This month marks the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 that killed an estimated one million people (mainly Tutsis). Curtis Abraham traces the harmful Hamite Hypothesis dreamed up by 19th and early 20th century European scholars and scientists that, many believe, had a direct link with the sad events in Rwanda in 1994, and by extension with the ongoing ethnic animosities in the Great Lakes Region.

Tracing the deeper roots of the Rwandan genocide

... How the Hamite Hypothesis played a role
When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in the summer of 1798, his motives were primarily geopolitical. French control of Egypt could be used to threaten British commercial interests in the region and to block Britain's overland route to India. Furthermore, France wanted control of Egypt for its commercial and agricultural potential, not to mention the fact that the country was a prime source of grain and raw materials.

But although the Corsican general's three-year military campaign ended in failure (not only did Lord Nelson's British fleet destroy the French ships, thus isolating Napoleon's forces in Egypt but Napoleon himself had to flee back to France), perhaps the greatest achievement of the invasion (besides the fact that it revealed the Middle East as an area of immense strategic importance to the European powers) was the impact on Europe of the discoveries that the scholars and scientists that accompanied Napoleon's invasion forces made in Egypt.

Napoleon's experts were there to investigate every aspect of life in ancient and contemporary Egypt. These discoveries led to the publication of *Description de l'Egypte*, which detailed the findings of the French scholars and scientists. The book not only became the foundation for the modern science of Egyptology, but it also led to the establishment of the great Egyptian museums we see around the world today. Egypt was in vogue.

Fast-forward to 1994. The shocking and tragic events that began in Rwanda on 6 April 1994, which transpired over the next 100 days and whose consequences are still being felt in the Great Lakes Region two decades later, have, some say, a direct link to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt.

It was the splendours of Egypt's glorious past that helped to give rise to the racist philosophy of the Hamite Hypothesis, which helped to trigger off one of the most horrific pogroms of the 20th century. 

Below: The royal pyramids at Nubia, or Kush as it was called in the Bible.

The Hamite Hypothesis helped to trigger the transatlantic slave trade.
The distorted hypothesis

But as it happened, the original notion of the Hamite Hypothesis was based on the false belief that the Hamites were blacks or “Negroes”. This was supposedly based on a collection of oral traditions of the Jews, called the Babylonian Talmud, which appeared in the 6th century AD.

This earlier tradition of the Hamites as blacks continued into the European “Dark Ages” when Jewish rabbis made fanciful elaborations on the story of Genesis that became more or less justifications for the Israelites’ subjugation of Canaan.

Centuries later, Europeans and Euro-Americans (or Americans of European decent) would use this flawed hypothesis to their political and economic advantage. The so-called “Curse of Ham” was the religious rationale used by southern pro-slavery intellectuals to enforce the enslavement of blacks during the transatlantic slave trade.

In fact, the distorting of the use of the word Hamites came about as Europe emerged from its “Dark Ages” into the Enlightenment. Until then it was the Scriptures that told the story of man’s origins and the place of blacks in it. But the philosophers of the Enlightenment applied “scientific” methods to the study of man and the origin of races, and in the process put the Scriptures and science on a collision course; biology was about to replace theology.

As the scholar, Edith Sanders, writes: “The concept of the Negro-Hamite was steadily losing ground because theological interpretation of the peopling of the world did not satisfy the men of the Enlightenment. The myth was now kept alive mainly by the clergy, who tried to keep their hold on the laity by discrediting the savants as infidels.”

The process of “Europeanising” the Hamites was achieved by the manipulation of what had been a previously sacred religious doctrine by placing the so-called curse on Canaan on Ham.

But if the change of the original Hamite myth could be traced back to any particular historical event, then it would be Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt. That desert country lay at the frontiers of Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and what was then termed as Asia Minor, and it was seen as the origin of Western civilisation. Its inhabitants became the innovators and originators of social, political and religious practices and institutions on the African continent. Indeed, Ancient Egyptian civilisation towered over those found in the Near and Far East, and in the Americas.

And so it was reasoned that such a hallmark of civilisation, as Ancient Egypt, could only have arrived there by one means only, through a process of borrowing or copying from others; in other words diffusion.

Diffusionist thinking went something like this: such aspects of civilisation like Ancient Egypt were rare and unique events which then spread out as other groups borrowed and copied them.

But the diffusionists were racists. They believed that anything regarding civilisation originated from Ancient Egypt, but, to them, the Ancient Egyptians were not Africans. Biologically they were Europeans or from European descent, they claimed. Dark-skinned Africans were incapable of such grandiose achievements.

