

# The Hamitic Hypothesis: A Pseudo-Historical Justification for White Superiority

*Travis Sharp*

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*Writer's comment:* European colonizers consolidated their power over Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by erasing the history of “Black Africa”—the Africa that flourished prior to European infiltration. Prominent Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper expressed the typical European sentiment in 1958, writing that pre-colonial African history was merely “the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.” The Hamitic Hypothesis was central to this attempt to deny black Africans any role in their own history by postulating that migratory white tribes, known as Hamites, were wholly responsible for spreading civilized practices throughout Africa. As we discovered in Professor Hoag’s course, however, this hypothesis was an overt manifestation of racist ideology, not a legitimate ethnological theory. My essay endeavors to trace the history of this hypothesis and explain how African historians repudiated it during the decolonization movement of the 1960’s.

—*Travis Sharp*

*Instructor's comments:* In my *Pre-Colonial Africa* course, students learn about the political, economic, and social complexities and successes of African societies prior to the onset of European rule in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Students also write a historiographical essay in which they analyze the state of the historical literature on a given subject. Through a discussion of the Hamitic Hypothesis, Travis Sharp shows how our understanding of social and political development in Africa has changed. As African scholars took a prominent role in the writing of African history in the post-colonial period, the achievements of pre-colonial African societies were recognized. Sharp draws upon a wide range of sources—from the Bible to 19<sup>th</sup> century European intellectuals to modern African historians—to illustrate the ways in which racial and political beliefs have influenced the writing of Africa’s history.

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**A**t the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “civilized” nations saw it as their Christian duty to spread modernity to the “uncivilized” regions of the world. Foremost among these uncivilized regions was Africa. As the “Scramble for Africa” unfolded and European powers struggled to assert their supremacy over the African continent, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists sought to explain the apparent backwardness of African societies. Drawing upon racist assumptions of inherent black inferiority, European scholars gradually came to accept the validity of the Hamitic hypothesis.

The Hamitic hypothesis transformed hundreds of years of pseudo-historical research into the most widely accepted ethnological theory of its day. As colonies proliferated throughout the African continent, Europeans were shocked to find that many African societies already exuded vestiges of civilization. The discovery of advanced African architecture, art, and political organizations “contradicted the low rankings that the racial classification schemes of the time accorded dark-skinned people.”<sup>1</sup> In order to rationalize such a clear demonstration of black intellectual ability, Europeans claimed that these achievements were the result of a cultural exchange between Africa’s indigenous black tribes and a superior white migrant tribe known as the Hamites. The white Hamite thus became directly responsible for everything black Africans had accomplished throughout their entire history. According to African historian Joseph C. Miller, proponents of the Hamitic hypothesis believed that “Only a ‘white’ residue in Africans’ cultures could explain so unanticipated a suggestion of competence among Negroes.”<sup>2</sup>

This essay will seek to trace the origins and development of the Hamitic hypothesis. Specifically, it will prove that the Hamitic hypothesis was a manifestation of racist ideology, not a legitimate ethnological theory. Finally, it will consider the role of African nationalism in the refutation and reformulation of the Hamitic hypothesis after 1960.

### **Origins of the Hamitic hypothesis**

The words of the Bible have been periodically misconstrued by Christians trying to legitimize their unjust actions. The Hamitic

hypothesis is a perfect example because its biblical origins ultimately led to the belief that black inferiority was divinely sanctioned by God. The term “Hamitic” comes from the biblical figure Ham. In the Book of Genesis, Noah exited the ark with three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. One day, Noah became drunk and fell asleep naked inside his tent. Ham mistakenly discovered his father’s nakedness, and then ran to tell his brothers about it. Shem and Japheth quickly ran inside the tent and covered their father but made sure not to look at his unclothed body. Upon awakening, Noah became furious at Ham, who was the father of Canaan, for gazing upon his nakedness. Noah swore:

Cursed be Canaan!  
The lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.  
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem!  
Let Canaan be his slave.  
May God expand Japheth,  
so that he dwells among the tents of Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave.<sup>3</sup>

