

An Obama Journey: An Interview with Mark Obama Ndesandjo

by

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Kam Williams is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the world. He was voted Most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the *Disilgold Soul Literary Review* in 2008, and he is a member of the New York Film Critics Online, the NAACP Image Awards Nominating Committee and Rotten Tomatoes. He has a B.A. in Africana Studies from Cornell University, a M.A. in English from Brown University, a M.B.A. from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and a J.D. from Boston University. He lives in Princeton, NJ with his wife and son.



Mark Obama Ndesandjo (at the left) was born in Kenya in 1965 to Ruth Baker and Barack Obama, Sr., he is an accomplished musician, author, artist and businessman. Prior to settling in Shenzhen, China, he earned a B.S. in Physics from Brown University, a M.S. in Physics from Stanford University, and a M.B.A. from Emory University. A half-brother of President Obama, Mark consults worldwide, employing his considerable telecommunications, international marketing and

branding experience gained as a senior manager at Lucent, Nortel and other companies. He is also fluent in Mandarin, both as a speaker and as a writer, and he's an avid brush calligrapher, too. As an author, he has published the novel, "*Nairobi to Shenzhen*," as well as an intriguing autobiography, "*An Obama's Journey*." Musically, he's released 3 piano CDs, "*The Untimely Ones*," "*Night Moods*" and his own composition "*Reflections on William Blake*." He regularly gives piano lessons to orphans in and around the city of Shenzhen, and he was appointed Volunteer Image Ambassador and Special Olympics Image Ambassador by China. Furthermore, he founded the Mark Obama Ndesandjo Foundation, Ltd for cultural exchange, whose goal is to bring art to disadvantaged children and youth.

Kam Williams: Hi, Mark. Thanks for the interview.

Mark Obama Ndesandjo: No, I am actually very honored, and I'm glad we finally linked up. It's been months, hasn't it? [Laughs]

KW: Yeah, the 12-hour time difference can make it a little hard to connect by phone. I already know that from writing for some Asian outlets.

MON: That's right. You're truly a global person in many ways. I've read your interviews. You've touched base with so many interesting people from all over.

KW: Including your sister, Maya, who touched me at the end of my interview with her, when she said, "I won't forget you and I would love to meet you someday."

MON: That's great! The art of the interview includes understanding yourself, and if one is trying to be thoughtful, it's a way in which one can see parts of yourself that perhaps weren't so clear before. So, you have a very important tool, and I can understand what Maya meant.

KW: Did you know that I also went to Brown and lived in the Grad Towers while I was there.

MON: Omigosh! Another Thayer Street refugee. [LOL] What a small world it is, Kam.

KW: I found "An Obama's Journey" fascinating.

MON: Thank you. It was a very difficult book to write.

KW: I can imagine. It's so revealing emotionally. Plus, you had to deal with the burden of your brother's being in the public eye.

MON: I'm so glad you liked it. Writing a book, you have to reach very deep inside of yourself to share a message that will touch the readers. Otherwise, people will know, and it won't connect.

KW: Some of what you wrote about Barack, like how, for political reasons, he lied to the press about when he first met you, was very revealing.

MON: One of the focuses was just to share some of the important facts that have shaped lives in our country and in individuals in my family. Hopefully, people can take positive lessons from that, and use it to make a change or do something positive. I don't speak for Barack. I speak for myself, as you know. There are many things about him that are difficult and almost inscrutable. That's part of the mystery and also part of the reason for his success. When he said that he'd only met me for the first time a couple of years before, when he really hadn't, it was very surprising and disappointing to me, because it seemed like politics were taking precedence over family. Having been through the excesses and the extreme emotional politics of family dynamics had already made me very sensitive. But that being said, I support my brother. He's a remarkable person, and he's changed my life in many ways.

KW: I have asked for permission to interview him many times, but the White House has repeatedly declined. Should I give up at this point?

MON: I hope that you get a chance to interview him one day. It'll probably happen. So, don't worry too much about it. [LOL]

KW: What message do you think people will take away from the book? What did you hope to achieve by publishing the book?

MON: There were a few reasons why I wrote the book. One was that I wanted to tell my story myself, and not have others tell it for me. Another was tht I felt my family is nebulous in many ways. A lot of people don't understand it. It represents change which can be frightening to many people. I wanted people to know about the Obama family and where we come from, with a lineage traced back to the 17th Century. I think that's a service the country needs to know. The other thing I wanted to talk about is the experience of being mixed-race. Many Americans, and more and more people around the world are going through this globalization of race, culture and religion. And we're discovering that we don't represent just one culture, but two or three. Growing up as a mixed-race kid was a very bumpy road, and I wanted to share how that experience helped form my identity, hoping that it might serve as a lesson for the kids of the world who are closer and closer physically as well as intellectually.

