

Let the Celebrations Begin: 42 Unbroken Years of Service to Humanity through the Performing Arts and Education: A Calling from God!

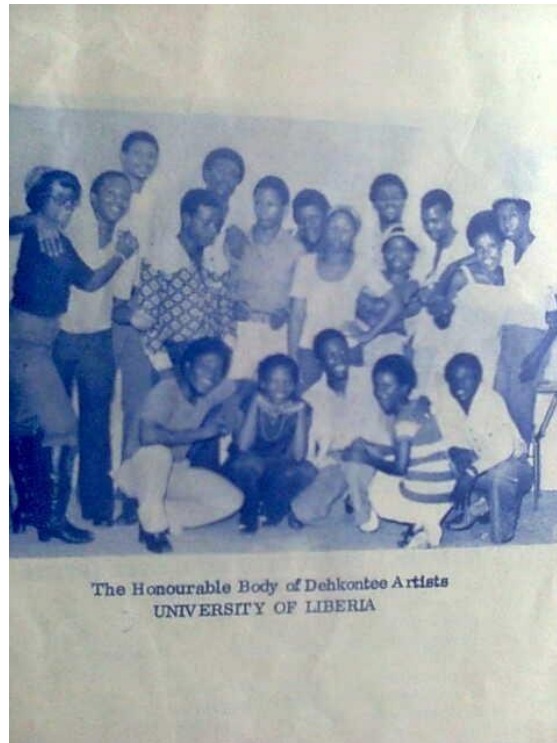


Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba during his freshman days at Liberia College, University of Liberia ca. 1976

***Introduction***

Dr. Gbaba and members of the Board of Directors, officers, and thespians of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI), and the general public, will converge at the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts on Saturday, 9 January, 2016 at 7:30 p.m. sharp to celebrate the 42<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of Dr. Joe Gbaba as a playwright, theatre director, actor, and producer. He will be honored for his service to humanity and the promotion of African/Liberian arts and culture and education on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora. Also, the occasion will mark the 39<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of DATI as a non-profit University of Liberia-based cultural and educational organization. The venue for this historical and cultural event is located at 15200 Annapolis Road, Bowie, MD 20715.

DATI was established at the University of Liberia in 1977 by Dr. Gbaba and many other University of Liberia students. Some of the early founders of Dehkontee Artists Theatre include but are not limited to: Joshua Howard (DATI's first President), Claude Langley (Business Manager), Bill Ross (Stage Manager) Josephine Ross, Josephine Gibson, Kathy Lokko, Jestina Gibson, Stephen Crayton, Jr., Dr. Henrique Scott, Dr. Nathaniel Doe, Melvin Smith, Dr. Maude Major, Raymond Kromah, Christian Fenning, aka Christian Fumba, Mona Bedell, Alicia Murray, Christopher Diggs, Eric Kay Goll, Evelyn Broderick-Weeks, Edwin Gibson, Joseph Kappia, Festus Russell, Comfort Innis, Sonia Tubman, and many others.



***Some original members of Dehkontee Artists Theatre at the University of Liberia (back roll left to right: Kathy Lokko, Eric Kay Goll, Joshua Howard, Christopher Diggs, Herbert Elliott, Guy Melvin Smith, Claude Langley Maude Major, Henrique Zobon Scott, Sonia Tubman, Joseph Kappia, Comfort Innis, Festus Russell;( front roll, left to right): Bill Ross, Josephine Gibson, Dr. Joe Gbaba, Evelyn Broderick-Weeks and Edwin Gibson.***

Looking back at Old Grandfather Clarke's clock, it seems just like yesterday when Dr. Gbaba was a high school senior at the prestigious Carroll High School (CHS) where his scholarly and artistic career was initially inspired. Notwithstanding, in reality, it is just so unbelievable how time and tide wait for no man; for, it has been more than four decades since the inception of DAT! In addition, one wonders how in the world a Liberian was able to muster up so much courage in an African nation and society over 90% of whose citizens are illiterate (unlettered and denied access to equality of educational opportunities for a protracted period of time in Liberian history), and that did not appreciate its own culture? Let alone overcoming the odds of a brainwashed quasi African society, in order to survive the test of time and still maintain his sobriety to keep pushing his dream through?

