

Barack Obama's Dual Triple Heritage

by

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Abstract

Contributing to Ali A. Mazrui's (1986) Africa's triple heritage concept, this paper argues that United States Senator Barack Obama from Illinois has a dual triple heritage: (1) race or ethnicity (ethnic origin) and (2) religion. The paper argues that the new positive friendship or partnership between the people of Africa and the people of the United States in the first decade of the 21st century is a contributing factor to the Barack Obama phenomenon. Finally, the paper claims that Barack Obama has the potential to help in uniting: (1) the United States; (2) Africa and the United States; (3) a Federal African Union; and (4) East-West regions of the three Old World continents (Africa, Asia and Europe).

Introduction

There has been a significant increase in the number of publications on Africa-U.S. relations in recent years (Arthur, 2000; Schraeder, 2000; Adebajo, 2004; Mazrui, 2004; Kaba 2004, 2005a; Barnes, 2005; Nyang, 2005). By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a positive relationship or partnership appears to have developed between the people of Africa and the people of the United States. The Barack Obama phenomenon appears to be part of the result of this new friendship between the people of Africa and the people of the United States. (Kaba 2004, 2005ab, 2006a). For example, in an article entitled "Kenya-U.S. Relations: the Urgent Need to Manage Kenya's Migrant and HIV/AIDS Brain Drain", Kaba (2006a) presented several examples showing that the people of Kenya and the people of the United States have a positive friendship that goes back decades, and that Barack Obama's Kenyan heritage was among the examples presented.

Barack Obama (2004) also mentioned a small part of the long term positive relations between Kenya and the United States when he wrote that his father won a scholarship “...on the eve of Kenyan independence, he had been selected by Kenyan leaders and American sponsors to attend a university in the United States, joining the first large wave of Africans to be sent forth to master Western technology and bring it back to forge a new, modern Africa” (p.9).

Mazrui (1986) explains Africa’s triple heritage as including the convergence of three civilizations (1) Indigenous African or Africanity; (2) Islam; and (3) Western or European, which includes Christianity. In this paper, I will take it further by attempting to explain this triple heritage concept through the life history of Barack Obama and its association with the new positive Africa-United States partnership. This will be done through what I call Barack Obama’s Dual Triple Heritage. The first part of Barack Obama’s Dual Triple Heritage is through ethnic or racial ties. The second part of Barack Obama’s Dual Triple Heritage is Religion.

This paper examines these two parts of Barack Obama’s Triple Heritage and how they are connected to both the Old World (Africa, Asia and Europe) and the New World, especially the United States. The paper will attempt to argue that Barack Obama has the potential to contribute to world unity in four major ways (1) unity in the United States; (2) Africa and the United States unity; (3) unity of a federal African Union; and (4) East-West unity. Let us now start with the racial/ethnic and geographic similarities between Africa and the United States.

Racial/Ethnic Similarities: Africa and the United States

Racially/ethnically, Africa as a continent is as unique as the United States as a country is unique. Africa is the continent cited by scientists as where human originated, before going to populate the world. Indeed, scholars have even pointed to the home region of Barack Obama’s father (East Africa) as where the first humans who left Africa to colonize the world left from (Diop, 1991:11). According to Diop (1991), “All the other races derive from the Black race by a more or less direct filiation, and other continents were populated from Africa at the *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* stages, 150,000 years ago” (p.11). And according to Major (1996), molecular evidence shows a unanimous consent that humans originated from Africa:

...Africans show far more genetic variation than non-Africans (i.e., Asians, Europeans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, et al.). Molecular biologists explain this greater variability by suggesting that African populations have had the most time to accumulate mutations and diverge from each other. Africa, then, is supposed to represent the ancient cradle from which all other populations have emerged (p.73).

As a result, it is argued that people of all racial/ethnic groups can trace their ancestry to Africa. As for the United States, Kaba (2006b) points out that "...racially and ethnically, the U.S. is the world as the world is the United States—the first true 'Universal Nation' in the world" (p.106). This means that technically, racially/ethnically the U.S. is a continent because it is the geographic entity that keeps not only every racial/ethnic group from the Old World, but also almost all animals inhabiting the world through their numerous zoos. For Africa, because of the striking similarities between the people of that vast continent, it sometimes appears as if it is one country. So one could then say that racially/ethnically: (1) Africa is the world as the world is Africa; (2) the U.S. is the world as the world is the United States; and (3) Africa is the United States as the United States is Africa. These two entities have the gene pool to repopulate any part of the world that might experience a catastrophic loss of life such as the December 2004 tsunami in Asia.

Geographic/Climatic Similarities: Africa and the United States

Although Africa is a continent and the United States is a country, they seem to have some kind of geographic or climatic similarities. On almost any given day in a year the continent of Africa may experience diverse climatic conditions, just as the United States also may experience diverse climatic conditions. In Africa, for example, when parts of North Africa and West Africa may be experiencing hot humid temperatures in the summer, southern Africa, especially South Africa may be experiencing its winter, with very cold temperatures. In recent years newspapers in countries around the world have reported significant snow falls in North Africa and South Africa.

