thomas Farley and William Mitchell. Both guys had the audience spell-bound with two musical selections. Thomas Farley vibrantly sang and danced to the rhythmic beat of his gospel song "God Bless Liberia", and his classmate, William Mitchell, nailed a famous disco beat of the 80s called "Rhythm of the Night".



Celebrants doing the famous Liberian quad-drill.

The entire hall went wild and 'loko'. People jumped from their seats and went on the dance floor to boggy down to the ground! Later they did the famous Liberian quad-drill. It was a real fanfare.

I also suggested to William Ngombu, the President of the Class of '89, that his organization could raise funds by staging a talent show in which gifted members of their class could perform and exhibit their innate talents. Throughout the night former classmates hugged, danced, and shared their experiences with one another as students within the walls of A.M. E. Zion Academy during what I would term *'normal day'* Liberia.

Kukalay Kukatonon and the Preservation of Liberian History and Culture



Rabbi Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh and Princess Ariminta Gbaba: "Liberia is better when Indigenous and descendants of Settlers live side by side."

The theme of my discourse was ***"Kukalay Kukatonon"***, a Kpelle expression that means, "We are one." My message was about national unity, integration and the promotion and preservation of Liberia's history and culture. Together, my wife and I echoed the belief that Liberia is better when Indigenous and descendants of Settlers live and work side by side. I narrated the story of my calling as a Liberian playwright forty-nine years ago when I was a senior student at the prestigious Carroll High School in 1974. I told my distinguished audience how the theme of the first play I ever wrote and staged at the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa, Nimba County, Northern Liberia, was about "National Unity and Integration". It has been forty-nine years since I began my vocation to promote national peace and integration in the performing and visual arts, but after

almost half a century, Liberians are even more divided than they were forty-nine years ago. What might be the cause of this national stagnancy I rhetorically asked?



A Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc.'s production of Dr. Joe Gbaba's "The Minstrel's Tales" at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia, Liberia 1992

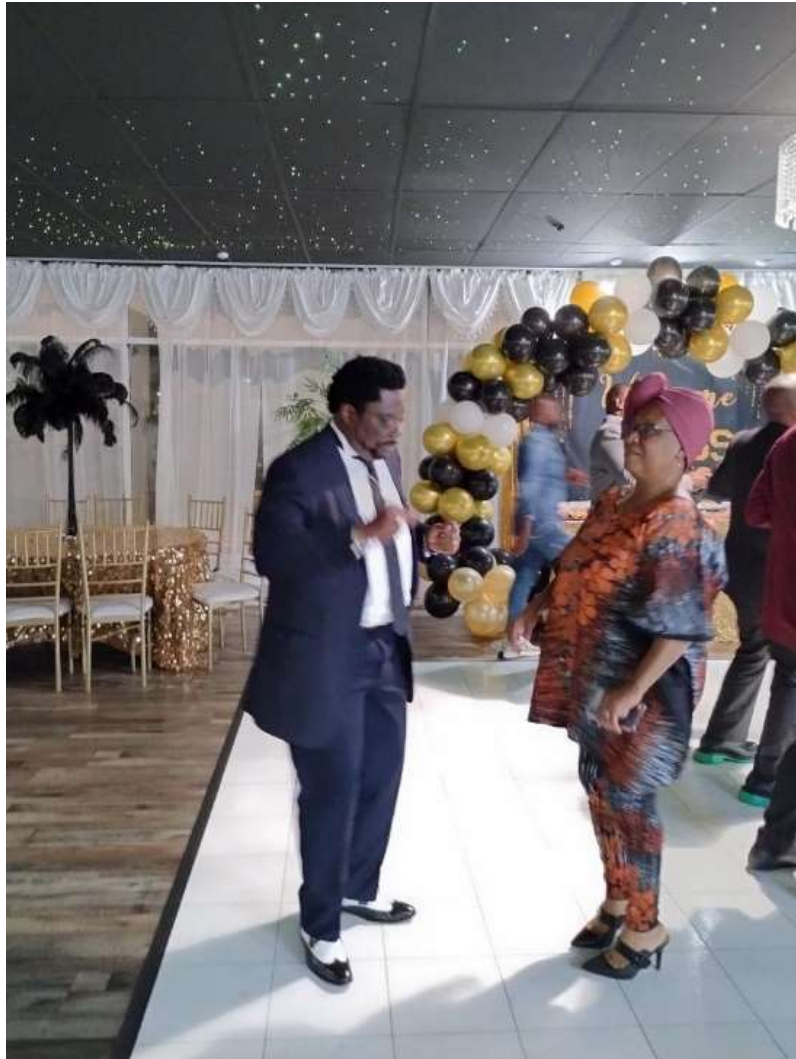
I strongly believe one reason for the stagnancy and degeneration of our national hegemony is because Liberian history and culture are denigrated by Liberians themselves. As a result, they lack self-knowledge and self-appreciation. A second reason is that Liberian history and culture are not institutionalized. The national curriculum of Liberia does not have inserted in it, enough cultural and historical materials that reflect the history and culture of the majority--indigenous Liberians. Hence, there is a dire need not only to reconceptualize the national curriculum of Liberia, but to also establish cultural institutions such as a school for the performing and visual arts, where Liberian history and culture can be preserved, taught, and used to conduct cultural and historical research. In fact, what is the national budget of Liberia for education and culture? You figure it out and compare that figure to the budgets of other government agencies and you will “know the balance”, my biology instructor at LU used to say!



