

£3 (\$6)

SENZAR

THE MYSTERY OF THE MYSTERY LANGUAGE



THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY CENTRE
LONDON
1988

SENZAR

**THE MYSTERY OF THE
MYSTERY LANGUAGE**

JOHN ALGEO

**THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY CENTRE
LONDON
1988**

This publication is made possible by assistance
from Blavatsky Trust, London.

Copyright © 1988
John Algeo

SENZAR

THE MYSTERY OF THE MYSTERY LANGUAGE

AMONG THE CURIOUS LORE of H. P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* are her references to a language she called Senzar. Senzar is a mystery. According to Blavatsky, it is the original language of the Stanzas of Dzyan, which are the core of her great book, and of certain commentaries and glosses upon the Book of Dzyan, from which the Stanzas come (1: xxii). * Other commentaries and glosses are in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit.

The version of the Stanzas that Blavatsky presents in *The Secret Doctrine* is said to be an abridgment of the originals, blending together the text of the Stanzas with various glosses (1:23). Some versions of the Stanzas themselves are in other languages; for example, stanza 6 is said to be translated from a Chinese text (1:136n).

The impression we get, then, is that the wording of the Stanzas in the *SD* is not simply a translation of some fixed text in a language called Senzar, but is rather a restatement for modern students of such parts of the Stanzas as Blavatsky herself understood, drawing upon such sources as she had available to make the ideas more comprehensible. That is, the Stanzas of Dzyan, as we have them, are not a fixed sacred text, but an approximation. The version we have is less a translation than a paraphrase. That difference is important for an understanding of what kind of language Senzar is.

Blavatsky calls Senzar "a tongue absent from the nomenclature of languages and dialects with which philology is acquainted" (1:xxxvii), and so it is. The name of Senzar appears in none of the lists of the world's languages that linguists have compiled, nor is it ever likely to. We know about Senzar only what HPB has told us, although in fact she has told us a good deal.

*References to volume and page number only are to *The Secret Doctrine* (the original pagination); other references are identified by abbreviations. The edition of *The Secret Doctrine* by Boris de Zirkoff is useful for its editorial apparatus but takes minor liberties with the text. Therefore quotations are from the Pasadena Centennial Edition.

Senzar and Other Languages

Much of what Blavatsky says about Senzar makes it seem to be an ordinary language like other languages, especially if we read her comments uncritically or with an excessively literal interpretation. Indeed, the question of Senzar's identity is significant precisely because it is a typical case of the temptation to interpret Blavatsky (and other theosophical authorities) in a literal, materialistic way, when what they are talking about is often something more symbolic and abstract.

The temptation to literalize is ever present and is fostered by Blavatsky herself. For example, she describes a dream in which she was studying Senzar in her teacher KH's house at the same time she was improving her English with his aid (*ML* 471). We might leap to the conclusion that Senzar and English are similar things. This description was, however, of a dream only, and even so, it tells us nothing about the nature of Senzar.

In addition, in *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky quotes a "Senzar Catechism" (1:9), which is elsewhere referred to as the "Esoteric [or Occult] Catechism." We might suppose that this catechism is written in Senzar. But that is not necessarily so; it may instead be about Senzar, since its alternative titles suggest that it is about esoteric or occult subjects.

The straightforward definition of Senzar in *The Theosophical Glossary* (295) also makes it sound like an ordinary language put to extraordinary uses:

Senzar. The mystic name for the secret sacerdotal language or the "Mystery-speech" of the initiated Adepts, all over the world.

Because of statements like this, we can assume that when Blavatsky elsewhere uses expressions like "secret sacerdotal language" or "mystery speech," she is probably referring to Senzar.

Yet Blavatsky sometimes uses terms in broad and overlapping senses. Consequently we cannot be sure that all her statements about a "primordial," "sacred," "secret," "sacerdotal," or "mystery" language refer to Senzar, though it seems likely that many of them do. Some apparent contradictions, however, may be due to her using such terms of both

Senzar and other languages. We cannot be sure. Even her use of the terms *language* and *speech* is by no means so conclusive as it might appear in identifying what Senzar is--a matter considered in more detail below.

Blavatsky does explicitly compare Senzar and other ordinary languages. For example, she speaks of the "Senzar and Sanskrit alphabets" (*CW* 12:642), as though they were parallel things. She contrasts Sanskrit as an ancient vernacular language with "the sacred or Mystery-language, that which, even in our own age, is used by the Hindu fakirs and initiated Brahmans in their magical evocations" (*Isis* 2:46). She calls the "sacerdotal language" or "mystery-tongue" the "direct progenitor" or "root" of Sanskrit (2:200, *CW* 5:298) and identifies Senzar as being "ancient Sanskrit" (*Isis* 1:440).

Blavatsky also seems to relate Senzar to Avestan, the language of the most ancient Persian scriptures. Yet her comments in that regard are susceptible of more than one interpretation.

The book containing the ancient Persian hymns is often called the Zend-Avesta; hence the name *Zend* was formerly used for the language in which the book was written. However, the word *zend* means a 'commentary,' and so *Zend-Avesta* denotes something like 'Interpreted Avesta' or 'Avesta with Comments.' Blavatsky is well aware of the proper meaning of *Zend* when she makes a punning identification of it with Senzar, in the kind of "occult etymology" that she was fond of, but that no philologist would accept as having historical validity. We might call such wordplay "synchronic etymology." There is no historical, causal connection between the words in question, but their similarity of sound is a meaningful coincidence.

What HPB says about Zend and Senzar bears careful examination:

*By contrast with the usual sort of diachronic (or historical) etymology that philologists practice and with allusion to C. G. Jung's principle of synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence (John Algeo, "Wisdom Etymology," *Theosophical Research Journal* 4 [1987]: 60-65).

