

## **July 26 Orator: 'We Have Our National Reputation and Integrity to Restore'**

07/28/2010 - Father Robert Tikpor, Orator, July 26, 2010 Independence Day, Liberia

### **INTRODUCTION**

Your Excellency, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, Your Excellency Joseph N. Boakai, Vice President of the Republic and President of the Liberian Senate, The erudite and articulate Speaker, Honorable Alex Tyler and the Distinguished Members of the House of Representatives; The President Pro Tempore, Honorable Cletus Wortoson and the Illustrious Senators of the House of Senate; Your Honor Johnnie Lewis, Chief Justice of the Republic and Associate Judges of the Supreme Court;

Your Excellency Archbishop George Antonysamy, the Papal Nuncio to Liberia; Prelates of the Christian Community, the Imams of the Muslim Community!

A Respectful and Special recognition to the Special Representative of Secretary General Ellen Magaret Løj and the men and women serving in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and her supporting Partners for Liberia's civil war years' ordeals .

The Doyen, His Excellence Mansour Abdallah, Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Lebanon and Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps. Honorable Ambassadors and Representatives of the different governments represented; God bless the lands and peoples you represent here! In your case all protocol is being 'observed' today.



I also want to recognize in a special way, the presence of the local and international journalists who have helped to keep the world informed of the happenings now in this once glorious land of liberty. I am not so sure whether it is still a glorious land of liberty.

Honored invitees and visitors, heartily welcome!

### **SALUTATION TO SANNIQUILLIE**

Our revered and vigilant House of Chiefs who are the wise and trusted custodians of Liberia's cultural and traditional heritage; reverential honor and respect to you and therefore we say: Gohn Kley Willie Tokpah. . ,AE mehn?... Kabua! M Dah, ZOTA Kaa Vueey!!!  
Coma?

R.T. Lele Seh

In this one hundred and sixty-third Oration, I have the honor to choose for my topic:

### **IN NATIONAL UNITY, WE WILL STAND**

From the very foundation of this nation in 1847 to this day, July 26, 2010, Liberia has been beset with a few but, absolutely indispensable missing links. Among which I list but three herein:

The first indispensable missing link, or bond for national unity – is the bond of blood. This bond of one blood we have been trying to attain in one hundred and sixty-three years, but it does not seem to be attainable. The second bond is that of one language. It has been working quite alright. The third bond is that of one Faith. I find this not



necessary at all. In fact it is not working in many countries like The Middle Eastern countries. Why should we try it here?

There are other debilitating factors which are stalling our progress and achievements. I mention only three here:

Insidious poverty which has been exacerbated by selfishness and greed, unceasing corruption in high places and the lack of patriotism. Personal interest has been placed above a common national interest. as a result, when the test of a civil war came, we were a divided, tormented and easily turned apart people.

The second sickening factor was the dwindling away of our natural resources. At the height of Tubman's administration I read somewhere, I think it was an account written by David Vinton, one of Liberia's brilliant banking magnates, that Liberia's per capital income was second only to that of Japan. In short, if Japan was the richest country in the world at the time, then Liberia came second. Not even the great U.S. A. could be placed over little Liberia. If you asked me where was the money coming from into our banks, the answer is this: Remember that our ore mines had been newly discovered virtually all over the country, at Bomi Hills, Nimba, Putu and elsewhere. Liberia was the leading exporter of natural Rubber as it had been during the Second World War? Where was all that money going? I hear you asking under your breath. Don't ask me. I am not an economist. One thing I do know though, with the death of Tubman, Liberia was standing on the brink of the precipice of a civil war. I first pointed this out to our much revered President William V. S. Tubman when in 1964, I cited his Open Door Policy as a typical example. "This door, your Excellency, is so wide open that the merchants trading in Liberia leave nothing of the enormous profits they make here, but only the chaff. "The door is too wide open." I concluded. I was branded with a typical Liberian adage: "These young men will teach their grandfathers how to suck eggs." It was the first and last time I ever heard that adage.

The third sickening element to hinder progress and achievement was Sectionalism. It was shown in this form: A former classmate met a friend and gave him a firm handshake. When the one who received the handshake didn't respond correctly, the giver of the handshake returned to his waiting "crowd-of-boys" and told them in a whisper: Don't mind him; he is not one of US!! Since not every one in a country "can be one of us" before that country could survive, we have a long way to go as regards national unity. Sectionalism could still be among us in disguise. Until we can weed it out from the soil it could raise its hateful head now and again to divide us and thereby rule us with an iron fist. In order to avoid any future and similar factors we must surgically excise all these cancerous tissues from our records. How can we do this? That is the home-work I give to students of Liberian history, to ponder over until July 26, 2011.



