**Kwame Ture: Memories.\* Mike Miller. *Social Policy.* January, 1999.**

I met him in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1963 as Stokely Carmichael: bold, audacious, fearless, inspiring, fun-loving, an infectious grin; his presence filled a room. People there thought he had a streak of craziness because he personally and "in your face" confronted Mississippi authority. But he had a purpose: to strip away the psychological intimidation of white supremacy.

Black Power emerged as SNCC's slogan in 1966, but since its shift in 1962 from direct action to voter registration and community organizing, SNCC had been about black power. I thought it was better to walk softly with a big stick than to talk loudly with almost no stick at all. He disagreed. His strategy at the time was to "use the white media" to talk to the Black community. He thought the central problem was one of consciousness, and that until Africans in America were freed from their white-defined or limited consciousness they would never be free.

In the mid-'60s, Stokely talked about an organizing campaign to "Free DC." Home rule was to be its goal; under that umbrella racism in all its manifestations would be challenged. When he wasn't the public agitator, he was a careful organizer. He could have done something significant in DC. I wish he had taken that course; his call was to a different drummer. He left the US 30 years ago and took residence in Africa.

In May, 1988, he wrote me after attending a SNCC reunion, "(I)t was interesting to see them/us together. Many you know have already accepted their laurels and do not even pretend to see the need for further reforms. For them the '60s put everything in place and they did it. Well I still see Revolution and continue to work for it. So communicating with you at least lets me know there are still some crazy ones, even if not as crazy as I." I responded, "As to revolution versus reform, I'm taken with a couple of new formulations: 'revorm' or 'refolution'. Both imply that there needs to be a basic change in the relations of power and property, but I don't want to throw everything out. Pol Pot and Shining Path leave me cold."

He saw Israel as an outpost for US foreign policy and Zionism as an ideology of imperialism, but he was not anti-Semitic; I think he worked to maintain the distinction. I wrote him in 1990: "I don't have a very elaborated position on this whole issue -- not much more than what I vaguely remember as Sartre's: two peoples with legitimate claims to a homeland who need to recognize each other's rights and negotiate their differences."

I don’t have all our correspondence, but in August, 1993, I received this:

**Republique de GUINEE August 16, 93**

**Paysage du Fouta Djallon**

**Comrade Mike,**

**Received 28th July letter, thanks for your constant work for the oppressed. Don’t skip a beat, till the heart stops. We are her doin the same thing and we getting better. Here we stand directly before state power, which will fall into the hands of the peoples power. Be strong—no sell out—just eternal struggle – Kwame**

**P.S. Send me an issue of TOM**

**[The Organizer Mailing (TOM) was a “reader’s digest” of organizing and related material published by ORGANIZE Training Center]**

"Ready for the revolution?" my answering machine said one afternoon in the mid-1990s in the unmistakable Caribbean-influenced lilt of Kwame's voice. Thirty-five years after Greenwood, we were still in touch. Though our paths had taken different courses, each in his own way stayed true to building the power of the oppressed, marginalized, exploited, discriminated against, powerless--you pick the word--to act as their own liberators. He eschewed the many opportunities beckoning him in a society that is master of the art of cooptation. He could have been a college professor, War on Poverty director or leading elected official and more. We corresponded over the years, and occasionally talked when he was in the Bay Area. I cried, really sobbed, something very hard for me to do, at the April, 1998 Washington DC dinner-celebration of his life. By then, everyone knew he would not beat the prostate cancer he had struggled to overcome.

Kwame spoke at the dinner on unity among all African people. At one moment he captured the room; you could have heard a pin drop. "Minister Farrakhan attacked Martin (Luther King, Jr.)." He paused for dramatic effect. "The NAACP attacked Martin. CORE attacked Martin. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee attacked Martin." He paused again, then quietly said, "And Martin never attacked back. We need unity in the black community."

The public debate about Kwame raged throughout his life--as these comments illustrate:

Assata Shakur: "...i loved him before i met him. There was absolutely no way in the world that i could not love that intelligent, bold, energetic, young Black man who gave so much to our people, who gave so much to our struggle. Kwame, on a daily basis, courageously stood up to the Ku Klux Klan, to would-be lynchers, to the U.S. government and demanded power and freedom for African people, born and raised in the United States...We will always be eternally grateful to him. As a young woman, Kwame was one of the people who changed my life. He helped give me the strength and courage to throw off the mental burden of white supremacy and to begin the long journey home, back to my African Roots.

