

DANCING WITH DEMONS - GIVE THE DEVIL HIS DUE

**Report from the Death Chamber
Correspondence from Hell**

Dancing with Demons

Give the Devil his Due

***A Witness to Executions *A Personal Experience *A View from Death Row ***

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

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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful.

I am writing to exercise some demons. The demons of anger, hatred, and guilt. These demons are the result of injustice. The worst injustice is hypocrisy in the form of legal and procedural technicalities. In, America, you could be legally guilty but factually innocent, and get jailed or even worse, put to death. On June 22, 2000, in Huntsville, Texas, I witnessed an innocent man put to death. This wasn't the first time. My first experience was on March 1 of the same year. Witnessing injustice and feeling helpless to change it is worse than death for those who sincerely love justice and fairness. At least with death, you don't have to live with the feelings of guilt that turn to anger, hatred, guilt, and a desire for vengeance.

The execution of Shaka Sankofa, death row inmate number 696, took a part of me with him. My belief that there was some measure of decency in the persons who operate the levers of power of government died too. Shaka Sankofa FKA Gary Graham was a 17-year-old youth convicted of the murder of a white man, Bobby Lambert in 1981. If this was a strictly black-versus-white issue it would be easier for me to handle my pain. After all, racism and slavery are America's original sins. However, I found too many poor Black people apathetic and rich whites adamantly opposed the death penalty and Shaka's execution. In fact, despite all the militant rhetoric coming from some quarters of the Black community, the only ones to get arrested for protesting Shaka's execution were whites and Hispanics known as the "Huntsville Eight."

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Why am I angry? Because Shaka Sankofa and the others on Texas death row were sacrificed on the altar of presidential politics. Either George W. Bush was the worst hypocrite in recent history or he is a decent man who was surrounded by ruthless devils. Either way, Shaka, and other poor inmates are dead while Bush et al went on to enjoy the comforts of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue at our (taxpayers') expense. I am angry because, if there ever was a case for an execution being stopped, Shaka Sankofa's was the one. There were and are too many unanswered questions in this case. Yet, The State of Texas went forward with his execution. I'm angry because the Board of Pardon and Parole didn't really review his case despite international pressures and scrutiny. I viewed a tape shot for a BBC broadcast showing members of the Board of Pardons and Parole not knowing that Jurors in the original trial signed affidavits stating they would not have voted for guilt if they had known what they know today. How can you have a man's life in your hands and not have known or seen that in Shaka's clemency application? Again, the charge to execute Shaka was led by a Black man who was the chairman of the Board of Pardons and Parole. The swing vote on the Supreme Court that sealed Shaka's fate was cast by a Black man, Clarence Thomas. The lousy court-appointed attorney who put Shaka and many others on death row was a Black man, Ron Mock.

My gut tells me this is a black, white, rich, poor issue but there is something deeper going on. This is why I speak of demons. Allah (God) may have allowed this to take place, but Satan killed Shaka. Yes, we must give the devil his due. On the day Shaka was executed, I was on the 30th day of a 40-day fast. No solid food, praying, working, preaching, and marching for justice.

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There is no way to make you believe what I saw in the spirit realm during my fast. "We war not against flesh and blood..." This is so true. I saw people for what they really were. I now understand why some people claim to be atheists and agnostics. Some of the biggest hypocrites and phonies come in the name of God. But to be an atheist is to miss what I witnessed in the spirit while on my 40-day fast. I saw things in me that made me more conscious of my shortcomings and strengths. Also, I saw things in others that I never want to see again. It has taken me a year to come to grips with what I saw. Like a drug addict, I was in denial. The ugliness I witnessed surrounding this execution was beyond description. Why, because it was done with civility, and legality and carried out with clinical precision. I know that sounds like an oxymoron to mention execution and civility in the same sentence. But that is what I mean by demonic. It was like witnessing what I have heard described as rituals involving human sacrifice. Everyone involved in carrying out the execution was in a trance-like state. It was as if someone else was in control of their minds. I couldn't help but wonder, "What kind of person could do this for a living and be normal?" I wanted to scream out, "Hey, don't you see what you are doing here!?" I imagine their response would be, "I am just doing my job." I don't believe Our Creator is going to accept that explanation from them. Do all of these participants really believe that everyone they executed was actually guilty of capital murder? Everyone? Or do they make themselves believe it to pacify the voice of conscience whispering to them contrary thoughts? How can one do that and then go out and have a meal?

