



Dr. Joseph Gbaba, Sr. Ed.D.
Preserving Liberian Stories

**Back In Time : Did You Know ?
Joseph Gbaba – Before the Stage Found Him
Part I of III**

By Derek M. Moore

In this series, I want to look at Joseph Gbaba not only as a playwright, actor, and educator, but as one of those Liberians who helped keep our stories alive. But before the books, before Dehkontee Artists Theatre, and before the audiences that would come to know his work, there was a young Liberian whose journey began far from the spotlight.

W h y H i s S t o r y M a t t e r s

Ask most Liberians about Joseph Gbaba and many will recognize the name. Some will remember the plays. Others will remember the performances, the students he taught, the actors he mentored, or the cultural institutions he helped build.

Yet there is a curious problem.

For a man who spent much of his life preserving Liberian stories, surprisingly little has been written about his own. That says something about Joseph Gbaba, but it may say even more about Liberia.

We have preserved power better than we have preserved culture.

We document presidents, debate politicians, and argue about soldiers, coups, and revolutions, while many of the artists, teachers, playwrights, musicians, and cultural workers who shaped Liberia's cultural identity are left to survive through scattered photographs, fading programs, newspaper clippings, and the memories of those who knew them.

Joseph Gbaba belongs to that group, and perhaps that is why his story deserves telling.

To understand him, we must begin long before the theatre productions, long before the books, long before Dehkontee Artists Theatre, and long before the audiences that would come to know his work. We must begin with the young Liberian who discovered that stories could do more than entertain; they could teach, preserve culture, and help a nation understand itself.

T h e B o y F r o m B T C A n d P H P

Publicly available records indicate that Joseph Tomoonh-Garlodeyh Gbaba was born in Monrovia at the Barclay Training Center military barracks, although his family roots trace to Grand Gedeh County in southeastern Liberia. Some accounts also place part of his early life around the Public Health Pond community near BTC, giving his story both a Monrovia beginning and a southeastern cultural foundation.

While many details of his childhood remain undocumented in public records, the cultural environment from which he emerged would later become a recurring influence in his work as a playwright, educator, and cultural voice.

This is one of the challenges researchers encounter when studying Liberian cultural

figures. We can often identify where they studied, where they worked, and what they accomplished, yet the personal stories that shaped them are frequently absent from the historical record.

In fact, much of what is publicly known about Joseph Gbaba's childhood and early development comes from his own recollections, interviews, autobiographical writings, and personal reflections. Unlike many political figures whose lives were documented through government records, newspapers, and official archives, the story of Joseph Gbaba must often be reconstructed from the memories and accounts he himself chose to preserve.

That matters.

It reminds us that some of Liberia's most important cultural figures were never documented with the same care that was given to presidents, politicians, and public officials.

In Joseph Gbaba's case, we know far more about the plays he wrote than the games he played as a child, far more about the stages on which he performed than the communities that first nurtured his imagination.

What we do know is that education became an important part of his early journey.

Published biographical information places the beginning of his formal education at Barracks Union School at BTC, where he started kindergarten under Mrs. Anna Wisnant and Mrs. Margaret Kofta. He later attended Daniel E. Howard Elementary School before graduating from Newport Street Elementary School in 1968.

Those details help fill an important gap. Before St. Philomena's, before Carroll High, and before the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa, there was a young student moving through Monrovia's school system, shaped by teachers, discipline, and the early classroom experiences that prepared him for the road ahead.

T h e M i s s i o n S c h o o l F o u n d a t i o n

His schooling eventually took him to St. Philomena's Catholic Mission School in Zwedru, where published accounts indicate that he distinguished himself academically and graduated as valedictorian of his class.

For many Liberians of that era, mission schools provided more than academic

instruction. They exposed students to discipline, literature, public speaking, religious education, music, and performance. They were often among the few institutions where young people could discover talents that might otherwise remain hidden.

The values taught in mission schools extended beyond the classroom. Students were expected to develop character, discipline, responsibility, and leadership. These qualities would later become visible in the way Gbaba approached theatre—not merely as entertainment, but as a vehicle for education, social reflection, and keeping Liberian stories alive.

T h e M o u n t N i m b a C a l l i n g

From St. Philomena's, Gbaba continued his education at Carroll High School in Grassfield near Yekepa, one of Liberia's most respected secondary institutions of the period.

Located near Yekepa in the shadow of Mount Nimba, Carroll High School developed a reputation for academic rigor and leadership development. Generations of Liberians who later entered public service, business, education, and the professions passed through its classrooms.

For Joseph Gbaba, however, Carroll High School appears to have become something more significant than an academic institution.

It became the place where a future playwright first discovered his calling.

According to accounts provided by Gbaba himself, it was during his years at Carroll High School between 1971 and 1974 that he began to develop his interest in theatre and dramatic performance.

Those years coincided with a period when Liberia was wrestling with questions of national identity, modernization, education, and social change. This was the Liberia of the final True Whig Party years, when questions of unity, identity, class, education, and national belonging were already pressing beneath the surface.

Across Africa, writers, dramatists, and intellectuals were increasingly turning to literature and theatre as vehicles for examining society and preserving cultural traditions. Whether consciously or unconsciously, young Liberians with artistic ambitions were growing up in an environment where storytelling was becoming an important instrument of cultural expression.