This seemingly innocuous conflict effectively sentenced Ham’s descendants to perpetual servitude. Nowhere in Genesis, however, do we see evidence that Ham was black. In fact, race is mentioned in neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament. The traditional belief that Ham was a black man developed much later, not being explicitly formulated until the Babylonian Talmud of 500 C.E.<sup>4</sup>

Europeans readily accepted the curse on Canaan as a denunciation of the black race despite the absence of racial identification in the original biblical account. Part of this acquiescent approval was related to suggestions of inherent black inferiority elsewhere in Western literature, particularly in the works of classical Graeco-Roman writers. For example, when introducing a discussion of certain Ethiopian primitives, the Sicilian historian Diodorus wrote:

The majority of them...are black in colour and have flat noses and woolly hair. As for their spirit, they are entirely savage and display the nature of a wild beast...and are as far removed as possible from human kindness to one another;

and speaking as they do with a shrill voice and cultivating none of the practices of civilized life as these are found among the rest of mankind, they present a striking contrast when considered in the light of our own customs.<sup>5</sup>

This account by Diodorus is markedly negative, portraying the Ethiopians as a sub-human species incapable of replicating civilized practices. Classical accounts, however, were not always so explicit in their degradation. Herodotus, the most noted of classical geographers, exhibits a more subtle ethnocentrism in his description of western Libya: “Huge serpents are found, and the lions...and the creatures without heads whom the Libyans declare to have their eyes in their breasts, and also the wild men, and the wild women.”<sup>6</sup> Although Herodotus is not as pejorative as Diodorus, his comments still make Africa seem like a dangerous place where civilization cannot possibly flourish.

The condescending attitudes of classical writers had a significant impact on later works by modern thinkers. As the Enlightenment revolutionized academia, white scholars struggled to explain the allegedly vast disparity in ability between themselves and black Africans. There were two primary theses: the black African was either condemned as incorrigibly inferior, or lauded as a victimized “noble savage.” Georg Friedrich Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* (1832) perhaps most vividly illustrates the view that black Africa was hopelessly incapable of reformation. Hegel postulated that Africa was “the land of childhood...enveloped in the dark mantle of night” and had neither “political constitution” nor “moral sentiments.”<sup>7</sup> He concluded that “the character of the Negroes...is capable of no development or culture.”<sup>8</sup> Hegel is one of the giants of modern Western philosophy, but his outright denial of African efficacy forces us to acknowledge the fact that for many Europeans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Africa had become “the antithesis of Western civilization.”<sup>9</sup>

Contrasting with Hegel’s view was the idea that uncivilized natives were actually much better off than civilized peoples. This ideology extolled the virtues of the noble savage and became increasingly popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. African historians Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin explain the appeal of the noble savage in their classic *Africa and Africans* (1988):

As the Europeans struggled with the problems of a complex and increasingly technical society, it was useful to imagine other people who were free to practice the simple virtues born of innocence, closer to nature, and somehow free of the incessant struggle for power and domination that marked European class and international relations.<sup>10</sup>

The noble savage theory was clearly expressed in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), the story of a peaceful "savage" who is uprooted from his family and ultimately corrupted by the trivialities of modern society. Another poignant example, particularly for Americans, is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The moral resiliency and Christian piety demonstrated by black slaves Tom and Eliza contrasts sharply with the unscrupulous greed of the white slave-trader Haley. *Emile* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were both enormously popular in their day and serve as lasting testaments to the unspoiled virtuousness of the noble savage.

### **The Hamitic hypothesis rises to primacy**

Having addressed the intellectual origins of the Hamitic hypothesis, it is now time to discuss its ascension to primacy. As was already mentioned above, Europeans traditionally believed that Ham and Canaan were black. Thus, "The Negro was seen by Europeans as a descendant of Ham, bearing the stigma of Noah's curse to be, forever, the white man's drawer of water and hewer of wood."<sup>11</sup> This view conveniently justified slavery as a biblical mandate. One of the most astonishing things about the Hamitic hypothesis, however, was its adaptability. The Hamites, or descendants of Ham, were quite malleable, and could be cited to support any European assertion of inherent black inferiority.

