

Sometimes *I*, Sometimes *Me*: A Study on the Use of Autobiographical Memories in Two Political Speeches by Barack Obama

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Abstract. Personalization being a major change in contemporary democratic persuasive endeavor, the paper is based on the general idea that leaders may sound more persuasive by using self-disclosure communications. The study presented is a first tentative to explore how Obama might profit from his references to his own life story to enhance intergroup reconciliation processes, when speaking officially to leaders of other countries. The in-depth multimodal analyses of the opening parts of two important political speeches (in Accra on July 11 2009, and in Jakarta on November 10 2010) allow to detect Obama’s different uses of autobiographical memories, sometimes linked to personal aspects and some other times more focused on social and historical aspects, without conveying any self-exposure intent. Consequences for further studies as well as for the need of a more complex concept of personalization are discussed.

Keywords: personalization, political speech, Obama, autobiographical memories, intergroup reconciliation.

1 Personalization as a Major Change in Democratic Persuasive Endeavour

Personalization, i.e. the phenomenon of leaders’ profiles eclipsing those of their respective parties, has been singled out as one major change in recent democratic politics [1], [2]. According to many scholars, this growing importance of leaders in politics may be traced to Thatcher’s and Reagan’s election times (1979, 1980), or even to Trudeau’s election times (1968). Moreover, this observation is of a common trend in modern democracies, regardless of whether these democracies are based on a presidential or parliamentary system ([3]; for a review and discussion, see [4]). I propose to set apart, in this trend, the case of Berlusconi and its influence on Italian politics, since here personalization seemed to signal not only a change in democratic politics but also a worrying weakness of political parties -- due to the very long and difficult building of Italian democratic institutions after the end of the Fascist regime, and to the current transition to a new kind of organization of the Italian Republic [5].

Setting aside the case of Italy, the trend of personalization is nonetheless not generally seen by scholars as a threat to the basic democratic system of checks and balances [4].

One reason which was proposed to explain this widespread trend is linked to the growing influence of media for political communication, especially during national elections [6], [7]. According to this explanation, party leaders and their communication experts have used new possibilities for exposure of leaders' images and speeches, offered in the Fifties by the spread of television [8], [9] and now by the internet and by innovative media, as powerful tools to reach voters, especially the younger and more cultivated ones. Nevertheless, it is clear that no single explanation can account for this phenomenon. On the contrary, it touches on multiple levels of explanation, such as – to quote only a few -- the many facets of political communication [10], the different designs of democratic institutions and of their electoral processes [3], the decline of parties in the minds of citizens [11], the illusion of intimacy and the new visibility of leaders due to advances in communication technologies [12], and the impact of mass media on the de-politicization of personal experience [13].

In this paper, I will consider how this phenomenon has changed the democratic persuasive struggle. In fact, due to the contemporary media's capacity "to convey close-up images, individuals could scrutinize their leaders' actions and utterances – their facial expressions, personal appearance, mannerisms and body language among other things – with the kind of close attention once reserved for those with whom one shared an intimate personal relationship" [14]. In these pages, I discuss the idea that, in this new communicative environment, leaders may sound more persuasive by using self-disclosure communications, making them appear authentic in the sphere of their new personal visibility. Using this kind of communications, moreover, leaders may be seen as signalling their sincerity, overtly talking of episodes they could easily have kept silent, and so conveying a more general impression of "credibility" and "trustworthiness", as well as their communicative intention to assume a non-hierarchical but equal position in relation to their audience.

On the other hand, it is important to stress that these persuasive moves are risky too, since they require the avoidance of any impression of manipulating the audience's sympathy, as well as any other effect that could impair the aura that continues to distinguish leaders even as they try to present themselves as "one of us".

In particular, my general aim is to discuss how autobiographical recalls, one of the more powerful communicative moves for inducing a sense of intimacy in face-to-face conversations [15], are used by a prominent leader of today, Barack Obama, in his political speech-making.

