



**Dr. Joseph Gbaba**  
The Stage Was Only The Beginning.

**B a c k I n T i m e : D i d Y o u K n o w ?**  
**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**  
**P a r t I I I o f I I I**

By Derek M. Moore

In Part I, we met Joseph Gbaba before the stage fully found him. In Part II, we followed the young playwright from Carroll High School to the University of Liberia, Blamadon Theatre Workshop, Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI), Bai T. Moore, and the professional theatre training that helped sharpen what Liberia had already placed inside him.

But Part III asks a different question.

What happens after the applause?

Most Liberians who know Joseph Gbaba know him as a playwright, actor, and theatre director. That is understandable. The stage is where the public saw him. The plays, the performances, the costumes, the audiences, and the name DATI all point us naturally toward theatre.

But after looking closely at his life, I came away with a different conclusion.

The stage may have been where Joseph Gbaba became visible.

But it was not where his mission ended.

For Gbaba, the work moved into education, writing, civic engagement, peacebuilding, child welfare, diaspora cultural work, and the long struggle to preserve Liberian culture for future generations.

This final part is not simply about what he performed. It is about what he tried to build.

### **T h e A r t i s t W h o B e c a m e A n E d u c a t o r**

It is easy to understand why Joseph Gbaba is remembered as a playwright.

Plays, stages, and performances are visible.

The harder thing to see is the work that happens after the curtain falls. To understand his full legacy, we also have to understand him as an educator. That part of his life matters because theatre, for Gbaba, was never only about performance. From the beginning, the stage was also a classroom. It was a place where people could learn about culture, identity, morality, conflict, reconciliation, and the story of who we are.

After earning his Master of Fine Arts degree in Drama from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Gbaba's path eventually expanded further into education. Published biographical accounts state that he later earned a Master of Science in Education with emphasis in Elementary and Special Education from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia in 2002, followed by a doctorate in Educational Leadership in 2009.

That educational path helps explain why his work cannot be reduced to theatre alone. He was not simply asking Liberians to watch culture on stage. He was asking how culture could be taught, how young people could learn with pride in who they are, and how African and Liberian history, language, values, and memory could become part of education instead of being treated as something outside the classroom.

That is a serious question for Liberia.

Because if children are taught everything except the value of their own culture, then education can produce achievement without memory.

And a people without memory can become strangers to themselves.

### **W h e n T h e a t r e B e c a m e C u r r i c u l u m**

At first glance, theatre and curriculum may seem like two different worlds.

One belongs to the stage.

The other belongs to the classroom.

But in Joseph Gbaba's work, they kept meeting each other.

For him, drama was not just entertainment. It was a method of teaching. That idea runs through his work as a playwright, director, actor, educator, and advocate for Afrocentric curriculum development. His work points to a belief that African children, Liberian children, and children in the diaspora should not have to search outside themselves to find dignity.

They should see their stories, hear their languages, learn their history, and understand that culture is not something old people do for ceremonies, but something that helps shape identity, discipline, values, and national consciousness.

That is why Gbaba's later work in special education, educational leadership, textbook production, and Afrocentric curriculum development becomes so important. It shows that he was not only interested in creating plays. He was interested in creating learning systems.

That is a different kind of legacy.

A play may move an audience for a night, but a curriculum can shape a child for life.

### **The Writer Beyond The Plays**

There is another Joseph Gbaba many readers may not know as well.

The writer beyond the plays.

Published biographical materials identify him as the self-published author of several books, including **Ah-z eo**, **Ma Gar h**, **The Frogs and Black Snake in Frogsville**, and **Conflict Resolution and the Concept of Change**.

Those titles tell us something about the range of his concerns: culture, storytelling, conflict, change, education, and community. Those are not separate topics in his work. They are connected.

A society that cannot resolve conflict will struggle to preserve culture. A society that does not educate its children properly will struggle to build peace. A society that forgets its stories will struggle to understand itself.

That is why Gbaba's writing matters.

It points to a man who was not only trying to entertain an audience, but trying to help a people think through who they are and what they must become.

### **Carrying Liberia Into The Diaspora**

Many Liberians left home because of war, opportunity, education, family, or survival.

But leaving Liberia does not always mean leaving Liberia behind.

Joseph Gbaba's work in the United States shows how culture can travel with a people. DATI continued to exist beyond Liberia's borders, especially through cultural activities in the United States. In the diaspora, the organization became more than a theatre company. It became a way of keeping Liberian culture visible among people who were living far away from home.

That matters because diaspora communities face a quiet danger.

The first generation remembers.

The second generation hears the stories.

The third generation may inherit only fragments.

If culture is not deliberately taught, performed, written, photographed, recorded, and passed on, it slowly becomes a memory without a structure.

Gbaba's work in the diaspora was part of that struggle. He carried Liberia into classrooms, community spaces, theatre programs, cultural performances, and educational projects.

Culture must be taught, practiced, and passed on.

## **P e a c e , C i v i c E d u c a t i o n , A n d T h e P o s t - W a r Q u e s t i o n**

No serious discussion of modern Liberian culture can ignore war.

