

# **Kuwasi at 60**

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# Contents

Early Life . . . . .	3
Military . . . . .	4
Becoming a Panther . . . . .	4
The Black Liberation Army . . . . .	6
Brinks Robbery and Prison . . . . .	7
As Anarchist . . . . .	8
As Queer . . . . .	9
Meaning of Kuwasi for Today . . . . .	9

On December 16, 2006 over 75 people gathered at LAVA in West Philadelphia. The crowd was a mix of Black liberation movement veterans (young and old), anarchist punks and white queer activists from ACT UP. They came together to pay homage to the late Kuwasi Balagoon, who would have turned 60 years old this year. Balagoon is not an immediately recognizable name in the pantheon of revolutionaries, yet he has developed into an underground hero 20 years after his death. This is due in large part to the maze of contradictions that constructed Balagoon's life.

As a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, he was the quintessential outlaw, escaping prison twice and leading units in the expropriation of banks, including the infamous Nyack armored car heist in 1983 (an incident that served as a basis for the film *Dead Presidents*). Balagoon was also a humanist, who enjoyed painting, writing poetry and baking for his fellow inmates. However, it was Kuwasi's identification as a queer anarchist that has sparked renewed interest in his life. "He was an anarchist in a black nationalist movement, he was queer in a straight dominated movement, he was a guerrilla fighter after it was "chic," and he never backed down from his ideals, his beliefs, the struggle or him self. And he demanded to be seen not as a revolutionary icon, but as a person, beautiful and flawed," said Walidah Imarisha, poet and one of the presenters at the Balagoon memorial.

## Early Life

Kuwasi Balagoon was born Donald Weems in Lakeland, Maryland on December 23, 1946. He was the youngest of three children and his parents were both employees of the federal government. Kuwasi was influenced early on by a deep maternal instinct, primarily through his grandmother ("Mama Shine") and Miss Reed, his elementary school teacher for whom he described having a fleeting crush. Kuwasi was a self-described "wild child" who had once jumped out of the second story window of his house in imitation of Superman. For the most part, Kuwasi had a comfortable childhood, where he played high school football (he missed the March on Washington for practice) and wanted to become a veterinarian.

Two major events lead to Kuwasi's political awakening. The first was the rebellion in nearby Cambridge, Maryland. In 1963, the local Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (under the leadership of Gloria Richardson) led a series of sit-ins aimed at desegregating public facilities. The sit-ins brought national attention to Cambridge, a town that prided itself on being able to maintain "racial peace." Nevertheless that peace was exploded when two young students were arrested for staging a pray-in. Their indefinite incarceration angered the Black community. For two days, white businesses were fire-bombed. On the Maryland Governor's request, the National Guard entered and occupied Cambridge's Black community for a year, leading to more rebellions. The event shook Kuwasi's consciousness, even as he was debating the tactics espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, "The rebellion that took place in Cambridge, Maryland showed a far better action for Black people to take even then."

The other event was more personal in nature. Kuwasi's eldest sister, Mary, began to date Jimmy. Kuwasi describes Jimmy as a cool guitar player and was like a big brother to me." The two ran the streets together, sneaking drinks and enjoying life. As a truck driver for a local department store, Jimmy also played the role of Robin Hood, often expropriating merchandise from the store. "The Christmas I was thirteen was a super Christmas for a materialistic youth...Good God he liberated, we couldn't get everything under the tree." Kuwasi's friendship with Jimmy only ended

with Jimmy's arrest for raping a white woman. A typical charge leveled against Black men in the south, the case was flimsy but within fifteen minutes an all white jury convicted him. Jimmy would spend seven years in the state penitentiary before he escaped. Jimmy's exportation and prison escapes would serve as a template for Kuwasi's life.

## **Military**

After high school, Kuwasi worked a series of odd jobs before enlisting into the military. Stationed at an Army base in Germany, Kuwasi and other Black soldiers were subjected to racist treatment by their white commanding officers. This included having to pick up cigarette butts in the rain and being written up for minor charges. To combat racism on the base, Kuwasi and his comrades formed a collective dubbed "De Legislators". Pre-figuring the rebellion of GIs during the Vietnam War, De Legislators vowed to meet racist repression with resistance:

"Every time white G.I.s ganged a Black G.I. we moved to more than even the score. One at a time we would catch up with them and beat and stomp them so bad that helicopters would have to be used to take them to better hospitals in the area.... Afterward we would have critiques, just like in the end of war games; get our alibis together; and keep the whole thing under our hats."

