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THE FAMILY ROMANCE OF COLONIAL LINGUISTICS: GENDER AND FAMILY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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1. Introduction

My title comes from Lynn Hunt's (1992) book, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, a study of family and gender imagery in the discourse of Revolutionary politics.[1] Hunt, in turn, takes the title from Freud, whose 1909 essay on "family romances" describes the fantasies of neurotic children who create imaginary families more satisfying than their own.[2] But unlike Freud, Hunt is not directly concerned with the psychic dynamics of individuals. Instead, she explores the ways people collectively imagine the operation of power through their understanding of family relations (1992: 8). Ideas about family, she suggests, provide a pre-analytical model for understanding political experience — a model invested with emotional significance.

If ideas about family have a compelling imaginative force, its impact is not limited to 1789, or to political discourse in the narrow sense.[3] In this paper I consider family and gender discourse in a somewhat later time, a more distant political context, and a type of text that is less obviously about politics. The time is the nineteenth century, the context is the European colonial expansion into subsaharan Africa, and the texts are linguistic analyses. Ideologically-based images of family relations pervade these texts, from descriptions of grammatical structure to discussions of language classification. And while these texts purport to be about languages, they also construct claims about those languages' speakers, their social and moral condition, and their place in a global community.

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[2] Freud's notion here is that the imaginary family is more emotionally satisfying, and more socially important, than the child's actual parents are. See Freud (1959), "Family romances."

[3] Hunt actually examines many kinds of texts, especially works of fiction, in addition to texts with explicitly political themes.

Family imagery as a way to understand relationships among languages dates back before the nineteenth century, but the family idiom took on new significance and substance during that period, with the rise of comparative philology and rigorous methods for determining what we still call genealogical relationships among languages. Yet, comparative philology got its start and its rigor with analyses of Indo-European and Semitic languages. What of the languages of the colonized or soon-to-be-colonized peoples? How did the idea of "family" apply to them? And how was it affected by the complex of ideas about race, sexuality, difference, and domination inherent in the construction of colonial power? Nineteenth-century studies of African languages not only employed family and gender imagery, but also gave special prominence to grammatical gender, as if this were the essence of language structure and the touchstone of language-family relationships. For many linguists of the time, how a language handled gender distinctions was the basis of its relationship to other languages, and (moreover) revealed its speakers' mentality and socio-political condition. Many linguists, too, appealed to (supposed) ethnographic facts about African family life to explain linguistic structures and relationships.

Among the authors who discussed African languages in this period (roughly, 1789-1914) there are groups whose views and political agendas sharply contrast. An early group, heirs to the French Revolution and the linguistic philosophy of the *Idéologues* Condillac and Destutt de Tracy, saw in African languages the proof of human equality and fraternity. Other scholars, later in the century, saw in African languages evidence of the importance of sexual and racial hierarchies. This was the view that predominated during the period of the "scramble for Africa" and the establishment of European colonial empires.

2. The rise and fall of linguistic "Fraternity"

My first group of scholars share the vocabulary and imagery of the 1789 Revolution. Instead of a king who embodied the state and was endowed with a father's authority over his subjects, Revolutionary political writers had emphasized the fraternal, thus equal, relations among citizens (rather than subjects). Fraternity was envisioned universally, as the appropriate relationship among men, whatever their nation or condition. (Among all these brothers not much was said about sisters, but never mind for now.)

