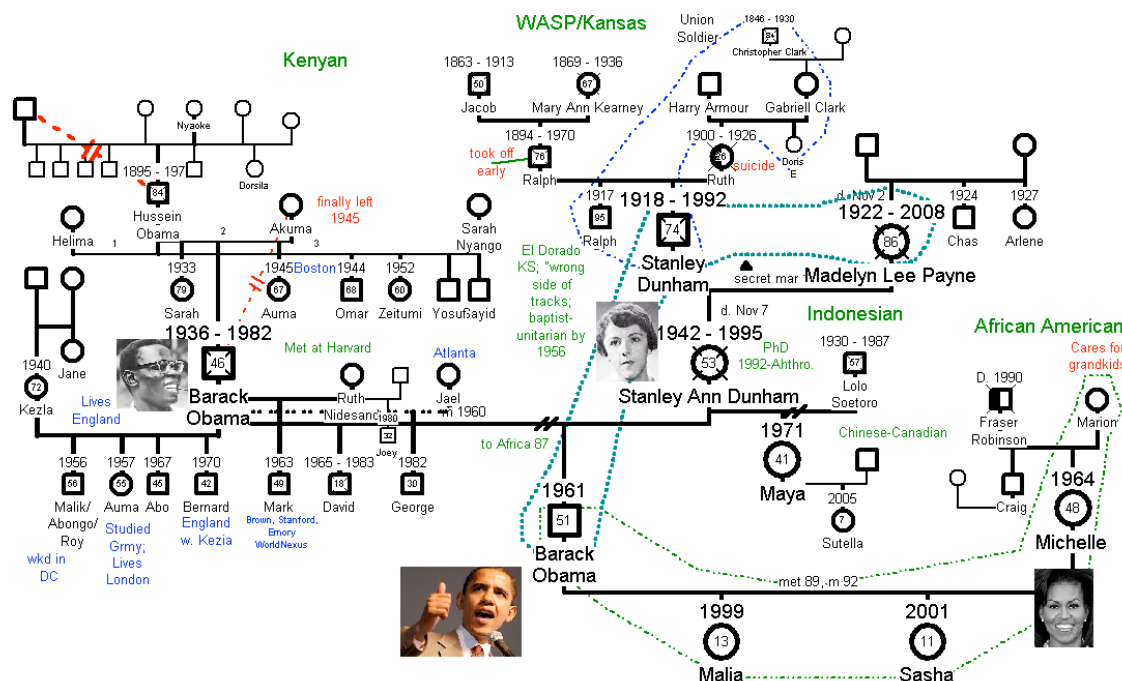


BARACK OBAMA's STORY

Monica McGoldrick

Perhaps it is not surprising that Barack Obama, having so many different cultures within himself, came to lead our nation at a time when the need to pull together our own diversity was becoming more apparent. Coming from a complex background, he struggled for much of his youth to find a sense of home. Ultimately his solution was to make home an inclusive community, built on "the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself" (Wolfe, 2009, p. 150). He concluded that what he himself represented in diversity would someday become the "American community."



