

**FROM “EGYPTIAN DARKNESS” TO THE CONDEMNATION OF
BLACKNESS: THE BIBLICAL EXODUS AND THE RELIGIOUS AND
PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF RACISM**

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William B. Chamberlin IV

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Dr. Ama Mazama, Dept. of Africology and African-American Studies

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines of the religious and philosophical origins of racism, arguing that anti-black, anti-African racism has its origins in the biblical account of the ancient Israelites' exodus from Egypt and the events recounted in the Hebrew scriptures. It begins with an examination of the nature of racism itself, considering how the contemporary experience of and scholarship about racism can illuminate the search for racism's historical origins. Contemporary experience has taught us that the functioning of racism often operates independently of the explicit racial prejudice coupled with power once thought to comprise it. This understanding has been reflected in scholarship that has examined how racism has functioned through hierarchical discourse, a concept which is defined and analyzed at some length. Following this examination comes a "genealogical" tracing of hierarchical discourse about African phenomena in the Western-dominated academy, leading to the centrality of the religious concept of idolatry in the making of racist accounts of African phenomena. Finally, the thesis concludes with a chapter on the mytho-historical exodus event, which gave birth to this concept of idolatry, analyzing the meaning and significance of the event in the making of racist discourse. This thesis demonstrates that a broader understanding of racism as an outgrowth of a worldview necessarily hostile to alternatives, when applied to the study of the historical development of racism, paints a far more convincing and complete portrait of the origins of racism, its historical development, and its present functioning than studies based on a more narrow understanding of racism.

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PREFACE

What follows is an examination of the religious and philosophical origins of racism. It is broken into three chapters. The first chapter considers critically the understanding of the concept of racism as relates to both historical and contemporary studies thereof. It introduces an expanded definition of racism based on Molefi Kete Asante's concept of hierarchical discourse as well as the work of several other scholars who have introduced similar concepts that help to illuminate the ways in which racism has entrenched itself in the intellectual and cultural apparatus of academic scholarship, especially in scholarship about Africa and African people.

In a sense, this thesis works backwards through the history of racism, beginning with a treatment of the nature and definition of racism and working back towards its origins, tracing the intellectual *genealogy* of racist concepts through history to what I argue is their origin the biblical account of the ancient Israelites' exodus from Egypt. This is a beginning of what I hope to be a larger investigation of the intellectual and cultural history of racism.

What I have found in my study of hierarchical discourse and how it functions to perpetuate racism in contemporary scholarship is that many of the theoretical questions most important to my own research are answered by the assumptions that scholars make either implicitly or explicitly in their writings about Africa and African people. They often adopt such assumptions as legitimate guides to their research without ever offering a rationale for them and without ever being challenged to do so by any of their peers in the academy. Specifically, in any history or analysis of African phenomena the author must, in some instances, assume a theoretical orientation toward the agency of African

people. Does the author see the African phenomena about which he or she writes as located within the stream of African culture and history or does the author see them as located primarily within theories and concepts drawn from the denial of African agency that is the underpinning of European racism?

This seemingly clear divide, as will be shown especially in the first two chapters, is often more complex than it may appear and I have deliberately tried not to avoid the challenges of parsing the theoretical issues involved in this study. As such, I have tried to make the theoretical orientation of this study, which is heavily influenced by the Afrocentric scholarship of Molefi Kete Asante, Ama Mazama, Wade Nobles, and others clear and, where necessary, offer a rationale for adopting it, considering its various implications.

My hope is that this work contributes in some small way to an understanding of the intellectual and cultural underpinnings of the scourge of racism, to the liberation of those who still suffer from its effects, and to the enlightenment and atonement of all those who continue to benefit from its legacy and perpetuate its existence.

CHAPTER 1:

SANKOFA: THE PRESENT IN SEARCH OF THE PAST

As soon as one begins to attempt to write about African history and culture, one is faced with the legacy of hundreds or even, as is argued here, thousands of years of racist distortion. In this sense, the disclaimer of the Guyanese historian and activist Walter Rodney that prefaces his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is wise counsel for approaching the writing of African history. Rodney wrote that he would not conclude his preface with the customary “all mistakes and shortcomings are entirely my responsibility,” but that he instead recognized that responsibility for remedying the shortcomings in the written accounts of African history was collective. He then summoned all but those who wish to sustain racist narratives to go beyond the history that is written “to satisfy the “standards” set by our oppressors and their spokesmen in the academic world.”¹ Rodney’s is but one voice in a much larger chorus that has called for the history of Africa and the history of African people throughout the world to be written according to standards that do not re-enshrine the historical racism of the academy; that is African history that is written to African standards.

The intensity of the influence of racist thinking about Africa and African people in the Western-dominated academic world, as well as the extended duration in which this thinking has been predominant, make the task of writing history that is free from the stain of such racism a challenge to say the least. The European colonization and enslavement of Africa and African people respectively was an intellectual as well as a physical act. Its violence sought to impose a European worldview on African people, to view their

¹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classics Press, 2011 [c1972]), pp. vii-viii.

enslavement and colonization as ‘a good thing’ because, for all the suffering and death that these processes entailed, they were said to be part of a narrative of historical progress towards a European ideal.

The imposition of a European worldview on African people attempted to restrict conceptions of reality to European terms, a process which the Afrocentric psychologist Wade Nobles has referred to as “conceptual incarceration.”² A particular historical or anthropological study may contain much important information about African phenomena but also lead the researcher unwittingly into reproducing racist ideas, as Ifi Amadiume warns:

One of the dangers of having our feet stuck in Western-produced literature is the tendency to use European terms and expressions uncritically when addressing non-European cultures and experiences. The history of European imperialism and racism means that the language which aided that project is loaded with generalized terms which do not necessarily have a general meaning, but serve a particular interest.³

In this sense, then, a deep understanding of the historical evolution and inner-workings of European racism is critical to the writing of the history of Africa and African people.

The purpose of this study is to examine the religious and philosophical origins of anti-black, anti-African racism. A guiding assumption, however, is that the study of anti-black, anti-African racism is both incomplete and one-sided when it is not conducted with reference to the culture, values, history, and traditions of African people. As it is precisely the frame of reference, the conceptual worldview of African people, that has

² See, for example, his 1976 essay “African Science and Black Research: The Consciousness of Self,” reprinted in *Seeking the Sakhu: Foundational Writings for an African Psychology* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press Foundation, 2006), pp. 61-70.

³ Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture*, (New York, NY: Zed Books, 1997), pg. 1.

been a primary target of such oppression, the study of racism makes little sense without reference to it. The understanding of how racism has operated through the “conceptual incarceration” described above should also result in conceptual liberation, wherein our understanding of phenomena that has been hindered by the use of terminology and conceptual apparatus that has served and often continues to serve the interest of racist oppression is clarified by the use of appropriate terminology and concepts. The study of racism here, then, is understood not merely as the study of racist policies directed against African people or racist ideas about Africans, but also as a search for a liberated vision of African people and a liberated understanding of an African worldview.⁴

In writing about Africa and African people, many scholars, particularly scholars of African descent, have drawn on the Akan concept of Sankofa, which symbolizes the imperative of returning for something important that has been left behind. The concept is represented by a bird with its neck bent backwards. As the writer Ayi Kwei Armah explains:

The bird is shown in mid-flight: history flows on. Its forward motion is not in doubt; nevertheless, the bird is aware of having dropped something valuable, indeed, indispensable. It therefore casts its vision backward, not with any intention of reversing time and returning to the past to live there,

⁴ This approach is informed by Afrocentric theory as articulated by its foremost architect Molefi Kete Asante, who in his seminal work *Afrocentricity*, originally published in 1980 and subsequently revised, defines what he calls “Afrocentric consciousness” as comprising both “consciousness towards oppression” and “consciousness towards victory.” Without a consciousness of oppression, one is at risk of living in denial; without a ‘victorious consciousness,’ grounded in a knowledge of the history and culture of African people, one is at risk of thinking that oppression and suffering are permanent and inescapable conditions of African life. See *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Chicago, IL: African American Images, 2003), pp. 64-66.

but with the purpose of retrieving from past time just that element of value that should not have been lost, prior to continuing its interrupted motion.⁵

He goes on to write:

In the presence of such a vision, we are free to understand that the imposition of European rule was a violent crime; that before the onslaught a once-vital society existed here, and that if we want to make our way into an intelligent future we will have to understand what we had, the better to assess what we might yet create.⁶

We are beset daily with reminders that racism continues to shape reality both globally and here in the United States. Discussions of the legacy of involvement with slavery at several prominent academic institutions have highlighted the extent to which racism and the history of the enslavement of African people are inextricably woven into the institutional history of academia in the United States.⁷ Similarly, the influence of the ideology of white supremacy on the development of academic disciplines is receiving renewed attention.⁸ The extent to which scholarship within the academy has normalized racism makes apparent the need to draw from different wells when seeking a frame of reference capable of assessing or even defining what racism actually is. Nonetheless, such intervention must of necessity take place ‘mid-flight.’

George M. Fredrickson, at the end of a scholarly career spent studying racism in comparative perspective, expounded in his *Racism: A Short History* a definition of racism that is standard among scholars of the subject; namely, racism is “ethnoracial” prejudice

⁵ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Eloquence of the Scribes: A Memoir on the Sources and Resources of African Literature* (Penguin, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2006), pp. 118-119.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁸ An exemplary contribution to this effort is Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*, (New York, NY: Norton, 2010).

coupled with the power to treat the “ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our own group.”⁹ Fredrickson thus begins his history in the 14th and 15th centuries with the rise of anti-semitic pogroms on the Iberian peninsula and the beginning of the Portuguese trade in enslaved Africans, that is, when European “ethnoracial” prejudices became coupled with powers of physical coercion and domination. Racist understandings of humanity that sought to assign some “ethnoracial” groups to permanently subordinate positions in the world, Fredrickson notes, were “originally articulated in the idioms of religion more than in those of natural science,”¹⁰ a point to which we will return shortly.

In an appendix to Fredrickson’s work on “the concept of racism in historical discourse” he observes the following:

Although commonly used, “racism” has become a loaded and ambiguous term....Once considered primarily a matter of belief or ideology, “racism” may now express itself in institutional patterns or social practices that have adverse effects on members of groups thought of as “races,” even if a conscious belief that they are inferior or unworthy is absent.¹¹

He notes that the definition with which he began, and which is commonly used in scholarship, is inadequate to actually identify the persisting phenomenon of racism in contemporary society. The persistence of racism in societies where explicitly racist views and policies have long ceased to be acceptable should lead us to wonder if the definition of racism as “ethnoracial” prejudice coupled with power was ever really adequate in defining racism. Similarly, the fact that 14th and 15th century Europeans were able to draw on religious and philosophical justifications for racism that were, by that point,

⁹ George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2002), pg. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 151.

ready-made should lead us to look further into the religious and philosophical origins of racism. Fredrickson suggests a broader definition of racism at the end of the appendix, in which he writes that “racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable.”¹²

When it comes to the history of racism, scholars can often miss the very thing that they are supposedly looking for by defining it in terms that are too narrow. If racism is so insidious as to be able to survive in the absence of explicitly racist views and policies, then perhaps racism’s origins run deeper in the cultures that have harbored these views and policies than a mere history of them suggests. If racism is able to survive and thrive in a world where only a small minority would actually express explicit racism, this suggests that explicit racism was only one form of a much broader and deeper phenomenon. If it is, as Fredrickson observes, in European religion (particularly Christianity) where racist ideas first took root, then we may begin to ask what about this religion led to the birth of such views. What about Europeans’ understanding of their God led so many of them to believe it was their prerogative to enslave, colonize, and otherwise dominate African people? What are the origins of these ideas?

In *The Afrocentric Idea* Molefi Kete Asante introduces the concept of hierarchical discourse, which, he writes, consists of three main characteristics: “control over the rhetorical territory through definition, establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or *rite de passage*, and the stifling of opposing discourse.”¹³ Asante describes the impact of such a hierarchy on discourse which is considered oppositional: “By defining not only the

¹² Ibid., pg. 170.

¹³ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple U. Press, 1998), pg. 34.

terms of discussion but also the grounds upon which the discussion will be waged, the established order concentrates power in its own hands.”¹⁴ In a similar but more limited vein, V. Y. Mudimbe defines what he calls “epistemological ethnocentrism” as “the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from “them” unless it is already “ours” or comes from “us.””¹⁵ Wade Nobles’ idea of “conceptual incarceration,” discussed above, also touches on a similar theme. These scholars all see the workings of what we might refer to more roughly as ‘racism’ operating within a worldview and a corresponding cultural and institutional apparatus that systematically devalues anything that is oppositional. In short, anti-black, anti-African racism is dependant on an intellectual, cultural, and institutional hierarchy that systematically devalues the history, culture, and life of African people and that systematically elevates the history, culture, and life of European people to the level of ideal normativity. In Asante’s words, “the entire social fabric of oppression is dictated by symbols of hierarchy and intellectual theories rooted in Eurocentric viewpoints.”¹⁶ It is the origins of this hierarchy that is the concern of this study.

A theme that underlies the writing of history is the agency of the actors being written about. Often, especially when it comes to scholarship about Africa and African people, authors’ views on the agency of Africans are not explicitly stated but emerge gradually through the authors’ conceptualizations of the events they write about and even in the choices the authors make of which events are worth writing about at all. The general field known as “postcolonial studies” has sparked a rethinking of the colonial

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1988), pg. 15.

¹⁶ Asante *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 37.

record and inspired “subaltern” readings of colonial texts, wherein the presence of colonized people represented in the texts as “objectified” are read as destabilizing monolithic, Eurocentric narratives about agency. However, this field has often been limited by an uncritical understanding of agency that is rooted in Eurocentric conceptions of liberty, rationality, and personal choice.¹⁷ Similarly, it is the presence of non-European people *in Eurocentric narratives* that is seen as critical to conceptualizing their agency, rather than their location *within non-European cultural and historical narratives* that serve as a foundation for an alternative view of the world and of the encounter with European racism.

For Afrocentric scholars, the location of African people within the stream of African culture and history is central to conceptualizing their agency. Agency is thus conceptualized not as the ability to exist or create new ‘hybrid’ identities within European narratives, but as location within the history and culture of African people. Agency is the freedom of African people to understand the world in which people of African descent live, whether it be on the African continent or in the African diaspora, in terms of their own culture and history, and to live accordingly. As Asante writes:

Africans have been negated in the system of white racial domination. This is not mere marginalization, but the obliteration of the presence, meaning, activities, or images of the African. This is negated reality, a destruction of the spiritual and material personality of the African person.¹⁸

¹⁷ An extended discussion of agency occurs in the essay “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency” in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), pp. 245-282. For an example of the “subaltern” reading of European colonial literature by another of the foremost theorists in the field of postcolonial studies see Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1993).

¹⁸ Molefi Kete Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), pg. 41.

It is this “spiritual and material personality of the African person” that constitutes the foundation for African agency in Afrocentric theory. What exactly constitutes this personality is capable of being debated by Afrocentrists, according to Asante, but the centrality of this spiritual and material personality to understanding the agency of African people is, for Afrocentrists, beyond debate.¹⁹

Utilizing an Afrocentric approach to conceptualizing the agency of African people offers the hope of a more complete analysis of the workings of anti-black, anti-African racism than is possible in studies that borrow their conception of agency from Eurocentric theorists. In Afrocentric terms, the process of the enslavement and colonization of African people by Europeans is conceptualized as a process of historical and cultural dislocation. That is, the physical dislocation and destruction of enslavement and colonization was accompanied by and inextricably intertwined with historical and cultural destruction and dislocation. Marimba Ani has designated this process by the term *Ma'afa*, a Kiswahili word meaning ‘disaster.’²⁰ Naming and identifying this process allows us to more clearly investigate the social and intellectual hierarchies that have enabled it and that are an essential part of it.

Examples of racism in European culture and scholarship are often blithely ignored by contemporary scholars who, relying on Eurocentric theorists as their intellectual forebearers, often excuse the role played by these scholarly architects of racist thought and ideas as merely conforming passively to ‘their times.’ Compare, for example, the passing remarks of Hegel about African subjectivity in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle be Unbroken* (Baltimore, MD: Nkonimfo Publications, 1997 [c1980]), pp. 12-14.

History with the remarks of the contemporary postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha.

