

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

THE WISDOM OF KARENGA

Author: *PROFILES* by **Janet Wiscombe**,

Beginning today, staff writer Janet Wiscombe will regularly feature people in our community.

The office, like the man, is a world apart.

A black national flag prominently rules a wall. Faces of African-American leaders - Fannie Lou Hamer, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X - dominate another. African carvings and masks accent scholarly literature in bookshelves.

From his seat at a conference table, the formidable Maulana Endabezitha Karenga answers the phone.

"Havari Gani," he warmly greets a caller.

"Njema."

In Swahili it means "What news? Good news."

In the course of a day at California State University/Long Beach, where he is chairman of the Department of Black Studies, Karenga might converse with a dignitary in Swahili, counsel a student in English, study a paper in French or Spanish, confer with a colleague in Zulu.

He is a professor who dwells in Los Angeles, but lives in a far larger world international travel, intellectual thought and political activism. He dresses in colorful African babas accented with a silver talisimu necklace - an African symbol of greatness and achievement. He has taken African names with extravagant meanings: Maulana, master teacher, Endabezitha, one who poses a constructive challenge to the established order; Karenga, keeper of tradition and intellectual master known to all people in The Movement.

A powerfully built man with a shaved head and thick black horn-rimmed glasses, he projects a quality of self-possession more common among spiritual teachers than college professors. When he walks through an office, people stop what they're doing. When he speaks, they listen.

He's a man accustomed to being at center stage, a sought-after lecturer invited to universities throughout the country, a proud man with a bizarre background.

"I cannot be satisfied with averageness," he declares.

Genius without equal

For the past three decades, Karenga has been on the vanguard of academic and political ferment. In the words of Molefi Asante, chairman of the pre-eminent department of black studies at Philadelphia's Temple University, he is "the most significant African-American thinker in the later part of the 20th century."

Asante specifically credits his esteemed colleague with writing the seminal text on black studies and for the cultural impact of his work, particularly his creation of Kwanzaa, an African-American holiday now celebrated throughout the world.

Now in his early 50s, according to newspaper files - he won't reveal his birthday except to affirm that he was born in July - Karenga looks back on his many academic distinctions and social accomplishments with pride. At the same time, he is an intensely private man who goes to great lengths not to talk about his personal life, artfully controls conversation, has a reputation for not returning phone calls and almost never agrees to interviews.

His reticence is understandable. He is a man with a criminal past, a professor whose own college years were punctuated by headlines of violence. During the 1960s when he was known as Ron Karenga, he was an outstanding student at UCLA where he graduated in political science cum laude and rose to national prominence as an unsurpassed civil rights leader. He was also a spokesman for Us, a cultural and social organization formed shortly after the Watts riots in 1965.

Then as now, his goal was liberation and the creation of a just and good society. "I am interested in cultural nationalism and black unity as a strategy for liberation," he says. "I'm interested in achieving cultural grounding to create ethical, cultural and intellectual grounding.

Not West but Europe

"The major problem of the day is not Westernization," he adds, "but progressive Europeanization - the imposition of European culture as the fundamental paradigm for human society and humanity itself. This leads to disrespect for others.

"Because of the holocaust of enslavement and subsequent racism, black people have talked in a European framework. They didn't discuss their own. What's important to me as an intellectual is that I can talk from my own text. Not a European text. It is important I stand on my own ground.

"You can't be a full person if you are not a cultural being."

A time of trouble

Following the shootings of two UCLA students in 1969 at meeting of Black Panthers, members of Us and other groups, Karenga made forceful public denials that Us was linked. Three members of Us were later convicted of the murders.

The next year, he was consumed by personal trouble. He was convicted of felonious assault against a young woman and sentenced in 1971 to one to 10 years in prison. He was paroled in May 1975. Newspaper accounts told of the torture of two young female members of Us. The women were allegedly imprisoned for two days in Karenga's garage, during which time they were held at gunpoint, disrobed and beaten.

He recoils at a question about the case. "It was a trumped-up charge," he snaps. "It isn't real and it never was. It is a lie and everyone knows it."

"A political, suppressive state did it to me."

He is referring to reports of underground FBI activity in the '60s aimed at harassing political activists. In 1975, the Senate Intelligence Committee obtained documents that showed the FBI tried to capitalize on warfare between black militant groups and ordered hard-hitting steps for pitting Black Panther's against Karenga's Us organization.

