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## **God's Name Yahweh Elohim and the Unification of Israel: A Challenge to Africans and African Americans**

### **I. Introduction**

Historical and archaeological data attest that African civilization in antiquity had reached great heights of development. This is in sharp contrast to what it is today. No simple explanation is adequate to explain how great civilizations like those of Zimbabwe and Kush fell. Unlike ancient Near Eastern civilizations, not many written records or artifacts are available to reveal decisively the hidden past and identity of the people who dwelt in these places. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the Great Zimbabwe, which means "Stone Dwelling," is a large area of stone buildings covering 60 acres of land. It is the largest of many similar ruins scattered in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. It dates from c. 800 C. E. although the site had been occupied before that. In the eleventh to the fifteenth century it was the center of trade, exchanging goods with countries such as China at the shores of the Indian Ocean. The Zimbabwe bird carved in soapstone and some copper coins have been excavated at the ruins. What is remarkable of the building skills is that the entire complex is still intact yet built without mortar.<sup>1</sup>

As excavations have revealed, Meroe, the capital of ancient Cush, located on the east bank of the Nile,

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<sup>1</sup>*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1987 ed., s. v. "Zimbabwe."

flourished in what is now Sudan. It was the administrative center of Cush beginning about 750 B.C.E. It was a wide and prosperous city, with streets and buildings revealing a very populous metropolis with an advanced state of industrial and artistic development. Inscriptions in hieroglyphics (for royal and religious records) and demotic or linear (for general records) show some connections with Egypt. That it was not an Egyptian language is attested by the fact that the grammar and language spoken at Meroe are still not fully deciphered. Some scholars associate the language with that spoken in Nubia or Southern Sudan.<sup>2</sup>

The question still remains: was this a high civilization created by Black Africans, or was it a culture produced by outside influences? This question has compelled African and African-American scholars to focus their attention on trying to reconstruct Africa's historical past. While some of their findings have remained inconclusive and controversial, some appreciable foundation for the restoration of Black antiquity has been laid.<sup>3</sup>

While the foregoing is taking place, some white scholars, consciously or unconsciously, are following the racial tradition of slave owners. They have attributed the decline of African civilization (which is concomitant with Africa's general low status among the nations of the world) to a divine curse applied on their progenitors due to sin.<sup>4</sup> The curse made them not only black, but also perpetual servants of the other races.

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<sup>2</sup>*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1987 ed., s. v. "Meroe."

<sup>3</sup>See the article by Charles B. Copher, "The Blacks in the Old Testament," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain H. Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 147-164.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 147-149.

At any rate, the issue confronting Africans and African Americans today is no longer how the other races regard them. Rather, it is with the low self-esteem that Blacks continue to view themselves. This low self-esteem is concomitant with the craving by some, if not most, to be like the other races, particularly those of Caucasian origin. Inspired by megalomaniac delusions, some Blacks believe that they have become white by virtue of interracial marriages.

In this article I intend to discuss three issues. First, I will demonstrate the significant way the Israelites used the dynamics of the name to achieve unity among the many Semitic tribes. Then I will turn to the Africans of antiquity to illustrate how they too attached great importance to the names they gave their children. I will conclude by suggesting how modern Africans and African Americans might emulate the Israelites and Africans by adopting names which promote the stability of the family and community, generate ethnic identity, and inspire personal self-esteem.

## **II. The Unifying Influence of the Divine Names in Ancient Israel**

The Israelites adopted names which aided in their emergence from a despicable status of slavery in Egypt, to that of a nation replete with dignity and self-esteem. It is solely by their own self- upliftment that they became respected by other nations. Contrary to their characterization as Jacob's progeny, the twelve Hebrew tribes were diverse in their ethnic origins, were divergent in their political aspirations and were different in their religious heritage.<sup>5</sup> They had a history of inter-

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<sup>5</sup>Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 72.

mittent bellicosity with each other, sometimes over turf and water for their livestock (cf. Genesis 13:7-12). There are instances when some tribes failed to send help to their fellow tribes. Normally, however, several tribes would unite to do battle with an adversary. In Judges 5:16-23, the tribes of Reuben, Gilead, Asher, and Meroz were condemned for failing to join a tribal coalition led by Deborah against Jabin, the king of the Canaanites (Judges 5:14-15a; 1 Samuel 10:26-27, 11:6-7; cf. Genesis 14:13-16).

