Is Omotic Afroasiatic?

A Critical Discussion.

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1 Introduction

Omotic, a group of 25–30 languages spoken in southwestern Ethiopia, is regarded as a family whose interior classification is presented in Table 1. The three main branches, South Omotic, North Omotic, and Mao, are very distantly related.

Table 1: The branches of the Omotic language family (Hayward 2003)

South Omotic Hamar, Aari, Dime
North Omotic
- DIZOID Dizi, Sheko, Nayi
- TA-NE LANGUAGES
  - ***Gonga*** Kafa, Shakicho (Mocha), Shinasha, Anfillo
  - ***Gimojan***
    - *Gimira* Bench, She
    - *Ometo-C'ara* C'ara
      - *North Ometo* Wolaitta, Gamo, Gofa, Dawro, Malo, Basketo, Oyda
      - *East Ometo* Zayse, Zargulla, Harro and other lacustrine varities, Koorete
      - *South Ometo* Maale
    - *Yem* (earlier known as 'Janjero') Yem

Mao Mao of Begi, Mao of Bambeshi, Diddesa

OM(otic)[1] is generally regarded as a branch Afroasiatic. This paper is a discussion of the arguments for this AA affiliation, the *OM Theory* (Lamberti 1991). I claim to show that no convincing arguments have been presented, and that OM should be regarded as an independent language family. No closer

[1] Cf. list of abbreviations at the end of the paper.

genetic relations have been demonstrated between OM and AA than between OM and any other language family.

2 Joseph H. Greenberg

Greenberg (1963) divided the languages of Africa into 4 families, Niger-Kordofanian, AA, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan. He divided AA into 5 branches, SE(mitic), EG(yptian), BE(rber), CH(adic), and CU(shitic), and CU into 5 subbranches, North, Central, East, West, and South CU. WCU corresponded to OM.

Greenberg's (1963) classification of African languages was primarily based on *mass comparison*, a method described by Campbell (1997: 210) as being based on looking at –

> «many languages across a few words» rather than «at a few languages across many words» ([Greenberg] 1987: 23), where the lexical similarity shared «across many languages» alone is taken as evidence of genetic relationship, with no methodological considerations deemed relevant.

A few lines later, Campbell adds that the resemblances –

> detected in mass comparison must still be investigated to determine whether they are due to inheritance from a common ancestor or whether they result from borrowing, accident, onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, or nursery formations … Since Greenberg's application of his method does not take this necessary next step, the results frequently have proven erroneous or at best highly controversial.

Greenberg (1963) does not discuss WCU explicitly. As pointed out by Fleming (1974), for several generations, CU had been accepted by most scholars as a branch of AA. However, the WCU languages «gained their membership in [AA] from a presumed kinship with the proper Cushites.» Chapter III *Afroasiatic* in Greenberg (1963) is an attempt to prove that CH is a branch of AA, and an AA Comparative Word List is presented, with 78 CH words claimed to have cognates in other branches of AA. There are 14 different WCU words in the list.

3 Fleming (1969)

Fleming (1969) reclassified WCU as a sixth branch of AA – Aari-Kafa (A-K). He used what he regarded as two methods, *lexicostatistics* and *grammatical comparison*.

Lexicostatistics, developed by Morris Swadesh, involves measuring the percentage of words with similar sound and meaning in different languages, on the basis of lists of basic vocabulary. Words with similar sound and meaning are called *cognates*. The larger the percentage of cognates, the closer the languages being compared are presumed to be related.

Fleming's lexicostatistical argumentation has this structure: (1) CU(shitic) is more internally differentiated than other branches of AA; about 12% of cognates are found between the (non-A-K) branches of CU. (2) Between A-K and the branches of CU, the percentage of cognates falls below 10%, which is the same level as that pertaining between families of (non-A-K) AA. (3) Therefore, A-K is a branch of AA, not of CU.

Lamberti (1991) reminds us of the fact that Fleming adduces no evidence but the result of his lexical statistical test, and the data used during the enquiry has remained unknown. Still, the OM Theory was accepted by some scholars of African linguistics.

Fleming presented some morphological features that he regarded as typically CU, and that were absent from A-K. A-K either lacks gender or uses different indicators than CU m. *k* / f. *t*.; there is no over-all correspondence in the pronominal system between A-K and CU, except 1pl *n*. He added two typological features: A-K verb roots are commonly monosyllabic and more rigid than CU roots, and the characteristic conjugational patterns of ordinary CU are absent.

Fleming's lexicostatistical comparisons are of little value, since no lexical data are presented. No conclusions can be drawn about the status of A-K. The morphological differences pointed out between A-K and CU are differences between A-K and all the other branches of AA. The morphological data indicate a genetic relationship with neither CU nor AA. Flem-

ing's typological arguments are irrelevant; there are often typological differences between closely related languages.

4 Fleming (1974)

Fleming (1974) replaced the name Aari-Kafa with Omotic, «after the most prominent geographical feature of their region – the Omo river basin.»

In this paper, Fleming included information about his unpublished computations, which «indicate that Omotic languages never achieve more than 5% of shared retentions on the short Swadesh list when they are compared with other Afroasiatic languages outside Cushitic.» The percentage of «shared retentions» is not higher than the accidental similarity expected between any two unrelated languages, which is usually estimated at 4%–5%, or even 7% (Campbell 1997: 229, 405). This indicates that there is no genetic relationship between OM and AA.

