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Abstract

Black Panther Party (BPP) and Black Liberation Army (BLA) member Kuwasi Balagoon has emerged as a heroic symbol for radical anarchists and some circles of Black radicals in the United States. He is one of the most complex figures of the Black Liberation movement. His legacy is obscured within broader Black liberation and radical circles. The evolution of his politics and his life as an open bisexual add layers of complexity to his legacy. Bala- goon's political biography is a long road that includes his activism as a G.I. in the U.S. army in Germany, a tenant organizer in Harlem, and member of the Harlem branch of the BPP. Documenting the political life of Kuwasi Balagoon reveals his significance as a symbol of Black and radical anarchism. Recognition of Balagoon's contribution to Black Liberation will only emerge with the advance of both anti-authoritarian politics and challenges to homophobia in African-American activist circles.

Introduction

ON OCTOBER 20, 1981, BLACK REVOLUTIONARIES and their white radical allies engaged in an attempted "expropriation" of a Brinks armored truck in Rockland County, New York. That day Rockland police apprehended three white activists and one Black man. A manhunt ensued and on January 20, 1982 Black revolutionary Kuwasi Balagoon was apprehended in New York City. The alliance of Black and white radicals captured were part of a radical formation called the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF) under the leadership of the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Balagoon was the lone anarchist among the RATF defendants; others identified themselves as Muslims, revolutionary nationalists, and Marxist-Leninists. While Balagoon was closely aligned with and respected by his comrades

in the BLA and RATF, his anarchist position set him apart ideologically (A. H., 1982).

Informants told the U.S. government investigators that his BLA and RATF comrades called Balagoon "Maroon." The term "Maroon" originates from enslaved Africans in the western hemisphere who escaped and formed rebel communities in remote areas away from slaveholding society. Balagoon earned this nickname due to his multiple escapes from incarceration. This article will explore how Balagoon was also an ideological and social "maroon" in the context of the Black liberation movement, and examine his legacy in the contemporary struggle for self-determination and social justice.

From Donald Weems to Kuwasi Balagoon: The Development of a Revolutionary

Kuwasi Balagoon chronicles his early life and political development in the collective autobiography of New York Black Panther Party defendants titled *Look for Me in the Whirlwind.* He was born Donald Weems in the majority Black community of Lakeland in Prince George's County, Maryland on December 22, 1946. Early experiences prepared young Donald Weems to become an activist who would militantly resist white supremacy and unjust authority (Balagoon, 1971; Blunk and Levasseur, 1990, 373; Balagun, 2006).

He was also inspired by the militant movement led by Gloria Richardson in Cambridge in the Eastern Shore region of Maryland. Protests in Cambridge evolved into violence in 1963. Blacks organized sniper teams to defend nonviolent protesters from white supremacist violence. The National Guard was sent to Cambridge to quell the accelerating disturbance in June, 1963, and deployed there for a year. U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department were forced to intervene and negotiate a "treaty" between

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Richardson and the white power structure. Nation of Islam National Spokesman Malcolm X Shabazz would mention the Cambridge movement as an example of developing "Black revolution" in his legendary speech "Message to the Grassroots." The militancy of the Cambridge Movement inspired and impressed the teen-aged Weems (Balagoon, 1971, 87–88; Harley, 2001, 174–196; Giddings, 1994, 290–292).

Weems joined the U.S. Army after graduating from high school and was stationed in Germany after basic training. Like most Blacks in the Army, he experienced racism and physical attacks from white officers and enlisted men. Weems believed Black soldiers were unjustly and disproportionately punished after altercations with whites. Black soldiers formed a clandestine association called "Da Legislators," in his words, "… based on fucking up racists … because we were going to make and enforce new laws that were fair." Donald prided himself in his ability to exact revenge on racist war soldiers. In London, he also connected with Africans and African descendants. He described the experience of socializing with African descendants from around the globe and other people of color in London as a "natural tonic," which motivated him to ground himself in Black consciousness and culture. He stopped "processing" his hair, wore a more natural hairstyle, and also "became more committed to Black Liberation." He was honorably discharged in 1967 after three years, serving primarily in Germany (Balagoon, 1971, 204, 224).

After his discharge and return home to Lakeland, Weems ultimately moved to New York City where his sister Dianne lived. In New York, he involved himself in rent strikes and was eventually hired as a tenant organizer for the Community Council on Housing (CCH). The principal leader and spokesman of the CCH was Harlem rent strike organizer Jesse Gray. Gray used the rhetoric of militant Black Nationalism to recruit lieutenants for his activist campaigns. He once told a Harlem audience that

he needed "one hundred Black revolutionaries ready to die." Gray exhorted:

> There is only one thing that can correct the situation and that's guerrilla warfare.... all you Black people that have been in the armed services and know anything about guerrilla warfare should come to the aid of our people. If we must die, let us die scientifically! (Jesse Gray, quoted in Noel, 1999.)

Like many of his generation, Weems was ready to join an uncompromising movement for Black freedom and human rights. He joined Gray in protesting the conditions in New York housing, particularly the infestation of rats in public housing. In 1967, Gray, Weems, his sister Dianne and two other tenant activists were arrested for disorderly conduct in Washington, D.C., where, unannounced and uninvited, they attended a session of Congress and brought a cage of rats to the assembly to highlight urban housing conditions. Due to the protests, the CCH lost its funding and Gray his ability to pay his organizers.