We must imbue the present generation with nobler ideals of what makes a nation strong and united. For example:

By putting the welfare of our country over our personal cravings and wants; the country will emerge from the great sufferings of the fifteen-year civil war. It is then that we can say with the late President John F. Kennedy of America, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." For example, Louis Arthur Grimes as Liberia's Representative to the League of Nations in Geneva defended the Liberian government and gave reasons to that organization why Liberia should not be placed under a protectorate after Liberia was found guilty of some forms of slavery.

The thoughts of the sufferings of the Founding Fathers who had borne the yoke of slavery from their former masters, a yoke which made them so resolute in their desire to remain free and united. In Liberia, or even in pre-Liberian times, the main yoke of bondage on our people was slavery. Once they had gained independence, they had to work towards remaining united. They could cultivate the following values: truths, trust, sincerity, love, etc., that have made a nation like America so great.

To my mind, our people should cultivate the spirit of personal integrity as the most urgent human value. It will help the nation as strong pillars help to hold a multi-storey building. Furthermore, the institutions of learning, organizations like the Young Men Christian Organization and its female counterpart, the Boys Scout Movement and its female counterpart, and others should instill this value in the students and young people so as to prepare them for a better Liberia which would be a Land of peace, truthfulness, justice, and equality.

These omens and ideals are for all of us to critically study. Let us now turn our attention to the task that I have decided to undertake in this Oration. That is, to inform us of the issue of Ethnicity and Sectionalism.

### **A SILENT TRUMPET**

To the founding Fathers who felt it was a national language or and a Constitution, soon began to teach the native children happily brought to them for adoption, a common language most spoken world-wide. They arrived here with that first Socio-chemical element, a national language, English, as was spoken by their former masters in America. Today we hear that English is spoken and sought after as the second language of every nation under the sun. But what the settlers did not know, but what the natives appreciated the most was not so much the education but Christian civilization they brought with them.

The Founding Fathers soon wrote the Constitution which they felt was the second missing link to those whose current “war-trumpet” is Ethnicity and Sectionalism. Now take a breath, let us pause for a few questions and answer these questions:

Who was the first to open this floodgate of multi-Ethnicity or Sectionalism in Liberia since the days of J.J. Roberts and E.J. Roye?

Was it the Constitution or the citizens who are enjoying the benefits of that Constitution?

Let me read to you that part of the Constitution of 1847 which is causing the consternation at the Immigration Bureaus and now extending even up to the House of the Senate and that of the Representatives.

From the Constitution of 1847, I read: “The great object for forming these colonies being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted Continent, none but persons of color shall be admitted to citizenship in this Republic.”Cfr. Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, Vol. II (New York: Central Book Company, Inc., 1947), p. 863.)

Now, I am not a lawyer. Furthermore, I stand corrected. It seems to me that these texts were written at a particular time, and referred to the people of that time, 163 years ago. In the 1960s, the former Colonial oppressors and repressors in Guinea, and Ivory Coast have granted those countries their freedom to govern themselves. But nationals from some neighboring countries still come, continuously pouring into Liberia’s porous borders. And, within a week or two, they are in Monrovia. Within another week or two, they have obtained a brand new Liberian Passport. Do you think I am joking?

Ask the appropriate officials at the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization and they will tell you how many spurious Liberian Passport holders they have detained here in the last twelve months.

I met one in South Africa recently at the Chancellery of the Liberian Embassy. He had come for a sort of official confirmation from the Consulate Officer, Mr. Ben Sie-Too Collins in Pretoria. He wanted to continue on his way elsewhere as a Liberian. After some fifty years after independence, foreigners are continuously pouring into our long cheated country. Should we not cry “Foul”?



At their July 16th 1959, Sanniquellie meeting, Tubman cautioned prudence over the readjustment of colonial boundaries, and this issue was placed on the shelf. It was this kind of rankling over wasted palm-oil that Tubman foresaw.

Put the case: If a complainer's ethnic roots could be traced back to Guinea, for example, before that country's independence, then he should be considered a non-Liberian because the Constitution granted him the permission of coming to Liberia as a place of refuge. Shouldn't the Attorney-General tell the lawyer of that Liberian Passport holder, no matter how brilliant this lawyer might be, that the burden of proof lies squarely in his client's court?

I recently presented my Passport to an immigration officer at Johannesburg International Airport. The man turned over my document and without looking up, he said hello! "Howdu yah" I answered. "You are a Liberian, for true. I was in Liberia before." He handed me my precious traveling document.

