



OBAMA and KENYA: Contested Histories and the Politics of Belonging

by Mathew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo

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Reviewed by: Olatoun Williams

The screen of my Android phone is taken up by a massive, graffiti image of the US President, Barack Obama, painted across the wall of a tall building. It's a marvelously colourful book cover, unmissable in the biblio-diversity of academia. "Obama and Kenya: Contested Histories and the Politics of Belonging", is jointly written by Mathew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo and published in 2016 by Ohio University Press.

The book's sub-title, The politics of Belonging and Contested Histories, represents its themes. This sub-title, not the main title, is what drew me to the book. I have followed Barack Obama's career, and through his memoir, his history, and I know well that that his links with Kenya are thin.



Sceptical, I was also intrigued and began to read. Much of the information the authors provide is interesting and they write clearly. With page references as signposts, they point us back and forward on what turns out to be a convoluted road toward understanding Obama's relationship with Kenya. There are far too many discussions brought to bear on the themes and the reader may have trouble accepting Obama's ties to Kenya as a window through which to view a sweeping history of Kenya. He may, like me, end up with a mental picture of the eye of a needle with a camel squeezing through it.

However, despite the lack of a strong axis around which the assorted expositions can spin, the book will be valuable to students of Barack Obama and to students of Kenya. Let me provide inventory of key concerns of the book presented from the vantage point of 'Contested histories':

- The history of the Luo of East Africa and the place of the Obama lineage within it.
- Pre-colonial trade history of Kenya: transnational connections.
- Colonial history with a focus on the white man's appropriation of Kenya as "White Man's Country"
- Various significant misrepresentations of Kenya's history overseas.
- Correction of such misrepresentations (i) by the authors, by means of their book, and (ii) by dot.com wananchi (Kenyans) at home and in the diaspora, in real time, using digital media

‘The politics of belonging’ are the lens through which we study:

- The Luo of East Africa, (a stifling 10% of the Kenyan population), and their search for a place in the Kenyan polity.
- The evolution of local politics pre-independence, at independence and post-independence with ethnicity as its fulcrum.
- Luo politicians in Kikuyu and Kalenjin dominated politics.
- Barack Obama's place in Kenya and more specifically, in Luoland of his fathers.
- Barack Obama's place in Luo politics via his contested relationship with prominent Luo politician Raila Odinga.
- Barack Obama, US President.
- Birtherism in the US under the leadership of Donald Trump

Born in 1961 in Hawaii, USA, to a white American mother from Kansas and a black Kenyan father from Luo Nyanza, in 2008, Barack Obama astonished the world when he began his run for the presidency of the USA. As if it were yesterday, I remember the wonder we, his supporters across the world, experienced, when victory appeared within reach and I remember our hope. But Obama's journey to the White House didn't really begin in 2008. It began symbolically in 2004 with the re-release of his memoir "Dreams from my Father". 'The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream', published in 2006, is a record of the actualisation of those 'Dreams' in an epochal journey broadcast across globe. In a chapter entitled "The Politics of Celebration", authors Carotenuto and Luongo make rich display of Obamamania exploding in Kenya from 2004 when the hitherto unknown Illinois State Senator defeated his Republican challenger for a seat in the US Senate.



CNN broadcast from thick of Kenya. I remember my smiles of recognition faced with the sight of the Obama family home in Kogelo transformed into a 'global historical monument', and the village secondary school renamed as a tribute to him. Shops all over the country stuffed with Obama paraphernalia: calendars, tee-shirts emblazoned with his face. All over Kenya, people drinking 'Senator' beer; awestruck faces gazing at TV screens suspended from bar walls: Turn up the tv! Let me see. You mean this handsome young man – is that his wife? He's our son?

Patri-lineage and patrimony are deeply cultural in Africa, so we understood this celebration of a rising US politician with an African heritage, in the land of his fathers.

