

Seeding the Mother's Tongue

Speech Delivered

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Chairman Anthony Young Urey

Mr. Howard Walloh, President of Zwedru Multilateral High School Alumni Association

Mr. Richard Zarway, Secretary General

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Members of the Board of Directors

Former Instructors here present

Fellow Multilaterians

Distinguished guests

Ladies & Gentlemen

First, I must thank those of you on the Organizing Committee for your dynamic leadership and hard work, to have made it possible for us to gather here once more in this atmosphere of brotherhood and solidarity.

Zwedru Multilateral High School (ZMHS) has given us such important memories —starting with our individual journey—the very frame of human life, which we all cherish.

Looking at the faces here tonight brings back wonderful feelings that transport us to the deepest levels of our reflection. Now, as we celebrate our reunion, I would like to wish all of you a healthy and prosperous celebration, and successful fundraising. I know I am joined in these good wishes by the alumni across the quad or globe, especially those of you who followed the advice of our elders and teachers not to embrace ignorance and become loads carriers, rather to aim and climb higher in order to drink of the fountain of wisdom and knowledge inherent in our history. You can attest tonight that their advice paid off. Because in life's journey, it is not how low one falls or the circumstances he encountered in his journey that matters, it is accomplishing what you dreamt you would achieve.

We should never forget from whence we came: we are alumni of ZMHS. We are former principals, teachers, and athletes. All of us are supporters to the ever-burning fire that helps rejuvenate and resurrect the memory of the footprints we left behind in the sands of ages.

When ZMHS opened in 1978, there were more than 2000 students from every corner of Liberia, including Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. But for the graduates who walked the school's halls, before it shut its doors due to the 14-year civil war, ZMHS was an ecosystem of academic excellence at a time when it was needed most. I know you still remember the list of failing students we used to refer to as the 'fire list.' Being on this 'fire list' kindled our extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to study hard. But, for me, the best part of our reunion is all of you and how we all fought to stay off the 'fire list' together. Thanks to the 'Study Group' and the cold water bucket we put our feet in to stay awake when it was necessary. The assignments were sometimes fun and challenging but those were happy and wonderful years.

Whatever our Friday night and Saturday assignments that we didn't complete, whatever borrowed books we didn't return, whatever disputes we didn't settle, whatever love letters we didn't reply—here, together, we can be oblivious or immunized to the disappointments of life and acknowledge how much we have all grown.

Some of you never thought you were going to be husbands, wives, grandmothers and grandfathers. Some of us never thought we would go gray. I'm very thankful to "Just for Men," or else I wouldn't have recognized some of you tonight. Those days we used to run on the soccer field and kickball field are about all gone. Nowadays I have to think twice and make sure before jumping off my bed. Indeed, age is real!

This reunion is a tradition we must uphold in order to keep alive the memories we share as well as continue a network that will be to the benefit of our native land Liberia. Today, we are celebrating every class, all the way back to 1978, to keep the East End Lion's flame alive. For me, today is a beautiful day; no matter how dark and dire our circumstances, for today, we remember that ZMHS lives in the kernel of our hearts. Being together here today is an affirmation that no matter where life takes us, we should never forget our roots, or fear our shadow.

### **Man's Struggle for Enlightenment**

Ladies and Gentlemen, without further delay, permit me to share with you the topic of my presentation; which is: "Seeding the Mother's Tongue." Freedom to pursue knowledge is innate. The restriction of this fundamental right is the root of the problem that has faced humanity since the beginning, *genesis*, of time. It is this struggle that has caused centuries of bloodshed throughout the world.

In this presentation, I will give you a synopsis of how the struggle got started in our so-called modern world, and has continued to contribute to many of the problems facing humanity today. Since the dawn of societal living, or people living in a group or community, the quest for human advancement or freedom for knowledge has been the preoccupation of our common humanity.

For example, in Africa, the history of human advancement began with the discovery of the first primitive stone cutting tools. Hundreds of thousands of years later, craftsmen and blacksmiths would become skilled in ways to manipulate stone and wood, giving birth to the beginning of civilization. Since we awoke to self-consciousness 50,000 years ago, it was this unrestricted seeking of knowledge that brought mankind from cave dwelling, during the Stone Age, to the Iron Age and led to our advancement in subsequent ages—notably,

the Industrial Age. But soon, the selfish desire and the greed of man, buttressed by religious zeal, tightened the grip on the dissimulation of knowledge.

