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Author(s): Edith R. Sanders

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THE HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS; ITS ORIGIN AND FUNCTIONS IN TIME PERSPECTIVE¹

BY EDITH R. SANDERS

THE Hamitic hypothesis is well-known to students of Africa. It states that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by the Hamites, allegedly a branch of the Caucasian race. Seligman formulates it as follows:

Apart from relatively late Semitic influence... the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and the Bushman, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists as are represented at the present day by the Beja and Somali... The incoming Hamites were pastoral 'Europeans'—arriving wave after wave—better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes.²

On closer examination of the history of the idea, there emerges a previous elaborate Hamitic theory, in which the Hamites are believed to be Negroes. It becomes clear then that the hypothesis is symptomatic of the nature of race relations, that it has changed its content if not its nomenclature through time, and that it has become a problem of epistemology.

In the beginning there was the Bible. The word 'Ham' appears there for the first time in Genesis, chapter five. Noah cursed Ham, his youngest son, and said:

Cursed be Canaan;
A servant of servants shall he be
unto his brethren.
And he said,
Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem;
And let Canaan be his servant.
God enlarge Japhet,
And let him dwell in the tent of Shem;
And let Canaan be his servant.

Then follows an enumeration of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, Japhet, and their sons who were born to them after the flood. The Bible makes no mention of racial differences among the ancestors of mankind. It is much later that an idea of race appears with reference to the sons of Noah; it concerns the descendants of Ham. The Babylonian Talmud, a collection of oral traditions of the Jews, appeared in the sixth century A.D.; it states

¹ This topic has been explored in detail in E. R. Sanders 'Hamites in Anthropology and History: A Preliminary Study', unpublished manuscript, Columbia University, 1965.

² C. G. Seligman, *Races of Africa* (1930), 96. All subsequent editions make the same statement (1957, 1966).

that the descendants of Ham are cursed by being black, and depicts Ham as a sinful man and his progeny as degenerates.³ Thus, early tradition identified the Hamites with Negroes and endowed them with both certain physiognomical attributes and an undesirable character. This notion persisted in the Middle Ages, when fanciful rabbinical expansions of the Genesis stories were still being made. Ham, some of them said, was supposed to have emasculated Noah, who cursed him thus:

‘Now I cannot beget the fourth son whose children I would have ordered to serve you and your brothers! Therefore it must be Canaan, your firstborn, whom they enslave. And since you have disabled me...doing ugly things in blackness of night, Canaan’s children shall be borne ugly and black! Moreover, because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren’s hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red; again because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked, and their male members shall be shamefully elongated! Men of this race are called Negroes, their forefather Canaan commanded them to love theft and fornication, to be banded together in hatred of their masters and never to tell the truth.’⁴

Scholars who study the Hebrew myths of the Genesis claim that these oral traditions grew out of a need of the Israelites to rationalize their subjugation of Canaan, a historical fact validated by the myth of Noah’s curse. Talmudic or Midrashic explanations of the myth of Ham were well known to Jewish writers in the Middle Ages, as seen in this description by Benjamin of Tudela, a twelfth-century merchant and traveller south of Aswan:

There is a people...who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile and in their fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and anyone they can find...they are taken as slaves and sold in Egypt and neighbouring countries. These sons of Ham are black slaves.⁵

Ideas have a way of being accepted when they become useful as a rationalization of an economic fact of life. As Graves and Patai put it: ‘That Negroes are doomed to serve men of lighter color was a view gratefully borrowed by Christians in the Middle Ages; a severe shortage of cheap manual labor caused by the plague made the reinstitution of slavery attractive’.

The notion of the Negro–Hamite was generally accepted by the year 1600. In one of the earliest post-medieval references found, Leo Africanus, the great Arab traveller and one-time protégé of Pope Leo X, wrote about Negro Africans as being descended from Ham. His translator, the Englishman John Pory, followed the text with his own commentary in which he

³ T. F. Gossett, *Race—the History of an Idea in America* (1963), 5.

⁴ R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (1964), 121.