KW: I found your writing intense and moving, especially that chapter about the loss of your brother, David.

MON: Thank you so much. That was a tribute to my brother. I wanted to make sure that no one forgot him. He was the closest to me in many ways. We had the same mom and the same dad. In that chapter and the one on my step-father I try to pay my respects to two remarkable people. Part of my purpose was to express the humanity of these wonderful people in my family.

KW: Well, you certainly succeeded. But you also succeeded in painting your biological father as a monster.

MON: He was tortured. For a long time, I felt that it wasn't a big deal, until I appreciated its effects on my life. For a long time, I couldn't remember anything good about my father. That was one of my reasons for writing the book. How can a child actually not remember one good thing about his father? I would really try to, Kam, but I couldn't.

KW: What inspired you to write about him anyway?

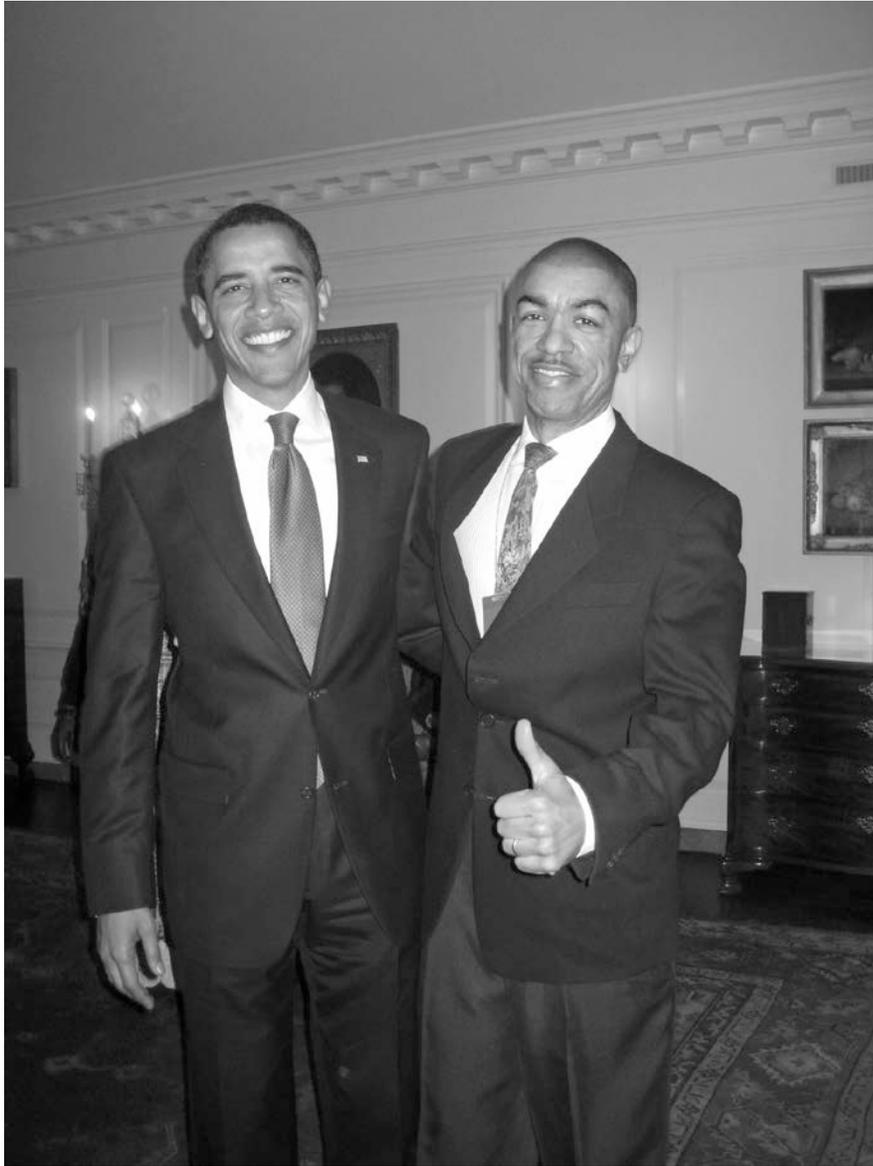
MON: The pride that Barack inspired in me about the Obama family once again. That rush of elation and that sense of being a part of something bigger than myself was unmistakable. For all of Barack's flaws and shortcomings, his ability to inspire people is amazing. Then, as I was writing, I felt like I couldn't write about a father who was so one-dimensional.

