

THE "HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS" IN INDIGENOUS WEST AFRICAN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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## THE "HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS" IN INDIGENOUS WEST AFRICAN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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### I

This paper explores the use of versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" by West African historians, with principal reference to amateur scholars rather than to academic historiography. Although some reference is made to other areas, the main focus is on the Yoruba, of southwestern Nigeria, among whom an exceptionally prolific literature of local history developed from the 1880s onwards.<sup>1</sup> The most important and influential work in this tradition, which is therefore central to the argument of this paper, is the *History of the Yorubas* of the Rev. Samuel Johnson, which was written in 1897 although not published until 1921.<sup>2</sup>

### II

The concept of the "Hamitic hypothesis" appears to have been coined by the historian St Clair Drake, in 1959.<sup>3</sup> In the historiography of Africa, it has conventionally been employed as a label for the view that important elements in the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, and more especially elaborated

<sup>1</sup>See Robin Law, "Early Yoruba historiography," *HA* 3(1976), 69-89.

<sup>2</sup>Rev. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (London, 1921; reprinted Lagos, 1937, and frequently thereafter). For assessments of this work, see Toyin Falola, ed., *Pioneer, Patriot and Patriarch: Samuel Johnson and the Yoruba People* (Madison, 1993); Michel R. Doortmont, "Recapturing the Past: Samuel Johnson and the Construction of the History of the Yoruba" (Doctoral thesis, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>See St. Clair Drake, "The Responsibility of Men of Culture for Destroying the Hamitic myth," *Présence Africaine* 24/25 special issue, 2nd Congress of Negro Writers & Artists, Rome, 26 March-1 April 1959, 228-43.

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state structures, were the creation of people called “Hamites,” who were presumed to be immigrants/invasers from outside, often specifically from Egypt or the upper Nile valley, and racially Caucasian (or “white”), who conquered the indigenous black African populations. One of the most influential proponents of this interpretation was C.G. Seligman, in a book originally published in 1930, which was reprinted down to the 1960s, and still formed part of the background reading of the earliest generation of academic historians of Africa (including myself). Seligman declared baldly that “the civilisations of Africa are the civilisations of Hamites,” and that these Hamites were “European” (i.e., racially “white”) pastoralists, who were able to conquer the indigenous agriculturalists because they were not only “better armed” (with iron weapons, which they are suggested to have introduced into sub-Saharan Africa), but also supposedly “quicker witted.”<sup>4</sup> The idea thus incorporated an explicit assumption of “white” racial superiority, and denied historical creativity to black Africans by attributing their cultural achievements to the impact of outsiders.

Although the overt racism of the “Hamitic hypothesis” was repudiated by the academic historiography of Africa which developed from the 1950s, the model of state formation through invasion and/or cultural influences from outside continued to exercise a powerful influence. The early works of the pioneer historians John Fage and Roland Oliver in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, continued to posit diffusion of the institution of “divine kingship” from Egypt to the rest of Africa, and the formation of the earliest states in the West African Sahel through the conquest of the indigenous (black) agricultural peoples by Saharan (white) pastoralists—the military superiority of the latter being now attributed to their possession of horses, rather than (or as well as) iron technology.<sup>5</sup> A more recent reflection of such views is the interpretation of Dierk Lange, who posits the pervasive influence of “Canaanite-Israelite” models of cosmology and political organization in several areas of western Africa, including Yorubaland.<sup>6</sup>

The classic racialist version of the “Hamitic hypothesis” propounded by Seligman was, in fact, not the only, or even the original, version, but only the last in a series of transformations. The historiographical evolution of the

<sup>4</sup>C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa* (4th ed.: London, 1966), 61, 100.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Roland Oliver & J.D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (Harmondsworth, 1962), chaps 4-5; Fage, *A History of West Africa* (Cambridge, 1969), 8-10; Roland Oliver & Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c.500 B.C. to A.D. 1400* (Cambridge, 1975), 41-2, 67-9. In a later formulation, Fage abandoned the hypothesis of the Egyptian origins of African kingship, but still posited a critical role for conquering Saharan pastoralists in the process of state-formation in the Sahel: *A History of Africa* (London, 1978), 39-43, 61-9.

<sup>6</sup>Dierk Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: Africa-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives* (Dettelbach, 2004).

"Hamitic hypothesis" was traced by Edith Saunders in a study published in 1969, whose general framework (if not all of its details) remains persuasive.<sup>7</sup> The origin and first version of the idea of the "Hamites" derives from the Jewish Old Testament, in the story of the dispersal of the sons of Noah after the Flood in Genesis 9–10. In this account, Noah had three sons called Shem, Japheth, and Ham, who were held to be the ancestors of the various peoples known to the ancient Israelites. The division among these three branches of humanity was evidently geographical rather than racial, with the descendants of Shem representing peoples of the center and east (including the Israelites themselves), those of Japheth those to the north (including the Javan, or Greeks), and those of Ham those to the west and south—or perhaps more specifically, Egypt, with neighboring countries within its sphere of influence. The sons of Ham thus include persons who stand for the peoples of northeastern Africa—Mizraim (i.e., Egypt), Cush (i.e., Nubia, or in terms of modern political geography, northern Sudan), and "Put" (or "Phut"), which last is probably to be identified with the "Libyans," to the west of Egypt;<sup>8</sup> and also Canaan, eponym of the Canaanites (also known as "Phoenicians"), the inhabitants of the coastal area of Palestine and Syria.

The account in Genesis is not merely a model of the peopling of the world, but also a political charter, with the story of the curse pronounced by Noah upon the descendants of Ham, provoked by the latter having inadvertently seen his father naked, in a drunken stupor, which condemns them to be servants to the descendants of Ham's brothers, Shem and Japheth. As told in Genesis, Noah's curse is directed (not very logically) specifically against one of Ham's sons in particular, Canaan, and was clearly intended to provide a justification for the Israelite occupation of eastern Palestine, and the dispossession and subjection of the indigenous Canaanites which this involved.

