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As a child, Obama crossed a cultural divide in Indonesia

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By Paul Watson
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
March 15, 2007

JAKARTA, Indonesia— As a boy in Indonesia, Barack Obama crisscrossed the religious divide. At the local primary school, he prayed in thanks to a Catholic saint. In the neighborhood mosque, he bowed to Allah.

Having a personal background in both Christianity and Islam might seem useful for an aspiring U.S. president in an age when Islamic nations and radical groups are key national security and foreign policy issues. But a connection with Islam is untrod territory for presidential politics.

Obama's four years as a child in Indonesia underscore how dramatically his background differs from that of past presidential hopefuls, most of whom spent little, if any, time in other countries. No one knows how voters will react to a candidate with an early exposure to Islam, a religion that remains foreign to many Americans.

Obama's campaign aides have emphasized his strong Christian beliefs and downplayed any Islamic connection. The candidate was raised "in a secular household in Indonesia by his stepfather and mother," his chief spokesman, Robert Gibbs, said in a statement in January after false reports began circulating that Obama had attended a radical madrasa, or Koranic school, as a child.

"To be clear, Senator Obama has never been a Muslim, was not raised a Muslim, and is a committed Christian who attends the United Church of Christ in Chicago," Gibbs' Jan. 24 statement said. In a statement to The Times on Wednesday, the campaign offered slightly different wording, saying: "Obama has never been a practicing Muslim." The statement added that as a child, Obama had spent time in the neighborhood's Islamic center.

His former Roman Catholic and Muslim teachers, along with two people who were identified by Obama's grade-school teacher as childhood friends, say Obama was registered by his family as a Muslim at both of the schools he attended.

That registration meant that during the third and fourth grades, Obama learned about Islam for two

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hours each week in religion class.

The childhood friends say Obama sometimes went to Friday prayers at the local mosque. "We prayed but not really seriously, just following actions done by older people in the mosque. But as kids, we loved to meet our friends and went to the mosque together and played," said Zulfin Adi, who describes himself as among Obama's closest childhood friends.

The campaign's national press secretary, Bill Burton, said Wednesday that the friends were recalling events "that are 40 years old and subject to four decades of other information." Obama's younger sister, Maya Soetoro, said in a statement released by the campaign that the family attended the mosque only "for big communal events," not every Friday.

The sensitivity of Islam as a political issue was on display earlier this year with the false report that Obama had attended a radical madrasa here. The report, which appeared initially on a conservative-oriented online magazine and then on a Fox News program, attributed the news to opposition researchers for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.). Both campaigns denied the story and accused conservative media outlets of trying to use the rumor to smear two Democratic hopefuls simultaneously.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic-majority country, has seen an upsurge of Islamic radicalism in the last few years. But during the 1960s, when Obama lived here, the country was known for a brand of Islam more open to the non-Islamic world than the austere versions preached in much of the Middle East. Even in the Mideast, political Islam was far less influential in the 1960s than it is today.

In his autobiography, "Dreams From My Father," Obama briefly mentions Koranic study and describes his public school, which accepted students of all religions, as "a Muslim school."

"In the Muslim school, the teacher wrote to tell my mother that I made faces during Koranic studies," Obama wrote. "My mother wasn't overly concerned. 'Be respectful,' she'd say. In the Catholic school, when it came time to pray, I would close my eyes, then peek around the room. Nothing happened. No angels descended. Just a parched old nun and 30 brown children, muttering words."

Obama was born in Honolulu. When he was 2, his father, Barack Hussein Obama Sr., a Kenyan, and his Kansas-born mother, Ann Dunham, separated and later divorced. Dunham later married Lolo Soetoro, who was a Muslim. In 1967, the family moved to Jakarta, where Obama lived from ages 6 to 10. People there knew him as Barry Soetoro.

Adi said he often visited the Soetoro family at their home, a small flat-roofed bungalow at 16 Haji Ramli St. Today, he runs an Internet cafe and purified water business from the same small Jakarta house where he grew up near Obama.

There was a middle-class neighborhood, but Haji Ramli Street was a dirt lane where Obama used to wile away the hours kicking a soccer ball. In the long rainy season, it turned to thick, mucky soup; Obama and his friends wore plastic bags over their shoes to walk through it, said Adi, who at 46 is the same age as Obama.

