

“Understanding Ourselves and History: A Call to National Unity and Collective Development in  
Liberia”

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Dr. Syrulwa Somah, Executive Director, LIHEDE; fellow LIHEDEANS; fellow Liberians, international friends of Liberia, conference participants; distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

There could not have been a more moving theme for a Liberian national conference during this critical period in our nation’s history than the one selected for the 2009 LIHIDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference: “Understanding Ourselves and Our History: A Call to National Unity and Collective Development in Liberia.” Through this theme, we may be able to examine and discuss the history, migration patterns, interethnic cooperation, linguistic tongues, and social, political, and legal institutions of the various ethnic groups of Liberia. We may also be able to address national issues we were unable to talk freely about in the past, with hopes of resolving them and moving in a more positive direction in the near future. Therefore, I am humbled to accept the responsibility as Chair of the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference. I anxiously look forward to working along with a group of esteemed and patriotic Liberian and international scholars who are equally concerned and committed as I am to the task of preserving Liberian culture and history through scholarly research.

Over the years, I have personally followed LIHEDE’s activities with admiration. LIHEDE has impressed me as an organization that calls on all of us to work for our nation as if we were employed to contribute our quota toward national development. Hence, LIHEDE’s call for understanding ourselves and history, as well as its stress on the need for national unity and collective development in Liberia, is indeed timely. It points to the future that through our history, education, and development, we may make a difference in the lives of our people. Therefore, in furtherance of its philosophy, LIHEDE has undertaken some very important national projects during the past several years that have benefited Liberians and the international community, such as: malaria control; fake drug control; reorganization of the Liberian military; youth development; Liberian studies; Liberian women center; mental revolution; agriculture; ethanol; tourism, etc. Based on these various projects, I also have come to realize that LIHEDE is a new voice that provides us an alternative milieu to deliberate our past, present, and future without blood shed or the use of violence.

Thus, I find that the overall goals and objectives of LIHEDE also resonate with my own philosophy and literary work as a Liberian playwright and educational leader in terms of

promoting Liberian and African history and culture, as well as providing a critical lens to analyze the fabrics of our society. In this connection, I too have been actively engaged over the past thirty-five years in writing, directing, producing, and acting in plays that depict national unity and integration ("Kekula"); plays that focus on the socio-cultural, political and economic deprivation of the underserved of our Liberian society ("No More Hard Times"); and the struggle of African peoples to liberate themselves from the yoke of colonialism and imperialism that was imposed upon them by foreign domination ("The Chains of Apartheid"). I also taught literature, drama, and writing, as a class room instructor in various high schools, universities and colleges, and as a high school principal on the continent of Africa, as well as a special education teacher in the Philadelphia public school system before becoming a Child Protection Worker with the Department of Human Services in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U. S. A. Presently, my work focuses on designing Afrocentric literacy curriculum for elementary school children, as well as the need to reconceptualize our school curriculum so that it may be culturally and historically relevant for learners in our schools. My most recent engagement in this area is in the production of an African children's reader series designed to introduce children to African arts, culture, and history through Afrocentric literacy. It is entitled, *The Frogs and Black Snake in Frogsville*, published January, 2009, by CB Publishing and Design, LLC, in Charlotte, North Carolina, U. S. A.

Therefore, in my view, the time has come for all of us to begin to study and write about our Liberian history and culture from the ancient days of our forefathers to contemporary Liberian history that is written not just for our sake but also for future generations yet unborn. Against this background, I firmly believe that understanding ourselves through our history and culture has the potential to move mountains and valleys deep and to empower us to reestablish our international status as the Lone Star of Africa. Knowledge about ourselves and culture is also a two-edged sword that may enable us to decipher our national crisis with prudence and accuracy. This is why I view the forthcoming 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference as a very good forum where we can critically examine our past (good and bad) in order to come up with new ideas about rebuilding Liberia economically, socially, politically, religiously, educationally, and internationally.

As we prepare for the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference, I would also like for all Liberians to understand that Liberia is not an island entirely of itself (Donne, 1624), and that when you pull rope, it pulls the entire bush to which it is connected. Hence, we must seek to be reconnected to the world around us and acknowledge that we form part of the comity of nations and the greater universe. Therefore, we must put aside our spears and cutlasses, our Barzukas and AK-47s, and learn to dialogue and negotiate with our pen, or to discuss and

intelligently exchange views face-to-face with one another at the conference table without any further threat of violence or anger outbursts.

Here, it is essential to note that conferencing with one another calls for expressing our differences without jumping at one another's throats. It calls for being tolerant of one another and showing respect for one another's views, no matter how different they may be from our own personal views. In essence, conferencing together calls for educating for peace and spreading the message of reconciliation as a people united under one God, one Nation, one Constitution, and one Lone Star Flag to which we pledge our allegiance. Therefore, when we meet in August at the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference in Greensboro and sing the Liberian National Anthem, or pledge allegiance to the Lone Star Flag of Liberia, we must do so with meaning and in truth and we must remember that our National Anthem contains the most poetic lyrics and tune in the world and that it urges us to live in "...a home of glorious liberty by God's command."

