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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَي سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَسْلِيمًا

Islam and Africa

The Revival of an Authentic Anthropology



A hand written copy of the Original Prophetic Letter to the King of Abyssinia composed by *Shaykh* Muhammad Shareef in 1999 using the Barnawi-Ifriqiya-Kufic script

**The Letter of Prophet Muhammad to the King of Ethiopia:
The Foundation of an Authentic Anthropology
Sept 9, 2000**

The Importance of History

History is the balance principle against which human endeavors are measured, critiqued, revised, and changed. All nations and religious communities universally acknowledge the advantages of the science of historiography. Allah ta`ala uses the evidence of the chronicles of the human situation to make a case against their rebellion. He utilizes the arguments of history as the basis for His evidence in the face of the recalcitrance of the People of the Book. Allah ta`ala says: "O people of the Book why do you debate about Ibrahim when the Torah and the Injeel were not revealed until after him. Will you not use your intellects?" [Qur'an 3:65] History and the time line that it creates are used to address fallacies of their claims of spiritual priority. Further in the Quran the precedence is given for the study of history as a genuine social science from the words of Allah ta`ala. He says: "Verily, I narrate to you some of the tidings of the messengers in order to make it firmly established in your mind, that you may bring from this Truth clear lessons and reminders to those who believe." [Qur'an 11:120] The scholars take the concept 'the tidings of the messengers' as a clear license for the study of history as a form of individual and social transformation. Allah ta`ala also says: "There is certainly in their chronicles a lesson for those of understanding." [Qur'an 12:111]

The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace has made the science of historiography religiously authoritative by his words as related in the al-Jam`i as-Saghir: "Deliver the message from me, even if it just a single verse." Shaykh Mustapha ibn Abdullah has mentioned in the introduction of his Kahshif ad-Dhanuun that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace is reported to have said: "Whoever composes a history of a believer is as though he has given life to him." The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace often encouraged the community to look into the histories of the by-gone civilizations and see how they came to their end.

Many of the scholars have left for us many wise sayings concerning the study of history and the importance this science has with the other religious sciences. Shaykh Hassan ibn Yazid once said: "There is nothing that can help in warding-off the lies of the fabricators more than the science of history." The great 15th century Timbuktu scholar, Shaykh Ahmad Baba said: "The one ignorant of history is a sightless person who acts haphazardly and attributes the matters of those who preceded to those who came later and the opposite, having no care for attentiveness." Shaykh Muhammad ibn Muhammad Makhluaf said: "Studying the lives of the grandfathers educates the character of the children and grandchildren in mature excellent wisdom and brilliant discourses." Ibn as-Shaakir said in his Uyuun at-Tarikh: History is among the greatest of the sciences with regard to education and the easiest of the sciences to utilize. Its lights are evident and its pleasantness arises within the hearts." Shaykh Abdal-Qadir Dan Tafa said in his famous Rawdat 'l-Afkaar that history is the sweet meadows of contemplation and attention. It is the lure that entices the news of distant lands. Citation, documentation, and authentication are the strongholds and fortresses with which we preserve and deliberate upon history's unusual events.

The Knowledge of Self

One of the key reason behind the study of history for the individual is in order to gain the self-knowledge necessary to develop a healthy relationship with Allah and the rest of His creation. Allah ta`ala says: "I have created you from a single male and female and made you into nations and ethnic groups so that you may know yourselves and others. The most noble of you with your Lord are those who are most fearfully aware of Him." [Quran 49:13] Consequently, self-knowledge constitutes the *raison d'être* for all innate human groupings. This self-knowledge precludes all human arrogance and deprivation when it is coupled with *taqwa* (fearful awareness of Allah)." The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said: "The white is not superior to the black nor is the black superior to the white except by means of *taqwa*. The Arab is not superior to the non-Arab nor is the non-Arab superior to the Arab except by means of *taqwa*." True history and the traditions connected with it should never be used to promote conceit, arrogance, greed, and over consumption. On the contrary, the science of history is the record of our human achievements and failures, authenticated and transmitted to urge us onward towards greater perfection and recognition. The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace once said: "Learn from your lineage that which will connect you with your family heritage." Thus, the science of history, whether local and personal or universal and public, serves to place the subject within its rightful time and place. History deposits the subject at a point in time, assesses the movement of that point backwards into time, and gives us the time line necessary to make educated deductions about the future of the subject.