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I know how I felt when I came home to an empty house that night. My wife and 17-year-old son were in Virginia registering him for college. I should have been there to walk him around our Alma Mater describing the do's and don'ts of college life. Instead, I was witnessing the State of Texas murdering an innocent man.

The range of emotions I experienced went from sadness to anger to guilt. From detailed memories of the sights, smells, and sounds to believing it was all a bad dream from which I was about to awaken. While I was home alone the night of the execution was the worst. I was in shock and disbelief. I had fought for Shaka's freedom for 7 years. My contribution was no more or less than anyone else's. But the pain is mine. My demons were mine.

It was godawfully hot that day. Media from all over the world was present. Huntsville had a zoo-like atmosphere. Fear was in the air. The authorities were well prepared for any outbreak of violence. What I saw while being escorted through the administration building let me know that slaughter was planned for the protestors. However, the only act of violence that took place that day was what the State of Texas did to Shaka Sankofa.

Is there any good news? Yes, there were several changes in the law debated as it relates to the criminal justice system in Texas. Life without parole, execution moratorium, and abolishing the death penalty for the mentally retarded and minors were considered. Post-conviction **DNA** testing and indigent defense system. Many of these measures were defeated or watered down through compromise, but at least they were considered. It was the presidential race and the attention that was brought to the State of Texas that pressured the politician to clean up the criminal justice system.

That, along with prison escapes blamed on sloppy management, understaffing and poor

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pay of the guards. The TDCJ is one of the most corrupt institutions in the state. Why, because wrongdoing is hidden and often ignored because no one thinks of prisoners as being human beings, regardless of their crimes. There is no rehabilitation in the Texas prison system. This is why it is easier to give someone the death penalty. What do I mean? In a death penalty or capital murder case, you have a guilt phase and a penalty phase. In the penalty phase, a person's criminal background is often highlighted by the prosecution. If the defendant has been in TDC, it is known that this person will be a further threat to society because TDC doesn't rehabilitate anybody. It is the religious groups, educators, drug counselors, and job-skill trainers who do the rehabilitation work. The lock 'em up and throw away the key mentality in Texas and America makes security and prison building a priority. Rehabilitation? Please, don't fool yourself. If during the penalty phase it is shown that you have spent time in TDC, the judge or juror knows TDC stands for Texas Department of Corruption, not Corrections. It is a criminal-making enterprise.

At the "Career Criminal College of Texas" one learns what mistakes they made that got them caught and sent to prison. The educational needs are not attended to. There is inadequate drug and alcohol rehabilitation! What can an ex-offender do for a living? Felony convictions affect where he or she can live and work. The families are usually dysfunctional before they go in, further fractured while in, and unable to cope or adjust when they return.

The commitment from private and public entities is inadequate to cope with the magnitude of the problem. The result is more prisons, harsher sentences, and the criminalization of a generation. "Racial" profiling is as generational as it is racial.

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Dancing with Demons. I have probably lapsed in and out of clinical depression over the following year. I listen to people's problems every day. Often, I sit and stare at them wondering if they really understand how trivial their problem is compared to a man or woman on death row that is innocent. Imagine knowing that you are innocent, yet 20 feet away is the death chamber. They offer you a meal, a last meal. You refuse because to accept the last meal is to cooperate with injustice. When the appointed time comes you struggle with your guards before, they overpower you and drag you to the death chamber. They strap you down and insert the IV's in your left and right arms. You wait for the witnesses to be brought to their respective places. You can see them and they can see you. You begin to speak for the last time while feeling the chemicals that will eventually kill you slowly flowing through your veins. You and I can only imagine what that looks like unless we witnessed an execution.

Everyone who runs for or aspires to the office of Governor should witness an execution before they ever consider their first clemency request from a death row inmate. The weight of the decision should not be lessened or sterilized by distance or isolation. All members of the Board of Pardon and Paroles should witness an execution before assuming the post.

