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Obama's swearing-in 'definitely a big deal' for Rutgers viewers

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When President Barack Obama got to the part of his inauguration speech where he mentioned his father's birthplace, Kenya, Nimu Njoya let out a cheer.

The Rutgers teaching assistant was among about 80 people who gathered Tuesday at the university's Eagleton Institute of Politics to watch the inauguration.

"This could not have happened in Kenya," said Njoya, who was born there and still has family there.

She noted that Kenya had an election last year and added, "They're still dealing with the fallout."

"There are still people in displaced persons camps, because of that election," she added.

By contrast, she said, the passing of the presidential torch - from a Republican to a Democrat - was marked with pomp and circumstances and hugs.

"This was an opportunity to show the world how politics happens here," said Njoya.

Denise Letendre, a junior political science major who came to Rutgers from St. Louis on a swimming scholarship, was at Eagleton to share a moment in history.

"We are a stable country. We do this peacefully every four, eight years," said Letendre, who wore a T-shirt with the inscription "1.20.09."

Abby Hoffman of South Brunswick wore a T-shirt with the name Obama spelled in English and Arabic, purchased, said Hoffman, when her partner was in Egypt on Election Day.

"I've been fighting off tears all day," she said.

"What we're seeing today is an amazing, smart, articulate man," said Hoffman. "Oh, yes, it's a bad time. We know that. That's why we need Obama's kind of leadership."

Hoffman, 50, was raised in Washington, D.C., which makes her old enough to have witnessed the era of overt segregation. She recalled how when she was young her mother brought a black child to a swimming pool in the mid-1960s.

"It was definitely a big deal," said Hoffman.

Crystal Coache, a senior political science major from Morris County, was at Eagleton on Tuesday for a late morning class, and felt a tinge of guilt as she remained to watch the inauguration.

"I was conflicted. My mother wanted me home to watch this with my family. To her it was like Christmas or Thanksgiving," said Coache, whose mother, Pauline, came to the United States from Jamaica.

Coache watched the inauguration, then drove home to be with her family.

The gathering at the Rutgers-based public policy think tank resembled a Super Bowl party, with wide-screen televisions and a potluck buffet including cold cuts, beverages and cakes. And everyone seemed to be rooting for the same team.

When the CNN broadcast showed the Bushes leaving the White House, there was a cheer. When it was

mentioned during the musical interlude featuring Itzak Perlman and Yo Yo Ma that the noon hour had passed and Obama was technically already the new president, there was a louder cheer. The loudest cheer followed Obama's swearing-in.

Bryan Blutstein, a senior political science major from Marlboro, said he voted for John McCain in November — and if the election were held today he would vote for McCain again.

But Blutstein added: "I'll definitely support Obama. It's a critical time in history and it's good to put partisan squabbling aside. He's now our president."
