

## **MAMA AISHA**

The Surmised Biography of Sister Aisha Kusaidia El-Mekki  
(born Sandra Marie Dickerson)

April 21st, 1947 - September 21st, 2020

30 Jumada al-Ula 1366 - 4 Safar 1442

**Please Recite Surah al-Fatiha in her Honour**

Memorial Tribute: <https://www.mykeeper.com/profile/AishaElMekki/>

Sister Aisha was born to Minnie Lee, her mother, and William Dickerson, her father, in the spring of 1947 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her birth name was Saundra Marie Dickerson. She has one sister named Rose (also known as Rosie), who survives her.

As a young girl she had terrible experiences in school due to racism and the discrimination she faced as an African-American growing up in the 1950s. While in second grade, the boarding school Sister Aisha attended expelled her! She later attended Martha Rhodes where she met her lifelong friend, Sister Shakurah Abdul-Samad, whom she later lived with in Iran. Eventually, her mother scraped up enough money for tuition at the West Catholic School for Girls.

One day as a 16-year-old, Sister Aisha was trying to get home. The bus was late, so her bus transfer expired while she was waiting. She boarded a PTC (Philadelphia Transportation Company) bus to get home, but the bus driver told her to get off! She refused and said, "I have to get home." The bus driver stopped the bus and proceeded to call the police, who responded. The police officers ordered everyone off the bus and told the bus driver to drive Sister Aisha to the nearest police station. The cops gave the bus an official escort. When they arrived at the police station, six policemen came onto the bus and dragged Sister Aisha off the bus. They arrested her for "theft of services" and she needed her mother to pick her up from the station.

Situations of discrimination and injustice in America led Sister Aisha to join the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). Her attraction to the Black Panther Party was that they were consistently "feeding Black children's stomachs and minds." Initially, she visited the West

Philly headquarters, on Wallace Street, to see if they were for real. Then she came back to visit another time. Once she saw this organization was serious, she joined. She loved their political education classes, as well as the support the Party provided to children and communities.

Another pivotal influence on Sister Aisha was Sister Maryam El-Mekki Abdullah (Aunt Maryam). Aunt Maryam was her mother's half-sister whom she grew very close to over the years, as Aunt Maryam was the first Muslim in her family. While visiting Aunt Maryam they would listen to Malcolm X speeches on record albums. Sister Aisha would ask her Aunt, "Who is that man?!" as she thought to herself, "That resonates with me! He's speaking my language!" about the teachings of Brother Malcolm. Sister Aisha credits Aunt Maryam with two major introductions in her life - Islam and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X).

She left the Catholic faith but held onto her relationship with the Creator, pleading with Him to guide her spiritually. When she became a Muslim, she would say "turning the other cheek" was one of the main issues she argued about with her white nun school teachers, as it seemed counterintuitive and unjust. Islam's perspective on justice and self-defense was inspiring and refreshing. Sister Aisha used to always say, "Allah (Glory be to Him) loves me! Allah loves me so much, I don't know how He has time for the rest of y'all!?" This highlights her immense reliance on God and reverence for His power as the guiding force in her life.

Through the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, she met Alfred "Dante" Thomas also known as Brother Hamid, her first husband, and his cousins Russell "Maroon" Shoatz and Saeedah Quaye. She also met Suzette, whom Brother Hamid and Sister Aisha would live with

for a time. Brother Hamid was forced underground during the struggle. He was part of the Black Liberation Army. Sister Aisha and Brother Hamid had two sons: Sharif and Mikyeil.

Seeking knowledge was an integral part of Sister Aisha's life. She was part of the first graduating class of the Community College of Philadelphia. Afterward, she attended Temple University. Her heart beat strongly for our children so she majored in Elementary Education, obtaining her Bachelor's Degree.

Sister Aisha helped to establish the Pre-Kindergarten program at a local masjid. She believed religious institutions should be responsible for educating youth, not just giving religious sermons to adults. Unfortunately, they fired Sister Aisha for her outspokenness, but she never feared sacrifice while speaking the truth.