Neighborhood Muslims worshiped in a nearby house, which has since been replaced by a larger mosque. Sometimes, when the muezzin sounded the call to prayer, Lolo and Barry would walk to the makeshift mosque together, Adi said.

"His mother often went to the church, but Barry was Muslim. He went to the mosque," Adi said. "I remember him wearing a sarong."

In her statement, Obama's sister, who was born after the family moved to Indonesia, said: "My father saw Islam as a way to connect with the community. He never went to prayer services except for big communal events. I am absolutely certain that my father did not go to services every Friday. He was not religious."

In 1968, Obama began first grade at St. Francis Assisi Foundation School, just around the corner from his home.

The Catholic elementary school had only opened the previous year and wanted to enroll as many students as possible, so it welcomed children of any religion, said Israella Dharmawan, 63, his first-grade teacher.

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"At that time, Barry was also praying in a Catholic way, but Barry was Muslim," Dharmawan said in Obama's old classroom, where she still teaches 39 years later. "He was registered as a Muslim because his father, Lolo Soetoro, was Muslim."

Like all pupils, Obama had to pray before and after each class, and cross himself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Dharmawan said.

After St. Francis, Obama completed third and fourth grades in what is now called Model Primary School Menteng 1 in central Jakarta. Opened by Indonesia's former Dutch colonial rulers, the public school screens for the best students with writing tests and interviews. Several of its students have gone on to join Indonesia's elite.

Bugs have eaten Obama's file in the school's archive, said Vice Principal Hardi Priyono. But two of his teachers, former Vice Principal Tine Hahiyari and third-grade teacher Effendi, said they remember clearly that at this school too, he was registered as a Muslim, which determined what class he attended during weekly religion lessons.

"Muslim students were taught by a Muslim teacher, and Christian students were taught by a Christian teacher," said Effendi, who, like many Indonesians, uses only one name.

Obama took few kids to his home, just members of an inner circle who were trusted to see his secret pets: crocodiles that lived in a concrete tub, about a foot-and-a-half deep and a yard long, surrounded by chicken wire. The biggest croc was almost as long as its home, recalled Adi.

Obama's stepfather "was breeding crocodiles in his house," he added. "Not many people knew about it. He only had one big crocodile, but they had many smaller ones."

The family's pets included a turtle as big as a cookie tin and an ape named Tata, which Obama's stepfather brought from New Guinea. Soetoro worked for Mobil Oil and was a "chubby, and relaxed kind of guy," Adi said.

Obama spent most his spare time hanging out with Adi and other friends at the home of Yunaldi Askar, a classmate. They used to play a kind of fencing game using sticks, kick a ball up and down the narrow dirt lanes or go swimming in the river behind the school, said Askar, 42, a car mechanic.

Obama was taller and better dressed than most kids in classes where shoes and socks were still luxuries, so he stood out from the start. As an African American, and the only foreigner, he suffered racial taunts and teasing but never turned to violence. "At first, everybody felt it was weird to have him here," Dharmawan said. "But also they were curious about him, so wherever he went, the kids were following him."

In "Dreams From My Father," Obama describes coming home one day with an egg-sized lump on the side of his head because he had challenged an older boy.

The boy hit Obama with a rock, so his stepfather brought out two pairs of boxing gloves and sparred with him. "You want to keep moving, but always stay low -- don't give them a target," he coached Obama.

Instead of using his fists, Obama gained respect -- and friends -- by using his imposing stature to protect weaker children against the strong, Dharmawan said.

Obama's Indonesian teachers all said he was a leader at a young age. Fermina Katarina Sinaga, Obama's third-grade teacher, didn't have to quiet her pupils before class because Obama did it for her.

"When the kids lined up before entering the class, he would step forward and lead the whole class," said Sinaga, 57. "He inspected the line, and he was acting like a teacher. I could see his sense of leadership back then."

Sinaga asked her class to write an essay titled "My dream: What I want to be in the future." Obama "wrote 'I want to be a president,'" she said. During a later writing assignment on family, he wrote, "My father is my idol."

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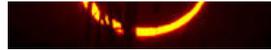




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