

## ORIGINS OF THE 'MISRI' LEGENDS

'Misri' legends are prevalent and widespread among a number of East African peoples. These societies hold that they originally came from a land called 'Misri' before they migrated into East Africa. It must be qualified straightaway that the equation of the 'Misri' of these traditions with present day political and geographical Egypt is a tendency of the professional historians. Because they are either illiterate or ill-endowed with any political and geographical knowledge of Africa, the majority of the East African elders who profess these legends simply talk of 'Misri.' But it is also true that a small but articulate percentage of these informants unmistakably link the 'Misri' of their traditions

# 'Misri' Legends in East and Central Africa

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with the 'Misri' (Egypt) of the Bible. This paper attempts a deeper probe into the historical significance of these legends. Additionally a few pertinent questions are raised which East African historians must attempt to find solutions to, in their attempt at illumination of the early period of East African history. Which African groups, for example, claim to have come from 'Misri'? What exactly do elders mean when they talk of 'Misri'? Do they mean a particular territory? Or do they mean a particular direction? What are the reactions of African historians to these 'Misri' legends? Let us first survey the extent of these traditions.

The Gusii of Western Kenya, whose historical traditions I am most acquainted with, claim that before they migrated to the foothills of Mount Elgon they lived in a country called 'Misri,' which they cannot precisely locate, but which is said to have stretched somewhere to the north of Mount Elgon. From 'Misri' the Gusii travelled 'southwards' in company with the Kuria, the Logoli, the Bukusu,

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the Suba, the Kikuyu, the Embu, the Kamba and the Meru. They claim that 'people separated around Mount Elgon due to overcrowding, epidemics and drought.'<sup>1</sup> According to the Logoli of Western Kenya, they, together with the Gusii, 'lived in Misri with the Arabs, the Kikuyu, the Meru, the Embu, the Baganda, the Basoga, and their fellow Baluyia.'<sup>2</sup> They migrated 'southwards' into Uganda, where they found a short people with huge heads known from their traditions as the 'Ngui.' They then moved to the foothills of Mount Elgon and later they migrated southwards into their present day territory.

From the researches of Osogo,<sup>3</sup> Were and Wagner,<sup>4</sup> we also learn that the Gusii and the Logoli are not the only people who claim origin from 'Misri.' Indeed the entire early history of most of the proto-Luyia clans is the story of their migrations from the land identified as 'Misri,' to the area around Mount Elgon and southwards. We learn, for instance, that the Shitsetse clan of the Wanga sub-tribe, who trace their origin and ancestry to a man called Mutesa, migrated southwards from 'Misri' and settled at Ibanda in Busoga, Uganda before they finally moved to their present country.<sup>5</sup> Or take the case of the Bukusu, a people claimed by the Gusii to have been with them at 'Misri.' They say that one of their earliest ancestors, Mundu, travelled with his brothers, relatives and children from 'Misri,' through the Sudan, to Embayi in present day Karamojong. From there they moved to Mount Elgon and eventually to Mbale (in Uganda). That is where Mundu died, and from Mbale they 'crossed the Lake to Kisii but later returned again and went to the territory where they now live.'<sup>6</sup> The list of the many Luyia clans which claim origin from 'Misri' is long. Among them are the Mumbo, Luhombe, Khoba and Shisutsa clans of the Tiriki. Several Nyore clans also claim that they originally lived in 'Misri' together with the Ganda and the Gisu. The royal Fofyo clan of the Marachi tribe, and also the Guuri clans of Khayo—all relate the story that they once lived in 'Misri.' We also know that several clans composing present day Samia, Tsetso, Khikka, and Tachoni tribes of the Luyia originally came from 'Misri.'<sup>7</sup>

There is also another significant tribe whose many clans claim origin from 'Misri'—the Haya of northwestern Tanzania. The Haya

who are culturally and linguistically akin to some of the Luyia clans are believed to have parted company from the rest of the Luyia somewhere in Uganda. Osogo describes their language as 'just as far and no more removed from Luyia as the Gusii language is.'<sup>8</sup> Among the clans which Cory and Hartnoll recorded as having originally come from 'Misri (Egypt)' are the Bagara, Bahinda, Basingo, Basindi, Bayango, Bagwe, Baganda, Bakombe, and Batenaita.<sup>9</sup>

