



THE
OBAMAS

THE UNTOLD STORY OF AN AFRICAN FAMILY

PETER FIRSTBROOK



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About the Book

Seen through the eyes of the Obama family this is the story of an African family over four hundred years, culminating in the inauguration of one of their sons, Barack Obama, as president of the most powerful nation on earth. Peter Firstbrook establishes the early ancestry of the Obama family and generation by generation follows them through colonial rule and the fight for Kenyan independence, including the Mau Mau and the role of Barack Obama's father with President Kenyatta.

It is a true testament to the belief that any person can make their mark in the world no matter how humble their origins.

About the Author

Peter Firstbrook worked for the BBC for twenty-five years before developing a successful freelance writing and film-making career in 2002, specialising in making history and international documentaries. He has published three bestselling books. During 2008-9 Peter spent several months in Kenya, crisscrossing the country to trace Barack Obama's African roots. By combining the Luo tribe's remarkable oral tradition with more academic research, he has traced President Obama's lineage from the present day, back more than twenty generations and tells a remarkable story of love and war, life and death, and of families lost and found. In June 2009 he convened a committee made up of members of the Obama family in Kisumu, Kenya, which approved his Obama family tree.

THE OBAMAS

The Untold Story of an African Family

PETER FIRSTBROOK

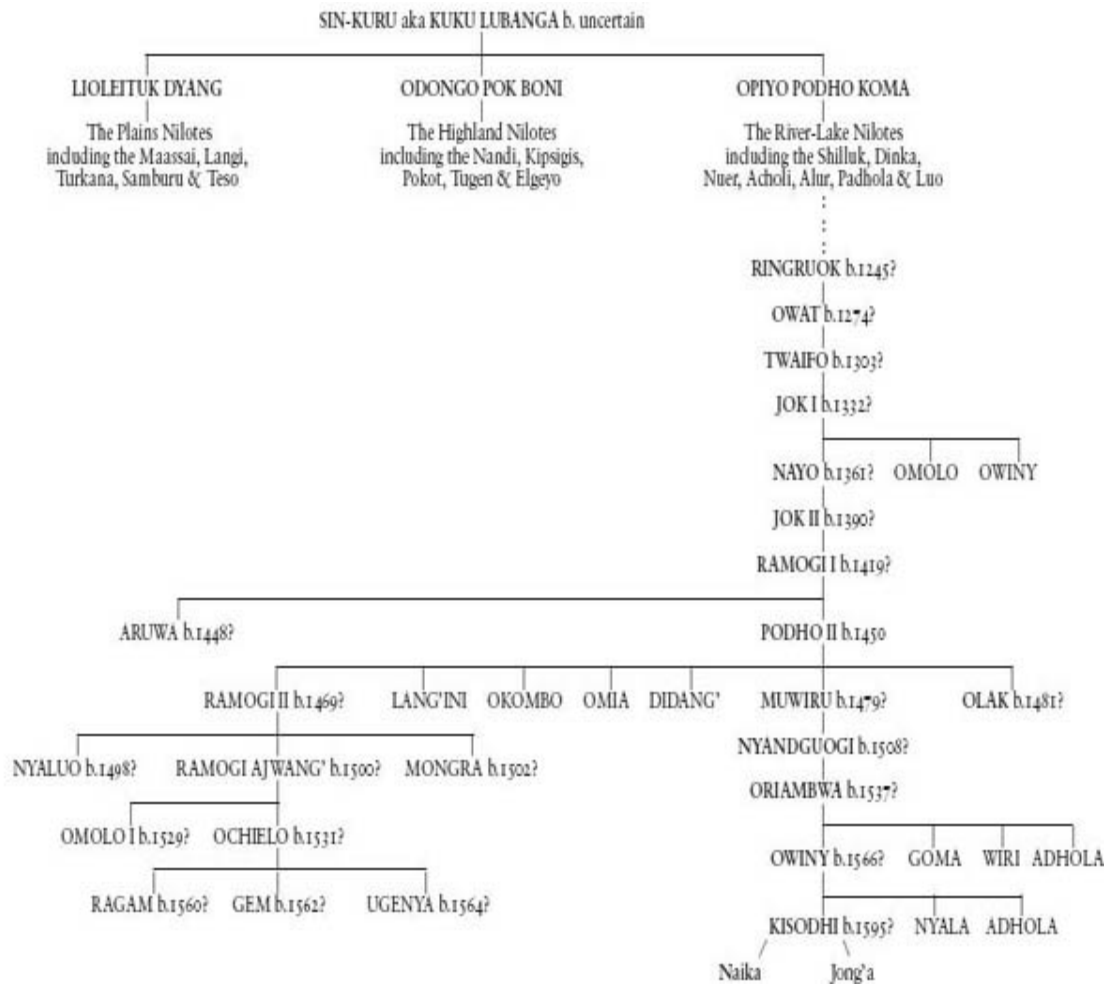


For Roy Samo

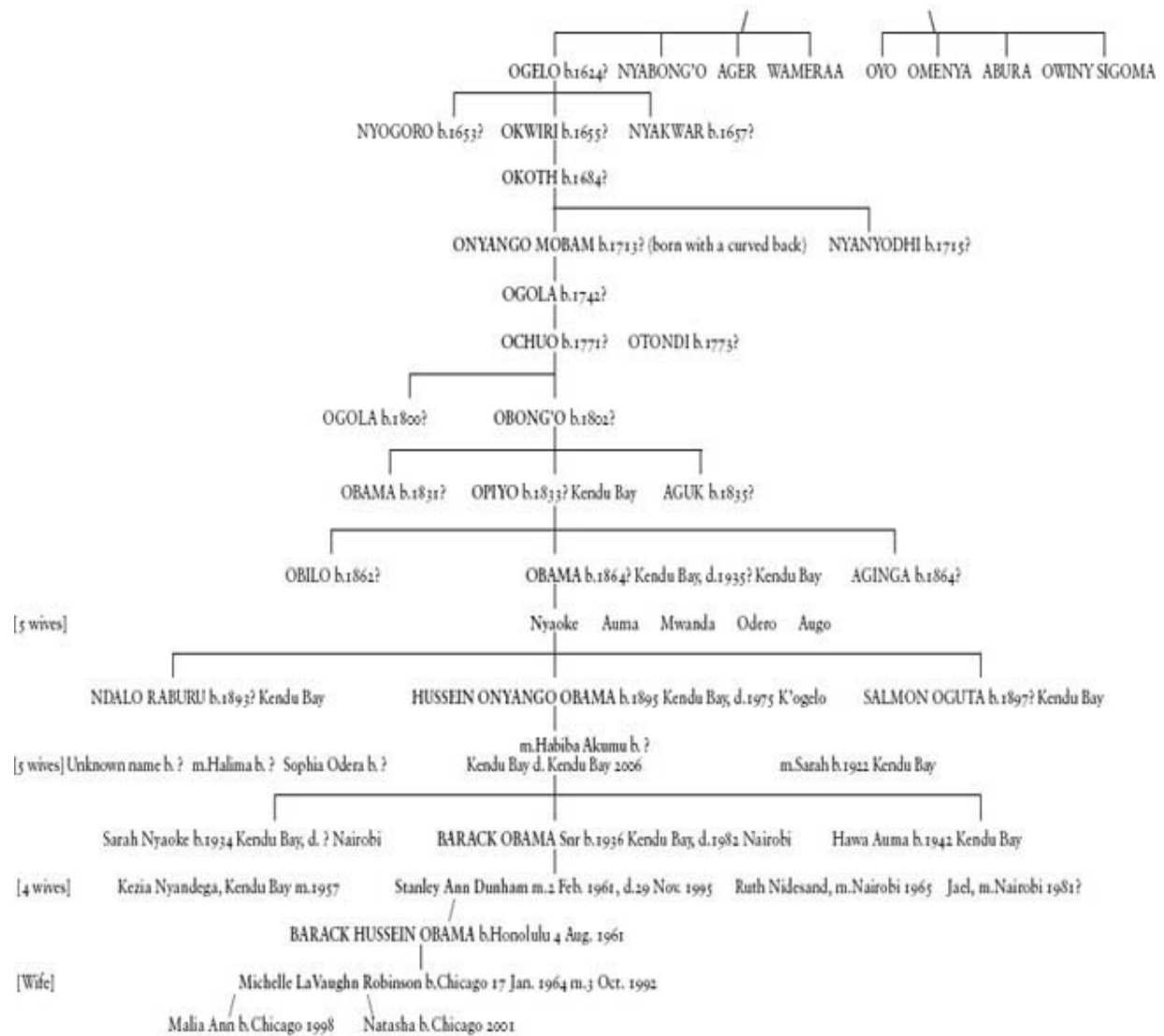
May your dream of a better
Kenya one day be realised