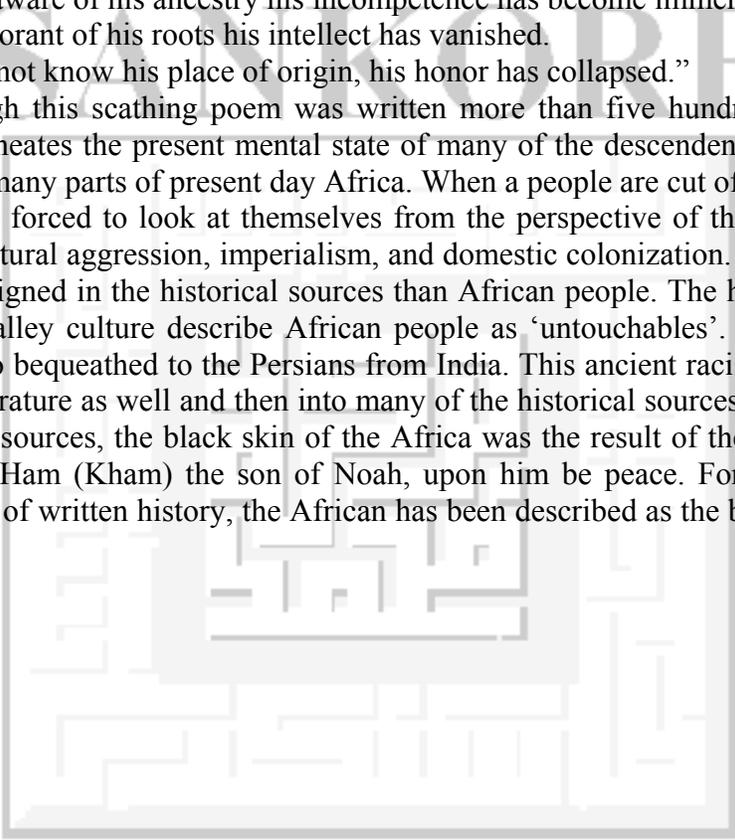
In twelfth century Mali, the *Mansa*, Maghan Kon Fata, advised his son, the great *Mansa*, Sundiata Keita regarding the importance of the oral historian (*belen-tigi*): "From his mouth you will hear the history of your ancestors. You will learn the art of governing Mali according to the principles which our ancestors have bequeathed to us." The above citations demonstrate that history has a universal utility designed to create group consciousness, designate legitimacy, overcome enemies, and prove continuity. From the standpoint of society, history serves countless pragmatic functions to insure its survival and coherence.

The Result of the Lack of Knowledge of Self

The late *Waziri* of Sokoto, Shaykh Junayd ibn Muhammad al-Bukhari, may Allah be merciful to him once said: "Knowledge is universal and eternal but it has a social and cultural stamp. It also has a purpose and a commitment to a particular worldview. It therefore cannot be neutral." Consequently, history cannot be neutral. It must and always present a given world view. The so-called objectivity of history is itself a fallacy. All people to present that view which is best for its people have utilized history. The European imperialist utilized history to justify colonizing the rest of the world. The historical conceptions of themselves and others were distorted in order to justify imperialism. The 'other' had to be painted as barbaric, uncivilized and in need of the enlightenment of European civilization. This was extremely important for their own self-image as well as to destroy the will of the colonized people. History was used to vilify them and create the basis for conquering them. The modern media utilizes the same techniques against the resurgence of Islam throughout the world.

Waziri Junayd also cited a poem in his work concerning the lineage of his great grandmother, Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Shehu Uthman Dan Fuduye'. This poem was taken from a 15th century Timbuktu scholar and it describes the deep psychological harm a people can face when they lack the self-knowledge which history bequeaths. He says: "Whoever does not inform his children of his grandparents has destroyed his child, marred his descendants, and injured his offspring the day he dies. Whoever does not make use of his ancestry, has muddled his reason. Whoever is unconcerned with his lineage, has lost his mind. Whoever neglects his origin, his stupidity has become critical. Whoever is unaware of his ancestry his incompetence has become immense. Whoever is ignorant of his roots his intellect has vanished. Whoever does not know his place of origin, his honor has collapsed."