It was in these terms — of universal fraternity and the relations among citizens — that our first group of writers described exotic peoples and languages. We may start with Joseph-Marie Degérando, a charter member of the *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* ('Society of Observers of Man'), founded in 1799 to promote anthropological study. Commissioned to draft recommendations on anthropological observation for a French expedition of round-the-world exploration, Degérando wrote a memoir outlining the principles and techniques of fieldwork — *The Observation of Savage Peoples*. Placing primary emphasis on the study of language, he remarked (1969 [1800]: 70):

> It is a delusion to suppose that one can properly observe a people whom one cannot understand and with whom one cannot converse. The first means to the proper knowledge

> of the Savages, is to become after a fashion like one of them; and it is by learning their language that we shall become *their fellow citizens*. [emphasis added]

Describing such people as "our brothers" (p. 104), "former kinsmen separated by long exile from the rest of the common family" (p. 63), Degérando urged travelers setting out for distant shores, "You who, led by a generous devotion ... will soon come near their lonely huts, go before them as the representatives of all humanity! Give them in that name the vow of brotherly alliance!" (p. 64) In contrast to Columbus, who "put in the New World only greedy conquerors" (p. 103), the French expedition was to inaugurate global community: "What more moving plan than that of re-establishing in such a way the august ties of universal society...?" (p. 63).

The particular expedition to which Degérando's memoir was directed was not a great success, nor did the *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme* long survive. Still, its members and its recommendations remained influential. Among those fieldworkers who might be said to have applied Degérando's recommendations in Africa are two authors of works on languages of Senegal: Jean Dard and Jacques-François Roger. Both were French civil servants who spent several years in Senegal, learned Wolof, and published accounts of the language in the 1820's.[4] Both argued against color prejudice and saw their linguistic analyses as evidence of Africans' fundamental rationality, potential for civilization, and membership in a common human fraternity. As Dard wrote in the introduction to his Wolof Grammar (1826: ii, vii):

> Not wishing to found either a particular people or a sect closed within narrow boundaries, the divine legislator has reproduced in human nature that universal fraternity which results from the identity of its origin, its forms and its destination.... As for [the blacks'] sensitivity, their mutual affection, their intellectual capacity, their humanity, these are at least as great and as true as among whites; and whoever has lived as observer among the Africans can affirm that, if nature has put some difference among men in the color of the skin, she has put none in the expression of those natural sentiments which she has placed in the heart of all beings belonging to the great family of humankind.[5]

Roger, also arguing against color prejudice, which he termed a "strange malady of the European spirit," a sort of "moral leprosy" (1828: 193, 194), similarly found in the structure of the Wolof language evidence of "that common nature, that fraternity" of all humanity, which is endowed with the same intelligence, sensibility, and mental "organization" (1829: 104-05).

Actually, in certain respects Roger finds the Wolof language more "rational" than French. In particular, Wolof's lack of a grammatical gender system based on sex distinctions is, in his view, a definite advantage. Wolof is not prevented from expressing maleness and femaleness when the referents of nouns actually have these

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[4] The connection with Degérando was not only ideological. Degérando was a member of the administrative council of the Société pour l'instruction élémentaire, sponsors of Dard's work in Senegal and of the publication of his Wolof Grammar. See Dard 1826: xxxi.

[5] My translation. For further discussion of Dard's work and his educational program for indigenous literacy in African languages, see Irvine 1993. With African-language literacy, Dard argued (1826: xi), Africans "could in very little time take their place among the civilized nations."

characteristics; it expresses sex differences lexically or periphrastically. So it avoids the arbitrariness and irrationality Roger finds in French, which makes all nouns masculine or feminine no matter what they refer to, "despite reason" (1829: 30). Like earlier *Idéologues* such as Destutt de Tracy (1817: 73, 170-71), Roger apparently thought languages would be better off without grammatical gender systems.

For these authors, then, the prevailing type of family imagery is that of the bond of brothers, a bond extending over the entire human species, Degérando's "universal society." The aim of linguistic research is to help bring Africans and other non-Europeans into a global public arena, where participation in discourse is accessible to all as fellow citizens, regardless of race, lineage, or gender (although, in contrast to the explicit discussion of race, social gender is seldom mentioned — perhaps because the image of fraternity had implied a social circle inhabited only by men anyway.)[6] In language, grammatical gender systems — i.e., sex-gender systems, the only type these authors recognize — are consequently of little interest, if not deplorable. And the only family mentioned as relevant to language is the common, human family. Genealogical relationships among languages, such as would imply long-term historical separation and structural exclusivity, are not the focus of attention.

