

Jayden Evans

BL ST 49A

Mhoze Chikowero

9 November 2021

Damaging Effects of Colonial Historiography

History is always important when trying to educate oneself about the past and that is only one of the many purposes history can serve. Although how we learn history is almost always dependent on who writes the history, which can vary drastically. These perspectives can change narratives, while altering or skewing history one way or the other, usually depending on the writer's relationship or position relative to the history being told. This makes historiography, or the writings of history, very important to how we understand the history of a certain region. When it comes to African history, they were subject to European colonization and had their histories confiscated through the emergence of dominating eurocentric colonial historiographies. This has happened throughout all of Africa with the silencing of the indigenous populations. The Europeans were able to establish a cultural and political hegemony which helped them create these historiographies that have persisted for so long, with only recent questioning by certain historians and scholars. Because of these narratives being pushed, Africa has been characterized as being in a constant state of unchanging, opposing the dynamic realities of African civilizations. Eurocentric theories and historiographies proven untrue, such as the Bantu Migration hypothesis and Hamitic hypothesis, have been the focal points in the continued discreditation of African involvement in their own history and have contributed to the harmful stereotypes against those of African descent that have persisted to modern day society.

The Bantu Migration hypothesis is one of the earlier colonial historiographies that was used to try to explain the people of sub-Saharan Africa around the period of 2000 BCE to 1000 AD. It posits the narrow, one dimensional cultural diffusion, which was the Bantu-speaking people migrating south from northwestern Africa to populate the rest of the continent. It looks at the technological advancements made in early African societies and puts an external influence on them rather than suggesting there were internal or local influences between groups. This is problematic for a number of reasons, starting with how it assumes the population process in Africa was a simplistic one, with one group migrating in one direction and spreading their language, technology and traditions with the rest of the continent. The issue is that it credits all of Africa's achievements and advancements to this one group of people, especially when it comes to agriculture, animal domestication, and early iron working technologies. In terms of iron working and other technologies. It disregards the many different groups or societies that culturally mixed with each other locally and shared cultures and technology through trade and other means. In an article discussing the Early Iron Age in Africa, John H. Robertson and Rebecca Bradley touch on this idea. They state that, "...the development of the Early Iron Age in Africa was a process rather than an event; that autochthonous populations gradually adopted the suite of traits that define the Early Iron Age, without any large-scale movement of peoples" (Robertson and Bradley 287). They directly challenge one of the main issues caused by the Bantu Migration hypothesis, which is the one that tries to reduce the dynamic processes and technological transformations that occurred in Africa through the years to one migrational event. Luckily, there has been significant strides made in the field of disproving the Bantu Migration hypothesis, especially by archaeologist Felix Chami. The east African coast, mostly Zanzibar and the Swahili coast, was the main focus of Chami's work. In this work he examined the history

of animal domestication and found evidence of domesticated animals from around 3000 BCE, predating the supposed Bantu migration. Chami states that, “Evidence presented in different papers in this work clearly suggests that nearly all types of known domesticated animals existed on Zanzibar Island by at least 3000 BC” (Chami 202). Chami also found evidence of cattle bones from around 4000 BCE of the *Bos taurus* cattle type. This cattle type was previously said to have “only spread from the northern Tanzania region...by the alleged Bantu immigrants” and the Bantu speakers were not in east Africa until around the BC/AD changeover. This helps prove Chami’s claims of animal domestication pre-Bantu migration. While it is important to note that these findings are not completely conclusive, they mainly make it so we can question these theories that we previously thought to be true. The other assumption made by the Bantu Migration hypothesis, and those who advocate for the theory, is that these Bantu-speaking people intermarried with some of the groups inhabiting south Africa like the Khoi and San, and are said to have essentially “colonized” some of these groups as well. This narrative can be dangerous because it tries to establish the Bantu people (who were black Africans) as the original colonizers or settler colonialists, and we have seen Europeans use this as a justification for their acts of settler colonialism in the region. It gave them a way to say that colonialism has always been happening and it is basically inevitable, so they could do it themselves.