The authors walk us through an extensive history of the Luo tribe in which Obama's patri-lineage is rooted, beginning with the mythical founder Ramogi Ajwang. They pause to reference contestable Luo claims about Barack Obama's direct descent from the Ramogi line of great men. The timeline is recounted in far too much detail but we acquire a clear picture of the marginalisation of the Luo people in Kenyan politics after their brief, powerful moment in the sun: the independence government (1963 - 1978) led by Kikuyu President Jomo Kenyatta and as VP, the Luo chieftain, Oginga Odinga.

By the time Barack Obama Jr. exploded on the scene, we understand why the Luo would pounce on the "big man" in American politics and confidently call him their own. To the average reader, their embrace of Obama will appear far-fetched, but to the Luo, there was no over-reach. Historically dispersed across East Africa, they are a diasporic people. That

the son of Barack Obama Sr. was domiciled in America was not an alien condition but a familiar one; he shares it with a multitude Luo. He was a diasporic leader, that was all.

How many visits has Barack Obama made to Kenya? From my count, verified in the book, there have been 4: in 1988, his very first visit which he undertook alone; in 1992, a visit with his fiancée, Michelle Robinson. He visited Kenya in 2006 as US Senator and, subsequent to a great deal of complaining by the Kenyans who felt rejected by him, he finally visited in 2015, to attend the Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES).

A total of 4 visits. It amazes me that anything significant can be made of that; that the pull and push of ethnicity can reach so far; that it can be, and is, such a driver of political behaviour. When you know that Luo identification with Obama was rooted not in a shared culture or in familiarity with the man, or in any significant attachment of his to Kenya; when you know it is rooted in nothing greater than biology and in what, the authors' magnifying glass shows us, are myths, rooted in Luo vanity. It was alarming to hear about the cycle of lies, fabricated out of Luo hyperbole about connections to the US President; how the lies would be spread for political gain by enemies of Luo Raila Odinga, Kenyan presidential candidate. Reading the book, I was distressed by how claims made in Kenya by Odinga's enemies were able, in real time, via digital media, to tarnish the credibility of Obama's candidacy and presidency in America.

There was too much information about it but I recognised in the bid of the diasporic Luo people, to find, shape and articulate their Luo identity, a foreshadowing of the troubles endured by their famous scion with his diverse and diasporic heritage. If in Obama's famous speech delivered in 2008 at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, he boasted that he was a "world citizen", he would spend the next 8 years as US President, trying to prove to Americans that he was a fellow citizen. As if the travails of his father's people were his augury, I saw in Obama's political odyssey in America, a mirror of the political path embarked upon by the Luo in their struggle to stake out territory for themselves in Kenya.

Carotenuto and Luongo shouldn't have taken us in such detail through transnational connections of pre-colonial Kenya and through colonial Kenya and her White Highlands. But I concede that the social Darwinism which permeated colonial Kenya and which has carried over into modern Kenya, mirrors the exclusiveness of America's Far Right which sought to keep Obama and his family out of the White House. The examples were excessive of native Kenyans finding their voices on digital media and redressing narrative imbalances in the way Kenya is misrepresented overseas.

Introduce digital media, but for one reason only: as a channel of Obamamania and of local politics of ethnicity which intersect with it and which inadvertently reinforced false narratives in the US about Barack Obama. Donald J. Trump of the Birther Movement, Jerome Corsi, author "The Obama Nation" and Indian born Dinesh D' Souza, author, "The Roots of Obama's Rage" were key personalities in the Far Right's campaign to discredit his candidacy and presidency. Linked to Jerome Corsi, WND, the Far Right website, played a big part in smearing Obama, using what would become known as typical birther rhetoric: "fraught with racial overtones", "resonating with conspiracy theories". They demanded the President produce his American birth certificate, making unrelenting assertions about the existence of a Kenyan one and floating arguments online and offline about Obama's complicated cultural heritage and "alien" behaviour all of which caused "people to look for an explanation".