Could it be some divine inspiration? From where did this Liberian cultural maestro and pedagogue get the inspiration and courage as a role model to pull through all this negativity that beclouded his career as a playwright—as a chief critic of the Liberian society—without one 'political arrest and imprisonment' over a period of four decades plus? What is the secret to the magic he used to educate and entertain the Liberian and international communities in Liberia and abroad without being prey to a suppressive political system back in the day that was bent on silencing advocates of social justice and equality in Liberia—those that spoke up against the ills of the Liberian society and that were as controversial as Dr. Gbaba? Was it due to the basic truths of everyday life he portrays in his writings

and theatrical productions? Or, was it because he lives by what he preaches against the ills of the Liberian society, while at the same time preaching national unity, and serving as father to all Liberian youths? This article delves into some of the background facts that will enlighten you on the questions asked above.

### ***The Lineage of Dr. Gbaba***



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

To fully understand the success of our celebrity, one has to research the family he originates from, as well as his upbringing, and philosophical persuasions. Dr. Gbaba's parents, Prince Jack Tomah Gbaba and Princess Martha Gbeh-Nyennonh-Garh Gaye, were distant cousins and descendants of Krahn kings, specifically from the Royal Household of the Nien Dynasty of the Tchien Krahn subgroup of Grand Gedeh County in Eastern Liberia. Prince Gbaba's father was also a descendant of Yarlee-Gbanh, the founder of Zwedru City, the regional capital of Grand Gedeh County. Interestingly, Dr. Gbaba was born at the Barclay Training Center (BTC) military barracks in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia and a cultural melting pot of Liberia. In view of the foregoing, it is safe to say that our subject was both an urbanite and an army brat! Further, living in an urban setting, Dr. Gbaba was exposed to western civilization and grew up living among citizens from all of Liberia's eighteen ethnic groups: Krahn, Kru,

Grebo, Bassa, Gbi, Belleh, Deiweion, Vai, Gola, Lorma, Kissi, Gbandi, Kpelle, Mah, Dahn, Mandingo, Mende, and Settlers (Americo-Liberians and Congors).

At an early age Prince Joe Gbaba was adopted by General Wilmot and Amanda Stubblefield who instilled rigid Christian discipline in him. In those days, parents tutored their kids at home and so Dr. Gbaba was also home-schooled by General Wilmot Stubblefield who introduced the lad to the Royal Infant Reader. Daily family prayer was a must in the home and the Stubblefield kids attended the regular morning service at the Providence Baptist Church on Broad Street in the morning, returned home after service to have a sumptuous family lunch of collard greens with crayfish, poke chop, some desserts and then went right back for Sunday School! Hence, under the guidance of his military adopted father, Dr. Gbaba had the best of instructions in ethics and Christian discipleship before he returned to his biological parents while still in his early teens. Besides, his artistic innovation and inspiration was buttressed by the mentorship of many other distinguished personalities in the Liberian society some of whom will be mentioned later in this text.

### ***Dr. Gbaba's Early Formal Education Experience***

Coincidentally, Dr. Gbaba began his first formal primary education at his birthplace at the Barracks Union School in the Barclay Training Center in Monrovia; and his first real contact with a school teacher was with Mrs. Margaret Tiplah-Mona Karpeh-Koffa, and Mrs. Anna Whisnant as principal of the Barracks Union School. His parents chose Barracks Union School for several reasons: one, it was in close proximity to P.H. P. (acronym for "Public Health Pond"). P.H.P. was a slum area that was surrounded by a pond where Joe and many children in Monrovia those days went to swim. It was a closely knit community where most of the underserved of the Liberian society lived at the time. Most of the inhabitants of P.H.P. were members of the Kwa linguistic group: Krahn, Krus, Bassas, Sapos, a few Americo-Liberian and Congor families, and a few Mandingoes. The second reason why Joe's parents chose Barracks Union School was because they could not afford the tuition to send him to a private school; and, the few good government schools in Monrovia like Monrovia Demonstration School on Clay Street or the Kindergarten School on Warren Street, mainly catered to children from the bourgeoisie of the Tubman era.