After Weems separated himself from CCH, he participated in the Central Harlem Committee for Self-Defense in solidarity with student protests at Columbia University. The Committee brought food and water to students who occupied buildings on the Columbia campus (Balagoon, 1971, 200–204; Gilbert, 2003, 9).

Weems would also associate himself with the Yoruba Temple in Harlem, organized by Nana Oserjiman Adefumi. The Detroit-born Adefumi was initiated in Cuba in the Lukumi rites of Yoruba origin. He saw the West African religious and cultural heritage as a means to cultural self-determination and peoplehood for African descendants in the United States. Explaining the nationalistic aims of the Yoruba Temple, Adefumi offered, "We must Africanize everything! Our names, our hats,

Black/New Afrikan nationalists to commemorate Balagoon in December 2006 (Balagun, 2006). His sexual identity has become a vehicle to challenge homophobia within the broader Black liberation movement. Elements of the queer liberation movement and their allies have criticized Black liberation forces for being silent on Balagoon's sexuality. Balagun, in a posthumous statement honoring Kuwasi Balagoon, offered this:

> 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. (*Ibid.*)

This issue will remain so long as heteronormativity remains the dominant sexual orientation of the Black liberation movement.

Kuwasi Balagoon is remembered and saluted by revolutionary nationalists, radical anarchists, and queer liberation forces. He remains a "maroon" isolated from mainstream Black and left political dialog and memory. His legacy will only be secure with the survival and empowerment of the political tendencies he represented. Balagoon's name will only be saved from obscurity when insurgent Black nationalists and anarchist collectives take up his charge to organize oppressed people to build a revolutionary program that challenges capitalism and institutional racism in the United States.

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Balagoon also continued to organize and provide political education to other prisoners. He died in prison on December 13, 1986 from pneumocystis pneumonia, an AIDS-related illness.

Legacy

While Balagoon is not in mainstream discourse, his name is evoked in some Black/New Afrikan, anarchist, and queer spaces. In 2005, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM), a New Afrikan activist organization, dedicated its annual Black August celebration to Kuwasi Balagoon. That year MXGM highlighted the need for awareness of the AIDS virus in Africa and the African Diaspora. A few radical Hip Hop artists such as Dead Prez and Zayd Malik also mention Balagoon's name. But Balagoon's name is not commonly used, even in socially conscious Hip Hop, as much as other Black revolutionaries such as Marcus Garvey, Huey Newton, Assata Shakur, Geronimo (Pratt)ji Jaga, and Mutulu Shakur.

Anarchist collectives have re-published Balagoon's statements. After his incarceration and self-identification as an anarchist, a Canadian anti-authoritarian collective that published the newsletter *Bulldozer*, which later became known as *Prison Nws Service,* published Balagoon's writings. The Patterson (New Jersey) Anarchist Collective reprinted his trial statement and tributes to his life in 1994. The Quebec radical publisher Kersplebedeb issued a Collected Works of Balagoon's trial statements, essays, poetry, as well as acknowledgements from comrades titled *A Soldier's Story: Writings by a Revolutionary Nw Afrikan Anarchist.*

Radical queer liberation forces also embraced Balagoon's legacy. He acknowledged his bisexual identity within a primarily hetero- normative Black liberation movement. ACT-UP, a direct action organization emerging from queer liberation forces, joined forces with anarchists and revolutionary

our clothes, our clubs, our churches … etc., etc., etc." Many of the youth of Weems' generation rejected their "slave" names and adopted African or Arabic names. Through his association with the Yoruba temple, Weems was renamed. He would be Donald Weems no more and adopt an Ewe day name "Kuwasi" for a male born on Sunday, and the Yoruba name "Balagoon," meaning "warlord." He would later say that the name Kuwasi Balagoon, "reflects what I am about and my origins" (Balagoon, 2003, 27).

Revolutionary Nationalism: Balagoon and the New York Black Panther Party

While Balagoon found his cultural bearing in the Yoruba Temple, he was attracted to the Black Power politics of Revolutionary Black Nationalism. The Revolutionary Black Nationalism of the Black Power movement was a political expression that argued that Black liberation would not be possible without the overthrow of the U.S. constitutional order and capitalist economic system. Revolutionary Black Nationalism represented a confluence of ideological influences on the Black freedom movement. Significant numbers of Black militants of the 1960s Black Power movement did not see classical Marxism- Leninism as a framework they could identify with. Many were inspired by the influence of Marxism in the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions and other national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, but were critical of the racism of the Old Left and sought a theoretical vehicle and self-definition that gave them ideological self-determination. A significant number of Black youth identified with the direct action of the Civil Rights movement, but were not committed to nonviolence as a way of life. Some Black radicals also identified with Black Nationalism and rejected

the integration and pro- assimilationist tendencies within the Civil Rights movement. Young Black Power militants also sought a more insurgent political program than they observed from the Nation of Islam and fundamental Black Nationalists. As a new ideological development in the Black freedom movement, the Revolutionary Black Nationalism of the Black Power movement incorporated the Marxian critique of capitalism, the historic tradition of Black Nationalism and self-determination, and the direct action approach that characterized the Civil Rights movement (Cruse, 1962).[1]

In his own words, Balagoon "became a revolutionary and accepted the doctrine of nationalism as a response to the genocide practiced by the United States government …" He began to read literature such as the *Autobiography of Malcolm X,* Robert F. Williams' book *Negroes with Guns,* and the newsletter *The Crusader*. SNCC leader and Black Power movement spokesman H. Rap Brown also inspired Balagoon. Brown was elevated to spokesman of SNCC in 1967. He became one of the most recognized voices of the Black Power movement and the rebellion of urban communities of the late 1960s. Balagoon also came to embrace the position that Black liberation would only come through "protracted guerilla warfare" (Balagoon, 1971, 270; 2003, 75).

