

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
D. ELWOOD DUNN
ON THE OCCASION OF THE
ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE
DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
OF THE
REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

Monrovia,
Republic of Liberia
July 26, 2012

Your Excellency Madam President
Your Excellency President Ernest Bai Koroma of the Sister Republic of Sierra Leone
Mr. Vice President
Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tempore and Members of the Legislature
Mr. Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary
Members of the Cabinet
Mr. Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps
The Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations
Prelates and Members of the Clergy
Officials of Government
Council of Chiefs and Elders
Fellow Liberians
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen
Friends

Madam President, I renew to you my gratitude for your gracious invitation to perform this national ritual on our country's Natal Day. I am fully sensitive to "the circumstances and thoughts that led to my selection." It is my fervent hope that what I say here today will serve to lift a people "long forlorn to nobler destiny."

I come to this task fully conscious of the efforts by government and citizens alike in restoring our country, especially in the aftermath of our recent national calamity. Perspectives naturally vary as to the right framework, the right course of action and the right order of priority, and a debate of sorts has already been joined. Perhaps this national platform provides me the privileged opportunity to join that national debate.

Our country is 165 years old! We have come a long way, on a long tumultuous journey, a journey, punctuated by weariness and dreariness, struggle and strife, a historic journey opened to a multiplicity of interpretations. Yet we continue that journey as one country and one people. We engage today the power of pause to reflect upon where we stand on this continuing and unending national journey. And as we pause to re-calibrate, I invite you to reflect with me on the topic:

RENEWING OUR NATIONAL PROMISE

In its “Declaration of Rights,” our founding Constitution proclaimed a national promise: “Therefore we the People of the Commonwealth of Liberia, in Africa...do, in order...to establish justice, insure domestic peace, and promote the general welfare, hereby solemnly associate and constitute ourselves a Free, Sovereign and Independent State, by the name of The Republic of Liberia.”

In the beginning was the promise. That promise took the form of an ideal left to be perfected by succeeding generations, left to be nurtured by succeeding generations, left to be rendered increasingly more meaningful, more relevant to the changing needs of a continuously changing Liberian population. Like the founders of states everywhere, no promise remains static. A more perfect country remains ours to build, today, as it was for those of yesteryears, and will be for those tomorrow. Thus we have moved in time from “We the people of the Commonwealth of Liberia” to a wider embrace of “We the People” resident in all 38,000 square miles of our national territory, incorporating today 15 political subdivisions inhabited by scores of ethno linguistic groups, including categories yet to be clearly delineated.

This is the situation as I speak. Liberia started small in fact and in concept. Expansion, including that of the mind, was inevitable. Just as we face today the imperative of re-defining the idea of Liberia, future generations will find the need to re-define their nation, their Liberia, taking into account the exigencies of that future. Liberia is a continuum, never frozen in time and space. It is an idea of infinite possibilities. And it is our duty as inheritors of that promise made almost two centuries ago to renew the charge given the challenges of our time.

Accordingly, I will briefly address the topic in two parts:

The first part will be to contextualize or remind us about the “what”, the “why” and the “how” of our national experience, while the second part will offer some thoughts on the role of values in national reconstruction.

Madam President, Fellow Citizens and Friends:

History has been defined as a discourse or a dialogue between the past and the present. We cannot escape being a part of that dialogue for that past, our past, remains an integral part of our national DNA. We must thus seek to appreciate the 19th century context in which the original promise of Liberia was made. I am not here speaking about material context, but the context, indeed also the contest of ideas. Liberia for some was one idea, one vision, for others yet another. We must come to grips with our own idea of Liberia. But first, the earlier debate that was initiated 165 years ago must be appreciated. It was a debate about chosen direction, vision, identity, and purpose. When the potted plant of the Liberian state was brought from overseas for implantation in West African soil, it came with a Euro-American purpose, a mission of enlightenment and civilization in the Western sense. Two decades later, an alternative paradigm or vision was proffered, that of blending Western and African values symbolized by planting the state firmly in African soil.