In addition, the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference calls upon all Liberians to soberly reflect on our past and it instructs us to ask ourselves the following questions: (1) how did we turn out to be inhumane toward one another instead of being compassionate toward one another as God wants us to be? (2) How did we end up destroying the little we had and ended up as fools hungering and thirsting near rivers of waters and humus soils in a land of plenty? (3) How can we pick up the remnants of our national culture, history, and educational infrastructures we have available to us and make something good out of them? (4) How can we forge a better and safer future for ourselves from now on end and keep on progressing without going backward as we did during the Liberian civil war? (5) How can we regain our national consciousness and individual self-pride so that we can get reconnected to the civilized world again?

My dear brothers and sisters, there is a lot of good to be derived from the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference, and I assert with great sincerity that when we attend, we will all learn a lot more about Liberian history and culture than you and I profess to know. Against this background, the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference is calling for papers that will address some of the crucial areas of our history, culture, education, and development. Below, I provide a historical survey or vignette of Liberia's past history, featuring major historical and cultural epochs that conference participants may possibly draw their topics from, or to make inferences about their personal observations as Liberians.

### *Pre-historic Liberia*

Pre-historic Liberia focuses mainly on our oral or unwritten history that was verbally handed down to us from one generation to another. Here, we may focus on Liberian history

and culture dating back to the beginning of the universe when God first created man. We may also adventure into early oral traditional history and culture that are focused on storytelling, minstrelsy, role play, traditional music, dance, acrobatics, and religious beliefs and concepts about the universe. Further, we may seek to verify that we are descendants of early African kingdoms and civilizations from Eastern Africa, as well as other ancient West and Central African kingdoms and civilizations. We may also attempt to trace our past history through the migration of our ancestors from Central and Eastern Africa and connect their migration to their search for freedom and self-rule that gave rise to the name, Liberia: "Land of the free," or "Land of liberty." Here, conference participants have a variety of themes and topics to choose from due to the diversity and richness of our Liberian culture.

Furthermore, there is even more to write about and discuss with respect to the composition, sociology, and migration patterns of the various traditional African ethnic groups that migrated to Liberia thousands of years prior to the coming of our Brothers and Sisters from the United States of America and the West Indies; as well as a study of the linguistic clusters to which the traditional Liberian ethnic groups belong: Kwa (Krahn, Kru, Grebo, Bassa, Gbi, Belleh); Mande-Ta (Vai and Mandingo); Mande-Fu (Mahn, Dahn, Kpelle, Kissi, Gbandi, Mende, and Lorma); and Mel (Gola and Dei). Presenters at the conference may have an opportunity to study Liberia's oral history to find out how these various traditional Liberian ethnic groups are related and how they formed alliances in the past based on their linguistic and sociological characteristics and beliefs. Presenters may also be able to explore how these interethnic and intra-ethnic relationships can be maintained to enhance national unity and collective development in Liberia today.

#### *The Historic Period: The Coming of Our Brothers and Sisters from America and the West Indies and the Introduction of Western Culture*

Another aspect of our national history and culture that is very unique is the historic period: the coming of our Brothers and Sisters from America and the West Indies and the introduction of Western culture. Settler Liberians were the last to arrive in Liberia. Their migration to Liberia constitutes what is known as "historic Liberia" period because this was when we officially began to write our history as a nation and people. Prior to that period, only the Vais in Grand Cape Mount County were credited with having their own native Vai script designed by Dwualu Buckele.

Most of the Settlers arrived in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries after the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. This era introduced Western civilization and a Western form of governance: a democracy and a republican form of government, with three separate but equal branches (executive, judiciary, and legislative), and a president as head of

state and a vice-president who heads the Senate. Both the president and his vice-president were previously elected for a four-year first term of office but nowadays in Liberia the first term of office for a newly elected president is six years.

This historic era also marks the start of cultural conflict in Liberia in that Western culture was imposed upon the vast majority who were native Africans who spoke various African languages that were different from the English language; and they dressed in African garbs that differed from Western costumes; and were mainly governed by monarchs who inherited the throne by ascription instead of being elected. The African religion was different from the Western form of Christianity that was presented, and so were the foods of the Natives and Settlers vastly different.

However, like their traditional counterparts, our Brothers and Sisters from America and the West Indies came to Liberia in search of freedom and liberty as the National Logo on the Liberian National Seal professes: "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." Therefore, all Liberians share a commonality of purpose in terms of our quest and search for freedom, liberty, and justice for all: i.e., we all came to Liberia because we wanted to be free and to exercise our human freedoms without intimidation from anyone. This is a commonality all of us share together as Liberians and I hope we may all be able to celebrate our common heritage as Liberian citizens at the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference in August.

