

# Liberians Seriously Need a Civic Education Program to Educate Them on their Constitutional Rights and Privileges!

By Rabbi Joe Gbaba, Sr., Ed. D.

## *Introduction*

I want to thank the management of TMZ Radio International for inviting me to participate in “Issues in the Press.” I find the program very rewarding and healthy for exchange of national and international views. In this light, I commend Mr. Eldourd James Qualah for his interview questions but I wish we had ample time to discuss some of the pressing issues that he had brought to the discussion table. However, I am still open for further discussions in the near future and so I look forward to another invitation at his earliest convenience. The reason is because Liberians seriously need a civic education program to educate them about their constitutional rights and privileges.

Thus, what I have basically done in this document is to summarize (not word for word) what the interview questions were and then I submitted responses that are sometimes a little more than what I was able to say during the actual live interview. Therefore, I take sole responsibility for additional comments stated in this document.

## *Focus of the Interview*

For those who missed the interview, there were several questions that were asked by the interviewer and a member of the listening audience. Hence, for your information, I hereby submit the summarized versions of the questions and provide modified answers in response to their inquiries about my views on: (1) the closure of Kendeja; (2) the educational system and how it can be improved; (3) rampant corruption in Liberia and how it can be addressed; and (4) why I consider President Tolbert as my mentor.

## *Closure of Kendeja National Cultural Village*

**Interviewer:** Dr. Gbaba, what is your take on the closure of Kendeja and how important was Kendeja to the Liberian nation and people?

**Dr. Gbaba:** Kendeja was a national shrine and symbol of national unity. It was an excellent showcase of our rich and diversified cultural heritage. Therefore, it is regrettable that Kendeja National Culture Center was demolished in order to build a private hotel in its stead. For instance, it would have been more reasonable if the hotel were at least government-owned, and if Kendeja was then relocated to another site so that Kendeja as a national institution and shrine could be preserved. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The hotel in question is a private business venture and so in this instance personal interests were placed above the overall interest of the Liberian people. I wonder what the response of the Liberian Legislature was, and/or what was the response of the chairman/chairwoman of the House/Senate committees on culture and tourism when the Sirleaf government made the decision to close down Kendeja? Was there a public outcry?

## **Kendeja Was the Nation's Pride and Symbol of Our Hegemony**

In addition, a lot of efforts went into establishing Kendeja by some patriotic citizens of Liberia in the early sixties and seventies. They included but were not limited to: E. Reginald Townsend, William Lewis, Tankanba Jankanba Johnson, Bai T. Moore, T. Nelson Williams, etc. These illustrious statesmen saw the need to promote Liberian arts and culture and they realized that Liberia's diverse cultures and histories could be preserved by establishing a national institution solely responsible for their upkeep. Further, Kendeja would be a symbol of our national heritage and unity by bringing artists from all regions of Liberia to live together in peace and harmony in one cultural village. Consequently, the idea or theory of using culture and tourism to unite Liberians worked very well because it provided Liberians and the international community with a collage or mosaic of artistic relics and artifacts that were very awesome and endearing to the Liberian people and the entire world. Thus, indeed, Kendeja was the nation's pride and a symbol of our hegemony.

In view of the foregoing, Kendeja was a living proof that Liberians could live together in peace and harmony and at the same time celebrate their cultural diversity or differences. As a consequence, the demolition of such a very important national institution was very troubling. It was also in contravention of the Constitution of Liberia. Similarly, the step taken by the Liberian government to demolish a national cultural shrine in favor of the construction of a hotel that is not government owned is definitely in contravention of the traditional norms and mores of the Liberian people and their best interest. One main reason is because the closure of Kendeja deprives millions of Liberians the opportunity to learn about and cherish their rich and diverse cultural heritage. A second reason is that future generations of Liberians may not know about their history and culture if Kendeja is not rebuilt, especially children of Liberian descent who are born in the diaspora. Therefore, while it is understood that the closure of kendeja is now spilled milk, Liberians must identify a new site to rebuild Kendeja. We must learn to keep our institutions alive and not destroy them.