Hegel writes:

In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the contemplation of any firm objectivity--as for example, God or law--in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he has the view of his own being. In the indiscriminate compact oneness of his existence, the African has not yet attained the distinction between himself as an individual and his essential generality, so that the knowledge of an absolute being, an other and a higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting.²¹

For Hegel, individuality was contingent on one's being European (or at least not African). Now compare this with Bhabha for whom, "[t]he individuation of the agent occurs in a moment of displacement,"²² in other words, much like Hegel, the individuality of the non-European is seen as contingent upon his or her dislocation into European cultural and historical narratives. European theorists who have espoused racist ideas may well have been 'men of their times,' but African people of the same period were also 'men and women of their times' who conceptualized themselves and their experiences in African terms. Their agency did not begin with the process of dislocation into European narratives, but rather was profoundly and often tragically threatened by it.

This study, then, is a historical inquiry into the religious and philosophical origins of the social, cultural, and ideological hierarchies that have functioned to deny the agency of African people both on the continent and throughout the diaspora.²³ The remainder of

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Ruben Alvarado (Aalten, Netherlands: Wordbridge, 2011), pg. 86.

²² Bhabha *The Location of Culture*, pg. 265.

²³ In addition to the sources cited above, this general conceptualization of racism has been influenced by the concept of an "agency reduction formation" in Michael Tillotson's *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011). Tillotson defines what he calls an "agency

this chapter will be devoted to an examination of some of the characteristic ways in which historical narratives often function to deny the agency of African people. In the process, a search for what Asante refers to as “the spiritual and material personality of the African person” will serve as a conscious guide.²⁴ Though difficult to define, this “personality” is, for this study, the “something valuable, indeed, indispensable” that Armah describes the Sankofa bird in search of in the quotation above. It is something that we will attempt to retrieve ‘in flight’ as this study unfolds, beginning with the following examination of some general characteristics of the denial of African agency in historical narratives.

1. Violence and Existential Nullification

The European colonization and enslavement of Africa and African people--the *Ma'afa*--was a violent process. Millions perished and millions more suffered great physical and psychological violence. This is an indisputable fact of history, but a fact that historians have dealt with, and continue to deal with, in a variety of ways. In this regard, Hegel's remarks quoted above are highly significant. Hegel denied that African people were capable of self-consciousness. In the same passage, Hegel went on to say: “The Negro...exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state: one must abstract from all thought of reverence and ethics--all that we call feeling--if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this

reduction formation” as: “Any system of thought that distracts, neutralizes, or reduces the need and desire for assertive collective agency by African Americans,” (pg. 60). The concept here is expanded to all African people and also incorporated into Asante's conception of the social and cultural hierarchies that both enable and constitute such “formations.” See Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pp. 34-45.

²⁴ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 41.

type of character.”²⁵ In a Western philosophical tradition in which self-conscious thought was enshrined in Descartes’ famous formulation--*cogito, ergo sum*, ‘I think therefore I am’²⁶--as the single characteristic on which human existence itself hinged, Hegel’s remarks placed African people, in the minds of Europeans, in a subhuman category; *human*, but not capable of existence *as humans*. This philosophical nullification of existence went hand-in-hand with the violence of the *Ma’afa*, as we shall see.

Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, from which these passages are drawn, were originally given in Berlin in the first half of the 19th century. In the second half of the same century, in the same city, European leaders gathered to divide the African continent, and its people, amongst themselves at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. The leaders presumed their prerogative to violently overtake and divide the continent of Africa without the consent of Africans. This prerogative to violently subordinate an entire continent and its people was deeply intertwined with a European mentality that assumed that African people were already subordinate. This mentality was far from being original to Hegel or to the Berlin Conference. In 1455, more than three decades before the first Europeans had rounded the Cape of Southern Africa and nearly three centuries prior to Hegel’s *Lectures*, Pope Nicholas V had issued a bull *Romanus pontifex* granting King Afonso of Portugal the right in Africa “to invade, conquer, crush, pacify and subjugate any whomsoever Saracens, and pagans, and other enemies of Christ wherever established...and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery....”²⁷

²⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, pg. 86.

²⁶ See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. John Veitch, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1935), pg. 35.

²⁷ John Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change*. (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2005), Ch. 10. See also Pope Nicholas V “*Romanus pontifex*.” 1455 Papal

Marimba Ani explains how ideology and violence were intertwined in the destructive process of the *Ma'afa*:

...within the setting of our enslavement, the ideology of white supremacy was systematically reinforced to deny the validity of an African humanity. This system of European oppression and denial was buttressed by a materialistic, aggressive world-view, and an ever more intensely technically ordered society that sought to make of Africans simply one more machine in the service of Europeans.²⁸

The remarks of Hegel are an extension of the culturally-bound thought of Descartes that equates “thinking”--by which he undoubtedly meant thinking of a particular kind that was determined by European assumptions about the nature of the world and the universe--with existing as a human. Scholarship about racist ideology is often capable of seeing the racism inherent in assuming that Africans are not capable of “thinking,” but not in the Eurocentric terms by which we define “thinking” for all people and by which we make a particular kind of “thinking” equivalent to existing as a human. This is the nature of what Asante terms “hierarchical discourse” which controls the discussion by “defining not only the terms of discussion but also the grounds upon which the discussion will be waged.”²⁹

The violence of enslavement and colonization were, in a sense, underwritten by this kind of existential nullification, and its legacy is still seen, often in passing, in the writing of history. Take, for example, John K. Thornton’s description and assessment of the middle passage in his influential book *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*:

encyclical. Accessed June 23, 2018. <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Nichol05/romanus-pontifex.htm>

²⁸ Ani, *Let the Circle be Unbroken*, pg. 12.

²⁹ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 34.

The voyage was at the very best extremely unpleasant, and for many was a slow and painful death. . . .the trip pushed a significant number of the cargo to the brink of death and routinely killed up to a third of them.³⁰

In writing about the middle passage, Thornton reduces the existence of the enslaved Africans who experienced it almost entirely to the physical, even the numerical. What may appear as a subtle euphemism--referring to the African people who suffered and died in the middle passage as “a significant number of the cargo”--is a striking nullification, especially in a work that is admirable for its effort to portray the extent to which enslaved Africans preserved and maintained their culture through the process of enslavement. Thornton has, however euphemistically, adopted the language, and with it the worldview and perspective of the slave-trader and the pain and suffering of the middle passage is nullified in the process. This is evident in his assessment of the passage’s effects: “...although these experiences were never to be forgotten, they do not seem on the whole to have been more than temporarily debilitating.”³¹ The violent dislocation and murder of millions is transformed, by way of nullification, into “experiences” that, to Thornton, “do not seem on the whole to have been more than temporarily debilitating.”

The legacy of racial violence and the existential nullification of African people have been a burgeoning sight of recent scholarship in the general field of Africana studies and a persistent theme in continental African philosophy. Such scholarship has often drawn on the legacy of Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and revolutionary thinker, who in his two most widely-read works--*Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the*

³⁰ John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, Second Edition, (New York, NY: Cambridge U. Press, 1998), pg. 154.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 162.

Earth--dealt extensively with these themes.³² In the earliest of his works--*Black Skin, White Masks*--Fanon wrote, "a Black man is not a man," but rather exists in a "zone of non-being."³³ As Fanon understood it, "White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man."³⁴ After several years residing in France, Fanon was intimately aware of the limitations placed on him by the logic of racism. He could earn his doctorate and practice psychiatry, but nonetheless be reminded of his confinement to the "zone of non-being" by a small child, saying, "Look, a Negro! Maman, a Negro!"³⁵

Many contemporary scholars working in the vein of Fanon in examining these themes of violence and nullification have been associated with the term "Afro-Pessimism," which traces its origin to a 2008 memoir by Frank B. Wilderson III entitled *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*.³⁶ Wilderson has explained the term writing that "Afro-Pessimism theorizes [blackness]...as condition--or relation--of ontological death."³⁷ In the United States, Saidiya Hartman has examined extensively how violence and nullification have impacted the writing of the history of enslavement and states the challenge to accepted historiography by asserting the agency of the enslaved with particular clarity when she writes:

³² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), originally published in 1952 and *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans.

Constance Farrington (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), originally published in 1961.

³³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. xii. See also the extensive discussion of this theme in Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, (New York, NY: Fordham U. Press, 2015), ch. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. xvii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-93.

³⁶ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, (Durham, NC: Duke, 2008).

³⁷ Frank B. Wilderson III "Afro-Pessimism." Frank B. Wilderson homepage. Accessed May 7, 2018. www.incognegro.org/afro_pessimism.html .

The particular status of the slave as object and as subject requires a careful consideration of the notion of agency if one wants to do more than “endow” the enslaved with agency as some sort of gift dispensed by historians and critics to the dispossessed. Certainly the constraints of agency are great in this situation, and it is difficult to imagine a way in which the interpellation of the slave as subject enables forms of agency that do not reinscribe the terms of subjugation.³⁸

Hartman’s scholarship deals extensively with themes of the violence inflicted on African people in the *Ma’afa* and with the ways in which the legacy of that violence is reinscribed in the writing of history.³⁹

Such scholarship has gone a long way in exposing the dynamics of violence and nullification, and the critical link between the two, as when Achille Mbembe writes, “At the root of colonial violence, there...lies an extremism of a quite special type, with origins that must be sought within Western cosmology itself.”⁴⁰ However, scholars working with these themes seem at times to set themselves an impossible task of critiquing racial violence and the existential nullification of African people using the very systems of thought and frames of reference that they themselves have revealed to make such violence and nullification normal if not inevitable. This impossible situation is something that scholars working with the themes of Afro-Pessimism are intimately and at times poetically aware of,⁴¹ recalling the nearly elegiac words of Ayi Kwei Armah: “We [African intellectuals] are rich in ideas concerning the untenability of our position as a

³⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1997), pg. 54.

³⁹ See especially her work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). The whole of this work can be read as a meditation on dislocation.

⁴⁰ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley, CA: U. of California, 2001), pg. 190.

⁴¹ See, for example, Christina Sharpe *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, NC: Duke, 2016).

people.”⁴² If nothing else the predicament of Afro-Pessimism bears witness to the severity of the issues presented by the themes of violence and nullification that it deals with.

2. Mummification

In a 1956 essay entitled “Racism and Culture,” Fanon, who by then was living and working in Algeria and deeply involved in the practical struggle against French colonialism there, wrote:

The setting up of the colonial system does not of itself bring about the death of the native culture. Historical observation reveals, on the contrary, that the aim sought is rather a continued agony than a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture. This culture, once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testifies against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal. The cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thinking.⁴³

In a later work, which was published in English as *A Dying Colonialism* and describes what Fanon viewed as the fruit of the Algerian revolution, he wrote about the revolution as much as (or more as) a historical and cultural revolution than a political one. The revolutionary struggle, Fanon wrote, “renews the symbols, the myths, the beliefs, the emotional responsiveness of the people. We witness in Algeria man’s reassertion of his

⁴² Armah, *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, pg. 296.

⁴³ This essay appears in a collection of essays collected after Fanon’s death and published as *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967), originally published in 1964. This particular essay was originally given as a speech to the First Congress of Negro Writers in Paris and published in the journal *Présence Africaine* in 1956, four years after the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* and three years after Fanon’s arrival in Algeria.

capacity to progress.”⁴⁴ Throughout the work Fanon describes how the culture of the colonized becomes ‘mummified’ under colonialism, encapsulated in a living museum that is meant to serve as a testimony to the backwardness that the colonizers have imputed to the culture of the colonized. Whatever good may come with colonialism-- Fanon cites Western medicine as what is perhaps his most compelling example--the colonized person is only able to receive it at the expense of devaluing and even abandoning his or her own culture, because whatever is given must be received on the terms of the colonizer. The revolution, in Fanon’s view, not only restored the cultural values of the colonized, but eliminated the dynamic that placed all that came from the colonized world in opposition to all that came from the world of the colonizer, freeing the culture of the colonized from its ‘mummification’ and allowing the colonized to adopt innovations, even those from outside, on their own terms.⁴⁵

The Gikuyu writer, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, describes the European colonization of Africa as unleashing a “cultural bomb:”

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves....It makes them identify with...all those forces which would stop their own springs of life.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1965), pg. 30. This work was originally published in French in 1959.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

⁴⁶ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 1986), pg. 3.

It is by means of this ‘cultural bomb’ that the African cultural and historical world is portrayed as a land of darkness. What is ‘African’ is portrayed as though it suspended in a living cultural and historical wasteland, a time when good and evil, modern and primitive, right and wrong, have not yet become relevant concepts for analysis. Instead, all is consigned to a mythological darkness where anything seems to go.

The imposition of this ‘cultural bomb’ of Eurocentric assumptions about African culture and history has cast a long shadow and continues to beleaguer scholarship about Africa, especially when it comes to African spirituality and religion. African scholarship in this area still must contest with the legacy of Eurocentrism passed on through terminology and classifications that are inadequate to describe African phenomena and that often unwittingly place scholars of African beliefs in the difficult position of having to defend their legitimacy using terminology that has already undermined it.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the way scholars of African religion and spirituality have approached the topic of classifying African religions as either monotheistic or polytheistic. The preeminent scholar of African religions John S. Mbiti has surveyed African beliefs about God in great detail in his *Concepts of God in Africa*, detailing that African traditional beliefs, without exception have a conception of God and an understanding of God as supreme over other spiritual beings, humans, animals, etc.⁴⁷ The depth of Mbiti’s studies and his analysis of a Eurocentric understanding that once classified African beliefs about God as ‘polytheistic’ and placed them on a low rung in an evolutionary schema that had European ‘monotheistic’ beliefs at the top have led Mbiti to generally eschew the concepts of ‘polytheistic’ and

⁴⁷ John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1970).

‘monotheistic’ in classifying African beliefs about God.⁴⁸ Other scholars have attempted to modify the existing terminology to be more accurate, such as Imasogie, who suggests the term “bureaucratic monotheism” to classify a belief in a supreme God and lesser deities, or Idowu who suggests the term “diffused monotheism” to mean the same.⁴⁹ Muzorewa similarly uses a modified term “cognitive monotheism,” but goes a step farther in distinguishing this from the “political monotheism” of religions like Christianity, writing that the primary distinction between the two is that “cognitive monotheism” is capable of tolerance of other beliefs where “political monotheism” is not.⁵⁰

The terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” are, historically speaking, recent inventions whose widespread use dates back no further than the 17th century. In other words, the terms came into use by European scholars after the European colonization and enslavement of Africa and African people was already well under way. If nothing else, the extended discussion of the terms among African scholars should call into question the actual meaning of the terms themselves, since those religions labeled “monotheistic,” especially at the time the term came into usage, recognize lesser divine entities (in the form of saints, angels, and other spiritual entities) and those labeled “polytheistic” almost without exception recognize a supreme God. The primary distinction between the two, in the words of Jan Assmann, is that monotheism “asserts its identity by opposing itself to

⁴⁸ See especially his discussion of these topics in his *African Religions and Philosophy*, Second Edition, (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1989), ch. 2.

⁴⁹ O. Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, Second Edition, (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Limited, 1985), pp. 20-26. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 108-136.

⁵⁰ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *African Origins of Monotheism: Challenging the Eurocentric Interpretation of God Concepts on the Continent and in Diaspora* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

polytheism, whereas no polytheistic religion ever asserted itself in contradistinction to monotheism....”⁵¹ Indeed, we are on solid ground when we ask if “monotheism” has ever really meant anything more than “the particular theism that European scholars have decided is correct.”

We will return to this point in some detail in the course of this study. For now, it suffices to say that Eurocentric terminology and systems of categorization often serve the purpose, by their mere adoption, of placing African beliefs in the position of needing to be defended. Such intellectual processes ‘mummify’ African beliefs, requiring scholars to defend African beliefs in Eurocentric terms, which often leaves them straining to fit African beliefs into the ‘correct’ category (e.g. “monotheism”) rather than critiquing the system that has already confined such beliefs to the ‘incorrect’ category by virtue of their not being European. The process of de-‘mummification’ requires an understanding of the hierarchies that have confined African beliefs to such categories and that continue to do so.

3. Disconnection

The Eurocentric narrative of the European colonization and enslavement of Africa and African people, as discussed above, hides the violence of the historical process of the *Ma’afa* by nullifying the existence of African people. This process has resulted in histories in which the streams of events and the flow of cultures have been disconnected in order to meet the needs of Eurocentric beliefs about both Europeans and Africans. This has required both the removal of African people from any historical narrative in which

⁵¹ Jan Assmann, “Monotheism and Polytheism” in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004), pp. 17-31.

they are seen to have historical and cultural achievements that are uniquely and solely African as well as the removal of historical and cultural achievements from African historical narratives.