The Israelites were forced by political expedience to adopt names which helped them to forge a tight tribal confederation. The two key names which they employed as a banner of unity for the twelve tribes of Israel are Yahweh (<sup>ʾ</sup>Ēlōhîm) and Yiśrāʾēl. The imperative for moving toward a tighter tribal confederation was to counter the powerful military threat posed by the Philistines, a formidable enemy equipped with horses, chariots, and iron weapons. Unlike the Canaanite city states which the Israelites could defeat individually, the Philistines were united behind the command of their king. The story of David and Goliath is told vividly to illustrate the precariousness of the Israelite military state compared to that of the Philistines. The Israelites, like David the young shepherd boy, were armed simply with a catapult, were facing the Philistines who, like Goliath, the strong giant, were heavily armed with fierce iron spears, and protected by heavy iron shields (1 Samuel 17:24-47).<sup>6</sup> It is the relentless menace and invincibility

<sup>6</sup>That we may be dealing with an allegory here is implicit in the legendary nature of the story. The question of who killed Goliath is very polemical because three sources do not agree. 1 Sam. 17:1-18:5 attributes the feat to the shepherd boy David. 2 Sam. 21:19, on the other hand, mentions ʾĒlhānān as being Goliath's slayer. In 1 Chron. 20:5, the conflicting sources were harmonized by crediting ʾĒlhānān with the slaying of Laḥmu, the brother of Goliath.

of the Philistines which compelled the Israelite tribes to strive for greater unity under the monarchy.<sup>7</sup> To forge this unity, the religio-political elite devised a strategy. They utilized the dynamics of names.

The search for a common name was concomitant with the search for a national deity. A name for the national deity was necessitated by the fact that the Israelites, before the introduction of the monarchy, appear to have been polytheistic. They believed in the *ʾēlōhê hāʾābôt*, "the gods of the(ir) ancestors." Their loyalty to these deities was so firmly entrenched that even the dramatic introduction of Yahwism by Moses failed to dislodge them from their fixed religio-traditional mooring. The Israelites accepted Yahweh only when the *ʾēlōhîm* of their ancestors were coalesced with Yahweh. Two texts confirm this point. In Joshua 24, Joshua related what Yahweh had done to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. He convinced them to abandon the gods which their fathers worshipped beyond the Euphrates, in Egypt and the gods of Canaanites (Joshua 24:15). He said nothing to them about abandoning the *ʾēlōhê hāʾābôt*, "the gods of the progenitors." In response to Joshua, who vowed to serve Yahweh, the Israelites responded that they too would serve Yahweh simply because he was their *ʾēlōhîm*, "gods." In 1 Kings 18:36-40 Elijah called to Yahweh, the *ʾēlōhîm* of Abraham, (the *ʾēlōhîm*) of Isaac, and (the *ʾēlōhîm*) of Jacob. When the people of Israel saw what

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<sup>7</sup>The introduction of the monarchy is problematic due to a conflict of sources. See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 189-190, for a discussion and suggestions for a solution. At any rate, a demand for a king signalled that the tribes of Israel were moving beyond a confederation based on language, ethnic and cultural identity to a more concrete national solidarity (1 Sam. 8:4-5).

Yahweh had done to the sacrifice, they responded: *yahweh hû hâ'ëlôhîm*, "Yahweh is indeed the gods." I find this to be the most cogent evidence that the Israelites were basically polytheistic albeit they worshipped Yahweh as the god who was the coalescence of their gods.