From the Jewish tradition, the concept of the peopling of the earth through the dispersal of Noah's sons and their descendants (with the associated story of Noah's curse) passed into both the Christian and Islamic traditions. As knowledge of Africa expanded, new African peoples (including black Africans) were fitted into the genealogy as further descendants of Ham, and especially of Ham's son Cush (though sometimes, alternatively, of Canaan). In time, in fact, the descendants of Ham came to be conceptualized as predominantly or wholly black. Embroidery of the original story

<sup>7</sup>Edith R. Saunders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis, Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *JAH* 10(1969), 521-32.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. "Putaya," the name given to the province formed in this area after its conquest by Persia in 512 BCE: A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, 1948), 149.

explained the blackness of Africans as a consequence of Noah's curse. This story probably originated, as Saunders suggested, in post-Biblical Jewish traditions collected in the *Talmuds*, compiled between the fourth and sixth centuries CE.<sup>9</sup> It had also entered Christian discourse by this time, and was inherited by Islamic writers from the seventh century onwards.<sup>10</sup>

In this second version, therefore, the "Hamitic hypothesis" acquired an explicitly racist character. Noah's curse condemning the descendants of Ham to servitude was now used to justify the enslavement of black Africans.<sup>11</sup> This supposed scriptural justification was, notoriously, cited by European and North American defenders of slavery from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> It also had some currency in the Islamic world. Although the institution of slavery was less thoroughly racialized in the Islamic world than in the European colonies in the Americas, there was a widespread popular prejudice linking black Africans with slavery, which Noah's curse was invoked to explain and justify.<sup>13</sup> This view is cited and critically discussed, for example, by the West African Islamic scholar Ahmad Baba of Timbuktu, in a treatise on the legalities of enslavement, written in 1614/15. Ahmad Baba himself refuted the justification of slavery through Noah's curse, together with its racist implications, reiterating the orthodox Islamic view that the only significant distinction to be made was religious rather than racial, and that only those Africans who were not Muslims could legitimately be enslaved.<sup>14</sup>

The classic version of the "Hamitic hypothesis," in which the "Hamites" became white invaders rather than black indigenes of sub-Saharan Africa,

<sup>9</sup>Saunders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," 521-22. This view is contested by Ephraim Isaac, "Genesis, Judaism and the Sons of Ham," in John Ralph Willis, ed., *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa* (2 vols.: London, 1985), 1:75-91; but the latter's own account in detail concedes that the idea of blackness deriving from a curse on Ham does occur in certain Talmudic texts (88, 90n44). See also David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, 2003), 102-06.

<sup>10</sup>Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 99-102.

<sup>11</sup>Strictly, the classic "curse of Ham" represented the conflation of two stories which were originally distinct: the Biblical story of a curse condemning the descendants of Canaan to slavery, and the post-Biblical story of a curse of blackness on the descendants of Ham collectively: for this development, see *ibid.*, 170-74. Goldenberg finds the origin of this "dual curse" in Christian and Islamic (but not, initially, Jewish) sources from the seventh century onwards, or even more specifically (*ibid.*, 170) "in seventh-century Arabia." However, the earliest source explicitly cited is of the eighth century.

<sup>12</sup>David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, 1975), 539-41, 553-54.

<sup>13</sup>Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York, 1971), 66-67.

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Barbour and Michelle Jacobs, "The Mi'raj: a Legal Treatise on Slavery by Ahmad Baba" in Willis, *Slaves and Muslim Society in Africa*, 1:125-59.

emerged only in the nineteenth century. In this third version, the concept of the "Hamites" was disconnected from its original Biblical context, and given a modern "scientific" form, in terms of the racist anthropology of the period. Saunders suggests that the initial stimulus to the reconceptualization of the Hamites as racial Europeans was the rediscovery by western Europe of ancient Egypt, which was in large part a consequence of the temporary occupation of Egypt by the French under Napoleon in 1798. Having now to acknowledge the impressive historical achievement of Egypt, Europeans reconciled this with their assumption of racial superiority by reclassifying the ancient Egyptians (who had previously generally been regarded as "black") as racially "white."<sup>15</sup> This reconstruction of history was not, of course, uncontested. In particular, African-American and African intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to insist that the ancient Egyptians were racially Negroes (or at least a mixed population containing a significant Negro element), and that their history thus provided proof of the latter's capacity for cultural achievement—as, notably, in the works of the Liberian writer Edward Wilmot Blyden and of W.E.B. Du Bois in the United States, which anticipated the modern "Afro-centric" claiming of ancient Egypt as a black African civilization.<sup>16</sup> But the new perception of the ancient Egyptians as racially "white" did become dominant in European thought at both academic and popular levels.

The "Hamites" were thus now conceptualized as the lighter-skinned peoples anciently settled in northern Africa, including the Berbers to the west and some of the peoples of northeastern Africa, as well as the ancient Egyptians, as distinct from the black Africans further south. The matter was complicated by the adoption, in the same period, of "Hamitic" also as a *linguistic* term, to refer to a group of languages—ancient Egyptian, Berber, Hausa and related languages, and some of the languages of northeast Africa (including Galla and Somali)—which were recognized as related to the Semitic languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Amharic, etc.).<sup>17</sup> The linguistic and racial usages were in fact overlapping, rather than precisely congruent, in their application, but were commonly conflated. One consequence of this introduction of a linguistic criterion which should be noted is that the

<sup>15</sup>Saunders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," 524-27.

<sup>16</sup>Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (Oxford, 1967), 55-56; for an example of his argument, see an aside in the lecture "Philip and the Eunuch" (1882), reprinted in his *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London, 1887), 154n2; W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (London, 1915), 30-34.

<sup>17</sup>Some other languages of sub-Saharan Africa, including Fulani and Maasai, were sometimes included incorrectly in this group. The term "Hamitic" for these languages is now obsolete: see Joseph H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (2nd ed.: Bloomington, 1966), 41-65.

Canaanites, unambiguously “Hamites” in the Old Testament, but who spoke a language closely related to Hebrew, had now to be reclassified as “Semites.”

For sub-Saharan Africa, given the persistence of models of migration from the northeast this implied that any cultural achievement which Europeans judged meritorious in this region could likewise now be attributed to “white” initiative or influence. Saunders suggested that a “seminal” role in the formulation of this interpretation of sub-Saharan African history was played by the explorer John Hanning Speke, who in the 1860s attributed the foundation of the kingdoms of interlacustrine East Africa to invasion and conquest by pastoralists from the north, who were identified as “Shem-Hamitic” in race, i.e., a combination of Semitic Ethiopians and “Hamitic” Galla.<sup>18</sup> In relation to West Africa, this was paralleled, and indeed preceded, by European speculations about the supposedly non-Negro origins of the Fulani, which were likewise cited to explain their role as conquerors and state-builders, although these were not generally cast within a specifically “Hamitic” framework.<sup>19</sup>

Since this denial of historical achievement to Black Africans could also be interpreted to suggest a lack of racial potential for cultural progress in the future, as long as Africans were left in charge of their own affairs, it could function subsequently to legitimate European colonial rule, which was presented as the only means of bringing about the development of Africa. This argument is implicit, for example, in a work of the British imperialist consul Sir Harry Johnston, published in 1899, in which the catalog of foreign invaders/immigrants in sub-Saharan Africa, beginning with the Phoenicians and culminating in the contemporary European partition of Africa, is prefaced by supposed prehistoric immigrations of “Hamitic civilisers,” mainly from the Nile valley.<sup>20</sup>

### III

As an explanation of the nineteenth and twentieth-century European version of the “Hamitic hypothesis” the foregoing account, which is partly summa-

<sup>18</sup>Saunders, “Hamitic Hypothesis,” 528; J.H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (London, 1863), chapter 9.

