

Discovering Ourselves Through History and Service Delivery

Speech By

Syruwa Somah, PhD

Executive Director, Liberian History, Education and Development, Inc. (LIHEDE), Greensboro, NC

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Associate Professor, Environmental Health and Occupational Safety & Health  
NC A&T State University, Greensboro, NC

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Principal Kpaka Kenmah, Vice Principal Henry D. Wilson, the President of the Student Council, members of the faculty and student body; Distinguished guests, fellow Liberians, ladies and gentlemen:

My brothers and sisters, it is good to be with you this afternoon at this student assembly. Back in 1977 I too sat in these student assemblies several times to listen to invited guests like myself; to listen to the principal or vice principal make important school-related announcements, or simply to listen to student government leaders. I had come to Tubman High in 1977 in my dream for education, which eventually took me through five Liberian counties in the 1970s prior to my travel to the U.S. In other words, I spent only a year at Tubman High before finally graduating from Zwedru Multilateral High in Grand Gedeh County. But my one year stay at Tubman High was a productive one. I was Senior Senator for 10-7 in this very building. I was a cardinal once, and I will always remain a cardinal, even if I didn't graduate as a cardinal. Yes, I know it has been 30 years since I last visited Tubman High, and I know so many things have happened at Tubman High and in Liberia as a whole in the last 30 years. But I once passed through these walls, and I have the right to ask anyone who is sitting in my seat in 10-7, and anyone who is occupying my post as Senior Senator of 10-7 to please get up politely because I am back. Okay, don't get up but please raise your hands way up so all can see!

Thank you all for warming up my seats all the years I have been gone.

Seriously, however, I want to thank the principal, student leadership, faculty, and student body of the great Tubman High for inviting me to speak with you today. Since 2002, I have been in and out of Liberia at least 14 times in the service of an organization I head as executive director, and that organization is the Liberian History, Education, and Development, Inc. (LIHEDE). And on this my 15th trip, I will undertake some work for LIHEDE, but I am mainly in Liberia this time to share with

the Liberian government and people a new vision. And that new vision is for this country to establish a National Liberian Studies Curriculum that will make it mandatory for Liberian languages, culture, and traditions to be taught in all Liberian schools, from elementary school through college. This is necessary so we can begin to learn about ourselves and our history in Liberia and keep peace with ourselves and our neighbors. Even in my native Margibi County, there is no indication that all the major ethnic groups of Margibi—mainly the Bassa, Kpelle, Gola, Vai, and Dey know about one another very well. And this is true about the people of Montserrado County where Tubman High is located, and people in the rest of the counties of Liberia. We have been strangers to our neighbors in Liberia, and our neighbors have been strangers to us so much so that even if our neighbors are crying at night, we don't care to look outside and see if our neighbors need help. This sort of attitude is not good for peace, unity, reconciliation, and development in Liberia. Yet I am afraid that we will continue to feel and do things this way until we learn about ourselves and our neighbors. And the schoolhouse is the best place to begin.

Again, Tubman High is a great school and a pioneer in many things, so I hope that Tubman High will take the lead in introducing Liberian language and culture within its curriculum. Okay, I know that Tubman High falls under the MCSS, and all MCSS schools probably use the same curriculum. However, the Secretary General of LIHEDE, Mr. Nat Galarea Gbessagee, a graduate of Tubman High, once told me that when he was at Tubman High in the 1970s, he used an African Studies textbook produced by San Francisco State University that described in detail the customs and traditions of the various ethnic groups of Liberia. He said that book gave him a better understanding and appreciation for the cultural practices of many of the ethnic groups of Liberia, and today he is able to write extensively on Liberian culture and tradition based on the knowledge he gained from that book and places he traveled in Liberia. I don't know if that book is still being used at Tubman High today, but I think it is time for us to learn about one another in Liberia, in order to avoid current and future conflicts with our friends and neighbors who don't speak the same language as us, and who don't practice the same culture as us. We should learn about ourselves to avoid the costly mistakes of calling our parents, market women, and traditional elders as "illiterate people" when these people can read the Bible in their various languages, and we can't; when these people can organize and run an effective business in the market places, and we can't, and when these people can administer tribal laws, learn acrobatic dance routines, and sing like angels, and we can't.

