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On the African Origins of the Afroasiatic Language Family: A Response to Diamond and Bellwood

Diamond and Bellwood suggest that food production and the Afroasiatic language family were brought simultaneously from the Near East by demic diffusion **(1)**. In resurrecting this generally abandoned view, the authors misrepresent the late I.M. Diakonoff **(2)**; rely on linguistic reconstructions inapplicable to their claims **(4)**; and, surprisingly, fail to engage the five decades of Afroasiatic scholarship that rebutted this idea in the first place. This extensive, well-grounded linguistic research places the Afroasiatic homeland in the southeastern Sahara or adjacent Horn of Africa **(5-8)** and, when all of Afroasiatic's branches are included, strongly indicates a pre-food-producing proto-Afroasiatic economy **(2,3,8,9)**.

A careful reading of Diakonoff **(2)** shows his continuing adherence to his long-held position of an exclusively African origin **(3,6)** for the family. He explicitly describes proto-Afroasiatic vocabulary as consistent with *non-food-producing* and links it to pre-Neolithic cultures in the Levant *and* in Africa south of Egypt, noting the latter to be older. Diakonoff does revise his Common Semitic homeland, moving it from solely within northeast Africa to areas straddling the Delta and Sinai, but continues to place the other five branches' origins wholly in Africa **(2)**. Archaeological data suggest a pre-food-producing population movement from Africa into the Levant **(10)**, consistent with the linguistic arguments for a pre-Neolithic migration of pre-*proto-Semitic* speakers out of Africa via Sinai.

The proto-language of each Afroasiatic branch developed its own distinct vocabulary of food production, further supporting the view that herding and cultivation emerged separately in each branch distinctly *after* the proto-Afroasiatic period **(8,9)**. Diamond and Bellwood adopt Militarev's **(4)** solitary counter-claim

of proto-Afroasiatic cultivation. However, not one of Militarev's proposed 32 agricultural roots can be considered diagnostic of cultivation. Fifteen are glossed as names of plants or loose categories of plants. Such evidence may reveal plants known to early Afroasiatic speakers; but it does not diagnose whether they were cultivated or wild. Militarev's remaining roots are each semantically mixed, i.e., they have food-production-related meanings in some languages, but in other languages have meanings applicable to foraging or equally applicable to foraging or cultivating.

Furthermore, the archaeology of northern Africa does not support early Neolithic demic intrusion from Asia. The evidence presented by Wetterstrom (11) indicates that early African farmers in the Fayum initially incorporated Near Eastern domesticates into an indigenous *foraging strategy*, and only over time developed a dependence on horticulture. This is inconsistent with in-migrating farming settlers, who would have brought more abrupt change in subsistence strategy. The same archaeological pattern occurs west of Egypt, where domestic animals and, later, grains were gradually adopted after 8-7000 BP into the established pre-agricultural Capsian culture, present across the northern Sahara since 10,000 BP (12). From this continuity it has been argued that the pre-food production Capsian peoples spoke languages ancestral to the Berber and/or Chadic branches of Afroasiatic (9). Furthermore, there is evidence that cattle domestication independently occurred in the early Holocene eastern Sahara, earlier than in the Near East (13), casting doubt on the idea of unidirectional spread of food production from the Levant.

A critical reading of the data in genetic analyses, specifically those of Y chromosome phylogeography and TaqI 49a,f haplotypes, supports the hypothesis of populations moving from the Horn or southeastern Sahara northwards to the Nile Valley, northwest Africa, the Levant, and Aegean (14,15). The geography of the M35/215 (or 215/M35) *lineage*, which is of Horn/East African origin, is largely concordant with the range of Afroasiatic. Underhill et al. state that this lineage was carried from Africa during the "Mesolithic" (14). The distributions of the Afroasiatic subfamilies and this lineage can best be explained by invoking movements that occurred *before* the emergence of food production as well as after.

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