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The Wise Men From the East - Solving the Sumerian Problem

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The origin of Sumerians is still a matter of debate and although Near East is well known for its significant role in human history, particularly as a theatre for great historical events, an exhaustive study of the Sumerian language, culture and literature, reveals that the civilization they were talking about originally had nothing to do with ancient Near East. In this extraordinary expose, we will look at the problem of Sumerian once more with the objective of resolving it and addressing other teething linguistic problems, which have not been understood before now.

My intention was never to decipher Sumerian as I was carrying out another research but then found something that caught my attention. It was all a coincidence and the rest became this story that you are reading here, which took seven years of painstaking research. I wouldn’t have ventured into this unknown field had I not seen something that I could easily recognize and interpret correctly, which I later found out was a major challenge for several linguists who had battled over the years to arrive at its exact rendering. Digging further, I realized that I could unravel quite a lot of things that have remained unsolved. It was while studying further that I discovered that some of the restored fragments in Sumerian had exactly or similar meaning in an African language, which I knew was older than Sumerian considering the fact that these non-Indo-European and non-Semitic people were migrants into Near East some thousands of years ago.

It was surprising to learn about the widely held misconception that Sumerian is a language isolate meaning that it is unrelated to any other language in the field of speech. How come no one was able to see what I had seen? Perhaps, it could have been that someone had looked at the problem from just one angle or it may well be that another had seen what I saw without knowing exactly how to interpret it. If only we could change our positions, then we will be able to solve the problems, which we had created based on the position we’ve been standing to look at it from the beginning. The idea that Sumerian is a language isolate is another problem on its own, which needed serious attention and I had to spend quite a lot of time trying to study what other scholars had thought about it.

The very fact that modern humans originated from Africa would have helped us to concentrate our search for the origin of Sumerian language in Africa. Perhaps, it is better to say that all humans came out of Africa except that our stream of
consciousness couldn’t have flowed from that Dark Continent. They couldn’t have developed any intelligible language except click sounds and babbles.

How could it have been possible that Sumerian is not related to any other language in this sphere? Most crucial in the decipherment of the cuneiform was the Behistun script; just as the Rosetta stone was to the Egyptian hieroglyphics. Did someone not write that script or was it also written by extraterrestrials? Based on the same analogy, could we now say confidently that the Egyptian language was unrelated to any other language in this sphere?

Perhaps, it must have been the work of some extraterrestrial race and since we do not know the exact planet these beings came from talk more of understanding the rudiments of their celestial grammar, it was better to isolate it from any human speech. Even if language was implanted into our consciousness by some extraterrestrials, it still does not exclude the possibility that there must have been the first people who received it and inscribed it on these tablets. Probably, someone must have spoken it likewise somebody must have written it down. It was equally possible that another must have carried it about in his journey across this conscious sphere.

It may well be that some extraterrestrials wrote the Behistun Script with which Sumerian was restored? If the Sumerian language did not leave fragments of its word or as such ideals within the Behistun inscription, how could we have established its existence? This first relationship validates the notion of affiliation, at least to one language even if we did not know how it got there. How could a true language isolate have demonstrated close relatedness to the early forms of other ancient languages?

If Sumerian is a language isolate, how exactly did we manage to arrive at the Emesal and Emegir dialects of Sumerian? Does this classification not reveal some modicum of understanding as regards how the language would have been written? Does this “language-isolate” identification not invalidate itself from the very moment of its conception? I had come across the remarkable work of Dr GJK Campbell-Dunn, who had successfully traced Sumerian language to the Bantu language of Niger-Congo family. He would later comment that he had "looked at Sumerian and can explain all the Sumerian determinatives as Niger-Congo". To have reached this far is remarkable and had it been that he went an extra mile, he would have arrived at the exact rendering.
Even if we never knew that Sumerians existed, looking at the deep sea of language would have thrown out that big fish of a question of its very origins considering the extent and pattern of replication of root words within diverse languages that are separated by time and distance. I had no doubt that an observant scholar would have thought differently and attempted a reconstruction of what could have been the original template, based on what is clearly visible in the realm of speech. Thus, it was possible to solve the problem by getting from the known to the unknown, which in this case in Sumerian. The challenges would have been to know the structure of what one was looking for as well how to detect and reconstruct it from a chosen language family, say, Semitic languages, which are perceived as the language of beginning. The main reason for choosing Semitic would have been because the Near East was often touted as the cradle of civilization.