**The African ancestry of Barack Obama c. 1250
to present**

[12 wives]



[2 wives]



Based on: Weere, Melik Ogutta, Mel Dhoudi moko mag Luo
loosely translated as 'Other Sub-Tribes of the Luo
Community', Edition, Earstar, 2007, Ogot (1967 & 2009),
Cohen (1968), original research, personal communication
with Professor Ogutu and oral history from Obama elders.
For further details of methodology, [see here](#).

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Ling' chicko it en ohala

The good listener learns many new things

Over the course of several months from November 2008 and throughout 2009, I criss-crossed Kenya as part of my research for this book. It is impossible to spend this amount of time in a foreign country without relying on the wisdom and support of many people. First, my gratitude has to go to the many members of the Obama family who opened their doors and welcomed me into their homes. In K'ogelo, I watched 'Mama' Sarah, step-grandmother to President Obama, greet literally coachloads of people who came to pay their respects to her; I would wait my turn to see her, and she always greeted me with kindness, patience and good humour. In Ouygis, Hawa Auma, President Obama's aunt, was always ready to stop her work to spend time with me - and she was always ready to kill a chicken and cook me a meal. Kendu Bay is home to most of the Obama family, and Charles Olouch, Elly Yonga Adhiambo, John Ndalo Aguk and Laban Opiyo were all very generous with both their time and their insight into the history of the Obamas; my thanks also go to Imam Saidi Aghmani, who introduced me to the Islamic community in Kendu Bay. In Kisumu, Wilson Obama and his wife Karen were always generous with their support, as were Aloyce Achayo and Leo Omolo Odera. Sam Dhillon from Nairobi was also very helpful and

supportive during my early research. This list cannot do justice to the many other Kenyans I interviewed for the book, but their contribution is recognised within the body of the text.

In the USA my old friend Thom Beers was very supportive at a crucial early stage of my research, and in Oxford Professor David Anderson gave me valuable counsel about the early history of Kenyan independence. In London I have special thanks for my agent, Sheila Ableman, who encouraged me to write a book rather than make a film. At Preface my editor Trevor Dolby has offered his constant encouragement and support during both gestation and delivery, and has gently nudged me at the right times to tease the most from my material.

In Kenya Roy Samo acted as my researcher and translator; he was always on hand, and without his unceasing help it would not have been possible to write this book. At home my wife Paula has balanced being both my fiercest critic and at the same time my strongest supporter.

I thank them all.

Wuothi eka ine
To travel is to see plenty



Barack Obama's election in November 2008 resulted in a demonstration of widespread public support on the streets of Kisumu, the heartland of the Luo tribe.

PROLOGUE

Wat en wat
Kinship is kinship

When the American people elect a president, they choose, de facto, a new leader of the free world. Overnight this individual becomes the single most powerful person in the world. The election of a young senator from Illinois in November 2008 caused more of a stir around the world than usual. It was not primarily because of his lack of experience in executive decision-making, but because he was black - or to be strictly correct, half-black. Although Barack Obama was brought up in Hawaii and Indonesia by a single mother for most of his early years, his absent father was African, from a tribe called the Luo who live around the shores of Lake Victoria in western Kenya. President Obama never really knew his father, and he recalls meeting him only once during a brief visit that he made to Hawaii just before Christmas 1971, when the young Barack was just ten years old. The president never saw his father again, because Barack Obama Snr died eleven years later, when he crashed his car into a tree one night in Nairobi.

It is clear from his two books, *Dreams from My Father*, and *The Audacity of Hope*, that President Obama is very conscious of his mixed heritage, unsure of where he

belonged as a young man, in a multi-cultural world. In his self-deprecatory style, he referred to himself as a 'mutt' in his first speech after his election, when he spoke about getting a dog for his children: 'Our preference is to get a shelter dog, but most shelter dogs are mutts like me.'

