

01 Feb 2020

Revisit to kibosh – rejecting the Irish ‘cap-of-death’ etymology

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Recommended Citation

Cohen, G. L., Little, M., & Goranson, S. (2020). Revisit to kibosh – rejecting the Irish ‘cap-of-death’ etymology. *Comments on Etymology, February 2020*, 49(5), pp. 2-12. Gerald Leonard Cohen.

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COMMENTS ON ETYMOLOGY

February 2020

Vol. 49, no. 5

edited by Gerald Cohen

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Rolla, MO 65409

Appears monthly, October – May; cost: \$16 per year

Libraries, institutions: \$20 per year

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REVISIT TO *KIBOSH* – REJECTING THE IRISH
'CAP-OF-DEATH' ETYMOLOGY

Gerald Cohen, Matthew Little, Stephen Goranson

In December 2019 *OED3* revised its entry on the origin of *kibosh* (in *put the kibosh on*) mentioning our co-authored book *Origin of Kibosh* and presenting as the first suggested etymology our proposal of *kibosh* from *kurbash* (a type of whip) . The *OED3* entry then presents two additional 'principal suggestions' but includes what almost seems like a rebuttal to each one. In the end the *OED* editors proceeded very cautiously by labeling *kibosh* as 'Origin unknown,' but our main feeling is gratitude to them for reconsidering the earlier entry.

With that said, there remains quite a bit to say about the new entry, and the present *COE* issue will start with the Irish 'cap-of-death' etymology. First, though, here is *OED3*'s new etymological treatment of *kibosh* (in *put the kibosh on*).

OED3: REVISED ORIGIN OF *KIBOSH*

The revised *OED3* entry says:

'kibosh, n.

Origin: Of unknown origin.

Etymology: Origin unknown.

Early evidence appears to be from colloquial and working-class English as spoken in London. There have been a number of attempts to trace the origin of the word; the following are the principal suggestions:

1. Some early uses suggest the *kibosh* may originally have been a physical object, used for striking, and the word has therefore been suggested to be < Arabic *kirbāš* (also *kurbāš*), denoting a kind of whip used for judicial punishment, or its etymon Ottoman Turkish *qirbāch* (see *kourbash* n.). If so, it may have been borrowed in London from immigrants or from those who served in the military in the Near East.

The pronunciation of the first syllable seems difficult to explain in this case; however, a form *kibosh* is also attested occasionally in the 19th cent. as a variant of *kourbash* n. For a detailed discussion of this suggestion compare G. Cohen, S. Goranson, & M. Little *Origin of Kibosh* (2018).

2. The word is also often taken to reflect an Irish phrase *caidhp bháis* (< *caidhp* coif, bonnet + *báis*, genitive of *bás* death: see *baser* n.). This phrase is variously said to denote the head covering worn by a judge when pronouncing a death sentence, the hood used at executions, the final item of clothing to be put on a body before wake and burial, or a form of torture (compare *pitch-cap* n. 2); however, the phrase does not appear to be attested in these senses except once with reference to burial customs (1935); otherwise it is used as the name of the fungus death cap (but this is probably a recent formation after English: see *death cap* n. at *death* n. Compounds 2). There is also no direct 19th-cent. evidence for a connection of the word *kibosh* to Ireland, although there was a sizeable Irish community in London. The syntax of the full phrase *to put..on* is similar to the common Irish construction *cuir..ar*, in the same literal sense (typically with reference to a physical item); however, an isolated Irish example *cuireadh an caidhp bháis air mar sgéal* ‘the *caidhp bháis* was put on your story’ (1924) is probably modelled on English *that put the kibosh on your story*.

3. Another suggestion takes the word to be of Yiddish origin, and there is an early example of it in Jewish usage in London (1835); however, no likely Yiddish etymon is recorded (although there have been various proposals for the further etymology of such a word or phrase, e.g. Hebrew *kāḇaš* to subject, to subdue, to tread down; compare also Hebrew *kibbeš* to subdue, which is < the same base).’

