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## The Name Shabazz: Where Did It Come From?

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### The Name *Shabazz*: Where Did It Come From?

Probably most people first learned of the name *Shabazz* as a designation for the African-American people through a reference to it in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, where Malcolm, in the middle of a discussion on Elijah Muhammad's racial doctrine, says: "One of the scientists, at odds with the rest, created the especially strong black tribe of Shabazz, from which America's Negroes, so-called, descend." The name gained further currency when Malcolm adopted it during his Hajj as part of his new Islamic name: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. To this day, it is used as a surname by many African-American Muslims.

One of the lengthiest published expositions on the mythology of the "tribe of Shabazz" is in Elijah Muhammad's book *Message to the Blackman in America*, in the chapter "Original man, know thyself":

[God] has declared that we are descendants of the Asian black nation and of the tribe of Shabazz. . . . Originally they were the tribe that came with the earth (or this part) 60 trillion years ago when a great explosion on our planet divided it into two parts. One we call the earth and the other the moon.

We, the tribe of Shabazz, says Allah (God), were the first to discover the best part of our planet to live on. The rich Nile Valley of Egypt and the present seat of the Holy City, Mecca, Arabia. . . . *We are the mighty, the wise, the best, but we do not know it.* [emphasis added].

Despite the continuing popularity of the name *Shabazz*, which by now has become independent of Elijah Muhammad's mythology, no authorities on the Nation of Islam have offered any convincing explanation of the name's origin. Was it simply invented, two meaningless syllables that have an appealing sound? (Words that contain the sounds *sh* and *z* have been popular with American fantasists: consider the name *Shiz* from the Book of Mormon, and the magic word *shazam* of comic book fame). Or is it derived from some existing word or words in an actual language? It should be worthwhile, especially for those who hold this name, to determine its derivation and meaning.

Some have suggested that *Shabazz* comes from the Old Testament, but I found nothing there that really resembles it. There is a Sheshbazzar, "Prince of Judah," in Ezra 1:8, but it is the name of an individual, not a tribe, and the difference in form between Shabazz and Sheshbazzar is too great. Another name there is Shethar-Boznai (Ezra 6:6), but it is even less likely.

Urdu-speaking Muslims from South Asia who come to America and encounter the name *Shabazz* see in it an obvious resemblance to the Persian name *Shahbâz*, a popular given name among Indian and Pakistani Muslims. Lâl Shahbâz Qalandar, of thirteenth century Sindh, is one of the most beloved saints of Pakistan. *Shahbâz* is Persian for 'royal falcon', so it carries a connotation of pride and nobility. For this reason, Indians and Pakistanis in America assume that *Shabazz* is really *Shahbâz*, Americanized.

This opinion might seem to be strengthened by the fact that some of the *da'wah* to African-Americans in the early years of the twentieth century was done by Urdu- and Panjabi-speaking Ahmadis/Qadiyanis, beginning in 1921. This early Indian influence, which may have introduced some quasi-Islamic ideas into Marcus Garvey's movement, formed part of the religious background when Noble Drew Ali was running the Moorish Science Temple for the "Asiatic" black race, one of the direct forerunners of the Nation of Islam (and which was also a successor of Garveyism: "Up, you mighty race..."). However, it is doubtful that this line of speculation could lead to a satisfactory derivation for *Shabazz*, despite the close phonetic similarity. We would need to document the actual transference of the name *Shahbâz* to African-Americans by Indian immigrants. In the absence of such evidence, it would make more sense to look for an Arabic derivation, and one that is semantically closer to the mark, considering what is known about the sources of Elijah Muhammad's doctrine.

First of all, the likely semantic import of the name, and thus the purpose it was intended to serve, cannot be ignored. When giving a name, it is important to select one with the right meaning, as Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, taught. The meaning of one's name contributes an important component of one's self-image and it must accord with one's chosen identity. Elijah Muhammad's mission among African-Americans was to uplift them from their state of misery and degradation, to which four centuries of racist oppression had reduced them. He effected a thorough transformation of their self-image, and he needed to rename them so as to remind them of their past greatness, their superior status among the peoples of the world. Their voices could then be heard to ring with pride when they identified themselves with the tribe of Shabazz.

It is difficult to say how much of Elijah Muhammad's teaching was his own invention and how much came from Master W. D. Fard, whom Elijah called "Allah" or "God." Still the basic outlines of the "Lost-Found Nation," tribe of Shabazz mythology are known to have originally been Fard's contribution. The most mysterious figure in all the modern history of religions, he carried out his mission to the African-American people in Detroit from 1930 to 1934. He lived and preached among the most downtrodden levels of society, in a milieu almost completely overlooked by the official recorders of history, so that he could disappear as mysteriously as he appeared. His real background cannot be discerned within the mists of his self-mythologizing. Harold J. Bloom wrote in *The American Religion*: "So far as I know, there is still no certain identification for Fard, whether as to his nationality, race, background, education, or even his age." Whether he actually came from Mecca, as he claimed, cannot be verified, but two extant photographs show him to have been Middle Eastern in appearance. Karl Evanzz presented evidence in *The Judas Factor* that Fard came from New Zealand and was half-Maori, but all other theories about his identity have to do with him being of Middle Eastern origin. He does seem to have been better acquainted with Islam than one would expect from a New Zealander. He came in the guise of a Syrian peddler, a common sight on the street in those days. Thus it is likely that he knew Arabic, and the obvious place to search for the derivation of the name *Shabazz* is in Arabic.

One immediately runs up against the fact that no word can be found in any Arabic lexicon, classical or modern, derived from the root sh-b-z. There is no such root used in any Arabic word.

I admit to having remained puzzled for years over question of how *Shabazz* could have come from Arabic. The clue that led to the solution was the final doubled *z* (the Persian word *shahbâz* ends in a single *z*). Why was the *Shabazz z* doubled? Generally, in Arabic morphology (except for the derived pattern *if'alla*), a final consonant is doubled only when it belongs to a geminated root, i.e. one in which the second and third letters are the same, as in *hajj* (<H-j-j) or *shaddah* (<sh-d-d). Four-letter roots, however, are not geminated in this fashion. Then it occurred to me, might this be a compound of two words? In that case, the name would divide into *shab* + *azz*.

There is no equivalent in the Roman alphabet for the Arabic letter ‘*ayn*. Careful writers represent it with a left-handed apostrophe, but it is commonly omitted. If we supply two missing ‘*ayns* to these two syllables, we get two genuine Arabic words *sha‘b* meaning 'a people' and <http://www.bartleby.com/61/roots/S39.html> - ‘<http://www.bartleby.com/61/roots/S39.html> - *azz*’, a verb meaning 'to be mighty and glorious'. Thus *sha‘b ‘azz* clearly means in Arabic '**a people mighty and glorious**', which carries exactly the meaning that W. D. Fard and Elijah Muhammad wanted to convey. Since the intended meaning, the form of the name, and its Arabic derivation all fit well together, we may conclude that the origin of the name *Shabazz* is now known.

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T.B.M.I.G.

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