The Hamitic paradigm shifted drastically after Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. French archaeologists uncovered the forgotten grandeur of an Egyptian civilization that had flourished more than a thousand years before Greece and Rome. After exhaustive research, Napoleon's scientists concluded that the ancient Egyptians were indeed "Negroid."<sup>12</sup> This conclusion, however, was totally unacceptable to the European intellectual community. It not only meant that

Africans were capable of building advanced civilizations, but also implied that they had done so a thousand years before white Graeco-Romans. To combat this theory of black intellectual equality, European theologians and ethnographers reformulated the premises of the Hamitic hypothesis. They postulated that in the Bible, Noah had only explicitly cursed Canaan; thus, Ham and his other sons were technically not condemned to a life of servitude. Ham's son Mizraim was subsequently identified as the patriarch of Egypt, leaving Canaan and his progeny alone to assume the malediction of perpetual slavery.<sup>13</sup> Freed from the curse of Noah, it was agreed that Ham must have been white. E.R. Sanders, who published a pioneering critique of the Hamitic hypothesis in 1969, concludes that "The Egyptians emerged as Hamites, Caucasoid, uncursed and capable of high civilization."<sup>14</sup>

Having secured the legacy of ancient Egypt as a white civilization, the Hamitic hypothesis became a salient feature in the rapidly developing ethnology of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, two theories emerged regarding the origins of modern humans: evolution and diffusion. Evolution, also known as polygenism or the Candelabra hypothesis, maintained that human societies developed through similar, protracted stages of development.<sup>15</sup> There was no single cradle of civilization from whence our earliest human ancestors emerged; instead, *Homo sapiens sapiens* evolved independently and in parallel (like the branches of a candelabra) throughout different parts of the world. Although this theory would appear to refute the Hamitic hypothesis, European scholars interpreted it to mean that in terms of development, "Western Europe represented one of the highest stages, black Africa one of the lowest."<sup>16</sup> It naturally followed that the only reason under-evolved black Africa exhibited semblances of civilization was because it had usurped them from white Hamitic northern tribes. Notice the Hamitic hypothesis' ability to adapt to seemingly contradictory evidence. This malleability illustrates the pseudo-historical racial motivations perpetuating the Hamitic myth.

The second theory proposed to explain human origins was diffusion. Also known as monogenism or the Noah's Ark hypothesis, diffusion clearly corroborated the Hamitic hypothesis.<sup>17</sup> Diffusion held that there was a unity to mankind, and

that all the races had originally emerged from a single parental stock.<sup>18</sup> Although it has since been unequivocally refuted, ethnologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that humans first evolved in Mesopotamia, subsequently migrating away from there to colonize the rest of the globe.<sup>19</sup> No one dared to suggest that these earliest Mesopotamians were anything but white. The diffusionist model was critical because it not only reinforced the Hamitic hypothesis, but also transformed the European approach to Africa, as historian Philip Zachernuk explains:

The diffusionist approach to early human history posited a single invention of most elements of civilization, rather than their repeated discovery by separate cultures. Primitive cultures advanced less by their own agency than by acquiring the tools or ideas for improvement from superior foreigners. [...] Diffusion could explain exceptions to African stagnation as the traces of foreign invaders. Further, it set precedents for colonial occupation: just as Africa had once needed Hamites to be improved, so now it needed Britons.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of acknowledging Africa's unique and independent history, the theories of evolution and diffusion corroborated the Hamitic hypothesis by whitewashing African development. The famous African historian W.E.B Du Bois observed that "All history, all science was changed to fit this new condition. Africa had no history. Wherever there was history in Africa or civilization, it was of white origin; and the fact that it was civilization proved that it was white."<sup>21</sup> Deprived of their history, Africans were seen as impotent pawns waiting to be manipulated by their European superiors. This negative stereotype resulted in the conception that African history was non-existent before European intervention. Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, wrote in 1958:

Undergraduates, seduced as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...Men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, but to study their history would

be to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.<sup>22</sup>

Though they sound abhorrent, Dr. Trevor-Roper's words were not unusual in European academia. The Hamitic hypothesis pillaged the history of Africa, subordinating it to small minded conceptions of European superiority.