Balagoon would actualize his revolutionary nationalist politics as a member of the Black Panther Party. Originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the BPP had distinguished itself in Oakland, California by its armed patrols to monitor police abuse and its armed demonstration at the California State Legislature in Sacramento on May 2, 1967. Balagoon first heard of the BPP after the October 28, 1967

[1] The first self-described revolutionary nationalist organization, the Revolutionary Action Movement, stated in 1963 that it was "somewhere between the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) and SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee)" (Max Stanford in Bracey, *et al,* 1970, 508; Umoja, 2013, 224–225).

Afrikan people and to eliminate capitalism, imperialism, and ultimately authoritarian forms of government.

Once convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, Balagoon continued to speak to New Afrikan/Black Liberation forces and anarchist gatherings through public statements. As well as his continued support for armed struggle, he advocated the building of an insurgent movement and building of autonomous communities. OnJuly 18, 1983, at a Harlem rally for imprisoned New Afrikan Freedom Fighters, Balagoon's statement was read: "We must build a revolutionary political platform and a universal network of survival programs" (Balagoon, 2003, 73–74). In another statement directed toward anarchists, Balagoon stated:

> Where we live and work … We must organize on the ground level. The landlords must be contested through rent strikes and rather than develop strategies to pay rent, we should develop strategies to take the buildings…. Set up communes in abandoned buildings…. Turn vacant lots into gardens. When our children grow out of clothes, we should have places we can take them, clearly marked anarchist clothing exchanges…. We must learn construction and ways to take back our lives … (Balagoon, 2003, 79.)

He also challenged anarchists to move from theory to practice. In the tradition of the insurgent anarchists of previous generations who inspired him, Balagoon argued:

> We permit people of other ideologies to define anarchy rather than bring our views to the masses and provide modes to show the contrary…. In short, by not engaging in mass organizing and delivering war to the oppressors, we become anarchists in name only. (Ibid., 78.)

of an underground infrastructure, families of political prisoners, Black Liberation movement political activities and institutions, and freedom struggles on the African continent (Lubash, 1982; Putman, 1982).

New Afrikan Anarchist Prisoner of War

After his capture, Kuwasi Balagoon publically spoke to the movement for the first time since the publication of *Look for Me in the Whirlwind* 11 years earlier in 1971. Defining himself as a New Afrikan anarchist, Balagoon represented New Afrikan and anti-authoritarian politics in public statements. In captivity, he defined himself as a prisoner of war, not a criminal. Balagoon acting *pro se* (serving as his own attorney) at the Rockland County trial where he was charged with armed robbery for the Nyack expropriation and the murders of the Brinks' guard and two police officers. This gave him the opportunity to speak to the public about his politics and to make his intentions clear for history. In his opening statement, Balagoon declared:

> i am a prisoner of war. i reject the crap about me being a defendant, and i do not recognize the legitimacy of this court. The term defendant applies to someone involved in a criminal matter.... It is clear that i've been a part of the Black Liberation Movement all of my adult life and have been involved in a war against the American Imperialist, in order to free New Afrikan people from its yoke.[5]

Balagoon wanted it acknowledged that his armed actions were politically motivated to win national liberation for New

[5] Balagoon, n.d.a, 27–28. In the grammar of the New Afrikan Independence movement the first personal singular is not capitalized ("i") and the first letter in first person plural is capitalized ("We"). This is the application of a principle of the New Afrikan Creed, "the community is more important than the individual."

shootout between BPP founder Huey Newton, one of his comrades, and the members of the Oakland Police Department. The shooting left Officer John Frey fatally wounded, and Newton and Officer Herbert Heanes injured; Newton's companion escaped and fled the scene. Newton became a national hero to urban Black youth after the shootout. While Newton was wounded from the exchange, the thought that a militant Black Power activist actually survived a gun battle with white police automatically propelled him to legendary heights. After he was charged with Frey's murder, the defense of Newton and the call to "Free Huey" became a popular cause in the Black Power and left circles (Umoja, 1998, 418–419).

The BPP came to New York in the summer of 1968. An alliance between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) attempted to create a Black Panther Party in New York in June 1966, but this grouping became dysfunctional due to internal conflict (Ahmad, 2007, 167170). The Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self-Defense became a national organization after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April, 1968. The organization grew from a regional organization with chapters in the California Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Seattle to a national movement with thousands of members and supporters throughout the United States. Building a chapter in New York was one of the most important events of this development. The same month as Dr. King's assassination, national BPP Central Committee members Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver came to New York and appointed 18-year-old SNCC member Joudon Ford as acting captain of defense of the BPP on the east coast. Ford was soon joined by 40-year-old David Brothers to found the New York chapter of the BPP in Brooklyn in the summer of 1968. The national leadership sent Ron Pennywell, a trusted member of its cadre, to give direction to the New York chapter. Pennywell had reached the rank of captain in the BPP ranks. Pennywell was described as "a very grass-root brother, who

would always ask the cadre for suggestions" (Kempton, 1973, 43; Acoli, 1985; Balagoon, 1971, 295).

