

Full Length Research Paper

The riddle of Barack Obama: A psychoanalytic study

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In August 2008 the 47-year-old Barack Hussein Obama was elected by the U.S. Democratic National Convention as its nominee for President of the United States. This was the first time an African-American had ever been nominated to this office. It was a momentous and revolutionary event. The bright African-American orphan son of a bright but tragic Kenyan father, who had died in a tragic car accident in 1982 in Kenya, after losing his career and his legs and struggling with alcoholism, and of a bright white mother who had died of cancer in 1995, was nominated for the highest office in the world's mightiest country. Soon Obama was leading in most public-opinion polls as the candidate most likely to become President, with a 10-point lead over John McCain, the Republican candidate. On November 4 he was elected President of the United States, the first African-American president in U.S. history. There had been nothing quite like this in U.S. history. On January 20, 2009 Barack Obama became the 44th president of the United States.

Key words: Barack Obama, CSV qualities, psychoanalytic knowledge, culture.

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous schools in psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. While this is basically a psychoanalytic study, it may also be interesting to examine Barack Obama in light of the *Character Strengths and Virtues* handbook, or CSV, developed by the positive-psychology school in the United States, which may be the first attempt on the part of the psychological community to identify and classify the positive psychological traits of human beings (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Just as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association, or DSM-IV, classifies emotional and mental disorders, the CSV provides a theoretical framework for the practical applications of positive psychology. This manual identifies six classes of virtue or "core virtues", made up of twenty-four character strengths, which can be assessed through questionnaires and other methods. Some scholars think that the CSV is specific to American culture. Others think that the CSV qualities are admired

by the vast majority of cultures and throughout history, and that these traits lead to increased happiness when practiced.

The claim of universality of the CSV virtues means that in addition to trying to broaden the scope of psychological research to include mental wellness as well as mental illness, the leaders of the positive-psychology movement are challenging moral relativism and anthropological psychiatry, suggesting that human strengths and virtues may even have a biological basis. Their list of these virtues and strengths can be summarized as follows:

1. *Wisdom and Knowledge*: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
2. *Courage*: bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality
3. *Humanity*: love, kindness, social intelligence
4. *Justice*: citizenship, fairness, leadership
5. *Temperance*: forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence,

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self control

6. Transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

Which of these strengths and virtues of the healthy and happy individual does Barack Obama have? Most psychological observers would agree that he certainly has quite a few. Indeed, it is thanks to them that he has become President of the United States. Despite his complicated childhood, his difficult mother, and his abandonment by his father, Barack Obama has succeeded in building himself into a healthy, active and happy individual, who with his character strengths and virtues has attained the highest political office in the country which is still considered the leading economic, military and cultural power in our world.

METHODOLOGY

This is a study in applied psychoanalysis. Applying psychoanalytic knowledge to politics, or to biography, or to history, is always a tricky business. There are many pitfalls on the way: one of them is reductionism, the tendency to reduce complex psychological phenomena to single causes in a person's childhood, such as "an unresolved Oedipus complex." Political action is always the product of many different and complex processes, social, personal, public, historical, economic, cultural, racial, and psychological. These processes are always in interaction, and one cannot understand one without considering the others. The method must therefore be *interdisciplinary*, and the leader's personal development must always be considered along with its cultural, political, historical and social background. While it is crucial to understand what happened to the leader in his early life, in his family of origin, in his early-life development, it is also important to understand all the other forces that shaped his personality and gave him his "strengths and virtues."

This study uses the available sources on Barack Obama's personal and political development as primary sources. While it may seem that the personal is divorced from the political, in fact there is an intimate relationship between the two. The political leader acts out his personal feelings, thoughts, wishes and conflicts on the public scene. At times the country that he leads may play the role of Mother in his unconscious and even conscious feelings. At other times his nation may play the role of an extended family, or one of his mentors may play the role of Father. Narcissism is often a key ingredient of political leadership, and most charismatic leaders are narcissistic, but there are many kinds, levels and functions of narcissism. In the case of creative and constructive leaders like Barack Obama, we may speak of "high-level narcissism" or of "constructive narcissistic leadership." This study is not designed to explore each of the strengths and virtues of Barack Obama's separately: rather, it is meant to explore the personal life

history that gave him his capacity for leadership and the psychological strengths that shaped his character. If we find any weaknesses or failures in his personality, why, that is all too human, and his ability to achieve what he has attests to his power to overcome such weaknesses.

Barack Obama's Development and Character

Like the DSM, the CSV lists traits and virtues but does not explain how they come about, what are the developmental psychological processes that bring about strong, happy, and virtuous individuals. It would take considerable probing into a person's life history and some psychoanalytic knowledge to understand or explain how these come about. This is what this study aims to do.

Like any top political leader, Barack Obama has great ambition, yet he also has humility, calmness under pressure and moderation. He knows that he is superior to most people, yet describes himself as "one of you" and often makes people feel it, too. That Barack Obama could attain such an extraordinary achievement despite what we shall see was a difficult psychological background attests to his great emotional strength and intelligence. Despite his unusual and in some ways unhealthy family-of-origin background, as we shall see, Barack Obama created for himself a psychologically healthy family with a bright, successful, able and caring wife and two happy daughters. Everything was going for him. It is therefore vital to ask the question, how did this unique young man from a broken family reach this extraordinary achievement and status at such a young age, rather than become a marginal, wayward youth? What emotional stuff is he made of? How did he overcome his early abandonment by his father? And did it have to do with his quest for power and his achievement of it?

In a TIME magazine article, Barack Obama was called "a man of five faces": a Black Man, a Healer, a Novice, A Radical and "the face of the Future." One might have added the Unifier, the Pacifier, the Hope Giver, and many other "faces." Some of these "faces" are contradictory, but together they make the man. In fact, much more than these "faces" makes Barack Obama what he is. Indeed, a man who is this complex and successful is not easy to decipher. He is unique that his biography calls for a psychoanalytic interpretation. We need to look below the surface to understand how Barack Obama came to be what he is. Given the very high hopes pinned on him not only by his own people but by the entire world, he is bound to disappoint some of us. Let us see whether we can understand this complex, extraordinary and fascinating man through the lens of psychoanalysis.

The mother

Psychoanalysis regards one's mother and her early relationship with her baby as crucial to the development

of his personality and his emotions. This is the first and most important physical and emotional relationship, and its effect on the individual's development is incalculable. Let us take a close look at Barack Obama's extraordinary mother, her personality, and her emotional relationship with her son.

The mother, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro (1942-1995), was a formidable woman. Why was her first name Stanley – a man's name? She was the only child of Stanley Armour Dunham (1918-1992) and Madelyn Lee Payne Dunham (1922-2008), born in Kansas during the Second World War, while her father was serving in the U.S. military. Just as her mother had a man's middle name, Lee, she was named Stanley after her father, who had wanted a son, and was deeply disappointed when his daughter was born. He named her Stanley, which expressed his wish for a boy. To be a girl, the little Stanley Ann had to struggle against a father who wanted her a boy. She was referred to as "Ann" in some documents, and as "Stanley Ann" in others. When she went to college in Hawaii, she called herself "Ann," dropping her first name. At the same time, her father was a crucial influence and an ambivalent identification figure for her.

What kind of parenting did Stanley Ann Dunham receive? Ann's mother, Madelyn Lee Payne Dunham, was a strict and pedantic woman. She was born in Kansas to stern Methodist parents who did not believe in drinking, playing cards or dancing. Focusing on her academic life, she was one of the best students in her high-school graduating class of 1940. She was a career woman, who was often promoted on her job, but was a relatively cold mother, as opposed to her husband, who was warm, loving and effusive. Barack Obama described his grandmother as "quiet yet firm", in contrast to Obama's "boisterous" grandfather Stanley, who was also described as "jolly" and highly emotional.

Ann seems to have identified with her "boisterous" father, whose first and last names she bore, more than with her pedantic and strict mother. Ann's mother died in Hawaii on the day before Barack's election as President. On November 2, 2008 (November 3, 2008 in the continental U.S.), the Obama campaign announced that Barack's maternal grandmother Madelyn Dunham had "died peacefully after a battle with cancer" in Hawaii. Barack Obama and his half-sister, Maya Cassandra Soetoro-Ng, released a statement saying that "She was the cornerstone of our family, and a woman of extraordinary accomplishment, strength, and humility." At his final rally in Charlotte, North Carolina on November 3, Obama said, "She was one of those quiet heroes that we have all across America. They're not famous. Their names are not in the newspapers, but each and every day they work hard. They aren't seeking the limelight. All they try to do is just do the right thing."

Had Madelyn Lee Payne "done the right thing" when she defied her own parents to marry the lower-class Stanley Armour Dunham? The Paynes were Methodists; the Dunhams were Baptists. Unlike the white-collar

Paynes, Stanley Armour Dunham came from a blue-collar family. His parents were Ralph Waldo Emerson Dunham (1894-1970) and Ruth Lucille Armour (1900-1926). Barack's maternal great-grandfather was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the great American philosopher, which may have expressed the great ambitions of that man's parents. In any event, on October 3, 1915, the 21-year-old Kansas café owner married a teenager from Illinois named Ruth Lucille Armour.

Barack Obama's maternal great-grandmother, Ruth Lucille Armour Dunham, who was born on September 1, 1900, gave birth to her first son, Ralph Waldo Emerson Dunham, Jr., who was named after his father, in August 1916, when she was not quite sixteen. She bore her second son, Stanley Armour Dunham, who was named after her, on March 23, 1918, when she was seventeen. Then, it seems, she became depressed, and when she was twenty-six, on November 25, 1926, Ruth Lucille Armour Dunham killed herself. At the age of eight, Stanley Armour Dunham had the misfortune of discovering his mother's dead body. He must have been enraged at his mother for abandoning him and deeply hurt and depressed.

The traumatized, abandoned and grieving boy Stanley Armour Dunham suffered a further trauma when his equally-traumatized father abandoned the family. Stanley and his elder brother Ralph were sent to live with his maternal grandparents. Unable to mourn his losses, his grief and bereavement gave way to aggression and violence. At one point an enraged Stanley Dunham punched his high-school principal and was kicked out of school. Stanley Dunham was variously described as "gregarious, friendly, impetuous, challenging and loud." He later became a manipulative furniture salesman "who could charm the legs off a couch." Madelyn's parents did not approve of their marriage, which took place on May 5, 1940, just as Madelyn was graduating from high school (Figure 1).

During the first two years of their marriage, Stanley Armour Dunham and his wife Madelyn had no children. Did Stanley Armour Dunham, whose mother had killed herself, fear another abandonment by a woman? In any event, he wanted a boy but had a girl. Madelyn conceived in February 1942, and their daughter was born on November 29, 1942. He named her after himself.