Along with evolution and diffusion, comparative anthropology was another development of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that endeavored to scientifically substantiate the intrinsic inferiority of black people. Phrenology, the study of the shape and protuberances of the human skull, was especially important to proponents of the Hamitic hypothesis because it linked physical traits to mental ability.<sup>23</sup> Phrenology divided the human race into four distinguishable sub-species: the Australoid, the Negro, the Caucasian or European, and the Mongolic or Asiamerican.<sup>24</sup> The craniums of the four sub-species were then compared to see which were the largest. Not surprisingly, Caucasians were found to have the largest skulls, while Negroes exhibited the smallest skulls.<sup>25</sup> Although most anthropologists thought that phrenology constituted cutting-edge science, hindsight demonstrates that their supposedly irrefutable "scientific" evidence reinforced many gross miscalculations about inherent racial abilities.

The most influential racial anthropologist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was Sir Harry Johnston. Utilizing phrenology, Johnston asserted that "The Negro, more than any other human type, has been marked out by his mental and physical characteristics as the servant of other races."<sup>26</sup> The "White Man," by contrast, is the prime cause of all "upward evolution."<sup>27</sup> Johnston's pseudo-scientific racism became even more pronounced as his career progressed. For example, consider his thoughts on the physical appearance of the "Negro Sub-Species":

Dark skin, squash nose, woolly hair, "blubber" lips, and "lark heel"—these are the principal taunts flung at the Negro. The dark skin affects not the sculptor's eye, but the other four points are the Negro's handicap in the competition for the Beauty Prize at some future Interracial Olympiad. Greater refinement of life will no doubt tend—is slowly tending—to

modify or eliminate the elements of facial ugliness; but the most effective method of doing so is crossing with the Caucasian.<sup>28</sup>

Quite frankly, it is hard to imagine a more prejudiced perspective. Physical appearance, however, was not the only thing Johnston found lacking in Africans. With regards to their sexual practices, Johnston wrote:

The Negro has been so busy eating, drinking, marrying and begetting, that he has devoted little attention to the arts and industries [...] The savage negro type is essentially unmoral. Men and women of this race are probably more inherently lustful, more eagerly addicted to sexual pleasures, than are the mass of Asiatics, Europeans, white Americans, and black Australians.<sup>29</sup>

Johnston clearly does not consider black Africans to be human beings. In highlighting their deficiencies, however, Johnston also highlights his own. Racial bigotry ultimately tarnished his anthropological legacy, exacting revenge on a man devoted to “scientifically” proving the inferiority of black Africans.

Comparative anthropology would have a lasting effect on the Hamitic hypothesis. Until Johnston’s work, the inferiority of blacks had been assumed, but not substantiated. Phrenology provided the evidence scholars needed to present the Hamitic origin of African civilizations as an indubitable fact. Although it has been disproved by our relatively recently gained knowledge of human brain activity, phrenology enjoyed decades of success as the leading explanation of white superiority. Unfortunately, the popularity of phrenology “Left a residue of prejudice from which anthropology was long in freeing itself: the idea that head shape was meaningful did not disappear until well into the twentieth century.”<sup>30</sup>

Utilizing phrenology as concrete scientific proof, proponents of the Hamitic hypothesis sought to justify the European “Scramble for Africa” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wyatt Macgaffey, who specializes in African racial history, points out that “From the European point of view, the classification of races and specifica-

tion of their attributes served, directly or indirectly, to sanction the colonial enterprise.”<sup>31</sup> During this period, European powers irreverently divided the African continent in order to establish profitable colonial settlements. As they became more familiar with the accomplishments of indigenous African societies, the Hamitic hypothesis cogently reassured Europeans of their innate superiority. For example, Europeans were awestruck when they first encountered the Great Zimbabwe Ruins in southern Africa. The highly advanced architecture defied the popular expectation that “darkest Africa” would consist of nothing more than savage seminomadic tribes. European scholars, however, rapidly discredited anyone who dared to propose that black Africans were responsible for Zimbabwe’s magnificent ruins. Allister Macmillan, a compiler of various commercial guides to the British Empire, wrote in 1912:

