

President William Richard Tolbert, Jr. Was my Mentor and Patron!

Rabbi Joe Gbaba, Sr., Ed.D.

The Saga of “Bob Willie”!

The saga of “Bob Willie” will be one that will always be on my lips for as long as I live because I saw with my own two big, big eyes what a true selfless leader can do for his people in a very short space of time. Hence, for those who did not know President William Richard Tolbert, Jr. personally, please permit me to share some historical facts with you about my mentor and chief patron.

President Tolbert was commonly called “Bob Willie” because he was a family man. He was also referred to as “Speedy” because he did not like to waste time. Further, President Tolbert was a well learned and experienced politician and Liberian leader. He had served nineteen years as Vice President of Liberia under President Tubman before he became President of Liberia when President Tubman died in 1971. Similarly, he was President of the World Baptist Alliance and then Chairman of the Organization of African Unity (now known as African Union (AU)) when he was killed. So, he had a lot of leadership experiences to his belt.

In addition, President Tolbert was very business minded and he liked to have things done in a timely fashion. He was also straight forward and he did not support “chay-chay-poly” as did his predecessor President William V. S. Tubman. For this reason, there were less reports of so-called “coup plots” than there were during Tubman’s or Doe’s eras because President Tolbert was self-confident. He had no fears about someone overshadowing him because he had achieved so much in life by the time he was sworn in as President of Liberia. For this reason, when you met President Tolbert face to face, not only did you see the radiance of power and knowledge in his presence but you at once acknowledged that he was truly an awesome Liberian leader who meant well but he became a victim of historical circumstances.

Tolbert's Kind Heart and Farsightedness Gave His Billy Goat Short Tail!

When I was a child, I wondered why a dog had a long tail while the tail of a male goat was short. My mother looked at me and smiled and then in a nutshell said: "My son, billy (male) goat had long tail in the beginning of time, but kind heart made billy goat to lose his long tail because he kept borrowing his tail to other animals that never returned his tail back."

For instance, President Tolbert valued education a whole lot and so he provided government of Liberia scholarships to and encouraged many young Liberian scholars back in the day to promote manpower development in Liberia during his administration. He also encouraged and provided jobs to Amos Sawyer, Charles Taylor, Bacchus Matthews, Dew Mason, Rudolph Roberts (Tipoteh), James Roberts (Kona Khasu), Boima Fahnbulleh, Edward B. Kesselly, Jr., Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and many other young Liberian scholars so they could return home to help him build a "wholesome functioning" Liberian society. Unfortunately for the President, these young "book boys" and girl that Tolbert boasted of and called his "Precious Jewels" had a hidden agenda! They became Tolbert's worst nightmare! Of course, our girl Ellen was in the mix! She was one of those in the thick of things during the Tolbert era and they were the ones that played their "abu-Kellee" trick on the Liberian people and got us in this mess today! As an operation definition, I provide below what the expression "abu-kellee" means in Liberian colloquialism.

What Does the Word "Abu-kellee" Mean?

The word "kellee" is a Liberian colloquial for cat. But when we were little, everyone wanted to be the first in any competition that we undertook whether on the basketball court or the soccer pitch. No one wanted to wait for his turn and so the expression "abu-kellee" was coined for such impatient persons or 'cats' who also wanted to be leaders but did not have the skills to deliver. Moreover, there is a Liberian parable that explains the difference between a cat and a dog. That is, cat and dog eat poo-poo but the difference between the two animals is that dog's parents did not teach dog how to wipe its mouth when it eats poo-poo. But cat on the other hand was more diligent in teaching its young. Mother Cat instructed her young one as follows:

"I ain't say you shouldn't eat poo-poo like dog oh, but do not ever forget to wipe your mouth when you eat poo-poo, my son or daughter. In this way, even though you eat poo-poo like dog

does, the entire village will only look at dog as the poo-poo eater and not you because they will not have any proof to show that cat eats poo-poo!”

“Chey”! Kru man says: “Orh wlatee oh!” All the book peopo dem who used to talk big, big book, dey holding the Old Ma handbag!

Liberian ‘ Revolutionists’ Turned Ma Ellen’s Pocketbook Tooters!

