When Barack (“blessed”) Obama – the child of a Kenyan father and Kansan mother – was elected as the first African-American president of the United States in November 2008, a wave of ‘Obamamania’ swept across the African continent, its Diaspora, and the world. Former South African president, Nelson Mandela, from whom Obama was linked to the Group of Eight (G-8) to or from more strategic destinations. His arrival as the first African-American president at the site of a cargo was transported to Europe and the suffocating dungeons from which human Africans perished, was particularly welcome. His visit in August 2006 during a visit in which he stressed the interdependence of Africa with the rest of the world. Barack also supported African ‘agency’ in resolving its own problems, with a strong identification with Africa by referring to his Kenyan father three times in the speech and observing: ‘I have the blood of Africa within me.’ His message was one of ‘good governance’ (though his praise of deceased oil-rich Gabon, Omar Bongo, as a peacekeeper in 2009, and his embrace of the US as a candidate rather than a power in 2007).…

In Ghana, Obama also visited the Cape Coast Castle, a major slave post with suffocating dungeons from which human cargo was transported to Europe and the Americas during the height of the slave trade and the holocaust of the first African-American president at the site of a tragic and sordid historical monument of a trade, in which an estimated 20 million Africans were sold. He particularly poignanted. This visit could, however, have revived feelings within sections of Africa’s black community that Obama is no part of the African American, since his ancestors – his father – came by airplane from Kenya to study in America, and not on a slave-ship from Africa.

Obama has now made two presidential visits to Africa – both of which resemble refuelling stops on the way to or from more strategic destinations. His aides, however, insisted that the Ghana trip was linked to the Group of Eight (G-8) summit that the president attended in Italy in the same week at which issues of critical importance to Africa – trade, world trade, and the global financial crisis – were discussed. The idea was to use Ghana, which has held five multi-party elections between 1992 and 2008, as a role model of democratic governance and civil society in promoting development in Africa. The choice of Ghana was also not entirely disinterested; the country is expected to become an important oil exporter by 2010. About two-thirds of recent US trade with Africa has been with oil-rich Nigeria, Angola, and Gabon.

Even before the Ghana trip in 2009, Obama had visited Kenya, South Africa, and Darfur refugees in Chad as a US Senator in 2006. In his ancestral homeland of Kenya, he postulated the importance of justice and returning ‘son of the soil.’ His condemnation of human rights abuses and corruption in Africa was widely applauded. As a student in the US, Barack had taken part in anti-apartheid demonstrations which had helped raise his political consciousness. I went to listen to Obama’s performance. He seemed like a machine politician, dodging difficult questions and sometimes giving vacuous responses. Barack’s most insightful biographer is American journalist David Wade, who has followed him closely since his time as a state legislator in Chicago, and covered his 2006 Africa visit. Mendell confirmed that Barack was exhausted from jet-lag during his first visit to Cape Town speech. I subsequently followed the rise and rise of Obama, and witnessed some of the most eloquent and inspirational performances given by any American politician. Soaring, often biblical campaign oratory promising a vision of a better America espoused by prophets like Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. He had preceded him, provided hope and succour to a pre-recession US that was desperately in need of both. Barack often seems to be exhausted from perceived sense of justice and empathy, and has sought to speak for the voiceless and the powerless: people who are usually invisible to mainstream American politicians. As he himself put it, he wants to ‘give voice to the voiceless, and power to the powerless.’

In understanding the symbolism of Obama for the continent, it is essential to revisit his African heritage. His elegant 1995 memoir, Dreams from My Father, describes how he ‘grew up with a fierce and vulnerable determination to crack the hard pane of glass.’ None of the previous forty-three American presidents of African ancestry could have made such a statement as ‘I am the son of my father’s pain. My questions were my brothers’ questions. Their struggle, my birthright.’ But his father’s legacy is also a source of weakness for the future president. Barack is struggling to comprehend. He is both in Africa and in the diaspora. His生態 has been disoriented from the beauty of the historical site of the biblical Garden of Eden; he identifies with, and makes connections between, black African-Americans in the US and Kenyans in dirt-poor Nairobi shantytowns (as well as with poor Indonesians from his childhood in Jakarta); and he is appalled by the current economic downturn, urban decay, and environmental degradation of the former British colony – Kenya. In a final moving scene in the ancestral rural homeland of Siaya (where Obama bathes in the cool waters) and in the restored house of Barack, the dictatorships, the pervasive corruption, the brutality of twenty-one-year-old guerillas who know nothing but war, wielding