#### *The Liberian Paradigms of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s*

A paradigm is a world view: it is the way how we perceive of ourselves and the world around us. Liberian history is replete with many paradigm shifts over the centuries. Below, I suggest about five decades in Liberian history in which there were many major paradigm shifts in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Presenters may also have the opportunity to select any of the decades listed above that they may feel comfortable writing about so that we may have a vivid picture of what went well or wrong within those historical and cultural time frames.

For an example, highlights of the 1960s included but were not limited to the concepts of "civilized" versus "Country;" "Who know you;" political and economic discrimination and segregation against the poor; the formation of four hinterland counties and the granting of political representation to Native Liberians in Lofa, Bong, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh Counties. Highlights of the 1970s consisted of more integration of Native and Settler Liberians; recognition of traditional and Settler Liberian cultures by the government of Liberia; the lowering of public college tuition and the admission of more Native and poor Settler Liberians into the University of Liberia; more public elementary, high schools, and vocational institutions were constructed and national literacy rate increased; agriculture was prioritized; low cost

housing projects were introduced; and Liberian youth were actively engaged in national policy making. In the 1980s, Liberia had its first military coup d'etat; there was more involvement of Liberians in establishing their own businesses; parity rate of Liberian Dollar or Doe Coin to United States Dollar was one to one; Liberia endeavored to repay its national and international debts; and Liberia became the international recruiting ground for soccer stars. There were reported human rights abuses and a rebel incursion and civil war that spanned more than fourteen years. The 1990s was a time of peaceful negotiations; request for handouts from the international donor agencies, as well as the institution of first post-war electoral processes and general elections. It was a time of factional politics. Finally, the 2000s have been a period of transition; the holding of the second general elections for a peaceful return to civilian democratic rule. It marks an era of resettlement, reconciliation, rehabilitation of former combatants and donor conferences.

#### *What Are the Lessons to Be Learned from Our Past History?*

There are many lessons to be learned from our past history. For instance, the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference in Greensboro will benefit all Liberians and foreign friends alike by serving as a forum of cultural and historical exchange. During the Conference, you and I may also have an opportunity to ask questions, or to make statements and suggestions. In addition, we may actively engage in a fruitful and rewarding democratic process that may empower and inspire us to write our own history, language arts books, produce video documentaries of our country's history and culture and provide culturally relevant instructional materials that can be used in our schools and universities to address the teaching and learning needs of diverse educators and learners.

Friends, please let me conclude my acceptance speech by once again expressing profound gratitude and thanks to the Executive Director of LIHEDE, Dr. Syrulwa Somah, the members of the Board of Directors and officers, for selecting me as the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference Chair. I would like to call on all Liberians, Americans, and the international community to provide their unswerving supports both in material and kind, and to attend this year's Conference en masse. I call on all my relatives, friends, supporters, fans, and students I have taught over the years from St. Patrick's High School, St. Teresa's Convent, A. M. E. Zion Academy High School, College of West Africa, Cuttington University, the University of Liberia, and the Zwedru Multilateral High School. In addition, I would like to invite all graduates of Carroll High School, Ricks, Lott Carey, Suehn, Our Lady of Fatima, Bishop Ferguson High School, B.W.I., B.W. Harris, Wells Hairston, Tubman High, Laboratory High, L.T. I., Gbarnga and Ganta Methodist Schools, St. Mary's High School in Sanniquillie, as well as all other graduates of educational institutions in Liberia and around the world.

Further, I would also like to invite the faculty and staff from my Alma Mata: The University of Liberia; The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, respectively; as well as members of the faculty of the host institution, NCA&T State University, and other interested Liberian and American universities and colleges, as well as all Liberian and United States government and United Nations agencies that may have a deep interest in the preservation of Liberian arts, culture, history, and education. I would also like to invite all Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. members and all those I trained over the years to also attend and participate in the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference.

Finally, I call on friends of Liberia, and Liberian and American women in Greensboro, North Carolina, to attend the 2009 LIHEDE 5<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Conference from August 7<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup>, to demonstrate their support for the preservation of Liberian arts and culture by providing the sumptuous meals to entertain the conference participants. I ask all Liberians to come dressed in your bon-zuways and agbadas and traditional royal garbs and let us exhibit true Liberian fashion and hospitality. Also, please come prepared to teach our guests the unique Liberian Handshake that is one of the commonalities we share as Liberians. I look forward to seeing all of you in Greensboro, North Carolina, from August 7<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup> in 2009, as we converge to deliberate on the theme: Understanding Ourselves and History: A Call to National Unity and Collective Development in Liberia."

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LIHEDE NATIONAL CONFERENCE CHAIR, 2009