<sup>19</sup>See Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (2 vols.: Madison, 1964), 2:411-12. The Fulani were variously supposed to descend from Persians or Carthaginians, or even to have immigrated from Malaya. Note, however, the alternative suggestion that the Fulani were descendants of Put (or Phut), son of Ham, on the basis of the Fulani toponym “Futa,” apparently first in Gustave d’Eichthal, “Histoire de l’origine des Foulahs ou Fellans,” *Mémoires de la Société d’Ethnologie* (Paris) 1/2(1841), 1-294.

<sup>20</sup>Sir Harry Johnston, *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races* (London, 1899; 2nd ed., 1913), chapter 1.

rized and partly elaborated from Saunders, seems to me defective; but it is not so much incorrect as incomplete. Although the idea of a civilizing input from outside Africa was certainly often formulated in explicitly racist terms, and sometimes used for the specific political purpose of justifying European domination, this was neither its only source nor its necessary implication; rather, the dominance of the "Hamitic hypothesis" in European thought about African history has to be seen in a wider intellectual context.

First, account must be taken of the persistence into the nineteenth century of the influence of the original Biblical version of the "Hamitic hypothesis"—that is, the model of the peopling of the world by migration from the Middle East through the dispersal of Noah's sons after the Flood. (Apart from the dispersal of Noah's descendants, the alternative Biblical model for the origins of exotic peoples was identification with the ten "lost tribes" of Israel, who were deported and dispersed after the Assyrian conquest in the eighth century BCE.)<sup>21</sup> Many of the earliest European commentators on African history were Christian missionaries, who were often scriptural fundamentalists, whose conception of history was predicated on a literal understanding of the Bible; and from such a perspective, the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa had necessarily to be derived from the immigration of "Hamites," irrespective of whether the new doctrine of racialism was accepted. Moreover, given the anti-Biblical character of nineteenth-century "scientific" racism, the more fundamentalist Christians were not, in fact, likely to subscribe to it, being committed by their Biblical literalism to the older doctrine of the oneness of humanity on the basis of common (and recent) descent from a single pair of ancestors, Adam and Eve.

Moreover, the "Hamitic hypothesis" as applied to Africa has to be seen as merely one local variant of a much more general view of the historical process, "diffusionism," according to which autonomous cultural innovation was a rare occurrence, and cultural change therefore normally came about through the diffusion of innovations from their place of origin. In such views, the original cradle of many critical cultural innovations (and indeed of "civilization" itself) was frequently (although not invariably) located specifically in Egypt. The Egyptocentric version of diffusionism was propounded in an extreme form in the early twentieth century especially by Sir Grafton Elliot Smith.<sup>22</sup> Diffusionist interpretations were commonly applied, not to Africa alone, but to the whole world, including the Americas, and indeed to Europe itself; absolutely everywhere else was supposed to derive its civilization from Egypt.

<sup>21</sup>See Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London, 2002), though this seems weak on West Africa.

<sup>22</sup>E.g. Smith, *Migrations of Early Culture* (London, 1915); idem, *The Diffusion of Culture* (London, 1935).



Given this wider background, it may be suggested that it is an oversimplification to see diffusionist interpretations of African history propounded by Europeans during the colonial period as necessarily expressing or reflecting ideas of racial superiority or colonial apologetics. A clear counter-example is the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius, in his book *Und Afrika Sprach*, published in 1912.<sup>23</sup> Frobenius attributed the origins of political institutions in the West African interior generally (described by him, essentially, on the basis of Nupe, in northern Nigeria) to migration from Nubia in the seventh century CE. For the particular case of Yorubaland, however, he proposed a different origin. Frobenius was the principal discoverer of the brass and terracotta sculptures of Ife, and he explained the existence of this art, and more especially its stylistic naturalism, as deriving from a supposed Etruscan maritime colonization of West Africa, attributed to the second millennium BCE, also speculating that Yorubaland might in fact have been the legendary land of Atlantis. Although regularly dismissed nowadays as reflecting Frobenius' racial prejudices, this view should more correctly be attributed to the general diffusionist mode of thought of his period. Frobenius himself, it is clear, saw the historiographical significance of his discoveries as proving, not that sub-Saharan Africa had no record of historical achievement, but on the contrary that it had a recoverable history which extended (in contradiction to the then dominant assumption) back into the pre-Islamic era—a vindication rather than denial of Africa's place in history.<sup>24</sup>

Even more critically, the interpretation of the "Hamitic hypothesis" as a projection of European racialism fails to take adequate account of the fact that essentially similar conceptions of history have often been espoused by black Africans themselves, both in precolonial times and into the twentieth century. It does not seem plausible, moreover, to explain this popularity of the "Hamitic hypothesis" among Africans as merely a reflection of their cultural subordination and deference to European intellectual authority, for two reasons: first, because the African espousal of versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" in part predated the establishment of European domination of Africa, but also because versions of it were often used during the colonial era to express African cultural nationalism—that is, to contest rather than to endorse the idea of African racial inferiority.

<sup>23</sup>Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, trans. R. Blind (2 vols.: London, 1913).

<sup>24</sup>As explicitly asserted in the conclusion of his book: *ibid.*, 2:680. I am fortified in this reading of Frobenius by the fact that this is clearly how the significance of his work was seen by the pioneer Afro-American historian, W.E.B. Du Bois: see Robin Law, "Du Bois as a Pioneer of Africa History," in Mary Keller and Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., eds., *Re-Cognizing Du Bois in the Twenty-First Century: Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois* (Macon GA, 2007), 45-64.

#### IV

Versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" occur in early local West African Islamic historiography, written in Arabic, at a period earlier than the rise of the classic European racist version. This should be entirely unsurprising, since West African Muslims took over the general Islamic (and ultimately Old Testament) historical framework of the peopling of the world by the dispersal of the descendants of Noah after the Flood. The dominant tendency was to affiliate West African peoples to Ham through his sons Cush or Canaan, although links were often also posited with other figures from Islamic/Arabic historical tradition. As a typical example one can cite the historical work of the noted scholar and political leader Muhammad Bello of Sokoto in Hausaland. His *Infaq al-Maisur*, written in 1812, attributes Middle Eastern origins—from Egypt, Palestine, the Yemen, and even Persia—to a number of West African peoples, though for the most part without reference specifically to Ham or Noah. In the case of the Yoruba, however, Bello declares them to be descendants of Canaan, and more particularly of his son Nimrud, who is traditionally linked with Babylonia/Iraq.<sup>25</sup> He combines this conventional piece of speculative genealogy with an equally speculative venture in historical etymology, deriving the name "Yoruba" from that of Yar'ub ibn Qahtan, the legendary ancestor of the Himyarite kings of Yemen in pre-Islamic times, hypothesizing that the ancestral Yoruba had been expelled from their original homeland in Iraq by Ya'rub.<sup>26</sup>

Equally, in West African oral traditions (in some cases, recorded in early Arabic writings), the origins of local peoples (or at least of the ruling dynasties of local states) are frequently attributed to the arrival of immigrants/conquerors from the Middle East, most often specifically from Mecca; but sometimes also from the Yemen, or from Iraq (sometimes, specifically, from Baghdad).<sup>27</sup> As early as the twelfth century, the kings of Ghana were claiming descent from a man called Salih, who was represented to be a great-great-grandson of the Caliph 'Ali, the son-in-law and fourth successor of the Prophet Muhammad, who ruled in Iraq, although this claim was dismissed by mainstream Islamic scholarship.<sup>28</sup> Later, in Songhay, the

<sup>25</sup>In the Islamic tradition, Nimrud is considered a son of Canaan; rather than, as in the Old Testament, of Cush.

