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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْ سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى أَلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَسْلِيمًا

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On ‘Naming’ and ‘Defining’ the Self

The ability to ‘name’ is the primary function of Adam and constitutes his and his progeny’s distinction and autonomy from the rest of creational realities. If you named yourself, then you defined yourself and established the demarcation of the diameter of your identity, which in turn presaged the circumference of what you will be. The gnostic *Shaykh Abd’l-Kareem al-Qushayri* explained this function in man in his concise Nahw’l-Quluub where he said:

“Praise to Allah, who entrusted wisdom to those worthy, who taught Adam all the names, and gave him knowledge of the circle of existence to the point that he unraveled its mysteries. Then He made the letters of the ‘circle’ explicit to his children, the sign of their name (*ism*) and the trace of their action (*fit’il*).”¹

Thus, the ability to define oneself and creation is the primary function of mankind after gnosis and worship of the Absolute Being. This function is what gives humankind their distinction spiritually, politically, socially, and individually. Your ability to name/define yourself and your environment is what gives you power. This alone gives new insight into the meaning of: ‘Knowledge is power’.

If on the other hand someone else named you and defined you, then they in turn have predetermined your potential, because you cannot break out of the linguistic confines in which they located you. This reality can be positive and negative. Positive in the sense that if the ‘other’ that names and defines you is the Creator, then you are as He named you in the world of the Unseen, as Allah ta`ala says:

﴿هُوَ سَمَّاکُمُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِ﴾

“He is the One who named you Muslim from primordial time.”² If the ‘other’ naming you is the corporal parent or the parent of meaning, like a Prophet or spiritual guide, then they have also delineated your spiritual potential and what can be hoped for you from good; as the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace once said:

﴿الْحَقُّ الْوَلَدُ عَلَى وَالدِّهِ أَنْ يَحْسَنَ إِسْمَهُ﴾

“The right that the child has on its parent is that he names him with an excellent name.”³

¹ I am indebted to Jaji Dylia Amadou Camara in her forthcoming translation of this text from French into English.

² Qur'an – Chapter 22 *al-Hajj*: 78. The translation is my own.

³ This prophetic tradition was transmitted by ad-Daylami in his *Musnad’l-Firdaus* and Abu Nu`aym in his *al-Hiliya* on the authority of Abu Hurayra.

However, if the one who named you is your enemy, then they have in effect delimited you and enclosed your potential within the confines of their linguistic reality. You are forced to utilize their frame of reference in defining yourself as if the ‘prison’ or ‘plantation’ which forms your repression is not just tangible or physical, but psychic and spiritual. Even your attempt to break free of their repression is predetermined by them since they ‘named’ you and ‘defined’ your reality. This concept delineates the difference between primary or REAL resistance and secondary or counterfeit resistance to all forms of repression. Subsequently in defining African Islamic reality, history, geography and its people, it is important to examine it from its own frame reference.⁴

One of the key factors that influenced the early formation of stereotypes about Africans was the myth concerning the ‘curse of Ham’. This myth was generated into the literature of Europeans by way of the *Babylonian Talmud* and it held ‘that the descendants of Ham were cursed by being black’⁵. In addition to this, the myth held that Africans were thieves, fornicators, liars and that they were destined by God to be slaves. These myths became the key elements behind the justification for the enslavement of African people by European Christians during the 14th to 18th centuries.⁶

With the emergence of scientific evolution, European anthropologists combined earlier myths about Africans with the racism espoused by travelers and explorers of Africa. These ideas were further developed by the writers and philosophers of the European ‘enlightenment’, utilizing the racist theories of evolution, which depicted Africans as the least evolved of humans and the most in need of the civilizing qualities of the Europeans.⁷ Finally, using 19th century objectification magic the ideas of social evolution brought these myths into the academic circles of America and Europe and ‘anthropological precedence’ was fashioned in order to justify European imperialism and American economic dominance over Africa.