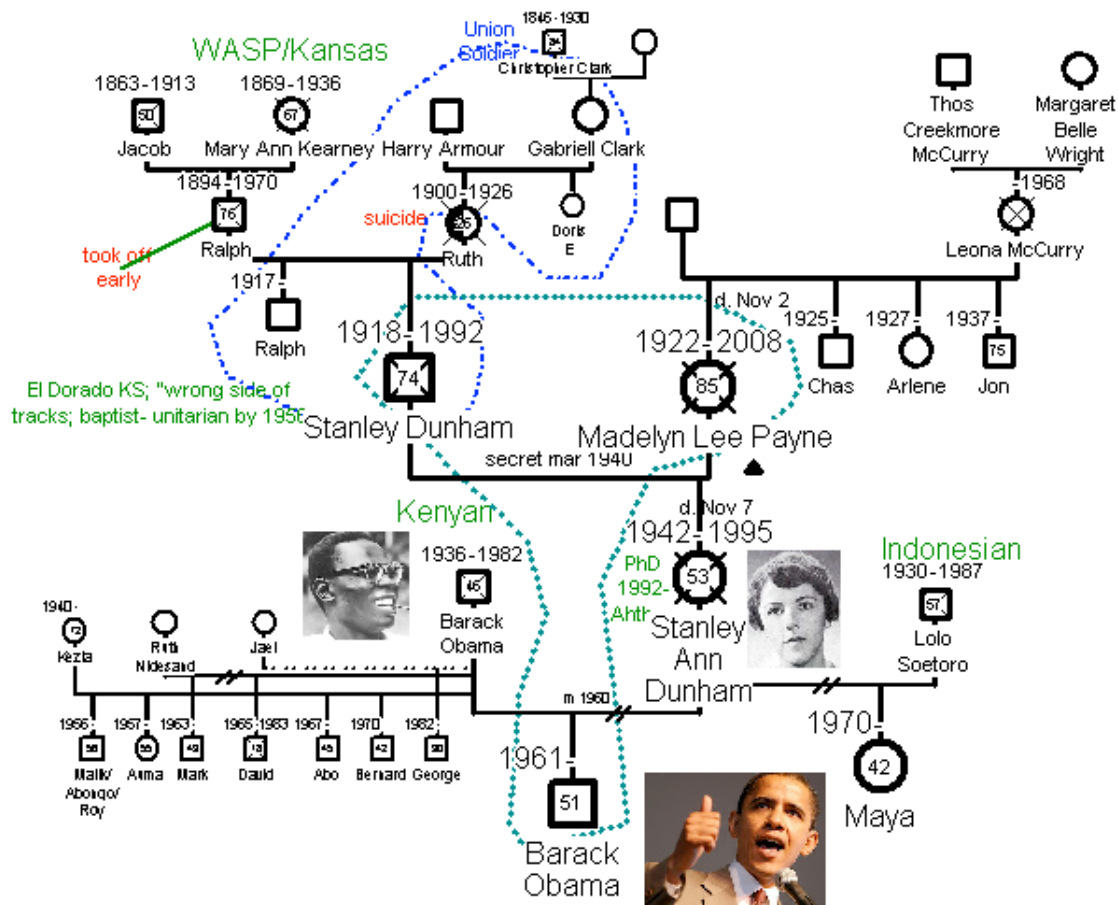
Obama's background was richly diverse. He personifies the complexities of identity that are emblematic of the increasingly multicultural world in which we live. At the same time his story reflects the complications, conflicts, cutoffs, and confusions that often arise in response to diversity. It also demonstrates many common family patterns, including the formation of triangles and alliances to manage anxiety and pain; losses and secrets that have become intertwined and then organize a family for multiple generations; and the issues of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, migration, and geography intersect with the dynamics of power to shape family dynamics in complex ways. His story also highlights how a person can become exiled, both in familial and cultural terms, and how painful and dispiriting it is to live in exile. Most important, however, Obama's story provides a powerful example of how a person can take the journey home by probing to learn his history and by embracing the parts that reflect both pride and shame, joy and pain. It is an instructive illustration of how we can take similar journeys of courage by risking to wonder about the things we never dared to let ourselves think about, risking to reach out to those we may never have talked to before or may not talked to for a long time, and to ask long withheld questions, daring to hear the answers. His is a cogent example of how we can find our ways back home, not in the sense of returning to the fantasy that never was, but in facing the truth of what was and building something meaningful from it.

Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, less than a year after his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, aged 18, and her parents, Stanley and Madelyn had made their 9th move since she was born in Kansas, settling in Hawaii, where she began college and promptly met Barack

Obama, Sr. a new student from Kenya, By November she was pregnant, and within a short time of Obama's birth the couple had split up. Obama was to see his father only once in his life, a brief visit at age 10. His mother never really returned to the mainland U.S., living most of the rest of her life doing anthropological studies and cultural development work in Indonesia. Obama lived with her until the age of 10 and after that lived primarily with his maternal grandparents. Thus he not only came from a diverse background but his experiences were of having to seek and remake his home base many times in his life, often pretty much on his own.

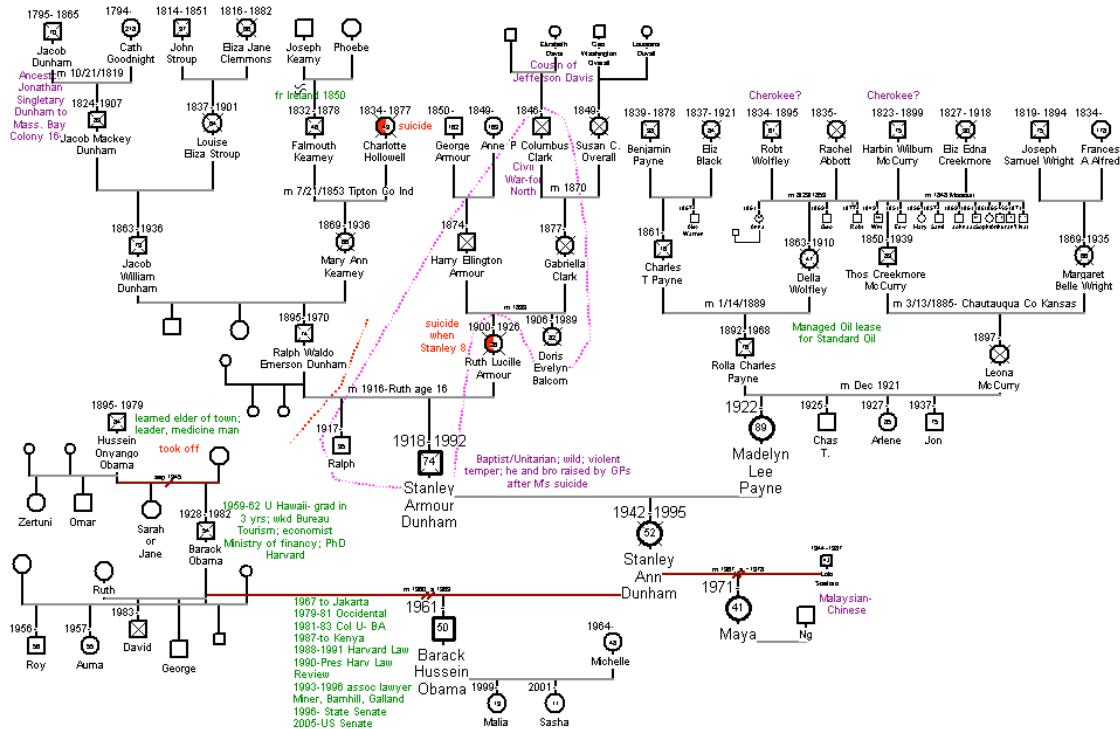
Barack Obama learned a great deal about himself as he thought about who his parents were, and who their parents were before them.