In the United States, due to its massive geographic size, one could even argue that it is a country-continent. That is because a person can leave any part of the world with any kind of climate and travel to the United States and actually choose to reside in a region with similar climate to that which they left at home. As a result, just as the U.S. is the world racially/ethnically, it is also the world geographically or climatically. From the state of Alaska to Florida, from Maine to Kansas to California and Hawaii, the U.S. has a great climatic diversity like no other country, not even Canada or Russia. Let us now turn to examining Barack Obama's Dual Triple Heritage.

Barack Obama's Dual Triple Heritage

Part of Barack Obama's appeal with the masses is that in one form or another people seem to see themselves in him, whether racially/ethnically or religiously. In him, one can witness both America's and the world's racial/ethnic diversity and religious diversity. Let us examine each of these.

Ethnicity

Towards the end of his speech after winning the South Carolina Democratic Presidential primary on Saturday, January 26, 2007, Senator Obama said that: “Out of Many are One.” Yet looking at him at that moment, one could also say that “Out of One are Many.” That is because as already noted above; science can prove that all people in the U.S. and the New World can trace their ancestry to one of the three Old World Continents (Africa, Asia and Europe). By ethnic origin, Barack Obama is African (Kenyan), European and Asian. Barack Obama Sr. traveled from his homeland, Kenya to the U.S. to further his education and he met Barack Jr.’s white American mother (named Stanley Ann Dunham by her father) in college in Hawaii. According to Barack Obama (2004): “...to take my parents brief union – a black man and a white woman, an African and an American...” (p.xv). Mary Jordan reported in the *Washington Post* on May 13, 2007 that DNA from Barack Obama’s white side of his family was traced to a small town in Ireland, Northwest Europe:

Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, Democratic candidate for president, is the talk of this village because recently unearthed records indicate that he is a son of Moneygall. Stephen Neill, a local Anglican rector, said church documents he has found, along with census, immigration and other records tracked down by U.S. genealogists, appear to show that Obama's great-great-great-grandfather, Fulmuth Kearney, was reared in Moneygall, then left for America in 1850, when he was 19. Megan Smolenyak, chief family historian for Ancestry.com, an online repository of family history records, said that although no single "smoking gun" document was found, there are about 20 different records that when pieced together make her "absolutely certain" of Obama's Moneygall roots (p.A14).

Barack Obama’s Asian heritage comes from his younger sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng. His sister from the same mother is part Indonesian because her father is Indonesian. So when Barack looks at his sister he sees himself, thereby seeing himself as an Asian. This then means that Barack is truly “One Out of Many” in this instance the racial make-up of the Old World (Africa, Asia and Europe). As Obama (2004) points out: “It is my family, though—my mother, my grandparents, my siblings, stretched across oceans and continents...” (p.xvii). That is a very unique racial/ethnic combination. Let us now examine the second part of Barack’s Dual Triple Heritage—Religion.

Religion

Long before the creation of Christianity and Islam, Africans in Africa were practicing their own traditional religions. Reader (1998) notes that 100,000 years ago, out of an estimated less than one million people that lived on planet Earth, 900,000 lived within the continent of Africa (p.130). It is apparent that if there were any religions practiced within Africa at that time, they had to be traditional or indigenous African religions, since Christianity and Islam did not exist. Mazrui (1986) writes that: “Long before the religion of the crescent or the religion of the cross arrived on the African continent, Africa was at worship, its sons and daughters were at prayer” (p.135). By 2001, however, out of 823.4 million people in Africa, Muslims comprised 371.4 million (45.1%), Christians 304.3 million (36.9%) and those who continue to practice traditional African religions comprised 137.8 million (16.7%) (Kaba, 2005c:560). This means that although more than four out of every five people in Africa are either Christians or Muslims, people in that continent first only practiced their own traditional religions. This then may hold true for Barack Obama’s father, because he was of “pure” African descent, which means that his ancestors once practiced traditional African religions.

Second, according to Barack Obama, his grandfather in Kenya was once a Muslim, but that his father became an atheist from a young age. So it is similar to a person having an atheist father who was born to a Catholic or Protestant father and the son of that person not ever being a Catholic or Protestant. Third, Barack Obama is a Christian and his white family comes from a Christian background in Europe. It is noted that Barack Obama himself has been a Christian for decades. The examples above show that just as Barack Obama has a Triple Heritage by ethnicity, so also he has a Triple Heritage through religion. The question now is whether due to his Dual Triple Heritage, if there is the potential for Barack Obama to contribute to uniting not only the United States, but also the world?

Uniting the World

Due to his Dual Triple Heritage, Barack Obama has the potential to contribute in uniting (1) the United States; (2) Africa and the United States; (3) a federal African Union; and (4) East-West of the Old World. Let us briefly look at each of these.

First, the primary reason for Barack Obama’s diverse support within the Democratic Party and in the United States is because of his potential to unite the country. Most Americans are truly looking for a figure that can unite them, especially at a time when they are fighting several foreign wars and their hard earned reputation has been destroyed badly overseas. In fact, that is a big part of Obama’s campaign speech—that he has the ability to unite the country.

