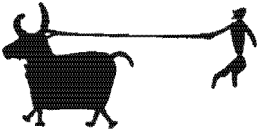


WHEN HYPOTHESIS BECOMES MYTH: THE IRAQI ORIGIN OF THE IRAQW¹



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The now-rejected Hamitic hypothesis, depicting Caucasoid peoples from the north as responsible for a number of precolonial cultural and technological achievements in Africa, served to legitimize European intervention and colonization on the continent. This article discusses how the Hamitic hypothesis was modified and revived as the origin myth of the Iraqw of Tanzania. Written sources and the oralization of written sources have significantly promoted the current widespread recognition among the Iraqw that they originated in Iraq or Mesopotamia. (Iraqw, Mbulu, Hamitic hypothesis, oral tradition, invented tradition)

A great many Iraqw in northern Tanzania claim that they have a historical connection with Iraq in the Middle East, and they are frequently able to provide detailed accounts and arguments reaching far beyond the phonological similarity between the two words in order to substantiate this linkage. The theory of the Middle East connection is a rather new phenomenon in Iraqw discourse about the past, and this article reports on how it came into being. This is an example of how the written word, and the oralization of the written word, under certain historical circumstances can become a powerful means for attributing authority and authenticity to an invented tradition. At the same time, the fixation inherent in the process of transcription does not mean that oral traditions lose their ability to respond to changing historical circumstances. On the contrary, “orality and literacy, far from being mutually contradictory poles, can interact and support each other” (Finnegan 1988:110). This implies the necessity of scrutinizing the historical, social, and political circumstances in which a particular tradition occurs before one proceeds to evaluate the content of oral traditions as historical evidence.

The story of how the Iraqw came to regard Iraq as a place of origin is also the story of how a well-refuted scientific hypothesis, heavily infested with European ethnocentrism and racism, has been modified and has taken on new life as the origin myth of an African people. In order to understand the Iraqw adoption of the new myth, it is necessary to explore how its parent, the Hamitic hypothesis, has constituted an integral part of European attitudes to Africa from the start of the slave trade to the present. The historical context and development of the Hamitic hypothesis reveal that it has always primarily been an ideological statement, a myth motivating actions and responding readily to changes in the relationship between Europe and Africa.

There is little extraordinary in the fact that Malinowski's functionalist approach to “savage myth” may be applied convincingly to statements which were presented as science during a specific historical epoch. There is a certain degree of irony, however, in the fact that C. G. Seligman, the author of the work that contains what

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is probably the most influential formulation of the Hamitic hypothesis, was also the one who probably more than anyone else contributed to bringing Malinowski, and with him modern anthropology, into prominence.

THE SETTING

The linguistic map of Tanzania shows the area where the Iraqw live as a pocket of Cushites in a land almost entirely dominated by Bantu- and Nilotic-speaking peoples. The linguistic contrast to the surrounding groups corresponds with other cultural differences, and to a certain extent with variations in physical attributes. Until a few decades ago the classification of the Iraqw language was problematic, as it contained elements "differing from any other known language," making it "impossible to regard it as anything but a member of an Isolated Language Group" (Tucker and Bryan 1956:157). The question of where the Iraqw came from when they entered the area in which they currently reside has until recently been equally problematic, and the various theories that have been suggested include all four cardinal directions.

The earliest sources of Iraqw oral traditions, however, provide quite a clear answer to the latter question in the story of Ma/angwatay. Ma/angwatay, as the story goes, was a fertile land where the Iraqw were healthy and strong. But the increasingly self-confident youth, disobeying the elders and the ritual expert, led their people to disaster by declaring war on an opponent that proved to be superior. The Iraqw had to flee northwards and finally came to a mountainous area (*Iraqwar Da/aw*) which is still regarded as the Iraqw core area. The different versions of this story that have been recorded are strikingly similar, and they all agree that Ma/angwatay was a land to the south of where the great majority of the Iraqw currently live (Berger and Kiessling, In press:110-13; Burra 1985:32; Fosbrooke 1954:55; Harri 1989:2-4; Huntingford 1953:127; Nordbustad and Naman 1978:7-15; Ramadhani 1955:1-4; Snyder 1993:319; Thornton 1980:205-06).

The rise of a new myth which names a place of origin in the opposite cardinal direction (in Iraq) does not, however, seem to have threatened the southward orientation of the story of Ma/angwatay, nor does it seem to have modified any other aspects of the previously existing myth. The two locations of origin are simply synthesized and combined in temporal sequence; i.e., the Iraqw originally came from Iraq, migrated southward to Ma/angwatay, and then had to flee northwards to where they currently live. It is the question of how the first part of this journey was invented and how Iraq has come to be accepted by the Iraqw as their initial point of origin that is discussed here.

WRITTEN SOURCES AND ORALIZATION

Informants' statements from all corners of the area dominated by the Iraqw showed a high degree of consistency in detail regarding the exodus from Asia to East

Africa. As the myth is a rather new phenomenon and the population in question numbers about 500,000 people, these similarities are indicative of a rapid and seemingly very widespread acceptance of the theory of the Middle East connection, and strongly suggest a written source as a key factor in the dissemination process.

The first written source referring to an Iraqw origin in Iraq or Mesopotamia is an unpublished ethnographic account in Swahili by Hemedi Ramadhani, a schoolteacher in Mbulu from 1930 onwards. The following is an excerpt from the introduction to the paper, which is dated 1955:

Their origin is not particularly well known, but they are Hamitic nomads who have now mixed with Bantus. There are many stories telling that they came from Iraq (Mesopotamia) in Asia, that they passed Egypt and some crossed a great sea in canoes. They came into a mountainous area and some went to Habesh and all the way to Somalia. Others continued to travel until they came to Lake Victoria, and some crossed the Blue Nile and finally came to the land Maangwatay which is in Kondoa-Irangi District, Central Region, Tanganyika. (Ramadhani 1955:1; my translation)

Ramadhani substantiates the connection to Iraq by listing eight Arab words which have similarities to Iraqw terms with the same or closely related meanings. He also points out that the Iraqw language has several rare phonemes in common with Arabic, and that young Iraqw who fought in World War II in Ethiopia had seen people there who dressed like themselves.

