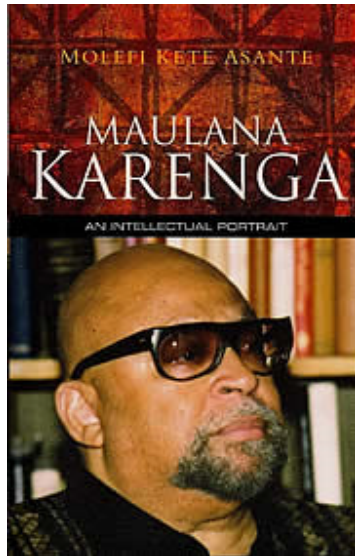


Maulana Karenga: An Intellectual Portrait

A book review by Itibari M. Zulu

Asante, Molefi Kete, *Maulana Karenga: An Intellectual Portrait*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 210 pp, notes, index, bibliography. ISBN 13: 978-0-7456-4828-6.



Readers of this work will get a full understanding of the intellectual dynamics, and the unquestionable genius of activist-scholar Maulana Karenga, the creator of the cultural holiday Kwanzaa, professor of Africana Studies (California State University, Long Beach), and the author of numerous scholarly articles and books, including: *Kawaida and Questions of Life and Struggle* (2008); *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (2006; 2004); *Handbook of Black Studies* (co-edited with Molefi Kete Asante, 2005); *Introduction to Black Studies* (2002); *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings* (1999); *Kawaida: A Communitarian African Philosophy* (1997); *The Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology* (co-edited with Haki R. Madhubuti, 1996); *Selections From the Husia: Sacred Wisdom of Ancient Egypt* (1984), and others.

Second, readers will be introduced to Maulana Karenga by fellow activist-scholar, Molefi Kete Asante, a professor of African American Studies at Temple University, the architect of the first Ph.D. program in African American Studies (Temple University), and the founding theorist of Afrocentricity.

This combination of Molefi Kete Asante and Maulana Karenga as seen in their editing of the *Handbook of Black Studies* is indeed a comprehensive baptism in Africology, and other essential aspects of the African centered enterprise. Thus, Ama Mazama (associate professor of African American Studies at Temple University and co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*) in her foreword outlines, *Maulana Karenga: An Intellectual Portrait* as the first serious probe into the intellectual ideas of Maulana Karenga and therefore "... a contribution to advancing revolution in the way African people view themselves" (p.vii). Hence, the intended purpose of this work according to Asante is to "... introduce the reader to some of the more important philosophical ideas of Maulana Karenga" (p.xi).

Considering that this book is about the intellect of a person, one would think of it is a biography, however it is not, as Asante informs us in the preface (p.xi). Yet, after reading the essential elements of the philosophical ideas of Maulana Karenga as presented by Asante, a personality narrative unfolds (especially in chapter one, 'Karenga and the Drawing of the Cultural Grounds'). For example, early in the book, Asante mentions the original capacity of Maulana Karenga to "... grasp the core of any argument and to present that argument succinctly and in such a way that his eventual dissecting of it seems effortless" (p.2), and a few pages later, he says that Maulana Karenga differs from other cultural theorists because he has the ability for 'conceptual generation' and the "... use of categorization as a form of simplifying complex thought" (p.7).

The book is organized in five parts. The first section 'Karenga and the Drawing of the Cultural Grounds' provides an introduction to Maulana Karenga, placing him within a historical context engaging the influence of Malcolm X, the articulation of Kawaida as his central philosophy, and his entrance into African American community politics. The second chapter posits the cultural narrative as an organic narrative of Karenga that involves an ethical imperative that calls for 'justice in the world' linking the past, present and the future in an African understanding of an obligation to the ancestors, the living, and the next generation to act "in dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways worthy of the name and history African" (p.32). Correspondingly, the chapter also reviews the depths of Karenga's ideas on cultural transformation, nationalism, and critical consciousness (Kawaida) to create an "an ongoing synthesis of the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world" (p.50). 'Controlling Intellectual Territory', chapter three, focus on the African cultural narrative of Karenga via his eagerness to incorporate Zulu, Yoruba (Odu Ifa) and ancient Kemet (Maat) ideals and concepts to advance the African world community, his optimism, his linguistic astuteness, his intermingled intellectual influences (Cheikh Anta Diop, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey ...), and his disciplined mind which created a capacity for work, and perfection. Chapter four begins with a re-cap of the influence of Malcolm X on Karenga to the lessons of the Watts revolt of 1965, the FBI counter intelligence program to disrupt and destroy The Organization Us and the Black Panther Party, an outline of Kawaida as a series of dualism (culture and community, thought and action) representing a functional classificatory scheme that highlights the idea of 'struggle' (p.110), a discussion of the interface of Kawaida and Afrocentricity and their placement in the "... same arena of consciousness" (p.120), the complementary unity between males and females, the influence of Karenga on the Black Arts Movement, the impact of the *Introduction to Black Studies* to the discipline of Africology (Africana Studies, African American Studies, Pan African Studies), and the Pan African intellectual and ethical grounding of Karenga. Concluding, chapter five, "Implementing the Lessons" provides a review of Kwanzaa, and an outline on Karenga's interest in the history and ethics ancient Kemet.

The strength of this work is that it is the first scholarly attempt to examine the intellectual philosophy and achievements of Maulana Karenga, and that it is written by a peer, a person who understands his dedication to excellence, and the African quest for agency. Nevertheless, some may call for a more extensive critique; however, I think such a rendering would limit the text to a dry non-collegial assessment. Second, based on past post-modern history, some people tend to drop their scholarly credentials, and thus rely on urban-myth and indictment-focused conspiracy theories to denounce a personality, especially in regards to politics and political organization.

In short, I think students and others, who would like to know of the intellectual and by extension the social-cultural contributions of Maulana Karenga, will find this book especially rewarding. And for those who are veterans of 'the struggle', Asante's placement of Karenga in intellectual history and his investigation of Karenga's significance is worth the read, and a reminder that an intellectual giant, an activist scholar, is among us.