The Hamitic hypothesis is one separate from the Bantu Migration hypothesis in terms of purpose, but they both use similar diffusionist mindsets. “Diffusionism in the social sciences of anthropology and cultural geography is a theory about the spread of ideas, technologies, and practices from one culture to another” (“Diffusionism” 460). It is very difficult to apply this to Africa, given how many different civilizations and societies have been developed in different regions, mixing cultures with each other via trade or other methods. The Hamitic hypothesis can

be identified as the theory which the Bantu migration theory stemmed from or is a subset of. The similarities, like mentioned above, are in the ways they try to look at the cultural and technological spread in Africa as a one dimensional, singular event. Although the Hamitic hypothesis has a different theory concerning who these people were who supposedly migrated throughout Africa and brought about all the early technological innovation in the region. It has to do with early Egyptian civilizations, and attempts to downplay the blackness of these civilizations. C.G. Seligman, a British physician and ethnologist who was an early proponent of the theory, stated “the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of Hamites” who were “pastoral 'European' — arriving wave after wave — better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negro” (Amadi 80). Based on this, these “Hamites” were a part of the white race, which is just another example of colonial historiography, trying to posit Europeans as the civilizing force who essentially brought everything good to Africa culturally and technologically. There are multiple problems around this theory: the problems similar to those in the Bantu Migration theory concerning evidence of pre-existing societies and problems regarding the blackness of Ancient Egyptians and these Hamites. Another advocate for these theories and British archaeologist, J.D. Clark, stated “ After the end of the Pleistocene, sub-Saharan Africa seems to have been more receptive of than contributory to cultural progress in the Old World as a whole” (Clark 211), which can obviously be seen as a very problematic statement. This is only a fragment of the problematic colonial historiographies, but can still say a lot when it comes to this conversation. I.R. Amadi did research in order to go against narratives supported by those like J.D. Clark, especially in the area of plant and animal domestication (similar to Chami’s work). “G.P. Murdock has postulated an independent origin of crop domestication in West Africa among the Mande people who, he says, domesticated the African rice around the headwaters (sic) of the

River Niger about 5000 B.C. He ranks the zone as one of four centres of agricultural evolution, adding that 'this was a genuine invention, not a borrowing from another people' (Amadi 82). Similar to the disproving of the Bantu Migration hypothesis, this evidence proves pre-existing crop domestication before the Hamites were supposed to have brought it to the region. He also mentions findings by Richard Gray and Roland Porter which showed cereal domestication by Africans in three different independent regions: Ethiopia, tropical west Africa, and southeast Africa. Amadi goes on to speak on the evidence of animal domestication and iron technology as well, further disproving the myth of the Hamitic hypothesis. It is very easy to see the commonalities between both the Hamitic and Bantu migration hypotheses, and how they are harmful in similar ways to paint early African societies in a bad light.

The larger scale problem regarding colonial historiographies of Africa is what came about from their spread, essentially working as anti-Africa and pro-colonialism propaganda. Considering the immense power of the European nations in the 18th through 20th century, they probably did not need much justification or reason to commence their colonizing missions, but it did help when they could gain more public support for these missions. A main way they did this was through scientific racism, where they would simply state that white people are naturally or biologically superior to every other race, but this could not always work due to the lack of evidence. Therefore, they had to use other ways to establish themselves as superior and that would be by establishing the people they would be colonizing as inferior. Edward Said, a Palestinian American academic, discussed the concept of Orientalism which examines how the Occident (Western nations) creates an image of the Orient (Middle East) to help them establish dominance over the Orient. This is important because it very much intersects with the ways in which European scholars have discussed Africa and characterized them as a nation to be

colonized and dominated. Said talks about the concept of the self and the other, which says how one uses the “other” to define themselves. Looking at Africa, European nations were able to create their own image and history of Africa through colonial historiography, which defined Africa as being uncivilized, to further their dominance over the region. If they were able to spread these narratives to their people that Africa is uncivilized and a nation of “backwards” people, they could gain support for colonialist efforts. They could utilize the cultural hegemony created, based on the idea that European identity is superior, to then impose a political hegemony over these “uncivilized” nations. This relationship between the Occident and Orient, or more generally the self and other, is interdependent, meaning the Occident is reliant on this “other” to define themselves as the normal (and in some cases superior). When the Europeans were able to accomplish this, it opened the doors for them to colonize in a “justified” fashion. Uma Narayan actually mentions one of Said’s other works in her article on colonialism when she states, “Pervasive racist stereotypes about the negative and inferior status of enslaved or colonized Others were used both to justify denial of the rights enjoyed by the colonizers, and to construct the colonized as childish and inferior subjects, in need of the paternalistic guidance and rule of their superiors (see Said 1993)” (Narayan 133). These stereotypes are a direct byproduct of eurocentric theories and histories of African civilization. What was created was an image of Africa being made up of poor, helpless, uncivilized people who were waiting to be “saved”, which meant colonized in this context. Africa has also been subjected to being in a constant state of primitiveness and unchangedness, meaning they have been portrayed as never being responsible for any new developments culturally or technologically. A common theme throughout history has been certain hegemonic nations believing they can speak for these “others” and create a history for them, causing skewed writings of these histories. Luckily, this