Service Delivery

Fellow cardinals, I know that God has a purpose for each and every one of us in this life. We are different but we are important to one another. Yesterday I was a student here, but today I am a professor at a university in the U.S. Today, some of you are here in school, but yesterday many of you didn't know during the civil war that you would live to see this day. But you are all here, and we are all here today. Why? Well, I don't quite know the answer, but I am certain that we are here today not because we are too smart or too lucky. Of course, we can say we are smart or lucky if we want to make ourselves feel good, but you and I know that there are many persons out there who are as smart and lucky, if not smarter or luckier than us, who are not in school today due to factors beyond their control. So my guess is that are all here today because God has a purpose for us. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here today.

Therefore, I believe God spared our lives so we can rebuild our homes, our families, our towns, our villages, our schools, our cities, and write a new history of Liberia. A history that speaks to our values and achievements of all of us in Liberia, no matter how different or diverse we might be individually, culturally, and linguistically. But the journey will not be easy. The challenge is great so we should dream big. And I believe if our God was able to lead the Biblical children of Israel to the Promised Land from

captivity in Egypt; to bless citizens of other nations like Japan and the United States of America to build their post-conflict nations, then He is also able to unite all Liberians to rebuild our war-ravaged country and for us to live in peace as brothers and sisters. So I just came by to encourage you to never stop dreaming and to never allow anyone to discourage you from reaching the goals you have set for yourselves, especially goals that have the potential to make a greater impact on our people, the people of Liberia.

Like many of you here today, I assume, I was born outside Monrovia. I was born in Kokoyah, Bong County, Liberia, but I grew up in Gibi. I grew up in Gibi along with more than 50 young boys and girls. As we were growing up, it didn't take too long for us to realize that there was a killer disease called malaria in our midst. It was common for this disease to reveal its most insidious and ravaging effects. There was never a time we did not wake up to a crying mother or mothers beating on their chests and falling on the ground calling for people to come to their rescue, because one of their children was at the brink of death or had died from malaria. In fact, when my sister got pregnant during that time, we all were happy and started preparing for our next family member, but malaria had another plan. My sister got sick with malaria during her pregnancy. She did not recover from the malaria she contracted. The parasites pierced her placenta, and not only did the parasites stop the blood flow to her fetus, but also they deoxygenated her unborn. In essence, malaria killed my sister, and since there was no doctor around to perform a cesarean delivery, and to prepare her body for proper burial, she was buried the same day. I didn't have the chance to see my dearest sister, and to say goodbye to her unconquered spirit on her journey to our ancestors. So, you see my brothers and sisters, these actual moment-to-moment and personal experiences made me to have a dream to do something about malaria and my own education.

The story about my sister or myself is not any different from your own family story. Many of you have to walk everyday to get to school. Many of you have to leave home to come to Monrovia to live with family members or friends just to go to school. Many of you have no food to eat before school and after school each day, but you still come. But why do you continue to come to school if you have no food to eat, to clean uniform to wear, to good place to sleep, no textbooks to use, and no transportation except your feet? Well, I know the answer because I have been there. I had to leave home in 1977 to come to Monrovia to go to school. And when things didn't work out for me the way I expected, I didn't give up on my education. I traveled until I got to Grand Gedeh. After Grand Gedeh, I wanted to go to Cuttington in Bong County or return to Monrovia to attend LU but I ended up at Tubman Technical College in Harper, Maryland County. It was after one year at Tubman Technical College that the opportunity came for me to go the U.S., and I took advantage of that opportunity. So I am in the position to know why you still want to come to school everyday in spite of the many problems you face. And this time I can guess that you want to learn in order to improve conditions for yourself and your family, just as I and others young people before me had hoped.