And in the process of researching more about him, I imagined his good points, I came to a sort of resolution, and I also came to understand a little bit more about myself. Still, there was something so raw about that chapter that I couldn't read it after I wrote it. It's so emotional for me, but it was something that needed to be said.

KW: You have a way with words. For instance, it was very vivid how you described Barack's smelling like cigarettes and his callousness.



Mark Obama Ndesandjo and President Barak Obama



President Barak Obama and Mark Obama Ndesandjo

MON: [Laughs] Details are important. I realize that people find it strange when I talk about my brother in physical detail. But I don't see him as the President. I see him as a brother. That's the fundamental difference in perspective between me and the vast majority of the people I interact with. When he steps off a plane, I might notice the bags under his eyes. Some people feel you shouldn't point that out about a president. You've got me going, Kam. [Laughs heartily]

KW: Cousin Leon Marquis says: I didn't even know Barack had a brother. How'd you get a name like Mark when your brother is named Barack? Did you Americanize it, like when Barack called himself Barry?

MON: When I was born, my father, being a member of the Luo tribe, wanted to give me a Luo name. He called me Okoth. But my mother, from the outset, wanted to give me a Western name, too. She took Mark from the Bible.

KW: Professor/Author Dinesh Sharma asks: Do you feel that growing up with parents from two different cultures shaped you in any important ways?

MON: I talk about this in the book. Because of the issue of domestic violence, I instinctively gravitated towards my mother and bonded with her, her values and her culture, Western culture. She was a beacon of love in a family driven by conflict. And I associated my father with negatives. My father was brilliant, but doctorates don't have currency with kids. Children look for love, but they don't really care about degrees. So, I gravitated away from African culture, and towards being alone, reading books and my music: Chopin, Beethoven and Mozart, and towards the intellectual giants. I love Western culture in many, many ways. These cultural conflicts and also these cultural joys sustained me and kept me going in Africa for a long time.

KW: Were you raised by your mother to appreciate your Jewish heritage?

MON: Yes, I was always very proud of being Jewish. She and my maternal grandmother, who emigrated to America from Lithuania, were the ones who helped me with that by exposing me to music and intellectuals I really admired like Einstein. My grandmother would come to Kenya to visit us. I remember sitting on the bed with her, leafing through the Torah, even though I didn't understand the characters. She'd be explaining the meaning of the characters, like "God," in Yiddish, but she could only pronounce them in Hebrew. She was also very musical, and helped me learn piano. Although my mother was secular, she took me to a synagogue when I was very, very young. I remember the warmth of the congregation. They didn't care about my skin color or where I was from. As long as I had a yarmulke on my head, I was fine. I considered Judaism as sort of a glue, like a 4th or 5th dimension, which cut across all of these cultures.

KW: In terms of your journey of self-discovery, do you feel that living in three cultures, Africa, America and China, has made you a better person?

MON: Yes, because I've been able to take some of the good things from each of the cultures and tried to mold them into one. The process takes years, but you eventually develop a unique identity that has Chinese, Kenyan and American aspects. It's a process of self-discovery.

KW: Dinesh also says: I have suggested in my book, "Barack Obama in Hawaii and Indonesia" that not having a live-in biological father made Barack a bigger person? Do you agree?

MON: Sort of. Having a very good, strong single-mom can make up for a lot. I think the absence of a father helped Barack, because it gave him the freedom to seek heroes. He could imagine what an ideal father would be, and his mother would support that, because mothers don't want their children to be unhappy. They want them to think of their absent fathers as special people. And I speculate that that's probably what happened with Barack.

KW: Do you think Barack has grown in the presidency, and do you think he will be regarded as important beyond being the first black president?

MON: I think my brother is America's first global president in more ways than one. Two huge things, the financial crisis and healthcare were addressed on his watch.

KW: When you first met him many years ago in Kenya, he was a different person, searching for his roots? How do you think he has developed as a person from then and now? How do you think he has evolved over time?

MON: When I first met Barack, we were both pretty arrogant. I was going to Stanford, he was at Harvard, and we both thought we were brilliant. I was shocked to learn that there was someone smarter than I in my family. I think he's mellowed a lot since then, but he's also distanced himself from Kenya and his Kenyan family as President. That's quite different from the way he was 20-odd years ago. He's a master of politics, and the challenge he's facing is how to reconcile character and personality, and family and politics without turning them into a political instrument.

