

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
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FINANCE, R.L,
DELIVERED AT THE INDUCTION CEREMONY OF OFFICERS OF
THE FEDERATION OF LOFA ASSOCIATIONS IN THE AMERICAS
(FLAA)
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, SEPTEMBER 4, 2010

Today marks the third time in little over a year that I have been afforded the magnanimous and exhilarating privilege of sharing my two cents worth with my fellow compatriots hailing from a particular geographic zone of our dear country, Liberia. In June 2009, I was honored to serve as the keynote speaker at the induction ceremony of officers-elect of the Liberia chapter of the United Nimba Citizens Organization held in the highland city of Sanniquellie, Nimba County. In January 2010, I was also the keynote speaker at the induction of the officers-elect of the Belle District Association. However, today's ceremony is special in that unlike the previous two occasions which were held on Liberian soil, this one is being held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States of America, thousands of miles away from our Motherland. Additionally, unlike the previous two occasions where I was addressing my brothers and sisters hailing from a political subdivision other than mine, today I am being honored to speak directly to brothers and sisters with whom I share the same

political subdivision. Therefore, officers and members of the Federation of Lofa Associations in the Americas, in a fashion characteristic of Lofa citizens, I lift humble and profuse thanks to you for my selection as Keynote Speaker and bring you warm greetings from the height of Mount Wologisi to the depth of the Lofa River from all your brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts, nephews and cousins.

Distinguished sons and daughters of Lofa County and friends of Lofa here present, the Almighty God in His divine wisdom has given mortal man the discretion to decide in certain matters concerning his life; but in other matters that the Almighty considers very significant, He Himself renders the verdict. To a large extent, we are free to, among other things, choose our profession; free to choose our political party, free to choose our spouse; free to choose our meal; and free to choose our friends or our enemies. But God did not ask our opinion regarding who should be our parents, which race we wanted to be born in, which tribe we wished to belong to, which county or country we wanted to hail from. These are Divine verdicts rendered in Heaven and implemented on earth by the most powerful Supreme Court Chief Justice and the most powerful Chief Executive.

In short, whether we are black or white, whether our father is a Kpadeh or a Jabateh, whether we hailed from Nimba or from Lofa, Rivercess or from River-Gee or whether we are Liberians or Nigerians, are questions whose answers were provided for us by

the Almighty. In a sense, these are suits that we did not buy in a store; they are permanent suits personally sewed for us by the Almighty Creator before He dispatched us here on these mortal plains.

But interestingly, although the Almighty did not seek our opinion when rendering His verdicts in these matters, he however gives us the option to love or hate His non-appealable verdicts. For while we did not choose our parents, the Almighty God has given us the option to appreciate them for what they are or spend our entire life regretting why they are what they are; while we did not choose whether we wanted to be black, Caucasian, etc., we have the option to stride the globe proud of our skin color or consider it a prison from which we perpetually desire to break loose; while we did not choose whether we wanted to be born Gbandi, Lorma, Kissi, Mandingo, Kpelle, Mende, Krahn, Kru, Gio, Gola, etc., we have the option to appreciate our tribe or spend our whole life regretting why we were not born a member of the other tribe; and while we did not choose our county or country of nativity, we have the option to choose to love our county and our country or spend the rest of our lives wishing that we were born citizens of another county or of another country.

My fellow Lofa citizens, the Almighty God certainly did not seek our counsel to decide whether we should be Lorma, Gbandi, Kissi, Kpelle, Mandingo, and Mende or whether we should belong to a common geographic area called Lofa. We are Lorma, Gbandi, Kissi, Mende, Belle, Kpelle or Mandingo by default. Fortunately or

unfortunately for us, the Almighty God did not provide a “Reset” button that we can click to change the options He has selected for each of us.

Similarly, though it may be argued that a person’s religious affiliation is a matter of choice, we should realize that in most societies, the religion that a person eventually affiliates with is closely linked to the religious orientation of the person’s parents. Just as the Creator renders verdicts for us without seeking our opinions, parents label their children Christian, Moslem, Buddhists without seeking the children’s opinions. Parents choose to name their son Matthew or to name him Mohammed. Parents choose to take their children to church every Sunday or to take them to the mosque every Friday. As a result of years of religious indoctrination and conditioning, when the child matures, he or she is already overly drenched with the tenets of a particular religion to the extent that it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him or her to disentangle himself from the religion that he or she had practiced over the years.

Therefore, to condemn someone for his or her religious affiliation is not to take cognizance of the fact that our religious affiliation is hardly a matter of choice. Someone cannot change his religion as easily and as often as he may be able to change his neck-tie. If you think you are a strong Christian and therefore because of your “Christianity” you condemn and hate all moslems for following the teachings of Mohammed, just think about which religion you would

have espoused if you were born in Saudi Arabia to Islamic parents. What is the probability that you would have become a Christian? Equally, if you are a strong Moslem and because of your “Islamic faith” you condemn and hate all Christians for following the teachings of Christ, just think about your fate if you were born unto Christian parents in Ireland. What is the probability that you would have become a Moslem?

I don't know what each of you here today thinks about the decisions that were made for you by the Almighty or by your parents. But for me, I state unequivocally that I am proud that I am called a Ngafuan, proud that I am called a Gbandi man, proud that I am called a black man, proud that I am called a Lofan, proud that I am called a Liberian, and proud that I am called a Christian. But as we boast of being proud that we are what we are, we should equally accept if any one of our fellow human beings is also proud that he or she is what he or she is. To hate your fellow man for what he cannot change about himself is to hate the Almighty Creator who made him what he is. Therefore, my fellow Lofans, except we want to challenge the wisdom of God, we must appreciate and tolerate the fact that we all come from different families, different tribes, different clans and different districts, belong to different religions but were all made involuntary passengers on this ship called Lofa.

The ethnic and religious tensions that occurred in February of this year in our dear county which led to the burning and vandalization

of residential and religious properties and the loss of precious lives is a sad commentary on the level of ethnic and religious tolerance in our county; and we Lofans, whether home or abroad, must look at this ugly monster of intolerance in the face and confront it with all our might and with all our minds.

The fourteen years of civil war were brutal for Liberia and brutal for Lofa in particular. Our county witnessed repeated episodes of war and its attendant destruction as various warring factions wrestled to hold sway over our county. The war brought to the fore deep-seated animosities among the various tribes and religions in our county. Luckily for us all, before we as a county and as a country could completely destroy ourselves, the international community intervened and assisted us to restore calm, leading to the return of many of our citizens from exile to what they consider their home or their county.

We cannot afford to go back to this gory and nightmarish past. We must accept some hard truths. The Gbandi man and the Kissi man, the Lorma man and the Mandingo man must accept that they are neighbors whose destinies are tied in what Martin Luther King calls a “garment of mutuality.” The Mandingo young man and the Lorma young man of today must realize that decades before both of them were born, their forefathers managed to live with and tolerate each other in spite of their cultural, tribal, and religious differences. It was therefore unfortunate that while the flames of the recent ethnic and religious tensions in Lofa were still blazing, some of our

citizens in the Americas purporting to be representing the interests of their respective tribes, cultures and religions granted interviews and issued position statements to the Liberian media and on the Internet that only served to feed the embers of conflict in the county. While they enjoyed the safety and security of their host country, they chose to undermine the safety and security of their home county and by extension their home country by using reckless and irredentist rhetoric to address a very delicate matter. If we cannot help a situation, we certainly should not hurt the situation.

All citizens of Lofa, and for that matter, all citizens of Liberia must realize that whether we call ourselves Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, Animists, or Latter Day Saints, there is common thread that runs through each religion or faith. Every religion teaches us to love our neighbor, to love our fellowmen, to help the poor and the needy, to live in peace with all persons, not to covet or trespass on the property of others, and to do unto others what we expect them to do unto us. So whatever happened in Lofa recently was not the exercise of love of religion but was the exercise of the perversion of true religion. As I stated in a poem I wrote in 2004 in protest over the death and destruction that were visited on Monrovia in October 2004 in the name of religion, such bestiality and cruelty only take place when the irreligious wear the cloak of religion; for it is at that point when the senses of men go on vacation causing Tarnue to butcher Sekou, his high school classmate; and Donzo to burn the

house of Flomo, his peaceful neighbor. This was precisely what happened in our beloved county in February.

Therefore, my fellow citizens of Lofa County, we must all say no to tribal, cultural, and religious bigotry. Lofa citizens and members of FLAA in particular must play a front-seat role in promoting harmony and tolerance in the county by ensuring firstly that there is unity and a sense of common purpose among Lofa citizens in the Americas, as it is easy for tensions and divisions among you here to be exported back to our beloved county; just as it is easy for divisions and tensions back home to cross the Atlantic Ocean and split you asunder here. Do not fail to chastise and discipline any one of your member chapters or associations if by their actions and/or inactions, they are promoting religious, ethnic, and cultural animosities back in our county. We citizens of Lofa are hard working, are disciplined, are respectful, and are humble. We love development and we love progress. But in spite of our hard work, our discipline, and our humility, our county will not develop or may even retrogress if we do not seek first the kingdom of religious, ethnic, and cultural tolerance in our county.