In the late 1970s, Sister Aisha's Temple University classmate, Mama Judith, invited her to visit Nigeria. She loved everything about Africa. She would often tell people (especially during her time living abroad) that she was from Nigeria, Kenya, or another continental nation. She was proud to be of African heritage!

She would later meet and marry Brother Yahya Abdullah-Aziz. He was originally from South Carolina and also went to Temple University. Fresh out of high school Brother Yahya had become a Vietnam Veteran and a Purple Heart recipient. He grew to despise that very military service, which seemed adamant in oppressing poor people globally, and instead became an

activist. He is a pillar in the Muslim community and a pioneer alongside Sister Aisha. They had three children together: Nzinga, Husayn, and Haajar.

Sister Aisha paid the utmost attention to her children's education and the education of folks in the community. She enrolled her children in ICCS and the African Institute. Eventually settling on Nidhamu Sasa African Freedom School, an instrumental decision in the education of her eldest three children which helped solidify their foundations and connections to Black Liberation.

During the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Sister Aisha was intrigued by the integrity, spirituality, and fighting spirit of the leader of the movement, the late Imam Khomeini. With her husband and her best friend, meetings were established to discuss Islam and the situation in Iran. They conversed with Iranians to learn more about the revolution. Eventually, Sister Aisha and Brother Yahya decided to move overseas to Tehran, joining her lifelong friend (since 4th grade), Mama Shakurah, already living there. Sister Aisha said she moved there for several reasons. She wanted her children to witness a country united in its efforts to make a change. She wanted them to experience living in a Muslim country. And, she wanted a safe environment to raise her black boys. She loved that Imam Khomeini continuously stood up to the bully without any fear. He called out the oppression of America and other superpowers. When the revolution happened, Iran seized the U.S. Embassy and took the conspiring spies working there as hostages. Yet, Imam Khomeini ordered the release of all of the African-Americans and women. He stated that they had suffered enough oppression at the hands of the United States. Sister Aisha was amazed that across the world there were people of faith and a leader who could deeply comprehend the plight

and struggle of African-Americans. She would visit Imam Khomeini with her dear friend Sister Shakurah and her son Mikyeil. As she told the story, she was so vehemently overwhelmed at that moment that she found herself frozen and clinging to a pillar. Eventually, security had to help her to leave!

Altogether, Sister Aisha lived in Iran for approximately ten non-consecutive years. During her time in the Islamic Republic, she studied in the Islamic Seminary (Hawza). Sister Aisha enjoyed studying *fiqh* (Jurisprudence), general Islamic studies, and *tafsir* (Exegesis), but her favorite subject was *akhlaq* (Islamic Ethics). She reveled learning the ahadith (traditions) from The holy Prophet Muhammad and the Ahl al Bayt (peace be upon them all), especially their *duas* (supplications) and teachings, paying the utmost attention to those on Akhlaq. Even at 50 some odd years of age Sister Aisha was studying, pursuing knowledge, and applying it to her life and worldview. During her time overseas, she would also become the “adopted mother” for many students seeking knowledge. Her mentees and the younger people around her referred to her as “Mama Aisha,” upholding the tradition of respect for elders within the Muslim, African-American, and revolutionary communities. “Mama” is often used as a term of endearment for sisters on the front lines of community activism and leaders in the struggle. She made and sustained many friendships across the world. During her time overseas, she studied Islam, Arabic, and Qur’an and learned to speak, read, and write in Farsi. Sister Aisha always embraced real intercultural exchange and dialogue. Her children attended local public schools and were encouraged to immerse themselves in Islam and the local culture while simultaneously maintaining their African-American identity. She held English language programs commemorating notable Islamic figures like El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X). Sister

Aisha took pride in educating international students and Iranians about true American History and the experiences of African-Americans living in the U.S.