Stanley Ann was a strong-willed girl, and her parents were progressive and non-conventional. Her father had joined the Army, leaving his wife behind, and her mother worked at a Boeing Aircraft plant in Kansas. At the end of World War II, in 1945, when she was three, Stanley came back home and moved his family to California, then to Texas, and then to Seattle, Washington, where he was a furniture salesman and her mother worked for a bank. In 1956 the family moved to Mercer Island, Washington, so that the 13-year old Ann could attend the Mercer Island High School, that had just opened, where progressive teachers taught the importance of



Figure 1. Barack Obama's mother and her parents.

challenging social norms and questioning authority. Ann did so naturally, with her defiant character.

Ann Dunham, as was then her name, also used the male name Stanley, as she ambivalently identified with her father. She took the Mercer Island High School lessons quite personally. She felt she did not have to be like every other girl – she could even be like the boy her father wanted her to be. She didn't need to date or marry or have children. A classmate remembered her as "intellectually way more mature than we were and a little bit ahead of her time, in an off-center way." Chip Wall, another former classmate of Ann's, has said, "She was not a standard-issue girl of her times ... She wasn't part of the matched-sweater-set crowd... If you were concerned about something going wrong in the world, Stanley would know about it first ... We were liberals before we knew what liberals were." And yet another former classmate of Ann's has called her "the original feminist". She was unconventional and eccentric. She was also described as quiet, cerebral and fearless. Stanley Ann was certainly courageous. But she was also difficult and stubborn (Jones, 2007; Ripley, 2008).

Stanley Ann Dunham was an only child, which exacerbated her predicament, as her father had no other child to fill the role of the son he craved. After Stanley Ann graduated from Seattle's Mercer Island High School in 1960, the Dunhams moved to Hawaii. Stanley Ann attended the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she studied anthropology, being interested in people of other cultures. Here she met Barak [sic] Hussein Obama (1936-1982), a graduate student from Kenya and the school's first African student under the airlift program initiated by the Kenyan Luo politician Thomas Joseph

Odhiambo Mboya (1930-1969), better known as Tom Mboya. Kenya would become independent in 1963, and Mboya would become its Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, and later its Minister for Economic Planning and Development. Eventually, Barak Obama would get himself in trouble with Tom Mboya, his benefactor, and this trouble would lead to his ruin.

Just as her mother's parents had opposed the mother's marriage to her father, when Stanley Ann became engaged to Barack Obama (for this was his official name in the United States), both her parents and his opposed the marriage, Barack's father in particular objecting. Nevertheless, the two young people supposedly defied their parents, Barak was as stubborn as his wife, and, according to their divorce decree of 1964, Barack H. Obama and Stanley Ann Dunham were married on February 2, 1961 in Maui, Hawaii. Attempts to unearth the marriage license, however, seem to have failed. *Is it just possible that Barack's parents were never married?* In any event, Ann was already pregnant by then. Their son Barack was born in Hawaii on August 4, 1961. Ann was not yet 19 at the time.

Mother and son

Barack Obama has repeatedly referred to his mother as "the dominant figure in my formative years ... The values she taught me continue to be my touchstone when it comes to how I go about the world of politics" (Jones, 2007; Ripley, 2008). What was Stanley Ann like as a mother? What were those "values" that Stanley Ann taught her son Barack? Let us recall that Chip Wall, a

former classmate of hers who is now a retired philosophy teacher, has said, “She was not a standard-issue girl of her times ... She wasn’t part of the matched-sweater-set crowd... If you were concerned about something going wrong in the world, Stanley would know about it first ... [she was] “a fellow traveler. . . . We were liberals before we knew what liberals were.” Wall used to make after-school runs to Seattle with Ann Dunham to sit and talk – for hours and hours – in coffee shops.

“She touted herself as an atheist, and it was something she’d read about and could argue,” said Stanley Ann’s classmate Maxine Box, who was Ann’s best friend in high school. “She was always challenging and arguing and comparing. She was already thinking about things that the rest of us hadn’t.” The parental traits that would mold Barack Obama – a contrarian world-view, an initial rejection of organized religion, a questioning and defiant nature – were taking shape years earlier in the nomadic and tempestuous Dunham family, where the only child was a curious and precocious daughter of a father who wanted a boy so badly that he named her Stanley – after himself.

Why did Stanley Ann Dunham marry – if in fact she did – a black man from an African culture she knew nothing about? Sigmund Freud thought that *exogamy – marrying outside your tribe, clan, nation, religion and so on – was an unconscious defense against incestuous wishes.* If indeed Stanley Ann was deeply – though ambivalently – attached to her father, whose first and last names she bore, then marrying someone who was as unlike her father as possible was exogamy, and she may have married the Kenyan as a way of telling herself, “it is not my father I want, it is someone totally different.” We have further proof of that in that she later married an Indonesian. Both exogamous marriages failed, however, perhaps due to the neurotic choice of mates and Ann’s difficult character. The family tradition of repeated physical or emotional abandonments, beginning with the suicide of Barack’s paternal great-grandmother, Ruth Lucille Armour Dunham, was continued by Barack’s father and mother. Her first husband abandoned her and her son, and the second was abandoned by her.

Barack’s Kenyan father, who had left his African wife in 1959, left his American wife and their son in 1963, when Barack was two years old, ostensibly to attend Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. *Was Barack Obama fleeing a domineering wife as well as pursuing his career?* It is not clear how Ann reacted to the separation and abandonment, nor how it affected the two-year-old Barack. Certain it is that his *imagined* father’s image played a very important role in his emotional life. The parents were officially divorced in early 1964 in the Circuit Court of the First Judicial Circuit in Hawaii. The senior Obama later obtained a master’s degree in economics from Harvard and returned to Kenya in 1965, where he obtained a position in the Kenyan government. Tragically, however, he got himself in trouble with the Kikuyu-dominated government of

Jomo Kenyatta (Kamau wa Ngengi, 1894-1978), and, later in life, he “was drinking too much” and became a bitter and frustrated alcoholic. He saw his son again in Hawaii in 1971, returned to Kenya, drove recklessly, and was killed in an automobile accident in 1982. The father’s life had ended in tragedy. Barack idealized his father in his memoir *Dreams from My Father* (Obama, 1995). We shall return to the father below, as he was a very important influence in Barack’s life, even in his absence.

After an initial period of traumatization following her abandonment, separation and divorce, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama went on with her life. Her divorce took place in 1964. She later met an Indonesian student, Lolo Soetoro (1936-1987), who had also been traumatized, at the East-West Center on the University of Hawaii campus. Lolo was the same age as her first husband, Barack Obama. Lolo Soetoro was an orphan and had also been abandoned. He was the ninth of ten children of a man from Yogyakarta, a center of classical Javanese fine art and culture and the Republican capital of Indonesia during the Indonesian National Revolution (1945-1949), in which the Dutch colonial rulers were defeated and driven out of the country. During that war, around 1946, Lolo Soetoro’s father and eldest brother were killed, and the Dutch army burned down the family’s home. The traumatized Lolo Soetoro fled with his mother into the countryside to survive. When he grew up he attended Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta and got his bachelor’s degree in geography. He later obtained a scholarship from his workplace to study for a master’s degree at the University of Hawaii, where he met Barack Obama’s mother, Stanley Ann Dunham.

Lolo Soetoro and Stanley Ann Dunham were married in 1966 or 1967, when she was about twenty-five and he was about thirty. As in the case of Ann’s first marriage, however, attempts to locate the marriage license have not succeeded. In the meantime, there was much political upheaval in Indonesia. President Soekarno, Indonesia’s first president who ruled since it became independent in 1949, was getting old and his government weak. In 1965 Major General Soeharto foiled a coup d’état against Soekarno, which Soeharto blamed on the Indonesian communists. The Indonesian Communist Party was outlawed, and Soeharto led a violent anti-communist purge, which is thought to have killed over half a million people. Soeharto wrested power from the weakened Soekarno, who relied on the communists for support, and was inaugurated President in March 1968.

During the unrest surrounding the ascent of President Soeharto, the Indonesian government recalled all its citizens who were living abroad. Lolo Soetoro returned to Indonesia in 1966 or 1967, where he worked as a geologist for the Indonesian army. Ann later followed him to Jakarta. Lolo later worked for Mobil Corporation, the U.S.-based international oil company, as a government-relations consultant. It is not clear whether or when Lolo legally adopted Barack Obama, but in Lolo and Ann’s

divorce decree of 1980, one child above 18 is listed, who must be Barack. In *Dreams from my Father*, Barack Obama described his stepfather Lolo Soetoro as well-mannered, even-tempered, and easygoing, and wrote about the struggles that Soetoro had to deal with after he returned to Indonesia from Hawaii.

The quest for his personal, ethnic, religious and national identity was a key psychological process in Barack Obama's life. After his mother took him with her to Indonesia in 1967, Barack Obama, who had an Arabic middle name (Hussein) lived in this Muslim country for four years. He was called Barry Soetoro by everyone, for Barry had been his nickname, and his stepfather adopted him. The name Barry may also have indicated an identity separate from that of his father (Erikson, 1959; Falk, 1975-1976). In 1970, when he was nine years old, a major event occurred in Barry's life when his mother gave birth to his half-sister, Maya Cassandra Soetoro (now Maya Soetoro-Ng, 38 years old, she is a history teacher at La Pietra – Hawaii School for Girls in Honolulu and also teaches night classes at the University of Hawaii. Maya is fond of her half-brother and is often interviewed about him in the media). Barack had to contend with a new rival for his parents' affection.

Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro educated her precocious son, among other things, with correspondence courses in English, records of the African-American singer Mahalia Jackson, and speeches by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Did she wish to inculcate "black consciousness" in him? Did she miss her first husband, the African Barak Obama? For three years Barack was in a Catholic boys' school, the Fransiskus Assisi School in Jakarta, where he was registered as "Barry Soetoro, an Indonesian Muslim." Barry was his nickname, yet he used it as his formal name, and the last name of Soetoro may indicate his adoption by his stepfather, Lolo Soetoro. When he was eight or nine, Ann placed him in the Muslim Basuki school. Barry was aloof from the other children. *By the age of nine, Barack had already developed the self-control, isolation of feeling, and control of feelings that would become a hallmark of his character, as we shall see below.* This was his defense against feelings of abandonment, rage, and fear, and it worked very well.

When he was ten years old, in 1971, Barry Soetoro's mother Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro decided to send him home to Hawaii to attend the Punahou School, a private, co-educational, nonsectarian college-preparatory school in Honolulu. She had been worried about his poor education at the Indonesian Muslim Basuki school, and she had a hard time taking care of her two children as a working mother. By some sources it was Barry's idea, but why would a ten-year-old boy wish to be separated from his loving mother? Did Stanley Ann have some less pleasant character traits, such as being domineering or pushy, opinionated, stubborn, sarcastic or demanding? For a man who later wrote so much laudatory stuff about his mother, this

childhood request would have been extraordinary. It may reveal to us his negative feelings about his mother, with whom he nevertheless ambivalently identified, as he had no father to emulate, except in his imagination. But if it was indeed her idea, then Barry may well have experienced it as yet another abandonment, this time by his mother. He may have had deeply ambivalent feelings about it.