Maternal Family



Obama's mother Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro's restlessness appears to have been something she came by honestly. She was the only daughter of a restless pioneer family with Irish and Anglo roots from Kansas. Ann Dunham (she gave up the name "Stanley" which was her father's name, after high school) was extremely smart, opinionated, adventuresome, and a seeker, who, like her parents and her grandparents before her and her daughter and perhaps her son after her, had a restless nature, was always seeking, never quite conforming. She was adaptable and self sufficient, accustomed to being an outsider and the perpetual "other," as were her parents to a considerable extent. Her father, Stanley Dunham was named by his mother, Ruth, for the explorer and journalist in Tanganyika who found David Livingstone and made the comment: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume."

Ruth killed herself with strychnine, when Stanley was 8 after a fight with her husband. The husband then took off and left



his two sons to be raised by their maternal grandparents and a great grandfather Civil War veteran Christopher Columbus Clark. The father soon remarried and had two more children. Just like Obama's father, he rarely saw his sons. Stanley himself became a bit of a drifter, a story teller, and a man who didn't quite fit in.

Obama's maternal ancestors were farmers, teachers, abolitionists, Methodist ministers, Baptists, and veterans of the Civil War and both world wars. We rumored to have Cherokee blood. In an era when few finished high school, both her grandfathers went to college. One ancestor was said to have married an aunt of Wild Bill Hickok, another to have shaken hands with Abraham Lincoln while on his father's shoulders, and an aunt was supposedly Mickey Mantle's teacher in Oklahoma.



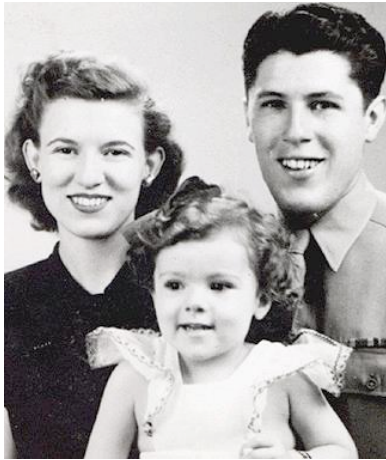
Madelyn Dunham's Parents: Leona McCurry and her husband R.C. Payne

Obama's maternal great grandmother Leona McCurry, the 6th of 7 children, became a school teacher. She was highly intelligent and interested in everything. During the middle of the depression she treated her children to the Chicago World's Fair, which they all thought of as a life changing experience from their small conservative segregated Kansas town where their father, R. C. Payne, worked for Sinclair Oil, as did most of the men in

the neighborhood.

Madelyn, the oldest daughter, born in 1922, and her siblings grew up during the depression and in the shadow of World War II. Madelyn's brother Charles, born 3 years after her, eventually became assistant director of the library at the University of Chicago; the 3rd child Margaret Arlene Payne, born in 1927, went to the University of Kansas, got a teaching degree at Columbia, and a PhD at the University of Chicago. The youngest child, Jon, born 10 years later,

became City Planning Director in Littleton Colorado. All the children seem to have grown up with the expectation that they would leave Kansas for wider horizons.



Madelyn's life, however, seems to have involved the most turmoil. She married Stanley Dunham secretly while still in high school, and against her parents wishes, and had to struggle to stay married for all the years of their peripatetic life. She was hard working and smart and became a bank manager in Hawaii, but had to work throughout her adult life to support the family because of her husband Stanley's unpredictable work efforts. She and Stanley moved at least 9 times from the year Ann was born in 1942, until they finally settled in Hawaii in 1960 when she graduated from high school, averaging a move every 2 years (from Kansas to Berkeley, California, back to Kansas, to Oklahoma, to Texas, back to Kansas, to Seattle, To Mercer Island Washington, and finally to Hawaii. For the rest of Ann's 52 year life, she

moved back to Washington State, then to several places in Indonesia, to Pakistan, briefly to New York City, and ultimately she died in Hawaii, somewhat out of touch with her children, who were in New York and Chicago at the time, although her daughter did manage to get to Hawaii just before she died. Always a seeker, an interesting anecdote about Ann Dunham, during high school in Washington State,



is that she took off with a young man (not her boyfriend) for California, without telling her parents and disappeared for several days until stopped by the police. Her biographer Janny Scott comments on this incident as reflecting her willingness to take a risk, and a kind of restlessness that led Americans westward, leading her parents as far west as they could go in the U.S. This theme in the Dunham family had played out in their secret marriage while Madelyn was still in high school and in Stanley's taking off for the west coast at a very young age, long before his marriage.

