

finally introduced, he grimaced as if I had done something wrong to him. I had heard of Cleaver while he was still in San Quentin. Somebody had called him "the new Malcolm X." But he was curt and uncommunicative and I couldn't figure out why.

The CORE convention was being held a short time later and our entire Black Communications Project went down to perform. I was invited as well to read poetry at the headquarters of Ron Karenga's organization, US. Some people claim that US meant "United Slaves," but Karenga told me it meant just what it said, "US" as opposed to "THEM." I also attended what Karenga called the first Afro-American wedding in the United States. This was said because Karenga had put together a wedding ceremony, an *Arusi*, that drew on certain generalized African customs, "updated" and supposedly made relevant for black people in the US.

Karenga did a great deal of work with culture. It was he who, with the organization, pushed a program that called for first having a "cultural revolution, to win the minds of our people," and then the political revolution would be a matter of course. So he put together a group of rituals, holidays, and programs that were aimed at politicizing black people with *blackness*. Karenga's line was that he was combining "tradition and reason"—i.e., what was traditional African with what had to be utilized from the American experience—to create a revolutionary Afro-American culture.

So the *Arusi* was one of these revolutionary rituals; the holiday Kwanzaa, which is still very popular, as an alternative to Christmas, beginning December 26 and extending seven days until January 1, was another. The seven days of Kwanzaa corresponded with the Seven Principles or *Nguzo Saba*, upon which the US organization and Karenga's doctrine of *Kawaida* (African traditionalism) rested.

Swahili was used by Karenga, as he explained in his doctrine, ostensibly because it was a non-tribal language, a kind of lingua franca for all the continent. So that the Seven Principles were to be memorized in Swahili as well as English. They were: *Umoja* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination), *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility), *Ujamaa* (Collective Economics), *Nia* (Purpose), *Kuumba* (Creativity); *Imani* (Faith). The practice of these principles by black people would give them a new value system, theorized Karenga, a value system which would make them revolutionary.

There was also a pamphlet, *The Quotable Karenga*, which some of "the advocates," as members of the US organization were called, had put together, which consisted of quotes from Karenga. Karenga also had a formal *Doctrine*, some of it published in bits and pieces in the *Quotable*, some other parts in the *Kitabu*, the book of the *Kawaida* doctrine.

The advocates I saw looked well disciplined and dedicated. All had Swahili names. Karenga's practice was to give out a Swahili name as a last name, the way it existed in many East African countries, such as Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda. So that a person could be James Tayari or Ken Msemaji. Karenga gave out the names, naming each advocate according to his

attributes. So that Tayari meant "ready," implying that that advocate was ready to make revolution. Msemaji meant "orator," it was given because Ken Msemaji could heavy rap! Just as I was impressed by Karenga's first appearance in my house, I was even more impressed by the images presented by this well-disciplined organization. By the seeming depth and profundity of his *Kawaida* doctrine. I felt undisciplined and relatively backward. Here was *organization*. The worst thing a person could be as far as Karenga was concerned was *Ovyo*, a Swahili word meaning "random," a person acting at random, disorganized and unpredictable. This was the problem with the "basic blood," as Karenga called blacks. No values or the values of their oppressors; no organization except the church.

Karenga's doctrine, as I found out after following it politically and socially for eight years, was very eclectic. He had borrowed and copped from everybody. Not only Elijah Muhammad, but Nkrumah, Fanon, Touré, Nyerere, Garvey, Malcolm, all ran through his doctrine, plus Mao and even Lenin and Stalin and Marx. Though Karenga hid the bits and pieces he had taken from the white revolutionaries. Even today I think that there is much in Karenga's doctrines that is valid. Certainly the idea that oppressed people practicing and believing in the values of their oppressors cannot free themselves is true and unchallengeable. But what are those values that will oppose black oppression and where do we find them? The idea that somehow we had to go back to pre-capitalist Africa and extract some "unchanging" black values from historical feudalist Africa, and impose them on a 20th-century black proletariat in the most advanced industrial country in the world, was simple idealism and subjectivism. Cultural nationalism uses an ahistorical unchanging never-never-land Africa to root its hypotheses. The doctrine itself is like a bible of petty bourgeois glosses on reality and artification of certain aspects of history to make a recipe for "blackness" that again gives this petty bourgeoisie the hole card on manners to lord it over the black masses, only this time "revolutionary" manners. Cabral and Fanon also expose this to the core, but Karenga only quotes bits and pieces. The fact that he could quote only bits and pieces of Mao shows how this quoting out of context to make a point, works. So that Karenga could "borrow" from anyone, even those that he disagreed with or who were saying some things absolutely opposite to what he was. It was the fact of Karenga's education (a Ph.D. student in African history and languages) and his nervy aggressiveness that gave him a leadership quality. He had the ability to take from anything and synthesize something that one could identify as "his." What he had created was a cultural nationalist organization that had aspects of, and indeed became, a *cult*. Karenga was Maulana, self-named, as he named all the advocates, "the master teacher," Karenga means "nationalist." So that he was the Master Teacher of Nationalists.

