



## “Obamabilia” from Africa

By Mary-Jane Deeb and Pamela Howard-Reguindin

When Senator Barack Obama won the presidential election in November 2008, the Library of Congress Nairobi Office, one of six overseas offices administered by the Overseas Operations Division (OVOP), found itself in a unique position to acquire Kenyan and African “Obamabilia,” both for the Library and for several Cooperative Acquisitions Program participants who had requested African memorabilia related to this historic event. Unfortunately, on the very day when the Nairobi Office staff started collecting in earnest, the Nairobi City Council initiated a crackdown on unregulated street hawkers, driving them away. These vendors were the Nairobi Office’s main source for such local Obama memorabilia as T-shirts, *kangas* (colorful cotton clothing panels printed with portraits and inscriptions, and mostly imported from Tanzania), bracelets, window doo-dads, bumper stickers, and pins and buttons. But the defiant street merchants reappeared a few days later, and staffers Terry Ngatia and Alfred Odhiambo quickly purchased as many items as they could for transport to the United States.

While this was happening in Nairobi, staff in the African Section of the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) was likewise thinking about collecting “Obamabilia.” Inspired by the presidential memorabilia collections on view at the Smithsonian’s American History Museum, specialist Laverne Page contacted Anne J. Johnson, Information Resources Officer (IRO) at the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa inquiring whether the embassy was collecting local newspapers announcing the results of the U.S. presidential election and if it was, would she ship such items to the Library. Not only did Johnson agree, but she also e-mailed

her embassy counterparts throughout Africa suggesting that they, too, collect for the Library local newspapers featuring boldly headlined, front page news stories with photographs on the election and inauguration of the 44<sup>th</sup>

President. To coordinate what turned out to be an enthusiastic response, Stephen X. Perry, IRO at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., arranged to have the items transported directly to his office by means of diplo-



Photos by Gene Berry

Obama's election headlines the major Kenyan newspaper, the *Standard*. Established in 1902, the *Standard* is the oldest newspaper in Kenya founded in the port city of Mombasa. In 1910, the paper moved its headquarters to the capital city, Nairobi.



(left) Queen Babito, female lead of a Luo “Benga” band, one of Africa’s most dynamic music genres. President Obama’s father hailed from the prominent Luo ethnic group. On the CD cover, she wears a top fashioned from one of the popular “Obama” design kanga cloths, standing in front of a background that mixes the Kenyan and American flags under the banner of Obama’s campaign slogan, “Yes We Can.”



(right) Poster depicting the Swahili translation of “Yes We Can” along with Obama’s trademark “O” in the colors of the Kenyan flag. The poster was produced by the Kenyan–American clothing company, Jamburiwear, based in New York City.



(left) Kanga cloth panel “congratulating” Obama in Swahili. Kanga cloths originated along the Swahili Coast, which stretches from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique. The cloths come in two identical panels, one worn as a wrap and the other as a top or head tie. The style was adapted for political campaigns to advertise politicians and their slogans. While the Kanga cloth industry was created in Kenya, Tanzania has now taken the forefront in production of the inexpensive textiles.

matic pouches for delivery to AMED.

Meanwhile, the Nairobi OVOP office was also acquiring newspapers and “Obamabilia” from the twenty-nine countries in Africa in which it had bibliographic representatives. Najma Sheikh in Namibia, Purity Aggrey in Botswana, Abebe Ashenafi in Ethiopia, and Dorothy Amuso in Uganda were particularly successful in soliciting additional materials from their localities. They also purchased less typical memorabilia, including (empty) Zambian liquor bottles labeled “Obama Whiskey” and “Obama Brandy”—advertised as “the Winning Spirit.” The Nairobi Office also acquired music CDs with Obama-centric songs composed by local artists—primarily Kenyans—and including such hits as *Obama Be Thy Name*, *Yes We Can*, and *A Man of the People*, as well as others in local languages Swahili, Kamba, and Luo.

As the newspapers, photographs, and other memorabilia arrived in AMED, the African section staff advocated a special display of these acquisitions, especially as visiting patrons and others spread the word that they were arriving at the Library. Interpretive Programs Officer Jake Jacobs was contacted for advice and he arranged for an exhibit to be installed in the glass display cases in the AMED Reading Room. With the assistance of Exhibit Production Specialist David Hayward and the help of Conservator Yasmeen Khan, a display of 50 items—“Obamabilia from Africa!”—was put together in record time. A press release prominently posted on the Library’s home page attracted press national attention in the print and online media and blogosphere.

Kenyan newspapers congratulating President Obama include the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, the *East African Standard* and *The Nairobi Star*; Nigerian examples include the *Daily Trust*, *This Day*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Sun*; and others with blaring headlines and color photographs are *A Verdade* from Mozambique, *The Sowetan* from South Africa, *A Capital* from Angola,



Kenyan recording artists invoke Obama’s name after historic election.

and from Zambia, *The Star*. The majority of these newspapers titles are not routinely acquired by the Library. AMED also received digitized front pages of other African newspapers trumpeting the outcome of the election and the inauguration, including several from Cameroon. The exhibit materials showcase the pride and excitement that Barack Obama’s historic journey to the Presidency generated across the continent, but most especially in Kenya, his father’s homeland.

To date, the growing “Obamabilia” collection includes: twelve music CDs and DVDs; three posters (including one of Senator Obama and his wife being tested for HIV/AIDS on a visit to Kenya); two bumper stickers; six pins and buttons with photo images of Obama; seven *kangas* printed with images of Barack Obama and congratulatory inscriptions in English and Swahili; thirteen T-shirts with the

President’s portrait accompanied by slogans such as “Yes We Can”—*Ndiyo Tunaweza* in Swahili—or “Change We Can Believe In;” two empty beer bottles with “Senator” and “President” labels (with related print advertisements); three baseball caps embroidered with the name Obama; and two large cotton panels from Uganda emblazoned with photographic portraits of President and Mrs. Obama. “Obamabilia from Africa!” was well received by both staff and visitors and served to honor the African roots of the 44th U.S. President and the collaborative spirit in which the overseas materials were enthusiastically gathered by Library and Department of State employees, as well as OVOP bibliographic representatives.

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