As an educator, Sister Aisha loved children and longed to see them grow and discover the world safely and on their own terms. This viewpoint led her to homeschool her younger children starting in the late 1980s. Sister Aisha believed that children's minds, hearts, and spirits were molded and highly influenced by their environment. She considered it a sacred and revolutionary duty to teach. She helped establish the co-op, Imam Jafar (pbuh) Academy (IJA) out of her home in West Philly. There they would concentrate on the holistic education and edification of the youth. The curriculum was filled with community involvement, travelling, political education, civic engagement, activism, and a variety of Islamic Sciences. The students enjoyed various forms of experiential learning such as gardening, cooking, going to Museums, attending protests, Islamic conferences, learning basic life skills, shopping, banking, entrepreneurship, sewing, and swimming. She taught Islamic Studies and Etiquette to the children through various sources and books. One book she was very fond of teaching from was "Philosophy of Islam" by Shahid Beheshti and Shahid Bahonar. Mama Shakurah Abdul-Samad focused on teaching Qur'an reading, recitation, memorization, and *tafsir* (exegesis). Brother Yahya taught practical Islamic law, prayer, auto-mechanics, and handy home improvement skills. Some of the older and more advanced students and mentees would go on to teach and mentor the younger students. They gained first hand experiences as teachers and educators involved in the community building process like Sister Aisha's daughter, Nzinga Abdullah-Aziz.

Sister Aisha acquired extensive experience teaching in not only the private, but also the public school system. At one point she was presented with the choice of whether to stay home with her youngest child at the time or continuing teaching outside of the home. Realizing her concern the Principal obliged, inviting her to bring her child to work. Sister Aisha taught as a science and substitute teacher for many years, right up until early 2020. She continued to agitate for change and taught inside and outside of schools. She attended many protests, rallies, and educational summits; making it a point to avoid those teacher lounges and particular spaces where constructive conversations were not taking place.

Sister Aisha was an activist, she helped launch many organizations, and was a consistent presence at events and protests that demanded justice. She was adamant about divestment from apartheid South Africa, and staunchly supported MOVE and other liberatory movements. She was a member of Concerned Muslim Women's Association (CMWA), and a founding member of Islamic Study Group (ISG). ISG established a religious center in Southwest Philly. This predominantly African-American neighborhood was intentionally chosen as a spiritual hub that welcomed all people. They leased a row home that was owned by the mother of Sister Shakurah Abdul-Samad, Buronlee Brown (Grandma B) who was a leading Jehovah's Witness and also an activist in her own right. For several years ISG hosted weekly Dua Kumayl programs, annual Muharram and Ramadhan programs, as well as other special occasions, commemorative events, and book readings. This was a significant effort in organizing and outreach as some religious establishments felt weary about having a presence in the inner-city. However, Sister Aisha and the other volunteers embraced the opportunity with open arms to have a place in the "hood" reflecting the Prophetic tradition of being amongst the people whilst cultivating their hearts.

Sister Aisha was a supporter of black liberation, and lived by the motto of advocating for truth and knowing one's history and roots. She instilled this knowledge into her children through reading various revolutionary books like "Roots", "The Autobiography of Malcolm X", "Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee", and "Watership Down.". She shared and enjoyed the rich history of freedom songs like "Lift Every Voice and Sing" & "Follow the Drinking Gourd," retracing the wisdom of her ancestors.

"Do for self" was one of those wisdoms. So Sister Aisha and her sister Rose ran their own business for years. It was called "Aisha & Rose's Resale Shop." She was an entrepreneur and a vendor at many conferences. She sold Malcolm X buttons, shirts and bags, and a wide variety of women's hijabs and clothing.

She was a global citizen and had the desire to truly connect with others and be aware of their conditions. Perhaps this was one of the things that prompted her to work at an airline for some time. Over the duration of her lifetime Sister Aisha was inspired to travel to many countries including Turkey, Congo, Egypt, Canada, Nigeria, Iran and she made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca for Hajj.

