

*Rabbi Gbaba’s “Golden Jubilee (50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary) Address to Liberians and the World: Preserving, Preaching, & Promoting the Culture of Liberia Globally; A 50-Year Journey”*



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## *Salutations*

Your Excellency, George Manneh Weah, outgoing President of Liberia, and Your Excellency Joseph Nyumah Boikai, President-elect of Liberia, and Vice-President-elect, Jeremiah Kpan Koung, the President-Pro Tempore and Members of the Liberian Senate, the Speaker and Honorable Members of the House of Representatives, Your Honor Madam Chief Justice, Associate Justices, and members of the Judiciary, members of the cabinet, diplomatic corps and international community, fellow citizens, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish all of you and the entire universe, a Happy and prosperous New Year, on behalf of my wife, Princess Ariminta, our children, grandchildren, and myself. Also, I wish the outgoing President of Liberia and his teammates God's bountiful blessings as they exit the stage, and as we begin a new political scene in the history and culture of Liberia. As a traditional Liberian and cultural icon for the past half a century (50 years), I would like to pour libation to the spirits of our ancestors, offer white kola nuts, pepper and salt, to warmly and traditionally welcome our father and distinguished elder, His Excellency Joseph Nyumah Boikai, President-elect, and incoming Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Congratulations, sir!

## *The Theme of My Golden Jubilee*

The theme of my Golden Jubilee Speech is ***LOVE, National Integration and Unification***. This is because I cannot think of anything else that would have made it possible for me to travel on a rough and tough 50-year journey that took me over many slopes, hills, and valleys, except for the love of Almighty God and all those that helped me carry the heavy burden of promoting the culture of a nation and people practically out of pocket for fifty years.

I recall very vividly that my journey began with a calling from God. It began as a VOCATION and in the form of a dream. At that time, I was in the senior class at Carroll High School in Grassfield, Yekepa, in Nimba County, Northern Liberia. In my dream, God gave me a COMMAND fifty years ago to tell the Liberian Nation and People that ***"WE ARE ONE PEOPLE and that we must love one another and live in peace and harmony !"***

So, as an obedient servant, I rose from my bed early that morning, grabbed a writing pad and a pencil and began to write my first play entitled, ***"Life Story of Kekula."*** The theme of my first play was ***"National Unity and Integration."*** It was in support of President William V. S. Tubman's National Unification and Integration Policy he had introduced earlier during his administration and prior to his death. The purpose of the National Unification and Integration Policy is to unite the people of Liberia and to bridge the socio-economic and political gap between the elites of Liberia that were predominantly descendants of settlers and the majority indigenous sect of Liberia that were impoverished and marginalized politically, economically, and socially.



*A photo of the National Unification and Integration Policy Monument in Voijama, Lofa County, Northern Liberia.*

In fact, there is a National Unification and Integration Policy Statue of President William V. S. Tubman in Voinjama, Lofa County. The statue is a reminder to all Liberians about the dire need for Liberians to live in peace, to integrate freely, and to be united in building Liberia. Hence, even though there has been great improvement with respect to integration of Liberians through interethnic marriages over the past fifty years since I wrote, directed and produced “Life Story of Kekula” at the Open-Door Theatre, yet, there is more to be desired in terms of national unity.

But sadly, we spent most of the past fifty years under review fighting among ourselves from 1979 Rice Riot, to the 1980 military coup, unto the rebel incursion in 1989 on Christmas Day, until now. We have been killing one another and destroying the infrastructures that people before our time built with their sweat and blood. And, what is so disheartening is that after all the pain we have gone through, we cannot pinpoint any real good that we have derived from inflicting pain and suffering on innocent civilians, vulnerable women and children, the elderly, and in particular, the youths of Liberia that were robbed of their childhood.



On the contrary, I can boast that though I was born in the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) barracks at the Barclay Training Center in Monrovia, Montserrado County, where soldiers carried guns day and night, yet, no soldier gave me a gun to shoot my mother and father. No adult forcibly recruited me to be a child soldier. No adults encouraged children or minors during my youthful days to take up arms or to defy authorities and/or to breach the Constitution of Liberia. Instead, adults in our lives during our childhood days were responsible, God-fearing people who taught us to pray. They taught us to be nonviolent and law-abiding citizens of Liberia. They encouraged us to go to school and they gave us presents, gifts, whenever we excelled in school. They taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves and to put our country first. They forbade us to steal, to kill, to lie, to bear false witness against our neighbors, to covet our neighbors' wives, and they taught us to respect our elders and our parents so our days on earth may be prolonged.

For an example, when someone stole during our day he or she was dressed in rags and adorned with leaves and ridiculed in the community. The entire community chanted: *"Teefie-teefie, jan-kolee-ko"* behind the culprit, to discourage stealing and other criminal acts in our society. This is quite unlike today when we hail thieves as *'honorable'*, and elect murderers in the National Legislature of Liberia, and in the Executive and Judicial branches of government. This is something other civilized and law-abiding societies across the globe never do because it would send a wrong signal to the youths who may conceive of rewarding criminals with access to state power and coffers as a desirable thing to do.

## *Setting the Record Straight about the Wordings on Liberia's National Seal*



Today, I want to reveal to you that the landscape now known as *Liberia* existed ever since God created the universe, but it was not called Liberia. Instead, the landscape formed part of ancient African civilizations, kingdoms and empires, such as Songhay, Mali, Ghana, Benin, etc. Also, most of the people that constitute the demographics of present-day Liberia migrated from East, Central, and Southern Africa and the Congo-Basin region to where our ancestors landed in search of FREEDOM, LIBERTY, and EQUALITY, and more fertile farmland since they were mainly agrarian peoples. In addition, Liberians are the *Israelites* of the Black Race and Liberia is the *Canaan* that Younsuah promised our ancestors when they fell on their knees, made burnt sacrifices and pled to the God of their ancestors, to give them a land where they would be free from the constant attacks of enemy tribes.

Likewise, free blacks from the United States emigrated to Liberia in search of freedom, justice and equality as their African ancestors did in the beginning of time before they were carried across the Atlantic Ocean as slaves. Also, I want to make it clear that before the slave trade, those whom we refer to as "*Congau*" or "*Americo-Liberians*", or "*Creoles*", were indigenous Africans separated from us through the slave trade. Therefore, it is very important that we stop thinking that Congau or Americo-Liberians are aliens that dropped out of the sky. They are our blood relatives, just as Liberians who today naturalized as citizens of the United States, Great Britain, France, etc., are our blood relatives. They were victims of our ancestors selling them into bondage and so, if they gained their freedom and returned to us, then we must rejoice and warmly accept them as our ancestors did when the early settlers landed on Liberian soil.

Therefore, the word "Liberia" that was given to our native land was not a coincidence. "Liberia" has a Latin root (*liber*, which means "*free*"), and the name "*Liberia*" was given to the colony at the time of its Declaration of Independence by American Colonization Society member and U.S. Senator Robert Goodloe Harper. In view of the foregoing, the slogan on the Liberian National Seal, "*The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here*" does not only apply to descendants of free slaves that emigrated to Liberia. It also applies to descendants of indigenous Africans because our ancestors left East, Central and Southern Africa in pursuit of freedom and in search of more farmland. So, indeed, God designed and blessed Liberia to be the *Canaan* he promised our

ancestors and the free Blacks that returned home after more than five hundred years of slavery and hard labor in the western world.

Therefore, to conclude this segment of our conversation, I would like to ask some rhetorical questions to challenge your thinking ability as we proceed to the next chapter of this text. My question to you is, *what would you call a Krahn or Kpelle, or Kru man and woman who fled Liberia during the war and came to the United States and naturalized as a U.S. citizen?* Is he or she not an “Americo-Liberian” too? So, because a Krahn or Kpelle man or woman became a U.S. citizen and thus became an “Americo-Liberian,” does that make that individual less Kpelle or Krahn or Kru than you his Liberian Krahn, Kpelle, Kru relative?

### ***Put Your Faith in God***



My beloved brothers and sisters, it is always good to put your faith in God. My fifty-year journey has been a journey of faith and trust in God. When God chooses you, he does not consider your tribe or family. He calls whomever he wants to call. As a Krahn man born in Montserrado, you would have thought God would have called me from Mt. Gedeh or the Putu Mountain in Grand Gedeh. No, He called me in the land of the Mahns, in Saingbain Clan, in Nimba County, to deliver a special message to his people who were segregated on socio-political and economic lines.