Ann, it seems continued that pattern of restlessness and moving on for the rest of her life. She seems to have had a powerful impact on many of the younger professionals she



mentored in Indonesia, but she appears to have had difficulty feeling a long term close connectedness with her parents or her spouses. She was the primary parent for her daughter, Maya Soetero,

TIME LINE

- 40 Stanley(22) & Marilyn (18) secret marriage-Kansas
- 42 Stanley Ann born
- 44 To Berkeley
- 46 Back to Kansas
- 47 to Ponca City Okla
- 48 To Tx
- 49 Back to El Dorado Kansas
- 50 To Seattle
- 56 To Mercer Island
- 60 To Hawaii
- 61 Ann (19) married Barack Sr (25)
- 61 Barack born
- 62 Couple separate. Ann to Seattle
- 63 Ann meet Lolo Soetero
- 64 Ann & Soetero marry
- 66 Ann to Indonesia
- 67 Ann B.A. U. Hawaii
- 68 Ann wkld for USIS
- 70 Maya born
- 70 Ann has Ford Fountatn grant
- 71 Barack back to Hawaii
- 71 Barack Sr & Ann visit Hawaii for Xmas
- 73 Lolo leaves
- 74 Ann to Hawaii for grad school
- 75 Ann to Indonesia
- 76 A & Maya to Yogokarta
- 78 Ann finishes field wk for PhD
- 79 Barack to Occidental
- 80 Ann & Lolo div
- 82 Barack to Col U
- 84 Ann back to Hawaii
- 86 Ann to Pakestan
- 87 Barack to Chicago
- 88 Barack to NYC
- 89 Ann in Pakestan
- 93 Ann gets PhD
- 94 Ann to NY for Bank Job
- 94 Ann Dx CA
- 95 Ann dies in Hawaii

but her connections with Barack after the age of 10 were rather sporadic. They were often continents apart, and her untimely death prevented him from having a mature chance to be connected with her.

Her life course was undoubtedly powerfully influenced by the cohort she was born into. As a brilliant and talented young woman who graduated from high school just as the 1960s were beginning, she could not fit into the old constraints of women that defined the role her mother played. There was no way Ann would have been willing to fit into the role her mother Madelyn had taken. Madelyn had had to work when Stanley went to college at Berkeley, and in his early years in business, but later, when he could have supported her, she told a relative she just had to go back to work: "If I don't work, I'll turn into an alcoholic" (Scott, 2011, p. 56). This was probably a good assessment of her mental health needs, but Madelyn was a highly intelligent and capable woman, who stayed with a man who was difficult and not loving to her and who left her responsible for holding their family together financially and emotionally. Ann was born too late to fit into that gender stereotype. But she was born slightly too early to have a group of women supports who might have spurred her to challenge the rules from college onwards and yet take care of each other and teach each other how to survive in a man's world. In the end Ann did not receive her doctorate for almost 30 years, until shortly before she died, and she does not seem to have had the skills or the support from others to encourage her to set aside resources for her later years. According to her biographer Jenny Scott (2011), she seems to have been unprepared to negotiate for herself or support herself in her early 50s when she had finally finished her doctorate and her children were on their own. It is a sad story of women of a certain generation who were outside the mainstream of women of their cohort who managed together to break through many educational, professional and social barriers.

An interesting fact about Obama is that through his maternal ancestors he is apparently related to at least 6 other U.S. Presidents (James Madison, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, George Bush & George W. Bush).

Obama's Search for his Father

*"The Old Man. That's what Auma called our father. It sounded right to me, somehow, at once familiar and distant. An elemental force that isn't fully understood." -Barack Obama in *Dreams from My Father*.*

