

## ***Kenya's Reaction to the American Election***

by Cassandra Stachniw

Located in the eastern part of the Sub-Saharan Desert, Kenya is, "...one of the most successful agricultural production regions in Africa."<sup>1</sup> Kenyan agriculture ranges from tea and coffee to pork, poultry, and eggs. The natural resources found in Kenya are just as diverse, offering limestone, gypsum, fluorspar, and diatomite, to name just a few. The 38 million strong population are contrasting as well, containing four major ethnic groups: Luo, Kalenjin, Masai, and Kikuyu, with Luo and Kikuyu being the two major ethnic groups. According to a 2003 estimate, 1.2 million of the near 38 million are currently living with HIV. Religiously, 45% of Kenyans identify themselves with the Protestant faith and 33% as Roman Catholic. If one were to travel to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, through the lush, beautiful landscape, he or she would hear English or Kiswahili, the two major languages spoken in Kenya.

Within the political sector, Kenya's history has been shaky in the past. Kenya gained independence on December 12, 1963 with founding President Jomo Kenyatta. Then in 2002, the then opposition group, National Rainbow Coalition, nominated Mwai Kibaki as their candidate to run against the former President Moi and won. Three years later the Orange Democratic Movement party developed, from which Kibaki's contender Odinga was a member.<sup>2</sup> Yet the election of 2007 did not follow international democracy standards, according to Alex Graf Lambsdorff, who heads the EU-Campaign Watching Commission.<sup>3</sup> During the elections in 2007 charges of vote rigging and corruption were

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<sup>1</sup> "Kenya." The World Factbook. 18 Dec. 2008. CIA. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Lwanga, Doreen. "Africa: Identity, Images, and African-American-African Relations." AllAfrica.com. 05 Dec. 2008. Nairobi Star. 07 Jan. 2009. ; "Kenya." The World Factbook. 18 Dec. 2008. CIA. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Unruhen in Kenia." Themen. 03 Jan. 2009. Bundeszentrale fuer politische Bildung. 08 Jan. 2009.

brought against Kibaki's re-election, bringing about months of violence, and as a result killing as many as 1,500 people. However in late February of 2007, United Nations (UN) sponsored talks brought about a power-sharing accord between Kibaki and Odinga by restoring the position of Prime Minister to Odinga. In 2001 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suspended loans to Kenya due to the failure to implement anti-corruption measures. The World Bank and IMF delayed monetary loans once again in 2006, because of the absence of governmental action against corruption itself.<sup>4</sup> Although Kenya might be one of the most developed sub-Saharan countries, it has been named one of the most corrupt too. On top of ongoing political corruption, there is persistent ethnic conflict as well. President Kibaki belongs to the Kikuyu ethnic group, whereas Prime Minister Odinga is part of the Luo group.<sup>5</sup> The differing ethnic tension is not exclusive to the political sector, it is also a problem at the grassroots level. Yet an American politician, whose father came from the rural village of Kogelo, Kenya, would help cast aside ethnic differences for a while by being elected as the first African-American President of the United States. His presence is a product of the African Diaspora to the Oval Office. However, the Kenyan-American relationship was already taking place long before Senator Barack Obama was elected in November.

In the past United States presidency former president George W. Bush committed over \$15 billion to the fight against HIV/AIDS and helped to provide 1.7 million Africans with anti-retroviral drugs. President Clinton started the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which reduces and eliminates tariffs on African exports to the USA. Another governmental initiative, Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), provides aid to those countries who embrace economic and political reform.<sup>6</sup> American Ambassador Ranneberger pointed out in his December 9<sup>th</sup> speech the important economic role the American Chamber of Commerce plays by advancing trade and investment between both

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<sup>4</sup> "Kenya." [The World Factbook](#). 18 Dec. 2008. CIA. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>5</sup> "Unruhen in Kenia." [Themen](#). 03 Jan. 2009. Bundeszentrale fuer politische Bildung. 08 Jan. 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Leon, Tony. "Africa and Our Election." [Cato.org](#). 19 Oct. 2008. Cato Institute. 08 Jan. 2009.