After I had my dream, a very strange feeling fell upon my soul. It appeared as if some invisible force grabbed me from the bed and made me sit at the table to write. The entire writing process seemed like electric current flowing through my brain. As I wrote the play, I thought on different scenarios I felt would make the play a hit and to create the desired impact I wanted to make to hammer down the theme of integration and unification in the minds and hearts of my audience. Besides, I had been a student of literature under Brother Edward D. Egan. He was an English Christian Brother and linguist that spoke over five European languages. He was also a disciplinarian whose path you did not want to cross on campus. The students rightly named him “Quarter-to-Four,” because that was the time of the day, we had our siesta on campus, but he would use that time to punish and assign us huge portions of saw grass to cut.



Apart from that, Brother E. D. Egan was a great professor. He knew his material inside out. He taught me World Literature, Shakespeare, and French, and painting. So, at the time I wrote my first play, I felt I was prepared academically to test the literary waters. I felt so confident even though I had never written, directed, and produced a play before in my life. But I believed then that there is always a first time and that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. So, I took that giant step fifty years ago.



*A photo of Careysburg, Montserrado County, Liberia where “Life Story of Kekula” was set 50 years ago.*

I elected to write “Life Story of Kekula” as a satire. I interspersed it with scenes from a traditional Kpelle village and mainly set the play in a Congau settlement, namely Careysburg. At the time I was Founder and Right-Hand Brother of the Creating Friendship in Christ (CFC) organization on Carroll High campus. It was a Christian organization that comprised most of the younger students in lower grades. So, I did not have any problem finding male actors for the play. The only problem was that Carroll High was an all-boys boarding school.

Fortunately, as God would have it, I managed to convince some of the mothers that lived in Yekepa and that knew and trusted me as a trustworthy student leader. Based on my reputation, the parents allowed their daughters to come on campus during weekends to rehearse with

members of the Kekula cast. The cast that I can vividly remember included Bill N. Ross, III who played “Kekula” and Roseline Rogers played his girlfriend named “Sussie.” Zobon Scott was “Reverend Davies” and Geleh Massaquoi played “Mrs. Davies.” Winston Conteh was “Sore-foot Nathaniel,” the drunkard, and Robert Freeman, Jr., was his drinking companion.



*Photo of Geleh Massaquoi, who played “Mrs. Davies” in “Life Story of Kekula 50 years ago.*

During rehearsals, I imposed strict restrictions and extra security to make sure the girls stayed within the authorized space where rehearsals were conducted. After rehearsal was over, I put them on the bus to go back to Yekepa. In short, God made it possible for me to stage my first theatre production, “Life Story of Kekula,” round about the month of October 1974, at the Open-Door Theatre, to a packed audience. Despite the fact we did not have girls on campus, God made a way where there would never have been a way if I did not have faith in him.

***My Debut as Playwright, Theatre Director and Producer at Open Door Theatre in Yekepa***



***Photo of the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa. So named in honor of President Tubman’s Open-Door Policy, which opened the way for more foreign investments to flow into the Liberian economy during the Tubman administration.***

“Life Story of Kekula” debut at the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa, Nimba County, in Northern Liberia in October 1974. The play received raving reviews from all those who attended the play. Most of the audience members who watched the play said they liked it because of its theme, ***“National Unification and Integration.”*** They also stated that they liked the way how I weaved



the storyline of “Life Story of Kekula” by having Kekula, an indigenous Liberian, fall in love with the daughter of a settler family that supposedly ‘adopted’ Kekula. To some adults the story resembled some real-life instances that occurred that I did not know about at the time but that I later learned about through research, like the story of J. Rudolph Grimes’ mother named Victoria Elizabeth Jellomoh Chessman Grimes. She was a Vai woman and a member of the Kiazolu Clan that was reared by President Joseph J. Cheeseman. She married Chief Justice Louis Arthur Grimes. Victoria and Louis Grimes were the parents of former Secretary of State J. Rudolph Grimes and first female President of the University of Liberia, Dr. Mary Antoinette Brown Sherman. So, you see, do not be too quick to segregate and to put people in your “Congau” and “Country” boxes. You may never know who is related to whom these days since Tubman introduced and enforced his National Integration and Unification Policy.



*Honorable Charles B. Roberts, Rabbi Gbaba’s first Patron who graced Gbaba’s debut production at the Open Door Theatre with his presence and gave the young playwright \$500 USD as a token of appreciation for his literary and cultural contribution to the LAMCO community in 1974.*

Honorable Charles B. Roberts, the Administrative Manager at LAMCO at the time, laughed his heart out during the “Life Story of Kekula” production! After the show he requested to chat with me and gave me my first compensation of Five Hundred United States Dollars for my hard work! That was a lot of money fifty years ago, but it was commonplace for adults to provide positive reinforcement whenever a child performed a dignified task. They instilled in us the notion about the dignity of labor! Then came my surrogate mother, Mommy Dolly McCritty-Massaquoi. Her face lit up with bright smiles when she walked up to me. She handed me a written note that she had prepared for me to keep as memorabilia to inspire me to continue the good work. It read: “Congratulations, Joe, I foresee your becoming the “Shakespeare” of Liberia someday.”

Thereafter, Magistrate James Harris, Sr. came up to congratulate me. He too looked baffled like the rest of the other adults with whom I previously chatted. Magistrate Harris could not believe I wrote, directed and produced the play. In fact, everyone in the hall thought it was the work of a professor. But again, that was the wonder of God. He can turn you into anybody or anything he wants you to be and do.

My dear compatriots and readers out there, note the level of love I got from the elders when I staged my first play. They were all very supportive. Almost all those I named were supposedly what you may term “*Americo-Liberians*,” but they warmly embraced and supported the talents of an indigenous youth. They were elders who put Liberia first and that loved excellent scholarship. So, even though fifty years ago, I was a “Gbara” as I am today, but back then that sometimes did not matter if you had a talent or if you were doing something that would benefit the common good of society. Hence, in my case, what mattered then was that a young talented Liberian had made his debut as a playwright, theatre director and producer. Further, the elders wanted me to continue the good work because they knew through my talents millions of Liberians, Africans, and citizens of the world would benefit from my literary prowess someday. That was the mentality that I grew up with, putting my country first and working for the common good of society. Thus, love lifted me when nothing/nobody else could help, but God!

In December 1974, I graduated from Carroll High School. Our guest speaker was none other than His Excellency William R. Tolbert, Jr., 19<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Liberia. He delivered a fiery speech, urging us to aim for “higher heights” and to be “totally involved” in nation building. So, most of my inner drive to do for my country and fellow countrymen and women was instilled in me from my personal encounter with President Tolbert. He planted his seed of patriotism in me!

### *The University of Liberia: The Cradle of My Growth as Artist/Scholar*



The University of Liberia served as a breeding ground for me to advance myself as an artist/scholar. I entered the University of Liberia August 1975, doing remedial math. I spent the rest of the school year during my leisure time working along with Kona Khasu and his Blamadon

Theatre Workshop. At the same time, I continued my literary work, writing plays, poems, and essays on issues related to social justice. One of my poems, "Watta Police," was published by Bill Frank and it drew public attention. Also, as a sympathizer of MOJA (Movement for Justice in Africa), I sometimes performed my poems at MOJA rallies at the Sports Commission on Broad Street. As a young student leader and upcoming Liberian playwright, I received the blessings of the students and faculty at LU to pursue my calling as a playwright. I even became more popular when I briefly served as Secretary General of the Vanguard Student Unification Party (SUP).

The following year, in 1976 I was unanimously elected President of the Silver Jubilee Freshman Class. Part of my plan was to push my literary vocation while serving as President of the Freshman Class to raise funds to undertake class projects that were geared toward conscientizing LU students about their culture and history through the performing arts. Subsequently, I wrote "*No More Hard Times*". It advocated the safety and well-being of female students and prevention of sexual abuse against them by older and influential men in society.

This time, I assumed more theatrical and production roles than as usual. Apart from being the author, I also directed, produced, and acted in "No More Hard Times" as the main character, named "Mr. Kamara." Jamesetta Howard Wolokolie, now Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia, played "Ma Miatta," Mr. Kamara's wife, and both of us were parents to "Bendu," our daughter. She had a friend named "Musu" who was materialistic and that influenced "Bendu" to go out with a big shot named "*Minister This*" played by William Travell. Bendu went out with "Minister This" so she could get money to pay her tuition and support her parents. In the end she got pregnant and had to drop out of school.