REBUTTAL OF THE IRISH ‘CAP-OF-DEATH’ ETYMOLOGY

A rather detailed rebuttal of the ‘cap-of-death’ etymology appears in Cohen/Goranson/Little (2018: 98-102), which we now reprint:

‘IRISH ETYMOLOGY OF KIBOSH:
CAIDHP BHÁIS ‘CAP OF DEATH’

‘An Irish Gaelic origin for *kibosh* is suggested periodically, evidently first mentioned in an Associated Press story, 1936:

“*Cornell Daily Sun*, 1 December 1936, p. 1: ‘Language Expert Explains Gaelic Origins of American Slang Terms’:

“Buffalo, Nov. 30 (AP) Words such as ‘kibosh,’ ‘quid,’ and ‘smithereens,’ may be modern English slang, but they spring from centuries back in the Irish language, Joseph Conboy, a railroad man whose hobby is Gaelic culture, told an audience here.

“Conboy, an employee in a freight office, is also president of the Buffalo Irish Foundation, and as such he occasionally entertains Irish audiences by analyzing American words taken from the Gaelic.

“‘Kibosh,’ Conboy said today, “comes from ‘caip,’ which means cap, and ‘bais,’ which means death. “It originated in Ireland about the time of Judge Norbury, who was called the ‘hanging judge.’ When the people would see him reaching for the black cap he wore when giving the death sentence, they would say: ‘The prisoner is “finished. The judge is putting on the caip bais” – kibosh. Thus when we say we ‘put the kibosh on something,’ we mean we have disposed of it.”

([*Cornell Daily Sun*] Editor’s note: Some authorities hold that “kibosh” might be of Yiddish origin.)...’

A second proposal of an Irish origin comes in a letter sent by Irish author Padraic Colum to Charles Earl Funk and mentioned by Funk in his 1948 book *Hog on Ice & Other Curious Expressions*:

p. 22: ‘...But I am indebted to Padraic Colum, well-known Irish author, for what I take to be the true explanation. In a letter to me he says: “‘Kibosh,’ I believe, means ‘the cap of death’ and is always used in that sense. – ‘He put the kibosh on it.’ In Irish it could be written ‘cie bais’ -- the last word pronounced ‘bosh,’ the genitive of ‘bas,’ death.”’ [G. Cohen: sic, no diacritic mark here for *cie bais*].

Evidently Colum’s prestige as an author lent credibility to the Irish etymology of *kibosh*, which was then proposed or at least considered as

a possibility in Dolan 1998, Green 2005, Hendrickson 2004, *Online Etymological Dictionary*, Rees1987, Share 1997, etc.

‘At this point it is necessary to distinguish between the two main variants of the Irish etymology:

1) the judge dons a black cap (cap of death, kibosh) before pronouncing a sentence of death;

2) British troops suppressing the Irish Rebellion of 1798 applied various tortures, a particularly nasty one being ‘pitchcapping.’ A cap containing hot pitch was applied to the head of the victim, and when the pitch cooled, the cap was pulled off, bringing part of the scalp with it. This ‘cap of death’ (kibosh) would then have been the origin of slang *put the kibosh on*.

FIRST VERSION: JUDGE DONS A BLACK CAP BEFORE PRONOUNCING SENTENCE OF DEATH

‘A sample of this first variant is found in Dolan 1998:

“Irish *caidhp (an) bháis* or *caidhpin (an) bháis*, ‘cap of death’, the black cap or judgment cap worn by judges when pronouncing sentence of death.”

A brief statement on the black cap is given in *Wikipedia*:

“In English law, the **black cap** was worn by a judge when passing a sentence of death. Although it is called a ‘cap’, it is not made to fit the head like a typical cap does; instead it is a simple plain square made of black fabric. It was based on Tudor Court headgear. When worn, it is placed on the head on top of the judicial wig, with one of the four corners of the black fabric facing forward.