"Later, i had the privilege of becoming Kwame's friend. My love for him grew deeper, and i learned to appreciate him not only as a great organizer, as a great thinker, as a great revolutionary, but as a great human being. He was one of the kindest, most humane, most thoughtful brothers who ever walked on this planet. Up to the last breath that he took...he struggled for social justice all over the world.

"...We will teach our children about Kwame, we will carry on his legacy, and we will call out his name with every libation. I respect and i thank his mother, his family, and those who nourished and loved him, those who helped give him the inner beauty and strength that he shared with so many people."

Tyler (her only identification on the internet): "I will forever remember Stokely Carmichael as the one who said 'the position of women in the movement is prone'. This viciously anti-women outlook is another reason why all of these nationalist movements went nowhere. Only with international working-class unity can any change be made for it is only labor which can make change. Only a united labor, regardless of color, and rejecting all anti-women and anti-gay attacks, can advance and make change in a capitalist society. The problem is capitalism, and the solution is socialism, which only labor can realize."

**Recollections from SNCC people**

I think Kwame should be remembered for his strengths as well as his weaknesses. Here are the recollections of a number of people who knew and worked with him.

Wazir Peacock was born and raised in Charleston, Mississippi. Prior to joining the SNCC staff in the early 1960s, he was a pre-med student at Rust College in Holly Springs, MS. In 1962, he was one of SNCC's first organizers in Greenwood: "Kwame demonstrated to me he was a good organizer, and he could mobilize too--that's a pretty unique attribute." (SNCC workers distinguished between 'organizing'--the slow, patient process of building a permanent grassroots organization--and 'mobilizing'--getting large numbers of people to an event like a march or demonstration.) "I first met him when I was at Howard University. He was down to earth; we became good friends. He could relate to all people on whatever class or education level. It was very obvious also that he was an intellectual with strong philosophy about the political structure as it should be to make things better for African-American people. In his Lowndes County work, he demonstrated to me an in-depth ability to organize and sustain a grassroots project. That was one of the most dangerous counties in Alabama. I saw him first hand as a person with a lot of depth. He was in for the long-haul. That gave me another level of respect for him as one of the students who came South from the North. Those students were very well educated and sophisticated -- more than we who were from the South even if we went to college. They were way past the people in their thinking. I saw myself as a person who could translate to them the level they needed to communicate with local people. Kwame appreciated that; he called on me many times to listen to my level of expression, to learn how to make his ideas sensible in the Delta. He knew he needed to do this to be a more effective organizer. He was like a sponge; he could absorb lots of material and sift out what was needed; he could cut through the fat and get to the lean. I had a lot of respect for him as a good friend and as an organizer. He had a lot of heart, a lot of love and an ability to see the larger picture.”

Casey Hayden was a white field secretary on the SNCC staff, working out of the Atlanta office. Her efficiency and toughness were legendary--as was her warmth. She and Mary King anonymously authored an early feminist paper on the treatment of women in The Movement. At a break in one of SNCC's marathon, multi-day, staff meetings, "Our paper on the position of women came up, and Stokely in his hipster rap comedic way joked that 'the proper position of women in SNCC is prone'. I laughed, he laughed, we all laughed. Stokley was a friend of mine. We crossed paths in many settings, as he was close to the Young People's Socialist League, and through them, to SDS...and I knew he was on my side about women's issues, because we'd talked about them. After we finished cracking up, we sang some more. This was my final experience after a SNCC meeting of Black and White joining together to laugh, to touch, to bond, and to comfort each other."

Hardy Frye was born and grew up in Tuskegee, AL. He left when he was 17 and spent three years in the newly integrated Army. In the early 1960s, he joined CORE, participated in California civil rights activities, returned to school, joined "Friends of SNCC" (the organization's northern support arm) in 1963, and, in 1964, became a Mississippi Summer Project volunteer where he met Stokely: "I was on the other side of the split in SNCC, in the John Lewis camp when Stokely won the election for Chairman. I'd been in jail with John Lewis. The racial hostility that grew within SNCC was not very strong in Holly Springs; we had a good working relationship between Blacks and Whites. It was hard for me to deal with the Black nationalism Stokely was talking about because it didn't fit my experience with White comrades in Mississippi. It wasn't that I was crazy about white people, but these were people who were there with me. We probably came as close to race not being a factor in relationships as was possible. I'd also had some experience with Northern Blacks coming down to Mississippi, talking about nationalism, then leaving town because they couldn't take the pressure. Black power was asking me to challenge my revolutionary comrades and friends. I couldn't see it.