Gbaba would later describe his entry into theatre as more than casual interest. In his own reflections, he connected the moment to a powerful spiritual experience, describing a night at Carroll High School when he felt called to write.

Whether readers interpret that moment as divine inspiration, artistic awakening, or the beginning of a young man's sense of mission, it clearly became part of how Gbaba understood his own calling.

Published accounts of his years at Carroll High School also indicate that he founded a Christian student organization known as Creating Friendship in Christ (CFC). That detail is important because it shows that his early leadership was not limited to theatre. Even before Dehkontee Artists Theatre, he was already organizing people around faith, fellowship, service, and shared purpose.

In that sense, Carroll High did more than awaken the playwright. It also helped shape the organizer.

T h e F i r s t P l a y

In 1974, while still a senior student, Joseph Gbaba wrote, directed, and produced his first known play, *Life Story of Kekula*, which was staged at the Open-Door Theatre in Yekepa. Some accounts also refer to the work as *Love Story of Kekula*, but the central theme remains consistent: the production reportedly focused on national integration, unity, and the bridging of divisions among Liberians.

That detail is worth pausing on.

Many first-time playwrights choose subjects that are personal, humorous, or narrowly focused on school life. Gbaba's early work instead addressed a national question.

Even as a young student, he appears to have been interested in the relationship between culture and nationhood, a theme that would later surface repeatedly throughout his career.

The significance of *Life Story of Kekula* is not that it launched an immediate national career. Its significance lies in what it revealed about the young man who created it.

The play demonstrated an early belief that theatre could be used not merely for entertainment, but also for education, reflection, dialogue, and cultural preservation.

That belief would become one of the defining characteristics of Joseph Gbaba's life's work.

T h e N a m e T h a t S t u c k

Accounts from the period also indicate that he received encouragement from Mrs. Dolly McCritty-Massaquoi, an educator associated with LAMCO International School. After seeing his early work, she reportedly praised his talent and gave him the kind of encouragement that helped affirm his path.

Some accounts credit her with attaching to him a description that would follow him for years:

"Liberia's Shakespeare."

Such encouragement may seem like a small detail, but the history of many artists often turns on moments like these. A teacher's confidence, a mentor's guidance, or a public acknowledgment can provide the validation that transforms an interest into a lifelong commitment.

By the time Joseph Gbaba left Carroll High School, the foundation had already been laid. He had demonstrated academic excellence, discovered a passion for theatre, written and staged his first play, and begun exploring the idea that storytelling could serve a larger social purpose.

What he could not yet have known was that the journey that began on the slopes of Mount Nimba would eventually lead him to the University of Liberia, to the founding of one of Liberia's most recognized theatre institutions, and to a career devoted to preserving culture through education, performance, and the written word.

D i d Y o u K n o w ?

- Joseph Gbaba's first documented play was staged in 1974, just six years before Liberia's political landscape was transformed by the April 12, 1980 coup. His artistic career therefore began during the final years of the True Whig Party era and continued through some of the most dramatic periods in Liberian history.

- Theater has long been one of Africa's most powerful educational tools. Across the continent, playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and others used drama not only for entertainment, but to explore identity, culture, leadership, morality,

and social change. Joseph Gbaba's work emerged within that broader African tradition.

- The history of Liberian theatre remains scattered across personal archives, old programs, photographs, interviews, and memories. Unlike political history, which is often preserved through government records and official documents, cultural history often survives only when families, artists, students, and witnesses choose to preserve it.
- Joseph Gbaba's early journey shows that Liberian theatre was never only about performance. At its best, it became a classroom, a mirror, and a tool for preserving national memory.

My t h V s . R e c o r d

My t h :

Joseph Gbaba simply discovered an interest in theatre while attending school and wrote his first play as an ordinary student project.

R e c o r d :

According to Gbaba's own recollections, his first major play emerged from what he described as a profound spiritual experience during his years at Carroll High School. Whether viewed as divine inspiration, personal calling, or artistic awakening, it became a defining moment in how he understood his life's work.

W h y T h i s H i s t o r y S t i l l S p e a k s

Joseph Gbaba's story still speaks because Liberia continues to struggle with how it preserves its cultural memory.

We have archives for presidents.

We have records for governments.

We have endless debates about political leaders.

Yet many of the artists, playwrights, musicians, teachers, and cultural workers who helped Liberians understand themselves remain poorly documented.

Gbaba devoted much of his life to preserving Liberian stories through theatre, education, and performance. Ironically, his own story reminds us how easily cultural builders can be overlooked if their contributions are not deliberately preserved.

In that sense, this story is not only about Joseph Gbaba.

It is also about how Liberia remembers its own.

**D r o p p i n g S o o n : P a r t I I o f I I I – J o s e p h G b a b a : T
h e M a n W h o P u t L i b e r i a o n t h e S t a g e**

From Carroll High School to the University of Liberia, Joseph Gbaba’s passion for storytelling would grow into a cultural mission. In Part II, we follow the rise of Dehkontee Artists Theatre and examine how one young playwright helped put Liberia’s stories, struggles, and identity on the stage.

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