countries.<sup>7</sup> The ambassador also reminded Kenya that America is willing to provide \$25 million more to help support the refugee programs and is able to talk to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in order to help in the construction of new camps.<sup>8</sup> America has been and is still willing to help Kenya with the support of economic and political reform within the country itself. Even before the turmoil brought upon by the 2007 elections, Senator Barack Obama visited Kenya in 2006, drawing a bigger crowd with each speech. Obama asked the Kenyans to stop blaming the events of the past on their discrepancies by accepting responsibility for their country. He challenged them to turn away from the detrimental tribal politics, reject the imbedded corruption throughout the land, by working towards a better future through reform. Long lasting change comes from the youth itself, one thing both Obama and the ambassador reminded the Kenyan people.<sup>9</sup> The Kenyan people left from Obama's speeches rejuvenated and hopeful, but the real euphoria would present itself in the first week in November.

The last presidential election in America was unarguably unlike any other preceding election. Barack Obama's campaign was groundbreaking in itself. The power of the people was demonstrated not only on a political elite level but even more so on the grassroots level. Obama's campaign used the empowering capabilities of the internet to the fullest extent, reaching across innumerable boundaries. Student groups and coalitions were formed, such as the African Diaspora for Obama Coalition, all created to help Obama get elected to the White House. Those in Africa who could not access the internet followed the election with bated breath in rural villages by use of radio and television. Whether Luo or Kikuyu, rich or poor, educated or not, Kenyans across the country were

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<sup>7</sup> Ranneberger, Michael E. "Fundamental Reform and the Democratic Future of Kenya U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger." 2008 Speeches. Nairobi, Kenya. Embassy of the United States. 09 Dec. 2008. U.S. Department of State. 08 Jan. 2009  
<[http://nairobi.usembassy.gov/speeches/sp\\_20081209.html](http://nairobi.usembassy.gov/speeches/sp_20081209.html)>.

<sup>8</sup> "U.S. Ambassador Renews Commitment to Refugee Issue on Visit to Dadaab." Embassy of the United States. 19 Nov. 2008. Embassy of the United States. 09 Jan. 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Ranneberger, Michael E. "Fundamental Reform and the Democratic Future of Kenya U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger."

anxiously following the American election involving the first African Diaspora candidate.

“The election highlighted the point that Americans draw their strength from its diversity. This is a key pillar of democracy that Americans and Kenyans share,” pointed out Ambassador Ranneberger.<sup>10</sup> The past election was diverse to say the least, and around 1,500 people, religious leaders, governmental leaders, students, and residing American citizens gathered in the early hours of the morning at the ambassador’s residence to follow the last hours of the election. Large tents with flat-screen TVs were set up, so that they were able to watch the electorate unfold, while also being able to web-chat with experts back in the United States. It was 7 o’clock in the morning when Kenyans received the news of Obama’s victory. Singing and dancing, great celebrations naturally followed. After watching Obama’s acceptance speech, Ambassador Ranneberger addressed the celebrators himself, saying that the Kenyan and American relationship will only deepen.<sup>11</sup> Celebration and euphoric joy spread throughout the land.

In Kogelo, the village where Obama’s ancestors come from, rural celebrations burst out, including dancing in the street with Mama Sarah (Obama’s grandmother) making preparations for a great feast. In Kisumu, a nearby city, there was a carnival like atmosphere, as people poured into the streets to celebrate. In January 2008 however, Kisumu was the location of riots, fights, and protests between the police and the public due to the Kenyan contested elections<sup>12</sup>. On November 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> though, that cold month didn’t make any difference. President Mwai Kibaki himself reiterated the Kenyan reaction to Obama’s victory by saying, “this is a momentous day not only in the history of the United States of America, but also for us in Kenya. The victory of Senator Obama is our own victory because of his roots here in Kenya. As a country, we are full of pride

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<sup>10</sup> Ranneberger, Michael E. "Fundamental Reform and the Democratic Future of Kenya U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger."