More important, I know that you want to learn to bring about peace, unity, and reconciliation in Liberia; to bring about development in Liberia; to take your proper place in government as future leaders of Liberia, and to preserve and protect Liberia. And these are all noble goals on your part. But don't forget that whatever you do or plan to do with your life, you will have to work with fellow Liberians. I don't have to tell you but with the government exam around the corner next week, I know many of you are already working and studying together to pass the national exam. I know that many of you have also begun working and studying together to pass the Cuttington entrance exam, the LU entrance exam, the TNIMA entrance exam, the Foreign Service Institute entrance exam, the Tubman Technical College entrance exam, and the entrance exams of the other major universities and professional schools in Liberia. Nonetheless, you should also learn to work along with others not just in

school and school-related activities, but with people in the community as well. You can begin by getting along with your next door neighbors, the people in your church, mosque, or traditional society, or the football club in your area. Liberia needs the help of every one of us, and it is important that we learn to respect one another and learn to work with one another. And in the spirit of working together as people of one big family called “Liberia,” I want to speak to you today on the theme, “Discovering Ourselves Through History and Service Delivery.”

To begin, I should state that after living in the United States for several years, two of my Liberian brothers, Mr. Gbessagee, whom I mentioned earlier, along with Mr. Siahyonkron Nyanseor, a graduate of Laboratory High, and me founded LIHEDE as a vehicle for discovering ourselves and our Liberian history while rendering our services to Liberia. The three of us met in Greensboro, North Carolina in 2003 to form LIHEDE, and since that time we have worked together to bring others on board. LIHEDE is still a growing organization, but we are proud of our achievements so far as a body. Over the last past five years, LIHEDE has effortlessly held conferences in the United States and Liberia on topics ranging from African governance and philosophical thought to malaria control and prevention in Liberia. And in August this year, LIHEDE will host its first anniversary jubilee to not only highlight the achievements of LIHEDE in its five-year history, but also to emphasize that understanding ourselves and our history as Liberians is a very important pathway to national peace, reconciliation, and development in Liberia. We are planning an elaborate program for the fifth anniversary jubilee celebrations, which details will be released to the public later.

Fellow cardinals and friends, I should also tell you that in 2006 LIHEDE hosted the first National Health Conference in Monrovia, Liberia on malaria control and prevention in Liberia. The conference, which was held by LIHEDE in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Liberian universities, and private bodies, sought to bring to the consciousness of the Liberian people and the world the magnitude of the impact of malaria in Liberia. And one of the highlights of the 2006 National Health Conference was an invitation extended to officials of LIHEDE by the US Embassy near Monrovia to witness the historic announcement by then U.S. President George W. Bush via satellite declaring Liberia a focused country to benefit from the President Malaria Initiative (PMI) funds. As a focused nation, Liberia automatically became eligible to receive over \$70 million in aid for malaria control and prevention efforts in Liberia from the PMI funds, Germany, Japan, China, WHO, and other donors with PMI accounting for \$37.5 million of the total amount.

Let me also clarify, however, that although Liberia was added onto the PMI funding recipient list in part due to a letter writing campaign initiated by LIHEDE, after a LIHEDE malaria symposium on Liberia held in the U.S. in 2005, all these funds and donations have been channeled through the Liberia government and not through LIHEDE. LIHEDE has not benefited directly from these funds, except indirectly, as manifested by the delivery of the hundreds of thousands of bednets to the Liberian government and people at the Freeport of Monrovia last week by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), under the PMI allocations for Liberia. Mind you, prior to LIHEDE’s letter writing campaign in the U.S. in 2005 and the subsequent national health conference held in Liberia in 2006, Liberia has never held a national health conference devoted to the control and prevention of malaria and other common diseases in Liberia, nor was Liberia prequalified for PMI at the time.

Of course, my message in all these examples is that service to one’s country pays, whether or not one benefits directly for or from that service. We in LIHEDE are very proud that through our efforts, the Liberian government and people are today benefiting from more than \$70 million in international aid

for malaria control and prevention in Liberia. And you too can be proud if you establish the first adult literacy program in your current neighborhood, your county, or your village and many of the people we wrongly called “illiterates” learn how to read and write in English because of your efforts. Mind you, I gave adult literacy as an example because you are students, but you could render other services to your community based on your individual talents. For as I informed you all, not all the smart and lucky people are in school today due to circumstances beyond their control. But those circumstances do not suggest that our brothers and sisters have ceased to be smart or lucky simply because they are not in school right now. They are still smart, but they need help to get to where they want to go in school and in life, and it is the responsibility of those of us who have tasted school to help those who also want to taste school but don’t have the means. This is what I mean by service delivery to Liberia. If you are in a position to help a friend, relative, or neighbor who is less fortunate than you, and you exercise that choice or option to help that friend, relative, or neighbor in whatever little ways you can, you are delivering a service to your country. For through the little help you gave, that person might be able to help another person, and that other person might be able to help someone else. And by the time you know it, the life of everyone is improved because of your help. This is part of what I mean by Discovering Ourselves Through History and Service Delivery