In any event, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro sent him to Hawaii, despite the decision being painful for her, as she probably planned to follow him there. But her son was leaving her, and she had already suffered earlier abandonments. In 1971, at any rate, at the age of ten, Barry Soetoro was sent back to Honolulu, to live with his maternal grandparents, Stanley Armour Dunham and Madelyn Lee Dunham, and to attend the prestigious Punahou School. Back home in Hawaii, Barry Soetoro became Barry Obama again, resuming his father's identity. Madelyn Dunham's job at The Bank of Hawaii helped pay his tuition, with some assistance from a scholarship. Barry was a bright student, but, as we shall see, he did not identify with the African-American student community. In that year he saw his father for the first and only time since age two, and it was not a happy meeting.

As in her first marriage, there were conflicts between the strong-willed Stanley Ann Dunham Obama and her husband Lolo Soetoro in Indonesia. For one thing, Ann wished to return to work, while Lolo wanted more children. "He became more American, she once said, as she became more Javanese" (Scott, 2008). Missing her son and her parents, and unhappy in her marriage, in 1972 Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro left Lolo Soetoro and Indonesia, taking their two-year-old daughter Maya with her, returning to Hawaii, and reuniting with her son Barry and with her parents. Lolo and Ann still saw each other periodically during the 1970s, when Ann returned to Indonesia for her anthropological field work, but they did not live together again. They were legally divorced in 1980 in Hawaii.

During most of the 1970s, Barry Obama's mother was divorced from her first husband and separated from the second. Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro kept in touch with both her ex-husbands, however. She was not estranged from either, and encouraged her two children to keep in touch with them. In 1974 she returned to graduate school at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu, while raising Barack and Maya. In 1975 Ann returned to Indonesia to do the field work for her Ph.D. in anthropology, taking her five-year-old daughter Maya with her. Did she miss Lolo? Was it Barry who chose not to go with her? *Was he again expressing his negative feelings for his mother?* Barry Obama remained at the Punahou School and with his maternal grandparents. He later wrote that he was concentrating on "his struggle to define himself." Ann Dunham acquiesced to his decision, despite it being personally painful for her. We shall see below what this meant for Barack.

Being a former weaver, among her other occupations, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro decided to study Indonesian village industries, and in particular blacksmithing. She moved to Yogyakarta, her second husband's birthplace, which was also the center of Javanese handicrafts and the former Republican capital of Indonesia during the war of independence against the Dutch in 1945-1949. In 1992 – following her father's death and preceding her son's marriage – the forty-nine-year-old Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Hawaii with a doctoral dissertation entitled *Peasant Blacksmithing in Indonesia: Surviving and Thriving Against All Odds* (Dunham, 1992). She signed it "S. Ann Dunham" – no first name, no Obama, no Soetoro. Why did Stanley Ann study blacksmithing and not weaving, for example, with which she had a first-hand experience? Ann's first husband was a *black* man, and he had abandoned her. Perhaps her keen interest in *blacksmithing* had to do with this?

Survival was a major theme in Ann's life. By the time she turned fifty on November 29, 1992, the formidable Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro, too, had survived and thrived against all odds, despite her dislocations, abandonments and divorces. She had pursued a career in rural development, championing women's work and micro-credit for the world's poor, first with Indonesia's oldest bank, the with the United States Agency for International Development, the Ford Foundation, and Women's World Banking, and as a consultant in Pakistan. She had ties to leaders of organizations working for human rights, women's rights, and grass-roots development in Indonesia and elsewhere. Ann never ceased to work and to fight for the underdog. Perhaps she felt like one herself. But she paid heavily for her hard-driving life: in 1992 – the year of her father's death, of receiving her Ph.D. degree, and of her son's wedding – she fell ill with cancer (which was diagnosed too late, two years later) and died within three years. Barack Obama would suffer yet another abandonment.

Painful Losses and their Mourning

In early 1992, when he was thirty years old, Barack Obama suffered a serious personal loss. His maternal grandfather, the warm, "jolly" and "boisterous" Stanley Armour Dunham, whom Barack affectionately called "Gramps," who had given his daughter Ann his own first name, and whose mother had killed herself when he was eight, died on February 8 at the age of 73. It was a great loss for Ann, of course, as he had been the dominant emotional influence in her life, for better or for worse. It was also a great loss for her son Barack. Was Ann able to mourn her losses? In the same year, she received her Ph.D. degree in anthropology, and her son Barack married Michelle Robinson, whom he had met in 1989. Losing his loving grandfather, he gained a loving wife. In

1994, when Barack was thirty-three, Ann Dunham was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and uterine cancer; she moved back to Hawaii to be near her widowed mother Madelyn. Stanley Ann died there in 1995 at the age of 52, after a bitter struggle with her health insurers, who refused to pay her medical expenses.

Barack Obama, who had been abandoned by his father as an infant, was sent back to Hawaii by his mother and stepfather when he was ten, and who already lost his maternal grandfather, now lost his mother as well. That he did not attend her funeral is significant psychologically. In 1995 Barack was starting his first campaign for public office in Illinois, and was not present with his mother at the time of her death. After he was informed of it, he flew to Hawaii. Following a memorial service at the University of Hawaii, Barack and his half-sister, Maya, spread her ashes in the Pacific Ocean on the south side of Oahu Island. Barack's emotional task now was to mourn the loss of his mother and to reconcile his ambivalent feelings for her. Mourning is a long and painful process. *His motherland, America, became his new mother to him.* By running for President, and by protecting America and saving her from her many woes, he could once again protect his mother, as he felt he had to do when he was six years old and they reached Indonesia (Obama, 1995; Ripley, 2008).

The Father of the Dreams

Barak Hussein Obama, the father of Barack Obama, was born in 1936 in the Kenyan village of Kanyadhiang, in Rachuonyo District, on the shores of Lake Victoria, just outside Kendu Bay, and raised in the village of Nyang'oma Kogelo, in Kenya's Siaya District, 60 km from the port city of Kisumu in Nyanza Province. Barak was the son of Hussein Onyango Obama (c. 1895-1979) and of his second wife, Akumu Habiba. The Obamas were members of the Luo tribe, a major Kenyan ethnic group, the chief rival of the Kikuyu. Barak was raised as a Muslim, but at some point in his young life he became an atheist. He was at various times described as a goatherd and as a brilliant student. His father Onyango was born into an animist Luo family, which, like many Africans, revered the spirits of its ancestors. He had traveled widely, enlisting as Onyango Obama in the British colonial forces in Kenya and visiting Europe, India, and Zanzibar, where he converted to Islam and took the first name of Hussein, then worked as a cook for missionaries in Nairobi. He named his son by his second wife Barak, meaning "blessed" in Swahili (and also in Arabic) (Figure 2).

One of the reasons Barack's paternal grandfather converted to Islam may have been to have more than one wife: Islam allows four. Hussein Onyango Obama had at least three wives. Though his son Barak was Second Wife Akumu's son, due to trouble between his parents, he was raised by Onyango's third wife, Sarah

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Problems Facing Our Socialism

BY BARAK H. OBAMA

Since many of the African countries achieved their independence there has been much talk about African Socialism. Moreover, there has been no individual or country which has at any time defined this socialism nor has there been any common ground among the leaders as to what they meant when they talked of African Socialism. Where, then, could we look for the definition of this "ism"? If it is accepted that it is the leaders of a country who usually formulate and define ideologies, then the only source for this definition would be to get it from them either through their speeches, press reports or papers or through their actions. So far the statements made by such leaders as President Nkrumah, Nyerere, Toure etc., have not had much in common. Likewise, the actions of these leaders while diverting a little from the capitalistic system have not by any means been directed towards any particularly defined-

ideology, be it scientific socialism — *inter alia* — communism.

As a first step, the Kenya Government must be congratulated for it has tried to clarify the situation in so far as it is possible to do so in the light of its planning needs. It not only specifies the objectives by which this country should be guided, but states the policies through which it hopes to fulfill these objectives. It also sets out targets, taking into account the priorities and shows ways by which to achieve these targets. The paper goes further to deal with matters of wide policy. The statement about non-alignment is for the first time explicitly expounded and one cannot help but be happy that those who wrote this paper realized the importance and the great urgency of this policy statement. The paper realizes that, as is true of any country, we must encourage international trade, foreign investments etc., since it is

Figure 2. First page of article by Barak Obama published in Kenya, 1965.

(born 1922), after Akumu left her family and separated from her husband in 1945, when Barak was nine. Barak's father's original first name was *Barak*, not Barack. For instance, in an article he published in the *East Africa Journal*, after his return from the U.S. to Kenya, when his son Barack was four years old, Barak Obama's father spelled his first name *Barak* (Obama, 1965). Above is a copy of the first page of this article (Figure 2).

In the United States, however, Barak Obama seems to have changed his first name to Barack, and, upon his return to Kenya, he changed it back again to Barak: in his son's birth certificate of 1961 (below), the father's

name is given as "Barack." *Why would the father change his name from Barak to Barack? And why did he change it back to Barak in Kenya? Did the father have two different identities, a Kenyan one and an American one? Here is a copy of Barack Obama's birth certificate (Figure 3).*

Barak Hussein Obama, who left Kenya for the U.S. in 1959, at the age of 23, under the airlift program organized by the Kenyan leader Tom Mboya, seems to have been the first African student at the University of Hawaii. Philip Ochieng, a Kenyan Luo friend who later became a prominent Kenyan journalist, went to another American university. Barak Obama was a brilliant but tragic man.


CERTIFICATION OF LIVE BIRTH		
STATE OF HAWAII HONOLULU		DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH HAWAII U.S.A.
CHILD'S NAME BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA III		CERTIFICATE NO. [REDACTED]
DATE OF BIRTH August 4, 1961	HOUR OF BIRTH 7:24 PM	SEX MALE
CITY, TOWN OR LOCATION OF BIRTH HONOLULU	ISLAND OF BIRTH OAHU	COUNTY OF BIRTH HONOLULU
MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME STANLEY ANN DUNHAM		
MOTHER'S RACE CAUCASIAN		
FATHER'S NAME BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA		
FATHER'S RACE AFRICAN		
DATE FILED BY REGISTRAR August 8, 1961		
HHS 3-1-61		
OHSM 1.1 (Rev 11/01) LASER		
This copy serves as prima facie evidence of the fact of birth in any court proceeding. [HRS 338-13(b), 338-19]		
ANY ALTERATIONS INVALIDATE THIS CERTIFICATE		

Figure 3. Barack Obama's birth certificate.

One of the first Kenyan nonreligious Muslims, Barak would get himself in trouble with the Kikuyu-dominated Kenyan government of Jomo Kenyatta, which would cause his downfall, alcoholism, accidents and early death.