Barack Obama was haunted throughout his childhood by the absence of his father, who had left by the time he was 2. His father had been among a small elite group from Kenya who had come to the United States for college in the late 1950's and 1960s in hopes that they would become the emerging leaders in Kenya when it achieved its freedom from Great Britain, which happened in the mid 1960s. Barack Sr. had managed to be the first African student to attend the University of Hawaii, the very month after Hawaii achieved statehood (1959). Though he was already married with two children in Kenya, he and Ann Dunham began their relationship the following fall (1960) through a shared class in Russian. He did not tell her about his other family and she very shortly became pregnant and dropped out of school. He later told her he was divorced, which was not the case. The couple seem to have separated within months of Barack's birth and Ann seems to have taken her son, Barack, to Seattle for the next school year (1961-62), returning eventually to Hawaii to complete her college degree. Barack Sr., Brilliant and intellectual, appeared on his way to greatness. Graduating from the University of Hawaii in 1962 Phi Beta Kappa, he was accepted at Harvard for graduate school spent 2 years there, though he never received his coveted PhD. He returned to Africa in 1964 with a new American wife, Ruth Baker, who was, like Obama's mother, also white and had with her two sons Mark and David. Obama seems to have known virtually nothing about the father's life in Africa, which was rocky from the start. He was brilliant but he was also arrogant and outspoken and not of the dominant cultural group. He was protected by the leading politician of his group, Tom Mboya, until Mboya's assassination in 1969. From that time on his drinking, impulsiveness and violence

toward his wife, Ruth, seems to have contributed to his downhill spiral. But Obama knew nothing of the details of his father's life personally or politically as he grew up. It was not until several years after the father had eventually died in his 4th very serious car accident that Obama realized, primarily it seems through a second death, that of his half brother David, that Obama concluded he had to learn about his father and go to Africa. In his memoir, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, about his search to know who his father was, Obama wrote that he had been very fortunate in his life in many ways:

There was only one problem: my father was missing. He had left paradise and nothing that my mother or grandparents told me could obviate that single unassailable fact... My father became a prop in someone else's narrative... I don't really blame my mother or grandparents for this. My father may have preferred the image they created for him—indeed, he may have been complicit in its creation. (Obama, 1995, p. 26)

Having had only once seen his father during a tense Christmas vacation when he was 10, he knew practically nothing about him. His half sister, Auma, got in touch with him as a young adult and the two of them arranged to meet for the first time. Obama was shocked by what she told him about their father's life:

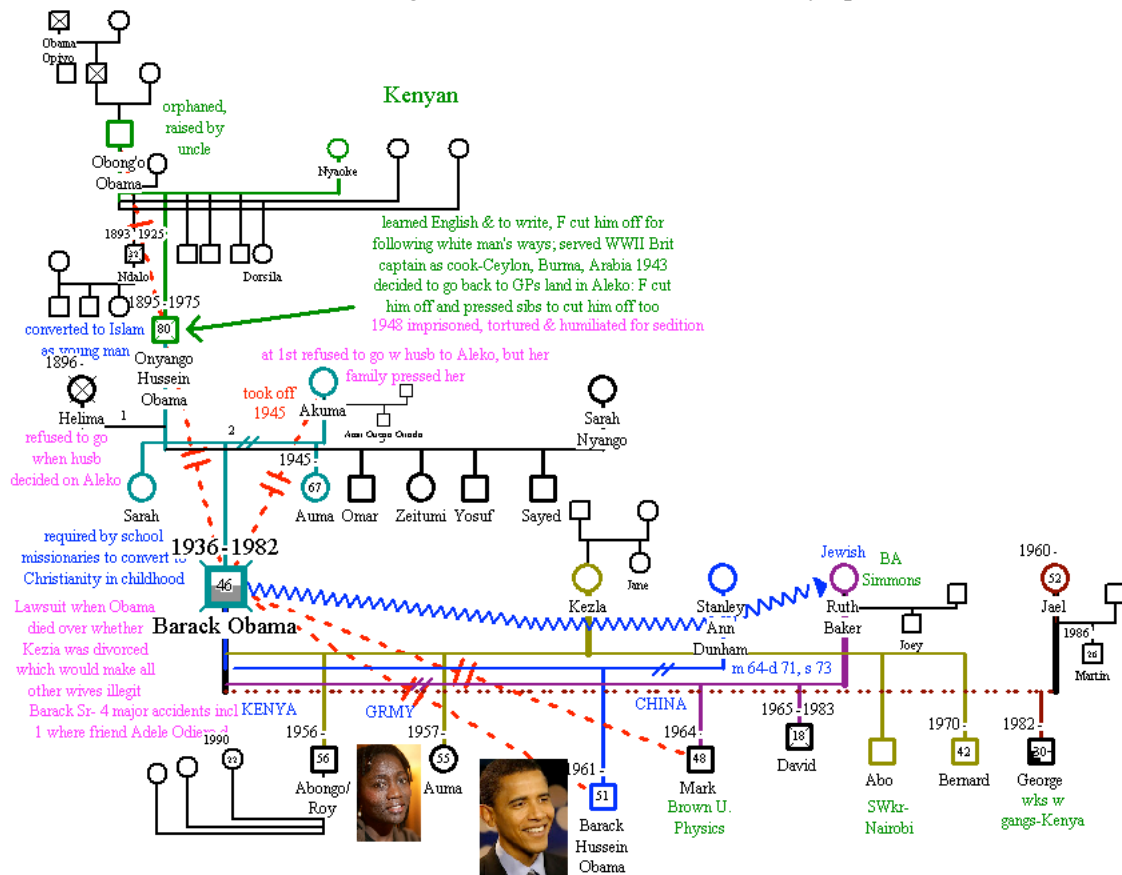
All my life I had carried a single image of my father, one that I had sometimes rebelled against but had never questioned, one that I later tried to take as my own. The brilliant scholar, the generous friend, the upstanding leader—my father had been all those things. I hadn't seen what perhaps most men see at some point in their lives: their father's body shrinking, their father's best hopes dashed, their father's face lined with grief and regret... I'd seen weakness in other men— Gramps and his disappointments, Lolo [my step-father] and his compromise. But these men had become object lessons for me, men I might love but never emulate, white men and brown men whose fates didn't speak to my own. It was into my father's image, the black man, son of Africa, that I'd packed all the attributes I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, DuBois and Mandela. . . . My father's voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval. Now that image had suddenly vanished. Replaced by . . . what? A bitter drunk? An abusive husband? A defeated, lonely bureaucrat? To think all my life I had been wrestling with nothing more than a ghost. (Obama, 1995, p. 220)