However, his mother and stepfather named Thomas Sackor made strenuous efforts to ensure that he had a good education that was available for a child from an underprivileged class at the time. Fortunately, Barracks Union was the right choice possible! There, Joseph received a warm welcome from his classroom teacher, Mrs. Koffa who treated him like her own son, but of course, that tough love was accompanied with some discipline, especially being taught by army wives! So, to say the least, Prince Gbaba received a solid educational and ethical foundation from the Stubblefields, Mrs. Koffa, and Mrs. Whisnant that would later prepare him to pursue higher knowledge in the future that lay ahead of him.



Mrs. Margaret Tiplah-Mona Karpeh-Koffa, Dr. Gbaba's first school teacher

***A Winding Road and Uphill Battle to Achieve Education and Success***

After the completion of the first grade, Tomoonh-Garlodeyh enrolled at Daniel E. Howard Elementary School located on Sekou Toure Avenue in Monrovia. He was taught by Dolly Bracewell in the second grade and by Mr. Anthony Davies in the third grade. He received a double promotion to the fifth grade and was taught by Ms. Mildred Davis, but he completed his sixth grade education at Matilda Newport Elementary School in 1968 under Mr. Joseph Seth before the school was elevated to a middle school in 1969. Later Joseph and his mother moved to the traditional home of his parents and ancestors in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County in Eastern Liberia. There, he spent the next three years studying at a Catholic middle school called St. Philomena's Elementary and Junior High School (S.P.S.). It was run by the Society of African Missions (SMA) priests and later by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. At S.P.S. Dr. Gbaba received rigid discipline in Christian religious instruction under Fathers Laurier Haines and James Gessler, as well as Grammar lessons under the adept tutorage of Sister Helen Reed (SSND). Dr. Gbaba became the valedictorian of his class in the ninth grade and was subsequently awarded a Catholic scholarship to attend Carroll High School in 1972 after the completion of his middle school studies in 1971.



A photo of Archbishop Francis J. Carroll (center) with President William V.S. Tubman on the left.

## ***A Calling from God on Mount Nimba***

Carroll High School (CHS) is named in honor of Catholic Archbishop Francis J. Carroll, a well-known and wise Irish Catholic prelate who lived the bulk of his prime life in Liberia and gradually rose through the ranks and files of the Catholic hierarchy before he became Archbishop of Monrovia and Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to Liberia. CHS was located at Grassfield, Yekepa, in Nimba County, Liberia, on the lower range of Mount Nimba, the highest mountain peak in Northern Liberia. It was originally an all-boys school founded in 1969 and run by Irish and English Christian Brothers of the Blessed Edmund Rice.

Mainly, Carroll High School was established to train an elite group of underprivileged but clever male Liberian youths that would build a peaceful and prosperous society through their laborious efforts and harnessed innate talents in the future as enshrined in the Carroll High School Ode: "The day will come when down the hill, the boys of Grassfield troop, to make this world a better place for God, for man, for youth." However, presently, Carroll High School is co-educational and was relocated to "Area C" in the LAMCO concession City of Yekepa in 1979.

