

LCRD Day One (December 2, 1999)
Apology and Challenge by President Rawlings of Ghana

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency,
My dear brother, President Kérékou,
Honorable Ministers who participate in the delegation,
Our most Revered and Distinguished Guests and Participants,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

This happens to be a subject related to the state of godliness and the rise towards excellence, and it's one of my favorite subjects. People don't believe that I once wanted to be a priest. And I can explain, I guess, why I chose to remain in the armed forces. And I was explaining to some of our police at breakfast that should have taken fifteen minutes took about four hours or more [sic]. Don't misunderstand it to think that I'm a violent person. No, I'm not. But, I couldn't stand the injustice of my society, and that runs back to since I was a little boy, and I guess that's why I was contemplating becoming a priest to fight the injustices of my society. And that's when I was also thinking about joining the armed forces because I thought it was a splendid institution where black was black and white was white, etcetera.

But I must admit that somewhere along the line, anyway, I ended up in the forces. And somehow it struck me, towards the end of my fifth service, which I could leave to go and join where they train the priests. I'm a Catholic, by the way. Thankfully, it struck me that no, it wasn't the word of God through words that was required to deal with the situation at that particular point in time. What do I mean by that? And I think Christ gives us a splendid illustration. You may not agree. You don't have to agree with me. But, yes, I understand why Christ should ask us to turn the other cheek. I mean, the beauty of the New Testament is the richness of how he talks about the force and the value of love as opposed to that of fear and hate. But that same Christ, let's not forget, in all his wisdom, realized there was a time to fight, a time to cry, a time to love, and a time for other things. In that same Bible, we're told when he walked into the chapel, there were people trading in His Father's house. And did he go down on his knees to pray to God to drive the traders out of the chapel? He didn't do that. He may have made several attempts, and failed. What did he do? He picked the whip [sic] and kicked them out. There are those—yes, it's the use of force of some kind. In a way, this is why, I think, I must have decided to stay in the armed forces and to do what we have to do. Because all the prayers, somehow, were not helping.

In much the same way, I was telling my colleagues earlier on, it's rather unfortunate that a little too often too many of us end up trapping ourselves in the prayer of thoughts. It's magnificent. Because that's where it all starts. And then if you want to share it, to analyze it, it will have to appear as a prayer of words. But we have to go beyond that. If not, you wouldn't be here. From the prayer of thoughts, the prayer of words into the prayer of action. [Applause]

And I think that a little too often we've ended up, we seem to have forgotten some aspects of the prayer of action. And we're trapped in our quest for miracles. And we pray and pray and pray. I've seen my mother do it. Oh, I've experienced quite a few things in my life, too. And it's almost as if we seem to expect manna from heaven, or whatever it is—you know, when they wake up—on their tables. And they sweat it out, psalm after psalm, etc.

But, I believe that you and I are the miracle. God gave us eyes to see. Ears, the mind, the brain, the hand, the legs. I mean, we've put all these faculties to use. God's creation, you and I, both are created in the image of God, so that even though we're not born to fly—we don't have wings on our backs—through our creative intelligence we can fly higher than birds that are created to fly. We can probably even go deeper than some of the fishes. Inventiveness.

So, I think the time has come when we must begin to take a little more seriously the power and the prayer of actions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, if I have to continue this way, we may not leave this place. So I will restrict myself to my text, but before I do so, let me say that as I watched our little young brothers and sisters and our children dancing and the beautiful rhythm, I said to myself, No matter what they took away from us, no matter what we collaborated to send away, I've seen this here, I've seen this is in the US, and in fact, I'm a partial victim of it, because whenever I'm having to dance with my wife—I'm sorry this is not in the book, so I hope you're following, those who are interpreting—when I'm dancing with my beloved wife I have to hold very hard on to her because I need her African, beautiful rhythm. And I think if I have a problem it's probably because of the Scottish blood in me. [Laughter] But as I watched, you know, the rhythm of these children and your sons, I said to myself, no matter they think they took away, one thing they couldn't take away from us was our rhythm and our music. [Applause] You know? And how much joy is brought in the homes because of music.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the issue of restoring our identity and creativity is extremely important. But before I dilate on this subject let me first and foremost use this opportunity on behalf of members of my delegation to express our appreciation and gratitude to President Matthew Kérékou, the convener, and our fellow colleagues of this conference for inviting us to participate in the program and also for the warm reception accorded me and members of my delegation into this peaceful city. Our gathering here today, ladies and gentlemen, is of great importance, as it is directly linked to the destiny of our continent for the rest of its existence.