Rabbi Gbaba teaching Afrocentric literacy to children of color at the Francis Myers Recreation Center in Southwest Philadelphia, PA.

Against this backdrop, I asserted that Liberians may gain more knowledge about who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed if their history and culture are

institutionalized and preserved. Consequently, this may bring about a reduction in the use of the divisive rhetoric and negative notions about "Country and Congau" divide in Liberia. Accordingly, I urged my audience to look at the bigger picture (Liberia). To demonstrate the seriousness of my message, I called my wife up from among the audience and introduced her to the crowd and said:



"Ladies and gentlemen, you see this lady, she is "Americo-Liberian" or "Congau", and I am an Indigenous Liberian or "Countryman", but this Congau woman and this this Country man have lived together in peace and harmony for forty unbroken years. Therefore, we want to tell you here tonight and all Liberians at home and abroad that if my wife and I can live in peace and harmony for four decades, Liberians, as a nation and people, can do the same."

Also, I recommended that a law be passed in Liberia to prohibit Liberians from spewing hate speech and slogans that have the propensity to incite violence, division and bigotry, such as the "Country-Congau" expression. Rather, we must celebrate our diverse cultures and backgrounds to peacefully coexist as compatriots. Furthermore, I called on all 'educated' Liberians to use their

education to uplift others as Reverend Fred Umoja did in Liberia, instead of using one's education and public influence to divide Liberians on ethnic grounds.

Save the Date: December 16, 2023 for DATI/Rabbi Joe Gbaba Tripartite Anniversary Fundraiser

The family, friends, fans, and supporters of Rabbi Joe and Princess Ariminta Gbaba and Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI), cordially invite you to their Tripartite Anniversary and Fundraiser on:

DATE: Saturday, December 16, 2023
VENUE: Merion Tribute House
ADDRESS: 526 Hazelhurst Avenue, Merion Station, PA 19066
TIME: 6-11 PM

PURPOSE: To generate enough funds, material and moral supports, to construct the first school of the performing and visual arts and center for cultural studies in Liberia.

ADMISSIONS

I. Grand Patrons: \$1,000. (Can be paid in installments when registered with Chief Project Financial Officer, Mrs. Juliana Koffa-Dixon @ julianakd69@gmail.com).

PACKAGE INCLUDES: 1. Photo of the Grand Patron & brief statement of support published in the ad journal; 2. Flashing photos and names of Grand Patrons in the hall during DJ musical interludes; 3. Names of the Grand Patrons to be engraved on cornerstone of the DATI School of the Performing and Visual Arts and Center for Peace and Cultural Studies.

II. Patrons: \$500

PACKAGE INCLUDES: 1. Photo of Patron in ad journal and brief statement of support for the project. 2. Flashing photos and names of patrons during DJ musical interludes; copy of official brochure

III. SUPPORTERS: \$250
Package includes: 1. Flashing Supporters' names during DJ Musical interludes.

IV. GENERAL ADMISSIONS: \$100
Package: A copy of the official Tripartite Anniversary Brochure

V. HOW TO DONATE TO DATI: 1. Via cashapp: \$Josephgbaba (267) 973-1709;
2. Via U.S. postal mail: Send check or money order to:
Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc., P. O. Box 143, Clifton Heights, PA 19018;
3. Deposit your donation in DATI's Wells Fargo
Account # 5730834990; Routing # 031000503;
Domestic Wire Transfer # 121000148; International Transfer #WFBUIUS65.

I shared with the audience efforts that I, DATI, and my spouse, Princess Ariminta, have made over the past forty-nine years as Liberian playwright, forty-six years with the founding of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI), and forty years of interethnic marriage, to practice what we preach. I informed the audience about the need to establish a school of the performing arts in Liberia to preserve, teach, and promote Liberian history and culture. Subsequently, I solicited their unwavering support of attendees, to provide much needed assistance to construct the first school of the performing arts in Liberia. Additionally, I invited the Class of '89 and attendees present at the gala, to the **DATI Tripartite Anniversary on Saturday, December 16, 2023, at the Merion Tribute House, 526 Hazelhurst Avenue, Merion Station, PA 19066, from 6-11 PM.** Admission information is contained in the event flyer above.

