

Keynote Speech

Delivered by:

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**On The Occasion Marking The 6th Annual Convention and Fundraiser
Of Bassa High School Association USA, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA**

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Mr. President, officers, and members of the Bassa High School Association, USA, distinguish guests, well-wishers, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to first of all acknowledge the efforts, commitment, and the many sacrifices the officers and the members of our association have made in providing various material and financial support for our *alma mater* Bassa High School. I would like you, Mr. President, and the members of our association to know that this is indeed a high honor for me, to be asked to be the Keynote Speaker on this August occasion marking the 6h Annual Convention and Fundraiser here in Atlanta, Georgia, in support of BHS. Having said that, here we are. *Where do I begin? What should I talk about?* Since circumstances at home forced some of us into self-imposed exile for more than two decades; May be the moment for setting an agenda for repatriation and for a fair, open, and peaceful return to civility has now arrived. And there are visible signs of such happenings under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Yet some of us would say: *"Wait, not so fast. The dust has not really settled yet."* And so on.

First, I must briefly contextualize the Liberian national tragedy. One of the defining features of our world since the demise of the Soviet Union, and therefore the ending of the Cold War, has been a proliferation of a new form of global conflict. These conflicts are different in nature from the normal state-to-state conflicts that result from disputes among nations. The new conflicts are intra-state, within the borders of countries, except for a couple of invasions. They are also known as civil wars. In the Liberian case, citizens were pitted against other citizens in deadly armed combat. Currently, as I speak, there are a number of such conflicts still raging through out the world. And in every one of them *women, poor women, and children* are the most vulnerable, the most abused, the most victimized. Children, in particular, have been deliberate targets of violence, with millions of them being killed, displaced, orphaned, abused, and separated from their families.

As Liberians, the world over, we are charged with the *collective responsibility* of reshaping our country. And we must find meaningful ways in which to do so. As we gather here tonight, we need to understand that with every successful event, comes sincere commitment, sacrifice, and active participation. I like to again commend the Bassa High School Association, USA, and the many other Liberian organizations for the initiatives that they have undertaken thus far to ameliorate the situation back home. So tonight, I charge my fellow *Turris Lucis* to support us in this worthy cause and I urge our American friends to help us in that regard. Yet there is a greater mission in which we

must be active participants. Our mission, in my opinion is: "REBUILDING A TRULY CONSTITUTIONALLY MULTI-ETHNIC DEMOCRACY THAT BREAKS THE BARRIERS OF TRIBALISM, GENDER, CLASS, AND RELIGION" with a central focus on rehabilitating our youths who happen to be the life blood of our future and who, for the past two decades have learned to achieve their goals through the barrel of the guns. It is to this topic I would like to draw our attention tonight.

Our commitment is to develop an agenda that will educate the youth of our society who will soon become the voting public of Liberia, and within the same breath, address the rights of the public to encourage all citizens to participate in government. This is part of the tenants of our constitution and of democratic principles and ours is a strife to build "A Truly Constitutionally Multi-ethnic Democracy" that Breaks the Barriers of Tribalism, Gender, Class, and Religion, so that our children, and children's children, will know war no more.

Now let me turn our attention to the challenges ahead of us Liberians, as we strive toward developing an agenda that informs our practice, an agenda that sustains the movement, and an agenda that actualizes our vision for A Truly Constitutionally Multi-ethnic Democracy. No doubt our current leadership's vision will embrace. In the education of our youths, we, Liberians have to face a choice: whether our ethnic diversity (which we commonly call tribalism) and class are going to continue to be perceived in the form of economic and political hierarchies of the superiors vs the inferiors, or of the dominant vs the oppressed, or whether we are going to see the issue of ethnic diversity in the context of enriching the totality of our society; politically, culturally, economically, socially, and spiritually.

The challenge before us is to construct the basis of a truly pluralistic, diverse, and constitutionally multi-ethnic democracy in which genuine dialogue, genuine interaction between and among all groups will flourish; where mutual learning and respect are going to be the norm rather than the exception.