Lumumba Shakur would found the Harlem branch of the New York chapter. Shakur was the son of a Malcolm X Shabazz associate Saladin Shakur. The elder Shakur also served as a mentor and surrogate father for many members of the New York BPP chapter. Lumumba Shakur and his friend, Sekou Odinga, traveled to Oakland in 1968 to learn about the BPP. Shakur and Odinga met in prison in the early 1960s and embraced Islam and revolutionary nationalism through the teachings of Malcolm X and under the tutelage of Saladin Shakur, a member of Shabazz's Muslim Mosque Incorporated and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. After the assassination of Malcolm X, both young men attempted to find a revolutionary organization to replace the fledgling Organization of Afro-American Unity. They returned to meet Pennywell and Brothers in April 1968. Shakur was the section leader of Harlem and Odinga was assigned to organize the Bronx with Bilal Sunni-Ali, who had introduced them to Pennywell. The New York chapter of the BPP would grow to be among the largest, if not the largest, in the organization, with approximately 500 members (Shakur, 1971, 295; Acoli, 1995; Sunni-Ali, 2013; Ahmad, 2007, 191).

When Balagoon found out the BPP was organizing in New York, he located the organization and ultimately joined. He had affinity with the BPP's ten-point program, which he believed was "community based." He also identified with the organization's appropriation of Mao Zedong's axiom that political power "comes from the barrel of a gun" (Balagoon, 1971, 270). The assertion of the necessity of armed struggle was not the only principle the BPP borrowed from Mao. Mao and the Chinese Revolution profoundly influenced the BPP, as it did other radical movements of the 1960s. The Chinese Communist Party and its Leninist model of democratic centralism was the model of organization for the BPP. The BPP's National Cen-

The FBI identified Assata Shakur as the "soul of the BLA" and hailed her capture as a significant event in "breaking the back" of the Black underground. While forensic evidence proved she did not fire a gun, and although she was paralyzed at the outset of the shooting, Assata Shakur was convicted of the murder of Foerster and Zayd Shakur and sentenced to life plus 65 years. She was considered a political prisoner by human rights organizations, in the United States and internationally.

According to the FBI, an armed team of four BLA members, including Odinga and Balagoon and two white allies, facilitated the escape of Shakur from Clinton Correctional Institution for Women in New Jersey on November 2, 1979. Prison officials stated the raid was "well planned and arranged." Shakur's escape was hailed and celebrated as a "liberation" by the Black Liberation movement and demonstrated the continued existence of the BLA (Umoja, 1998, 425; 1999, 148–149).

An attempt by the BLA and RATF to expropriate 1.6 million dollars from a Brinks armored truck in the New York city of Nyack resulted in a shooting exchange, resulting in the deaths of one Brink's security guard and two police officers. Three white radicals —Judy Clark, David Gilbert, and Kathy Boudin — and one Black man — Solomon Brown — were captured in Nyack. A manhunt ensued for others who were believed to have escaped the scene or assisted in the attempt. Physical evidence, electronic surveillance, and informants led to arrests of other revolutionaries and the death of BLA member Mtayari Sundiata. The Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF) apprehended Balagoon in New York City at a Manhattan apartment three months later. The JTTF was organized after the escape of Assata Shakur to provide a coordinated investigation by FBI and local police. The FBI believed Balagoon was a part of the BLA team that initiated the expropriation attempt in Nyack. It was also believed that this wing of the BLA had successfully expropriated funds from financial institutions in a series of raids dating back to 1976. The funds had been utilized to support the development

orientation, respected Balagoon due to his commitment to revolutionary struggle and his history of sacrifices on behalf of his comrades and for the liberation movement. In terms of his sexuality, comrades stated, "that's Kuwasi's business." Differences over ideology and sexual orientation were tolerated and subordinated to the pragmatic unity necessary to carry out the clandestine work of armed propaganda, expropriations of resources from capitalist financial institutions, or assisting comrades in escaping from incarceration (Umoja, 1999, 154; "Sekou Odinga," 1982).

The RATF came together in response to an increase in violent acts against Black people in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the murders of Black children and youth in Atlanta and Black women in Boston, and shootings of Black women in Alabama. The increase in white supremacist paramilitary activity, including the Ku Klux Klan, was a related motivator for this alliance. The whites in the RATF participated in intelligence gathering on white supremacist and right-wing activity to ascertain its capability and connection with elements of the U.S. military. The RATF also engaged in "expropriations" to obtain resources to build the capacity of the Black Liberation movement to resist the white supremacist upsurge (BLA, 1998, 423–424).

The two most well-known actions of this New Afrikan Freedom Fighters' wing of the BLA and the RATF were the escape of Assata Shakur and the attempted "Brinks expropriation" in Nyack, New York. Assata Shakur was a member of the New York BPP who was forced underground in response to the repression on the organization. She was captured on May 2, 1973 after a shootout with New Jersey state troopers and BLA members. State trooper Werner Foerster and New York BPP member Zayd Shakur were both killed in the shootout. Assata Shakur was wounded and paralyzed from the shooting. Former Black Panther 21 defendant and BLA member Sundiata Acoli was captured two days after the shootout, after escaping the scene.

tral Committee (NCC) was the highest decision-making body of the organization. The first NCC was concentrated in Oakland, with the overwhelming majority of the body composed of associates of BPP founder Huey Newton (Holder, 1990, 255). The BPP also functioned as a paramilitary organization, with Newton, as Minister of Defense, being the principal leader and with military positions *(e.g.,* Captain, Field Marshall, etc.) integrated into the organization's chain of command. The BPP system and style of governance would become a factor in Balagoon's attraction to anti-authoritarian politics.