2 The Importance of His Own Autobiography in Obama's Political Speech

As we all know, Obama's mother, Stanley "Ann" Dunham, was of European-American descent, a white woman originally from Wichita, Kansas. During his childhood he was raised by both his mother and maternal grandparents firstly in Indonesia and then in Hawaii. He has black-African siblings and an Asian sister, from

his mother's second marriage to an Indonesian man. In Obama's case, then, his autobiography may be called, like many others in our times, an "ethnic" autobiography, i.e. a living illustration of that multifaceted concept of the self that serves as a basis for our contemporary "wider social ethos of pluralism" [16]. In this sense, many articles and books have set out to explore Obama's ability, in his political communication, to articulate his own autobiographical memories, describing his self as "occupying liminal spaces" [17]. There is no doubt, in fact, that this capacity of autobiographical recall referring to a constitutive interracial intimacy [18] was not only integral to his success on the campaign trail, but is also one of the keys to appreciating the novelty of his presidential stance. Due to his personal life story, the latter appears to be strikingly innovative, making his power particularly close to younger generations. In fact, "Obama has much more in common with 18 to 29 year olds, a group I call the First Global Citizens...Having roots in Kenya, lived in Indonesia and raised in poly-ethnic Hawaii, Obama's background makes him more of a world citizen than perhaps any other president" [19].

With the study presented here I would like to delve into a less-explored aspect of this political influence of President Obama as representative of a new generation of First Global Citizens. Apart from questions about his use of autobiographical memories as a way to convince and gain power amid his competitors in the internal struggle for leadership, I would like to explore how he might profit from his references to his own life story to enhance intergroup reconciliation processes, when speaking officially to leaders of other countries. To the best of my knowledge, up to now little scientific effort (see, for instance, [20]) has been made to transfer considerations advanced about the highly intelligent use of autobiographical recall in Obama's speeches to the growing field of studies exploring intergroup reconciliation processes. These studies have received increasing attention since the change of *zeitgeist* in the world's political openness to possibilities for peace, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decline of a world politics based on the reciprocal threat of two opposing power blocks [21]. Referring to this new theoretical framework, proposed by social and psychological studies on intergroup reconciliation, in these pages I would like to examine whether the way in which Obama proposes his autobiographical recalls during difficult international political speeches may be seen not only as an "identity message" to gain credibility as a new kind of leader in a new globalized world, but also as a resource to enhance ongoing international reconciliation processes.

3 An Exploratory Study on Two of Obama's Political Speeches: Aims and Methodology

To explore how autobiographical recall are used by President Obama as a persuasive strategy to enhance international reconciliation processes, in the next pages I will consider more in depth the case of two important speeches by this leader, perhaps one of the finest political rhetoricians of our time. More in particular, I will distinguish between two different ways in which he uses personal recalls. The first way refers to the recall of social dimensions that historically shaped his own life; the second way

refers instead to the recalling of a personal aspect of his autobiographical past. After an analytical description of the way in which these autobiographical memories are recalled – considering not only the words used, but also aspects of body language and the reactions of audiences to which these recalls were addressed – I will discuss why different autobiographical recalls were required to empower the persuasive aims directed towards a firmer international reconciliation, which in my opinion are expressed by each speech. Finally, I will propose some speculative conclusions on how more studies conducted on this same line of distinction between these two uses of autobiographical recall in Obama’s political speeches could eventually help us to refine the concept of the personalization of politics when applied to speeches of leaders of well-consolidated democratic systems.

4 “I Have the Blood of Africa within Me”: The Speech in Accra to African Leaders

On July 11, 2009, Barack Obama flew from the G8 summit in Italy to Accra, the capital of Ghana in West Africa, for his first visit to Sub-Saharan Africa since becoming President. The speech that we analyze was addressed to African leaders and attracted an audience of over 175 participants from the African Union Commission, AU organs like the Peace and Security Council, and African civil society organizations and NGOs. Attendees demonstrated a keen level of interest during the President’s remarks, which lasted approximately half an hour. My analysis will address approximately 4 minutes¹, when Obama, immediately after thanking his hosts for their warm welcome and presenting the main aims of his visit to Accra, recollected his autobiographical memories. In this part of his speech he intertwined his autobiographical memories with the issue at stake of his persuasive message, i.e. the need to accept the mutual responsibility on which relationships between Africa and USA have to be built.