<sup>26</sup>E.J. Arnett, *The Rise of the Sokoto Fulani, Being a Paraphrase and in Some Part a Translation of the Infaku'l Maisuri of the Sultan Mohammed Bello* (Kano, 1922), 16.

<sup>27</sup>Reference to Baghdad probably reflects its eminence as the seat of the Caliph, the (nominal) supreme ruler of all (Orthodox) Muslims, between 762 and 1258.

<sup>28</sup>al-Idrisi, in N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981), 109, referring to Salih b. 'Abd-Allah b. al-Hasan b. al-Hasan b. al-Hasan b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib. Ibn Khaldun later commented that "this Salih is not known among the descendants of 'Abd Allah b. al-Hasan:" *ibid.*, 320.

founder of the first royal dynasty of the kingdom, the Zuwas (who supposedly ruled until the thirteenth century), is named as Zuwa-Alayaman, which name was explained (already in local Arabic scholarship in the seventeenth century) as meaning “he came from the Yemen.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise among the Hausa, the mythical dynastic ancestor Bayajidda is usually presented as coming from Mecca, although sometimes from Baghdad.<sup>30</sup>

Although sometimes (as in these cases just cited) the individuals claimed as founders, although said to have come from the Islamic/Arabic world, appear to be local West African creations,<sup>31</sup> in other instances, prominent figures from Islamic historical tradition were appropriated by West Africans as ancestors. In the case of the kingdom of Mali, for example, the royal dynasty claimed descent from Bilali, and the caste of griots from Surakata. As has been shown by David Conrad, the first of these represents Bilal ibn Rabah and the second Suraqa ibn Malik, two of the early companions of Muhammad—the former being his *muezzin* and the latter an initial enemy of Muhammad, who had sought to kill him before being converted to Islam.<sup>32</sup> The Fulani similarly traced their descent to one “Ukuba,” who is identifiable with ‘Uqba ibn Nafi’, one of the commanders of the Arab conquest of North Africa in the later seventh century—a claim recorded already in the early nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

In other cases, the claimed ancestors are figures from pre-Islamic Arabic tradition. The best-known example is Borno (in northeastern Nigeria), whose royal dynasty claimed descent (at least as early as the thirteenth century) from Sayf ibn dhi Yhazan, last scion of the Himyarite royal dynasty, and hero of Yemeni resistance to invasion from Christian Ethiopia in the sixth century (the “War of the Elephant” alluded to the Qu’ran).<sup>34</sup> Sayf, although living before the time of Muhammad, can be thought of as a proto-Islamic hero, as a defender of Mecca against Christian imperialism. In other cases, however, West African origins were traced to more ambiguous, or even explicitly anti-Islamic figures. In Borgu (which, in terms of modern

<sup>29</sup>John Hunwick, ed., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’di’s Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden, 2003), 5-6.

<sup>30</sup>W.K.R. Hallam, “The Bayajidda Legend in Hausa Folklore,” *JAH* 7(1966), 47-60.

<sup>31</sup>Although it has also been suggested that “Bayajidda” should be identified with Abu Yazid, leader of an Islamic sectarian uprising in Tunisia in the late eighth century CE: H..R. Palmer, *Bornu Sahara and Sudan* (London, 1936), 273-74.

<sup>32</sup>David C. Conrad, “Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata,” *JAH* 26(1985), 33-49.

<sup>33</sup>David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: the Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1985), 82-84. The claim is already found in Muhammad Bello’s *Infaq al-Maisur*.

<sup>34</sup>First recorded by Ibn Said, in Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 188.

political geography, straddled northern Bénin and adjacent areas of Nigeria to the east), the royal dynasties of the various kingdoms trace their descent from Kisra, who represents Khusraw (or, in a Greek form, Chosroes), a Persian king of the early seventh century, a contemporary of Muhammad, who reputedly rejected an appeal by the latter to convert to Islam.<sup>35</sup> In the West African traditions, Kisra is usually presented as having left Mecca (*sic*) after refusing to follow Muhammad.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of Yorubaland, the origins of the principal royal dynasties are conventionally traced to a common ancestor called Oduduwa, who in the usual (and presumably original) version of the story descended by a chain from heaven, when the earth was covered with water, to create dry land in the middle of it, at Ife. But in the version told in the northern Yoruba kingdom of Oyo (and recorded in Samuel Johnson's *History* in the 1890s) Oduduwa is presented as the son of one "Lamurudu," a king of Mecca who renounced Islam, clashed with a pious Muslim called "Braima," and was killed in a Muslim uprising.<sup>37</sup> "Lamurudu" and "Braima" in this story evidently represent Nimrud and Ibrahim (i.e., Abraham), and the story is based on an Islamic saga of the confrontation between these two figures. Muhammad Bello, as cited earlier, in tracing Yoruba origins to Nimrud, may have been drawing on this tradition, although alternatively, the tradition may be a more recent development, itself derived from Bello's written account.<sup>38</sup>

In the early years of academic study of African history in the 1950s and 1960s, traditions of this sort claiming origin from the Middle East were often interpreted essentially literally, as recording real historical migrations.<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, although the literal truth of the supposed migrations was discounted, the existence within West African oral traditions of what were recognized as elements derived ultimately from Biblical or other Middle Eastern sources was seen as evidence of ancient cultural links with the Middle East. John Fage in the 1960s thus spoke of the transmission of "ideas and influences," not directly from the Middle East but through the intermediate agency of Saharan pastoralists (here identified as "Hamites");

<sup>35</sup>Richard Kuba, *Wasangari und Wangara: Borgu und sein Nachbarn in historischer Perspektive* (Hamburg, 1996), 98-148.

<sup>36</sup>Another version makes Kisra clash with "Anabinuhu," i.e., the Prophet Noah: Frobenius, *Voice of Africa*, 2:617.

<sup>37</sup>Johnson, *History*, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup>For discussion, see Robin Law, "How Truly Traditional is Our Traditional History? The Case of Samuel Johnson and the Recording of Yoruba Oral Tradition," *HA* 11(1984), 195-221, esp. 202-05.