⁵ R. Hess, ‘Travels of Benjamin of Tudela’, *J. Afr. Hist.* vi, 1 (1965), 17.

stressed the *punishment* suffered by Ham's descendants, thus reinforcing the myth in modern times.⁶

Some seventeenth-century writers⁷ acquaint us with notions current in their time by citing European authors, known or unknown today, who wrote, directly or indirectly, about the low position of Negro-Hamites in the world. This was further strengthened by European travellers who went to Africa for reasons of trade⁸ or curiosity.⁹ Concurrently, there existed another point of view, in which the term 'Hamite' denoted a sinner of some sort, not necessarily a Negro, although the characteristics of the Hamite were the same negative ones variously attributed to the Negro.¹⁰

The idea of a Negro-Hamite was not universally accepted. Some individuals¹¹ believed that the blackness of the Negro was caused by the soil on which he lived together with the extreme heat of the sun. Others doubted that either the climate theory or the efficacy of Noah's curse were responsible for the Negro's physiognomy, but reasoned that 'their colour and wool are innate or seminal, from their first beginning. . .'¹²

By and large, however, the Negro was seen as a descendant of Ham, bearing the stigma of Noah's curse. This view was compatible with the various interests extant at that time. On the one hand, it allowed exploitation of the Negro for economic gain to remain undisturbed by any Christian doubts as to the moral issues involved. 'A servant of servants shall he be' clearly meant that the Negro was preordained for slavery. Neither individual nor collective guilt was to be borne for a state of the world created by the Almighty. On the other hand, Christian cosmology could remain at peace, because identifying the Negro as a Hamite—thus as a brother—kept him in the family of man in accordance with the biblical story of the creation of mankind.

The eighteenth century saw an efflorescence of scientific inquiry, which directed its efforts to the understanding of man's place in the world. Modern science had developed a century earlier and had attempted to establish order in the universe; the nature of man, however, was not part of scientific investigation, but remained in the province of theology. This state of affairs became unsatisfactory to the later scholars, namely the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, who tried to apply scientific methods to the study of man and whose theories as to the origin of the race often came into direct conflict with the Scriptures.

The Negro's place in nature was the subject of great debate at that time. One of the crucial issues of this debate was the question of unity in

⁶ J. Pory, Translation of Leo Africanus, Hakluyt Society, xcii-xciv (London, 1896).

⁷ For instance, the Italian philosopher Campanella and a Mr Mede who was cited by seventeenth-century authors (see below) but whose own writings I was unable to find.

⁸ Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade* (1623).

⁹ Sir Thomas Herbert, *Some Years of Travels into Divers Parts of Africa* (1677).

¹⁰ E. Pagitt, *Heresiography or a Description of the Hereticks*, printed by W. W. for W. Lee (London, 1646).

¹¹ Herbert, op. cit. 27.

¹² Cited by T. Bendyshe, *The History of Anthropology: Memoir read before the Anthropological Society of London I* (1863-4), 371.

mankind, or monogenism, as opposed to the separate creation of races or polygenism.¹³ The concept of the Negro–Hamite was steadily losing ground because theological interpretation of the peopling of the world did not satisfy the men of the Enlightenment. The myth was now kept alive mainly by the clergy, who tried to keep their hold on the laity by discrediting the savants as infidels.¹⁴

The polygenist theories led to a widespread belief that the Negro was sub-human and at the same time de-emphasized his relationship to the accursed Ham. The monogenist theories attempted to explain Negro physical characteristics by natural rather than mythical causes. The conservative theologians still clung to the now classic exegesis of the Old Testament and discouraged any attempt at a different interpretation.¹⁵ At the end of the eighteenth century, many famous men espoused and popularized one of two views regarding the Negro. One was that he was the result of 'degeneration' due to various environmental conditions.¹⁶ The other and more frequent view was that he was a separate creation, subhuman in character.¹⁷

The Western world, which was growing increasingly rich on the institution of slavery, grew increasingly reluctant to look at the Negro slave and see him as a brother under the skin. Some writers¹⁸ feel that the image of the Negro deteriorated in direct proportion to his value as a commodity, and the proudly rational and scientific white man was impatient to find some definitive proof for the exclusion of the Negro from the family of man and for ultimate denial of common ancestry.

The catalyst which made this possible was an historical event, namely Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. Because Napoleon shared the passion for science and antiquities that was the hallmark of the Enlightenment, he invited archaeologists and other scientists to join him. The experts who had accompanied him discovered treasures that led them to found the new science of Egyptology and an institute on Egyptian soil. These

¹³ Some of the outstanding monogenists were Linnaeus, Buffon and Blumenbach. Some outstanding polygenists were Voltaire, Lord Kames and Charles White (an English physician and author of *An Account of the Regular Gradations in Man and in Different Animals* (London, 1799)).

¹⁴ Lord Bolingbroke, an English friend of Voltaire, attempted a different interpretation of Genesis which was answered by a book by Robert Clayton, Bishop of Clough, entitled *A Vindication of the Histories of Old and New Testament*, in 1753.

¹⁵ For instance, the Rev. Samuel Stanhope Smith, a professor at Princeton, then called College of New Jersey, an institution founded in 1746 to train Presbyterian ministers. He wrote *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion* (Philadelphia, 1787).

¹⁶ Buffon, cited by L. Eiseley, *Darwin's Century* (1961), 35–46; and Dr Benjamin Rush (American physician and son-in-law of Benjamin Franklin), cited by J. Greene, 'The American debate on the Negro's place in nature, 1780–1815', *Journal of History of Ideas*, xv (1954), are examples of this school of thought.

¹⁷ Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version* modernized by W. J. Fleming (New York, 1901); and Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Edinburgh, 1780), are examples of this group.

¹⁸ E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (University of Carolina Press, 1944); P. D. Curtin *Image of Africa* (New York, 1964).

discoveries were to revolutionize history's view of the Egyptian and lay the basis for a new Hamitic myth.

Napoleon's scientists made the revolutionary discovery that the beginnings of Western civilization were earlier than the civilizations of the Romans and the Greeks. Mysterious monuments, evidences of the beginnings of science, art, and well-preserved mummies were uncovered. Attention was drawn to the population that lived among these ancient splendours and was presumably descended from the people who had created them. It was a well-mixed population, such as it is at the present time, with physical types running from light to black and with many physiognomical variations. The French scholars came to the conclusion that the Egyptians were Negroids. Denon, one of Napoleon's original expedition, describes them as such: '...a broad and flat nose, very short, a large flattened mouth...thick lips, etc.'¹⁹

The view that the Egyptians were 'Negroid' and highly civilized apparently existed before the French expedition to Egypt. Count Volney, a French traveller to the Middle East, spent four years in Egypt and Syria and wrote in a well-known book:

How are we astonished...when we reflect that to the race of negroes, at present our slaves, and the objects of our contempt, we owe our arts, sciences, and...when we recollect that, in the midst of these nations, who call themselves the friends of liberty and humanity, the most barbarous of slaveries is justified; and that it is even a problem whether the understandings of negroes be of the same species with that of white men!²⁰

In spite of the deserved respect which Volney enjoyed, his opinions on this subject were not accepted.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian expedition made it impossible to hide that seeming paradox of a population of Negroids who were, once upon a time, originators of the oldest civilization of the West. The conflicting ideologies which existed in the West made it difficult for the various proponents of these ideologies to deal with the notion as it stood. Such a notion upset the main existing tenets; it could not be internalized by those individuals on both sides of the Atlantic who were convinced of the innate inferiority of the Negro, nor by those who adhered to the biblical explanation of the origin of races. To the latter such an idea was blasphemous, as Noah's curse condemned the Hamites to misery and precluded high original achievement.

Egypt became the focus of great interest among the scientists as well as among the lay public. The fruits of this interest were not long in coming. A few short years after the Egyptian expedition, there appeared a large number of publications dealing with Egypt and Egyptians. Many of these works seemed to have had as their main purpose an attempt to prove in some way that the Egyptians were not Negroes. The arguments which

¹⁹ V. Denon. *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt* (London, 1803).

²⁰ Volney, *Travels through Syria and Egypt 1783-1784-1785* (1787), 83.

follow brought forth the questions of language, migration, ancient writers, and the existence of mummies.²¹ The polygenist theories of race postulated that as each race was created separately, so it was endowed with its own language. Because the Coptic language was clearly related to Arabic, it was convenient to draw the conclusion that the nations who spoke related languages must have proceeded from one parental stock. Since the Ethiopians, Nubians and other allied peoples were declared not to be Negro by European travellers, the Egyptians could not be said to be of African (Negro) race, as all of these peoples were colonists from Syria or Arabia Felix. Since ancient writers were silent on the subject of the Negroid physiognomy of the Egyptian, it was understood that in effect Egyptians were not Negroid, as such a fact would have startled the ancients into a detailed description. Herodotus himself, ran the argument, described them in comparative not absolute terms. Thus 'black and woolly haired' meant black as compared to the Greeks and woolly haired as compared to the Greeks. Some said that the existence of the mummies itself constituted sufficient proof that these people were non-Negro; to W. G. Browne the '... prescience of that people concerning errors into which posterity might fall, exhibits irrefragable proof of their features and of the colour of their skin...',²² clearly implying, therefore, that the ancient Egyptians knew they could be mistaken for Negroes, and so left their bodies in evidence to refute such an allegation.

Browne insisted that the Egyptians were white. Although he himself did not call them 'Hamites', he paved the way for his successors who were to identify the Egyptians as such.

Modern times showed their influence on theological writings as well. The new Hamitic concept made its appearance quite early in the nineteenth century, spearheaded by the clergy. If the Negro was a descendant of Ham, and Ham was cursed, how could he be the creator of a great civilization? It follows logically that the theologians had to take another look, both at the Bible and at its explanation of the origin of the races of man. The veracity of the Scriptures obviously could not be denied. New interpretations of the meaning of Scriptures were offered. Egyptians, it was now remembered, were descendants of Mizraim, a son of Ham. Noah had only cursed Canaan-son-of-Ham, so that it was Canaan and his progeny alone who suffered the malediction. Ham, his other sons, and their children were not included in the curse.

For example, the Reverend M. Russell took up the issue of the Hamites and the Egyptians:

In the sacred writings of the Hebrews it [Egypt] is called Mizraim... the name which is applied to Egypt by the Arabs of the present day. The Copts retain

²¹ The arguments presented here are those of W. G. Browne, a British traveller to Egypt, who was representative of this type of thinking; he was one of the first to have his ideas published. These ideas contained the seeds of the new Hamitic myth that was to emerge in the very near future. W. G. Browne, *Travels in Africa, Egypt and Syria* (London, 1806).

²² W. G. Browne, op. cit. 170-5.

the native word 'Chemia' which perhaps has some relation to Cham, the son of Noah; or as Plutarch insinuates, may only denote that darkness of colour which appears in a rich soil or in the human eye.²³

He admits that there is a peculiarity of feature common to all the Copts, but asserts that neither in countenance nor personal form is there any resemblance to the Negro.

He and other scholars re-read the Book of Genesis focusing on the genealogy of the three ancestors of mankind, and especially Ham. The histories of the sons of Ham were discussed, particularly those of Cush and Mizraim. The question was raised then whether it was Ham who had been cursed after all, or was it only Canaan?²⁴ It was indeed Canaan who was cursed, but the rest of the progeny of Ham went on to prosper.

So it came to pass that the Egyptians emerged as Hamites, Caucasoid, uncursed and capable of high civilization. This view became widely accepted and it is reflected in the theological literature of that era. A survey of Biblical dictionaries of the period is quite revealing as to the wide acceptance of the new Hamites. *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, published in 1846 by John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A., has a long article under the name *Ham*. It is stressed that the curse of Noah is directed only against Canaan. The general opinion is stated that all southern nations derive from Ham. However, the article admits difficulties in tracing the history of the most important Hamitic nations—the Cushites, the Phoenicians and the Egyptians—due to their great intermixture with foreign peoples. Thus, the early decades of the nineteenth century greeted a new Hamitic myth, this time with a Caucasoid protagonist. At the same time the scientific bases of the new Hamitic myth were being devised and, allegedly, substantiated.

Perhaps because slavery was both still legal and profitable in the United States, and because it was deemed necessary and right to protect it, there arose an American school of anthropology which attempted to prove scientifically that the Egyptian was a Caucasian, far removed from the inferior Negro. As Mannheim said, each intellectual stand is functionally dependent on the 'differentiated social group reality standing behind it.'²⁵ Such workers as Dr Morton,²⁶ assisted in various ways by Josiah Nott²⁷ and George Gliddon,²⁸ collected, measured, interpreted and described the human crania. The comparative studies made of these crania led Morton to believe that the Egyptian osteological formation was Caucasian, and that it was a race indigenous to the Nile Valley. He also postulated fixity of

²³ M. Russell, *View of Ancient and Modern Egypt* (New York, 1831), 27.

²⁴ It was the same doubt which had been formulated by Lord Bolingbroke 100 years before. But now the doubt was general, and the answer much different from that given by Bishop Clayton.

²⁵ K. Mannheim, *Essays in Sociology of Knowledge* (1952), 190.