The divine name Yahweh *Ëlôhîm* was, therefore, a compromise appellation which the Israelite religious leaders devised in order to facilitate the adoption of Yahweh by all the tribes. The identification of Yahweh with the individual *'ëlôhê hâ'âbôt* was, therefore, a means of uniting all the ethnic groups of Israel. Prior to this point, the tribes were divided by their ethnic origin and by their belief in their respective *'ëlôhê hâ'âbôt*. Cross, following A. Alt, points out that "The gods of the fathers were *paidogōgoi* to the god Yahweh who later took their place."<sup>8</sup> In this way, Yahweh and the *'ëlôhîm* became synonymous because they were, thenceforth, referring to the same god(s) in a collective sense. In so doing, it did not make any difference whether the Israelites worshipped Yahweh or revered their patron deities because Yahweh and the *'ëlôhê hâ'âbôt* had been fused. The syncretistic religion which resulted from this fusion is, according to my analysis, monotheistic polytheism. It was a monotheism in that the Israelites believed in Yahweh. It was a polytheism in that the Israelite tribes remained anchored in the gods of their progenitors. Each tribe appears to have continued to venerate its patron deity or deities.

The process by which Yahweh was identified with the gods of the ancestors is more discernible in the call of Moses at Mount Sinai. An analysis of Exodus

<sup>8</sup>Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973), 6.

3:13-15 reveals the intricate process by which Yahweh and the *elohim* were merged.

13. hinnēh bā 'el-bēnē yisrā'ēl wē'āmartî lāhem 'ēlōhē 'ābōtēkem<sup>9</sup> šēlāhanî 'ālēkem, wē'āmērû-lî mah šēmō mah 'ōmār 'ālēhem. 14. wayyōmer 'ēlōhîm 'ehmōšeh, 'ehyeh 'āšer 'ehyeh. wayyōmer koh tō'mar libnē yisrā'ēl, 'ehyeh šēlāhanî 'ālēkem. 15. wayyōmer 'ōd 'ēlōhîm, 'el-mōšeh, kōh-tōmar 'el-bēnē yisrā'ēl, yhw h 'ēlōhē 'ābōtēkem 'ēlōhē 'abrāhām, 'ēlōhē yišhāq wē'lōhē ya'āqōb šēlāhanî 'ālēkem, zeh-šēmî lē 'ōlām wēzeh zikrî lēdōr dōr.

13. Suppose I go to the children of Israel and I say to them, "The Gods of Your Fathers has sent me to you, and they say, what is his name, what shall I say to them?" 14. And 'Ēlōhîm said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Thus you will say to the children of Israel, 'Ehyeh has sent me to you." 15. And 'Ēlōhîm said again to Moses, "Thus you will say to the children of Israel, "Yahweh, the gods of your progenitors, the gods of Abraham, the gods of Isaac and the gods of Jacob, has sent me to you, and this is my name forever and this is the way I should be remembered to every generation.

In v. 13, Yahweh was coalesced with the individual patron deities of the tribes of Israel resulting in one God known by the epithet 'ēlōhē hā'ābōt.<sup>10</sup> Yahweh,

<sup>9</sup>Italics identify the various names of God.

<sup>10</sup>Originally the 'ēlōhē hā'ābōt, referred to in v. 13, were individual deities who were known by specific individual names. Abraham's patron deity was *māgēn 'abrāhām*, "The Shield of Abraham" (Gen. 15:1). Isaac, on the other hand, venerated *paḥad yišhāq*, "The Fear (Kinsman?) of Isaac" (Gen. 31:42,53). Jacob's patron deity was 'ābū ya'āqōb, "The Bull of Jacob" (Gen. 49:24; Ps. 132:2, 5; Isa 49:26, 60:16). In the quest for unity, these deities were later referred to as the 'ēlōhē hā'ābōt and were identified with Yahweh resulting in the compound name, Yahweh 'Ēlōhîm or Yahweh 'ēlōhē yisrā'ēl.

the new deity who was being introduced by Moses, is purported to be the same divinity worshipped by the progenitors as *ʾēlōhê hāʾăbôt*. This argument is corroborated by the fact that the verb *šlh* and the noun *šēmô*<sup>11</sup> are in the singular because the name phrase, *ʾēlōhê hāʾăbôt*, was, in this case, used as a divine compound name of the unifying deity, Yahweh.

There is another interesting clue to the interpretation of God's name. It is found in Yahweh's explanation to Moses that speaking with him was *ʾehyeh ʾăšer ʾehyeh* (I am who I am) (v. 14). This entire phrase, *ʾehyeh ʾăšer ʾehyeh*, is given as Yahweh's epithet. Like all the other long divine epithets of Yahweh, *ʾehyeh ʾăšer ʾehyeh* could be shortened simply to *ʾehyeh*. This is exactly what Yahweh told Moses: *ʾehyeh šəlahanî alekem*, "Ehyeh has sent me to you."<sup>12</sup> This example provides the strongest hint on how the compound name Yahweh *ʾĒlōhîm* should be interpreted.