Obama never really knew his father, who left before he was 2 and only returned once in his life. The father had been cut off from his own father as an adolescent, and had lost his mother, who left their home by the time he was 9, having tried to leave three times before. This grandmother, like Stanley Ann Dunham in some ways, was undoubtedly a victim of her gender and generation in a culture that did not provide much possibility for intelligent women to manage on their own. On the paternal side, cutoffs between fathers and sons seem to have characterized the family for at least three generations. Obama's father, Onyango, had been put out of the home by his own father, yet managed to find his way to an education in Hawaii and then to Harvard through connections to outsiders. Obama's paternal grandfather, Onyango, had learned English and writing working for white men when they took over Kenya. Later he left home and served a British Captain as cook during World War II, travelling to Ceylon, Burma and Arabia. However, his father so resented his having adopted white ways that he cut him off and pressed all his other children to cut him off as well. They never reconciled.

Obama's grandfather, Hussein Onyango had been born at a time of crucial change as well: 1895, the very year the British made Kenya a protectorate and began their mega-engineering program to create a railway across Africa which came to define Kenya for the past hundred years. They did not gain their freedom until 1965. Onyango was one of the first in his village to learn English and Swahili. His father ostracized him for adopting the clothing and ways of Whites, pushing him further toward working for the British, which allowed him to travel widely and learn about the world.

Barack Obama Sr. was the first and only son of his mother, who abandoned her 2 older

children to escape her abusive husband when they were still young children. The father proceeded to have three more sons and another daughter with his next wife, Sarah, who became the mother Obama Sr. knew from childhood. His father, Onyango, had been talented middle son in a large family, born in 1895, just at the time when the British were establishing their foothold in Africa, and especially in exactly that part of what became Kenya, where they created one of the greatest engineering projects of all time, building a railroad which went from Lake Victoria, beginning in Kisumu, precisely the territory where the Obamas were located, to Nairobi, and on to the ocean at Mombasa on the East coast of Africa. Onyango left home early, learned English, worked for the British, which led his father to reject him and pressure his other children to reject him. When Barack Sr., who had converted to Christianity by local school Missionaries who insisted on it, had the chance to leave home for education, he followed in his father's footsteps and he too had trouble when he returned, not being able to fit into the situation easily upon his return.



Barack Obama, father and son, had many similarities: a boldness of ambition enabled each of them to imagine life beyond the constraints of their circumstances. Each had perhaps a “hubris, some would call it arrogance, that enabled them to dream large, each had been orphaned by a parent and left to explain the empty space as best he could, and both came of age at a time when currents of change allowed them to imagine having a life until recently thought impossible. Indeed, walked toward opportunity without hesitation” (Jacobs, 2011, p. 12).

Years later, after his father had died, Obama decided to go to Kenya in a search to understand himself. He visited his father's third wife, Ruth, whom his father had divorced while her two sons were still children. She took out an album of pictures of the family when they were together years before. Obama wrote of it almost eerily:

They were happy scenes, all of them, and all strangely familiar, as if I were glimpsing

some alternative universe that had played itself out behind my back. They were reflections, I realized, of my own long held fantasies, fantasies I'd kept secret even from myself. The fantasy of the Old Man's having taken my mother and me back to Kenya. The wish that my mother and father, sisters and brothers were all under one roof. . . . The recognition of how wrong it had all turned out, the harsh evidence of life as it had really been lived, made me so sad that after only a few minutes I had to look away. (Obama, 1995, pp. 342–343)

What is sad and touching and very common about this is that parents tend to live large in the hearts and fantasies of their children even if they have physically disappeared. In Obama's case it took until he was in his late twenties and his father had been dead several years to risk the journey to learn about him. He realized only when he was en route how strong his avoidance of this journey had been:

"I began to suspect that my European stop was just one more means of delay, one more attempt to avoid coming to terms with the Old Man. . . . It wasn't that Europe wasn't beautiful; everything was just as I'd imagined it. It just wasn't mine. I felt as if I were living out someone else's romance; the incompleteness of my own history stood between me and the sites I saw like a hard pane of glass" (Obama, 1995, p. 301).