Against this backdrop, I am willing as a playwright and theatre director, to provide consultancy and technical support and services to rebuild Kendeja National Cultural village if the government and people of Liberia provide the requisite logistics to do so.

### ***The Educational System***

**Interviewer:** Dr. Gbaba, what is your view about the educational system in Liberia at this time?

**Dr. Gbaba:** It needs to be improved.

**Interviewer:** Are you trying to say that those on the ground are not doing what they should to improve education in Liberia?

**Dr. Gbaba:** No, that is not my trend of argument; for it would be foolhardy of me to criticize the efforts of my colleagues on the ground since I have been away for more than fifteen years. However, I still feel that certain infrastructures need to be put in place to address the diverse teaching and learning needs of post war Liberian children and youth and teachers. Subsequently, this may help to reduce the high illiteracy rate (about 85%) in Liberia. Of course, the high

illiteracy rate was caused basically by the civil war and by the use of children as combatants, as well as the closure of our schools over a protracted period of time.

### ***The Grand Design of the Elites in Liberia and Its Impact on Former Combatants and the Entire Liberian Nation***

For instance, take the case of a child soldier who was conscripted/recruited by the NPFL and other warring factions at age 8. Let us assume that the child soldier was at least attending school at the time of recruitment and was in the first grade. Principally, child soldiers were taken out of school to carry guns to kill their mas and pas and to fight a political battle and help Liberian politicians to regain political and economic power. After twenty-two years of national turmoil the same child is now a thirty year old youth (man or woman). He or she is now married with children to feed and support but does not have the financial resources or basic life skills to earn an honest living.

For these reasons, most former combatants lack basic literacy skills since they were recruited approximately twenty-two years ago when they were in the first grade. Also, schools were closed around Liberia and so child soldiers (whether males or females) were deprived equal access to educational opportunities during the heat of the civil war. Meanwhile, children of Liberian politicians who gave children from Liberian villages and towns and cities weapons to fight their political battle were in safe havens in the United States and other parts of the world attending school.

Their parents were preparing them to return home someday after the cessation of hostilities so they would be rewarded with big, big positions in government and in the private sector, so as to enrich themselves and continue their parents' legacy of suppressing the masses. Hence, the grand design of the oppressor was to secure the future of their children and next generations to come while those who sacrificed their lives to fight the political battle for their parents live in abject poverty. These are the "Go-Back-and -Chops" who now are making the US\$10K or 20K per month when most of the citizens cannot afford to purchase a cup of pusava rice to feed themselves and their families.

As a result of this vicious political and economic plan, there are presently thousands of former combatants roaming the streets of our cities, towns and villages, with first grade education but that do not have a trade to hang on to in order to earn an honest livelihood. Accordingly, former combatants have turned to armed robbery and other violent crimes in society as an alternative source of livelihood because former combatants lack the necessary education, skills and qualifications to reintegrate successfully into mainstream post war Liberian society.

### ***We Can Reduce the High Illiteracy Rate in Liberia by Providing Remedial Literacy, Technical and Vocational Programs***

Therefore, by stating the need to improve the Liberian educational system, I am suggesting that we may be able to reduce the high illiteracy rate in Liberia in terms of providing the huge illiterate youth population with general education knowledge, like the GED program in the United States, and at the same time to establish vocational and technical institutions to train our youth to learn various trades: such as carpentry, electricity, plumbing, auto mechanics, and so forth. These facilities may provide the milieu to empower our youth to be self-reliant and productive and to give them a second chance opportunity to earn an honest living and to reintegrate into mainstream society.

Also, there is a dire need to establish mental health facilities, trauma and rehabilitation programs to address the psychological, social, political, and violent experiences and problems Liberians underwent during the civil crisis because many Liberians are still traumatized and they have not had closure from the atrocities that were committed against them and their deceased loved ones. Of particular concern is the harsh reality that perpetrators who engineered the deaths of their loved ones are roaming about with impunity as national leaders. Therefore, such rehabilitation programs may help Liberians air out their differences; it may help them develop self-confidence and appreciation of themselves and *the others* around them; reinstitute the rule of law; and it may ultimately encourage forgiveness and reconciliation among embattled Liberians of varied persuasions.