Later, we took "No More Hard Times" on the road under the banner of the Silver Jubilee Freshman Class of the University of Liberia. We performed at the Sanniquellie Administration Building in Nimba County and then we travelled to Maryland County and performed at the Harper City Hall. We received a standing ovation from the people of Harper, Maryland in 1976. Few months thereafter in the same year, we performed "No More Hard Times" at the Grand Bassa County Fairgrounds in Buchanan as guests of the Grand Bassa University Student Association. Ma Rosa Dillion was our chief sponsor. She showed us what Bassa hospitality was all about!

***Establishment of Dehkontee Artists Theatre in 1977 & the Use of Theatre to Transform the Mindset of the Masses***



1977 was a progressive year for me as an artist/scholar. This time I began to experiment with using theatre and the performing arts to transmit to the public important political, social and economic issues through drama, music, dance, and poetry. By then, my one-year term as President of the Silver Jubilee Freshman Class had ended. Also, as a busy body, I always preoccupy myself with worthwhile pursuits because “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” the old folks always advised us. Hence, I decided I would establish a theatre company of my own and Part of my inspiration was spurred by working with Kona Khasu’s Blamadon Theatre Workshop where I served as Stage Manager for roughly a year. Therefore, I thought I could branch off as an independent artist to begin my own genre of theatre and establish a legacy for myself.

***DATI Was Founded under the Palava Hut on LU Campus***



***The famous palava huts on the Capitol Hill campus of the University of Liberia where DATI was founded 47 years ago.***

One day, I received inspiration from the Lord and invite several of my classmates and friends to a meeting under the palava hut on the Capitol Hill campus of the University of Liberia. The

meeting was called to decide my brand name and to determine our mission and vision. During that meeting I informed my colleagues I wanted to organize a theatre company that would preserve, promote and educate Liberians about their culture and history through the performing and visual arts. I also informed them my vision was to construct a school of the performing and visual arts someday. I was not sure when, but that concept has always lingered on my mind until quite recently, forty-six years later, when I manifested it publicly by launching the DATI Tripartite Anniversary Gala and Fundraiser on December 16, 2023. The aim of the fundraiser is to construct the first school of the performing and visual arts and center for peace and cultural studies in Liberia.

During my days at the University of Liberia, Dehkontee Artists Theatre was Liberia's premiere collegiate theatre organization. It became the chief rival of the University Players that was directed by a faculty from the English Department named Professor Victor Lawson. It was obvious the UL Players were no match for DATI on or off campus. DATI was always in the news and at some point, it was very embarrassing to see a student heading a theatre organization on campus that outshined the official theatre organization of the University of Liberia. We had the support of the students and the support of the masses because of the themes of our productions.

While the University Players were rehearsing Shakespeare's plays that had no cultural or current relevance to what was taking place in Liberia, DATI's productions dealt with contemporary issues that affected the masses of Liberia. We featured "No More Hard Times" that portrayed the socio-economic conditions of the poverty-stricken Liberian masses and "Chains of Apartheid" that revealed the ills of Apartheid regimes and the guerrilla warfare that was going on in Southern and Southwest Africa to liberate those regions of Africa from the yokes of neocolonialism and imperialism. Therefore, I felt inspired to continue advocating for the masses because part of my inspiration came from most of my SUP comrades who gave me grassroots support. Some of them included LeRoy Boikai, Swamzy Elliott, Chris Toe, Al Gbi Toe, Dusty Wolokolie, James Fromoyan, and the list goes on.

I also received support from members of ASAP, the rival student political party at the University of Liberia back in the day. ASAP members were mainly conservative students that were from the upper echelon of the Liberian society, but as a national playwright, I did not care where anyone came from. I got along with both sets of students and so I enjoyed the best of both worlds on LU campus. Consequently, this opened the doors of many opportunities that follow in subsequent passes in this address.

### ***"Chains of Apartheid" and "Love for Mymah"***

I first realized the power of the performing and visual arts as an effective transformative tool when I wrote "Chains of Apartheid." This is because the performing and visual art or any art form, has the propensity to educate and entertain and because of man's universal enjoyment of imitation. I experienced this during one major historic event that took place in Liberia in 1977 during which President William R. Tolbert, Jr., launched the ***National Fund Drive for the Total Liberation of Southern Africa***. At that time, the Republic of South Africa was then still under

the racist Apartheid regime of Pete Botha. Nelson Mandela was also imprisoned on Robben Island and there were liberation battles taking place in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, and Southwest Africa (Namibia) between African freedom fighters and their colonial rulers.



*President William R. Tolbert, Jr., 19<sup>th</sup> President of Liberia*

President Tolbert was a Pan Africanist and he was dead serious about liberating the entire continent of Africa. As Vice President of Liberia for nineteen years, he had worked with President Tubman to assist many African countries gain their independence from colonial rule, such as Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Mali, Togo, etc. So, the involvement of the West African Peacekeeping Force, ECOMOG, in mediating the internal civil crisis that occurred in Liberia, was a small “pay back” that is not even commensurate with what Liberia has done for her little sisters over the last century on the continent of Africa and on the global stage.



*Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh, political activist in the 1970s*

Also, during this time frame, the “progressives” ( Togba-Nah Tipoteh, Bacchus Matthews, Henry Boima Fahnbulleh, Jr., Dew Tuan Wleh Mayson, Amos Claudius Sawyer, Oscar Jayee Quiah, D. Karn Kalor, etc.) were echoing the battle cry for freedom in other parts of Africa as well as in

Liberia. They espoused socialist and communist ideologies of Mao tse Tung, Muammar Qaddafi, Fidel Castro, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Benito Mussolini, etc.

Against this backdrop, the progressives were armed with varied foreign ideologies that they used to vehemently protest capitalism. Consequently, their progressive advocacy countered the Liberian government's traditional capitalist alliance with the United States. Subsequently, there was a high level of national and international consciousness among Liberian intellectuals and university students, as well as mounting political tensions between the progressives and their followers and the status quo. At that stage, Liberia had become so politically polarized that it was evident a political revolution was not too far from taking place!

As an activist myself, I felt I could assist in translating on the theatre stage, President Tolbert's foreign policy on the total liberation of the African continent. Hence, my aim was to create a sensational and realistic play that would provide visual and aesthetic effects and insights on the ills of Apartheid so that the Liberian people would better grasp the importance of President Tolbert's foreign policy. Mind you, I was not asked by the Tolbert government to perform this crucial educational and public relations task. Instead, I took up the initiative because I felt it was my civic duty as a patriotic Liberian and scholar/artist, to contribute my quota towards the liberation of the African continent, and the whole thing went viral!

In other words, what I am trying to say to you, young people, don't wait to be called upon before you do something for your country or people. Don't wait to go to the people to tell them, "I want to be president" when you have never contributed anything towards their well-being before. Get totally involved by taking initiatives. Since we got a senior citizen as our incoming President, we must pray for him to stay around long enough so we can learn from his wisdom. We must offer our services without being asked because Liberia is our home and because God loves a cheerful giver.



*South African musician and activist Mariam Makeba*

I personally had no knowledge about what the Apartheid system in South Africa was all about but there were many South African refugees that attended the University of Liberia that I felt I could interview to obtain some vital information about the Apartheid policy in South Africa. Some of them were medical students at the A.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine. Also, Mariam

Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Philemon Hou, and other Pan African activists such as Stokely Carmichael and Nina Simon, frequented Liberia and Guinea and Ghana to consult with Presidents Tubman, Ahmed Sekou Toure and Nkrumah who were great advocates and proponents of the Pan African movement. So, sometimes I would bump into them at Gerttie-Lue Flora Park in Sinkor where they sometimes assembled to socialize and discuss plans about their liberation struggles.

Fortunately, I interviewed Sepo, Philemon Hou, and other South Africans to enable me to put my story into proper context. After I finished the script, I trained my actors and part of the requirement of the play was to affect the South African accent so that we did not sound like Liberians but that we sounded like South Africans, to reflect their suffering realistically. Zobon Scott, Claude Langley, Nathaniel Doe, Christie Fumba, Mona Bedell, Alicia Murray, Maude Major, Joshua Howard (Jacko), and I, played major roles in the play. Joshua Howard, Melvin Smith, Eugene Wilson and Maude Major were the “ray” ones among us, so they took the white South African roles and the rest of us “blackies” were the Black South African freedom fighters.