With their capacity to amuse and outrage, the authors did well to include salacious details of the Far Right's smear campaign which was rampant with false assertions, misinterpretations, misnomers and mis-spellings gathered from meticulously scoured

sources. Their data is exhaustive about Obama's alleged romance with Islam; his anti-Western, anti-capitalist stance; his "rage" inherited from his grandfather. Hussein Onyango Obama was tortured for Mau Mau affiliations by the colonial government of Kenya which saw in the Mau Mau insurgency, "terrorism", not an armed struggle for liberation. Perpetrated in post 9/11 America, we recognise the power these myths possessed to stoke the flames of fear in Americans. The authors speak of the currency which these fabrications gained with the result that up until today, 20% of Americans believe, despite the production of a US birth certificate, that President Obama was not born in America. 30% are convinced, still, that he is a Moslem. Obama bin Biden, O'Mau Mau...Floating around the blogosphere, it is not unusual to stumble on these references to the first African-American US President.

Take another look at the book's cover. A bicycle is propped up against the graffiti image of the US President. A handyman's bicycle with baskets, one in front and one at the back of it. The owner, a middle-aged man, is already on his way. One of Kenya's 47 million wananchi, going about his business. He's in faded jeans, a mauve shirt and matching jacket; clothes, well-worn and comfortable. The image of Barack Obama painted across the wall of a Kenyan building is the artist's statement about how much the average Kenyan, the man on the street, identified with him and felt that he belonged to them and to their country. Look again, closely. Can you see Obama's mouth is open to speak? But there is a window with a grating - there are bars across the US President's mouth, where the artist has painted it.

If his famous Philadelphia speech about race was calculated to take place at a precise moment during his campaign, the same advisors calculated that it was best to muzzle him during his presidency. As a candidate, Obama could stand before Berlin's Victory Column proclaiming his world citizenship and extolling the rich diversity of his biography. But when the candidate becomes US President, he must adhere to circumspection. The authors quote David Axelrod speaking to the New York Times, on the eve of President Obama's only visit to Kenya in 2015. The former chief strategist to the president confirmed what had become increasingly clear: as US President, Obama was no longer free to speak to issues that defined him personally, like race and belonging; no longer free to identify with Kenya; or with Indonesia, the Muslim majority country of his step-father, where he had spent a significant part of his childhood and attended a local school.

"If you're asking me," said David Axelrod, "(if there was) a political discussion as to whether it would be disadvantageous to show up in Kenya when Donald Trump was questioning his citizenship, I don't recall ever having that discussion." He added witheringly, "But maybe no one needed to have that discussion."

"Obama and Kenya: Contested Histories and the Politics of Belonging" would have been a compelling read if the authors had limited their material to just that: Obama and Kenya, from the perspectives of its two themes. It would have been compelling if exposition of facts painstakingly gathered, had led to an interrogation of "belonging", and to a thrashing out of the issue of identity. The authors could have rounded up the book with exciting arguments about:

- The various histories (family, personal, religious, cultural, educational, geographic/migrational; one's parental origins and one's birthplace) and how they interact with identity. And of course, how far, if at all, any one or more of them defines it.
- The metrics with which we gauge if we or anybody else "belongs".
- Fluid identities, increasingly prevalent in a world awash with migrants and refugees.
- Feelings: what if I look Kenyan but feel American?
- Accents: their reliability as an indicator of identity and as a factor of 'belonging'.

The book is crying out for fierce debates, book-ended with the simplicity of the American Constitution: only an American born citizen can accede to the American presidency.

What I envision is the two authors looking at the data they had amassed and carefully presented, about Obama's relationship with Kenya, and wondering what to do with it. They knew they hadn't finished but didn't know what was missing. So into the vacuum they inserted the wider history of Kenya emphasising the contested parts of it. That's my take on it.

Let me suggest that Mathew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo, failed to hear their book's cry because they are not conditioned to hear it. Let me guess that living in America as white Americans and being members of the political, economic and social majority, their level of comfort in the country and sense of belonging, are high. This stands in contrast with minorities of the so-called diverse America, whose default state of mind is to doubt whether their citizenship amounts to more than words on paper; whose default state of mind is to question and to daily protest any hint of social, economic and political exclusion; whose default is to continuously assert their belonging to America within a national culture that will often challenge it. Have either of these two authors ever needed to question his or her identity in America? His or her "belonging" to America? And if they have, are they in the habit of doing so? In other words is it their default condition? I think not. I believe - perhaps wrongly- that they are not primed to interrogate the politics of belonging from a passionate place, but only to do what they have done: present the relevant information and do that very well. The authors are not conditioned to hear in "Obama and Kenya," the muffled cry of a US President with tan skin and a mixed heritage.