It was Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and the Classics at Havard University, Late Calvert Watkins, the great Indo-Europeanist and Celticist, who once said that – “the comparatist has one fact and one hypothesis. The one fact is that certain languages present similarities among themselves so numerous and so precise that they cannot be attributed to chance and of such a kind that they cannot be explained by borrowings or as universal features. The one hypothesis is that these languages must then be the result of descent from a common original”.

If I find for instance, several words having the same or similar meanings in Nigeria, Japan and Europe, I did purse for a moment and ask myself how it all came to be that people widely separated in time and distance could have a large number of words in common – all having the same or similar meanings. It can neither be a coincidence to an intelligent and scientific mind nor a case of mere borrowing if more and more words exhibiting the same features are found. Someone must have migrated with those words. Who could it have been that transmitted it and how could we know that he was the one that carried it along. Could it also be possible that the presence of large number of common words among these languages could help justify their common origins?

It is not a mystery if we begin to appreciate that this Japanese must have come from Nigeria or that this Nigerian must have been in Japan at one point in time and vice versa. It will amount to a waste of precious time, trying to perfect theories to explain why this Nigerian and Japanese had nothing whatsoever in common or how this Nigerian must have originated from the Japanese even as it is against the natural laws of genetics.
Since Sumerians were neither Indo-European nor Semitic, there was every opportunity to trace if they could have come from Africa. Science would have solved part of this mystery considering that the very first humans emerged from Africa. If the Bible had recorded that at the beginning, there was one language spoken by all, even going as far as saying that there was this father of all nations, which science has come to perceive as the mother of all nations considering the mitochondrial Eve phenomenon, then what is so wrong and difficult in tracing the very first words spoken by this man or this woman back to where h/she once dwelt.

People migrating from a former location will always carry their language or a particular dialect of an already existing language. For instance, what became American English or Canadian English was once known as British English. That American English is now spoken in America neither means that it is no longer a tongue of English nor that British English had ceased to be spoken. One cannot also pass off American English as Queen’s English. That Australians have their own dialect of English language does not mean that they speak Australian.

The Victorians who carried English to all parts of the world during their imperial incursion spoke neither Elizabethan dialect nor Victorian language. That the English are not known as Germans today does not remove the fact that they were once a Germanic tribe. So, what was so special about this term - Sumerian? As Prof Michalowski had pointed out - “the term "Sumerian," like any linguistic identity label, is a metaphor that stood for a broad range of variation in time and space. To me, it was very much a misnomer, considering that the Sumerians took their name after a royal patriarch – a tradition that was common in their homeland; just as the Victorians took their name after Queen Victoria. Thus, there is no Sumerian language in the same way as there is no Victorian language. So, if the Victorians spoke English language, what could the Sumerians have spoken? How relevant is this question?

For decades, it was a widely-held notion that the Sumerians who spoke the first attested language of southern Mesopotamia had to come from somewhere else. If that is the case and if we can appreciate the simple fact that they weren’t just dump when they left their original homeland, then we will be closer to understanding the problem and solving the puzzle of how the first language became isolated from the many that are thought to have derived from it. There were several “WHAT-Ifs” that needed to be addressed, which had not been looked at properly.

Was it also possible that this first language could be extracted from the Near Eastern languages considering that it was migrants that brought it? If this realistic
analogy was applied to the Sumerian problem, then, the mystery will be solved once and for all. Considering the roots of Semitic languages and the presence of quite a lot of Sumerian words in the babel of languages, there was the possibility of Sumerian being spoken originally elsewhere before it was carried into Near Eastern realm or any other location that we have become aware of.

What could it have been known originally as? We may never have known although the only option available to us would have been to give it a new name – that was how another language was passed off as Sumerian. Think of what could have happened to the original speech, which the world had come to know as Sumerian. It could have remained in its original form where it developed or as such adapted into several languages in its new grounds. I knew this was the case with the Semitic languages as I have uncovered several “meaning-bearing fragments” from its daughter cells during my painstaking research.

Could Sumerian have become extinct or reincarnated into a new body of speech? Today, Old English is still alive as Modern English. All varieties of English spoken today derived from dialects spoken in the British Isles hundreds of years ago. What could have happened to those earlier dialects? Just as we can trace the origins of English back to Old English (c. 1000), which itself derived from a language that was brought in the British Isles by Germanic tribes starting in around 450 C.E; is how we can trace the Sumerian language to the Niger-Congo family and further back to its humble beginning – the Igbo.