There are unenlightened persons who assert complacently that these unexampled structures are of Bantu artistry. Pitiful their limitations and their childish theories. They can never see the forest for the multitude of trees. Bantu peoples are unchanging; they are as they used to be, farmers, herdsmen, elemental, of small brain capacity.<sup>32</sup>

Macmillan’s words clearly indicate the authoritative position the Hamitic hypothesis had assumed by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the daunting physical evidence provided by the Great Zimbabwe Ruins was not enough to convince European scholars that Africa was capable of civilization. The rehabilitation of the biblical Ham, the theories of evolution and diffusion, comparative anthropology, and the “Scramble for Africa” combined to elevate the Hamitic hypothesis to primacy. Utilizing the theories of his predecessors, Charles G. Seligman would soon pilot the Hamitic hypothesis to its climatic zenith.

### **The Hamitic hypothesis reaches its apex**

The Hamitic hypothesis emerged from a long-standing tradition of European ethnocentrism, and developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century further enhanced its reputation as a viable explanation for African backwardness and inferiority. Up to this point, however, there had not been a lucid scholarly work that explicitly formulated

all the important principles of the Hamitic hypothesis. That all changed in 1930 when C.G. Seligman published his famous *Races of Africa*.

Seligman was a British ethnographer who had worked extensively in Africa. Affectionately known as “Sligs” to his contemporaries, Seligman attained “massive respect and prestige” among colonial-era British scholars and anthropologists.<sup>33</sup> The contributors’ list to Seligman’s *festschrift* read like a “Who’s Who” of the European ivory tower, with every major figure in the field paying obeisance to his legacy: from Bronislaw Malinowski to Melville Herskovits, Louis Leakey to Marcel Mauss, Audrey Richards to George Pitt-Rivers.<sup>34</sup> As Saul Dubow has remarked, Sligs was “a key intellectual broker in the world of inter-war British anthropology.”<sup>35</sup>

In *Races of Africa*, Seligman argues that Africa can be divided into two separate racial regions: the people of the northern division are essentially white or light-skinned Hamites of “European” type, while the southern division is populated by dark-skinned Negroes with “spiraled hair.”<sup>36</sup> The Hamites, “who belong to the same great branch of mankind as the whites,” entered Africa from Mesopotamia and gradually intermixed with indigenous black Negroes.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, the Hamites unknowingly spread their own advanced civilization to their less fortunate Negro counterparts:

The mechanism of the origin of the Negro-Hamitic peoples will be understood when it is realized that the incoming Hamites were pastoral ‘Europeans’—arriving wave after wave—better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes, for it must be remembered that there was no Bronze Age in Africa, and we may believe that the Negro, who is now an excellent iron-worker, learnt this art from the Hamite.<sup>38</sup>

Seligman goes on to assert that iron-working was not the only thing introduced to blacks by pastoral Hamites. He claims that drystone walling, rock-cut wells, irrigation systems, complex political organizations, and age-grade systems are all Hamitic in origin.<sup>39</sup> To dispel any ambiguity, Seligman openly denies black Africans any role in the impressive developments on their continent:

Indeed it would not be very wide of the mark to say that the history of Africa south of the Sahara is no more than the story of the permeation through the ages, in different degrees and at various times, of the Negroes and the Bushmen by Hamitic blood and culture. The Hamites were, in fact, the great civilizing force behind black Africa.<sup>40</sup>

It is worth mentioning that Seligman did not even consider the Hamites to be completely competent members of the white race. In fact, the Hamites were originally forced to migrate out of Mesopotamia and into Africa because they were the dregs of white society. In light of this revelation, Seligman's condemnation of black Africa becomes that much more disparaging. As Ole Bjorn Rekdal articulates, "Even the cursed among the Euro-Asians were able to completely outshine the original inhabitants of Africa."<sup>41</sup>

