

Wilhelm von Humboldt and the study of the Kawi language

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

If he were alive today, Wilhelm von Humboldt would be most excited to learn of the new evidence which has come to light, of the third century B.C. voyage from Egypt to the South Pacific and on to America. Von Humboldt, who was the greatest thinker of the German school of philology, died in 1835, fifty years before the cave drawings in Chile were discovered, and 140 years before Barry Fell's decipherment of the inscriptions there and in Polynesia. Von Humboldt would have seized on these findings with joy, seeing in them a confirmation of his studies of the languages of the region.

Humboldt's last and greatest work, in fact, was entitled *Über die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java (On the Kawi Language on the Island of Java)*. Written during 1830-33, it was published posthumously between 1836 and 1839. There were no further editions, and the work has not been translated as a whole.

The most famous part of the work was its introduction, entitled "Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts"; this one part has been translated into English, *On Language: the Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (Boston, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1988). This piece was von Humboldt's crowning achievement in the theory of language, and the language group he examined in the main corpus of the work, was the Malayan-Polynesian group.

Skill as navigators

Significantly, the introduction opens with the following words: "If we consider their dwelling-place, their mode of government, their history, and above all, their language, the peoples of Malayan race stand in a stranger connection with races of different culture than perhaps any other people on earth. They inhabit merely islands and archipelagoes, which are spread so far and wide, however, as to furnish irrefutable testimony of their early skill as navigators."

The author goes on to expand his concept of the Malayan group of languages, considering the close relations among the languages, to include people in the Philippines, "and there in the most richly developed and individual state of

language, on Java, Sumatra, Malacca and Madagascar." He continues: "But a large number of incontestable verbal affinities, and even the names of a significant number of islands, give evidence that the isles lying close to these points have the same population too, and that the more strictly *Malayan speech-community* extends over that whole area of the South Asiatic Ocean which runs southwards from the Philippines down to the western coasts of New Guinea, and then west about the island chains adjoining the eastern tip of Java, into the waters of Java and Sumatra, up to the strait of Malacca."

The key language which von Humboldt identifies in this group, which he was the first to study and so classify, is the Kawi language. Kawi was the poetical language of the epic poem, known as the "Brata Yuddha" ("The War of the Bharatas"), which was inspired by the Indian epic Baghavadgita. It is on the basis of the text of this poem, that von Humboldt elaborated a grammar of the Kawi language.

What fascinated von Humboldt about the Kawi language, was the extent to which it had been influenced by Sanskrit language culture. "Nowhere else, perhaps, do we find a second example of a nation that, without surrendering its independence, has been permeated to this degree by the mental cultivation of another." Yet, the elements of Sanskrit which Kawi assimilated, were incorporated according to rules which are properly the language of Java.

Some intriguing questions

This raises the question, of Indian influence in the following manner: "whether, that is, the whole civilization of the archipelago is entirely of Indian origin? and whether, too, from a period preceding all literature and the latest and most refined development of speech, there have existed connections between Sanskrit and the Malayan languages in the widest sense, that can still be demonstrated in the common elements of speech?"

Von Humboldt believed that the first question should be answered in the negative, and that there was "a true and indigenous civilization" on the archipelago. The second question, he answered in the affirmative, on the basis of the extraordinary and far-reaching similarities in vocabulary and grammar between these languages, from Madagascar to the South Sea island, and Sanskrit.

The other, most intriguing question raised by von Humboldt, is the nature of the indigeneous language, what is the underlying or substratum language, beneath the Sanskrit. Here is the area where the findings of Barry Fell and others would be of particular relevance. What is the relationship of the language, which Fell identified as an ancient Egyptian dialect, transposed to Polynesia, of which the Maori inscriptions provide the historical record? Is the language which the students of Eratosthenes took to Java, the same language von Humboldt identified as the non-Sanskrit language of Java, and its relatives throughout the area?