One should not suppose, I think, that these scholars were simply ignorant of the rising schools of German and Danish philology that emphasized historical particulars and relationships. Rather, comparative philology did not appeal to them. And it was not yet clear whether its approach was even possible, outside the Indo-European and Semitic families. Thus Friedrich Schlegel, for example, distinguished between "organic" and "inorganic" languages, a contrast he equated with inflecting and noninflecting languages, thus between Indo-European and Semitic on the one hand, and the rest of the world's languages on the other. Only the organic languages had families (see Schlegel 1977 [1808]: 51-54).

For Schlegel the problem was that noninflecting languages lacked the grammatical structures on which comparison could be based. So, for reasons partly methodological but partly deriving from the languages' essential nature, they could not be grouped genealogically. For some other linguists the problem was the lack of written traditions that would fix a language's structures against uncontrolled variation and change. Descent, in such circumstances, was untraceable and virtually irrelevant. Even as late as 1866 Max Müller could write, "Genealogical classification ... applies properly only to ... languages in which grammatical growth has been arrested, through the influence of literary cultivation." (1866: 174; see also pp. 338-9.)

Actually, Max Müller attributes the supposed lack of language families in Africa not only to the lack of written traditions but also to a supposed lack of public meetings and, especially, lack of family life involving parental supervision of children. He quotes the South African missionary Robert Moffatt's description of Kalahari desert villagers:

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[6] Many recent works have commented on the gendered construction of Revolutionary discourse and the difficulties this presented for female participation in a supposedly universalistic public sphere. See, e.g., Landes 1988; Outram 1987; Fraser 1990.

> With the isolated villagers of the desert it is far otherwise; they have no such meetings; they are compelled to traverse the wilds, often to a great distance from their native village. On such occasions fathers and mothers, and all who can bear a burden, often set out for weeks at a time, and leave their children to the care of two or three infirm old people. The infant progeny, some of whom are beginning to lisp, while others can just master a whole sentence, and those still further advanced, romping and playing together, the children of nature, through their livelong day, *become habituated to a language of their own.* ...Thus, from this infant Babel, proceeds a dialect of a host of mongrel words and phrases, joined together without rule, and *in the course of one generation the entire character of the language is changed.* [Müller 1866: 64-65; emphasis original.]

"Such is the life of language in a state of nature," concludes Müller.

In contrast, then, to the *Idéologues'* view of human fraternity and the universal society, a later generation of linguists revised the imagery of family so as to exclude the possibility of African participation on an equal plane. For some authors, such as Max Müller, Africans simply had no language families as Europeans did, and perhaps not much in the way of domestic units or public fora either. For other authors, family imagery did apply to Africans but with an emphasis on hierarchies of sex and age, so that black Africans were described as if they were women or children in relation to white European adult men.

This view was perhaps most sweepingly applied to Africans by the Saint-Simonian sociologist and linguist Gustave d'Eichthal. Though claiming a connection with the ideals of the 1789 Revolution (d'Eichthal and Urbain 1839: 20), d'Eichthal argued that it was unrealistic to discuss the human species in the abstract, as earlier scholars had done, without full consideration of gender and generation. "Every individual is *male* or *female*, and successively *son* and *father* ... Thus ... it was necessary to locate, in the development of the human species, not an *individual* life, but a *family* life; it was necessary to say who, in this family, is the *male*, and who the *female*, who the *older generation*, and who the *newer generation*" (p. 8; emphasis original). In this "definitive constitution of the human family" — now cast in an explicitly gendered and developmental framework — the two races "form a *couple*, in which the white race represents the *male*, and the black race the *female*, and thus humanity reproduces the law of duality of the sexes which all organic beings obey" (pp. 14-15).