Although this scathing poem was written more than five hundred years ago, it accurately delineates the present mental state of many of the descendents of Africans in the US and in many parts of present day Africa. When a people are cut off from their own history and are forced to look at themselves from the perspective of their enemies then the result is cultural aggression, imperialism, and domestic colonization. No ethnicity has been more maligned in the historical sources than African people. The historical sources of the Indus valley culture describe African people as 'untouchables'. This false racial theory was also bequeathed to the Persians from India. This ancient racism made its way into Jewish literature as well and then into many of the historical sources of the Arabs. In their historical sources, the black skin of the Africa was the result of the curse allegedly inflicted upon Ham (Kham) the son of Noah, upon him be peace. For more than five thousand years of written history, the African has been described as the barbarian and the cursed.



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Historical Continuity

By definition, the preservation of the cultural identity of any people can only be maintained through history. Thus, its preservation is the function of its people. No one else can tell a people's story. They must speak for themselves. The great Senegalese intellectual, Cheikh Anta Diop in his seminal work called Civilization or Barbarism, later underscored this idea when he said: "The historical conscience, through the feeling of cohesion that it creates, constitutes the safest and the most solid shield of cultural security for a people. The essential thing for a people is to rediscover the thread that connects them to their most remote ancestral past. In the face of cultural aggression of all sorts, in the face of all disintegrating factors of the outside world, the most efficient cultural weapon with which a people can arm itself is this feeling of historical continuity."

The best example of historical continuity can be seen in the letter of Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace to the Negus of Ethiopia. This letter not only reflects the opinion that Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace had of African people. It also gives the grid for the mission of African Muslims throughout history. The letter confirms the Africans own self-image as presented in their historical sources.

From the onset, the Abyssinian people looked upon themselves as the inheritors of the two great religious communities, Judaism and Christianity. It began with the encounter between Prophet Sulayman, upon him be peace and the great Abyssinian/Yemeni queen, Bilqis, also known as Makeda in African sources. The Abyssinian historical traditions confirm the idea of the falling from grace of the Bani Isra'il as described in the Quran where Allah ta'ala says: "Those who disbelieved among the Bani Isra'il were cursed by the tongue of Dawuud and Jesus, the son of Mary. This is because they were disobedient and went beyond the limits." [Quran 5:78] This first curse was actualized by the loss of the single symbol that represented the religious identity of the Bani Isra'il – the Arch of the Covenant. According to Abyssinian sources, Prophet Sulayman, the son of Prophet Dawuud, upon them be peace married Makeda and they had a son named Dawuud. Allah ta'ala revealed to Prophet Sulayman, upon him be peace to order his son and the first born sons of the Bani Isra'il to take the Arch of the Covenant into the lands of Abyssinia where it would remain until the End of Time. Later, this image would be enhanced by their acceptance of the message of Jesus, the son of Mary, upon him be peace. This self-image of the African people as inheritors of the Bani Isra'il was extremely significant in making Abyssinia one of the three most powerful kingdoms during the time of Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.

The three most influential unitary kingdoms that existed when Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace was given the final revelation were Rome, Persia and Abyssinia. The Romans ruled most of North Africa, Syria and its surroundings for more than one thousand years before the birth of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The Persians ruled the lands of Iraq, the northern Arabian peninsula, and most of most of the western region of the Indian subcontinent. Abyssinia was at that time the most politically sophisticated unitary kingdom in Africa. Its rule included all the lands of Nubia, present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, present day Sudan, and parts of Somalia. It also included within its sphere of political hegemony the entire western region of the Arabian Peninsula.

Africa: the Land of Refuge for the Prophets

Africa has been the place of refuge for many of the Prophets of the past. Prophet Ibrahim, upon him be peace made the *hijra* to Africa in his flight from the people of Nimrod. The Bani Isra'il took refuge in Africa from famine and starvation during the time of Prophet Yusef, upon him be peace. Jesus, the son of Mary, upon him be peace was taken by his guardians into Africa in their flight from the Roman and corrupt Jewish authorities of that time. Allah ta'ala addresses Prophet Muhammad and his early community in the following words: "Do the people think that they will be left to say, "We believe" and they will not be tried? We certainly tried those before them. Allah will surely make plain those who are truthful and He will surely make evident those who are liars." [Quran 29:2-3]

Like with the previous communities, Allah tested the faith of Prophet Muhammad and the early community with the trials of persecution, slaughter, the seizing of wealth and oppression. Moreover, like the previous communities, Africa was chosen as the first place of refuge for the persecuted Muslims. This choice of Africa as a place of refuge for the Prophets is very significant for the self-image of the African Muslim. It confirms the ancient belief system of the Abyssinians as well as creates the foundation for cultural renewal for all of Africa. This image of Africa as a place of refuge implies the proclivity for justice for those who seek refuge there. This is reflected in the famous statement Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace made to his Companions about Africa. "Verily therein is a ruler whose people are not oppressed in his land. Therefore, seek refuge and protection with him until Allah brings about some relief from Himself for you."