As J. J. Roberts and his political theorist Hilary Teague moved forward in initiating their vision of building a “little America” in early 19th century West Africa, Edward Wilmot Blyden, perhaps Liberia’s foremost original thinker, proffered some two decades later a very different vision, a very different national purpose. Even in those formative years Blyden thought of Liberia as the nucleus of a modern, progressive nation—a synthesis of the best in African and Western cultures. Teague and Blyden then, in their respective advocacies became the progenitors of the Liberian dilemma—a civilizing mission or the development of an African nationality that blends elements from the dual heritage of Africa and the West.

But no, we are not heirs to just two heritages. We the people of the Republic of Liberia, like other peoples on this vast continent of ours, are children not of two but of a triple heritage—the Traditional African heritage, the heritage of Islamic civilization, and the Western heritage. We are not one or the other. We are a composite of all three. Quickly disposing of the Traditional African heritage, in which we live, and move, and have our being, we can cite the Vai proverb: “What is mine goes, what is ours abides.” Or we can reference a study by the late Bishop George Browne of the Episcopal Church drawing parallels between African traditional religions and Old Testament Christianity.

Islamic civilization first came to North Africa in the 7th century and then percolated over many centuries downwards through Sub-Saharan Africa. That civilization became a part of the Liberian experience before the 1822 colonial settlement and the 1847 Declaration of Independence. In fact this Universalist religion accompanied with its own culture first came to the Liberia area in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Prominent Liberian explorers not only confirm this Islamic presence in their 19th century Liberia, but Liberian Muslims impacted the process of Liberian state formation as witnessed by the roles of prominent Muslims Zulu Duma and Sao Boso. The culture of Islam has remained an integral part of the Liberian national journey initiated 165 years ago.

I need not now elaborate on the Western heritage, for it has been and continues to be so pervasive though with different emphases depending on the era, that we need a separate debate about what and what not to accept coming from the West—the classic dilemma of acceptance and rejection.

What has been the impact on us of these heritages? What sort of people have we become as a consequence of the triple experiences? The impact of these heritages has obviously varied in time and space. Some have enjoyed privileges more than others. Our exposure to the three has been uneven, and this has left in its wake a certain misunderstanding. As we contemplate a more genuine unification of our people we need to revisit this issue of the impact of our triple heritage on us as a people, bringing all three to the table or the palaver hut of national unification, integration and reconciliation.

Contextualizing the Liberian experience also means acknowledging dissent or political opposition in the history of Liberia. Liberia has had its market place of ideas before the contemporary “Brouhaha.” Before the hegemonic True Whig Party came to power, there was lively political competition even within a circumscribed political community. The TWP never went unchallenged in its 133 years of hegemony. The 1970s was a time of much dissent in our country, and some of the ideas generated from that period remain as yet unrealized, given the military intervention, the devastating civil war that followed, and the lack of national focus on value issues since then.

Dissent is healthy. It helps us to self-correct. It helps us come to terms with ourselves. Perhaps leading us to imagine narratives other than, and in addition to the one of conventional wisdom whose derivatives we have yet to subject to scrutiny; perhaps helping us address our national identity problematic; perhaps helping us see Liberia as a whole, not the caricature that often passes for conventional wisdom; perhaps leading us to undertake a national dissection such that we lay bare ALL of the component parts of our national make-up; perhaps revealing to ourselves a clearer number of human groups that compose

the Liberian mosaic; perhaps allowing ourselves the opportunity to self-identify, not excluding a large potential category of hybrid-Liberians, a cross between or among groups. Here I am alluding to a critical population reconfiguration that could well result in a future sociological paradigm shift. Perhaps that shift has already occurred and we have yet to recognize it.