Feminized imagery for black Africans and their languages persisted in European writing throughout the colonial period if not later, as many recent works have noted. The same imagery also appears in linguistic descriptions, as when (for example) Hausa is described as "impregnated with Semitism" (La Grasserie 1898: 618). Though the idea that whole languages might be gendered, and enter into sexual relations with one another, was only a metaphor, some authors seem to have taken it rather seriously.[7] We shall see more of this metaphor later; for the moment, let us just note how altered is the imagined family of the "family romance" — altered in emphasizing an idealized (and hierarchically-ordered) reproductive couple, rather than a band of brothers.

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[7] Such views were consistent with the extreme organicism advocated by Schleicher (1869: 20-21), for whom "languages are organisms of nature ... subject to that series of phenomena which we embrace under the name of 'life'."

3. Comparative philology: Language families and racial hierarchy

Max Müller was one of the last scholars to exclude African languages from the arena of genealogical investigation. By the second half of the nineteenth century, most linguists discussing African languages were grouping them into families, and placing their analyses squarely within the traditions of German comparative philology. By this time, enough African languages had been documented that the possibility of systematically classifying them was not utterly unrealistic. And as Darwinian ideas of evolution entered linguistics (see, e.g., Schleicher 1869 [1863]; Bleek 1868; Haeckel 1868), philological efforts could be linked with evolutionary hierarchies. The linguists of this period, then, took a global view of language classification, grouping African languages into families which, in turn, could be linked to a worldwide genealogy of humankind.

At this time a crucial question, paralleling the contemporaneous debate on the monogenesis or polygenesis of the human species — i.e., whether the species had a single evolutionary origin or many — was whether the human acquisition of language came before or after racial differentiation. Some linguists, such as the Viennese scholar Friedrich Müller,[8] emphasized the priority of racial differentiation: Only within a race could one speak of language families. Since races could (in his view, following Haeckel) be distinguished by the form of the hair, Friedrich Müller's (1876-1888) four-volume survey of the world's language families is organized according to whether their speakers' hair is woolly, straight, curly, or tufted. Further racial distinctions apply within these groups, before language families — the narrowest level of a racially-defined classification — appear.

Friedrich Müller's classification, though widely cited, was vulnerable to criticism on its racial basis: Hair form might not be the crucial marker of racial difference; and European history itself showed that language was not inevitably linked with blood. Both criticisms were made by scholars in another, competing line of Africanist linguistic scholarship, more sympathetic to the monogenesist position. These scholars recognized larger language-family groupings than Müller had, and claimed to establish them on the basis of linguistic facts alone. Although the groupings were still accorded a racial interpretation, supposedly this was only subsequent to the linguistic analysis. Among these linguists, three who produced general works on languages of the African continent were most important: Wilhelm Bleek, Richard Lepsius, and Carl Meinhof. The work of Meinhof in particular continued to be influential in African linguistics until after World War II.

The object of identifying language families, as Lepsius (1863: 24) put it, was that

> from the relations of separate languages, or groups of languages, to one another, we may discover the original and more or less intimate affinity of the nations themselves... [Thus] will the chaos of the nations in [Africa], Asia, America, and Polynesia, be gradually resolved

[8] The Viennese scholar Friedrich Müller is not to be confused with F. Max Müller, cited earlier. F. Max, though of German origin, spent most of his professional life at Oxford, and is the better remembered of the two today.

into order, by the aid of linguistic science.[9]

To discover language-family relations Bleek and Lepsius paid particular attention to noun morphology, comparing gender systems based on sex-distinction with systems of noun classification based on other principles, and with languages lacking noun classification systems altogether.[10] Africa has languages of all three types.[11] (See Appendix 1 for a typology, locating languages referred to by Bleek within larger groupings recognized today.)