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The Original Message to the Blackman



A copy of the Original Letter of Prophet Muhammad to the King of Abyssinia, written during the early years of Islam; utilizing the most ancient script used by the Arabs which later became known as 'kufic'. It is said that this particular letter was written by Ali ibn Abi Talib or Ja'far ibn Abi Talib

Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace dispatched many letters to various kingdoms and rulers. In all of these letters the Prophet affirmed the primacy of worship of Allah ta'ala and confirmed the veracity of his mission as the seal of the prophets and messengers. He invited the kingdoms and rulers to accept Islam and succeed or to enter into a social contract with the Muslim community as defined by the *jizya*. When addressing the Christians of Rome, Jerusalem and Alexandria, Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him grant him peace failed to accept their claim of inheritance to the mantle of Jesus, the son of Mary, upon him peace. His letters to them demonstrate that he saw them as inheritors of a distorted and altered religious tradition that was completely disconnected from the traditions of the early Christian community.

However, in the letter of Prophet Muhammad to the Negus of Abyssinia we get an entirely different image. The immediate impression from this letter is that of a Prophet addressing a believing ruler to whom he gave honor and esteem. It is first a confirmation of the self-image that the Abyssinians had of themselves. Secondly, it is a mandate and a mission statement for all African people. It constitutes the first message to the Blackman.

The Essence of the Letter

من محمد رسول الله إلى النجاشي عظيم الحابشة سلام على من أتبع
الهدى أما بعد فإني أحمدهمك الله الذي لا إله إلا هو الملك القدوس السلام
المؤمن المهيمن وأشهد أن عيسى بن مريم روح الله وكلماته القاها إلى
مريم البطول الحصينة الطيبة فحملت بعيسى من روحه ونفخه كما
خلق آدم بيده وإني ادعوك إلى الله وحده لا شريك له والمواالاتة على
طاعته وأن تتبعني توفيقاً بالذي جئني فإني رسول الله وإني ادعوك
وجنودك إلى الله عز وجل وقد بلغت ونصحت فاقبلوا نصيحتي والسلام
على من اتبع الهدى

“In the name of Allah the Beneficent the Merciful, from Muhammad the Messenger of Allah to the great Negus of Abyssinia. Peace upon he who follows the Guidance. As to what follows: Verily for you I praise Allah the One whom there is no deity except Him, the Sole King, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Protector and the Guardian. I bear witness that Jesus the son of Maryum is the spirit belonging to Allah and His word that He cast into the chaste and excellent virgin, Mary. She thus became pregnant by means of His spirit and His inspiration with Jesus in the same manner that He created Adam with His hand. Verily I invite you to Allah the One who has no partner and to friendship, continuity, and government in obedience to Him. I invite you to follow me and to have absolute certainty with what I have come with. Verily I am the Messenger of Allah and I invite you and your government forces to Allah the Mighty the Majestic. Hence, I have delivered the message and given you counsel, therefore accept my counsel. Peace be upon he who follows the Guidance.”

The Mandate of the Prophet to All African Muslims

The letter of Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace to the Negus of Abyssinia and the message therein constitutes the highest aspirations of a people. When the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said: “I bear witness that Jesus the son of Maryum is the spirit belonging to Allah and His word that He cast into the chaste and excellent virgin, Mary.” – he connected Africa to the earlier religious communities. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace affirmed the self-image of the Abyssinia as inheritors of the earlier Prophets. In all other letters that Prophet dispatched he would declare that there was no deity except Allah and that he was His messenger. However, in the letter to the Negus of Abyssinia, the Prophet replaces affirmation of his own messenger-ship with affirmation of the prophet and messenger before him. This is extremely significant because it shows that Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace accepted the religious claims of the people of Abyssinia. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace saw the Africans as insiders and not outsiders to the prophetic traditions.

