

Kwame Ture: An African Revolutionary
by
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Kwame Ture (Stokely Standiford Churchill Carmichael) has been called “the most courageous and consistent Black revolutionary of his generation.” It is said that his “love for suffering and struggling Black people was astounding and amazing.” The following pages highlight the remarkable life of this extraordinary man.

Kwame Ture was born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad May 29, 1941. He spent his first 11 years under the watchful eyes of his grandmother and his aunts. He, along with his two sisters, joined their parents in New York City in 1952. More than 40 years would pass before Kwame would return to the land of his birth.

After completing New York PS 34 and New York PS 83, he graduated from the prestigious Bronx High School of Science in June 1960. That fall, he enrolled in Howard University where he immersed himself in the student protest movement. He joined first the Non-violent Action Group (NAG) and later the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a national civil rights organization that he helped to build and would one day lead.

Though a premed major, Kwame studied with the foremost Black intellectuals of his times. Sterling Brown, Chancellor Williams, E. Franklin Frazier, Toni Morrison, Frank Snowden and Rayford Logan among others contributed to his development. And, as student activist, he was mentored by the civil rights movement’s chief architects and major strategists. Leaders like Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, James Lawson, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Baldwin, Bob Moses, Martin Luther King Jr. and others groomed Ture for a life of service to African people.

As a 19-year-old Freedom Rider, Kwame was imprisoned for 45 days in a 6 x 9 foot cell in Mississippi’s most notorious prison, Parchman Farm. During his college years as a civil rights activist, he was beaten, shot at frequently and arrested and imprisoned 27 times. But this did not stop him or his fellow SNCC workers from helping local residents to organizing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). However, it wasn’t until 1966 after his election as SNCC chairman that he came to national and then international prominence.

It happened on the evening of June 17th in Greenwood, Mississippi while on the “March Against Fear.” Disgusted with the killings, beatings and torture of civil rights workers by racist cops and their Klan supporters, Ture delivered an emotional speech to 3,000 of his fellow marchers in which he called for Black Power as the only means of ending these brutal acts. And then, with the assistance of Willie Mukasa Ricks, he led the audience in a spontaneous, soul-stirring Black Power chant.

Black Power sparked a firestorm of controversy and generated a heated national debate with Kwame at the center. Roundly condemned by both the Black and White establishments as divisive, polarizing and destructive to “Negro progress,” Black Power was enthusiastically embraced in both the national and international African community. Student activists, revolutionary artists and progressive intellectuals considered it a milestone in Black political thought. To formalize the concept, Kwame and Charles V. Hamilton published the book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* in 1967.

At the height of his American popularity and after speaking to 200,000 Black people, Kwame was invited to Africa by the world’s leading exemplars of Black Power, President Seku Ture of Guinea and his co-president, Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana. They, along with Dr. Shirley Graham DuBois, wanted him to attend the 8th Congress of the Democratic Party of Guinea. Kwame gladly accepted the invitation, traveled to Guinea, and attended the proceeding in Conakry, a city destined to be his home-base for 30 years.

During this period, he also visited Cuba, Algeria, Soviet Union, China and North Viet Nam. Much to the displeasure of the U.S. State Department, everywhere he traveled he was warmly received by heads of state as a leader of and spokesman for the African American people. In Cuba he met with Fidel Castro and in Viet Nam, Ho Chi Minh.

Because of his irrepressible advocacy of Black Power, Kwame was declared persona non grata and banned from France, England and 30 territories of the former British (British) Empire, including Trinidad and Tobago, the country of his birth. Nonetheless, during his lifetime, he managed to deliver his message of Pan African unity to Africans in over 70 countries. He also served briefly as prime minister of the Black Panther Party, a Black revolutionary Marxist-Leninist-Maoist youth organization established in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.

In 1968 he married popular Azanian (South African) singer-musician-activist Mariam Makeba and in 1969, weary of the constant government surveillance and harassment, he and Mariam moved to Guinea to live, study and fight for African liberation.

He lived in a government house in Conakry, trained with the Ghanaian armed forces, and participated in clandestine military operations. He also served as Kwame Nkrumah’s political secretary. After reading Nkrumah’s *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare*, Kwame asked for and received Nkrumah’s permission to organize the All-African Peoples Revolutionary Party (A-APRP), a task that consumed the remaining 30 years of his life. It was also during this period that Ture changed his name from Stokely Carmichael to Kwame Ture, in honor of his two “political fathers”, and began using his trademark salutation “Ready for Revolution.”

After 30 years crisscrossing Africa, the U.S. and the Caribbean organizing on behalf of the A-APRP, in January of 1996 while on a trip to New York City, Kwame was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. His friends and supporters from NAG, SNCC, Nation of Islam, Black Panther Party, A-APRP and other organizations rushed to his aid and raised the large sums needed for his medical expenses. Kwame also accepted an invitation from his supporters in Cuba to come there for additional medical treatment. And shortly before his death, his friend Libyan leader Muammar Al-Qathafi sent a hospital plane to Conakry to transport him and his family to Libya for yet further medical care.

In spite of his illness and constant pain, Kwame did not reduce his workload. During 1997, he managed trips to Cuba, Bahamas, Ghana, Egypt, Libya, Guinea and Azania (South Africa). In the U.S., before a large university audience, Kwame stated openly that the “forces of American imperialism and others who conspire with them” infected him with cancer because of his 30-year advocacy of Pan Africanism and his uncompromising stance against U.S. imperialism and Zionism.

On July 5, 1998, following a tribute by 1,500 of his closest friends, family and supporters, he left New York City for the last time. It was his wish to die in his beloved Africa working for Black Power. And on November 15, 1998 “an exhausted Kwame Ture, weighing less than 100 pounds, danced and went to join the ancestors.” At his funeral, friends from 39 nations, including the Libyan and Cuban ambassadors and representatives from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the A-APRP and others formations joined together with his family and the Guinean people to celebrate a life well lived.

Post Script

On May 8, 1999 Kwame was posthumously awarded an honorary doctorate by Howard University, his alma mater, at its 131st Commencement Convocation. He also received posthumous awards from the governments of Gambia and Trinidad and Tobago.

Kwame Ture’s final wish was to have a work-study institute and library in Conakry in his name to house his 1,700 books, personal papers, photographs and recordings. His 80-year-old mother, May Charles Carmichael, is spearheading this effort. She asks that all of Kwame’s friends and supporters send their tax-exempt donations to the Kwame Ture Work-Study Institute and Library c/o Black United Front, 1809 East 71st Street, Chicago, IL 60649. Telephone: 773.324.0494. Or, send your contributions Kwame Ture Work-Study Institute and Library, 1019 O St. NW, Washington, DC 20001.

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