Second, it has been written that there is a gradual positive friendship or partnership between the people of Africa and the people of the United States. Indeed, as Kaba (2005b, 2006a) points out, the people of Barack Obama Sr.'s homeland, Kenya, are experiencing a positive friendship with the people of the United States. One could argue that it is that positive friendship between the people of Kenya and the people of the United States that might have contributed to the wide acceptance and support of Barack Obama. It is very possible then that Barack Obama may be among those leaders who will help to unite the people of Africa and the people of the United States.

Third, as noted in Kaba (2004), African Americans have been at the core of the new friendship or partnership between the people of Africa and the people of the United States by the beginning of the 21st century. When Barack Obama first declared that he intends to seek the Democratic nomination to run for the presidency of the United States in early 2007, some African Americans were not sure what to make of him because he was new to the national stage and relatively young when compared to the career politicians. However, out of 26 states that held official Democratic primaries and caucuses across the U.S., from January 3, 2008 to February 5, 2008, Barack Obama had already won 15 (57.7%) of them. On June 4, 2008, Dan Balz and Anne E. Kornblut reported in the *Washington Post* that: "With a split decision in the final two primaries [in Montana and South Dakota] and a flurry of superdelegate endorsements, Sen. Barack Obama sealed the Democratic presidential nomination after a grueling and history-making campaign against Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton that will make him the first African American to head a major-party ticket" (p.A01).

The African American support for Barack Obama during this period was very strong, with 4 out of every five of them voting for him. This is a very important development for the African Union as it continues to attempt to become a federal Union. That is because African Americans may be setting a precedent for Africans in Africa. By comprising a small proportion of those with ancestry from east Africa but voted overwhelmingly for an east African, whereby when they start holding federal elections in Africa in the future for the presidency of the African Union and for its legislature, Africans will remember to vote not on ethnic or regional ties, but for the candidates who will best represent them.

Fourth, most people might not have noticed a significant breakthrough that Barack Obama might have made in the United States, as someone with ancestry from East Africa. If one carefully examines the world map and the current geo-politics, two observations are visible: (1) the most economically, politically, militarily powerful individuals in the world today are not in their ancestral lands; and (2) it appears that the core of these powerful individuals who are not in their ancestral lands, come from the Western parts of the three Old World continents (Western Europe, Western Asia and Western Africa).

The U.S is the most powerful country in the world today and therefore the most powerful individuals reside there. However, it appears as if there might have been an East-West competition that might have been going on the past thousands of years. At this moment, the most powerful individuals in the U.S. are from Western Europe, Western Africa and western Asia. Kaba (2007) points out that by the beginning of the 21st century, "...among the most influential individuals in the world such as scientists of all kinds, professional entertainers, athletes, politicians, businessmen and women, etc. are people of West African descent who are not in West Africa" (p.77), with most of them in the United States. Just as the most influential West Africans are not in West Africa, so also are the most influential Western Asians and Western Europeans in the world are not in their ancestry lands, but mostly in the United States too. For example, records from the period of enslavement show that most African Americans are from West Africa. According to Nunn's (2007) study on the effect of enslavement on Africans entitled; "The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trade," estimates of Africans transported as enslaved persons between 1400 and 1900 to different parts of the world were presented: Trans-Atlantic; Indian Ocean; Trans-Saharan and Red Sea. The estimates show four countries, including three from West Africa losing one million or more of their people: Angola had the largest number (all 3,607,020 of them through the Trans-Atlantic); followed by Nigeria (1,406,728 Trans-Atlantic, 555,796 Trans-Saharan, and 59,337 Red Sea for a total of 2,021,859); then Ghana (all 1,614,793 through Trans-Atlantic); and Ethiopia (813,899 Trans-Saharan, 633,357 Red Sea and 200 Indian Ocean for a total of 1,447,455) (p.13). According to Bah (2005): "West Africa is believed to have supplied about 60 percent of the slaves taken to the Americas,..." (p.79).

For Western Asians, such as Arabs and Jews, they are among the most powerful groups in the United States. Ralph Nader, the prominent U.S. politician, for example, is a Lebanese American. The vice presidential candidate for Al Gore in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is a Jewish American. For Western Europeans, if one were to carefully study the ancestries of all U.S. presidents, one would find that the majority of them have ancestry from Western Europe.

So here one sees that we are moving towards equilibrium to see such an influential American like Barack Obama, who is from the Eastern part of the Old World. Although there are powerful Americans with ancestry from the other two eastern ends of the Old World, East Asia and Eastern Europe, they do not yet have the numbers as those from the Western parts of those continents.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to argue that the people of Africa have what appears to be a new positive friendship with the people of the United States. This new friendship is a contributing factor to the Barack Obama phenomenon in the United States. This paper attempts to argue that Barack Obama has a Dual Triple Heritage, with one set being racial or ethnicity and religion. The paper also argues that due to his new leadership role in the United States and the world, Senator Barack Obama has the potential to contribute to uniting the United States, and also the people of Africa with the people of United States. Senator Barack Obama, it is argued in this paper, also has the potential to contribute to uniting a federal African Union and the peoples of the Eastern parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe with the peoples of the Western parts of Africa, Asia and Europe.

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