In *Dreams*, he talks about his struggle as a young man to come to terms with his mixed racial heritage; later, he recalls his first visit to Kenya in 1987 to meet his father's family, and to learn more about his African birthright. It is clear from *Dreams* that his African 'roots' became important to him; his relatives asked him: 'Barry, what made you finally come home?' He felt welcomed in Kenya, and he came to understand the importance that Africans place on family. Obama was taken to see his step-grandmother, Sarah Obama, who still lives in her husband's compound which the family call 'Home Squared'. It is here that Barack Obama Snr is buried, and he wrote movingly about the father he never knew:

I dropped to the ground and swept my hand across the smooth yellow tile. Oh, Father, I cried ... When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close. I realised that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America - the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago - all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of name or the colour of my skin.¹

Even the title of this first book hints at his lost opportunity in life - of never really knowing his father: 'I had been forced to look inside myself,' he wrote in *Dreams from My Father*, 'and had found only a great emptiness there.'² In

his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he again hints at the influence his multi-racial background has on his character. When talking about growing older, he notes that 'each successive year will make you more intimately acquainted with all your flaws - the blind spots, recurring habits of thought that may be genetic or may be environmental, but that will almost certainly worsen with time, as surely as the hitch in your walk turns to pain in your hip.'³

When talking of his political beliefs in *Audacity*, Barack Obama acknowledges that he is a prisoner of his own biography: 'I can't help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated and stigmatized, and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives.'⁴

Perhaps the most telling part of Obama's prologue to *Audacity* is where he makes a direct reference to his own father. He wrote: 'Someone once said that every man is trying to either live up to his father's expectations or make up for his father's mistakes, and I suppose that may explain my particular malady as well as anything else.'⁵

It was because of what he called 'a chronic restlessness' that had pursued him throughout his adult life that Obama decided to run for the US Senate in 2000. That year he was unsuccessful, but he tried again in November 2004 and won with 70 per cent of the vote. Obama then made headlines around the world when he announced, in February 2007, his candidacy for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. He was locked in a tight battle with the former first lady, and later the New York senator, Hillary Clinton, until he became the presumptive nominee on 3 June 2008. Five months later, on 4 November 2008, Barack Obama defeated the Republican presidential nominee, John McCain, to become the 44th president of the

United States and the first African-American to hold the office.

Like many Americans, President Obama can trace the ancestral background on his mother's side to a broad mix of European blood; he is, apparently, about 37 per cent English, with additional contributions from German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and even Swiss forebears. In many ways, this is a mixture which is not uncommon among white Americans descended from European stock. On his father's side, however, the mix is much simpler; he is 50 per cent African, descended from a long line of Luo tribal warriors who originally lived in the Sudan; over the centuries they migrated across 1,000km of desert, swamp and jungle before eventually settling around the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya.

This book has grown out of my long interest in Africa as a documentary filmmaker. Over the years I have made dozens of visits to Africa, but I had not actually worked in Kenya since 1987. Within just a couple of weeks of Obama's election as the new president, I was out again in Kenya with the intention of researching a film about the village where his family originated. I met many members of the Obama family; some had been in the media spotlight in the run-up to the election, but there were many more whose voices had never been heard. Even though I only scratched the surface of the history of the Obamas and the annals of the Luo people on this first visit, I realised that there was a fascinating story to be told. So the documentary was put on hold, and I decided that the story of Obama's family - and the extraordinary history of the Luo people - needed to be told in a different way.

This book, then, is the fruit of several more visits to the shores of Lake Victoria, to that part of western Kenya that is called Luoland. Barack Obama's upbringing and education in America, and then in Indonesia, has been well covered elsewhere, both by the President himself and by

other writers. I hope, therefore, that this book will offer some insight into the little-known half of President Barack Obama - that half of him which is Luo and which has its genetic roots in a long line of formidable African warriors. It is a family lineage of which the President himself is only vaguely aware. In 2006 he made his third visit to Kenya, but this time it was in an official capacity as an African-American member of the US Senate. He upset many senior Kenyan politicians on that trip with his outspokenness, but the ordinary people loved him. His visit was brief and he had only a short time to visit the village where his father grew up. His relatives told me that he had less than forty-five minutes to meet his extended family, who lined up in the hot equatorial sun in their dozens outside Mama Sarah's hut, waiting for their brief few seconds with their most favoured son. Barack Obama's aunt and closest living relative showed me, with obvious pride, the set of drinking glasses which she had been given on that visit; sadly, in the few seconds that she spent with her nephew, Hawa Auma did not have time to tell him the extraordinary story of how his grandfather fell in love with his grandmother, nor the tragic circumstances of their separation; Charles Olouch did not tell the Senator about his suspicions as to how Barack Obama Snr *really* died in 1982; nor have his father's friends ever had the chance to tell Barack Obama about the parties they had together at Harvard as students in the mid-sixties.