### **THE CONSTITUTION vis-à-vis Citizenship**

To those who are protesting their rights as given by the Constitution, let's look at the Constitution together again. "The object of forming these colonies being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted Continent, none but Negroes or persons of Negro descent shall be eligible to citizenship in this Republic." (Article V, Section 18. Amended 1907)

Next to that I further read from Chapter 4, Art. 27 of the Constitution of 1986:

All persons who, on the coming into force of this Constitution were lawfully citizens of Liberia shall continue to be Liberian citizens.

In order to preserve, foster and maintain the positive Liberian culture, values and character, only persons who are Negroes or of Negro descent shall qualify by birth or by naturalization to be citizens of Liberia. The Legislature shall, adhering to the above standard, prescribe such other qualification criteria for and the procedures by which naturalization may be obtained.

Article 52 of the Constitution of 1986 states, "No person shall be eligible to hold the office of President or vice-president, unless:

A natural born Liberian citizen of not less than thirty-five years of age.

The owner of unencumbered real property valued at not less than twenty-five thousands, and Resident in the republic ten years prior to his election, provided that the president and the vice-president shall not come from the same County.

Note two points:

What one is to be and do to become a citizen?

What one is to be before he can become the President of this Republic?

### **CITIZENSHIP**

In the days of Tubman, who came to claim "his rights" to citizenship or to the presidency? In the days of Tolbert no one came up. In the days of Samuel Kanyan Doe, no one came up to make such a claim. When Charles Taylor occupied the Presidential Chair at the Mansion no one dared stir up the dust on Broad Street when his motorcade was passing by.

Professor Joseph Saye Guannu in his Civics for Liberian Schools tells us that one can become a citizen of a country sub sole or sub sanguine. E.g. A child born in Freetown could claim Sierra Leonean citizenship sub sole, that is born under the sun; but a Liberian citizenship sub sanguine, that is born of blood. From the Latin roots it all boils down to this: The child is only a Sierra Leonean citizen sub sole, meaning that he was born in Sierra Leone where his Liberian parents were residing as non-citizens (i.e.

Liberian citizens who have never had any reasons to renounce or change their country of birth (sub-sanguine). The child's claim could be substantiated by the Immigration officer who knows these civic facts in order to ease the child's fears, or the parents' uncertainty.

When the Founding Fathers had tested all they knew and that a national language does serve as the first missing link, they then tried Blood Relationship. That too was found to be one of several missing links. If every Liberian could say I love this man or woman because they are my blood-brother and blood-sister, these then would be the missing and ever illusive links. That was why Edward Blyden's proposal to the settlers was a wise, far-sighted one, to inter-marry with their neighboring African tribes in order to secure their survival. This was in 1850 when he joined the Settler community in Lower Buchanan, Grand Bassa County.

Liberian citizenry could be slowly, but permanently, integrated and assimilated by marriage with the surrounding tribes. On the contrary, the elite ruling mulatto group subsequently charged Blyden with being a womanizer and drove him away to Sierra Leone where he took refuge.

Perhaps what Blyden didn't know was what the "Patriotic" Founding Fathers had secretly written behind the Presidential chair at the Mansion: Do not forget the children of the Pioneers! Now please tell me, with that obvious maxim of Sectionalism, who was the first to promote and encourage disunity in Liberia, the Pioneers or the Natives?

Madam President, I chose for this oration whatever topic was most urgent on the Liberian scene. From what one hears most frequently on the world's radio and newspaper media, Ethnicity seems to head the list.

## **ETHNICITY – IT'S ROOTS**

Ethnicity has been a source of division that we can trace as far back as the days of Joseph and his brothers. We read from Genesis 37:1- 28 of the plot to kill Joseph. It was one of his brothers, Reuben, in trying to save him from death, asked that Joseph be sold to some Ishmaelite traders who were traveling to Egypt.

We know from the readings in World History that there have been clashes between members of the same tribes, and between tribes. So it is not a strange phenomenon that ethnicity had been here from time immemorial.

## **INTER-TRIBAL WARS IN LIBERIA BEFORE 1847**

In our own country, before the settlers came to found Liberia, there were frequent intertribal wars; especially, during the two hundred years (1619 – 1816) when slaves were captured, collected, from among the tribes fighting each other. Before slavery began, these intertribal wars were fought over land, wealth, and other matters that were offensive to one or the other tribe. For example, there was a war between the Bassas and Kpelles. How do we know about these wars? From maxims often repeated by the Bassas like "Glewetae Dju Dje a Kpah Kpeletoh", and again "Zainkpa da mehn Kpeleh da Coatin Kpo."

