

Avah Atherton [AA]: Please tell me a bit about yourself and your background.

Malcolm Kernahan [MK]: My mom was born in St James, Port of Spain. She came from a family of 13 siblings. Her 3 youngest brothers were involved with an early steelband known as Red Army. They were involved in the early evolution of the steelbands. And the early riots between steelbands. This rivalry resulted in her youngest brother being killed and his body dumped at sea near to the Mucurapo Road near to their home at the southern end of Matura Street. I wasn't born as yet. My mom was badly traumatised by this incident. She didn't want to continue living in the St James Community. She went to a Siparia fete one year with a friend where she met my father.

My father was employed as a well-servicing foreman and he was living in the TLL housing project in Palo Seco. TLL, Trinidad Leasehold Limited Company, was the major oil exploration company between 1940 to 1963. The predecessor to Texaco Trinidad Incorporated. The oil companies build houses at Forest Reserve and Palo Seco for some of their senior employees.

They got married and she birthed 4 children in south. My father told me a lot about the Butler struggle. He was a Butlerite in the 1937 to 1945 period. As a young teenager in the mid 1960s, I became interested in the OWTU's fight for proper representation for the working class.

[AA]: So you were living in St James during the 1970 events?

[MK]: I kept my links with my relatives in St James. My elder brothers and I had a deep appreciation for steelband music. Against the wishes of my mom, my two elder brothers moved to St. James and started playing pan. I think this stress sent my mom to an early grave. She died in 1965 when I was in my early teens.

I also began playing pan somewhere around 1967 when I moved to St James. I was always in between Palo Seco, Fyzabad and St James. Because my grandmother lived in St James, I considered St James as my real home, my fall back home. The family went through a lot of dislocation so we were here, there and everywhere. But I spent most of my youthful life in St. James. I was going into 21 during 1970.

On Panka Street, in St James, there was a very militant block known as Block 4. I met Brian Jeffers there as a teenager growing up. We played pan together for a brief period. The younger members of the Esso Tripoli, Westside Symphony, North Stars (all St James steelbands) were part of the [1970] Marches.

[AA]: Were you part of the Feb 26th March to the cathedral?

[MK]: During that early period of the marches, NJAC core leaders were the main actors. I did attend the [February 26th] march but I didn't go into the Cathedral. I was also in the march on Charlotte Street that was tear gassed by the police. Since I was not part of the NJAC, most times I was just an ordinary rank and file follower.

The tear gassing of the march on Charlotte Street was during the early part of March. I can't recall the exact date. But NJAC leadership abandoned that march.

There were two trade unions which were active in the 1970 marches. Namely, the Transport and Industrial Workers Union (TIWU) and the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU). This was mainly due to Clive Nunez from (TIWU) and George Weekes from (OWTU). George would have had some supporters from the Point-a-Pierre branch behind him. The bulk of the oil workers didn't support the 1970 mass movement. The movement got most of its support from the unemployed section of the working class.

At the Charlotte Street march, it was George Weekes who placed a handkerchief over his nose and led the protesters back to Woodford Square. He had some choice words for the police before he dismissed the marchers. There were persons (provocateurs) who started looting stores which give the police the excuse to dismantle the demonstration.

That march was about 5,000 in numbers. Most of my comrades from St James, Block 4 position was that of critical support for NJAC. The State began to panic at the increase participation of young people in these protests. Coming from the oilfield, my position wasn't one of cultural nationalism. Yes I wore my hair in afro and I did sport a bracelet on my left hand. But that was all. I never wore a dashiki.

[AA]: If your position wasn't cultural nationalism, what was it?

[MK]: Even before 1970, there was a group in St James called the Western United Liberation Front. This group was comprised of about 6 soldiers from the T&T Regiment. These soldiers, most of them, were influenced by the politics of CLR James.

Coming from the oil belt, I myself was influenced by certain leftist figures in the OWTU. There was a guy, Clive Phil, he was the education officer of the OWTU. He was a Marxist. He visited Cuba in 1967 and on his return he made a statement that "the only solution is armed revolution".

Oh yes, we were against the discrimination of black people in T&T. But we believed in class struggle. The PNM was a black government. NJAC was not a monolithic Black nationalist organization. It was a front organization comprising of different ideological currents.

Brian Jeffers himself was a member of WULF. He was most influential in forming NUFF. He was from mixed parentage; East-Indian mother and an African father. He couldn't relate to African cultural nationalism. He said in 1970 that he was fighting for a "humanitarian cause". He was never part of NJAC as well.