Despite his American upbringing, President Obama has reached the position of a near demi-god in Kenya. Like all African tribes, the Luo have a rich chronicle of proverbs and sayings, and there is one which strikes me as particularly poignant: *Wat en wat* - 'Kinship is kinship', which loosely translated means 'blood is thicker than water'. The Luo will never consider Obama to be a white man. Regardless of where he was raised, or what he might say or do, they will always see him as an African - a true

Luo with an ancestry that can be traced back two dozen generations.

Writing *The Obamas* has really been a process of assembling a large pile of jigsaw pieces. Without the patient support, help and generosity of dozens of local people - eminent historians, members of the Obama family and Luo elders alike - this book would not have been possible. These people unstintingly supplied me with all the individual pieces to the jigsaw; all I have tried to do is to arrange them into a coherent picture of the past.

Peter Firstbrook,
Kisumu,
Western Kenya



The 44th President of the United States takes the oath of office from US Supreme Chief Justice John Roberts Jr, 20 January 2009. Michelle Obama holds the Bible used by President Abraham Lincoln at his inauguration in 1861.

1

TWO ELECTIONS, TWO PRESIDENTS

Ber telo en telo

The benefit of power is power

The elections of Barack Obama of the USA, and of Mwai Kibaki of Kenya; the cultural, social and political issues in Kenya today

THE EVENING WAS drawing in, dark clouds rolled overhead and ominous specks of rain were making themselves felt in the hot, sticky, tropical twilight. It was not the ideal start to the evening; five hundred relatives and friends had gathered in the Obama ancestral home to watch on television the presidential inauguration of their most famous son. We were all sitting outside in the family compound in a remote village in western Kenya, just a stone's throw from Lake Victoria, and the heavens looked as if they were about to open. Some of the people had already walked several miles to get here, and many of them were related to the president-elect either through birth or by marriage. We had less than two hours to go before Barack Obama took his historic oath of office, but the inclement weather and encroaching darkness were not the worst of our problems. We still had no television available,

the only generator to be found had no fuel or oil, and there was no aerial set up to receive the broadcast.

It had seemed so simple and straightforward the previous day, when I sat down with the village committee to discuss their preparations for the celebrations - the Kenyans love their committees. Yes, there would be three televisions for people to watch, and three generators to power them. The trees around the compound would be strung with electric bulbs, and all of them 100 watts, so that we would have plenty of light. They would slaughter a cow and several goats, and they welcomed my offer to bring a dozen crates of soft drinks, but definitely no beer as they were all Seventh Day Adventists.

I was in K'obama, a small village just outside of Kendu Bay, itself a small township on the shores of Lake Victoria. K'obama is home to dozens of families, all of them related in one way or another to the recently elected president. Like many small villages in this part of Kenya, the ancestral name takes the prefix 'K' to denote the family homestead. I had found that K'obama had been largely ignored by the international press since the election of Barack Obama. Journalists and television crews had all headed to K'ogelo, a small village on the northern side of Winam Gulf and home to 'Mama Sarah', step-grandmother to the president-elect. Yet when I visited K'ogelo a couple of months previously just after the election, I found a sleepy, quiet village, and the only 'Obama' living there permanently was Sarah herself. K'obama, however, was very different and a hive of activity, with literally hundreds of Obama relatives in residence. Yet here I was, on the eve of the presidential inauguration and not a journalist in sight, or even another *mzungu* (a white man in Swahili). I had my suspicions why K'ogelo had attracted all the attention of the world's press, but I did not get confirmation of the real reason until sometime later.

Meanwhile, although the party in K'obama was in full swing, there was still no sign of a television set. I had tracked down a couple of empty fuel cans and I sent our van off to buy some petrol for the generator, but that had not materialised either. It had been a few years since I had last worked in Africa. It is one of my favourite places to visit, but it is not without its challenges. I knew that the Luo, Obama's African tribe, were known for being easy-going and generous, and I had received nothing but help and support from them. But they also had a reputation for, among other things, talking big and doing very little.