Your Excellency, President Kérékou, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Four centuries ago, our beloved Africa was subjected to the most traumatic and dehumanizing treatment in the history of mankind: the slave trade. The trade of humans took away the most able-bodied men and women and even children from Africa, plundered our God-given resources, and divided peoples and nations in a manner that generated hatred, mistrust and suspicion amongst brothers and sisters, people of various ethnic groups, thereby distorting our African values and systems.

Two centuries after the abolishing of the slave trade, the consequences of this shameful trade still persist in our lives, directly and in other forms. But we cannot forever continue to bemoan these dark and painful periods of our history, and explain away our failures of today with references—or with *mere* references—to them. The time has simply come for us now to reassess the past and

take appropriate measures to do what is necessary to forge a future of partnership and togetherness for mutual benefits.

My brother, President Kérékou, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few months ago, in May, 1999, Ghana played host to the Fifth African-African American Summit, which brought together a number of African heads of state, including my brother President Kérékou, as well as important personalities of African descent from the Diaspora, particularly the United States of America and the Caribbean. During the weeklong meeting we discussed various aspects of the slave trade and accepted responsibility for the role that some of our ancestors played in this traumatizing experience. At the end of the day, there was a spontaneous manifestation of a desire to let go of the pains of the past, to forgive and forget the psychological trauma that we still feel and to pave the way for our own healing and complete reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora.

Let me, once again, before you, say on behalf of our people, how sorry we are for the misdeeds of the past.

Is an apology enough? Yes, it is. Provided—or if—it is serious and genuine. But the prayer of words—once again—an apology can best be nourished with a prayer of deeds, the prayer of action. Our generation, I believe, has not just the moral, but the godly responsibility and obligation to break down the barriers which now stand between Africa and those in the Diaspora.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Africans of African descent are morally and historically entitled to reconnect with your mother continent. There can never be any justification for maintaining or putting obstacles in the way of the mutually beneficial obligation to reconnect. This is as much their home as it is ours.

[Applause]

Out of this reconciliatory spirit is bound to emerge a new sense of rededication to tackling the development needs of the mother continent. I, for one, felt that it is through such a reconciliation process that we can genuinely overcome this dreadful fate and build a future together where we—Africans on the continent, African Americans and all blacks of the Diaspora—could regain our lost identity and our creative energy and unite in our determination to work towards Africa's prosperity and dignity. We can turn this negative past into something positive for our future. As a result of this unfortunate past, our African American brothers and sisters, with your new modern levels of skill and expertise, now find themselves as members or nationals of a society which is technologically advanced, economically endowed, and literally powerful—a situation they've contributed immensely to. This, no doubt, places them in a strategic position of strength to stretch a hand across the ocean to the new victims of technological and economic slavery.

