



**Back In Time :Did You Know?**

**Joseph Gbaba –The Man Who Put Liberia on the Stage**

**Part II of III**

By Derek M. Moore

In Part I, we followed Joseph Gbaba before the stage fully found him – from BTC and PHP, through his early schooling, to St. Philomena’s, Carroll High School, and the first

play that revealed his belief that theatre could teach, unite, and preserve culture.

But a calling is only the beginning.  
What matters is what a person builds from it.

For Joseph Gbaba, the years after Carroll High School would transform him from a promising student playwright into something larger: a campus artist, a theatre organizer, a cultural advocate, and eventually the founder of one of Liberia's most recognizable theatre institutions.

This is where the story begins to move from talent into purpose.

### **F r o m S t u d e n t P l a y w r i g h t t o C a m p u s A r t i s t**

After graduating from Carroll High School, Joseph Gbaba entered the University of Liberia during a period when young Liberians were asking hard questions about the future of the country.

The University of Liberia in the 1970s was more than a place where students attended classes and earned degrees. It was one of the spaces where young Liberians were beginning to ask larger questions about identity, politics, education, poverty, culture, leadership, and the future of the country.

For some students, the university was simply a path to professional advancement.

For others, it became a place where ideas became movements.

Gbaba entered that environment already carrying the experience of having written and staged a play at Carroll High School. By the time he arrived at the University of Liberia, he was not coming empty-handed. He came with a sense that drama could be more than performance.

It could become a way of thinking about Liberia.

Published biographical accounts indicate that he enrolled at the University of Liberia in 1975, majored in English Literature, minored in French, and later received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1980.

That choice of study was important.

English Literature exposed him to dramatic structure, language, poetry, criticism, and the written traditions of the wider world. But Gbaba's work would not simply imitate foreign literature. His larger challenge was to take the tools of formal education and connect them to Liberian culture, African identity, and the story of who we are.

That connection would become central to his life's work.

### **The University: Where the Stage Became A Mission**

At the University of Liberia, Gbaba came into contact with some of the major intellectual and cultural voices of that era. Published accounts connect his university years to figures such as James Roberts, also known as Kona Khasu; Togba-Nah Tipoteh; Dew Mason; and Amos Sawyer.

Those names matter because they remind us of the atmosphere in which Gbaba was developing.

The 1970s were not quiet years in Liberia. The country was still under the True Whig Party order, but new questions were rising. Students, writers, lecturers, activists, artists, and public intellectuals were beginning to examine the contradictions of the republic more openly.

Some asked those questions through economics.

Some asked them through politics.

Some asked them through journalism.

Joseph Gbaba asked them through theatre.

That distinction is important. Theatre gave him a public language that could reach people beyond classrooms and political meetings. A play could bring culture, history, identity, humor, music, conflict, and moral instruction into one shared space.

In that sense, the stage became his classroom.

### **Blamadon: The Training Ground**

Before founding his own theatre institution, Gbaba worked briefly with the Blamadon Theatre Workshop in 1975 and 1976.

That period is important because it shows that Dehkontee Artists Theatre did not appear from nowhere. Gbaba was first moving through an existing theatre environment,

learning, observing, performing, organizing, and testing the possibilities of dramatic art in a Liberian setting.

The available public record does not yet give us enough detail about Blamadon's full internal structure, membership, productions, and leadership. That gap itself tells us something about the larger problem we raised in Part I: Liberian cultural history has often been preserved in fragments.

But what can be said is that Blamadon appears to have served as an early training ground for Gbaba before he launched his own institution.

It helped prepare the road.

### **B i r t h o f D A T I**

In 1977, Joseph Gbaba founded Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc., better known as DATI, at the University of Liberia.

That was the turning point.  
DATI was not simply a drama club.

Published descriptions of DATI characterize it as a collegiate cultural society that brought together students, graduates, performers, musicians, dancers, traditional artists, and cultural practitioners. Its vision extended beyond the stage and into the broader preservation of Liberian and African cultural identity.

DATI became a cultural organization, a training space, a performance institution, and eventually a vehicle through which Liberian culture could be staged, taught, and carried beyond ordinary entertainment.