It appears to me that, originally, the compound name Yahweh Elohim emanated from *yahweh ʾēlōhê hāʾăbôt*. This long name was later shortened to either Yahweh, *ʾĒlōhîm*, or to a simpler compound, Yahweh *ʾĒlōhîm*. In v. 15, the name Yahweh was prefixed to the divine epithet *ʾēlōhê hāʾăbôt*, resulting in a longer compound divine name, *yhwh ʾēlōhê ʾăbôtekem ʾēlōhê ʾabrāhām, ʾēlōhê yišḥāq wəʾlōhê yaʾăqôb*.<sup>13</sup> It is this deity who was sending Moses to speak to Pharaoh. The entire long phrase was to be regarded as Yahweh's name

<sup>11</sup>The Hebrew term is *šēm*, "name," which here has the masculine suffix, third person singular.

<sup>12</sup>There is no question that the author of this passage used paranomasia here, playing on the divine name Yahweh and the verb *hāyāh*.

<sup>13</sup>"Yahweh, the gods of Abraham, the gods of Isaac and the gods of Jacob."



because Yahweh even stressed that *zeh-šēmî lě'ôlām*, "this is to be my name forever," *wězeh zikrî lědôr dôr* "and this is the way I should be remembered to every generation" (Exod 3:15). What was to be remembered was that Yahweh was the *ělōhê hā'ăbôt* worshipped from the time of Abraham.

The interchange between Yahweh and Elohim is not surprising. It is common in the Old Testament, as it was and still is in Africa, for long names to be shortened by simply using one of the compound elements. This means the *ělōhê hā'ăbôt* was shortened to *ělōhîm*. When this epithet was used together with Yahweh, the result was that either Yahweh, the proper name of God, or *ělōhîm*, the generic construct noun in the compound title *ělōhê hā'ăbôt*, could be used to refer to God.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Israelite tribes venerated tribal patron deities also explains why the Israelites would ask Moses the question *mah šēmô*, "What is his name?" The question was apt because the Israelites wanted to identify which of the *ělōhê hā'ăbôt* had sent him.<sup>15</sup>

The Priestly account identifies Yahweh with the *ělōhîm* in a similar method, albeit using different names for the deity of the progenitors. P's starting point is that Yahweh originally was worshipped by Israel's ancestors as *ěl šadday*. This is made clear in Exodus

<sup>14</sup>Cross in *Canaanite Myth*, 89, alludes to the same idea in his comment on the complex development of Israel's cultic themes. In the pre-Yahwistic phase of the religion of the patriarchs, Cross discerned both historical and mythic features. He noticed the cult of the Divine Kinsman, the cult of the Canaanite *ěl*, the Divine Patriarch, and several others.

<sup>15</sup>Raymond Abba, "The Divine Name Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961): 323, who argues that the interrogative pronoun *mah* refers to quality and not to the name as such. Normally, he added, the interrogative relating to names would be *mî*, as in Judg. 13:17.

6:1-2:

wayyēdabbēr 'ēlōhîm 'el-môšeh wayyōmer 'ēlāw 'ānî  
yahweh. wā'ērā 'el-abrāhām el-yiṣṣāq wē'el-ya'āqōb  
bē 'el šaddāy ūšēmî yhw h lō' nôdātî lāhem.

And 'Ēlōhîm spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.'

The Priestly divergent explanation of how the 'ēlōhê hā'ābôt came to be called Yahweh is not surprising. By the period during which the Priestly School was writing, Yahweh was already known as 'ēlōhê hā'ābôt. In other words, the usage of the epithet 'Ēlōhîm with reference to God had become common practice. Thus P simply uses 'Ēlōhîm, the shortened form of Yahweh's epithet, 'ēlōhê hā'ābôt. Retrojecting a post-exilic monotheistic religion to the patriarchs, P discloses that formerly the same 'ēlōhê hā'ābôt or simply, 'Ēlōhîm, was known as El Shaddai. By finding a formula which would provide the 'ēlōhê hā'ābôt with a collective or unifying appellation, Israel's religion became a vehicle for forging strong unity among the tribes.