[AA]: What about you? What influenced you to support these movements?

[MK]: I think my upbringing would have unconsciously prepared me to accept class struggle rather than being a Black Power cultural nationalist. Firstly, I came from a poor working class background and I felt more comfortable with the ordinary guys on the blocks. At the age of about 7 or 8, my family left Palo Seco and moved to an agricultural community in Manzanilla. It was a rural community called Sadhoo Village, 5 miles away from the Manzanilla main road. It was a neglected community where my father's elder brother owned 7 parcels of lands (cocoa, coffee, citrus, and bananas. Mixed cultivation. But most importantly this community was comprised of East-Indians, Caribs, Cocoa Payols and Africans. We had no electricity. No water. no access roads. We didn't even had shops.

My father had moved on to being an ardent supporter of the PNM. My uncle was a Democratic Labour Party Activist. My uncle's lands, several pieces, off the Sadhoo Road were off the road on mud tracks. Sometimes 1 and 2 miles. He, like most others, wanted access roads to bring out their farm produce. They wanted better prices for their cocoa, coffee, and bananas. They thought that the PNM government weren't performing. Agriculture was not prioritised. He had heated discussions with my father about how oppressive the PNM was. My uncle felt that the PNM leaders were representing the urban middle class and the rich.

Secondly, one of the first demonstrations I attended was in the Palo Seco area. In 1967 British Petroleum, one of the three oil companies operating in South wanted to retrench 3,500 workers. There was an OWTU protest march from Palo Seco to Santa Flora. I attended that demonstration even though I was not employed. This was militant stuff and I liked it.

And thirdly, I was refused employment at Texaco (the company which took over from TLL). My father got blind on the job, yet they never gave me a job. Maybe it was a sort of instinctive vengeance against capitalism. Maybe.

[AA]: So you were actively protesting against the economic conditions even before 70.

[MK]: Yes. Maybe it was because of my Butlerite socialisation. I was very angry with the rejection I got from the big bosses at Texaco. It started as a love for trade unionism, I suppose.

[AA]: Were other members of your family also involved in the movement? How did your family feel about your participation?

[MK]: My mom came from a hard core PNM family. My elder brothers never supported my activism. Even my blind father thought that I was going too far. I had some younger cousins who were interested. But they migrated soon after the 1970s.

My only support came from some of my close Comrades in St James and Fyzabad. Several of my friends in Fyzabad parents were Butlerites. And they were blocked from jobs in the oil belt too.

During the 1937 strike, the Company brought in scab labour to break the picket line. Most of these guys were brought in to replace striking workers. Some were beaten by the strikers for going to work. A lot of them came in from the smaller islands, and their children got preferential treatment and were employed.

We were deliberately blacklisted. There was a guy at the labour office at Forest Reserve, who it would seem did a lot of background checks on who the oil company employed. If I was employed maybe my name would not have been mentioned in T&T history. Maybe

[AA]: Outside of the oilfields, was it difficult for you to find other forms of employment?

[MK]: I went to TELCO which was a State Company. They were employing people from rioting steelbands. And I went there seeking employment. The bosses were a guy called Brewster and Ivan Williams. Ivan Williams was handpicked by Dr Eric Williams. They only employed persons who were loyal to the PNM. I didn't fit that bill so I was asked to come back and come back. The same thing happened on the Port. T&T has always been who know you and not who you know.

[AA]: Tell me about the establishment of NUFF.

[MK]: There was supposed to be an attempt by a group known as Coordinating Council to seize political power before the SOE. Some rebel soldiers were in the forefront of this movement. The block militants like myself were all geared up for it. But it fell through. Then the police start raiding the blocks and arresting people who they felt were involved in this abortive strike. We the militants fought back.

Then the army mutinied. Rebel soldiers took over Tetron and crossed over the hills and were stationed at St Barbs Hills. Brian Jeffers, the then leader of NUFF joined them. They were planning to initiate armed struggle. Then Lasalle and Shah gave the orders to these rebel soldiers to surrender. They surrendered to Commander Jeff Serette and were promised an amnesty.

The Police knew Jeffers and Block 4 had contacts with the rebel soldiers. Arms and ammunition went missing from Tetron after the army mutiny. Some of those arms were in the hands of NUFF militants. There was a lot of armed confrontation on the blocks. Then Guy Harewood, Brian Jeffers, John Beddoe, Adolph De Messiah and several others became wanted men.