Your Excellency, President Kérékou,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather here today, we are in effect continuing the work that we started in a crawl in May 1999, and to turn the focus more on how best to lay the foundations for our development, with the help of our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora. The theme of the conference, reconciliation and development, is therefore most inappropriate [sic]. The development gap between Africa and the rest of the world, especially Europe and America, is ever widening. It is gratifying to note, however, that there is a real change in our political, economic and business environment now. In many parts of the continent, governments are striving to create a friendlier, more competitive environment to attract investments and ensure ever increasing higher economic growth rates and better standards of living for their people. We urge you all—we urge you, in all sincerity, irrespective of your color—to be part of this African Renaissance. We in Africa accept the challenge of this conference for us to demonstrate to our counterparts from outside the continent, that we are serious and that we appreciate their contribution to Africa's prosperity. Let us, therefore, use this occasion to infuse more dynamism into the spiritual, cultural, and economic ties that bind us, so that together we can overcome the remaining barriers to cooperation and progress. This type of cooperation should not be a one-way process. As our brothers and sisters assist us to develop our nascent capacities and overcome our numerous handicaps, we in turn should use our strength and power to support their causes in a country where the competition for recognition is always tough, and only the fittest find pride or place. We're going to show them that a strong Africa, the continent of your ancestors, will serve as their backbone in their country of abode.

Your Excellency, President Kérékou,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

We, as you know, stand on the threshold of a new millennium with all its refreshing prospects for positive change, but also with its many uncertainties. The task we have set for ourselves at this meeting may well become part—and I feel very confident about this—part of our history in the years to come. We can, indeed, make this historical event a gift to be cherished by future generations—*if* the conclusions to emerge from our interactions will reinforce our capacity to work for the greater good of all our people; *if* they will also lead to the emergence of new men and women of vision in Africa and the Diaspora who are motivated by their service to their people. Fortunately, ladies and gentlemen, this issue has now gone beyond the salvation of black by black. It has taken a new—or it's always been there—but the dynamism is rising in the sense that our fellows—whites from developed countries, people of various races—are waking up to their human obligation to their fellow man and woman, be they black, white, yellow, or otherwise. Talking about service to the people, ladies and gentlemen, will mean that everybody will be part of the implementation process. And here I would like to make a special appeal to our own people. And I'm referring to the common man in the street, to the lowly, so-called lowly ranked police officer or factory worker, students, policemen, and customs officials, security operators, bureaucrats, top management executives, lawmakers and judges, etc., so that the decisions and commitments of our heads of state who are leading in this endeavor may not remain a hollow dream. Indeed, the expectations of our people that we succeed as Africans on the continent and Africans in the Diaspora in the coming millennium are very high, and we cannot afford to fail.

Your Excellency, President Kérékou,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I say thank you to our brother, President Kérékou, let me share one little piece of observation. There was a time—I was quite small then—when racism was—not “prominent”—was a force to reckon, a detestable force to reckon with. And those were the days when we didn’t have any schools to train medical doctors and they had to be sent out. In those days as far as Ghana was concerned, most of them actually ended up in the UK, for instance. Yes, a few were in the Eastern bloc countries and some in the US. Ladies and gentlemen, no matter how good or how hard some of those black African doctors would try, no matter their level of expertise and competence, somehow their color was never recognized. Merit had no place. It only had place, maybe, amongst them. So, what happened? We were talking about love and hate this morning. There’s a connection. When I said love is a force to reckon with, and so is hate, if it is used constructively.

So, what happened? Our own fellow black medical pioneers who couldn’t take and stomach that kind of racism anymore in a place, say the UK, returned home. In other words, in our dealings with our fellow human beings, do whatever you wish, whether it’s to hurt in order to elevate, whether it’s to punish in order to make him or her wake up to his or her responsibilities, use any means, but don’t use any method that’s designed to humiliate. If you have to humiliate, let it be the last resort because in having to use the instrument, the medium, of humiliation, he or she could end up hating you. What happened? Of course, our people couldn’t stomach this any more and came back home. Feeling so humiliated, these pioneers got together and established the first medical school in Ghana. Today as we sit here, that medical school turns out some of the finest doctors, but unfortunately, because of a certain change, which I’ll explain, you cannot find most of them in my country—in Africa, in Ghana—but you will find them in Germany, UK, America, etc. Why? In the old days, when racism was at its peak and the black man felt humiliated most of the time and couldn’t take it any more, he naturally found comfort back at home. And the force, the sense of mission, was strong enough for him to set up a school, persevere, and to turn out medical doctors.