“The death penalty has now been abolished in England and Wales, but the black cap is still part of a judge’s official regalia, and as such it is still carried into the High Court by each sitting judge when full ceremonial dress is called for.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_cap

OBJECTIONS TO ‘BLACK CAP’ AS DEATH-CAP ETYMOLOGY

‘The first objection is that the judge who will pronounce the sentence of death puts the black cap on himself, not on the prisoner. So even if this cap were called a ‘kibosh,’ it could not be relevant to slang *put the kibosh on*.

‘Secondly, the search for the Gaelic words meaning ‘cap of death’ prior to the first, 1830’s attestations of ‘kibosh’ has thus far turned out to be a search for the will-o’-the-wisp. The online anonymous author of “Putting The Kibosh on Cassidy” (hereafter *PTKOC*) explains:

“...The usual claim in relation to its supposed Irish origin is that it comes from *caidhp bháis* or *caidhp an bháis* or *caip bháis*, meaning a cap or cape of death. Some sources also mention *cie báis*, but *cie* is not a possible word in Irish orthography.

“While *caidhp bháis* is given as the name of a fungus in Irish dictionaries (the death cap), there is no evidence that this is an ancient expression [G. Cohen: make that: prior to the 1830’s] and it may have been composed on the pattern of the English phrase death cap in the 20th century.

“...Only the mushroom explanation is in the dictionaries. *Corpas na Gaeilge* (a huge corpus of Irish material from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries) gives a number of examples of *caidhp* but nothing with *caidhp bháis* or *caidhp an bháis*.

“...The story of the Irish origin of *kibosh* is so common and well-known that it is hardly surprising that people have started to use the terms *caidhp bháis* or *caidhp an bháis* in Irish in recent years. It sounds convincing and natural enough. However, without some evidence of its use in Irish before speculation about *kibosh* began, we can’t accept these modern uses as evidence for an Irish origin of the phrase.”

IN THE SAME VEIN: SKEPTICISM OF DIARMAID Ó MUIRITHE

‘Note also the skepticism of Ó Muirithe (1996:88):

“*Kibosh* ... Pádraic Colum [sic: typo for ‘Colum’] suggested that

kibosh is none other than Irish *caidhp bháis*, death cap, an execution blind-fold in the bad old days.

“The problem I have with that is that I have never read of that kind of a *caidhp bháis* being used when Larry was stretched; neither can I place any trust in the Wexford folk-etymologies that it was the ’98 Yeomanry pitch-cap, or a cloth placed on a dead person’s face.

Where’s the evidence that would support any of these theories?”

‘This book is a collection of columns which Ó Muirthe published in the *Irish Times*. His skepticism about *kibosh* might carry some weight, considering that he is the author of *A Dictionary of Anglo-Irish: Words and Phrases from the Gaelic* (1996) and was Senior Lecturer in Irish at University College, Dublin.

‘Also, the phrase ‘when Larry was stretched’ derives from ‘The Night Before Larry Was Stretched’ -- an anonymous 18th century poem written in Dublin slang about the preparations for an execution.’

SECOND VERSION: ‘KIBOSH’ AS THE CAP-OF-DEATH IN PITCHCAPPING

‘This version is based on a comment by Bernard Share in his 1997 *Slanguage, A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English in Ireland* (p. 157):

“*kibosh/kybosh* -- noun, derivation disputed but possibly from Irish *caipín báis* cap of death, or pitch cap, as employed by British forces against 1798 insurgents; vb. usage of other origin and not general Hiberno-English. ...”

Note: Share 1997 limits himself solely to pointing out *kibosh/kybosh* as a cap of death and says specifically: “vb. usage of other origin...” So he sees ‘to kibosh’ as having a different (non-Irish) origin, and this would presumably pertain to the full phrase *put the kibosh on*.

‘But once *kibosh/kybosh* was identified as a pitch cap/cap of death, it seemed only logical to assume that *put the kibosh on* referred to this cap. We see this in the uncertain treatment of *Online Etymological Dictionary*:

“...One candidate is Irish *caip bháis*, *caipín bháis* “cap of death,”

sometimes said to be the black cap a judge would don when pronouncing a death sentence, but in other sources this is identified as a gruesome method of execution ‘employed by the Brit. forces against 1798 insurgents’ [Bernard Share, *Slanguage, A Dictionary of Irish Slang*]. ...”