<sup>11</sup> "Ambassador Ranneberger Hosts U.S. Election Celebrations." Embassy of the United States. 05 Nov. 2008. Embassy of the United States. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Kenya declares holiday for Obama." BBC News. 05 Nov. 2008. BBC. 09 Jan. 2008.

for his success.”<sup>13</sup> President Kibaki went on to name November 6<sup>th</sup> as a national holiday. David McKenzie, a CNN blogger located in Kogelo, wrote, “In a land that has been wracked by ethnic tension, Kenyans see unity through his ancestry and possibilities in his success.”<sup>14</sup> Kenyans from all different ethnic groups, economical and educational levels were brought together in jubilee as the son from Kogelo defeated the odds and was elected to be the future president. For the vast majority of Kenyans, Obama came to represent hope, change, and politics not ridden with corruption, but a better future. This anticipation and hope spread quickly throughout Kenya and across the world with memorabilia and songs as well.

In Makadem’s “Obama Be Thy Name”, the singer suggests that Obama has now fulfilled Martin Luther King Jr.’s hopes by intermixing his famous quote, “I have a dream, that one day this great nation...”, throughout the song. Makadem even goes as far to parallel Obama to a religious type figure by rephrasing a part of the Lord’s Prayer by singing, “Thy Change shall come, Thy will be done, as it is in the American Dream.” Indeed it has been apparent that Obama does almost have a magical ambiance to him, many people placing him above his politician status. Countless other music videos can be found on the internet, celebrating Obama’s victory and Kenyan roots.<sup>15</sup> Barack Obama broke down ethnic boundaries and injustices throughout Kenya, and the Kenyans have responded in many different ways.

Suddenly the world turned its face to Kenya, Kogelo, and Obama’s relatives living there, bringing along positive and negative results. Journalists traveled to Kogelo, interested in understanding Obama’s roots, asking for interviews with the now famous Mama Sarah, although she does not speak any English. There have been two local schools named after

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<sup>13</sup> Visabureau.com. "Kenyans wait for tourism boost after Obama's election victory." ETN:Global Travel Industry News. 12 Nov. 2008. ETurboNews. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>14</sup> McKenzie, David. "Joy, hopes and dreams in Kogelo." Cnn.com International, In the Field. 05 Nov. 2008. CNN. 09 Jan. 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Obama Be Thy Name. Perf. Makadem. YouTube: Broadcast Yourself. 27 Oct. 2008. 09 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PDehLPWsdQ>>. Obama Kenya Song. Online video. Mwambao.com, 2008. YouTube: Broadcast Yourself. 07 Nov. 2008. 09 Jan. 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdn7qchqqcU>>.

Obama, partially to commemorate his ancestral roots, partially to raise awareness of the need for school funding.<sup>16</sup> Because of the international attention, the schools along with the roads of Kogelo have been improved as well. But not all of the international attention has drawn positive results. Due to the Obama mania, “long lost” relatives of Barack Obama seem to be trying to get famous by name association, one being politician Nicholas Rajula. While he claimed to be a distant cousin of Obama to help further his political campaign, the Obama campaign openly denied any relations to Mr. Rajula.<sup>17</sup> And for those who are truly related to President Obama, the Kenyan government is now asking those relatives to ask for the government’s permission before talking to the media.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, President Kibaki proposed a law that would give the government the right to interfere with the broadcasting by means of television and radio.<sup>19</sup> Such issues will be left in the young Kenyans hands. The American Ambassador to Kenya recognizes that himself, “I know Kenyans have embraced President-elect Obama as a favorite son. This is particularly true of young Kenyans, who are inspired by the election of such a young, bright leader. While I cannot speak for the President-elect, I hope that the vast numbers of young Kenyans will be inspired to push the agenda for positive change here.”<sup>20</sup> The high hopes of political reform and a better foreign policy with America are not the only forms of hope with the Kenyans. Tourism is the second largest source of revenue for Kenya.

After the violence in the first months of 2008, tourism in Kenya dropped by thirty percent in the third quarter. This drop hurt the Kenyan economy, but since the nomination of Obama as President, developments in Kenyan tourism should improve. In fact, Kenyans are expecting a ten to fifteen increase in American tourism. Like previously mentioned, renovations of roads leading to Kogelo have taken place, with the idea of establishing an

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<sup>16</sup> Kristof, Nicholas D. "Obama's Kenyan Roots." [CNN.com\\*Politics](#). 24 Feb. 2008. CNN. 09 Jan. 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Connors, Will. "Kenyan Pins Election Hopes on a Big. U.S. Name." [Nytimes .com](#). 28 Sept. 2007. The New York Times. 09 Jan. 2008.