Alongside the rehearsal of “Chains of Apartheid”, we also rehearsed an excerpt of “Love for Mymah”, a traditional Liberian folk drama that narrates the love story between two Liberian royalties from the Vai and Kru ethnic groups of Liberia. This was when I began to delve into producing plays that required the use of different theatrical styles and periods while at the same time delving into producing contemporary directing styles and Avant Gard theatre.

### ***DATI's Open House Performance: Tubman Hall Auditorium, UL Capitol Hill Campus***

In mid-August 1977, we staged DATI's open house performance. It was attended by an array of distinguished Liberian scholars, politicians, and educators including but not limited to Dr. Edward B. Kesselly, Jr., Minister of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism, Bai T. Moore, Assistant Minister of Youth and Sports, Stephen J. Crayton, Sr., Dr. Mary Antoinette Brown Sherman, President of the University of Liberia, and last but not least, the students of the University of Liberia, my support base, were all very present.

There was no standing room in the Tubman Hall Auditorium. During that time, we only featured excerpts from both plays. The full-length production of “Chains of Apartheid” was officially staged at the E.J. Roye Auditorium in Central Monrovia in December 1977. A few of the progressives attended our debut performance, including Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh, Dew Mayson, and photojournalist Eugene Shaw. My mother and some close family members were also in attendance.



***1978: DATI's First International Tour and Launch of the First Drama Festival at the University of Liberia***



The following year in 1978, I became more prolific as a playwright. I also influenced my cast members so much that they too were enthused to be a part of Dehkontee Artists Theatre. That year, Dehkontee Artists Theatre held the first ***Joe Gbaba Drama Festival at the University of Liberia Tubman Hall Auditorium in July 19778***. Six of my plays were featured: “Zon Ninneh Taryee”, My Redeemer Liveth,” “Disappointed God-Ma,” “Love for Mymah,” “Chains of Apartheid,” and “Kekula.”



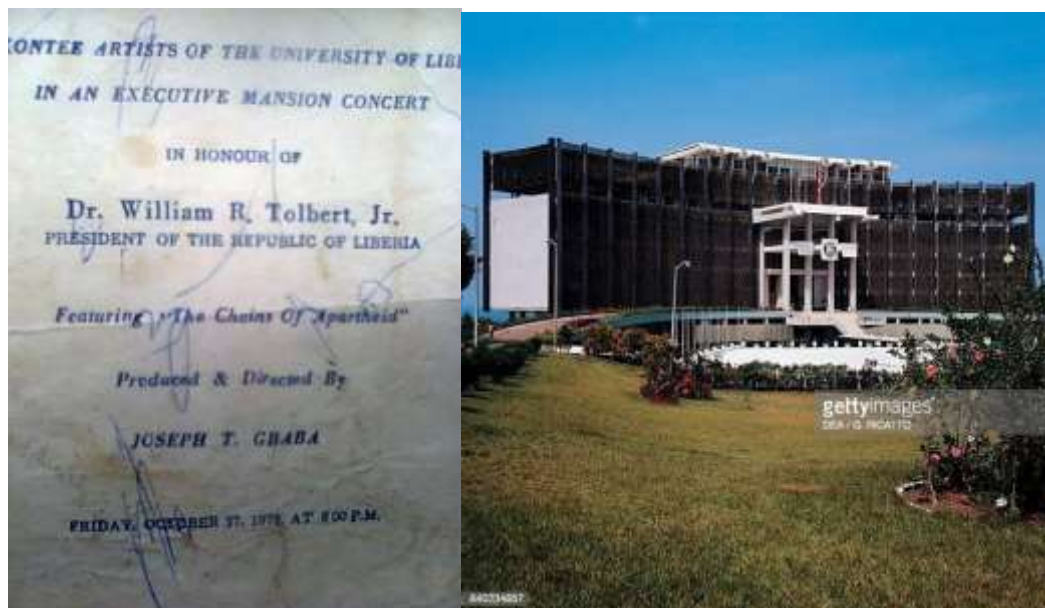
***Sierra Leone's First Vice President, S. I. Koroma & First Grand Patron of DATI***

Following the First Joe Gbaba Drama Festival, Dehkontee Artists Theatre went on its first international tour to Freetown, Sierra Leone in July 1978. We performed “Chains of Apartheid” at the Fourah Bay College Arena Theatre, the Freetown City Hall Auditorium, and DATI held its first presidential performance on July 26, 1978 at the State House in Freetown under the auspices of His Excellency S. I. Koroma, First Vice President of Sierra Leone. S.I. Koroma was then

Acting President of Sierra Leone because President Siaka Stevens had traveled to Khartoum, Sudan, to attend the OAU (now African Union—AU) Heads of States Summit. S.I. Koroma gave us a purse of Five Hundred United States Dollars.

Also, during the State House performance in Freetown, Dr. Joseph Morris, the Liberian Ambassador accredited near Sierra Leone, attended the ceremony. He was so fascinated by the performance that he wired a telegram to President Tolbert stating how effective the “Chains of Apartheid” production was in terms of vividly supporting the President’s call for all African leaders to oppose Apartheid and racist colonial regimes in Africa. On that same memorable and historic day, I got my first BBC interview in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

### ***1979: DATI Executive Mansion Performances in Monrovia***



In 1979, Liberia hosted one of the most elaborate OAU/AU conferences in Africa! The National Unity Conference Center, Hotel Africa, and the presidential villas were constructed in the township of Virginia in preparation for this elaborate historic event. The Liberian government also chartered a floating hotel ship to accommodate hundreds of thousands of foreign guests that attended the summit. While government was preparing to host Africa in July, we received a Green Letter with the emblem of the President of Liberia inviting Dehkontee Artists Theatre to the Executive Mansion theatre to perform for His Excellency President William Richard Tolbert, Jr., First Lady Victoria Tolbert, Speaker of the House, Honorable Richard Abrom Henries, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, His Honor James A. A. Pierre, and the Haitian Ambassador accredited near Monrovia and Deputy Minister of Health, Joseph Ellis. While the invitation was exciting, it did not come as a total surprise because President Tolbert was an avid lover of the arts and he considered the youth of Liberia as his ***“Precious Jewels.”***

The President was so moved by our performance that he requested a repeat performance during the state visit of Ghanaian Head of State, General Fred Akkuffo and Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings. The third time “Chains of Apartheid” was performed was under the aegis of His

Excellency C. Cecil Dennis, Jr., Foreign Minister of Liberia and all diplomats and heads of foreign missions accredited near Monrovia. The purpose of this particular performance at the Monrovia City Hall was to obtain the opinion of foreign diplomats whether the play should be staged for all African heads of states attending the OAU '79 Summit. Unfortunately, due to heavy security at that time, DATI did not perform for all heads of states attending the summit as President Tolbert had wished.

Nevertheless, let me stress here that one of the reasons Liberia was in the leadership seat of African liberation was because the Presidents of Liberia at the time had love for the culture of Liberia. They did not pay lip service to culture and they did not appoint anyone who did not know how to present our culture on the world stage to work in that capacity. During the Tubman and Tolbert eras, Liberia had one of the best African ethnographers in the person of Honorable Bai T. Moore. Other celebrated Liberian cultural icons included Peter Ballah, Kona Khasu, Miatta Fahnbulleh, Yatta Zoe, Hawa Daisy Moore, Nimba Bird, Henry Lewis, Ma Gbessie Kiazolu, Morris Dolly, Zack and Geebah, etc. I was Old Man Moore's handbag, and I learned from him, too!

***1980-1983: Suspension of DATI Activities in Liberia & Establishment of DATI at UNC-Greensboro, in the United States***



***Head of State Samuel K. Doe and members of the People's Redemption Council***

In 1980, there was a military coup in Liberia. This event was the first of its kind. There was a change of leadership from the hands of the descendants of free slaves who had ruled Liberia for more than one hundred and thirty-three years, to the hands of the indigenous sons of the land. The Constitution of Liberia was suspended, and martial law was imposed. There was dusk to dawn curfew as well. The real ***'socialist/communist' type of rulership that the progressives were advocating came right at their doorsteps.*** An interesting thing about the 1980 military takeover was that majority of the soldiers who 'led' the revolution were not literate. Some of them were soldiers from the barracks that were used to saying "Yes, sir" to their superior officers. Now, civilians were required to say "Yes, sir" to the soldiers or you got your butt whipped. They were once derogatorily referred to as ***"NOKOS,"*** but now they were addressed as ***"Chief."***

For a good period, all civic activities were immediately suspended, and all political activities were also suspended. While that was going on amidst summary executions, I hustled a Liberian government scholarship to travel abroad to major in Theatre and pursue graduate studies.