In Hegel's *Lectures*, we see an example of the removal of the historical and cultural achievements of the Egyptians from Africa in the following passage:

The second portion of Africa is the river district of the Nile--Egypt; which was adapted to become a mighty center of independent civilization, and therefore is as isolated and singular in Africa as Africa itself appears in relation to the other parts of the world....This part [of Africa] was to be, and had to be, attached to Europe.⁵²

It was, for Hegel, the fact that Egypt had "become a mighty center of independent civilization" that placed it outside of Africa (and in Europe), not any fact of culture or history. Africa, for Hegel, lay "beyond the day of self-conscious history...enveloped in the dark mantle of night,"⁵³ and a civilization whose existence clearly contradicted this, though it was undeniably located in Africa, was thus for him "attached to Europe."

Extreme as it may seem for Hegel to 'detach' Egypt from Africa solely on the basis of its cultural and historical achievements, the detachment has its modern equivalent in the opening lines of a work by contemporary Egyptologist Donald B. Redford:

One of the greatest anomalies in the long story of civilization on the face of the globe is the stark contrast between Egypt of the 4000s and 3000s before Christ and its immediate progeny of the early pyramid age. Only generations separate the two, and yet in terms of relative societal and political development a vast gulf interposes itself. Unlike the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, where human society over millennia of prehistory displays a linear evolution at a constant rate and where the temples at Uruk presage the glories of Sumer centuries in advance, Egypt bounced

⁵² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, pg. 85.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 84.

overnight, as it were, out of the Stone Age and into urban culture. High-rises suddenly replaced mud huts; a civil service superseded the village elders. A new sophisticated focus for human organization filled the void where only chiefdoms had occasionally appeared: a king sat over Egypt.⁵⁴

Here we find a not-so-distant echo of Hegel's understanding of Egypt's relationship to Africa: Egypt is a civilization rising almost miraculously in the midst of a "void where only chiefdoms had occasionally appeared." The assumption stands: Egypt's cultural and historical accomplishments place it, of necessity, outside of the stream of African history.

In the case of Egypt, the demands of Eurocentric historiography require that the accomplishments of Egypt be disconnected from Africa. Just as often if not more often, however, it is African people, as opposed to African civilizations, who are disconnected from the stream of African history and culture. Fanon, for example, wrote about the effects of Martinican children of African descent being "constantly asked to recite "our ancestors the Gauls"" and subsequently coming to identify themselves with the history of Europe.⁵⁵ In *Flash of the Spirit: Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Robert Farris Thompson demonstrates the prevalence of African aesthetic and religious themes in African American art and thought throughout the Americas.⁵⁶ Focusing on the United States the works of both Albert J. Raboteau and Sterling Stuckey have emphasized the persistence of African religious and spiritual beliefs in communities of enslaved Africans and have both been influential in the study of African-American history.⁵⁷ What

⁵⁴ Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1992), pg. 3.

⁵⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. 126.

⁵⁶ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York, NY: Vintage).

⁵⁷ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: the "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, (New York, NY: Oxford U. Press, 1978); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist*

distinguishes these works is their conscious use of African historical and cultural explanations in analyzing the history and culture of African people in the Americas. Such efforts aid in the process of reconnecting histories that have long been neglected in Eurocentric scholarship that has seen African people solely in terms of their (subject) role in European narratives. The structures that sustain this imbalance is the final topic to which we now turn.

4. Structural Marginalization/Neglect

Ayi Kwei Armah has offered a vision for the self-determining, autonomous engagement of African people with African culture. Of this vision, he writes:

When able to operate autonomously, African society engages in a constant attempt to locate and relocate individuals within society, as well as to place society itself as present reality within the temporal flow from past through present to future, all within a cosmos imagined to be seeking a natural balance.⁵⁸

What Asante refers to as “the entire social fabric of oppression”⁵⁹ offers us insight into why such an organic vision of the history and culture of African people is often not the one we find in contemporary scholarship. Perhaps the greatest way in which the categories of racial domination continue to reinforce themselves is structural. Funding for research, institutional priorities within academia, control of the processes of credentialing scholars, all have an impact on the development of scholarship about African culture and history.

Theory and the Foundations of Black America, 25th Anniversary Edition, (New York, NY: Oxford U. Press, 2013 [c1987]).

⁵⁸ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, pp. 252-253.

⁵⁹ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 37.

The academy and the whole of society have been deeply impacted by the categories of racial domination. Scholars whose works are guided, whether consciously or not, by Eurocentric assumptions and categories are well-placed within the academy, and challenges to those assumptions and categories are often met with sharp rebuke, as we shall see in the pages that follow. For now, it suffices to say that many important topics are pushed to the margins or neglected completely by a structure that has deemed them unworthy by reason of definition.

This brief sketch of some of the characteristic ways in which hierarchical discourse within historical and cultural scholarship functions to deny the agency of African people gives us a grounding for the study that is at hand. What will be examined in the pages that follow are the religious and philosophical origins of these hierarchies. Having introduced some of these themes, we can now proceed to look for their historical development. This study of history, however, is rooted in the present, as the Sankofa bird is in flight; as such, we must look not only at the historical narratives but the function these narratives serve and have served historically. We turn first, then, to the home of one of the most powerful stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Ancient Egypt, or Kemet as it was known to the people who lived there, the place that Moses was said to have led the Israelites out of, the birthplace of both what has been called the first monotheistic religion and the religion of the Hebrew scriptures.

CHAPTER 2:

GYE NYAME (“EXCEPT GOD”): GOD WITHOUT IDOLS

In the previous chapter, this study was defined as a historical inquiry into the religious and philosophical origins of the social, cultural, and ideological hierarchies that have functioned to deny the agency of African people both on the continent and throughout the diaspora. This was followed by an examination of some of the characteristic ways in which historical narratives often function to deny the agency of African people, namely through violence and existential nullification, “mummification,” historical and cultural disconnection, and structural marginalization and neglect. It was emphasized that underlying this project is the search for what Asante refers to as “the spiritual and material personality of the African person,” which serves as a conscious guide to this study and the approach taken to its topic.⁶⁰

In this and the following chapter, we will examine the historical and mythical origins of Judeo-Christian monotheism, the categories that have been used in the propagation and explication of a Judeo-Christian worldview, and how these categories have functioned in racist discourse about African people, culture, and history. This chapter will focus on the concept of idolatry. Being the central concept that distinguishes monotheistic belief systems from other systems, we will examine both its origin and its “genealogical” connection to racist ideas and discourse that are both current and historical. The following chapter will look more specifically at the historical and ‘mythical’ significance of the biblical exodus, in which Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and during which time the God of the Israelites formed a covenant with them, declaring them to be God’s chosen people.

⁶⁰ Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 41.

This chapter is broken into two sections. The first section will return to some of the subject matter of the first chapter, examining how the displacement of African phenomena into Eurocentric historical narratives and cultural frames of reference has resulted in what Asante has described, and what was introduced above, as a hierarchical discourse.⁶¹ In particular, the way in which various theorists have conceptualized the agency of African people in relation to African history and culture will be examined in greater detail. This discussions provides necessary background and serves as an introduction to the main topic of this chapter, which will be discussed in the second section: idolatry. The approach taken in both sections of this chapter, and in the following chapters, I have called *genealogical* because it begins with the present (or recent past) and works backwards to ancient history, tracing the origins and connections of the concepts that are identified, then returns to the present. In the case of idolatry, what will be shown is that the concept of idolatry has morphed and changed names several times but has had a lasting impact that continues to exert its influence on the study and understanding of African phenomena. Before that, however, we will take a closer look at the concept of agency.

1. African Agency and the Subjectivity Trap

In his introduction to Paulin Hountodji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Abiola Irele writes of the new orientation for African intellectuals that was signaled by African independence. Of the basis for this new orientation, he writes, "It is impossible to doubt the influence of Frantz Fanon's writings in securing a clear ideological base for this new

⁶¹ Ibid., pg. 34.

orientation and in imparting to it a radical spirit.”⁶² The influence of Fanon in both continental and diasporic African scholarship is clear enough, but the “ideological base” of Fanon’s thought has proven more illusive.

Often reading selectively, various schools of thought have sought to ‘claim’ Fanon for their own particular orientation and outlook.⁶³ None is without reason for his or her claim. Fanon drew on a wide range of sources and influences, and while both his opposition to colonialism and his portrait of the psychological processes that enabled and sometimes outlasted colonialism are both clear and compelling, the particular foundational perspective for his critique and his vision of liberation seems at times to contradict itself if not to change completely. In his writings, the very structures of thinking that Fanon was so eloquently critiquing nonetheless often exert an inescapable, foundational influence. In this section, we will examine the “trap” that is set for African subjectivity when it seeks to assert itself in the terms of Eurocentric discourse. Fanon’s compelling critique of colonialism and racism and the search for a foundational perspective in which to ground it, will thus serve as a point of departure.

The first of Fanon’s two best-known and most widely-read works came out of his time in France as a psychiatry student. The work that would become *Black Skin, White Masks* actually began as a rejected proposal for Fanon’s doctoral dissertation in psychiatry. *Black Skin, White Masks* as it was eventually published in 1952, a year after Fanon successfully defended his doctorate, is an examination of the psychology of racial and colonial oppression. In it Fanon asserts that the psychology of the colonized under

⁶² Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Second Edition, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1983), pg. 23

⁶³ For a detailed and balanced overview of this phenomenon see Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*.

colonial oppression reveals the irrationality of colonialism itself. Essential to this irrationality is the negation of black life that colonialism entails in which, as Fanon wrote, “a Black man is not a man,” but rather exists in a “zone of non-being.”⁶⁴

As Fanon understood it, “White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man,”⁶⁵ and it was this “existential deviation” that was the root of psychological discord. After several years residing in France, Fanon was intimately aware of the limitations placed on him by the logic of colonialism. As stated in the previous chapter, he could earn his doctorate and practice psychiatry, but nonetheless be reminded of his confinement to the “zone of non-being” by a small child, saying, “Look, a Negro! *Maman*, a Negro!”⁶⁶ The black person under colonialism can strive so hard to speak perfect French, attain the highest academic degree, take on all the trappings of French civilization to the point where he or she even disdains his or her homeland, but all of these efforts to signal the “humanity” one was supposed to gain through the acquisition of ‘civilized’ (i.e. “French”) behavior will be doomed to failure because the logic of colonialism will never allow him or her to escape the “zone of non-being.”⁶⁷

At a few points in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon makes direct or indirect references to the work of the French philosopher cum anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose works on what he called “primitive mentality” asserted that the broad category of people that he referred to as “natives” or “primitives” conceptualized the world in ways that were “pre-logical,” relying on “mystical participation” rather than the resolution of

⁶⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. xii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. xvii.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-93.

⁶⁷ For an extended philosophical and biographical discussion of the “zone of non-being” see Lewis Gordon’s *What Fanon Said*, ch. 2.

logical contradictions to make sense of phenomena.⁶⁸ The sharp distinctions that Lévy-Bruhl drew between what he termed the “primitive,” “pre-logical” thought of non-Europeans and the “modern,” “logical” thought of Europeans, at the time they were written, signified, in Mudimbe’s words, “the task of comprehending the primitive mentality as a poor and non-evolved entity and the possibility of restoring it at the beginning of the history of reason.”⁶⁹ Lévy-Bruhl was at the end of the era of “armchair ethnographers,” who, in the tradition of Hegel, theorized about the people in the non-European world without leaving Europe.

Lévy-Bruhl and the type of Eurocentric thinking he represented were a particular object of scorn for Fanon, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon wrote:

Black magic, primitive mentality, animism and animal eroticism--all this surges toward me. All this typifies people who have not kept pace with the evolution of humanity.⁷⁰

Fanon also praises Georges Mounin, a white writer who he quotes saying:

I had the good fortune not to discover the black man through reading Lévy-Bruhl’s *Mentalité primitive* in our sociology class; I had the good

⁶⁸ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s best-known works are perhaps the first two that he wrote. The first is *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1966), which was first published in French in 1910 and first translated in 1926. The second is his *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York, NY: Beacon, 1924), which was originally published in French in 1923. Also of interest are his posthumously published notebooks, which collected and published as *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, trans. Peter Revière, (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), first published in 1949.

⁶⁹ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, pg. 136. Mudimbe’s discussion of the recent intellectual history of European and African writing about Africa is an excellent introduction to both the issues and the thought of some of the major figures involved in thinking and writing about Africa and African people and it will be relied on throughout this work.

⁷⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. 105.

fortune to discover the black man otherwise than through books--and I am grateful for it every day.⁷¹

Lévy-Bruhl's writings, for Fanon, were part of an edifice of the colonial consciousness, or even the colonial 'unconscious,' of Europeans, in which: "The European knows and does not know. At an introspective level, a black man is a black man; but in his unconscious, the image of the black savage is firmly fixed."⁷² Fanon was harshly critical of Lévy-Bruhl, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*, for the way in which Lévy-Bruhl's theory of "primitive mentality" seemed to imprison the thought of all those who were non-European, and especially those who were African, in some mental land that had been left behind by evolution.

This is, however, only part of the story. The dissertation that Fanon actually submitted for his doctorate in psychiatry drew heavily on Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about "mystical participation." Patrick Ehlen describes what this signified about Fanon's evolving understanding of the role of the psychiatrist in the conditions of colonialism:

In the context of Fanon's developing theory of human psychology, his attention to Lévy-Bruhl's law of participation reveals an early understanding of and sympathy for the patient's cultural worldview above and beyond medical theory. The task of the psychiatrist, then, becomes not simply to interview the patient and then thumb through a book to uncover the diagnosis and solution, but to make an effort to "reach" the patient through the patient's own symbols and belief systems....Before subscribing to any doctrine, the task of the doctor is to lean the doctrine of the patient.⁷³

For all that Lévy-Bruhl had done to imprison the culture and worldview of the colonized in a land forgotten by evolution, he had offered a theory that attempted to account for

⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 176.

⁷² Ibid., pg. 175.

⁷³ Patrick Ehlen, *Frantz Fanon: A Spiritual Biography*, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2000), pp. 99-100.

cultural differences that Fanon, even before beginning his work as a psychiatrist in Algeria, was clearly already deeply aware of.

This awareness would only grow as Fanon, a year after *Black Skin, White Masks*' 1952 publication, accepted a position at a psychiatric facility in French-colonized Algeria. Upon his arrival at the clinic in late 1953, Fanon immediately set about reforming the facility. He instituted a wide range of reforms designed to give more liberty to the patients. Among his reforms was the erasure of distinctions made between French and "native" patients. He forbid his staff to even identify patients as such. The results, however, he found frustrating. Where the French patients flourished with their new freedoms, the "native" patients floundered. As Ehlen writes: "Ideas began to take shape, and he soon came to the realization that his attempt at sociotherapy failed among the Algerians not because they were treated differently from Europeans, but because they were treated the *same* as Europeans."⁷⁴

Fanon's efforts to create an environment free from the inequality of colonialism was now revealed to him to be a backhanded imposition of European culture. He soon realized that when he structured activities along Algerian cultural values, emphasizing "family relations, storytelling, traditional Arabic games, and tending to their own plots of land in the garden,"⁷⁵ it was the Algerians who flourished, furthering Fanon's already growing understanding of the importance of culture and worldview in liberation from colonialism.

So, what are we to make of Fanon's critique of Lévy-Bruhl? When Fanon wrote that "White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on

⁷⁴ Patrick Ehlen *Frantz Fanon: A Spiritual Biography*, pg. 120.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 121.

the black man,”⁷⁶ he was writing about the frame of reference that colonialism and racism have placed on African people. When African people, in this frame of reference, attempt to assert their subjectivity, their personhood, their agency, they are faced with an impossible choice, the same choice Fanon was faced with in relation to Lévy-Bruhl: either accept that African people are fundamentally culturally and psychologically different from Europeans, and thereby accept all of the not-so-subtle implications that they are people who evolution has in one way or another passed by; or, assert that African people are fundamentally the same as Europeans, and thereby commit oneself to the challenge of demonstrating this sameness in a world where a black man can go as far as Fanon did and still face the ridicule of a small, European child, saying “Look, a Negro! *Maman*, a Negro!”⁷⁷ In the mental categories of European colonialism and racism, the attempt to assert the subjectivity of African people is a hopeless trap.

In his writings, Fanon deftly analyzed the various workings and complexities of this trap, its enduring presence in the mental and cultural lives of those struggling against colonialism and racism, and the ways in which this trap can endure even after the end of political colonialism.⁷⁸ In his life, Fanon worked tirelessly for an end to colonialism, eventually embracing the path of a full-time revolutionary leader in the African struggle for liberation from colonial rule. But, for all of that, one can read Fanon’s writings and analyze his life, as above, and make a strong case based on more than selective quotation

⁷⁶ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, pg. xvii.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-93.