Twenty-three years after Ramadhani wrote his version of early Iraqw history, a collection of Iraqw folktales was published by W. D. Kamera (1978) in Swahili. In the book's introduction the author presents some general ethnographic information about the Iraqw and some of their clans. Here the connection with Iraq reappears. A detailed account is given of how the Iraqw crossed the Red Sea, and how they then spread southward in Africa in a manner that corresponds well with the current distribution of Cushitic languages (Kamera 1978:vii). No reference is made to Ramadhani's paper in Kamera's book, either as source or as corroborative evidence. A factor which must be considered concerning the remarkable similarities between the works of the two authors is the fact that Ramadhani's paper had already become oralized by the time Kamera collected his material. It is impossible to estimate how many copies have been made of Ramadhani's paper, but there are definitely several copies of two slightly different originals circulating in the Mbulu area. The three anthropologists who have written theses about the Iraqw have all managed to get hold of a copy independently of each other. The man who lent me Ramadhani's paper said I could borrow it on the condition that I "renew it." It was just a heap of pages badly torn and completely worn out after decades of use, yet it appeared to be one of his most precious possessions. The owner of the manuscript, who was heir to the position of ritual leader (*kahamusmo*) in the area of my first fieldwork, had learned much of Ramadhani's text by heart and frequently cited its content or referred to its authority in various contexts. How profound an effect such an oralization of this written text has had is hard to estimate, but the authority and the extensive travels of this particular man alone may account for considerable dispersion of Ramadhani's theories. Thus the appearance of Ramadhani's paper may have had substantial

influence on Iraqw discourse on the past through such processes, despite the fact that the manuscript was never published.

Much of the power of both Ramadhani's and Kamera's versions lay in the fact that they were printed, and were written by learned individuals whose authority may have been enhanced by the fact that both authors were outsiders. It should also be emphasized that a typed ethnographic account written in Swahili was itself a remarkable phenomenon several years prior to independence. The inherent power attributed to the written word in a society characterized by restricted literacy may, as comparative evidence suggests (Goody 1968; Ong 1982:93-94), be considerable. While the importance of this factor may have decreased between 1955 and 1978, the influence of Kamera's text was obviously enhanced by the fact that this was a real book, printed, published, and made readily available, apparently strongly subsidized, to the literate Iraqw public. Moreover, it was written by a scholar with a Ph.D. from abroad.

There is, however, good reason to believe that another and more modern type of oralization has played a key role in the distribution of Kamera's version. Most of the Iraqw I met who were in possession of and had read Kamera's book were people with a relatively high level of education, such as schoolteachers and pastors. Many of them had used the book (or Ramadhani's paper) in writing their papers and theses (e.g., Burra 1985; Mathiya 1981; Naman 1980) and continue to use it actively in their teaching and preaching. The effect of this dissemination is reflected in papers secondary-school students in the Mbulu area have written about Iraqw history (Mosses et al. 1987), and in interviews with students, particularly secondary-school students. The Middle East connection has in this way become part of the body of knowledge that Iraqw pupils and students bring back from school to illiterate relatives and neighbors.

Despite the fact that there is a remote relationship between Semitic and Cushitic languages (classified as distinct subgroups under Greenberg's [1963] Afro-Asiatic language family), the Cushites are rooted "firmly in African soil" and "the unity of the Afro-Asiatic language family does not support any theory of Asian influence on Africa in historic times" (Curtin et al. 1978:121). There appears to be good reason to claim that the Iraqw connection with Iraq is, in a literal sense, rather far-fetched. If anyone is to blame for the spreading of the theory, however, the culprits are not Ramadhani and Kamera, nor the teachers and other literates who present the theory as authoritative knowledge. The works of these two authors have certainly served as catalysts for the dissemination of the theory, but they were by no means the originators of the idea. The short introduction to each work provides a clear indication as to whence the theory came. The clue to the phenomenon I am discussing here is contained in one of the terms by which the two authors classify the Iraqw. Both consider the Iraqw to be Hamites.

THE HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS

The origin of the term "Hamite" is the biblical figure Ham, who was cursed by his father, Noah. More precisely, Ham's son Canaan was cursed because of the wrongs of his father, and doomed, together with all his descendants, to serve as slaves for the descendants of Noah's other two sons.

The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave." (Gen. 9:18-27)

When Ham later came to be associated with black skin,² which was first explicitly formulated in the Babylonian Talmud of around 600 A.D., the foundation was laid for a most fitting legitimization myth for the slave trade (Sanders 1969:523). By defining the African as the descendant of Ham or Canaan, his status as "slave of slaves" in relation to the rest of the world was endorsed by God.

The nineteenth-century Hegelian view of Africa postulated that the continent was "the land of childhood . . . enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" and that in Africa there would not be found any signs of civilization, of culture, or of "political constitution." Even "moral sentiments" were nonexistent, and "the character of the Negroes . . . is capable of no development or culture" (Hegel 1956:91, 96, 98). In 1912, Kitching (1912:276) wrote that the savage African "has no conception at all of love. In many dialects there is no word for love." Africa was characterized entirely by what it lacked, all of which was defined in European terms (cf. George 1958:64). Some of the more or less bizarre arguments in this same vein were phrased in biological terms. The claim that Africans did not have hair but wool, that their children matured more rapidly than whites, that women gave birth quickly and practically without pain, and that mulattos were infertile hybrids, were efforts clearly directed at associating Africans with animals (Curtin 1965:43-44). The European image of "darkest Africa," which may have had its origin in geographical ignorance, soon came to be an expression of cultural and racial arrogance. Africa had become the antithesis of Western civilization.