But this was an amazing claim, because even after the conquest of Pharonic Egypt during the Hellenic period and beyond into the Roman era, Ancient Egyptian culture persisted for hundreds of years, albeit in a diminished or diminishing form in the upper Nile area, particularly at Meroe.
The Kings of Kush had withdrawn to Meroe, a tract of land some 250 km broad, lying between the points at which the Atbara and the Blue Nile join the main stream of the White Nile, after first fleeing the invasion of the Assyrian armies wielding weapons of iron. They settled at Napata, and then Meroe. The culture at Meroe in northern Sudan was basically an expression of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation rooted in Black Africa. Gods were worshipped in Egyptian-styled temples; pyramids — small and flat topped — were constructed over the tombs of rulers. The civilisation was run along the lines of the Egyptian model of centralised authority and power. And, although Nubia is commonly associated with the areas of the far north of Sudan and southern Egypt, scientists today believe that medieval Nubia was a much greater region spreading across what is now west-central and northern Sudan. But naturally, like any great civilisation, Meroe collapsed.

In good diffusionist tradition, A. J. Arkell in his 1961 volume, A History of The Sudan: From Earliest Times to 1821, argued that when Meroe collapsed, members of the ruling class migrated across the Nile and west through the Sahel and deeper into Black Africa, taking with them Meroe’s technological knowledge and concepts of state organisation which then spread throughout the continent.

But as one writer has summed up: “The primary objective of [European] scholars, philosophers, and historians during the 18th and 19th centuries was to construct an image of the African as inferior, incapable of civilisation, deserving of enslavement, and belonging to some subset of humanity.”

In this thinking, if Ancient Egypt was a civilisation prior to that of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, then the individuals who created this monumental achievement on the African continent could not be black or brown-skinned Africans but were Caucasian or Caucasian-like individuals.
This was despite the brave conclusions of a number of learned European men of the day, who witnessed for themselves the monuments and mummies of Ancient Egypt, men such as Count Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf de Volney (1757-1820), the French traveller who wrote *Ruins of Empire* (1793), and Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825), the French artist and scholar who was selected as one of the members of the “Committee of Arts and Sciences” accompanying Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt.

There was also the Frenchman who made a profound study of the Egyptian monuments, which was published in 1802 as the *Voyage dans la Basse et dans la Haute Egypte* (“Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt”). Denon later became the director general of the French museums and played an important role in creating the Louvre Museum collections.

Denon and Volney were correct in concluding that the Ancient Egyptian civilisation was indeed the creation of “Negroids”. But this, of course, was too much for mainstream Europe and America to accept. In fact, when *Ruins of Empires* was published in an American edition, positive references to blacks were deleted from the text. Volney, however, later issued a corrected edition that restored those positive references.

**The new Hamite Myth**

In any event, a kind of compromise had to be invented by those who continued to see blacks as representing the lowest rung on the human ladder to give justification for their continued enslavement.

As Edith Sanders wrote over a generation ago: “The new Hamitic concept made its appearance quite early in the 19th century, spearheaded by the clergy. If the Negro was a descendant of Ham, and Ham was cursed, how could he be the creator of a great civilisation? A new interpretation of the meaning of the Scriptures was offered. Egyptians, it was now remembered, were descendants of Mizraim, a son of Ham. Noah had only cursed Canaan, the son of Ham, so that it was Canaan and his progeny alone who suffered the malédiction. Ham and his other sons, and their children were [thus] not included in the curse.”

Once again the continuation of slavery as a viable economic system in America had to be maintained. And the only way to do so on a moral basis was to deny that black Africans had anything to do with Ancient Egyptian civilisation. Thus, the civilisation that Napoleon’s scientists found in Egypt had to be the creation of Caucasians, which made the Ancient Egyptians a branch of the Caucasian race.

As Edith Sanders states: “The late 19th century provided two new ideologies which utilised and expanded the concept of the Caucasian Hamite: colonialism and modern racism. Both shaped the European attitude to Africa and Africans.

“The [European] travelers found a variety of physical types in Africa, and their ethnocentrism made them value those who looked more like themselves. These were declared to be of Hamitic descent, and endowed with the myth of superior achievement.”

By the early part of the 20th century, it was alleged that science had firmly established a separate Hamitic branch of the Caucasian race. This then gave rise to the creation of a linguistic group called the family of Hamitic languages. Members of this racial group comprise blonde, blue-eyed Berbers of North Africa and dark-skinned woolly-haired Ethiopians in the Horn of Africa.

