

## **The Ethics of Black Atonement in Racist America: The Execution of Stanley Tookie Williams\***

*Dhoruba al-Mujahid Bin-Wahad*

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As one of the individuals Stanley Tookie Williams dedicated his book to, I thought it important to comment on his execution and the sad state of affairs that now determines the parameters of debate around the death penalty.

First of all, Tookie Williams was a product of the African experience in racist America. Let's not get it twisted. Nuns can lament his execution, preachers can pontificate about how valuable he could be to Black youth, and law enforcement can talk about legal and judicial rulings, but the bottom line is that Tookie Williams was a consequence of his community's racist marginalization—of America's internal Black colony and its occupation by racist and brutal police armies. This being the case, his execution was by the enemies of African-America, and I know there are scores of born again Negroes out there who don't believe that the nation-state of America is their enemy (a faith they must have if they are to attach any meaning to their life). History and recent events emphatically substantiate the racist character and morality of America.

Tookie Williams is a product of social and political forces we have permitted to take control of our collective destiny. African-America should have judged and punished Tookie Williams itself. But it didn't. It was incapable of holding its denizens accountable. Street gangs that started out as expressions of our community's inability to control our own streets and in opposition to police terror, were led down a certain path by the likes of Tookie. These gangs became predatory, apolitical, and reactionary. Our communities suffered as a consequence. Those who followed in Tookie's footsteps did so because not one Black institution existed that embraced and channeled their warrior spirit in a positive direction. Black nationalists were too busy "getting the right political line"; the Black Clergy was too busy mobilizing themselves to influence a body politic that considered them nothing more than mouth-pieces for the Black middle class; Black professors and militant academics were hollering at white educational institutions for inclusion and relevancy—none spoke the language nor harnessed the energies of our street soldiers. The only organization that did so was the

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Black Panther Party—and that was destroyed by a potent combination of forces over three decades ago. Nothing ever replaced it.

As a Muslim, and even in the Panthers, I never opposed the execution of criminals and butchers of people. There can be no true justice without retribution—without balance. Having said that, I must point out that the European nation-state, and America in particular, given the racist nature of its evolution, has absolutely no right whatsoever to act as a surrogate executer of justice for people of color. But because the African-American community and its ersatz leaders have no temporal power, no institutions for social justice or to exact a political consequence on those who make war on our community, we are left to debate the merits of the “death penalty” as a deterrent to crime or as state murder. The state says it executed Tookie Williams because he killed four people—three of them Asians and people of color. But the State of California has never executed one white man for killing Blacks, Latinos, or Asians during the course of armed robberies. And if they did, would that justify executing one Black man? If guilt or innocence were the real issue rather than a pretext, I would still say no. Why? Because the death penalty in America has always operated as a legal instrument of racial terror. The death penalty evolved from, and assumed the psychological role of Lynching. Least we forget, every Black man lynched was “guilty of a crime”. Tookie Williams could have murdered Black folks in droves and would have never faced the death penalty. It was law enforcement’s role in the politics of drugs and urban gang warfare that made his case extraordinary.

If I were to say the present regime in Washington qualifies for judicial prosecution and probable execution for crimes against humanity, not one newspaper or major media outlet would treat that statement with respect, rather incredulity. But if law enforcement officials were to say that to embrace the likes of George Jackson meant that one was “criminal-minded”, there is not one media outlet that would question that proposition. Which brings me to my major point: Tookie William’s execution by the State of California is not just about the efficacy of the death penalty in America, or punishment for a heinous crime, but about the ethics of atonement and redemption in a racist culture and society. Indeed, the Governor of California, in his Hollywood portrayal as the “terminator” and other violent monosyllabic killers, is himself a role model for countless thugs, bandits, and murderers around the globe, some of whom I’ve met personally. Liberia’s murderous

rebels, Sierra Leonean butchers of children, and scores of other misguided youth have adopted the violent persona of the Sylvester Stallone's "Rambo" and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the "Terminator"!

Although Schwarzenegger notes that Williams dedicated his 1998 book to a group that includes myself, Assata Shakur, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and Mumia Abu-Jamal, he is particularly upset by praise for George Jackson. Schwarzenegger said the inclusion of a dedication to George Jackson, who was charged with the murder of a California prison guard, "defies reason and is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed". Defies whose reason?

Apparently Schwarzenegger, or the Experts on African sub-culture in America find it absolutely abhorrent that Black redemption can or should embrace a radical political paradigm. They find it absolutely repugnant that the heroes and sheroes for an entire generation of Black youth don't look or behave like Hop-Along Cassidy, Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Last Action Hero", or GI Joe.

