Nonviolence Work in Africa: a Historical View

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Bill Sutherland wields a pickaxe at a construction project in Dar Es Salaam, Tanganika (now Tanzania) in the Spring of 1962, connected with the nonviolence training center established there that year. Watching him, holding a shovel, is Bayard Rustin; at Rustin's left is Michael Scott.

About five years ago, World War II conscientious objector and longtime pan-Africanist Bill Sutherland and former War Resisters League national chairperson Matt Meyer embarked on an oral history project to record reflections on the uses of violence and nonviolence within the African liberation movements and governments. The project, sponsored by the Muste Institute, will result in a book culled from interviews with Sutherland and such notable African leaders as Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Ella Ramgobin (Gandhi's granddaughter), Graça Machel, Walter Sisulu and Sam Nujoma.

Though the forthcoming book is still in the writing stage, below are some edited excerpts from interviews with Bill Sutherland.

"While cycling across Europe with the Peacemakers project in 1951, we met with African students whose enthusiasm about their struggles back home was contagious. They were so gung ho about the possibilities for liberation on the African continent, and I was inspired by their passion. Back in the U.S., the possibilities of progressive social change looked more remote to me, but in Africa it seemed that there was a real possibility to put the values we were talking about into practice.

"Not everyone agreed. A.J. Muste felt I was off on the wrong foot. According to A.J.'s analysis, Africa would have to go through various social and economic stages—including industrialism—before Africans would be ready to reach a revolutionary potential. The options of social change in the U.S. or Africa, I thought, were not as clear as all that—not as clear as the black and white of contemporary socialist analysis or, metaphorically, as the black and white of the keys on a piano. I was going to try, as I explained to A.J., to play between the cracks."

While he may have had academic disagreements with Bill about Africa, A.J. did not hesitate to help with fundraising for Bill to go there. Bill moved to the Gold Coast in December 1953, which was undergoing a largely nonviolent transition towards independence. Under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, Gold Coast became Ghana.

"By 1959, plans had been publicized for a French atomic test in the Sahara desert—at Reggan in Upper Volta, the northern neighbor of Ghana. Sentiment against this testing was strong among the Africans, and I used my position as Finance Minister Gbedema's private secretary to bring about a liasion between Ghanaians and the British and American peace movements. British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) leaders Michael Scott, Michael Randle and Francis Hoyland joined A.J. Muste in Accra, Ghana's capital city, to set up the Sahara Protest Team.

"Calling it 'the most significant in the series of direct-action civil-disobedience projects in which radical non-pacifists have been involved,' A.J. described the Sahara Protest in his essay 'Africa Against the Bomb,' printed in the January 1960 issue of *Liberation*. Beginning on the morning of Dec. 6, 1959, the Sahara Protest Team caravaned through northern Ghana, stopping for support rallies at towns and cheered by crowds of people along the route."

After one nuclear test took place, the French government decided to move their testing out of Africa and into the South Pacific. The Sahara Team disbanded but its members helped plan a follow-up "Conference on Positive Action for the Peace and Security of Africa," held in Accra on April 7-10, 1960.

"'This is your conference,' President Nkrumah told the advisor group. "Let's see what you can come up with.' It was a formidable task, even for a veteran tactician like Muste. He and Michael Randle worked long into the night planning a center, a pacifist West Point, to train African revolutionaries in nonviolent strategy and tactics.

The idea for the training center in Ghana was eventually abandoned, but it resurfaced in March of 1962 in Dar Es Salaam, Tanganika (see photo). Unfortunately, Muste and other international supporters were unable to drum up enough financial support, and the center closed in June of 1963. Bill Sutherland stayed in Dar Es Salaam, where he still lives.

Bequests

If you are making up your will, we hope you will consider leaving a bequest to the Muste Institute to ensure the continuation of our work in the future. A suggested simple wording to use in making bequests is: "I bequeath_____dollars ($____) or _____ percent of my estate to the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute, Inc., a charitable, not-for-profit organization located at 339 Lafayette Street, New York, New York, 10012, to be used for its general purposes."

To discuss other types of bequests, such as those directed toward a specific purpose or for one of our sponsored groups, write or call Murray Rosenblith, the Institute's Executive Director.