With the De Legislators as an example, Latino and Asian soldiers also began to rebel. This ushered in a new respect for soldiers of color and struck fear into the heart of the brass.

During his stint in the military, Kuwasi had the opportunity to travel to Spain and London. The burgeoning Third World consciousness that emanated from the anti-colonial struggles and the Bandung conferences gripped the African and Asian communities in the metropole. In London, Kuwasi met Black power activists and vowed to shear his "conk", or straightened, hair. "Relaxing, partying, learning and teaching about what was happening with Black people all over the world, was a natural tonic," Kuwasi wrote.

## **Becoming a Panther**

Kuwasi would return to Lakeland and serve as a clerk for the US government. On his weekends, he ventured to Harlem. At the time, Harlem served as the crossroads of revolutionary political activism.

For a disillusioned veteran like Kuwasi, New York looked like a promise land. He soon moved to Harlem to get closer to the struggle and found a job as a tenant organizer alongside the legendary Black Nationalist Jesse Gray. Gray led a major rent strike to protest the dilapidated living conditions faced by Harlem residents. Indeed, as Kuwasi would later note, many of the health problems faced by Harlem residents (particularly children) were in direct result of poor housing conditions, including lead paint as well as the vermin infestations that led to rat bites. Seeing the power of direct action, Kuwasi would organize tenants to confront their landlords at their homes. In a few instances, he and tenants armed themselves with machetes. Needless to say, the tenants rarely lost a battle.

Kuwasi's ascent as an organizer coincided with the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Founded in Oakland, CA by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the BPP formed as a response to police brutality. Trained in Marx, Lenin, Fanon and guerilla tactics, the

BPP combined both a political program (The 10-point platform) alongside direct action including armed patrols. In this sense, the BPP synthesized the multiple political tendencies within the Black community, from cultural nationalist to communist. After Seale and his armed comrades walked into the California Capitol to protest the Mulford Act, which would have made it illegal to carry weapons (a bill many felt was in response to the BPP's armed patrols of the Black community) the BPP shot into national prominence. Soon afterwards, BPP chapters spread like wildfire across the country.

In New York, the BPP came as a previous incarnation, the Black Panther Party for Political Power fell apart, primarily due to interference by law enforcement. The BPP served as a catalyst for a new generation of Blacks, many of whom moved to New York from the South and the Caribbean. This is an important point missed by many, because while many scholars and activist focus on the West coast-East Coast divide in the BPP, it was not only a matter of personality but geography. Whereas Oakland faces Asia and Mexico, producing a mestizo radical politic, New York faces the Caribbean and Africa. As such, many of the transplants who come to New York carry with them what Winston James called a "majority consciousness." This could be seen in the activism of Marcus Garvey down to the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, while many of the West coast Panthers were going by Huey, Bobby, Eldridge and Kathleen, the New York Panthers were changing their names to reflect this majority consciousness: Assata, Afeni, Zayd, Sundiata, and Lumumba. It was in this period that the young Weems became Kuwasi Balagoon, a name derived from the Yoruba people: Kuwasi meaning "Born on Sunday" and Balagoon meaning "warrior."

The NYC BPP was a big fish operating in a bigger pond. They worked alongside groups like CORE to place Black history inside Public Schools, most notably during the 1969 school strike when communities of color began to exercise control of the schools (Afeni Shakur, Tupac's mother served as a kindergarten teacher during the strike.) Safiya Bukari and Assata Shakur helped lead the Feeding Programs as well as Liberation Schools. The NYC BPP also worked alongside the revolutionary Puerto Rican group, the Young Lords, demanding fair housing and an end to police brutality and community control of health care institutions, including Lincoln Hospital.

As the Panthers slowly made inroads in the community, they were soon derailed by state repression. In 1969, 21 Panther leaders were arrested on conspiracy charges including a plot to blow up the Botanical Gardens, subways, and police precincts. The 21 Panthers (Kuwasi included) were held on \$100,000 bond a piece or \$2.1 million (in 1969 terms that was unbelievable.)

