

LCRD Day One (December 2, 1999)
Message from President Eyadema of Togo

Mr. President of the Republic of Benin,
His Excellency, Mr. President of the Republic of Ghana,
Mr. and Mrs. Presidents of the High Commission of Benin,
Mr. and Mrs. Members of the Government,
Honorable Ambassadors and Representatives of International Organizations,
Honorable Friend-Countries,
African American Brothers and Sisters, come from near and far:

It is with sincere pleasure and true pride that I take the floor before this assembly in order to deliver the message from the head of state of Togo, His Excellency Gnassingbe Eyadema, at this leaders' conference on reconciliation and development.

I would like convey his regrets for not being here in person at this great historical event held in your beautiful capital, less than thirty days before the third millennium. But held back by his heavy responsibilities of state, in particular the preparations for the UMOA [?] Summit and the CDAO Summit that will take place shortly in the capital of Togo, he has honored us by sending Mr. Barimon Sarbake [?], his Special Counselor, and myself to convey his solidarity to the brothers in Benin and to express his wishes for success at this gathering of the sons of the continent and those that the vicissitudes of history carried across the Atlantic.

Permit me now to deliver to you the content of the message by President Eyadema. This gathering, occurring at a time in which Africa, torn by conflict, is looking for new direction, brings up a pivotal theme: reconciliation and development.

Reconciliation presupposes forgiveness, but forgiveness does not authorize forgetting. The treatment of Blacks consisted of several million people, men and women, uprooted from their native lands, beaten, and sent away to the savage lands of America.

In the big book of the history of humanity, the discovery of fire, the invention of the wheel, and the discovery of nuclear reaction are constantly eluded to as decisive events indicating Progress that have made the world what it is today. The world has a tendency to forget to add to this list the infamous trading of Blacks. Nevertheless, the port cities of Europe owe a great part of their development to the blood and sweat of Black slaves toiling in cotton fields under the heat of the American sun, chained up, their stomachs empty, and their horizons hopeless.

The Great Powers benefited enough from this enterprise to be able to launch the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. The acceleration of development that followed is the result of the forced holocaust suffered by Black people in the silence of stifled revolt, in the pain of humiliation. Voltaire made his character, a slave from Suriname, point out with irony: "Poor Negro, with an amputated arm and a leg, abandoned by his master . . . It is at this price that you now eat sugar in Europe." It is perhaps at this price also that we eat at McDonald's and drink Coca-Cola.

But forgiveness is also a difficult journey that begins with self-questioning. If the African people can believe themselves to be victims of an international plot at this particular moment in history, it does not follow that they are cleared of all responsibility for this. Here is the confession of an African to his White master at the beginning of the eighteenth century: "The ability that we have to sell each other in order to attain a better way of life has resulted in the fact that brother cannot trust brother, friend cannot trust friend, and a father only barely trusts his son." Local chiefs and powerful merchants enriched themselves almost everywhere in the coastal states by profiting from the trading of their brothers. It is this crisis of reality that we are not always allowed to utter. But history is the memory of the people, and men do not have the right to deform it but they can revisit it constantly to find the strength and the enlightenment that permit us to embrace the truth, deal with the pain, lessen the bitterness and reconcile men whom the wrinkles of time had caused to become enemies. We must revisit history in order to extract lessons from it.

First of all, the participation of Black people in the universal slave trade bears consideration. We must think about the shadows of mutual interests and the imperatives of liberty and dignity to which all people have a right.

Secondly, the Black nation must become aware of its true identity and the necessity of its survival and of coming together with one strategy and one faith.

It is based on these dual concepts that we can hope that the opening of borders and the raising of custom barriers will permit the rebirth of a Black patrimony that is united, strong, and prosperous. At the dawning of the third industrial revolution with the advancements in communication and technology, something must be done about the gap between the rich and the poor, between rural and urban populations, and the reunification of Black Nation is the most necessary answer to restoring balance, equality and to ensuring the triumph of democracy.

You understand, then, that I am overjoyed by the activities of this gathering in which people from [?], Abidjan, Dakar, Harare, Accra [. . .] come to bring deep reflections concerning our history. Our questions about the future will lead us step-by-step on the path of reconciliation and I would like to express profound appreciation to the government leaders of Benin and particularly to His Excellency, Mathieu Kérékou, President of the Republic of Benin, for the special effort put into this very moving ceremony. I want to express the wish that the gathering at [Cotonou] be a place of brotherhood and solidarity. Should the past, filled with disparity, egoism, rancor, poverty and humiliation, prevent future union and agreement between the sons of Mother Africa and those who can carry us into development and progress, our brothers who are lucky to have access to the secrets of technology, merely because of a painful Caesarian section of history? It is imperative that we have unity in our continent in order to be able to offer new hope to the African population and to confer upon the continent its place in the Counsel of Nations.

The new millennium opening before us can be a formidable opportunity for Africa if the international community takes action and if, with the collaboration of our African American brothers, we liberate the resources and the vitality that slumbers inside of each one of us in order to fight a raging battle against poverty, which the United Nations considers today a violation of human rights.

I wish you much success. Long live the solidarity between peoples of Africa and African Americans. May God bless you all. Thank you.