



**OBAMA IN AFRICA:
RETHINKING REALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

In spite of the current usefulness of his color, the progressive character of his consciousness and his early and often-stated desire to repair and remake the country and the world, Barack Hussein Obama is first and foremost President and thus, protector and promoter of U.S. state interests. And given the absence of a broad-based, multicultural progressive movement as a countervailing force, these interests are often in conflict with the best interests of the country, the people and the world. So, regardless of how we Africans—continental and diasporan—want to view and value his trips to Africa, it is important to keep in mind his primary and overriding purpose.

President Obama's second visit to Africa within a month, first to Cairo, Egypt to speak to the Muslim world and then to Accra, Ghana to speak to Africa as a whole, indicates the importance the U.S. puts on Africa as a site of strategic, ongoing and urgent interest. U.S. policy toward Africa is shaped by its interest in Africa as: 1) an expanding source of resources—oil, gas, minerals; 2) a strategic base for military activity in Africa and around the world to impose its will, attack its enemies and protect its markets; 3) a contested terrain for economic competition with emerging economic powers like China and India as well as the old economies of Europe; and 4) a source of political allies and/or client states to be engaged and used as needed.

These realities were obscured or at least half-hidden in the PR presentation of him as Obama *omowale* (son returned home), a source of pride and promise, a champion of change and a harbinger of hope. But within a 24-hour turnaround, Obama pursued state interests in private and then in public read from a familiar template, one in which the corrupt elite are lumped with the oppressed

and the whole people condemned, and one in which history is revised or even erased so that the international primary predators are hidden, their local representatives propped up and protected and those preyed on are preached to about the virtues of a good life they are systematically prevented from living.

Obama had the capacity to share and shape a new way the world could understand and engage Africa, and rethink and reconceive Africa's historical, current and future place in the world. He could have built on his model crafted to appeal to the Muslims in his Cairo speech. There he acknowledged that current realities and relations between the U.S. and Muslim countries and peoples are rooted in centuries of history, that the U.S. had committed wrongful actions against Muslim governments and people, that Islam has been a positive and creative force in the world and will continue to be, and that a new beginning must be based on mutual respect, mutual interest and benefit and the shared capacity to listen to and hear each other.

But he did not mention Africa's role as the home of the fathers and mothers of humanity and human civilization, its contribution to the crafting of basic disciplines of human knowledge in the Nile Valley or its intellectual history in the civilizations of Western Sudan. Nor did he speak of the heroic struggles of the people for the liberation of the continent. Also, he did not acknowledge the U.S. role in overthrowing the democratically-elected government of Kwame Nkrumah, the founding father of Ghana or in the overthrow and assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the founding father of today's Democratic Republic of Congo, and other leaders and groups which the U.S. designated as hostile to willing submission or shameless service.

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Nor did he concede that it is the U.S. (and its allies) that introduced and sustained military coups and now stands ready to militarize Africa in undercover ways, shifting funding, building and training for formerly civilian projects to military sources and trying to establish a central military command in Africa. He did not call to task corporate plunder of the wealth and resources of Africa, nor condemn their and other countries' use of proxy armies to destabilize countries; terrorize, murder and rape the people; and facilitate the brutal robbery of their resources.

Obama's litany that good governance and the end of corruption lead to investment and development flies in the face of current practice where corporations and countries bribe their way to African riches, cultivate the corrupt collaborator, and eagerly invest in Africa to its great disadvantage. In a word, corruption is a collaborative affair involving the very countries and corporations publicly condemning it, but privately pursuing it for all its worth. And this has gone on historically and since independence in various forms leading to brutal exploitation of African labor, the progressive impoverishment of African people, environmental degradation and the ironic reality of Africans having the richest of resources and the poorest of peoples. Thus, Obama cannot seriously dismiss the effects of the Holocaust of enslavement, colonialism, neo-colonialism and the current destructiveness of international agencies and corporate exploitation.

The Obama administration and its corporate colleagues must take responsibility for the rational and ethical contradiction of

condemning corruption and collaborating in it; calling for democracy and supporting pliant dictators; advocating development and sustaining unjust global agricultural practices and unfair trade; expressing the need for improved human services and infrastructure and imposing restrictions on the development of these through aid and loan policies; calling for an end to armed conflict and funding it, the end of child labor and not challenging the corporations that practice it; and impoverishing the people and condemning them for being poor.

The question is clearly one of responsibility, but how that is defined is critical not only to understanding and resolving the issue, but also to dealing in a dignity-affirming way with African people, their centuries of suffering and their life-and-death daily struggles to sustain themselves, push their lives forward against all odds and build the good societies we all want and deserve to live in. Obama's statement that "Africans are responsible for Africa" is not only true, but a well-established principle of any serious emancipatory and developmental theory, philosophy or project. But there are two levels of responsibility involved here and we must be rightfully attentive to each and their interrelationship. As we say in *Kawaida* philosophy, the oppressor is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation. And part of our responsibility for our liberation is not only being responsible to and for each other, our lives and future, but also holding the oppressor responsible for the various ways he oppresses us and dares to deny it.

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