

LCRD Day One (December 2, 1999)
President Kérékou's Opening Address

His Excellency, President of the Republic of Ghana,
His Excellency the Vice-President of the Dominican Republic,
Honorable President of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso,
Honorable President of the National Assembly of Togo,
His Excellency the Prime Minister of the Republic of Chad,
Honorable Chairmen of the National Institutions of Benin,
Honorable Ministers,
Honorable members of the National Assembly of Benin,
Honorable Senators from the United States of America,
Honorable members of the American Congress,
Honorable Representative of the European Countries,
Honorable Representatives of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Royal Highnesses of Benin,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Today, Thursday, December 2, 1999 the entire population of the Republic of Benin, its institutions, and its leaders are happy and honored to host this historical gathering of the Black Diaspora who have come back here to their very roots, together with their brothers and sisters from Europe and America, with a view to putting a seal on the forgiveness and reconciliation part [of the conference theme?], which is expected to pave and light up the way to a genuine brotherliness between men and women of our planet.

On the eve of the Third Millennium, our joy is immense and our pride is real as we welcome you here in this free African land of Benin, the country of our common ancestors, a country you are bound to by such links that the tragic and painful mistakes of the dark centuries of our history have not been able to alter. On this memorable day, the heart and conscience of Africans and African Americans are swelled up with the chapters of four centuries of history written in tears and blood.

And yet, we are resolved to look toward the future and commit our hopes to building a new and modern era. It was said there is a time to pull down and there is a time to build up. This means that the disastrous consequences of the long, painful separation of our ancestors are still dividing families, villages, ethnic groups and whole regions of our great, beautiful, and rich continent, Africa. Basically, this is why the Republic of Benin is determined, on the eve of the new millennium, to help turn the page of that dark period of our history by organizing at a global level a series of events that will involve all the slave trade actors, namely the Africans of Africa as suppliers, the Europeans as slave traders, the New World as buyer and the Diaspora as the innocent victim.

Here, you are in the country that still bears the indelible marks of history that can be forgiven but never be forgotten. For it is written: "He will appear before those who crucified Him, who nailed His hands and feet. He will show His side pierced by a spearhead"—God's words.

Even at the worst moment of humiliation, woes, and shameful treatment and denials that fuelled and sustained the shameful traffic on the blood-trailed routes in ocean expanses that carried our great-grandfathers to other continents—never has this Black soul, the vivid expression of our specific and indestructible and persistent civilization, been lost, despite the most strenuous hardships and corrosive tests of time. That Black soul found its expression in our music, art, in our literature, in brief in our way of thinking and acting. In all the places in the world where Blacks have settled, the echoes of the mother continent, Africa, have resounded in almost an identical way, in cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane fields, in the atrocious prisons, in artistic and literary movements. We are happy that the flame that was lit by such precursors of Black renaissance as William Dubois, Claude McKay, [and] the gospel, jazz and blues rebels are alight and resound yet again in Africa to perpetuate history and the secular link that we share.

Our memories, Aimé Césaire said, are full of rivers of blood. They still remember, though striving for forgiveness and reconciliation, the sad memories of blood-trailed routes, of ephemeral objects sailing out of view on the sea, of Blacks thrown as food to sharks, families parted forever, those men and women sold in the shameful trade markets, enslaved and turned into mere chattel on hostile plantations. Our collective memories also remember our guilty complicities in this hideous trade: the manhunts that took place in the hostile forests, moments of great anxiety and the time of departure for unknown places.

However, the wheel of history has been inexorably turning, taking this shameful and abject past far away from mankind, leading it by the same token towards a more rational and modern era. Molded in the values of modern rationality, we belong to the generation of the men and women upon whom is thrust the privilege and the duty to instill a new sense of direction to mankind.

In my mind, there lies the object of our present gathering, the real aim of which is to raise fresh queries on our past and, together, write a new page of our history in golden letters of reconciliation, love, brotherhood and forgiveness.

What we have in common today goes beyond the simple issue of the color of our skins. What we want to show today to the world is a common fervent desire for mutual rediscovering and understanding, cooperation and development in the midst of a globalization drive that will bring down many barriers and will eradicate so many artificial differences among the people and the nations. Our duty is to invent a new promising vision of the Black Diaspora that will consecrate a return to an active and sustained solidarity enriched by the exchange of knowledge and know-how. This is clearly a new challenge that is dictated by the ongoing changes, which require us to bring out all that strongly binds us.

His Excellency, President of the Republic of Ghana

His Excellency the Vice-President of the Dominican Republic

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Beyond the justifiable groundswell of emotions generated by our meeting, it is our duty to remain lucid and clearheaded. Given present realities of our contemporary world and given the responsibility that we have in our legitimate venture that consists in establishing a cooperation and wide-ranging exchange network between the Africans of Africa, the African Americans and those who belong to the Black Diaspora. This is a new challenge that we must take up and overcome on the eve of the third millennium, which holds great opportunities for achievement, notwithstanding the discrepancies in living standards, the difficulty in creating harmonious link between the past, the present and the future.

Benin, like the other countries of Black Africa, is your second motherland. It is quite normal and natural that you show a particular interest in, first, Africa, so as to be involved in its reconstruction and share its wealth. In other words, you should give, and in return you should take. If so far our bruised continent has not benefited from the expected reparation for prejudices caused by slave trade, the acceptance of reconciliation by our brothers and sisters of the Diaspora will be a form of positive and constructive response that matches our true aspirations. We should remind ourselves that we cannot live on bread alone.

Being fully convinced that the new millennium will be that of the renaissance of our Diaspora, and our solidarity-drive towards the future will consolidate our development action, I now wish to declare open this Conference of the Leaders on Reconciliation and Development.

Long live this reconciliation between the African Americans and the Africans of Africa. Long live international friendship, solidarity and cooperation.

May God bless you.

Thank you.