<sup>39</sup>E.g. Hallam, "Bayajidda Legend," 49-50, accepting the identification of "Bayajidda" with the historical Abu Yazid (see note 31 above), supposed that remnants of his army might have fled south into West Africa, following his defeat and death in Tunisia.

while Dierk Lange more recently suggested that the crucial conduit was a pre-Islamic trans-Saharan trade, supposedly conducted by Phoenician colonists in North Africa.<sup>40</sup>

The more general view nowadays, however (at least among academic historians), is that these traditions of migration from the Middle East are to be explained by the expansion of the influence of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa in relatively recent times. The concern of African peoples to claim origins from the Islamic world reflects no more than a desire to relate themselves to what was seen as a prestigious world civilization—comparable, for instance, to the concern of the ancient Romans to relate themselves to ancient Greek historical tradition by representing themselves as descendants of the defeated Trojans; and indeed, the concern of many European societies in medieval times to link themselves to Classical Antiquity—again, very often through stories of the dispersal of defeated Trojans. Britain, for example, was commonly said to have been colonized by, and to have derived its name from, a Trojan refugee called Brutus.<sup>41</sup>

In cases where descent was claimed from specific figures in Islamic tradition, it is sometimes possible to suggest reasons for the choice of these particular persons as ancestors. In the case of Mali, for example, the claiming of Bilal as dynastic ancestor evidently reflected the fact that the original Bilal was, according to tradition, in origin a black African slave, and thus the first black African Muslim. In that of Suraqa/Surakata, as Conrad has argued, his appeal as ancestor derived from his status as a converted opponent of Islam, which had a particular resonance for the *griots*, as the intellectual establishment of the pre-Islamic order.<sup>42</sup> Likewise for the Fulani, the claim of descent from ‘Uqba, as one of the pioneers of the spread of Islam into Africa, functioned to underwrite their claim to pre-eminence in the dissemination and consolidation of Islam from the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, anti-Islamic figures such as Kisra and Nimrud were appropriate choices of ancestors for peoples who resisted conversion to Islam.

It has been argued that some cases of the claiming of Middle Eastern ancestry cannot plausibly be put down to Islamic influence, since such stories are not limited to Islamic societies in West Africa, but occur also

<sup>40</sup>Fage, *History of West Africa*, 9-10; Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms*, esp. 277-85.

<sup>41</sup>First recorded in the ninth century: John Morris, ed., *Nennius: British History and Welsh Annals* (London, 1980), 18-20. Note that this work also supplies a genealogy tracing the ancestry of Brutus to Javan, son of Japhet, son of Noah (and beyond to Adam and Eve).

<sup>42</sup>Conrad, "Islam in the Oral Traditions of Mali."

<sup>43</sup>For the context see Robinson, *Holy War of Umar Tal*, 81-89.

among "essentially pagan peoples," as for example the Kisra story in Borgu—and, one might add, the Nimrud story among the Yoruba.<sup>44</sup> This seems a doubtful inference, however, since Borgu and Yorubaland, while still indeed mainly "pagan" down to the nineteenth century, had certainly been involved in Islamic trading networks, and had resident communities of foreign Muslims since at least the seventeenth century.<sup>45</sup> As has been argued by Philips Stevens, the appeal of figures like Kisra and Nimrud for such societies was precisely their status as heroes of anti-Islamic resistance. They represented ancestors who were figures of stature in Islamic tradition, and thus conferred an antiquity and status comparable to that of Islam, while simultaneously legitimating their supposed descendants' resistance to conversion to Islam.<sup>46</sup> A similar argument, it may be suggested, applies to the Roman claim to descend from the Trojans, which gave Rome a place within the Greek scheme of world history, but which also emphasized their distinctness from the Greeks themselves. A likely historical context for the adoption of Kisra and Nimrud as legitimating ancestors is the early nineteenth century, when both Borgu and Oyo were resisting the militant Islamic *jihad* led by Usuman dan Fodio from Hausaland.<sup>47</sup>

The existence of versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" in early West African Islamic writings and oral traditions deserves emphasis, not only because these were evidently independent of (since earlier than) the classic European versions of this model, but also because they clearly exercised some influence on European thinking about African history. It may be suggested that stress on the racist/imperialist purposes served by the "Hamitic hypothesis" tends to obscure the role in its evolution and consolidation that was played by the nature of the available evidence. It seems clear, at least, that one of the major reasons why Europeans attributed Middle Eastern origins to West African peoples/cultures was, straightforwardly, because this is what they were told by their African informants. The classification of the Fulani as racially "white," for example, was not simply a projection of European prejudices, but was a claim which they themselves

<sup>44</sup>Fage, *History of West Africa*, 9.

<sup>45</sup>For Islam in Borgu see Nehemiah Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa* (Oxford, 1968), 173-78; for Oyo see Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire c.1600-c.1836* (Oxford, 1977), 75-76, 255-60.

<sup>46</sup>Philips Stevens, Jr., "The Kisra Legend and the Distortion of Historical Tradition," *JAH* 16(1975), 185-200. It should be noted that the defense of the historicity of the Kisra traditions by Marjorie Helen Stewart, "The Kisra legend as Oral History," *IJAHS* 13(1980), 51-70, although cast in part as a critique of Stevens, does not relate to the alleged Persian connection.

<sup>47</sup>For the Oyo case see further Law, "How Truly Traditional?," 204-05.

made.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, in positing exotic origins for pre-Islamic West African kingship, Frobenius drew upon the local legends of Kisra.<sup>49</sup> Intellectual influences did not flow in one direction only.

## V

Even more critically for present purposes, versions of the “Hamitic hypothesis” also occur regularly in the writings of western-educated Christian West Africans, writing in European languages. An early example is the Afro-British ex-slave (and Abolitionist activist) Olaudah Equiano, who in his autobiography (published in 1789) discussed the origins of his own people, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, and suggested that they were derived from the ancient Jews—the argument being based mainly on similarities of customs, notably circumcision. The difficulty that the Jews were white and the Igbo black was explained on the supposition that blackness was an acquired rather than an inherited characteristic, attributed to the West African climate.<sup>50</sup> The idea was subsequently elaborated by James Africanus Horton, born in Sierra Leone but also of Igbo ancestry, in his book published in 1868, which suggested more specifically that the Igbo were remnants of the “lost tribes” of Israel.<sup>51</sup>

Equiano and Horton were not strictly historians, but offered these historical speculations casually while writing on other subjects. A more self-conscious and systematic interest in local history developed, however, from the late nineteenth century onwards, among communities of Anglophone Africans in Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Yorubaland. This rise of the study of local history was part of a wider movement of “cultural nationalism,” which sought to overcome the alienation of western-educated Christian Africans from their indigenous African societies.<sup>52</sup> Several of these local

<sup>48</sup>As noted already in the 1790s: “[t]hey evidently consider all the Negro natives as their inferiors; and when talking of different nations, always rank themselves among the white people:” Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (London, 1799), 46. This statement has to be understood in its local (Senegambian) context, in which “white” (Arabic *bidan*) denoted (patrilineal) Arab descent and free status, rather than skin color.

<sup>49</sup>Frobenius, *Voice of Africa*, 2:617-20.

