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## A YAKI-SIZED HOLE IN THE UNIVERSE

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April 18, 2008

Qwusu Yaki Yakubu (aka James Sayles) was an extraordinary human being and a committed revolutionary. He was born on May 29, 1947 and went to dance with the ancestors on March 28, 2008, at age 60. He spent almost 40 years, on and off, in prison. James Sayles went in as a brilliant but uneducated youth. Yaki emerged in 2004 as one of the leading revolutionary thinkers in the U.S.

When prisoners rebelled in 1978 against the barbaric conditions at Pontiac Prison in central Illinois, Yaki was in Stateville Prison. About 50 prisoners at Pontiac were indicted for participating in the rebellion and 17 of them, all Black, were charged with murder and thus faced the death penalty. The case became one of the largest death penalty cases in the history of the U.S. Yaki became the strategic leader of the effort to defend the Pontiac Brothers, working from inside his cell at Stateville prison. The trial went on for years and became a cause that was picked up around the country and the world. A major victory was achieved when the jury did not find even one of the Pontiac Brothers guilty of the death penalty charge. After spending millions of dollars, the State could not get even one conviction. The “not guilty” verdicts were stimulated in large part by the Black people on the jury.

Yaki was a C-number prisoner. These are people who were convicted of crimes many, many years ago, at a time when there were draconian sentencing laws. They grow old and die in prison regardless of their activities or behavior inside. The only way for a C number prisoner to be released is to have his/her case presented to the parole board. The parole board then decides whether or not to release that individual. For years and years, almost no C number prisoners were released (about 1% a year) while others who had been convicted of the same crimes in later years were set free.

Yaki, along with David Saxner and others on the outside, launched a campaign to free all C number prisoners. People persistently lobbied the Parole Board and traveled to their hearings to try to insure that the process was a transparent one. Yaki was finally released on April 1, 2004.

Upon his release he continued to struggle to free all the other C number prisoners as part of the Committee to Free C Number Prisoners. Indeed, the rate at which they were released did accelerate although there are still too many who remain incarcerated. Yaki also held a full time position at the John Howard Association, a Chicago-based prison watch dog organization. Additionally, he participated in the campaign to free Indiana death row political prisoner, Zolo Azania.

Yaki was even more than an activist revolutionary. He was a deep political thinker, writer, and the founding editor of several journals: *Vita Wa Watu: A New Afrikan Theoretical Journal*; *Crossroad A New Afrikan Captured Combatants Newsletter*; *Notes from a New Afrikan POW Journal*. Often writing under the pen name Atiba Shanna, his articles were read throughout the US, both inside and outside of prison, and even crossed borders to other countries. He frequently defined and clarified political issues for people concerned with freedom struggles. He himself drew widely from international struggles, particularly those in Algeria, Vietnam, Latin America and most definitively Africa. The journals reprinted many articles from these great revolutionary thinkers.

In particular, Yaki was influenced by the writings of the African revolutionary, Franz Fanon, which dealt with the colonial mentality. Yaki wrote about the relevance of Fanon’s work to the New Afrikan

freedom struggle. Yaki studied at great length the writings of many revolutionaries. He was fond of quoting Amilcar Cabral, the African revolutionary. One of Cabral's best-known quotes was "Tell no lies, claim no easy victories."

In that spirit it is important to remember Yaki as the passionate revolutionary that he was, a revolutionary in the clearest, most explicit way possible. He believed that the freedom of Black people in the U.S. (New Afrikans) could only come about by a revolution. He was not at all opposed to small steps that might be seen as only reforms but he believed that a revolution was needed to free Black people. He hated the condition of Black people in the U.S. One of Yaki's favorite quotes was the one by Malcolm X: "Don't be shocked when I say I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means, prison." Yaki also believed that if violence was necessary to end the horror of the mass incarceration and destruction of Black people by the U.S., then so be it.