### Discovery Through History

There are many things to learn about discovering ourselves through history and service delivery, but I hope you understand that my main point here is that honesty pays and vision pays, even if we are not publicly recognized for whatever contribution we make to society. You see back in 2003, Mr. Gbessagee, Mr. Nyanseor and I had an idea, a great idea of change. We wanted to understand ourselves and our history, so we took action. We founded LIHEDE and LIHEDE was instrumental in securing over \$70 million in aid money to Liberia for use in the healthcare delivery sector of the national economy. We didn’t benefit directly as individuals and as an organization from the aid money with its corresponding bed nets and other malaria treatment options. But our brothers and sisters on the ground in Liberia benefited and still stand to benefit from the assistance, so we indirectly benefited by initiating change in the lives of others. And I hope and trust that each of you will initiate change by using your education to benefit others without demanding direct benefits for yourselves.

I can tell you from experience that change always begins with a baby step or an idea. It is a window of possibility! Take action to effect change, and then develop the tenacity to stay the course. Work hard day and night like the tropical black ants in your desire to effect change. And do not worry about who gets or gives you credit, even when ordinary and powerful people take over your idea. This is what you want to happen in the first place. Change the world for the common good of humanity but do not try to own or corrupt the world. Nothing we own in this life because even the carbon or stardust of our bodies is simply loaned from the sacred womb of nature. None of our belongings is truly and entirely ours. So let your small discovery be added to by another and another until one ordinary day, the world’s attention is attracted in an extraordinary way to your discovery or idea.

Indeed, in effecting change, especially in discovering ourselves through history, we need to pay attention to our oral histories, legends, linguistic links, documents, spirituality, cultures, words, voices, groves, buildings, oracles, and sacred places of the past. These oral histories and legends should be preserved because they are the lifeblood of peace and stability. These historic resources can tell us time and again who we are, where we came from, and how we got here as Liberians. This is the purpose for establishment of the National Curriculum for Liberian Studies (NCLS) I spoke about earlier. The proposed National Curriculum for Liberian Studies (NCLS) from elementary school through Ph. D. is designed by LIHEDE, Inc. The goal of the proposal is to promote peace, unity, and development in Liberia by including in the Liberian grade school, high school, and college curriculums the teaching of

Liberian languages, culture, and traditions to help Liberians understand themselves and their self-identity as Liberians.

Liberians young and old need to know the contribution of the traditional Poro and Sande institutions to the growth and development of Liberia, and understand that our traditional chiefs and elders are not uneducated and illiterates, but they are only different from us in terms of education. They went to the Poro and Sande learning institutions, and they are educated in indigenous Liberian culture, tradition, customs, mores, philosophy, medicine, law, and governance, while we are educated in western culture and education. So they are not “illiterates” simply because they don’t speak and write in English like. And I am sure we wouldn’t call ourselves illiterates because we not grounded in traditional culture. But these are stereotypes that we learned in English schools in Liberia, so we who go to English schools think we are more educated than our traditional leaders. We need to stop this kind of stereotype and learn to utilize the natural talents and knowledge of all the citizens of Liberia without suppression of the rights of some falsehoods about our own importance in society as western educated persons.

Indeed, the absence of a thriving NCLS in our national curriculum to speak to our oneness and national identity has been one of the most divisive chapters in the history of this nation. Liberians are continually being denied the storehouse of information about their origin and cultural diversity. Consequently, this attitude has cast a pall of gloom over Liberia since its inception as a modern nation-state in 1847. We need to change course in Liberia. We should no longer sit by and let others tell us who we are or who we should be as Liberians. We must bear in mind that without a common curriculum framework that speaks to our national unity, stereotypical expressions such as “Bassa people make good cooks,” or “Kru people like pepper,” and other very negative expressions about other Liberian ethnic groups which don’t want to repeat in this public forum, will continue to breed hatred, disunity, and self-dejection in Liberian society. Therefore we must act soon to teach Liberian culture and tradition in Liberian schools because we cannot expect our children, or even some fellow adults, to know what they were not taught by their parents in the home or by their teachers in school.