Muslim custom allows a man four wives. As we have seen, Hussein Onyango Obama had at least three: Barak was the son of Habiba Akumu, his father's second wife. However, he was raised by Onyango's third wife, Sarah, since his mother's relations with her husband were not good, and she left her family and separated from her husband in 1945. Sarah thus became Barack Obama's step-grandmother. Since she only speaks Luo and Swahili and Barak does not speak those languages, their communication is very limited (Figure 4).

Given the tensions between his father and his mother, we might assume that Barak Hussein Obama's mother

Akumu was not always psychologically available to him, that she may not always have been a "good-enough mother" for him (Winnicott, 1953), and that she finally abandoned him when he was nine. *This was a crucial psychological issue for Barack's father: he was abandoned by his mother, first psychologically, and then physically, at the age of nine.* He in turn would abandon his own son and wife when his son was not two years old. This was a crucial event in his son's life.

It may have been no accident that Barak Hussein Obama was married several times. Having been abandoned by his natural mother, his marriage to Ann Dunham, at least, may have been an unconscious but unsuccessful attempt to repair his feelings of abandonment, ending up with his own abandonment of his wife. As we have seen, he grew up in the Kenyan village of Nyang'oma Kogelo, in Kenya's Siaya District, in



Figure 4. Barack Obama with his Kenyan family. Front row (left to right): Auma Obama (Barack's half-sister), Kezia Obama (Auma's mother), Sarah Hussein Onyango Obama (third wife of Barack's paternal grandfather), unknown woman. Back row (left to right): Unidentified man, Barack Obama, Abongo [Roy] Obama (Barack's half-brother), unidentified woman, unidentified man, unidentified man.

Nyanza Province. At age 18, in 1954, he married a young Luo woman named Kezia in a tribal ceremony, but five years later Barak left her and Kenya to study in Hawaii, having received a scholarship to the university. They had four children, one before he left her (she was pregnant with their second child), one soon after he left, the other two after he returned to Kenya from the United States.

Some biographers think that Kezia, rather than Barack's mother Ann, was Barak's true love. Barak Obama never divorced Kezia, who now lives in England. When he married Stanley Ann Durham, Barack's mother, he was still formally married to Kezia. Bigamy was illegal in the U.S. but Barak did not report his other marriage, stating that he was unmarried. *This may have been another reason he gave his first name as Barack: to conceal his Kenyan marriage.* In Kenya, as a Muslim, Barak was

entitled to four wives. In the U.S. he would have been considered a bigamist had his Kenyan marriage been known. Indeed, in the U.S. and Kenya together, Barak had four wives: Kezia, Ann, Ruth and Jael. He had eight children by his four wives: four children with Kezia, one with Ann, two with Ruth, and one with Jael. Whether he was a good father to them is another question.

The young and narcissistic Barak Obama had a "grandiose self." He was very ambitious and wanted to study in the United States and to become a famous, rich and important man. In Kenya, in 1959, a program offering Western educational opportunities in the United States to outstanding Kenyan students was organized by the nationalist leader Tom Mboya, a prominent Kenyan Luo politician in the government of the Kikuyu leader Jomo Kenyatta. The Kikuyu-Luo rivalry had not yet led to the kind of murderous riots of 2007-2008 that followed a

Kikuyu-stolen Kenyan election, in which Luo tribesmen killed many Kikuyus. The bright young Barak Obama was awarded a scholarship in economics, and in 1959, at the age of 23, he enrolled at the University of Hawaii. In what was to become a *pattern of abandonments*, he left behind his pregnant wife Kezia and their infant son. Kezia was to become Barack's adoptive stepmother. If recall the suicide of Barack's maternal great-grandmother, We can now see that *Barack Obama's parents both came from families with histories of emotional abandonments*.

In his memoir, Barack Obama attributed his father's admission to the University of Hawaii to the Kennedy brothers' African Student Airlift initiative, but in fact the Kennedy family did not become associated with the "educational airlift" until 1960, a year after Barak Obama was already studying in the United States, and after a visit from Tom Mboya (Dobbs, 2008). The first Airlift Africa program had begun in 1950. Through the efforts of Tom Mboya of Kenya and the African-American Students Foundation, 81 students from Kenya were granted scholarships in the United States and a plane was chartered to bring them there in 1959. Repeatedly the U.S. State Department was asked to help finance this project and repeatedly it turned the project down. The money was raised by a direct appeal to the public.

The second Airlift Africa initiative was in 1960. In response to letters from Ralph Bunche (1903-1971), the African-American Nobel Peace Prize winner, a prominent United Nations official, and a director of the African-American Students Foundation, some 230 scholarships valued at over \$1 million were offered for African students by Class I accredited colleges in the United States. This 1960 program included not only Kenya, but also Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland (now Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi). About 230 students were selected, and money was raised in Africa from Africans to provide about \$1,000 per student for living expenses in the United States. The original supporters of the Mboya program for Kenyans to study in the United States included Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Jackie Robinson, and Elizabeth Mooney Kirk, a literacy advocate who provided most of the support for Obama Senior's early years in the United States, according to the Tom Mboya archives at Stanford University.

According to Barack Obama, his father Barak had abandoned Islam and become an atheist by the time he moved to the United States in 1959 (Obama, 2006). However, Barak Obama's daughter Auma, a daughter of his wife Kezia and a half-sister of Barack, has said that her father "was never a Muslim although he was born into a Muslim family with a Muslim name" (Rice, 2008). Be that as it may, on February 2, 1961, Barak Obama married a fellow white student, Stanley Ann Dunham, in Maui, Hawaii. She was only eighteen and pregnant with his child. Their son, Barack Hussein Obama, was born

six months later, on August 4, 1961. Did Barak Obama really want to marry Ann Dunham or was he forced to marry her by her pregnancy? Where is their marriage license? In any event, he would soon leave her.

It was no accident that Barak Hussein Obama, who gave his first name as Barack on his U.S. marriage certificate, named his son after himself. He may have wanted a copy of himself, a narcissistic image of himself. For the father, however bright and capable, did have a self-destructive narcissistic personality, which, eventually, led to his ruin after he went back to Kenya. It was there that he got himself in trouble, had serious accidents, drank alcohol and finally died in another accident (Figure 5).

When Barack Obama was one year old, his father Barak was accepted by Harvard University for graduate study in economics. He moved to Massachusetts, *abandoning his wife and son*. The ostensible reason was that he could not afford to take them with him. The deeper reason may have been his wish to escape his strong-willed wife, and his lifelong pattern of abandonments. With his father absent, the toddler Barack Obama was raised by his mother and her parents, and was free to imagine and to idealize his father any way he wished to imagine him, or according to the idealized stories that his mother may have told him about his father. But he also had to deal with an abandoned and perhaps grieving mother.

Separation and abandonment were the key psychological motifs of Barak Obama's life. Barak Obama and Stanley Ann Dunham divorced in early 1964. He received his M.A. degree in economics from Harvard in 1965, and then returned to Kenya. He only saw his son again once, in 1971, when Barack was ten. At Harvard, Barak had met an American-born teacher named Ruth Nidesand, who would follow him to Kenya, despite the fact that he already had another wife there, Kezia. As Ruth Ndesandjo, she became his third wife, after Kezia and Ann, and had two children by him, before they too were divorced. By his father's wives, Barack Obama thus has several half-brothers.

Upon his return to Kenya, Barak Obama was hired by an oil company, but did not last long on the job. He then worked as an economist in the Kenyan Ministry of Transportation, and later became a senior economist in the Kenyan Ministry of Finance. But Barak Obama's life ended in self-inflicted tragedy. After his return to Kenya he published an anti-government paper entitled "Problems Facing Our Socialism" (Figure 2), which was published in the *East Africa Journal*, harshly criticizing the government's blueprint for national planning. This blueprint was entitled "African Socialism and Its Applicability to Planning in Kenya," and was produced by Tom Mboya's Ministry of Economic Planning and Development. Naturally, Mboya was offended and angry. The man he had helped get an American education had turned against him (Fornek, 2007).

Tom Mboya, who, like Barak Obama, was a member



Figure 5. Barack Obama and his Kenyan family. His hands rest on his adoptive stepmother Kezia and her daughter Auma.

of the Luo tribe, was assassinated in 1969 by Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, who was convicted for the murder and hanged. After his arrest, Njoroge reportedly asked, "Why don't you go after the big man?" He may have meant Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, since Mboya was seen as a possible contender for the presidency. The mostly Kikuyu tribal elite around Kenyatta has been blamed for Mboya's death, which has never been subject of a judicial inquiry. During Mboya's burial, a mass demonstration against the attendance of President Jomo Kenyatta led to a big skirmish, with two people shot dead. The demonstrators believed that Kenyatta was involved in the death of Mboya, thus eliminating him as a threat to his political career, although this is still a disputed matter.

Jomo Kenyatta continued to run Kenya. In 1971 Barack Obama returned to the U.S. and spent a month with his son in Hawaii. As Barack described it in his memoir, *Dreams from my Father*, his father Barak was a Luo and his conflict with Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, destroyed his

career. But, had Barak not sought the conflict early on, he might have survived and thrived. Barack Obama's life deteriorated into drinking and poverty, from which he never fully recovered. His friend, the prominent Kenyan journalist Philip Ochieng, who came to study in America on the same airlift as Barack Obama, described Obama's difficult personality and drinking problems (Ochieng, 2004). Obama lost both legs in an automobile accident, and subsequently lost his job. He died not long afterwards, in 1982, at the age of 46, in another car crash in Nairobi. Was it an unconscious suicide?

Barak Hussein Obama is buried in the village of Nyang'oma Kogelo, in Kenya's Siaya District, in Nyanza Province, where he grew up (Fornek, 2007; Dobbs, 2008). In an article for *The Daily Nation*, Kenya's leading newspaper, Philip Ochieng remembered his friend Barack Obama as "charming, generous and extraordinarily clever," but also as "imperious, cruel and given to boasting about his brain and his wealth" (Ochieng, 2004). It was this narcissistic arrogance that brought about his

ruin.

The Son and his *Dreams from His Father*

Barack Hussein Obama's lifelong inner struggle with the "ghost" of his abandoning father is crucial to the understanding of his extraordinary, unique and complex personality. The perceptive American journalist Scott Fornek pointed out the discrepancy between Barack's idealized youthful image of his father and his later disappointment with him:

"All my life, I had carried a single image of my father, one that I had sometimes rebelled against but had never questioned, one that I had later tried to take as my own," [Barack] Obama writes in *Dreams From My Father*. "The brilliant scholar, the generous friend, the upstanding leader – my father had been all those things." But, as an adult, he learned there was a darker side to his Harvard-educated father. "A bitter drunk? An abusive husband? A defeated, lonely bureaucrat?" Obama wrote. "To think that all my life I had been wrestling with nothing more than a ghost!"... [he further wrote] "He and my mother divorced when I was only two years old, and for most of my life I knew him only through the letters he sent and the stories my mother and grandparents told," Obama said in speech he delivered this year just before Father's Day (Fornek, 2007).

