

Barack Obama in Jamaica: “Di New Trendsetter”

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“Me have a new album which me a go put out and it a go name Barack Obama...The message that Barack Obama is bringing resonates among black, white, old and young... It’s not about him being a black man, I just can identify with him message...Me love seh him a preach withdrawing of the soldiers from Iraq and that him a go bring change to Washington.”

([Fragment] “Barack Obama,” *Cocoa Tea*)

So moved was the veteran reggae musician Cocoa Tea by Senator Barack Obama’s presidential campaign that in March 2008 he wrote a song about him. So profound was his devotion to the presidential hopeful that soon after the release of this song he decided that one was not enough. So deep was his passion for the Senator that he vowed to finish an entire album devoted to him in time to perform at the Democratic Convention in August 2008.¹

Cocoa Tea’s interest is by no means exceptional in Jamaica. Indeed, the reaction of Jamaicans to the presidential campaign of the senator from Illinois has been striking in its intensity. Jamaicans from all walks of life are keenly aware of the man and his aspira-

tions. While most do not know (or care about) the fine details of the mechanisms of the U.S. electoral system, all are very aware of and excited by three facts: Barack Obama is a black man who has a real chance of running the most powerful country in the world; Barack Obama represents the promise of real and meaningful change within the United States; and Barack Obama represents the promise of real and meaningful change in the international arena.

Before delving further into the meaning of the presidential campaign for Jamaicans, it is important to contextualise the Jamaican reaction to Senator Obama’s campaign. The Jamaican perspective reflects this nation’s long engagement, political and otherwise,



Jamaican Market

with the United States of America. That is, it is a continuation of the close relationship that the two nations have enjoyed since the era of slavery. In many ways, the few miles that separate Jamaica from the United States do not exist in any meaningful way. There has long been a cross-fertilisation of political ideology: one needs only to consider a few important names from history. Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican who conceptualised Pan-African nationalism and set up his Black Star operations in the United States in the early years of the last century. Claude McKay, the Jamaican writer who was deeply involved in Harlem's 1920s Renaissance. And of course, the 1960s Black Power Movement that emerged in the 1960s (itself inspired by Pan-Africanism) that found great traction in Jamaica. Ideas about race, freedom, equality and revolution have circulated between the two regions: and certainly from the point of view of the Caribbean, our fate has been considered tightly bound to that of the United

States. What we have seen then between the two regions and certainly between Jamaica and the U.S. is a back-and-forth migration of ideas and of people, one which reseeds and refreshes thought and action in both locations and contributes to a sense of shared destiny on the part of Jamaicans.

So while a continuation, there are also stark differences as well. The excitement is palpable and perhaps unprecedented in Jamaica. Obama-mania is expressed in Jamaica's two languages. The barber sees Obama on television and waves his clippers in the air exclaiming, "dat a my man pon di TV!"² Masons on a construction site dissect the latest news on the campaign trail: "Hillary seh what? Bwoy, dem Clinton deh wicked! But Barack nah guh bow to dat racism ting, yuzimi?"³ Intellectuals weave Greek mythology into their weekly newspaper columns: "Barack Obama's campaign [is] premised on a non-racial, non-confrontational approach: he [is] a candidate to clean

the Augean stables of Washington and to unite the people of the United States in their own best interests.” One of the few critics of the Senator is described as “off the reservation” and was deluged with angry letters about her “tawdry” article.

And sum ah tek back dem chat⁴

(Chuh!)⁵

*All sum ah dem who was racist⁶
Jumpin an dancin in di street.*

...

*Well it's no joke it's a fact
We gonna paint all di White House black
(Obama!)*

And nuff cyaan believe ah true⁷

Black come fi run di red white and blue.⁸

(Cocoa Tea, “Barack Obama”)

If Barack Obama were Jamaican, he would not be a “black” man: the offspring of a black man and a white woman is “brown” in Jamaica. Nonetheless, Jamaicans are familiar with and accede to the U.S. “one-drop rule” of racial classification. Familiar—in some cases from first-hand experience—with racism in the United States, Jamaicans are stunned that there is a serious African-American candidate for the White House, and see Senator Obama’s value in his ability to steer non-blacks away from their prejudices. Engaged in the racial struggles in the U.S.A., philosophically and/or physically for decades past, Jamaicans see Senator Obama’s ascent as a welcome vindication of the shared fight for racial pride. He will show the world that black people are “capable,” the barber assured his audience.

At the same time, however:

*Well this is not about class
Nor colour race nor creed
Make no mistake it's the changes
Weh all di people dem need⁹*

...

*So whether you come from California
(Obama!)*

*Or you live a North Dakota
(Obama!)*

*You coulda come from Texas
(Obama!)*

*Or you livin inna Florida
(Obama!)*

*Ah wan' ya join dis ya line ya!¹⁰
An lemme hear you start shout
Just shout out*

*Barack Obama, Barack Obama,
Barack Obama*

(Coco Tea, “Barack Obama”)

That is, the particular shade of black that Senator Obama would paint the White House is not the same shade as a Minister Farrakhan or a Reverend Sharpton would have painted it. And so Cocoa Tea tells us that the Senator’s symbolic importance goes beyond race to that change that he will bring to the nation. Unity is perhaps the most important kind of change that he will bring to the domestic arena. This is considered a real necessity after eight years of increasing polarisation within the U.S.A. and Washington, between those who support the current President and his neo-conservative agenda, and those who do not; and as economic inequality has intensified. Cocoa Tea assures us that the Senator will bring together all colours and classes of Floridians, Texans and Californians and the other residents of the fifty states. A unified U.S.A.