⁷⁸ Fanon’s two lesser-known works are very valuable in showing the depth and care Fanon took in attempting to understand and emphasize the cultural element of the struggle against colonialism. The first of these is a collection of essays collected after Fanon’s death and published as *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, originally published in 1964. The second is *A Dying Colonialism*, originally published in 1959. Fanon’s final work is *The Wretched of the Earth*, originally published in 1961.

that Fanon saw one or another clear road out of this hopeless trap, or even that he saw no road at all. The point here, however, is not Fanon's personal views, or even his intellectual struggle, but the trap imposed by thought about African people that places African cultural and historical frames of reference in the position of having to either embrace their inferiority or abandon their claim to legitimacy entirely.

Given this, it should not be surprising that questions of authenticity and legitimacy have been central to contemporary discourse about African culture and history. In 1945, the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels published his *Bantu Philosophy*.⁷⁹ His work presented itself as an attempt to give a systematic and philosophical presentation of the thought of "Bantu" which was, in his mind generalizable at least to all of Africa south of the Sahara, if not beyond. The work, which is brief and appears to give a parsimonious explanation for cultural differences in outlook and interpretation between Europeans and Africans, reduces "Bantu philosophy" to the idea of "force" not being separated from "being" as it is in Europe. This oversimplified and over-generalized schematic of Tempels has been one of the key points in criticism of it. Indeed, as an introduction to indigenous systems of African thought, the work has been largely dismissed in the years since its publication.⁸⁰ The significance of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* lies not in the accuracy of its findings, but rather in the discussion provoked by his assertion that the thought of Africans could be schematized and presented as philosophy.

⁷⁹ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969).

⁸⁰ The legacy of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* is examined at length in Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, especially ch. 5 on "The Patience of Philosophy." What follows draws heavily on Mudimbe's presentation of the discourse surrounding Tempels.

For Tempels, the rationale for presenting “Bantu philosophy” as such was simple: “Anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men. Those who do so, contradict themselves fatally elsewhere.”⁸¹ To avoid the contradiction inherent in insisting on a subhuman category of humans, then, Tempels was forced to present “Bantu philosophy” as “philosophy.” However, as is perhaps indicated by his uncritical use of the term “primitive peoples,” his own argument has already cast the African people he is writing about into the position of having to demonstrate their humanity in the court of European opinion, and he has positioned himself as lead attorney for the defense. What if his presentation fails to meet the measure of “philosophy” as defined by those keepers of the gates of philosophical discourse located in the universities in Europe? Are Africans, then, “excluded from the category of men”? The very contradiction Tempels is trying to avoid, he has already embraced.

For that, however, the book has not been without its impact. John S. Mbiti, for example, while finding much to criticize in Tempels still accords him an important place in the development of scholarly discourse about African religions. His extended criticism, delivered even as he is according Tempels an important place in the study of “African religions and philosophy” is worth quoting at length:

In spite of his arrogant and superior attitudes, Tempels’ book opens the way for a sympathetic study of African religions and philosophy. His motive and that of the fellow colonialists whom he addresses, is ‘to civilize, educate and raise the Bantu’. The book is primarily Tempels’ personal interpretation of the Baluba, and it is ambitious to call it ‘Bantu philosophy’ since it only deals with one people among whom he had worked for many years as a missionary. It is open to a great deal of

⁸¹ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, pg. 21.

criticism, and the theory of ‘vital force’ cannot be applied to other African peoples with whose life and ideas I am familiar. The main contribution of Tempels is more in terms of sympathy and change of attitude than perhaps in the actual contents and theory of his book.⁸²

The accuracy and generalization of Tempels’ schematic were deeply problematic, but in a very different way his use of the term ‘philosophy’ was equally if not more problematic, perhaps to the point of obscuring the underlying assertion that the thought of colonized Africans could stand on an equal footing with colonizing Europeans as the subject of scholarly discourse.

The use of the term ‘philosophy’ to describe the worldview and ontology of African people, and the presentation of this data in ways that unified and distilled key characteristics of *the* African worldview (as opposed to *a* worldview of a particular African ethnic group) has provoked an ongoing controversy over what can legitimately be called African philosophy, with some African scholars insisting that ‘African philosophy’ should, strictly speaking, look much like philosophy does in European and American universities, raising the question of what exactly would, then, make such philosophy ‘African’ at all (the question of authenticity).⁸³ Hountondji, among the sharpest critics of what came to be called “ethnophilosophy” insisted that the meaning of “philosophy” was based on its definition in the West. He writes derisively of efforts to argue otherwise:

Words do indeed change their meanings miraculously as soon as they pass from the Western to the African context....That is what happens to the word ‘philosophy’: applied to Africa it is supposed to designate no longer

⁸² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pg. 10.

⁸³ The outstanding example of this view is Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. A more conciliatory, though in some ways similar, view is found in Kwasi Wiredu *Philosophy and an African Culture* (New York, NY: Cambridge, 1980).

the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective world-view, an implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere....Behind this usage, then, there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in 'primitive' societies--that is to say, non-Western societies--everybody always agrees with everybody else.⁸⁴

Hountondji argued that, when it came to African philosophy, 'African' should simply refer to 'philosophy' (as defined in Europe) that is done on the African continent.

Not without reason, Hountondji saw in works like Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* a motivation that made him suspicious of their content. Listing Mbiti alongside several other African scholars, Hountondji writes:

...let us note that all of the authors...are churchmen, like Tempels himself. This explains their main preoccupation, which was to find a psychological and cultural basis for rooting the Christian message in African's mind without betraying either....these authors are compelled to conceive of philosophy on the model of religion, as a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, impervious to time and history, ever identical to itself."⁸⁵

Hountondji's criticism of Mbiti (and others), perhaps ironically, in its emphasis on how such scholarship overgeneralizes and encases African beliefs in a sort of 'primitive unanimity' sounds much like Mbiti's criticism of Tempels, with one important exception: Mbiti saw Tempels' work as a precursor to more accurate and complete works that would not be limited, as Tempels' was, by European paternalism. Hountondji, on the contrary, saw the flaws in Mbiti's work as inherent in the nature of the project. In Hountondji, the underlying assertion that the thought of colonized Africans could stand on an equal footing with colonizing Europeans as the subject of scholarly discourse, is pushed

⁸⁴ Hountondji *African Philosophy*, pg. 60.

⁸⁵ Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, pg. 59.

entirely to the side. For him, African thought standing on an equal footing with European thought in the case of philosophy means having a philosophical discourse that looks like, if indeed it is not just an extension of, philosophical discourse in the West.

The presentation of terms like “philosophy,” which are loaded with cultural assumptions, as merely technical has often disguised the hierarchical discourse that is sustained in their deployment as regards African phenomena. Tempels is not merely offering his own opinion when he writes “Anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men.”⁸⁶ Instead, he is expressing the ethno-racial assumptions implicit in European ideas about both themselves and Africans, which demand that in order to be considered truly human by Europeans, Africans must have prove that they have a “system of thought” that is recognizable by Europeans as properly philosophical. In other words, we see yet another demonstration of what Asante singles out as characteristic of hierarchical discourse: “control over the rhetorical territory through definition.”⁸⁷

Hountondji and Tempels and indeed much of the discourse about the topic of “African philosophy” share much more than many of the various authors involved would care to admit. Many have fully embraced European definitions in examining African phenomena, and have thus placed the African phenomena they study firmly in the subjectivity trap of racist discourse about it. In such discourse, the subjectivity of African people is resigned to the place of a problematic proposition that must be proven either through imitation of European ways or through rationalizations of African ways that must

⁸⁶ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, pg. 21.

⁸⁷ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 34.

be constructed in European terms and for which the ultimate judge of their efficacy will be Europeans.

The exchange of ideas amongst European and African scholars of various persuasions around the issues of African philosophy, emphasizes the dangers of an uncritical embrace of European categories in discussing African phenomena. On the same front, however, the exchange of ideas has revealed a great deal about the challenges of creating categories and terminology that does not reproduce racism. Hountondji's vigilance about the dangers of enshrining "the myth of primitive unity" is well-heeded, but his unwillingness to engage with scholarly discourse that treats discourse occurring within or emanating from indigenous systems of belief as philosophical discourse reveals a blindness to the underlying issue of the hierarchical nature of scholarly discourse about African phenomena. It also shows a double standard in evaluating the philosophical literature of Europe.

The anthropologist Marcel Griaule alluded to this double standard, in the preface to his *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. The work, which comprises a series of recorded "conversations" with a Dogon elder named Ogotemmêli, has been criticized by a chorus of critics, with Hountondji among them. Griaule defended his approach against these critics writing: "It might be thought that we are here concerned with esoteric teaching; some have even suggested...that it was a case of personal speculations of merely secondary interest. These are, moreover, the very people who will devote a lifetime to the presumably personal ideas of Plato or Julian of Halicarnassus."⁸⁸ Hountondji would presumably have had no problem with the study of Plato or Julian of Halicarnassus and,

⁸⁸ Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1965), pg. 2.

if it were done in Africa, would even call it “African philosophy,” but the study of Ogotemmêli is just not considered by him to be a legitimate basis for philosophical thinking.

One need merely recall that much of Plato’s oeuvre consists of recorded conversations between Socrates and various others, many of which may well have been at least based on conversations that actually happened, and that Socrates himself never wrote anything but is regarded as one of the most important, if not the most important, figure in the history of European philosophy in order to see that the lines between ethnography and philosophy, even in Europe, have always been far more blurry than the detractors of African “ethno-philosophy” would have us believe. Indeed, in this light, the most striking distinction between Socrates and Ogotemmêli is that the former would never been the target of racist ridicule in European universities.

The classification of the thought of an African elder to as “esoteric” or “of merely secondary interest” is an example of the “mummification” discussed in the previous chapter: the process whereby African phenomena are cast into a sort of living museum that is assumed to be entirely irrelevant to the pressing concerns of the present. This is the problem of legitimacy: the efforts to remove African phenomena from the museums of irrelevant and esoteric objects of “merely secondary interest” in which European thought has encased them and to treat them as relevant, living sources of insight and inspiration are forced to defend their legitimacy in terms that have already condemned them to irrelevancy by assuming that they come from a land untouched by evolution or “modern progress.” When Tempels assumes that he must assert the ‘systematic’ nature of the thought of Africans that he terms “primitive peoples,” he has defined African phenomena

in a way that has already condemned them to needing a defense in order to achieve legitimacy.⁸⁹

Afrocentric scholars have taken a different direction by locating the foundation, and thus the legitimacy, of African thought in the African past. Afrocentric scholarship has drawn on the legacy of the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop whose scholarship about Ancient Egypt (Kemet) attempted to establish both the African (“racial” and cultural) identity of Ancient Egyptian civilization and to situate it as a living source of African cultural and historical insight. It was this latter that Diop, in his final work, saw to be his most fundamental contribution:

...for us the new, important fact is less to have stated that the Egyptians were Blacks, as one of our principal sources, the ancient writers, already did, than to have contributed to making this idea a conscious historical fact for Africans and the world, and especially to making it an operational scientific concept....⁹⁰

Locating Ancient Egypt in the stream of African culture and history and making the Africanity of Egypt “an operational scientific concept” is a foundation that has been built on in the development of Afrocentric scholarship. In his theoretical work *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*, in which the importance of Kemet as a foundation for Afrocentric scholarship is developed in detail, Asante gives two reasons for regarding connection with Kemet as foundational:

⁸⁹ Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, pg. 21.

⁹⁰ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill, 1991), pg. 2. See also Diop’s *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill, 1974). For an overview of Diop’s life and work with some reflections on Diop’s relevance to Afrocentricity see Molefi Kete Asante, *Cheikh Anta Diop: An Intellectual Portrait* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2007).

(1) re-confirmation and (2) delinking. Reconfirmation means that the scholar pursues the organic, Diopian unity of African thought, symbols, and ritual concepts to their classical origins. Delinking implies that the study of African phenomena ceases being a subset of the European intellectual project which maintains the study of African people, continental or diasporan, as marginal or peripheral.⁹¹

A foundation that seeks the historical and cultural depth and continuity of African phenomena, rather than assuming their esotericism and irrelevance, breathes life into African phenomena rather than sentencing such phenomena to the ongoing death by marginalization that they often suffer in European discourse about them.

The Egyptologist Jan Assmann's assessment of how Maulana Karenga's work *Ma'at, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt* differs from the work of "Egyptology" demonstrates something of the significance of an Afrocentric approach to the study of African phenomena:

Notwithstanding its carefully documented basis which meets the most exacting standards of Egyptological philology, its approach is definitely different from Egyptology in that it is value-oriented, meta-historical and interpretive in the sense not only of understanding, but of application.⁹²

It is perhaps a stunning admission from a reputed Egyptologist that, for all of the scholarly study of Ancient Egyptian wisdom literature that has been done, the thought of actually applying it to life's problems is something so new as to place Karenga's work outside the bounds of what is known as "Egyptology."

Studies of African phenomena that are both rooted in and constantly seeking the cultural and historical depth of African people cannot help but enshrine the agency of

⁹¹ Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), pg. 56.

⁹² Quote taken from Jan Assmann's foreword to Maulana Karenga, *Ma'at, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2006), pg. xx.

African people, whereas studies that assume that only European frames of reference are relevant to the study of African phenomena cannot help but re-enshrine the hierarchical discourse that has sought to confine African phenomena and African people to the margins of a world centered in Europe. When the cultural and historical depth of Africa and the relevance of this depth to the study of African phenomena is assumed to be something that must be demonstrated or proven in European terms, then the agency--the historical and cultural subjectivity--of African people, has already been trapped in a discourse that has defined it as marginal. On the contrary, when this depth is made a centerpiece of the study of African phenomena, it is not only the depth of African history and culture that are revealed, but the nature and history of racist concepts that have sought to make us believe otherwise and whose influence can still be felt in the present.

2. Truth and the Genealogy of Idols

As the preceding section makes clear, the historical and cultural framework in which we locate particular historical and cultural phenomena, can influence not only the presentation and interpretation of the data but also our understanding of what the phenomena themselves actually are. This is particularly true when it comes to the study of religious and spiritual beliefs of non-European people in Western scholarship. The British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard pointed out the problematic tendency among those in his profession to take words (concepts) from one group of people and apply them to others regardless of the differences between them. He identifies such words as *totem*, *taboo*, and *mana* as having been borrowed from particular non-European cultural groups in North America, Polynesia, and Melanesia, respectively, and being applied to other

non-European groups that Evans-Pritchard labels “primitive.” Evans-Pritchard believed that what he called “the coining of special terms to describe primitive religions” was problematic because it suggested “that the mind of the primitive was so different from ours that its ideas could not be expressed in our vocabularies and categories.”⁹³

A closer examination of the concept of “totemism” in European writing about non-European religious and cultural practices and beliefs bears out much of Evans-Pritchard’s skepticism. One can indeed ask the question, as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss did, of whether “totemism” is actually a phenomenon that occurs among the people who European anthropologists and ethnographers reported as practicing it, or whether it is entirely an invention of Europeans.⁹⁴ Evans-Pritchard’s concern is that the use of terminology borrowed from one non-European people, perhaps never fully understood to begin with, and then applied to a likely equally misunderstood phenomenon elsewhere, can cause a needless appearance of difference between the people he calls “primitive” and the people of Europe. For him, the problem is resolved, at least in part, by a will on the part of the anthropologist to explain phenomena encountered among the people they study in European terms.

What Evans-Pritchard failed to appreciate was that the issue was not merely one of which language was being used to describe which concepts, but the concepts themselves. European languages have proven quite effective in enshrining difference, as evidenced by Evans-Pritchard’s own defense of his usage of the term “primitive,” which

⁹³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, (London, UK: Oxford, 1965), pp. 11-12.