But with the passage of time, ladies and gentlemen, as the intensity of racism began to give way, right across the world to a large degree—otherwise what are doing, here in your mixed colors?—began to give way, economic racism, scientific expertise recognition began to replace the racism by color. So, irrespective of whether you were black or whatever it was, you were acceptable to the economic—fine!—to their social and economic needs. So as the barriers of racism was falling, it created an opening for my fellow black men to move, to leave my continent, suffering continent needing their doctors. And by the way, sometimes when you analysts are telling us that this is how much it costs to train that medical doctor, it’s just a question of having to pay back the fees, sorry! If it costs so much to train a student to become a medical doctor, at the end of which you go and line up from 2:00 in the morning in front of the British High Commission or whatever it is called, whatever they call where they issue the visas, and to pack your bag and baggage to board the next plane and leave the country. Please come back. There’s so much in my mind. ([Incomprehensible], can you help me?)

Well, where were we? The cost of trade. And then you're telling me that maybe your parents or you, whoever they are, or have to just find some means of paying what it took to train you. I'm sorry! You mathematicians, you people with big brains, you're wrong. I tell you what you'll have to pay *me*. You will have to pay me, my country, the taxpayer, the poor farmer, not only what it took to train you, but you will have to pay me enough to rent or hire a doctor to be in place right away, enough money to keep him, pay him every month, until a new doctor comes out of our school to replace you. Do you gather? I'm sorry.

In Ghana we have a saying that I can give you a million pounds, ten billion—I'm sorry, you will have to use it to buy food, to buy water. Nobody eats raw cash or money. You can't chew. You don't eat it for food. You will have to use it to buy food. In other words, I need a doctor, and that money would not be enough, and this is why I would have to, need much more to, go and probably bring in a Cuban or Western doctor to come and take care of my patients for eight years or six years, no matter how long it takes, until a new student emerges out of the university. Right? No, come on, don't tell me you don't agree. You know?

What does a country like Cuba do? Some of you should know. Where I come from or where I belong to, within the tropics of Africa, apparently looking at the syllabus or the syllabi, as they call it, we don't need more than sixty percent of what they have to learn to be able to take care of tropical or African diseases.

In other words, we could turn out doctors so fast to be able to take care of our people, but we train them to international standards. With that international license, we will be acceptable to any institution in any part of the world, and so he can pack his baggage and move out.

What do they do in Cuba? They train them on the sixty percent that they needed—that way you did not make him an international commodity—forcing the person to stay at home and service his people. Maybe you make it eight years, five years, ten years, at the end of which you can then add the additional forty percent and you can leave if you want to. But, the point is that I'm talking about some other aspects of the brain drain, one of the biggest diseases that we suffer. This subject "reconciliation and development" couldn't have been a better title or theme to choose to discuss this subject. And I think it's an issue that should not be taken lightly at all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My brothers and sisters from Africa, sometimes we also have some little disease. Times when I ask myself, I mean, don't we feel humiliated about certain things? Where lies our pride? I remember when, a few years ago, this so-called AIDS disease was first noticed. An African newspaper, was it in *New Africa* or something like this (which we know is sponsored by the CIA—I don't know if they still do)? And I knew it when this thing first appeared. I said, you watch it, they'll put this on Africa. And surely enough they used that newspaper to be the first paper—*New Africa*, I've forgotten its name—to announce to the world that this AIDS, whatever it is, this disease, emanates from Africa. And the campaign has continued that way. I don't know whether it's true or false, but I've read enough to put question marks on quite a few things.

