

## Obama's roots trace new routes for US-Africa relations

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Barack Obama is now the most powerful man on the planet for at least the coming four years. The man who repeatedly showed his pride of being a Kenyan-American who struggled from scratch to fame, has promised change at all level. That was even his campaign motto: 'Change we can believe in'. Back 'home', in Kenya in particular and in Africa in general, they too believe that something is changing. The view of America, the warlike nation, the country of the rich who operate where their interests are, is changing. Obama's foreign policy does not contain any

spectacular change as far as Africa is concerned. However, those changes are to be found somewhere else: namely in Obama's most important speeches.

### My African father was a shepherd

Soon after his nomination as the Democratic Party's candidate for the 2004 senatorial election, which he eventually won, Obama pronounced his first 'address to the nation', during the Democratic National Convention in Boston on July 27. After the traditional thank yous in paragraph one, Obama sets the frame for his speech in paragraph two, before jumping to serious matters in paragraph three:

My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father -- my grandfather - was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. [\[1\]](#)

At that time, he was still struggling to secure the senatorial seat for the State of Illinois. Africa is no vote-winning subject either for senatorial or presidential elections. Yet, he took the big risk to open his keynote with his strange story of 'the magic mulatto trapped between two worlds' [\[2\]](#) Speaking in support of presidential candidate John Kerry, he would have logically opened with the hot crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, the North Korean nuclear threats. In any case, not with a shepherd somewhere in an unknown village on the shores of Lake Victoria, who received poor education and managed eventually to fly to the US thanks to charity.

Berlin, 24 July 2008: exactly (minus three days) four years after the Boston keynote speech, Obama was addressing the entire world, this time as presidential candidate. Paragraph one: thank yous. Paragraph two: speech framework. Paragraph three: guess it! 'My mother was born in the heartland of America, but my father grew up herding goats

in Kenya. His father –my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British.’ [3] As he was campaigning for himself, he elaborated on his father’s story, extending it to, and comparing it to the plights of ‘many others in the forgotten corners of the world’. [4]

### **What the heart thinks, what the paper says**

Obama visited Kenya in 1988 and understood why his father, after a PhD in econometrics from Harvard University, had decided to leave comfort and ease to fly home: getting ready for independence, Africa sent students abroad to ‘master Western technology and bring it back to forge a new, modern Africa’. Loyal to the continent, Obama Sr. ‘returned to Africa to fulfil his promise to the continent’ [5]

I said in the beginning that Obama’s official foreign policy, the one designed to earn him votes, brings nothing new, as it copy-pastes from existing policies. His plan diverges considerably from his major speeches I have mentioned. The list of challenges in terms of foreign policy in order of importance is as follows: 1-collective security with NATO partners; 2-‘unshakable commitment to Israel’s security; 3- Buttress partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and other nations [no African nation named]; 4-Engage China on common interests [climate change, free society, trade]; 5-‘Vigourously engage South Africa and our friends in Southern Africa to put pressure on the vicious Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe’; 6- stop the genocide in Darfur through tougher sanctions targeting Sudan’s oil revenue; and two other challenges, one regarding the FARC in Columbia, and the last about the democratization of post-Castro Cuba. [6]

The discrepancy between the bureaucratic, vote-winning policies and the more spontaneous declarations is clear: in the former Africa appears somewhere down on positions five and six and only from a disgusting perspective – bad governance and genocide; while in the latter, Africa appears as the introduction into Obama’s political philosophy. Poverty, hardships, and the poor education his father received, seem to explain why Obama is going to be, not another president, but a new, different president, also for Africa.

### **What will change, what will not change**

What can, or will, Obama do concretely for Africa? Or, to repose the question of Raymond W. Capson, professor at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, ‘what could be done to change [the Bush] policy in ways that would make it fairer and more just?’ [7] Abdi Ismail Samatar, professor of Global Studies at the University of Minnesota, is categorical about the US foreign policy in Africa:

Bluntly, I do not foresee any meaningful and positive change in US policy towards Africa in the near future...US policy towards Africa continues to be driven by self-interests, regardless of the period. This has meant support for dictatorships and disregard for the African people’s wish for democracy and autonomy to set their own economic and social priorities. [8]

Officially, that is from the bureaucratic point of view, Obama has pledged to be active on two fronts: first on the security front, to prevent failing states in Africa to be 'incubators of resentment and anarchy that can become havens for terrorists' [9]; and to prevent other crimes against humanity such as those in Rwanda, Congo and Darfur. Second on the humanitarian and aid front Africa could have a bigger share in the promised \$50 billion to achieve the Millennium Development Goal until 2015, compared to the current \$25 billion. However, since no specific amount has been put forward for Africa, there is much doubt about whether Obama will do better than the Bush administration which 'reached record levels' in economic assistance and commitments against HIV/AIDS. The total aid to sub-Saharan Africa amounted to \$1,8 billion in 2002; \$2,8 billion in 2003; \$3,4 billion in 2004; \$4 billion in 2005; \$3,3 billion in 2006; and \$3,8 billion in 2007. [10] At this level, the hope lies in the declaration to double the foreign development aid, which, in some sense, would mean the doubling of the aid to Africa.