Fleming presented what he regarded as two methods to support the OM Theory: morphological and lexical comparison. However, these are not two methods, but mass comparison applied to lexical and grammatical morphemes, respectively. From a comparative point of view, the main difference between lexical and grammatical morphemes is that the latter tend to consist of fewer phonemes that lexical morphemes. The shorter a morpheme, the higher the probability of finding accidental similarities, and Fleming's morphological comparisons are therefore even less reliable than his lexical comparisons. As pointed out by Meillet (1967: 53), a «comparison which rests solely on one or even two root consonants is without value if it is not supported by very specific facts.» This is true for grammatical as well as lexical morphemes.

4.1 Fleming's (1974) morphological comparisons

Fleming's (1974) grammatical morphemes with alleged cognates in (other branches of) AA are presented below. Language names are changed in accordance with Table 1. Data from different branches of AA are separated by a dot, •.

I. CAUSATIVE *-s*. «Almost universal.»

II. PLURAL *-n*~*-na* in SOM AAR; **-ti*; partial reduplication and change of stem vowel.

III. GENITIVE CONNECTOR *-n*~*-ni* in NOM YE, «rare elsewhere»; *-t*~*-ti* in SOM AAR, «rare elsewhere».

IV. CASE Acc. *-m* SOM /*-n* NOM; dat. *-n* SOM / *-s* NOM • «The /n m/ accusative is found in Semitic.»

V. MASCULINE/FEMININE Acoustically flat/sharp vowels, cf. KA m. *-o* / f. *-e*. • «The «flat/sharp» contrast is also found widely in AA, often associated with *k*/*t*.»

VI. FEMININE *-n* and *n*+*V* occur in nouns in SOM and in verbs in NOM. • Fem. *-n* occurs in verbs in SE UG. • «[P]lural markers in /n/ in [MEG] were analyzed by Gardiner [1957: 85-87] as "really pronouns" of a neutral character which had been feminine in older stages of [AEG]. So feminine in /n/ may also be a very archaic AA trait preserved in [OM].»

VII. 3RD PERSON PRONOMINAL BASE *is-*~*us-*~*uʒ-*~*b-* in NOM, «most of which have contacts in [AA].»

VIII. 1PL PRONOUN *no:(na)* «almost everywhere; «its link to [AA] is clear.»

IX. 1SG PRONOUN *i-* 'my', *in* 'me' in SOM, and perhaps some other SOM languages • «[U]sed
by Greenberg to show [CH] links to [SE].»

X. VERBAL PERSON SUFFIXES. 1sg *-it*, 2sg *-n*, 3sg Ø, 1pl *-ot*, 2pl *-ɛt*, 3pl *-ɛk* – «rests heavily on Galila [dialect of AAR] which is the only SOM language with a proper paradigm of person marking inflections. But SOM DI has enough left of an earlier paradigm to make it plausible.»

In most cases Fleming mentions no data from other branches of AA. No attempt is –

> made to specify the grammatical morphemes in the various families of [AA]. It is presumed that the reader knows about the common particles of [AA] or some of its sub-divisions or that he can easily obtain Greenberg's famous article on [AA] [ch. III of Greenberg (1963)] which remains the template for phylum-wide comparisons in [AA] studies.

No systematic phonological comparisons are made between grammatical morphemes in OM and (other branches of) AA. This weakens Fleming's argumentation.

Fleming lists grammatical morphemes that occur in one or just a few OM language(s), without telling why they should be regarded as retentions from POM, e.g.:

(i) *-n*~*-na* 'plural' occurs in SOM AAR. Pl. formations vary within and among OM languages, e.g. NOM ML uses gemination of the stem final consonant, or the suffixes *-atsi* and *-att-* (Azeb 2001); NOM KA uses *-na'ó* (my field notes); KO uses *-ita* (my field notes). (Pluralization through partial reduplication and change of stem vowel are typological features, and therefore irrelevant.)

(ii) NOM YE has the genitive connector *-n*~*-ni*, which is «rare elsewhere».

(iii) *i-* 'my', *in* 'me' in SOM AAR and «perhaps some other [SOM] languages».

(iv) The reconstructed verbal suffixes rest «heavily on Galila [dialect of AAR].» The SOM reconstructions differ from most verbal person suffixes in a NOM language like KA (my field notes), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Verbal person suffixes. Fleming's SOM compared to Kafa

	SG		PL	
	SOm	Kafa	SOm	Kafa
1st person	*-it*	*-Ø*	*-ot*	*-on*
2nd person	*-n*	*-in*	*-ɛt*	*-otee*
3rd person	*-Ø*	*-e* m, *-an* f	*-ɛk*	*-eetee*

One of Fleming's explicit comparisons with other branches of AA is farfetched. An etymological relationship is proposed between OM m. *-o* / f. *-e* and AA m. *k* / f. *t*, because *-o* and *k* are acoustically flat, while *-e* and *t* are acoustically sharp. The relationship is not accounted for historically.

Most OM morphemes claimed by Fleming to have AA cognates consist of a coronal consonant (*t s ʒ n*), either alone or with a vowel that plays no role in the comparison. Coronals are among the most frequent consonants in grammatical morphemes in the languages of the world, and accidental similarities between unrelated languages are easy to find.

4.2 Fleming's lexical comparisons

Below follows a summary of Fleming's (1974) presentation of 21 OM words with alleged AA cognates.

1. ALL. POM **kull* «might be proposed»; the reconstruction is based on a PSOM reconstruction **kull* (cf. DI *koll*, HM, KR *wull*) and NOM forms KA, SH *bulli* «but the correspondence is not confirmed» • SE UG *kl*, AM *hullu*.