Evidence gradually appeared, however, that seemed to contradict the hypothesis of the biologically or divinely determined inferiority of the African. Archaeologists found remnants of African empires and sophisticated cultural artifacts, and anthropologists described highly complex political structures. Increased knowledge indicated that at least some Africans had religion, albeit not the right one, and cannibalism turned out to be not as universal in Africa as the first European accounts

had claimed. These new, positive attributes of Africa and Africans demanded explanation, and the racist view was salvaged by a remarkable redefinition of the Hamites. The Hamites were now turned into Europeans, to whom at least some of the European virtues of the time were attributed. Meinhof's (1912) *Die Sprachen der Hamiten* is, according to Knappert (1976), "the one great work on the Hamitic languages." Meinhof writes in his introduction that "the Hamitic tribes acted invariably as the *Herrenvolk* in the midst of the dark-skinned peoples" (cited in Knappert 1976:315). But it was Seligman who provided what probably became the most influential formulation of the new Hamitic hypothesis when he wrote in his *Races of Africa*, "The incoming Hamites were pastoral 'Europeans' arriving wave after wave—better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes" (Seligman 1959 [1930]:96).

This version of the hypothesis assumed that the Hamites had migrated southward into a continent already inhabited by primitive bushmen and Negroid peoples, bringing with them everything that might be considered signs of civilization.³ In other words, even the cursed among the Euro-Asians were able to completely outshine the original inhabitants of Africa. The newly discovered cultural achievements of Africa were in this way explained as the work of outsiders, in most cases of Caucasoid peoples from the north. One well-known example which is symptomatic of this attitude to Africa was the persistent denial of the possibility that Africans could have been capable of creating the great masonry of Zimbabwe (Fagan 1981; Garlake 1982). Hodgkin (1956:177) writes, "It was at one time the fashionable view that any remarkable work of art or architecture discovered in Africa south of the Sahara must have been produced by non-Africans . . . since Africans were by definition incapable of this level of achievement."

Archaeologists alleged that Hamitic material culture was superior, linguists maintained that relative sophistication characterized the Hamitic languages, and descriptions of the Hamitic peoples emphasized that they were "light-skinned" and "good-looking" in comparison with their neighbors. Whatever good there was in Africa came physically with the Hamites, or by diffusion from the north. This view provided, of course, a powerful legitimation for the next historical epoch, colonialism.

"It was thought that just as every sign of civilization in Black Africa was to be attributed to influences of 'light-skinned' Hamites, no development could take place without the interference of 'superior races'" (Farelius 1993:109).⁴ The remarkable redefinition of the Hamite seems to be a good example of the point that Hammond and Jablow (1977:13, 18) were pursuing in claiming that Africa was "a field for the free play of European fantasy," and that "for each period certain historical factors determined the precise content of the images."

THE SHADOW OF THE HAMITE

The inference of the Hamitic hypothesis that Africa is dependent on outsiders for its evolution and development is an idea which is still very much alive in European minds. It is perhaps most clearly seen in films (Dunn 1996) and popular literature describing rather ordinary white men who travel to Africa, where their innate qualities turn them into deities in the eyes of the natives (e.g., *The Phantom*), or where apes take the intermediate position between the ruling white man and the Africans (e.g., *Tarzan*; see Gruesser 1992:12-13). It is also, in varying degrees, an element in the ideology behind the activities of missionaries and development workers. Africa is still to some extent perceived by many as the white man's burden, and continues to be defined by what it lacks and not what it has, as reflected in negative prefixes such as under-, non-, or un-.

These remnants of the world view underlying the Hamitic hypothesis are not, according to Farelus (1993:111), confined to the popular sector: "It is no exaggeration to say that the shadow of the Hamite is still lingering on in lecture rooms of both European and African universities." Murdock (1959), Greenberg (1963:50-51), Bohannan (1964:65-68), and many of their contemporaries argued strongly against the Hamitic hypothesis and the prejudices it represented and reproduced. The careful reader may, however, still recognize elements reminiscent of the Hamitic hypothesis in the following quotation, in which Murdock (1959:195) provides a first-hand description of the area where the Iraqw, now classified as Cushites, live:

This particular area, which the writer is fortunate to have visited, makes an indelible impression upon the European because of its sharp contrast to the settlement patterns of most African tribes. One sees no brush, no fallow or unoccupied land. The rolling countryside presents a vista of alternating cultivated fields, neat strips of green pasture, homesteads, and well-tended plots of woodland—the whole strongly reminiscent of prosperous peasant sections in certain parts of Europe.

If the message of Caucasoid superiority implicit in the Hamitic hypothesis has been able to survive in more or less disguised forms, there may be reason to raise the question of whether this has had any influence on the characteristics attributed to the Cushites. It would be speculative to suggest that such a factor has played any role in linking the introduction of both agriculture and pastoralism in this particular part of Africa to Cushitic peoples (Ambrose 1982:113; Ehret 1967; Sutton 1981:576-79). It is tempting, however, to ask whether there might not be a parallel between the efforts to attribute the ruins of Zimbabwe to Phoenicians, Hittites, Sabeans, or Hamites, and more recent proposals that the impressive structures of Engaruka in Tanzania are remnants of a Cushitic or Nilotic society, and not, as is increasingly accepted today, the work of the ancestors of the nearby Bantu-speaking Sonjo (Ambrose 1982:135, 143-44; Nurse and Rottland 1993). The suggestion that Cushites or Nilotes were the engineers of Engaruka is based on very slim evidence,⁵ and the most plausible connection between Engaruka and the peoples that were earlier called Hamites or

Nilo-Hamites is the fact that one of these groups, the Maasai, was probably responsible for the destruction of Engaruka (Davidson 1968:129).