Known as the "Panther 21" trial, the case was part and parcel of attempts by the federal government to suppress the Black Panther Party. The BPP national leadership was such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were in jail; Panther spokesman Eldridge Cleaver was in exile in Algeria, while Bobby Hutton, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton would be slain by the police.

The charges against the Black Panther Party by the District Attorney Robert Morgenthau were to serve two goals: one, to neutralize their leadership and two, to provoke fear of the BPP into the hearts and minds of potential supporters. However, the subsequent Panther trial had the opposite effect; many white liberals came to the Panthers aid, as it was clear that their civil rights were violated.

The Panthers under trial were separated throughout prisons in the city. Rather than surrender, the Panthers began to organize against the horrific conditions in the jails. Kuwasi and other comrades in the Queens House of Detention soon staged a rebellion that resulted in five guards being taken hostage. In Manhattan a similar rebellion took place at the infamous Central processing

prison known as "The Tombs." The demands put forth by the prisoners were better food, the right to worship (particularly for Muslim prisoners), and speedier processing for trials.

It is interesting to note how the Queens prison rebellion served as a catalyst for Kuwasi's later anarchist leanings. During the rebellion his primary concern was a consensus process for all inmates in decision-making including access to food being brought to the outside. Fearing that the weight of the Panther leadership was too influential on the general consensus of other prisoners, Kuwasi and his comrades skipped out of general meetings in order for prisoners to "determine what was true and what was bullshit." The Panthers also promised to go with the majority.

In the end the guards were released. Kuwasi had mixed feelings about letting the hostages go feeling that the prisoners could have "fought to the death and taken as many pigs with us as possible." Despite the beatings that the prisoners took after the prison was retaken over, nothing could stop the euphoria felt that power to the people was not a slogan, but a reality. Indeed, the prisoners, many of whom were locked up on petty charges and told throughout their lives that they could not accomplish anything were able to hold the state at bay. As Kuwasi noted "We are going to have our freedom and we'll tear down the jails with bars and the jails without bars and America will be unusable for the pigs and fit for the people. All Power to the People!"

## **The Black Liberation Army**

After deliberating for 30 minutes, the Panther 21 were found not guilty on all charges. Still, it was a Pyrrhic victory. Police repression coupled with internal fissures within the BPP left many members stranded ideologically. A split occurred within the national leadership. Newton's release from prison marked the beginning of a moderate approach for the Panthers. Focusing on "survival programs," Newton sought to curb the image of the BPP as violent. Cleaver, now head of the International Panther Branch in Algiers, was in favor of urban guerilla warfare. Meeting with leaders of Third World liberation struggles, Cleaver was convinced that the time was right for armed struggle. The split would spill over the states as Newton and Cleaver argued on a local morning show. Words turned into violence when two of the BPP's best cadre, Robert "Spider" Webb and Samuel Napier, were killed. The New York Chapter of the BPP began to go underground and form the Black Liberation Army (BLA).

The BLA was conceptually part and parcel of the development of the BPP. Point six of the BPP rules states "No other party member can join any army forces except the BLACK LIBERATION ARMY." Additionally, within the party structure below the Central Committee was an anonymous committee of Field Marshals, some of whom included Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter (killed by members of the nationalist US organization), Donald Cox (exiled in Algeria along with Cleaver), and Elmer "Geronimo Ji-Jaga" Pratt, a former Green Beret. Within the primarily white anti-war movement, members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed the Weather Underground faction, which bombed several institutions throughout the United States.

For the NYC BPP, the formation of the BLA units was in response to particular crises facing the urban Black community: police brutality and drugs. As the revolutionary fervor and activity of Black people increased, there was a growing drug epidemic. In addition, police killed several people, including 10-year old Clifford Glover. The BLA lead campaigns against drug dealers and their suppliers while sabotaging the ability of the police to wage war on the Black community.

Expropriating banks, damaging patrol cars and attacking station houses was seen as an offensive measure against years of brutality.

Kuwasi was in the mix from the start. Convicted of sniping a police station, he and another comrade escaped from the Brooklyn House of Detention. Between 1971-1975, Kuwasi would lead a number of actions to "liberate" funds for the movement. "Kuwasi loved hitting those armored cars," Said one former BLA member. Though he was arrested twice, he was able to escape both times, including in 1978. Kuwasi was also thought to have been part of the unit that liberated Assata Shakur from a New Jersey jail.