We wouldn't have known about these wars but for the maxims that have come down to us. In the first maxim, the Bassas are saying that Glewetae was a little man who was so small in body that the children saw and thought that he was one of them. So they invited him to join them and go against the Kpelle, but he displayed such warlike deeds that his deeds were cited for generations yet unborn to emulate. His heroic feats became themes for a ballad to him since then.

In the second maxim, "Zainkpa is dead and so the Kpelle man has worn a coat," Zainkpa was a Kpelle man who was captured by the Bassa warriors and he was disowned by his own kinsmen. But the Bassas honored him as brave a captive. Therefore they kept him. But in order to retaliate against his own people,

Zainkpa swore to his ancestral spirits that any Kpelle man who ever crossed his path would be captured and sold into slavery. From Zainkpa's death, this ballad was sung and began to spread far and wide among the Bassa people.

### **BATTLE OF FORT HILL, DEC. 1, 1822**

These intertribal wars were not limited to tribes and tribes. When the Settlers came, there were wars between them and some ethnic groups. For instance, a battle was fought between the combined forces of the Dey, Vai, and Mamban Bassa ethnic groups and the Settlers at Fort Hill on December 1, 1822. In that battle, Matilda Newport is alleged to have been the heroine, and until sometimes very lately did her alleged exploits have come to be questioned by some Liberian historians. Mind you, those native warriors were imbued with the mystic idea that no bullet or canon fire could put them to flight when they had taken a magic potion in their blood. This conviction had come down to our times as we heard amongst most of the fighters who partook in our Civil War for which, you will recall Doe is said to have sent some of his fighters to the practitioners of this "bullet proof" magic.

### **BATTLES BETWEEN THE GREBOES AND SETTLERS**

There was a war between the Grebos and the Settlers in Maryland County in the early 1900s. Very little is known about the fighting between the Grebo and Settler community in Maryland County.

There was a Kroo war declared on the Settlers in 1915 – 1918 called the Sasstown War. One Juah Nimely was the leader of that war. Eventually, he was captured and brought to Monrovia. He was never allowed thereafter to return to his native Sasstown.

The February 26 incident in Lofa County in which little Korpu Kamara was killed, and which sparked into ethnic clashes between members of the Lorma tribe and their counterpart, the Mandingo tribe is another example.

These points are for us to be aware that there were wars between the indigenous inhabitants even before this nation was established in 1847, and between them and the settlers.

There remains, however, another evil conduct outside of Ethnicity of which I have decided to mention that continues to besmear the national character. It is this ritualistic killing of innocent children who will disappear from the watchful eyes of their parents and after sad search for them, their lifeless bodies are discovered with the private organs removed. We hear frequently about these happenings but there have been no reports made by government as to what has been done to the perpetrators of these heinous acts. Liberians need to be reminded that it was these very acts that caused the hangings of prominent citizens in Harper City in 1979.

### **ANOTHER LOOK AT ETHNICITY**

Ethnicity and Sectionalism are necessary ingredients of all governments in the world today. For example, in the British Parliament, you have the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish who have been emphasizing that their ethnic origins should be pointed out and maintained always. This has been accepted by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Moreover, this has enabled the British Parliament to overcome some of the difficulties of modern times. In the American Congress, there are representatives of ethnic groups, e.g., the African-American Caucus.

In our own country, the presence of Ethnicity is not far to fetch. The Kru, Bassa, and Grebo tribes who live along the Atlantic seaboard are well known for their seamanship. As a result, the first European ships to visit our coast got their seamen from these ethnic groups.

The Krahn, Lorma, and the other hinterland tribes are well known for their militant spirit. For example, it was a Lorma man who led the Liberian Contingent that was sent by President Tubman to the Belgium

Congo during the Katanga War. Up to the time of President Samuel Doe, these interior tribes form the bulwark of the infantry regiments in the Liberian Army. Now, we hear of an ethnic balance being established in the new Liberian Army so as to avoid any ethnic tension that had existed before and had been a cause of our civil war.

The Kpelles are known for their hard working capabilities.

The Vais are known for their intellectual capabilities from the very beginning of the nation because they had invented a script unknown anywhere else in the world. This script was used in the Second World War by the Germans, and nobody could easily decipher it.

Every ethnic group has its capabilities that could be useful to this country. What is left for the Liberian government to do is to find out what these capabilities are and put them to use. The government is to direct these capabilities into their proper channels and put into place mechanisms which will stop anyone from amalgamating them with bad morals.

