

Dancing with My Demons: Personal Reflections from Death Row

by

Abdul Haleem Muhammad, Ph.D. (Robert S. Muhammad)

Southwest Regional Student Minister of the Nation of Islam

Muhammad Mosque No.45 Houston, Texas

The execution of Georgia death row inmate Troy Davis on September 21, 2011 re-stimulated some personal demons I thought I had long vanquished. When I speak of these suppressed personal demons, I am speaking of the fear of death, uncontrollable anger, and misdirected hate.

On March 1 and June 22, 2000, I witnessed two executions in the State of Texas. Odell Barnes and Shaka Sankofa both died before my eyes on death row in Huntsville, Texas. I served as spiritual advisor to both and I believe they were innocent. I am convinced that had either been wealthy and able to afford competent legal counsel, I wouldn't have witnessed their deaths. In Texas, and across the United States, it is better to be rich and guilty, than to be poor and innocent.

Troy Davis, Odell Barnes, and Shaka Sankofa's cases have similarities that unleashed my demons. In the case of Troy and Shaka, both had jurors that would not have found them guilty had they known the inconsistencies that were uncovered after their trials. Odell Barnes said to us from the death gurney in March 2000: *"I thank you for proving my innocence, although it has not been acknowledged by the courts."* Prior to his execution, the French Government had paid tens of thousands of dollars for appeals lawyers and forensic experts who raised more than a reasonable doubt as to Mr. Barnes' guilt.

What is interesting is that all three men saw their cases as symbols of a larger struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. Odell Barnes said moments before he died: *“May you continue in the struggle and may you change all that's being done here today and in the past. ”* Both Troy and Shaka accepted that they may lose their lives, but the struggle against injustice must continue. Shaka said to me in the death chamber during the last 15 minutes of his life: *“...You must expose this injustice to the world. You must continue to demand a moratorium on all executions. We must move forward Minister Robert Muhammad.”* His words still ring in my ears and resonate in my soul.

During our struggle to save Shaka's life, I fasted for 40 days under medical supervision. Shaka was executed on the thirtieth day of my fast. During our last private visit on the day of his execution, we were talking about a tray of food sitting in front of his holding cell. I asked whether that was his last meal. Shaka's response to me that hot steamy day in June 2000 was: *“No sir! Brother Muhammad, to accept a (last) meal is to cooperate with injustice. Noncooperation with evil is an obligation.”* Troy Davis, like Shaka Sankofa before him, refused his so-called last meal. It makes me wonder how many times we have cooperated with injustice and thereby perpetuated our own suffering by assuaging the guilt and affirming the humanity of our oppressors.

In conclusion, I don't see any easy path to liberation for us and our children. There will be no permanent change without the willingness to reason one with another, coupled with a long-suffering patience to unify our people, and an unwavering effort to pool our spiritual, mental, and economic resources toward formulating a long term strategic plan for building the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Only when we lose our fear of death, control our emotions, and direct our hatred toward what Allah (God) hates will we be free.

A part of me died last night with Troy Davis as before with Odell Barnes and Shaka Sankofa in 2000 – what died in me was the fear of death and any hope that the Black people in particular and the righteous in general will ever get justice in America absent an intense struggle backed by the power of Allah (God) and His Christ. Shaka told me from his holding cell outside of the death chamber hours before his execution: *“My brother, death is a complement to life. They make it something to fear so that they can control us. To be an effective leader, you must be willing to pay the price.”*

Last night, Troy Davis, as Shaka Sankofa before him, died a free Black man. Now I know what the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan means when he says he is a “free” Black man. After my final dance with my demons last night, I too, am now free.