The text of this passage of the speech was the following:

“(…) So I do not see the countries and peoples of Africa as a world apart; I see Africa as a fundamental part of our interconnected world – as partners with America on behalf of the future that we want for all our children. That partnership must be grounded in mutual responsibility, and that is what I want to speak with you about today.

We must start from the simple premise that Africa’s future is up to Africans. I say this knowing full well the tragic past that has sometimes haunted this part of the world. After all, I have the blood of Africa within me, and my family’s -- (ap-
plause) -- my family’s own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story.

¹ The video can be seen at the youtube address <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkNpUEWlhd4&feature=related>

Some of you know my grandfather was a cook for the British in Kenya, and though he was a respected elder in his village, his employers called him "boy" for much of his life. He was on the periphery of Kenya's liberation struggles, but he was still imprisoned briefly during repressive times. In his life, colonialism wasn't simply the creation of unnatural borders or unfair terms of trade -- it was something experienced personally, day after day, year after year.

My father grew up herding goats in a tiny village, an impossible distance away from the American universities where he would come to get an education. He came of age at a moment of extraordinary promise for Africa. The struggles of his own father's generation were giving birth to new nations, beginning right here in Ghana. (Applause.) Africans were educating and asserting themselves in new ways, and history was on the move.

But despite the progress that has been made – and there has been considerable progress in many parts of Africa – we also know that much of that promise has yet to be fulfilled. Countries like Kenya had a per capita economy larger than South Korea's when I was born. They have badly been outpaced. Disease and conflict have ravaged parts of the African continent. In many places, the hope of my father's generation gave way to cynicism, even despair.

Now, it's easy to point fingers and to pin the blame of these problems on others. Yes, a colonial map that made little sense helped to breed conflict. The West has often approached Africa as a patron or a source of resources rather than a partner.

But the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants. In my father's life, it was partly tribalism and patronage and nepotism in an independent Kenya that for a long stretch derailed his career, and we know that this kind of corruption is still a daily fact of life for far too many.”

In these four minutes of speech, Barack Obama used his memories as a crucial element for achieving the aim of clarifying the link between acceptance of Western responsibilities on the one hand, and declaration of African responsibilities for Africa's future on the other hand.

If analysis of the words used indicates the contents of this persuasive message, the analysis of gestures, gaze and head and body position leads to valuable insights on the way in which these contents are mastered in the overall self-presentation that Obama offers his audience. Frequent hand gestures are used, to attract attention or to accompany discourse with batonic gestures.

Apart from these gestures that parallel the words, Obama's postural characteristics seem very interesting. The head is up, the chin raised, especially during pauses, when he checks for feedbacks from his audience, and slowly turns around his gaze. Interestingly, during memory recollections no overt signals of emotions are shown – indeed, if not an accentuation of Obama's proud posture. He slightly smiles only when pronouncing the word “history” and shows a slight movement of disgust (only with his mouth) when remembering his grandfather's short detention in jail. More overt

signals of emotion and uneasiness are expressed just before mentioning the African problem of child soldiers: here, eyebrows are raised, and body and hands are moved as if to declare, “I’m sorry, but it sounds like an obvious remark”.

If we consider the memory contents presented during this part of Obama speech, we observe that, according to [22], [23], Obama uses his family memories to remind to his audience of the common ground of protective factors that granted to his family, as well to the other families living through that phase of African history, a possibility of resilience in the face of life’s difficulties: protective factors in action from the older generations down to the younger. This resilience of his own family is recalled, at the same moment in which he presents to his audience the need to face the fact that their present-day difficulties cannot be attributed *in toto* to yesterday’s Western wrongdoings.

While the speech contents remind his audience of African resilience and achievements, making it possible that “Africans were educating and asserting themselves in new ways”, Obama’s posture shows the proud attitude of the pariah that, fully aware of the social exclusion of his group of birth, does not hide its origins, as other members of his group do, choosing a parvenu attitude [24]. This proud attitude is observed during all of the family memories recall, referring to three generations. Recalling his grandfather, Obama focuses on humiliations this old man had to suffer – called “boy” by his employers, briefly imprisoned in repressive times. Being a self-conscious emotion [25], humiliation is one of the emotions possible only to humans, while others (e.g. fear or anger) are shared with animals. Remembering an experience of suffering as a humiliation, therefore, implicitly stresses the humanity of the one suffering, in contrast to the dehumanization of colonized people implicit in colonial attitudes [26].