Other significant East African groups which are mentioned in the various traditions as having lived in 'Misri' include the Ganda, the Soga and the Gwe. The traditions of these people do not specifically mention 'Misri,' but their migrations from the Elgon population and beyond, would lend strong support to their earlier association with travellers from the mythical 'Misri.' While very little is known about the earliest invaders of Buganda and Busoga, it is known that later at least thirteen or fourteen of the present clans of Buganda were founded by Kintu and his companions. The clans associated with this migration specifically claim to have come from beyond the eastern bank of River Nile, and they allude in their histories to various places in the modern eastern region such as Mount Masaaba (Elgon) and beyond. 'Their unanimity about the direction from which they came,' according to Kiwanuka, 'is proof of the authenticity of their story.'<sup>10</sup>

It must not be supposed that it is only the Bantu-speaking clusters who claim to have come from 'Misri.' Professor Southall in an earlier work on the Alur makes mention of 'Misri' traditions.<sup>11</sup> According to S. C. Langat, 'the Kipsigis claim that their Kalenjin ancestors originated in Egypt (Misri) during Biblical times . . . Plagues, drought and famines (*ilchonoik*) caused an exodus from Misri. The Kalenjin who were then known as *Miotik*, were the last of many groups to leave.'<sup>12</sup> To these Kipsigis traditions Dr. B. E. Kipkorir adds those of the Marakwet: 'The Talai of North Marakwet aver that according to their traditions they came from Misri, and that an important stopping point en route was Mount Elgon (*Tulwop Kony*).'<sup>13</sup> Like their Kipsigis and Marakwet cousins, the Aror Tugen also claim origin from 'Misri.'<sup>14</sup>

## GEOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the foregoing, we have demonstrated that the 'Misri' legends are widespread. Indeed it is possible that with further research even many of the yet untouched groups will come forward with similar claims. What, however, do we make of them?

The first point to take into account is that 'Misri,' as referred to in these traditions, denotes a specific territory, to the north of Mount Elgon; it is not simply a direction. If it were a direction, it is most unlikely that both the Bantu-speaking groups and the Rift Valley Nilotes would use the same word for it. It must be admitted that the etymological meaning of 'Misri,' in the East African context, is not yet clear. It is known, however, that the Egyptians would ordinarily refer to themselves as the 'Misriyin' (Egyptians) and to their country as 'Misri'.<sup>15</sup> The name, apparently, derives its origin from the descendants of Mizraim, one of the children of the Biblical Ham. We learn from the book of Genesis that the Egyptians were a tribe from Asia, called the 'children of Ham.' 'Their physical character, and their habits of life, both show that they were more nearly allied to Asiatics than to the less civilised tribes of the Arabian and Libyan deserts.'<sup>16</sup> When they invaded Egypt they occupied Upper Egypt, which they called Mizraim. It was from the Greeks that they later received the name *Egyptus* (Egypt), or 'the land of the Copts,' but while their land has been known throughout history as Egypt—that is, to the outside world—the Egyptian *fellaheen* (or peasants) would ordinarily refer to their land as 'Misri.' In the 1880s, when the Egyptians were fighting British and French imperialism, their rallying political slogan was '*Misr lil-Misryin*,' ('Egypt for the Egyptians').

The second point to take into account is that some of these African traditions attempt to describe the traditional 'Misri' geographically. Gusii elders occasionally refer to it as a dry country, where droughts and famines were prevalent. Many Luyia groups, particularly the Maragoli, refer to it as a dry country, adding that apart from the Negro people Arabs also lived in 'Misri.' The Bukusu people go so far as to claim that on their way from 'Misri' they trekked southwards through Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to what is now known as the

Uasin Gishu plateau in Kenya under the prominent leadership of Maina. The Abatachoni tribe of the Luyia, who also claim to have come from 'Misri,' regard their country of origin as characterised by 'scarcity of rain and water, poor sandy soil, poor harvests, and constant starvation.' Dr. Were writes: 'While some of the migrants are said to have partly come up the Nile in boats, the rest appear to have simply trekked southwards through the wilderness.'<sup>17</sup>