2. ASHES. POM **b-nd-* • CH Gabri *húndu* • CU OR *ibid-da* 'fire'.

3. BLOOD. PSOM **ʒumʙ/dzum?* • BE *i-damm-ən* «(from [SE]?)» • CH Maha *dom*, Bachama *ʒambe* • Se **dmm*.

4. BONE. POM **k'us* • BE *i-xs*, «said to be from **i-ḳs*» • CH HM *k'aši* • CU GL *Gəs* 'foot' • AEG *ḳs*.

5. BRIGHT, SHINY. OM DI *ʙɛlxən*; SH *p'arik'* 'lighten, flash' • CH Batta Garua *baratje* 'lightning' • CU KH *birqa:* 'lightning' • AEG *brq* 'to shine' • SE HE *bəraq* 'lightning'.

6. TO COME. POM *y-/yi?/yɛg* • CU BD *?i* • MEG *ĭw* and *ĭŭ*.

7. BUILD, CREATE. OM DI *bɪn* • CH Bolewa *bin* 'house', Sokore *be:ni* 'build' • CU «forms with *mina* or *mana* for 'house' abound» in ECU and CCU.

8. DOG. PNOM **kan-*; «*kana* … virtually universal in [NOM]. SGO has an innovating form *kuna:n-o* but NGO has *kana*» • SE **kl-b* «with the assumption that *-b* is a suffix for animal terms».

9. EAT. PSOM **its*; NOM M *itsa* 'crop' • BE *ča* • CH Bolewa *ti*, HS *či* • CU BD *tiyu* 'food' • AEG *t?* 'bread' • SE AK *te?-u*.

10. EYE. POM **a:f / a:p* • CU SI *af-* 'to see' «judged to be borrowed from [OM]» • SE UG *ʃpʃp-m* 'eyes', presumed to be reduplicative with *-m* pl.

11. TO FLY. OM DA *fal*, GM *fir* • BE Shilha *firri* • CH Ankwa *p'aar* 'jump', etc • CU BD *fa:r* 'jump, hop' AEG *p?* • SE AR *farra* 'flee', UG *pr* 'flee'.

12. GO. OM COMT *b-*, EOMT *ba/bay* • CH Dera *bə* 'go away'; Newman's PCH **B-* • CU BD *ba:y*, AF, OR *ba:* • SE HE *bɔ*, AR *ba:?* 'return'.

13. HEART. OM K *nibb-o* «secondary form», AN *yimb-a*, SH *nimba*, AMU *libb-o*; «all suspected of being borrowed from OSE **lbb*. The same for YE *nib-a*. However, AAR … *lip'a/liBa* … and BA *lippe* 'belly', perhaps also COMT *ulw-a/ull-o* 'belly', suggest that the form goes back to [POM]. If so, cf. Greenberg (1963) 'heart'. • The form is virtually absent from [CU], being known only in [OR] *lap'e* [etc.]».

14. KNEEL. OM AAR *gump-ɛr-*; ML **gumB-at* • CU BD *gumba* 'knee' «and probably other [AA] forms [for 'knee'] cited in Greenberg (1963)» • CH Angas *kirm* 'kneel', Musgu *gurfa* 'kneel' • BE Kabyle *keref* 'bend the knee'.

15. LICK. OM DI *lits'*, CA *hals*. • «Cf. Greenberg (1963) 'tongue'»: BE *i-ls* • CH HS *harše/halše*, Angas *lis* • AEG *ns* • SE AR *lisa:n*.

16. MOON. POM **?arf-/?arp*. «[NOM] has an innovated form *agen-*» • SE UG *ʃrp-t* 'clouds' • «Cf. also [CCU] *arba* 'moon'»

17. MOUTH. PSOM **af/ap*. «[NOM] has innovated forms … from **no:n-* or **ad-*» • CH HS *?afa* 'throw in the mouth' • CU BD *yaf*, SO *af* • SE AK *pu:*.

18. NOSE. PNOM **sinD/sint'* • CH HS *sunsuna:* 'to smell', Sukur *šin* • CU SO *san* • EG *snsn* 'to smell'.

19. TOOTH. POM **ačč/ats* • BE TA *added* 'bite', etc. «Possibly all [BE] forms are from [AR]» • CH Angas *at* 'bite' • SE AR *əðð*.

20. DONKEY. PNOM **kur-*; PSOM **uki-* • CH Bolewa *koro*.

21. YOUNG FEMALE. SOM DI *amza* 'woman, woman in prime sexual life', AAR *anza* 'young woman' • SE CHA *anž* 'heifer', AR *anj* 'heifer'.

Fleming compares words from 26 OM languages with words from all languages in the other branches of AA, that is, around 350 languages (Gordon 2005). This method gives more than 8 500 possible language pairs to compare where one of the members of the pairs is an OM language. On this background, 21 cognates is not impressive, and one may ask whether a significantly lower number is at all possible. Let us take a closer look at some of Fleming's cognates.

1. ALL. POM **kull*, reconstructed on the basis of SOM DI *kʊll*, HM *wull* and possibly NOM *bulli*; no reasons are given for postulating a phonological correspondence *k–w–b*. DI *kʊll* is apparently the only occurrence of a form with *k-* outside SE, and may be a loanword from SE.