Figure 1 shows Bleek's classification, with its identification of a "sexual stock" or "sex-denoting family" as against other language families:

For these nineteenth-century scholars the essence of the language family, evidently, was how the language represented family in its grammatical structure. Lepsius (1880: xxvi) claimed that the basis of noun classification lay in "the discrimination and separation of the sexes and their ... moral ordering and opposition in marriage, whereupon the family is based." Thus domestic family and language family depended on the same psychological principles, namely, those underlying a people's management of sexual relations. Bleek (1869b: xvi) noted that languages that threw all humans into the same grammatical class (a "person" class), like the Bantu languages, or languages that had no classes at all, were associated with polygamy. Apparently, for Bleek and Lepsius, both Africans and their languages failed to identify the male-female monogamous couple as the proper basis of family life.[12]

Further consequences were to be found in religion and science. The speakers of languages lacking sex-gender systems and, instead, distinguishing a "person" or "human" class from non-human noun classes, were preoccupied with the hostility of the non-human environment (Lepsius 1880: xxii). For protection they looked to their deceased ancestors, whom they worshipped. Moreover, in a polygamous family, worship of the male ancestor merely extended the children's and grandchildren's customary attitude toward him beyond the grave, Bleek argued (1869b: xvi). In contrast,

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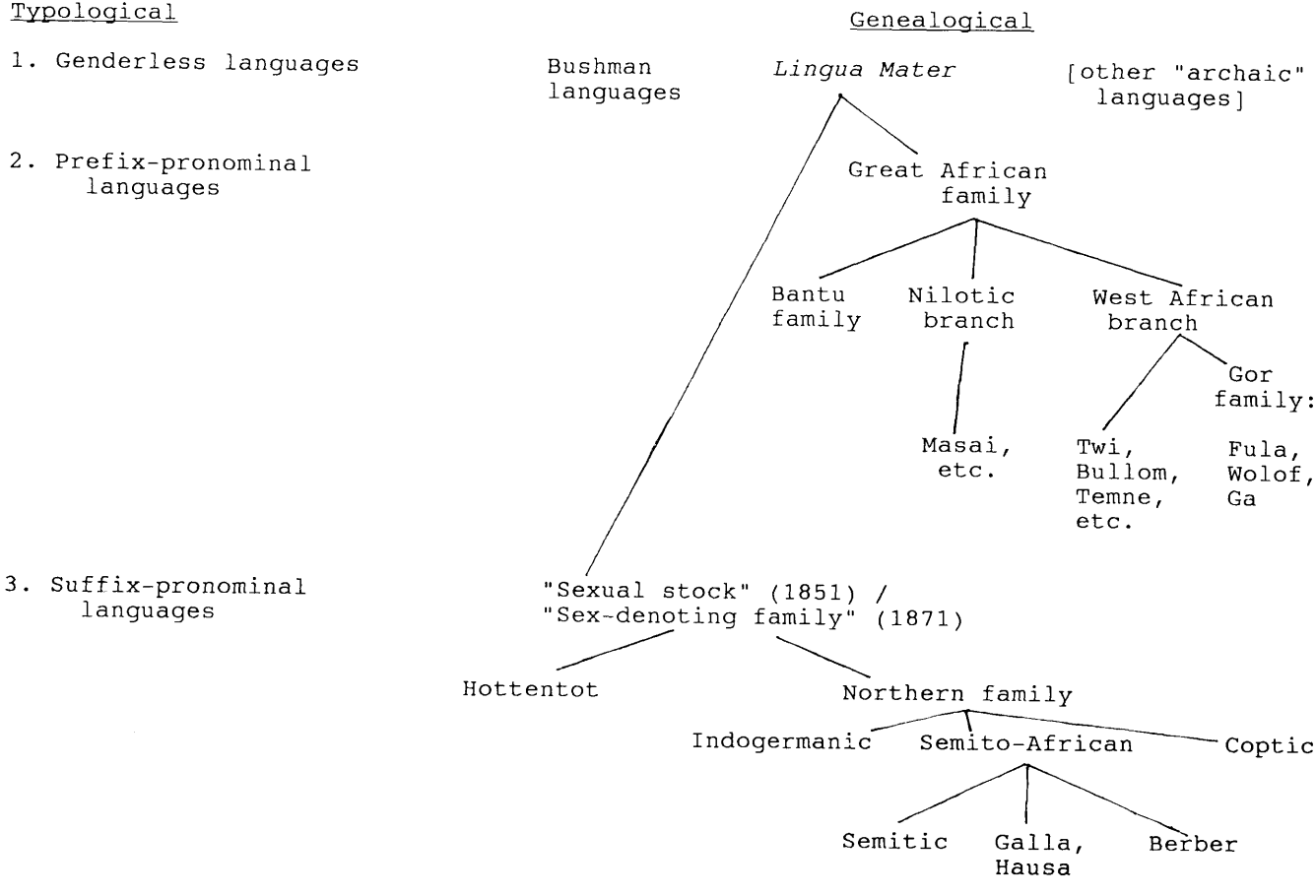
[9] In the full text of this passage, Lepsius discussed some specific aspects of the classification of African languages and nations before continuing, "In like manner will the chaos of the nations in Asia, ... [etc.]."