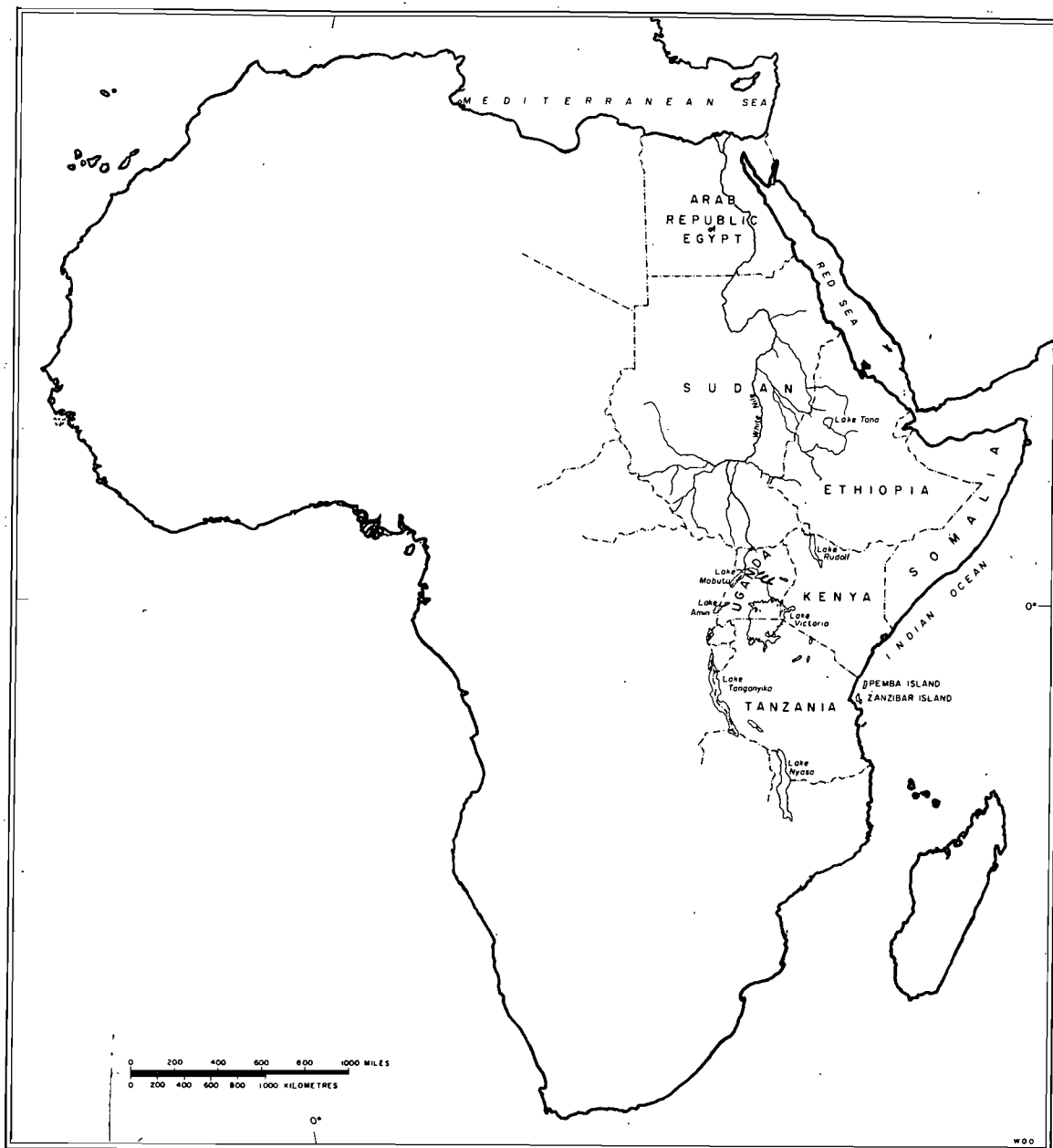
## HISTORICAL ASPECTS

East African historians who have had to grapple with these legends have reacted to them in a number of ways. There are those, like George Alfred Anyona and Gideon S. Were, who have outrightly rejected them as legends smuggled into African traditions, by Christianised elders, from the Old Testament. There are those, like B. E. Kipkorir, who believe that 'the Misri legends—providing us, as they do, with a wider perspective in both time and setting—cannot be dismissed out of hand.'<sup>18</sup> And then there are those, like J. B. Osogo and Cardale Luck, who accept these traditions and, in fact, go to the extent of trying to prove that some of these East African groups, who claim to have come from 'Misri,' actually did come from Egypt. Let us examine a bit more closely a few of these conflicting views about the legends. Writing in the case of the Gusii G. A. Anyona had the following to say:

There is no historical validity in tracing the origins of the Abagusii, or any other people for that matter, to Adam. Not only is this an impossible task in the face of no available records, but it is also an attempt to impose a religious twist on history. The view has disregarded the fact that the creation story as contained in the Old Testament of the Bible is not necessarily the true origin of Man as such . . . I, therefore, find the whole endeavor to link directly the history of the Abagusii with the story of Adam a little unpalatable and without historical authenticity.<sup>19</sup>

Another scholar who has rejected the idea of Egyptian origin, this time in the case of the Abakusu, was Dr. G. S. Were:

. . . like the majority of the sub-tribes of the Abaluyia, the Bakusu regard "Egypt"



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as the original homeland of their ancestors. For the time being "Egypt," and all it stands for appear to belong to the realm of myth and the remote incomprehensible past . . . . Judging by their own accounts, it is quite likely that some of this myth probably originated from the Jewish history as contained in the Old Testament . . . .<sup>20</sup>

An attempt has also been made to geographically locate the 'Misri' of these legends. Concerning the Abaluyia Dr. Were had the following to say:

Whether "Misri" stands for Egypt (and this is highly improbable), or for Anglo-Egyptian Sudan of more recent years, or for neither

of them, is a question we may never answer correctly. What appears to be certain is that, as these accounts show, that country must have been arid or semi-arid. It may therefore be tempting to identify it as the present Karamoja or Turkana district.<sup>21</sup>

One would like to agree with G. A. Anyona and G. S. Were that the traditions of these African groups have been influenced by Jewish history as contained in the Old Testament of the Bible, but this would be taking refuge in the nearest and simplest explanation. The explanation that these traditions have been influenced by the Bible, even in so far as it is strongly appealing, is too simple to be swallowed uncritically. For example, there is no reason why the various African societies who profess these traditions should not have acquired them independently of the Bible. But even if we assumed for the moment that most of these traditions owe their origins to the Bible, why is 'Misri' (Egypt) agreed on as the homeland of these groups? Surely since both the New and the Old Testaments mention many other places in Africa—for example, Cush, Ethiopia, and Punt—why do these traditions choose in favour of 'Misri' (Egypt)? And if the main idea is to associate some of these groups with the birth-place of Christ why don't they say, straightaway, that they came from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, or Galilee? What good historical reasons do we have to make us reject the possibility that a number of the Misriyin (Egyptians) did not mingle with the Negroes (whether Bantu-speaking or Nilotic) in the long pre-Colonial Period and thus have bequeathed their traditions to these groups?

It is my contention that our first duty in trying to unravel these legends is to adopt a broad and open mind towards them. As yet we know very little about the early migrations, settlements and contacts of the many East African peoples. It is, for example, very difficult to know exactly where the progenitors of present day East African people were, or what they were doing, between the first century B.C. and the 10th century A.D. Given the fact that the majority of East African people, whether they are Bantu-speakers, Cushites or Nilotes, speak of southward migrations from the north, it is very important that these 'Misri' legends be given critical scrutiny, especially since it is also true that the majority of elders who profess

them are people who, in addition to having had no meaningful contacts with Christian Churches, can neither read nor write. It is very possible that waves of migrations from the Upper Nile reached both the Bantu and the Nilotic worlds in the early period or periods of our millenium. In fact a number of leading scholars, like Professor Edward Ullendorff, have begun to pay very close attention to the area of Southern Sudan, Northern Uganda and Western Ethiopia, which they regard as a vital region of 'early Negro-Caucasoid contacts.' This, of course, is not to revive the 'Hamitic myth.' But it is just possible, as M. S. M. Kiwanuka has observed, that the fact that people like Kintu (of the Ganda mythology) and his followers claim to have come from eastern or northeastern Uganda at once would lend support 'to the Hamitic origins of some of the Baganda and of Kintu himself.'<sup>22</sup>

Writing in 1926 to the *East Africa and Uganda Journal of Natural History*, C. Luck set out to prove that it was possible that a number of East African peoples, like the Bukusu, either originally came, or had mingled, with refugees from Egypt during the early period. He writes:

Previous to coming to the Kenya colony, six years ago, I had, in connection with the study of art, taken a particular interest in Egyptian sculpture, and on arriving here I was immediately struck with the strong resemblance of the natives, particularly those of the Hamitic groups, and of the Kikuyu and their fellows, to the types portrayed in Egyptian statuary. This resemblance was not merely a matter of physical types, the ornaments, and above all, the elaborate head dress of these tribes seemed surprisingly similar to those of ancient Egyptians. My interest and curiosity thus aroused after a time I began to study the matter more closely. The highly organised religious ceremonials and tribal customs and laws, so similar in many respects to Mosaic code, strengthened my first impressions that these people must, at some earlier periods of their history, have been in very intimate touch with a higher civilization, probably that of Egypt, and I believed at first that they were the degenerate descendants of the ancient Egyptians themselves . . .<sup>23</sup>

