

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
PRESIDENT JERRY JOHN RAWLINGS OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA**

I have always said to those around me, “We must learn from Africa, take a lesson from the African people.” Nothing is more obstructive to friendship than arrogance.

When I first met President Jerry John Rawlings of the Republic of Ghana, I greeted him by saying, “I welcome the ‘Robin Hood’ of Ghana to Japan!” He responded with a warm smile.

Our first meeting took place in Tokyo in October 1993. President Rawlings was only 46 at the time. Twelve years earlier, in 1981, he had assumed national leadership to put his country back on track to democracy. Over the years, he has taken stringent measures to stamp out corruption in the government, bureaucracy and armed forces. He frankly states that he has zero tolerance for corruption and graft, because he knows that the country belongs to the people of Ghana. It belongs to the ordinary people, to those who labor under the hot sun, to the fishermen who brave the rough seas, to the women who keep its markets bustling with activity, to the truck drivers who deliver the necessities of daily life. He vowed to restore power to the people of Ghana.

President Rawlings knew that a small, corrupt, privileged class could rob the nation of its very future, and he was determined not to compromise in his struggle. This champion of truth and justice, who fought against corrupt and self-serving officials, came to be compared to the legendary hero of Old England, Robin Hood.

I heard that President Rawlings maintains a very simple lifestyle, and is so devoted to his job that he keeps an army cot in his office so that he can sleep there when his work continues into the early morning. Emphasizing the importance of improving his country’s environment and sanitation, he pulls on high rubber boots and grabs a shovel and cleans out the gutters of city streets, making his staff do the same. This is not some grandstand play for popularity. He wants to show the people, through his own actions, what needs to be done.

He is so strongly opposed to any corruption or injustice, and has such personal integrity, that those who wish to exploit their power for personal gain cannot long remain in his company. I have heard that he has sternly disciplined several of his staff members for ethical lapses.

I have long said that the twenty-first century will be the “Century of Africa.” For three centuries, various colonial powers plundered, pillaged, murdered and wrought abominable destruction in Africa. The scars are still fresh. How can we ring in a truly new century unless those who have undergone the most painful suffering attain supreme happiness? There can be no dawn of a new age of humanity until the people of Africa find that happiness.

I spoke of my bright expectations for Africa, noting how the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72), cherished an ardent hope that Ghana’s future heroes would cut through the suffocating mist of inhuman discrimination and lead the people of Ghana into an open valley of light. I said I am sure that this beautiful wish is now being realized in Ghana. My dream is to see the dawning of the African century with my own eyes.

President Rawlings thanked me for my goodwill toward Ghana, saying he keenly appreciated my concern for its future. He then went on to state that whereas President

Nkrumah had fought against colonialism, the struggle today was against a new type of colonialism—in other words, while the chains had disappeared from people’s arms and legs, they still shackled their hearts and minds. This simple statement revealed the profound humanism of the president’s beliefs. These words could also just as easily be applied to contemporary Japan.

President Rawlings noted that there are two kinds of education—education that tames people and education that liberates them. Education forced on people from above, the cramming of information into students’ minds, he asserted, only prepares them to be robots who meekly obey authority without questioning. Unless education causes the inner potential of the student to flower, unless it promotes development from the inside out, it will only produce machines, not fully realized human beings, he said.

I met President Rawlings again four years later, in December 1997. His wife, First Lady Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, accompanied him. After arriving at Narita Airport, they came directly to see us. They first stopped at the “Ghana at 40” exhibition at the Min-On Culture Center and then at the Seikyo Shimbun building, where the couple and their entourage were greeted with a choral presentation by members of the Soka University Pan-African Friendship Society and other youth representatives.