Cocoa Tea

under his leadership will have important ramifications for the quality of life of its citizens, which is important for those Jamaicans (that is, most) who have family and other connections there. Indeed, some say that the economic changes that the Senator promises are enough to encourage people to see beyond his race.

But domestic change, important as it is, is a less important aspect of Barack Obama's promise of change from the Jamaican perspective...

*Di Japanese and all di Chinyman
(Obama!)*

*Di Indian an all di Mexican
(Obama!)*

Arabs and Jews and Palestinians

Ah time fi wi join up as one.¹¹

(Cocoa Tea, "Barack Obama")

For Jamaicans, unity across borders is probably the most important change that Senator Obama promises. By extension then, this gift is not just for the United States citizen, but for everyone across the globe.

Senator Obama has made it clear that he is a proponent of dialogue with his nation's putative enemies: thus Iran and Cuba are no longer pariahs but invited to the table. Here he draws a clear line between himself and the other Democratic nominee, Senator Hillary Clinton, who has reiterated the hard-line talk of the Bush administration. Peace has been a scarcer commodity than usual over the last eight years, say Jamaicans, but it is a real possibility under President Obama. He would certainly right the situation in Iraq by withdrawing the troops, thereby saving soldiers' and Iraqis' lives. The hope is that with a more considerate approach to international affairs, the world will benefit.

Lessons to be learned for Jamaica

Senator Obama's popularity in Jamaica lies also in the fact that Jamaicans believe his ideas should be applied to their own nation. That is, politicians and the Jamaican people in general should learn from his honesty and his focus on the grassroots. The Jamaican people feel overwhelmed by corruption, violence and a deteriorating quality of life. The chance of true political accountability and people-centred development in Jamaica—issues that have been discussed for decades here—now seems more possible.

Defending Senator Obama

Support for the Senator has only grown as evidence accumulates of what is understood as a racist conspiracy against him. The U.S. media is believed to be part of the problem: columnists condemn the "media barrage" that used "Wright's fat to fry Obama" in the aftermath of the scandal involving his pastor.

Hillary Clinton, his erstwhile Democratic rival, was targeted for particular

ire: she was accused of running a dirty campaign. Even if she is not racist herself, say Jamaicans, Clinton was certainly willing to pander to others' prejudices in order to nullify him as a competitor. Worse, her single-minded desire to win the nomination led her to harm her party's chances of winning the presidency, as she provided ammunition for the Republican Party against Senator Obama. Senator Clinton's behaviour convinced those few Jamaicans who favoured her candidacy (usually on the basis of her experience and substantive policy initiatives) to change their allegiance.

While his rival was able to subtly use race to condemn him, observers say that he was unable to foreground race himself in his campaign, because of the potential for divisiveness that this issue that might engender. Jamaicans believe it unfair that Senator Clinton was able to use her unique, defining characteristic—her sex—to her advantage, while Senator Obama was unable to use his race in a similar way. This was just added evidence of the racist character of the United States, which would surely be on the mend with a successful Obama campaign.

President Obama?

But is there truly a chance of success? Jamaicans believe so, because of the country's fatigue with the succession of painful and traumatic events of the past eight years. They see that the country is desperate enough for a change that they may well be willing to vote in a black man to make that change.

However, observers point out too that even if he does win the presidency, his ultimate chance of success may be limited. Either the "system" or an assassin may stymie his attempts at change. They say that perhaps the fact of his blackness will be immaterial in the

long run, as he will simply be the figurehead of a deeply entrenched system run by the powerful white elite who will prohibit any substantive changes. Or, on a more sombre note, there is a strong possibility that he may be killed in a racist assassination plot.

But in the final analysis, let him try. Elect the man who promises that "we can," and let him try to heal his sick nation and the world because Senator Obama is "di new trendsetter" for the nation, for Jamaica, and for the globe. Even a failed presidential bid against the Republican contender will give hope, and in the final analysis, in light of the disturbing world events of the last eight years, that is what the world needs.

Notes

1. This is entirely possible, given that the song received a great deal of publicity on the cable channel CNN, and in the *Washington Post* newspaper and other influential media outlets (indeed, it was publicised more in the U.S.A. than at home, to Coco Tea's consternation).
2. "That's my man on TV!"
3. "Hillary said what? Boy, those Clintons are terrible! But Barack won't capitulate to racism, you know?"
4. "And some of them are swallowing their words."
5. Jamaican expression of irritation.
6. "Even some of the racist people."
7. "A lot of people can't believe it."
8. "Black is going to run the red white and blue."
9. "That everyone needs."
10. "I want you to join this line."
11. "It's time for us to come together."