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# Young Africans to Obama: 'Clean your own house first'

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**By Aleem Maqbool**

BBC News

**President Obama came to Africa to deliver a "blunt message" to its politicians. But young people in Kenya and Ethiopia had plenty to say to Mr Obama about the state of America.**

"Tough love" has been a theme of President Obama's visit to East Africa.

The moments where he really came alive on this trip were not just when he talked of his love for Africa, but also when he spoke passionately about human rights.



| Young Ethiopians at a coffee shop in Addis Ababa

Standing beside the Kenyan president he likened the pursuit of gay rights in Africa to the civil rights struggle in the US. To an enthralled crowd in a stadium in Nairobi he talked of the importance of women in society.

He talked of the need to eradicate corruption and treat fairly minority communities, including Muslims in Kenya.

"Progress requires that you see the differences and diversity of this country as a strength, just as we in America try to see the diversity of our country as a strength," he said.

"I always say that what makes America exceptional is not the fact that we're perfect, it's the fact that we struggle to improve. We're self-critical. We work to live up to our highest values and ideals."

## **American Black Lives Matter**

Kenyans and Ethiopians were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, even fanatical, about their returning East African son, but there were many who felt America, even Barack Obama, was not in a position to lecture others on some of these points.

"Most Americans think about what needs to change in other countries but they need to solve their own problems," Shiferaw Tilahun, 31, tells me in a coffee shop in Addis Ababa.



"They are interested in other people's problems but they don't care about black people in their own country," Shiferaw says. "Most of our black brothers and sisters are suffering in the US,"

It was clear in both countries that the issue of race, more than any other, had damaged people's perceptions of the US.

"When I speak to my friends and family here in Kenya, their feeling about America is 'clean your own house first'," says Teresa Mbagaya, 28.



| Teresa Mbagaya, a Kenyan-American

Teresa is a Kenyan-American entrepreneur we met at the summit in Nairobi attended by President Obama.

She told us that Africans often asked her about the state of race relations in the US having been concerned about reports they had seen on the news.

"We're not on the ground so we just get reports from what is on the media, but it is extremely appalling, shocking and horrifying what is going on to the black community in America," says Amanda Gicharu, 29, who we also met in Nairobi.



| Amanda Gicharu in Nairobi

"Police brutality, all these killings, everything being swept under the rug, investigations don't happen. They definitely have to do something about that and stop the violence,"

In both Kenya and Ethiopia, it was a recurring theme when we asked what "tough love" might need to go in the US' direction, with people saying they felt personally "offended," "hurt" and "insulted" by the treatment of African Americans that they had seen reported.

## **Violence and shootings**

But it wasn't the only thing that concerned them about US society.