And now we return to the “what”, “why” and “how” questions that contextualize our national experience. What? In the beginning of Liberia there was a contestation of visions, but a single vision prevailed for long and shaped the country’s development or evolution. Why? Because of the preferences and prejudices of the era. How? Competing visions or dissident views were routinely ignored. Consider how one historian described the reaction of the Liberian people to Dr. Edward Wilmot Blyden and his time, and I quote: “Blyden’s oratorical prowess thrilled his hearers but did not change social norms. He was rewarded with distant diplomatic appointments in Europe. He was fluent in a number of languages including Arabic—but if he had learned Kru and began to express his challenge from Sasstown he would have been considered more threatening than the Court of St. James in [faraway] England.” Unquote.

Through historical twists and turns, Roberts and Teague and their ideological heirs retained for long the ascendancy. But the ideas of Blyden and Co. were never extinguished. They awaited and still await, propitious times. Might those times be our time? Are we ready to answer the clarion call of this age, are we ready to seize this seminal moment and build an inclusive Liberia on the solid foundations of our triple heritage? Are we ready to collaborate with our West African sisters and brothers, with whom we share so much in this post-colonial, supra-nationalist age, as we all move into a new era of shared interconnection and cooperation?

Madam President, Fellow Liberians, and Friends:

Renewing our national promise also means moving toward a more united Liberia. We must do more than merely proclaim a “Unification Policy” or perpetuate a National Unification Day based on a flawed policy. Nor must we assume that our divisions will cease without conscious effort, without our being intentional about the matter.

But even here, context matters. We are not here seeking to re-invent the wheel. The Liberian nation-building process has a past that, for good or ill, has become ingrained in our national DNA. We speak English with a unique Liberian accent. We have even developed a “Liberian English” that we seem to refuse to consider a lingua franca. We have a national cuisine, perhaps several. We have many national types of attire. We have put a Liberian twist to the universalistic

religions of Christianity and Islam to which we have converted. We continue to struggle to address the kinks of flaws in our original African Traditional Religions.

The question before us then is how we might employ the instruments of culture learning and education broadly conceived to craft a strategy to take us from identification as cultural freaks to recognized cultural integrity, from being like bats, not knowing whether we are beasts or birds, to a greater clarity about what we have become as consequence of our exposure to the outside world.

Defining the intangible dimension of our national reconstruction imperatives:

And so, Madam President, Fellow Liberians, and Friends: as we celebrate today 165 years of independence the state of our country impels us, perhaps compels us to seek opportunities and infrastructure for mediation, mediation to address historic divides and divides of more recent vintage such as the generational or all those things that make us still an un-reconciled people, mediation to address the polarization in this society, mediation to bridge the unacceptable divide between the sea of poverty that pervades our nation and the handful among us who enjoy wealth and privilege, mediation that will take us to the streets of our cities and towns to seek out those traumatized and disabled by war, mediation in short that will lead us to acknowledge our dysfunctional society and conscientiously seek to render it indeed more functional and more wholesome.

Now, let me make myself clear. I am not here disparaging the efforts of many who are trying to address some of these issues. I am aware that local and foreign resources have been employed, indeed deployed, for this purpose. I am aware that government agencies have made it a part of public policy to do likewise. What I am talking about, however, are the intangible dimensions of the issues, the values dimension without which we navigate without a compass. I am talking about national values deficits (not budget deficits, not electric power deficits...). I am talking about empathy, solidarity, trust, justice, honesty, sincerity, mutual goodwill, social responsibility, mutual respect, a sense of common identity, accountability, innovation, and tolerance. All of these notions are closely interrelated. They all add up to what might be called a national moral deficit. This is quintessentially or basically the intangible I earlier alluded to. You see, it is real; it is there; it will not just go away. Without a measure of moral commitment to Liberia, indeed moral investment, we risk everything—our traditional security, our human security, and the sustainability of all the material reconstruction on which we are today embarked with near religious zeal. Why? Because in the nature of things, if we remain a society of gross inequality, of social alienation, of distrust, of injustice, of conflicting identities, the “WE” remains weak and will collapse when faced with the inevitable moment of national stress.