Consistent with the introduction of Yahweh was the tribal adoption of the unifying name, Israel. The tribes adopted the name of Jacob as their confederate name. Just as Jacob had usurped his brother's birth-right, the Israelites aspired to replace the Canaanites in the land of Canaan. At all events, to further consolidate their unity, they adopted a common creed which each Israelite was required to recite at the annual thanksgiving harvest ceremony held at a central sanctuary. G. von Rad isolated Deuteronomy 26:5b-9 as the earliest *credo* which identified Jacob as the unify-

ing patriarch for all the tribes.<sup>16</sup> An examination of this test shows that it was very carefully crafted to unite the individual with the past community and also with the present and future community.

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. 7. Then we cried to *Yahweh the God of our fathers*, and *Yahweh* heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; 8. and *Yahweh* brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; 9. and he brought us into this land flowing with milk and honey. 10. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O *Yahweh*, has given me.

There are several aspects of this creed which are very significant. The reciter begins by telling his own personal story which was based on the ordeals of his unifying patriarch, Jacob. Every individual in Israel adopted Jacob's history which was characterized by struggles, perseverance, and determination, factors which made him become the most admired and model patriarch. Recapitulation of Jacob's story was greatly encouraged because it was analogous to every person's vicissitudes in life.

By reciting this creed, an individual was compelled to view self as part of a larger community comprising the ancestors and the living. It is for this reason that the reciter quickly assumed a corporate per-

<sup>16</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 1-4.

sonality. One saw self as a member of the historical community. Thus, in v. 5b, the worshiper begins by telling a personal story: "A wandering Aramean was *My father . . .*," but quickly in v.6, the reciter sees self as a member of the larger community: "The Egyptians treated *us* harshly . . ." By this creed, the Israelite leadership intended to influence the Israelite worshipers to realize that they, as a people, had a common heritage, a common history, and a common destiny. In concluding the creed, however, each reciter again reverts to one's respective individuality although remaining a member of the close knit community of the living and the dead. The creed, accordingly, concludes with the words: "Now I present the first of the fruit of the ground which thou, O Yahweh, has given me." It is after traversing one's own personal history that one would be able to find a place in the histories of others and be able to blend well with other members of the community. It is when one identifies self firmly with one's community that God would accept the gift presented at the divine altar.<sup>17</sup> The form of this creed is reminiscent of the African concept of the individual in the community of the living and the living dead. It is summed up in the African affirmation: "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am."

Another significant aspect of the creed is the use of the unifying name, Yahweh. In v. 7, the reciter says that the Israelites cried to *yahweh ʿēlōhê hāʾbôt*, "Yahweh, the gods of our forebears," using here Yahweh's longer and comprehensive appellation. But subsequently, the reciter used the abbreviated name,

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Jesus' statement about giving alms after reconciliation (Matt. 5:23).

Yahweh, in vv. 8 and 10. That Yahweh was an element of a longer name, *yahweh ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt*, is evidenced by its regular usage in combination with *ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt* or *ʿĒlōhîm*, the shortened form of *ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt*. Whenever the Israelites were warned to discard the other gods, they were entreated to worship "Yahweh, the god(s) of the forebears." The link between God of the present and the gods of the past was to be maintained to facilitate Israel's acceptance of Yahweh.

Now that the Israelites had adopted Yahweh *ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt* as the unifying appellation of their God, and Jacob/Israel as their unifying patriarch, they then sought to establish one central shrine to which they collectively would make an annual pilgrimage.<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason that Jerusalem, a neutral city which formerly belonged to the Jebussites, was seized and made the capital city of the united Israel. The twelve tribes were now truly united under one monarchy. They were answering to one name, Israel. They now had one deity, Yahweh, whom they worshipped in one central sanctuary, Jerusalem. It is clear that this unity was achieved by the Israelites' ability to utilize the dynamics of the names Israel, Yahweh and *ʿĒlōhîm*, the shortened name of the epithet *ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt*.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to realize that Africans, like the Israelites, used

<sup>18</sup>The Josianic reforms which contributed toward the centralization of worship in Jerusalem were introduced to consolidate unity among the tribes of Israel. The condemnation of Jeroboam for making and placing two bulls, one at Bethel and another at Dan, was not so much because he reintroduced syncretism, but because he had undergirded the schism between the North and the South by religious means. Once the Israelites reverted to ancient patron deities, it would be very difficult to reunite them by any other means.

<sup>19</sup>*ʿēlōhē hāʾābôt* being a shortened form of the long name *ʿēlōhē ʾabrāhām, ʿēlōhē yiṣḥāq wēʾlōhē yaʿāqōb*.

names longer and shorter in form to achieve similar goals.

### **III. The Name in Traditional Africa**

The name played a significant role to Africans. It helped to stabilize the family, clan, and also strengthened tribal ties.<sup>20</sup> Africans believed that a name could shape a person's character and future behavior. It distinguished a person from other people and underscored their uniqueness. It acted as a benediction, a wish, a motto and a blessing to the bearer. The calling of a name reactivated its potency continuously to influence a person's character and reformulate one's personality.

A name also served as a historical record of an episode or event which had happened in the past or was transpiring at the time of the child's birth. The event could be a natural phenomenon such as famine, an epidemic, or it could be war, some achievement, failure or death.<sup>21</sup> Several children born in the year of the arrival of the white people in the land of Zimbabwe were given names such as Mangiza.<sup>22</sup> Those who were displaced by war or colonialism, and were always on the move in search of work, land or food, were given names such as Mbuwayesango, "the provision for the

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<sup>20</sup>The past tense is used because Africans are fast abandoning their customs and adopting western culture. Traditional Africans, i.e., those who resist change and continue to maintain their traditional heritage of ancient times, on the other hand, are still attaching great significance to their traditional names.

<sup>21</sup>An example would be Naomi in Ruth 1:20-21 who changed her name to Mara; "bitter," after the deaths of her husband and two sons.

<sup>22</sup>This is a Ndaus name which means, "the English (people)." The Ndaus are a tribal component of the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

way." Similarly, if a person felt a transformation or a rebirth of personality, either by attending school or by conversion to Christianity, he/she adopted a new name to commemorate that special event. It is for these reasons that many Africans bear two names: the traditional African birth name and the school or baptismal name.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the African names were sentence names either in the imperative or in the affirmative mood.<sup>24</sup> If the family was experiencing a predicament which was testing their faith in God, or was depleting their hope for the future, they would give a baby born at that time of emotional crisis a name which either acknowledged the crisis, or constantly encouraged them to keep up hope. An example of such a name is Bekitemba, "Place hope, faith, or trust (in God)." This name is normally shortened by using only the suffix, Temba, meaning "Hope," "Trust," "Faith," or by using only the prefix, Beki, which means "Put" or "Place" (your hope or faith in God).

Names were also inherited to act as living memorials of deceased relatives. Death, to Africans, separated people only from their physical communion: it did not prevent the spiritual presence of the deceased among the living.<sup>25</sup> The baby inheriting the name of

<sup>23</sup>Jesus renamed his disciples when they agreed to follow him. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus gave Simon another name, Peter (Gk. *Petros*, "rock") and promised that "upon this rock [Gk. *petra*], he would build the church."

<sup>24</sup>The Israelites used similar names, for example, Yišmā'ēl is a sentence name meaning "Yahweh hears" or "Let Yahweh hear;" Yēhōšāpāt means "Yahweh judges" or "Let Yahweh judge." Dan, on the other hand, is in the imperative mood and should be rendered, "Judge (O God)" as in Dan'el.

<sup>25</sup>John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 32-34.

the deceased person would be regarded as the reincarnation of the dead relative. This child would be treated with respect because he/she was the physiognomy of the deceased person by the process of *pars pro toto*.<sup>26</sup> The respect accorded to the child influenced his stability, integrity and leadership development. A child would ultimately grasp the family's expectations of him as he constantly hears of the good things or valorous deeds of his namesake. This was one of the methods by which Africans developed leadership in the children. They realized that leaders are made, not born.

Because of its importance, a name was given at a naming ceremony attended by relatives and friends (cf. Ruth 3:17). No person gave him/herself a name. A name given without a ritual ceremony would miss one very important ingredient: the blessings of the elders and of the ancestral spirits.<sup>27</sup> The ancestors acted as the guardians of the person from childhood to death. They also protected the people for as long as they observed the accepted customs and norms of the community.

While different names could not reveal blood con-

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<sup>26</sup>Henri Frankfort, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946), 12. See also T. J. Mafico, "The Ancient View of the Universe," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 54 (March 1986): 6. This is the concept whereby an aspect of a person, e.g., hair, finger nails, blood, shadow, or clothing, would take on the actual physiognomy of its owner. It is not regarded as representing the owner, but it becomes the actual owner. By destroying it, one destroys the actual person who owns the elements. This explains why the people of the ancient Near East always craved for an heir. An heir would perpetuate the life of the parent by the concept of *pars pro toto*.

<sup>27</sup>Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Random House, 1965), 144-145, reveals that these same blessings were bestowed upon the child at the rite of circumcision, a very elaborate ceremony.



nections, African clans identified with animals which were regarded as their totems. There are those who belong to the zebra, elephant, cow, etc. They always use the name of the animal to which the clan belongs as their second or third name. For example, Temba Mafico is in actual fact, Temba Mhlanga or Temba Mafico is the father's name and Mhlanga, meaning zebra, was the clan's unifying name. All the people who belong to the zebra (Mhlanga or Dube) would regard themselves as related. The older generation would regard the younger ones as their children and the younger would respect the older as their parents. People of the same totem would not marry lest they commit incest. A person could marry from the baboon, cow, buffalo, or lion clans. Should accidents happen, whereby people fell in love before they noticed that they were related by belonging to the same totem, both family parties would meet and by a ritual ceremony of breaking the ties, they annulled the totem connection.<sup>28</sup> Now that Africans are using surnames rather than totems, it has become hard to realize totem relationships instantly. However, following the normal greeting, Africans usually ask: "Who are you? What is your totem? Who is your father or mother? And so on." By the time the long greeting process is completed, names will have revealed close or remote relationships among people who had originally met as strangers.

The names, therefore, tied members of the family, clan, and tribe together. These connections helped

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<sup>28</sup>The actual breaking of the relationship was very simple. The boy and the girl were instructed to hold each end of a piece of grass and pull until it snapped. Ritually this annulled the totem relationship. The children born by them would be healthy and normal; otherwise, they would be retarded.

create close community ties. For example, the whole family felt blessed if one of their members achieved success, status, or honor. In conversations, a person of low social status would feel honored when asked, "Are you the brother of so and so, the doctor?" If no one asks, he would find a way of raising his status by pointing out that he was related to the prominent so and so. Since no person lived outside the community in Africa, the relatives felt honored by a fellow member's success story. By the same token, people were normally thanked, not by their family names, but by their totems. This was done to honor, not only the individual, but also the whole clan and family which nurtured the individual.

The name also acted as a means of social control. A person avoided bringing shame on the family name, clan, or tribe. If Vuso Tengende Muyambo did something wrong far away from home, and out of the reach of relatives, people would be able to retrace and locate his relatives by the totem and relate to them the unbecoming behavior of their kinsman. This news would bring shame on the name of the entire family.<sup>29</sup>

#### **IV. The Implication of the Name for Blacks**

The problem in modern Africa is that Blacks are now more divided than ever before. Divisive factors are educational achievements, economic advancements, and religion, i.e., whether one is Christian or African Traditional. In America Blacks were (and, in a way still

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. 2 Sam 13:1-2, 10-14, Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar. This wanton act brought shame on the name of Israel. Prov. 22:1 states: "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches . . ." and in Eccl. 7:1 is written, "A good name is better than precious ointment . . ."

are) divided by an element of color (those who are light looking down on those who are black), and ethnic origin, i.e., whether one is continental African or African American. Then, of course, education and economic factors also compound the divisive factors. Can Blacks, in general, be united under a name? Efforts to achieve this goal are being made in Africa. African leaders have been seeking national and continental unity by the formation of the Organization for African Unity.<sup>30</sup> To remind African nations that they have a common destiny, many African nations share the same African anthem which reads:

Lord bless Africa,  
let its name be respected  
Listen to our prayers  
Lord, bless us, we, its children  
Come Spirit, the Holy Spirit  
And bless us, we, its family.