has slightly changed over time as we have seen voices from African societies revealing the true histories and also archaeological work which has also disproven these eurocentric theories.

While all this information seems to only have relevance when referring to the early African civilizations extending through European colonization, many of the issues have still persisted into our modern society. We can look towards Western media for an example, as they continue to have an understanding of Africa which lacks nuance and conceals the true realities of what occurs in the region. This can both be unintentional and stem from a lack of nuance alone, or it can often be intentional because it is convenient to the West politically to show the “negative” aspects of African civilization. We have seen a portrayal of Africa which ignores the dynamics of African societies, the diversity between different countries in Africa, and the advancements made in the region void of Western influence. A report was done on mentions of Africa in American media and the findings tell an interesting story. Some of the more significant findings were that “Over one-third (35%) of African mentions in scripted entertainment were about crime”, “In scripted entertainment, we found that 44% of TV shows and movies only mention “Africa,” with no reference to a particular country”, and “Several African countries were virtually invisible: Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and Sao Tome and Principe were mentioned less than 10 times in almost 700,000 hours of programming” (Blakely, Jung, Rogers, and Watson-Currie 4-5). These findings reveal how American media sees Africa, and that is that they barely see them at all. Africa has been “otherized” to the point where they are constantly seen as being naturally inferior. These findings will most likely not be questioned by many because they do not Africa of any importance. When you combine the media portrayal with lack of coverage in the education system, Africa will continue to be ignored unless voices from those in the region are lifted and heard. It allows for the Western nations to continue the

hegemony when they characterize Africa in these ways because they essentially have control over the public perception of Africa. This is what is meant by establishing a cultural hegemony and it is an essential factor in establishing political hegemonies.

Overall, it is crucial we continue to research about the culturally diverse and dynamic history of Africa and listen to the experiences of those who live there. This can help us possibly change our personal perceptions of Africa and also help undo the years and years of eurocentric historiographies that have damaged Africa's reputation and put them in a position to be dominated by western powers. Theories like the Bantu Migration hypothesis and Hamitic hypothesis acted as catalysts for the larger system of discrimination directed towards Africans and their nations. We have seen the discreditation and otherization of Africans transpire in their own history. The reversal of this occurrence has been a slow progress, but there has been progress due to great archaeological work, along with other ways to disprove these faulty theories. Africa has and always will be a dynamic continent, containing people of diverse cultures who have developed significant innovations contributory to the modern world.

Amadi, I. R. "THE NORTHERN FACTOR IN THE HISTORY OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: THE HAMITIC HYPOTHESIS REVISITED." *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol. 18, Gideon Were Publications, 1989, pp. 80–89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24328705>.

Blakley, Johanna, et al. "Africa Key Findings and Recs - the Norman Lear Center." *Norman Lear Center*, Jan. 2019, <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Africa-Key-Findings-and-Recs.pdf>.

Chami, Felix. Zanzibar and the Swahili Coast from c.30,000 Years Ago. E, 2009. https://gauchospace.ucsb.edu/courses/pluginfile.php/18308274/mod_resource/content/1/Chami%2C%20Zanzibar%20and%20the%20swahili%20coast%20from%20c30000.pdf

Clark, J. Desmond. "The Spread of Food Production in Sub-Saharan Africa." *The Journal of African History*, vol. 3, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 211–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179740>.

"Diffusionism." *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 460–61. https://search.library.ucsb.edu/permalink/01UCSB_INST/1876c7q/cdi_credito_entries_9300989

Narayan, Uma. "Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses." *Hypatia*, vol. 10, no. 2, [Hypatia, Inc., Wiley], 1995, pp. 133–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810285>.

Robertson, John H., and Rebecca Bradley. "A New Paradigm: The African Early Iron Age without Bantu Migrations." *History in Africa*, vol. 27, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 287–323, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3172118?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.