In August 1981, I was admitted at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G) School of Theatre to pursue my master’s degree in Drama. I also organized DATI on the UNC-G campus and engaged African American and Caucasian students to participate in the production of “Chains of Apartheid” as my master’s thesis production. The reception of the audience at that Southern university was very different from those who watched the play on the continent of Africa.

One of my classmates named Tom who watched the play remarked, “Joe, if I had a pistol, I would have shot you in the theatre for portraying a white South African police officer as a vicious racist white man shooting a baby!”

For a moment, it seemed my classmate Tom was in denial, and indeed he was because I was portraying the truth. But again, giving his behavior a second thought, it was obvious many Americans down South were not aware of happenings in next door Mexico, let alone South Africa. However, staging “Chains of Apartheid” in the racist South of the United States was an eye opener. It taught me about audience reaction and the consequences that may emerge given the gravity of the impact the play creates on the minds of the audience.

***1983-1989: Reorganization of DATI & Fostering My Education Career & Family Life***



After grad school, I returned to Liberia (1) because I went on a Liberian government scholarship and I obligated myself to return and provide services for the government of Liberia. Unfortunately, the Doe administration had no plans for government scholarship recipients that successfully completed their studies abroad and returned home to assist in national development.

It was my way of thanking the Liberian government and people for the opportunity accorded me to study abroad at taxpayers' expense. The overall cost of my first graduate studies was approximately Twenty-Seven Thousand Dollars (\$27,000); and (2), I returned home at the end of my academic sojourn to get married to my fiancée, Princess Ariminta Gbaba and to start a family of own.

Also, at the time when I returned to Liberia to get married to my wife now of forty years, Head of State Doe and my wife's distant cousin named Albert Porte, had fallen out. And, for a naïve society with 80% illiteracy rate, it was deemed an affront to the ruling indigenous junta to be an indigenous Liberian and get married to a Porte or an Americo-Liberian lady during the third year of an indigenous people's takeover of political power from descendants of settlers after one hundred and thirty-three years of Americo-Liberian/Congau rule. The anti-Congau or anti-Americo-Liberian sentiments were still very high! Sometimes, I got scolded by some prejudiced indigenous Liberians that had nothing good to say to me, such as, "All the women in Liberia, you ain't see no one to marry but that Congau girl?"

Additionally, the inter- Krahn ethnic rift and rivalry between Doe's kinsmen and other Krahn subgroups even made matters worse. I recall one Krahn woman once told me, "You will walk until you shoe heels eat up!"

It was the least I expected to hear from a Krahn woman, but she was right. I did not have a job for roughly one year. During that time interval as God would have it, I received a French government scholarship to travel to Paris, France, artists that were interested in doing a three-month course and orientation in cinematography and theatre. It was just in that time frame, Head of State Samuel Kanyon Doe appointed me as Special Assistant to the Director General of the National Bureau of Culture and Tourism. I couldn't let a good opportunity go by so I requested permission from the government to take up my post after my trip to Paris from October-December 1984. After I returned, I reorganized Dehkontee Artists Theatre and recruited actors from the University of Liberia. We staged "The Resurrection" at the Monrovia City Hall, and at the LAMCO Buchanan Messhall and at the Grand Bassa County Fairgrounds in 1984.



In 1985, two Bandi intellectuals in the persons of Dr. Stephen Yekeson and Dr. William Saa Salifu recognized my intellectual worth and noticed that I was being underused or not appreciated by the Doe government. Subsequently, they offered me a full-time teaching job in the Humanities Division at Cuttington University College in Suacoco, Bong County.

We felt at home at Cuttington because my wife and I got married in Gbarnga two years earlier and so Suacoco was a familiar territory. In addition, the administration, faculty, and staff, and student body received us warmly. It was fun returning into an academic setting after a very boring and worthless experience working in an environment where it was obvious *square pegs were placed in round holes!*

Also, for a young married couple who were just starting up their family living upcountry was the ideal. We did not have a vehicle but fortunately most of the services we needed such as healthcare for our babies and transportation were right at our doorsteps. My wife transferred from the University of Liberia and resumed her college education on campus, and Phebe Hospital, one of the best health care facilities in Liberia, was just a few yards away from the Cuttington campus. In addition, Gbarnga where we did most of our grocery shopping and where my wife's parents lived, was half an hour drive from Cuttington. So, we had family support in case if our children got sick and if we needed extra family support.

As one of the youngest professors on campus, I found it fascinating teaching students some of whom were older or mostly younger than I was. We got along very well, and I was affectionately called "Uncle Joe" or "Ah-plokush." However, that had nothing to do with my rigorous teaching style in the classroom. Obviously, I separated pleasure from business. I taught Advanced English, English Literature, Shakespeare, Composition, and Expository Writing, and served as Chair of the Faculty Cultural Pattern Committee and Director of the Cuttington University Players. In 1986, I produced and directed "The Minstrel's Tales" and collaborated with a traditional Kpelle minstrel and musician named Jokpankpan, to stage a very culture-rich theatre production using local artists and college students to showcase the richness and diversity of Liberian culture. The following year in 1987, I staged "Chains of Apartheid" at Cuttington, the Relda Cinema in Monrovia, and at the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa, Nimba County.

#### ***1988-1989: Zwedru Multilateral High School***



*A scene from Dr. Joe Gbaba's "Yah" ("Vision") staged by ZMHS Dramatic Club at Relda Cinema in Monrovia 1988.*

I landed at Zwedru Multilateral High School after three years of teaching at Cuttington. This time I was the chief administrative officer of the largest secondary school in the Southeastern region of Liberia. ZMHS provided three streams of scholarship as a multilateral educational

institution: technical, vocational, and academic. Initially, the school was built as a World Bank project, but it was handed over to the GOL to run several years later. ZMHS was at the brink of collapse when I took over. Hence, it took the concerted efforts of administration, faculty, student body, and all major stakeholders in Grand Gedeh County and Liberia, to revive the three streams of educational opportunities for the students. During my administration, the entire outlook of the campus was rehabilitated and equipment such as generators, broken down vehicles were repaired to bring back vibrant student life on ZMHS campus.

Also, apart from my official duties as Principal of ZMHS, I organized the ZMHS Dramatic Club, wrote and directed “Yah” (Vision) and brought my students to Monrovia on a one-month performance tour. I included in our entourage, some very famous traditional Krahn musicians such as “Bah-Beh”, “Gaye-yah-Ninneh,” “Doelue-bah-Paboo”, and two traditional Krahn dance masks called, “Voor-pen Gleh”, and “Zah-yea Gleh”. We spent two weeks on the Paramount Chief Compound in Monrovia and had a cultural festival that attracted the residents of Monrovia. We also performed for two nights at the Relda Cinema to raise funds to construct a football stadium and to give the children exposure and promote the academic, vocational, and technical programs of the institution. Unfortunately, that plan did not materialize because senior county officials and Doe himself did not provide the necessary support we needed to implement the project. Instead, they mainly saw ZMHS as a ground to recruit NDPL partisans.

### ***1990-1997: Period of Warfare and the Use of the Performing Arts in Peacebuilding***



*Some members of the diplomatic community during the Liberian civil war attending a DATI performance at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia in 1992.*

The Liberian genocide did not stop me or the Dehkontee Artists Theatre team from carrying out my golden mandate to preserve, promote, and teach Liberian history and culture through the performing and visual arts. During the heat of the hostilities my family and I were in hiding most of the time. We only came out if we were relocating from one embattled zone to another less engaged area of Monrovia. However, when hostilities ceased, I began working with Medicine Sans Frontiers as a Cultural Consultant. Later, I got a contract from UNICEF as a cultural consultant with the UNICEF War Trauma Healing Counselors Project. I taught Liberian History and Culture and then eventually ended up with a bigger contract that included DATI as an implementing partner of UNICEF’s Kukatonon Peaceful Conflict Resolution Project. Internally, I worked along with a colleague of mine named Fredrick Russell Deshield.