The final dismissal of the Hamitic hypothesis by leading scholars occurred within a few years of the publication of the last edition of Seligman's *Races of Africa* in 1957. However, by then the hypothesis had been treated as authoritative knowledge for so long that its impact and influence could not easily be wiped out by the new theories that emerged. The continuous authority of *Races of Africa* and the Hamitic hypothesis is indicated by the impressive list of leading Africa scholars who contributed to the revision that led to the 1957 edition (see "Publisher's note to the third edition" in Seligman 1959 [1930]). MacGaffey (1966:13) writes that "since World War II [the Hamitic hypothesis] has taken on the sanctity of established doctrine." He cites a 1960 article which traces the origin of a Nigerian stone axe to western Europe, and comments that "At this stage our hypothesis has become a virus" (see also Lewis 1963). Kamera's 1978 contribution is but one example of the fact that aspects of the Hamitic hypothesis survived even outside the popular sector. Just one year previously, Kesby had published *The Cultural Regions of East Africa*, and though the term Hamite had been eradicated from the vocabulary, its shadow lingered on. The admiration for the Maasai that seems to be projected onto neighboring peoples in this quote is strongly reminiscent of preindependence thinking regarding cultural influence and prestige in East Africa:⁶

They have impressed European visitors and residents in East Africa almost as much as they have their African neighbours. . . . Whatever Europeans' opinions, there is no doubt, as has been stressed already, that they are the key people of the whole region. Prior to European administration, the Maasai represented the centre of fashion for the peoples around them. . . . All that can be said with certainty is that the Maasai represented, in a high degree, the desirable way of life, and the appropriate culture, which was the ideal of all the peoples of the region, except for the Swahili. (Kesby 1977:79)

The loss in charm of the Hamitic hypothesis and its replacement by new terms in the 1960s seem to have had virtually no effect on the Iraqw myth that had developed. The terminology of the following quote from a thesis written by an Iraqw student is quite up to date, but the migrations of Seligman's Hamites have been kept intact:

The ancestors of the Iraqw tribe are said to have lived in ancient Mesopotamia, the country today known as Iraqw [*sic*]. At some time in the remote past they migrated to the highlands of Ethiopia between the Blue and the White Nile where their descendants are known as Cushites today. (Naman 1980:1)

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Ramadhani and Kamera do not state explicitly that the Iraqw come from Iraq, but refer to the "numerous stories" and "interesting legends" of their informants. Both authors, however, seem to take for granted that the myth is pre-European, and their readers are certainly led to perceive the historical connection with Iraq as probable. Hauge (1981:8), a folklorist who collected his material between 1968 and 1972, also

refers to Iraqw “legends” about an origin in the Middle East, apparently, like Ramadhani and Kamera, treating these more as a hypothesis of history than as myth. His contribution is published in English, and has therefore not had the feedback effect on Iraqw culture as has been the case with Ramadhani’s and Kamera’s contributions in Swahili. The fact that scholars such as Kamera and Hauge indicate that the stories of a Middle East connection are interesting as historical evidence must be appreciated in the context of the “euphoria” in the nascent discipline of African history in the 1960s, and the publication of Vansina’s (1965) *Oral Tradition* as “a fundamental justification of the value of oral tradition as historical source” (Miller 1980:ix-x).

There is little reason to believe that the Iraqw, prior to contact with the Europeans, had any knowledge of the specific locations referred to in the legends that were collected by Ramadhani and Kamera. The Mbulu highlands were located far from the caravan routes of the Arabs, and the Iraqw had “only passing contact with the Germans until 1902” (Iliffe 1969:162). As late as 1913, the area was described by German officials as a “remote and inaccessible region” (Koponen 1994:559). Moreover, the very first descriptions of the Iraqw (Bagshawe 1925, 1926; Baumann 1968 [1894]; Jaeger 1911; Kannenberg 1900; Werther 1898), and the substantive material collected by Kohl-Larsen (1958, 1963, 1964) and Berger (1938, 1947) between 1934 and 1939, provide no evidence of oral traditions mentioning an Iraqw origin in the north. As almost all of this material is either unpublished or published in German, it was probably not accessible to Ramadhani and Kamera at the time they wrote their contributions.

The Iraqw legends presented by Kamera, Ramadhani, and Hauge are, I argue, derived from stories heard from Europeans obsessed with the idea of the Hamites; an idea which, as we have seen, was central in legitimizing the very presence of Europeans in Africa. The way in which the European image of Africa, substantiated by biblical myths, was projected into the folklore of the peoples who were colonized, is highlighted by another set of newly created legends that were collected by the missionary H. Faust among the Barbayiig, another Hamitic or Nilo-Hamitic group in the area. The three stories told by Langai, “chief of the Arajek medicine clan,” are all remarkably similar to sections of Genesis, and the following text is virtually identical to the story of Noah’s curse. Even more impressive is the fact that it also contains the interpretations of the Babylonian Talmud; i.e., that the curse was the origin of the black skin:

Shortly after the man who had escaped the flood returned to the valley, he made himself a gourd of ghamunga, honey wine. He became drunk and sought the comforts of his bed.

His sons found their father lying there naked, since his covering had fallen from him. The sons laughed at the nakedness of their father.

He roused himself and cursed them. “You shall be as black as your hearts.”

From that day on, these sons and their sons in turn have become the dark races of the world.

But sons who were born to the old man after this incident remained light and have peopled the light races of the world. (Faust 1966:22)

The many similarities with Genesis (9:18-27) cannot be coincidence, and Faust concludes that the Barbayiig must have some kind of ancient connection with Semites or early Christians.

At about the same time that this Barbayiig story was recorded by Faust, C. B. Johnson interviewed Tsea, an Iraqw informant estimated to be more than 90 years old:

“Another man had two sons. One day the father forgot to cover himself when he went to bed. One of the sons came, saw his father, laughed, and went away. The other son also passed by. He found something to cover his father with. When the father woke up, he said to the first son: ‘Because you laughed, you shall be black, and be the slave of your brother.’ To the other son he said: ‘Because you covered me, you shall be white, and your brother shall work for you.’ This is the reason why you as a white man are superior to us blacks.”

“But this is the story of Noah!” I exclaimed. Where could Tsea have got it from? Not from the Christians, and not from the Mohammedans. Later I heard the story in an entirely different part of the tribe, so it is authentic enough. (Johnson 1966:96; my translation)

As we have seen earlier in this article, however, the fact that a story is told by a person of considerable traditional authority does not necessarily mean that he is repeating the words of his remote ancestors. His inspiration may in fact have come from a book he or his son had just read, or, as is more likely in these cases, from a church sermon or Christian meeting that had been attended by someone sometime during the 70 years of European contact prior to the interviews that Faust and Johnson conducted. Faust is analyzing the myth as a statement about real origin and real past, and not as a real comment on the present. The fact that an influential Barbayiig elder presents Noah’s curse as the origin of his people may say more about effects of the collective punishment and marginalization of the Barbayiig (Blystad 1992; Ndagala 1991; Rekdal and Blystad, *In press*), and even about future Barbayiig conceptualization of HIV (Blystad 1995:104), than about their historic relation to the Middle East.