<sup>50</sup>Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself* (2 vols, London, 1789), 1:38-41.

<sup>51</sup>James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples* (London, 1868), 167-71. This example is missed by Parfitt, *Lost Tribes*.

<sup>52</sup>See Robin Law, “Local Amateur Scholarship in the Construction of Yoruba Ethnicity, 1880-1914” in Louise de la Gorgendière, Kenneth King, and Sarah Vaughan, eds., *Ethnicity in Africa: Roots, Meanings and Interpretations* (Edinburgh, 1996), 55-90, esp. 56-63.

historians put forward arguments for the origins of West African peoples from the Middle East, often citing local oral traditions in support. In the case of the Yoruba, for example, Samuel Johnson, writing in 1897, claimed that the ancestral Yoruba had migrated to West Africa from "Upper Egypt," meaning Nubia. In support of his argument he cited not only the local tradition, mentioned above, of descent from "Lamurudu" of Mecca—arguing that the reference to Mecca should not be understood literally, but symbolically, as representing "the East" more generally. He also adduced supposed parallels between Yoruba and Middle Eastern customs, and even (anticipating Frobenius) archeological evidence in the form of the stone sculptures of Ife, which were held to be similar to those of ancient Egypt.<sup>53</sup>

This claim for the Yoruba of Egyptian origin was reiterated and elaborated in several later works, notably by Archdeacon J. O. Lucas in his study of Yoruba religion published in 1948.<sup>54</sup> Lucas argued for the ancient Egyptian origin of Yoruba religion, and supported his argument not only by citing supposedly parallel customs (the Yoruba practice of wrapping corpses in cloth for burial, for example, being compared to Egyptian mummification), but also with linguistic evidence, suggesting Egyptian etymologies for the names of Yoruba gods, and indeed for the Yoruba language more generally—he claimed that over half of Yoruba vocabulary could be traced to Egyptian origins. Alternative versions of Middle Eastern origins for the Yoruba were also canvassed. For example, the Sierra Leonian historian A.B.C. Sibthorpe, in a book published in 1909, claimed that the Yoruba were the "lost tribes" of Israel.<sup>55</sup>

This way of looking at Yoruba origins, it may be noted, survived into the earliest stages of the development of academic historical writing in the 1950s. The pioneer Yoruba academic historian, S.O. Biobaku, in a series of radio lectures on Yoruba origins in 1955, synthesizing earlier speculations, argued for ancient Egyptian, Jewish, and Etruscan influences on Yoruba civilization, and explained these on the assumption that the ancestral Yoruba had migrated from somewhere in the Middle East, probably the Nile Valley, between the seventh and ninth centuries CE.<sup>56</sup> But Biobaku avoided the implication of "white" initiative by positing that the medium through which

<sup>53</sup>Johnson, *History*, 3-7.

<sup>54</sup>Archdeacon J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos, 1948).

<sup>55</sup>A.B.C. Sibthorpe, *Bible Review of Reviews: the Discovery of the Ten Lost Tribes, Yorubas or Akus* (Cline Town, Sierra Leone, 1909), for which, see Christopher Fyfe, "A.B.C. Sibthorpe; a Tribute," *HA* 19(1992), 327-52. This example is also missed by Parfitt, although he does allude to other theories of exotic origins of the Yoruba (referring to Frobenius, Samuel Johnson, and Biobaku): *Lost Tribes*, 199, 203.

<sup>56</sup>S.O. Biobaku, *The Lugard Lectures—1955* (Lagos, n.d.); reprinted as *The Origin of the Yorubas* (Lagos, 1960).



Middle Eastern elements were transmitted to the Yoruba was the kingdom of Meroë in Nubia, which was emphasized to be itself an “all-Black kingdom.”

The idea of the “Hamitic hypothesis” as a rationalization of European claims to racial superiority cannot, obviously, be very easily applied to cases such as Samuel Johnson, who was writing from an explicitly “nationalist” (or in his own terminology, “patriotic”) perspective, seeking to assert the value of African culture and its historical achievement.<sup>57</sup> For Johnson, the claim to Middle Eastern origins was a way of attaching Yoruba civilization to what he saw as the mainstream of history, to claim prestigious origins for it rather than to dismiss it as marginal or derivative.

In Johnson’s case, the thesis of Middle Eastern origins has an additional twist, which added to its “nationalist” appeal. He argued, as has been seen, that the ancestral Yoruba came not from Arabia (as local tradition claimed), but from Nubia, and on this basis inferred that their original religion had perhaps been, not paganism, but Christianity, in its specifically Egyptian (Coptic) form.<sup>58</sup> (Lucas, by contrast, sought to derive Yoruba religion from ancient Egyptian paganism.) Johnson supported his argument by suggesting that versions of Biblical stories were preserved in Yoruba oral tradition—interpreting the Yoruba story that the earth was covered with water prior to the descent of Oduduwa from heaven, for example, as a derived variant of the Biblical story of the Flood.<sup>59</sup> For Johnson, therefore, Yoruba religion was a degenerate or corrupt form of Christianity. The appeal of such an interpretation for an intellectual in Johnson’s position is evident. There was on the face of it a fundamental contradiction in the project of “cultural nationalism,” in that the value of African culture and history was asserted by people who themselves remained Christians, and committed to the conversion of their fellow-Yoruba to Christianity—that is, effectively to the subversion of indigenous historical and cultural traditions. The representation of the ancestral Yoruba as Christians resolved this contradiction. Christianity was after all not alien, but traditional, and conversion to it would represent simply a restoration of the original and pure form of the indigenous religion. Hence, it was after all possible to be simultaneously a true patriot, a champion of Yoruba culture, and a Christian.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup>For Johnson’s “purely patriotic motive,” see *History*, vii.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 9; for other claims that Yoruba traditions contained “garbled forms of scriptural stories,” explained as “showing that the ancestors of the Yorubas were acquainted with Christianity in their land of origin,” cf. *ibid.*, 148, 154.

<sup>60</sup>Robin Law, “Constructing ‘a Real National History:’ a Comparison of Edward Blyden and Samuel Johnson” in P.F. de Moraes Farias and Karin Barber, eds., *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham, 1990), 78-100, esp. 96.

