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In many ways, our work is an earnest attempt, the first of its kind in the annals of Gedebo, a subsection of the Grebo ethnic group. We are obliged by many helping hands. In this picture are Peter Dodae Sauldi Davis and Nathaniel Nyenati Dior Davis who financed our research.. We are also sincerely thankful to those who searched their old albums to send us the pictures by which we adorn the pages of our book. Our thanks go also to Mr. George Dioh Wilson, former senior inspector of Commerce for Maryland County, Liberia, who helped us deductively assign time and ages to some of the subjects in our book.

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FOUNDER YAWAH TOE AND PARAMOUNT CHIEF WREA MUSU

Preface

Piecing together this story, a brief history of the founding of Gedebo or Kleo by Yawah Toe and the oral history of Paramount Chief Wrea Musu (alias Coffee Musu) took brainstorming and a great deal of effort. We left home at a very tender age in pursuit of education. I, William Kpaye Kamma Reeves, studied in Nyaake, Webbo District, Eastern Province, Liberia, and I, Alphonsus Gbenon Nyenati Davis, studied in Pleebo, Maryland County, Liberia. But in the many years of our hunt for education, we came home for brief visits with our parents once in a while. During those visits, we attentively collected the pertinent oral history about Gedebo from our fathers and other elderly men we met as we walked within Gedebo.

But we had first heard the stories and events that we have presented here in childhood. In Gedebo, a subsection of the vast Grebo ethnic group, traditions, customs, and the history were not taught in a formal way, such as with lessons in a classroom. And in the Grebo country, children are supposed to be seen only and not heard. This means that when children and young people are around adults, the children must keep their mouths shut. So the children who paid attention to the conversations of the adults would learn about Gedebo traditions, customs, and the history, as we did. The activity in the village that is very important and gives pre-teen and teenage boys the opportunity to learn is the assembly of the elders and men under the palm tree.

Since the elders and men prefer to gather in isolated places to hold serious discussions, it is customary to sit under a remote palm tree to avoid the noise and distractions of the village. To prepare for the meeting, the men cut down palm trees to make a clearing and save the cuttings to process into palm wine. Palm wine is a drink often used at home for gatherings and special occasions. In the area that they clear, the men find a comfortable place and select a palm tree to sit under. The men further clean the area under that tree, and seats are made available for those who will attend the assembly. During the assembly, the elders and men discuss issues to be probed, and recount stories

of the history, traditions, and culture of the tribe. After the talks have been exhausted, the palm wine is collected and served.

As we did from 1942 (William) and 1946 (Alphonsus) into the 1950s, young boys sit and listen to the elders at the palm tree assembly to gain knowledge. Between ages 10 and 12, boys are initiated into the men's society, and a teenage boy who has attained that level accompanies his father to the palm tree assembly.

Besides taking their sons to the palm tree assembly, a father also becomes more involved in training and teaching his son in another way. To prepare him to meet the challenges not only in the village or tribe, but also in life, a dad often takes his boy with him when he goes to work, or travels to villages, towns, and cities. The father teaches his son to help him transact business. Boys, as a group or club, may also go to work on other people's farms. As a result of this training, boys emulate their fathers and elders to become good leaders and members of the village and tribe.

William: As a village boy, I was no exception to how the boys were treated in the village. But I think I had some exclusive blessing. In my clan, which we call *family* in the Grebo parlance, I was the only boy among droves of girls. Although I was born very frail and sickly, according to my parents, my mother said that I had a very retentive memory as I was growing up. One elder call Nyeneku Payah also observed that I was a good listener. So once in a while, Elder Payah would tell me some story about the Gedebo tribe, especially about the founder of Gedebo, Yawah Toe. My father's closest friend, Hiebe Toe, who often visited my father at the palm tree, was another source. During the farming season, the men brewed palm wine individually at their farm sites; but they were always ready to share with their friends who wanted a cup or two of some palm wine. My father was a constant brewer of well-brewed palm wine, and many men flooded his tent. They shared the intelligence of the day while they gobbled away the palm wine.

Kablake is the name of my village. Shortly before I went to Nyaaake for school, about 100 people were living there. The village had about 12 umbrella-shaped one-room huts with roofs

covered with thatch. The inhabitants were, and are, all peasant and swidden (cutting back and burning vegetative cover to clear a temporary agricultural plot) farmers who did not produce enough to feed themselves, their families, and the extended ones. Every year there is a hungry season.