*Fredrick Russell Deshield serving as MC during a DATI production of “The Minstrel’s Tales” at the Centennial Memorial Pavilion in Monrovia.*

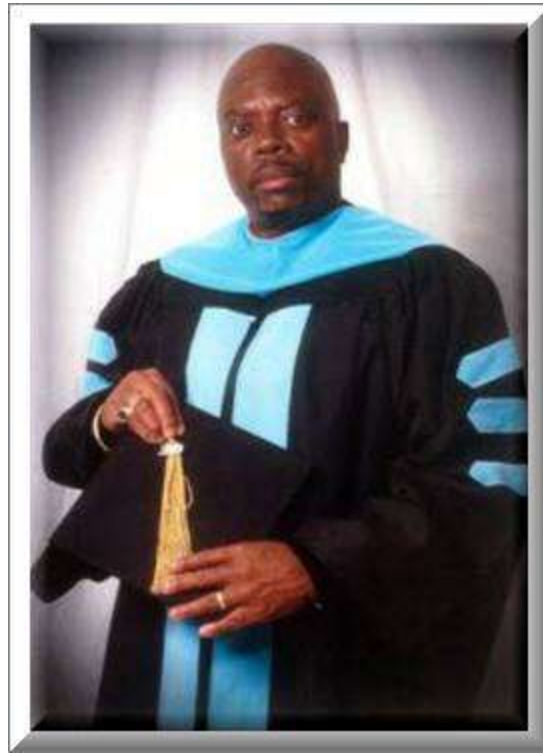
Fred Deshield and I worked together to promote peace and reconciliation during the peak of the Liberian civil war from the early through the late 1990s. Together, we helped to restore a semblance of normalcy in the buffet zone of Monrovia under the security supervision of the West African Peacekeeping Force, ECOMOG. We staged numerous theatrical productions and implemented peacebuilding projects in collaboration with UNICEF-Liberia. Some of our projects included the establishment of the DATI/UNICEF Kukatonon Peaceful Conflict Resolution and Peace Education Project and the DATI Kukatonon Children’s Peace Theatre. We conducted training workshops for war trauma counselors, educational leaders and teachers throughout Liberia.

We also launched a radio drama series with UNICEF and the Christian Health Association (CHAL), entitled, “Roads to Recovery”, a peace and reconciliation radio drama series that I wrote and produced. It ran for twelve months on Radio ELBC of the Liberia National Broadcasting System (LBS). “Roads to Recovery” became a source of entertainment and counseling for millions of war traumatized survivors of the Liberian genocide.

Furthermore, DATI performed at various displaced persons centers for hundreds of thousands of displaced people across Liberia, staging its traveling theatrical production about HIV/AIDS and STDs awareness entitled, “Wheh-gba.” DATI produced a radio drama series entitled, “Mardea.” The play promotes gender equity and women empowerment. We also did plays on disarmament of child soldiers and former combatants in collaboration with the United Nations Military Mission to Liberia (UNMIL).



*1997-2024: Fleeing into Exile and Making the Best of a Challenging Situation*



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

In 1997 I fled in exile due to the atrocities that took place in Liberia and threat of life. However, that did not stop me from carrying out my mandate from God, to promote peace, national unity, and reconciliation among Liberians and citizens of the globe. Even though living in a strange land and starting anew posed a lot of socio-economic and political stress, nonetheless, I found time to further my education, to work and support my family and to revive Dehkontee Artists Theatre in the United States.

I attended a Jesuit institution of higher learning called St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I earned my second master's in Elementary and Special Education, and my Doctorate in Educational Leadership. Some of DATI's U.S.A. productions and projects include, "Love for Mymah," "Town Trap," visited several schools in Philadelphia and in Prince George's County in Maryland where I shared my Afrocentric concept of teaching and promoting African heritage with local artists. We also performed at some of the prestigious performing spaces in the United States, including the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts, The Ibrahim Theatre, and the African Cultural Center in Philadelphia, etc.



*Some of Rabbi Gbaba's students who attended DATI's Tripartite Anniversary Gala and Fundraiser (L-R) Lynda Buesmaill-Tall, Aston Wolo, Josephine Davies-Worwoi, St. Clare Avery, Rabbi Gbaba, Qualyna Porte-Dunbar, Patrick Taplah, Hassan Tall, Irene Roberts-Gulley, Nancy Green-Samoi, and Amelia Attia.*

I want to thank all the organizers of the DATI Tripartite Anniversary Organizing Committee that comprised mainly my students from Cuttington University, University of Liberia, St. Patrick's High School, and A.M.E. Zion Academy Class of '89. Here are the names: Stateswoman Linda Buesmaill-Tall and her beau Hassan Tall, Stateswoman Edna and her handsome hubby Beyan Kesselly, Stateswoman Kou and her sweetheart Dr. Nyaquoi Kargbo, Stateswoman Munah and her darling Timothy Gardiner, Stateswomen Irene Roberts-Gulley, Juliana Koffa-Dixon, Jocelia Rancy, Mai Stevens, Nora Solo, Comfort Shilue-Sobah, Ann Cooper Wilson Zeze, and Statesmen Joe Monyue, Vonjo Tommy, Alston J. Wolo, Patrick Taplah, Lionel Brown, William NGombu and A.M. E. Zion Class of '89, Liberian Association of Pennsylvania and our trustworthy Board member and webmaster, Statesman Harrison "Black Baby" Jiedueh. Please forgive me if I left out any organizer's name.

The response of the public towards the news that DATI intends to establish a school of the performing and visual arts and center for peace and cultural studies, was very encouraging. We raised an initial amount of \$14,595, including expenses. Our initial target is \$50,000 to purchase the land on which we would like to construct the first school of the performing and visual arts. When completed, we will offer courses in traditional Liberian dance, music, Liberian vernaculars, as well as Americo-Liberian culture and history, and culinary arts, etc.

## ***2019: The Launch of the DATI Kukatonon Peace Project in Liberia***



In 2019, we launched the DATI Kukatonon Peace Project in Liberia, to promote peace and reconciliation through the performing and visual arts and literacy. We collaborated with Liberian college graduates and college students to serve as peace advocates since it was the youth of Liberia that were forcibly conscripted to serve as child soldiers during the atrocities that took place in Liberia. We established two DATI chapters in Liberia, the Maryland Gbenelue Chapter and the Montserrado Dugbor Chapter. The youths were trained in peaceful conflict resolution techniques and they also did cultural research to learn about their cultural and ethnic lineages. Thereafter, they took oath to promote peace and nonviolence in Liberia.

DATI Peace Advocates have worked as volunteers for five years now. They stand in readiness to travel throughout the length and breadth of Liberia to promote peace and to provide adult literacy and civic education through drama, and community engagement activities. Our progress and plan of action have been slowed down due to lack of funding and logistical support. However, it is our hope that the incoming administration will openly embrace our peacebuilding and literacy programs so that we can sustain our fragile peace and create cultural awareness and national consciousness among survivors of the Liberian genocide.

### ***The Proposed DATI School of the Performing and Visual Arts and Center for Peace and Cultural Studies***

It is my wish that my *Diamond Jubilee* will be celebrated in Liberia with the Groundbreaking Ceremony of the First School of the Performing and Visual Arts and Center for Peace and Cultural Studies. It will also be the 47th Anniversary of the founding of Dehkontee Artists Theatre as the oldest surviving collegiate theatre organization in Liberia. We will need the

blessings of the incoming administration to pull this worthwhile national project through successfully.

***Estimated Cost of DATI Performing Arts Project: 6 Million Dollars***



***DATI 40th Anniversary at the African Cultural Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.***

The total cost of the DATI Performing Arts Project is estimated at \$6 Million. The facility will include theatre and performing art spaces, ballrooms, auditorium, sound and television studios, classrooms, recreation facilities, etc. We will offer courses and degrees in traditional Liberian languages, music, dance, performing and visual arts, traditional Liberian culinary arts, etc. Please note that the fundraiser is an ongoing process until the construction of the school of performing arts is completed.

