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C o m m e n t a t o r**

Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

October 23, 2008 - Issue 296

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What is America to Me?
Thoughts on the US Presidential Elections
Think Piece
By Mukoma Wa Ngugi
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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Countee Cullen, a black American poet, once asked: What is Africa to me?

With the US elections just days away, and Africans holding their breath, fingers mostly crossed for Obama, I find I have to reverse the question and ask: What is America to me?

Why should the outcome of the US presidential elections matter to Africa?

What my heart feels and what my mind knows are at loggerheads. My heart, nationalistic and black, beats with the ups and downs of the Obama campaign. But my mind, at times cynical but always searching for the bottom line of things, knows an Empire is not run on good will, that there are no gentle giants and that history is not erased overnight.

What is America to me?

I want to reconcile my heart and mind. I want to speak freely.

I want to ask some hard questions because Obama, with his unflinching analysis of race relations and the state of the US in the world, invites us to do the same.

What is America to me? I have to begin with Obama.

I did not fully understand Obama's candidacy and its historical importance until I saw

him speak in Cleveland, Ohio this past February. In person, he is rather thin and not very tall, and surprisingly his unscripted talk delivery is not fluid in a Martin Luther King Jr. style. He halts unexpectedly as he searches for words. His charisma, I thought, is not embodied in him - rather it is embodied in his vision - that in this time of war and economic turmoil, Americans want to believe that they can do better.

It occurred to me that Obama, a mosaic of cultures and experiences, is probably the first political leader to fit snugly into the skin of globalization, with all its promise and contradictions. He is one of those rare historical figures that come to embody a historical period and offer it promise while inspiring hope.

And we from Africa, as well as Latin America and Asia, are responding to that hope and promise.

But more than that, Obama has created a rare opportunity for us to reflect upon ourselves as peoples and nations. As an African I ask: were I to hold up Obama as a mirror to reflect Africa, what would I see?

I would see an Africa that knows how to struggle, - a continent of hope and promise, where Africans defeated colonialism and apartheid, and have given notice to the last of its dictators.

But I would also see Africans blinded by ethnicity, and who wear religion so tightly that it is a straightjacket of madness.

I would see Africans plagued by an intense lack of curiosity about the world at large and who relate to international politics through foreign aid.

I would see an Africa where, in spite of the promises of globalization, poverty is on the rise. And other measures of progress, like child mortality, show that things are getting worse in Africa while they get better in other parts of the world.

I would see an Africa that has as yet to deal with colonial legacies such as land distribution, and where white skin is still more valued than black life.

I would see an Africa that is encouraging caricature democracies, where countries like Zimbabwe can learn from Kenya that the vote does not count, where democracy becomes a cover for injustice and plunder.

I would see an Africa where political imagination has run dry; the kind of political imagination embodied by Steve Biko, the anti-apartheid activist, or Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary leader from Burkina Faso, assassinated in the 1980s. We have forgotten how to dream for our children - for a future yet to come.

We are not alone in all this: it is just that in using a telescope to see the world, we cannot see ourselves.

Consider this: George Bush, the architect of the war on terror who also presided over the US economic meltdown threatening financial institutions worldwide, is apparently more respected in Africa than in the US. One poll this year showed his approval rating in Africa hovering at 80 per cent while in the United States it was a meager 30.

It gets crazier. Benin has declared a George Bush public holiday. This is a country without a Nelson Mandela Day, a Kwame Nkrumah Day or even an Africa liberation day.

How do we explain this? Is this adulation because George Bush is white? An American with money? A nice Christian gentleman? Has George Bush done more for Africa than Clinton, or Carter?

Bush's long-lasting legacy to Africa will be the creation of the African Command Center, a US military project that promises to meld civilian expertise with military planning and logistics. Africom is first to be based in the German city of Stuttgart, because no African country has been willing to host it. Combine Africom with a war on terror that has spilled into Somalia, and we see Bush's legacy will be the militarization of US-Africa relations.

Now throw in his faith-based "ABCs" HIV policies that have set back the fight against AIDS in Africa, and his 80 percent approval rating becomes a symptom of our myopic reading of the world.

Enough about Bush - what would McCain or Obama do for Africa?

Let's start with John McCain. As the chairman of the International Republican Institute, the foreign policy arm of American conservatives, McCain has already revealed himself. The IRI wants to consolidate democracy in an American image. That is, it actively works for democracies that will open their markets to US interests and their borders to US military operations.

What would happen if a McCain presidency encountered a real African democracy that wanted to do more trade with China than the US? Or one that believed in social welfare programs, or that wanted its national wealth, the oil and the diamonds, to primarily benefit Africans?

McCain's political philosophy is simple, country first - America first, the rest of the world second.

But will Obama be any better for Africa?

Obama says he is against the Bush Doctrine of preemption. And that in his administration, the US would intervene in cases of genocide and countries would only lose their right to international law when they harbor terrorists, or fail to kill them.

Sounds fair enough except when we consider the fine print: Who names and defines a terrorist? It was, after all, only this year that Nobel peace prize winning Nelson Mandela was removed from the US terrorist list.

And it is well and good that an Obama administration would intervene in cases of genocide, whether militarily or by supporting allies with money and logistical help. Darfur, where an estimated 300,000 have died in five years, has been given as such an instance by both Obama and McCain. But what about the Congo where over 6 million people have died since 1996?

Now, you know things are bad when you compare numbers of the dead like this: but the question is valid: why Sudan, where far fewer people have died, and not the Congo where a slow holocaust is unfolding? If the sheer enormity of lost human lives is not the most decisive factor in deciding where and when to intervene - what is?

So would Obama be good for Africa?

I see the war on terror continuing in an Obama presidency. After all, he wants to end

the war in Iraq so that he can better wage war in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

I see unequal trade continuing to cost African countries more in lost revenue than they get in foreign aid.

My mind tells me that if you are looking at issues that really matter, such as ending the militarization of US Africa relations, or fostering equal trade, where African countries have equal access to US market to the same extent as the US has in Africa, the answer is no.

So my mind tells me no.

But if you are thinking more handouts, more sensitivity to African problems, and more foreign aid, Obama will do better than McCain.

We, Africans, need to lose that telescope and take a hard look at ourselves, my heart, wounded, cries out.

Look, Obama's story, difficult but possible in the United States, would have been impossible in Africa.

In Kenya, his ethnicity alone would have prevented him from becoming the president. As a professor teaching law in an African university, he would have been fired or detained. As a community organizer, he would almost certainly have been assassinated.

My heart, nationalist and black, wishes Obama well. But my heart and mind say to fellow Africans, - Don't pin your hopes on the US; if Africa is to succeed, it will be because Africans rose to the challenge of fulfilling its promise.


My heart says - We too have to answer Countee Cullen's question: What is Africa to me?


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Mukoma Wa Ngugi, is the author of [Hurling Words at Consciousness](#) (AWP, 2006), a political columnist for the BBC Focus on Africa Magazine and the Assistant Editor of Pambazuka News. This article was commissioned by and appears courtesy of the BBC World Service. [Click here to contact Mukoma Wa Ngugi.](#)

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