White ethno-state advocates like Richard Spencer of the National Policy Institute and adherents of Birtherism are denounced by America's mainstream for their espousal of a vision which would reject the presence of a man with African heritage at the highest level of American politics. Interesting that this identitarian vision should find a mirror in the local politics of Kenya which embraces, for political advancement, the American president with a Kenyan heritage. There is so much that is identical in the way politics of belonging are played out in the United States and in Kenya - and everywhere. Same rhetoric of cliché and ridicule; of cultural supremacy; same rhetoric of disdain and disparagement which so easily escalates into the rhetoric of hate with its attendant violence. Since the days of Jim Crow, violence has been bridled in America but in Kenya, ethnic violence is a marker of every electoral cycle.

As I read the book, two ironies struck me: first that there should be concord, any at all, between Kenyans of Africa and members of America's Far Right. Second, that in responding to Obama, with denigration on the one hand and exaltation on the other, two historically opposed groups should arrive at the same conclusion: that Barack Obama is a "*son of the soil*" not of America, but of Kenya.

Two groups, as far apart as night and day and like night and day, chained to a binary of opposition. Racial opposition may not have birthed transatlantic slavery, but it certainly helped to perpetuate it. It caused a war, divided a nation and created a confederacy of states which fought to the death to retain slavery. Racial opposition justified colonialism and calls not for the unity of all peoples but enthrones through heartless laws, the divisiveness at its heart.

Slaves, enslavers. Perpetrators, victims. Prey, predators. Excluders and the excluded. How do we break free of these binaries? The Christian worldview offers a way out: that all peoples are created equally in the image of the Creator God. This means when I look at you from Kenya, or America, I must see myself, from Nigeria. This means that having created

diversity in His image, God is as much defined by diversity as He is by everything else He created and found good. It means not America first or Nigeria first or Kenya first, but God first. It means that before we root our identity in a tribe or in God's Own Country, we must first root it in God as our country. If He is the primary country in which we root our identity, neither idolatry of, nor slavery to a secondary identity can take hold of us. This is our freedom. This is the credible worldview I subscribe to.

On 7th December 2016, in commemoration of America's first battle of World War II, President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, visited Pearl Harbour. I cherish the words Obama spoke.

"...even when hatred burns hottest, even when the tug of tribalism is at its most primal, we must resist the urge to turn inward. We must resist the urge to demonize those who are different....the anguish of war reminds us to seek the divine spark that is common to all humanity".

Barack Obama's presidency brought with it a beautiful vision but ultimately, under him, America was far from uhuru, far from equal rights and unity in his country's diversity. During Donald Trump's run for the US presidency, we saw Obama's vision of the Americanness of all Americans, shattering. Before our eyes; apartheid was sweeping in. And on 8th November 2016, the notorious leader of the Birther Movement against Barack Obama, succeeded him as the 45th President of the United States. With Trump's shocking and divisive win, change once again has come to America.

During her Final Remarks as First Lady, Michelle Obama asserted that America's 'diversity', was a 'glorious' thing. Far from threatening who Americans were, it was on the contrary what made Americans who they were. Donald Trump was sworn in as US President on 20th January 2017, sealing his inauguration with a declaration of a National Day of Patriotic Devotion. My question: in the citizenry and in the body politic, will this day celebrate or avoid the subject of America's diversity? "Obama and Kenya: Contested Histories and the Politics of Belonging," is the work of Americans, Mathew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo. The value to me of their well-researched book lies in the power of its content to provoke that question and in retrospective answers to it, in four or perhaps eight years time.

Authors' Biographies



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Author: Matthew Carotenuto is associate professor of history and coordinator of African Studies at St. Lawrence University. He studies the ways Kenyan identities are imagined within the context of colonial violence, postcolonial politics, and indigenous sport (www.ohioswallow.com).



Author,
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