## **Brinks Robbery and Prison**

The fevered pitch of 1960s radicalism ended during the 1970s. The combination of repression, burnout and political disorientation led to a collapse of movements. While some moved towards non-profit work, others dug in their heels and became participants in the growing New Communist Movement. The BLA suffered major defeats after arrests and killings of leaders such as Twymon Myers. By 1975, the BLA's fighting capacity was decimated.

During this period Kuwasi lived underground, taking assumed names. While he could have stayed underground, he re-emerged for the Brinks job in 1981. Members of the BLA and the Weather Underground formed the Revolutionary Armed Task Force. "It was an attempted expropriation. That means taking money from those who amassed wealth by exploiting the people and using that money to finance the resistance. Every revolution has had to use expropriation as a method of finance. You're just not going to get donations from the Ford or Rockefeller Foundations. This particular expropriation was under the leadership of the Black Liberation Army with white revolutionaries participating in alliance with them. The BLA communiqué after the action said that the funds had been intended to build the army, and for nationalist programs, especially for youth in the Black community," said David Gilbert, a member of the RATF and political prisoner.

While the plan called for disarming guards and taking the cash from the armored truck, the result was three officers dead and five members of RATF arrested: Kuwasi, Gilbert, Sekou Odinga, Judy Clark and Kathy Boudin. Marilyn Buck and Mutulu Shakur were also arrested for their involvement in the Brinks job as well as the liberation of Shakur. Kuwasi, who was wanted by New Jersey police for escaping prison, eluded capture only to be arrested later.

During the trial, all of the RATF comrades took the stance that they were prisoners of war and did not recognize the jurisdiction of the court. Kuwasi was particularly articulate. In his opening trial statement, he linked his actions with the 400 year history of Black people being brutalized in this country. This served to turn the tables and place the entire system of US oppression on trial:

"The US doesn't intend to make fundamental changes, it intends to bully New Afrikans forever and maintain this colonial relationship based on coercion, or worse, a "final solution" This means that some New Afrikan soldiers like myself must make our stand clear and encourage New Afrikan people to prepare to defend themselves from genocide by the American nazis--- study our mistakes; build a political program based on land and independence... and be ready to fight and organize our people to resist on every level. My duty as a revolutionary in this matter

is to tell the truth, disrespect this court and make it clear that the greatest consequence would be failing to step forward."

For the audacity to act as Prisoners of War and not be shamed as criminals, the judge gave Kuwasi 75 years to life in prison. Kuwasi wrote in a letter, "As to the seventy five years in prison, I am not really worried, not only because I am in the habit of not completing sentences or waiting on parole or any of that nonsense but also because the State simply isn't going to last seventy five or even fifty years."

## **As Anarchist**

The 1980s represented an ebb in the overall revolutionary movement. As conservatives continued their assault on the poor, many on the left were bewildered by the new circumstances. In prison, Kuwasi was politically principled, maintaining a revolutionary position, but worried about the future of the movement. Indeed, many of the left press denounced the RATF as "adventurists", sometimes just as hard as the mainstream press did.

Looking for answers, Kuwasi began a study of anarchism. He was not the only Black Panther to do so; Frankie Zitts and Ashanti Alston also began to read anarchist literature and apply the theories of Wilhelm Reich, Emma Goldman and others to the Black liberation struggle. This was an outgrowth of the organizing work put forward by anarchists in the prison system, particularly groups like Anarchist Black Cross.

For Kuwasi, anarchy served as a framework for his direct action ethos and a means to understanding the shortcomings of the Black Panther Party. For Kuwasi, anarchism meant building the fighting capacity and leadership of the masses through struggle.

In looking back on his Panther days, Kuwasi saw shortcomings in the model of centralized leadership, particularly in its relationship to the rank and file. While Kuwasi embraced anarchism, he did so as a constant nationalist. Looking squarely at the reality of American racism, he still maintained the correct position that Black people were oppressed as a nation and had a right to self-determination. This was in direct refutation of anarchists engaged in a pure class analysis such as the late Freddy Perlman, the target of Kuwasi's critique "The Continuing Appeal of Anti-Imperialism."

