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A PORTRAIT OF CHANGE

In First Family, a Nation's Many Faces

By JODI KANTOR

WASHINGTON — The president's elderly stepgrandmother brought him an oxtail fly whisk, a mark of power at home in Kenya. Cousins journeyed from the South Carolina town where the first lady's great-great-grandfather was born into slavery, while the rabbi in the family came from the synagogue where he had been commemorating Martin Luther King's Birthday. The president and first lady's siblings were there, too, of course: his Indonesian-American half-sister, who brought her Chinese-Canadian husband, and her brother, a black man with a white wife.

When President Barack Obama was sworn in on Tuesday, he was surrounded by an extended clan that would have shocked past generations of Americans and instantly redrew the image of a first family for future ones.

As they convened to take their family's final step in its journey from Africa and into the White House, the group seemed as if it had stepped out of the pages of Mr. Obama's memoir — no longer the disparate kin of a young man wondering how he fit in, but the embodiment of a new president's promise of change.

For well over two centuries, the United States has been vastly more diverse than its ruling families. Now the Obama family has flipped that around, with a Technicolor cast that looks almost nothing like their overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly Protestant predecessors in the role. The family that produced Barack and Michelle Obama is black and white and Asian, Christian, Muslim and Jewish. They speak English; Indonesian; French; Cantonese; German; Hebrew; African languages including Swahili, Luo and Igbo; and even a few phrases of Gullah, the Creole dialect of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Very few are wealthy, and some — like Sarah Obama, the stepgrandmother who only recently got electricity and running water in her metal-roofed shack — are quite poor.

"Our family is new in terms of the White House, but I don't think it's new in terms of the country," Maya Soetoro-Ng, the president's younger half-sister, said last week. "I don't think the White House has always reflected the textures and flavors of this country."

Though the world is recognizing the inauguration of the first African-American president, the story is a more complex narrative, about immigration, social mobility and the desegregation of one of the last divided institutions in American life: the family. It is a tale of self-determination, full of refusals to follow the tracks laid by history or religion or parentage.

Mr. Obama follows the second President Bush, who had a presidential son's self-assured grip on power. Aside from a top-quality education, the new president came to politics with none of his predecessor's advantages: no famous last name, no deep-pocketed parents to finance early forays into politics and, in fact, not much of a father at all. So Mr. Obama built his political career from scratch, with best-selling books and long-shot runs for office, leaving his relatives astonished at where he has brought them.

"It is so mind-boggling that there is a black president," Craig Robinson, Mrs. Obama's brother, said in an interview. "Then you layer on top of it that I am related to him? And then you layer on top of that that it's my brother-in-law? That is so overwhelming, I can't hardly think about it."

Though Mr. Obama is the son of a black Kenyan, he has some conventionally presidential roots on his white mother's side: abolitionists who, according to family legend, were chased out of Missouri, a slave state; Midwesterners who weathered the Depression; even a handful of distant ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War. (Ever since he became a United States senator, the Sons of the American Revolution has tried to recruit him.)

But far less has been known about Mrs. Obama's roots — even by the first lady herself. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago, "it was sort of passed-down folklore that so-and-so was related to so-and-so and their mother and father was a slave," Mr. Robinson said.

Drawing on old census data, family records and interviews, it is clear that Mrs. Obama is indeed the descendant of slaves and a daughter of the Great Migration, the mass movement of African-Americans northward in the first half of the 20th century in search of opportunity. Mrs. Obama's family found it, but not without outsize measures of adversity and disappointment along the way.

Tracing Family Roots

Only five generations ago, the first lady's great-great-grandfather, Jim Robinson, was born a slave on Friendfield Plantation in Georgetown, S.C., where he almost certainly drained swamps, harvested rice and was buried in an unmarked grave. As a child, Mrs. Obama used to visit her Georgetown relatives, but she only learned during the campaign that her forebears had been enslaved in the same town where she and her cousins had played.

According to Megan Smolenyak, a genealogist who has uncovered the roots of many political figures, Mrs. Obama has ancestors with similar backgrounds across the South. The public records they left behind give only the briefest glimpses of their lives: Fanny Laws Humphrey, one of Mrs. Obama's great-great-grandmothers, was a cook in Birmingham, Ala., born before the end of the Civil War. Another set of great-great-grandparents, Mary and Nelson Moten, seem to have left Kentucky for Chicago in the early 1860s, a hint they might have been free before the end of the Civil War. And in 1910, some of Mrs. Obama's ancestors are listed in a census as mulatto, adding some support to family whispers of a white ancestor.

The jobs that her relatives held in the early 20th century — domestic servant, coal sorter, dressmaker — suggest an escape from sharecropping, the system that trapped many former slaves

and their children in penury for generations.

Still, the family's progress has a two steps forward, one step back quality. Jim Robinson was born into slavery, but his son, Fraser, ran a lunch truck in Georgetown. In turn, his son, Fraser Jr., struck out for Chicago in search of something better. But he was unable to find work, and left his wife and children for 14 years, according to his son Nomenee Robinson. As a result, Mrs. Obama's father was on welfare as a boy and started working on a milk truck at 11.