In fact, Obama spent much of his childhood living away from his mother as well as his father, being raised by his maternal grandparents in Hawaii. So his search for his mother was also a part of his journey. He wrote of a visit she made to him while he was in college, when it became clear to him that she had never stopped loving his father: "She saw my father as everyone hopes at least one other person might see him; she had tried to help the child who never knew him see him the same way" (Obama, 1995, p. 137). But he was struggling to understand his mother as well:

In her smiling, slightly puzzled face I saw what all children must see at some point if they are to grow up—their parents' lives revealed to them as separate and apart, reaching out beyond the point of their union or the birth of a child, lives unfurling back to grandparents, great-grandparents, an infinite number of chance meetings, misunderstandings, projected hopes, limited circumstances. My mother was that girl with the movie of beautiful black people in her head, flattered by my father's attention, confused and alone, trying to break out of the grip of her own parents' lives. (Obama, 1995, p. 127)

Finding Himself In Finding His Father's Family

When Barack Obama visited his African relatives in 1987, 4 years after his father died, and met most of his extended family for the first time, he was immediately drawn into triangles set up by the conflicts between several different parts of his father's multiply divorced family. His father's sister complained that Obama should have visited her first instead of connecting to his father's first wife, Kezia, and her family, which included Obama's half sister, Auma, the only one he had met before and the one with whom he had the most connection. All sorts of conflicts developed about whom he would spend more time with and to whom he would be more generous. There was also conflict in relation to the fact that during Obama's father's relationship with his third wife, Ruth, who was white, he had continued his relationship with Kezia as well, though she was also involved with someone else and over time had two younger sons, Abo and Bernard, there being question as to whether Bernard was actually Obama's father's son. Barack struggled with the question, wondering whether the truth should have an impact on his relationship with Bernard, whom he was just getting to know. The family reassured him that his father had been very accepting of Bernard and did not let it become an issue to him, accepting all the children as his own, though he had taken Kezia's two oldest children, Roy and Auma, away from the family home in Alego to live with him and Ruth in Nairobi, meaning that the two oldest were separated from their mother and had not known their youngest brothers. During Obama's visit word came

that the third wife, Ruth, was also resentful that he was in Africa and not coming to visit her. Obama was told that his father's third divorce was very bitter. Barack Sr. had been very abusive to her for years before she finally left him. She later became involved with another man and tried to get her two sons by Obama's father, Mark and David, to change their name to that of her new husband. Mark did so, but the younger son, David, became rebellious and refused, actually moving back to live with his half brother Roy (Auma's brother), where he was when he tragically died at age 18 in 1983. This death occurred just a year after Barack Sr. died. The death left all the triangles and conflicts of the divorced and multiply remarried family in a very unresolved place, compounded by the question of whether he and Kezia had ever been divorced at all, which added to the complexity of settling his estate, especially in relation to the mother of his youngest son, George, who was born just before Barack Sr. died. Luckily, through Obama's efforts to make connections to each part of the family and his willingness to visit each side and listen to them without choosing sides, he was able to learn a great deal about his family and thus about himself. He even took an opportunity to question his half brother Mark about his lack of interest in their father, whom he had also hardly known because the parents divorced when he was still young and he rarely saw his father after the divorce. Mark's response is understandable:

"I'm cut off from my roots. . . . At a certain point I made a decision not to think about who my real father was. He was dead to me even when he was still alive. I knew he was a drunk and showed no concern for his wife and children. That was enough. . . . Life's hard enough without all that excess baggage" (Obama, 1995, p. 344).

Such responses are very common and understandable in the painful aftermath of losing a parent in a divorce. Obama had felt the same pain, but the effort to reconnect, even when the parent is gone, can make a tremendous difference, as Obama's memoir reveals. In *Dreams from My Father* Barack Obama (1995) wondered to himself:

"What is a family? Is it just a genetic chain, parents and offspring, people like me? Or is it a social construct, an economic unit, optimal for child rearing and divisions of labor? Or is it something else entirely: a store of shared memories, say? An ambit of love? A reach across the void?" (p. 327).

In Africa Obama encountered a definition of family much broader than anything he had experienced in the U.S., underscoring the point that whereas family may or may not have a genetic component, it most certainly has a cultural component. How we understand what family is—who is included and excluded from this group—and the role it plays in our lives is shaped by our cultural contexts. Barack Obama (1995) wondered how his maternal grandparents, Stanley and Madelyn came to allow their daughter, however grudgingly, to marry an African, a question that always puzzled him. White privilege enables most white people to live without pondering how race influences their lives. He said: "When black people appear at all in the Kansas of my grandparents' memories, the images are fleeting . . . they are shadowy, silent presences that elicit neither passion nor fear" (p. 18). He said they probably never thought about race except when they observed someone else's racism: "Like most white Americans at the time, they had never really given black people much thought," because in their world, "the unspoken code that governed life among whites kept contact between the races to a minimum" (p. 18).