It may be easier to grow up without a father than with a difficult and disturbed one. Perhaps luckily for himself, Barack Obama was spared his father Barak's difficult personality and his tragic life by his father's abandonment of him. Though traumatized by this abandonment, *he imagined a highly-idealized father, identified with him ambivalently, and outdid his father in every way.* Not having a real father with him, he was free to imagine one that was great, wise and wonderful, until he discovered otherwise, after his father's death in 1982, and, in fact, only when he first came to Kenya in 1988.

Emotional Intelligence and Freudian Slips

The feelings that were aroused in the twenty-seven-year-old Barack Obama by his discovery of his "flawed father" were very powerful and painful. In my view, his unconscious defense against them was *emotional isolation, discipline and detachment to achieve total control of his feelings.* He had developed this defense in his early life. As the American journalist Jodi Kantor put it, "If there is one quality that those closest to Obama marvel at is his emotional discipline. This is partly a matter of temperament, partly *an effort by Obama to step away from his own feelings* so he can make dispassionate judgments. 'He doesn't allow himself the luxury of any distraction,' said Valerie [Bowman] Jarrett, a close adviser. 'He is able to use his disciplined mind to

not get caught up in the emotional swirl' ... It is not that Obama does not experience emotion, friends say. But he detaches from it, observing it instead. 'He has the qualities of a writer,' said [David] Axelrod, his strategist. 'I get the sense that he's participating in these things but also watching them.' Obama watches and assesses no one more avidly than himself (Kantor, 2008).

Valerie Bowman went through a very painful divorce five years after marrying her childhood friend William Robert Jarrett, who died three years later. She knows a thing or two about painful emotions. So does Barack Obama, but he seems to have an extraordinary degree of "emotional intelligence" in dealing with people, and this is one of the secrets of his success. "Emotional intelligence" involves correctly perceiving people's emotions and one's own, using them, understanding emotions, managing emotions, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 1998; Matthews et al., 2002). Barack Obama has the extraordinary ability to observe his own feelings and to control them rather than to express them outwardly.

Barack developed this ability early in his life, in his emotional relationship with his mother, but when he discovered his father's tragic past, and when his idealization of his father was shattered, this unconscious process of emotional control, discipline, detachment and isolation was reinforced. This is why Barack Obama seems cool, almost detached, non-spontaneous, never very angry, euphoric, upset or desperate. He is always in total control of himself, and never displays overdue emotion. His self-confidence and self-control are supreme. *His total control of his feelings is the most remarkable quality of his personality, the one most vaunted by his aides and friends.*

People who are as self-controlled as Barack Obama rarely display or express their innermost feelings, especially not the painful ones, which everyone has: anger, fear, longing, loss, grief, sadness, abandonment, bereavement, jealousy, and so on. These feelings may come through inadvertently through slips of the tongue and other "parapraxes." On August 23, 2008, when introducing his running mate, Barack Obama said, "So let me introduce to you *the next president* – the next vice president of the United States of America, Joe Biden." It was only through this "Freudian slip" that his painful feelings about his father came through. Obama's slip of the tongue can be understood if we think of Joe Biden as a father figure to Barack Obama and of Obama's lifelong quest for the good father that he never had.

Born in 1942, old enough to be Barack's father, Joe Biden had lost a wife and child in a car accident, while Obama's father was killed in such an accident. Biden was a much better father than Obama's. He had recovered from his loss and trauma and rebuilt his life, while Obama's father had destroyed himself. Biden built a new family, as did Barack Obama. In Obama's unconscious mind, Biden may be the good father he

wanted, and therefore has priority over him. It was like saying, “here is my new father.” Interestingly enough, when it was Biden’s turn to speak and to accept his nomination, the Delaware senator called the presumptive Democratic nominee “Barack America.” One can only wonder what it was in Biden’s unconscious feelings that caused this curious slip.

The occasions on which Obama displays his painful feelings in public or loses his control of them are rare. One such occasion was the launch of his book *The Audacity of Hope* in 2006. When he spoke of his work as a U.S. Senator in Washington and of the emotional price that his wife and daughters were paying for it, due to his absence from home, tears welled up in his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. He felt he was abandoning his family. *This may have reminded him of his own abandonment by his father, of the price that he and his mother paid for it.* It brought out the pain that he had been denying, repressing or isolating all his life. His wife Michelle calmed him down with a kiss. Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, who was born in 1964, the year Barack’s parents divorced, seems like a perfect emotional match for Barack Obama. “He loved Michelle,” said Gerald Kellman, Obama’s community-organizing boss, but he was also looking for the kind of partner who could join him on his climb. “This is a person who could help him manage the pressures of the life he thought he wanted.” (Kantor 2008). Gerald (Jerry) Kellman, who hired Obama as a community organizer in 1985, had this to say about Obama’s character: “He liked the young man’s intelligence, motivation and acutely personal understanding of how it felt to be an outsider. He also remembers that Mr. Obama drove a hard bargain” (Kovaleski, 2008).

Barack Obama considered his three-year period as a community organizer in Chicago’s South Side a very important education. An American journalist wrote that “Mr. Obama’s three-year stretch as a grass-roots organizer has figured prominently, if not profoundly, in his own narrative of his life. Campaigning in Iowa, Mr. Obama called it ‘the best education I ever had, better than anything I got at Harvard Law School,’ an education that he said was ‘seared into my brain.’ He devoted about one-third of the 442 pages in his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, to chronicling that Chicago organizing period” (Kovaleski, 2008). It was here that he learned empathy, and that his emotional intelligence developed. And he also may have had a good father figure in Jerry Kelman.

Fathers and Sons

It may sound surprising, or strange, but Barack’s absentee father may have been one of the great emotional forces of his entire life. He forged for himself an identity in which the imaginary father played a major role, trying to emulate the idealized father in his mind. Only six years after his father’s death, in 1988, did he confront

the truth about his father by going to Kenya. Throughout his life his fantasies about his father, and his quest for a good father figure, played a major role in his emotional development. We can now see how the son of two very special and difficult people forged his own identity. How he became a self-made man, how he overcame his abandonment and created a family.

We know relatively little about the child Barack. Much of it comes from his memoir, *Dreams from my Father* (Obama, 1995) and from *The Audacity of Hope* (Obama, 2006). What we do know is complex and ambiguous. One thing is clear throughout, though: the father continued to preoccupy Barack throughout his life. He first visited Kenya and found out the bitter truth about his father in 1988, the year before he met his future wife, Michelle. In 2006, on his third trip to Kenya, Obama flew his wife and two daughters from Chicago to join him in a visit to his father’s birthplace, the village of Nyang’oma Kogelo, in Kenya’s Siaya District, in rural western Kenya. *Dreams from my Father* relates how Obama tried to understand himself and his origins following his father’s death, which was no doubt a traumatic event for him. By traveling to all the places of his childhood and youth, and then to Kenya, his father’s birthplace, he sorted out his life in an admirable way emotionally, by reconstructing it through travel and imagination. Fantasy is a way of dealing with painful reality. And Barack emerged emotionally triumphant. He married and had a healthy family which was very different from his father’s.

Barack Obama was twenty-one when he received a phone call from Kenya in late 1982 telling him that his forty-six-year-old father had died in a car crash. “I felt no pain,” Obama wrote after the call, “only the vague sense of an opportunity lost.” He did not go to Kenya to visit his father’s grave and meet his paternal family for another six years. He must have repressed or denied the pain, because, as the perceptive British broadcaster, writer, and political campaigner Oona King pointed out, after several more years and several hundred pages of *Dreams from my Father*, the pain finally came out. (King, 2007). Throughout his journey, Obama tried to deal with “the puzzle of being a black man”, but the deeper issues were: “Who am I?” and “Why did my father abandon me?” “Why did I grow up in a white family?” and “Am I like my father?”

Of his early childhood, Barack Obama has recalled, “that my father looked nothing like the people around me — that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk — barely registered in my mind” (Obama, 1995, pp. 9–10). In his memoir, he described his struggles as a young adult to reconcile social perceptions of his multiracial heritage (Obama, 1995, Chapters 4 and 5). But his struggle with his own identity was hard, for he also wrote that he had used alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine during his teenage years in high school to “push questions of who I was out of my mind.” And at the Civil Forum on the Presidency in 2008, Obama called his high-school drug use his “greatest moral failure.” Being a

mixed-race child, raised mostly by his white grandparents, Obama desperately sought to believe that white and black people could get along, even though his own parents could not. Oona King thought that Barack felt that “otherwise his existence must be at best a mistake, at worst a lie” (King, 2007). But the puzzle of being the black son of a white mother always concealed his deeper, personal puzzles, such as his abandonment by his father.

It is hard to say what kind of mothering the infant Barack received, but, despite his mother’s difficult character, or because of it, judging by his own very strong character, his emotional intelligence, and his ability to overcome adversity, the basic relationship with his mother must have been a good one, and he writes about her with much affection in his memoir. Later on, however, the relationship of care and protection was reversed, as we shall see, and when they came to Indonesia the six-year-old Barack felt that *he wanted to protect his mother* (Ripley, 2008).

Barack Obama’s Odyssey began in his childhood in Hawaii, and took him to Indonesia, “the markets and slums of Jakarta,” then back to Hawaii, and then to Los Angeles, New York, Harvard, Chicago, Springfield and Washington. He went to local schools in Indonesia from the age of 6 until 10. His mother woke him up at 4AM each morning for English lessons so that he didn’t fall behind his peers in America. Ann was very ambitious for her son, whom she may have unconsciously seen as an extension of herself. “This is no picnic for me either, *buster*,” she replied when he complained bitterly about his early starts. Stanley Ann Dunham was obviously a tough woman. Barack himself described her as a “soldier” for peace, liberty and equality. Nevertheless, Barack wrote about her with great affection and admiration, saying that: “What is best in me I owe to her.” Did he deny the negative feelings he had for her?

The perceptive British broadcaster, writer, and political campaigner Oona King has a personal background that helps her understand Barack Obama. Oona Tamsyn King, who is of mixed race, was born in 1967 to Murreil Hazels Stern, a British Jewess committed to social justice issues, and an African-American father, the civil rights activist Preston King. Oona King has pointed out that as the memoir’s title, *Dreams from my Father*, suggests, it is mostly concerned with his black father, who abandoned him as a baby, and who ended his life tragically. The primal wound of parental abandonment, added to the search for identity within white mainstream society, means that his journey of self-discovery must uncover the black part of him, not the white part (King, 2007). The question of “why did my father abandon me?” seems to cry out for an answer.

At the University of Hawaii, Barack Obama was an outsider to both whites and blacks. He felt unable to fit in with the white students, yet constantly had to prove himself “black” to the black students. In his memoir, when a right-on black comrade claims [falsely] that his

choice of reading – *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad – is a racist tract, Obama replies: “I read it to help me understand just what it is that makes white people so afraid [of black people]. Their demons. It helps me understand how people learn to hate.” “And that’s important to you?” asks the friend. “My life depends on it,” Obama writes (King, 2007). Deeper inside him may be the question, “did my father hate my mother? Was she afraid of him or he of her? Is that why he left us?”