KW: Sangeetha Subramanian asks: For people traveling to a new country, what are some key tips on being respectful and for learning a local culture's etiquette?

MON: I love this question. There are two things I've learned from my experiences. First, take an active and passionate interest in the culture, whether the traditional culture or otherwise, maybe in the arts. Second, develop an emotional connection by trying to give back to the people in the culture. When I came to China, I wanted to connect with the orphans here. I've been teaching them to play piano for 14 years now. It's amazing how that can give you an emotional connection with a country. I believe those two things are fundamental.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: What drew you to live in China? In other words, what do you love the most about the Chinese culture?

MON: Two things. Learning to read and write Chinese opens a window to an amazing past with multiple layers of meaning. It's not enough to be able to speak Chinese. Second, the ability of foreigners to come here and lose themselves.

KW: Patricia would also like to know a little about your foundation.

MON: MarkObamaNdesandjo.com/ is an outgrowth of activities I've been doing for some time. The foundation is based on the cultural exchange concept. The idea is to bring arts to children and disadvantaged kids around the world. My vision is not only to bring pianos but piano teachers to hundreds of schools all over the world.

KW: Editor Lisa Loving asks: Do you worry about the safety of the First Family? They seem so nice and I suspect Obama receives more death threats than any other president did.

MON: That fear was one thing that helped me reconnect with my brother after we'd been separated for over 15 years.

KW: Editor Robin Beckham asks: How would you describe your relationship with Barack now?

MON: I've been pretty open and candid in the book about my past experiences with my brother. But out of respect for his feelings and privacy, I've decided not to comment any further about our relationship. All I can say is: how could anybody take a job that gives you so many white hairs?

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles asks: What is the significance of being Barak Obama's brother, given that you didn't know one another growing up?

MON: The significance is that he enabled me to expand my vision. The path I've followed probably would've been the same if he hadn't become President, but it 's definitely been amplified.

KW: Environmental activist Grace Sinden asks: What has been the most important effect on you and your family of having Barack Obama as President? Has it brought you more privileges and/or attention than you would normally otherwise have received?

MON: Yes it has, but it has forced me and the other members of the family to reflect very deeply on who we are and on what we want in our lives. The tension and the focus has left us no choice but to think about what we want to be and what we're going to do about it.

KW: You have an extraordinary background in humanitarian work and in the arts and sciences. How do you connect these accomplishments with the also extraordinary, but different, arc of your brother, Barack?

MON: They say fathers and sons have a unique relationship. Sons either achieve their fathers' dreams or correct their mistakes. I believe Barack has been achieving our father's dreams while I have been trying to correct some of his mistakes.

KW: Interesting. In your wildest dreams, did you ever think your brother could be where he is today? If so, at what stage in his life and what characteristic in particular made you feel this was at least possible?

MON: When I was at Stanford, I heard he was campaigning for Bobby Rush's seat in Congress. At that time, I sensed that he was going to do something in politics, but how far he was going to succeed, I did not know.

KW: Being President of the U.S., especially recently, has not been a bed of roses. Do you feel the emotional ups-and-downs in accordance with his triumphs and troubles?

MON: We're not twins. [Chuckles] During the first few months of his presidency, I was with him every step of the way. Then I was a little depressed after realizing that we had separate lives and that Barack didn't really need me. But that also freed me to see him from a distance and to evaluate him more objectively. And part of the result are the books that I wrote.

KW: Marcia Evans asks: Why are you pushing to have a relationship with Barack when it's evident that he would prefer not to have one?

MON: [LOL] I'm not sure I'd agree with your premise, Marcia. At times, Barack has reached out to me. Other times, we've been separated by distance. Barack and I are brothers, and we're tethered together by fates well beyond our control. I know a little bit more about relationships in our family than people who are not Obamas. But thanks for the question.

KW: Marcia also asks: Wasn't your father just a product of his environment in Africa where men can have more than one woman, if they so choose? How would that part of your book help American and European readers, when we have a different culture?

MON: Sometimes, it's a little more complicated than just having more wives. There were a number of issues in my father's case that led him to turn out the way he did: childhood abuse, alcohol, domestic abuse. I wrote about them in the book. It's not fair to lump him into a category suggesting he's simply representative of a certain culture.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Mark, and best of luck with the book.

MON: Thank you, Kam, and keep up the great work you're doing.



Mark Obama Ndesandjo