*Races of Africa* was undoubtedly Seligman's magnum opus and represented the final evolution of the Hamitic hypothesis. After its publication, E.R. Sanders writes that "In the eyes of the world the Negro stood stripped of any intellectual or artistic genius and of any ability at all which would allow him, now, in the past, or in the future, to be the master of his life and country."<sup>42</sup> Although it would be malicious to suggest that Seligman was responsible for the racial purification programs of Nazi Germany, his endorsement of inherent "scientific" white superiority did corroborate Hitler's racial ideology. The truly amazing thing is that even after the atrocities of the Third Reich were revealed in the aftermath of World War II, nobody attempted to refute Seligman's position. In fact, the Hamitic hypothesis assumed "the sanctity of established doctrine" immediately after World War II.<sup>43</sup> Though originally published in 1930, *Races of Africa* went through four relatively unchanged editions, the most recent of which appeared in 1966. Remarkably, Seligman's treatise was still regarded as authoritative up until the last edition. Several intellectual movements developed during the 1960's, however, that would rapidly lead to the repudiation and reformulation of the Hamitic hypothesis.

### **The refutation of the Hamitic hypothesis**

During the 1960's, a massive reconfiguration of the global political power structure compelled black Africans to reclaim their

prominent role in the historical development of pre-Colonial civilizations. As the strenuous demands of the Cold War prevented many European nations from maintaining strict control over their colonial settlements, the indigenous colonial inhabitants experienced a reawakening fueled by the ideologies of nationalism, socialism, and Marxism-Leninism. European preoccupation combined with indigenous dissatisfaction to overthrow the colonial world order that had flourished for centuries. The rise of the “Third World” was particularly significant in Africa because it not only terminated European political domination, but also redefined notions of inherent white superiority. As a central element in the ideology supporting colonialism, the Hamitic hypothesis fell into disrepute and was gradually expunged by black leaders eager to honor the accomplishments of their forebears.<sup>44</sup>

The arduous reformulation of the Hamitic hypothesis was primarily undertaken by black African scholars who were “unencumbered by colonial ties”; although educated in European and American schools, they became eager to throw off the yoke of foreign domination and reassert Africa’s unique identity.<sup>45</sup> In Nigeria, African scholars reexamined the civilizations of the Yoruba to see if the detested Hamitic influence could be eradicated. Philip Zachernuk summarizes their ambitious endeavor:

By the early 1970’s waves of invasion had been replaced by informed speculation that the roots of southern Nigerian cultures lie largely within the region, perhaps near the Niger-Benue confluence, and that their history needs to be understood in the context not of foreign inspiration, but rather as a slow process of African development and adaptation within the regional environment.<sup>46</sup>

The expulsion of the Hamite was certainly not peculiar to Nigeria. All over the continent, scholars began to realize that the Hamitic hypothesis was a “colonial cultural artifact, not suited to post-colonial times.”<sup>47</sup> Seligman’s white Hamite became a symbol of European oppression as Africans moved to abolish any suggestions of pre-Colonial African savagery.

History, however, does not operate in a vacuum. If the Hamitic hypothesis was going to be dethroned, something needed

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to take its place. The rediscovery of pre-Colonial Africa's remarkable achievements provided this *coup de etat*, toppling the intellectual sovereignty of the Hamitic hypothesis and clearing the way for a new black history of Africa. Scholars of the time "began to discover that Africa was not a *tabula rasa*, but that it had a past, a history which could be reconstructed; that it was a continent which knew empire builders at a time when large areas of Europe stagnated in the Dark Ages; that it knew art and commerce."<sup>48</sup> In order to catalyze African pride, historians used pre-Colonial African accomplishments to "build up new loyalties" and ultimately "break down the feelings of impotence, dependence and irresponsibility among Africans which it is in the nature of colonial rule to produce."<sup>49</sup>

In classical times, Byron reminded the Greeks of Sappho and Marathon that "You cannot have a nation without ancestors."<sup>50</sup> European colonizers, however, had continually emphasized the Hobbesian nature of pre-Colonial Africa—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>51</sup> For example, Lord Milverton, a former Governor of Nigeria, denounced pre-Colonial Africans' ability to sustain a civilized society in 1932:

The African has had self-government. Until about fifty years ago he had had it for countless centuries, and all it brought him was blood-stained chaos, a brief, insecure life, haunted by fear, in which evil tradition and custom held him enslaved to superstition, hunger, disease, squalor and ruthless cruelty, even to his family and friends. For countless centuries, while all the pageant of history swept by, the African remained unmoved—in primitive savagery.<sup>52</sup>

Lord Milverton's words are a simplified, unrestrained, and completely unscholarly articulation of the Hamitic hypothesis. They do represent, however, the popular (i.e. European) conception of Africa prior to colonization. Nationalistic African historians clearly had a long way to go, but they quickly launched a counterattack against the myth of African inferiority.

Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop led the assault. Diop is widely regarded as the father of modern Afrocentric thought; indeed, "One might say that every significant idea or claim put forward by Afrocentrists today was earlier expressed by him."<sup>53</sup> In

his *Nations negres et culture* (1955), Diop presents the three themes which would become the foundations for his later work: the character of ancient Egypt as a black African civilization, the continuity of Egypt's cultural influences across the continent, and the culturo-historical unity of Africa.<sup>54</sup> As the first prominent nationalistic historian of the post-colonial period, Diop's work was crucial because it encouraged pan-African unity. At a time when unstable revolutionary governments were struggling to break free from colonial oppression, Diop reminded Africans that there was an illustrious black history they all could be proud of. His Afrocentrism, though not always historically accurate, did encourage stability in a continent desperately seeking a new identity.

Building on Diop's groundbreaking scholarship, other African historians postulated that the undeniable grandeur of the medieval Sudanic kingdoms negated the viability of the Hamitic hypothesis. The vigorous commercial and intellectual life in pre-Colonial Sudan—Ghana, Mali, Gao, the Mossi kingdom, the Hausa states, Kanem, Wadai, the Fung kingdom—proved incredibly important to nationalistic historians, primarily because these societies were indubitably black.<sup>55</sup> Widely respected African historical figures were also cited as concrete proof that blacks were intellectually equivalent to whites. Mansa Musa, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Emperor of Mali, and Ahmad Baba, the brilliant 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar who taught at the University of Sankore in Timbuktu, are perfect examples of Africans who contradicted European assumptions of black inferiority.<sup>56</sup> An abundance of admirable qualities also began to be attributed to pre-Colonial African societies during this time, as historian Thomas Hodgkin recounts:

The plastic arts, work in gold and bronze and ivory, music and dancing, folk story and folk poetry; the complexity and depth of their religious beliefs and metaphysics; their conception of the community—as 'consisting of the dead, the living and the unborn'; their rational attitude to sexual relations and to the place of women in society—their delight in children and reverence for the aged; their view of education, as a process continuing through life; their dislike of autocracy, and their delicate political mechanisms for

securing the expression and adjustment of different interests and wills.<sup>57</sup>

Needless to say, nationalistic Africans transformed pre-Colonial Africa from a barbarous wasteland into a mythical utopia. As with all things, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. The efforts of African historians should be applauded, however, because they pulled the center of debate away from the pseudo-historical extremity occupied by the Hamitic hypothesis.

### **Concluding remarks**

The early Hebrew and Greek versions of the Song of Solomon had a passage that read “I am black *and* beautiful.”<sup>58</sup> When Europeans translated the passage into Latin and English, it became “I am black *but* beautiful.”<sup>59</sup> This subtle change had a profound impact on the meaning of the passage. Instead of being complementary adjectives, black and beautiful became contradictory opposites.

There is a strong connection between this biblical alteration and European espousal of the Hamitic hypothesis. In both cases, facts were adjusted to accommodate *a priori* assumptions of black inferiority. The Hamitic hypothesis originally postulated that Noah cursed Ham and his black descendants to perpetual servitude. This theory conveniently justified the most profitable economic activity of the time—slavery. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, slavery was no longer the bustling industry it had once been. Europeans needed a new way to subjugate blacks outside the framework of slavery. This was accomplished by altering the Hamitic hypothesis to suggest that only black Canaan was cursed, not Ham’s other white descendants. Black Africans became inferior not because they had been cursed to slavery, but because white Hamites were directly responsible for everything they had ever achieved. Africans lost their history and agency to the Hamite, reinforcing the Eurocentric view that blacks were nothing but primitive savages. This pseudo-historical reformulation of the Hamitic hypothesis paved the way for European powers to invade Africa and participate in the most profitable economic activity of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—colonialism.