NJAC had a defense shadow Minister call "Ambrose" who had contacts in several Villages. Soon after the SOE, Ambrose and Guy Harewood defected from NJAC. They felt that it was time to start the armed revolution. So the St. James, Deigo Martin, Boissierre, Laventille, San Juan, Fyzabad, Point Fortin, Rio Claro, Tunapuna, Sangre Grande, and Arima etc chapters of NUFF were established. We had several safe houses in all the above named places. After St. James, Fyzabad would have been another NUFF base area. There were several persons in these communities In whose homes NUFF members camped out.

[AA]: Was it in response to the leaders of NJAC being detained or something else?

[MK]: We rose up against the detention of NJAC leaders and the charging and detention of Rex Lasalle, Raffique and other rebel soldiers.

And there were other block militants who were charged for being in possession of Molotov cocktails and subversive literature. You would also remember the commanding officer of the Coast Guard and the lead prosecutor of the rebel soldiers was shot and injured. NUFF militants were accused of these incidents. There were also attacks on the St James and Belmont Police Stations during this heightened period of militant activities after the declaration of the SOE.

[AA]: So if the SOE didn't happen, do you think NUFF would have still decided to choose militant action?

[MK]: Isn't that a bit difficult to answer? Maybe NUFF was the outcome of the state repression of the movement of the 1970s. I can't think about it in no other way.

Let us assume that I was given a decent job at Texaco, would I have been so angry with the status quo? And what about if the government had called in the protesters and opened the door to negotiations? Maybe things would have been different. Honestly we really can't say.

[AA]: How did your wife, Jennifer and her sister, Beverley Jones get involved with NUFF?

[MK]: Jennifer and Beverly were still at school during the 1970 mass movement. Jennifer was attending St George's College in Barataria and Beverly was at Providence High school in Port of Spain.

Jennifer said they would skip classes and attend NJAC marches at times. In 1972 while doing the A' Level Subjects at Polytechnic Institute in St James, she came across a NUFF member of the Boissiere Unit.

Jennifer was very intellectually inclined. Their elder brother studied at Harvard University and he was an avowed Marxist. He would have influenced Beverly and Jennifer's political orientation. I don't think it was his intention that they get involved in armed revolution.

Jennifer, John Beddoe, Guy Harewood and another sister known as Ruth were responsible for conducting ideological classes with the different chapters within NUFF.

I think the Police would have gotten information about Jennifer when John Beddoe was killed in February 1973. She ended up joining the brothers who were operating from the Northern Range.

NUFF rented houses which were called "Safe Houses". People who were wanted by the State would be able to meet here to discuss the organization's plans and projections. They were

places not known to much people. Beverly was held in such a safe house where she was staying with a NUFF Member who was injured in a firefight with the police. She eventually got married at a church to Guy Harewood's younger brother, Alan Harewood, another member of the Boissiere Unit.

[AA]: Can you give me some details about the ideological classes you mentioned?

[MK]: John Beddoe was really a brilliant guy within the organization. He felt that NUFF's urban units should build block cooperative to serve as the basic unit of the organization. So we had several of these block cooperatives. The block cooperative was an attempt to build a sustainable economic base while waging war against the State.

This was done by FRELIMO in Mozambique successfully. But here in T&T we didn't had the space for such an undertaking. And it was a difficult task to achieve considering that some of the political "commissars" were wanted by the police. Some of these blocks were involved in handicraft, while others were involved in agriculture. This was done to get members involved in some kind of sustainable project. At the same time the ideological work would have involved studying the works of [Karl] Marx, Walter Rodney, Fidel Castro, Stokely Carmichael and others.

[AA]: What about you? What role did you play in NUFF?

[MK]: In 1971 we had a split in the ranks. I left St James and went back to the south. I was based in Fyzabad. I honestly found that the northern units were taking too much of a confrontational role towards the security forces. I did established a unit in Fyzabad and we (the Fyzabad Unit) wanted to take a different road. But maybe it was too late. We did team back up with the northern units. The Port of Spain-centric units, because the police were always up in their faces, saw the police as the main enemy.

Being from the more tranquil countryside, we the southerners saw the corporations as the enemy. So the attacks against the police did ease up a bit. I also wanted closer links with an emerging revolutionary organization, the National Liberation Movement. But they only materialised when most of the NUFF fighters died.