Recommendations

I recommend that the President appoint a standing committee. It would carefully examine any ethnic clashes that would tend to suggest that they are religious confrontations. It is left with us to use ethnicity when it crops up in governmental circles. When such a committee selected to probe an incident finds out what the truth is, the committee must make its findings known to the public. It would be dangerous that the findings are not reported in the print or electronic media so that what went wrong in the case of the little eleventh grader, Korpu Kamara's death, would not be repeated.

In the case of the eruption that went on in Monrovia in 2004 where one community versus another community clashed, some religious places of worship were burnt down and vandalized. Similar publications must be done as pertain to findings from committees sent to investigate the mayhem so that the government will not be blamed for the accumulation of grievances incurred by opposing parties.

I am very concerned about the reporting of these findings, because if not made known through journals and radio, they may accumulate into 'justice delayed is justice denied.' The wrongdoers must be brought to justice. Let us be aware that innocent people lost their lives. These precious lives must be accounted for by responsible government. Failure to bring the truth out and to bring the guilty to justice would make us return to the same section of the circle that once brought us to our bloody Civil War.

INTER-FAITH MEDIATION IN LIBERIA

For its efforts in fostering in Christian – Muslim ties in Liberia in which the leaders of the Liberian Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council of Liberia had merged the two religious groups into one powerful body to address the Samuel K. Doe's Government which tended to ignore either of these two dominant religions in the country. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu heard about this novel movement from all Africa, he visited Liberia and awarded his United States \$30,000.00 prize to the merged Council.

Once Liberia had achieved this recognition from a religious leader of the caliber of Archbishop Tutu, the country now goes on to make progress. Archbishop Michael Francis, who led this merger, received President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's warmest congratulations on the day of her inauguration.

In this context, I recommend that religious conflicts should not be mixed with ethnic tensions. "The death of student, Korpu Kamara, in Konia Village near Lofa's provincial capital of Voinjama which sparked clashes in which churches and mosques were destroyed as earlier reports suggested that the violence was a result of religious tension between Christians and Muslims. But eyewitness, the Liberian Government, and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) have since dismissed the reports as false and attributed them to ethnic tension between the Lormas and the Mandingoes in that part of the country." Cfr. ([www.frontpageafrica.com](http://www.frontpageafrica.com) "What Went Wrong?" March 3, 2010)

For the one hundred and sixty-third anniversary of our national existence, there has been no conflict arising between the Christian community and the Muslim community. It seems that there are individuals or people who want to create an issue that was non-existent for these numbers of years. The people who

are advocating these distortions must have some other vested interests, a hidden agenda elsewhere and I am begging them to keep these far-fetched thoughts away from these shores, from Liberia the home of all the oppressed children of the Negro race wherever they may be.

The government must take note not to be dragged into these so-called religious wars. The government must carefully investigate, analyze, and bring to justice anyone who is caught because we don't want any religious fundamentalism here. The government should stay clear from taking sides which would only add more fuel to the situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

To Liberians upset about ethnicity, I say be calm. It is not multiplicity of ethnic sources which we want to avert. It was these millions of ethnic immigrants that have enriched continental America. The Founding, Pioneering Fathers knew this. That was the reason why their Constitution left the gates wide open that if some other ethnic groups coming to Liberia were of different faith, they would be free to practice their religion and live freely. Unity is the key for a successful Liberia. Let us put aside political, social, and religious biases and hold together so that we can lift this nation to higher heights.

We could learn from the United States of America which has managed to overcome ethnic barriers and has become a great nation.

Whereas Liberia's own ethnicity was narrowly limited to the few oppressed and depressed children of the Negro race, why couldn't Liberia welcome them to increase and enrich our population?

From the foregoing points, I have critically and thoroughly reviewed the nation's records up to 2010. Have we made any progress, fast or retarded? Are Liberians a bit happier or still frustrated and melancholy? I have given you reasons for which I think Liberians are surely emerging from a nightmare of miseries.

We have our national reputation and integrity to restore, our economy to strengthen and stabilize, and finally our moral consciences to reexamine and reform. Corruption, like an unwanted weed, must be uprooted out this country. Or it might cover the whole land.

I beg to leave and step down from this podium. I think my awesome duty is performed, and my mission is accomplished.

May the God of the founders of the Republic who sustained Liberia these turbulent 163 years when we saw better days as well as bad times, continue to sustain us all in this beautiful nation! May we live together as brothers and sisters in peace!

God bless you, Madame President! God bless our friends and august visitors, may He bless the people of Liberia and save the State!