Balagoon was able to engage in militant, grassroots organizing, combined with revolutionary ideology, as a member of the BPP in Harlem. In the Party he found comrades ready to participate in working with poor and oppressed Black communities around basic issues and willing to challenge the system with insurgent action. The New York City BPP engaged in grassroots organizing. In September 1968, BPP members participated in a community takeover of Lincoln Hospital. Lincoln was a "dilapidated and disinvested public hospital in the [predominately Black and Latino] South Bronx." The BPP would ultimately align itself with the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa to take over and reform the Detox Program at Lincoln Hospital (Tracy, 2010, 223). New York Panther branches were also involved in tenant organizing, and in fights for community control of the school system and of the police. BPP leaders, along with the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, Center for Constitutional Rights, and the National Lawyers Guild, filed a lawsuit calling for decentralization of the police in October, 1968 (Holder, 1990, 227). While Balagoon's previous experience as a tenant organizer helped him become a key member of the organization, he was attracted to the military wing of the BPP.

Repression and BPP Internal Contradictions: Catalyst Towards Anti-Authoritarianism

Balagoon and New York BPP member Richard Harris were arrested in February, 1969 on bank robbery charges in Newark, New Jersey. On April 2, 1969, less than one year after the founding of the New York chapter of the BPP, 21 Panther leaders and organizers (including Balagoon and Harris) were indicted, and 12 arrested on conspiracy charges in a 30-count indictment. This case became known as the case of the New York Panther 21. The charges included conspiracy to bomb the New York Botanical Gardens and police stations, and to assassinate police officers. After their arrest, most of the defendants were released on $100,000 bail. Balagoon was held without bail (NYT, 1971, 33; Kaplan, 1969; "Panther 21 Trial," 1970).

A central charge in the indictment was the accusation that on January 17, 1969 Balagoon and Odinga planned to ambush New York police but were interrupted by other officers coming on the scene. This charge was based on testimony from a 19-year-old BPP member Joan Bird, who, defense attorneys argued, had been beaten by police to agree to elicit a statement to favor the prosecution. Bird's mother reported arriving at the police station and hearing her daughter screaming. She was startled when she was taken to her daughter, who had visibly been beaten, with a black eye, swollen lip, and bruises on her face (English, 2011, 267–268).

Odinga escaped police and went underground on the day he was charged, after hearing of Bird's arrest and alleged torture. He escaped arrest on April 2, when his comrades were apprehended, fled the United States, and eventually received political asylum in Algeria. Balagoon was severed from the case of 13 of those who had been arrested originally, to face charges in NewJersey. After over two years behind bars, the 13 defendants

> similar to the progress of anarchist collectives in Spain during the era of the fascist Bahamonde…. (Lutalo, 2002,132.)

Like his teacher and comrade, Lutalo identified himself as a "New Afrikan/Anarchist Prisoner of War."

A New Afrikan Freedom Fighter: Balagoon and the Revolutionary Armed Task Force

Balagoon would again escape from Rahway State Prison in New Jersey on May 27, 1978. He would rejoin a clandestine network of BLA soldiers in alliance with white radicals in solidarity with the Black liberation movement and other national liberation struggles. This ideologically diverse network of insurgent militants was known as the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF). The RATF was described as "a strategic alliance … under the leadership of the Black Liberation Army." The BLA members in the alliance identified themselves as Muslims or revolutionary nationalists and the white radicals as anti-imperialists or communists. Balagoon appeared to be the sole anarchist in this formation. Balagoon's BPP comrade Sekou Odinga had returned from political exile in Algeria and the People's Republic of the Congo to be a major leader in this formation. While Balagoon was critical of Marxism and nationalism, he decided to join comrades he loved and trusted in a common front against white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism. He and his comrades in the RATF also had political unity on the question of New Afrikan independence.

This wing of the BLA identified themselves as "New Afrikan Freedom Fighters." Balagoon, who was considered a "free spirit," viewed most nationalist formations as "too rigid." His RATF comrades, despite ideological differences or his sexual

Afrikan politics also distinguished him from the majority of the anarchist movement in the United States, many of whom opposed any form of nationalism.

Balagoon would share his New Afrikan anarchist viewpoint and ideologically struggle with Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary nationalist political prisoners incarcerated with him. He recruited soldiers for the BLA, as well as converts to anti-authoritarian and New Afrikan politics. In Trenton State Prison in New Jersey, his fellow New York Panther 21 defendant Sundiata Acoli and BLA members James York and Andaliwa Clark formed a political study group inside the penitentiary (IAT, 2001, 9).

Political education behind bars became a vehicle for recruitment into the BLA. Clark and Kojo Bomani were both inmates who had been politicized by Balagoon and other political prisoners after being incarcerated and recruited into the BLA.[4] Bomani was released in 1975 and arrested in December of the same year in a failed BLA expropriation of a financial institution. A BLA member captured with Bomani was Ojore Lutalo. Lutalo provides testimony concerning Balagoon's influence on his transition from Marxism-Leninism to anti-authoritarian thinking:

> In 1975 I became disillusioned with Marxism and became an anarchist (thanks to Kuwasi Balagoon) due to the inactiveness and ineffectiveness of Marxism in our communities along with repressive bureaucracy that comes with Marxism. People aren't going to commit themselves to a life-and-death strugglejust because of grand ideas someone might have floating around in their heads. I feel people will commit themselves to a struggle if they can see progress being made

[4] Clark would be killed in an attempted escape on January 19, 1976; NYS, 1985, 102.

were acquitted of all charges. It only took the jury one hour of deliberation to acquit. While this was a significant legal victory, the incarceration of key organizers and leaders of the New York BPP significantly crippled the organization's momentum and activities. After the acquittal of most of his comrades, Balagoon pled guilty to the charge that he and an unidentified person did attempt to shoot police officers, making him the only one of the 21 original defendants to be convicted. If these charges were true, Balagoon had committed himself to participate in offensive guerilla warfare as early as 1969 (Odinga, in *Can't Jail the Spirit,* 1990, 143; Lubash, 1981, B1; Vasquez, 1971, 37).

