



IN HONOR OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE:  
THINKING CLEARLY AND DANGEROUSLY

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 04-24-08, p. A-7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), one of the great minds and men of African people and the world, made transition last Thursday at the age of 94, rising up in radiance, highly valued and vindicated by his work in the world and the legacy he left and thus, worthy of eternal life in this world and the next. Surely as it is written in the *Husia*, “he shall be counted among the ancestors, his name shall endure as a monument and what he has done on earth shall never perish or pass away”. Césaire was a literary lion—a poet, novelist, playwright, journals founder and editor; a political leader, the mayor of Fort de France, the capital of Martinique, his beloved land, for 56 years and representative of his people in the French Assembly for 45 years.

An anti-colonialist and cultural nationalist, Césaire focused on culture as the fundamental ground for liberation, still arguing in 1997 in an UNESCO interview that “just at the moment when Africa is truly being born into the world, it is in greater danger than ever of dying unto itself”, if it abandons its own culture and its people lose their essential selves and become as Fanon taught “obscene caricatures” of others. Indeed, he notes “the shield of a merely political independence, unaccompanied and unsupplemented by cultural independence, would in the long run prove to be the most unreliable of shields and the most untruthworthy of safeguards”. It is this position on the centrality of culture in the struggle for full liberation that drew us to his writings and reasoning as activist intellectuals and students in the 60’s and as advocates (members) of our organization Us. Although his classic poem *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* was a key statement of his philosophy and focus, it is his seminal work *Discourse on*

*Colonialism* and his other essays such as “Culture et Colonisation” and interviews on culture that were our central references and resource, along with Toure, Fanon, Cabral et al.

In his *Discourse*, Césaire starts with the fundamental assertion that Europe in its current colonial, capitalist and racist form “is unable to justify itself” and “is morally, spiritually indefensible”. For, in spite of its self-sanitizing self-portrait, colonialism is not about evangelization, philanthropy, education, humanitarian concern or “for the glory of God”. It is the violent project of those committed to plunder and piracy, gold-digging and greed, and a world-scale commerce without conscience.

He contrasts Europe’s claim of benevolence with the magnitude of its malevolence imposed on the people of color and the internal malignancy which emerges as Nazism. He says “They talk to me about progress”, but he talks instead of millions killed, tortured and sacrificed to profit, instilled with fear and inferiority complexes, denied justice, and reduced to serving the cruel and crushing interests of the oppressor. And he talks of “societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out”. Césaire argues that racism and colonialism are directly linked to the rise of Nazism. Indeed, he reminds Whites “that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices”. Thus, he says, what the Europeans “cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself, *the crime against man*; . . . it’s the crime against the White man and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist

**IN HONOR OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE:  
THINKING CLEARLY AND DANGEROUSLY**

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 04-24-08, p. A-7

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

2

procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for (peoples of color)".

Here he reminds us of "the value of our old societies which were not only *ante-capitalist* . . . , but also *anti-capitalist*". He argues in defense of those democratic, cooperative and fraternal societies and suggests our building a new society "rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity (and sorority) of olden days". In his interview with the Haitian poet, Rene Depestre in Havana in 1967, he talks of his coming to consciousness, working with Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas on the journal, the *Black Student*, searching "beneath the social being (for) a profound being": rooted in history and culture. This he called Négritude, Negroness, Blackness, Africanness and he and his colleagues launched a movement around this project of cultural recovery.

Césaire criticizes and eventually breaks from his communist colleagues whom he labels "abstract communists", who questioned his solidarity with other Africans and commitment to culture. He argued that "the emancipation of (Black people) consisted of more than just a political emancipation"; they had also to free their minds and culture from racist conceptions and constraints. Indeed, he says, "our struggle was a struggle against alienation. That struggle gave birth to Négritude". Moreover, he maintains, "we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are—that is of the first fact of our lives: that we are Black; that we are Black and have a history". Furthermore, we must accept and assert that our culture is worthy of

the highest respect, contains "universalizing, living values that (have) not been exhausted" and has an important contribution to make to the world.

Césaire also argued that we must resist the tendencies to label our commitment to ourselves and our culture as narrow, racist, separatist or any new negative names assembled from the right or the left or try to be "universal" at the expense of our particular selves and culture. He says Europeans "told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were Black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we are Black, the more universal we would be". For if the universal is to be real, it must be, as we say in Kawaida, based on mutual respect for each people and culture as a unique and equally valuable way of being human in the world.

Finally, these are among his most important words and wishes for us: that we struggle in radical, progressive and productive ways to liberate ourselves culturally and politically and make our own unique contribution to history and humanity, and that we remain acutely "aware of the non-negotiable responsibility that goes with a consciously accepted identity" as Africans. This too he would want for us: that we recognize "we are always, all of us, warriors; that the war takes different forms at different times"; but we must always be "in rebellion against . . . things that are unacceptable" and that we constantly strive "to see clearly, to think clearly—that is dangerously" and to act likewise in the ongoing interest of our people and the good of the world.

---

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Black Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, [[www.US-Organization.org](http://www.US-Organization.org) and [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org)].