



THE OBAMA EFFECT

GHANA REACTS TO THE PRESIDENT'S FIRST VISIT

BY TOBY THOMPKINS

When Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States of America, the enormity of a Black man stepping into the role of leader of the free world was bigger than most of us had dared imagine. The frenzy we experienced on January 20 was reignited thousands of miles away on July 10 when Air Force One landed in Accra, Ghana's capital city.

EBONY's Africa correspondent, Toby Thompkins, traversed Ghana documenting the feelings, hopes and concerns of Ghanaians and expatriates to President Obama's visit. The folks Thompkins met were more keenly focused on the magic and majesty of the president, whom they call "OBAAAA-MAAAA," a son of Africa come home.

THE AUDACITY OF GHANA

In 1957, Ghana was the first African country to gain independence from colonial control, and it basically has had a friendly relationship with the United States since then. The nation's first prime minister and president, Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the Pan African movement, welcomed the support of such Black American leaders as W.E.B. Du Bois, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

In 1998, President Bill Clinton was received by Ghana's president Jerry John Rawlings when the Clinton administration chose Ghana as the "gateway" for its six-nation tour of Africa. President Clinton's visit marked a "new" African renaissance,



Journalists and local citizens documented President Obama's action-packed schedule, filled with meetings, ceremonies and a public address to parliament.

ushered in by the Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), which focuses on strengthening trade between Africa and the United States.

During his 2008 visit, President Bush pledged \$17 million to combat malaria in Ghana. While returning to the United States, Bush commented, "I would say this is one of the most exciting trips of my presidency."

The third sitting U.S. president to visit Ghana, Obama was on African soil for less than 24 hours. His schedule included talks with the country's president, John Atta Mills, breakfast with national and international leaders, a hospital visit, a speech to Ghana's parliament in which Obama presented his African agenda, a ceremonial meeting with the paramount chief of Cape Coast and a tour of the Cape Coast slave castle.

Barack Obama has some tough issues to confront if he is to realize the transformation he has stated he wants in Ghana and in Africa. As Africans wait and watch, Ghanaians want to know what having Barack Obama as president of the United States of America means for their country.

OBAMA'S MESSAGE TO AFRICA

President Obama's address to Ghana's parliament spoke to the changes that need to happen on both sides of his proposed U.S.-Ghana partnership when he said, "The true sign of success is not whether we are a source of aid that helps people scrape by—it is whether we are partners in building the capacity for transformational change." His speech also targeted a number of prickly African issues: corruption, stopping genocide, building transparent institutions and replacing strongmen leaders with strong institutions. Ghanaians were encouraged that Mr. Obama issued a nod in favor of moving away from a history of patronage toward the creation of a "mutually responsible" partnership based on "shared interests and shared values." His message sparked dialogue among many Ghanaians and even some sub-Saharan countries' presidents suggesting that Obama should, perhaps, address some of the same issues he raised about Africa at home.

Still, Africans are keenly interested in the Obama administration's efforts toward raising, addressing and resolving the inequities and inefficiencies that exist in their own backyard as they cast a wider net for good

EBONY partnered with the Africa Channel to cover President Obama's visit to Ghana. Toby Thompkins and Africa Channel executive vice president and general manager Bob Reid traveled all over the west African nation interviewing government officials, business leaders, education and art consultants to get a sense of the import of this historic visit. For more of these interviews, visit www.EbonyJet.com, and look for the two-hour Africa Channel special that documents our coverage.

Abuakari Afolabi, restaurateur: *Local trade and commerce is what we need*



"I hope that Obama's partnership encourages more local trade and commerce. Our culture lives in the things we make, trade and sell. We need more support for local products, and we need the resources and commitment to making local things more valuable in our minds than the things we import. If you buy local, you strengthen the local community, family and culture," says Afolabi, co-owner of Osekan, a restaurant

named for the ghost of the high priest of the Gan tribe of Ghana who migrated from Egypt by sea into Accra. Educated and trained as an economist, Afolabi decided that rather than pursue a career outside of Ghana like many of his friends and classmates, he wanted to develop a business in Accra.

The establishment's location, a historic landmark was overtaken by criminals and thieves before Afolabi and his brother went to the chief and asked to take over the land and turn it into a cliff side restaurant and performance stage in the heart of central Accra. "We need to honor our culture as African people, and what better way than to bring our cultural and historic landmarks to the world," said Afolabi.