As part of his strengths and virtues and his emotional intelligence, Barack Obama has integrity and authenticity. Oona King felt that “there is an authenticity to the book [*Dreams from my Father*] that makes you think he might really be driven by the quest for common ground; the desire to diagnose the phenomenon of hate, and to come up with a prescription; the desire to prove that what unites us is greater than what divides us. *This desire to bring harmony is not purely a Ghandiesque display of altruism, but also an act of survival.* He finds some of the answer to what feeds hate in his grass-roots work. He tries to bring hope to desperate communities in sink estates around the decaying hulk of Chicago’s industrial past, and has a surprising level of success. You have to admire him for it, especially if you’ve ever tried to mobilise local communities mired in poverty and depression” (King, 2007). *On a deeper level, by working to repair the broken lives in his chosen community, was Barack Obama trying to repair his own broken family?*

Like most other political leaders, *Barack Obama dealt with his personal problems by unconsciously displacing them to the public arena.* Rather than explore the question of his black father’s relationship to him, or to his white mother, he explored the political issue of black-white relations. As a U.S. Senator, on his third visit to Kenya, in 2006, Obama gave a speech at the University of Nairobi condemning corruption in the Kenyan government (Wamalwa, 2006; Moracha and Mosota, 2006). Did he blame the government, rather than his father, for his father’s tragic fate? Was he trying to preserve his idealized image of his father despite everything he knew about him? The perceptive Oona King thought that Obama’s personal exploration of African-American rage in the face of white discrimination was coupled with incomprehension (why are black people always so angry?). But, although *Dreams from my Father* deals with race and class, its real strength is in revealing the flawed human psychology, black and white, that can lead any person towards misunderstanding, prejudice, despair, poverty and tragedy (King, 2007).

The Outsider and His Family

Barack Obama has always been something of an outsider and a maverick in his own black community. The *New York Times* journalist Jodi Kantor has observed that “Obama is often called a permanent outsider – racially, geographically, politically. But his story is more

complicated than that. 'He's been an outsider at Columbia and Harvard,' said Matthew McGuire, a friend. 'He was an outsider but within the ultimate insider clubs.' Within those and other powerful institutions, Obama has always appointed himself critic. After being elected the first black American president of the Harvard Law Review, Obama gave a speech to black students and alumni so rousing that a few recall it nearly two decades later. 'Don't let Harvard change you,' went the refrain (Kantor, 2008). Indeed, among the qualities that attracted voters to Obama during the presidential campaign were precisely those of the outsider and the critic, or, as the psychoanalyst Irvine Schiffer put it, the charisma of the foreigner and of the fighting stance (Schiffer, 1973).

Barack Obama was lonely in his youth. Much of Obama's memoir *Dreams from my Father* is a meditation on loneliness. At the Punahou School, in Hawaii, Obama felt lonely and abandoned by both his parents. Oona King thought that Obama was constantly an outsider in search of a real community, a community that he finally found in Chicago (King, 2007). This is a very important psychological observation, for a community is like a large, extended family, and political entities can represent personal objects in the unconscious mind. If you replace the word "community" with the word "family," then *the young Barack Obama was always looking for an alternative family, one that would accept and never abandon him. And he finally found it, first on Chicago's South Side, then in the Illinois State Senate, then in the U.S. Senate, and finally in the United States of America.* He was the only African-American U.S. Senator among his 100 colleagues, and then the first African-American president. That was his new white-black family.

There are many emotionally poignant passages in *Dreams from my Father*. Obama recognizes his own ultimately privileged position, but his emotional empathy for others is considerable. In one passage, when he comes back to Hawaii from Indonesia at the age of ten [in 1971], he stands in the American immigration control line, behind a Chinese family who had been lively and animated during the flight from Jakarta to Honolulu. But "now the family was standing absolutely still, trying to wish themselves invisible, their eyes silently following the hands that riffled through their passports and luggage with a menacing calm. Finally the customs official tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I was an American. I nodded and handed him my passport. 'Go ahead,' he said, and told the Chinese family to stand to one side" (King, 2007). One can tell that Barack feels for poor Chinese immigrants and does not like the immigration's official's discrimination in his favor.

Oona King thought that Barack Obama's background gives him a heightened ability to understand opposing world views. He believes in the power of words: "If I could just find the right words, things would change." A decade later, in 2004, he proved this point at the Democratic National Convention when he was chosen as the keynote speaker. The words he picked made him

an overnight celebrity and a political sensation. His keynote address, entitled *The Audacity of Hope*, propelled him to national prominence. In the less than twenty minutes that it took to deliver the speech, Obama was catapulted to sudden fame, with many political analysts rightly predicting that he would enter a future presidential race. He was immediately commissioned to write a book, and, in 2006, Obama released *The Audacity of Hope*, a book-length account that expanded upon many of the themes he had addressed in the convention speech. It became a bestseller.

Oona King thought that *Dreams from my Father* proved that Barack Obama is a "listening" politician; he couldn't otherwise have depicted the myriad lives that are described in the pages of this book. It also demonstrates his capacity to provide a compelling narrative for the human condition. The book's epilogue ends with him at his own wedding in 1992, toasting "a happy ending". Becoming America's first African-American president is a good new beginning (King, 2007). But on a deeper level, Barack Obama's entire career may be seen as an attempt to fix broken families and shattered lives, to knit together broken communities. *By repairing and "fixing" America's troubles, perhaps he can overcome his own early feelings of helplessness at being unable to fix his mother's broken marriages, his father's self-destruction, and the deaths of both.*

Dreams from my Father is a somewhat idealized account of his life, as Barack Obama later also had to come to terms with his father's failed life in Kenya after his return there from the United States, his tragic entanglement with the Kenyan authorities, and his tragic death. It is in Kenya, in 1988, during his first visit there, where he discovers a nation with forty different tribes, each of them saddled with negative stereotypes of the others. It is also in Kenya where he recognizes the dichotomy that has been his lifelong existence between the graves of his father and his grandfather. *He tried to make sense of everything, but he cannot make sense of his father's tragic life.*

Two *Chicago Tribune* journalists have searched for discrepancies between *Dreams from my Father* and Obama's real-life events:

More than 40 interviews with former classmates, teachers, friends and neighbors in his childhood homes of Hawaii and Indonesia, as well as a review of public records, show the arc of Obama's personal journey took him to places and situations far removed from the experience of most Americans. At the same time, *several of his oft-recited stories may not have happened in the way he has recounted them.* Some seem to make Obama look better in the retelling, others appear to exaggerate his outward struggles over issues of race, or simply skim over some of the most painful, private moments of his life. The handful of black students who attended [the prestigious] Punahou School in Hawaii, for instance, say they struggled mightily with issues of race and racism there. But absent from those discussions,

they say, was another student then known as Barry Obama (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

Why did Barack Obama call himself "Barry" when he was in school? Was this his nickname among his classmates, or was he trying to fit it with the American scene, to be accepted, to avoid further rejection or abandonment, not to feel an outsider anymore? Obama's emotional turmoil as a youth was not about race. It was about the much more personal issues of abandonment and loneliness. Another mixed-race classmate in Hawaii, Keith Kakugawa,

... said he does recall long, soulful talks with the young Obama and that his friend confided his longing and loneliness. But those talks, Kakugawa said, were not about race. "Not even close," he said, adding that Obama was dealing with "some inner turmoil" in those days. "But it wasn't a race thing," he said. "Barry's biggest struggles then were missing his parents. His biggest struggles were his feelings of abandonment. The idea that his biggest struggle was race is [bull]" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

Abandonment was the primary issue of his life. His father had abandoned him at age two, and his mother had sent him away to Hawaii from Indonesia when he was ten. Even if he was the instigator of this move, he may still have felt it as an abandonment.

Barack's Life as a Child

What was it like for the baby Barack Obama to be born to an eighteen year-old white rebellious, feminist, unconventional, stubborn, restless, self-willed mother? When Amanda Ripley interviewed the son about the mother, he called her "reckless." "When I think about my mother," Obama told me recently, "I think that there was a certain combination of being very grounded in who she was, what she believed in. But also a certain recklessness. I think she was always searching for something. She wasn't comfortable seeing her life confined to a certain box." (Ripley 2008). So, Barack had to adjust to his mother's "recklessness." In a way, his father, too, was reckless, and self-destructive. So Barack would have to learn to be as careful as he could, which he is.

One might say that Barack Obama had to fight hard to find the right place in his mother's heart. She was a complex and difficult individual. She did not get along well with her first husband, Obama's Kenyan father, who left her when Barack was two years old. After that abandonment, she may have clung to her little boy for comfort, which placed him in the unhealthy situation of a symbiotic relationship with his mother, and of having to take care of her, protect her, and comfort her, until she married the Indonesian Lolo Soetoro and they moved to Indonesia in 1967, when Barack was six years old. When they got there, Barack felt that he had to protect

his mother. (Ripley 2008.). Many years later, in a note placed in Jerusalem's "Wailing Wall," and later retrieved, he asked God for "protection, humility and wisdom."

At the age of nine, Barack recalled in his *Dreams from my Father*, in Indonesia, he saw the copy of *Life* magazine that caused his "racial awakening" and was a turning point in his life. In it, he wrote, was an article about an African-American man physically and mentally scarred by his efforts to lighten his skin, with two accompanying photographs. In fact, as some journalists from the *Chicago Tribune* have found, the *Life* article and the photographs don't exist, nor are they to be found in *Ebony* or anywhere else (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007). The psychological interpretation of this "screen memory" may be that Barack wanted to be white, like his mother, but that he *ambivalently* accepted his father's black identity, or some kind of combination of the two. Trying to be white was no use: it would only scar him emotionally. It was not just the color issue, it was a parental and identity issue: "Am I like my father? Am I like my mother? Whom do I identify with? Who am I?"