The Hamitic hypothesis was fundamental to the European perception of Africa in general and the Iraqw in particular, and these images were projected into the self-images of their new subjects through powerful new channels of communication. The Hamitic hypothesis was taught as history in the schools and churches that provided the educational basis for the new emerging African elite. In his introduction, Ramadhani (1955) expresses his gratitude to those who had helped and given advice in connection with writing his ethnography of the Iraqw, among whom was Jon Jøssang, who has described his experiences as a missionary in a book published in Norwegian. The theory Jøssang subscribed to regarding the origin of the Iraqw and the other Hamites in the area is formulated explicitly as follows: “[A]ll agree that they are of white origin and have come to Africa across South Arabia, the Red Sea and into Somali-Land” (Jøssang 1959:26; my translation). There is good reason to assume that Jøssang is one of the informants who, directly or indirectly, perpetuated Ramadhani’s Middle East origin of the Iraqw.

These examples show that Seligman's authoritative statements in *Races of Africa* are combined with tales and locations taken from Genesis, which synthesis is then communicated to the peoples in question by missionaries and other Europeans. Later, the message is recalled as genuine tradition (with local attributes such as ghamunga, the honey mead of the Barbayiig) and, in the sense that it is taken as evidence of the reliability of the initial point of departure, it reinforces and verifies not only the message of the Hamitic hypothesis, but indeed the authority and universality of the Holy Writ itself. When this evidence is communicated back to the Iraqw in written form and then oralized by authority figures in both modern and traditional institutions, the ultimate effect is a self-fulfilling prophecy: a new Iraqw origin myth.⁷

THE IRAQW AND THE HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS

The simple argument of the Hamitic hypothesis of African inferiority to Europe depended heavily on the claim that the "Caucasoid" or "European" Hamites were indeed superior to other Africans. We have already seen how the Hamites in general were associated with rather positive attributes, and correspondingly how the Bantu-speakers, or "real Africans" were stripped of what were perceived as desirable qualities by the Europeans. Let us now consider how the Iraqw, who were classified as Hamites by the end of the previous century following the first contact with Europeans (Jaeger 1911:96; Kannenberg 1900:144), were conceptualized and described prior to independence in 1963.

The official national census of 1931 contains several notes describing the categories of people listed. Here, the Iraqw are described as "intelligent" while certain Bantu-speaking groups are labeled as "extremely primitive and ignorant people" (Mitchell 1932:7). Raikes (1986:139) cites the notes of a Mbulu District Officer in the 1920s who described a Bantu group as "exceptionally backward, unprogressive," and characterized by "natural stupidity and laziness," while the Iraqw were "steady, hard-working and people of their word," qualities which were associated with their "nilo-hamitic origin." Perham, who travelled from Iraqw country to that of the Bantu-speaking Mbugwe in the late 1920s, reveals her preconceived attitudes to the peoples she met in the area, "from bush to semidesert, from handsome Hamitic to squat-faced Bantu. Their tribal mark, a deep gash under the eye, makes them ghastly and they are sickly enough without this extra infliction" (Perham 1976:113). Earlier she has described the Iramba (Bantu-speakers to the west of the Iraqw) as "ugly" and "magic-ridden," and the contrast to the Iraqw becomes marked:⁸ "They, and especially the children, have a very spiritual look: the expression in their great eyes is of people who see more than plains and crops and herds. It was most exciting, after so many months of Bantu, with only a sprinkling of alien dynasties, to be among Hamites" (Perham 1976:94). It should be noted that Perham traveled extensively in the British colonies and wrote several books on African administrative issues. Moreover, she was lecturer in Government and Administration at Oxford at a time when "the Colonial Office began to recruit

administrators chiefly from Oxford and Cambridge" (Iliffe 1979:325). The equation of Hamitic with certain racially determined positive qualities is perhaps never as clearly stated as in the way Perham describes the chief of the mainly Bantu-speaking Singida, who was "popular and efficient. He has a strain of Hamitic, I fancy" (1976:89). "The strain of Hamitic" which accounts for the surprisingly positive qualities⁹ identified in this particular man is illustrative of the way the new Hamitic hypothesis saved the thesis of the predestined inferiority and misery of Africa from being directly falsified. Just as every new sign of civilization and cultural achievement tended to be attributed to Hamitic peoples from the north, whatever were perceived as desirable qualities in African individuals could, as in this case, be attributed to partial or purely Hamitic racial origin. The glorification of the Iraqw and the other Hamites, or the blood of the Hamites, at the expense of Negroid or Bantu-speaking neighboring groups was, of course, an act of European self-glorification.

There is good reason to believe that Iraqw acceptance of the Middle East connection was facilitated by the fact that being classified as Hamites implied a promotion to the very top of the new prestige ladder that was imported from Europe. Furthermore, judging from the terminology of colonial administrators, it is fair to assume that this attitude may have influenced colonial policies toward the Iraqw to some extent. Although their extraordinary territorial expansion and the correspondingly rapid population growth in the twentieth century is undoubtedly a result of many factors, including being favored as a both peaceful and sedentary population (Rekdal 1994:60-72), it would be hard to believe that the superlatives of the Europeans were not converted into actions beneficial for the Iraqw. It is also an open question whether, or to what extent, the peacefulness and sedentariness of the Iraqw were related to the fact that they were treated as "intelligent" and "hard-working" Hamites.