John Marie Alain Auckloo, general manager, African Regent Hotel: *Obama is raising the Afropolitan standard*



The hospitality industry in Accra was so excited about the president's visit that one hotel owner changed the name of his establishment to Hotel Obama. "Obama is a world-class leader, and choosing Ghana as his first destination in sub-Saharan

Africa means that the hospitality industry [here] must strive to become the example of a world-class African experience," said Auckloo. "President Barack Obama's visit to Ghana means for the hospitality industry that [this country's] hospitality is open to the world. September 27, 2009, is World Tourism Day, and this year it will be celebrated in Ghana. Now people will know about Ghana as an Afropolitan experience, not just an African experience."



Reminiscent of election day in the United States, people took to the streets of Accra in celebration of Obama's visit.

governance and democracy throughout the continent.

GHANA HAS MADE STRIDES IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Obama outlined four key areas of focus in the partnership between the U.S. and Ghana: democracy, opportunity, health and peaceful conflict resolution. He emphasized that sound and sustainable development is the result of good governance and that Africans must continue to rise to the call if they wish to unlock their countries' potential.

Listening to Ghanaians, a recurring concern emerges: how to address the issue of U.S. foreign aid programs and policies that don't allow them greater involvement and accountability in how the funds get allocated, distributed, implemented and managed. African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have historically been less resourced and funded than foreign NGOs doing work on the continent. John Adza, Executive Director of the African Challenge, a Ghanaian NGO that focuses on responsible mining practices in Ghana, believes that the U.S. should reserve a full and proper seat for Africans at the decision-making table of foreign aid. "More of the resources of foreign aid should be placed in our hands so that we can do the work of good governance our way."

Although Obama expressed an interest in being more than a source of foreign aid that helps Ghanaian people "scrape by," Ghanaians and African-Americans agree that Obama's commitment to a better Ghana will have to start with the end goal clearly defined. Since 1970, Africa's share of global exports has declined from 3.5 percent to 1.5 percent. In implementing his plan for African transformation, the president must collaborate with African leaders to move swiftly to reverse this decline or



Rosa Whitaker, trade consultant
A matter of respect

Obama's firm message against corruption led some people to wonder why Western leaders are so quick to mention corruption when they talk about Africa. "Africa was poor long before it was corrupt. Why are Western leaders comfortable talking to Africans in this way? When they go to China or Russia, both of which are known for corruption, they don't talk to them about [such things]," says Rosa Whitaker, who also served as a former U.S. trade representative to Africa. "I

was pleased with President Obama, but I was disappointed that he was the first president to come to Africa since the enactment of the AGOA who did not talk about it. He did, however, mention the importance of market access, but the AGOA delivers to Africa \$63 billion each year, [which] is the value of African products being sold in the U.S. Three hundred thousand jobs in Africa depend upon AGOA, and it may expire. I would like to see it expanded."

Regina Dennis, supervising program officer, U.S. Agency for International Development: *The Obamas represent a commitment to service*



U.S. civil service professionals such as Regina Dennis will serve as the key implementers of the partnership strategy that President Obama has proposed.

In her spare time, Dennis takes President Obama's track record of community service to a global level. As the founding past president of the Accra chapter of Toastmasters International, she helps Ghanaian professionals find their voices as effective and powerful communicators to local and international

audiences. She further challenges young American professionals, especially African-Americans, to seriously consider careers in the international civil service (which, she mentioned, is hiring.)

Dennis had the opportunity to meet the president and was one of the key people on the ground in Ghana who supported the White House's observance of local Ghanaian protocol and honored traditional African practices. "I am hopeful that President Obama's visit will inspire others, especially African-Americans, to consider a career in international foreign service. I knew that a career in the foreign service would help me grow as a person," she says. In her role as a supervising program officer, she is responsible for managing a \$115 million budget for designing and monitoring economic and sustainable development programs.

more African families will slip deeper into poverty. African-Americans know all too well the learned helplessness and destruction of family capital produced through government aid initiatives.

“Dead aid,” as economist Dambisa Moyo discusses in her book of the same title, does little to promote the ability of an African family to advance itself economically, emotionally, socially, spiritually and culturally, all dimensions of how people use capital to live successful and happy lives. Moyo believes the Obama plan’s success should correlate directly to its ability to create, restore and sustain the African family. The upward economic journey of nations such as India suggests that empowering all members of the African family, not just the women, will be necessary for Africans to thrive in the global economy as wealth creators.