These death row inmates are people, not numbers. The world needs to understand that my religion doesn't forbid the death penalty as capital punishment. There is a balance between real justice and implementing the ultimate penalty. Islam should and will never condone killing people who have been unjustly convicted - Arabs, Africans, Asians, and Europeans may in the Name of Allah, but Islam will never condone such. Until there is a just society there can never be the thought of a death penalty. The Holy Qur'an specifically authorizes the death penalty. But under what

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circumstances? It is no coincidence that disproportionate numbers of the poor and people of color find themselves on death row. Few if any have a college degree. Most come from broken homes. I am so angry that our society continues to pretend that there is nothing wrong or slightly wrong. Denial, denial, denial. How long will the God of justice sleep? The longer He takes to execute His justice the worse His punishment will be. Why? This society believes there is no one they must answer to for what they do. So when it rains, it will pour.

Shaka told me that when he went to death row his father was in jail. Oddly enough, when Shaka was executed, his son Gary Jr. was in jail on capital murder charges. He was eventually convicted **and** sentenced to prison.

Shaka educated himself in prison. He was a brilliant advocate for abolishment of the death penalty. He was the greatest in Texas history. Unlike Mumia Abu Jamal, Pennsylvania's death row inmate, Shaka wasn't an activist, or journalist when he came to death row. He was raised to consciousness by his condition. He made time serve him well. We see the metamorphosis of a man in prison similar to that of Malcolm X. The most dangerous person in America is an educated, articulate, fearless Blackman with nothing to lose. Shaka arrived on death row in time to see everyone put to death since the resumption of the death penalty. He said that he was there when Charlie X Brooks was executed.

The death penalty is not a deterrent in America. We don't need more police, prosecutors, judges, and jails to solve the crime problem. We need fewer criminals. The way to arrive at that goal is by preventing children from becoming criminals through education, family counseling, career training, drug and alcohol treatment, and access to medical care. Prevention, rehabilitation, and indefinite

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incarceration for the incorrigible is what is needed.

Dancing with demons means listening to the rhythm of a tune. Dancing with demons dancing to that same tune, it can also mean to be moving out of step to the beat. Dancing isn't always joyful or celebratory. In some cultures, there are funeral dances, mourning dances, and dances to ward off evil. Dancing with demons means that Satan was trying to be the maestro or bandleader. It reminds you of a dance club or party where the DJ plays a tune that you don't want to dance to. You can either sit back in your seat or get on the floor and dance unenthusiastically to a song you don't really like. Yet you dance - dancing with demons is to watch unwillingly as demons do their thing. Dancing with demons is to listen to someone say one thing yet hear something else come out of their mouth. It is to hear their thinking no matter what their mouths say. It is to see the struggle of good versus evil take place in a microcosm and macrocosm simultaneously. It is to see evil rule temporarily, win temporarily, and bask in the sun temporarily.

Yes, temporarily. The only thing that will make your dance with demons bearable is the knowledge that this nightmare is temporary. Demons such as anger come up in you. This is a fire that can consume you and those around you. Because your anger leads you to hate the source of your anger. Then your hate pushes you to strike out at the source of your anger in a vengeful manner. To strike out leads to reprisals, that lead to reprisals, and so forth. My guilt is feeling that I should have done more to save Shaka but did not. That still haunts me.

Remembering One Year Later

June 22, 2001

Today has been a very stressful day. I was supposed to travel to a reparations conference in Baton Rouge (N'Cobra). All of my best efforts to leave town were frustrated by circumstances beyond my control. Today is the day the State of Texas murdered my brother Shaka in 2000. My writing was interrupted by Sister Dusty from Baton Rouge. She said, "maybe you were not supposed to be here [in Baton Rouge]." I don't know if she is right or not. All I know is that I am here. There are two memorials for Shaka tonight at 7:00 pm. I wish there was just one. Shaka had a way of bringing all elements of the movement together. Although our relationship was very cautious we still worked together. I remember my last conversation with Shaka - I asked him if he wanted to declare his Shahadah (declaration of faith) - "I bear witness there is no God but Allah - I bear witness that Muhammad is His Messenger." He told me "no" because he didn't want to offend the other faith traditions that supported him. I remember the first time I met Shaka face-to-face. I made the mistake of addressing him as "Gary." He quickly corrected me. He said, "My name is Shaka." Allah knows I respected his wish.