"I invited Carmichael to speak at Sacramento State. He came and mesmerized the audience; he was very articulate, dynamic. There was then a period when he was involved with the Black nationalists. Then Carmichael started getting hooked up with the Panthers who were marching around with guns without bullets in them. That didn't make any sense to me. I respected Carmichael, but it was the northern hangers-on and people around him who frightened me. They hadn't put their bodies on the line as some of my white friends had. You were measured by how Black you were, not by what you did.

"He forced me to confront the whole thing of Blackness in The Movement. I grew up in an almost all Black environment and, for the most part, didn't have direct negative experience with White people. I wasn't acting in reaction to Whites, as many of the Northern Blacks were, and was more concerned with poverty in the Black community. Class was important in my analysis of things. But over time, I came to accept the political importance of Black Power.

"I felt robbed of a voice of leadership in the Black movement here. He could have been the heir to Malcolm X, but his direction toward Africa and Pan-Africanism led him away from that. I don't know anybody else who was capable of playing that role, but he choose to go in a different direction. Some people see him in a direct line from Malcolm, but to me Malcolm was moving toward putting together a movement here in the U.S."

Elizabeth Sutherland (Betita) Martinez was Director of SNCC's New York office from 1965-67, edited the book Letters From Mississippi, published numerous articles about SNCC in the '60s and is now co-chair of the Institute for Multi-Racial Justice: "Kwame stood for a very fearless defiance of society as it is, especially its racism and oppression, and he never stopped exuding that kind of spirit. That's what people mean when they say he was so consistent all through his life. But I don't think people always realize the sheer humanity of him, his willingness to spend time with people whether they were 'important' or not--like the time he spent an hour with my 8th grade daughter being interviewed for a school assignment.

"He was complex beyond the icon of militant defiance. He kept on growing; he wasn't frozen in a position; he always was reading, studying, increasing his understanding.

"His battle with cancer in the last several years gave him a new kind of depth as a human being, I think. When I talked with him in 1997, it was a conversation with someone who possessed an inner strength.

"He was exciting because he aroused people's sense of potential, inner power. A lot of his militancy was designed to raise consciousness--it wasn't empty rhetoric. Kwame thought it was central to move people out of fear. However much he may have disagreed with Martin Luther King on some things, he admired him for moving people forward, beyond fear.”

Jean Wiley was a 1960 sit-in student while at Morgan State College and a SNCC staff member from 1965 - 1969. She taught creative writing and literature at Tuskegee, Federal City College (DC) and UC Berkeley, and is now a program specialist and publications editor at the National Economic Development and Law Center: "I thought Carmichael was a brilliant organizer. I watched him develop the Lowndes County (Alabama) Freedom Organization (LCFO) with Courtland Cox and Bob Mants. Carmichael was a key strategist for the Project." LCFO was in one of Alabama's most dangerous counties, and was also one of SNCC's most successful organizing efforts.

"I was struck by how he related to local people, especially elders. He had no more familiarity with the rural South than I, but it was as though he belonged there. He had an ease with them, and they with him. He brought a calm respect to his work with the people. He was a stranger living in and being accepted by a very different culture and lifestyle. Lowndes County people liked him. He was funny, witty in a way that is usually associated with the North, yet he was able to make it connect with the humor and people of the South in a way I didn't see in any other organizer. He knew when to teach and inform and when to step back, listen and watch.

“I appreciated the Black Power slogan; it was, in fact, exactly what we were building in Lowndes County. I was saddened and bewildered that we couldn't define it to describe what we were doing so that people at least understood it.

"Our personal conversations ranged from Huckleberry Finn to the debate in existentialism between Camus and Sartre to practical organizing questions. He taught my first college class on Mark Twain's book. I hadn't heard his take on it before--it was brilliant and the students were enthralled. We also talked a lot about music. He introduced me to Bob Dylan, who he liked. He was very urbane, so he enjoyed the fancy cocktail parties where we raised big money, and he saw irony in the contrast between the wealth present in those events and the poverty of southern sharecroppers. He could function well in both worlds.