3. BLOOD. Fleming compares PSOM **zumɓ/*dzum?* to PSE **dmm*, BE *i-damm-ən* and CH Maha *dom*, etc. He presents no other words exhibiting OM-AA phonological correspondences *z/dz–d* or *mɓ/m?–mm*, and the vowels seem to play no role in the comparison. Fleming does not mention that the words for 'blood' in NOM are completely different, cf. ML *súgútsi* (Azeb 2001) KO *súutse* (my field notes) and WO *suutta* (Lamberti & Sottile 1997). No arguments are presented for treating the SOM forms as more conservative than the NOM forms. Similarity with AA is not an argument unless it is shown that the comparison is not as farfetched as it looks.

6. COME. Fleming compares POM **y-/yi?-/yɛg* to CU BD *?i* 'come' and MEG *ʾiw* and *ʾii* 'come'. 'Come' in AEG was *ywy* («jwj») (Loprieno 1995). Only the initial consonant resembles OM *y-/yi?-/yɛg*. The CU form is not evidently similar.

8. DOG. Fleming (1974: 88) compares POM **kan-* to SE **kl-b* (with the assumption that *-b* is a suffix for animal terms), CH and PLECU **k-r-*. He adds that «South Gonga has an innovating form *kuna:n-o* but North Gonga has *kana*.» No reason

is given for treating SGO *kuna:no* as innovating. No arguments support the analysis **kl-b*. No other words are presented that exhibit a phonological correspondence OM *n*–AA *l*/*r*.

9. EAT. Fleming compares PSOM **its* to forms meaning 'eat' in BE, CH, CU, and 'bread' in EG. Fleming seems to assume PAA **-t-* 'eat', but presents no other evidence for a phonological correspondence PAA **t* – POM **ts*, or PAA **t* – BE *šš*/*čč*; cf. Shilha *ešš* (Dray 1998) and Kabyle *ečč* 'eat' (Dallet 1982). Fleming does not discuss vowel differences or the glottal stop in the SE and EG forms.

12. GO. The SE forms mean 'return', not 'go'. Fleming does not discuss the plausibility of a semantic change 'go' > 'return' or 'return' > 'go'.

13. HEART. Fleming assumes that NOM K *nibb-o*, «secondary form», AN *yimb-a*, SH *nɨmba*, and AMU *libb-o* are cognates, and that they are not borrowed from OSE **lbb*, due to SOM words meaning 'belly': AAR *lip'a*/*liBa*, BA *lippe*. Fleming does not explain in what way K *nibb-o* is a «secondary form», but the ordinary word for 'heart' in K is *múllo* (my field notes). AM *libb* 'heart' would become *nibbo* if borrowed into K, in accordance with general principles (Theil, in press).

14. KNEEL. Fleming does not explain how OM **gumB-at* is related to CH Angas *kirm* 'kneel', Musgu *gurfa* 'kneel' and BE Kabyle *keref* 'bend the knee'. The CH and BE forms have a liquid not found in OM. The comparison is farfetched.

19. TOOTH. Again, an example of an unparalleled phonological correspondence, OM *čč*/*ts* – BE *dd* – CH *t* – SE *ðð*. The AR form is wrong; the correct form is *aḍḍ(a)*.

21. YOUNG FEMALE. Fleming compares OM DI *amʒa* 'woman, woman in prime sexual life' and AAR *anʒa* 'young woman' to AR *anj* 'heifer'. Doniach (1972) has only one AR word meaning 'heifer', *ʕijla*. Cowan (1994) has no word *anj* or *ʕanj* 'heifer'. Elie Wardini (p.c.), professor of AR at the University of Stockholm, does not know such a word. However, he mentions *naʕja* 'ewe, female sheep' and *ʕanʒ(a)* 'goat'; the latter resembles AAR *anʒa*, but DI *amʒa* indicates that *m* is the original nasal, with a regressive assimilation in AAR *anʒa*.

There is clear evidence that the *n* of AR *ʃanz(a)* is the original nasal, cf. the plural forms *aʃnuz/ʃunūz/ʃināz* (Cowan 1994). As Wardini adds, one should be very careful with AR words without cognates in other SE languages; the historical study of the AR lexicon is almost totally neglected.

4.2.1 Preliminary conclusion

Comparing morphemes the way Fleming has done, it is practically impossible not to find some look-alikes. However, to quote Meillet (1967: 51), «an etymology is valid only if the rules of phonological correspondences are applied in an exact way, or in case a divergence is accepted, if this divergence is explained by special circumstances rigorously defined.» But in Fleming (1974) we find discussions of neither phonological nor semantic correspondences.

Another weakness in Fleming's argumentation is that he has not shown that OM is closer to AA than to any other language family. In the next paragraph OM is compared to PIE.

4.3 Omotic and Proto-Indo-European

The following comparison between OM and PIE is limited to Fleming's alleged OM/AA cognates. The comparison is also limited in another way: With few exceptions, OM is compared to *one* language, PIE, and not to all the 449 IE languages (Gordon 2005); including all languages in the comparison would have made it even easier to find similarities.

BE, CH, CU, EG, and SE forms are left out, but are found in 4.2-3. The source for IE forms is Mallory & Adams (2006), unless other works are referred to.

I have included data from Greenberg's (2000-2002) Eurasiatic (IE, Uralic, Altaic, Gilyak, Korean-Japanese-Ainu, Chukotian, and Eskimo-Aleut) and Ruhlen's (1994) «global etymologies». Fleming's methods are similar to those of Greenberg and Ruhlen, and the EA and GE data emphasize the arbitrariness of Fleming's results.

Most resemblances in grammatical morphology between OM and AA are also found between OM and IE:

I. CAUSATIVE. OM *-s* • IE **-s* (Greenberg 2000) • EA **-s*.

II. PLURAL. (a) *-n*~*-na* in SOM AAR; (b) **-ti*; (c) partial redupl. and change of stem vowel • IE **-ns* acc pl • EA *-t*.