She also committed her life to environmental work. Sister Aisha lived a simple life intentionally reducing her carbon footprint and consumption. She thrifted, participated in food and clothing drives, and stayed abreast of issues of climate change, forest and land preservation. She was very serious about supporting local and small businesses, buying from community farmers' markets and mom-and-pop shops. She always promoted the three R's; Reduce, Reuse,

and Recycle. Sister Aisha was aware of and educated herself further on the ongoing struggle of the Native Americans. She stood in solidarity with them and other environmental justice workers. Towards her later years, she created and grew a beautiful pollinators' garden in her backyard, which aimed to protect and help replenish insects nearing extinction, like bees. She enjoyed grounding and gardening, sitting out on her porch, and spending time in nature.

Sister Aisha's friends and family members have shared how she mentored many young American, Caribbean, and Canadian converts. Some of whom would go on to migrate to the Islamic Republic to become students of the faith. Along with her family she attended the annual Hajj Conference in Toronto where she was a part of a lot of important discussions with other active Muslims. She was also a part of the African/Indigenous delegation which initiated the annual *ziyarah* (visitation) to the grave of Malcolm X in upstate New York. These efforts remain a *sadiqah jariyah* (ongoing charity) for her soul. God-willing she will reap the benefit of encouraging the many students and families that would go on to share the message of Islam upon studying in the Hawza.

Some of the many accomplishments of Sister Aisha include attending and participating in science fairs and exhibitions, attending almost every Muslim American conference, and being recognized for an award at the Black Muslim Psychology Conference.

Her social justice activism encompasses prison abolishment, racial justice, chaperoning youth with Sharif at the Equal Justice Initiative, teach-ins with BPP members, and standing up for the Uyghur Muslims of China and the Muslims of India. She and her comrades attended a

rally at a masjid in Upper Darby (just outside West Philly), she spoke out against the newly-developing issue of terrorism and fascism against Muslims in India through discriminatory citizenship laws. She also traveled with human rights groups like the Uyghur Rally Philly Group, to D.C. for campaign efforts to lobby Congress to pass bills (such as the Uyghur Human Rights Bill). She spoke alongside others to congressional aides to gain their support for this bill and for them to pass along information from lobbying efforts to the representatives they worked for.

Sister Aisha also attended and spoke at several City Council public hearings. She testified against the ongoing police brutality, abuse, harassment, shootings, and killings that disproportionately impact communities of color.

Defiance and opposition against global oppression always resonated with her, which is what al-Quds Day embodies. She was vigilant for decades in attendance of this annual demonstration; a coalition symbolizing the resistance of the Palestinian people, Muslims, and all freedom fighters against Zionism, tyranny, and oppressive powers. Her human, civil, and moral activism was far-reaching.

Sister Aisha lived a very full, healthy, and beautiful life. During 2020 she fell ill. Her illness progressed with an advanced stage of cancer during the summer and early fall. She was in such a state that she was unable to consume food for the last several months of her life, rather receiving some nourishment from juice and water. Whenever she had a sip of water she would say, “Ya Husayn”, affirming the thirst and revolutionary movement of the grandson of the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Imam Husayn ibn Ali (pbuh). She recalled the story of Imam

Husayn, his righteous family, and companions (pbut) who were denied water and martyred in Karbala, Iraq for standing up against the tyrant of the time and demanding social justice. Despite Sister Aisha's extreme weakness, weight loss, and frailty she remained exuberant in the tasks that she was still able to accomplish unassisted. She was steadfast in brushing her teeth and praying independently. She also enjoyed hearing the recitation of the holy Qur'an and listening to inspirational talks.

Each one of Sister Aisha's last days were filled with visitors from far and near who would schedule time to sit with her. They would share stories, memories, read Qur'an, sing, and look at photographs amongst other things. She was loved and respected by so many people. She never stopped smiling. She never stopped discussing the plight of the oppressed people. Sister Aisha never stopped highlighting the beauty of Islam. She spent her last months surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and family - who took turns caring for her around the clock while in the hospital and during in-home hospice. She continued to give them motherly advice and pointed but caring reminders. She passed away in the comfort of her family home in West Philadelphia.