After the farming season, the men of my village choose some place with many palm trees in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. After the necessary preparation for brewing the palm wine, the men gather with the boys every morning and late afternoon at the palm trees. Here they talk about everything as the young men listen—domestic, tribal, national, or international issues. Here also the boys are taught how to tap the palm trees. One may wonder how these rustics come by genuine information about the world. If you can ask any villager, a boy or elder about the name of the President of the United States, don't be surprised if you are told that his name is Bush. They have their own window on the world. In an informal way, the young people learn from the elders by listening to what an elder had to say— but no questions!

Boys alone are never assembled to listen to or learn a story in a village. A griot talks about the founding of the tribe only when a claim is laid against the tribe by another tribe. This is the time people of all ages assemble to listen, and those who care to memorize those myriad of facts without dates do so. This takes place where the high priest (Bodior) resides. Klede Kamana, Kwaiyu Charde, and I were in the same age group and listened to the long and complex narration of the griot. I began to listen to of those many stories shortly before I left the village for school in Nyaake in 1942. In 1950 when I was in the 7th grade, my appetite for literature became more pronounced. Each time I went to the village, I would ask Elder Gbayer many questions about the story of Yawah Toe. This surprised my elder because it was completely and strangely not the Grebo way of life. The elder forgot that I was the young man of two worlds, Western and African.

Alphonsus: My village, Heweken, approximately had a population of 350 when I was growing up, and it now has about 150 people. There are two families in the village, the Taalue and the Paapo. One family occupies one side of the village, while the

other is on the opposite side. The village had about 30 houses in my youth. Like all Gedebo vilages, the people principally engage in farming, growing rice, corn, cassava, sweet potatos, eddo, banana, coffee, cocoa, and rubber. Our people also raise domestic animals, hunt, and fish. After roads were built, many villagers left to find jobs. Boys and girls left to go to school.

Besides our fathers, two reputable elders who helped teach us under the palm tree were Cheediady Toe, a former clan chief of the Gedebo Chiefdom (an uncle), and the late Kalley Kamannon, Bodior or high priest of Chidiwodor, a subsection of Gedebo. They played an important role in teaching us under the palm tree, where we enjoyed the shade, cool breeze, the sweet palm wine, and the company of elders. As I learned from our elders, the following boys were with me under the palm tree : James Kammon, Joseph Kamannon, Joe Kasper, Chedy Toe, Emmanuel Davis, and Bollor Koany. Since our learning was by listening to our elders, we had to be present as often as we could in order to learn more things from their talks. If one was absent for some time, he risked losing an important part of the conversation.

In my teens, I was close to my parents, especially my father. My Dad told us stories of great events. On many occasions, he talked about the tribal history, culture, and traditions of our people. Listening to him and the elders, I was able to learn about Yawah Toe, the patriot and founder of the tribe of Gedebo.

William and Alphonsus: Readers should note that we have standardized the spelling of names in this work. But in parts of Liberia and similar societies, the spelling of names is *not* standardized and variant spellings exist, such as Yawah and Yawa. Third parties must record names for illiterate people based on pronunciation and the recorder's education; this reality is one cause of an individual having an alias.

To gather information on Paramount Chief Musu, we used a questionnaire with 14 questions (see Appendix, p. 74). It was particularly hard, defyingly challenging for us to finish this work. We are separated from our country and our tribe by a long, straggling distance covering thousands of miles. However, we hope that our earnest attempt will be appreciated by the scanty Gedebo reading public and all others who appreciate Liberian folklore

and oral history. Although we had nothing to read about Gedebo, we hope to consult more people in the tribe who may be knowledgeable as a reference in the future. Perhaps, we will be able to tell our story in even greater detail. We are happy we made this remarkable effort.