Distinguish Ladies and Gentlemen; it is a healthy phenomenon to see citizens from the fifteen political subdivisions of our country consolidating themselves in county organizations aimed at promoting the interest and welfare of their respective counties. It is also a healthy phenomenon to see citizens from a county dearly loving their county and working actively to promote development

and harmony in their county. However, while consolidation of county groupings to seek the common interest is good and it is not wrong for us to dearly love our individual counties and work for their development, we should not lose sight of the fact that our individual counties exist within a country called Liberia, and that while we have our individual county flags that belong to some of us, we have a single national flag that belongs to all of us. In other words, we who cluster in county organizations need to do so in a manner such that our county-centricity does not conflict with our country-centricity.

Looking back in Liberia history, the conflict between *county-centricity* and *country-centricity* has been at the core of some of our political problems; and even in contemporary Liberia, this conflict is still evident and if not managed properly, could become one of the causes of our country's underdevelopment and may even trigger political upheaval. Yes, every Liberian citizen hails from a particular tribe or ethnic group, a particular district, and a particular county. Therefore, it goes without saying that those who lead our country whether from the Executive Mansion or from the Capitol Building; whether from the Supreme Court or from the ministries or public corporations, must hail from some place, some community, some district or some county. What do we as citizens hailing from a particular county expect from a President, a Vice President, a Speaker, a Chief Justice, a Minister, or a Managing Director of a public corporation who hails from our county?

For instance, if one of our county citizens is the Minister of Health, do we expect that our county should therefore have the biggest hospital? Suppose he or she is the Minister of Public Works. Do we expect that our county should be the first county to benefit from a paved road under his/her tenure? Or suppose one of our county citizens is the Chief Justice, does it mean that he or she must declare “Not Guilty” any one of our county citizens who is being prosecuted for a heinous crime? And finally, suppose we are blessed to have one of our county citizens as the President of our country. Do we expect that a disproportionate number of ministers and heads of public corporations and commissions must come from our county and that all citizens of our county who seek jobs must be employed by the government?

Can a government official having national responsibility promote development in his county without injuring the collective development of the country? Is it an impossible duality to show love for county and show love for country at the same time? Is love for county and love for country mutually exclusive? I say an emphatic NO as there are 1001 ways to show love for county without undermining the national interest. For instance, while it is wrong for an official hailing from a county to only target citizens of his county for job opportunities, it is not wrong for him to use his hard-earned resources to help support scholarship schemes aimed at producing qualified citizens from his county who can compete for and win jobs based on what they know and what they can do. We can show love for our county by trying to excel in whatsoever

endeavor we are engaged in so that when the question is asked where does he or she come from?, the answer to that question will engender respect and open more doors of opportunity for the citizens of the county instead of closing doors in front of them.

Fellow citizens, recent events in our country have brought to the fore the tension between our *county-centricity* and *country-centricity*. The difficult and turbulent journey suffered by the Threshold Bill intended to allocate the number of seats in the House of Representatives is a case in point. Strictly speaking, if every legislator were focusing primarily on the national interest, no matter the consequences, the Threshold Bill aimed at determining the number of citizens that qualify for an electoral constituency would have lasted for only two weeks, not two years, before passage into law. The national interest dictates that we consider the economic implications of whatever threshold we set, otherwise we will increase the number of legislators far above our ability to sustain economically. Furthermore, the number of representatives a county should have in the House of Representatives, strictly speaking, is a function of the number of persons who reside in the county at a point in time.

Senators represent a county as a unit; and in this respect, all counties are considered equal. That is why no matter the size of the county, it is entitled to two senators. Representatives however represent a number of persons. That is why the number of representatives in a county fluctuates with the number of persons

resident in the county at a point in time. If a particular county has a good number of its citizen's resident in another county for whatever reasons, these far away citizens still benefit from representation because their number may justify an extra constituency in their host county. What they cannot gain by being absent from their native county, they gain by being present in their host county. Bluntly and brutally speaking, therefore, the national interest dictated that some counties should have lost seats while others should have gained seats to accommodate the real geographic distribution of our population.

But the national interest conflicted with county interests; in other words, *county-centricity* clashed with *country-centricity*, and it became difficult for legislators and citizens from the counties who would have lost seats to accept that harsh reality. As a result, a host of political maneuvers, both overt and covert, intended to thwart this reality was put into motion.

As the Threshold Bill painstakingly lingered at the Legislature, Liberians both in the diaspora and at home began to do what they know how to do best – criticize and condemn. But all those criticizing and condemning never paused to ask themselves the real hard questions? What would have been the political fate of any current legislator from a county that would have lost seats? Would they have been applauded as great statesman who decided to think nationally instead of provincially or would they have been regarded as sell-outs and weaklings who should be booted out of the

Legislature by the citizens in the next election? In a sense, the legislators from the counties that would have lost seats were in a fierce battle to protect their political lives. So if they played hardball and became intransigent and impervious to sound logic as they might have done, we should appreciate the harsh choices they faced. The Liberian contradiction is that the very people that expect a leader to behave like a statesman are the first to crucify that leader for behaving so, especially if the implications of the leader's sound and nationalistic decisions will not benefit them personally. Thus it was easy for Liberians from counties that would have benefitted from additional seats or that would not have lost seats as a result of the original version of the Threshold Bill to criticize legislators and citizens from the counties who would have lost seats. Again the hard question is, what would have been our attitudes had we ourselves hailed from a county that would have lost seats? Would we have behaved any differently? Probably not!