We cannot expect our citizens to acquire knowledge regarding their culture if they have not been introduced to reading books and instructional materials that are focused on Liberian history and culture. This is why under the LIHEDE curriculum proposal, the main goal is to revamp the Liberian national curriculum, and to produce culturally relevant textbooks written by Liberian writers and scholars to strengthen academic and professional excellence in the presentation of Liberian arts, culture, history, and communication across ethnic boundaries. The time is now ripe, after 162 years of national independence and 14 years of civil war, for Liberian languages to be offered in our elementary, junior and senior high schools, and colleges, especially the colleges beginning to grant the Bachelor of Arts or Science to Master’s and PhD degrees in Liberian Studies.

Fellow cardinals and friends, what Liberia needs at this juncture of its history is a transformative educational system that will bring out the best out of every Liberian citizen in order to remove all forms of hatred, racism, tribalism, sectionalism, fear, disease, poverty and self-destruction from our midst. This is one major reason why all great nations of the globe have found it necessary to heavily invest in national studies, sciences, math, cultural development and social research in order to uphold their unified national bond at all cost. For an example, just before World War II, China was called the “sick man” of Asia, but through sound education, and with emphasis on cultural pride and technology, China not only improved its image on the world stage but it also turned out both as a military and economic power. Even in Nigeria, Liberia’s next door counterpart, there are Nigerians who hold BA, MA, and PhD degrees in studies related to their local languages, including but not limited to Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa

studies, and so forth from Bayero University in Nigeria. Uganda, Ghana, and Kenya also offer degree programs in their local languages, so Liberia will not be alone in this enterprise.

### Closing Thoughts

Fellow cardinals and friends, what I have done up to this stage of my presentation is to give you some convincing examples that speak to some of the problem areas in our educational system as it stands today. Hence, what is needed to propel the Liberian nation to the frontline of progressive or transformative education is a sound Liberian Studies program that does not leave any aspect of the nation's history behind. In this respect, LIHEDE is calling on the government of Liberia to mandate officially the inclusion of Liberian Studies in our national curriculum if it has not already done so. In addition, the Liberian government should approve that Liberian Studies be taught from elementary school through the nation's highest institutions of learning. And in time, Liberian studies should also become one of the subject areas on the 9th grade and 12th National Examinations. The late Liberian educator, Dr. Edward Wilmot Blyden advocated in his 1906 National Independence day oration more than 100 years ago for Liberians to embrace their indigenous culture if they didn't wish to be severed from their roots and withered away. Today I am making the same call in the name of LIHEDE.

I believe that NCLS is a promise rooted in a shared vision of nationhood and learning community. It is an oasis of academic excellence and a place of caring and compassion, tolerance, enduring friendships, and civil discourse. It is therefore no coincidence that we as Liberians must be fed up with stereotyping ourselves and writing off our own history from our nation's academic curriculum. We need to preserve our oral history, legends, linguistic tongues, spirituality, cultures, oracles, and sacred places as a means of learning about ourselves through history and service delivery. Liberian language, geography, history, mathematics, science, physical sciences, and religion must be taught in our schools if we must survive as a nation and people. It is time to establish a new educational system of Liberia that recognizes and codifies Liberian cultural values and norms not only into the national curriculum of Liberia, but also in the Constitution of Liberia, in order to prepare Liberian citizens for the task of nation building now and in the future.

Consequently, it is my conviction, and that of LIHEDE as a whole, that this type of national curriculum that focuses on Liberian history and culture shall reduce our reliance on foreign expertise, foreign goods and services, and cultivate and generate within each of us our own resources based on the knowledge and skills we will obtain from our re-conceptualized national curriculum. I challenge you to think on these things and lend your support to establishment of a national Liberian studies curriculum in Liberian grade schools, high schools, and colleges as part of understanding ourselves through history and service delivery. I thank you, and may the God of Our Parentage Bless the House of Cardinal and Liberia.