

# Miss Mary Hamilton

## *A Devotional About Names*

Names mean so much within the cultures of the African Diaspora. Our names may be “monikers that have a history that forever may be a mystery” as Poet Sha’Condria ‘iCon’ Sibley describes about the name Tynishia in her poem “To All the Little Black Girls With Big Names (Dedicated to Quvenzhane’ Wallis). She continues writing,

*If those who assume ever stop to think that maybe...*

*Transatlantic submerged native tongues*

*have reemerged in the form of ghetto monikers.*

*Sounds a lot like Tinashe*

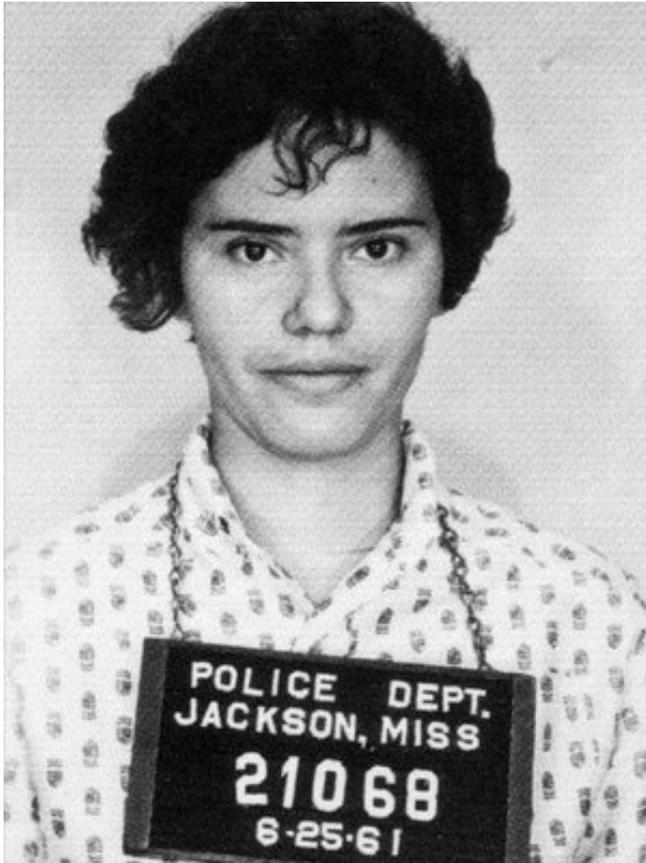
*a name from the Shona tribe meaning “God is with us”*

*because when her mother died, He was all she had.*

Our names, when spoken or read, convey sturdiness and whimsy, tradition and originality, assimilation and uprising. It is not only *what* our names convey that signify our culture, but also the nuances of *how* we relate to names. I know it wasn’t only my Grandma (whose dazzling name was Goldie Amelia Patterson) who, when trying to get my attention, would call me by each of my cousin’s names before she got to mine. Expecting me to respond immediately as if I knew telepathically that it was me for whom she was calling, she’d declare, “KiaKarenJamarEricShalisha...Porsche, you know I’m talking to you!” Or how about that story you told just the other day about “whatshisname” whose name you nor any of the folk listening to your story could remember, yet they all confidently said “Oh yeah yeah, whatshisname! We know who you talkin’ bout!” There is so much diversity and nuance associated with names in our culture, but there are also expectations.

## **Honorifics**

One expectation about names that upends others is the use of the *honorific* – a word that expresses respect, confers honor, appreciation or affection. You know honorifics well. *Mrs.* Pauletta Washington. *Auntie* Maxine Waters. *First Lady* Michelle Obama. The *Mrs.*, *Auntie* and *First Lady* all ascribe an intention and describe a relationship towards each woman that would otherwise be lost if the honorific was omitted. This is exactly what *Miss Mary Hamilton* knew, and because she knew it she chose to do something for the culture regarding names; something that we still benefit from today.



## **Miss Mary Hamilton**

Miss Mary Hamilton was a teacher, a Freedom Rider and the first female field organizer in the South for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). While testifying as a witness in a case in Alabama, the prosecutor called Miss Hamilton by her first name only, which was par for the course of how African Americans were addressed in 1963 courtrooms. Mary Hamilton refused to answer the question, stating instead, "My name is Miss Hamilton. Please address me correctly." Twice the prosecutor repeated his use of only her first name. And twice Mary Hamilton replied that she would not respond unless she was addressed correctly. She was never addressed correctly, thus she never responded. Subsequently, she was held in contempt of court, fined \$50, and jailed for 5 days.

The story doesn't end here for I believe you already get the feeling that Miss Mary didn't take no stuff. In fact, she took her case all the way to the United States Supreme Court whose landmark ruling, HAMILTON v. ALABAMA, 376 U.S. 650 (1964) "established that people of color are entitled to the same courtesies and honorifics as whites."

### **What's My Name?**

Now that you know or have been reminded of what Miss Hamilton did on our behalf, will you, if involved in a legal proceeding, ever willfully ask to be called only by your first name? Will you reason that, despite what happened in 1963, you'd be fine with however someone chooses to address you in 2020? I doubt it, for it would be an affront to Miss Hamilton and to the culture! In the same way I proudly accept what Miss Hamilton won for us, I accept what Yeshua Hamashiach has won for us. He has made it possible for us to be addressed as valuable (Matt. 6:26), loved (John 3:16) and specially made (Psalms 139:13). These and other descriptors all ascribe an intention and

describe the relationship He wants with us. And because of these honorifics, we are empowered to do good works ([Ephesians 2:10](#)), restore communities ([Isaiah 58:12](#)), say the right thing at the right time to people ([Isaiah 50:4](#)) all while living healthy, prosperous lives ([3 John 1:2](#))! He most definitely did something for the culture – for every culture under the sun regarding names – that all people benefit from today.

### **Sources**

[To All the Little Black Girls With Big Names \(Dedicated to Quvenzhane' Wallis\)](#)

[Mary Hamilton](#)

[Mary Hamilton, The Woman Who Put The 'Miss' In Court](#)

[When 'Miss' Meant So Much More: How One Woman Fought Alabama – And Won](#)