After all, the Nation of Islam teaches us to get out of our slave names ASAP! So, I never met Gary Graham. The man referred to himself as Shaka Sankofa. Shaka was the great Zulu chief who waged war against the colonizers who came to occupy his kingdom. Sankofa is a bird that looks backward to go forward. Shaka was a warrior. "Death before dishonor" is a befitting description of my brother. The eloquence of his final statement still impresses me. Considering the circumstances under which he made them.

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June 22, 2000 - It was God-awful hot that day. I wore blue. Ashanti Chimurenga told me it was Shaka's favorite color. She is a lawyer and a death penalty abolitionist. She really loved Shaka. I know she was devastated by his execution.

I remember the press conference after the execution. I warned America and the world that we could not allow that evil to get out of Texas to occupy the Whitehouse. What most did not understand was that the road to the Whitehouse for George W. Bush ran through Huntsville. He had to prove to his handlers (Karl Rove et al) he would do whatever he was told. It played out during the invasion of Iraq after 9-11. He executed a nation based on a lie. Shaka said he would be "avenged" during his last moments in the death chamber. Well, it was one year to the month his death date was set in the Harris County Justice Center that Tropical Storm Allison hit Houston-Harris County. According to Wikipedia: "The six-day rainfall in Houston amounted to 38.6 inches (980 mm). Houston Hobby Airport received 20.84 inches of rain from June 5 to 10, 2001, while Bush Intercontinental Airport received 16.48 inches. The deluge of rainfall flooded 95,000 automobiles and 73,000 houses throughout Harris County." The courthouse where Shaka's death date was set one year earlier was flooded out completely.

My prayers and fasting were answered a year later. I never doubted God's justice, but I must admit, my demons keep whispering, feeding my anger, hatred, and guilt about his execution. To see those who thought they had power rendered helpless by the forces of nature was comforting to my soul and bolstered my faith. Yes, many "innocent" people suffered along with the guilty. Are we innocent when we ignore or remain apathetic to injustice? We all must dance with our own demons. No one is exempt.

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EXECUTION RECORDING

OFFENDER: Graham, Gary, TDCJ #000696 EXECUTION

DATE: June 22, 2000

TAKEN FROM HOLDING CELL	8:20pm	TIME
STRAPPED TO GURNEY	8:29pm	TIME
SOLUTION FLOWING	8:27pm	HAND / ARM
	8:29pm	LEFT HAND / ARM
LAST STATEMENT	8:34pm	TIME
LETHAL DOSE BEGAN	8:41pm	TIME
LETHAL DOSE COMPLETED	8:43pm	TIME
PRONOUNCED DEAD	8:49pm	TIME

UNUSUAL
OCCURRENCES:

LAST STATEMENT

OF

BROTHER SHAKA SANKOFA
(Formerly known as Gary Graham)

June 22, 2000
8:34 pm

I would like to say that I did not kill Bobby Lambert. That I'm an innocent Black man that is being murdered. This is a lynching that is happening in America tonight. There's overwhelming and compelling evidence of my defense that has never been heard in any court in America. What is happening here is an outrage for any civilized country to anyone anywhere to look at what's happening there is wrong. I thank all of the people that have rallied to my cause. They've been standing in support of me. Who have finished with me. I say to Mr. Lambert's family, I did not kill Bobby Lambert. You are pursuing the execution of an innocent man. I want to express my sincere thanks to all of ya'll. We must continue to move forward and do everything we can to outlaw legal lynching in America. We must continue to stay strong all around the world and people must come together and stop the systematic killing of poor and innocent Black people. We must continue to stand together in unity and to demand a moratorium on all executions. We must not let this murder/lynching be forgotten tonight, my brothers. We must take it to the nation. We must keep our faith. We must go forward. We recognize that many leaders have died. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and others who stood up for what was right. The stood up for what was just. We must, you must brothers, that's why I have called you today. You must carry-on that condition. What is here is just a lynching that is taking place.