The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace invited the African people to “friendship, continuity, and government in obedience to Allah.” The concept of *mawaalat* in Arabic has many connotations. The immediate implication of the word is that of friendship and contract of clientage. Here the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace is inviting the Abyssinian people to a social contract with Allah defined by protected-friendship. The concept of protected-friendship or what some call “sainthood” was one of the primary preoccupations of the Abyssinian kingdom. Its entire history was predicated upon the belief of its rulers and priest being among the class of saints. Here the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace invites them to the essential aspirations of its people. The concept of *mawaalat* also embraces the meaning of constancy and continuity. This means that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace invited African people to a tradition which would persist throughout their long history and be sustained in the face of all cultural aggression from the outside world. Finally, the concept of *mawaalat* comprises the implication of government and sovereignty. This recognition of African sovereignty and political autonomy was repeated when he, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said: “I invite you and your government forces to Allah the Mighty the Majestic.” The word *junuud* in Arabic has many meanings. When Allah ta`ala uses it in the Quran He refers to both the government forces of mankind as well as His Angels. Allah ta`ala says: “And when Talut went forth with the military forces (*al-junuud*), he said: ‘Indeed, Allah will be testing you by means of the river’.” [Quran 2:249] Again Allah ta`ala says: “Then Allah sent down His tranquility upon His Messenger and upon those who believe and sent down forces (*junuudan*) whom you did not see to punish those who disbelieved.” [Quran 9:26] Here, the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace utilizes the concept of *junuud* to give recognition to African military might, their governmental sovereignty and political autonomy. It is clear that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace was not inviting African people to be subsumed under some Arab hegemony, as many would suggest. On the contrary, this letter from Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace represents the fundamental right of self-determination of African Muslims.

The Historical Implications of the Letter

Allah ta`ala says: “O you who believe, if you support Allah, He will support you and plant firmly your feet.” [Quran 47:7] This is definitely true with the Negus of Abyssinian and his people. The Negus answered the call of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace and accepted Islam. He protected the persecuted Muslims and gave them the first place of refuge against their enemies. Thus, Africa supported Allah and His religion during its darkest hour. History has given evidence to that fact that Allah ta`ala in turn supported Africa and its people and He fulfilled the promise of “friendship, continuity, and government in obedience to Allah.” The history of Africa is synonymous with the history of Islam. For more than 14 centuries, Islam has played a major role in transformation of Africa. Africa has seen an unbroken line of self-governing Islamic kingdoms from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. The Africans were the first to support Prophet Muhammad’s community and were the last armies that stood up against the face of European imperialism. The African Muslims were the first to bring Islam to the shores of the Americas and sparked revolts and revolutions that preceded the so-called American

Revolution. Africa enjoys the fastest conversion to Islam in the entire world. The descendents of Africa in the western hemisphere are the fastest growing Muslim population in the world.

One of the most significant features of the letter is the style of early calligraphy. The letter was written in the distinctive style of writing which later became known as Kufic. This was among the earliest styles of calligraphy to develop during the time of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. This style of calligraphy was brought into North Africa and became the official style with which the earliest official Qurans were written. It later became known as Ifriqiyya. This in turn gave birth to Andalusí or Maghribí script. Is it from these styles that the prominent styles of Timbuktu, Barnawí, and Jihadí emerged. For more than 14 centuries this style of writing has persisted and was even carried by enslaved African Muslims to the western hemisphere. In fact, the only anthropological evidence of the transmigration of African culture into the western hemisphere is the existence of hundreds of Arabic manuscripts written in the identical style of the letter of Prophet Muhammad to the Negus of Abyssinia.

Today some 900 thousand Arabic manuscripts exist in the African continent, which contain all the diverse sciences of Islam. This literary legacy and the political hegemony, which it gave birth to, is the sign of Allah's gratitude to Africa for supporting the early community of Muslims. Men and women like Ahmad Baba, Muhammad Baghyugu, Nana Asma, and A'isha Iyyagarka testify to the saintly and pious learned tradition that the letter of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace promises. The kingdoms of Adar, Harar, Takrur, Darfur, Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, Mali, Funj and Sokoto bear witness to the persistence and continuity which the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace invited Africa to. Allah ta'ala says: "Allah has promised those who believe and do good deeds from among you that they will inherit the earth just as He caused those before them to inherit it. And that He will make their religion which is pleasing firmly established and change their anxiety into assurance." [Qur'an: 24:55.] Just as general European civilization cannot be understood except through first examining Hellenistic culture. Likewise African Islamic history must begin with this significant letter of Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace to the Negus of Abyssinia. It is the point at which Islam encounters Africa and Africa encounters Islam. The ideas and mandates given to Africa by Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace as exemplified in the letter will be recurring themes throughout the glorious history of Islam and Africa.

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