



**IDA B. WELLS:  
TROUBLING AND TRANSFORMING THE WATERS**  
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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

***T**HIS MONTH OF SPECIAL CELEBRATION OF Black women's history brings to mind so many models of human excellence and achievement; so many way-openers and way-makers who opened and made ways for us, as a people, in our awesome march through human history. And surely in the sacred circle of these ancestors, there sits Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a "strong bright presence". Indeed, as the Husia says, she will always be for us "a glorious spirit in heaven and a continuing powerful presence on earth. Her name shall endure as a monument and what she has done on earth shall never perish or pass away".*

She was an awesome ancestor, one of those whose name we will always honor, whose praise poems we will always write and recite, and whose life is a book of lessons we will always read with reverence and pass on as a legacy of the highest value. Ida B. Wells-Barnett (July 16, 1862 – March 25, 1931) was born during the Holocaust of enslavement and became orphaned at the age of sixteen when her mother and father died in a yellow fever epidemic. Resisting the separation and parceling out of her sisters and brothers, she decided, against all odds and advice, to quit school, get a job and take care of them. It was a sign of the commitment, courage and will that would carry her through and beyond the many difficulties and fierce opposition she would face. And she rose in the ranks of African American leadership through an extraordinary combination of intellect, strategic planning, insightful writing, hard work in critical areas, audacious self-assertion, admirable resiliency and an iron and resistant will.

Certainly, she lived in a critical period in Black history, the reversal of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, Caveman Charlie and "Beast-Lady Lynch," savage White terrorism and the brutal burning of Black towns, and racist mob murder as a way of life. It is

her work in the muck and mire of this racist South and compliant North that Ida B. Wells came into her own and taught us audacious African ways to walk, work, struggle and stand tall in the world.

Wells-Barnett was a tireless journalist, organizer, lecturer, teacher and activist in numerous organizations and had collaborated with the major leaders of her time. Her ideas foreshadowed and prefigured womanist, Black Power, armed self-defense, civil and human rights, and related discourse in our contemporary conversations. In fact, she made a major contribution to Africana womanism which is clear in her commitment to self-definition, ethical grounding, male/female partnership in equality, family, community and social action. It is obvious also in her refusal to place in conflict the liberation of Black people and the liberation of Black women. Indeed, she insisted on joining the two in a total liberation of all, as exemplified in her work with her husband and partner in struggle, Ferdinand Barnett.

Embodying the self-defining womanist, she asked in an article on the mission and meaning of women, "What is or should be woman?" And she answered: "Not merely a bundle of flesh and bones, nor a fashion plate, a frivolous inanity, a boundless doll, a heartless coquette – but a strong, bright presence, thoroughly imbued with a sense of her mission on earth and a desire to fill it; an earnest, soulful being, laboring to fit herself for life's duties and burdens, and bearing them faithfully when they come; but a womanly woman for all that ..."

It is this stance as an aware, socially active, self-assertive, and "womanly woman," willingly bearing the burdens and obligations at hand, that was a source of the inner strength that gave her courage to struggle for both racial and gender justice. These struggles were pursued in her work as an organizer, institu-

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tion-builder, anti-lynching, civil rights and human rights advocate and in her collaborating with other leaders whose names we know and also honor – Douglass, DuBois, Garvey, Bethune, Terrell, Randolph.

Wells-Barnett was a “race woman,” uncompromisingly committed to the freedom and well-being of her people. Like Marcus Garvey, whom she admired and who admired her, she was for “race first.” She argued there was no substitute for unity, self-help, self-reliance, and constant struggle. And she stressed strong community institutions, the essentiality of education and economic strength, constant vigilance and ceaseless struggle.

In an article, “Freedom of Political Action,” she criticized African Americans for being too tied to one party or the other without critical assessment. Prefiguring a similar position of Malcolm X, she declared she was neither a Democrat nor Republican, but an African American seeking justice and freedom for her people.

Wells-Barnett also argued against uncritical allegiance to leaders and for critical assessment of leadership in terms of how it furthered the objective desired above all others: “the well-being of (Black people) as a race, morally, socially and intellectually.” And in another article on “Functions of Leadership,” she asked of leaders “how many of them are exerting their talents and wealth for the benefit or amelioration of the conditions of the masses?” Moreover, she asked “What material benefit is a ‘leader’, if he does not, to some extent, devote his time, talent and wealth to the alleviation of the poverty, and misery and elevation of his people?”

It is Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s courageous, constant and uncompromising struggle against lynching which brought forth the best of her

virtues and values, and reaffirmed her role as a leader of great merit and meaning. Clearly, she played a crucial and vanguard role in exposing the racist terrorism and savagery of lynching, traveling widely in the U.S. and speaking internationally. Her anti-lynching lectures and writings were vital witness against this brutal and barbaric practice. She defined lynching as a “national crime,” “a color-line murder,” and “the cold-blooded savagery of White devils under lynch law.”

Also, Wells-Barnett raised the issue of armed self-defense and argued that in other places lynching had been prevented by this strategy. She stated that “The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every Black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.” Thus, long before Robert Williams and Malcolm X had argued the right to armed self-defense against murderous mobs in face of the failure of law, Wells-Barnett had raised the option publicly.

**I**DA B. WELLS-BARNETT WAS A TOWERING woman and leader of her time, an extraordinary person which, as her *Memphis Diary* shows, was self-questioning, self-critical and caught up also in the ordinariness of life and living. And yet, she had a historic sense of herself and the moral meaning of the freedom struggle of her people. Her commitment, she said, was to constantly “trouble the waters” and transform the status quo. Indeed, an oppressor has no right to peace, if he dares to deny a people’s right to freedom and justice. And when we are attacked by the oppressor in our fight for freedom and justice, we are to remember her defiant words of wisdom: “with me, it is not myself nor my reputation, but the life of my people which is at stake.”

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture and Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).