### **The Modern European Experience**

In England, the likes of Sir Alexander Flemming, Sir Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, John Harrington, Joseph Bramah, Edward Jennings and John Locke, were just like you and I. They were alumni of their institutions. These men, in their quest for the advancement of humanity completed their areas of training and went on to champion man's rights to think freely so as to contribute to the 'unrestricted zeal' of humanity – some called it, the human condition. These individuals applied their acquired education to uplift the citizens of European nations to accomplish unthinkable progress in their mother's tongue. Their time period was later named The Enlightenment.

Fellow alumni and distinguished friends of ZMHS, the ideas of these men were very powerful, yet they caused no death in their country. These men were not remembered for being, say, a distinguished sergeant, commander-in-chief, or rebel leader, who, due to human weaknesses erred in their lives, so they were surrounded by enemies and then shot dead. The results of the achievements of these Enlightenment Scholars, contributed immensely to education, politics, and science, in Europe and the rest of the world. Today, these men are remembered by all educated people. Their contribution was solely intended for the advancement of humanity, as opposed to the violence that comes about when humanity's freedom is restricted, either by the government or a religious doctrine.

### **My Opposition to Violent Revolution**

This brings us to my opposition to the kind of restrictions we as a people experience in Africa and Liberia, in particular. In my forthcoming book titled: "Scrapping Coup D'états for the New Inter-independent Movement in Africa," I write about why African people should do away with violent revolution. However, unlike the road the English followed, France and the Soviet Union chose to experiment with violence or used brute force as the means to achieve their revolutionary goals and objectives. The French Revolution and the Soviet Communist Revolution were a living hell—a violent time that dug dungeons and sent men, women, and children to their early graves. Individuals like François Marie Arouet, Baron de Montesquieu, Comte de Buffon, and Rene Descartes, who made enormous

contributions to uplift France in science and other areas before Sir Isaac Newton and other thinkers, were 'forced march' into exile; because, the authorities refused to listen to their scholarly findings.

Throughout the Middle Ages, new universal laws of religion pioneered by Europeans reworked the human conception of heavenly order. Then, in time, Europeans were encouraged to see themselves in a divinely hierarchical structure—a "Great Chain of Being" in which God called each person to occupy a distinctive area in life. Peasants were expected to be subordinate to landlords, women to men, thinkers to kings and kings to the pope. This social order was woven and interpreted by those in the upper echelon of the Roman Catholic to be in accord with God's will as revealed in the Bible. The Church also argued that certain trends of thought could stir up revolutionary thinking.

A classic example of the restriction of academic freedom took place during what is referred to as the "Age of Reason," during which individuals like Nicolas Copernicus and Galileo played a significant role. For example, in 1514, Copernicus initiated a change in astronomical and cosmological thought. He concluded that the sun was the center of the universe, not the earth. He stood up to the Pope, when Western intellectual thinking was suppressed. At the time, the Catholic Church had absolute power over vast areas of the world. It could excommunicate members and punish persons with revolutionary views. The Pope even exercised that power by issuing a Papal Bull, which divided the world between Christian and non-Christians and who live or die. Therefore, the Copernican revolution was denounced by the Church because his concept was opposed to normative values, religious authority, and the idea of natural laws.

The corollary to this belief, of course, was that God was European and the pope was His representative on the Earth. Eventually, the world's conscience came to be braided by such a narrow perception, and Africa was one of the victims: everything African was considered dark and uncivilized. Like the victims we were, many of our people committed what I referred to as "cultural suicide." These people were brainwashed into believing in the superiority of European culture --they accepted European culture and belief systems over African Culture.

Let me show you how this bizarre belief knife-separated us from our African way of thinking and shaped the worlds of culture and experience. As you will see, the truth is far richer as the imperatives of borrowing everything from the West; our official language. I believe, as a result, since 1960, Africa has had 88 violent revolutions and 181 failed coups have been staged. Since violent revolution was not a part of indigenous African culture, this may be one of the most harmful aspects of African colonization. Not only have the seeds of violent revolution poisoned our soil, the plants continue to grow—almost to the point of blocking out the sun.