After serving in the Army in World War II and finally securing a job as a postal clerk, Fraser Robinson Jr. rejoined his family. He was so thrifty that he would bring home chemicals to do the family dry cleaning in the bathtub. But his son — Mrs. Obama's father, Fraser Robinson III — became overwhelmed with debt and dropped out of college after a year. He worked in a city boiler room for the rest of his life, helping to send his four younger siblings to college, then his two children, Mrs. Obama and her brother, to Princeton.

Classroom Values

For all of the vast differences in the Obama and Robinson histories, a few common threads run through. Education is one of them. As a young man, Mr. Obama's father herded goats, then won a scholarship to study in the Kenyan capital. When Mr. Obama lived in Indonesia as a child, his mother woke him up for at 4 a.m. for English lessons; meanwhile, in Chicago, Mrs. Obama's mother was bringing home math and reading workbooks so her children would always be a few lessons ahead in school.

Only through education, generations of Robinsons taught their children, would they ever succeed in a racist society, relatives said. "My mother would say, 'When you acquire knowledge, you acquire something no one could take away from you,' " Craig Robinson said.

The families also share a kind of adventurous self-determination. In the standard telling, the Obama side is the one that bent the rules of geography and ethnicity. Yet the first lady's family, the supposed South Side traditionalists, includes several members who literally or figuratively ventured far from home. Nomenee Robinson was an early participant in the Peace Corps, serving in India for two years; later, he moved to Nigeria, where he met his wife; the couple now live in Chicago. Capers Funnye Jr., a cousin of Mrs. Obama's and a rabbi, was brought up in the black church, he said, but as a young man, he felt a calling to Judaism he could not ignore.

In daring cross-cultural leaps, no figure quite matches Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro, Mr. Obama's mother. As a university student in Honolulu, she hung out at the East-West Center, a cultural exchange organization, meeting two successive husbands there: Barack Obama, an economics student from Kenya, and later, Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian. Decades later, her daughter Maya Soetoro was picking up fliers at the same East-West Center when she noticed Konrad Ng, a Chinese-Canadian student, now her husband.

Now the Obama-Robinson family's move to the White House seems like a symbolic end point for the once-firm idea that people of different backgrounds should not date, marry or bear children. In Mr.

Obama's lifetime, racial intermarriage not only became legal everywhere in the United States, but has started to flourish. As many as a quarter of white Americans and nearly half of black Americans belong to a multiracial family, estimates Joshua R. Goldstein of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.

Diversity inside families, said Michael J. Rosenfeld, a sociologist at Stanford University, is "the most interesting kind of diversity there is, because it brings people together cheek by jowl in a way that they never were before."

"There's nothing as powerful as family relationships," Mr. Rosenfeld said, "and that's why interracial marriage was illegal for so long in the U.S."

Initially, some of the unions in the Obama family caused consternation. "What can you say when your son announces he's going to marry a Mzungu?" said Sarah Obama in an interview, using the Swahili term for "white person." But it was too late, she said, because the couple was deeply in love.

Now, the relatives say, their family feels natural and right to them, that they think of each other as individuals, not as members of groups. Ms. Soetoro-Ng said she was not "the Indonesian sister," but just Maya.

A Special Reunion

On Monday, some of Mr. Obama's Kenyan relatives milled around the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel here, their colorful headscarves earning them more curious glances than even the sports and pop music stars in the room. Zeituni Onyango, the president's aunt, explained that their family had always been able to absorb newcomers.

Pointing out that her male relatives used to take on multiple wives, she said, "My daddy said anyone coming into my family is my family." (Ms. Onyango, who lives in Boston, recently faced deportation charges, but those orders have been stayed and she is pursuing a green card.)

At holidays and celebrations, "you get a whole lot of people who are happy to be around family," Craig Robinson said. "They happen to be from different cultures, but the common thing is that they are all family."

"Like the inauguration, those celebrations draw on a happy mishmash of traditions and histories. Take the Obamas' 1992 wedding, which included Kenyan family in traditional dress, a cloth-binding ceremony in which the bride and groom's hands were symbolically tied, and blues, jazz and classical music at the reception (held at a cultural center that was once a country club where black and Jewish Chicagoans were denied admission).

White House events may now take on some of the same feel. Four years ago, when the family descended on Washington for Mr. Obama's Senate swearing-in, Mr. Ng strolled over to the White House gates and took a picture of his then-infant daughter, Suhaila — "gentle" in Swahili — sleeping in her stroller.

Days before leaving Hawaii for the inauguration, Mr. Ng stared at the picture and wondered how much had changed since it was taken. After Tuesday's ceremony, he said, "folks like me will have a chance to be on the other side."

Jeffrey Gettleman contributed reporting from Kenya. Kitty Bennett contributed research.