"I have no interest in discussing it," he says. "It has nothing to do who I am and what I'm doing and what I have produced."

Philosophic synthesis

What he does like to talk about is his belief in Kaqaida, a Swahili philosophy he defines as a synthesis of tradition and reason, and Maat, a spiritual and ethical tradition of ancient Egypt grounded in respect for culture and "how we treat each other, speak truth, do justice, walk in the path of righteousness: truth, justice, harmony, reciprocity, balance and service."

Last year he received a second doctorate - in social ethics - at USC. The first doctorate came from U.S. International University in San Diego. Since then he's won numerous awards, written eight books and several scholarly papers. He also serves as director of the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies in Los Angeles.

He refers to himself variously as a cultural nationalist, an Afrocentric intellectual, a public intellectual, a black nationalist, an activist scholar.

One of his central themes is a passionate belief in the need for African-Americans to discover and reclaim their rich cultural and ethical roots. At Cal State, he chairs the President's Task Force on Multicultural Education and Campus diversity.

"In our work on multiculturalism, our central theme is academic excellence and social responsibility: to use one's knowledge in the service of humankind," he says. "The Founding Fathers created a truly unjust society limited by race, class and gender. Multiculturalism enriches the social discourse by including the formerly excluded. We raise up suppressed voices.

"Our role in black studies is to rescue and reconstruct history and culture and use it as a paradigm of human possibilities for creating a just and good society. The question is how to show concern for society's most vulnerable. How to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked and a boat to those without one, as is though in Maatian ethical texts.

"As a vulnerable population, African-Americans have a lot to say about what constitutes a just society. We are correcting the distorted picture society and the university has of African-Americans.

"Rather than teaching vulgar careerism, we value knowledge for humans' sake - making a significant contribution to the quality of social life and the human condition. We believe you have to lift as you climb."

A proud campus

On campus, Cal State President Robert Maxon counts himself as one of Karenga's many fans. "He's done an enormous amount," he says. "He's brought national recognition to the campus as founder of Kwanzaa and as an expert on black studies programs."

On college campuses throughout America, the name Maulana Karenga is known as a champion of human rights. In recent months his itinerary has included lectures at Michigan State, Case Western Reserve, Georgia Tech, the City University of New York.

His own roots are less well known. He was born in the early '40s in Maryland, the son of poor farmers. As the youngest of 14 and the seventh son born on the seventh month, he says he was always treated with a high degree of specialness.

It is a quality he projects even today.

From the time he can remember, he says he was blanketed in attention. When he started school at 5, teachers and family members knew he was exceptionally bright. "They always knew he was exceptionally bright. "They always knew I'd do something," he says. "They expected things from me. It was a beautiful challenge. I wanted to honor their belief in me."

Always a good student and leader, no one was surprised when he followed an academically gifted brother to L.A., enrolled at Los Angeles City College in '58 and was elected student body president two years later.

Although newspaper stories from the '70s report that he was married and the father of three, he says he has no children. He lives and travels with his wife, Tiamoyo. In a preface to "Introduction to Black Studies," he describes her as "my friend, secretary, administrative assistant, colleague on this project, wife and constant companion in love, work and struggle, and in all things good and beautiful."

When not working on a book he hopes to complete this year on the social and ethical thoughts of Malcolm X, Karenga is likely to be peering out from a podium through his thick glasses, passionately arguing for a just and good society. He'll talk about his vision for the 21st century: "sharing and shared space, shared wealth, shared power, shared status."

He'll expound on the importance of multiculturalism. Then, to his audience's surprise, he might introduce another topic. Those intent on labeling him a black separatist might be surprised. Those who know him best will smile.

Underneath the bubas and the talisimu is a man who believes there is an urgent need to address the Native American holocaust for the good of all.

"One of the first items on the agenda must be coming to terms with the Native American's just claims on U.S. society," Maulana Endabezitha Karenga will say. "The first thing we have to do is concede it was a holocaust. We have to talk in moral terms as history requires. We have to talk about Native Americans as people, not objects to be removed by Europeans.

"If we can apologize and address this problem in serious terms, it will benefit all people of color and all vulnerable people.

"The climate created from such a moral practice would benefit everybody."

March 5, 1995