<sup>18</sup> "Kenya: Govt Gags Obama Family." [AllAfrica.com](#). 11 Dec. 2008. Nairobi Star. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>19</sup> "Kenya: Kibaki Backs Down on Repressive Media Law." [AllAfrica.com](#). 07 Jan. 2008. Nairobi Star. 08 Jan. 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ranneberger, Michael E. "Fundamental Reform and the Democratic Future of Kenya U.S. Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger."

Obama heritage trail for future tourists because, "...it is expected that Americans visiting Kenya would now include the small town in their holiday itinerary."<sup>21</sup> Not only is the nomination of an African Diaspora good for the political and tourism future of Kenya, but cultural attributes are being developed as well.

The rich culture of Kenya will be presented in glamorous form at Barack Obama's inauguration, where the Boys Choir of Kenya will be performing. The choir was founded by Muyale, who is a music writer, composer, director, and conductor, in order to help prevent mischief amongst the Kenyan teens and help pay for education; yet the choir turned out to be much more than a preventive feature. Comprising of 26 young men, the choir will sing traditional Kenyan folk songs along with a few patriotic American songs such as "American the Beautiful".<sup>22</sup> Cultural Diplomacy will take one of its best forms through traditional Kenyan music and dance as the American and world audience will experience Kenyan culture through the Boys Choir of Kenya.

Back in Kenya, during the months of January to March, the U.S. Embassy is creating a cultural diplomacy initiative by asking Kenyan artists to submit works of art, in song, poetry, visual arts, or dance form. The winners of the "Unity through Diversity: A Kenyan Perspective" art contest will have their pieces of art displayed at either the Ambassador's residence or at the Embassy itself.<sup>23</sup> By doing this art contest, the U.S. Embassy is building cultural bridges with the Kenyan people themselves, by embracing the diversity and unity of the Kenyan people.

President-elect Barack Obama, a product of the African Diaspora, broke down ethnic differences within the nation, giving hope for a better future to Kenyans alike. The challenge to the 44<sup>th</sup> president elect will now be fulfilling the high expectations placed upon him from both Americans and Kenyans. Tony Leon reiterates in his essay, "African

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<sup>21</sup> Visabureau.com. "Kenyans wait for tourism boost after Obama's election victory." ETN:Global Travel Industry News. 12 Nov. 2008. ETurboNews. 07 Jan. 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Niagi, Anthony. "Music to the ears as Kenyans plan for Obama's fete." Sunday Nation. 23 Dec. 2008. Daily Nation. 08 Jan. 2008.

<sup>23</sup> "2009 "Unity through Diversity: A Kenyan Perspective" Art Contest." Embassy of the United States. Embassy of the United States. 09 Jan. 2009.

and Our Election” though that, “Africa’s worst problems...and its best hopes...can benefit from the continued engagement and partnership with the United States. Africa’s development success, however, will mostly depend on the commitment of African ruling elites to the ideas of political and economic freedom.”<sup>24</sup> The Kenyan and American relationship will improve itself in the years to come, but the Obama mania and euphoric state will eventually ebb and then the political reform, economic reform, and dissolution of ethnic tension will be the greatest challenges in the years to come. And the young Kenyan generation is beginning to recognize that as well. Moses Kuria, a young Kenyan, wrote in the Daily Nation, “It is all good, brothers and sisters, to drown ourselves in alcohol and celebration parties over the Obama victory, but we could do ourselves more good if we joined the Obama revolution.”<sup>25</sup> The new reform and improvement between America and Kenya will now depend on the perseverance of the young generation to come. A symbol of realized hope and positive political change, Obama forever changed the Kenyans and the African Diaspora itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Leon, Tony. "Africa and Our Election." Cato.org. 19 Oct. 2008. Cato Institute. 08 Jan. 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Kuria, Moses. "Old timers must take heed, change is coming to Kenya." Daily Nation. 30 Dec. 2008. Daily Nation. 09 Jan. 2009.