

## Personal Reflection on the Victory and Inauguration of Barack Obama

*By Wathira Kamoji*



I followed Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign with intense interest from the moment he announced his candidacy in February of 2007. On January 20, 2009, I had the privilege of attending his inauguration as President of the United States. The day and its many poignant moments were in many ways surreal. It was also empowering in an indescribable way, being part of the throngs of millions that congregated on the vast grounds of the Washington Mall (of which the surrounding buildings and monuments had been built by slaves) to witness this momentous occasion. I wanted to be present to witness history unfolding and see for myself that Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King's dream and that of a people had finally come to fruition.

Like me, Obama's father was born in Kenya. For me, President Obama's victory goes well beyond all the congratulatory wishes I have received simply for being Kenyan. His win was personal since it was recognition of how far we had come in my own father's lifetime. President Obama's father and mine were part of a generation of Kenyans that were afforded the opportunity to study in the United States by various American organizations. Their generation was born while Kenya was still a British colony, and as children had witnessed the human cost of the war for independence.

In their time, they were considered amongst the brightest youth that the country had produced. The purpose of educating them was with the expectation that they would eventually contribute to the reconstruction of a post-independent Kenya. As students in the United States, they were further faced with the burdens of racial discrimination and segregation, and were present when the civil rights movement began succeeding to eradicate several of the legal barriers for Black participation and recognition in American society.

My father so believed in Barack Obama's message that he got involved in both his Senatorial and Presidential campaigns at a time when many people were still doubtful of his qualifications. My father spent the final weekend before the election canvassing, phoning and knocking on doors in New Hampshire. I attended the inauguration with my father, and was proud to see that the fruits of his labour over a lifetime of involvement in social justice causes and that of others were realized on January 20th.



Crowd at Lincoln Memorial,  
Inauguration of Barack Obama  
*Photo: Kamweti Mutu*

My family relocated to Canada 20 years ago. We came here like many other families to escape a repressive government in Kenya. It was a difficult transition to make, coming from a country where there were no restrictions on what I could achieve, and where my race did not matter to one where I was unexpectedly viewed as a minority and where suddenly race *became* my “social identity.” This identifier carried with it a perceived social construction of how I was expected to carry myself in a predominantly white society based on historical stereotypes of what it meant to be “Black.” A different identity was forced upon me, which had little to do with my own history and reality. Therefore I chose to educate myself on the histories of Blacks in the Western Hemisphere and my place within this history in my adopted country.

Obama’s inauguration as President did not happen in a vacuum. As he himself has said, he stands on the shoulders of many named and nameless people who came before him and helped advance the long fight for equality. President Obama is the product of the historical legacies on both sides of the Atlantic, slavery and colonialism.



Cape Coast Castle  
Photo: Wathira Kamoji

Watching the President-elect emerge from the doors of the Capitol Building to be sworn in, reminded me of my recent trip to Ghana where I visited both Elmina and Cape Coast Castle. A day that left me feeling haunted, moved and humbled by the gross violations that the enslaved Africans had endured, before they exited through the door of no return and were cruelly

transported across the Atlantic into slavery. Obama’s emergence on the balcony of the Capitol was in a sense a triumph for all of the struggles of African people in the Americas, Africa and the entire world. Finally, we have overcome a barrier towards true inclusion.

For me personally, Obama’s inauguration means that, although racism will not disappear overnight, I will not be judged by the color of my skin but by the content of my character – to quote Dr. Martin Luther King. Obama’s historic ascent shatters the biased limitations on what people of colour can and cannot achieve. His win makes an empowering statement of the realm of possibilities that are now more attainable (for any child) because his story could be my story; his moment is my moment as he remakes our human story.



Door of No Return –  
Cape Coast Castle  
Photo: Wathira Kamoji

Yes we can!!