### ***How You Can Donate***

1. Cashapp: \$JosephGbaba, Tel. (267) 973-1709

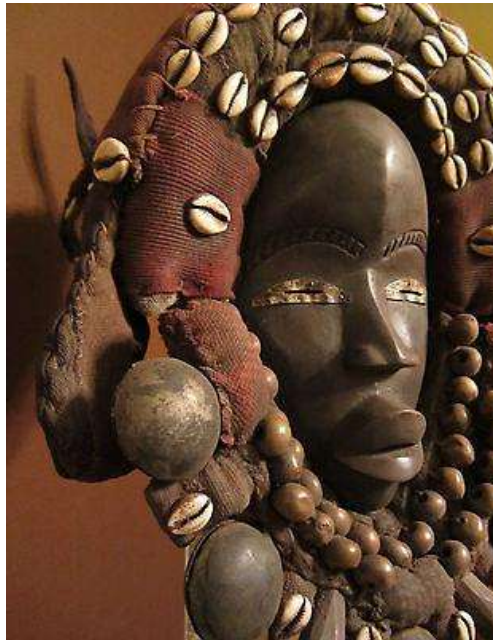
Zelle: Joseph Gbaba, email: [gbaba5@aol.com](mailto:gbaba5@aol.com); Tel. (267) 973-1709

3. Log on our website: [www.dehkonteeartiststheatreinc.com](http://www.dehkonteeartiststheatreinc.com) and click on the "Donate" button.

### ***Your Donation Is Tax-deductible***

Dehkontee Artists Theatre is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization here in the United States and a duly registered nonprofit in Liberia. Therefore, any donation you make is tax-deductible. Please donate to help Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. to assist in helping to change the mindset of Liberians from hating to loving one another as compatriots and to appreciate their cultural heritage.

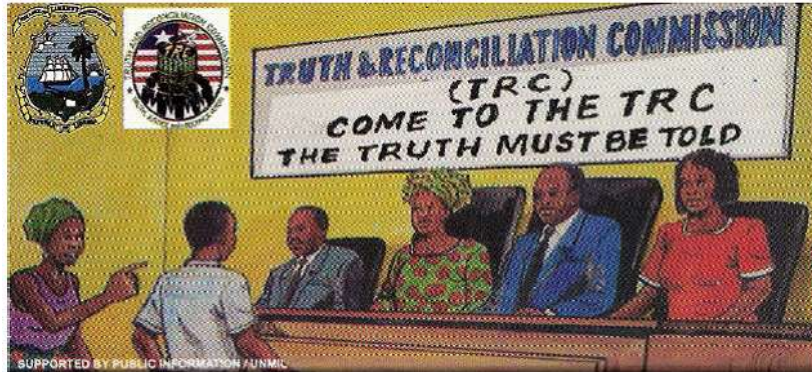
## *Analysis of Liberia's Socio-Cultural and Political Problem*



It is fair to admit that the genesis of Liberia's cultural conflict began long before the coming of the settlers on the West Coast of Africa. It existed among indigenes the settlers met on the ground because each ethnic group functioned as a unique nation or kingdom due to their cultural and linguistic differences. These differences led to frequent tribal and intertribal wars. Apart from these extenuating circumstances, Africans that settled in what is today's Liberia had a lot of cultural and linguistic similarities that bind them together as remnants of splinter kingdoms from different African civilizations and empires, such as Songhay, Ghana, Mali, Benin, etc.

However, with respect to the current conflict that Liberians are presently facing, it is safe to say Liberia's cultural conflict became more complicated and deepened when the settlers arrived in the early 1800s and introduced western culture as the predominant culture over the traditional African culture of the majority. In addition, indigenous Africans were civilized. They had their own governance, educational, social and economic systems that they were accustomed to but that differed from western civilization and culture. Therefore, degrading or referring to the culture of the indigenes as "*barbaric*" or "*uncivilized*," due to cultural or ideological differences, did not go well with the indigenes. Consequently, this gradually developed into a national divide commonly termed as, "*country vs. Congau.*"

Since the early days of the First Republic to the Second Republic, many vicious Liberian politicians have used this cultural, political, and economic divide, to cause national disunity and endless political upheavals throughout Liberia's past and present history. Hence, the million-dollar question is, how can Liberians address this national issue so that they can begin a new page in their history? How can Liberians avoid creating old national wounds revolving around social, cultural and political differences or segregation that have hurt our interpersonal and interethnic relationships over a century and a half, to recreating an inclusive, multicultural, and law-abiding democratic society where justice and rule of law will prevail?



To adequately address these questions, we must first recognize that Liberia is a multicultural society. It comprises multiple ethnic groups and languages and each ethnic group in Liberia has its own set of history, cultural values, mores, and norms that must be respected, preserved and celebrated as part of the overall mosaic of the culture of the Republic of Liberia. Secondly, Liberians must celebrate and use their diversity not as a divisive element but as a nation-building tool to create an equitable and peaceful society. Subsequently, this may lead to a positive first step towards genuine unification and integration. It would also be the first step required to develop respect for one another's cultural beliefs and persuasions, while working together to rebuild a wholesome functioning Liberian democratic society based on the rule of law.



Overall, the national healing strategy calls for the active and total involvement of all stakeholders to the Liberian conflict to correct the mistake and oversight of the founding fathers for not foreseeing that cultural differences between the indigenes and settlers would eventually mushroom into a more complex and divisive national problem that pervades every nook and cranny of the Liberian society today. Thus, the resolution to the age old “Congau vs Country” conflict rests in reconceptualizing the national curriculum to formulate a new educational and peacebuilding strategy to reorient the mindset of Liberians. This may empower Liberians to recognize they live in a multicultural society that requires each Liberian to treat and respect his compatriot as he/she would like to be treated and respected in return.

### ***The Need to Teach Peace and Civic Education and to Institutionalize Liberian Culture***

To achieve this critical national goal, it is also important for Liberians to acknowledge that the development of a well-informed citizenry living in a multicultural democratic society stems from educating the people about their government, themselves, their families, ethnic affiliations, and the *others* in their lived world. This can primarily be done by providing civic and peace education, and cultural awareness to spark national pride and consciousness within the citizens of Liberia. One of the most effective media through which this can be effectively implemented may be through the performing and visual arts and literacy.

Also, Liberians must seek permanent legal and peaceful means to resolve their prolonged national cultural conflict by ensuring that appropriate laws are legislated to prevent seditious and heinous crimes that cause division and derail the Liberian fragile peace process. This also requires the execution of the principles of the rule of law to ensure those most responsible for the atrocities take full responsibility for the consequences of their criminal actions based on the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia. Ultimately, this may be Liberia's best way forward to curbing the chronic upsurge of lawlessness, corruption, and human rights violations by a handful of outlaws in Liberia. Hopefully, this national peacebuilding strategy may end over forty years of internal turmoil and conflict that deprived Liberians at home and abroad and Africans in the West African subregion many decades of peace, and economic and social development.



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

As a Liberian cultural expert, I have elected to analyze the problem confronting the Liberian nation from the cultural perspective, which includes identifying differences in the lifestyles of Liberians based on their ethnic backgrounds. Some key identifiers of Liberia's cultural conflict include but are not limited to: ***(1) governance structure and system (2) religion or system of worship, (3) educational methods, (4) social values and customs, and (5) medium of communication.*** These crucial socio-political and cultural issues that are based on western

cultural values and norms and that conflict with traditional African cultural values and norms must be harmonized and institutionalized by inserting them into the national curriculum of Liberia, so that they may be taught in Liberian schools, colleges, and universities. Teaching these cultural concepts in our institutions of learning may help post-war Liberians and victims of the Liberian genocide to heal and get closure from the atrocities they witnessed as a result of cultural conflict that began since the formation of the modern Republic of Liberia.

In addition, the remolding process must entail educating Liberians on the political system of Liberia (*republican democratic system that has three separate but equal branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial, as contrasted against the monarchical governance system, to give Liberian pupils an overview of how the Liberian society has transitioned from monarchy to democracy*). In this way, we may be able to tactically redirect indigenous Liberians that were accustomed to monarchical form of governance that was mainly exercised through the process of ascription and the absolute power of the monarch, to gradually comprehend the democratic and republican governance structure that employs the ballot box or the will of the majority to determine their destiny.

### *The Impact of Christianity on Traditional African/Liberian Culture and Spirituality*



*Photo of Providence Baptist Church, oldest Christian edifice in Liberia where the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1847.*

Christianity has had a great impact on traditional Liberian culture and spirituality because most of the settlers were Christian evangelists who were intent on *Christianizing their unsaved and barbaric African brethren*. According to an excerpt culled from Catherine Reef's (2002) *This Our Dark Country: American Settlers of Liberia*, "They [recaptured slaves or indigenes] were instructed in the doctrines of Christianity and told when to pray, when to wake up in the morning. ... Settlers created laws barring them from mingling with native African population although some recaptured men ignored this rule and chose wives from nearby villages" (p. 42). In this light, the settlers introduced Christianity in a fashion that was not designed to liberate the indigenes and/or to enlighten their brothers and sisters to seek salvation in a way best suited to their spiritual needs. Rather, Christianity was used to make indigenes subservient to settlers' rule.