### **The Liberian Experience**

The same holds true about the 14-year, senselessly violent Liberian civil wars, which did not initiate any meaningful national development. Instead, they produced horrendous images of brothers killing sisters; sisters killing brothers; parents killing their children and children killing their parents, which have left us more divided than when the conflict began. I think it is about time to wake up from our deep sleep and nightmare – to make use of our God-given creativity, talent and knowledge and to accept who we are, and to not use other people’s standards as the yardstick by which we judge ourselves.

Fellow Alumni, Liberians have plenty of stories to tell, stories about their unification struggles, stories about their past and present, stories about their unique alphabets, stories about their colonial periods, stories about our spirituality and political activities and stories about different aspects of our livelihood and that is best done in our blood language. I argued in my gone 164th Independence Day Speech entitled “The True Meaning of Independence: Reflection of Our Yesterdays and Vision for Our Tomorrow,” that in Pre-Liberia, the 3000-year-old Liberian (Melegueta, Grain, Paradise) Civilization traded with the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho in 600 BC, and Hanno of Cathage in 520 BC. The Pre-Liberian people were trained as doctors, lawyers, scientists, economists, judges, and servicemen using their mother’s tongue.

The Melegueta Civilization of pre-Liberia had established form of government, democracy and with scripts of all kinds such as the Vai Script invented by Duwalu Bukehdeh; the Mende script invented by Mr. Kisimi Kamara; the Kpelle Script invented by Gbili Sanoyea;

the Loma Script invented by Widor Zobo, and the Bassa script, 'Ehni Ka Se Fa,' used in the mother' tongue of our people.

Brother and sisters, fellow alumni, I think it is very important in the new Liberia to continue to demystify our mother tongue and shine light on some of the misconceptions that unbraided our culture and traditions until our blood language becomes our official language. This unbraiding of our culture and blood language are stories we are unused to telling. We have yet to realize that our culture and survival are tightly woven together and shaped our grandest imaginings of our Creator and who we are. And parents are experts in their own mother's tongue and feel comfortable teaching their blood language, history, and culture to their children. Employing our mother tongue is one of the most basic human rights that affect all of aspects our lives. One's mother blood language is important because it shapes his identity, personality, skills, character, and other aspects revealed through the mother tongue that gives confidence. President Nelson Mandela couldn't have said it better, *"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his mother's language that goes to his or her heart."*

Our mother's tongue should get precedence because it is requisite to sustaining and maintaining solid contact with our collective history, culture, tradition. I truly believe this and have been working for nearly ten years to make a change in the future generations in Liberia.

### **The LIHEDE Experience**

The question is, then, what part can we—as an organization—play to contribute in resolving some of the problems caused by man's quest to be liberated -- to carry out what our Creator intended, for which we were given "free will?" In answering this question, we in LIHEDE state in our Motto and Principles and Objectives the manner in which our contributions can be made.

Motto: "We Dare to Preserve History for Posterity."

Article IV: Principles & Objectives:

Section 4.1: The purposes and objectives of LIHEDE shall be literary, educational, and charitable in character, and shall include, but are not limited to hosting annual

symposiums on African governance and philosophical thought, undertaking programs aimed at educating the American public about African leadership, culture and socio-economic development, setting up and providing a speakers bureau service for Black History Month and related activities, soliciting and providing scholarships to aid deserving Liberian students at home and abroad, and undertaking the writing and publishing of textbooks and other books on Liberia.

Section 4.2: LIHEDE shall strive for the promotion of indigenous Liberian history and the advancement of human and civil rights of every individual or group, including undertaking programs geared towards women empowerment and enrichment of children, regardless of race, religion, gender, disability or political orientation. And in consonance with its Constitution and Bylaws, affiliates with organizations that are dedicated to similar goals and causes.

As LIDHE's Executive Director and spokesperson since April 2003, the Greensboro-based nonprofit organization has undertaken the promotion of educational and historical projects and related development activities. For the past eight years, our organization has been contributing to the reconstruction efforts of post-conflict Liberia - in such areas as malaria control, Liberian Studies, and with the Liberian Literature Project 2011, which is part of our ongoing National History focus. During LIHEDE's National Health Conference at the University of Liberia on malaria treatment, control, and prevention in Liberia, the US Embassy in Monrovia, extended an invitation to officials of LIHEDE to witness the historic announcement by President George W. Bush via satellite declaring Liberia a focused country to benefit from the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) funds. As a focused nation and the recipient of other donation, Liberia received the tune of about \$70 million for malaria control and prevention in Liberia from the PMI funds and WHO.