III. GENITIVE CONNECTOR. (a) *-n*~*-ni* in NOM YE; (b) *-t*~*-ti* in SOM AAR • IE **-n* (Greenberg 2000) • EA *-n*.

IV. CASE. Acc *-m* SOM /*-n* NOM; dat *-n* SOM / *-s* NOM • IE acc sg **-m*, gen/abl sg **-(o)s*.

V. MASC/FEM Flat/sharp, cf. K m *-o* / f. *-e*. • IE m sg nom **-os* / f sg nom **-eH$_2$*; cf adjective 'new': m **new-os*, f **néw-eH$_2$*, n **néw-om*.

VI. FEM *-n* and *n+V* occur in nouns in SOM and in verbs in NOM • IE Latin *-īn-* in *regīna* 'queen' and *gallīna* 'hen' is a fem. suffix.

VII. 3RD PERSON PRON BASE. *is-*~*us-*~*uʒ-*~*b-* in NOM • IE **s-*, cf. m. **so* and f. **seH$_a$* 'that one' • EA *s-*

VIII. 1PL PRON. *no:(na)* • IE **nóH$_1$* 'we two' • EA 1st person *n-*.

IX. 1SG PRON *i-* 'my', *in* 'me' SOM AAR • Cf. IE 1st person forms without a nasal and with a nasal: **H$_1$eg^{y}*, **H$_1$éme*.

X. VERBAL PERSON SUFFIXES. Table 3 is a comparison between K and PIE (2nd conj). The main difference is found in 2.sg.

Table 3. Verbal person suffixes. Kafa and Proto-Indo-European

	SG		PL	
	Kafa	IE	Kafa	IE
1st person	*-Ø*	**-oH$_2$*	*-on*	**-omes*
2nd person	*-in*	**-etH$_2$e*	*-otee*	**-ete*
3rd person	*-e* m., *-an* f.	**-ei*	*-eetee*	**-onti*

Below is comparison of 21 OM and PIE lexical morphemes.

1. ALL. POM **kull*, PSOM **kull*, DI *kɔll*, HM, KR *wull*. NOM K, MO *bulli* • PIE **H$_3$el-* (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000).

2. ASHES. POM: **b-nd-* • PIE **péH$_2$ur* 'fire'; **pē(n)s-* 'dust' • EA *pana* 'ashes', *par* 'fire', *pa* 'dry' • GE *bur* 'ashes, dust'.

3. BLOOD. PSOM: **ʒumb/dʒum?*. • PIE **g^{y}heumn-* 'libation', **g^{y}heu-* 'pour' • EA *kem*. NB: The OM *ʒ* – PIE *g^{y}h* correspondence has a parallel in OM *ʒ* – PIE *gh*, cf. 21. YOUNG FEMALE.

4. BONE. POM **k'us* • PIE **H$_2$óst*. • GE *kati*.

5. BRIGHT, SHINY. OM DI *ʁɛlxən*; SH *p'arik'* 'lighten, flash' • PIE **bhreH$_2$g^{y}-* • EA *belk*.

6. TO COME. PNOM **y-/yi?/yɛg* • PIE **H$_1$ey-, *H$_1$eyH$_2$-* 'go' (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000) • EA *i*~*ya* 'go'.

7. BUILD, CREATE. OM DI *bɪn* • IE **bhendh-* 'bind'.

8. DOG. PNOM **kan-*. SGO *kuna:n-o* • PIE **k^{y}won-~*k^{y}un-* • EA *kan~kun* • GE *kuan*. The PIE and EA alternations resemble OM *kan-~kun-*.

9. EAT. PSOM **its*; NOM MJ *itsa* 'crop' • PIE **H$_{1}$ed-*, Hittite **ets-* (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000).

10. EYE. POM **a:f/a:p* • PIE **x^{w}ek^{w}-*; cf. Greek *ōps*.

11. TO FLY. OM DA *fal*, GM *fir* • PIE **pl-ew-k-* > Proto-Germanic **fléuh-* 'flee, fly' • EA *par* • GE *par*.

12. GO. OM OMT *b-*, *ba/bay* • PIE **g^{w}eH$_{a}$* 'come'.

13. HEART. NOM K *nibb-o*, AN *yimb-a*, SH *nimba*, AMU *libb-o*. SOM AAR *lip'a/liBa*, BA *lippe* 'belly' • PIE **leyb^{h}-* > Proto-Germanic **leiba-* 'body, belly; life' (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000).

14. KNEEL. OM AAR *gump-ɛr-*; ML **gumB-at* • PIE **g^{y}énu-~*g^{y}ónu-~*g^{y}nu-* 'knee' (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000).

15. LICK. OM DI *lits'*, CA *hals* • PIE **leig^{y}h-* • EA *lak*.

16. MOON. POM **ʔarf-/ʔarp* • PIE **H$_{3}$érbhis* 'circle'.

17. MOUTH. PSOM **af/ap* • PIE **H$_{1}$ub-~*H$_{1}$up-* 'up' (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000) (the origin of English root in *up, open*); cf. also Hittite *api-* 'hole in the ground' (Greenberg 2002: 96) • EA *api* 'hole'.

18. NOSE. PNOM **sinD/sint'* • PIE has sound-imitative words beginning with *sn-*, referring to breathing, snoring, nose, etc.; cf. English *snout, snore, snot, snuff, sniff* • GE *čun(g)a* 'nose; to smell'.