William Kpaye Kamma Reeves
Alphonsus Gbenon Nyenati Davis
April 2008

Part I
Gedebo Folkloric History,
Founder Yawah Toe

Chapter 1

Yawah Toe, the Founder of Gedebo

Yawah Toe makes Gedebo or Kleo his home

In time past and time present, the reasons for exploring the unknown seem to be primarily the same with Western explorers and African expeditioners. According to our oral historians, Yawah Toe, the founder of Gedebo, or Kleo in the original language, came on a big game hunt. He was uncertainly and perilously tracking elephants in rolling mountains, hills, and deep valleys and seeking hostile wildlife that was abundant in the land then almost unknown to human habitation. Oral historians or griots sound dubious when they relate the adventure of Toe and his family. His travels suggested that he had no permanent dwelling place; he must have been a nomad. However, our traditional storytellers say that Toe traveled from a point called Wealah or Garaway, partly located along the Atlantic Ocean in southeastern Liberia. The time would be earlier than the sixteenth century AD.

After chasing the elephants for several months or perhaps a year or so, he encountered the great animals and successfully killed two or more. With the distance he traveled to accomplish his mission, Toe realized it was physically impossible to trace back to where he came from. Secondly, his family and he were not able to carry the elephant meat. But the most compelling reason to stay was that he found the place where his adventure had paid off was fertile and habitable. And so at last, Toe said, “We are going to make this place our home.” Their home it became.

As soon as he settled his family, he came into very surprising contact with many other groups of people who lived close by. The neighbors coaxed him to be part of their tribal (also called indigenous) group. But Toe wanted to be independent to establish his own identity in the jungle. When he uncompromisingly refused to subject himself to their plea, they waged war against him.

One sunny afternoon while at the location where he and his family had feasted on the elephant meat, Toe worried about how

to secure himself and his family. He bathed in a river, the Munon, to ease his body from the heat of the scorching sun. As soon as he plunged into the river, he dived deeply; and to his utter surprise, he saw a large hole in a huge rock underneath the river. It appeared like a living place, habitable for humans. There appeared also some sign of welcome at the entrance of the large hole. He moved closer to discover that the cave was roomy enough to house him and his family. But the baffling question for Toe was this. Was it possible for human beings to live under water?

“Let me go in and see whether life is possible under water,” Toe whispered to himself. “Bravo,” he shouted, as inside the cave breathing was like the natural one on the surface of the earth. “If I can breathe naturally like this in a cave under the water, I guess it is no question to live here. My family and I will make the under the water cave our abode, a place that will no doubt naturally secure us from our enemy.”

Toe returned to the surface of the river to tell the family his miraculous discovery. “Under this water, I saw a cave in which we can live happily. When I entered I discovered that breathing there was as natural as on the surface of the earth; in short, it would appear that a natural supply of oxygen there was in abundance. Our living there will naturally secure us from the people who want to compel us to be part of their group. To this, as you know, I totally refused to submit myself. Since nature has given us this fortress, I would, therefore, ask that we move into it at once,” Toe pleaded.

With one mind, the family settled in the natural wonder of the underwater cave. This was around the early sixteenth century.

The security of Toe’s newfound home was beyond ordinary human understanding. An ocean of smoke ascended through the water into the high sky as the family prepared their daily meals. Toe was at constant war with the surrounding tribes who demanded that he should be part of them or face indefinitely their hostility. With an indomitable will he would not surrender to the threats. Nearly every day the enemy attacked. As soon as he felt that he was being cornered, he would plunge into the river and take cover in his cave. When the enemy observed that each time Toe was chased he found his way to the river and then

Part II
Gedebo Oral History,
Paramount Chief Wrea Musu

Chapter 4

Musu Ancestors Join A Founding Clan

Migration builds Gedebo

Migration seems to be increasingly a burning human instinct. On many an occasion, the reason or reasons for migration are different from person to person or group of persons. But the migrants hold one thing in common: they leave one place for another place, the reason being best known to the migrant or migrants. This general movement of people in our one world is a common phenomenon. The people of that vast continent called Africa are no exception.

In the Gedebo country, a subsection of that huge Grebo ethnic group sprawling in southeastern Liberia, over the years people have arrived seeking greener pastures and a peaceful place for settlement. This little homeland, shadowed over by towering mountains and hills canopied by evergreen leafy trees and drained by many large streams of water, boasts of highly fertile soil. The Gedebo nutritious rice yields abundantly and peaceful and hungry home seekers found a ready reception by the generous, hospitable, and sparsely inhabited Gedebo country.