The BPP national leadership's handling of the New York Panther 21 case played a significant role in the transition of Balagoon from revolutionary nationalism and democratic centralism to anti-authoritarian politics. The members of the New York BPP, including the defendants in the BPP 21 conspiracy trial, became disenchanted with the national leadership in Oakland. Division between the Oakland- based national leadership and the New York chapter increased after the purge of Geronimo Pratt by the national leadership. Pratt, a U.S. Army veteran who served as an Army Ranger in Vietnam, distinguished himself by training BPP members and other Black liberation forces in paramilitary tactics. He went underground to develop a clandestine apparatus, but was captured in Dallas, Texas on December 8, 1970. On January 23, 1971, Huey Newton, the BPP Minister of Defense, expelled Pratt from the organization for "counter-revolutionary behavior." Newton's expulsion of Pratt created confusion within the ranks of the organization. Many BPP rank-and-file members considered Pratt a hero and he was well respected in the New York chapter (Umoja, 1999, 138–139).

The expulsion of Pratt is connected to a series of expulsions by the national leadership of BPP members engaged in armed struggle. The initial orientation of the BPP encouraged the development of an armed underground capacity to wage

guerilla warfare. Combined with the image of armed Panthers patrolling against the police, many Blacks who believed in armed confrontation with the state were attracted to the BPP. The New York BPP had developed an armed, clandestine capacity from its inception. One police officer reported at a congressional hearing: "Members of the Panthers are not secret, with the exception of those who have been designated 'underground.' This group are secret revolutionaries and their identities are kept secret." New York police and the FBI suspected the BPP in an August 2, 1968 shooting of two police officers in Brooklyn and an attempted bombing of a New York City police station on November 2, 1968 (Courtney, 1969, 4235).

Tensions also developed when the BPP national leadership sent Oakland cadres Robert Bey and Thomas Jolly to New York to assume leadership of the chapter. Years later, Balagoon publicly criticized the decision to import a new leadership group to New York, as opposed to promoting indigenous leadership from the local community. He saw this as critical to destabilizing the revolutionary vitality of the organization. Other New York BPP members shared Balagoon's criticism of the NCC appointment of supervisory leadership over Panther activity in New York and the East Coast. Unlike Pennywell, the newly imported leadership possessed a more autocratic and hierarchal style of decision-making. In her autobiography, Assata Shakur questioned the quality of some of the West Coast leaders sent to New York. Shakur noted:

> We [New York BPP members] had a bit of a leadership problem with Robert Bey and Jolly who were both from the West Coast. Bey's problem was that he was none too bright and that he had an aggressive, even belligerent, way of talking and dealing with people. Jolly's problem was that he was Robert Bey's shadow. (Shakur, 2001, 228.)

> We say the U.S. has no right to confine New Afrikan people to red-lined reservations and that We have a right to live on our own terms on a common land area and to govern ourselves, free of occupation forces such as the police, national guard, or G.I.s that have invaded our colonies from time to time. We have a right to control our own economy, print our own money, trade with other nations…. We have a right to control our educational institutions and systems where our children will not be indoctrinated by aliens to suffer the destructive designs of the U.S. government.

His position for Black self-determination was also combined with an anti-capitalist perspective. Balagoon proposed that New Afrikans would

> enter a work force where We are not excluded by design and where our wages and the wages of all workers can not be manipulated by a ruling class that controls the wealth.

The New Afrikan Independence Movement was consistent with Balagoon's belief in the necessity of national liberation of the colonized Black nation. He identified himself as a New Afrikan anarchist to express his national identity, aspiration for self-determination, and desire for whatever type of society he wished to inhabit.

Balagoon's identity as a New Afrikan anarchist set him ideologically apart from Black Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary nationalists who had the objective of seizing state power from the white power structure of U.S. capitalism and imperialism. But he still desired a land for Black people to achieve self-determination and space to build a society based on anti-authoritarianism and freedom. His continued support for New

sexual relationships with both men and women (Ojore Lutalo, phone interview with author, October 12, 2013).

Balagoon continued to believe the original BPP position that Black people were an internal colony of the United States, and interpreted the Black liberation struggle as a national liberation movement. Like other BLA members, he also began to identify with the New Afri- kan Independence Movement. The Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA) viewed Black people as a "subjugated nation" within the USA. The PGRNA was founded in March, 1968 at a conference of 500 Black nationalists who declared their independence from the United States and demanded five states in the deep southern states (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana) as reparations for the enslavement and racial oppression of Blacks. "New Afrika" was declared the name of the new nation and the five states as its national territory. Some New York BPP members developed a political relationship with the PGRNA from its inception. Kamau Sadiki (a.k.a. Freddie Hilton) of the Queens BPP branch remembers PGRNA member Mutulu Shakur facilitating political education sessions for him and other BPP members. Corona (in the borough of Queens) BPP branch leader Cyril Innis remembers taking the oath of allegiance to the New Afrikan nation in 1969, when PGRNA and BPP collaborated around struggles for community control of education in New York's public schools.[3]

Like many of the New York BPP and BLA comrades, Balagoon began to ideologically unite with the political objective of the PGRNA for independence and adopt "New Afrikan" as their national identity. Balagoon believed that:

[3] Kamau Sadiki, discussion with author, Atlanta, Georgia, November 27, 2003; Cyril Innis, discussion with Charles E. Jones and author, Bronx, New York, June 5, 2013.