Recalling his father, Obama shifts his attention from the emotions of a “lived History” [23] – that made colonialism, in his grandfather’s life, “something experienced personally, day after day, year after year” – to the practical problems slowing down the strategy of self-empowerment of his father generation: the “impossible” distance away from educational resources, the damages to his career due to “tribalism and patronage and nepotism”. Finally, presenting himself as a living example of a son of these two African generations, Obama does not speak about himself or his personal reactions, only expressing himself by his bodily attitude of pride and gratitude.

Obama’s multigenerational remembering of violence suffered by his family – presented as a story that “encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story” -- highlights, in short, a passage from the sufferings lived by his grandparents’ generation down to the full awareness of the grandchildren’s generation of facts derailing the history of their in-group [27].

Using a smart persuasive strategy, Obama links the social sharing of his family memories with the reconciliation processes still on-going between the Western group – which he is now representing as the President of the USA – and the African group.

On the one hand, the shifting of the memories from the emotional sufferings of the older generations to the self-empowering strategies of succeeding generations, and finally to the younger generations’ awareness of the historical facts of their in-group, is a clear example of marginalization of the enemy’s image from the core of self-description, as in [28] operative definition of the concept of reconciliation.

On the other hand, the contents reminding African leaders of their responsibilities to stop the political corruption still characterizing the administration of African nations appear to be closely linked to theoretical expectations expressed by the need-based model for intergroup reconciliation of [29] According to this model, in order to be successful reconciliation processes have to fulfil the different needs of both perpetrators and victims. Perpetrators need social acceptance, avoiding exclusion due to their moral indignity. Victims need empowerment to regain control of their lives, which they lost when suffering violence perpetrated by the other group. Drawing attention to past and current shortcomings of African political administrations of newly independent nations, Obama implicitly fosters his audience of African leaders to go further, from the regained control of their lives due to the end of colonial domination to the acceptance of their personal and social responsibilities for present-day in-group situations.

In accordance with the difficulty of this persuasive aim, the audience reacted to these autobiographical memories with rapt and silent attention. People nodded without applauding at the recall of Obama's family difficulties, especially when referring to his father's difficulties due to political corruption. They nodded also, sometimes moving their gaze away from the President, when he mentioned the serious responsibilities of African leaderships for current problems, first of all children used as soldiers.

5 "Satay! I Remember That. Baso!" The Speech at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta

President Obama gave this second speech on November 10th 2010, from 9.30 to 10.31 am, at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. This speech is considered to be a follow-up to the speech he gave in Cairo, Egypt in 2009, in terms of outreach to the Muslim world.

He spoke to a packed crowd estimated at 6,500 in the indoor stadium at the university, many of them young, greeting them with "*Assalamualaikum dan salam sejahtera*" (an Indonesian expression of greeting). As in the Accra speech, he recalled his autobiographical memories only at the opening of his speech. This time, however, he recalled not only family memories, but intertwined the first part of his speech with a series of personal memories of his childhood in Indonesia, where he spent about four years as a boy. The part of the speech² that we analyze concerns these first recalls, and lasts approximately 9 minutes.

The text of the speech is the following:

"Let me begin with a simple statement: *Indonesia bagian dari diri saya*³. (Applause.) I first came to this country when my mother married an Indonesian

² The video can be seen at the you tube addresses: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1zVVgs_0AE&feature=relmfu and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjVbn79HqfI&NR=1&feature=endscreen>

³ (Indonesia is a part of me. My translation).

named Lolo Soetoro. And as a young boy I was -- as a young boy I was coming to a different world. But the people of Indonesia quickly made me feel at home. Jakarta -- now, Jakarta looked very different in those days. The city was filled with buildings that were no more than a few story tall. This was back in 1967, '68 -- most of you weren't born yet. (He smiles, laughter among the audience.) The Hotel Indonesia was one of the few high rises, and there was just one big department store called Sarinah. That was it. (Applause.) *Betchaks* and *bemos*, that's how you got around. They outnumbered automobiles in those days. And you didn't have all the big highways that you have today. Most of them gave way to unpaved roads and the *kampongs*.