As Eric Drovu, a married father of two who works as a housekeeper in Accra, stated, “I want for my life what you (Americans) want in yours: the chance to turn my talents and effort into opportunity.”

WHO AND WHAT MUST CHANGE?

In the United States, it is a commonly held notion that the end goal of any person on welfare should be to get off welfare. Similarly, an African country that is receiving foreign aid must determine the do-or-die date when that aid is no longer required for it to function as a governing nation. Anything less risks creating poverty of mind, spirit and culture for generations to come.

Afia Appiah, a Ghanaian development expert based in Accra, understands both sides of this issue and feels strongly that “Ghanaians must change. We must be more responsible with the foreign aid that we receive. We must embrace the need to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps if any partnership has a chance of success.”

Research confirms that sustained personal change must be accompanied by sustainable change at the systemic and institutional levels of a society. Ghana, America’s shining example of good governance and democracy in Africa, has an annual governmental budget that is more than 60 percent supported through foreign aid. The last Bush administration granted Ghana \$547 million through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the largest aid award in Ghana’s history. “That is a lot of money to spend, and I want to know how we are going to see the full value of it reflected in the lives of the average Ghanaian,” said Bob, an American who works on an agricultural development project in Ghana. The belief is that a truly committed Obama administration will help Ghana achieve economic independence and freedom from reliance upon foreign aid with a “mutually responsible” and determined timetable. This must be a core deliverable in the manifestation of Obama’s intention that “Africa’s future should be up to Africans.”

But in her own way, Africa must find her way. This alone will break the vestiges of colonialism and neo-colonialism and incite a consciousness of African humanity, cross-tribal collaboration and ethnic unity. This alone will stomp out the forces of self-sabotage, learned helplessness and uninspiring leadership that diminish the good intentions of some recipients of foreign aid in Africa and beyond. The democracy, opportunity, health and peaceful conflict resolution that the Obama administration seeks to support will only happen as a natural outcome of a Ghana that fully owns, benefits from and embraces its destiny.

Young Africans

An evening spent at **Busy Internet**, the most popular Internet café in Accra, found young Africans interested in life-building opportunities. They are industrious and interested in being in the best possible positions to build successful lives for themselves. This sentiment was repeated often in their comments, both from some who are hoping to find their way to the U.S. and others who have lived in this country and have now returned to Ghana ready to build a future in the motherland. Kofi Anku, a young Ghanaian realtor who has lived in the U.S. and is now back in Ghana, said of Obama’s visit, “Africans in the U.S. are economic immigrants. They are there in search of opportunities. If the



proposed partnership creates business opportunities for young African people, especially those of us who want to become entrepreneurs, we will come back home. For example, now we have technology that goes into the African bush. This wasn’t possible before and the opportunities are limitless.”

Rita Marley: Obama as a “natural mystic”



“Love brought me to Ghana. A love that goes beyond place.”

Ghana is a dream come true for its most famous repatriated member of the Diaspora, Rita Marley, widow of legendary reggae singer Bob Marley, and her family. “Growing up in Jamaica, the Caribbean, we use to say they [slave traders] carried us beyond. It was ordained that I should return home. After Bob died, I came to Ghana for a concert. The stones were glistening on the beach and someone said to me, ‘This is where diamonds come from.’” Upon returning to Jamaica, she told her family how impressed she

was with Ghana, its people, its food.

After moving to Accra, Rita knew that she was supposed to settle on a mountaintop. So she went to the chief of the nearest mountain village outside the city. Much to her surprise, the village received her warmly and she was subsequently enstooled as a queen mother. “Bob always told me I was a Black queen. So when they told me they wanted to make me a queen mother, I accepted it.”

Generous in her support of local projects, Marley says “Barack Obama’s dynasty means a lot because he comes from Africa. He must have listened to Bob when he was a boy. He was able to take the doubts and fears out of our minds and teach us, yes we can. If Bob were here, he would have encouraged President Obama to continue to give a voice to the voiceless. He would have asked the Obamas to help create a one Africa, because Africa must unite. That is the role of a natural mystic.”

Rita Marley Overflow

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