Sister Aisha's burial was attended in droves, by both Muslims and non-Muslims from all across the country. Some people drove or flew from distant cities to come pay their respects. Her international community (from nearly every continent) sent messages and condolences. Many different groups of people volunteered to complete the recitation of the holy Qur'an, a tradition for the benefit of the deceased's soul. Distinguished leaders, scholars, and activists all around the

world sent heartfelt messages of condolence and respect to her children and family. Sister Aisha brought together people from all walks of life.

Her burial was akin to a seed being planted deep within fertile ground, connecting to the world and its people, continuing to grow and bear fruit. The similitude of a tree connecting to earth and the heavens, fostering relationships, legacy, and goals through the branches of those who remain behind. The holy Quran, burial prayers, supplications, eulogies, and poetry were recited for Sister Aisha during the memorial programs held in her honor. Even in her passing she continued effecting change. She never stopped shining. She continues to be gracefully radiant for the community. A sister who did not know Sister Aisha personally but came to know of her, shared a vision she'd had on her *arba'een* (a traditional memorial held 40 days after burial):

“On the night of the Majlis, I had a dream in which I was walking in a procession towards Sister Aisha’s grave. There was so much light coming from the grave that when I closed my eyes I was still able to see the way.”

One of Sister Aisha’s most famous quotes includes true motivational and inspirational ideals: “If you want peace, fight for justice. Justice will give birth to peace!”

And while she dedicated most of her life to education, Sister Aisha highly valued edification and self-awareness, which is exemplified in one of her well-known quotes: “Ain’t no point in learning to read and write if you don’t know who you are!”

Sister Aisha's children are in essence the fruits of all of her tremendous efforts. They have launched and led multiple organizations devoted to psycho-social development, intellectual education, activism, and Islam. Likewise, they all serve in careers centered upon community. Due to their mother's efforts, they have all lived in Iran for a portion of their lives, are able to read and recite Qur'an, know Arabic and are fluent in Farsi. Sister Aisha's children have all taken part, in some capacity, in Islamic knowledge, education, activism, environmentalism and social and racial justice. Moreover, they all have had involvement in interfaith and intrafaith work. They walk in her light, continue her endeavours, and truly uphold her legacy.

Sharif Dawud El-Mekki is the Director of the Center for Black Educator Development, which aims "to recruit black teachers, to train black teachers, and to retain black teachers". He was the Principal of Mastery Charter School Shoemaker Campus, a Freedom School that teaches students cultural pride and black liberation. Sharif was one of a few educators selected as part of the Principal Ambassador Fellowship, in the U.S. Department of Education of the Obama Administration. He has worked as an educator for many years in different roles, including teaching and administration. He is an organizer of Philadelphia Freedom School summer programs, and a co-founder of the Fellowship for Black Male Educators. Sharif is a contributing writer at The Philadelphia Citizen and Philly's 7th Ward. He is a founding member and co-host of the "8 Black Hands" podcast. He has won many awards for his advocacy work, and served as an advisor in various roles nationally, at the state level and locally. He holds a blackbelt in Vita Saana African Martial Arts. He has six children: Ali, Ahmed, Fatimah, Sakinah, Zainab and Zakiyyah.

Mikyeil Saifu El-Mekki is the brilliant founder of the Paul Robeson Chess Club, which he named after one of his heroes, the “black genius who lived in West Philly among the people”. He is an advanced and award winning National Champion Chess coach, who holds 14 national club titles and has been featured or interviewed on multiple TV news stations. He is a mentor and an inspiration to his students and the chess community. Mikyeil was a Gifted/Talented student, and was a recipient of countless full scholarships to pursue further education and learning. He also spent time studying in the Islamic Seminary of Qom. He is well versed in Qur’an, and is an avid reciter and memorizer. He is a polyglot, who knows almost a half-dozen languages. Mikyeil is an award winning poet. His poetry centers around freedom, justice, Islam, and the Ahl al-Bayt (the holy family of Prophet Muhammad pbut). He was also a star football player in high school.