With little more than an hour to go before darkness fell over K'obama, my luck began to change; not one, but two televisions suddenly arrived. The first made its entrance balanced precariously on a wheelbarrow. Then the second turned up - this was one that I had previously negotiated to hire for the evening from a neighbour. The van came back with fuel for the generators, and within minutes I breathed a sigh of relief as the little Honda spluttered into life and the televisions lit up into a grainy image. Perhaps we would, at least, be able to watch the historic inauguration after all. It was, however, not all going my way; we could not get both televisions to tune to the same station at first, and a TV aerial had to be lashed to a long wooden pole and hoisted high above rooftop level in order to get reasonable reception.

Meanwhile the Obama family members began to drag their cheap plastic garden chairs in front of the two screens. Darkness falls quickly in the tropics, and soon everybody was settling down for the evening, apparently oblivious to the gathering storm clouds. It was a wonderfully diverse mix of people, from six-year-old school children to great-grandmothers in their eighties. Dozens of people came and thanked me for helping to get the TVs working, some of them smelling as if they had been drinking more than fizzy soda. I had not actually seen any

beer around, but illicit alcohol is commonly available in Kenya, and I suspect that some of the revellers were not conforming to the strict lifestyle expected of Seventh Day Adventists.

Local brew has always been fermented in Kenya, but traditionally it was only as strong as beer. However, stronger and more potent brews have become more popular in recent years, encouraged no doubt by the high taxes imposed on alcohol by the government. The police often turn a blind eye to the brewing in return for a cut of the profits. Sometimes these drinks are 'fortified' with methanol, a toxic wood alcohol, which can have disastrous consequences. They call the drink *chang'aa*, but it is also given other popular names such as 'Power Drink', which gives a hint to the strength of the industrial additive, and 'Kill-Me-Quick', which frankly is a more honest description. It has been known for people in illegal drinking dens to complain that the lights had been switched off in the bar, when in practice the lethal concoction they were drinking had turned them blind in an instant. One of the most severe drinking accidents happened in 2000, when 130 people died and over 400 were hospitalised after drinking a toxic batch of the brew.

As darkness began to fall, we managed to tune the televisions to gain a reasonable reception on the same channel, and the audience became transfixed by the events unfolding before their eyes, 12,000km away in Washington DC. Unknown to us at the time, some of the Obamas who had travelled to the USA had arrived at the White House late for the inauguration, only to be turned away because they could not take their seats in time before the president-elect arrived on stage. Apparently there had been a mix-up with the arrangements, and they were picked up late from their hotel; despite producing their Kenyan passports and their official invitations which showed the most famous surname in the world on that day, their pleas went

unheeded, and they returned to their hotel where they watched the very same CNN coverage that we were watching in K'obama.

There was little interest in much of the early proceedings of the inauguration ceremony and people chatted among themselves. After all, these people lived in huts with tin roofs, with neither running water nor electricity. What interest did they have in the finer details of the president's new limousine, with its eight-inch armour plating and tear-gas cannons? Most of these people do not even own a bicycle, and they would have no idea whether Obama's new Cadillac, which gets eight miles to the gallon, was a good thing or not. The long list of guests arriving on the podium meant nothing to the five hundred-strong Obama family. As the assembled dignitaries shivered in the bitter Washington winter, where the air temperature had fallen several degrees below freezing, the Kenyans were glancing nervously upward and wondering if the tropical rainstorm was going to stay away.

One by one, past presidents assembled in front of the podium: Jimmy Carter, George Bush Snr, Bill Clinton, and finally the outgoing George W. Bush. Then the president-elect appeared, and the imminent downpour over Kendu Bay was instantly forgotten as the crowd roared his name, and stood up to applaud 'their' man. As the proceedings moved at a glacial speed in Washington, the raindrops over Kendu Bay dried up in the tropical heat, only to be replaced by mosquitoes and flying ants. Personally, I preferred the rain - at least it didn't bite.

Finally, the big moment arrived. Supreme Court Justice John Roberts moved to the podium to be joined by the president-elect. (Cue more exuberant cheering from the Kenyans.) Obama was about to make history by becoming the first African-American US president in history. Before him, over a million people were gathered in the National Mall, with the vast crowd stretching as far back as the