And so this is the type of “abu-kellee” game our ‘revolutionaries’ have played on the Liberian people for about forty years now. After Tolbert, they collected Doe and members of the PRC and did the PRC people’s business! Again, they licked poo-poo but wiped their mouths like “abu-kellee” and left the blame on poor Krahn, Gio, Mano, and Mandingo people. And who say the PRC boys should be illiterate! Oh, you spoiled it! Come see our “book” boys dem confusing Doe and Kwiwonkpa with all their Mao Tse Tung and Bolshevik theories that landed the Krahns, Manos, Gios, Mandingoes at each other’s throats as enemies and a big civil war ensued that got Liberians scattered around the world!

Our Revolutionists Are Like Cat: They Eat Poo-Poo but They Lick Their Mouths!

Did you hear the names of these individuals as perpetrators of the war? No! You want to know why poor Krahn, Mandingo, Mano, Gio people were victimized while these so-called ‘revolutionaries’ are eating sweet and totting our girl’s pocketbook today? The answer is simple. Because they are cats: they eat poo-poo and wipe their mouths! Poor Boima Fahnbulleh, Sr., I can imagine he is rolling in his grave! Manjah, never mind oh: you can born the child but you ain’t born the heart!

What I Remember Most about President Tolbert

What I remember most about President Tolbert was that he loved smart young people. He regarded the youth of Liberia as his “Precious Jewels” because he had so much confidence in himself and in our potentials as future leaders of Liberia. Thus, President Tolbert did everything within his power to put words into deeds. My colleagues and members of Dehkontee Artists Theatre and I benefitted immensely from his generosity and patronage. Twice Dr. Tolbert invited my troupe and me to the Executive Mansion Theatre where we performed my play “Chains of Apartheid” two consecutive times and I sat at the right hand of the President of Liberia.

The first performance was in honor of President Tolbert, the Speaker, members of his cabinet, and diplomats accredited near Monrovia; and the second time President Tolbert invited Dehkontee Artists to replay “Chains of Apartheid” during the state visit of the late Ghanaian Head of State Fred Akkuffu at the Executive Mansion. Mr. Jerry Rawlings was present that night. He piloted the plane that brought the Ghanaian Head of State to Liberia in April 1989. Immediately after they returned to Ghana, Jerry Rawlings did Fred Akkuffu’s business and the rest is history!

President Tolbert Was a Genuine patron of Liberian Arts and Culture

Another great attribute of the late President was that he was a genuine patron of Liberian arts and culture. He always took with him when he travelled abroad a cultural troupe (National Cultural Troupe, Cultural Ambassadors, University of Liberia Chorus, Cuttington Choir, and the list goes on). He was close to nature and the soil, i.e., he was an agriculturist as well. He had a big farm in Gbalatuah, in Bong County in Liberia. In addition, President Tolbert’s era was a time when we were encouraged to go to school and learn and at least we would be recognized for what we knew irrespective of our ethnic backgrounds and political affiliations. Consequently, Tolbert had more indigenous Liberians in his cabinet than any other Liberian President did before his era. I don’t mean little stooges that the Old Ma is using like billy goats that do not know the difference between the letter “A” and bull frog; but I mean mature men that were great hopes for the indigenous people of Liberia! But can we look around and find them today! Where side! O yo girl did their business and like “abu-kellee” she licked her mouth and wiped the poo-poo on the Krahn, Gio, Mano, and Mandingo people! Hello!

When Someone Does Good for You, Do Not Be Ashamed to Acknowledge It.

My parents taught me a lesson when they were alive. They said: “When someone does any good for you, do not be ashamed to acknowledge it.” Thus, I am who I am today as a world renowned scholar/artist because there was once a President of Liberia named William Richard Tolbert, Jr. who not only considered me his “Precious Jewel” but he also took my hand and lifted me up so that today I can be a witness of the great deeds he performed to raise Liberians from mat to mattress in his effort to build a wholesome functioning Liberian society through his “Total Involvement for Higher Heights” policy!

Rabbi Joe Gbaba, Sr., Ed. D.

April 14, 2013