I'm not here to discuss AIDS, much as I know the damage it is doing to my continent, to our people. As I sit here, how far do I go? I set the example. I've done my third or fourth AIDS test. That does not presuppose that I'm that promiscuous—I'm not an angel—but listen my friends, you'll laugh when you finish: I'd like to know whether you have an AIDS certificate. Why?! Because I remember—let me come back to this subject—many years ago when this issue first came up, there was a conference of African scientists in a crock on this subject, and I was saying, "Let's watch it." This disease, from what they say—how it is passed from one person to another—could do extensive damage to Africa because we, in Africa, don't eat very often on individual plates with forks and knives, etc., or yes, but the point is that very often we eat from a communal plate (a big family) or from the same bowl. Excuse my saying the poor hygienic situations we have around, the unsanitary situations, or even from the positive standpoint, some of the things that we do collectively is such that you probably cannot avoid accidentally passing this thing on. And I was saying that we knew we have to careful.

Could you believe that a week, or less than a week after that, we had another meeting somewhere and said—African scientists—Africa had nothing to fear. This was in the early 80s. Africa had nothing to fear from the AIDS scare. I would like to round all of them up today and say, this is what I said, this is what you said in those days. And you are the ones we look up to as the people of great wisdom and thinking. Look at it. This didn't require anything special. This was simple, pure common sense.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I talk about pride, what do I mean? I'm talking about our weaknesses. There's no point in talking about development. There's no point in having these people around—black, white, rich, whatever it is—feeling repentant, wanting to help us. You know, if they want us to help, we've got to be ready to stand on our feet! I'm sorry, I have difficulties helping somebody who's not prepared to help him or herself! What happened?

When Europe, not too long ago, found herself in a tight spot, Britain, with her commonwealth sisters and brothers, naturally, forced by the European Community demands, had to find ways of means to keep out some of us. And they found a very intelligent way of going about it. What did they do? I'm listening to BBC and what do I hear? They were interviewing people in the streets, and they were saying some of the most atrocious things about us in Africa. They must stay away from our country. Stay away on their continent with their skirt and this and not bring their AIDS to our country.

Do you think I was angry? Sorry. I was not angry, I was not annoyed, I was happy. I mean to be insulted in this manner. Because I was hoping that my fellow black man would feel so humiliated by this thing, he wouldn't step over there, he would stay at home and put his profession to use in my country. The following morning—whatever it is, a few days—I was spying that chancellery where they go for passports. Once again, they had to line up. That insult had more effect on us. I'm sorry. I don't think this is good enough. You're playing your part. You're here to play your part. Apologies, etc. But out of this apology, we're supposed to be deriving some strength. Some of you can put it in a better way than I can.

Apologies must not be wasted. For some of us, we're very quick to say "thank you." The way I talk to my children, my wife, my steward, is no different. What I may be saying to the steward,

the content may be different from what I'm saying to my wife, but the tone, the manner I speak to that steward is no different from the way I speak to my wife. In other words, I must recognize the basic humanity in each and every one of us. If you cannot recognize that, I'm afraid then you're only hurting yourself. You are remaining small. You're not helping the growth of your fellow man and woman, your society.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me end here and give our elder brother, President Kérékou, to also come and share his thoughts with us. But I sincerely hope that we will meet again. Let me say one thing: I used to see President Kérékou when he used to mouth his Marxist, Leninist duh duh duh duh duh! [Laughter] As a lonely—not a lonely—as a man who was alone. He's gone and come back and today nobody wields the Bible any harder or stronger than he does. [Applause] And as we meet to discuss issues, seventy percent of the time it's on the Bible and twenty-five percent on probably, you know, what has to be tackled. There again, I was beginning to think that the man is still alone. But coming here and seeing all of you such noble people—and I don't underestimate the strength of those who follow the teachings, the love of Christ. I don't. Every single one of you with your sense of mission, with your tendency to have purpose, could be worth ten, fifteen other people who have no sense of purpose because of the light—

Ladies and gentlemen, like I'm saying: I'm so grateful that the man I thought was alone and lonely, is not alone and is not lonely with you here. Yes, ladies and gentlemen. [Applause] I feel very much at home in your midst. [Applause]

Let me end up once again by thanking my brother, President Kérékou, for the honor done my colleagues and I by inviting us to this historic event, and may success crown our efforts. God bless you.