

Profiles in Excellence: A conversation with Mahmoud El-Kati

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Friday, 25 October 2013 09:32



I knew well before I sat down with Mahmoud El-Kati that this interview and the subsequent piece to come from it would be like no other I had written before.

Normally, in a standard reporter's notebook, an interview or press conference takes up just a few pages. For me, I can have notes from up to five or six stories in one notebook. With El-Kati – professor emeritus at St. Paul's Macalester College – I needed the *entire* notebook, and we both agreed that this was just *part one* of the interview. We barely got through the college years of the 78-year-young scholar, activist and iconic figure.

The professor and I met at the place of his choosing, Golden Thyme Coffee & Café, 921 Selby Ave., St. Paul. As I arrived, the professor escorted me to a back conference room so we could have our talk with as little distraction as possible, however, the interview was interrupted several times by various individuals so excited to talk with El-Kati that I wondered for a moment if my one-time wish for invisibility had been granted.

"You know this is the room where I show movies every Friday night," said El-Kati as he slid several papers across the table in my direction.

The papers were wide-ranging, yet focused. They were a microcosm of the man.

The first sheet was a schedule of events titled Karamu House Forum Series. The next in the series is Monday, Nov. 11 from 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. at St. Peter Claver Church, 375 Oxford St., St. Paul. Some of the other sheets also dealt with Karamu, which El-Kati explained to me was a

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Swahili word that meant place of enjoyment and center of community activity.

“Now of course, you can’t literally translate it, but that’s pretty much the translation,” explained the beyond-wise professor.

El-Kati went on to tell from where he “borrowed” the word Karamu.

“When I lived in Cleveland, there was a Karamu House, which was founded in 1923 by Rowena Woodham – a white woman. Karamu was the first Swahili word I learned – I’ve learned several since, but that was the first, and I learned it from a white woman,” said El-Kati. “You see there’s really no such thing as race – now a lot of white people want to believe that race exist, but it really doesn’t.”

El-Kati said the separate classifications of Americans help to promote a cast system that affords many whites a sense of superiority and entitlement.

“Race is not personal, it’s political, it’s social,” said El-Kati, who has served as a reporter and commentator for a multitude of publications, including this one.

To echo his point, El-Kati told a story of his childhood in Savannah, Ga.

“OK, here’s the scene,” said El-Kati as he leaned back in his chair. “So there’s this man, Mr. Frazier who’d come to visit my grandmother and occasionally he’d bring a buddy or two along for dinner. We were poor people. Mr. Frazier was what people today would call a redneck. But he and my grandmother had a genuine friendship. You could tell they genuinely liked each other – and I can imagine this happening all over the segregated South, yet these people were able to form these relationships.”

Ever the intellectual, El-Kati then directed me to a book by former president Jimmy Carter, “An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood.” El-Kati told of how Carter was best friends with a boy, A.D., who was African-American and how the two would play together and ride the train to the theater, but when they got to the train, Carter would sit up front with the whites and A.D., in the back in the “Negro Car” and once off the train, their friendship would resume only to be interrupted once at the theater where Carter would sit downstairs and A.D. would have to go around back and upstairs to the “Colored Section.”

“That reveals racism as a public evil that reveals private pain,” said El-Kati. “See, so this is how I got into deconstructing race very early on.”

And El-Kati has been deconstructing race ever since. From his time in Harlem, to his time in Cleveland and through his life in the Twin Cities – primarily St. Paul, El-Kati has been offering insightful commentaries on race and class in America. El-Kati, who has either been faculty or a guest lecturer at such places as the University of Minnesota, Macalester, the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse and some 15 other institutions of higher learning, seems most comfortable talking about the subject at places such as Golden Thyme and other community gathering spots. As he said, he is a community activist who was brought into academia.

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For much of the Civil Rights Movement El-Kati had a front row seat. During our nearly three-hour sit-down El-Kati told me stories of his interaction with Malcolm X and his friendship with Carl Stokes prior to Stokes historically becoming the first African-American mayor of Cleveland – the first African-American mayor of a major United States city. El-Kati and Stokes met while attending meetings and events at Cleveland’s Karamu House.

Almost from the beginning of our interaction El-Kati talked about two institutions that shaped his life – his college, Wilberforce University and the Black Press.

“When I first encountered (the Hon.) Elijah Muhammad it was through the Black Press,” said El-Kati, who has an Islamic name but is not Muslim. “I read them (African-American newspapers) all – the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore African American*. I remember when Al (McFarlane) started

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(News) and it was a sheet the size of this paper here (pointing to a piece of paper on the table). I was immersed in these papers. At Wilberforce I’d go to the library and read all of these papers – and more.”

Again, our discussion was interrupted with another person drawn in by the mere presence of the professor emeritus. El-Kati had a few more stops to make so he told me he would have to venture on. But he promised me we would pick up the discussion, which is a good thing because I never got to ask him about his years here in Minnesota, his name change or how his genus translates into art through the works of his son, Stokley Williams, lead singer and drummer for Mint Condition.

I look forward to our next sit down.