To many Black people (with an iota of consciousness), George Jackson is a hero. Why? Because Comrade George represented uncompromising resistance to a racist system and its political institutions, a system that incarcerated him his entire adult life for a crime for which a white boy from suburbia would have done community service. Schwarzenegger never considered this. He never asked himself why should one black man or woman who has been savaged and brutalized by police and prison guards, agents of a state that has historically exhibited utter contempt for them, their community, and their lives, mourn the death of any prison guard? That would be like a survivor of Dachau mourning the death of a concentration camp guard. Were the murders of countless men and women behind prison walls by sadistic guards ever a subject of public outrage except when the state under John D. Rockefeller murdered both prisoners and guards at Attica in September of 1971? Lest the Governor of California forget, in regions like New York and New Jersey fully 85% of prison inmates come from only certain communities in the area—all Black, Latino and poor. What that means is that almost every black person has a relative either behind bars, on parole, or under pre-trial detention. So who cares about the prison guards? Their union, the state, and a racist society that has always viewed Black people as criminals or potential criminals, that is who. But thanks to "The Patriot Act" even white citizens are potential criminals before they are law-abiding citizens.

What wonderful icons Tookie chose to offer his respect to: Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, Mumia, all respected and revered freedom fighters—except to those who have spent half of their lives living off of the misery and disenfranchisement of Black folks. The utter absurdity of a Jamie Foxx begging a fellow actor to exercise progressive politics is a sickening commentary on the state of African-American leadership.

“Governor Schwarzenegger, we’re not trying to push you into a corner. We realize that you have a tough job to do and you’re very busy, but in being very busy, you may not get a chance to hear everything with the case”, Foxx is reported to have moaned. Like Richard Pryor once joked about praying to God for help, “I know you’re busy, cause I checked your schedule”. Whether they are busy or not, there is not one legal or “constitutional” right African People have in America that white folks don’t have the veto over, or is not subject to judicial review—including the right to life. A Black man’s life is subject to termination by a cop or agent of the state at any given moment—without recourse to appeal.

Indeed for many of today’s so-called leaders from Jessie and Sharpton to national “talk show hosts” (who in the age of instant communication substitute for ideological movements), the issue of African-America’s right to self-defense has been a taboo subject, yet it was the destruction of militant groups such as the Black Panthers that left a social, political, and ideological void in African-America to be filled by street gangs and the distorted politics of individuals like Tookie Williams. Although law enforcement experts are anxious to dispel and distort the social and political roots of street gangs such as the Crips, the fact of the matter is that gangs like the Crips were, in part, a consequence of the success of COINTELPRO’s devastation of the militant Black liberation movement in America.

COINTELPRO was a government campaign directed at the African-American community that Black leaders to this day have failed to fully investigate or even wish to investigate. It was the selective repression of COINTELPRO and its spinoffs that has conferred credibility on some of today’s Black leaders. That lynching, an historical instrument of anti-Black terror, evolved into the modern death penalty system only further highlight the illegitimacy of Tookie Williams’ execution by the state. Indeed California’s governor alludes to this when he says, “there is little mention of atonement in his writings and his plea for clemency of the countless murders

committed by the Crips following the lifestyle Williams once espoused. The senseless killing that has ruined many families, particularly in African-American communities, in the name of the Crips and gang warfare is a tragedy of our modern culture.” A tragedy of “our modern culture”, the body builder says? The Austrian Oak never lived one minute in the South Bronx or Watts, never ducked bullets in the Projects or watched helplessly as cops gunned down a teenager on “suspicion of having a gun”.

Yes, Black families have been ruined by gang warfare. Black communities have also been occupied by police armies—cops who also believe they are the biggest and baddest gang in the ‘hood and act accordingly. The rise of street gangs directly coincides with the destruction of grass root militant movements that would have otherwise occupied the energies of several generations of African-American youth. What the Governor of California fails to mention is that the “tragedy of our modern culture” was contrived and created by a society and a nation of people who have absolutely no shame, little sense of history, and absolutely no sense of themselves as “pigs” rather than saints. What’s a tragedy is that the people of California failed to make a distinction between the plastic imagery of Hollywood and the reality of American politics when they elected Schwarzenegger Governor!