Who knows? Sumerian may have been another Creole as Hoyrup (1992) had argued just as was the case by some scholars to brand Middle English as one. If it was so, it would have been to tame this mighty beast in the sea of languages, thus, implying that it must have been a corruption of an original speech – perhaps, one that was confused in Babel. Consequently, this would have required that we looked elsewhere for that original speech – the so called lingua humana, which was corrupted and there is no doubt that that original would have belonged to the Niger-Congo family and for those, who could have afforded to dig further until they got to the root of the matter, they would have found out that the stream of our consciousness flowed from across the River Niger. As Prof Michalowski noted, “one would be hard pressed to find an example of a language with the typological features of Sumerian whose origins could be found in creolization”.

It may well be comforting and at the same time frustrating to say that Sumerian never existed as Halevy once declared. It is often exasperating to know that something exists in reality although tracing it could take several man-hours of
painsstaking observation. Quite often, the things we perceive as mysteries are simple facts that we’ve failed to realize. That we do not accept it does not in any way negate its authenticity. It remains until we come to its awareness. That we cannot find it does not mean that it neither exists nor is extinct. It may well be that it has always been there without our knowing it.

Even if it was dead, we can exhume its fossils and reconstruct how it was from the very beginning. As Prof Michalowski noted, “the death of Sumerian has been the subject of speculation, or rather of asserted theses, although it has never been discussed at length. Many had simply thought that it died in antiquity.” This reminds me of what Prof Alan Dresher said about the first language being lost in the mist of time or even being closer than we might have thought.

Which criteria are we going to employ to argue for the life or for the death of an ancient language? It was very much like looking for something that was lost or forgotten and finally giving up on your search and then choosing to believe that it must have ceased to exist or even if it was alive, cannot be recognized. According to Prof Michalowski, “the fact that we’ve been dealing with the written remains of a language and that most of our information on the language came from some time after its putative demise creates an extraordinary situation. With respect to the socio-linguistic context of the use of the Sumerian language, it may be unusual to ask when Sumerian ceased to be spoken or as such when it was no longer understood in vernacular conversation”.

The problem of Sumerian is a complex matter that required several diverse means of investigation. What makes us think that it was impossible to dig deeper into the sea of languages and recover fragments that had existed since the very beginning, which we could through painstaking research, observe how they’ve continued to code for meaning in the descendant languages. No wonder we keep searching for meanings where there are no words and we keep isolating languages that are related yet creating ones that do not really exist while destroying ones that are still alive.

So, the last resort could have been the idea that no one today speaks Sumerian - very much like saying that no one today speaks or understands Latin. This could have solved the problem or simply made it to go away. Latin was often said to be a dead language yet it is still taught in the academia and used in the Roman Catholic Church. What happens when we finally come to the realization that the language the world has come to appreciate as Sumerian is not dead and is still spoken, where it developed. How joyful it would be for our children to learn that the first speech,
which became confused into many languages, is still living and breathing sense into every tongue. It was very much like a language standing by while every other tongue was confessing its presence.

Sumerian speakers couldn’t have been butchered to the extent that their language died out with them. As Cooper (1973:241) once suggested many years ago, "in exclusion of violent incidents, such as wholesale annihilation, deportation, or deliberate suppression, language displacement is a slow process, and occurs when the bilingual community expands to include all members of one mother-tongue group, who then neglect to teach the mother tongue (here Sumerian) to their children.” This situation does not solve the Sumerian problem considering the degree of its spread.

If a language is no longer spoken where it diffused, it does not mean that it died in its original location or even in its new location. In all the Semitic languages that I have studied so far, Igbo root words are quite discernible and extractable. Most remarkable is the fact that these Igbo root words still code for sense wherever they were found. It was the main reason why I coined the term – monogenes (the basic unit of letters and/or sounds that codes for meaning), and created the monogenetic technique – a practical method of tracing and establishing genealogical relationships between languages based on their meaning-bearing fragments, which behave very much like genes. Thus, languages can be studied and classified genetically using the monogenes. To me, relating languages based on their shared monogenes was very much like solving another paternity case.