Because I was so self-critical, especially from a black nationalist perspective, the fact of the US organization—i.e., that it was an organization and not just a bunch of undisciplined people taking up time mostly arguing with each other about what to do, or what method to use, even about things

Kwanzaa

imposed by the organization of i



that most agreed should be done—drew me US and Karenga. He was quick-witted, sharp-tongued, with a kind of amusing irony to his put-downs—of white people, America, black people, or whatever, I admired. Plus, there was no doubt, when you were around Karenga, as to who was *the* leader, even if you weren't in his organization. And if you were, *all* things revolved around Maulana. He named the advocates, married them, named their children, even suggested where they should work and live. When I first came out to LA, many of the advocates lived very close together, several in the same housing development. In fact, I thought maybe Karenga owned this one development, because not only did he live there but his principal security lived on either side, plus some of the other important people in the organization lived both downstairs on the first floor as well as on the floor above.

It seemed to me the kind of next-higher stage of commitment and organization as compared to the Black Arts or what was going on in the Spirit House in Newark. There was a military aspect to it, a uniformity that I regarded then as indispensable to any talk of black revolution. Also, Karenga's doctrine, some of which had been printed, summarized and ordered an approach to the revolution we sought. He had various lists, like the Nguzo Saba, but in almost any category you could think of. There were the Three Criteria of a Culture, Three Aspects of a Culture, Two Kinds of Revolution, Seven Aspects of Malcolm X, all of which were for memorization purposes. Advocates were questioned about these parts of the doctrine and were supposed to respond with the answers by rote.

There was a heavy emphasis on karate, named Yangumi by Karenga to give it an African cast. His security was always armed. All the advocates had shaven heads, "in mourning for African people," and the high-collared olive-drab bubbas with the US emblem and the talismanus added a kind of neo-African military quality to the organization that impressed me and I suppose a bunch of other people. It seemed that Karenga was serious. In my right-around-the-corner version of the revolution, I thought that Karenga represented some people who were truly getting ready for the revolution.

Even everyday greetings Karenga had stylized and "Africanized": "Habari Gani" was the greeting ("What's happening?") and the response was "Njema" ("Fine") or "Njema, Sante Sante" ("Fine, thank you"). The men shook hands with one hand on their arm and then pounded their right fist on their chest, something like the Roman legionnaires. Greeting women, one crossed one's arms and embraced each cheek. When Karenga passed, advocates would pop their fist to their chest, the women "submit"—i.e., cross their arms on their breasts and bow slightly in an Afro-American adaptation of West African feudalism.

Because Karenga's whole premise was of cultural revolution, I was pulled closer. Being a cultural worker, an artist, the emphasis on culture played to my own biases. And no doubt in a society where the "advanced forces" too often put no stress on culture and the arts at all, I thought his philosophy eminently correct. Culture and the arts can be used to help

bring the people to revolutionary positions, but the culture of the black masses in the US is an African American working-class culture. The "revolutionary culture" we must bring to the masses is not the pre-capitalist customs and social practices of Africa, but heightened expression of the lives and history, art and sociopolitical patterns of the masses of the African American people stripped of their dependence on the white racist society and focused on revolution.

It is Cabral who said that the African petty bourgeoisie, because they were too often exposed only to the master's culture and history, when they become radicalized want to identify with things African as much as possible. This was obviously my problem and Karenga's US was a perfect vehicle for working out the guilt of the overintegrated.

After my trip to LA I remained in close contact with Karenga and very quickly I had assimilated the Kawaida doctrine and began pushing it wherever I went.

When I got back to San Francisco, a strange thing had happened. Cleaver had gotten the Panthers, ostensibly through Huey Newton, to throw the artists, many of whom were cultural nationalists of one kind or another, out of the Black House, saying that all the artists were "reactionary." I had heard before I had gone to LA that Cleaver was going to SWP meetings and I thought this strange. We had just gone through a "get away from whiteness" push in the East. That, I thought, was the root action of revolutionary motion, getting away from white people. What was with Cleaver? I didn't understand. The idea of his being Marxist-influenced I wasn't clear on. Some weeks later the Black Panther paper came out with an editorial warning black nationalists not to attack the Panthers' revolutionary allies. Did they mean hippies, the flower children, or white women lawyers? There was never any clear ideological breakdown of what was going on, no clear polemics with the nationalists. There was just the summary breaking up of the Black House and the creation of an even deeper split in the movement which was to go down a few years later. But from the time of the Black House split, I always thought Cleaver was aptly named.

It had never occurred to me that a variation of what had gone down inside the Black Arts could happen again on a larger scale. But it did, and even worse. But at this point there was still some effort by various developing factions to work together. Sometime after the Black House ouster, the artists who had been around the Black House and the Black Communications Project agreed to do a benefit for the Panthers. That was during the period just before the Panthers tried to "draft" Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown. Stokely and Rap appeared at this benefit, along with Huey, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge. I directed BSU head Jimmy Garrett's play *We Own the Night*, with Willie X as the black youth revolutionary and poet/radio host, Judy Simmons, as his domineering mother, whom the youth shoots when she tries to warn the police of the black revolutionaries' plans. This last act got a roaring standing ovation from the capacity audience.

We continued to travel all over the Bay Area with the Communications