

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, noted: ‘Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place’. Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki said: ‘The victory of Senator Obama is our own victory because of his roots here in Kenya. As a country, we are full of pride for his success’. South African president at the time, Kgalema Motlanthe, opined: ‘Your election.... carries with it hope for millions.... of people of ...African descent both in Africa and in the diaspora’. Nigerian president, Umaru Yar’Adua noted: ‘Obama’s election has finally broken the greatest barrier of prejudice in human history. For us in Nigeria, we have a great lesson to draw from this historic event.’ Finally, the former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, the Ghanaian Kofi Annan, exclaimed: ‘Obama’s victory demonstrates America’s extraordinary capacity to renew itself.’

Six months into his tenure, Barack Obama’s visit to Ghana in July 2009 was a twenty-four hour sojourn that marked the first trip to sub-Saharan Africa by America’s first black president. This followed a brief stop-over in Egypt a month earlier. In Accra, Obama delivered a major address to the Ghanaian parliament on development and democracy 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 the US acting as a partner rather than a patron. He noted his own 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 tyrant of oil-rich Gabon, Omar Bongo, as a peacemaker in June 2009, and his embrace of autocratic oil-rich Arab sheikhs and Chinese communists, appear to contradict this); increased opportunity; better health (announcing a vague \$63 billion plan to fight AIDS and malaria); and conflict resolution. The speech essentially noted that Africa needed ‘strong institutions’ rather than ‘strong men.’ Obama ended by reminding Africans that Martin Luther King Jr. had been inspired in his continued pursuit of the American civil rights struggle by attending Ghana’s independence celebrations in 1957.

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. The symbolism 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 perished, was particularly poignant. This visit could, however, also have revived feelings within sections of America’s black community that Obama is not a ‘real’ African-American, since his ancestors – his father – came by aeroplane from Kenya to study in America, and not on a slave-ship from Africa.

Obama has now made two presidential visits to Africa – Accra and Cairo – 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 – food security, climate change, 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 Darfuri refugees in Chad as a US Senator in 2006. In his ancestral homeland of Kenya, he was enthusiastically received like a rock star 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 speak in Cape Town on his senatorial safari in August 2006 during a visit in which he met one of his great heroes – former South African president, Nelson Mandela – and criticised the incumbent Thabo Mbeki’s AIDS policies. During his Cape Town speech, Obama noted the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. on the anti-apartheid struggle, and called for South Africa and the US to assist poorer countries to ‘build a vibrant civil society.’ I was, however, somewhat disappointed with 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 Mendell, 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 the 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 politician. His soaring, often biblical campaign oratory promising a vision of a better America espoused by prophets like Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., who had preceded him, provided hope and succour to a pre-recession US that was desperately in need of both. Barack often appears to have a profound 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,

Dreams from Our Ancestors: Obama and Africa

Adekeye Adebajo

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

Three Rivers Press, 1995, 453 pgs, ISBN: I-4000-8277-3, \$13.95

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

Crown Publishers, 2006, 375 pgs, ISBN: 978-1-84767-083-0, \$16.50

Obama: From Promise to Power
by David Mendell

HarperCollins, 2007, 406 pgs, ISBN: 978-0-06-085821-6, \$14.95

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 a painful quest for identity and a vulnerability triggered by the death of an arrogant, impulsive but determined Kenyan father (in a car crash in 1982) who left his family when Barack was only two years old. Obama met his father only one other time, when he was ten. He idolised his father (a goat-herder as a boy) and they both studied at Harvard University. But Barack’s father – a civil servant in Kenya – had died in penury, an alcoholic and abusive character who failed to fulfil either his personal ambitions or his family responsibilities. Obama was therefore determined to correct these flaws. Becoming president of the US was born out of a determination to fulfil personal ambitions that his father had clearly failed to do. The love and attention that Barack devotes to his two daughters, Malia and Sasha, appear to be a conscious attempt to make up for his own lack of paternal affection.

Obama clearly identifies with Africa, as is evident from his journey of self-discovery to Kenya as a 26-year old described in his 1995 memoir. As he put it: ‘The pain I felt was my father’s pain. My questions were my brothers’ questions. Their struggle, my birthright.’ But his father’s legacy is also a heavy burden that the young, sensitive Barack is struggling to comprehend. He is clearly caught in a cultural limbo, feeling neither completely American nor African; neither completely white nor black. As he prepares to fly to Africa for the first time, Obama describes himself as a ‘Westerner not entirely at home in the West, an African on his way to a land full of strangers.’ On his way to Africa, Barack tours historic sites in Europe and makes the startling observation: ‘It wasn’t that Europe wasn’t beautiful....It just wasn’t mine. I felt as if I were living out someone else’s romance; the incompleteness of my own history stood between me and the sites I saw like a hard pane of glass.’ None of the previous forty-three American presidents of European ancestry could have made such a statement, nor listed Martiniquan Frantz Fanon, as Barack does, as one of their main intellectual influences. This is what makes Obama’s ascent to the White House so phenomenal and of such great interest to Africa.

But like many African-Americans, before Obama arrives in his ancestral home, he has a somewhat romanticised view of Africa

which, he notes, ‘had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums.’ Once in Kenya, Barack feels his father’s seemingly ubiquitous presence. He is nostalgic about Obama Sr.’s life and times, seeking to recreate, through this visit, a sometimes mythical past that he never knew but so badly needs to understand and feel a part of. It is with great trepidation and anxiety that Barack approached this visit, as if fearing that his long quest for identity in America would once again be frustrated. Having struggled to become an African-American in order to overcome his painful fatherless childhood, it is as if he now wanted to don the robes of an African identity in order to reconnect with his ancestral homeland. In Kenya, Obama experiences, and enjoys, the extravagant hospitality and warmth of his large extended Kenyan family; he speaks a bit of his native Luo; he is exposed to the corruption and ethnic tensions of Kenyan politics; he rides in *matatus* (rickety taxis); he eats goat curry and *ugali*; he goes on safari and discovers and appreciates the beauty of the historical site of the biblical Garden of Eden; he identifies with, and makes connections between, black Americans in Chicago ghettos and Kenyans in dirt-poor Nairobi shantytowns (as well as with poor Indonesians from his childhood in Jakarta); and he is appalled by the continuing pernicious socio-economic impact of British colonialism on Kenya.

In a final moving scene in the ancestral rural hometown of Siaya (where Obama bathes in the open air and uses pit-latrines), Barack breaks down and cries by his father’s grave. He is finally ‘home,’ writing – perhaps a bit sentimentally – about no longer feeling watched and not having awkward questions raised about his name or his hair. He had read about Dedan Kimathi, the great Kenyan liberation fighter during the Mau Mau struggle against British colonialism in the 1950s, and could now put a place to the legendary names he had learned about in America.

Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui famously noted that Obama’s parents’ divorce could turn out historically 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 US president. He would have grown 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 – Ann Dunham (who 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 has sometimes been guilty of 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, the constant droughts and famines, the dictatorships, the pervasive corruption, the brutality of twelve-year-old guerrillas 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.