Sources connected to DATI describe it as an African-centered educational and cultural organization. Joseph himself has described DATI as a collegiate cultural society, with membership tied to students, college graduates, and traditional artists such as musicians, dancers, carvers, and cultural performers.

That definition is important.

It means DATI was not only about theatre in the narrow sense. It was about building a cultural community around performance, education, heritage, and identity.

This was especially significant in 1970s Liberia. Much of the formal education system had been shaped by Western models. Many Liberian students were trained to read European and American literature, study Western institutions, and measure success by foreign standards. Gbaba's project attempted to do something different.

He wanted to bring Liberian and African culture onto the stage with dignity.

He wanted the stories of the people to become part of formal artistic expression.

He wanted theatre to become a place where Liberians could see themselves.

### **L o v e f o r M y m a h A n d t h e C u l t u r a l S t a g e**

One of the early works associated with DATI was **L o v e f o r M y m a h**, a play Gbaba later described as an effort to connect what he was learning as an English Literature student to the authentic culture and history of Liberia.

That statement helps us understand the deeper purpose of his work.

Gbaba was not just writing plays for applause. He was trying to build a bridge between academic training and traditional culture. In **L o v e f o r M y m a h**, published accounts describe him as drawing from the cultural beliefs and customs of Liberia's major linguistic communities, including Kwa and Mande-speaking groups.

That was not a small artistic choice.

In a country where ethnic, regional, class, and historical divisions have often shaped public life, placing different Liberian cultural identities on the same stage carried meaning. It suggested that theatre could become a meeting ground for a divided society.

A classroom teaches by lecture.

A theatre teaches by experience.

For Joseph Gbaba, the stage became a place where Liberians could encounter one another through story.

Decades later, **L o v e f o r M y m a h** would still be part of DATI's living cultural work. In 2018, the production was staged in Philadelphia at the Ibrahim Theater, International House, as part of DATI's 41st Anniversary season, showing that a play rooted in Liberian culture had continued to travel with the Liberian diaspora.

## **W h e n t h e S t a g e R e a c h e d t h e E x e c u t i v e M a n s i o n**

By the late 1970s, Dehkontee Artists Theatre had begun to move beyond the university campus.

Published accounts connected to DATI describe President William R. Tolbert, Jr. as an important supporter of Gbaba's theatre work. Joseph himself has referred to President Tolbert as his chief patron, but because much of that information comes through accounts connected to Gbaba and DATI, it is best handled carefully.

What is clear is that DATI's work reached important national and regional audiences during the Tolbert era.

Accounts describe performances at the Executive Mansion Theatre in Monrovia, State House performances in Freetown, and productions connected to visiting West African leaders and diplomatic audiences.

One major production from that period was **T h e C h a i n s o f A p a r t h e i d**, which was reportedly performed in support of Liberia's foreign policy position against colonialism and apartheid in Southern Africa. Published accounts say the play was performed before President Tolbert of Liberia, Ghanaian Head of State General Fred Akuffo, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, and S.I. Koroma of Sierra Leone between 1978 and 1979.

Even with limited public archives available, the pattern is clear: DATI had moved from student theatre into national cultural space.

That matters.

Because when theatre reaches the Executive Mansion, it is no longer just entertainment. It becomes part of how a country presents itself, educates its people, and speaks to the world.

## **B a i T . M o o r e ' s H a n d i n t h e S t o r y**

One of the most important names in this chapter is Bai Tamia Moore, better known to many Liberians as Bai T. Moore.

For many Liberians, Bai T. Moore is remembered as a cultural figure, writer, and author

of **M u r d e r i n t h e C a s s a v a P a t c h** . But in Joseph Gbaba's story, Moore appears as more than a famous literary name. He appears as a mentor.

Published accounts connected to Gbaba describe Moore as someone who guided him in understanding Liberia's diverse cultures and later supported his professional development.

That relationship makes sense historically.

Bai T. Moore represented the serious effort to place Liberian culture, folklore, moral instruction, and storytelling into written and public form. Gbaba, through theatre, was moving in a similar direction but through performance.

Bai T. Moore helped preserve Liberian culture through literature and public service.