DREAMS FROM OUR ANCESTORS: OBAMA AND AFRICA

Adekeye Adebajo

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance
by Barack Obama


The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream
by Barack Obama


Obama: From Promise to Power
by David Mendell


Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui famously noted that Obama’s parents’ divorce ‘could turn out to be one of the most significant matrimonial breakups in history.’ If Obama’s parents had stayed together, observed Mazrui, he would probably not have become the first African-American president. He grew up instead more African than American and might have been ‘another African sending remittances home to Kenya.’ His father may even have moved the family permanently back to Kenya, where Obama Sr. returned to live. The stability that sustained Barack’s political ambitions appears to have been provided by three strong women: his Harvard-trained African-American wife, Michelle, and his white mother, Stanley Dunham (died of cancer in November 1995) – and white grandmother – Madelyn Dunham (who died two days before her grandson’s historic presidential victory in November 2008).

But despite his visits to Africa, Obama himself seems to have been prevented by political or economic concerns from reinforcing similar stereotypes of the continent which he condemned in his 1995 memoir and his Accra speech of 2009. He talks about Africa in broad-brushed Afro-pessimistic strokes in his 2006 The Audacity of Hope: ‘There are times when considering the plight of Africa – the millions racked by AIDS, four days, the dictatorships, the pervasive corruption, the brutality of twenty-one-year-old guerillas who know nothing but war, wielding
machetes or AK-47s – I find myself plunged into cynicism and despair.’

Despite Obama’s obvious identification with Africa, it must always be remembered that he is the president of America and not of Africa. Barack thus has other pressing policy priorities which will undoubtedly take precedence over the continent’s problems. These include: reviving America’s economy and securing a viable health-care plan; ending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; making peace in the Middle East; repairing relations with European allies; fighting nuclear non-proliferation in North Korea and Iran; and engaging an increasingly wealthy China and erratically assertive Russia.

In spite of the great expectations unleashed by his historic election in some African quarters that Obama will act as a Messiah in increasing US support for Africa, even a black Gulliver will be held down by powerful Lilliputian legislators who control America’s purse strings. There is still a lack of a powerful, cohesive domestic constituency on Africa in the US which can wield the influence of the Israel lobby, even though the Jewish American population is much smaller than the thirty million African-Americans who account for twelve percent of the country’s population. Israel receives $3 billion of US aid a year, while Egypt obtains $2 billion a year to remain friends with Israel. Forty-eight sub-Saharan African countries, including some of the poorest in the world, share less than $1 billion annually – the clearest sign of the political nature of American aid. In contrast to its policy towards Israel, US policy towards Africa is not based on consistent Congressional support and often involves seeking ad hoc coalitions in support of specific policies. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) currently has only one Senator out of 100, and 43 out of 435 members in the US House of Representatives. It is thus important that pro-Africa lobbyists work closely with progressive legislators and Washington-based interest groups to influence Obama’s policies towards Africa, as they successfully did in sanctioning apartheid South Africa in the 1980s. The tens of thousands of highly-educated Africans in America must also be mobilized in building a viable constituency for Africa.

The main outlines so far of Obama’s early Africa policy, gleaned from his senatorial career and presidential campaign include: support for the United Nations/African Union peacekeeping mission in Sudan’s Darfur region; increasing aid to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); supporting South Africa and Nigeria to play a leadership role in Africa; and pushing for reform of the UN, an institution that many Africans see as vital to their security and economic development. Johnnie Carson, a respected African-American former ambassador to Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, has been appointed as Obama’s Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.

Building on his Ghana trip, Obama must support more strongly the role of UN peacekeeping in Africa, as well as the strengthening of African regional organisations and national health systems. Washington should play a greater role in annulling Africa’s $290 billion debt. America must also eliminate its deleterious agricultural subsidies to its farmers ($108 billion in 2005) and allow free access to its markets for Africa’s agricultural products. This must be done not just out of some altruistic feeling of charity but – as Obama himself noted in his speech in Accra – to take advantage of the potential of trade with an African market of nearly one billion consumers. It is in these issues that the first African-American president must invest some political capital. Otherwise, these sporadic trips to Africa will become mere symbolic photo opportunities that feel the continent’s pain but yield no concrete benefits for Obama’s ancestral homeland.

In the true spirit of our ancestors, Africans must always welcome Barack back home but should continue to hold his feet to the communal fire.