

An Intercultural Look at Obama's Mind

Born across boundaries, the US president is a master of intercultural sensitivity, yet his intellectual detachment leads some to wonder what he believes in.

By Patrick LeMont Schmidt

Barack Obama has often been described as the ultimate compromiser, continuously seeking to work with friends and foes alike. When addressing controversial issues, he usually begins with a respectful nod toward the view he's about to reject--a line or two that suggests he understands and even sympathizes with the concerns of his opponents.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes about trying to comprehend his adversaries' beliefs through empathy; he's willing to connect to his counterpart by intentionally shifting his frame of reference. His capacity to see and feel the relativity of beliefs, to know that there is no absolute standard of "rightness", is a clear sign of intercultural sensitivity.

At the same time, this intellectualized detachment leads some to say--often cynically--that he doesn't believe in much of anything. "*No-drama Obama*", the ultimate political chameleon.

But where did he acquire his ability to empathize with others while remaining so detached?

Barack Obama was a child of many homes, the first modern president to have spent a good part of his childhood outside the United States. And not only did he live in Asia from age 6 to 10, his father was from Africa and his mother, America.

Someone who spends part of his or her developmental years outside the “passport country” is often referred to as a *third-culture kid* (TCK). And children who experience abrupt changes of culture are forced to grapple with very basic questions about identity.

Imagine yourself as a six-year old living quite happily in Hawaii, then abruptly finding yourself transplanted to Indonesia and surrounded by people you can’t even talk to. It goes way beyond what adults call culture shock!

Just when you’re coming to grips with what constitutes “normal” or “acceptable” behavior, everything is ambiguous. You’ve barely begun to define yourself as an individual entity

on this strange planet and you're already forced to redefine yourself. *The center cannot hold...*

But growing up between different worlds is also a gift, generating an “ethno-relative” mindset which usually blossoms in early adulthood. TCKs possess a high degree of social and intellectual flexibility, are quick to think outside the box and have an uncanny ability to appreciate and reconcile different points of view.

Obama's colleagues on the *Harvard Law Review* were among the first to note his exceptional skill in mediating competing points of view. (The jealous ones suggested he had a quasi-neurotic need to be liked by all sides.)

Then again, another characteristic of TCKs is detachment, sometimes perceived as being “above it all”. Nearly all of Obama's classmates described him as aloof and hard to decipher. In a sense, they're not wrong: a person who looks at all angles and listens to all sides is someone whose values and norms are forever in a state of flux.

Studies show that the primary challenge for maturing TCKs is to glean a sense of personal and cultural identity from the various

environments to which they've been exposed. "This is who I am, no matter where I am."

Obama's vivid memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, is a classic search for self-definition and the understanding of roots. Finding his identity proved to be extraordinarily difficult but, in succeeding, he became all the stronger.

In Obama's case, non-defined cultural identity wasn't the only problem. He was abandoned by his father, who returned to Kenya when his son was two years old, then separated from his "second father" in Jakarta when his mother sent him back to the to Hawaii to live with her parents when he was ten.

People who lost a parent at an early age often appear cool; they don't often show emotion. It's a coping mechanism designed to get on with life "as normal". *No-drama Obama* is the logical consequence of childhood experience.

At the same time, one can understand his need to write "*Dreams from my Father*" as a healing mechanism--a way to reconnect to his African father and that African heritage, both biological and cultural.

Because, growing up in the U.S.A., Barack Obama's life was also shaped by the color of his skin. Caught between the margins of White and Black America, he was acutely aware of the need for dialogue between the races — even in his own family. His “*Race in America*” speech from the 2008 campaign mentioned his maternal grandmother's fear of black men.

Despite everything--and because of it--he managed to forge what seems to be a perfectly-balanced dual identity. It's painfully obvious that Black and White America still don't speak the same language but Mr. Obama speaks both. More importantly, he can speak to both. And his own “self” is far beyond the simple binary equation of black and white. It is, in fact, the most stupendous example of what interculturalist Milton Bennett calls “cultural marginality” in the history of the country!

Barack Obama might smile if he were to read what I've written thus far. “Yeah, that sort of describes my mental state...” But his remarkable upbringing definitely gave him a unique feel for a nation made up of some 200 different races. The dislocated child was free to invent a new self — a strong American theme.

Empathy combined with detachment, an insider who'll always remain an outsider at heart, a modern Soloman regarding compromises...

The problem is that such people aren't generally feared. And "other-worldly wisdom" can inspire both reverence and scorn. If Barack Obama plans to go down in history as a true leader who brought about great changes, he might want to take another look at Machiavelli.

If a Prince must choose to be either feared or loved, it is better to be feared, for "love is held by a chain of obligation which (for) men, being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails."