

## What's in a Name? Fake History and the Hamitic Theory

Who controls the naming of peoples and places? History shows that it is often the powerful that control the imposition of names and their definitions on those named, sometimes with catastrophic consequences.

### Introduction

In the colonial invasion period European invaders and explorers used the term African to designate all peoples of the continent and usually sub-divided it into Sub-Saharan (Black) and Mediterranean Africa (Arab). They further subdivided Black Africa into races and tribes using 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of classification, most of which have been since rejected as being inaccurate, racist or both.

However, some definitions have become so entrenched that they have become part of discourse. The term Africa is a prime example; originally a geographical definition of a continent it has become a catch-all phrase that covers a wide variety of meanings to peoples from the continent and elsewhere.

Many definitions have been since adopted and redefined by those who were thus defined, such as territorial names and national identities. Others have been rightfully rejected for their racist underpinning and ideology; one example is the Hamitic theory and definition.

### Theory

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans had a major problem when they arrived in Africa as explorers cum conquerors; they found that many African societies had sophisticated well organised social and political organisations. As they believed that Africans were savages barely above cannibalism, this was a major shock and so they scrambled to find explanations to fit their preconceptions of the Dark Pagan Continent when, in reality, the only darkness was in European perceptions and cultural blindness.

It was John Hanning Speke who came up with the Hamitic theory in 1858 while travelling in modern day Tanzania and Uganda: It was a personal theory that he freely admitted to having invented with absolutely no factual basis though he pretended support from the myths of Kitara (Northern Uganda). This fantasy fake history was enthusiastically taken up by the Europeans that read his books and spread like wildfire to all imperialists with colonial aspirations and intellectual pretensions.

Even the Vatican was sucked in; they called for a mission in 1870 to 'rescue' Hamites 'trapped' among Negroes. In 1878 Monsignor Lavignerie, founder of the White Fathers, wrote that his mission was to free the "poor sons of Ham" from slavery and ignorance by converting rulers, creating Christian kingdoms and cooperating with colonial authorities in line with the Church's historic philosophies of conversion, dating from the medieval period in Europe

This immediately put the White Father hierarchy into the role of supporting Belgian colonial authority (and before WW1, the Germans, even though they were mostly Protestant), at the expense of the majority and often previously independent and recently conquered areas. Their promulgations of Hamitic theory combined with their alliance with the colonial state eventually resulted in the Church becoming an institutional contributor to the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

The core of the theory was that it was the descendants of Ham that had come south via Egypt and Ethiopia and had migrated, conquered and thus taught the ‘benighted’ African ‘negroes’ all that they knew. (Despite Darwin and late 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific advances, literal interpretations of ancient Jewish and Christian religious texts as sources of world history were still common). But, alas, they had become weakened and enfeebled by ‘negritude’ and were caught in ‘primitive feudal’ relations: another popular European theory notwithstanding the criticisms of European medieval historians that saw little in common between medieval feudalism and African political and land tenure systems.

The theory proved to be a handy historical justification for the European conquest and exploitation of Africa. They could even point to African pastoral kingdom propaganda claims that they were superior as further ‘proof’. Conquerors were remarkably guilt free about their activities, the numbers of native people they killed in defence of their home lands and number of villages razed to the ground with scorched earth military tactics (the standard method of defeating rebels by destroying their food sources and starving them into surrender and not bothering about the numbers of men, women and children non-combatants and uninvolved that died of famine – ‘collateral starvation’ – and related diseases) under the guise of ‘pacification’ and introduction of ‘civilisation’.

There was even the innovative hypocrisy that it was for ‘their own good’ though they never produced any formula or rationale of numbers of people killed and villages destroyed to any measurement of ‘good’.

Hamitic theory thus informed colonial and later independence political theory with tragic results in Central Africa.

## History

(The discussion is confined to Burundi, DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda as it is those countries that this author is most knowledgeable.) In Uganda it had little effect in that the English formed their alliance with the Baganda Kings but not before ensuring that the right lineage, i.e. Protestant, was installed. They were definitely not Hamitic but their ideology and rituals of royalty were in accord with Buckingham Palace’s ideology and rituals. However, the Buganda kings claimed that Kintu, mythological founder of the Baganda, might be Ham and buried in Magonga.

It was the Baganda that became the agents of colonial administration over alleged Hamitic tribes in the Uganda Protectorate, i.e. Bunyoro and Nkore (later Ankole). While the English admired the Hamites it was theoretical and from a distance. Their only practical experience of Rwandan ‘Hamitic’ politics was the Nyindo rebellion of 1916 in Bufumbira Saza, Kigezi, during WW1.

Congo was too large with too many diverse peoples to implant such a philosophy and there does not seem to have been any argument that Hamites influenced Congolese kingdoms, by then under physical and economic slavery from the Western Rift to the Atlantic coast. Anyway, Leopold, king of Belgium, was primarily interested in profit; he did not use the theory in support of his alleged charitable endeavours.

In the small kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi there was a general classification into Tutsi, Hutu and Twa (sometimes with Ba-, Aba- or Wa- prefix and analogous to Hima and Iru further north, particularly Nkore). At the time it was a definition of social status, kinship and of the cultural association with primary livelihoods of cattle, crops and forest. The meaning and usage of these terms

changed over time; and people could transfer from one to another depending on the vagaries of wealth acquisition or loss, political manoeuvres, marriage or personal choice.

Historical analysis of the terms, of how the definitions changed over time, how the relationships of the people so defined changed over time, and discussions of how peoples could change their status focus solely on the Hutus and Tutsis but never include the Twa. There appears to be a systematic avoidance of including the Twa in Rwandan history; of their integration into society and how this changed over time apart from cursory references to them being of the forest, potters and soldiers.

The apparent longevity and stability of the royal lineages in both kingdoms were of great fascination and admiration to German and Belgian colonists but while the Germans mostly left political and administrative infrastructure untouched, as they focused on militarily securing the colonies, the Belgians 'reformed' administrative systems that they did not understand or properly control to their advantage after they conquered the two kingdoms in 1916.

In 1926 they turned the general tripartite class into an immutable caste system with the introduction of identity cards. Furthermore the consolidation centralised the infrastructure of power and administration and concentrated power to the wealthy Tutsi elite of royal lineage with the assistance of Christian educated civil servants, usually sons of the same Tutsi elite. As a result the majority of Tutsi that weren't sufficiently wealthy, all Hutus and all Twa (the first 40 Twa sub-chefs were named by Fr. Alex Kagame) were dispossessed of their political rights and powers.

This was taken to extremes: Colonial and church policy was that the Tutsi elite were to be supported in any dispute regardless of the merits of justice so that their authority was not undermined; which naturally created conditions for systematic exploitation and corruption by those in power.

This was justified by racist Hamitic eulogies of the Tutsi as natural leaders by the Belgian colonial government and Roman Catholic Church as represented by the White Fathers hierarchy who controlled education and limited it to their favoured elites. The Church also assisted with the identification of Tutsis during the 1934/5 census using local knowledge – there were far too many Tutsi recorded for the number of cows as per the notional 10 cows = 1 Tutsi.

The League of Nations, later the United Nations, mandate to the Belgian government to prepare the countries (Ruanda and Urundi) for independence was conveniently ignored. By the 1950s international criticism and growing political activism among the Hutu population made this mode of rule unsustainable. In an abrupt volte-face the government changed their position, dispossessed the Tutsi elite and established Hutu elites in their place, though keeping the racial divide in place.

By Independence the entrenched classification system had developed such momentum with the active support of both sides who believed and promoted this racist propaganda. From then on it informed political discourse and ultimately led to civil strife, civil war and, ultimately, mass murder and genocide in both Burundi and Rwanda

#### Discussion on Definitions

Definitions cannot define race, tribe, ethnicity or genealogy. Race has been rightfully abandoned as a classification term within our species. Genetic or genealogical determinism has no place in the reconstruction of any history.

Genealogies can be invented for a multiplicity of reasons. A problem in royal genealogies worldwide is the common practise of usurpers to claim common ancestry, by inventing spurious familial and

historic links, with the defeated king's ancestors to legitimise their power grab. In general, association with a clan (however defined) or lineage does not necessarily indicate that the clan or lineage founder is a person's ancestor or implies any genealogical association.

Tribe as a classification is now rarely used. It is of colonial origin and has been found to be overly simplistic. However, in some countries these terms have been since adopted and adapted to suit modern sensibilities; they are an African equivalent to ethnicity.

There have been attempts to sanitise 'race' by the term 'ethnicity', but it is equally invalid. Whether ethnicity is a useful term in Africa is an open question. It certainly does not mean the same as in Europe (more historic ethnicities than countries) and North America (hyphenated-Americans) given the differing perceptions of the relationship of cultural identities within history where lineages, clans and kin, or combinations of, were the primary personal identifiers.

In modern times nationality has become the primary identifier in external relations and has often become analogous to ethnicity.

There is no relationship between ethnicity and genetics, claims to the contrary by genetic research companies have been called genetic astrology.

Moral

The creation of fake history can, over time, have unforeseen and tragic consequences.

Lessons Learned Locally

In Rwanda there is a continuing effort to understand the past and reshape the present. In modern day presentations these divisive terms have been rejected by the Government and are not used in the formulation and application of policy: Everyone is deemed a Rwandan.

It has been argued that this may disadvantage the Twa when as the most marginalised indigenous population they need special recognition to assist them become fully integrated into Rwandan society to overcome past discrimination. The current euphemism of 'historically marginalised' is incorrect; they were historically integrated and were marginalised first by the Belgians and then by all independence, including the current, governments.

Under the 2001 law on 'Divisionism' those that use the banned terms "Tutsi", 'Hutu' and 'Twa' are liable to fines and up to five years imprisonment and since the Twa were never consulted it may also be argued that in addition to having their forest livelihoods stolen from them previously in the name of conservation, now their identity has been stolen.

However, the indigenous concept infers that the descendants of Bantu migrants that settled in the area some 1,500-2,000+ years ago or later pastoral peoples, c. 500 years ago, with remote Bantu ancestry are not indigenous solely on the basis of their livelihoods.

In Burundi, divisions still occur with fatal consequences. In Rwanda there is an autocratic peace generally welcomed and supported by the resident population; however, there are still major issues of firstly, gaining justice among some exiled genocide participants and, secondly, the assassination of political opponents of the current regime outside Rwanda.

## Lessons Learned Internationally

Lessons have not been learned elsewhere judging by past and current mass murders and genocides; they are a common and widespread feature of our so-called civilisation – at time of writing: Myanmar, Syria and Yemen.

## Appendix – On African History

Some ideas about African history take a long time to die as is evidenced by the Greater Zimbabwe city of the Shona, 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, was ignored in colonial histories as it was proof positive that Africans were capable of sophisticated urban civilisation. This should not be a surprise as such centres of civilisation go back over 3,000 years such as the Nok civilisation of central Nigeria.

Even so, the quote of Hugh Trevor-Roper, a well-known, but typical English, historian of Oxford University is stunning in its ignorance: “Perhaps in the future here will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none – only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not the subject of history”.

Unless, it is the history of darkness among historians; a history of cultural blindness and over-reliance on the written word as the only source of history.

As a counter Emma Dabiri, historian of School of Oriental and Asian Studies, wrote: “Africa remains a prisoner of the lies told about its pre-colonial past, and of the legacy of its colonial history. The kidnapping of millions of able-bodied young people in their prime, the destruction of complex societal organization, the decimation of often egalitarian and socially just spiritual belief systems and philosophies — all these paved the way for fictitious states... any meaningful acknowledgement of this remains a long way off.”