Member of the Harlem BPP branch, along with historian Kit Holder, argued the "lack of indigenous leadership on the local level was one of the major contributing factors to the initial differences of opinions and misunderstandings" between the national leadership and the New York chapter (Holder, 1990, 258). Holder argued these factors "inhibited the growth of the Party." One of the factors Holder identified was "cultural nationalism."

Due to conflict with elements of the Black Arts Movement in the Bay Area and the Us Organization in Los Angeles, the California-based BPP developed an aversion to African-Americans who identified with African culture. The New York group, on the other hand, embraced African and Arabic names *(e.g.,* Kuwasi, Afeni, Assata, Lumumba, Dhoruba, Zayd, etc.), and African clothing. Some were Muslims or influenced by African traditional religion. Holder reports that the national leadership barred New York BPP members from participating in nationalist-oriented community events or displaying the red, black, and green flag that originated in the Pan-African nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association (a.k.a. the Garvey movement). The decision by national appointed leadership to take emphasis away from the local activism of the NY BPP around tenant issues and re-assign cadre to serve-the-people programs that were popular on the West Coast was also resented by New York cadre (ibid., 258–261).

The incarcerated members of the New York BPP conspiracy case also believed the national leadership did not provide sufficient financial support for their legal defense. Balagoon would also comment on how the national leadership selectively determined who would be released on bail. He stated: "Those who were bailed out were chosen by the leadership, regardless of the wishes of the rank-and-file or fellow prisoners of war or regardless of the relatively low bail of at least one proven comrade." It must also be noted that the U.S. government, particularly the FBI through its Cointelpro program, worked to increase the di-

vision within the national leadership of the BPP and the New York chapter and the New York 21 defendants (Umoja, 1999, 141; Balagoon, 2003, 76).

After a series of attempts to send criticisms of the national leadership to *The Black Panther* newspaper, New York Panther 21 defendants publicly took what was interpreted as a critical position of the BPP national leadership in an open letter to the Weather Underground published on January 19, 1971. The Weather Underground was a clandestine organization of white radical anti-imperialists who initiated a campaign of armed propaganda by bombing U.S. government facilities in solidarity with the national liberation movements, particularly in Vietnam. The open letter applauded the insurgent actions of the Weather Underground and acknowledged them as part of the vanguard of the revolutionary movement in the United States. Without naming the BPP national leadership, the statement of the incarcerated New York Panthers also critiqued, "self-proclaimed 'vanguard' parties" who abandoned the actions of the radical underground struggle and the political prisoners (Umoja, 1998, 421–422; 1999, 138–139). Balagoon agreed with this criticism of the national leadership of the BPP.

> Under their leadership, "political consequences" (attacks) against occupation forces [police] ceased altogether. Only a fraction of the money collected for the purpose of bail went towards bail. The leaders began to live high off the hog … leaving behind so many robots [in the rank-and-file] who wouldn't challenge policy until those in jail publicly denounced the leadership. (Balagoon, 2003, 76.)

The differences between the national leadership and the New York BPP accelerated after the publication of the New York

> the majority.… Only an anarchist revolution has on its agenda to deal with these goals. *(Ibid.)*

Balagoon clearly believed the true Black liberation could only be achieved through anarchism.

While incarcerated he read and identified with certain radical anarchists, particularly those men and women of action advocating insurrection of the oppressive order and the necessity and right of the oppressed to expropriate resources from their oppressors. One of his inspirations was Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, who exhorted that revolutionary struggle "consists more of deeds than words." Another influence was Spanish revolutionaryJose Buenaventura Dur- ruti Dumange, who organized the anarchist guerilla movement *Los Justicieros* (The Avenging Ones). Like their name, *LosJusticieros*were thought to be involved in political assassinations in retaliation for political repression and guerilla raids on the military forces of the Spanish dictatorship. Balagoon was also motivated by the example of Italian exile Severino Di Giovanni, known for his campaign of bombing as armed propaganda in solidarity with executed anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. Durutti and Giovanni both engaged in expropriation of capitalist institutions as a mean of supporting the revolutionary movement.[2]

Another ideological influence on Balagoon was Russian immigrant and pioneer of American anarchism Emma Goldman. Another advocate of revolutionary armed struggle, Goldman supported the attempt by her comrade Alexander Berkman to assassinate a wealthy industrialist, Henry Clay Frick. The methods used by Frick to suppress the Homestead (Pennsylvania) Steel strike "justified the means." Goldman's encouragement of "free love" also resonated with Balagoon, as he was open to

[2] Ashanti Alston, correspondence with author, September 7, 2013. Alston is a former Black Liberation Army member, political prisoner, and anarchist activist. See Alston, 1998; Paz, 2007, 19–22, 87, 88, 116.

gle (Gilbert, 2003, 9; NYS, 1985, 99–100; "Panther 21 Trial: Another Chicago"; Shakur, Mutulu, 1986).