THE HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS IN INDEPENDENT TANZANIA

The Hamitic hypothesis went through a radical transformation in order to account for the changes in European political relations with Africa. The early version depicted Africans as the descendants of Ham, cursed by Noah to serve as slaves for the rest of humankind. Its successor turned the Hamites into Europeans or quasi-Europeans, conveniently accounting for new discoveries of impressive achievements that should not have occurred on the African continent according to the prevalent European image of Africa. Although the Hamite had appeared remarkably adaptive during the preceding centuries, his function as an instrument of oppression and domination of Africa remained constant. It was therefore to be expected that there would be little place for the idea of the Hamite in the new independent African states.¹⁰

The Maasai warrior who had been featured in all his regalia on Tanzanian 100s banknotes was removed and replaced by entirely different national symbols in the late

1960s. At about the same time a law was passed that made the wearing of Maasai and Barbayiig traditional dress illegal. Hundreds of Maasai men were in fact arrested because they were wearing the very clothes that still appeared on their Tanzanian banknotes, and the district commissioner of Maasai-land told journalists in 1967 that "police are prepared to herd the Masai into mass baths, burn their ceremonial garb in public and shave off their ochered hair" (*Time* 1967:31; see also *Newsweek* 1968:24 and 1972:10-11; *Daily News* 1977:1; Arens 1976:69).

The degree to which this change of attitude affected the Iraqw and their response to the new government is hard to judge, but a comparison of politically oriented studies prior to and following independence seems to indicate a certain degree of change in the relationship between the Iraqw and government. Officials and researchers employed by the colonial administration had written reports which described the political and economic integration of the Iraqw into the greater society as harmonious and successful, and a stark contrast to the development among other groups in Tanganyika was often pointed out (Hatch 1972:17; Iliffe 1979:473; Meek 1953). Studies conducted after independence frequently focused on problems of Iraqw integration into the nation state and described widespread skepticism and lack of participation on the part of the local population (Malley 1970; Quorro 1971; see also Raikes 1975:86). This scenario corresponds well with stereotypes, currently prevailing in urban and administrative centers such as Arusha and Dar es Salaam, of the Iraqw as reserved and skeptical.

This point is clearly illustrated by contrasting the findings of the two major anthropologists working among the Iraqw prior to 1980. Thornton, who conducted his fieldwork in the mid-1970s, writes that "many Iraqw, especially those of Irqwar Da'aw, express suspicion and hostility toward all governmental institutions" (Thornton 1980:6). Just prior to national independence, the implementation of an extensive government-initiated culling program appeared to be "a spectacular success" (Winter 1968:18, 22) and "marked the first occasion on which any cattle-owning people in all of East Africa was successfully induced to participate in such a scheme" (Winter and Molyneaux 1963:500). Winter (1968:16-17) found that the Iraqw had moved territorial boundaries of important ritual significance in order to bring them in accordance with the ones drawn up by the colonial administration, and moreover,

[t]he Native authority is fully accepted, and is an organic part of their own social structure. Very few Iraqw are capable of envisaging modern tribal life without the system of chieftainships. What has occurred has been that as the Native Authority has established its authority, in the sense that as it has reached the position where the Iraqw not only think that they have to obey its dictates but they *should* obey them, the old system and the new have delimited their own spheres of activity. Thus both are seen as having legitimate places in the total social structure, but each has a different part to play in the over-all scheme.

One particular event highlights the changes indicated here. During the national election in 1960, the official candidates of the Tanganyika African National Union won all the contests except in the area dominated by the Iraqw. This caused great

consternation as it was perceived by many as a reactionary move on the threshold of independence. The winner of the election in Mbulu was Herman Elias Sarwatt, a top administrator of Mbulu District during the last decade of colonial rule who was also the son of the last Iraqw chief to be installed by the British. Sarwatt was subsequently expelled from Parliament, but was later readmitted under "a general amnesty for party renegades" and elected deputy speaker of the National Assembly in 1964 (Tordoff 1967:59n; see also Listowel 1965:380-81).

Ethnographic material from multiethnic rural communities such as Mto wa Mbu and Mangola in Arusha Region provides additional evidence of how independence affected the image of those peoples who had earlier been labelled Hamites. In both of these communities a new and valued superethnic or national identity, *mswahili*, had developed, which implies a remarkable redefinition of a term that to a certain extent had been stigmatized during the colonial period (Arens 1975). The contrasting category was the more or less pejorative term *watu wa kabila* (literally, tribal people), which was applied to the Iraqw, the Datooga, and the Maasai (Arens 1979:60, 69; 1976:70; Ishige 1969:99); i.e., the peoples in the area who had been classified as Hamites or Nilo-Hamites by the Europeans. The quasi-European Hamite was suddenly no better than the rest. The removal of the Hamite from the banknote reflects changes that extend far beyond the symbolic domain. In the southern Mbulu and Hanang area it is not uncommon to see Barbayiig women hiding their traditional leather skirts under layers of modern clothing in order to be admitted to local guest houses, or to be allowed to board a bus. Those who are pursuing a career in the modern Tanzanian society sometimes use special earrings, or even surgery, to hide the fact that their earlobes have been pierced in the manner characteristic of the Nilotes and Cushites in the area.

Europeans have fallen from grace and taken the Hamite with them. Independence in Tanzania was marked by a radical re-evaluation of the influence of Europe in Africa, turning the former rulers into the prime villain. Colonialism, which had earlier been described as an altruistic intervention, was redefined as imperialism, economic exploitation, or even genocide.¹¹ As a central element in the ideology behind colonialism, the Hamitic hypothesis was dismissed for both scholarly and political reasons.

The fall of the Hamitic hypothesis as an explanation for the cultural achievements of Africa seems, however, to have had little influence on the popularity of the Iraqw myth of origin in Iraq. Furthermore, there are no indications that the new nationalist ideology or postcolonial academia had any political objections to the existence of the myth, as is illustrated by the fact that Kamera's book was published as late as 1978 by the state-controlled East African Literature Bureau. The continued and virtually unopposed existence of the Iraqw myth, both as it is presented by the authors reviewed in this article and as it is currently circulating and flourishing among the Iraqw as oralized literature, may be explained in part by the fact that it has been stripped of the clearly racist message of the Hamitic hypothesis. The Iraqw myth contains no explicit formulation of Iraqw racial or cultural superiority and does not, therefore,

represent a contradiction to the postindependence nationalist ideology which stresses the unity and equality of all Tanzanians. The connection northwards, however, is hardly value-neutral at another level, and there is a certain amount of pride implicit in being directly linked to the cradle of civilization and two major world religions. This, however, is in perfect accord with other aspects of nationalist ideology, embracing, for example, modern development theory, Islam, and Christianity.