This “cap of death”, actually referred to as “pitch cap,” was not so much a method of execution as of torture. Sanderson (1899: 43) describes it briefly:

“The grossest outrages were rife, including methods of torture called ‘half-hanging’, ‘pitch-capping, and ‘picketing’. ... ‘Pitch-capping’ meant the pouring of hot pitch on the head, allowing it to cool, and then roughly tearing off the ‘cap’ thus formed, bringing with it the hair and portions of the scalp.”

OBJECTION TO ‘DEATH CAP’ IN PITCH-CAPPING ETYMOLOGY

‘The objection is the same as for the first version involving the cap of death: There is evidently no attestation of *caidhp bháis* (cap of death) prior to the first, 1830’s, attestations of *kibosh*. The quotes from *PTKOC* presented above are pertinent here.

‘Furthermore, even the English words “cap of death” do not seem to have been used prior to the 20th century to describe the pitch cap; as mentioned just above, the pitch cap was intended for torture, not execution.

INCIDENTALLY,...

‘Michael Quinion, author of the online column *World Wide Words*, deserves credit for being the first to question the early appearance of the Irish Gaelic words that supposedly led to *kibosh*. The following (Quinion 2016) was first posted in 2010; the key sentence is in the last line:

‘...Another interesting conjecture that has been advocated several times, notably by the Irish poet, Padraic Colum, is that *kibosh* is Gaelic, from the phrase variously cited as *cie báis*, *caidhp (an) bháis* or *caidhpín (an) bháis*, cap of death, where *báis* is pronounced “bawsh” and *cie* is said with a hard initial consonant. The cap is said

to have been the one worn by judges when pronouncing sentence of death. However, I can't find any evidence for this expression.”

I asked Quinion for clarification of his last sentence, and he responded: “My meaning is that I can't find any historical reference to the various Irish phrases, let alone any association of *kibosh* with judicial matters.””

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- Cohen, Gerald, Stephen Goranson, and Matthew Little 2018. *Origin of 'Kibosh':* Routledge Studies in Etymology. (London and New York: Routledge; Taylor & Francis). ISBN 9781138628953. The book gives 2018 as the date of publication, but it was in fact available already by mid-October 2017. The 'cap-of-death' topic is discussed on pp. 98-102.
- Colum, Padraic – See below: Funk 1948.
- Cornell Daily Sun* (newspaper), Dec. 1, 1936, page 1; article title: 'Language Expert Explains Gaelic Origin of American Slang Terms.' 'Cruck-a-Leaghan' & 'Slieve Gallion' [pseudonyms of Dugald Macfayden and David Hepburn] 1884. London: Houlston. p. 87: 'Thin the Rector pull'd out an' oul' fourpinny-bit (For the fourpinny-pieces wir current as yit) An' handed the pill that wid kibosh* the fun.' --- [The asterisk appears in the book to indicate a footnote: 'end, put a stop to.']
- Dolan, Terence Patrick. 1998. *A Dictionary of Hiberno English*. -- (for possible derivation of *kibosh* from Irish words for 'cap of death'; see below: Jonathon Green 2005).
- Funk, Charles Earle 1948. *A Hog On Ice & Other Curious Expressions*. NY: Harper & Row. p. 22: '...But I am indebted to Padraic Colum, well-known Irish author, for what I take to be the true explanation. In a letter to me he says: “‘Kibosh.’ I believe, means ‘the cap of death’ and is always used in that sense. – ‘He put the kibosh on it.’ In Irish it

could be written ‘cie bais’ -- the last word pronounced ‘bosh,’ the genitive of ‘bas,’ death.” – [G. Cohen: sic, no diacritic mark here for *cie bais*]

Green, Jonathon 2005. *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang*. London: Weidenfeld. 2nd edition. Pp. 831-832:

‘*kibosh* n. (also)...a bad accident, a defeat; usu. in PUT THE KIBOSH ON v. thus *give someone the kibosh*, to destroy or defeat someone. ... [Etymology]: ? Heb. or Yid. *kabas, kabasten*, to suppress (B&L, but rejected by Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish*, 1968); but note intensifying KER- prefix + BOSH n.¹; KYE n. + BOSH n.¹, i.e. 18 pence and thus synon. with a FOURPENNY (ONE) n. (see Eric Partridge, *DSUE*, 8th edn, Appendix, for further theories); however, note Irish Gaelic *ceip bais*, death cap, i.e., black cap used in court; note also Dolan (1998): ‘Irish *caidhp (an) bháis* or *caidhpin (an) bháis*, “cap of death”, the black cap or judgment cap worn by judges when pronouncing sentence of death.’”

Hendrickson, Robert 2004. *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*. 3rd edition. New York: Checkmark Books.

pp. 409-410: ‘*kibosh*. The Gaelic *cie bas*, pronounced “kibosh,” means “cap of death” and seems to offer the most logical explanation for the expression to *put the kibosh on* something, “to put an end to it, to dispose of it.”...’

Ó Muirithe, Diarmaid 1996. *The Words We Use* (Dublin: Four Courts Press). --- p. 88: *Kibosh*; expresses skepticism for ‘cap of death’ Irish etymology.

Online Etymology Dictionary – (as consulted on June 6, 2016):

‘*kibosh*: 1836, *kye-bosk*, in British English slang phrase *put the kibosh on*, of unknown origin, despite intense speculation. The earliest citation is in Dickens. Looks Yiddish, but its original appearance in a piece set in the heavily Irish “Seven Dials” neighborhood in the West End of London seems to argue against this.

‘One candidate is Irish *caip bháis, caipín báis* “cap of death,” sometimes said to be the black cap a judge would don when pronouncing a death sentence, but in other sources this is identified as a gruesome method of execution “employed by Brit. forces against

1798 insurgents” [Bernard Share, “*Slanguage, A Dictionary of Irish Slang*”]. Or the word might somehow be connected with Turkish *bosh* (see *bosh*). ‘*bosh*, (n): “empty talk, nonsense,” 1834, from Turkish, literally “empty.” Introduced in “Ayesha,” popular romance novel by J.J. Morier (1780-1849).’

PTKOC = ‘Putting the Kibosh on Cassidy’ (q.v.)

‘Putting the Kibosh on Cassidy’ – See above: Anonymous (online)

Quinion, Michael 2016. *Putting the kibosh on it*. In: *World Wide Words* (<http://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/kibosh.htm>), first posted Feb. 17, 1996, last updated: March 27, 2016. --- I asked Quinion when his comments on the Gaelic origin first appeared in this column, and he kindly replied: ‘...The first version I have access to, dated 22 Mar 1997, had this:

“The Irish poet, Padric Colum, believes the word originated in the Irish Gaelic phrase *cie báis* meaning ‘cap of death’. The word *báis* is apparently pronounced ‘bawsh’ and *cie* is presumably pronounced with a hard initial consonant, rather like ‘kai.”

‘The text you quote replaced it [and] is a revision of 22 July 2010.’

Rees, Nigel 1987. *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. London: Cassell. p. 113: ‘...One explanation [for *put the kibosh on*] is that it comes from the Irish *cie bais* (which is pronounced “kibosh”) meaning a cap of death. Certainly some of the earlier recorded uses of the expression are Irish. [G. Cohen: No. All the earliest ones are in England; Rees then quotes the 1884 example presented above in Cruck-a-Leaghan and Slieve Gallion.

Sanderson, Edgar 1899. *The British Empire in the Nineteenth Century: Its Progress and Expansion at Home and Abroad : Comprising a Description and History of the British Colonies and Dependencies*, Volume 1. Blackie & son. – p. 43: pitch-capping.

Share, Bernard 1997. *Slanguage, A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan. – p. 157:

‘*kibosh/kybosh* -- noun, derivation disputed but possibly from Irish *caipín báis* cap of death, or pitch cap, as employed by British forces

against 1798 insurgents; vb. usage of other origin and not general
Hiberno-English. ...'

Wikipedia -- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_cap