"There were so many contradictions that he managed. He could be ferocious and passionate in political debate, but he was never mean to those with whom he disagreed and I never saw him attack anybody who couldn't handle the attack. There was a surprising gentleness about him; there was also sadness. While he was around a lot of people, I thought he was a loner. He was a friend who was very significant to me."

Phil Hutchings was National Program Secretary for SNCC 1968-69. Since then he lived mostly in the mid-west, then the Bay Area. He worked in various community organizing projects, educational institutions and as an organizational consultant for progressive advocacy and other nonprofit organizations: "I think his enduring contribution is his life which was a model of how to struggle, how not to sell out, how to maintain your principles through different time periods -- from civil rights period to now. His getting, 'ready for the revolution,' embodied his life. He lived his life according to what he thought should be happening in the world, and he never abandoned that. For those of us who are older, getting tired, wondering if there's a movement out there, his life is a model, an inspiration.

"For me personally, as someone who knew him from his Howard University days on, he taught me a lot about what it means to be a Black man in the modern world. You are generous with your friends, tough with your enemies. You can be tough-minded, yet very open at the same time. The most important thing is to hold onto your principles, not be liked or popular. He was willing to go out and do something, to be the first to become engaged. Other people followed him. He energized other people. He was doing that to the end of his life."

His impact on others: "It was impossible not to like him even if you disagreed with him; he had an infectious personality. You wanted to be in his presence. He emboldened people, particularly in the South where poor, uneducated Black folks were afraid to register to vote; he could get them to take risks. He propelled people into motion. He used action as a teaching laboratory. In the context of action, he got people to think.

"He was someone you could disagree with and not fall out over it. Even though we kidded and called him 'Starmichael,' he could sublimate his ego to get done what was needed to be done. I don't think he fell out with very many people since the SNCC days. He would say what he thought, and you could disagree with it but you wouldn't cease being a human being and someone with whom he wanted to be in relationship. I think it's something British that was used and transformed by the West Indian radical tradition of CLR James. Stokely epitomized that spirit. He never stopped talking about imperialism, so he could talk with the Marxists; he never stopped talking about Pan Africanism, so he could talk with the nationalists. He was one of the few people who could bridge this division among Black radicals.

Terry Cannon was on the SNCC staff with me in the early to mid-1960s, and served as editor of the Bay Area-based SNCC newspaper, The Movement: "Among the themes I would explore in talking about Kwame are audacity and (to create awkward word) mercurialness. I think they are related. Audacity at its best being the ability to pick up on political currents and move with them, riding, or leading, the wave. Initially, it served him well. I think it turned into mercurialness a while later. One must, after all, pick the right wave....It would be interesting to analyze Kwame at his worst, which I would pinpoint as his February 17, 1968 speech in Oakland. I disagree politically with almost everything he said in that speech, yet it burned with honest ferocity, and responded to a desperate fear of disunity. It seemed like a cultural nationalist position, but it was not, and he wasn't. He jettisoned any concept that might get in the way of Black unity. And at the same time he wanted that black unity to be a revolutionary vanguard force that would be obeyed, which is impossible...impossibility being the limit of audacity."

**And From Others**

Joe Brooks was President of the Emergency Land Fund--an effort to help Southern Blacks keep and gain land taken from them--and has for many years been active in a variety of roles in the Bay Area. He knew Kwame as an undergraduate (1964) at San Jose State College; as "a citizen of and leader in the Republic of New Africa;" and, later "I was close to the South African liberation movement--specifically the Pan African Congress. It was the same group Kwame was close to. He was at my house; we talked.

"I always thought he had a very sharp mind and could move a crowd better than anybody I'd ever seen; he had an infectious presence and smile. He pushed Movement people to study, to have clear thinking as opposed to emotional reaction and confrontation at the wrong place and wrong time. I think he lost an opportunity by not staying here and moving people here. I thought he was a romantic, but there's nothing wrong with that. I saw him angry in a positive way; it was his passion that you mostly saw, not anger. He was a good model for young Blacks. I really think that we missed his leadership here. These brothers from the Caribbean come here and take care of so much business. He was one sharp brother.