During interviews with Iraqw informants I was often forced to state my opinion regarding the question of the origin and migrations of the Iraqw. In all honesty I replied that I thought that the linguistic evidence links the Iraqw to Cushitic-speaking peoples currently living in northern Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia. When I added that this common linguistic ancestry lay several thousand years back in time, and that the connection with Iraq or Mesopotamia seemed highly unlikely, the response was in some cases very negative. My skepticism about the Iraq connection was an obvious attack on the authenticity of a tradition that was meaningful for my informants. The paradox in the situation lies in the fact that their reactions indicated the degree to which the modified Hamitic hypothesis really had become an authentic tradition. These reactions are reminiscent of the distress provoked by Hanson's article on the inventions of Maori culture (Hanson 1989, 1991; Levine 1991; Linnekin 1991). Anthropologists should keep in mind that the invention of tradition is a contradiction in terms for most people, especially for those whose traditions are involved.

ORALITY AND WRITING

In order to map the extent to which the Iraq myth has pervaded Iraqw society, I sought the collaboration of a group of students at Dongobesh Secondary School. As part of a project in history, they were to interview elders in their respective home areas about the origin of the Iraqw. The result confirmed my own experiences regarding the pervasiveness of the new myth, but one of the interviews with elders in Karatu provided some unexpected findings. A new prelude had been added to the Iraq(w) origin myth, describing the origin of three important Iraqw clans. According to this version, the Masay clan are descendants of Romans from Messina, the Tipe clan are descendants of Jews originally living around Tigris, and the Naman clan are descendants of Normans. These additions may be seen as serving to reinforce the Iraqw ties to centers of civilization in the north, but there may be reason to question whether the choice of Normans is as phonetically determined or coincidental as it appears.

Norwegian missionaries in this area have built a network of dispensaries and established one of the best hospitals in Tanzania, Haydom Lutheran Hospital. The doctors, most of them Norwegians, working in these institutions are frequently referred to as *qwaslare*, which is the Iraqw term for ritual experts from certain clans, including the Naman clan. It is probably stretching the analysis too far to draw attention to the fact that the only Iraqw doctor at Haydom Lutheran Hospital is from the Naman clan, and that his father, recently made bishop, has been the most

prominent Iraqw in the development of the powerful (and still Norwegian-sponsored) Mbulu Lutheran Church in this area. It should, however, be noted that a strikingly similar prelude to the Iraq myth has been recorded independently elsewhere by the historian Yusufu Q. Lawi (pers. comm. 1997). This example indicates that the raw material for making myths is virtually unlimited and, more importantly in this context, that writing does not necessarily freeze the process.

Ramadhani's and Kamera's contributions to Iraqw discourses on the past have had a significant influence because of characteristics attributed to the written word. The technical side is obvious; i.e., numerous (at least in the case of Kamera's book) and inexpensive copies of the written story were distributed and could thereby reach a large number of literate Iraqw differently located in time and space. These Swahili texts became particularly influential and authoritative because they were the very first descriptions of Iraqw culture presented in an intelligible language to the Iraqw public. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, comparative evidence suggests that the written word tends to have considerable authority, sometimes even magical and healing power, in a population that is moving toward literacy. Thus, several contributing factors made the Iraq connection appear authentic and authoritative, thereby creating tradition. The other side of the coin appears to be that these processes imply fossilization or fixation of the myth, imprisoning it in the very letters that provided the power for its creation. The question then is whether, having lost its adaptability, the myth will survive in a world that is changing ever more rapidly.

Henige (1980:255-56) writes that "orality can free the present from imprisonment by the past because it permits the remembrance of aspects of that past . . . to accord with ever-changing self-images" and that "one of the more attractive features of the oral mode is that it allows inconvenient parts of the past to be forgotten." Parts of books, however, can also be forgotten, and this article has illustrated some adaptive features of the written version of the Iraq myth. First it was synthesized elegantly with the pre-existing myth of Ma/angwatay without causing internal contradictions or discontinuities. More recently, at least one interesting prelude has been added to the myth, and its vocabulary has even been updated in accordance with recent developments in African linguistics.

The best example of the potential adaptability of the written myth, however, is provided by the predecessors of the Iraq myth. Seligman's version of the Hamitic hypothesis was oralized by European administrators, teachers, and missionaries, and underwent further transformation in the process that led to the new origin myth of the Iraqw. Reaching further back in time, the account of Noah and his sons is today, in a sense, identical to the original as it was written several thousand years ago. At the same time it has been interpreted, oralized, and popularized in preparation for reception by diverse peoples who have all produced their unique reinterpretations of the story. One of the results of this proliferation and of the continuous interaction between written and oral forms of this particular biblical story is that we find it reappearing in myths and genealogies from all over the world. Even the Maori are recorded to have myths and genealogies linking themselves to Noah and the Middle

East, and Fijians are able to provide detailed accounts of how they migrated along the same course as the Iraqw (in the Iraq myth), before they set out in canoes from the shores of Tanganyika (France 1966 and Kelly 1940:241, both cited by Finnegan 1988:113-15, 119).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The story of the Iraqi origin of the Iraqw, I believe, emphasizes the point that myths must be analyzed in the light of their present and their own history before one proceeds to draw any conclusions about what the myth can reveal about history itself. This may lead to conclusions, such as those drawn here, that may falsify theories of grand migrations and long-distance culture contact or may shatter the credibility of impressively consistent royal genealogies of 35 generations (Henige 1980). This does not, however, mean that myth is a less important object of study for the historian, especially if we consider the myths that purport to be the product of science. Malinowski (1948 [1926]) has argued that myths are of limited value as historical evidence and should instead be analyzed as social charters or rationalizations for the social organization of a particular group. In the conclusion to his argument, he presents the following suggestion:

Let me state once more that I have dealt in this book with savage myth, and not with the myth of culture. I believe that the study of mythology as it functions and works in primitive societies should anticipate the conclusions drawn from the material of higher civilizations. (Malinowski 1948 [1926]:145)

Some 70 years after the publication of *Races of Africa*, the Hamitic hypothesis has all the characteristics that Malinowski attributed to myth. It is clear that the description of the migrations and the cultural influence of the Hamites were actually an ideological statement about the present and the future that had considerable political importance on the development (some would say underdevelopment) of an entire continent. Furthermore, it has become clear that the Hamitic myth has been rewritten dramatically in response to changing historical circumstances, such as the rise and demise of the slave trade, the beginnings of colonialism, and national independence in the 1960s. The Hamitic myth exemplifies well Malinowski's (1948 [1926]:146) point that myth is "constantly regenerated; every historical change creates its mythology."

