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Cover Story

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Nafsi ya Jamii

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Barack Obama would have done well to have more fully internalized this famous phrase from William Faulkner's 1950 book *Requiem for a Nun*. Obama used this phrase in his speech on racism, *A More Perfect Union*, that some say won him the presidency in 2008. How he failed to incorporate and internalize this analysis is a mystery to me; I suspect a continuing, residual internal psychic-emotional revulsion at feelings of rejection, pain, and anger at racial discrimination he suffered in his youth. He, emotionally, has difficulty holding on to the past being present in the now. He falsely wants to believe that the future can start now, in the present, without any reengagement with the past. As a black man, I know that black males internalize their past pain and anger in different ways.

Faulkner's phrase about the past encapsulates a cultural meme that is intensely poignant in the lives of African Americans and other **colonialized, enslaved**, suppressed and oppressed peoples in the US. The larger society and especially many of the oppressors' offspring and many beneficiaries of the oppression would like **very much** for the past to be past. They would like for everyone in the US to be born into a human political, economic, and cultural environment that is full of justice and equal opportunity without much admittance of past wrongs, without much repair of past damage, and with no corrections to the various systems that continue to perpetrate and maintain that damage. The reality is far from that because "the past is never dead... it's not even past."

Obama's 2008 speech was masterful in reiterating past wrongs without assigning agency to the perpetrators **or** – even more importantly – assigning agency to those aspects of our systems that still carry and maintain racism. The speech's intent was the rejection of the **emotionality** – not the historical substance – of candidate Obama's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Specific segments of the intellectually powerful, evocative, and emotional sermons of Rev. Wright were almost endlessly looping on the Internet and were being repeatedly rebroadcast in the commercial media. I can hear the Reverend now: "God Dam America!" for what you did and are doing to people-of-color. The presidential candidate's speech formally cut all relationship with his pastor and suggested that the problems of racism in the US could be addressed by folding in black **community** concerns and deficits in to the struggle to resolve the general deficits experienced by any person or group in the US. In other words, "quiet down and wait your turn." In other words, "trust me...let me get this presidency and, of course, I am going to take care of you while I take care of everyone else." Blacks have heard **that** tale many times in our history.

The ***A More Perfect Union*** speech was delivered on March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia before an audience at the National Convention Center with frequent references to the Constitutional Convention that had taken place there in 1787. That was the moment in our history when it was formally decided that blacks and women would not be able to vote and the historical moment when it was decided that black bodies would be counted as 3/5ths of a white body for population counts to define state representation in Congress. [Because of the decisions made at that place and time, **most** free or escaped blacks **fought for the British Crown** which was rapidly moving toward the abolition of the slave trade (1807).]

Obama expressed a tragic lack of understanding of how the past does not go away that easily. He castigated Wright for his view that "...sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America." Obama went on to say that Wright's views were "not only wrong but divisive... at a time when we need unity." Obama needed **the appearance** of unity for the sake of the easily scared and sometimes frozen by guilt white liberals who he wanted to vote for him; but, **Rev. Wright was and is right**. Racism is endemic both in terms of conscious and unconscious racism in continuing pockets in the population and it is more extensively endemic through the functioning of public and private **systems** that produce racist results. **It is Obama that is wrong.**

Neither the US' wrongs **nor** the US' rights should be elevated above the other; the Both/And paradigm, not the frequently inaccurate and misleading Either/Or paradigm, provides the more reality based logical paths to justice, equality, and peace.

Obama – like Romney – is adrift in a collection of cultural memes that include preferences or emphases for the use of the Either/Or paradigms. Our political and electoral system – probably more than any such system in the world – glorifies and deeply epitomizes the Either/Or paradigm. Those who participate as candidates, activists, or voters are massively, mentally pushed in to Either/Or understandings and Either/Or decisions despite the unreality of it all. Because of the multicultural nature of his life, Obama and many people-of-color in the US are both better able to deal with the subtleties and nuances that arise in the real world where perspectives, framings, and conflicting truths exist. People-of-color, with multiple identities, and multiple cultural foundations are better able to articulately switch between the utterances, postures, and memes of different cultures. These mental, cultural skills have been well displayed by many over the years and they give advantage for personal advancement in a multicultural environment. However, the Obama's, the Oprah's, and the other color-line-breaking **Firsts** have historically **changed little** when it comes to systemic racism. The President has spent more than three years learning some hard lessons about the endemic nature of false Western cultural paradigms, vampire-like corporate memes, and facing massively resistant camouflaged racism.

One of the cultural behaviors that “educated Negroes” like Barack Obama take on is voluntary suppression of their emotions, especially their anger. Western culture associates emotions with women, with “primitive” savage people, and with a lack of intellect. The President's legendary “coolness” under fire must derive from this practiced emotional suppression and the rechanneling of emotion into intellectual activity. Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson have the brilliance to re-inject emotion into their speech without increased volume or angry tones by their choice of sharp edged terminology and evocative phrasing. Obama, whose caretaker grandmother stated her fear of walking down the street past a black man and who openly expressed her racism in his face, built up mental insulation between himself and his emotions.

Candidate Obama stated of Rev. Wright that “...anger is not always productive...it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging

the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races." Obama clearly understands that our justified anger must be engaged but he offers no direction for that. Anger is a natural mental process that, in certain circumstances, healthy human minds and bodies experience. I think that Obama engaged his anger for decades **vicariously** through the powerful, evocative sermons of Rev. Jeremiah Wright; but for the sake of an election, he cut that off and offered no substitute. Having a black President is not a substitute for exorcising the racist past that is still with us fully but more subtly as Obama learned.

There can be little doubt that our past racist history has significantly blunted Obama's presidency. He is disrespected like no previous president **from** the clear disdain from the British and Israeli Prime Ministers **to** the persistent, ridiculous myths about his birth and religion **to** the "you liar" shout-out on the floor of Congress during State of the Union Address **to** being physically bear hugged and picked up by a stranger at a campaign event without the intervention of the Secret Service. His efforts to have folks respectfully come together around mutual concerns – even using previously agreed on solutions – has been strongly rejected by a significant portion of mostly the white male population.

Recognizing the need to exorcise racist differences, the South African ANC (who would now be labeled terrorist) leaders took that nation through the long and **emotional** process of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Most point to this process as successful even though it was flawed and did not fully implement the **reparations** pledges of the legislation. Congressman Conyers' bill for a study of the on-going impacts of slavery and discrimination has – after more than twenty years – not even reached Congressional committee discussion level. Clinton ("the first black President") attempted a poorly resourced national dialog on race. Clinton, at least, deserves credit for trying. Obama's administration has seriously suffered from racism. He lacks support from the population pool where racism is most virulent: uneducated white males. Progressive, anti-racist political activists are settling for the kinds of institutional reform that can lift the mostly white middle class but that does not address the generational impacts of injustices of the past that are manifest in enormous (stolen) wealth differences rather than income differences. It is time that somebody exhibited a little healthy anger combined with the wisdom of **revolutionary patience** to achieve fundamental

changes rather than to **just** re-elect a unconsciously-suppressed black man intent on integration into a cosmetically reformed collapsing, “burning house.”

[Note: Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to “The Soul Community”]

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