19. TOOTH. POM **ačč/ats* • IE **H$_{1}$d-ént-~*H$_{1}$d-ónt-~*H$_{1}$d-nt-* (same root as **H$_{1}$ed-* 'eat').

20. DONKEY. POM **kur-*; PSOM **uki-* • English *horse* < Proto-Germanic **hrussa-* < IE **k^{y}ers-* 'run' or **(s)ker-* 'hop about' (Pfeifer 1995).

21. YOUNG FEMALE. OM DI *amza* 'woman, woman in prime sexual life', AAR *anza* 'young woman' • PIE **maghwiH$_{a}$-* (from **magh-* 'be able').

All of Fleming's OM/AA lexical cognates have parallels in PIE, and in some cases the similarities are more striking between OM and IE; 8. DOG is an interesting example. There are also lots of similarities in the grammatical morphemes, and while the OM/PIE resemblances are described explicitly, the OM/AA similarities are left to the reader to discover.

The conclusion is *not* that OM is related to PIE. Rather, the comparison shows how easily look-alikes are found. Resemblances between OM and AA that are also found between OM and PIE do not support the hypothesis of an AA affiliation for OM, regular phonological correspondences between OM and AA are established. But such correspondences have never been demonstrated.

Undoubtedly, many more look-alikes would have been found if we went beyond Fleming's cognates. Some are found in OM, PIE, and AA, like 'horn': OM KA *k'áro*, PIE **kʲer-*, AA AR *qarn*, others only in OM and PIE, like 'foot, leg': OM KA *baatoó*, PIE **pōd-~pod-~ped-* or 'wall': OM KA *duuhó*, IE **dhigʲh-s*.

5 Later studies

To the best of my knowledge, nobody has later presented a more convincing argumentation than Fleming (1969, 1974) for the OM Theory. In spite of this, this theory is the received opinion among Africanists. In this paragraph, I shall discuss some other attempts to support it.

5.1 M. Lionel Bender

Bender (1975, 2000, 2003; Fleming & Bender 1976) has argued for the OM Theory. Bender (2003) presents those *four* (!) POM words that he regards as likely lexical retentions from AA, that is, 2,7% of the items on Swadesh's 150 words list:

BIRD *kap-* • OCU *kanh-* 'bird, wing' • Se **k-n-p*.
DOG *kan-* • OCU *kar-* «??»
EYE *aap-* • OCU *ʔaykw* «??» • «More likely semantic transfer from [AA] 'mouth', e.g. AM *af*.»
SEW *sip-* • OCU *šekw-* • Se *š-f-y* 'sew, mend'.

None of these proposals are convincing. As I showed in the preceding paragraph, the OM words meaning 'dog' and 'eye' have parallels in PIE, and Bender's two new proposals, 'bird' and 'sew', can be compared to PIE **kap-* 'hawk, falcon' and **sep-* 'handle (skilfully), hold (reverently)'.

In addition, Bender (2003) presents 25 grammatical morphemes, repeated from Bender (2000), «likely to be retentions» from AA; cf. Table 4. Since he has found no lexical support for the OM Theory, these 25 morphemes are his only evidence (p. 314):

> Pending further work on [AA] lexicon, I am forced to the conclusion that lexicon alone cannot serve to establish Omotic as [AA]. Omotic has

a very innovative and mixed lexicon with many intrusions from [AA] languaes, especially Cushitic, and also from Nilo-Saharan. Morphological retentions establish Omotic as an [AA] family.

Table 4. Bender's 25 OM grammatical morphemes with alleged AA cognates

Independent Pronouns		*Verbal affixes*		*Nominal*	
2sg *n*	1	1sg *n*	2	nominal case *i*	3
3sg m *is*	2	2sg *n*	1	genitive *ka*	1
1pl *nu*	2	1pl *uni*	2	gentive *n*	2
2pl *int*	3	2pl *eti*	2	dative *s*	2
3pl *ist*	3	2pl *to*	3	*Verbal TMA System*	
Pronoun Gender and Case		*Interrogatives*		jussive *o~u*	3
absolutive *n*	1	Q particle *ay*	1	perfect *i~e*	2
Demonstratives		Q particle *al~ar*	2	perfect *a*	2
near *ha ~ ka*	1	Q particle *am*	2	*Derivations*	
Copulas/Connectives				causative *s*	1
be *k~g*	2			pas. / recip. *t*	2

1: Found in all Om branches. 2: Found in all but one Om branch.
3: Found in two branches with traces in one or two others.

Bender (2003) assumes an historical stability of morphology that cannot be taken for granted. Thomason (1980) (cited in Campbell 1997: 222-23) showed that «morphology is by no means so stable as to justify the assumption that lexical cognates may vanish almost entirely while the morphology holds firm» (1980: 360) and that «all the evidence available from well-documented language families indicates that morphological diversification goes along with elsewhere in diversification elsewhere in the grammar (1980: 368).

More than 50 percent of Bender's (2003) grammatical morphemes are monophonemic, and, as mentioned earlier, similarities are easiest to find for short morphemes, and especially when they consist of one highly frequent phoneme, which is in general the case with grammatical morphemes; cf. the discussion in Campbell (1997: 221-222).

Finally, Bender (2003) includes 5 pronouns. Campbell (1997: 240-52) has a detailed discussion of the controversial use of pronouns in establishing relatedness of languages, and concludes «by agreeing with Meillet that «pronouns must be used [only] with caution» (2003: 252). Pronouns tend to be

similar in all languages, and the consonants of pronouns are in general those found in grammatical morphemes in general. «The consonants that are used tend to be the ones that are least marked … *m, n, t, k,* and *s*» (1997: 243). The OM pronouns mentioned by Bender (2003) all contain *n, t,* or *s*.