To achieve this end, the settlers used Christianity to defame traditional Liberian spirituality as did their former slave owners who stripped black slaves of their traditional African culture when they were taken across the Atlantic Ocean. Similarly, the settlers used Christianity as a weapon to destroy most of Liberia's indigenous traditions, customs, and core values and thereby eventually stripped most indigenous Liberians off their cultural heritage and values through political pressure, trauma and economic isolation. Consequently, this type of *'evangelization'* or *indoctrination hypnotized Liberians to develop duo-personality disorder*, meaning that at one time a Liberian is thinking and dressing as westerner and at other times reverting to traditional African norms and values. Sometimes this inner cultural conflict occurred under duress, especially in cases when indigenous Liberians were given the option to either adapt to western lifestyle to be *'accepted'* into the inner circle of Liberian elites; or, to be politically and economically isolated if they chose to live traditional African/Liberian lifestyle.

### *Educational System and the Need to Reconceptualize the National Curriculum*



*Members of the Liberian National Cultural Troupe*

Similarly, there are some issues concerning the way the educational system of Liberia was introduced and is run and structured. For instance, there is a vast difference between the culturally relevant traditional education that was provided by the Poro, Sande, Gborh, Blonyoun or “Grebo Bush” schools and the western educational system that was introduced by the settlers. Traditional Liberian institutions were *more technical and vocational in structure* and instruction was hands-on. Students were instructed through *a culturally relevant curriculum* that trained them to transfer knowledge they acquired to their everyday lives and settings. Graduates of the Poro or Sande institutions learned basic life skills. They learned how to hunt, fish, farm, construct their own homes, transact business, provide medical, legal and social services. They

also learned about the governmental structure of their time and adhered strictly to traditional rules and laws to sustain peace, stability, and rule of law.



On the contrary, the educational system introduced by the settlers was *more academic and white-collared*. A student spent twelve years reading, writing, learning mathematics and science and graduated without a technical or vocational skill to construct a house or to carry out basic household functions in the home or community. Hence, that type of education was not and is not culturally relevant for future citizens of a developing nation and society like Liberia. In addition, the national curriculum of Liberia is designed in a way as to prepare Liberian pupils to be more knowledgeable about western cultural norms and values, while either presenting scanty and less accurate information of traditional history to learners in Liberian schools, such as assigning Anglican names to great traditional Liberian kings and/or presenting distorted historical information that is difficult to corroborate.

In most instances the materials in the Liberian curriculum were not culturally relevant for majority of Liberian pupils. In fact, most of the texts used in schools during my day were written by foreign writers and the few textbooks written by local writers vilified and described African concepts and way of life as being “*barbaric*,” and “*uncivilized*.” And, Liberian pupils that took pride in their traditional Liberian beliefs and customs, were ridiculed and discouraged and described as being “*country*,” or “*uncivilized*.”

Therefore, the issue of cultural conflict must be tackled by providing Liberian citizens the basic civic and peace education they need to understand for instance, the political system (*republican democratic system*) that calls for the coexistence of three separate but equal branches of government. Special efforts must be made to clearly show the difference between democracy versus the monarchical governance system that most of the population, the indigenous people, were used to, prior to the introduction of the western governance system in Liberia in the early 1800s. For this reason, the government of Liberia must resume teaching civics in Liberian schools. Liberians must also hold town hall meetings and community engagement programs, and conduct adult literacy classes, to educate the majority about the democratic and republican governance system that was introduced in Liberia over one hundred and seventy-six years ago.

These are basic significant steps Liberians must take, to rehabilitate Liberia's cultural heritage and create a new mindset for postwar Liberian citizens.

### ***The Need for a Compatible Communication System***

Finally, there is a dire need for a compatible communication systems or different media through which vital public information can be transmitted apart from the English language since the bulk of the Liberian population does not speak, read, write, understand the English language efficiently. To make matters worse, government officials mostly speak in standard English when delivering national policies to the citizens of Liberia. Regrettably, ordinary Liberian citizens with little or no western education find it difficult to closely understand the messages that government officials deliver. As a result, it is very common to spread misinformation like wildfire in Liberia because messages delivered in Standard English are easily misinterpreted and subjected to individual biases by majority of Liberians who cannot read, write, speak, understand the official language of communication in Liberia. In addition, Liberia does not have a common indigenous language/vernacular that can be used as a lingua franca, unlike Ghana, Nigeria, and some East African countries where a huge population of the people speak a common national language like Swahili, Fulani, Akan, etc.

Additionally, the issue of defaming traditional Liberian culture has endangered the existence of traditional Liberian languages and customs due to the fact that (1) it was the norm of the status quo of Liberia back in the day to degrade traditional Liberian culture and discourage Liberians from speaking their native vernaculars, if they desired to be ***'accepted'*** in the inner circle of the elites of the Liberian society. As a result, most of our Liberian customs and languages are gradually disappearing. Thus, the construction of the school of the performing and visual arts and center for peace and cultural studies will be of great help in revitalizing Liberian democracy and institutionalizing Liberia's history and culture to foster research, universal scholarship and enhance interpersonal relationships among Liberians.

### ***Conclusion: Stark Reality of Persistent Disunity, and Lack of Self-Knowledge***



The stark reality of persistent divisiveness that Liberians face today is slightly different from what we experienced sixty or fifty years ago. Back then, due to President Tubman's charismatic nature and his determination to promote national unity, rule of law, and national integration,

Liberians lived together in peace more than we do today. Having a President that was keen about uniting his people and demonstrating his respect for traditional culture helped tremendously to encourage Liberians from all sectors of the Liberian demographics to integrate freely of their own volition, even though it was done gradually. Nevertheless, disunity, economic and social deprivation of the masses, as well as the marginalization of certain people or ethnic groups in national decision-making processes based on ideological differences or prejudice, persists today under the guise of partisan or tribal politics.

Based on the circumstances above, Liberians who survived the atrocities are battling with so many socio-cultural conflicts in a post-war society whose culture is at the brink of complete extinction. Certainly, this dilemma speaks to the dire need for Liberians to preserve, appreciate, teach, and cherish their history and culture in their homes, communities, neighborhoods, schools, and universities for the following reasons: (1) to improve the mindset of Liberians regarding their attitude toward their own history and culture; (2), to discourage the negative way Liberians regard and interact with one another as compatriots, and (3) to promote national unity and integration.

We look forward to receiving support from the incoming administration of President-elect Joseph Nyumah Boikai to construct the first school of the performing and visual arts and center for peace and cultural studies. Happy Golden Jubilee to all who have contributed towards this awesome journey of peace, love for God and country, and respect for the spirits of our forebears!

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*The Deshield Brothers (L-R: Dr. McKinley A. Deshield, Jr., former Dean of the College of Agriculture & Forestry and First Chief Sponsor of Dehkontee Artists Theatre at the University of Liberia; and Fredrick Russell Deshield, Sr., Assistant Director of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc.*

Dr. Deshield was there for me when I founded Dehkontee Artists Theatre forty-seven years ago at the University of Liberia where he was Dean of the College of Agriculture and Forestry. He served as DATI's first Chief Sponsor and he laid the groundwork for me to attend UNC-Greensboro School of Theatre in the United States after I earned a B.A. degree in English Literature from Liberia College.



*Three prominent Ministers of Information and Culture who helped to promote my literary work in Liberia (L-R: Dr. Edward Binyah Kesselly, Jr., J. Jenkins Peal, and Bai Tamia Moore)*

Honorable J. Jenkins Peal, Dr. Edward Binyan Kesselly, Jr., Ministers of information, and Deputy Minister for Culture and Tourism, Honorable Bai T. Moore and Congresswoman Melinda Jackson Parker, supported and ushered me into the Culture Bureau to study under and work with my artistic father, the renowned Liberian ethnographer, Honorable Bai T. Moore. As a father, he blessed me and passed the baton unto me. He once told me, “I want you to continue the work I have begun when I can no longer do it.” His word being his bond, , Bai T. Moore recommended me to The University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Theatre, from where I earned the Master of Fine Arts degree in Drama in 1983.

*Thank You, United States of America for Providing a Haven for Us!*



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

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