Legitimate historical theories should not unrestrainedly shift to suit political and economic developments. Although historians must always be ready to reevaluate their position based on the discovery of new empirical evidence, this rarely entails a complete reversal of previously held beliefs. European scholars mistakenly exploited the Hamitic hypothesis and utilized it to justify European subjugation of Africa. Allowing theories to determine facts is bad history, but perhaps Sherlock Holmes puts it best: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to wish facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit fact."<sup>60</sup> Fortunately, the Hamitic hypothesis was unable to survive the rapid decolonization of the 1960's. The contradictory evidence presented by nationalistic African historians decimated the tenability of consummate white superiority. The Hamite receded into the annals of history, leaving behind a legacy of racism that ethnological historians are still struggling to overcome.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph C. Miller, "History and Africa/Africa and History," *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 1-32, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 9:25-27, *The New American Bible* (Wichita, Kans.: Fireside Bible Publishers, 1994-1995), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Ole Bjorn Rekdal, "When hypothesis becomes myth: the Iraqi origin of the Iraqw," *Ethnology* 37 (1998): 17-32, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Katherine George, "The Civilized West Looks at Primitive Africa: 1400-1800," *Isis* 49 (1958): 62-72, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, Translated and edited by George Rawlinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), volume I, 362.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Batoche Books, 2001), 91, 96.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>9</sup> Rekdal, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert J. Foster, "The Ethnicity of the Ancient Egyptians," *Journal of Black Studies* 5 (1974): 175-191, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Edith R. Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History* 10 (1969): 521-532, 526.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 527.

- <sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the Candelabra hypothesis, see Brian M. Fagan, *The Journey From Eden* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 15-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Philip S. Zachernuk, "Of origins and colonial order: Southern Nigerian historians and the 'Hamitic Hypothesis' c. 1870-1970," *Journal of African History* 35 (1994): 427-442, 432.
- <sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the Noah's Ark hypothesis, see Fagan, *The Journey From Eden*, 15-22.
- <sup>18</sup> Foster, 178.
- <sup>19</sup> For a summation of the mistaken Mesopotamian theory, see Glyn Daniel, *The First Civilizations* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968).
- <sup>20</sup> Zachernuk, 432.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Foster, 175.
- <sup>23</sup> Bohannan and Curtin, 56.
- <sup>24</sup> Sir Harry H. Johnston, *The Negro in the New World* (New York: Johnston Reprint Corporation, 1969 [1910]), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> In actuality, the Australoids were thought to have the smallest skulls, but anthropologists postulated that they were more like ancestral humans than modern *homo sapiens sapiens*. Therefore, amongst the three "modern" sub-species, Negroes were thought to have the smallest skulls.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Zachernuk, 432.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Johnston, 7.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>30</sup> Bohannan and Curtin, 56.
- <sup>31</sup> Wyatt Macgaffey, "Concepts of Race in the Historiography of Northeast Africa," *Journal of African History* 7 (1966): 1-17, 7.
- <sup>32</sup> Zachernuk, 432.
- <sup>33</sup> Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (New York: Verso, 1998), 115-116.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (London: Cambridge, 1995), 85-86.
- <sup>36</sup> Charles G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 30-31.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.
- <sup>39</sup> Foster, 180.
- <sup>40</sup> Seligman, 8.
- <sup>41</sup> Rekdal, 20.
- <sup>42</sup> Sanders, 531.
- <sup>43</sup> Macgaffey, 13.
- <sup>44</sup> Rekdal, 25.
- <sup>45</sup> Sanders, 531.
- <sup>46</sup> Zachernuk, 438-439.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>48</sup> Sanders, 531.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 169.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Hodgkin, 173.

<sup>53</sup> Howe, 163.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-165.

<sup>55</sup> Hodgkin, 173-174.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Song of Songs 1:5, italics mine.

<sup>59</sup> Rekdal, footnote 2, 28, italics mine.

<sup>60</sup> Sherlock Holmes, from *A Scandal in Bohemia*, quoted in Fagan.

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