Within that richness of diversity we are going to find, I believe, those common threads that bind us together in building a new definition of democracy and the true meaning of politics in Liberia. First, our youths and the voting public need to know that politics is the process by which we in a democracy create laws from our beliefs. Secondly the voting public has a right to know that politics is the process of determining who gets how much of the **what's, when's, where's** and **how's** in five major areas: **income, education, health care, housing, and justice**. We should educate the public to vote their beliefs--- and see to it that their beliefs are translated into public policy, and to make certain that policy does not give less income, less education, less health care, less housing, and less justice to the masses.

As we take a retrospective view of the last two decades, we see that our country needs peace and unity. We do not need thirteen different political parties, when the small market woman can't get a small business loan to conduct business. We need a coalition. The first step toward that begins with us right here and now, not necessarily focusing on

the efficacy of the actions of our leaders; but rather, some how, finding the way for the public, to focus on the efficacy of our action. We can achieve peace by first constructing unity of purpose, by pooling our resources and energies around progressive projects, projects that are designed to promote greater awareness, greater sense of purpose and a practical national agenda. Just like the projects of fencing, furniture, books, and augmenting teachers' salaries, that the Bassa High School Association is currently undertaking, JC, Tordi, are good examples of the agenda around which we all can rally.

In the main time we need to infuse our politics and education with a common sense of ethics and spirituality that would challenge the structure of oppression, that would challenge the structure of power, and that would challenge the structure of the privileged within the dominant social order. Our educational agenda needs to be perceived in the grandeur of a critical project that transforms the larger society. Our agenda has to be about many things: it has to be about the struggle against tribalism, the struggle against sexism, the struggle to empower working people, the struggle to restore our top soil, the struggle to stop deforestation, the struggle to rebuild infrastructures, the struggle to protect what's left of our mineral resources when the best parts have already been minded, it has to be of course, above all things, the struggle to retrieve our human resources and intellectuals who are the life blood of the nation (our youths).

Our educational agenda must place humanity at the very center of its politics. What do I mean by this? It is not sufficient for us to simply assert what we are against. We must affirm what we are for from an interest base perspective. It is not sufficient for us to simply declare what we want to overturn, but rather, what we are seeking to build. It is my hope that we will work collaboratively with a sense of restoring humanity, and humanistic values to a political system that is so materialistic, individualistic, and destructive to the environment, and above all, oppressive to human beings. Our agenda, above all, needs a vision; a vision that actualizes the fact that **the people who actually produce the wealth of the society should control how the wealth is allocated**. Then and only then we will live up to the true meaning of equity.

Our agenda has a moral obligation to address, in a fundamental way, poverty in contemporary Liberian society. Our agenda should deal with the vast chasm, which separates the conditions of material well being, the affluence, the power, and the privilege of a small elite, from the masses of the rest of us. We need to understand that we have a moral and political responsibility to achieve social and democratic change. We cannot be disinterested observers as the physical and spiritual beings of thousands of people, poor people, working people, market women; women in general, are collectively oppressed and destroyed. We have left the leadership for too long in the hands of men, look at what this kind of leadership has lead us to today! It is high time our national agenda takes into serious consideration **women** in the leadership role; thank heavens for President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

We can, tonight, during our deliberations and or mini dinner conversations, make a commitment to this kind of democratic struggle, a struggle of empowerment, a struggle of emancipating the energies, talents and abilities of poor and oppressed people

including women. Can we dare to engage in that commitment of struggle, to envision a new definition of democracy and politics for Liberia? A definition that would teach future and current Liberian politicians, and public servants the ethical and moral limits of a winning strategy, the difference between commitment and zealotry, and the everlasting need for selflessness and civility in Liberian public life, as President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is trying to do. I challenge all of us to start now, let this 6th Annual Convention and Fundraiser so well planned be a benchmark for the continuous improvement on our part.

If we achieved this, then we will be fulfilling our mandate and our charter, truly strengthening democracy in the post civil war Liberia; and at the same time, exercise our firm belief that politics and public service must elevate our standards not subvert them. We should always remember that no government is better than the women and men who compose it and we want the best! Today our country needs the best; but we are all too rarely receiving it. I look to this august body of wonderful Liberians and to this audience of political practitioners and to our children to give us your very best. Let us therefore prepare well ourselves, our national agenda, and above all our children for in their hands lies the future of a truly Constitutionally Multi-ethnic Democracy. I thank you.