5.2 Richard J. Hayward

Hayward (1990, 1995) supports the OM Theory, but apparently for reasons that are incompatible with Bender's: «[C]ertain grammatical formatives … often assumed … indispensable hallmarks of the [AA] phylum … are simply absent from Omotic» – while «[i]n terms of vocabulary … Omotic looks respectably [AA]» (1995: 13). On the same page, he refers to «Blažek (forthcoming)», who claims that in terms of shared vocabulary,

> Omotic looks like being a reasonably nuclear member of [AA]. For example Blažek claims that for some 80 per cent of the names for parts of the body found among the various Omotic languages cognates can be identified among the Chadic languages—which … is a family of languages situated on the other side of the African Continent.

I have not had access to Blažek's work, and Bender (2003) does not refer to it. To check Blažek's claims, I compared the body parts terms among Bender's (2003) POM reconstructions to Newman's (1977) and Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow's (1994) PCH reconstructions, and found no evidence.

5.3 Christopher Ehret

Ehret (1995) reconstructs 1024 PAA roots, and lists OM reflexes for round 435. Not surprisingly, he writes (1995: 9):

> The Omotic languages emerge from the available data as definitely Afroasiatic. The demonstrations in Fleming (1969, 1974) and Bender (1975) that Omotic forms a division of the family quite distinct from Cushitic seem fully convincing.

On the background of the discussions in earlier paragraphs of this paper, this is surprising. It is also worth mentioning that Ehret (1995) accepts only 9 of Fleming's (1974) 21 cognates: 1 ALL, 4 BONE, 6 COME, 7 BUILD, CREATE, 11 FLY, 12 GO, 13 HEART, 15 LICK, 17 MOUTH.

Many of Ehret's proposed 435 OM–AA cognates are far-fetched – morphologically, phonologically, semantically, and in other ways. It is impossible to show this in detail, but the following examples gives an impression of Ehret's methods:

AA ROOT 82 **-feŋ-* 'to set apart, move apart (tr.)' • SE AR *fann* 'species, kind, category; way, manner' • CU **fenḥ-* 'to spread apart' • OM OMT GA **penge* 'door'; «semantics: move apart > open > door».

AA ROOT 140 **dîm-/*dâm-* 'blood' • SE **dm (*dam)* 'blood' • EG *idmi* 'red linen' • CU **dîm-/*dâm-* 'red' • WCH **d-m-* 'blood' • OM GO **dam-* 'blood' «(MO *'damo*) (contra Leslau, loan < Sem. seems implausible in this case)»

AA ROOT 367 **-ɣâp-* 'to rise, arise' • SE AR *ɣafw* 'to float on the water' • EG *xpr* 'to come into being; become; grow up; occur, happen' • CU **ɣaap-/*ɣuup-* 'fruit' • NOM **kap-* 'bird'; «semantics: rise > fly».

AA ROOT 636 **-ŋôm-* 'to use the mouth (other than eating)' • SE AR *namm* 'breath, breeze' • EG *nmi* 'to shout, low' • PSCU **ŋûm* 'to pucker the lips (as in blowing)' • NOM **no:n-* 'mouth'; «presumed assim. *no:m- > *no:n-».

AA ROOT 637 **ŋaan* 'boy' • EG *nn* 'child' • CU BU *naw* 'small' boy' • some WCU **nan* 'brother' • NOM **na:m-* 'son'; «stem with nasal dissim., *nVn > *nVm».

AA ROOT 660 **-noh-* or **-ŋoh-* or *ɲoh-* 'to cry out' • SE **nḥḳ* 'to bray'; «stem + *k' intens. of effect» • OM YE *nòon* 'to murmur'; «[PRE-POM] *nohn-, stem + *n non-fin. > *no:n-».

AA ROOT 859 **-dlă?-* 'to decline, become low' • SE AR *ḍa?al* 'to make oneself small' • EG *ḏ?t* 'remainder, deficiency' • SCU Proto-Rift **tlatla?-* 'afternoon' • OM MO *t'à:'o* 'place'; «semantics: < presumed earlier sense "ground": ground is below one».

AA ROOT 914 **-tl'uw-* 'to rise' • SE Modern South AR **ṣwr* 'to stand, stay'; «stem + *r diffus.» • EG *ṯw?, tw?* 'to support, sustain, hold' • CU **ɬw* 'meat'; «Ng. *tlùwái*, stem + *y deverb.; semantics: rise > grow > live, + *y deverb. > animal (i.e., living creature) > meat» • NOM **t'umu* 'mountain'; «stem + *m n. suffix».

Ehret's methods are dubious, among other things in the following ways. Roots are broken up into *ad hoc* roots + suffixes; cf. root 660 «[PRE-POM] *nohn-, stem + *n non-fin. > *no:n-

». OM root 914 SE Modern South AR «stem + *r diffus.» and NOM «stem + *m n. suffix». This means that the etymologies are based upon a single consonant.

Ad hoc sound changes are «presumed»; cf. root 636 OM «presumed assim. *no:m- > *no:n-» and root 637 OM «stem with nasal dissim., *nVn > *nVm».

Meaning relations are often farfetched. Cf. root 914 SE 'to stand, stay', EG 'to support, sustain, hold', CU 'meat', OM 'mountain'; the reconstructed AA meaning is 'to rise'.

