

To Monique Baptiste of Newark and young African-Americans like her, the life and teachings of former Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur hold a captivating allure.

"She's become a myth and legend. She embodies the political counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s that many people still follow, appreciate, attempt to emulate and to which they still pay homage," said Baptiste, 25. "In addition, she's used as the matriarch of the politically oppressed, especially in the black and urban communities."

Shakur's struggles against racial oppression have inspired hip-hop artists and been the subject of college classes and her self-titled autobiography, which sold more than 125,000 copies.

"It is just a classic," Lawrence Hill senior editor Yuval Taylor said of the book, which his company released in 1987. "It just keeps selling more strongly every year. It's one of these books that everyone just wants to read."

The story is a far cry from the one told by New Jersey's law enforcement community, which knows Shakur by her non-Muslim name, JoAnne Chesimard.

To them, she is a convicted trooper killer who escaped 25 years ago Tuesday from the Clinton Correctional Institution for Women in Hunterdon County, since renamed the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

"JoAnne Chesimard was no freedom fighter. She was no revolutionary. She was a gutless coward engaged in a criminal enterprise, the same as any gangster or thug," said David Jones, president of the State Troopers Fraternal Association.

Chesimard - aka - Assata Shakur

Written by Westside ID295

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"She assassinated an honest, hardworking American who was only out there to feed his family and protect the public -- the facts bear that out and a jury concurred," Jones said.

Chesimard, now 57 and living in Cuba under political asylum after fleeing there in the mid-1980s, was convicted in 1977 by an all-white Middlesex County jury for participating in the murder of State Trooper Werner Foerster during a gunbattle on the New Jersey Turnpike in East Brunswick. A second trooper, James Harper, was wounded in the shootout.

The troopers pulled Chesimard and two companions over May 2, 1973, for a faulty tail light on their vehicle. In the ensuing shootout, Chesimard's brother-in-law, James Costan, was killed. Chesimard and another associate, Clark Squire, were wounded.

All three were associated with the Black Liberation Army, a group that championed armed revolution and the formation of a separate black nation. Chesimard was well known to police, who linked her to a string of bank robberies and attacks on police officers.

Following her arrest, she was tried and acquitted of two bank robberies and a kidnapping. Authorities later dropped charges in connection with another armed robbery, a murder and an attempted murder of a New York City police officer.

There remains debate over who fired the shots that killed Foerster.

Authorities claimed Chesimard used Foerster's gun to shoot him, but her attorneys said Chesimard was too seriously wounded after being struck twice by shots from Harper's gun to fire a weapon.

After her conviction, Chesimard was sentenced to a life term and jailed at several locations before being transferred to the Clinton facility. There, on Nov. 2, 1979, three gunmen posing as visitors briefly held two guards hostage and drove her out of the facility's maximum-security unit in a van.

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Supporters helped hide Chesimard underground for years until she surfaced in Cuba, where Fidel Castro granted her asylum. Since then, she has earned a graduate degree, written her autobiography and poems, as well as worked as a translator.

Chesimard's capture remains a priority for authorities.

She still is listed as one of New Jersey's most-wanted criminals and her sanctuary is one of the reasons the U.S. State Department cites in continuing government sanctions on Cuba.

"Anytime there is somebody who is a fugitive from justice we'd like to bring them to justice," said state Corrections Department spokesman Matt Schuman. "It's only been fairly recently that the department has had success in bringing back escapees internationally," he said, referring to the recent capture of escaped felon Manny Farina in Colombia. "In that respect, there is hope."

Despite the allegations and conviction, or perhaps because of them, Shakur's stature has grown among young African-Americans and other minorities who relate to her feelings of disenfranchisement.

"She's a revolutionary fighter against imperialism and brings that home very directly," said Rutgers University professor H. Bruce Franklin, who uses an excerpt from Shakur's book in his Crime and Punishment in American Literature class. "In the book, one of the things that comes out is how her own personal experience dramatizes the particular experiences of so many in our society.

"The other thing that makes her such a heroic figure is the fact that she escaped," Franklin said. "She is the modern counterpart to the escaped slave. She escaped from the tremendous power of the system."

Jones, of the troopers' union, scoffed at such a portrayal.

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"The beauty of America, unlike the regime JoAnne Chesimard went to, is that these young people have a right to be wrong," Jones said.

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