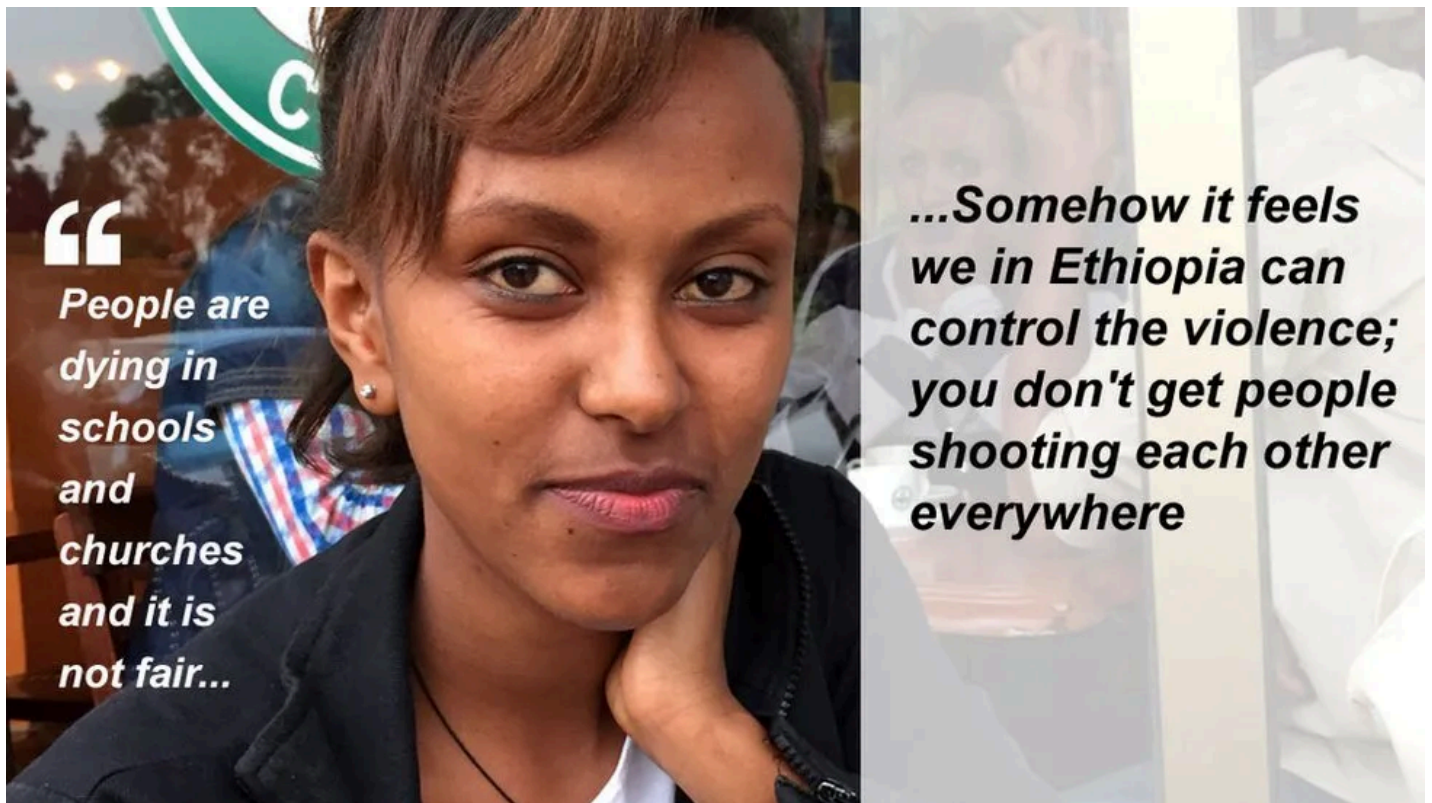
| Alifie Amalia says the prospect of violence seems more likely in America

"The shootings in America for me are scarier than what is happening in Kenya," says Alifie Amalia, 37, in Nairobi.

"An attack in our mall is just a one-off, but for America it feels like every day there's some attack, not from Muslims but some random acts in malls or schools."

Many Kenyans are upset about American travel warnings imposed on their country in light of recent attacks like those at the Westgate Mall and Garissa University, but some said they had the perception that travellers would be in more danger in America than in their region.

"People are dying in schools and churches and it is not fair," Tewedaj Solomon, 24, told us in Addis Ababa.



"I don't want to compare but somehow it feels we in Ethiopia can control the violence, you don't get people shooting each other everywhere," she says.

## Gay Rights

Surprisingly, there was one more negative impression of the US that young Kenyans and Ethiopians repeatedly told me about, and it was about a lack of freedom of speech and expression in the US.

But this impression was related to the issue of gay rights. It is one topic on which many told us they found President Obama's views unpalatable.





"When Obama declares gay rights is about human rights, most of us feel he's not Christian," says Daniel Abera, 33, in Addis Ababa.

Some Kenyan journalists attending the news conference in Nairobi even cheered when the Kenyan president said homosexuality was unacceptable in his country's culture and gay rights was a "non issue".

"About gay rights, I think a few people [the US Supreme Court judges] should not decide for the whole country," Hawaii Terfessa, 24, tells me in downtown Addis Ababa.

"I know some people want this reform on gay marriage, but there is a group of people who do not, and they have been hated for saying that," she says.



| Hawaii Terfessa

"They should feel free in their country too. All of America should have been asked if they want this step to happen."

President Obama's visit has undoubtedly reignited debate in East Africa on sensitive issues.

As the stadium in Nairobi emptied after his speech, I caught on my microphone a couple arguing about the president's focus on girls getting an education.

The husband said all the attention on girls was detrimental to progress being made by boys, until his wife told him something she said she had never told him before - that growing up as a girl in her village she had felt invisible.

In Ethiopia, people felt uncomfortable being interviewed about human rights abuses by their own government in its suppression of free media and political opposition, but many told us they were pleased President Obama had raised these issues.

It was clear though that Kenyans and Ethiopians perceived that while he was trying to forge a legacy in Africa before leaving office, there were huge issues for Mr Obama to try to resolve at home too.

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