[10] Bleek's 1851 dissertation seems to have been the first work to move beyond the Bantu languages in developing any systematic, large-scale genealogical classification of African languages on structural criteria, rather than regional criteria or wild etymologizing.

[11] The classifications proposed by Bleek and by Lepsius are sometimes genealogical, sometimes typological. Since genealogical relationship depended above all on structural criteria, the difference between the two kinds of classification was not always obvious. Yet, both authors recognized that genealogical classifications ultimately depend on establishing sound correspondences as well. Bleek, in particular, takes some initial steps in this direction and toward reconstructing protolanguages (see Bleek 1862).

[12] See also La Grasserie (1904: 227), who argues that the languages of uncivilized societies lack sex-gender systems "precisely because of that extreme easiness of sexual relations" among their speakers. Under conditions of promiscuity, the "sexualist idea" would be of relatively little power of interest.

Fig. 1: Bleek's Classifications of African Languages (1851, 1855, 1862, 1871)



> The nations speaking Sex-denoting languages are distinguished by a higher poetical conception, by which human agency is transferred to other beings, and even to inanimate things, in consequence of which their personification takes place, forming the origin of almost all mythological legends. This faculty is not developed in the Kafir [i.e. Bantu-speakers'] mind, because not suggested by the forms of their language.[13] (— Bleek 1869b: ix-x)

Other scholars extended this argument to economics and politics, especially after 1880 — also the period in which the European countries extended their political domination of the African continent. For some linguists, the basis of grammatical gender lay in distinctions of force and domination: Masculine gender was associated with power, independence, and control, feminine gender with subordination, dependence, and passivity (see, e.g. Byrne 1892: 9; La Grasserie 1898: 613, 1904: 241, and discussion in Royen 1929). Languages lacking sex-gender systems — such as most sub-Saharan African languages — revealed, to these scholars, a mentality not yet able to recognize social hierarchy or assert independence.

For Carl Meinhof, writing in 1915 (1915: 146-48), sex-gender systems evolved from noun classification systems distinguishing humans from non-human referents. The change was due to the marriage practices of patriarchal warrior tribes, where the exchange of women for cattle resulted in transferring women from the "person" class to a "thing" class, the origin of the feminine gender. These warrior cattle-herders, speaking languages Meinhof classified as "Hamitic," were also (he supposed) the source of political hierarchy in Africa, through their putative conquest of darker-skinned peoples speaking "Sudanese" (or "Nigritic") languages.

Thus Meinhof interpreted African linguistic genealogies, as he constructed them, in terms of a construction of racial essences and racial history. Gender was not only a crucial aspect of grammatical structure revealing these essences, but it also entered in at the metaphorical level, contrasting "feminine" Sudanese with "masculine" Hamites. These metaphorically-gendered languages might even mate and produce offspring. Thus he described the Bantu language family, which has noun classes but not sex-based grammatical gender, as "a mixed language, such as I might say, [sprang] from a Hamitic father and a Nigritic mother" (Meinhof 1910-11: 164-65). Actually, Meinhof's text slides between suggesting metaphorical matings of languages and suggesting actual matings of their speakers, as giving rise to the mixed-language result.