New Afrikan Anarchism

Balagoon's imprisonment and expulsion from and disillusionment with the BPP did not discourage his involvement or commitment to revolution. He began to explore anarchist politics during his incarceration. Balagoon received and studied literature from solidarity groups such as Anarchist Black Cross, an anti-authoritarian organization that provided material and legal support to political prisoners. Anarchism provided an analytical lens to sum up his critique of his experience in the BPP. According to Balagun, he worked to "apply the theories of Wilhelm Reich, Emma Goldman and others to the Black liberation struggle." He began to ask critical questions about the practice of his comrades and himself in allowing the national hierarchy to weaken the resolve and fighting capacity of the BPP. He concluded:

> The cadre accepted their command regardless of what their intellect had or had not made clear to them. The true democratic process which they were willing to die for, for the sake of their children, they would not claim for themselves. (Balagoon, 2003, 76.)

He desired a democratic process that would unleash the revolutionary potential of the masses and not make them prey to new oppressors.

> It is to say the only way to make a dictatorship of the proletariat is to elevate everyone to being proletariat and deflate all the advantages of power that translate into the wills of a few dictating to

21 open letter. Newton immediately expelled the New York Panther 21 on February 9, 1971. The cover of the February 13 *Black Panther* newspaper would declare NY BPP leaders and New York 21 defendants Richard Dhoruba Moore, Cetawayo Tabor, and Newton's personal secretary Connie Matthews "Enemies of the People." Moore and Tabor, out on bail, went underground rather than return to court proceedings. Matthews and Tabor would ultimately surface in Algeria at the BPP International section. Later that month, members of the New York BPP would hold a press conference and call for the purge of Huey Newton and BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard and the formation of a new National Central Committee. The New York chapter officially split from the national organization (Umoja, 1999, 141–143).

Balagoon's involvement in the New York BPP was an important part of his political development. On one hand, he was inspired to be a part of a dynamic revolutionary movement with comrades that he respected, loved, and trusted. On the other, Balagoon's experience with the BPP national leadership left him questioning its decisionmaking and the nature of democracy in the organization. While acknowledging that state repression disrupted this revolutionary nationalist organization, Balagoon wanted to correct the internal and ideological weaknesses that compromised the fighting capacity and solidarity of the liberation movement.

Besides his disenchantment with the BPP national leadership, Balagoon's receptivity to anti-authoritarian politics was also supported by his role in organizing fellow inmates as a Panther political prisoner. His comrade Kazembe Balagun argues that Kuwasi's experience in prison, awaiting trial, influenced his transition to anarchism. The New York Panther 21 were incarcerated at a variety ofjails in different boroughs of New York City. Kit Holder called a series of inmate protests at each of these institutions in 1970 a "coordinated rebellion." Balagoon, Lumumba Shakur, and New York Panther 21 defendant

Kwando Kinshasa were all incarcerated in the Queens House of Detention, where inmates organized an uprising that held seven hostages, including a captain, five correctional officers, and a Black cook hostage between October 1st and 5th, 1970. The slogan for the multi-ethnic (Black, Latino, and white) inmate takeover was, "all power to the people, free all oppressed people." The primary demand of the inmates was for speedier trials. Instead of attempting to play a "vanguard" role in the decisionmaking, Kazembe Balagun argued, even before formally declaring his commitment to anti-authoritarian politics, Kuwasi Balagoon's "primary concern was a consensus process for all inmates in decision-making, including access to food being brought from the outside." He and the other incarcerated Panthers in Queens were concerned 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.

The prisoners formed committees to coordinate their uprising. The inmates agreed to release the Black cook and one prison guard as a "sign of good faith." The prisoners ultimately released the hostages and suffered physical abuse and charges from the uprising. Kazembe Balagun argues that while Kuwasi was disappointed at the outcome, he believed the power the inmate resisters felt by "holding the state at bay" was a valuable experience. As an organizer, he saw the uprising as " 'growing pains' to those of us who believe oppressed people *will* rise up and seekjustice …" (Balagun, 2006; Balagoon, 1971, 32–347; NYT, 1971a, 24; "Prison Struggle 1970–1971"; Queens, 1970).

From Black Panther Party to Black Liberation Army

Balagoon's experience in the BPP and the repression of the New York chapter also convinced him of the necessity of being involved in a clandestine fight against the state. He concluded that repression turned the BPP away from grassroots organizing the Black masses around issues that most affected their daily survival (housing, education, and police abuse) to defending the political prisoners. Balagoon stated:

> The state rounded up all the organizers pointed out to it by its agents who infiltrated the party as soon as it had been organizing in New York. It charged these people with conspiracy and demanded bails so high that the party turned away from its purpose of liberation of the Black colony to fundraising [for legal defense].

This experience convinced him that "to survive and contribute I would have to go underground and literally fight (Balagoon, n.d.b, 75–76)." Balagoon was committed to building a Black Liberation Army and seeing his role in the Black Liberation movement as a clandestine freedom fighter.

On September 27, 1973, Balagoon would escape from New Jersey's Rahway State Prison shortly after his conviction for armed robbery in New Jersey. Approximately eight months after his escape, Balagoon was captured attempting to assist New York BPP member and Panther 21 defendant Richard Harris escape from custody while being transported to a funeral in Newark on May 5, 1974. Balagoon and Harris were apprehended after being wounded in a gun battle with correctional and police officers. His risking being recaptured to free Harris demonstrated Balagoon's commitment to his comrades and willingness to sacrifice for the liberation strug-