## VI

Given the overt nationalist purpose of much of local Yoruba historical writing, it does not seem helpful to dismiss the espousal of versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" by Johnson and others as merely a case of intellectual colonization "imposed by the West" and "uncritically accepted" by European-educated Africans, as A.E. Afigbo has suggested in the case of the Igbo.<sup>61</sup> A more nuanced analysis is offered by Philip Zachernuk in a study of Nigerian historical writing published in 1994. Zachernuk rejects the suggestion of "uncritical acceptance" of European ideas by local intellectuals, in favor of that of "critical dialogue" with them. He acknowledges that African historians selectively appropriated and adapted, rather than simply repeated, the "Hamitic hypothesis," and used it as a means to vindicate rather than denigrate African historical achievement. However, he maintains that although West Africans had their own agenda, they were nevertheless "constrained" in their thinking by the colonial situation; even though they sought to subvert the racist and imperialist intentions of European literature, they "had to work within European concepts of history." In a felicitous formulation, he says that they "appropriated the authority but undermined the intent of imperial literature." Zachernuk concludes by invoking the idea that under colonialism West African thought was "de-centred," in the sense that it had to work within a framework of ideas shaped by European, rather than African, needs.<sup>62</sup>

This analysis, however, although a substantial advance on earlier treatments, is not wholly persuasive. It is, first, arguable that it by implication exaggerates the monolithic character of "European" thought. Although Zachernuk recognizes successive transformations and competing constructions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" by African intellectuals, he gives less attention to variety within European thinking, which in effect gave Africans a choice of which European models to follow.<sup>63</sup> Even more critically, I would suggest, this perspective exaggerates the degree of "dialogue" with European thought in which African writers in fact engaged. There were certainly particular African (or African-American) writers who pursued the sort of "critical dialogue" with European thinking which Zachernuk describes,

<sup>61</sup>A.E. Afigbo, "Traditions of Igbo Origins: a Comment," *HA* 10(1983), 1-11.

<sup>62</sup>Philip S. Zachernuk, "Of Origins and Colonial Order: Southern Nigerian Historians and the 'Hamitic Hypothesis', c.1870-1970," *JAH* 35(1994), 427-55, quotations from 430, 454-55. For an application of the argument in a wider context, cf. Philip S. Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: an African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville, 2000).

<sup>63</sup>Zachernuk himself does make this point in general terms in *Colonial Subjects*, 6-7, but he seems to lose sight of it in relation to the "Hamitic hypothesis."

and, indeed, who in the process found themselves to some degree entrapped within the categories of the very European thought which they were seeking to subvert. A clear example is E.W. Blyden, who in seeking to contest European imputations of African racial inferiority, nevertheless internalized many of the assumptions of European racist thought.<sup>64</sup> But the tradition of specifically Yoruba historiography appears much more locally focused and autonomous than Zachernuk's analysis allows.

Samuel Johnson, for example, does not show much sign even of being aware of, far less of being influenced by or seeking to contest, European racist models of African history.<sup>65</sup> The only point at which his *History* explicitly engages in "critical dialogue" with imperial literature is, not in its examination of Yoruba origins, but in its account of British attempts to negotiate peace among warring Yoruba states in the 1880s, in which Johnson himself had served as interpreter to the British mediators, where extended citation of British official records is combined with critical commentary on the conduct of British policy.<sup>66</sup> In his discussion of Yoruba origins, the only "European" source cited is an English translation of Muhammad Bello's Arabic account, cited earlier: an African Muslim authority, that is, even though accessed through a European intermediary.<sup>67</sup> The most obvious influence on Johnson's historical thinking was not the "imperial" version of the "Hamitic hypothesis" (which, indeed, at the time of his writing in 1897, hardly yet existed in published form, in relation to the Yoruba),<sup>68</sup> but rather

<sup>64</sup>See Law, "Constructing," 84-88, 98.

<sup>65</sup>For a contrary view see Philip S. Zachernuk, "Johnson and the Victorian Image of the Yoruba," in Falola, *Pioneer, Patriot and Patriarch*, 33-46. In particular, Zachernuk argues that Johnson was responding to the work of A.B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1894). This connection is confessedly "inferred," since Johnson nowhere explicitly cites Ellis. But in any case, the argument of Ellis that Johnson supposedly sought to refute was not the "Hamitic hypothesis," but rather his "evolutionist" interpretation of Yoruba religion.

<sup>66</sup>Johnson, *History*, 538-60. Most, and perhaps all, of these critical comments seem to be the work of Johnson's posthumous editor, his brother Dr Obadiah Johnson.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6, citing Dixon Denman and Hugh Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa* (London, 1826), Appendix XII, 165.

<sup>68</sup>Zachernuk, "Johnson," 40-41, argues that rudimentary versions of the "Hamitic" theory of Yoruba origins can already be found in T.J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856* (Charleston, 1857), and Richard F. Burton, *Abeokuta and the Camaroons Mountains* (2 vols.: London, 1863). The former does indeed posit "large immigrations of white people into Africa," producing a partly "mulatto" population in much of West Africa, including Yorubaland (pp. 267-69, 276-80), but although he stresses the "somewhat civilized" character of the Yoruba, he does not relate this explicitly to the supposed admixture of "white" blood; while the latter work likewise hypothesizes a "stream of immigration from the lands nearer Arabia," but explicitly regards the Yoruba as "a race of pagans" displaced by this immigration, rather than deriving from it (1:231). In any case, here again, Johnson does not cite (or show any evidence of acquaintance with) either of these works. Another

the older Biblical version of diffusionism, which it is misleading to regard as specifically European, since, as has been seen, it was already naturalized in West Africa through the influence of Islam, long before any European missionaries or administrators arrived.

Archdeacon Lucas in the 1940s was much more engaged with wider currents of thought, mainly because his book was based on a doctoral thesis (in Divinity, not History) written for a British university (Durham, 1942). But his main orientation was not in fact towards the "Hamitic hypothesis" as such, but rather towards the debate within the anthropology of religion over whether apparent convergences between different religious traditions were best explained through common origin or parallel evolution—in the specific terms in which Lucas posed the question, was Yoruba religion a case of "degeneration" (from a "higher" religious tradition from which it was derived) or "arrested development" (at a "lower" evolutionary stage)?<sup>69</sup> It so happens that the first of these options, which is the one which Lucas himself espoused, was diffusionist. But it does not seem all that helpful to "explain" his adoption of this position as reflecting deference to European authority, when there was also a non-diffusionist alternative on offer which was equally "European." Moreover, Lucas, in adopting a "Hamitic" version of Yoruba origins (overland from the Middle East), was explicitly rejecting the principal European diffusionist interpretation of the origins of Yoruba civilization then on offer, which was Frobenius' "Atlantic theory," in favor of something closer to that propounded by the African Samuel Johnson (and beyond him, indeed, by the Muslim African scholar Muhammad Bello).<sup>70</sup>

Although Yoruba scholars after Johnson certainly regularly cited European "authorities" (alongside indigenous traditions, and indeed earlier Yoruba historians, including above all Johnson himself), this was more a matter of plundering such European sources for usable detailed "facts" than of taking over their intellectual frameworks. Ironically, indeed, with regard to discussion of Yoruba origins, one of the major areas of such borrowing was in assimilating the oral traditions of other African groups, as reproduced in European colonial literature. By the 1960s local historians in Yorubaland had incorporated versions of the Kisra legend into their accounts of Yoruba origins.<sup>71</sup> They knew of these not directly from the tra-

writer of the 1850s identified the Yoruba as descendants of Canaanites dispersed from Palestine by the Israeli conquest (in the thirteenth century BCE), and more explicitly linked this to their relative "civilization." But this work was still unpublished when Johnson wrote: W.H. Clarge, *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland, 1854-1858*, ed. J.A. Atanda (Ibadan, 1972), 287-92.