"His contribution was courage and patience; patience pays off; he put another dimension to what it means to struggle; he had a long view. His time on campuses creating a link to youth was very important, and when he was a youth he listened to older people."

A "Friend of SNCC (and of mine):" SNCC's inability "to hold together the band of brothers and sisters, circle of trust, the beloved community, I lay to a great extent at Stokely's feet. Rather than the fond remembrance of the civil rights leader he was purported to be, my recollection is of the extreme disappointment and sadness I felt at the time, watching him use his remarkable talent in rhetorical excess to exclude Whites from The Movement and incite Blacks with lines like, 'when you talk of Black Power, you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created.' ...Stokely, with his anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, gun-waving, fiery language, and exclusionary policy did much damage to The Movement."

Clarence Johnson was twelve years old when he first met Kwame. Aaron, his oldest brother in a family of eight children, pastored First Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church. He was the first to let SNCC hold mass meetings in his church. "The first things I remember about Stokely were his vibrancy, smile and intellect. He had a special way of connecting with people. His personality was authentic. Growing up in the Delta, we didn't see Black people with his level of education. Then I heard him speak once, and he was so fiery, so emotional. He was a tireless worker. I guess the thing I remember most was in 1966, during the Meredith March against fear in Mississippi. Meredith was shot, and other civil rights leaders came in to finish the march. There must have been several thousand people in Greenwood when Stokely made his now infamous Black Power speech there. It was this person who convinced us that he loved Greenwood, and so we loved him. His speech was so powerful.

"People didn't know what Black Power meant; they'd never heard those two words put together in that fashion. We took it to mean it was time for Blacks to do some things for themselves, take responsibility for our organizations, for our political and economic empowerment. We couldn't wait for someone else to do things for us.

"He made it clear that all people had gifts to share and that those should be contributed in the context of real democracy. When he moved from nonviolent action to a more strident, militant tone he was still pushing for freedom. He turned the light of freedom on for me. Freedom is a constant struggle; we are constantly moving to attain it. It's not something you can grab and hold onto. You are always pursuing it and you can't relax in that pursuit."

Anonymous: "Kwame had a fair amount of mystery that surrounds him. It's never been clear to me how he supported the Sekou Ture regime in Guinea even when it was quite brutal and dictatorial and putting many intellectuals in prison. We knew from the exiles here that this was true, yet Kwame would deny it and say it was rumor and Western attempts to undermine Toure's leadership. It's hard to know how Kwame made this fit with his own commitments."

Margot Dashiell now teaches sociology and African-American Studies at Laney Community College. She is a long-time activist in the African-American community in Berkeley and Oakland: "He spoke to students at Laney. By the '80s, he was talking with huge numbers of students. It's his fountain of energy that I remember and his passion about ideas. He turned on many young people. I also remember him as a person who just didn't say 'no'. When I ran for public office in Berkeley, he took the stance that he didn't align himself with a particular candidate if Black candidates were opposed to one another. But he allowed his presence to be a fundraiser for me. He stretched to be as supportive as he could be. What struck me so much during his illness is the power of the human will. What happens when someone is committed to a cause? The test of that commitment is what one can do through his or her physical limitations and pain. I think that was a test for Kwame. He had a perfect right to retreat, rest and mend but he forced as much work from himself as could be done. It was incredible. In '97 he came to a small fundraiser to try to cover his medical expenses. We knew he was ill and in pain. We gave him ten minutes on the evening's agenda so we wouldn't tire him, but when it came time to speak, he held forth for thirty or forty minutes, determined to reach people and teach his ideas.

"He showed tremendous integrity by introducing to us the struggles of Native Americans and other oppressed people. He reminded us of the struggles of other people, and the importance of alliances with them. He was especially moved by the Native American claims to land in this country."

Everyone remembers Kwame in two dimensions--the political and the personal. It was the latter that meant most to me. He understood, as too few "movement" people do, the meaning of friendship. It is easy to betray friends in the name of what are called 'principles.' And to do so with moral righteousness. The political positions we adopt change as our understanding of the world changes. Fidelity to a friend is an enduring virtue. I think Kwame understood that.

*(The author was a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Field Secretary from mid-1962 to the end of 1966. He now directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center.)*

\*Minor revisions have been made to this article.