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Introducing Muhammad I. Kenyatta

A search for justice for black Americans has led Muhammad I. Kenyatta, 44, through a circuitous route to UB Law School, where he has accepted his first position as a law teacher. "I think of law as a calling to do service — a vocation similar to the clergy," says Kenyatta, who is a Baptist minister as well as a scholar and teacher.

Kenyatta's academic credentials, picked up mostly later in life, include study at the Harvard Divinity School, a Bachelor of Arts degree from Williams College and a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School. He also brings to law students a rich and varied background of writing and teaching coupled with real world involvement: he has been active in the civil rights movement and has participated in both community service and elective politics. His work at UB will center on issues of constitutional law, federalism, legal theory and race and the law.

From 1966 to 1969 he was an editor for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which fought racial barriers to participation in Southern politics, a community organizer for Headstart and a coordinator of the Southern Cooperative Development program and the Child Development Group in Mississippi. Subsequently, he was a member of the Black Economic Development Conference in Philadelphia and a director of community programs for the New England Region of the American Friends Service Committee.

Over the years, Kenyatta says his goal has remained the same: "to help create a society where love is more possible."

Kenyatta grew up in Chester, Pennsylva- nia, where he became a preacher at the age of 14. Then called Donald Brooks Jackson, "The Boy Wonder Preacher," he sometimes spoke at ladies' teas on "The Negro in America: The Unfinished Dream." During the mid-1960s, when reports of sit-ins, marches, Bull Connor and James Mere-dith's attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi appeared daily in the media, he left Williams College to go to Mississippi with his wife Mary. He enrolled in Tougaloo College and committed himself to helping his people in the struggle for equality.

It was then that he renamed himself for religious and black leaders. His first name honors Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad, the American black religious leader; his middle initial is for Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet; and his last name pays tribute to Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya and one of Africa's foremost crusaders for independence.

In 1973 Kenyatta took a year off to attend the Harvard Divinity School as a Merrill Fellow. In 1977, he was theologian-in-residence at the College of Wooster in Ohio, then taught urban studies as a visiting professor at Temple University in Philadelphia. From 1976 to 1978, he was also national director for the Black Theology Project, National Council of Churches of Christ.

During the period, from 1972 to 1981, he served as vice-chairperson of the Pan African Skills Project, an international educational program involving the United States, Tanzania and Ghana. He was a permanent representative to the United Nations' NGO Section (non-governmental organizations) from 1972 to 1978. Kenyatta was director of a community out-reach program at Haverford College from 1978 to 1980, where he also lectured in the humanities. Between classes at Harvard Law, he taught political science courses at Williams College. At Harvard, Kenyatta was president of the Black Law Students Association.

Kenyatta's diverse experience will doubtless enrich both his teaching and scholarship at UB. He will teach a course on Race, Racism and The Law and on Constitutional Law and Democratic Theory, both of which will address the tensions between justice and democracy and between majority rule and minority rights and participation. Even before coming to UB, Kenyatta had written on the mission and limits of constitutional law.

One of his main teaching goals at UB, Kenyatta says, will be to focus more attention on the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a legal philosopher. "Probably because King was not a lawyer, he is not generally studied in law school," says Kenyatta. "But I think he was one of the most important English speaking legal philosophers of the 20th century. His concern was what is law and why should we obey it."

Kenyatta intends to bring an ethical dimension to the classroom. As he puts it, "I'm very interested in the intersection of spirituality and the law."