Grantee Profile:
Organizer from Eastern Amazon Visits US

Dona Raimunda Gomes is an organizer among babaçu palm nut workers in the Eastern Amazon. She is the coordinator of the Regional Association of Women of the Parrot's Beak, one of the most violent regions in all of Brazil. She travelled to New York in May of 1994 to attend Amazon Week in New York City, organized by Amanaka'a Amazon Network. Her presence at the Week was supported by a grant from the Muste Institute.

In the Eastern Amazon, women use babaçu palms for many things: principally to make oil, but also to make soap, chocolate, the walls and roofs of their houses. Babaçu is the root of their economy and their way of life. But large land owners have taken over the wild stands of babaçu, razing them or making it difficult for the women to collect the palms. The women confront jaguños, or gunmen, in order to continue. The women are at the forefront of the struggle in the Parrot's Beak, both because many of the men have been killed and because of their role in defense of the babaçu stands.

In New York for Amazon Week V, Dona Raimunda spoke at the opening ceremony at the United Nations; on a panel entitled "Women of the Amazon"; and on various panels during the weekend workshops. She also brought her poetry and songs to the week, illuminating each of the events. Although her songs were in Portuguese, everyone seemed to understand them for what they are: songs of hope, of work, of struggle—songs that reflect the social movements of the Amazon.

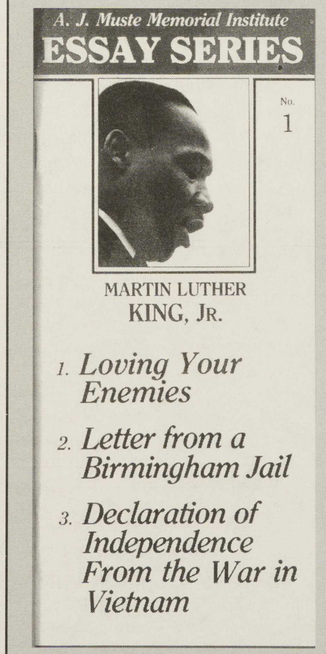
Father Ricardo Rezende, a human rights worker from the Parrot's Beak, was also invited for Amazon Week V. He was not able to come as he had to testify in the trial of the murderers of two rural workers and organizers. The killers were convicted, but the violence continues: Father Ricardo has been receiving serious death threats for his work denouncing slave labor in the area. For more information contact Amanaka'a at 584 Broadway, #814, New York, NY 10012, fax# 212-925-7743.

—Christine Halvorson

KATHERINE MCGLYNN

Dona Raimunda Gomes speaks at the Amazon Week V Opening Ceremony at the UN.

Celebrate Martin Luther King Day with our Special Pamphlet Offer



Since 1986, Martin Luther King Day has been an official holiday, celebrated on the third Monday in January. The day commemorates the birth of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights leader and advocate of nonviolent direct action for social justice.

Our Essay Series pamphlet No. 1, containing three writings by King, provides an excellent introduction to his ideas on nonviolence. The pamphlet features King's classic sermon, "Loving Your Enemies," an inspired condemnation of hate; his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which he explains to white liberal clergymen the absolute necessity and urgency of direct action; and "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," perhaps his most radical speech, delivered at an anti-war meeting at Riverside Church one year to the day before he was assassinated.

This Martin Luther King Day will be observed on January 16, 1995. We're making a special offer to reach as many people as possible with our King pamphlet. Between now and January 31, we will charge only 25 cents per copy—shipping included—to organizations or individuals buying fifty or more copies of the King pamphlet to distribute for free. (Those who plan to sell the pamphlets will pay our regular wholesale price of 70 cents each, plus shipping.)

If you work with any organizations who might be interested, urge them to purchase fifty or more copies of our King pamphlet for free distribution to their members or to the general public. Send us the names and addresses of any community organizations, cultural centers, churches, schools or even businesses who you think might be interested, and we'll send them information. This special offer also applies to our Spanish-language version of the King pamphlet.

Speaking of literature, our special Sampler Packet offer is only good until December 31. You can pay $10 postpaid to get all 12 of our Essay Series pamphlets on nonviolence, and only $5 postpaid for *Peace Agitator*, Nat Hentoff's biography of A.J. Muste. Have us send them to your friends as gifts! If you want quick delivery, add $3 per address and we'll send them by two-day priority mail.