Ehret rejects Fleming's 3 BLOOD etymology and instead, cf. root 140, relates the AA form to GO **dam-* 'blood'. For some unknown reason he thinks that it is implausible that this is a loanword from Semitic. It is tempting to quote Meillet (1967: 51):

> The risk that a word is borrowed is always great, and the etymologist of an ancient or modern language who reasons is if the words to be explained had a priori every chance of being native exposes himself to frequent errors.

Root 140 cannot be used to prove a genetic relationship between OM and AA, because it *may* be a loanword. KA *damoó* 'blood' has exactly the form to be expected if borrowed from AM *däm* 'blood' (Theil, in press).

Ehret's claim that «[t]he Omotic languages emerge from the available data as definitely Afroasiatic» is not supported.

5.4 Marcello Lamberti

There are still scholars who argue that OM is a branch of CU. I include a few lines about Lamberti (1991), who argues for this view. He is of the opinion that (1991: 556)

> lexical arguments do not have a great weight within the evaluation of a genetic relationship because lexemes (also those of core vocabulary!) can easily undergo semantic changes, can be easily be replaced by new expressions, and can always be the result of borrowing … The morphology, on the contrary, represents the most conservative and intimate part of a language.

He goes on to present some comparisons of grammatical morphemes in different CU and OM languages. Some of the morphemes resemble each other, but no attempt is made to establish regular phonological correspondences between the languages. I shall discuss some of his suffixes.

He postulates a noun forming suffix **-tee,* which *inter alia* has the modern forms *-tsi* (CU AW), *-ti* (CU SO), *-ts^{j}* (OM ZA), and *-ti* (OM YE), but he does not account for the phonological variation. The ZA form is illustrated in «*d'an-ts^{j}* (udder) ← *d'am-* (suck)». A change **-tee* > ZA **-ts^{j}* is not well founded, and the phonemic analysis of the ZA form can be questioned. ZA is closely related to KO, which I know from my own field-work. The KO counterpart is *dànse* 'breast'; *s* is pronounced [ts] after *l, r,* and *n* (Theil, forthcoming). There are no reasons to believe that ZA *-se* comes from an earlier **-tee*.

Surprisingly, Lamberti (1991: 556-557) analyzes the KA suffix *-cco* in two different ways; as «*-ec-co*, e.g., *shatt-ec-co* (coward)», where *-ec-* is claimed to come from «the suffix for agent nouns **-aam*», and as «*-ccoo*, e.g. *Kafi-ccoo* (a Kafa man)», claimed to come from a singular noun suffix **-ttaa*. There are no morphological reasons for treating the KA *-cco* suffix as two different suffixes, and the assumed change «**-ttaa* > *-ccoo*» has no basis.

Lamberti (1991: 557) claims that the same **-ttaa* suffix has become *-tts^{j}* in ZA, «e.g. *akima-tts^{j}* (traditional doctor), cf. Amharic *hakim* (id.)». The analysis «*akima-tts^{j}*» is clearly wrong, and should be *akim-atts^{j}*; *atts^{j}* is a noun meaning 'person'. KO has *kèm-atse* 'hunter' and *yèem-atse* 'shepherd', which are compounds; cf. *kème* 'to hunt', *yèeme* 'to herd', and *àtse* 'person'.

Finally, Lamberti (1991: 558) claims that «the numerals 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 100, and 1,000» support the hypothesis that OM is a branch of CU. But he does write anything else about this question.

In conclusion, Lamberti (1991) does not present any interesting evidence in favor of a «Cushitic Theory».

6 Conclusion

My conclusion is that Omotic should be treated as an independent language family. No convincing alternative has ever been presented.

Hayward (1995: 11) writes that «[i]t is, of course, a relief not to have Omotic as an isolate; we do not need a whole family of 'Basques' on our hands!» An alternative point of view is possible. Africa is the cradle of mankind. Why are there no language isolates on a continent where humans have lived since language was invented?

7 Abbreviations

AA Afroasiatic
AEG Ancient Egyptian
A-K Aari-Kafa
AK Akkadian
AM Amharic
AMU Amuru
AN Anfillo
AAR Aari
AW Awngi
BA Basketo
BD Bedawie
BE Berber
BU Burunge
CA C'ara
CCU Central Cushitic
CH Chadic
CHA Chahar
COMT Central Ometo
CU Cushitic
DA Dawro
DI Dime
EA Eurasiatic (Greenberg)
ECU East Cushitic
EG Egyptian
EOMT East Ometo
GB (G) Gabri
GE Global etymology (Ruhlen)
GL Galab
GM Gamo
GO Gonga
HM Hamar
HS Hausa
IE Indo-European
KA (K) Kafa
KH Khamir
KO Koorete
KR Karo
MJ (M) Maji
ML Maale
MEG Middle Egyptian
MO Mocha
NOM North Omotic
OCU Old Cushitic
OM Omotic
OMT Ometo
OR Oromo
OSE Old South Ethiopic
PAA Proto-Afroasiatic
PCH Proto-Chadic
PIE Proto-Indo-European
PLECU Proto-Lowland East Cushitic
PNOM Proto-North Omotic
POM Proto-Omotic
PSCU Proto-South Cushitic
PSE Proto-Semitic
PSOM Proto-South Omotic
SE Semitic
SGO South Gonga
SH Shakicho
SI Sidamo
SO Somali
SOM South Omotic
TA Tamashek
UG Ugaritic
WCH West Chadic
WCU West Cushitic
WO Wolaitta
YE Yem
ZA Zayse

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