Robert Martin, Tookie’s prosecutor, questioned whether there was any moral equivalence “between co-authoring some children’s books and the senseless murder of four people in cold blood”. I have always asked similar questions—was there any moral equivalence between starting a bloody war by lying to the world and thereby causing the deaths of thousands and justifying the lies with the rhetoric of decency and humanity? Or was there a moral redemptive equivalent between security agents of apartheid who brutally tortured and murdered Steven Biko, and their apologies thirty years later before a “truth and reconciliation commission” as Winnie Mandela would have us believe, while descendants of white settlers still control the land in South Africa even though Blacks are in political power and racists Europeans still dominate the gold and diamond industries and call the shots? Or should the apologies of the Belgian, French, and American murderers of Patrice Lumumba, who now enjoy their old age and write self-justifying memoirs while the Congo wallows in chaos and bloodshed because of their imperial machinations, be accepted as true atonement? Or even closer to home, is there a moral equivalence between a government’s collusion with

organized crime and right wing Asian cartels and paramilitaries to flood the African-American communities with drugs and then declare a war on drugs thereby incarcerating and killing thousands of Black youth?

Let's not talk about moral and ethical atonement for heinous crimes—there is so much America needs to atone for that “clemency” is out of the question. Why should Africans debate a non-issue as if it were relevant to the real deal? If the African community in America hadn't turned its back on its youth by failing to seize control of their own community, its institutions, its economics, and its cultural instruments of self-verification, Tookie Williams could have been another freedom fighter, rather than a redeemed thug who died at the hands of our enemy and their hypocritical system of democratic fascism.

Al Sharpton is dead wrong when he says Tookie Williams has shown a lot of young Americans, particularly in urban areas, the folly of being involved in gang life. It would be far more positive for him to live behind bars and continue that work. There's nothing gained by executing him.

By “Young Americans”, I am assuming Sharpton is referring to an audience not enthralled by the war on drugs, the war on terrorism, and war on us, because if he is—ain't none of them took Tookie's books as a guide down the yellow brick road to mainstream success.

Nor is there such a quality as “life behind bars”. Everyone in prison is socially dead and politically mummified. Ask Sharpton and the rest of our national Black leaders how alive to him are the Bashir Hameeds, Herman Bells, Russel Shoatz and countless other Black Political Prisoners?

Indeed, if anything, young Blacks realize that the biggest “gang” is the US government and its law enforcement agencies. And if nothing is gained by executing Tookie Williams, then surely nothing is lost with his demise. But something is lost and something is achieved. In the age in which we live information is intelligence and manipulation of public perception is key in the manufacture of public opinions. Tookie Williams was executed to send a clarion signal to African youth that redemptive militancy is unacceptable—only rejection of your social history and complete surrender to the myths of white America could possibly save your life. In this sense, his execution was a commentary on the cowardice of many of today's Black leaders—who want to be both patriots and champions of Africans in America. This is the age of American empire; you can't be both.

As for America's African-American youth—don't believe the hype, stay strapped, stay alert, and stay Black. But most of all, don't mourn—organize!

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**Dhoruba al-Mujahid Bin-Wahad**, age 63, is a former Black Panther Party leader from New York. Once a Black Political Prisoner in the USA for nineteen years, Bin Wahad is a long time Pan-African activist, writer, and lecturer. Born to parents from the Caribbean and Southern United States, Bin-Wahad was raised in the Southeast Bronx and Harlem as "Richard Earl Moore". Once a South Bronx gang leader (Torch) and a fledgling artist, Bin-Wahad's social and political consciousness developed during the cold war era in an America deeply polarized by institutional racism. Characterizing himself as a "victim of public school education", Bin-Wahad is mostly self-taught, with only two years of college under his belt. He has always viewed academic pursuit as tool enabling social activism—not as an end in itself. For Bin-Wahad, to pursue education is to train for the struggle—but social practice is the criterion of a valid education. Refusing to be sucked into the standard western educational system, which he defines as an "elitist system of mental engineering which teaches people what to think rather how to be better people", Bin-Wahad has engaged scholars internationally for over two decades on issues of racism, the role of European history and culture in global under-development, and the politics of modern nation-states. His radical and often controversial analyses and essays have received widespread acceptance amongst Black and Non-Western students and critical acclaim from progressive intellectuals ranging from Professors Noam Chomsky to Dr. Cornel West. Civil rights and moral activists Rev. Al Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan respect and acknowledge the depths of Bin-Wahad's "no holds barred" Pan-African analysis.

Currently, Bin-Wahad resides in West Africa where he is the resident "Director of the Institute for Development of Pan-African Policy (IDPAP), and BlackStar Consults Limited". IDPAP is a West African Based NGO, which attempts to co-ordinate expatriate expertise to evaluate and study policies from a grass-root Pan-African perspective and perform advisory and liaison work for the African Diaspora.