The only thing that could be different on the security front could be the approach, as George Bush has since February 2007 set up the Africa Command responsible for all US military activity in Africa. [11] While Bush seemed to be much more open to military action, by for instance supporting Somali factions or the Ethiopian army in its invasion of Somalia, [12] Obama has repeatedly advocated 'pressure', not only on Sudan and Zimbabwe, but also on Pakistan, for which military aid should be conditioned on its cooperation in fighting Al Qaeda. [13]

Africans are impatiently waiting to see how Obama will behave with regard to the selfish but strategic interest of the US in Africa. Akwe Amosu, a senior policy analyst at the Open Society Institute in Washington, D.C., points out one crucial point: the 'competition for oil'. He argues that

The Gulf of Guinea is a critically important alternative zone from which the US intends to source some 25% of its needs by 2020. The need to secure oil supplies, particularly in the light on China's competing interest, causes Washington to avoid criticising or even acknowledging governance deficits and repression. [14]

For this reason, the Equatorial Guinea, the African Kuwait located in the middle of the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea, has acquired a special status in the eyes of the US, despite its dictatorial and anti-democratic impulses. [15] The energy issue imposed itself during the campaign and Obama constantly said that he would implement 'an aggressive domestic cap-and-trade program combined with increased investments in clean-energy development and deployment.' To achieve that, the Gulf of Guinea's oil will obviously not be as attractive under Obama as it was under Bush, as Obama will invest \$15 billion per year in developing alternative fuels and in helping the US economy adjust. As Senator, Obama was leading efforts to get federal investment in 'plug-in electric vehicles' and combined plug-in hybrid/flexible-fuel vehicles. [16]

### **Conclusion: Dreams from his father**

All signs show that Africa will take great advantage from president Obama's administration. He has repeatedly mentioned his encounter with poverty in Africa, but

also and above all, he is proud to have been shaped, and profoundly marked by that poverty. The fight against poverty called his father back home. That fight is part of the Dreams from My Father; otherwise he would not have entitled his first book like that; he would not keep opening his speeches with his father's poverty story. Since knows his father's dreams and seem to make them his own, the same reason why his father flew back home will push him to go on with the fulfilment of the mission, from the Oval Office. Aware that the US can change people's plight into light, President Obama solemnly pledged, from Berlin, to

extend our hand to the people in the forgotten corners of this world who yearn for lives marked by dignity and opportunity...to lift the child in Bangladesh from poverty, shelter the refugee in Chad....[\[17\]](#)

It would not be correct to call these signs deceptive rhetoric, because, back in 1994, when he was still envisaging a legal career far from politics, Obama dedicated his autobiography to 'my siblings, stretched across oceans and continents.' [\[18\]](#) The hopes and expectations of Africans and other people from forgotten areas are thus grounded as they are the siblings of the mightiest man on earth, just like his other siblings in the US.

## Notes

1. Barack Obama, 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address [Speech 27 July 2004]  
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2. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, [1994] 2004), p. xv
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4. Barack Obama, 'A World that Stands as One', p. 261
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6. Obama for America, *Change We can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), p.136-137.
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9. Obama for America, *Change We can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), p.20
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12. Raymond W. Capson, *The United States in Africa: Bush policy and beyond*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 1
13. Obama for America, *Change We can Believe In*, p. 111

14. Akwe Amosu, 'Dangerous Times for Africa', in *Review of Africa Political Economy*, No. 114: 709-717 (ROAP Publications Ltd., 2007)p. 711
15. Akwe Amosu, 'Dangerous Times for Africa', in *Review of Africa Political Economy*, No. 114: 709-717 (ROAP Publications Ltd., 2007)p. 711
16. Obama for America, *Change We can Believe In*, pp.66-67; 71 and 74
17. Barack Obama, 'A World that Stands as One' [Speech, 24 July 2008], published in Obama for America, *Change We can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), p. 269
18. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, p.xvii