⁴ Dr. Abd'l-Baqi ibn *Shaykh Muhammad Kabira, ad-Duwal'l-Islamiyya Fee Ghurb Ifriqiyya Fee'l-Qarin'l-'Aashir'l-Hijriyya* (Islamic Government in West Africa During the 10th Century of the *Hijra*), PhD. Dissertation, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, 1988. I am indebted to my friend and mentor Dr. Abd'l-Baqi for guiding me in this direction regarding the interpolating African Islamic history from its own perspective. His monumental work has become my ‘bible’ in understanding the philosophy behind African Islamic history. He was gracious enough to give me a copy of this seminal work on the completion of his dissertation in 1988 in which he wrote: “This transcript is a gift to my brother the professor Muhammad Shareef bin Farid in order that he may translate it into English that perhaps by it Allah may benefit our Muslim brothers and others on the other side of the ocean, those who have been cut off from their original Islamic African heritage.” This epic work by Dr. Abd'l-Baqi gathers together all the seminal works on African Islamic history, from unpublished manuscripts to published works. More importantly he systematically deconstructed the western European writings regarding this area of history and uncovered the political and imperial motives behind their distortions and obscurantist approach to this vital history. Indeed, Allah ta`ala has caused his work to impact the descendants of African Muslims in the western hemisphere through the on going work of the Sankore` Institute of Islamic-African Studies International. I ask Allah ta`ala to reward him, illuminate his intellect and increase him in erudition, as well as illuminate the grave of his father, the learned *Imam* and *al-Khateeb Shaykh Muhammad Kabira al-Kanuri* who is buried near his mosque in Mayo in southern Khartoum, Sudan.

⁵ Joseph E. Harris, *Africans and Their History*, 0 p. 5.

⁶ See George Fitzhugh, “*The Universal Law of Slavery*”, in *The Black American: A Documentary History*, edit. Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. 7 Benjamin Quarles, Third Edition, (Illinois, 1976).

⁷ OpCit. 8-9.

The Africans were portrayed as being incapable of culture and those refined qualities essential for government and high civilization. Wherever evidence demonstrated the contrary, like the high civilization of the Nile valley, then the old myth of Ham was reintroduced under the guise of Hamitic or ‘white’ influence. African cultural and intellectual achievements were classified under European ‘hamitic’ taxonomy. Pejoratives like ‘tribe’ and ‘native’ were reserved specifically for Africans in order to further characterize them as primitive.

An example of this ‘scientific classification’ which still persists is the theory that the original inhabitants of the land of West Africa were Black pygmies, who were driven from the region into central Africa by other Black ethnicities. These latter were subsequently driven into the southern regions of West Africa by ‘white’ Hamitic ethnicities arriving from the east.⁸ There is no evidence in the oral traditions or in the written records at all which confirm this theory, so I will let this hypothesis stand on its own merit. These negative myths and stereotypes have not gone unchallenged by African scholars and liberators. The Africans have produced a host of scholars and movements designed to deconstruct these myths. The development of Africana Studies is to exclusively ‘reveal the values goals aspirations and the vision of African peoples in the course of history’.⁹

Like our father Adam, African historians must ‘name’ and ‘define’ our own history by ourselves for ourselves following the guidelines carefully laid out by Professor Diop when he said:

“The African who has understood us is the one who, after reading of our works, would have felt a birth in himself, of another person, impelled by an historical conscience, a true creator, a Promethean carrier of a new civilization and perfectly aware of what the whole earth owes to his ancestral genius in all the domains of science, culture and religion.”¹⁰

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⁸ Seligman, Human Origin in Africa, trans. Yusef Khalil, (Cairo, 1959), p. 47-49.

⁹ OpCit. 19.

¹⁰ Cheikh Anta Diop, cit. par Mbeki, Thabo, 1998, The African Renaissance Statement, SABC, Gallagher Estate, 13 août, 12.01.2004.