Joseph Gbaba's work reflects many of the same concerns: preserving culture, educating future generations, and ensuring that Liberian stories are not forgotten.

Both were part of the larger struggle to make Liberian culture visible, teachable, and respectable within a society that too often treated foreign culture as more polished than its own.

Published biographical accounts state that Bai T. Moore recommended Gbaba for graduate study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Theatre. That recommendation represents an important bridge between Liberia's literary and theatrical traditions and the next stage of Gbaba's professional development.

The point remains powerful: one Liberian cultural worker helped open the door for another.

That is how cultural memory survives.

### **F r o m L i b e r i a t o U N C - G r e e n s b o r o**

After his University of Liberia years, Gbaba's journey took him to the United States for professional theatre training.

Published biographical accounts state that he enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1981 and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Drama in 1983.

That training matters because it moves Gbaba's story into another stage.

He was no longer simply a self-taught playwright or campus theatre leader. He was now being professionally trained in drama, acting, directing, theatre history, stagecraft, and performance technique.

Joseph later described being trained by professional theatre figures, including Equity and Broadway actors and directors. Published accounts describe Gbaba as having trained under professional theatre figures, including Equity and Broadway actors and directors. That experience added professional training to a foundation he had already built through years of theatre work in Liberia.

But this is important.

America did not create Joseph Gbaba's vision. Liberia did.

UNC-Greensboro refined the artist, but the calling had already begun at Carroll High School. The institution had already been born at the University of Liberia. The cultural mission had already taken shape before he left home.

That is why Part II is so important.

It shows us that Joseph Gbaba did not simply join Liberian theatre.

He helped organize it, institutionalize it, and carry it from campus stages into national cultural life.

### **D i d Y o u K n o w ?**

- DATI was founded in September 1977 at the University of Liberia and is approaching its 50th anniversary, a milestone few Liberian cultural institutions have reached.
- Joseph Gbaba's theatre journey spans more than five decades, beginning with a student production in Yekepa and eventually extending across Liberia, the United States, and other international stages.
- The late 1970s saw a growing effort by Liberian artists, writers, and intellectuals to place Liberian culture at the center of artistic expression rather than treating it as secondary to foreign influences.

- Many of the records documenting Liberian theatre history remain scattered among personal archives, programs, photographs, and private collections, making preservation an ongoing challenge for researchers and historians.

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

**My t h** : Joseph Gbaba was simply a talented playwright who happened to form a theatre group.

**R e c o r d** : The record suggests something larger. Gbaba moved from student playwright to university artist, from Blamadon Theatre Workshop to the founding of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc., and from campus performance to national and regional cultural stages. His work was not only about writing plays. It was about building an institution around Liberian culture, education, and performance.

### **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 Part II story still speaks because Liberia continues to struggle with the question of cultural institutions.

We have political parties.

We have government ministries.

We have churches, schools, civic groups, and alumni associations.

But how many institutions have been built specifically to preserve Liberian theatre, performance, storytelling, indigenous culture, and artistic education?

DATI matters because it tried to answer that question.

It showed that culture should not be treated as decoration after politics is finished.

Culture is part of how a nation teaches itself, remembers itself, and explains itself to the next generation.

When Joseph Gbaba founded Dehkontee Artists Theatre, he was not simply forming a performance group.

He was building a place where Liberian stories could be performed, taught, and remembered.

And in a country where cultural history is too often scattered, forgotten, or reduced to occasional celebration, that kind of institution matters.

**D r o p p i n g S o o n : P a r t I I I o f I I I – J o s e p h G b a b a :  
B e y o n d t h e S t a g e**

The educator.

The writer.

The diaspora cultural worker.

The advocate for Afrocentric curriculum, peace education, and the preservation of Liberian culture for future generations.

In Part III, we follow Joseph Gbaba beyond performance and examine the larger legacy of a man who has spent more than five decades using education, theatre, and culture to keep Liberia's stories alive.

#BackInTime #DidYouKnow #JosephGbaba #DehkonteeArtistsTheatre #DATI  
#LiberianHistory #LiberianCulture #LiberianTheatre #AfricanTheatre #BaiTMoore  
#UniversityOfLiberia #CulturalMemory #LiberianDiaspora #LiberianHeritage