So we moved to Menteng Dalam, where -- (applause) -- hey, some folks from Menteng Dalam right here. (Applause.) And we lived in a small house. We had a mango tree out front. And I learned to love Indonesia while flying kites and running along the paddy fields and catching dragonflies, buying satay and baso from the street vendors. (Applause.) I still remember the call of the vendors. *Satay!* (He smiles, laughter among the audience.) I remember that. *Baso!* (He smiles, laughter among the audience.) But most of all, I remember the people -- the old men and women who welcomed us with smiles; the children who made a foreign child feel like a neighbour and a friend; and the teachers who helped me learn about this country.

Because Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands, and hundreds of languages, and people from scores of regions and ethnic groups, my time here helped me appreciate the common humanity of all people. And while my stepfather, like most Indonesians, was raised a Muslim, he firmly believed that all religions were worthy of respect. And in this way -- (applause) -- in this way he reflected the spirit of religious tolerance that is enshrined in Indonesia's Constitution, and that remains one of this country's defining and inspiring characteristics. (Applause.)

Now, I stayed here for four years -- a time that helped shape my childhood; a time that saw the birth of my wonderful sister, Maya; a time that made such an impression on my mother that she kept returning to Indonesia over the next 20 years to live and to work and to travel -- and to pursue her passion of promoting opportunity in Indonesia's villages, especially opportunity for women and for girls. And I was so honoured -- (applause) -- I was so honoured when President Yudhoyono last night at the state dinner presented an award on behalf of my mother, recognizing the work that she did. And she would have been so proud, because my mother held Indonesia and its people very close to her heart for her entire life. (Applause.)

So much has changed in the four decades since I boarded a plane to move back to Hawaii. If you asked me -- or any of my schoolmates who knew me back then -- I don't think any of us could have anticipated that one day I would come back to Jakarta as the President of the United States. (Applause.) And few could have anticipated the remarkable story of Indonesia over these last four decades.

The Jakarta that I once knew has grown into a teeming city of nearly 10 million, with skyscrapers that dwarf the Hotel Indonesia, and thriving centres of

culture and of commerce. While my Indonesian friends and I used to run in fields with water buffalo and goats -- (laughter) -- a new generation of Indonesians is among the most wired in the world -- connected through cell phones and social networks. And while Indonesia as a young nation focused inward, a growing Indonesia now plays a key role in the Asia Pacific and in the global economy. (Applause.)

Now, this change also extends to politics. When my stepfather was a boy, he watched his own father and older brother leave home to fight and die in the struggle for Indonesian independence. And I'm happy to be here on Heroes Day to honour the memory of so many Indonesians who have sacrificed on behalf of this great country. (Applause.)

When I moved to Jakarta, it was 1967, and it was a time that had followed great suffering and conflict in parts of this country. And even though my stepfather had served in the Army, the violence and killing during that time of political upheaval was largely unknown to me because it was unspoken by my Indonesian family and friends. In my household, like so many others across Indonesia, the memories of that time were an invisible presence. Indonesians had their independence, but oftentimes they were afraid to speak their minds about issues.

In the years since then, Indonesia has charted its own course through an extraordinary democratic transformation -- from the rule of an iron fist to the rule of the people. In recent years, the world has watched with hope and admiration as Indonesians embraced the peaceful transfer of power and the direct election of leaders. And just as your democracy is symbolized by your elected President and legislature, your democracy is sustained and fortified by its checks and balances: a dynamic civil society; political parties and unions; a vibrant media and engaged citizens who have ensured that -- in Indonesia -- there will be no turning back from democracy.

But even as this land of my youth has changed in so many ways, those things that I learned to love about Indonesia -- that spirit of tolerance that is written into your Constitution; symbolized in mosques and churches and temples standing alongside each other; that spirit that's embodied in your people -- that still lives on. (Applause.) *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* -- unity in diversity. (Applause.) This is the foundation of Indonesia's example to the world, and this is why Indonesia will play such an important part in the 21st century.