⁹⁴ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1963).

he classifies as “value-free” and “etymologically unobjectionable.”⁹⁵ The assertion that “primitive” is a technical term used, in Evans-Pritchard’s words, “to describe peoples living in small-scale societies with a simple material culture and lacking literature”⁹⁶ masks the heavily value-laden judgments that, first of all, a culture that a European anthropologist terms ‘materially simple’ is indeed of such a radically different type as to be ‘primitive’ in everything it does from material culture to religious practices to the process of thinking itself, and, secondly, that the literature of such people must share enough characteristics with European literature for the anthropologist to be willing to identify it as such. The question is not one of choosing language which produces difference or similarity, or merely of which language to use, but of being able to communicate concepts and describe phenomena in ways that are appropriate to the history and culture of the people about whom one is writing.⁹⁷

The use of scholarly work about African phenomena that has been produced within the Eurocentric tradition (even if not from an explicitly Eurocentric outlook) poses a two-sided problem. It is impossible to deny that works by Eurocentric scholars and historical data collected by Eurocentrists are often an invaluable source of information about African phenomena. However, it is likewise impossible to deny that such scholarship has been produced within conceptual schema that renders not only the interpretation of the data but the data itself in need of careful scrutiny. As Asante writes in the original formulation of the theory Afrocentricity: “Breaking the mental chains only

⁹⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, pg. 18.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Asante discusses the use of “terms such as “primitive,” “pygmy,” “tribe,” “Black African,” “hut,” “Bushman,” and scores of others” as part of the terminology that has helped enshrine racism in discourse about African people and phenomena in *The Afrocentric Idea* (pp. 43-45).

occurs when a person learns to take two sets of notes on almost everything encountered in the Western world.”⁹⁸ Expanding on this as relates to Eurocentric scholarship about African phenomena, we might say that one must learn to parse both the African phenomena being written about and the Eurocentric framework in which it is being constructed, locating each within its historical and cultural milieu. Our questions then become, what did the Europeans *think* they saw when they wrote about Africa and why did they think it; and, conversely, what were the Africans they wrote about actually doing as they themselves understood it and why?

When the interpretation, and indeed the very perception, of phenomena relies heavily on culturally and historically bound, but nonetheless often implicit, underlying metaphysical assumptions about the nature of being, time, and truth, those phenomena are particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation. Furthermore, the nature of these assumptions, the ways in which they are adopted by the people who use them, and the ways in which they change through history are often forgotten. Scholars are thus confronted with terminology that once served an explicit purpose of denigration, which is now veiled only by the uncritical assumption of its validity in describing the phenomena about which it claims to write.

Contemporary scholarship about Ancient Egyptian spirituality, religion, and philosophy has often pointed out the need to understand not only what past scholars have written about these topics, but also the often polemical purposes past scholarship served in particular debates and controversies within European culture and history that drove much of those scholars’ understanding of their topics. As the Egyptologist Erik Hornung has observed: “For long stretches of its history, egyptology has suffered from the chasm

⁹⁸ Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, pg. 53.

that appears to divide the cultural and ethical achievements of ancient Egypt, on the one hand, and Egyptian conceptions of god, which have widely been considered to be “unworthy,” on the other.”⁹⁹ Hornung attributes this “chasm” primarily to controversies within European discourse: “As so often happens, egyptology was dependent on the questions and solutions of its time; its history mirrors the general history of ideas in the West.”¹⁰⁰ The Congolese Egyptologist Théophile Obenga has similarly commented on this chasm, identifying in more forceful terms a tendency on the part of Egyptologists, to not only consider Egyptian religion as “unworthy” but to cast all of the recorded thought of the Ancient Egyptians in the mold of “sacred” and “religious” writings so as to ‘taint’ it with the ‘unworthiness’ that has been implicit in Eurocentric analysis of Egyptian religion, rather than making every effort to analyze the written works of Ancient Egyptians on their own terms.¹⁰¹

As discussed in the previous chapter, in the Eurocentric tradition, since the beginnings of the European “Enlightenment” the study of religions that are outside of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism has often been preoccupied with the project of classifying those systems of belief as either ‘monotheistic,’ ‘polytheistic,’ or as belonging to any range of terms subsequently coined as variants of these two, such as ‘henotheism’ and ‘pantheism.’ In the midst of an early twentieth century controversy between two German historians of religion--Karl Beth and Hermann Grapow--relating to the understanding of the meaning of the Ancient Egyptian word “*ntr*” (“god” or “divinity”),

⁹⁹ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1982), pg. 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 19.

¹⁰¹ Théophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period, 2780-330 BC*, trans. Ayi Kwei Armah (Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2004), pg. 69.

Beth characterized the impact that this project of classifying religions had had on the study of Ancient Egyptian Religion in general, writing in 1916:

Monotheism or polytheism? This has been the greatest issue in egyptology since the discovery of the first Egyptian texts. The survey I have given here shows that both answers have their justification; it also shows that the proponents of both use these concepts like slogans, yet neither concept can characterize the true individuality of Egyptian religion.¹⁰²

Why the sloganeering about the number of Gods Ancient Egyptians worshipped? The answer is that these European attempts to classify non-European religions, especially the religion of Ancient Egypt, as either ‘monotheistic’ or ‘polytheistic’ have often been, and still to some extent remain, charged with a significance that stretches well beyond that of mere curiosity and touched the very heart of the developing European conceptions of truth, rationality, and what structure of power both within European societies and in the world, was warranted.

The psychological theories of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl by which the beliefs of non-European people that he classified as “primitive” were considered predominantly as a psychological function of what he called “primitive mentality” that corresponded to the supposedly “primitive” nature of the society itself were not new at the time he developed them. Crude notions of an evolution of consciousness, in which religious ideas have played a central role, have long been central to various European thinkers and remain so to the present day. The particular path taken by this supposed evolution of consciousness has had various iterations. The point here, however, is to be aware that much that has been written by Europeans about the African world, especially in the areas of religion and culture, has been written in the context of these various theories of the “evolution” of

¹⁰² Quoted in Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, pg. 27.

human nature, with the main constant being a reification of whatever Europeans believe about themselves. As the intellectual historian and cultural psychologist Gustav Jahoda puts it: “The ‘savage’, whether noble or ignoble, was essentially a negative mirror reflecting what Europeans believed themselves *not* to be.”¹⁰³

The study of Ancient Egyptian religion has been no different and is in fact emblematic of the dynamic whereby the investigation and analysis of the data has been driven and determined largely by European thinkers’ theories about themselves. A central concern for scholars as regards the study of Ancient Egypt has thus been locating data about Ancient Egypt within these various theories, which has often resulted in clear contradictions, especially as regards the Ancient Egyptian conception of God. Le Page Renouf summarized the problem neatly:

Throughout the whole range of [ancient] Egyptian literature, no facts appear to be more certainly proved than these: (1) that the doctrine of one God and that of many gods were taught be the same men; (2) that no inconsistency between the two doctrines was thought of. Nothing, of course, can be more absurd if the Egyptians attached the same meaning to the word God that we do. But there may perhaps be a sense of the word which admits of its use for many as well as for one. We cannot do better at starting than endeavour to ascertain what the Egyptians really meant when they use the word *nutar* [*ntr*], which we translate “god.”¹⁰⁴

Enlightenment thinkers relied upon this apparent contradiction to assert their understanding of Ancient Egypt as possessing a ‘dual religion,’ that is, one in which a conceptually abstract “monotheistic” understanding of God was possessed by a religious elite, and kept secret from the masses, who were attached to their “idols” (physical

¹⁰³ Gustav Jahoda, *Crossroads Between Culture and Mind: Continuities and Change in Theories of Human Nature*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992), pg. 42.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, pg. 33.

representations of divinities) and were not expected to embark on the painful shedding of these attachments that would have been involved in their coming to enlightenment.

This understanding would prove influential in shaping the very idea of “enlightenment” and the corresponding idea of pre-enlightenment “natural religion.” Ideas of this ‘dual religion’ would also motivate the formation of secret societies such as the Freemasons and would have a lasting impact on the interpretation of Ancient Egyptian religion and culture. It led to what are in retrospect quite wild Enlightenment-era theories about, for example, the then-undeciphered system of hieroglyphic writing. As Assmann explains in tracing this history, many European writers associated “the evolution of writing ‘from images to letters’ with a shift from the cult of images to the cult of the word, which coincides with the transition from polytheism to monotheism.” He continues, “God (or Moses) could never have inscribed the tables of the law in hieroglyphs; for this purpose, an abstract, alphabetic writing had to be invented.”¹⁰⁵ These theories now appear quite ridiculous in light of the fact that the system of hieroglyphs is known to be precisely an “abstract, alphabetic” system of writing; however, the kind of theorizing in which scraps of data are made to fit grand theories that are rooted primarily in European self-understanding is often still taken quite seriously. Hence, even up to the present, not only Ancient Egyptian religion but also many non-European religious and spiritual systems, are categorized in terms of their either being monotheistic or polytheistic, or some variation on these concepts. The need or even the attempt to explain divinity in these terms, as Hornung has demonstrated extensively as

¹⁰⁵ The history of this idea of ‘dual religion’ has been traced out in detail in Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Malden, MA: Polity, 2014). The quotes are from pg. 34.

regards the beliefs of Ancient Egypt,¹⁰⁶ results more often in unfounded apologetics, theologizing, and the very kind of highly speculative storytelling about how the consciousness of humanity “evolved” to its “modern” (Eurocentric) apex rather than a simple asking of the question: ‘how did/do the people who held/hold these beliefs understand them?’

The question--‘were the Ancient Egyptians polytheistic or monotheistic?’--admits of no easy answer. The evidence suggests that the Ancient Egyptian understanding of *ntr* was more complex than is capable of being communicated by calling *ntr*, “one,” “many,” both, or neither. The inability of Eurocentric scholarship to deal adequately with the Ancient Egyptian conception of *ntr* goes to the heart of European logic, as Hornung writes, towards the conclusion of his study:

Any application of a two-valued logic, which is based on *a* / not-*a* distinctions and on the law of the excluded middle, to Egyptian philosophical and theological thought leads at once to insoluble contradictions. We cannot avoid this fact, and “common sense” is no help here. We must choose between two alternatives. Either we equate truly logical thought with two-valued logic, in which case Egyptian thought is undeniably “illogical” or “prelogical”; or we admit the possibility of a different type of logic which is not self-contradictory, which can only be a many-valued logic.¹⁰⁷

The problem is far from being an isolated one. The inability to deal with more complex conceptions of truth than Western logic admits of dogged the European study of African cultural and historical phenomena in general. As Wole Soyinka has argued, Western conceptions of “fiction” and “fantasy” have proven inadequate to an understanding of African myth and ritual:

¹⁰⁶ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 239.

The definition of this inner world [of myth and ritual] as ‘fantasy’ betrays a Eurocentric conditioning of alienation. We describe it as the primal reality, the hinterland of transition. The community emerges from ritual experience ‘charged with new strength for action’ because of the protagonist’s Promethean raid on the durable resources of the transitional realm; immersed within it, he is enabled emphatically to transmit its essence to the choric participants of the rites--the community. Nor would we consider that such a communicant withdraws from conscious reality, but rather that his consciousness is stretched to embrace another primal reality.¹⁰⁸

Soyinka writes of African myth and ritual theater not as ‘fiction’ or ‘fantasy’ but as “another primal reality,” the existence of which is problematic for the Eurocentric logic that struggles with a conception of reality that does not fit neatly into “fact” or “fiction.” Ritual theater may be different from the physical drama of war, but it is, in Soyinka’s understanding, quite real.

The choice set out by Hornung of either labeling Ancient Egyptian thought as “illogical” or accepting that it had its own logic, which European scholars do not understand, and the great intellectual effort put into denying this unavoidable end of European scholarship about Ancient Egypt (as well as European scholarship of Africa more generally), reveals a hostility to the existence of an alternative worldview. The reduction of the complex truths of those designated as “others” by European scholars to mere “idols” that are thought to be sensible only with respect to some “primitive” mentality or a “natural” state corresponding to some lower stage in the “evolution of consciousness,” has had a deep and lasting impact. Tracing the concept of idolatry, in genealogical fashion, through the history of European thought reveals a great deal about the power of this idea and about the nature and workings of a hierarchical discourse that

¹⁰⁸ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, (New York, NY: Cambridge, 1976), pg. 33.

has systematically placed a European worldview at the top and an African worldview at the bottom. Or, to be more specific, it reveals a worldview that has assumed the universal validity and superiority of European logic and that has relegated all other forms of logic and worldviews to a prior (lesser) stage of evolution towards a European consciousness.

The concept of “idolatry” stated explicitly as such can sometimes be found in passing references in contemporary scholarship which are revealing indicators of how truth and falsehood are culturally structured in the Eurocentric tradition.¹⁰⁹ However, as much as a study of these passing references might reveal about the structure of truth in the Eurocentric tradition, the influence of the concept of “idolatry” within Eurocentric scholarship has been far deeper than where it is explicitly stated. The Eurocentric logic that classifies Ancient Egyptian thought as either “prelogical” or “illogical,” and the “psychological” theories of Lévy-Bruhl discussed above that classified African thought in much the same way, share a common root that can be seen clearly in the first systematic treatment of the concept of “fetishism.” Written by the French linguist Charles de Brosses in 1760, this investigation into “fetishism” bore a title which is translated as *On the Worship of Fetish Gods; Or, A Parallel of the Ancient Religion of Egypt with the Present Religion of Nigritia*.¹¹⁰ At the time “Nigritia” was one in a succession of general terms that Europeans applied to western Africa, and the “parallel” with the “Ancient Religion

¹⁰⁹ For example the past president of the American Psychological Association and champion of “positive psychology,” Martin Seligman, in a passing reference about the assumptions guiding college admissions criteria writes: “For almost a hundred years *aptitude* and *talent* have been the code words for academic success. These idols occupy the place of honor on the altars of all admissions and personnel officials.” Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006), pg. 153.

¹¹⁰ De Brosses’ full text is translated and offered with extensive commentary in Rosalind C. Morris and Daniel H. Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2017).

of Egypt” was de Brosse’s attempt to locate the religious practices of West Africans within the same Eurocentric theoretical frames in which Ancient Egypt was, for Eurocentric Egyptology, already trapped.

A passage from the beginning of de Brosse’s text, in which he introduces his project, is worth quoting at length:

It is not necessary to go searching very far for something that is found much closer, when we know by a thousand similar examples that there is no superstition so absurd or so ridiculous that ignorance, joined with fear, has not engendered; when we see with what ease the crudest form of worship [le culte le plus grossier] establishes itself in stupid minds affected by this passion, and becomes rooted by custom among savage peoples, who spend their life in a perpetual childhood. But they cannot be uprooted so easily: old customs, especially when they have assumed a sacred cast, live on a long time after the error is perceived. Besides, the Egyptians are not the only ones we could reproach with this. We will soon see that other Nations of the Orient were no more exempt, in their first ages, from a puerile worship that we shall find spread generally over the entire earth, and maintained especially in Africa. It owes its birth to a time when peoples were pure savages, plunged in ignorance and barbarism....Some nations have remained in this unformed state up to the present: their customs, their ideas, their reasoning, and their practices are those of children. The rest, after having passed through this state, have emerged sooner or later through example, education, and the exercise of their faculties. To know what practices once existed among the latter, one has only to look at the present practices of the former; in general, there is no better method to pierce the veils of the little-known points in antiquity than to observe whether somewhere before our eyes, something quite similar is still occurring.¹¹¹

De Brosse’s text, in sharp and degrading language, develops some of the fundamental assumptions of Eurocentric approaches to the study of non-European religion and culture. He outlines a hypothetical prior psychological state in the history of the consciousness of

¹¹¹ From de Brosse’s *On the Worship of Fetish Gods* in Morris and Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism*, pp. 44-132. The quotation is from pg. 47.

“peoples,” which we are to assume includes Europeans, when they were “pure savages, plunged in ignorance and barbarism” and then claims that this past can be known by way of the present practices of non-European people and he singles out Africans as particularly warranting of such study. He paints a psychological portrait of religious beliefs which he labels “fetishism”¹¹² as both being a natural part of this supposedly prior/lesser state of consciousness and also carrying an attachment when these beliefs assume “a sacred cast” as they supposedly do in much of the world “especially in Africa.”

De Broses’ conviction that in writing about African religion, he was, in fact, writing about a forgotten stage in the European consciousness is one that was significant and impactful, especially in the history of the social sciences. We do well to recall that the men who are perhaps the two most important figures in the development of the social sciences--Max Weber and Émile Durkheim--made substantial analyses of non-Western religious and spiritual beliefs (relying almost exclusively on travelers’ accounts or the work of other European “ethnographers”) which were foundational to their own thought about the European societies that they are now best known for studying and analyzing.¹¹³ As Evans-Pritchard later observed, in critiquing so-called “primitive” religions, such theorists often had as their real object of criticism European institutions, especially Christianity. He writes that eighteenth century rationalist scholars, “sought, and found, in

¹¹² The term apparently was first used by Portuguese sailors on the west coast of Africa to describe items that the Africans they encountered regarded as of spiritual significance. De Broses writes, “The Negroes...have as objects of worship certain Divinities that the Europeans call *Fetishes*, a term coined by our traders in Senegal from the Portuguese word *Fetisso*, which means, *fairy, enchanted or divine thing* or *giver of oracles*; this from the Latin root *Fatum, Fanum, Fari.*” Ibid., pg. 48.

