

Opinions
The Hamitic Myth - A theological
anthropology that contributed to the 1994
Genocide against the Tutsi

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The New Times, August 3, 2022



‘Gusimbuka-urukiramende’ (high jumping) during pre-colonial Rwanda. The kingdom of Rwanda was structured, orderly, and capable. Net photo.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND any aspect of the genocide against the Tutsis in 1994, it is important to first acknowledge that there is a history behind it. For the case of this article, we ought to look back at the mid to late 19th century, during the colonial and missionary period, to better understand how the Church abetted a genocide that claimed the lives of over one million Tutsi.

The glorious years of the spread of Christianity to Rwanda came through devoted missionaries who arrived at the end of the 19th century, with patronage from explorers and colonizers who had preceded them. One of the men who was sent on an expedition to Africa to explore it before the deployment of missionaries was an army officer in the British Indian Army called John Hanning Speke. During his expeditions to Eastern Africa, Speke traveled to the Kingdom of Rwanda as he searched for novel discoveries on account of his Sovereign. On arrival, Speke was greatly surprised by how structured, orderly, and capable this kingdom was. As a European, his image of sub-Saharan Africa was grounded in false preconceptions that this continent was untamed and that nothing good could ever come of it. Because of these preconceptions, he pitifully posited a theory – now known as the Hamitic hypothesis - to try and explain how the kingdom of Rwanda could be advanced and progressive despite no prior presence of Europeans in this land.

The Hamitic hypothesis was named after Ham, Noah's son, to whom a curse (upon his offspring Canaan) was directed in Genesis 9 :20-27. Whereas there are variations of this Hamitic hypothesis, one that tends to grasp the most attention, which is accredited to Speke, postulates that after his curse, Ham and his family conveniently found their way down to Africa and ended up settling amongst the African people of the North. However, being pastoralists, an offshoot of these Hamites (those who came to be known as the Tutsi), traveled south and finally settled in a kingdom called Rwanda. On arrival, the Tutsi found a native group known as the Hutus, who were Bantu speaking and ended up usurping them and taking power and land via authoritarian rule. Being of a superior race due to their ancestral blood, the Tutsi dominated and suppressed the Hutus to begin their regal reign. Essentially, Speke came to a rather inane conclusion that the Tutsi were a superior race primarily because of their “supposed” ancestral lineage to Noah, and the Caucasoid race.

When, the missionaries arrived, they continued the trend set by Speke and the Belgian colonialists, who had accepted this myth as gospel truth. They utilized the Hamitic myth in their missional work to elevate Tutsis to

positions of power (pulpit) while condemning the Hutus to menial jobs (servants). The missionaries somehow believed the narrative that Tutsis could not have been native to the land because of the advanced nature of the Rwandan kingdom. Sadly, by advancing this anthropological myth, they categorically challenged the history of Rwanda as it had always been, as one that did not purposefully segregate on account of clanship. They supplanted our history with Speke's myth in order to further their colonial agendas.

Ultimately, this myth gained much traction through the Belgian Catholic Flemish priests, who themselves had been victims of hate by the French and saw the Hutus as victims who needed to be saved from the hatred of the "Hamite pastoralists" called Tutsi. The Flemish priests took this myth and made it "gospel" truth. Not only did they preach about how the Tutsis were foreigners, but they also used this narrative to instill racial ideologies into the Hutu majority group, by preaching a history that was false. They used Speke's myth to divide a nation that had not been divided on this front before.

Paul Rutayisire, a Rwandan historian, scholar, and co-author of the report on Unity of Rwandans before the Colonial Period, writes that prior to the colonial period and advent of western missionaries, there is no evidence whatsoever of tension, wars, or bad blood between the Tutsis and Hutus. He writes that only after the arrival of those who adhered to, and embraced the Hamitic myth, who came with preconceptions about the origins of the Tutsis, did tensions begin to brew.

Speke's assertion that the Tutsi were descendants of Ham is the principal theory that was ultimately built upon by those who first brought Christianity to Rwanda, to racialize, ethnicize, and create a theology that was tainted in false anthropology. This myth was solidly integrated into all sectors of governance, especially through the church, to spew dangerous ideology and create a fragmented society. Speke's Hamitic myth aimed at usurping the creation narrative, which states that all men and women are created in the image and likeness of God, in favor of one of a theory that ultimately led to the slaughter of millions of innocent men, women, and children.

This was the genesis of the story of the complicity of Christianity in the massacre of millions.

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The views expressed in this article are of the author.
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