Several years after they were married, Obama's grandparents moved to Texas, and it was probably there that they first became aware of racism. Stanley was warned to not serve Mexican and black customers in the furniture store where he was a salesman, and Madelyn was accosted by a secretary in the bank where she worked for referring to the black janitor as "Mister Reed." Experiences like these shocked and offended them, but were probably the only times they thought about race overtly. Although Stanley insisted that they left Texas because they were disturbed by the racism there, Madelyn said they actually left in search of better work, according to her grandson: "The word racism wasn't even in their vocabulary back then" (Obama, 1995, p. 21).

Obama's Struggle with His Multicultural Roots

For many years, Obama struggled with his multicultural roots. This was partly because he grew up without knowing his father except through the myths his mother and grandparents told about him. In part it was probably also because of the complexity of his family's roots, which, like so many families in the U.S., were shrouded in mystery and silence. Obama hypothesized that his grandfather's receptivity to his mother's marriage to a black man may have reflected his identification with outsider status as a child whose mother committed suicide and whose own father disappeared. Hence his daughter's interracial marriage was "at some deeply unexplored level . . . a window into his own heart" (Obama, 1995, p. 22).

Courtship and weddings are fascinating nodal points to explore in learning how family process works. Gender, class, and race influence couple relationships profoundly. Once Barack was born, his grandparents were forever part of an interracial family. Of course, racial diversity in Hawaii was much more a part of the local culture than in the mainland U.S., which may have made things easier. Nevertheless, this once white family now had to deal with race overtly as an undeniable part of their everyday experience.

In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama described having dated someone white for almost a year, until it became clear to him that she did not understand issue of race which were at the core of his experiences. Alone together, he said, they could fall into their own private world, "Just two people hidden and warm, your own language, your own customs" (Obama, 1995, p. 210). But then one weekend she invited him to go with her to her family's country house:

The house was very old, her grandfather's house. He had inherited it from his grandfather. The library was filled with old books and pictures of the grandfather with famous people he had known—presidents, diplomats, industrialists. There was this tremendous gravity to the room. Standing in that room, I realized that our two worlds, my friend's and mine, were as distant from each other as Kenya is from Germany. And I knew that if we stayed together I'd eventually live in hers. After all, I'd been doing it most of my life. Between the two of us, I was the one who knew how to live as an outsider. (Obama, 1995, pp. 210–211)

When he thought about the future it pressed in on "our warm little world." He took her to see a play by a black playwright—an angry, funny play of "typical black American humor." Afterwards she asked why black people were so angry all the time and he responded that it was a matter of remembering and no one asks why Jews remember the Holocaust. She said that was different and that black anger was just a dead end. Though they had been close in their private relationship she could not understand his world and, given the larger context, there was no solution possible other than to break up.

Obama's Struggle to Come To Terms With His Father

Obama struggled for many years to come to terms with the father he never knew, realizing on his trip back to Africa that his father had failed by holding himself apart from any home. Of course Obama's mother did that as well, moving continuously and almost never returning to the mainland U.S. once she and her parents left when she was 18. Indeed, she was away from her son for years at a time. And Obama's father returned only once to see him after abandoning him at 2. Obama made tremendous efforts to understand what each of his relatives meant to him—to meet his African half siblings and a step-grandmother he had never known. His maternal grandmother, his primary caretaker, died (Nov 2) 2 days before his election (Nov 4) as president and three days before the anniversary of his mother's death (Nov 7). He struggled over the years to understand the complexities of his identity is racially and culturally. Given our complexities as a nation, his example may be a guide to building a broader home base, because his family reflects multiple ethnic and racial groups (white, African, African American, Indonesian, Chinese, Jewish) and multiple religious orientations. His great grandfather converted to Islam. His paternal grandfather converted to Christianity and then back to Islam; his maternal grandparents came from different religious backgrounds.

Obama visited his father's grave in Kenya and wrote to his dead father about what he

now understood: If it weren't for that silence, your grandfather might have told your father that he could never escape himself. Or re-create himself alone. Your father might have taught those same lessons to you. And you, the son, might have taught your father that this new world that was beckoning all of you involved more than just railroads and indoor toilets and irrigation ditches and gramophones—lifeless instruments that could be absorbed into the old ways. You might have told him that these instruments carried with them a dangerous power, that they demanded a different way of seeing the world. That this power could be absorbed only alongside a faith born out of hardship, a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim, but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead—a faith in other people. The silence killed your faith. And for lack of faith you clung to both too much and too little of your past. (Obama, 1995, p. 428) Obama continued by describing what the experience of finding his father meant for him:

I felt the circle finally close. I realized that who I was . . . —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 a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (Obama, 1995, pp. 428–429)

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