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But they're going to keep on lynching us for the next 100 years if you do not carry-on that tradition, and that period of resistance. We will prevail. We may lose this battle but we will win the war. This death, this lynching will be avenged. It will be avenged, it must be avenged. The people must avenge this murder. So my brother all of ya'll stay strong, continue to move forward. Know that I love all of you. I love the people, I love all of you for your blessing, strength, for your courage, for your dignity, the way you have come here tonight, and the way you have protested and kept this nation together. Keep moving forward my brothers. Slavery couldn't stop us. The lynching couldn't stop us in the south. This lynching will not stop us tonight. We will go forward. Our destiny in this country is freedom and liberation. We will gain our freedom and liberation by any means necessary. By any means necessary, we keep marching forward. I love you Mr. Jackson. Bianca, make sure that the state does not get my body. Make sure that we get my name as Shaka Sankofa. My name is not Gary Graham. Make sure that it is properly presented on my grave. Shaka Sankofa. I died fighting for that what I believe in. I died fighting for what was just and what was right. I did not kill Bobby Lambert, and the truth is going to come out. It will be brought out. I want you to take this thing off into international court Mr. Robert Muhammad and all ya'll. I want you, I want to get my family and take this down to the international court and file a lawsuit. Get all of the videotapes of all the beatings. They have beat me up in the back. They have beat me up at the unit over there. Get all the videotapes supporting that lawsuit. And make the public exposed to the genocide and this brutality world, and let the world see what is really happening here behind closed doors. Let the world see the barbarity and injustice of what is really happening here. You must get those videotapes.

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You must expose this injustice to the world. You must continue to demand a moratorium in all executions. We must move forward Minister Robert Muhammad. Ashanti Chimurenga, I love you for standing with me, my sister. You are a strong warrior queen. You will continue to be strong in everything that you do. Believe in yourself, you must hold your head up, in the spirit of Winnie Mandela, in the spirit of Nelson Mandela. Ya'll must move forward. We will stop this lynching. Reverend Al Sharpton, I love you my brother. Bianca Jagger, I love all of you.

Ya'll make sure that we continue to stand together. Reverend Jesse Jackson and know that this murder, this lynching will not be forgotten. (I love you too my brother.) This is genocide in America. This is what happens to Black men when they stand up and protest for what is right and just. We refuse to compromise; we refuse to surrender our dignity for what we know is right. But we move on, we have been strong in the past. We must continue to be strong as a people. You can kill a revolutionary, but you cannot kill the revolution. The revolution will go on. The people will carry the revolution on. You are the people that must carry that revolutionary on in order to liberate our children from this genocide and for what is happening here in America tonight. What has happened for the past 100 or so years in America? This is part of the genocide. This is part of the African Holocaust that we as Black people have endured in America. But we shall overcome, we will continue with this. We will continue, we will gain our freedom and liberation, by any means necessary. Stay strong. They cannot kill us. We will move forward.

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To my sons, to my daughters, all of you. I love all of you. You have been wonderful. Keep your heads up. Keep moving forward. Keep united. Maintain the love and unity in the community. And know that victory us assured. Victory for the people will be assured. We will gain our freedom and liberation in this country. We will gain it and we will do it by any means necessary. We will keep marching. March on Black people. Keep your heads high. March on.

All ya'll leaders. March on. Take your message to the people. Preach the moratorium for all executions. We're gonna stop, we are going to end the death penalty in this country. We are going to end it all across the world. Push forward people. And know that what ya'll are doing is right. What ya'll are doing is just. This is nothing more than pure and simple murder. This what is happening tonight in America. Nothing more than state sanctioned murders, state sanctioned lynching, right here in America, and right here tonight. This is what is happening my brothers. Nothing less. They know I'm innocent. They've got the facts to prove it. They know I'm innocent. But they cannot acknowledge my innocence, because to do so would be to publicly admit their guilt. This is something these racist people will never do. We must remember brothers, this is what we're faced with. You must take this endeavor forward. You must stay strong. You must continue to hold your heads up, and to be there. (And I love you too, my brother.) All of you who are standing with me in solidarity. We will prevail. We will keep marching. Keep marching Black people, Black power. Keep marching Black people, Black power. Keep marching Black people. They are killing me tonight. They are killing me tonight. They are murdering me tonight.