Luck's conclusion was not merely influenced by what he observed of the cultural and physiological similarities between the Egyptians, on the one hand, and some groups among the Kikuyu, Babukusu and Maasai, on the other. He also employed his extensive historical knowledge to contend that not only did the Jews migrate (or flee) to Egypt many times in the course of their turbulent history, but that there is more than ample evidence to indicate that many of these Jewish families who had fled to Egypt for various reasons had also been forced to flee southwards into the heart of Africa, or at least to the southern borders of Ethiopia. For example, we learn from Herodotus that in the reign of Psamtek of Egypt (644-610 B.C.) the Egyptian garrison stationed at Elephantine, on the Egypto-Ethiopian border, mutinied and the mutineers deserted and moved southwards into Ethiopia. Realising that prior to this the Israeli tribes would have taken refuge in Egypt as a result of the dispersal of the kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., and also the use to which such exiles would be put, and the existence at this time of the Jewish colony at Elephantine, it may be supposed, argues C. Luck, that the greater portion of the troops stationed at Elephantine—according to Herodotus there were 240,000 individuals—were composed of Canaanite exiles. All these are said to have fled to Ethiopia. And Ethiopia, in the context in which it is being used here, does not precisely coincide with present day political Ethiopia. In assessing the Biblical reference to Ethiopia one has to bear in mind that Hebrew 'Cush' (the original Ethiopian kingdom) lacks any precisely defined location. Many of the scriptural references are of difficult interpretation, and the same is very largely true of classical writings: thus Homer speaks of 'the distant Ethiopians, the farthest outposts of mankind, half of whom live where the sun goes down, and half where it rises.' The Biblical and classical Ethiopia, thus, is a vague designation including the entire Nile Valley south of Egypt, probably including the northern parts of East Africa. According to Professor Ullendorff the long history of this region, spreading over several millenia, has witnessed the intermingling of peoples of the Semitic, Hamitic and Nilotic origins.

It is not to be supposed that the above was the only major flight from Egypt into Ethiopia and southwards. Example after example could

be given both from the Bible and from early Egyptian history to indicate the periodicity of such movements. For example there was a serious flight from Egypt 'into Ethiopia and beyond' during the reign of Tanutamen of the Nubian dynasty (667-666 B.C.) when the conquering army of Ashurbanipal of Assyria swept all before him. A century later another Assyrian conquest under Cambyses conquered Egypt and set up a reign of terror, and in fact moved south to attack Ethiopia, causing many Egyptians and their king to flee before his army southwards.

The above are only a few examples of mass migrations into the northern borders of East Africa. We now know that these migrations did not stop in the pre-Christian era. Only five hundred years ago a large wave of migrants of Hamitic stock invaded Western Uganda and constructed a large kingdom called Kitara. As yet their ethnotype is uncertain, 'but it is now clear that it was not Galla.'<sup>24</sup> Most possibly they were akin to the Sidama people of southwestern Ethiopia, but the probability that they were Egyptians has not been ruled out. Thus, it is now clear that the northern borderland of East Africa acted for a long time as the shock absorber to turbulence in the Nile Valley. Having examined all possible explanations to these 'Misri' traditions C. Luck came to the conclusion that the groups which claim 'Misri' origins must at one time have lived as far north as the Fashoda Blue Nile area in the Sudan, and that for a long time they were subjected to influences from the Old World civilization of Egypt, and in the case of a few families, to Jewish traditions. As for those Egyptian and Jewish families who migrated south and mingled with the Negroes, C. Luck sees their cultural and physiological 'degeneration' as due to 'changed environment and conditions of life which came about on their migrating into these regions . . . that the Semitic and other Asiatic tribes which have wandered down into Africa have suffered an infusion of Negro blood . . . that this has been, so great as to account directly for the proportion of negroid characteristics to be found amongst these tribes today . . . that under the law of the survival of the fittest, the negroid has survived at the cost of the Asiatic, as more resistant to the diseases and the rigour of climatic conditions of the tropical countries.'<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is still too early to arrive at any meaningful conclusion about the widespread 'Misri' legends. It may well turn out in the end that the advocates of these legends have not been influenced by the Bible. It may well be that these people were non-Bantu and non-Nilotic originally, and that they were Bantuised, or Nilotised, as they entered East Africa. That their traditions of origin from 'Misri' (Egypt) are independent of Biblical influence, to a large extent, is most apparent, and in the light of our profound ignorance of the early movements of the East African peoples, there is no reason why we should reject wholesale the possibility that some Egyptian and Jewish blood entered the veins of the early Logoli, Gusii, Bukusu, Tachoni and such tribes as claim origin from 'Misri.'

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