Liberia's civil conflict did not only destroy buildings, families, schools, and communities. It also damaged trust, memory, institutions, and the ways people understood one another.

That is why peace education became an important part of Joseph Gbaba's later work.

His later work with DATI also moved into civic education, peace education, youth engagement, reconciliation, and public health outreach during Liberia's years of conflict and recovery. Accounts describe programs involving UNOMIL, UNICEF, WHO, and Liberia's National Elections Commission during the 1997 electoral period.

That is important because it shows an evolution in Gbaba's work. Theatre was no longer only a vehicle for cultural expression; it had become a tool for civic engagement, public education, reconciliation, and national recovery.

Peace is not only the absence of war. Peace also requires memory, education, and young people learning a different language than violence, revenge, tribal suspicion, political manipulation, and social division.

For a theatre artist, educator, and cultural worker, this was a natural extension of the

same mission.

### **T h e C h i l d W e l f a r e A n d S o c i a l S e r v i c e S i d e**

Another part of the story that is easy to miss is his child welfare and social service work.

Published accounts indicate that he worked in Philadelphia with the Department of Human Services and was involved in child welfare and social services.

That may seem far removed from theatre, but it is not as disconnected as it appears. A man concerned with children, education, culture, and peace would naturally be drawn toward work involving vulnerable young people and families.

That part of his life reminds us that legacy is not always built on stage. Sometimes it is built in classrooms. Sometimes it is built in social service offices. Sometimes it is built in quiet places where the public may never see the work, but lives are still being touched.

### **T h e S c h o o l H e S t i l l W a n t s T o B u i l d**

Perhaps the most important part of Joseph Gbaba's current legacy is not only what he has done.

It is what he is still trying to do.

DATI is approaching its 50th anniversary in 2027. That is no small milestone for a Liberian cultural institution. In a country where many organizations disappear after a few years, DATI's survival tells us something about persistence.

But Gbaba's vision is not simply to celebrate an anniversary. The larger goal is to help establish a School of the Performing and Visual Arts in Liberia, along with a broader vision tied to peace, culture, education, and national development.

The vision extends beyond buildings. Published DATI materials describe a broader peace and youth development effort influenced by Pan-African philosophy, civic engagement, and the Kukatonon peacebuilding framework. Those same accounts describe young Liberians from different ethnic groups, universities, and colleges participating in peace and cultural education initiatives.

That matters because it suggests that the proposed school and peace center are not simply future projects. They represent the continuation of work that has already been taking place through DATI for many years.

Because Liberia still needs institutions that take the arts seriously.

We have schools for law.

We have schools for medicine.

We have schools for business.

But where are the strong national institutions dedicated to theatre, traditional music, dance, storytelling, visual arts, cultural research, peace education, and the preservation of Liberian identity?

Culture is infrastructure for the soul of a nation.

### **T h e U n f i n i s h e d M i s s i o n**

More than five decades after **L i f e S t o r y o f K e k u l a**, after DATI, after **L o v e f o r M y m a h**, after **T h e C h a i n s o f A p a r t h e i d**, after professional training, teaching, writing, diaspora work, and peace education, the mission is still not finished.

That may be the most important lesson.

The work of cultural preservation is never completed by one person. One person can begin it. One person can build an institution. But if the next generation does not continue the work, the record breaks again.

Joseph Gbaba's life raises a question Liberia cannot avoid:

What happens to the people who spent their lives preserving our culture when the nation does not properly preserve them?

That question is not only about Gbaba. It is about Bai T. Moore, Fatu Gayflor, the National Cultural Troupe, and countless cultural workers whose labor helped Liberia remember itself.

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

- DATI's 50th anniversary fundraising effort is tied to a larger plan to purchase land in Liberia for a future School of the Performing and Visual Arts and a Center for Peace and

## Cultural Studies.

- Joseph Gbaba's educational path includes both theatre training and special education, an unusual combination that helps explain why his work connects performance, teaching, children, culture, and social development.
- Some of Gbaba's writings move beyond drama into children's literature, conflict resolution, cultural education, and social change, showing that his work was never limited to the stage.
- The survival of DATI into its 50th year is significant because many Liberian cultural organizations have struggled to preserve archives, maintain funding, and survive war, migration, leadership changes, and institutional neglect.

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

**My t h** : Joseph Gbaba's legacy is mainly that he wrote and acted in plays.

**R e c o r d** : The fuller record shows something much broader. Gbaba's work moved through theatre, education, writing, special education, Afrocentric curriculum development, peace education, child welfare, diaspora cultural work, and institution-building. The stage may have introduced him to many people, but it was never the boundary of his mission.

### **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 spent much of his life helping Liberians remember who they are.

The larger question now is whether Liberia will remember him with the same care he gave to remembering Liberia.

Not simply as a playwright or theatre director, but as one of the cultural workers who spent decades carrying forward stories, traditions, values, and cultural memories that might otherwise have been lost.

In the end, the true measure of a cultural institution is not only what it accomplishes in one generation, but what it helps preserve for the next.

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