As patron of Carroll High School, His Grace Francis J. Carroll ensured that the best of professors were recruited from the Christian Brothers Order and the Catholic laity in England and Ireland to establish a solid spiritual and educational foundation to teach young brilliant and underprivileged Liberian boys that were recruited from some of the best Catholic schools in Liberia so that they may not only become intellectuals but practitioners that would help to make Liberia and the world a much better place to live. Accordingly, the Christian Brothers implemented a rigorous academic and vocational and technical curriculum that was interspersed with extracurricular activities such as music, drama, painting, drawing, writing, speech, electricity and scientific experiments that were conducted by the Science Club. Also, Carroll High School was very famous for its musical productions such as "Tommy", "Joseph and His Technicolor Dream Coat" and "Jesus Christ Super Star", among others.

Hence, it came as no surprise when out of the *crème de crop* of Carroll High emerged a very zealous, creative, and inspired young intellectual that would help to shape the trends of culture and education in Liberia for over four decades! However, it is worthy to note that it was at the original campus of Carroll High School in Grassfield, on the lower range of Mount Nimba, that Dr. Gbaba received his calling to become a playwright, theatre director, actor and producer. It all started early on a cool morning while he was in deep slumber, Joe heard a strange voice call him two consecutive times: "Joseph, Joseph!" and on the third count, he awoke with a unique perception about "national unity and integration".

Immediately, Joe started writing his first play forty-two years ago. The Play was entitled: "Life Story of Kekula" and its setting was the City of Careysburg, a predominantly Americo Liberian settlement in Southcentral Liberia. In the storyline the young playwright creatively and artistically wove his theme of national unity and integration around two main characters in the play named Kekula, an indigenous Liberian, and Sussie, an Americo-Liberian. Kekula was given to Sussie's family to be fostered; but the two of them became attached to each other as lovers and ended up getting married after Sussie's Americo-Liberian parents found out Sussie was pregnant! Consequently, their union was blessed with several children. Subsequently, the children became the "core-lineage" of the Liberian society as offspring of both indigenous and Americo-Liberian sects.

Furthermore, this was the young playwright's attempt to reflect the prevailing political, social, economic divide and reality that subsisted among the haves and have-nots on the one hand, and/or the Indigenous and Settlers in the Liberian society on the other. "Life Story of Kekula" was first staged at the Open Door Theatre ca. October, 1974 to a packed and bewildered audience that marveled at the craftiness of the young scholar and playwright. Among those that inspired Dr. Gbaba the most was an elementary school teacher named Mrs. Dolly McCrittty-Massaquoi who wrote the young playwright a note after she watched the production. It read in part: "Joe, congratulations for a job well done. I foresee you becoming the "Shakespeare" of Liberia" someday. And that was how Dr. Joe Gbaba got his pen name: "Liberia's Shakespeare" forty-one years ago!

### ***Who Was Archbishop Francis J. Carroll and How Did He Impact the Life of Dr. Gbaba?***

The patron of Carroll High School, His Grace Francis J. Carroll, was born 12 June, 1912 in Newry, Ireland. He was ordained priest of Society of African Missions (SMA) on 20 December, 1926 at age twenty-four and was later ordained Prefect of Cape Palmas 27 October, 1950. Subsequently, Father Carroll was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Monrovia, Liberia on 20 December, 1950; and eleven years well ahead he was ordained Bishop 21 May, 1961 by Pope John XXIII. Afterward, Bishop Francis rose to the rank of Apostolic Internuncio to Liberia (9 November 1961) and later as Titular Archbishop of Gabula 14 January, 1964. On March 7, 1966 Archbishop Carroll was appointed Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to Liberia. He resigned as Vicar Apostolic of Monrovia, Liberia on 28 October 1976 and resigned as Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to Liberia 25 August 1979. He passed away into heaven's aurora bliss on 10 October, 1980 as Vicar Apostolic Emeritus of Monrovia, Liberia—a couple of months before Dr. Gbaba's graduation from the University of Liberia in December, 1980.