Perhaps, just perhaps what we need is a serious consideration of how we might harness our culture (even our cultures) in service to the nation. And so the intangibles boil down to our national culture problematic. Call it the Humanities (a study of the human condition) or the Arts (the imaginative and creative branches of knowledge), but what we need is a critical evaluation of values on a big scale, in high and low places in our country—at all societal levels—the home, the business community, education community, faith community, community of the professions, the Media, the Diaspora in all its diversity and on all continents.

Consider the challenge at hand! Consider what we are experiencing, and its impact on us! Seemingly two competing streams invite our attention: The first is from abroad where we uncritically receive a deluge of books, magazines, films, DVDs, videos, CDs, even foreign national propaganda (VOA, BBC, Radio France International, China News Agency, etc). They are all well funded and professionally packaged and promoted by major organizations and lobbies. Whether intentional or not, this stream has the cumulative effect of reinforcing our national sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the societies from which such products emanate. Have you considered the effects on us of drinking so deep into other people's culture and relegating our own to the margins? This is why I earlier used the term "cultural freaks," or, being like the bat, not knowing whether we are beasts or birds.

The second stream, the domestic alternative to this external effort has never been organized or funded. Sure, whether from the past or the present, there are Liberian artists, scholars, and creative entrepreneurs at work plying their respective trades. But they seem to be moving in many different directions. Not only does the field lack coherence, it fuels disunity. Our histories have emphasized conflicts between competing groups (although all histories, including our own, are replete with both conflict and cooperation). We wouldn't be here today 165 years later as one people had our relationship been characterized only by conflict to the exclusion of cooperation. Can we imagine an alternative to the book "The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in [the history] of Liberia?" Some anthropologists stress particularism to the exclusion of cross-group interaction and collaboration. We often say much about social cleavages without a word about many other crosscutting cleavages whereby we have, like all peoples, multiple identities. Folktales are categorized by ethnic groups; although anyone growing up in Liberia knows that "spider" belongs to no one group.

On this critical subject of studying the human condition as expressed in Liberia, what contributions might be possible to our common enterprise from Literature, History, Economy, the Arts, Law, just to highlight a few.

Literature: We should encourage the development of stories (written, oral or video) that promote empathy across lines of division such as ethnic, religious, or regional. We should do so by offering prizes to “writers” of such stories. Consider the European historical experience that traces the development of human rights sensibilities and feelings of nationhood to the Novel form. Folklore was useful in fueling feelings of nationhood in 19th century Europe, and we could appropriate this art form to our national re-making effort.

History: or that great dialogue between the past and the present. We should encourage Liberian historians to hash out a national narrative that is truthful, inclusive and does not shift blame from individual wrongdoing to groups whether in the distant past or more recently. Rwanda and South Africa, two African countries successfully digging themselves out of conflict, provide models we might explore. As does UNESCO, with experience in production of the UNESCO History of Africa series, the first authoritative narrative of the history of the African peoples written largely by African scholars. It is vital that the process of a history-writing project be de-politicized. We cannot remain mired in the social and political sniping between the polarized versions of Liberian history.

We should consider as well Museums as critical sites of “social remembering” that help to facilitate construction of national narratives, preservation of collective memory and production of a national culture.

Economy: Here too, there is a values dimension for the full story of the Liberian economy is not alone the ubiquitous "growth without development" thesis of the 1960s. If we went back to the 1860s we would discover a Liberian entrepreneurship characterized by self-reliance, innovation, creativity and risk-taking. These early Liberian business people produced goods and services that they then traded internally and externally and held their own for decades. Goods produced in Liberia were transported to Europe in Liberian built vessels. With the initiation of patronage politics by what became a hegemonic True Whig Party politics soon became king. The Open Door Policy that made politics king then sealed the fate of independent Liberian business. A paradigm shift to a rent seeking economy, incompatible with productivity, innovation and self-reliance, has bedeviled us since. We must borrow a page from our past to restore the creative and innovative entrepreneurial spirit.

