

**THE SUNNI ISLĀMIC TRAINING AND MISSION OF
EL-HĀJJ MALIK EL-SHABAZZ / MALCOLM X**

By Imām Al-Hājj Tālib ‘Abdur-Rashīd



(above) El-Hājj Malik El-Shabazz with Shaykh Hasoun of the Sudan, 1964

The Muslim Mosque Inc. was founded on March 12, 1964 by El-Hājj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X, May Allāh forgive his sins and grant him Paradise), after his departure from the so-called Nation of Islam, and acceptance of the authentic faith of Al-Islām. The MMI was incorporated on March 16, 1964. Shabazz, a globally esteemed Muslim martyr, did not live for a year after this incorporation.

While it is true that he and those of his followers who made *hijra* (flight) from the Nation of Islam didn't know a great deal about canonical Al-Islām, none can deny that the man known as Malcolm X was firmly on the True Path when he was martyred. His conversion was conscientious and based upon knowledge- not just sincerity.

Beginning in early March, 1964 Malik Shabazz received almost nightly Islamic instructions for several weeks from Dr. Mahmoud Yusef Shawarbi; then director of the Islamic Center of New York (an institution that now shines on the corner of E. 96th Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan, New York City).

On March 12, 1964 he held a press conference at the Park Sheraton hotel in New York City, during which he stated “I am going to organize and head a new mosque in New York City, known as the Muslim Mosque Inc. This gives us a religious base, and the spiritual force necessary to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community”. True to his word, on March 16, 1964, he and his followers who were ex-members of the so-called Nation of Islam combined their efforts with other Sunni Muslim African-Americans, to legally incorporate the Muslim Mosque Inc.

George Breitman writes ¹ “Malcolm founded a religious organization first, because he and most of the people willing to work with him at that point wanted to remain Muslims although outside of the Nation of Islam.”

Their religious intent in forming the mosque is evident in their stated purpose, outlined in the seven points of their certificate of incorporation:

“To provide a suitable place of worship for its members and others in accordance with the Islamic Faith.

“ To maintain a house of study for the advancement of the Islamic Faith and Religion.

“To stimulate interest among the members in the formation, maintenance, and the teachings of the Islamic Faith.

“To publish textbooks, pamphlets, brochures, and to solicit, collect and in other manners raise funds for the hereinabove and hereinafter enumerated purposes..

“ To work for the imparting of the Islamic Faith and Islamic Religion in accordance with the accepted Islamic Religious principles.

¹ Author of The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary

“ To purchase, lease, acquire, sell and mortgage improved or unimproved real property and any interest therein.

“The foregoing clauses shall be considered both as objects and purposes, and it is hereby expressly provided that the foregoing enumerated specific objects and purposes shall not be held to limit or restrict in any manner the powers of this corporation, but that this corporation shall be entitled to enjoy all the powers that a religious corporation may have under and by virtue of the Laws of the State of New York.”

Thus it is clear that the stated intention and purpose of the Muslim Mosque Inc. encompassed the traditional areas of (Sunni) Islamic belief , doctrine and practice - namely *ibaadat* (worship), *tarbiyya* (religious education), *da'wah* (propagation of the Faith), *Aqeeda* (traditional binding beliefs, understanding and actualizing Islam in accordance with “accepted Islamic principles”, and thus separating themselves from the NOI), and *'iqaamatud-din* (establishment of the faith through institutionalization).

On April 8, 1964 Malik El-Shabazz wrote on the stationary of what was then called The Islamic Foundation of New York, the original name of The Islamic Center of New York at 1 Riverside Drive. His exact words were²

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“Declaration

I do here by declare that I am a true Muslim. I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah, and His Last Prophet.”

It is signed, “Malik El-Shabazz”, and dated “April 8, 1964”.

Malik El-Shabazz departed the U.S. for hajj on April 13, 1964. He completed his pilgrimage and then went on to visit Africa and the so-called Middle East. When he returned to the United States, he continued his mission of liberation of the oppressed African American masses.

The strategic plan formulated by him called for two-pronged leadership amongst his followers. He arranged for Koli Ahmad Tawfiq (Rahmatullah ‘alaihi) to take the entrance exam to Al-Azhar University. When Tawfiq passed the exams he was dispatched to that esteemed institution as part of a plan that called for him to eventually become the first African-American Imām of the Muslim Mosque Inc.

At that time prayers were being led, and guidance according to the Sunna was provided by a Shaykh from the Sudan, named Ahmad Hassoun. While Shabazz continued to lead the Organization of Afro-American Unity – providing political leadership for the African American masses, the M.M.I. was to provide spiritual and religious leadership for those from amongst them who accepted Al-Islam.

Tawfiq began matriculation at Al-Azhar in September, 1964. At the same time Shabazz returned to Makka, to make Umra (the lesser hajj), having been in Cairo since July. Much attention has been given to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz’s political activities during this, his second tour of Africa and the so-called Middle East. He met with heads of state, observed and made speeches before such august bodies as the

² Taken from a copy of the original document

Organization of African Unity. This political work was vitally important, and brought him much attention and targeting by the U.S. government. This is well-known.

However the fact is that he was also furthering his own religious training on the path of the Sunna (traditional, orthodox Islam), during that time

During a four month period from July through October of 1964, Shabazz studied Al-Islām under the supervision of the Supreme Council on Islāmīc Affairs in Cairo, Egypt and the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia. His training and education was not designed to make him an imām or ‘ālim, but rather to further correct his understanding of dīnul-Islām and to strengthen his qualification as America’s most visible Sunni Muslim and potential da’ee (propagator of the faith).