## ***The Need for Teacher Training Programs and the Construction of Well Equipped Schools***

In view of the above mentioned, it is very important to emphasize the need for teacher training and the construction of equipped schools and educational infrastructures; to stress the need to reconceptualize the national curriculum so that its contents may be inclusive and representative of the aspirations of all Liberians; so that locally produced textbooks and the national curriculum may match in order to prepare patriotic future citizens and leaders of Liberia who may be educated about themselves and the others around them; and in order to promote national consciousness and tolerance. Thus, within this context, it is important to establish well equipped schools with good laboratory facilities, libraries, enough playgrounds, as well as ample extracurricular activities to ensure the holistic molding of the minds of Liberian youth and to instill good moral and cultural values and principles within them.

### **What Is the Role of the Legislature and the Executive Branch in the promotion of Education in Liberia?**

Again, what is the concern of the Legislature of Liberia regarding the educational needs of post war Liberian youth? Who are members and the Senate/House Chair on education and what has been their role in restructuring the Liberian educational system? The President has stated in recent times that the educational system in Liberia sucks. If this is the case, then whose responsibility is it to provide the Liberian people an educational system that works? As for me, I can personally contribute in the areas of curriculum development, production of local textbooks and assist with teacher training in my capacity as a cultural and educational consultant. This of course is contingent upon the cooperation of the powers that be and their ability to see reason to extend an invitation to discuss and resolve these burning national issues irrespective of my ethnic background.

## ***Rampant Corruption in Liberia***

**Interviewer:** Dr. Gbaba, I am sure you are aware that Liberia is classified as a very corrupt nation in the world, irrespective of the massive international support the Sirleaf government has received in the tone of more than three billion dollars but with no tangible results of development in sight to prove how the funds are being used. What is your take on this matter?

**Dr. Gbaba:** It is very easy to cast blame on the leader but let me tell you one thing: Ellen Sirleaf is only one person, the chief executive; but she is not a legislator and she is also not the Chief Justice either. Therefore, when it comes to corruption in Liberia we must look at the issues more analytically. For instance, when we speak of corruption, we must consider the fact that corruption cannot be caused by one individual person, even though it is said that the fish rots from the head. Nevertheless, the technical point to focus on here if we want to curb corruption in Liberia is to examine the system of government we have on the ground and how it is supposed to function.

### ***There Are Three Equal but Separate Branches of Government to Provide Checks and Balances***

For an example, it is very important for Liberians to be educated on the political system that governs them. In Liberia, we have a republican form of government with three separate but equal branches of government that are required by law to perform specific national tasks to ensure “checks and balances” among all three branches and to ensure the safety and security of everyone residing in Liberia. The Legislative branch is the first branch of government. It makes the laws and it has the powers to confirm public nominees and to impeach the President, among many other duties. The Executive (second branch) executes the laws when they are passed by the Legislature and is responsible for running the day to day affairs of the state; and the Judiciary interprets the laws.

So, if this is the case, then let us examine the reasons why corruption is so rampant in Liberia at this time. Let us see who is not doing his or her job. Is it Ellen; or is it the Legislature; or is it the Judiciary? I assume your answer may be “All of the above”. However, let us just discuss a little bit in order to arrive at a logical conclusion without casting blame on one individual.

For example, are there laws on the books to address corruption head on? And, if there are no laws to address the matter then whose responsibility is it to make the laws—the Executive Branch or the Legislature? Also, if there are laws on the books but they are not being executed by the President then what is the role of the Legislature?

To answer this rhetorical question, I hasten to say it is the responsibility of the Legislature to take action by summoning the President to give reasons why she should not be held in contempt for her failure to do her job. In addition, if it is assumed that most government officials are so corrupt then why is the Legislature still confirming them? Does that not make Liberian legislators accessory to the crimes of corruption as well?