One of the major psychological questions we face is how Barack Obama was able to thrive so well personally, politically, and in the family he created for himself, despite the emotional difficulties of his childhood, his abandonments and his loneliness, and his inner struggle with his father's ghost. The *Chicago Tribune* journalists put it thus: "Some of these discrepancies [between the memoir and reality] are typical of childhood memories -- fuzzy in specifics, warped by age, shaped by writerly [sic] license. Others almost certainly illustrate how carefully the young man guarded the secret of his loneliness from even those who knew him best. And the accounts bear out much of Obama's self-portrait as someone deeply affected by his father's abandonment yet able to thrive in greatly disparate worlds" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

It is indeed amazing and fascinating that *by the age of nine Barack Obama had already forged the ambivalent identification with his idealized father that would sustain him and help him thrive*. Obama likes to think of himself as a rare combination of black and white, rich and poor, educated and simple, liberal and conservative, mainstream and rebel, all the contradictions and diversity in American society and in the human species. As the *Chicago Tribune* journalists have pointed out, "Not as well known is the fact that the many people who raised him were nearly as diverse as the places where he grew up. There was his mother, Ann, a brilliant but impulsive woman; his grandmother Madelyn, a deeply private and stoically pragmatic Midwesterner; his grandfather Stanley, a loving soul inclined toward tall tales and unrealistic dreams" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

Successively identifying with those who raised him, Barack internalized their emotional qualities, especially those "objects" whom he liked and those that helped him thrive. This internalization capacity was a unique ability. It is hard to understand how he could avoid identifying

with his mother's impulsiveness and recklessness while making her hard-working and her drive part of himself. Perhaps his "jolly" grandfather's deep love for him made up for his father's abandonment of him and for mother's toughness:

One of those friends [of Barack Obama], Neil Abercrombie, then a graduate student in the sociology department, frequently would see young Obama around town with his grandfather Stanley, whom Obama called "Gramps." "Stanley loved that little boy," said Abercrombie, now a Democratic congressman from Hawaii. "In the absence of his father, there was not a kinder, more understanding man than Stanley Dunham. He was loving and generous." A close friend of Obama's from their teenage years, Greg Orme, spent so much time with Dunham that he, too, called him "Gramps." Orme recalled that years later, at Obama's wedding reception in Chicago [in 1992], Obama brought the crowd to tears when he spoke of his recently deceased maternal grandfather and how he made a little boy with an absent father feel as though he was never alone (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

Barack Obama must have loved his "jolly" grandfather as much as "Gramps" loved him. The personality of his maternal grandfather may be another key to his emotional well-being and to his achievements.

"Gramps" died on February 8, 1992. This was a great loss to Barack. He had been with his future wife Michelle since 1989. He married her later that year, on October 3, not long after Barack's mother finally got her doctorate in anthropology from the University of Hawaii. In some ways, the new family that he created for himself made up for his many losses and abandonments. He was going to be the good father that his father could never be, and that "Gramps" had been to him. He is also everything his mother was *not*: a stable, protective, good parent who keeps his kids in one place, does not drag them to faraway places and does not keep changing their environment, their schools or their friends, until his move to the White House in January 2009 did this to them.

Barack Obama developed his mature identity through his ambivalent identifications with his problematic parents and grandparents, though he seems to have had a positive identification with his maternal grandfather: he wanted to be like "Gramps," not like his mother Ann or his father Barak. Nonetheless, some of his mother's character must have become his through identification, and he acknowledged her to have been a great influence on his life.

But Obama is his mother's son. In his wide-open rhetoric about what can be instead of what was, you see a hint of his mother's credulity. When Obama gets donations from people who have never believed in politics before, they're responding to his ability – passed down from his mother – to make a powerful argument (that happens to be very liberal) without using a trace of ideology. On a good day, when he figures out how to

move a crowd of thousands of people very different from himself, it has something to do with having had a parent who gazed at different cultures the way other people study gems (Ripley, 2008).

What was the mother-son relationship really like? Ann was a hypersensitive woman. "She cried a lot," says her daughter Maya Soetoro-Ng, "if she saw animals being treated cruelly or children in the news or a sad movie – or if she felt like she wasn't being understood in a conversation." When they arrived in Indonesia, when he was six, Barack recalled, "Walking off the plane, the tarmac rippling with heat, the sun bright as a furnace," Obama later wrote, "*I clutched her hand, determined to protect her*" (Ripley, 2008). So, in a reversal of roles, the child felt that *he* had to protect *his mother*. This is rather extraordinary, as normally it is up to mothers to protect their children. From an early age, Barack had to learn to protect a needy person, to be his mother's parent. *Today, he is out to protect and help America, which has replaced his dead mother in his emotions.*

In Indonesia, he was "Barry Soetoro." At the Roman Catholic St. Francis of Assisi School in Jakarta, from age six to age nine, the other kids called him a "Negro," which was a slur in Indonesia at that time. Yet he was not offended, and was already displaying leadership qualities, not only "protecting his mother" but also leading other boys:

Still, all of his teachers at the Catholic school recognized leadership qualities in him. "He would be very helpful with friends. He'd pick them up if they fell down," [Obama's former teacher Israella Pareira] Darmawan recalled. "He would protect the smaller ones." Third-grade teacher Fermina Katarina Sinaga, now 67, has perhaps the most telling story. In an essay about what he wanted to be when he grew up, Obama "wrote he wanted to be president," Sinaga recalled. "He didn't say what country he wanted to be president of. But he wanted to make everybody happy" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007).

So, to Barack Obama, being president meant taking care of people, protecting them, making them happy. Perhaps also making his mother cry less and be happier.

In 1970, when Barack was in fourth grade, his sister Maya Cassandra Soetoro was born. Barack was then nine years old. The birth of his sister meant that he had a new rival for his mother's affections. At that time his parents moved, and he was sent to a Muslim school, the Basuki School, which was a secular school rather than a religious *madrassa*. With his middle name of Hussein he could have passed for a Muslim, but he did not even try. He sat in the back of the class, drawing the popular American cartoons of Batman and Spiderman. *Did he want to be omnipotent like those cartoon characters?* His capacity for emotional detachment was showing. But when he was ten, he was gone – back to Hawaii, where his mother sent him back to her parents in 1971 to

attend the Punahou School, the elite private college-preparatory academy. Was it her decision or his? It seems that Barack had asked Ann to send him away, and that she agreed reluctantly. But she was already preparing to end her unhappy second marriage.

In 1971 the ten-year-old Barack Obama saw his biological father for the first and only time since he was abandoned by that father as a baby. The father had returned to the U.S. from Kenya after learning that his son had returned to Hawaii from Indonesia, leaving his mother behind. Barack was living with his maternal grandparents. The meeting between the son and his father, which took place at the home of Barack's maternal grandparents, lasted one month – and *Barack couldn't wait for his father to leave*. Here is the poignant memory as described by a perceptive journalist based on Barack's memoir:

He last saw his father in 1971, when he was 10 years old. Remarried and living in his native Kenya, Barack Obama Sr. sent word that he wanted to visit his son in Hawaii over Christmas. *To the son, he had become a ghost, an opaque figure hailed as brilliant, charismatic, dignified, with a deep baritone voice that reminded everyone of James Earl Jones. All the boy knew was that his father had gone off to study at Harvard and [had] never come back.* Now, the old man would put flesh on the ghost. On the day his father arrived, young Barack, known as Barry then, left school early and headed toward his grandparents' apartment, his legs leaden, his chest pounding. He nervously rang the doorbell. His grandmother opened the door, and there in the hallway was a dark, slender man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and sporting a blue blazer and scarlet ascot. (Merida 2007, italics added).

The meeting between the ten-year-old boy and the father who had abandoned him as a baby was emotionally poignant and heart-rending:

"He crouched down and put his arms around me, and I let my arms hang at my sides," the son recalled in *Dreams From My Father*, a soul-baring memoir rare for a politician, written long before Obama contemplated a run for the White House. "Well, Barry," his father said. "It is a good thing to see you after so long. Very good." *For a month, the father hung around [his in-laws' home], speaking to his son's fifth-grade class, taking the boy to a Dave Brubeck [jazz piano] concert, but never quite re-establishing himself.* The trip's pivotal moment came one night as Barry prepared to watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the annual Dr. Seuss [television] special. The father said the boy had watched enough television and insisted that he go to his room to study. Barry's mother and grandparents intervened in what became a heated family argument. But they proved no match for the strong-willed father, who in an instant had reclaimed the paternal role he had long ago abdicated. *Barry went to his room, slammed the door and "began to count the days until my father would leave and things would return*

to normal" (Merida 2007, italics added).

What a disappointment with his father Barack had suffered! How angry he must have been! The father who had abandoned him as an infant was now denying him the simple childish pleasure of watching his favorite television show. And yet, after his father left, he began to idealize him again and continued to identify with him, however ambivalently. It was not until many years later, in 1988, that he discovered the truth about his father.

In 1972 Barack's mother, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro, and her daughter Maya Cassandra Soetoro also left Indonesia for Hawaii. Ann's second husband, Lolo Soetoro, stayed behind in Indonesia. It was a separation that would be followed by a divorce. From now until Barack's graduation from Punahou School in 1979 they lived together in a small apartment near the school. After two failed marriages, Ann had come back home to her parents, who also lived nearby. She depended on her children and on her parents.

Barack felt isolated at Punahou School, where African-American students were few. In his memoir, Barack said he attended parties at local military barracks where there were many black soldiers. But his black friends of that time say that he was isolated from them. "We'd all do things together, but Obama was never there," Smith said, adding that they often brought along the few other black underclassmen. "I went to those parties up at Schofield [Barracks] but never saw him at any of them" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007). So, it seems that *Barack did not see himself as a black man at the Punahou School. He was different. He was the son of a white woman being raised by a white family. He was forging his own complex identity. And perhaps he did not wish to be the son of the man who had abandoned him, out of deep feelings of resentment at his absent father.*

Barack was about to be abandoned by his mother – again. In 1977, after several years of studying anthropology at the University of Hawaii, she decided to go back to Indonesia for her field work for her doctoral dissertation, and also to see her ex-husband, Lolo Soetoro. She took her daughter Maya with her. "Barry" was then sixteen. He decided to stay in Hawaii. Apparently, *his ties to "Gramps" were more important to him now that his ties to his mother.* While his memoir is full of praise for his mother, his actual feelings may have been less positive and more complex. Indeed, when she left, he moved back in with "Gramps" and his wife, who loved him very much. There was no more Sister Maya to compete with as a sibling for his mother's love. And his unquiet and reckless mother was away.

"Barry" Obama stayed at the Punahou School and played on the school basketball team. He was good at the game, and a good team player. Through playing basketball, he got love and comradeship from his teammates. When he graduated from the Punahou School in 1979, at age 18, his preference for his grandparents over his mother was quite clear. "On page 271 of the 1979 *Oahuan* [the Punahou School yearbook],

Obama's entry reflects the crossroads he found himself at as he prepared for life beyond Hawaii. *He thanked "Tut and Gramps," his nicknames for Madelyn and Stanley Dunham, but didn't mention his faraway mother*" (Scharnberg and Barker, 2007). The faraway mother returned to Hawaii and finally got her Ph.D. in 1992, the year "Gramps" died and Barack married. She was never an ideal mother for Barack, even though he idealized her in his memoir.

Identity and Name Changes

In Indonesia, Barack Obama had been known as Barry Soetoro. He used the nickname Barry throughout high school. After graduating from the Punahou School in 1979, Barack Obama moved to Los Angeles, on the West Coast of the United States, to attend Occidental College for two years. In 1980 he switched from the nickname Barry to his formal name of Barack. Name changes always involve identity issues (Falk, 1975-1976). Some journalists thought that "the choice is part of his almost lifelong quest for identity and belonging – to figure out who he is, and how he fits into the larger American tapestry," while Obama himself told the journalists that at Occidental, he was feeling as if he was at a "dead end," and "that somehow I needed to connect with something bigger than myself" (Wolffe et al., 2008). That "something bigger than himself" was America, the maternal figure. The former Barry Soetoro was now Barack Obama, like his father. In his quest for identity, he had come to identify with his idealized image of his father.