¹¹³ See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1995); and Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991).

primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way.”¹¹⁴ In a similar vein, we might recall Marx’s use of de Brosses’ term “fetishism” in his critique of European economic culture and what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” What all of these examples share is that they were, often quite consciously, relying on a critical concept of the supposedly “illogical” nature of the people they had labeled “primitive” as a foundation for critiquing European thought and action. This insight should cause us to look critically at the present use of concepts, especially in the social sciences, and to examine how many concepts still used depend on racist analogies in order to carry their critical weight.

De Brosses’ work also provides a genealogical link between the eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalist scholars of Europe, who labeled non-European religions “primitive” and “irrational” and used them as a ground for criticizing European religious and secular institutions, and earlier European “enlightenment” scholars whose understanding of “enlightenment” was deeply tied to themes found in the Bible, and particularly in the Hebrew scriptures. De Brosses regarded the Bible as a source of reliable historical information about the beliefs of Ancient Egyptians. Writing of the widespread European labeling of Egyptian religion as ‘animal worship’ or ‘zoolatry,’ De Brosses writes: “All of this *Zoolatry* is very ancient in Egypt. The Bible depicts it to us not as an emblem or as an allegory, but was pure and direct *Zoolatry*....Independent of the faith owed to the sacred text, it still represents the period and the Historian best

¹¹⁴ Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, pg. 15.

informed about the Egyptian way of thinking.”¹¹⁵ The use of the biblical notion of idolatry both as a source of information about Egyptian religious worship and as social critique was influentially formulated by Francis Bacon, who is often regarded as the father of the Enlightenment. He wrote, in his *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), of certain “idols of the mind” that are “natural” to humanity, and offered somewhat detailed “psychological” explanations for the ‘idolatry of animals’ that he alleged existed in Ancient Egypt. In Bacon’s conception of “enlightenment,” this biblical understanding of idolatry and the hypothetical “natural” psychological state corresponding to idolatrous belief is a foundational background, without which “enlightenment” makes little sense.¹¹⁶

Tracing these ideas of idolatry, animal worship, natural religion, and irrationality back even further in history, we find that the Christian Church father Origen, writing in the 3rd century c.e., was already developing ideas about Egyptian religion into the something like the idea of the “natural religion” that we would later find in the Enlightenment and in rationalist theories of the ‘evolution of consciousness.’ Origen, who was himself born in Egypt, wrote in his tract *Contra Celsus*, of the rejection of truths that are alleged to supersede what was previously known (such as, he would claim, monotheism). He writes:

That something of this sort has been the natural experience of men, will be clear to those who observe that people who have once become prejudiced in favour even of the most shameful and futile traditions of their fathers and fellow citizens, are not easily changed. For instance, one would not quickly persuade an Egyptian to despise what he had received from his

¹¹⁵ From de Brosses’ *On the Worship of Fetish Gods* in Morris and Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism*, pp. 44-132. The quotation is from pg. 73.

¹¹⁶ See especially Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, (New York, NY: Oxford, 2002), pp. 217-229. This theme in Bacon is also discussed and analyzed in some detail in Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1992), pp. 115-116.

fathers, so as not to regard as god any irrational animals or to guard himself even on pain of death from tasting the flesh of an animal of this kind.¹¹⁷

In this ‘intellectual genealogy’ of idolatry, there is a great irony, which is that European rationalist criticism of European religious and social institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depended largely on a set of overtly religious concepts that make little sense apart from the contexts in which they were born. As Halbertal and Margalit put it: “The criticism of idolatry is transformed into the criticism of folk religion, and the fight against idolatry into a struggle against imagination, superstition, and the masses’ projection of their own world onto that of God.”¹¹⁸ The religious nature of the concept is obscured by its use in condemning religion.

In the same vein, we can see that the religious denigration of the Ancient Egyptians and the “rationalist” denigration of Africans are part of a continuous intellectual and cultural history, wherein the Eurocentric tradition built on the biblical concept of idolatry to invent new and derogatory concepts with which to label and thereby condemn the religion and culture of African people. To understand this biblical concept, and the origins of the hierarchical discourse that has been the topic of this and the previous chapter, requires that we go to its source in the Hebrew scriptures and the fundamental event in the birth of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the biblical exodus from Ancient Egypt.

¹¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (New York, NY: Cambridge, 1953), pg. 48.

¹¹⁸ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, pg. 3.

**CHAPTER THREE:
“EGYPTIAN DARKNESS”**

Underlying the European colonization and enslavement of Africa and African people was the often explicit belief on the part of Europeans that African people, prior to European contact, existed in an all-encompassing darkness as regards morality, religion, political and social life, and even thought itself. In the first chapter, we examined the racist reduction of African people to a preconscious state by the early nineteenth century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who wrote of Africans as people for whom “consciousness has not yet attained to the contemplation of any firm objectivity--as for example, God or law--in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he has the view of his own being.”¹¹⁹ In the second chapter, we began an examination of the roots of this denial of African consciousness through the reduction of African historical and cultural agency and the denial of African subjectivity, tracing the genealogy of the concepts that underpinned this denial back to the biblical notion of idolatry and the resultant caricature of Ancient Egyptian religion that has continued to affect scholarship about Ancient Egypt up to the present.

This “darkness” into which European scholars cast African culture, history, and thought, was not only an idea in the minds of Europeans that helped them to justify enslavement and colonization. It was also an idea that the European colonizers and enslavers of Africans sought to impose on Africans. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who grew up in colonized Kenya, has written extensively of the effect that this notion of “darkness” has had on African languages. Writing of his experience in a British-run boarding school in Kenya, Ngũgĩ writes of the suppression of the African languages of the students:

¹¹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, pg. 86.

The culture and the history carried by these languages were thereby thrown onto the rubbish heap and left there to perish. These languages were experienced as incomprehensible noise from the dark Tower of Babel. In the secondary school that I went to in Kenya, one of the hymns we were taught to sing was a desperate cry for deliverance from that darkness. Every morning, after we paraded our physical cleanliness for inspection in front of the Union Jack, the whole school would troop down to the chapel to sing: 'Lead kindly light amidst the encircling gloom, lead thou me on.' Our languages were part of that gloom. Our languages were suppressed so that we, the captives, would not have our own mirrors in which to observe ourselves and our enemies.¹²⁰

These ideas were felt at the most practical level. They did not merely exist in the universities of Europe but they came to exist in the practical, everyday lives of African people throughout the world.

The genealogy of racist concepts in the previous chapter examined the mechanisms by which contemporary (or at least recent) scholarship about African phenomena is tied to the deeply religious concept of idolatry. Though contemporary scholars in the Eurocentric tradition might not do so explicitly, or even intentionally, they nonetheless often rely on concepts that have a clear genealogical link to earlier concepts that drew their meaning from a racist analogy (in the case of "fetishism" and even "irrationality") or a religious one (in the case of Bacon's "idols of the mind") and that still draw much of their meaning from these analogies, however implicit they may have become. For such scholars, the racial and religious roots of these concepts have often been obscured by contemporary usage and by contemporary scholars' understanding of themselves as neither "racist" nor in many cases "religious." Thus, the contemporary anthropologist who seeks to write 'sympathetically' about cultures that many

¹²⁰ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. (London, UK: James Currey, 1993), pp. 31-32.

anthropologists would no-longer call “primitive,” and the contemporary missionary of European descent, who aims to convert the people they no-longer call “heathen,” however ‘inculturated’ the methods of conversion may be, share much more in common than they might immediately recognize. Both projects are founded on the idea of a “darkness” of either “primitivity” or “idolatry” or “fetishism” or “lack of conceptualization and abstract thought” or any number of concepts that signify a similar dimension of historical and cultural darkness that must be made “light” either through rationalization (anthropology) or conversion (missiology).

The complex and sometimes nuanced workings of hierarchical discourse and conceptual incarceration of African phenomena in scholarship done in the Eurocentric tradition, and the detailed historical analysis that one must engage in in order to unmask its historical rootedness in racial and religious concepts, have their counterpart in the writings of missionaries who readily made (and sometimes continue to make) the historical connections that are often buried under centuries of scholarly iteration but nonetheless clearly present in the academy. In the late 19th century, Robert Moffatt, a British missionary in Zimbabwe, wrote very directly about the “darkness” in which he believed the people of Zimbabwe to exist and the connection between this “darkness” and the biblical “darkness” in which Egypt was said to be when the Israelites departed in the exodus. He writes in his journal: “I am among a people who are living in Egyptian Darkness, in beastly degradation, everything in their political economy diametrically opposed to the spirit of the gospel of God. Born and brought up to revere with selfish fear

their king, who, they are bound to believe, rules their destinies and governs the invisible world.”¹²¹

In this chapter we will examine the role of the biblical exodus event in the creation of the conceptual and cultural apparatuses that were analyzed in the previous chapters. Having established in the second section of the last chapter that the intellectual genealogy of racist conceptualizations of Africans traces its roots to the labeling of Egyptian religion as idolatry, we will proceed now to an examination of the process by which Egyptian religion was first labeled as such, the exodus event itself, when the god of the Israelites was said to have made a covenant with them as this god’s chosen people and to have declared himself the one true god, making all other gods into false gods, the worship of whom would be idolatrous.

This sort of examination brings with it several pitfalls, which will as much as is possible be avoided. The first, and perhaps most striking, of these pitfalls lies in attempting to treat the mytho-historical event of the biblical exodus as either pure myth or pure history. One would be hard-pressed to find a contemporary scholarly work that regards the exodus event as recounted in the Hebrew scriptures as a wholly reliable account of historical events. A lengthy discussion of the historical evidence concerning the biblical Exodus would indeed be a distraction from our purpose. In a similar, but yet very different, vein it would be equally faulty for us to examine the exodus event as though it were purely myth. Accounts of the exodus of this sort--which view the biblical exodus as a purely mythic flight of the good from the darkness of evil--are far more common. From the above quotation from the missionary Robert Moffat to the speeches of

¹²¹ Robert Moffat, *The Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat, 1829-1860*, volume 2, ed. J. P. R. Wallis, (Salisbury, Rhodesia: National Archives of Rhodesia, 1976), pg. 82.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the songs of Bob Marley, the trope of the exodus as a mythic flight from the darkness of evil to the promised land of good is widespread. The exodus may not be pure history, but the setting in which it began--Ancient Egypt--and their religion, which it labeled idolatry, are very much real, so care needs to be taken in analyzing the historical as well as the mythic dimensions of this event.

As has already been argued, when real people's culture, history, and beliefs are transformed into tropes in a conceptual world in which they are regarded as having no cultural and historical agency, the inevitable consequence is that the concepts born of these tropes will often continue to condemn the people whose agency they denied, no matter how well-disguised the origins of these concepts may be. The concern of this chapter is thus precisely the transformation of a very real historical people and their beliefs into a trope for the darkness of evil. This chapter begins where the last chapter left off, with a section examining the birth of the concept of idolatry in the exodus event itself and what it signified historically. The second section will in turn examine the controversy provoked amongst scholars in the Eurocentric tradition by the identification of Ancient Egypt as an African civilization and the significance of this identification for the understanding of the importance of the exodus event in the history of the origins racism.

1. *The Exodus and the Birth of Idolatry*

So, what is idolatry? Though the word is of Greek origin (a compound of *eidolon* "image" and *latreia* "worship"), the concept is deeply rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. As Halbertal and Margalit explain, the rabbinic term most frequently used to denote "idolatry" is *avodah zarah*, which means literally "strange worship." They go on to

explain that “strange” has two senses: the first is “strange” in the sense of worshipping a strange or foreign god, and the second is “strange” in the sense of how the god is being worshipped.¹²² Both sense are deeply important to a full understanding of idolatry.

The sense in which we have examined idolatry thus far emphasizes the later understanding of idols as “false gods,” closer to the contemporary “rationalistic” notion of “superstition.” As in Bacon’s “idols of the mind,” this sense of idolatry is practically synonymous with “untruth,” implying a sort of mystical devotion to and fixation on falsehood. Attempts to explain this mystical devotion and fixation in psychological terms underpinned Charles de Brosses’ “fetishism” and can be seen as well in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s “primitive mentality.” What has been of particular interest thus far is the genealogical connection of these ideas, which have served as a foundation for Eurocentric, “rationalist” denigration of African culture and history, to the earlier biblical accounts of idolatry. De Brosses and Bacon relied directly on the biblical account of Ancient Egyptian religion to form their own notions of idolatry as “natural religion” stemming from a “natural” psychological state in the evolution of consciousness in which such beliefs were to be expected, an idea shown to have a parallel stretching back at least as far as the Christian Church father Origen in the 3rd century c.e.

A closer examination of the biblical concept of idolatry, however, reveals that the concept of idolatry is deeply rooted in relationship. In the case of the biblical exodus, the relationship is between the Israelites and their god, who had formed a covenant with them. In the Hebrew scriptures, this god is personal and very human, and the concept of idolatry is heavily dependent on the Israelites forming an exclusive relationship-- “covenant”--with this god, which would make the worship of other gods “idolatry.” The

¹²² Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, pg. 3.

centrality of this element of relationship in the biblical conception of idolatry is emphasized by Halberal and Margalit:

A personal, anthropomorphic God is essential in order for it to be possible to speak of the sin of idolatry. If God were not a person, then it would be difficult to speak of betraying him. And if God had not created an attitude of loyalty toward him within the framework of a specific history of human relations, then there would not be any betrayal. It is this kind of god that gives the story of the Exodus from Egypt its importance as a basis for the prohibition of idolatry. The event of the Exodus is the foundation of the relation of obligation between Israel and God....[This] event creates an obligation because it is the event in which God consecrated Israel as a wife, or--according to the romantic interpretation--in which God revealed his love for Israel and Israel revealed her willingness to follow her beloved into the desert.¹²³

Loyalty and betrayal are thus central to the biblical understanding of idolatry. In fact, loyalty and betrayal are so central to the biblical understanding of idolatry that they supersede even the importance of "truth" as a rationale for worship. As Halbertal and Margalit emphasize:

It is entirely possible that the Bible admits the existence of other gods and merely forbids their worship...it is also possible that the Bible not only forbids the worship of other gods but also denies their very existence. In either case, even if the existence of other gods is denied, the sin of idolatry is not identified with the cognitive error of believing that other gods exist. The error in such a case is not the sin, but only the cause of the sin, which is the worship of and following after these gods.¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid., pg. 21.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pg. 22.

Indeed, the biblical Exodus emphasizes not the exclusive “truth” of the god of the Israelites, but the jealousy of that god: “for you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”¹²⁵

The later association of “idolatry” with cognitive error, as in Bacon’s “idols of the mind,” is a natural corollary of the slow supplanting of the “anthropomorphic” conceptualization of a god who is jealous and very human by a set of abstract, philosophically “rational” principles and concepts. The relationship with a god that was once direct and motivated by both a promise of love and care as well as a fear of the consequences of betrayal, becomes mediated by these abstract principles and concepts, which have been painstakingly purged of contradiction through centuries of philosophical argument, defense, and critique. Soon enough, however, the anthropomorphism of the god of the biblical exodus becomes troubling to the philosophers precisely because of the emotional (and therefore capricious) part of this god’s nature, which is such a strong feature of so many of the biblical legends.

It is thus easy to understand the appeal to enlightenment thinkers of the idea that all religions were in fact ‘dual religions’ in which one religion was given to the masses who needed ‘idols’ and another was preserved for the elite who were capable of comprehending the principles that underlay those ‘idols.’ The idea of such a split in religious belief allowed those who embraced this idea to avoid the apparent contradictions of believing in the very human depiction of the god in the Hebrew

¹²⁵ Exodus 34:14. All biblical quotations are taken from *The Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Fourth Edition. (New York, NY: Oxford, 2010).

scriptures and at the same time believing in a god whose every thought and action must be utterly free from any sign of contradiction or potential for caprice.¹²⁶

We are now in a better position to understand the long-standing resistance that Hornung has identified in European Egyptology to accepting the existence of “a different type of logic which is not self-contradictory, which can only be a many-valued logic.”¹²⁷ The apparent contradiction in an Egyptian conception of god/gods (*ntr*) who is/are both one and many can only be dealt with by Eurocentric scholars as “illogical” or “pre-logical” because it is, in their conceptual scheme, contradictory; and contradiction, the great-grandchild of idolatry, poses a threat to the whole edifice of principles and concepts whose consistency has been painstakingly arrived at by centuries (or longer) of scholarly work and therefore must be either denied or explained away. That a whole system of logic could exist independent of and unintelligible to the edifice that has been so painstakingly erected calls into question the very logic of the edifice of Eurocentric scholarship itself, suggesting that “Egyptology” cannot exist as an appendage of the Eurocentric tradition but requires its own logic, its own methodology, its own worldview. Without this, Ancient Egyptian thought will remain trapped in the hypothetical “pre-logical” world to which Eurocentric scholars have most often condemned it.