Furthermore, what is the role of the Judiciary when alleged criminals and thieves are recommended to the courts to be tried? What are the outcomes of those trials and has the government been successful enough to retrieve the country's stolen wealth from perpetrators? Against this backdrop is it safe to assume that the Judiciary is also corrupt? And, if there are corrupt judges then whose responsibility is it to discipline corrupt judges— of course, the President, the one with the powers to appoint and dismiss judges! Nevertheless, only both the President and legislators are elected by the people but the role of the Legislature is very crucial in the check and balance system of the Liberian government because the legislators represent the voice of the people and they have the power to call into question the President, the Chief Justice, and/or any public servant or individual citizen, or resident, who may violate the laws of the land. Against this backdrop legislators are also clothed with the authority to recommend appropriate legal actions and punishments in accordance with the laws of the land.

### ***Does Liberia Have 'Opposition' or 'Coalition' Parties?***

To my understanding, the bulk of the Legislature constitutes members of the 'opposition' parties. By definition, an **'opposition' party** would be one that **challenges** the ruling party to create a check and balance in the political system. However, if an opposition party fails to pose a challenge and fails to question the wrong doings of the ruling party, then it is not an **'opposition' party** by definition; but rather, it may be termed a **coalition party**. That is, its members may have merged with the ruling party in order to further promote corruption in Liberia.



Is that what is obtaining in the Legislature by the complacent silence of Liberian law makers who are members of so-called ‘opposition’ parties? Against this backdrop, is it not safe to say that political parties that have representatives in the Legislature other than the ruling party are not by definition ‘opposition parties’ but coalition parties instead? Further, is it not safe to argue that by virtue of their inability and unwillingness to address head on the issues of rampant corruption, within the framework of their legislative mandate to make laws and to oversee the overall good of the people that elected them, that there are really no ‘opposition’ political parties in Liberia? Yes, indeed we can say so unless opposition parties can buckle up and perform their tasks as true challengers of corruption in the best interest of their constituents that elected them!

### ***Why I Consider President Tolbert My Mentor***

**Interviewer:** Dr. Gbaba, we have heard you overtime refer to the late President Tolbert as your mentor. What is your reason for this?

**Dr. Gbaba:** President Tolbert was a visionary but he was the victim of political circumstances. Having said that, President Tolbert made some milestone improvements in the Liberian political system within the short space of time he was President, if one compares his achievements and nine year tenure with the twenty-seven years and the amount of development his predecessor President Tubman made.

For instance, President Tolbert lowered the tuition at the University of Liberia from \$150 per semester to \$75 dollars to grant poor students equal opportunity to higher education. He inspired Liberians to grow their own staple diet and foods so that they may be self-reliant; and he introduced his Total Involvement policy and was the first Liberian President to address the Liberian people in a traditional Liberian language (Kpelle). Further, President Tolbert was the chief patron of the arts. He promote the University of Liberia and Cuttington University chorus, Dehkontee Artists, Cultural Ambassadors, and he considered the youth of Liberia as his ‘precious jewels’. He appointed more Liberians of indigenouse descent in his government than any other Liberian President did prior to the ascent of President Doe to the helm of power in Liberia. On two occasions members of my theatre company Dehkontee Artists and I were invited to the Executive Mansion theatre to perform my play “Chains of Apartheid” in the presence of world class dignitaries. So, how can I ever forget such a great Liberian leader and not speak of his legacy!

## *Closing Remarks*

Again, I want to thank the management of TMZ Radio International for the opportunity to appear on their “Issues in the Press”. I also want to send a shout out to my fans, relatives and friends in Liberia and around the globe. Thank you for your support through thick and thin over the years. I look forward to another occasion in the near future to communicate with you on radio, television and the cyber space. My reason for this anticipation is because Liberians seriously need a civic education program to educate them about their constitutional rights and privileges so that we can put the dismal past behind us and embrace a bright new future!

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