For thousands of years, many scholars have held the wrong notion that the original language was dead; even if alive was no longer spoken and even if spoken; was a “language isolate” yet the language is still very much alive having crossed several boundaries and flowed through every stream of consciousness ending up flooding the entire sea of languages. It is a universal speech, which can be found at the root of many languages including Old Indian, Old Chinese, Old Japanese, Old Europe, Old Arabia, Proto-Semitic, Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Niger-Congo, Proto-Nostratic, Proto-X; Proto-Y, etc including their modern versions.

I knew from my deep study of languages that there were innumerable evidences of the Sumerian diffusion hence the “language isolate” identification could very much mean the opposite – being that it is a language whose words or as such monogenes can be isolated from the cells of other descendant languages and vice versa. As Michalowski had correctly noted, “on comparative grounds, it was more probable that Sumerian represented a remnant of a much broader linguistic continuum, areal
if not genetic, that had occupied much of Western Asia before the Semitic spreads”. There was ample evidence to justify that Sumerian is a language/dialect continuum (sprachraum) of an already existing language.

Quite a lot of scholars had attempted the noble act of trying to relate Sumerian to their language or even claim that it descended from an older form of their language. No doubt that they must have seen a pattern or a feature that they could easily recognize although they could not explain it. In the process of deciphering Sumerian, the Hungarian language was very useful as Sumerian had left a significant heritage in it.

Other scholar like Professor Gosztony was able to demonstrate that the grammatical structure of the Hungarian language was the closest to the Sumerian language. According to him, “out of the 53 characteristics of Sumerian grammar, there were 51 matching characteristics in the Hungarian language, 29 in the Turkic languages, 24 in the Caucasian languages, 21 in the Uralic languages, 5 in the Semitic languages, and 4 in the Indo-European languages.” If this was the case, this would have again sounded a final death knell on the isolate position. It couldn’t have been possible to use Hungarian to decode Sumerian if they were not related by some measure.

If Sumerian was truly an isolate, then how could it have been possible to establish its grammatical structure using the above languages? Remarkably enough, Prof Samuel Noah Kramer had indicated earlier on that “Sumerian was difficult for linguists as it has iterative features, which no modern language including the classical languages of Greek and Latin possess. Couldn’t it have been better to choose on older language for this sort of task? It would have better to choose a language that has iterative features in order to decrypt Sumerian.

Although it was well acknowledged that the Sumerians were not indigenous to Mesopotamia, the presence of close kinship of Sumerian and the Ural-Altaic languages and additionally many cultural evidences showing direct kinship between the Sumerians and the Central Asiatic peoples, have been used to justify that the Sumerians must have been an Altaic people. Some scholars had reasoned that the ancestors of the present day Altaic peoples (such as Turks and Hungarians) and those of the Sumerians must have been in direct contact with each other before Sumerians migrated into Mesopotamia.

Thus, the Sumerians must have been a Central Asiatic people and must have been speaking the same or a dialect of a Proto-Ural-Altaic language that Ural-Altaic
peoples spoke then. It was often conjectured that the Proto-Ural-Altaic language must have been either the same as the Sumerian or a version of the Sumerian language that linguists have been able to read from thousands of Sumerian tablets. The very fact that the present day Turkish and Hungarian languages were Sumerian-like languages was a strong indication that the speakers of these languages were the descendants of an Ural-Altaic people who must have been members of a group that the Sumerians also belonged to. Looking at Hungarian, Turkish and Finnish, I knew that Sumerian had left an indelible mark on them as I was able to recover quite a lot of Igbo root words from them.

Several scholars had been able to establish a relationship between Sumerian and their candidate languages although these claims were often neglected by the mainstream because of their unverifiability. To me, it was better to have treaded this path than to say that Sumerian was an isolate. Knowing what I was looking for, these claims would encourage me to dig deeper into these languages in search of Igbo roots and what I discovered has continued to amaze me till date. If we had known that Sumerian was an Igbo language continuum, then it would have been easier for scholars to justify these remarkable claims. In trying to relate these languages to the Sumerian language, these scholars have indirectly provided ample evidence to help justify that the above listed languages actually stem from Igbo language. Having established that Sumerian was actually Igbo language, it became easier to solve other teething problems.