They were then divided into Northern and Eastern branches. The Eastern branch included ancient and modern Egyptians, Gallas or Oromos, Danakil, Maasai, Ethiopians, Somalis, and the Tutsi and Hima of the Great Lakes Region.

The majority of these groups were cattle-keepers, and somehow these pastoralists were lauded as possessing a superior culture over the agricultural “Negro”. Furthermore, innovations such as iron-working, age-grade systems, political institutions such as kingship, etc, were all attributed to the Hamites.

So when European adventurers, missionaries, soldiers, naturalists, administrators, and travellers of the late 19th century encountered the Tutsi cattle-keepers and their close kin, the Hima of western Uganda, they were struck by a sense of déjà vu.

For example, when Sir Henry (Harry) Hamilton Johnston, the first British administrator of the Uganda Protectorate and Queen Victoria’s first commissioner and consul general to British Central Africa, first laid eyes on the Hima, a clan of the Tutsi, he thought that they were Egyptian soldiers left behind by Emin Pasha, the German-born governor of Equatorial Province who had been forced to retreat with his forces near Lake Albert by the revolt of Muhammad Ahmad, that started in 1881 in Sudan.

In fact, the theme of the Ancient Egyptian origins of the Tutsi and Hima resurfaced, again and again, in the Victorian and Edwardian travel literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Referring to the physical appearance of the Hima for example, Sir Albert R. Cook said that: “…Everyone has remarked about their extraordinary likeness to the old Egyptian mummies”.

In his 1911 book, *Eighteen Years in Uganda and East Africa*, Alfred R. Tucker observed that the average (Mu)Hima male was “a man the very image, you would say, of Ramses II”.

Even in modern times, echoes of Ancient Egyptian origins still reverberate from the pens of foreign travel authors. Alan Reeve says of these cattle-keepers: “Members of the Bahima tribe, the natives resembled images of ancient Egyptians – straight noses, high cheekbones, wide flat eyes.”

**Enter John Hanning Speke**

No one else during the 19th century, however, was a more influential proponent of the
Hamite Hypothesis than the myth's originator, John Hanning Speke, the Briton who claimed to have "discovered" the source of River Nile.

Speke and James Grant travelled around the western and northern shores of Lake Victoria in 1862 to substantiate his claim that the lake was indeed the source of the Nile (which he had "discovered" while making a solitary side trip from Sir Richard Burton's expedition).

During his stay in the Great Lakes Region, Speke also recorded detailed observations on the people he encountered, their social and political organisation, and on their history.

Speke's Journal of the Discovery of the Source of The Nile, the forum in which he dreamt up the new Hamite Myth, was published in December 1863. The book was an instant literary success and it immediately sold out in bookshops.

Subsequently, Speke's volume was translated into several European languages. However, the book has a dubious dual legacy in the history of Victorian travel literature and the history of the African continent. Besides being a gripping travelogue, the book is said to have paved the way for the colonisation of East Africa.

According to the historian, David Finkelstein, Speke's magnum opus is credited with "...being extremely influential in shaping Victorian attitudes to Africa and its people, as well as providing a political rationale for colonial expansion into the continent."

Among the ruling groups in the kingdoms of the Great Lakes Region, Speke would note the curious "Hamitic" characteristics. He thought that the Tutsi and Hima were a branch of the cattle-keeping (Hamitic) peoples he had encountered while with Burton in the Somali town of Harar in 1854. The women of these pastoralist groups certainly reminded him of Somali women who in turn resembled the women in Ancient Egyptian paintings.

In chapter XI of his book, History of the Wahuma (the Hima in Bunyoro in Uganda), Speke presents what he boldly called his "Theory of Conquest of the Inferior by Superior Races".

Simply stated, Speke believed that the monarchic institutions, like the kingships of some of the Great Lakes communities, were brought to the region by a "conquering superior race", carriers of a "superior civilisation". These supposed highbrow Hamites, ancestors of Tutsi, Hima, etc, were the Gallo of southern Ethiopia. But just from what we know about Speke's personality today, it is hard to imagine anyone taking his "idée fixe" (or fixed ideas) very seriously, then or now. In fact, Speke was a typically stiff-upper-lip Victorian army officer. Prudish and inhibited is how one writer describes him.