I have been to Liberia seventeen times to help with the reconstruction of Liberia. During my visits, I participated in several symposium titled, "Mapping out Appropriate Strategies for the Restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia"; "The Impact of Fake Drugs on Malaria Treatment in Liberia"; "Using Our Culture and Sports for Malaria Control and Prevention"; "Working together for Quality and Equitable Public Education in Liberia"; and "Culture-Driven Malaria Awareness Program" in the port of Buchanan, Grand Bassa County and Gbarnga, Bong County, and Jacob Town, Montserrado County.



In fact, I just returned from Liberia where I spent eight weeks to lobby the Liberian President and Congress for the inclusion of Liberian Studies in Liberian institutions. The National Education Reform Act was signed by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf while I was in Liberia.

Brothers and sisters, fellow alumni, the inclusion of Liberian Studies curriculum in our nation's higher institutions of learning is a great accomplishment for all of us. The Liberian Studies was included in the act, while the main bill mandates the teaching of Liberian Studies in elementary, junior and senior high schools, and colleges. More important, universities will be granting Bachelor of Arts, Science, Master's and PhD degrees in Liberian Studies.

This has been a long journey. LIDHE first advanced the idea of creating a national Liberian studies curriculum in Liberia to educate Liberians about themselves and their history, culture, and traditions to the Liberian government in 2004, through the offices of former Transitional Government leader, Mr. Gyude Bryant, former education minister, Dr. Evelyn Kandakai, and former education Minister, Dr. Joseph Korto, along with the heads of Liberian colleges for the establishment of a Liberian studies program in our grade schools and colleges. By 2006, LIHEDE signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with two Liberian universities to begin a degree program in Liberian studies. And in 2009, I presented a paper on creating a National Liberian Studies Curriculum at the Liberian Studies Association 41st Conference held at the University of Liberia from May 14-18.

Ladies & gentlemen & fellow alumni, our dream weaving continues at LIHEDE. We are currently working on the Liberian Literature Anthology Project 2011. The goal of this project is to produce a literature anthology series that draws on traditional literature of each ethnic subgroup in Liberia—the Kwa (Bassa, Dei, Grebo, Krahn, [Wee], Kru [Klaol], Mande, Dahn [Gio], Kpelle, Loma, Mano [Mahn], Vai, and Kissi. Brothers and sisters, you are invited to join us in Greensboro, North Carolina on May 28, 2012 to unveil the book.

As members of ZMHS Alumni Association in the US, I urge you to be a good steward for this organization. Attend some of the teleconferences and pay your dues and make donations on time. ZMHS should pride itself on commitment, dedication, resourceful, quality and quantity in membership. In other words, we should assemble a Gideon army

and our commitment speaks for itself. ZMHS Alumni Association should grab one project one at a time and do a damn good job in an extraordinary way to attract the world's attention. I believe this is how we should announce ourselves on the stage of the word. You and I know that it is not the number of diplomas we earned, but how we advance the frontiers of knowledge for future generation. To do a good job, requires capable men and women who are silent revolutionists to match us forward.

Most importantly, though, is the dream of making ZMHS a junior College, let call on our senators, representatives, and officials until its doors are finally opened. As you may know, group of students in Grand Gedeh County made an appeal to Vice President Joseph Boakai for a Jr. College. Let us not rest until this dream is achieved. Let us also begin the process to go back home and build our nation and our alma mater. It is not how we lived and where we live now, but our character and the difference we make in the lives of people and the next generation. This is the challenge to members of this organization and the future leaders of Liberia.

My fellow alumni and friends, if in the twilight of our memory, should we meet once more, by the grace of God to celebrate together our achievements, which is made possible by the God of forefathers - to sing to the tune of our national song – “In union strong, success is sure,” it will become another milestone in ZMHS' history.

**Happy reunion, fellow alumni and friends!**