²⁶ Samuel George Morton, American physician and professor of anatomy, author of several books on the human crania, such as *Crania Americana* and *Crania Egyptica* (1844).

²⁷ Josiah Clark Nott, an American scientist and collaborator with Gliddon on *Types of Mankind* (1854).

²⁸ George R. Gliddon, an American vice-consul in Cairo and an admirer of Dr Morton, whom he supplied with Egyptian skulls.

species, considering it a primordial organic form, permanent through time. Nott and Gliddon, who acted as Morton's apostles, also bolstered his interpretation by explaining the Negroid admixture of the Egyptians as being a population which descended from numerous Negro slaves kept by Egyptians in ancient days. These theories attempted to include the Egyptians in the branch of the Caucasoid race, to explain their accomplishments on the basis of innate racial superiority, and to exclude the Negro from any possibility of achievement by restating his alleged inferiority and his position of 'natural slave'. The conclusions of American scholars found a receptive audience in Europe, where craniology was considered to yield positive and meaningful data, a point of view expressed by two scientists of world renown, the Drs Retzius of Sweden and Broca of France. The intellectual vogue of the day was the stress on 'facts', not abstract theories, in all disciplines. Craniology provided a seemingly concrete 'fact', thus fitting in neatly with the prevailing academic attitudes. Again, there was no complete consensus among anthropologists. The most prominent opponent of the American school of anthropology was James Prichard of England,²⁹ who was not convinced that the Egyptians belonged to the Caucasian race.

The science of philology added weight to the new Hamitic theory. This young science was developing at a time when language and race were considered to be inextricably bound together, an approach which lent itself to polygenist theories. Bunsen,³⁰ a philologist and an Egyptologist, reported two branches of cognate languages, the Semitic and what he called the Iranian. Khamitic or Egyptian he postulated to be anterior to Semitic and antediluvian. Here was irrefutable proof, it seemed, that the Hamitic language belonged to the Caucasoid peoples, and it was eagerly adopted by scholars and theologians. The new Hamitic myth was gaining momentum.

The late nineteenth century provided two new ideologies which utilized and expanded the concept of the Caucasoid Hamite: colonialism and modern racism. Both shaped the European attitude to Africa and Africans. The travellers found a variety of physical types in Africa, and their ethnocentrism made them value those who looked more like themselves. These were declared to be Hamitic, or of Hamitic descent, and endowed with the myth of superior achievements and considerable beneficial influence on their Negro brothers. John Hanning Speke³¹ was seminal to the Hamitic hypothesis which we know today. Upon discovery of the kingdom of Buganda with its complex political organization, he attributed its 'barbaric civilization' to a nomadic pastoralist race related to the Hamitic Galla, thus setting the tone for the interpreters to come. The Hamites were designated as early culture-bearers in Africa owing to the natural superiority of intellect and character of all Caucasoids. Such a viewpoint had dual merit for European purposes: it maintained the image of the Negro as an inferior

²⁹ J. Prichard, *The Natural History of Man* (London, 1855).

³⁰ C. K. J. Bunsen, *Egypt's Place in Universal History* (London, 1848-67).

³¹ J. H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (New York, 1964).

being, and it pointed to the alleged fact that development could come to him only by mediation of the white race.³² It also implied a self-appointed duty of the 'higher' races to civilize the 'lower' ones, a notion which was eventually formulated as 'the white man's burden'. At this point in time the Hamite found himself in an ambiguous position. On the one hand he was considered to be Caucasoid, that is superior. On the other hand he was a native, part of the 'burden', a man to benefit from European civilization. Here the Teutonic theory of race showed its adaptability. Having devised a hierarchy within the Caucasian race, the builders of the theory placed the Teutonic Anglo-Saxon on top of the ladder with the Slavs on the lowest rung. But an even lower position could always be added, and the Hamites filled the space admirably. 'Politics and race theories seemed natural allies';³³ they provided a seemingly cogent ideological framework for colonial expansion and exploitation.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the Caucasoid-Hamite solidly established. Science supplanted theology as the alpha and omega of truth. Racial 'scientific' classifications, which had to face the physical diversity of the various 'Hamites', established a separate Hamitic *branch* of the Caucasian race, closely following the creation of a linguistic entity called a *family* of Hamitic languages. Linguistic typologies were based on racial types and racial classifications on linguistic definitions. The confusion surrounding the 'Hamite' was steadily compounded as the terms of reference became increasingly overlapping and vague. The racial classification of 'Hamites' encompassed a great variety of types from fair-skinned, blonde, blue-eyed (Berbers) to black (Ethiopians). Two early racial typologies were devised by Sergi³⁴ and Brinton.³⁵ Sergi called certain populations Hamitic chiefly on the basis of their linguistic characteristics. Among these were the inhabitants of the Sahara, the Berbers and even such people 'who have wholly, or partially, lost their language', like the Egyptians, Watusi and Masai. They were divided into the Eastern branch, and the Northern branch. The Eastern branch included the ancient and modern Egyptians (excluding the Arabs), Nubians, Bejas, Abyssinians, Gallas, Danakil, Somali, Masai and Watusi (or Wahuma). The Northern branch included the Berbers, Tebus, Fulbes (Fulani) and the Gaunches of the Canaries.³⁶ Brinton denoted Lybians, Egyptians and the East African groups as Hamitic, and remarked that each of these groups is distinguished by physical and linguistic differences.³⁷ He went on to state that 'the physical appearance of the Libyan peoples distinctly marks them as

