Lost and found on fringes of First Family

by Debra_J_Saunders

When Barack Obama first met his Auntie Zeituni at an airport in Kenya in 1988, his late father's sister told him, "Welcome home," and kissed him on both cheeks. Obama was on a pilgrimage to the land where his African father lived apart from Obama's American mother.

Zeituni Onyango then told Obama's older half-sister, Auma, "Make sure he doesn't get lost again."

What does that mean? Obama asked. As he wrote in his compelling memoir, "Dreams from My Father," Onyango answered, "Don't get lost" is a common expression: "Sometimes it has a more serious meaning. Let's say a son or husband moves to the city, or to the West, like our Uncle Omar, in Boston. They promise to return after completing school. They say they'll send for the family once they get settled. At first they write once a week. Then it's just once a month. Then they stop writing completely. No one sees them again. They've been lost, you see. Even if people know where they are."

Twenty years later, a week before Obama was elected president, the London Times â€” not an American news organization; perhaps U.S. journalists were too busy scrounging for dirt on GOP running mate Sarah Palin's family â€” found Onyango living in Boston public housing in violation of a 2004 deportation order. At the time, Obama announced that he was unaware that his aunt, whose bid for political asylum was rejected, was living in America. And: "If she is violating laws, those laws have to be obeyed."

In a move perceived as preventing Onyango's deportation, the Bush administration ordered a stop to any deportations before the election without White House approval.

On Wednesday, April 1, Onyango appeared before an immigration judge who ordered a February 2010 re-hearing for her argument against deportation. As I read the Washington Post story, I had to ask: Who got lost?

Zeituni and Auma were pivotal characters in the memoir that made Obama's mark on the world. How could he not know where his aunt was living? True, his aunt was not family in the way I know family â€” people you've known since your birth or theirs. Perhaps I was guilty of amplifying the bond I saw in the book.

Indeed, Obama plainly addressed the gulf between him and his African relatives, including the seven half-siblings whom his father sired with three other wives. When he met a grandmother, she demanded cash. It was his Aunt Zeituni who then told him how relatives and friends had looked to his Harvard-educated father for handouts. "And you must learn this from life," she said. "If you have something, then everyone will want a piece of it. So you have to draw the line somewhere. If everyone is family, no one is family."

During the 2008 campaign, conservative pundits waged a satirical campaign to help support half-brother George Hussein Onyango Obama after media reports that he lived in a shack outside Nairobi on $1 per month.

Be it noted, Barack Obama owed this son of his father's fourth wife little to nothing. Obama was turned away when he tried to meet the brother about whom he had but recently learned. Obama wrote, "I took comfort in the fact that perhaps one day, when he was older, George, too, might want to know who his father had been, and who his brothers and sisters were, and that if he ever came to me, I would be there for him, to tell him the story I knew."

A White House aide confirmed that Obama is not involved in trying to influence the outcome of Zeituni Onyango's deportation case. The Associated Press reported that Onyango attended Obama's U.S. Senate swearing-in ceremony in 2004, but Obama has said he did not know that his aunt was living in Boston in 2008. The aide confirmed that Obama has not seen his aunt since the election and that he is not working for some alternative living arrangement for her. (Hint for Obama: Maybe you should ask your pal Gordon Brown to find her a safe sinecure.)

To be honest, if Obama stepped in to help his aunt, by, say, asking a friendly member of Congress to write a bill naturalizing Onyango, I would understand. Yes, he would be asking for special treatment. But why be president if you can't use the White House to help your aunt? (Unless you have too long a line of aunts.)

Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates stricter immigration control, praised the president for "not exercising undue influence" after his aunt clearly abused the system. Said Krikorian, "For him to make sure that the law is enforced, even when his relatives are involved, could raise his credibility with regard to enforcement."

That said, Krikorian would not be shocked to see a decision that allows Onyango to stay in the United States â€” without any direction from the White House. A favorite saying among immigration lawyers, he quipped, is that "it ain't over until the alien wins."

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