The difficulty of uniting Africans, and Blacks in general, may be attributed to the fact that Black unity is being built on a name whose history, meaning, and significance are not fully articulated and appreciated by the people. Blacks need a statement on the significance of the name African or African American. Without a clear meaning and significance, a name on its own cannot foster Black identity, inspire pride, and promote national unity. A name which will foster Black unity is a name which is corroborated with a rich and glorious history. A unifying name must be like a motto to which individuals will aspire, and must sound like a

<sup>30</sup>For that reason Zimbabwe changed what, in colonial Rhodesia, was Cecil Square to Africa Unity Square and this is right in the heart of Harare.

benediction which inspires hope for Blacks in the face of all forms of adversity.

The Africans also need a center of pilgrimage. The Israelites made Jerusalem their center of annual pilgrimage and praise to Yahweh. The Moslems have Mecca. Many African nations have ancient national shrines. Could one of these be so modelled as to become the center for continental unity? African Americans could, for instance, develop the Martin Luther King Center into a center of pilgrimage for all Blacks, irrespective of national origin.

Like the Israelites, Blacks need to develop a creed which connects them with the continental Africans. Blacks (especially of African origin) should proudly affirm one Africa, one identity and one God, the god of the forebears. It is when this is done that Africans and African Americans will become a united people with a common purpose and destiny. It is at this point that Africans and African Americans will share with each other stories of their past at church, in homes, at tea parties, and at postprandial gatherings. It is at this point that Blacks will be able to synchronize their theologies to develop a common Black theological stance.

It is becoming more and more apparent that western white theology is not satisfying Black aspiration. Africans and Europeans have major differences in their cosmological perspectives and conceptions. For example, western theologians spend an undue amount of time abstractly arguing on who God is. Africans know that God is inscrutable and unfathomable. Therefore, they regard efforts to identify and to define the nature of God as engaging in an exercise of gross futility. For that reason, Africans' search for metaphysical reality

begins with and ends with God. For life to have meaning, Africans affirm God, whatever image of God one may portray.

That Blacks are seriously searching for identity is poignantly clear. Some identify with Jews even though no Jew has ever desired to be African or to be a member of any other race, for that matter. Some Blacks are embracing Islam, but no Arabs, even among those in Egypt (Africa), have ever considered changing their religio-culture to any aspect that is traditional African. Some are identifying with whites to acquire honorary white status as upgraded Blacks, but white Americans have distanced themselves even from African Americans who are the result of interracial marriages with whites.

### **V. Conclusion**

This discussion should help African Americans and continental Africans realize that they share a common history and traditional heritage. They must struggle together for the restoration of their Black heritage and dignity. Until Africa regains its past glory, dignity, and religio-cultural influence, Blacks all over the world will lack dignity and self esteem. They will be regarded as paupers, as people who are mentally deficient, and materially indigent. People who are not proud of their historical past are like a wandering spirit without a home.

The tragedy of the slave trade so parallels that of the sale of Joseph to Egypt that I perorate this discourse with its moral lessons. It is a fact that African Americans, barring other complicated circumstances surrounding this issue, were sold by their kinsfolk to

America. While this might have been done for evil, God appears to be changing it for good, to promote the image of Africa. I envisage a time when African-American engineers, doctors, computer experts, scientists, church specialists, educators, and a host of others, will go to Africa to help develop the continent of their origin. I can dream of a time when Africa's rich mineral deposits such as gold, silver, diamonds, and nickel will be refined in Africa by Africans and sold at cost to Europe and the Americas. I can envision seeing Africa, in turn, bargaining at the World Bank from a position of economic strength. I can foresee a time when Africans will no longer be on the receiving end of mandates from the International Monetary Fund to devalue their currencies to facilitate the purchase of their raw materials by the Westerners. Why should Africa still depend solely on white Europeans, white Americans and Asians, for the expertise in all areas of development when African Americans, with a real stake in Africa, can render it? This is the challenge I pose to African Americans.