The distinction between hypothesis and myth has been dissolved in the course of this discussion. The Iraqw have, in fact, simply borrowed a myth from another tribe who provide authenticity and authority to some of their own myths by calling them hypotheses or theories. The binary oppositions of human/subhuman, civilized/savage, and Christian/pagan that provided legitimacy for European intervention in Africa have changed in accordance with historical circumstances. There remains, however, an uncomfortable resemblance between the old colonial contrasts and the dichotomies that are currently applied in the encounter between the West and the rest. When science has become the dominant mode that orders lives and legitimizes actions, the

science/nonsense dichotomy is perhaps no less powerful and potentially dangerous than previous ones.

NOTES

1. I thank Yusufu Q. Lawi, Georg Henriksen, Astrid Blystad, and Frode Jacobsen for constructive comments to early drafts of this article. Gaseri Nanagi, Petro Gasheka, and William Naman provided invaluable assistance during fieldwork, and Barbara Blair helped with language editing. I am also grateful to Roland Kiessling, who has made unique unpublished material collected by Paul Berger in the 1930s available to me, and to the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology for research permission.

The author carried out fieldwork in three separate locations in the northwestern part of Hanang and the southern part of Mbulu Districts of Arusha Region in Tanzania between 1989 and 1995. Fieldwork was funded by grants from the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies and the Norwegian Research Council.

2. Isaac (1985:81) provides an interesting example which appears to reveal changes in the connotations of this black skin. The passage "I am black and beautiful" in the early Hebrew and Greek versions of Song of Solomon (1:5) became "I am black but beautiful" when translated to Latin and English by Europeans.

3. As Curtin has pointed out, the Hamitic hypothesis had a predecessor in early-nineteenth-century theories of the influence of the "Europeanoid" Fulbe: "By assigning the Fulbe a very long migration route, they could be given the role of cultural bearers for all of Africa" (Curtin 1965:411).

4. Trigger (1984:363) makes a more general statement on the same phenomenon:

Colonialist archaeology, wherever practised, served to denigrate native societies and peoples by trying to demonstrate that they had been static in prehistoric times and lacked the initiative to develop on their own.

5. The various versions of the story of Ma/angwatay are, as stated earlier, quite consistent in claiming that the Iraqw came from the south when they entered the Mbulu area. Furthermore, a large number of Iraqw clans are claimed to have been founded by members of ethnic groups (the Alagwa, the Burunge, and the Rangji) currently living considerably further south than the Iraqw. No Iraqw clans trace their origin in sedentary groups (such as the Sonjo) to the north of Mbulu; i.e., in the direction in which Engaruka is located.

6. The British affection for the Maasai has been interpreted as a reaction to lost British values and institutions during the industrial revolution. The Maasai was quite appropriately termed "the noble warrior" because he represented the antithesis of the decay of the European nobility and its values. The affection, which sometimes amounted to a diagnosis called "masaitis" and prompted the transfer of government officials to other posts (Hammond and Jablow 1977:164-65), has continued in the popular Western view of Africa, as is perhaps most clearly seen in the way the Maasai dominate the numerous coffee-table books presenting visual images of Africa.

7. Henige (1980) illustrates the dangers of treating oral traditions as history when, after earlier arguing that the Ganda kinglist is reliable, he realized that the consistency in detail between seemingly independently collected versions was not proof of authenticity, as he had assumed, but the result of manipulations of powerful individuals who were literate before the coming of Europeans. Access to the written word had fundamentally shaped the depth and content of the kinglists, which came to be regarded as authentic by both the Ganda people and the scholars who studied them.

8. Ernest Hemingway (1976 [1935]:57) met a group of "M'bulus" whom he describes as "good-looking savages." Another adventurer classifies them as "a rather nice-looking lot" (Dugmore 1925:53).

9. Less attractive features could similarly be attributed to Bantu blood. Barns (1923:73, 77) described the Iraqw as "an interesting industrious and intelligent people," while the neighboring Gorowa, who

are linguistically and culturally closely related to the Iraqw, were "of a low order of intelligence and morality." The author, whose ethnographic descriptions from Mbulu were heavily influenced by the Political Officer in charge, J. B. Bagshawe, explains the contrast by mentioning that the Gorowa are more "Bantu in physique."

10. Another reaction to the Hamitic hypothesis and what it represents is the Afrocentric movement. Just as the Hamitic hypothesis attributed all good things in Africa to Caucasians or Europeans, Afrocentrists are arguing that what Europe can be proud of in fact originated in Africa. The status of pharaonian Egypt as a black civilization is a central focus of debate as it implies a reversal of the argument of the Hamitic hypothesis. Black Egypt brought civilization to Europe through the Greeks who studied there (Bernal 1989), just as the Hamites allegedly brought European achievements to Africa. On the fringes of the debate are several other interesting mirror images, such as the claim that white people may be descendants of African albinos. While the early Hamitic hypothesis stated that the Africans lost their color because of Noah's curse, some Afrocentrists say that it is the whites who lost their color as a result of hereditary genetic deficiency (which we may regard as a modern equivalent to the multigenerational curse). Certain Afrocentrist arguments take on an equally racist dimension by claiming that the lack of skin melanin, which is virtually identical to a neurotransmitter found in the brain, can account for a number of biologically determined mental and emotional capacities that black people have and whites lack (see, e.g., Kittles 1995; Ortiz de Montellano 1993; *Time* 1991:19-20, 1994:74-75).

11. One of the colonial officials who worked in the Mbulu area sums up his feelings in connection with this re-evaluation in the title to his book, *Donkey's Gratitude* (Harris 1992). The gratitude of a donkey, according to a well-known Swahili proverb, is a fart.

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