He was a withdrawn and conservative young man and it was probably this aspect of his personality that made him fall out with the more extroverted and daring Sir Richard Burton, with whom he had teamed up in 1855. Burton, among other things, was disgusted by the fact that Speke had an appetite for eating the embryos of the pregnant female animals he killed while hunting.

Unsurprisingly, Speke was uninterested in traditional African ways of life. He was shocked by the near nudity of African women and he deplored both African and Arab polygamy.

And neither was he fond of Africans. Once at the court of King (Kabaka) Mutesa I of Buganda in Uganda, he was decidedly taken aback when offered two Uganda girls who were daughters of the Queen Mother as wives. He recoiled in horror and was "staggered at first by this awful proposal."

The audiences back home

It was bad enough that the explorer and missionary vanguards of European colonialism in Africa trumpeted such stereotypes to their Victorian/Edwardian audiences back home in metropolitan Europe. Worse still is when their weird ideas were passed off as serious scientific doctrines and were expounded on by noted scientists of the day, such as in the case of the British anthropologist Charles Gabriel Seligman, who was considered to be the "great guru of African racial theories between the two World Wars".

In his book, Races of Africa, first published in 1920, Seligman laid out his beliefs, claiming that: "...the incoming Hamites were pastoral Caucasoids -- arriving in wave after wave -- better armed as well as quicker-witted than the dark agricultural Negros".

Indeed, the Hamite-Africans were claimed to have a "white morphological" that originated from Caucasoids. They were then divided into "Eastern Hamites" and "Western Hamites".

However, little was known about their origins or migration patterns. It was surmised (a gigantic leap of faith really) that...
their migration into Africa was an ancient one and that they interbred with the “Negroes” whom they “civilised” and helped to develop.

In short, the Hamite Hypothesis revealed one of the great biases of 19th and early 20th century Western thought. It had long been the Western belief that any remarkable discoveries made on the African continent were not indigenous creations, but the work of people from outside Africa, and always with a lighter skin complexion of course.

Sadly, Speke’s new Hamite Myth not only represented the way in which Western eyes looked at African peoples like the Tutsi and Hima, but also the way in which the Tutsi and Hima looked at themselves and thus expected others around them to see them.

It was a belief that inadvertently planted the seeds of animosity in some of the Great Lakes kingdoms. Today this animosity has led to serious social divisions in the Hima/Iru in Uganda, and at its extreme end a heart-wrenching and nightmarish genocide in neighbouring Rwanda.

In Rwanda, the Hamite Myth was an essential component of the ideology of ethnicity, which was part and parcel of the ethnic constructs developed under Belgian colonial rule. This ideology claimed that the Tutsi minority was vastly superior to their Hutu brethren.

Of course, differences between the two communities existed long before the Europeans arrived, but the differences were worsened by the Belgians’ deliberate policy of raising the Tutsi above the Hutu. Until then, the words Hutu and Tutsi were mere occupational categories, but much later they became ethnic labels.

The French historian/political scientist, Gerard Prunier, has summed up for us the “dangerous” legacies of the Hamite Myth in his illuminating volume on the Rwanda genocide of 1994:

“Firstly, it conditioned deeply and durably the views and attitudes of the Europeans regarding people like the Banyankole they were dealing with. Secondly, it became a kind of ‘unquestioned scientific canon’ which actually governed the decisions made by the German and even more so the Belgian colonial authorities. Thirdly, it had a massive impact on the natives themselves.”

Prunier added: “The result of this heavy bombardment with highly value-laden stereotypes for some 60 years, ended by inflating the Bahimal/Tutsi cultural ego inordinately and crushing Bairu/Hutu feelings until they coalesced into an aggressively resentful inferiority complex.

“If we combine these subjective feelings with the objective political and administrative decisions of the colonial authorities, favouring one group over the other, we can begin to see how a very dangerous social bomb was almost absent-mindedly manufactured throughout the peaceful years of European domination.”

Alas, the Hamite Hypothesis was a great myth. A grand fairytale made elaborate by European missionaries and explorers harbouring literary, anthropological, and imperialistic ambitions; but, most damaging of all, by scientists who were practising pseudo-science by attempting to give intellectual legitimacy to a racist myth. And by colonial administrators who incorporated it into government policy in their never-ending effort to divide and rule.

The Hamite Hypothesis, in the words of the British historian Basil Davidson, was yet another “white illusion”. In fact, the great American linguist Joseph Greenberg has suggested that the term “Hamite” be completely eliminated. Instead he favours that the people to whom the term was applied should be labeled by names referring to the various languages they speak.