³² With respect to the role played by such theories in English colonial expansion see E. Sanderson, *Africa in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1898); F. D. Lugard, *The Rise of our East African Empire* (Edinburgh, 1898); J. Scott Keltie, *Partition of Africa* (London, 1895); W. L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902* (New York, 1935).

³³ J. Barzun, *Race: A Modern Superstition* (New York, 1965), 33.

³⁴ G. Sergi, *The Mediterranean Race* (New York, 1901).

³⁵ D. G. Brinton, *Races and Peoples* (New York, 1890).

³⁶ Sergi, *op. cit.* 40-41.

³⁷ Brinton, *op. cit.* 115.

members of the white race, often of uncommonly pure blood. As the race elsewhere, they present the blonde and brunette type, the latter predominant, but the former extremely well marked'. Because Brinton also considered the Iberians to be Hamites, and not Basques, his description of the Libyans seems to imply that the Libyans are a sort of half-way house of the 'Hamitic' race, because they combine elements of the blonde Hamites (of Europe) and the brunette Hamites (of East Africa). This reasoning appears to be no more logical than that of Sergi, who first bases a racial group on its linguistic characteristics and then includes in it people who have 'wholly or partially' lost the language!

Linguistic classifications were based on geography, racial characteristics and occupation, rather than on rigorous methodology pertaining solely to language. Grammatical gender became the main diagnostic of the so-called Hamitic languages. Although grammatical gender exists in many unrelated languages of the world, it was not found in the languages of the 'true' Negro (racial category again). Thus linguistic typologies had racial bases just as racial typologies were based on linguistics.³⁸

Because the Hamites discovered in Africa south of the Sahara were described as pastoralists and the traditional occupation of the Negro was supposedly agriculture, pastoralism and all its attributes became endowed with an aura of superiority of culture, giving the Hamite a third dimension: cultural identity.

The historians who began to compile histories of Africa wrote with an often unconscious racial bias, and accepted the dicta of the discoverers of that continent as indisputable proven facts and presented them as historical explanations of the African past.³⁹

Much of anthropology gave its support to the Hamitic myth. Seligman found a cultural substratum of supposedly great influence in Africa.⁴⁰ In 1930 he published his famous *Races of Africa*, which went through several editions and which was reprinted in 1966 still basically unchanged. He refined the Sergi-devised classifications of Hamitic peoples, adding the category of Nilotes or 'half-Hamites'. Every trace and/or sign of what is usually termed 'civilized' in Africa was attributed to alien, mainly Hamitic, origin. In such a way, iron-working was supposed to have been introduced to the Negroes by pastoral Hamites, along with complex political institutions, irrigation and age-grade systems.⁴¹ Archaeological findings of any

³⁸ Early work on the Hamitic language family was done by R. N. Cust, *A Sketch of African Languages* (London, 1883); also Lepsius and Meinhof.

³⁹ See A. R. Atterbury, *Islam in Africa* (New York, 1899); J. W. Gregory, *The Foundation of British East Africa* (London, 1901); K. Johnston, *Africa* (London, 1884); J. Scott Keltie op. cit.; E. Sanderson, op. cit.; Capt. C. H. Stigand, *The Land of Zinj* (London, 1913); and A. S. White, *The Development of Africa* (London, 1890).