The fecund valley called Gedebo, seemingly a *promised land*, attracted and encouraged the flow of immigrants whose hope of satisfying their hunger and peace was on the rise each day. The Kaiser War, as the tribal people termed the 1914 War or the First World War, and the miseries, the Asian influenza, commonly called flu, and famine drove people around the world into migration. Those miseries rained on them around our one world, and they tried to piece together their shattered lives from the first world insanity. During those hunger years that the people of Gedebo bitterly remembered and called Bidijlo, meaning Palm Cabbage Year, the tribe of Gedebo experienced a mass influx of immigrants from all walks of life in the southeastern region of Liberia into the Gedebo territory. The year is so named because of the severe shortage of food. Literally people lived on palm cabbage. The people of Gedebo were no exception, as her people

had to chew palm kernel and the pomace cooked in palm butter was used to feed their infants. But because the Gedebo territory was famous for the abundance of golden grain (rice), the rush there was incredibly high and unimaginable. People of all ages, especially women and their infants saddled on their backs from Barclayville or Kplipo mostly, rushed to the *promised land* to see whether they could find the golden grain, rice, their staple food, where the gem was always abundantly found.

At that time whether the quest for the migrants was satisfied or not, we do not know because our historians or griots are tight-lipped about it. But the tribe of Gedebo is replete with the long of descendants of those Barclayville or Kplipo women with their infants in their arms, boys and girls. As they inundated the Gedeboland, some of them fell in love with courteous and hospitable young Gedebo men who willingly adopted their migrant spouses' children. Women from Grand Cess also found their way to the breadbasket. Their descendants too are found in every nook and corner of all the towns and villages of that valley country.

Krahns, lying in upper southeastern Liberia, were no exception to this grand influx of people, following the cessation of the hostilities of the 1914 nightmare. One of our best and daring warriors for the staunch protection and defense of the Gedebo territory was Tabaju Sagbe, a Krahn migrant and a dauntless warrior in Gedebo. After having been totally and wholesomely united and integrated into the Gedebo society, he manfully defended the Gedebo country. Another Krahn migrant of note was Sargba Ju, a well-seasoned, dedicated empirical midwife, who render sacrificial, invaluable and motherly service to the childbearing women and the people of Gedebo.

The Gios and the Manos from Central Liberia flooded the Gedebo territory also after the Firestone Rubber Plantation Company in Gedetarbo, Maryland County, Liberia, laid them off in the early 1940s when they were no more needed. They immediately sought a livelihood in Mother Gedebo's rice farming industry. Even though the primary methods engaged in were decried by Western farmers as primitive and comparatively nonproductive or inadequate methods of production, the people of Gedebo conservatively held fast to the so-called primitive ways

which gave them an abundant yield every year. As is the case always in human settlement, human beings are social animals. Those Gio and Mano men who came without spouses socialized with some beautiful Gedebo young women and the outcome spelled children, adding to the numerical strength of Gedebo's sparse population.

But that is not all. Those industrious people from Central Liberia, having been harmoniously unified and totally integrated into the Gedebo populace, painstakingly trained Gedebo young men to train dogs and use them for hunting. They gathered meat from the wildlife to supplement the scarce domestic supply. The Gios and Manos also taught the young men how to drive away or kill those pests, called guinea pigs or ground hogs, an age old enemy of the Gedebo farmers. This diverted the dog population of Gedebo from only babysitting and greedily collecting the baby's feces into the role of suppliers of meat and protectors of rice farms.

Over the years, people gunning for a wholesome home from every nook and corner of Liberia found their way to this little humble tribe embedded in the fecund valley. Since Gedebo's oral historians or griots left the people in doubt by not naming the years when the migrations occurred, historians are placed at a disadvantage in not being able to pinpoint the time according to years. But the facts are there, even up to this point, as the offspring of those who migrated to Gedebo are an integral and interwoven part of the Gedebo country. Paramount Chief Musu is the concrete example of those whose parents or ancestors migrated.

Musu ancestors migrate to Gedebo

According to the Gedebo statesman, a griot of no mean caliber, Honorable Paramount Chief Musu, a grand polygamist, paramount chief of the amalgamated chiefdoms of Gedebo and Nyenebo tribes, Eastern Province, Liberia, on several occasions made it an open secret that his ancestors migrated from Konobo to Gedebo, perhaps sometime around the 18th century. Konobo is a subsection lying in upper southeastern Liberia and the inhabitants are a part of the large ethnic group in this area. As integration into the Gedebo society appeared as a welcoming

gesture, Musu's ancestors, no doubt, became part and parcel of the hospitable Gedebo society in no time. Were those Konobo immigrants Musu's parents, grandparents, great-grand parents or great-great-grandparents? Wrea Musu did not elaborate. However, the fact is that the venerable paramount chief's people came from Konobo, a huge subsection of the large Krahn ethnic group.