By then President Rawlings was serving his second term in office. His passion and humanism burned as bright as ever. On that occasion he stressed the importance of reenergizing the people. In the past, he said, the people of Ghana had been treated as machines and left empty and hollow. Far too often, he noted, nations tend to establish various social structures and then force their citizens to fit into them; they tend to enslave the people and take away their power. But that is wrong, he insisted, maintaining that the people, not the nation, should wield power. The people are the leading players of society and it is they who have the right to decide society’s future. Yet, he observed, so many people are at a loss as to what to do or which way to turn. This is what he wants to change, he declared.

In his passion for these ideas, the words spilled forth with tremendous force. He was urging the people to rise and rid themselves in one clean sweep of the old, corrupt established order.

I offered my support and encouragement. “The Soka Gakkai was once scorned as a gathering of the poor and the sick,” I said, “but I have always been proud of our organization. I have striven all these years in my endeavors absolutely confident in the belief that working with the people, for the people, is the right way to live.”

President Rawlings was an air force pilot, and he led his comrades in 1979 in toppling the corrupt military dictatorship. After the uprising, he promptly handed over the reigns of power to a new popularly elected civilian president and government. Unfortunately, the new administration was plagued by the same old corruption and misgovernment. Several attempts were made on the life of Ghana’s “Robin Hood.” And fighting between rival groups seeking to seize control of the country continued to wrack Ghana.

Flight Lieutenant Rawlings knew that his country’s future hung in the balance. He traveled all over Ghana in his old Datsun, talking to the people. “We must make the welfare of the people our central concern,” he urged, as he traveled from village to village without rest. Then in 1981, he led an effort to bring down the corrupt government and set about rebuilding his nation. From that moment on, Ghana has astonished the world with its

economic growth.

Both the president and the first lady have devoted themselves wholeheartedly to drawing out the potential of the Ghanaian people. President Rawlings declared that leaders who care only for the trappings of power accomplish nothing. He pointed out that while many people think that the job of Ghana's first lady is to travel around the country accepting bouquets, nothing in fact could be further from the truth.

Mrs. Rawlings shares her husband's commitment to their nation. She declares that the people will only truly triumph when women rise up and take their rightful place in society. Women, she says, are now awakening to the fact that they have taken a backseat for too long. Mrs. Rawlings launched a grass-roots movement based on the belief that women must take responsibility for society's future and that ordinary women working together have the power to change society. Her goals are to teach women to read and write, to equip them with skills to work in small businesses, to help them learn how to run their homes as efficiently as possible, and to provide day-care centers where they can leave their children while they study or work.

President Rawlings is unstinting in his praise for his wife: "I couldn't have accomplished what I have without her. In my country, we say that behind every great man is a great woman. My wife is so busy that my daughter says, 'Behind every great man there is an exhausted woman!'" After we all laughed heartily, I added, "Why don't we just say that 'Behind every great man is an even greater woman?'" We all laughed again and reaffirmed the bright future of a society that respects women and their rights.

When President Rawlings visited Japan in 1993, he expressed a special wish to visit Kagoshima in Kyushu. There he wanted to pay his respects to the parents of a member of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) who had met an accidental death in Ghana the previous year. He told the parents what a valuable contribution their son had made to the African nation. Unfortunate as his death was, the young man had left behind a great deal in terms of the know-how and technical skills he had imparted. The people of Ghana would do their best to show that the young man's efforts and his death had not been in vain, the president said. Their son had contributed something that money could not buy; he had been a wonderful young man, and he had done a superb job. The president expressed his most profound gratitude, and the young man's parents appreciated his sincere gesture.

While President Rawlings can be so kind and considerate on the one hand, he firmly believes that one must also speak one's mind plainly. When he does speak, he gives voice to what is really on the people's minds. Unlike so-called professional politicians, he is straightforward and honest.

When speaking to a former president of a country that had in the past expelled all Ghanaians from its territory, he brought up the issue and confronted him directly, saying that he could never forget the cruel manner in which his compatriots had been treated. He does not "make deals." For the sake of his comrades, he speaks out, he fights, at the risk of his very life.

President Rawlings is a person of character and integrity—he has cast off the chains that restrain the heart and mind. □