Law: A number of issues commend themselves here: We should consider requiring law students to offer pro bono services to indigent clients, and strongly encourage lawyers to do the same. Without justice for the poor, stability will remain elusive. We face a problem of Constitutional inadequacy.

Many here and listening to me out there will recall how we ended up with the current Constitution of 1986. A constitution drafted by professionals was in 1983 subjected to substantial editing by a panel of politicians. It was the politically edited draft that, under circumstances of military rule, became the constitution bequeathed to us. Since the end of the civil war in 2003 we have tiptoed around the issue of constitutional review and reform. Two full-fledged and seemingly permanent government institutions have been created in large measure to fix our constitutional and governance problems. We still labor today under a dysfunctional constitution replete with conflicts of land law, trial law and other dualities of customary and statutory laws. An American colleague has rightly characterized presidential powers under the present constitution thus, and I quote: “The president’s power is still lying around like a loaded gun.” Unquote. Aside from the potential for abuse, such hyper-presidential powers could create the impression among ordinary Liberians that political hegemony is normal. There may be benevolence and probity in the present regime. What guarantees do we have for future regimes?

There are other important issues. I understand that we continue to use today the anachronistic “Rules and Regulations for Administering the Hinterland” that once vested all powers of governing in the “Secretary of the Interior”, today the Minister of Internal Affairs. As well, the issue of dual citizenship looms large for Liberians residing abroad, a significant national resource that we alienate to our detriment.

Then there is the issue of our national symbols and awards. We seem to talk about this issue interminably without the national will to act. I wonder, I just wonder, for example, whether anyone has carefully read the citations to such national awards as “The Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption,” or “The Most Venerable Order of Knighthood of the Pioneers of the Republic of Liberia.” The wordings are a throwback to nineteenth century provincialism, and as such these awards need to be complemented with others more relevant to contemporary circumstances. Post-apartheid South Africa’s experience in these regards could prove salutary or beneficial.

The Arts: We should recognize the role of creative and expressive culture in national integration or re-integration, national reconciliation and national unity. Literature, poetry, music, dances, paintings, plays, folktales, proverbs and parables are all critical assets in nation building. We should encourage the development and distribution of art works that promote themes of justice, equity and unity. We might do this by offering incentives and prizes to creators of such works. There are many examples elsewhere for such undertakings designed to help audiences “feel” conditions experienced by citizens who are different from themselves, different ethnically, different religiously and in diverse other ways. Given our divisions and deep-seated feelings of distrust, this work would best be undertaken by civil society, with limited government involvement.

We should recognize that investing in the arts is also investing in national security --job opportunities, a more united nation conscious and respectful of its component parts, with a strengthened sense of collective security, thus obviating exploitation of genuine differences by the disaffected at home and abroad.

There are many models for undertaking this imperative national work. Four come to mind: The Arts Council in South Africa, the Social Service of Commerce in Brazil, the United States National Endowment for the Arts, and the United States National Endowment for the Humanities. The Social Service of Commerce in Brazil is described as “a private nonprofit entity whose role is enshrined in the national constitution, with its budget derived from a 1.5 percent payroll tax imposed on and collected by Brazilian companies; as the workforce in this nation of nearly 200 million people expands, so does the organization’s budget.”

Relevancy for Liberia: I believe that we should employ the arts and humanities as vehicles for promoting genuine reconciliation and unity by undertaking the following specifics:

1. That we set aside a reasonable percentage of revenue generated from iron mining and oil extraction to be placed in a locked box for arts and humanities activities.
2. That we supplement such funds with fundraising at home and abroad, especially among Liberians residing abroad.
3. That as fundraising is most effective if a self-help effort is already in place, I recommend (a) a negotiated transfer of the E.J. Roye Building here on Ashmun Street to a National Arts and Humanities Council of Liberia. The building is already appropriately configured for such an enterprise. Spaces could be rented cheaply to artists and arts organizations that meet certain criteria, and other spaces could be rented at market value to help fund the organization, and (b) we immediately appropriate the idea of a “Liberia Youth Corps” with the specific goal of bringing together young people from diverse educational, political, cultural and religious backgrounds in campaigns that inculcate a culture of service and engender a common sense of nationhood. Social learning programs in other societies have increased students’ sense of social responsibility, compassion, tolerance, and belonging to a broader community. I have personally fond recollections of the impact of The National Student Christian Council of Liberia and the late David Howell’s YMCA on my own social learning experience. Youth are critical to any country’s future especially our own, given the demographic imperative. Unless we invest adequately in their future, we leave them a poisoned inheritance.

Now, though investing in such intangibles may require an enabling role for government, the weight of responsibility for this undertaking must fall squarely on the shoulders of civil society and must involve Liberian leaders at all societal levels—business, faith (Churches, Mosques, Groves of our African Traditional

Religions), educational, professional, philanthropic—all must show the courage to lead.

Furthermore, under the auspices of the proposed National Arts and Humanities Council of Liberia, consideration should be given to implementing at least two priority projects. The first is to partner with government in the full restoration and expansion of The Kendeja National Culture Center. I say expansion because I believe that we need a national culture center in each of our 15 political subdivisions. Such centers must become venues for establishing, nurturing, showcasing, studying and celebrating our cultural heritage.

The second priority project for the new Council is to transform into an area of historic preservation the land and key buildings here in the heart of Monrovia bounded as follows: Starting at the corners of Broad/Buchanan and Broad/Ashmun Streets housing the current “National Museum” and this edifice, the Centennial Memorial Pavilion, and continuing along both Broad and Ashmun Streets to the corners of Broad/Randall and Ashmun/Randall Streets housing the Executive Pavilion and the old Executive Mansion.

Beyond these, and building upon traditional knowledge systems, I also recommend the establishment of an ad hoc panel of citizens to help sort out issues in our society arising from conflict of values. I have in mind such issues as sassawood or “trial by ordeal”, a modern role for traditional chiefs, conflict of international human rights values and traditional values, the modernization of the Poro and Sande institutions, traditional healing arts and modern medicine.

Education: Our modern educational institutions must be at the heart of any engagement that seeks to appropriate the humanities and arts in building national unity. For in its primary mission of preparing our young people “to think creatively, read critically, construct effective arguments using persuasive evidence, write clearly, remain flexible and look at issues with an open mind,” our schools and universities must also be places for the transmission of the society’s core values, attitudes and mores. To do this, a national core curriculum review may be necessary, for a productive educational system must be driven “by a culturally sensitive and balanced curriculum.” Do we have one in place today? That’s not what I learned from a recent study by Sister Mary Laurene Browne. We must revisit our curriculum at all levels in our educational system.

And we must do one more thing regarding educating our youth. Following the model of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, let us target here and now every six-year old across this land. Let us set a goal of closely monitored quality education for them, so that come 2030, we might unveil a new generation of Liberians superbly prepared to play their roles in a twenty-first century Liberia, indeed a twenty-first century world.

Conclusion

And so, Madam President, Fellow Liberians, and Friends:

Let us then, one and all, solemnly resolve, in this place and at this time, to re-launch our country, to renew our country's promise, to build a stronger Liberia not alone of bricks and mortar but fundamentally of values, to build a country inclusive of all our experiences since we began together this arduous national journey 165 years ago. Let us build against the backdrop of our triple heritage.

Let us do all of these things, and more, linking today's Liberia to yesterday's, and then let us affect a social paradigm shift as we resolve to build a modern African nation that participates fully in the African renaissance and remains open to wholesome contemporary global cultural streams.

Let us re-enforce the national foundations of our common heritage, so that 35 years hence, when Liberia moves into its third century of nationhood, it will have made genuine progress toward fulfilling the national promise "to establish justice, insure domestic peace, and promote the general welfare.

I THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION.

LONG LIVE LIBERIA!

GOD, BLESS LIBERIA!