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A Journey to Obama's Kenya

The dusty village where Barack Obama's father was raised had high hopes after his son was elected president. What has happened since then?



When the future president journeyed to Kogelo in 1987, it was, he said, as if “a circle was beginning to close.” (Guillaume Bonn)

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The new asphalt highway to Barack Obama's ancestral village winds past maize fields and thatched-roof mud huts for several miles before terminating at a startling sight: a row of lime-green cottages with pink pagoda-style roofs, flanked by two whitewashed, four-story villas. Kogelo Village Resort, a 40-bed hotel and conference center that opened last November, is the latest manifestation of the worldwide fascination with the U.S. president's Kenyan roots. Owner Nicholas Rajula, a big man with a booming voice, was sitting beneath a canopy on the parched front lawn answering a pair of cellphones when I drove through the gate. Rajula stirred controversy here in 2007, shortly after he helped organize a tour of western Kenya for the junior senator from Illinois. Calling himself a distant cousin, Rajula ran for a seat in the Kenyan Parliament. Obama's campaign officials disputed his family connections, and Rajula lost the election.

Now, five years later, the Kenyan entrepreneur is back in the Obama business. “I visited Barack three times in Washington when he was a U.S. senator,” said Rajula, a textbook distributor who built his hotel, as his brochure boasts, “only 200 meters away from Mama Sarah Obama's home” (a reference to the president's step-grandmother). Furthermore, Rajula claimed, “Barack inspired me. We were alone in the

lift, in the U.S. Capitol, and he patted my back and said, ‘Cousin, I am proud of you. You are a businessman.’” Most members of the local Luo tribe, Rajula asserted, are “lazy people, not good at business. I told myself that should Barack come back to Kogelo, he will find the Luo businessman that he met in D.C. and see that he owns this magnificent hotel.”

Nyang’oma Kogelo first came to public attention in Barack Obama’s *Dreams From My Father*, his acclaimed autobiography published in 1995. The story is largely about young Obama’s search for the truth about his brilliant but self-destructive father. A Kenyan exchange student who met the future president’s mother, Ann Dunham, at the University of Hawaii in 1960, Barack Sr. abandoned the family when his son was 2, returned to Kenya and went on to a career as a government economist. After falling into alcoholism and poverty, he died in a car crash in Nairobi in 1982, at age 46. “He had almost succeeded, in a way his own father could never have hoped for,” writes the son he left behind in America, toward the end of *Dreams From My Father*. “And then, after seeming to travel so far, to discover that he had not escaped at all!”

Five years after his father’s death, the younger Obama flew to Nairobi and embarked on an emotional trip to the family homestead in Nyang’oma Kogelo. “I remember the rustle of corn leaves, the concentration on my uncles’ faces, the smell of our sweat as we mended a hole in the fence bounding the western line of the property,” he writes. “It wasn’t simply joy that I felt in each of these moments. Rather, it was a sense that everything I was doing, every touch and breath and word, carried the full weight of my life, that a circle was beginning to close.”

Tourists—especially Americans—have followed Obama’s footsteps to this once-obscure rural community a half-hour north of Lake Victoria ever since. After Obama’s 2008 victory, many Kenyan tour operators added side trips to Nyang’oma Kogelo. These tours typically promise an opportunity to meet Obama’s relatives, visit the market, gaze at the fields and house where Barack Sr. spent much of his childhood, and ponder the president’s uniquely cross-cultural identity. Nyang’oma Kogelo is also at the center of a push to invigorate what is optimistically known as the Western Kenya Tourism Circuit: little-visited but beautiful highlands that include Lake Victoria, the lakeside railroad city of Kisumu, bird sanctuaries and sites where legendary paleontologists Mary and Louis Leakey made some of their landmark discoveries about the origins of mankind. Locals continue to hope that investment will flow into this long-neglected region. Here, the HIV-AIDS infection rate is among the highest in the country and unemployment, boredom and poverty drive young people to migrate to the urban slums in search of opportunity. So far, however, the global attention paid to Nyang’oma Kogelo has proved a boon to only a few enterprising insiders like Rajula. For the rest, the initial wave of excitement has dimmed, replaced by disappointing reality.

In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama begins his journey west by train from Nairobi to Kisumu. He notes from his window “the curve of the tracks behind us, a line of track that had helped usher in Kenya’s colonial history.” Kisumu was founded in 1901, at the terminus of the Uganda Railway, which ran for 600 miles from Mombasa to the shores of Lake Victoria. It set forth a wave of white colonial migration deep into the East African interior that would soon touch the life of Hussein Onyango, Barack’s grandfather. Born in 1895 in Kendu Bay on Lake Victoria, Onyango moved as a young man back to the ancestral lands of Nyang’oma Kogelo. Onyango both respected and resented the white man’s power. He worked as a cook for British families, served with the King’s African Rifles during the First and Second world wars, and was jailed for six months in 1949, charged with membership in an anti-colonial political organization. The migration would also affect the fate of Barack Obama Sr.—the bright schoolboy dabbled in anti-colonial politics following his father’s detention, then pursued a Western education in the hope of transforming his fragile, emerging nation, which would achieve independence in 1963.

Kisumu is a sleepy provincial city that sprawls along the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. As I journeyed

by rented 4 x 4 from there, deeper into the Kenyan countryside, I encountered all the signs of rural poverty that the young Obama had noted on the same route. Here were the “shoeless children,” the “stray dogs [snapping] at each other in the dust,” the “occasional cinder- block house soon replaced by mud huts with thatched, conical roofs.” Then I crossed a chocolate-colored river and at a crossroads reached Nyang’oma Kogelo.

The market, a typical African bazaar, consisted of rickety stalls surrounded by shabby shops selling T-shirts and tins of condensed milk. A drive down a red-earth road, past groves of bananas and rolling hills covered with plots of millet and maize, brought me to the homestead of Malik Obama. Born Roy Obama in 1958, he is the president’s half-brother and the oldest son of Barack Obama Sr., who had eight children with four wives. He has invested a large sum in the soon-to-open Barack H. Obama Recreation Center and Rest Area in Nyang’oma Kogelo. Obama has also developed a reputation as something of an operator. When, en route to Nyang’oma Kogelo, I inquired about the possibility of an interview, he texted back: “My schedule is brutal but I might/could squeeze you in for about thirty minutes if I can get \$1,500 for my trouble.” I politely declined.

Mama Sarah Obama, the widow of Barack’s grandfather, lives in a tin-roofed house set back a few hundred yards from the road. After the inauguration, Mama Sarah was besieged by well-wishers, greeting dozens of strangers a day. “She is a very social, very jovial person,” a friendly police officer at her front gate told me. The strangers included those with more nefarious purposes, such as members of the U.S. “birther” movement, who hoped to gather “proof” that the president was born in Kenya.

After the killing of Osama bin Laden last year, the Kenyan government heightened security around Mama Sarah’s compound. Even so, she still meets visitors. When I phoned her daughter from the gate, I was told that her mother was resting, but that I should come back in several hours. Unfortunately, my timing was not fortuitous. Mama Sarah, 91, was recovering from minor injuries suffered two days earlier when the car she’d been riding in overturned on the way back from Kendu Bay, near Lake Victoria. She wasn’t up for greeting me today, a plainclothes security man told me when I returned.

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About Joshua Hammer



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