### ***How Dr. Gbaba Matured into the Seasoned and Disciplined Scholar and Artist That He Is***

Archbishop Carroll was a diplomat par excellence and he possessed a wealth of experience in politics, human psychology, international diplomacy, and had mastery of the Queen's language! Further, he had a retentive memory: he was a people person, a true shepherd of the Lord's flock. Also His Grace was a great socialite and he knew every prominent Liberian family and was a confidante of two Liberian Presidents--Tubman and Tolbert—before his death in 1980. Furthermore, Archbishop Carroll had a special affinity to Carroll High School and its students, and all Catholics for that matter. He was a fatherly figure and mentor to thousands of Liberian scholars, politicians, diplomats, clergymen and women, including Dr. Gbaba, who sometimes visited the aging diplomat and ecclesiast at his Mamba Point Mansion prior to his retirement and death. Hence, Archbishop Francis Carroll and later his immediate successor, Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, were among a long list of enlightened personalities that provided spiritual guidance and encouraged the young playwright and theatre director and actor to pursue his dream in life by demonstrating strong faith in God and self-confidence.

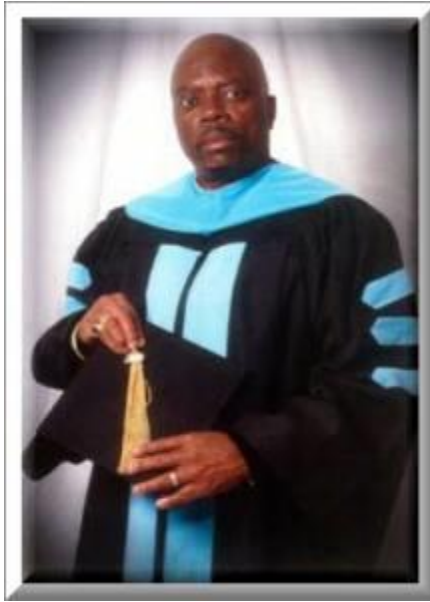
Gbaba informs that there were some characteristics that were outstanding and that he admired about Archbishop Carroll. He recalls that the Archbishop was very charismatic, wise, far-sighted, very caring and generous. "One could never leave his presence without his offering you something to eat, or throwing a little purse your way "to pay your way". As well, His Grace was very fluent in speaking Liberian colloquialism and he had a deep sense of humor, too. In his eyes one could see that naming a school in his honor while he was still alive meant a great deal to him. For the Archbishop, Carroll High School was his greatest prized possession on earth. He was profoundly grateful that he was being memorialized while still alive and so he did everything within his purview for CHS to excel in academics, vocation, and technology, the arts, and sciences. "

Another quality that Dr. Gbaba picked up from his mentor was Archbishop Carroll's true commitment to his congregation, the people he served as a true servant of God and how he wisely spent his time God gave him on earth helping the poor and providing spiritual guidance to hundreds of thousands of Liberians, including members of the Catholic and other Christian denominations, as well as Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and persons of different races and social, political, and ideological persuasions. That was why CHS was named in honor of Archbishop Francis J. Carroll, in profound gratitude for his devoted ecclesiastic and political contributions and services to the Liberian people in particular and humanity in general. These were some of the qualities that Dr. Gbaba as a youth admired about his mentor and that he tries to emulate in his lifetime as an artist/scholar and pedagogue.

### ***A Snap Shot of a Forty-Two Year Journey***

The journey to the celebration of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary which comes up on January 9, 2016 at the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts has been very rugged and challenging. Yet, through perseverance and the assistance of his immediate family, the Liberian Jewish Heritage Society, patriotic Liberians and humanitarians from across the globe, Dr. Gbaba has been able to muster up strength and courage to achieve some of his lifetime laurels as a playwright, poet, director, actor, educator, God-fearing Christian Jew, family man, and father to thousands of youths and fans from around the world. Thus, apart from his innate talents as a scholar/artist he resiliently pursued his dreams by exercising patience, endurance, and exhibiting discipline in order to harness his skills and expertise as a playwright, theatre director, actor, producer, and as an elementary and special education specialist and educational leader.





Rabbi Prince Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba, Sr., B.A., M.F.A., M.Sc.Ed., Ed. D.