I was there from the inception and I always tried to broker a truce between the ultra radical hot heads and those who were a bit moderate. Honestly, I think we in the military arm of NUFF were isolating too many good brothers and sisters.

[AA]: Can you tell me what a typical day in NUFF looked like?

[MK]: On the military side we had to be safe. You weren't allowed to speak hard. We had a 24-hour watch. And we kept the weapons well serviced. On the political side we published our newsletter. It was known as the Freedom Fighter. We had to always keep meetings to trash out policies; what activities would isolate the organization and what activities would build the organization.

In the early period of the organization some renegade elements attacked a dwelling house and stole from the occupants. They were thrown out of the organization. In the forest we never stole from people's gardens. And we had to be careful how we treated farmers whom we came in contact with.

We always had weekly meetings with the flats unit to work out strategy. The urban arm felt that since they were on the ground they should dictate the day to day running of the organization. We usually had very stormy meetings. We operated for a 3 year period after 15 of our members were killed. But constant police harassment forced us to disband the organization.

[AA]: Were you considered one of the leaders of the organisation?

[MK]: Well I never saw myself as a leader. The internet blogs described me as a leader. But I don't think that is something that I would feel proud saying. I never believed in blowing my own trumpet. What I would admit is that I tried my best to be committed and responsible.

[AA]: Do you think terms used to describe the revolution are accurate? Words like 'black power', 'revolution', 'guerilla' and 'gang'.

[MK]: The leaders of NUFF including myself never used the term Black Power. Of course we were waging a guerilla war. Gang? We were never a gang. Most of the people who were involved in NUFF (the survivors) went on to live responsible and fulfilling lives. Clyde Haynes went to UWI and had a Masters degree. Andrea Jacob did a degree in Sociology and got a prestigious government job. Jennifer did an agricultural program and then graduated as a Doctor in Cuba. She went on to be a Minister and an Ambassador. Terrence Thornhill is an ordained Minister in a Christian church and I had a management job at a State enterprise and was a Director at a State special purposes company for 6 years. I can go on and on. Gangsters don't even try to make a contribution to society. I rest my case.

[AA]: What about your history with the police?

[MK]: I had it very rough. I was shot in Montevideo in the North Coast in early April 1974. The police placed me on ID parades on the 10th and 11th of April. They placed me on about 24 parades but no one pointed me out. Allec Heller, the Commissioner in charge of crime in those days, told me that most of the people made me out and just didn't want to point me out.

He told me that I should join a church because Christ was with me. But they did frame me with several charges. Shooting 3 policemen in the St James in 1972. Possession of arms and ammunition, shooting to murder and a \$95,000 robbery with aggravation. I spent about 4 months in which I was remanded in custody.

Then they arrested me again in 1976 and again threw me in prison. They would revoke my bail over and over. I won my last case in 1993 about 20 years later. I conduct my own defense in court and they hated me for that. I don't have any conviction. I won all my cases.

[AA]: Is there anything about what's reported on the 70 Movement that you feel is inaccurate?

[MK]: What I think no one ever take note of is the fact that the armed forces didn't want Guy Harewood and John Beddoe to be captured alive. They learnt from the Cuban playbook where Castro was captured alive. He went on to lead a successful revolution. Burroughs said that he didn't want those guys alive. Guy was cornered in a house with Terrence Thornhill. Guy was killed and Thornhill was held alive. Guy was a national symbol of revolution. They tear gassed the house with John Beddoe and others. They were disoriented and the police could have captured them alive. Both Guy and Beddoe were revolutionary intellectuals. They didn't take any chance to leave them alive. Just my take eh.

Most of what was said about the 1970 mass movement was distorted. I think even though the NJAC banner was "Indians & African Unite" people felt that the movement was an afro movement. So I think although the urban & semi-urban Afro-Trinis could have related to it, the other ethnic groups could not relate to it.

People still feel that the movement was about Africanizing the T&T population. Even when NJAC wanted to take part in the electoral process the African boogey was thrown at them.

In 1965 Sugar Workers didn't want Bhadase Maharaj leadership and they went to George Weeks and the OWTU for help to settle Industrial matters. The PNM govt declared a SOE in the Sugar Belt. Dr Williams is on record as having said that his "greatest contribution was to keep oil and sugar apart because if they mixed it would become "sweet oil". Please read his book, Inward Hunger. We just can't deal with the fact that T&T is a hybrid country. This is the sad dichotomy.