Contemporary scholarship in the Eurocentric tradition has proven itself very capable of critiquing the contradictions in the foundations on which it stands, but has proven itself incapable of resolving many of those contradictions.¹²⁸ Indeed,

¹²⁶ See Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*; and Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, Ch. 4 on “Idolatry as Error.”

¹²⁷ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, pg. 239.

¹²⁸ For an extended discussion of this theme see Ana Monteiro-Ferreira, *The Demise of the Inhuman: Afrocentricity, Modernism, and Postmodernism*, (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2014), especially Ch. 4 on “Afrocentricity and Postmodernism.”

“postmodern” theorists are often doing little more than stating the contradictions in “modernism;” and “relativist” approaches to non-European worldviews can be understood as the inevitable extensions of the universalist conceptions of truth which they are aimed at combating. Being as they are, little more than grand theories of truth that account for all possible “contingencies,” relativist theories of truth accomplish this accounting only by reducing all truths except that of the theory itself to the level of “contingencies.”

In the slow supplanting of the anthropomorphic conception of god, and the gradual replacement of this god with abstract principles and concepts, formulated and reformulated so as to be freed from apparent contradiction, and referred to simply as “truth,” much about the nature of this “truth” has been obscured. Tracing the genealogy of these principles and concepts to the biblical exodus event when “idolatry” (which would later become “untruth”) was defined reveals much about not only the nature of “idolatry” but about the way “truth” itself is conceptualized in the Eurocentric scholarly tradition. As has been shown, this tradition has drawn heavily on the trope of the exodus and the resulting image of Ancient Egyptian religion in conceptualizing its own dichotomies--“rational” and “irrational,” “fetishism” and “rational belief,” “civilized” and “primitive,” “logical” and “illogical” or “pre-logical,” “truth” and “falsehood,” “light” and “darkness.” What these dichotomies, so fundamental to the Eurocentric scholarly tradition, all share is that they define a paradigm that is built on the rejection of one of the many conceptual descendants of idolatry. These conceptual descendants of idolatry define the hierarchical discourse that has confined African phenomena to existing in the margins of Eurocentric theories, reminding us once again of Asante’s remarks: “By

defining not only the terms of discussion but also the grounds upon which the discussion will be waged, the established order concentrates power in its own hands.”¹²⁹

Let us return to de Brosses’ mid-eighteenth century tract on “fetishism” and his representation of what he labeled “zoolatry” in Egyptian religion. De Brosses presents the Egyptian religion as containing unsustainable social contradictions that would sow the seeds of its own demise:

...the same animal that was divinized in one place was elsewhere regarded with indifference, or even killed without scruple if it was a nuisance. Such contrary treatment could not fail to be a source of quarrels between neighboring lands, where the differences in worship produce, as is known, sharp animosities. The wars of Religion among the Egyptians have been discussed; they must have been fiercer than elsewhere, because of a singular reason in addition to the general reason. The antipathy created by nature between several species of animal could not help but increase that found between the peoples who had chosen them as Fetishes: there was no way the worshippers of rats could live for a long time in good relations with the worshippers of cats.¹³⁰

Reading this passage from de Brosses, we can observe that he has painted a picture of religious beliefs that are inherently contradictory because they will lead inevitably to conflict that can only be resolved by either by the victory of one group over another or the supplanting of one or both groups’ beliefs with something capable of producing unity. According to the logic of de Brosses’ analysis, this could only be some kind of monotheism; anything else would be inherently contradictory and would lead inevitably to conflict.

We can here recall once again the passage from Hornung about the application of European logic to Egyptian conceptions of God:

¹²⁹ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, pg. 34.

¹³⁰ De Brosses’ “On the Worship of Fetish Gods,” in Morris and Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism*, pp. 71-72.

Any application of a two-valued logic, which is based on *a* / not-*a* distinctions and on the law of the excluded middle, to Egyptian philosophical and theological thought leads at once to insoluble contradictions. We cannot avoid this fact, and “common sense” is no help here. We must choose between two alternatives. Either we equate truly logical thought with two-valued logic, in which case Egyptian thought is undeniably “illogical” or “prelogical”; or we admit the possibility of a different type of logic which is not self-contradictory, which can only be a many-valued logic.¹³¹

De Brosses found himself confronted with these very same alternatives in his “comparison” of Ancient Egyptian and west African religion. Confronted with a belief system that the data he had suggested was very different from his own, de Brosses is faced with a contradiction at the heart of Eurocentric thinking and logic itself. Instead of turning inward and analyzing this contradiction, or turning outward and seeking a resolution in the wisdom of the people whose beliefs he claimed to be comparing, he projects this contradiction onto the subject of his analysis, resulting in a portrait of both Ancient Egyptian and west African religion that, mostly through de Brosses’ own invention, paints into the beliefs of Ancient Egyptians and west Africans a contradiction that is purely of his own invention. With this invented contradiction comes an invented need for the imposition of the monotheistic religion to resolve it.

The Egyptologist Jan Assmann’s multiple studies of Ancient Egyptian religion and the nature of monotheistic belief have helped to elucidate both the nature of monotheism and the idea of religious conflict. Assmann observes a fundamental distinction between religious and political violence, noting that the distinction is often a fine one in the ancient world. Acknowledging the inappropriate nature of the term, Assmann analyzes the capacity for tolerance in “polytheistic” religions, which did not

¹³¹ Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, pg. 239.

exclude the possibility of violence of a religious nature. Writing of the Assyrians inflicting violence in the context of “polytheism,” Assmann states:

The foreign gods whose images were subjected to violent treatment were taken seriously. The idea was not that there should be no other gods besides Assur but that the conquered town or country should be shorn of its tutelary deities....This is political violence directed against a people and its gods, who are believed to be their protectors, but not against a foreign religion as such.¹³²

The intolerance that de Brosses was reading into the beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians was a projection of the intolerance of later monotheism. In Ancient Egypt, where god was both one and many, the doctrine of god as one had no need of contradicting the doctrine of god as many. The contradiction arises only with the birth of a monotheism that coupled the doctrine of the one god with an intolerance of any other belief. Such intolerance carried with it a necessary implication of violence:

Violence--always understood as propensity and not as consequence--is inherent not in the idea of the One God but in the exclusion of other gods, not in the idea of truth but in the persecution of untruth. There is no logical necessity for the distinction between true and untrue to turn violent. The implication turns real only if the distinction between truth and untruth or “us” and “them” is interpreted in terms of friend and foe.¹³³

In light of Assmann’s parsing of the concept of religious violence, we can better understand the claim of Muzorewa, writing of African religion: “...African religion has never gone to war in the name of God as has been the case with Christianity and Islam.”¹³⁴ Though perhaps no society is free from conflict, de Brosses’ portraits of

¹³² Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2008), pg. 30.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

¹³⁴ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *African Origins of Monotheism: Challenging the Eurocentric Interpretation of God Concepts on the Continent and in Diaspora*, pg. 10.

Ancient Egyptian and African religion as *causes* of violent conflict are pure invention, stemming from an inability to think of a religion different from that practiced in Europe, which had by then for centuries been a cause of violent conflict.

As noted in the previous chapters, the category of “monotheism,” when taken to mean belief in one, supreme god can be applied much more widely than scholars in the Eurocentric tradition have often applied it. The litany of scholars of African religion cited in the first chapter have all based their assertions that African religions are “monotheistic” on ample evidence, as have the numerous European scholars who made the case that Ancient Egyptian religion was “monotheistic” as discussed in the second chapter. Furthermore, the terms used by Europeans to define African religions as “idolatry” or “fetishism” have been shown to apply just as well to European, “monotheistic” religions as they do to African or Ancient Egyptian religions. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor gives a striking example of how the clear distinctions drawn by scholarship in the Eurocentric tradition break down under analysis. Instead of avoiding the term “ancestor worship” as some scholars have done,¹³⁵ Ephirim-Donkor embraces the term and turns it around, asking if people of European descent do not also worship the dead:

A recurring point about black spirituality is the so-called “worship of the dead” among Africans, but do not all peoples “worship,” i.e., venerate or show reverence for the dead? I know of soldiers on every continent who visit war memorials and wail, and whole countries that set aside national (memorial) days to remember their dead. I have seen many people visit cemeteries or crematories and leave flowers on the graves of their loved

¹³⁵For example, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp. 74-89. Mbiti discusses at some length the relationship between the living and spirits of those who are deceased in the physical sense but still living as spirits in African religions, and even discusses devotional obligations to the spirits of the physically deceased, but avoids the term “worship.”

ones...The fact is that in Africa deliberate efforts are made to worship the dead regularly although the way cemeteries are kept in the Western world makes me wonder if the dead are not also worshipped in Western societies.¹³⁶

The Cameroonian philosopher and former Jesuit Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, in a somewhat similar vein, applied the term “fetishism” to the practice of Christianity in Africa, writing of the attachment of Christianity to European colonialism and European ways of life as a “fetish.”¹³⁷

The concepts that have been used by scholars in the Eurocentric tradition to describe belief systems that they classify as other than “monotheistic” do not stand up to critical and comparative analysis precisely because these concepts originate in a dichotomy between “the true God” and “idols” that was drawn on no basis other than a covenant of loyalty and a corresponding commandment of intolerance. The centerpiece of the biblical exodus event was the Israelites’ god delivering them from Egypt and making a covenant with them in the process: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.”¹³⁸

On Mount Sinai, the Israelites’ god spoke to Moses, laying out the obligations to which covenant bound the Israelites which would become known as the ten commandments.¹³⁹ Far from innovative, however, the moral wisdom of the ten commandments was a storehouse of maxims found elsewhere, with three exceptions:

¹³⁶ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, revised ed., (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011), pg. vii.

¹³⁷ Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).

¹³⁸ Exodus 6:7.

¹³⁹ Exodus 20.

The three Jewish and Christian commandments that have no parallels in the Egyptian concept of sin--which can be neatly summarized as no other gods, no images, and keeping the Sabbath--represent the innovative and revolutionary core of biblical monotheism. The other commandments reflect the common wisdom of the Ancient Near East and were treated there--especially in Egypt--at a considerably higher level of moral sensitivity and elaboration.¹⁴⁰

It was the first of these three commandments--“you shall have no other gods before me”¹⁴¹--that defined “other gods” as “idols.”

Aside from this definition, the parallels between Egyptian religion and the religion of the Israelites are so strong as to be an enduring source of hypotheses about the nature of the connections between the two. Though often unacknowledged within the Eurocentric field of Egyptology, such parallels have a long and enduring history.¹⁴² As has already been noted, Assmann finds that most of the ten commandments find parallels in Ancient Egyptian wisdom literature, where they are articulated “at a considerably higher level of moral sensitivity and elaboration.”¹⁴³ Cheikh Anta Diop has also argued that the practice of circumcision, so central to defining membership in the Israelite community, is given a much more full explanation in relation to Ancient Egyptian mythology, which gives reason for circumcision beyond a mere act of obedience to a

¹⁴⁰ Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, pg. 38.

¹⁴¹ Exodus 20:1.

¹⁴² For perhaps the most forceful statement of the claims see, for example, Yosef A. A. ben-Jochannan, *African Origins of the Major “Western Religions,”* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1970), and *The Myth of Genesis and Exodus and the Exclusion of Their African Origins*, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1974).

¹⁴³ Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, pg. 38.

divine command,¹⁴⁴ and has also examined parallels in practices of religious worship between the Ancient Egyptians and the Israelites.¹⁴⁵

In recent years, many Egyptologists have begun, on a limited basis, to acknowledge that even if they do not accept the broader claim of Ancient Egyptian origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the parallels between the two are too striking to simply be dismissed out of hand. Perhaps the strongest case to made, and the one articulated in the greatest detail, is the parallel between the religion of Moses and short-lived religion of Akhenaten, the Egyptian king who for a brief period declared that only the “Aten” would be worshipped and set about destroying the temples of all other deities.¹⁴⁶ Unlike Moses’ revolution, however, Akhenaten’s did not last; soon after his reign the deities were restored and Akhenaten’s name was erased from the Egyptian king-lists. The association between the two figures--Moses and Akhenaten--has lasted and been a cause for more than speculation about the relationship between the two.

Written at the end of his life, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, in his *Moses and Monotheism* theorized that Moses was in fact a priest of Akhenaten’s spurned “Aten” religion.¹⁴⁷ Based on his own psychoanalytic perspective, Freud theorized a complex psychological relationship between Ancient Egypt and the Israelites that

¹⁴⁴ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, pp. 135-138.

¹⁴⁵ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*. See especially Diop’s discussion of the influence of Egyptian cosmogony on the Judeo-Christian tradition and his discussion of the concept of priesthood on pp. 328-337.

¹⁴⁶ A brief overview of this period in Egyptian history can be found in Jacobus Van Dijk “The Amarna Period and the Later New Kingdom (c.1352-1069BC)” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York, NY: Oxford, 2003), pp. 265-307. A summary of recent scholarship within the field of Egyptology regarding the influence of the Amarna period on the Bible can be found in James K. Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, (New York, NY: Oxford, 2015), pp. 238-266.

¹⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, (New York, NY: Vintage, 1939).

mirrored his understanding of the complexity of the relationship between parents and children. Freud was not the first to make such claims and, indeed, Assmann has argued that the association between Moses and Akhenaten can be found in the writings of the Egyptian priest Manetho as early the third century b.c.e.¹⁴⁸

The association between Moses and Akhenaten is complicated by questions regarding whether or not Moses was in fact a historical figure, and indeed also by questions about the historical origins of the Israelites and their relationship to Ancient Egypt.¹⁴⁹ These questions, however, would take us rather far afield, as our concern is not so much with how historically accurate the biblical account of the exodus is, but the relationship that it established between the tradition of those who followed the god of the Israelites and their descendants, and the Ancient Egyptians and those who would ultimately be compared to them as “idol worshippers” or as any of the conceptual descendants thereof.

The establishment of this ethno-religious hierarchy, and its meaning, is made clear in the writings of the third century c.e. Christian Church Father Gregory of Nyssa. Writing of the biblical passover, when the god of the Israelites was said to have killed the firstborn of the Egyptians but “passed over” the houses of the Israelites because they had been marked with the blood of the passover lamb,¹⁵⁰ Gregory extends the logic of this event to its genocidal conclusion:

The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished the newborn child, who in his infancy cannot discern what is good and what is not. His life

¹⁴⁸ Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford, 2010), pp. 57-67.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. See also Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*.

¹⁵⁰ Exodus 12.

has no experience of evil, for infancy is not capable of passion. He does not know to distinguish between his right hand and his left.¹⁵¹

The teaching is this: when through virtue one comes to grips with any evil, he must completely destroy the first beginnings of evil. For when he slays the beginning, he destroys at the same time what follows after it. The Lord teaches the same thing in the Gospel, all but explicitly calling on us to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian evils when he commands us to abolish lust and anger and to have no more fear of the stain of adultery or the guilt of murder.¹⁵²

For now in the difference of the names, Israelite and Egyptian, we perceive the difference between virtue and evil. Since the spiritual meaning proposes that we perceive the Israelite as virtuous, we would not reasonably require the firstfruits of virtue's offspring to be destroyed, but rather those whose destruction is more advantageous than their cultivation.¹⁵³

On the basis of ethno-religious identification, that is “in the difference of names, Israelite and Egyptian,” Gregory asserts that “we perceive the difference between virtue and evil.” Even in infants, who are incapable of doing evil, he senses “the first beginnings of evil,” and thereby claims to justify their murder.