In 1981 Barack Obama crossed the United States to the East Coast, to attend a much better school, Columbia University in New York City, where he majored in political science with a specialization in international relations. In 1982 he received the news of his father's death in Kenya, but did not go there for another six years. Barack Obama graduated with a B.A. in political science from Columbia in 1983, then worked at Business International Corporation, a publishing and advisory firm assisting American companies in operating abroad, and then at the New York Public Interest Research Group, the New York state branch of the national lobbying and grassroots public-interest advocacy organization working for consumers and ordinary citizens against special-interest lobbyists. He was still groping his way, trying to cement his identity, trying to know who he was.

In 1985, after four years in New York City, Barack Obama went to Chicago's South Side, to work as a community organizer. This move changed his life and his identity. *He was going to fix the broken pieces of a poor community, which unconsciously stood for his broken family.* From 1985 to 1988 Barack Obama directed the Developing Communities Project, a Catholic-church-based community organization comprising eight Roman Catholic parishes in Greater Roseland (Roseland, West

Pullman, and Riverdale) on Chicago's far South Side. All this time he still idealized his dead father and never went to Kenya to discover the truth about him. It was better to keep his father's ideal image.

In mid-1988 Barack Obama traveled to Europe for three weeks and then finally went to Kenya for the first time, where he spent five weeks visiting his father's grave, his paternal family, and his father's country. He heard all the stories about his father, including his self-destructive alcoholism, accidents, and tragic death. This was one of the most emotionally painful events in his life. In that year, after he returned to the United States and to Chicago, the 27-year-old atheist and skeptical Barack Obama, who, by his own words, "had many quarrels with God" was baptized a Christian by his new father figure, the fiery Rev. Jeremiah Alvesta Wright (born 1941), the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago's South Side, who twenty years later damaged Obama's presidential campaign with his "white racist" anti-American outbursts. The United Church of Christ had been formed in 1957 by the merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Wright's sermon *The Audacity of Hope* seems to have turned Barack Obama from a religious skeptic to an enthusiastic churchgoer (Obama, 2006; Kantor, 2007).

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright was a replacement father for the young Barack. Like Joe Biden, now Barack's vice president, he was old enough to be Barack's father. He was charismatic and easily swayed young people. He was black and loved Africa. Obama remained a member of Wright's church for twenty years, and he had his two daughters baptized there by the Rev. Wright. "Trinity's Afrocentric bent, with its African visitors and women dressed in African robes, may have particularly appealed to the son of an African" (*The Economist*, 2008). But *Barack Obama was a post-racial or "colorblind" politician*, opposing any racial stereotypes, whereas Wright remained thoroughly racial, if not racist, hating white America. In 2008, when the Rev. Jeremiah Wright damaged Obama's presidential campaign with his "God Damn America" sermon, Barack had the wisdom and strength to repudiate his "bad father" Wright and to resign from his church.

While some African-American people may not accept Barack Obama as "black like me," to him, racial politics are a thing of the past. At the same time, he is himself a mixture of black and white, with a touch of "foreignness" about him – Kenya, Indonesia, and his many half-siblings in various countries. The African-American leader Andrew Young has said that called Barack Obama "isn't just black; he's an Afro-Asian-Latin European" [sic] (Young, 2009). Psychoanalysis has shown that slight foreignness contributes to a leader's charisma (Schiffer, 1973). This charisma, which depends on our early-life perceptions of our mother's body during the separation-individuation phase, may explain his great success and attraction. Barack Obama has been compared to

Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.

After Meeting His Father's Ghost

In 1988, after his return from Kenya, Barack Obama himself went to Harvard Law School, and at the end of his first year at law school was made an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. At the age of 27 he was already showing enormous intellectual and emotional capabilities. Barack Obama met his future wife, Michelle Robinson, in 1989, when he was working as a summer associate at the venerable Chicago law firm of Sidley Austin, one of the oldest law firms in the world, the sixth-largest U.S.-based corporate law firm, with over 1,800 lawyers, annual revenues of more than one billion dollars, and offices in 16 cities worldwide. He would marry her three years later, in 1992. His election in 1990 as the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review* was widely reported and followed by several long, detailed media profiles. He graduated with a J.D. *magna cum laude* from Harvard in 1991, outdoing his father, who had only obtained a Master's degree, and then returned to Chicago where he had worked as a summer associate at the law firms of Sidley and Austin in 1989 and Hopkins and Sutter in 1990. In 1991 he turned 30.

In his early thirties, Obama's meteoric career progressed rapidly. The year 1992 was pivotal in Barack's life: his beloved grandfather "Gramps" died, his mother got her Ph.D., and he married Michelle Robinson, "the love of his life," as he called her in his acceptance speech at the DNC in 2008. They seem to love one another deeply, and they have two lovely daughters. Barack was offered a lectureship at the prestigious University of Chicago Law School, but he also continued community work and law-firm work. In 1994 he became a Senior Lecturer, which is regarded as a professor, but declined a full-time tenured position to continue his public work.

However, Barack Obama continued to teach constitutional law as a part-time Senior Lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School until 2004. In 2005 the Obamas used the proceeds from his book deal for *The Audacity of Hope* to move from their Hyde Park condominium apartment in Chicago to their \$1.6 million private house in neighboring Kenwood. The purchase of an adjacent lot and the sale of part of it to Barack Obama by the wife of his developer friend Tony Rezko attracted public attention because of Rezko's indictment and subsequent conviction on political corruption charges that were unrelated to Obama. In December 2007, *Money* magazine estimated the Obama family's net worth at \$1.3 million. Their 2007 IRS tax return showed a household income of \$4.2 million – up from about \$1 million in 2006 and \$1.6 million in 2005 – mostly from the sale of his books.

Obama's books are a fascinating story in themselves.

In 1992 Barack Obama had been commissioned to write a book about race relations. This led to his fascinating memoir *Dreams from my Father*, which he wrote with his wife Michelle on the Indonesian island of Bali. It was published in 1995, the year his mother died of ovarian cancer. *The theme of the book is not race relations: it is Barack's struggle with his father's image and his ambivalent identification with him.* Then in 2005 he was commissioned to write *The Audacity of Hope*, whose title was derived from a sermon delivered by his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright. While a Senate candidate, Obama had delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, with the same title.

Political Activity: Protection, Love and Guidance

In 1996, Barack Obama went into politics, which had become a natural calling for him. Here he aimed to give America everything that his father had not given him: protection, love and guidance, but which his grandfather "Gramps" had tried to give him.

Obama won a seat in the Illinois State Senate, and won it again in 1998 and 2002. In 2000 he lost a Democratic primary race for the U.S. House of Representatives to the four-term incumbent, Bobby Rush, by a margin of two to one, but he gained name recognition from this lost race. Obama served in the Illinois State Senate from 1997 to 2004. He used his power with much wisdom. He went about reforming ethics and health-care laws. Obama sponsored a law increasing tax credits for low-income workers, negotiated welfare reform, and promoted increased subsidies for child care. In 2001, as co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, Obama supported Republican Governor George Ryan's payday-loan regulations and predatory-mortgage regulations aimed at averting home foreclosures, and in 2003, Obama sponsored and led the unanimous, bipartisan passage of legislation to monitor racial profiling (the inclusion of racial or ethnic characteristics in determining whether a person is considered likely to commit a particular type of crime or an illegal act), making Illinois the first state to mandate videotaping of homicide interrogations.

In 2004 Barack Obama won the race for the U.S. Senate, where he continued to work to protect America. In 2005 *he found an adoptive father figure in the Senate: "Old-school realist Richard Lugar, the five-term Republican senator from Indiana, has embraced new-school realist and rising star Barack Obama, the junior Democratic senator from Illinois. The relationship is admiring. 'I very much feel like the novice and pupil,' Obama has said of Lugar. And it's warm. Lugar praises Obama's 'strong voice and creativity' and calls him 'my good friend.' In short, the two agree on much and seem to genuinely like each other. Rather unusual in hyper-partisan Washington, these days"* (Larson, 2006).

Working with his colleagues, Obama voted in favor of

the Energy Policy Act of 2005 and cosponsored the Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act, even though he had presidential ambitions and knew he might lose some Hispanic votes. Obama supported a related bill, the Secure Fence Act. Working with his Republican colleagues, Obama co-introduced the Lugar-Obama bill to halt the spread of dangerous and illicit conventional weapons (Lugar and Obama, 2005), and the Coburn-Obama Transparency Act, which authorized the establishment of a web search engine on U.S. government spending. He sponsored legislation requiring nuclear plant owners to notify state and local authorities of radioactive leaks. He also introduced a bill to criminalize deceptive practices in federal elections. Obama fought against AIDS and for abortion rights. He was deeply concerned with making America a better place in terms of life, politics, immigration, defense and everything else.

Obama did not shy away from foreign-policy issues. Identifying with his tragic African father, Obama initiated legislation to help the victims of the Congo war, and, in December 2006, President Bush signed into law the Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act, the first U.S. federal legislation to be enacted with Barack Obama as its primary sponsor. In January 2007, Obama co-sponsored the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, which was signed into law by Bush in September 2007. *His father had not been honest with him: he would make America honest.* Obama introduced the Iraq War De-escalation Act of 2007, aimed to bring troops home. Later in 2007, Obama sponsored an amendment to the Defense Authorization Act adding safeguards for personality-disorder military discharges, so that traumatized soldiers would get fairly treated. He co-sponsored an ill to reduce global poverty. He sponsored the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act, which called for divestment of state pension funds from Iran's oil and gas industry, and co-sponsored legislation to reduce the threat of nuclear terror.

Perhaps, as the Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek has put it, Obama's greatest achievement is his subtle rhetoric, in that "he has, in his refined and non-provocative way, introduced into the public speech topics that were once unsayable: the continuing importance of race in politics, the positive role of atheists in public life, the necessity to talk with 'enemies' like Iran" (Žižek, 2008).

Obama, who wants a universal health care plan for America, so that no one would be left without care, meanwhile sponsored a Senate amendment to the State Children's Health Insurance Program providing job protection for family members caring for soldiers with combat-related injuries. *Protection, guidance and love were his key words, rather than honor, as in the case of John McCain.* In February 2007 he announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for U.S. President. In his acceptance speech at the DNC in Denver, Barack Obama said that government programs

could not replace parents and that "*fathers must take more responsibility to provide love and guidance to their children.*" Did he have his own father in mind? Certainly he is one father who has provided love and guidance to his daughters, which his father had not done for him. He now aims to give that fatherly love and guidance to America.

Conflict of interest

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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