It would be a failure to simply read Kuwasi's embrace of anarchism in purely political terms. Anarchism was a theoretical framework for Kuwasi's unabiding individualism. Within the context of movements, individualism is often seen as a vice and indeed Kuwasi did commit serious errors because of his refusal to abide by collective decision making. Nevertheless, individualism also means choice. The Russian nihilist Nechayev once wrote "The revolutionary is a doomed man". In Kuwasi's sense the term "doom" refers to choice; either die a quiet death obeying the dictates of an oppressive system or give up one's life to fight for freedom. This is not a romantic notion. The state as a whole operates on a "play or pay" model where those who follow the rules receive small rewards and those who rebel are crushed, silenced and forgotten about.

What makes Kuwasi a revolutionary hero is that, like George Jackson, Ella Baker and other Black revolutionaries, he put the struggle for freedom ahead of any personal gain:

"That sentence 75 years after the Brinks robbery was to effect others to frighten others into giving up their lives altogether without fighting for real control of their lives. But if I worked thirty years at the post office and went bowling on Thursdays or doing anything but opposing



the U.S. I'd be worse off, it would be like making a rope so my children and myself could be tied up."

## **As Queer**

One of the silences that engulfed Kuwasi's life was his bisexuality. The official eulogies offered by the New Afrikan People's Organization and others omitted his sexuality or that he died of AIDS-related complications. These erasures are a reflection of the on-going internal struggle against homophobia and patriarchy within the larger society in general and the movement in particular.

The Black liberation movement has had a complex relationship with the question of sexuality. Black people's sexuality has always been defined from the outside. In the media, Black men and women are portrayed as sexual deviants. As such, protecting the image of Black people as firmly masculine and feminine was a project of much of the Black liberation movement.

Adding fuel to the fire is the inroads by conservatives, particularly the Christian Right in creating a wedge between Black, feminist and queer movements. The Christian right's moves have manifested in a number of ways, from accusing queers of benefiting from the Black blood spilled in the civil rights movement to the myth of the "Down-Low" brother infecting Black women with AIDS.

Of course homophobia is a cover for a larger push for forcing "traditional" family structures including condemnation of single family households. Since the Moynihan report of the 1970s that linked Black oppression to the "pathologies of single mothers", money has flooded people of color communities from "Faith Based" initiatives encouraging abstinence instead of safe sex and forcing single mothers to marry the fathers of their children in order to receive benefits.

Unfortunately some of the Black liberation movement has been taken in by these arguments, although the work of the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Marlon Riggs, and Dorothy Roberts among others have fashioned space for queer/feminist thought within a larger Black liberation framework. Still, Kuwasi's life as a queer man presents the Black liberation struggle with the fundamental question of what kind of society are we fighting for. Many feel that there should be unity at all costs and therefore there should be a pragmatic focus on jobs, healthcare and housing. I agree these are key demands and needs in our community; however it's important not to forget the goal of revolution is not only to lay hands and seize state power but also to smash the state. This means fundamentally smashing the social relationships that reproduce oppression, including homophobia, sexism and patriarchy. This is what we can gather from Kuwasi's sexuality.

## **Meaning of Kuwasi for Today**

The word meaning comes from moaning. To find meaning is also to find moaning. Often times we get our most contemplative and find meaning in times of distress (i.e.-breaking up with a partner, losing a job) rather than in times of comfort. In the past two years, the activist movement has experienced the moaning of Katrina, a global war perpetuated by the US, and a greater disciplining of the working class, both through unemployment and prison. This is rocky ground in which to grow a social movement and the challenges of being a revolutionary are greater.

However in this moaning, people are finding meaning and truly challenging what the system is all about. There is a growing discontent with the ways things are. In a large sense, the Empire has lost some of its clothes. However, we radicals have not responded in kind. There's a tendency to put comfort before our activism. There is the mad dash to apply for graduate school or the demand that one has to have a \$30,000 salary to be a grassroots organizer.

Kuwasi's legacy of being a queer Black anarchist freedom fighter, with armed desire, is that the revolutionary is always in discomfort with the status quo. As such, he/she is the disturber of peace, awakening the consciousness of the masses and putting fear into the rulers.

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