Yaki was a nationalist, in the spirit of Malcolm X. He stated that "The stand of Malcolm, the stand that We must take up and creatively develop, is the stand of the nation for its independence, and of the working class for social revolution." Yaki believed that although many of the conditions that Malcolm faced in his time were quite different, "We know with certainty that Malcolm left a legacy of unselfish commitment to the struggle of Afrikans in the U.S. for the realization of our national and revolutionary interests." (Crossroad, Vol. 3, Nos. 2&3, p.17)

Yaki was also an internationalist. He felt connected to all oppressed peoples who struggled to control their own land and more equitably distribute their own resources. A quick review of the journals he edited reveals articles reflecting the struggles in South Africa, Namibia, Cuba, Brazil, Vietnam, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Italy and more. There were articles about the past as well as contemporary issues. For Yaki believed that "the road to the future goes through the past". (Crossroads, V. 1 No. 4, Jan 88 pg 13).

Yaki from within his prison cell, removed from the direct influences of women, struggled to understand the condition of women, and particularly Black women in the U.S. The publications printed articles such as "Notes on the Link Between Oppression of New Afrikan Women and the New Afrikan National Liberation Revolution" and advertised Black women's organizations around the US. Yaki sought out and printed articles by Margaret Burroughs, Assata Shakur, Safiya Bukhari, Aminata Umoja and others. He did not want to repeat the practice of other movements where, "once in power, they failed to fulfill the promises made to women in the course of struggle." (Vita Wa Watu, Book 9, Pg 3) At a time when many nationalists were resistant to accepting gay liberation, Yaki understood that homophobia needed to be defeated as part of the struggle of the human family.

Yaki believed that what organization someone belonged to was not determining. He was adamant that what mattered is ideology and practice, that leadership becomes apparent through theory and practical activity. The breadth of the journal articles reflect that non-sectarian attitude. They also reflect both sides of the coin: Yaki's belief that although ideological work is essential, practical activity is absolutely necessary as well. The journals reflect a myriad of struggles that were taking place across the country around police brutality, control unit prisons, grand juries, police spying. Often there were articles about the fight to free political prisoners, many of whom were given voice through the journals-- Sundiata Acoli, Assata Shakur, Jalil Abdul Muntaqim, Mutulu Shakur, and many others. The journal kept the plight of Ruchell Magee alive. Yaki had the greatest respect for, and was chagrined by, the continued imprisonment of Marilyn Buck who has spent most of her life behind bars, punished by the government for her close association with the Black liberation movement.

Jazz was a passion of Yaki's, and unbeknownst to many, he was an able conga drummer. Yaki was very interested in culture in all forms, and the journals printed articles about Hip Hop, Paul Robeson, and explored the relationship between art, culture, and labor.

In Yaki's final months he was lovingly cared for by his wife, Acreeba Mohammad. A memorial service was held on April 4 and produced an outpouring of love, admiration and respect from a broad range of people who love Yaki. Stepping up to the open mike were a number of ex-prisoners, some who came from faraway because Yaki had been so important to them. Some described how their lives had been turned around by encountering Yaki in prison and participating in the study groups that Yaki initiated. Others were Pontiac Brothers whose lives were saved through the effort to free the Pontiac Brothers. Still others were C number prisoners who had gained their release from prison in no small part to the efforts of Yaki.

The church was filled with family members as well, many of whom spoke. Yaki's brother, Louis, related how Yaki had always pushed him to reach higher, to do more. Acreeba said he was her knight in shining armor. She described how when she was young and had difficulty herself with the law, Yaki took care of her kids, changed their diapers and fed them until she could be there again.

Among many others who spoke that day were representatives from the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, including Jose Lopez, from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, who spoke about Yaki's internationalism and reiterated that Yaki understood that nationalism and internationalism must go hand in hand. Also present were ex-political prisoners Alicia Rodriguez and Luis Rosa.

As one speaker said towards the end: "We love you, Yaki. We love you for being a husband, a father, a friend and a great human being with a smile that we saw far too rarely. And we love you for being a revolutionary." As Arundhati Roy would say, his passing leaves a Yaki-sized hole in the universe.