Unlike the immigrants arriving in a Western country, where the immigration authority of that country checks and interviews every immigrant through a valid legal entry procedure, in the tribe an immigrant gropes, as it were, for a family or household to accept him or her at their home and be personally concerned for his or her being there. Anybody who takes in the person assumes the humanitarian responsibility of adopting the stranger as a member of the household. After a short period of time, say about a month or two, the father of the household casually informs his clan, which is called family in the tribe, that he has in his household a person from so and so tribe who has expressed a desire to live with him for life. In a brief ceremony in which *kola nuts* and *hot pepper* with fresh cold water are given as signs of welcome and full acceptance of the immigrant. Implied in the eating of the kola nuts and hot pepper with the fresh cold water is a treaty, an understanding being signed between the new home seeker and his benevolent hosts that neither of them will have ill will against each other; if the new home seeker desires to do harm to any of the host parties and vice versa, the offending person should meet his or her end.

Musu's ancestors were no exception to the age old procedure. Their immediate host clan was the Dogbopo clan, one of the founding families of the Gedebo tribe. And so they were accepted, adopted, and integrated into the Dogbopo clan and the tribe of Gedebo as a whole. It is interesting for one to know Musu's origin and this oral history was established to the best of available knowledge about where Musu's ancestors came from and where they settled and made a permanent and prominent home.

Hardworking Musu grows up in Gedebo

Maybe Wrea Musu was an immediate offspring of the first generation of his ancestors in Gedebo. We have no knowledge. We have no clue. We do not know whether Musu's biological father, called Jay, was born in Gedebo or whether he had migrated. But the facts are overwhelming that Wrea Musu was born of a native Gedebo woman, his biological mother, Wrea, whose parents were native dwellers nestled on a steep hill called Kablake in a small village of the same name. The ke ending the name of any village or town in Gedebo means "on" and that the village or town is on top of a hill or mountain or simply on a specific piece of land. Wrea's father's name was Sagba. The clan called Nonwaon was a clan that migrated too, from Nyenebo to Gedebo. The Nonwaon clan produced warriors and first class soothsayers.

From the union of Jay and Sagba Wrea were born the following siblings: Wrea, Klarlo, Chelleh, Chumu, and Nyeneporju. As much as the authors would like to tell when that distinguished son of Gedebo was born, it was not possible to unearth his exact time of birth. However, certain facts about his social and political peers help age him. From keen observation of the people with whom Musu interacted, it is certain that he was one of those 19th century levelheaded politicians and statesmen delivered to the threshold of the 20th century. Deductively, therefore, the authors feel it is true that Paramount Chief Wrea Musu was born in the early 1890s.

In this family of four boys and a girl, Musu grew up as a quiet, ambitious, and hardworking lad. His early life as a boy was caught on the discernment screen of the conservative elders of his village. They began in earnest to groom him.

Like his fellows growing up in his village, Musu tried his hands in many things. He cultivated his own patch of cocoa, flirted with young women, and above, went to visit *down the Coast* or the *Gold Coast* (Ghana) for a livelihood. He visited Gold Coast and gathered as much wearing apparel as he possibly could. His many visits to the Gold Coast soon ushered him into the waiting parlors of bachelors. From here and there, he began his coy hunt for a future partner in his village, the tribe, and the neighboring tribes.

Some of the sources the authors gathered said that the famous paramount chief got engaged. After some baffling years of his betrothment, he took in his first wife. But this remote research failed to unearth the name of his first spouse. However, according to another source, his early wives were as follows: Nyepulorju, Dwehde, Hiede, Gbenorh, and Karbehde. In his early years of procreation, Musu's fishing basket was replenished with two daughters: Chedi and Nonmonji; the sons included Klewede and Dakor. Over the years, as he increased his numerical strength of wives, he brought into his fold the following: Tetee, Worloo, Seebodi Haweh, and many other children.