The myth of the conquering Hamites proved an enduring representation of African history throughout the colonial period. Because Meinhof had earlier earned a considerable reputation for his painstaking work within Bantu linguistics, his 1912 book *Die Sprachen der Hamiten* lent to the Hamitic myth the weight of linguistic science. In that work, to which he appended an essay on Hamitic racial characteristics, he discussed at length the linguistic features that supposedly constituted the Hamitic language family. I say "supposedly" constituted, and I call the Hamitic hypothesis a myth, not only because of its racial, political, and gender fantasies but also because the linguistic features detailed by Meinhof do not in fact

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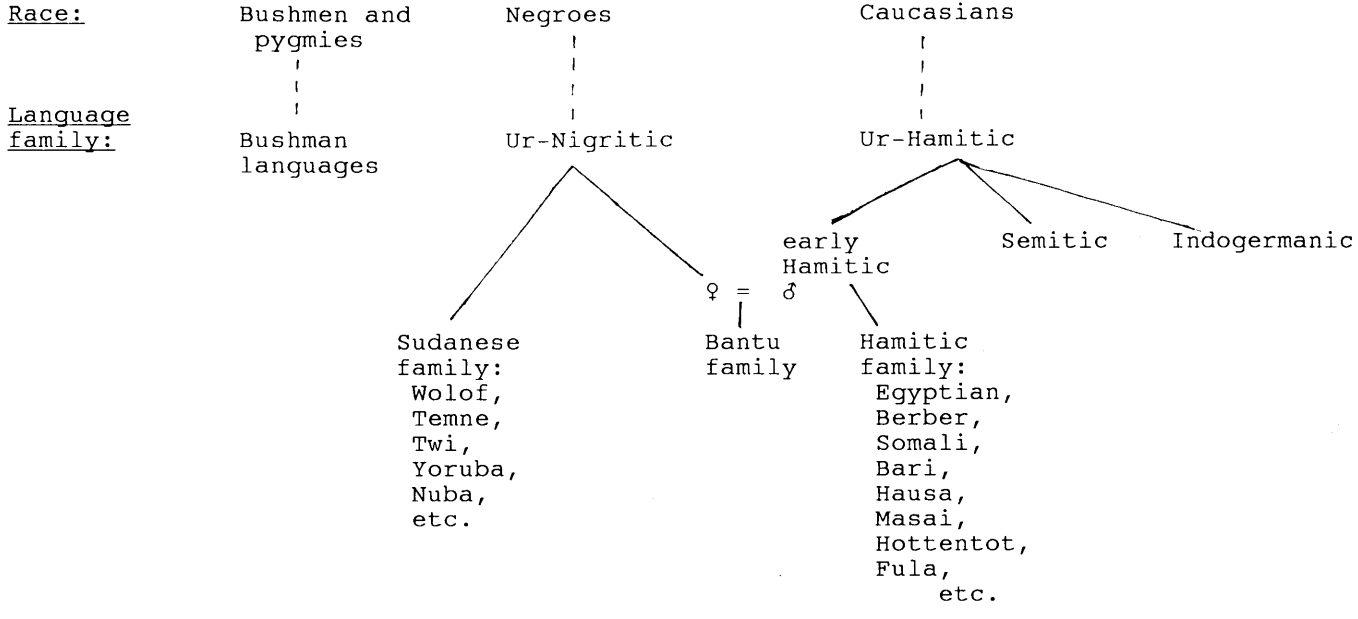
[13] Note that Bleek did not invent the notion that grammatical gender systems based on sex distinctions involved a superior and "poetic" imagination. This idea goes back to Humboldt, Grimm, and Herder. See Discussion in Royen (1929).