<sup>69</sup>Lucas, *Religion*, 3-4, 344-45.

<sup>70</sup>For his critique of Frobenius, see *ibid.*, 347-52.

<sup>71</sup>Chief S. Ojo, Bada of Saki, *Iwe Itan Oyo, Ikoyi ati AFIJIO* (Oyo, n.d. [ca.1961]), 16-17.

ditions of neighboring Borgu, but at second hand through European sources.<sup>72</sup>

It may be suggested, in fact, that the dialogue in which local Yoruba historians engaged, at least prior to the emergence of academic history in the 1950s, was more with each other than with the European colonial master. Johnson's work, for example, was explicitly addressed to fellow Yoruba who were ignorant of the history of their own nation, rather than to Europeans who denied or denigrated it.<sup>73</sup> It should also be stressed that, although Johnson himself wrote in English, a significant minority of other early local historians wrote in Yoruba: evidently, these were writing for a local rather than a European readership. Indeed, this internal orientation remained to some degree true even in the early period of academic history, with Biobaku in the 1950s. Although Biobaku was certainly concerned to relate his work to, and legitimate it within, a European tradition of academic historiography, this related more to its methodology than to its content. He gave attention to Yoruba origins, in a series of lectures explicitly addressed to a wider non-academic audience, not in order to contest colonial European versions, but because the question of origins had been a central issue of local interest since the nineteenth century. If one wants to characterize the development of Yoruba historical thinking in terms of "critical dialogue," there is a much stronger case for saying that this dialogue was with Johnson's *History* than with any European literature.

Moreover, insofar as there was an interaction between African and European thought, it did not flow only one way.<sup>74</sup> Local historians such as Johnson, as well as the older Islamic scholarship and oral traditions, were regularly cited by Europeans writing on African history. For example, the standard textbooks on Nigerian history written in the 1920s and 1930s, by the British colonial officials Alan Burns and Rex Niven, both posited Middle Eastern origins for the Yoruba. But they did so on the authority of the African Samuel Johnson (and, here again, in preference to espousing the alternative "Atlantic" theory of the European Leo Frobenius).<sup>75</sup> African

<sup>72</sup>The pioneer of the integration of the Borgu legend of Kisra with Yoruba traditions of origin (as reported by Johnson) seems to have been H.B. Hermon-Hodge, *Gazetteer of Ilorin Province* (London, 1929), 115-21.

<sup>73</sup>"Educated natives of Yoruba are well acquainted with the history of England and with that of Rome and Greece, but of the history of their own country they know nothing whatever! This reproach it is one of the author's objects to remove:" Johnson, *History*, vii.

<sup>74</sup>Again, this point is made by Zachernuk in general terms, in *Colonial Subjects*, 66, but he does not apply it to the case of the "Hamitic hypothesis."

<sup>75</sup>A.C. Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London, 1929), 32-33; C.R. Niven, *A Short History of Nigeria* (London, 1937; 3rd ed., 1948), 64-65. Also C.R. Niven, *A Short History of the Yoruba Peoples* (London, 1958), 6-7.

constructions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" thus reinforced the dominance of this paradigm in European thought, as much as vice versa.

## VII

Zachernuk concludes his study by referring to the decline in the popularity of the "Hamitic hypothesis" among Nigerian historians since the 1950s, and links this to decolonization: "the Hamitic Hypothesis and the colonial order decline together . . . the Hamitic Hypothesis was a colonial cultural artefact, not suited to post-colonial times." However, he acknowledges that there was in fact "not a clean break," and that versions of the "Hamitic hypothesis" have continued to have some currency in modern Nigeria.<sup>76</sup> In my own reading, the abandonment of the "Hamitic hypothesis" was clear enough among academic historians—although this perhaps had less to do with the rejection of colonial paradigms than with a shift of scholarly interest away from "origins" towards other (more recent) subjects. But it still seems alive and well in local amateur historiography.

In Yorubaland, it is true that the most substantial recent treatment of the "origin" question, by Chief M.A. Fabunmi, published in 1985, rejects theories of migration from outside, in order to restate the traditional local (Ife) account that the world (and therefore civilization) was created at Ife. On Fabunmi's view, any similarities between ancient Egyptian and Yoruba civilisation are to be explained by diffusion from Yorubaland to Egypt, rather than *vice versa*.<sup>77</sup> However, he adopts this position in explicit repudiation of contemporary as well as earlier literature which has continued to maintain the foreign origins of Yoruba culture. Indeed, only a year previously (though too late for Fabunmi himself to take account of it), the migrationist thesis had been restated in another local publication (in this case, claiming specifically Jewish origins for Yoruba religion), by Canon R.A. Fajemisin, writing from a perspective outside Ife (in the eastern Yoruba town of Ilesa).<sup>78</sup>

Explicit in this recent revival of the controversy over Yoruba "origins" are disputes over the contested claim of the *Oni* of Ife to seniority of status among Yoruba rulers. The creationist story self-evidently underwrites the primacy of Ife, while the migrationist alternative can be employed (as it is explicitly by Fajemisin) to challenge it. Zachernuk registers this sort of use of "Hamitic" links in the service of local micro-nationalisms (citing, among others, the case of Fajemisin), and suggests that this represents a further transformation of the Nigerian use of the "Hamitic hypothesis," reflecting a

<sup>76</sup>Zachernuk, "Origins," 453-54.

<sup>77</sup>Chief M.A. Fabunmi, *Ife, the Genesis of Yoruba Race* (Lagos, 1985).

<sup>78</sup>Canon R.A. Fajemisin, *Primacy in Post-Oduduwa Yorubaland* (Ilesa, 1984).

fading of concern with contesting “imperial” ideology and a reorientation towards internal Nigerian issues.<sup>79</sup> It is questionable, however, how new this really was. There had always been an ambiguity about whether supposedly prestigious foreign origins were claimed for Africans as a whole, or for particular peoples in contrast with others—an ambiguity which goes back at least to Johnson, who certainly claimed a special status for the Yoruba among Africans, as well as the dignity of Africans vis-à-vis Europeans.<sup>80</sup> Already by the 1900s, the study of Yoruba history had become implicated in contests over seniority of status and territorial disputes between different Yoruba groups.<sup>81</sup> Rather than being a specifically post-colonial phenomenon, this was an element of continuity with the colonial past: the principal dialogue in which Yoruba historians engaged, it may be suggested, had *always* been an internal one.

<sup>79</sup>Zachernuk, “Origins,” 451-52.

<sup>80</sup>Johnson, *History*, xxi-xxii; for the claim of Johnson and other early local historians to the distinctiveness of the Yoruba, see more generally Law, “Constructing,” 91-92; idem., “Local Amateur Scholarship,” 79-82.

<sup>81</sup>Law, “Early Yoruba Historiography,” 78.