So today, I return to Indonesia as a friend, but also as a President who seeks a deep and enduring partnership between our two countries".

Differences between these autobiographical recalls and the recalls of the Accra speech are striking, and concern contents, body language and attitudes of the speaker, as well as audience reactions. As we have seen, the Accra memories are mainly family memories, in which personal aspects are little mentioned. The contents of the Indonesia speech refer on the contrary to memories of a personal time, "a time that helped shape my childhood", as Obama overtly declares. It is a group of memories, relating to the city, so changed today, that Obama describes smilingly to those in his audience who were not born yet when he arrived in Indonesia; relating to his family

house, and its surroundings; relating to the way of life of those times (e.g. getting around the town), and more particularly to the life of children. Here, Obama adds to his already organized text some last minute embroideries, imitating for his audience how local street-food vendors called out "*Satay!*" and "*Baso!*", in a singsong voice, to sell their wares. Between the two calls, he softly interpolates a consideration – addressed to himself as well as to others – “I remember that”, as if he was somehow surprised by the vividness of his sensorial memories. The contents of these recalls refer, in short, to his own personal autobiographical memory, considered in its various aspects and layers, related to individual aspects as well as social and cultural ones [30]: memories of landscapes, of familial places, of routines and scripts, of sounds and voices, together with the emotions that gave importance and distinction to each one of them. These personal memoirs stay at the beginning of his speech; later on, when declaring the greatness of Indonesia because of its culture, of its struggle for democracy and of its respect for diversity (“unity in diversity”), Obama will also recall family memory, his love for his mother and her devotion to the Indonesian people, especially women and girls, his respect for his stepfather, his religious diversity never oppressing him, the courage of his stepfather’s generation in fighting for democracy, and his thoughtful consideration of the silence that left these heroic gestures unspoken of, as an “invisible presence” absent from quotidian family narratives. But, in spite of this due homage to the nation and to his family, the autobiographical recalls used by Obama in this speech convey, in all, his happiness – as well as his surprise – to speak in a place that shaped his childhood, that was “the land of my youth”.

Also body language – gestures, gaze, head and body position, voice – is strikingly different in this speech as compared to the Accra one. During autobiographical recalls, Obama smiles when remembering his childhood times. His hands shape the old times’ landscape he is describing for his young audience; fake the movements of the games he used to play; point to the audience when someone is laughing or cheering, to join them in a kind of unexpected dialogue. Gaze and head are turned around smoothly and rather quickly, not in a checking attitude (as in Accra’s speech) but as if asking for feedback to his social sharing. His body position is relaxed, and when remembering the sounds of his youth he goes so far as to use his voice in a singsong tune, imitating the old vendors. During these communications, he often smiles before speaking, as signalling that he is now about to say something very personal. Also when remembering his mother’s love for Indonesia his voice is soft, giving to understand the personal emotion linked to these memories. Further diminishing the formal distance between his present role of President of the USA and his audience, Obama sprinkles the speech with phrases spoken in Indonesian; in these moments, bodily posture shows that he is open to the audience’s reactions and waiting for them, signalling this attitude both through overt smiles and spontaneous stops of his communication flow, to allow audience feedback. When passing from these personal memories to the family ones, and especially when remembering the courage of his stepfather’s generation and the difficult climate of the silent presence of these heroic acts in Indonesian families that gave their sacrifice for the nation’s freedom, Obama’s posture and other signals of his bodily language become serious and proud: the head is nodded to

stress the more important lines of the speech, the open smile vanishes and the smooth circular movements of head and gaze are stopped, while the body is kept in a proud and dignified attitude.

His audience – more crowded and younger than in Accra – is highly responsive to his joyful and playful attitude. The President is frequently interrupted with cheers, laughter and happy remarks, to which he tries where possible to quickly answer. It is worthwhile to note that, in this same line of mutual understanding and informal communication – considering both the packed crowd and the presidential role of the speaker – after his speech Obama worked the rope-line. When he both shook hands with and hugged members of the audience, reactions became so enthusiastic that they resulted in near-hysteria.