Founder & Executive Director, DATI

After he received his calling at Carroll High and wrote, directed and produced his first drama, Dr. Gbaba began his higher education sojourn by traveling through several rigorous academic walls that included Liberia College at the University of Liberia where he obtained his Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, and then earned the Master of Fine Arts in Drama from the prestigious UNC-Greensboro School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. In furtherance of his dream to be a world class artist/scholar Joseph enrolled at the St. Joseph's Jesuit University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he spent nine consecutive years pursuing the Master of Science in Elementary and Special Education and the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. His doctoral studies focused on Afrocentric curriculum design and the immersion of African-centered materials in mainstream curriculums in order to address the teaching and learning needs of children of color and minority and underserved students. His research work is entitled: "The Chiandeh Afrocentric Curriculum and Textbook Experience: Exploring Children's Responses to an Afrocentric Curriculum" (2008).

Apart from his artistic career, Dr. Gbaba has played numerous leading social and political roles in Liberia and here in the United States as an educator and human rights advocate and child protection worker. From 1980 up to 2002 he taught at numerous secondary and tertiary institutions of learning in Liberia and the United States of America. He mainly taught Literature, Drama, Composition, African Literature and Creative Writing courses at St. Patrick's High School, A.M.E. Zion Academy, St. Teresa's Convent, College of West Africa, A.M.E. Zion Community College, Mother Pattern College of Social Work, the University of Liberia, Cuttington University; served as Principal of the Zwedru Multilateral High School, Special Education teacher at Jay Cooke Middle School in Philadelphia, and as a civil servant at the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, among others. He also briefly served as Acting Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism of Liberia and as consultant to the United Nations Children's

Educational Fund (UNICEF), and other United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Military Mission to Liberia (UNMIL).

As a spouse and parent Dr. Gbaba is happily married to Princess Ariminta Porte-Gbaba, his wife of thirty-two years. Their union is blessed with five children and five grandkids. In addition, he plays a fatherly and mentor role to thousands of his students, fellow countrymen and women and is affectionately referred to as “Uncle Joe” by most Liberian youths. He has self-published three books: ***Ah-zeo, Ma Garh; Conflict Resolution and the Concept of Change; The Frogs and Black Snake in Frogsville***, as well as numerous unpublished plays that he wrote, directed, and sometimes acted in that include: “Kekula”, “No More Hard Times”, “Love for Mymah”, “The Chains of Apartheid”, “Zon Ninneh Taryee”, “The Resurrection”, “The Minstrel’s Tales”, “Yah” (“Vision”), etc.

This year Dr. Gbaba concomitantly celebrates his 42<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary as a playwright, theatre director, actor, producer and the 39<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of his theatre company Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI). In July, 2013 Dr. Gbaba opted for early retirement so that he may dedicate the rest of his life to promoting Liberian/African arts and culture. He has determined to pursue his dream of establishing a school of the performing arts in his original homeland in Liberia and also here in the United States under the umbrella of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc.

This article therefore was produced to give readers an insight into the legacy and vocation of a wonderful and creative cultural and educational maestro who has a wealth of knowledge, experience, and expertise that the world can benefit from. Hence, it is hoped that this literary piece will inspire you to donate to a worthy cause to promote African arts and culture on the continent of Africa and here in the diaspora for the expanse of universal knowledge. Forty-two unbroken years filled with passion for the betterment of humanity through education and entertainment is enough time to convince all of us that indeed Dr. Joe Gbaba deserves our respect and unflinching financial, logistical, and moral supports in order to successfully fulfill his calling as a pedagogue and master artist, and to provide quality cultural and educational services for the common good of mankind.

N.B. Those who wish to donate to the Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI) Civic and Peace Education Program may do so online on the DATI official website: [www.dehkonteeartists theatreinc.com](http://www.dehkonteeartists theatreinc.com). Click on the “Donate” button to make a donation or to purchase tickets to the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries.

9 December, 2015