The conflicted relationship that Freud theorized as lying at the heart of biblical monotheism is born out by Gregory's insistence, only a few pages later in the same work, that the followers of Moses should see in him also an example of the virtue of ‘borrowing from the wealth of Egypt,’ writing of Moses: “

Our guide in virtue commands someone who “borrows” from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the

¹⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe (New York, NY: Harper One, 2006), pg. 56.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pg. 57.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 59.

divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason.¹⁵⁴

How could those so “wealthy” in moral wisdom simultaneously be so inclined to evil as to warrant their murder at the time of infancy? And how could the followers of the god of Israelites be so certain that they were so pure? The answer is, as Gregory writes, “in the difference of names, Israelite and Egyptian.” The ability to identify an individual as good or evil, warranting death or life, on the basis of ethno-religious identification was a powerful distinction. One could, of course, assert that Gregory’s words are intended to be read symbolically, but the history of the colonization and enslavement of those people who would later be condemned as living in “Egyptian darkness,” reveals that the ramifications of the idea were far more than symbolic.

We now turn to a brief examination of what exactly “the difference of names, Israelite and Egyptian” signified in terms of ethno-racial distinction.

2. From Darkness to Blackness

In chapter 1, we discussed in some detail the ways in which Eurocentric historiography has come to treat Egypt as a part of Europe based on the racist assumption that any culture capable of civilization, as the Ancient Egyptians clearly were, was therefore *by definition* not African, because Africans were *by definition* uncivilized. We have seen this set of assumptions operating in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he writes:

The second portion of Africa is the river district of the Nile--Egypt; which was adapted to become a mighty center of independent civilization, and therefore is as isolated and singular in Africa as Africa itself appears in

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pg. 63.

relation to the other parts of the world....This part [of Africa] was to be, and had to be, attached to Europe.

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In the Eurocentric tradition of scholarship, especially as regards Egyptology, this set of assumptions about Ancient Egypt--that Africa was uncivilized and that Ancient Egypt's accomplishments in the realm of civilization detached it from Africa--have shaped the direction that research has taken for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

European scholars have long had a conflicted relationship with Ancient Egypt, having to account simultaneously for the reverence paid to what Gregory of Nyssa, in the third century c.e., referred to as Egypt's wealth in "moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else,"¹⁵⁶ and at the same time for the biblical account of Egypt as the corrupted background of idolatry from which the Israelites fled when the covenant with their god was formed. In the European Enlightenment, as we have seen, this conflict was dealt with by the invention of the concept of 'dual religion,' which theorized Ancient Egypt as having an elite, 'secret' religion based on abstract principles and conceptual truths, and another public, mass religion of idolatry that appealed to the emotions of the supposedly less civilized masses.

Though Freud's work *Moses and Monotheism* may be based on historical research that has been superseded, the primary importance of the work lies not so much in the details of the history laid out, but in Freud's theorizing about the "mass psychology" that he believed to underpin the birth of biblical monotheism. In Freud's theory, the Egyptian origins of the biblical religion were "repressed" so as "to glorify the new God and deny

¹⁵⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, pg. 85.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, pg. 63.

his foreignness.”¹⁵⁷ The plausibility of this theory, that at the heart of the religion of Moses is a repression of its origins that accounts for the violent rejection (both human and divine) of Ancient Egypt, has been developed in some historical detail by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann finding considerable evidence to corroborate the theory.¹⁵⁸ In truth, Freud’s theories are much stronger in explanatory power when they are not hinged on the specific assertion that Moses was a priest of Akhenaten’s “Aten” religion, an assertion that is hard to prove or disprove especially given that there is so little evidence about the historical Moses outside of the biblical accounts. Rather, as developed by Assmann, we see this “mass psychology” of monotheism evolving slowly, over centuries, shaping the portrait of Ancient Egypt that was handed down to all those who have claimed to follow the religion of Moses and those influenced by them.

When in the eighteenth century Charles de Brosses labeled the religious practices of west Africans as “fetishism,” he did so by comparing their traditions with the “idolatry” that the biblical accounts defined as characteristic of Ancient Egyptian religion. He thus located Ancient Egypt firmly in Africa by virtue of its “idolatry.” On the other hand, later on in the history of European thought, when Hegel and other Enlightenment thinkers saw in Egypt a forerunner of later philosophical thought and a beacon of civilization, they located Ancient Egypt firmly in Europe. The often explicit belief that only Europeans were capable of civilization led to the assumption that Ancient Egypt was ‘white’ in both culture and complexion.

¹⁵⁷ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, pg. 85.

¹⁵⁸ Though many of Assmann’s subsequent works deal with these themes, the most detailed development of them on this specific point remains Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1997).

Beginning in the late 1980's a controversy erupted in the American academy when Martin Bernal released the first volume of what would be a three volume work entitled *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. The first volume, which has perhaps been the most influential of the works, fills in the gaps between de Brosses and Hegel, tracing in considerable detail the intellectual history that led to the 'whitening' of Ancient Egypt and the impact that European racism had on that 'whitening.' In what Bernal referred to as "the Ancient Model" of Egypt, the writers of 'classical' Europe held, among other things, that the Ancient Egyptians were both revered for their civilization and African in appearance.¹⁵⁹ Bernal describes the process by which "the Ancient Model" was supplanted, which involved both a renewed interest in the civilization of Ancient Egypt and an unwillingness to attribute its accomplishments to people who were not European in appearance. In Bernal's words, "The Ancient Model fell not because of any new developments in the field but because it did not fit the prevailing world-view. To be more precise, it was incompatible with the paradigms of race and progress of the early 19th century."¹⁶⁰

Though Bernal perhaps traced the intellectual history behind this movement in greater detail than had previously been done, he was far from the first to make this case or to spark controversy by doing so. In 1974, at an international gathering of scholars in Cairo on 'The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of the Meroitic Script' sponsored by UNESCO, Cheikh Anta Diop presented perhaps the most detailed argument that had then been laid out for the African origins of Ancient Egypt. Along with

¹⁵⁹ See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume 1: the Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1987), pp. 75-120.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 316.

Théophile Obenga, Diop presented both biological and cultural evidence, especially the linguistic evidence that the Ancient Egyptian language was connected to other central and western African languages. One of the great strengths of Diop's analysis was his uncompromising ability to see and analyze how European racism influenced not only the agenda of research on Ancient Egypt but the methodology and definitions used in constructing theories about Ancient Egypt. He saw this especially in biological definitions of race that seemed to do biologically much what Hegel's analysis had done culturally and historically, confessing some African characteristics of Ancient Egyptians but defining them as somehow distinct from Africa. The evidence presented by Diop appeared in essay form in the second volume of UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, but the contentious nature of the debate surrounding Diop's claims led the editor to include an 'annex' to Diop's contribution summarizing the debate and discussion that had occurred in Cairo.¹⁶¹

At times, the 'annex' has been thought to supersede the essay by Diop,¹⁶² but as the 'annex' itself states, the conclusions of the Cairo meeting were far from being so conclusive: of twenty participants, "Professor Diop's Theory was rejected in its entirety by one participant."¹⁶³ Further, "None of the participants explicitly voiced support for the earlier theory concerning a population which was 'white' with a dark, even black pigmentation. There was no more than tacit agreement to abandon this old theory."¹⁶⁴ In

¹⁶¹ UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, *General History of Africa II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, ed. G. Mokhtar, (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1981), pp. 27-83.

¹⁶² See, e.g., David M. Goldenberg's discussion of Diop's essay and the response in his *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2003), pp. 328-329.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pg. 66.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 67.

what was perhaps the greatest vindication of Diop and Obenga's efforts, the 'annex' concludes: "Although the preparatory working paper sent out by Unesco gave particulars of what was desired, not all participants had prepared communications comparable with the painstakingly researched contributions of Professors Cheikh Anta Diop and Obenga. There was consequently a lack of balance in the discussion."¹⁶⁵

The concluding statement on Diop and Obenga's work reflects not only on the symposium in Cairo, but more generally on the lack of engagement that scholars in the Eurocentric tradition have had with both of their work and analysis. In an examination of the works of Diop and Obenga, Gray writes, "I was struck by the silence their work received from "mainstream" Africanist scholars and historians. Often quickly dismissed as politically motivated or part of the literature of Negritude, their ideas have rarely received the specialist evaluation that both Diop and Obenga welcomed."¹⁶⁶ Gray continues, speculating about a dialogue between the works of Diop and Obenga and the "mainstream" of Africanist scholarship: "that such a dialogue might result in the rejection of a number of their theories would not be surprising; what is surprising is that it has not taken place."¹⁶⁷

At the very minimum, what the symposium in Cairo revealed, as did the controversy surrounding Bernal's *Black Athena*, was that the existing theories that either made Ancient Egypt marginal to the history of the development of European civilization or that Europeanized Ancient Egypt, had been given their impetus by European racism and that they were sustainable only through an unwillingness to engage with scholarship

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 76-77.

¹⁶⁶ Chris Gray, *Conceptions of History in the Works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga*, (London, UK: Karnak House, 1989), pp. 2-3.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pg. 3.

that challenged the existing assumptions. As mentioned in the first chapter, Diop wrote in his final work, “for us the new, important fact is less to have stated that the Egyptians were Blacks, as one of our principal sources, the ancient writers, already did, than to have contributed to making this idea a conscious historical fact for Africans and the world, and especially to making it an operational scientific concept...”¹⁶⁸ Eurocentric scholarship has, for centuries, been built on racist assumptions, and the clarion call of Diop and others beckons us to look critically not only at the rare places where the questions raised by Diop and others are explicitly addressed by scholars in the Eurocentric tradition, but also to look at the places where silence preserves these assumptions unchallenged.

The central biblical justification for the European colonization and especially the enslavement of African people goes back to what has become known as the “Curse of Ham,” in which the Canaan, the son of Ham, was cursed by his father Noah after Ham had seen his father naked when Noah had imbibed too much wine. As a result of Ham’s seeing his father naked, Noah cursed Ham’s son Canaan, saying “Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”¹⁶⁹ Immediately following the ‘curse’ in the book of Genesis is what is referred to as the “Table of Nations,” which clearly identifies Ham’s descendants (“Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan”) with the the Egyptian world.¹⁷⁰ That Ham referred to Egypt is given further credence by the fact that Egypt is referred to as either “Ham” or “land of Ham” four times in the Psalms.¹⁷¹

In what is the most comprehensive study of the “Curse of Ham,” Goldenberg observes that the biblical passage in which the curse occurs says nothing about the curse

¹⁶⁸ Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism*, pg. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Genesis 9:25.

¹⁷⁰ Genesis 10.

¹⁷¹ Psalms 78:51; 105:23; 105:27; 106:22.

having anything to do with skin color. However, as Goldenberg also observes, Jewish and Christian texts dating back at least as far as the fourth century c.e. have interpreted the curse of Ham to have involved the darkening of the skin of Ham's descendants as well as the curse to slavery or servitude and these explanations were commonplace, at least in Jewish sources, "by the ninth to eleventh century."¹⁷² Not altogether convincingly, Goldenberg rejects the theory put forward by Diop that the name itself--"Ham"--was derived from the name by which the Ancient Egyptians called their land--"*kmt*" (which means "black land")--and thus means "black."¹⁷³ Goldenberg concludes with the very strong statement:

One thing is...absolutely clear. The name Ham is not related to the Hebrew or to any Semitic word meaning "dark," "black," or "heat," or to the Egyptian word meaning "Egypt." To the early Hebrews, then, Ham did not represent the father of hot, black Africa and there is no indication from the biblical story that God intended to condemn black-skinned people to eternal slavery.¹⁷⁴

On the basis of this analysis, Goldenberg proceeds to answer what he believes is the relevant question in determining the origins of the racist curse, namely: "At what point...was Ham understood to have been black?"¹⁷⁵

As has already been observed, in his efforts to write history that did not repeat the racism of the past Diop demonstrated a keen understanding of how racism shaped the

¹⁷² Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, pg. 105.

¹⁷³ After noting that Diop's theory is consistent with the historical and linguistic evidence from the Hebrew scriptures, he dispenses with Diop's explanations on the not entirely convincing grounds that the transliteration of the name of Ham in Greek translations of the scriptures indicates an *h* (velar fricative) sound distinct from the *ħ* (pharyngeal fricative) sound that would indicate a derivation from the Egyptian *kmt* (Kemet). *Ibid.*, pp. 146-149.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 149.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

writing of history. He noticed how historians “blacken” or “whiten” Ancient Egypt according to the needs of their cause. Referring explicitly to Ham (who Diop argued was synonymous with Kemet/Ancient Egypt) he writes:

...according to the needs of the cause, Ham is cursed, blackened, and made into the ancestor of the Negroes....On the other hand, he is whitened whenever one seeks the origin of civilization, because there he is inhabiting the first civilized country in the world.¹⁷⁶

The same dynamic is occurring in Goldenberg’s analysis of the curse, though with a different agenda. Ancient Egypt is whitened when Goldenberg encounters Diop’s theory that Ham, the one who provoked the curse, had a name that meant “black.” Goldenberg pokes holes in Diop’s theory and refers us to more literature that does the same.¹⁷⁷

However, elsewhere in the same work, Goldenberg notes that Rabbis and Church Fathers of the ancient world frequently referred to the Ancient Egyptians as a dark-skinned people, “echoing a view commonly found in Asia Minor, Syria, Greece, and Rome,” and cites several examples to corroborate this.¹⁷⁸

If we are willing to consider the evidence of the ancient (European) authors cited by Diop, as well as the Rabbinic, Christian, and Islamic accounts cited by Goldenberg, we are forced to ask a different question from the one proposed by Goldenberg. The relevant question in determining the origins of religious racism is not, as Goldenberg suggests it should be “At what point...was Ham understood to have been black?”¹⁷⁹ Ham--Ancient Egypt--was always understood to have been black in appearance. The question

¹⁷⁶ Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, pg. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, pp. 146-149 and 328-329n37.

¹⁷⁸ Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, pp. 105-110.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

is rather how and why the biblical account associates this curse to servitude with Ancient Egypt.

The answer, as argued here, is contained in the story of the biblical exodus itself. Though it was not initially articulated in terms of physical characteristics, the rejection of Ancient Egypt in the biblical account of the exodus had always been not only a religious distinction, but an ethnic one. That it would later be articulated in terms of race should not be surprising in the least. What is surprising, rather, is that the connection between the “Egyptian Darkness” by which Robert Moffat condemned the culture and life of the people he encountered in Zimbabwe, the “darkness” of irrationality by which secular academics did and do the same, and the blackness of Ancient Egypt and African people is a connection that continues to elude many scholars who study these very topics.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

What has been argued in the preceding pages is that racism has its origins in the biblical account of the ancient Israelites' exodus from Egypt. In the first chapter the nature of racism was critically examined and the traditional definition of racism as ethno-racial prejudice coupled with the power to assign privilege on the basis thereof was shown to have several weaknesses in terms of analyzing the historical development of racism. In its place, a broader analysis and definition was put forward drawing on Molefi Kete Asante's concept of hierarchical discourse and Wade Nobles' idea of conceptual incarceration. This was followed by an exposition of some of the characteristic forms of hierarchical discourse about Africa and African people.

In the second chapter, the analysis of hierarchical discourse was extended and deepened. The ways in Eurocentric discourse "traps" the subjectivity of African people by dislocating African phenomena into European cultural and historical narratives was analyzed and *genealogical* method of studying the history of racist concepts was introduced. Following this, the *genealogy* of the religious concept of idolatry was traced, showing its relationship to various other concepts that have been critical to European understandings of truth, rationality, fetishism, superstition, and several other concepts that all draw on some *genealogical* descendant of idolatry.

In the final chapter, the event that gave birth to the concept of idolatry--the biblical exodus--was examined in some detail. It was shown that the concept of idolatry was *the* central, distinguishing factor in the religion of the ancient Israelites and it was further demonstrated that what gave rise to idolatry was a corresponding assumption of a

particular ethno-religious structure of authority to define “truth” based on association with it. Extending this analysis, the evidence that Ancient Egypt was known to be an African civilization, both in terms of culture and in terms of the physical appearance of its inhabitants, at the time of the exodus story gave the story ethno-racial implications that would have been clear to those who heard or told the story both at the time and long after. Thus, the later development of an explicit condemnation of physical blackness read into the biblical story of the “curse of Ham” was not an innovation but a logical outgrowth of an already existing ethno-religious condemnation of Egyptian civilization to “Egyptian darkness” that was initiated by the biblical exodus event.

The implication of this study is that the widespread racism in the Judeo-Christian tradition is far more deeply rooted in the structure of Judeo-Christian belief than has been previously understood. Further, as the *genealogical* study of the relationships between various concepts that still characterize the structure of scholarship done in the Eurocentric tradition makes clear, the racism of the Judeo-Christian belief system has shaped the very nature of how “truth” is understood and defined even for academics that have either long rejected the existence of God or ceased to be motivated by an explicitly Judeo-Christian conception of the world.

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