⁴⁰ 'Some Aspects of the Hamitic Problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan', *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, LIII, 1913.

⁴¹ S. Cole, *The Prehistory of East Africa* (Hammondsworth, 1954); K. Oberg in *African Political Systems*, M. Fortes and E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.); D. Westermann, *The African Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford, 1949), are only a few of a long list of examples.

magnitude were also ascribed to outside influences, and kept the Negro African out of his own culture history.⁴² 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.

The confluence of modern nationalism and the ensuing modern racism evolved from earlier nineteenth-century national romanticism and developed through theories of de Gobineau and adaptations of the Darwinian revolution. It was echoed in all Western nations, culminating finally in the ideology of Nazi Germany. Because that leading exponent of racism became the enemy of most of Europe and of the United States during World War II, German-championed ideology seemed to have lost some of its popularity. The Hamitic myth ceased to be useful with African nations which have been gaining their independence one by one, and the growing African nationalism drew scholarly attention to Africa's past. Many of the scholars were unencumbered by colonial ties; some of them were themselves African. They 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.

Some writers started to throw doubts on the Hamitic hypothesis by discovering indigenous Negro achievement of the past,⁴³ while others attempted to explode it.⁴⁴ Still the myth endures, is occasionally subverted by new terminology (such as 'Southern Cushites'),⁴⁵ and stubbornly refuses to give way and allow an unbiased look at what can be validly ascertained from African culture history. It would be well-nigh impossible to point to an individual and recognize in him a Hamite according to racial, linguistic and cultural characteristics to fit the image that has been presented to us for so long. Such an individual does not exist. The word still exists, endowed with a mythical meaning; it endures through time and history, and, like a chameleon, changes its colour to reflect the changing light. As the word became flesh, it engendered many problems of scholarship.

⁴² See early writings on Great Zimbabwe: D. B. MacIver, *Mediaeval Rhodesia* (New York, 1906); W. C. Willoughby, *Race Problem in New Africa* (Oxford, 1923); E. Naville, 'The Land of Punt and the Hamites', *Journal of Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, LVII (1925).

⁴³ G. Caton-Thompson, *The Zimbabwe Culture: Ruins and Reactions* (Oxford, 1931); J. P. Crazzolara, *The Lwuo*, Missioni Africane (Italy, 1950); two instances of such discoveries.

⁴⁴ See for example D. Apter, *Political Kingdom in Uganda* (Princeton, 1961), 63; L. Fallers, *Bantu Bureaucracy*, East African Institute of Social Research (1956), 27-9; J. H. Greenberg, *Studies in African Linguistic Classifications* (New Haven, 1955); I. Wallerstein, *Africa, the Politics of Independence* (New York, 1961), 12-13; D. McCall, *Africa in Time Perspective* (Boston, 1964), 136-138.

⁴⁵ E.g. G. P. Murdock, *Africa, Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (New York, 1959).

SUMMARY

The anthropological and historical literature dealing with Africa abounds with references to a people called the 'Hamites'. 'Hamite', as used in these writings, designates an African population supposedly distinguished by its race—Caucasian—and its language family, from the Negro inhabitants of the rest of Africa below the Sahara.

There exists a widely held belief in the Western world that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by these Hamites, a people inherently superior to the native populations. This belief, often referred to as the Hamitic hypothesis, is a convenient explanation for all the signs of civilization found in Black Africa. It was these Caucasoids, we read, who taught the Negro how to manufacture iron and who were so politically sophisticated that they organized the conquered territories into highly complex states with themselves as the ruling elites. This hypothesis was preceded by another elaborate Hamitic theory. The earlier theory, which gained currency in the sixteenth century, was that the Hamites were black savages, 'natural slaves'—and Negroes. This identification of the Hamite with the Negro, a view which persisted throughout the eighteenth century, served as a rationale for slavery, using Biblical interpretations in support of its tenets. The image of the Negro deteriorated in direct proportion to the growth of the importance of slavery, and it became imperative for the white man to exclude the Negro from the brotherhood of races. Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 became the historical catalyst that provided the Western World with the impetus to turn the Hamite into a Caucasian.

The Hamitic concept had as its function the portrayal of the Negro as an inherently inferior being and to rationalize his exploitation. In the final analysis it was possible because its changing aspects were supported by the prevailing intellectual viewpoints of the times.