Nzinga Summayya Abdullah-Aziz is an empathetic and kind Caregiver, a Registered Nurse and Nurse Educator, working in Home Health Care, Hospice, and Palliative Care. She also spent several years studying in the Islamic Seminary of Qom. Nzinga serves on the Board of Directors of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia and as a Wellness Consultant for the Junior Alliance of Worship Action and Development. She is an advocate for and has developed culturally sensitive education around end-of-life care and practices of Muslim patients. She is an educator who taught younger students at the Imam Jafar Academy (IJA), and was a teacher at multiple Islamic schools for a period of time. Nzinga was also a business owner and an entrepreneur, with ventures like Jum’uah catering with her younger brother and a clothing shop she co-owned with her mother.. She has two children: Husnaa and Sajjad.

Husayn Bilal El-Mekki Abdullah-Aziz is a member of the Clergy after studying nearly a decade in the Islamic Seminary in Qom. He is the Director of the Ahl al-Bayt Assembly of America, a faith-based charitable organization that focuses on advocacy, education, and empowerment of American Muslims. Husayn is a PhD student studying Educational Leadership. He is a public speaker who conducts workshops and camps focusing on youth, community building and spirituality. He has written and or translated and published many articles through various websites, journals and blogs. Husayn is an advocate for neurodiversity, supporting and celebrating people with Autism and Special Needs in general, and he participates in community groups and forums to support their rights. He is trained as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and also has a background in Information Technology (IT). He is an educator and has been in the role of principal, assistant principal, academic coordinator, teacher and board member for a variety of Islamic Schools. He has three daughters: Masoumeh, Firdawsa and Asiyah.

Haajar Shakurah Abdullah-Aziz is an Educator. She has a Master's in Math Education, and a Bachelor's in Mathematics with a minor in Education. She is a talented mathematician. Haajar is the Founder of Whole Child Care, an in-home child care and child development service. She is a graduate of Jame'at al-Zahra (a renowned women's Islamic Seminary in Qom). She has been a teacher at the University level, and she also taught at Mastery Charter Schools. Haajar is a Learning Team Leader for Teach for America. She has also volunteered as a tutor for middle-school students, GED students, and the Public Library's Homework Help Hour. She was featured in an article about her journey to parenthood in The Philadelphia Inquirer. Haajar is involved in community programming and organizing, including the Hayaa360 initiative (the

sisters' wing of The Muslim Congress organization.) She speaks and runs workshops at various events and conferences. She has twins: Laylah and Malik.

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

'innā li-llāhi wa-'inna 'ilayhi rāji'ūna

"Surely we belong to Him and surely unto Him is our return"

The Holy Quran, Chapter 2, Verse 156

**Please recite surah *al-Fatiha* for the soul of the deceased.**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi

In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabbi l-‘ālamīna

All praise belongs to Allah, (in muslim parlance the phrase al-ḥamdu lillāh also signifies ‘thanks to Allah.’) Lord of all the worlds,

الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

ar-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi

the All-beneficent, the All-merciful,

مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

māliki yawmi d-dīni

Master of the Day of Retribution.

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

'iyyāka na'budu wa-'iyyāka nasta'īnu

You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn for help.

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

ihdinā ṣ-ṣirāṭa l-mustaqīma

Guide us on the straight path,

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

ṣirāṭa lladhīna 'an'amta 'alayhim ghayri l-maghḍūbi 'alayhim wa-lā ḍ-ḍāllīna

the path of those whom You have blessed — such as have not incurred Your wrath, nor are astray.

The Holy Quran, Chapter 1, Verses 1-7