Fig. 2: Meinhof's Classification of African Languages (1910-11, 1912, 1915)



support his "Hamitic" grouping at all. Although there were linguists who pointed out this difficulty (such as Edward Sapir, reviewing Meinhof's book in 1913), and many linguists who disagreed with the assignment of particular languages to the "Hamitic" group, the hypothesis did not really die until attacked by Greenberg in the 1950's — if even then. (See Appendix 2 for Greenberg's [1963] classification.)

4. Conclusion

We have seen that early colonial representations of African languages, and of Africans via linguistic evidence, were thoroughly entangled with ideologies of family relationships and of gender, racial, and political hierarchies. The tangle is particularly evident where genealogical classifications are concerned. There, Europeans came to represent Africans in terms especially of the management of sexual and family relations. And those linguists who openly disagreed with the views of Bleek or Meinhof, such as William Dwight Whitney (1873) and Edward Sapir (1913), were not primarily interested in African languages, and so provided no specific alternatives.

Of course I do not mean to suggest that historical relationships among languages should not be investigated, or that the idiom of "family" and "descent" cannot be useful in linguistics. But, as Henry Hoenigswald (1990: 122) has pointed out, it is not the only idiom one might have chosen. It is neither inevitable nor exactly suited to the case, although it was once thought to be so.[14] Instead, like any metaphor it carries baggage, extra implications about languages and about their speakers - such as whether those speakers share a common interest, whether they are co-participants in some global community, and whether their participation is (as some of the authors discussed here would have it) inevitably differentiated according to some hierarchical principle.

Such connotations may be particularly powerful if, as Hunt's book suggests, family relations are a model invested with special emotional significance. It is not just "family" as the term might be defined analytically, but family romances — imaginative constructions based on ideologies of gender and politics — that have dominated the representation of linguistic relationships, and, thereby, the representation of discursive communities.

[14] See, for example, the following statement by E.A. Freeman (1877: 723), concerning the languages of "the great Aryan family": "... we cannot avoid ... the use of language which implies that the strictly family relation, the relation of community of blood, is at the root of the whole matter. We cannot help talking about the family and its branches, about parents, children, brothers, sisters, cousins. The nomenclature of natural kindred exactly fits the case; it fits it so exactly that no other nomenclature could enable us to set forth the case with any clearness."

Appendix 1: Outline Typology of Noun Morphology in African Languages

Languages having grammatical gender systems involving sex distinctions:

(Indo-European languages)
Semitic languages
Other Afro-Asiatic languages (e.g. Hausa, Somali, Galla, Berber)
Some Nilo-Saharan languages (e.g. Maasai, Bari)
Nama Khoi ("Hottentot")

Languages having noun classification systems based on other principles:

Atlantic languages: Fula, Wolof, Temne, Bullom, etc.
Voltaic languages
Bantu languages and some other Benue-Congo languages

Languages having vestigial or no noun classification systems:

Kwa languages (including Ga, Twi)
Yoruba (usually no longer included in Kwa)
Mande languages
Other Nilo-Saharan languages

Appendix 2: Greenberg's Classification of African Languages (1963)

(Some portions of this classification have been questioned and revised, but most of the well-accepted changes involve internal subgroupings of the four major language families. Languages referred to in this paper are noted below:)

I. Khoisan: includes Khoi ("Hottentot") languages and "Bushman" languages

II. Nilo-Saharan: includes Maasai, Nuba languages, Bari, etc.

III. Congo-Kordofanian: the main branch (Niger-Congo) includes:

A. Atlantic: includes Fula, Wolof, Temne, Bullom, etc.
B. Mande
C. Voltaic
D. Kwa: includes Twi, Ga, etc., and Yoruba (later excluded)
E. Benue-Congo: includes Bantu languages
F. Adamawa-Eastern

IV. Afro-Asiatic

A. Semitic
B. Egyptian
C. Berber
D. Cushitic: includes Somali, Galla, etc.
E. Chadic: includes Hausa

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