In Saudi Arabia, Shabazz/Malcolm X’s studies were supervised by Shaykh Muhammad Sarur As-Sabban, the Secretary-General of the Muslim World League³. During this period of time, The University of Medina offered Shabazz 15 scholarships for young African Americans, to go along with those offered by Al-Azhar. Thus it is evident that those detractors who think that Malik Shabazz had no formal Islāmīc training according to the Sunna are clearly mistaken. In fact, his intensive training occupied five of the last eleven months of his life.

Both Decaro⁴ and Edward E. Curtis IV⁵ quote Richard Murphy, who was an American embassy official in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 1964, as reporting an interview

³ *ibid.* page 73

⁴ On The Side of My People, by Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. ,pg. 241

⁵ author of Islam in Black America (2002)

between Malik El-Shabazz and a reporter, that was published in the Jeddah newspaper *Al-Bilad*.

During the interview Murphy wrote, “Malcolm X stressed his pleasure at his visits to Saudi Arabia and their benefit to his personal spiritual development. He took pain during this conversation to deprecate his reputation as a political activist, and dwelt mainly on his interest in bringing sounder appreciation of Islam” to African Americans.

Dr. Yusuf Naim Kly, a Muslim who is former Chairman of the Canadian Branch of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (the political organization founded by El-Hajj Malik) and currently an globally renowned scholar of International Law, verifies this desire as expressed by Malik Shabazz, in writing⁶:

“...under the guidance of Dr. Mahmoud Youseff Shawabi, Imam of the New York Islamic Center, Hajji Malik El Shabazz accepted Sunni Islam as his personal faith, made the hajj to Mecca, and traveled to Africa wherein he became engaged with the following three major concerns that occupied the remainder of his attention until his untimely death in the Audubon Ballroom that winter Sunday of 1965:

- 1) The introduction of the Islamic civilization into America (and here it must be stated that Shabazz envisioned a connection between Islam and Muslims in Africa and in America, as evidenced by the photograph that he took wearing the traditional turban and robes of the Jamaa’at of the esteemed Muslim leader, Imam, Shaykh, and reviver of The Faith,

Uthman Ibn Fudi (Usuman Dan Fodiyo), in Nigeria, as clearly indicated by the Amīr of that Jamaat in North America, Muhammad Shareef ibn Farīd. The traditional African Muslim robes and turban were presented to Shabazz by a Nigerian government official, described by Peter Goldman⁷ as the “Nigerian High Commissioner”.

- 2) The introduction of the Afro-American question to the United Nations
- 3) The organization of an authentic internationally-recognized Afro-American national liberation movement
- 4) The replacement of the irresponsible traditional negro leadership, for without this no meaningful changes or new conceptualizations could reach the masses.”

This it is evident that Shabazz’s first priority was the establishment of Al-Islam in the West, and that simultaneous second priority was the liberation of his people (African Americans) from oppression. So sweeping and comprehensive was the scope of Shabazz’s work, that after his passing it was taken up by several organizations, Muslim and non-Muslim, all of whom have built entire platforms of activity, work and action, around only various parts of the MMI and OAAU program.

The threads of El-Hajj Malik’s life and work as a reflection of the history of Al-Islām in America, manifested themselves even in his passing. According to Shaykh Hajj

⁶ see Kly’s [The Black Book: The True Political Philosophy of Malcolm X \(El Hajj Malik El Shabazz\)](#)

⁷ Author of [The Death and Life of Malcolm X](#)

Hesham Jaaber⁸ many of the Imams of that time (*i.e.* the mid- 1960s) in New York and New Jersey, either couldn't or wouldn't (mostly wouldn't) officiate over Shabazz's burial (due no doubt to fear of reprisal from either the U.S. government or the Nation of Islam, as it is called). At that time in the M.M.I., Tawfiq was still a student in Egypt. Many of the soldiers of the M.M.I. were in a state of both covert and overt warfare with the paramilitary "Fruit of Islam" (FOI) of the Nation. Besides, at that time most of the soldiers lacked the knowledge of the Sunna necessary to conduct traditional burial services, even if they had been in the position to do so.

Thus the remains of Malik Shabazz were prepared in the traditional Islamic way (*i.e.* according to the Sunna) by Shaykh Hassoun. The Janāza prayers were courageously led by Shaykh Jaaber (whose roots lie in the Addeynu Allahu Universal Arabic Association – a pioneering Sunni Muslim community founded in 1930), and Sunni Muslim African Americans from Elizabeth, New Jersey, including Haj Muhammad Taleeb, Yahya Bashir, Wakeel Abdu-Nafi, Jamil Abdul-Aziz, Yusef Abdu-Razzak, and Ismael Abdu-Ghani.

Other African American Sunni Muslims from what was affectionately known in New York City as the Ansar House, were also trying to be of assistance. This is evidenced by a letter that had been left at the New York Medical Examiner's office by one of the Ansar House's representatives, Sister Hajjah Jamilah Hassan, for Betty Shabazz –Malik El-Shabazz's widow. The letter was intercepted by the New York City Police Department,

⁸ read the excellent eye-witness account of Malik Shabazz's burial by a Muslim who was there, The Final Chapter...I buried Malcolm (El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), by Hesham Jaaber (1993)

and it is not clear whether or not Sister Betty ever saw it. At any rate, Shaykhs Hassoun and Jabber saw to it the Malik Shabazz was properly prepared and buried.

Shaykh Jaaber has written⁹ “History has recorded my participation at the Janaaza of Hajj Malik, but few in history have ever reported or known that we were an indigenous community of Sunnah Muslims, born, raised and touched by Allah on the soil of the United States”.



(above) El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz with Nigerian government and religious leaders in Africa, 1964

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⁹ *ibid.* pp 84-85