Know Thy History and Culture as Liberians



Further, I used the occasion to awaken the audience about their civil responsibilities to seek and appreciate self-knowledge, and to uphold their national hegemony with integrity and dignity. I also urged all Liberians, including the Class of '89, to actively participate in the democratic process as Liberian citizens and as forerunners of their own destiny. Accordingly, I asserted that it may be impossible to achieve this goal without one having full knowledge of the history and culture of the nation of which one is allegedly a citizen.

So, for an example, I put my audience to a test and teased their brains. I asked, "Hands up of all those who know the wordings of the 'Lone Star Ode', or, who wrote the 'Lone Star Ode' and how many of you know the words of the Ode and can sing it?"

Out of a crowd of nearly one hundred and fifty people, only four ladies raised their hands in the hall. I did not bother to quiz those who raised their hands due to time constraints. However, in reference to having self-knowledge, I stated that, "Most Liberians claim to be citizens of Liberia, but they do not know key important information about Liberia, like "How many stripes are on the Liberian flag and what does each strip on the Liberian flag represent? What are the names of the signers of the Declaration of Independence? What do the flag colors represent. To make matters worse, most Liberians do not know the author, nor the wordings of the two stanzas of the Liberian National Anthem. Therefore, what kind of Liberians are we when we do not know the fundamental information about our own country called Liberia? Mind you, we know the capital

cities of the United States, Russia, France, Great Britain but ask a Liberian where Togbaylee-bli is, and he or she starts to scratch his or her head!

A Special Group of Young Patriotic Liberian



Members of the A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89 pose with Rabbi Gbaba and Ms. Sayondee Kofa, President of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania.

There is something very special about the A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89 that automatically attracts you when you meet them initially. Historically speaking, they were the last batch of youth to graduate from A.M.E. Zion Academy before the outbreak of the Liberian genocide that claimed the lives of over a quarter million people and dispersed millions of Liberians around the world. Nonetheless, these youth worked out a means to reconnect in the diaspora. Some of them travelled from as far as Australia and Great Britain, and from various states in the United States of America, to attend their first reunion after they graduated high school thirty-four years ago.

During their cookout on Sunday, August 20th, Ms. Sayondee Kofa, President of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania graced the occasion with her presence. She took photo with the Class and made a pledge of One Hundred Dollars (\$100) to help a needy A.M.E. Zion Academy student in Liberia. Ms. Kofa congratulated the Class of '89 and wished them success. She also promised to attend their functions in the future.

I interviewed and asked the class President, William Ngombu, how the Class of '89 pulled it off as a class organization. The reason for my inquiry was because normally it is very rare to have an entire school alumni association assemble in one place, let alone a single class. Below is the response I received from the class President, William Ngombu.



Representatives of the Class of '89 paying a courtesy visit with their mentor and father, Reverend Frederick Umoja at his North Carolina home May 2022

"We began to communicate and reconnect with each other through our former Principal, Reverend Fred Umoja. He is the link that binds together the A.M.E. Zion Academy Alligator Family. In May 2022 a few of us from the class of '89 paid Reverend Umoja a courtesy call to present him his flowers while he is still alive. He had spent over forty years in Liberia as a missionary and during those years he helped thousands of Liberian youths to obtain education and he redirected many of us to achieve in life. Also, the passing of two of our classmates served as ad hoc reunions when we met at Jessie Harmon's and Rudolph Vah's funerals about two years in a role in Providence, Rhode Island and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Their deaths motivated us to organize a group chatroom so we could communicate better and keep in touch. Consequently, we planned a reunion so that many of us who are in contact with each other, may meet to share our old memories and give back to our Alma Mater."

I asked William if the A.M.E. Zion Academy National Alumni Association in the Americas would not take offence to what the Class of '89 is doing, to raise funds to support their Alma Mater. His response, "If the National Alumni Association of A.M.E. Zion Academy in the Americas begins to function, we will be more than happy to collaborate with them. But for now, we will continue to do what we can for our Alma Mater."

The Class of '89 is bold and progressive. They are a set of patriotic Liberian youth that must not be taken for granted. I love and support their patriotic deeds to give back to their country and to assist young Liberians who stand in need of help.

I salute you, A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89. I urge you to pray and stick together in your pursuit to give back to Liberia and A.M.E. Zion Academy. Way to go, guys!

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

August 24, 2023