6 Sometimes *I*, Sometimes *Me*: A Comparative Analysis of the Two Speeches

Having analyzed the two Presidential speeches in depth, I will now try to compare the different ways in which Obama used his autobiographical memories to pursue his persuasive aims in the direction of a firmer international reconciliation between his two audiences. It is evident that the two situations that we are examining are deeply different. However, a common aim may be traced in both, i.e. a clear statement that relations between the nations considered and America have to be defined as partnerships among equals, sharing an equal degree of mutual responsibility in protecting their sound democratic institutions and their systems of checks and balances. Apart from this general aim, the speeches in Accra and Jakarta differ profoundly in their persuasive aims.

Autobiographical memories recalled in Obama's speech to African leaders in Accra, 2009, seem to play a protective function, helping leaders attending to it to accept the idea of African responsibilities for some of their important present-day problems.

Remembered negative episodes concerning family memories were *not* characterized by Obama's emotional expressions. The only overt emotional signals stressed his declaration of direct responsibilities of Africans for dramatic present-day problems. These observations suggest that the choice of these contents was not linked to a social sharing of personal memories to help an intimate communication climate to arise.

On the contrary, remembering sufferings of Obama's family seemed, in that speech, to be a more powerful way to draw attention to all the victims of yesterday's violence. This somehow personally risky move (perhaps it is not by chance that Obama avoided mentioning, in this speech, his mother and his mixed origin) fully contributed to empowering the victims, this need being the more important one for enhancing reconciliation processes when addressing the victims' group [29]. But Obama went further and used his family memories as a way to urge his audience to shift from an external to an internal locus of control, when trying to understand some

of the reasons for their present-day problems. This is in fact a difficult yet necessary step, which could help them to fully elaborate the emotional barriers due to past intergroup violence.

According to this interpretation of Obama's persuasive struggle, it is interesting to consider more in depth his choice of remembering not only the positive achievements that strikingly showed that, in spite of colonialism, for Africa history "was on the move", but also the negative emotions (humiliations, deceptions and disillusion) linked to his African family memories. If intergroup reconciliation is mostly a process of overcoming emotional barriers [29] why keeping on recollecting these negative memories?

In political speeches, negative emotions linked to past colonial violence are often used to refuel intergroup animosity [26]. Nevertheless, trying simply to forget emotional sufferings may lead only to cheap reconciliations, especially in the case of radical evil [31]. Therefore, we may speculate that Obama used his autobiographical family memories as an example of what history is currently asking from Africans, in order to reach a complete freedom from their colonial dominance. Here, the personal sphere of Obama's life was not therefore important *per se*, but was only offered as a reflective self-awareness of one of the descendants of the group of victims – one being self-aware not only of injustice suffered by his family, but also of his own personal responsibility for the future. I propose therefore the idea that, when Obama remembered his family during this speech, he did it to struggle against the multigenerational effects of the objectifying experience of violence. Not only for the generation that suffered violence, but for their descendants too, to be a victim meant a cruel loss of control over their conditions of survival. This particular kind of historical experience implies, in fact, a particular form of self-image characterized by a sense of hopelessness. The highly dignified posture kept by Obama during the whole Accra speech, his perfect self-control when remembering his family humiliations and difficulties, were therefore offered to the audience of African leaders as a model, in which Obama was important not as a person, but as one of the children of the group of victims. His mere presence in that hall as the President of the USA proved how historical damage may turn into resilience and control over one's own future, instead of into self- or other-blaming and into escape from personal responsibilities.

The use of autobiographical memories in the Jakarta speech was quite different. Here, Obama made clear that his aim was to create an intimacy with his audience: not only remembering a rich group of personal memories of his childhood years spent in Indonesia, but also through the relaxed attitude that he frequently allowed to himself during this speech, smiling, playing games with his audience and offering several embroideries departing from his prepared text, including the possibility of hearing the President of USA imitating the singsong voice of local street-food vendors once calling out "*Satay!*" and "*Baso!*" to sell their wares. This time, his speech was intended, in fact, not mainly for leaders, but for the ordinary people – many of them young people – that crowded the stadium. Standing before this other kind of audience, Obama's choice to open his speech by recalling autobiographical memories seemed to suggest a persuasive strategy based mainly on self-exposure. In the Jakarta speech, in fact, Obama used his own *personal memories*, presenting himself as someone that,

boarding his plane four decades ago to move back from Indonesia to Hawaii, could in no way have anticipated – as none of his schoolmates who ran with him in fields with water buffalo and goats – that one day he would speak to Jakarta university students as the President of the United States.