Before now, anyone could simply write any word and assume that it is Sumerian considering that the language is not fully understood. It was the notable assyriologist, Lt. Prof Samuel Noah Kramer, who once commented that “it is a common error of ignorance to suppose that the existing scholarly translations of ancient language documents are firmly established and that no further refinement is possible.” In addition, Prof Thorkild Jacobsen once indicated that – “…translations, even by highly competent scholars, may diverge so much that no one would ever guess that they rendered the same text...” Having digested the works of notable sumerologists and assyriologists, a standard orthography for Sumerian – known as the Sumerian Orthographic Triangle (SORT) was developed to solve these issues. Now, it is possible to know exactly how Sumerian words were spelt and pronounced - something that has not been done before now because of the complex nature of the language. For instance, you will know if ever the Sumerian word for above or heaven is an or enu. Even from the title, Enuma Elish, you can extrapolate the word for high. With the development of SORT, it becomes easy to appreciate the many features of the language - including how the
words are agglutinated. In addition, we get to appreciate their great epic literature as well as a lot of facts that are lost in mistranslation.

The many puzzling features of the Sumerian language has often impeded scholarly research and literary appreciation. As Late Prof Kramer correctly pointed out – “Sumerian language is difficult for linguists because it is context-dependent. A single word often has multiple sounds and meanings that full translation would require extracting from each character not a single meaning as in modern languages, but all of the meanings that apply. This may be termed iterative translation (meaning that multiple meanings are extracted from a single compound) and no modern language has iterative features including the classical languages of Greek and Latin. Several linguists have often deserted this minefield of language where there are several homophones and homonyms competing for context but now, this problem is finally addressed as I was able to show how several look-alikes can be denoted through contextual analysis. We get to learn why Ido meaning to raise should imply a house (uno) and ‘Idu’ meaning to lead should imply a people (unu).

Several Sumerian words had been restored in fragments but with the new “Affixation and Reconstruction Technique” (ART), you can restore those fragmented words and resolve the problem of ambiguity. Such novel techniques like the “Extrapolation and Replacement Technique” (ERT), enables you to extrapolate as well as recreate a Sumerian word from another cognate. As languages often share “meaning-bearing fragments”, the “Monogenetic technique” was created to enable you attempt meaningful comparative or as such philological studies. It enables you to establish the relationship between languages – very much like using genes to solve a paternity case except that here, we are talking about ancestor and their descendants. Now that we know the Sumerian language, you can carry out a comparative study confidently knowing what you are looking for.

With the final decipherment of Sumerian and its words, we get to appreciate how certain key words in Sumerian are essential to unraveling and appreciating the culture in which the language developed; as well as the people that spoke the language or practised the culture – a key tool for developing a prosopography. The SORT is key to understanding the basic vocabulary of Sumerians and exploring every aspect of their civilization including their kingship, kinship, anthropology, ethnology, economy, religion, astronomy, mathematics, etc.

Having established the structure of the Sumerian grammar, it becomes easy to appreciate the concrete idea underlying some of the controversial Sumerian
pictographs, and how they correspond with the Sumerian phonemes. For instance, the *arrow pictograph*, which the Sumerians employed to express the idea of life, had nothing to do with the *rib* practically and linguistically.

By correctly matching the words with their corresponding pictographs, key aspects of the Sumerian civilization - for example, the humble beginnings of agriculture depicted by the *kur pictograph*, which is often misinterpreted as a mountain because it looks like one, is finally resolved with other linguistic evidences.

Most importantly, the correct decipherment of some key pictographs are essential to appreciating and unraveling some other ancient concepts that have not been substantiated like the mysteries of the Babylonian Hanging Gardens as well as the Biblical mountain flood, which all had to do with the *kur pictograph*.

With the correct decipherment of Sumerian language, we now have ample tools to appreciate the true origins and meanings of the great epic literature and how they were copied, recasted and distorted to fit a new stage. For the very first time, we are exposed to the first pun in Eden, which became lost to the biblical authors together with the true identity of the serpent, which was originally a Sumerian River-dwelling deity. The exact structure that Noah built before the flood is finally revealed so that we know how to take refuge the next time the flood arrives.

Before now, much of the research done had often neglected or failed to address the problem of Sumerian origin choosing to remain on the safe path that the language is dead or as such an “isolate” when this proposition already invalidates itself from conception. Now that the problem of Sumerian origin is finally solved, it enables us to explore every aspect of the first classical civilization and appreciate the diffusion of its culture. We cannot fully appreciate Near Eastern Studies without first of all establishing the language and culture of this non-Indo-European and non-Semitic people who established civilization in Middle East some thousands of years ago, which I have been able to trace to the East of the River Niger.

Reference