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, recent boundary disputes between counties have also brought to the fore the dangerous features of unbridled *county-centricity*. Notable among the boundary disputes is the one between Sinoe County led by Superintendent J. Milton Teahjay and Rivercess County led by Superintendent Wellington Geevon Smith. Both Superintendents drummed up county sentiments and used incendiary rhetoric to assert their claims to the disputed area to the extent that the national security of the country began to be threatened. They both retreated to their county cocoons for support. As Superintendent

Teahjay and his people threatened to enlist the mysterious powers of the Chiefs and Bodeos of Sinoe in their fight to retrieve “stolen territory”, Superintendent Geevon Smith and his people threatened to resort to the dreaded practice of “Neejee” to protect the territorial integrity of their county and prevent citizens of Sinoe from travelling through Rivercess. In recent days, legislators from both Bomi and Gbarpolu have been taking to the airwaves using militant language to assert their respective claims to the disputed Sawmill Area that adjoins the two counties. Similar tension exists between Bomi and Montserrado counties over the area of land around the Po River.

While it will do the entire country extreme good for the Ministries of Lands, Mines and Energy, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and other relevant government institutions to move fast in clarifying and clearly demarcating county and district boundaries, the onus is on each citizen of Liberia to refrain from resorting to devices that play on the gullibility of our people and undermine national unity and development. We should not love our county so much that we cause the rest of Liberia to begin to hate us and our county so much.

Is there a better way for counties to compete instead of competing over boundaries? Yes, each county should endeavor to compete and capture the County Meet, for by doing so we produce talents that can be recruited to play for the *Lone Star*. Each county can endeavor to compete and capture the first prize in the Annual Agricultural Fair; for by doing so, we assist in making our people

industrious and help combat the food insecurity in our whole country.

How can county organizations in the diaspora such as FLAA behave in a *county-centric* way that buttresses their *country-centricity*? By focusing on issues of reconciliation and development among their members here in the US and collectivizing efforts to impact on reconciliation and development in the home county, organizations such as FLAA can be *county-centric* and still be considered *country-centric*. For example, suppose you have among you here a very brilliant medical doctor hailing from Lofa County who specializes in curing a disease that is ravaging our citizens back home in Lofa. One way to demonstrate positive *county-centricity* is for members of FLAA to encourage that brilliant doctor to return to Lofa, even if just for few weeks, and if necessary, mobilize the resources to sustain him back in Lofa to save the lives of our dying people. Such can be replicated with other professionals having critical skills that are sorely needed back home in our dear county.

Organizations such as FLAA can also demonstrate *country-centricity* by also synergizing and synchronizing strategies and efforts with similar county organizations in the Americas to promote the common cause of our common patrimony, Liberia. Lastly, if you ask me how can officers and members of FLAA demonstrate *county-centricity* that buttresses their *country-centricity*, I will say to you, begin immediately to work with the political leadership of Lofa and other Lofa associations and leaders both in the diaspora and in

Liberia to ensure that our dear county hosts the best ever July 26 celebration next year.

Finally, before I take my seat, allow me to say hats off to Mr. Arthur Zakama and the other officers who have been elected to lead this great Association for the next two years. By your election, you have earned the vote of confidence to lead a great Association promoting the interest of a great people from a great county within a great country. Would you justify the confidence reposed in you by these great people? Well, I trust and hope so. But as I told the citizens of Belle District at the induction ceremony of their newly elected officers, I usually do not rejoice when I witness an individual assuming power neither do I mourn. I take an indifferent posture to induction ceremonies because whether power is a good thing or a bad thing depends on whose hands power is entrusted in. Power in the hands of the dedicated, honest, selfless, prepared leader is like a trophy in the hands of the champ; but power in the hands of an incompetent, selfish, dishonest, and dictatorial individual is like a bomb that not only destroys the holder but also destroys those who are around him.

Two years from now when we look back at this day, would the members of FLAA, yea the citizens of Lofa and of Liberia, look back and thank God for this day or would they look back and regret this day? I do not know what they will say. But all I know now is that what they will say depends on you and how you will lead.

So I challenge you to lead well so that two years from now when we all watch the video of this event, we will all be proud that the smile and celebrations of today are justified. I trust, Mr. President and officers of FLAA, that you will be kind enough to do us this favor.

Thank you very much.