7 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this study is to discuss how *autobiographical recalls*, one of the more powerful communicative moves for inducing a sense of intimacy in face-to-face conversations [15], are used by Barack Obama, one of the more prominent leaders of today, in his political speech-making not only to gain credibility as a political leader but also to enhance international reconciliation processes.

Autobiographical memories are organized in a *nested* [32] structure: personal memories are nested in family ones; family memories in historical ones. Therefore, the complexity of layers organizing autobiographical memories [33] makes it possible, for a fine political speaker, to use them by passing from the personal level to the historical one and *vice versa*. The analysis of two speeches of Barack Obama addressed to two different audiences with different persuasive aims intended for reconciliation helped us to consider several examples of these different uses of autobiographical memories in political oratory, evident not only in the contents used but also in all his body language, thus claiming for the need of a multimodal [34] strategy of analysis of these kinds of communication.

Summing up what was observed of the Accra speech, we can appreciate how in this case autobiographical memories (mainly family memories) are meant as a self-presentation in which Obama stressed how much his own life was a historical product of African development. He presented these contents showing, by his body language, the full awareness of the *pariah* that declares his pride for his own social origin, refusing the self-diminishing posture of the *parvenu* [35]. Nevertheless, presenting himself as an example of African achievements, he did not remind his audience of the most delegitimizing aspect [36] of being born in a family that mixed different races. All these aspects lead me to propose that the use of autobiographical memories in the Accra speech may be considered *not only* as a signal of personalization of this political speech. In this speech, in fact, Obama considers himself as an object of the historical achievements of his group, exemplified through his *family memories*.

Observations on the Jakarta speech are quite different. In this case, the use of autobiographical memories refers mainly to *personal memories*: more precisely, to a specific phase of Obama's lifetime, i.e. his childhood. The body language and postural attitude of the speaker, and his audience's reactions, all convey the idea that these memories are used to create a climate of intimacy, through a self-exposure of the President and his social sharing of very personal recalls.

In the previous pages we have seen how, for Barack Obama more than for other leaders, his life is "the" political message. The aim of this first exploratory research was to see how these personal aspects – made visible via autobiographical recalls – may be used for reconciliation purposes. Our analysis confirmed that this communicative move

was used in both speeches. However, only in the Jakarta speech may we say that his political speech has been deeply personalized, and that the personal profile of the leader has eclipsed the political message [4].

This analysis suggests that, in speeches used in democratic regimes, personalization may certainly be traced when narratives refer to *personal aspects* of autobiographical recalls. However, the recall of memories in political speeches often conveys more than that. The first explorative considerations that were suggested after an in-depth analysis of two of Obama's speeches meant for reconciliation purposes showed how his autobiographical memories referring to *social aspects* of his identity were proposed, on the contrary, in a very different way. Although describing his own life, these social aspects of Obama's autobiographical memory – expressed by the family and historical memories nesting the personal ones – were not in fact expressing any self-disclosure intent, as the lack of body language expressing his personal emotions seemed to suggest.

Of course, in these pages only exploratory observations are proposed, which do not allow us to draw any final conclusion, except to express the hope to work more on this same track in the future. However, we may consider how, when speaking as individuals, sharing with all others the same life challenges and tasks, leaders are implicitly assuming that their political speech could be based on their own personal characteristics, instead than on the social and historical dimensions framing the democratic political struggle. On the contrary, when recalling the social and historical features of their own lives, leaders are implicitly showing through their family and historical memories how social dimensions shaped their lives, therefore presenting their political power not as a function of their own personal characteristics, but mainly as a product of historical change. Personal aspects of one's own life being difficult to distinguish from social and historical aspects, we may propose that a more complex concept of personalization in political speeches should perhaps be developed, especially when these speeches are meant to enhance intergroup reconciliation processes.

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