. . . the word "Zend" does not apply to any language, whether dead or living, and never belonged to any of the languages or dialects of ancient Persia. . . . It means, as in one sense correctly stated, "a commentary or explanation," but it also means that which the Orientalists do not seem to have any idea about, VIZ., the "rendering of the esoteric into exoteric sentences," the veil used to conceal the correct meaning of the *Zen-(d)-zar* texts, the sacerdotal language in use among the initiates of archaic India. Found now in several undecipherable inscriptions, it is still used and studied unto this day in the secret communities of the Eastern adepts, and called by them--according to the locality--*Zend-zar* and *Brahma* or *Deva-Bhashya*. (CW 4:517-18n)

Bhashya is Sanskrit for 'speaking, talking'; thus *Brahma-Bhashya* or *Deva-Bhashya* means 'divine language.' Elsewhere, HPB cites a letter in which the "secret sacerdotal language" is called *Senzar Brahma-bhāshya* (CW 5:62).

HPB's remarks on Zend cited above are echoed in the *Glossary* (386):

Zend means "a commentary or explanation" . . . As the translator of the *Vendīdād* remarks . . . "what it is customary to call 'the Zend language', ought to be named 'the Avesta language', the Zend being no language at all . . . Why should not the Zend be of the same family, if not identical with the *Zen-sar*, meaning also the speech *explaining the abstract symbol*, or the "mystery language," used by Initiates?

However, if Zend and Senzar are "of the same family, if not identical," and if Zend is "no language at all," what shall we conclude about the nature of Senzar? Apparently that it too is no language at all. Moreover, in both the above passages, HPB indicates that Senzar (under the punning names *Zend-zar* and *Zen-sar*) has something to do with interpreting esoteric communications into exoteric forms and with explaining abstract symbols. This connection with abstract symbols is significant, as we shall see.

Despite these comparisons of Senzar with ordinary language, and other such comparisons noted below, Senzar is no ordinary form of speech. It is secret. It is distributed over the whole globe. It is used by initiated adepts. It involves the explanation (*zend*) of abstract symbols. And it has other peculiarities that set it off from ordinary language.

Some Puzzles about Senzar

Another of HPB's language comparisons creates a puzzle for interpretation, if we assume that by Senzar she is talking about an ordinary language:

The Neter Khari (hieratic alphabet) and secret (sacerdotal) speech of the Egyptians is closely related to the oldest "Secret Doctrine Speech." It is a Devanagari with mystical combinations and additions, into which the Senzar largely enters. (CW 14:97)

Hieratic is a cursive form of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Its comparison to Devanagari (the form of writing used for Sanskrit) probably refers only to the sacred use of both scripts; they are quite different in appearance and principles. If "the oldest 'Secret Doctrine Speech'" is Senzar, as seems likely, HPB twice states a relationship between Senzar and hieroglyphics--a difficult statement to understand in view of her earlier linkage of Senzar and Sanskrit, since it and Egyptian have no known affinity.*

There are other puzzles in HPB's statements about Senzar. One comes during her discussion of the identity of Amida Buddha, in which she states, "'Amida' is the Senzar form of 'Ādi'" (CW 14:425). *Amida* is

*Some Russian linguists have proposed a linkage between Hamito-Semitic (which includes Egyptian) and Indo-European (which includes Sanskrit) in a hypothetical Nostratic language family; however, this theory is generally regarded as speculative. In any case, Blavatsky seems to be talking more about writing systems than about language proper in the passage cited above. Her conflation of writing and speech is discussed below.

in fact the Japanese form of the Sanskrit word *Amitabha*, the name of one of the five (or esoterically seven) Dhyani Buddhas that symbolize the creative power of the Adi or Primordial Buddha. If we take HPB's statement as an etymology, she is wrong on two counts. *Amida* is Japanese, not Senzar (unless Senzar is also Japanese, as well as Sanskrit and Egyptian); and *Amida* does not mean the same as *Adi*.

Moreover, HPB must certainly have known those simple facts. And therefore she must have meant something other than a simple etymology by her statement. In fact, HPB was not much interested in or concerned about the philologist's form of etymology; she was far more interested in a symbolic connection between things. This peculiar statement must be a symbolic one, a possibility to which we return later.

As a final example of the many puzzles surrounding Senzar, we can note the legend of the marvelous Kumbum tree. It is a tree that is supposed to grow only in Tibet and to have sprung originally from one of the hairs of the Lama Tsong-kha-pa, an avatar of the Buddha. Blavatsky quotes an account by the Abbé Huc, who says that the leaves and bark of this tree have impressed upon them letters and characters and that, if the surface bark is peeled off, different characters appear on the deeper layers.

The tale is a familiar sort of traveler's marvelous narrative, but to it HPB adds several details. She says that the writing on the Kumbum tree is

in the Sansar (or language of the Sun), characters (ancient Sanskrit); and that the sacred tree, in its various parts, contains *in extenso* the whole history of the creation, and in substance the sacred books of Buddhism. In this respect, it bears the same relation to Buddhism as the pictures in the Temple of Dendera, in Egypt, do to the ancient faith of the Pharaohs. (*Isis* 1:440)

The association of Senzar with Sanskrit has already been noted, and the comparison of Senzar with pictures is dealt with hereafter. Blavatsky adds that the pictures from the Egyptian temple allegorically represent a cosmogony (*Isis* 1:441). That is a significant point since Senzar is also used in the Stanzas of Dzyan to express a cosmogony.

Elsewhere, Blavatsky repeats the main points about the Kumbum tree and insists that

The letter-tree of Tibet is a fact; and moreover, the inscriptions in its leaf-cells and fibres are in the SEN-ZAR, or sacred language used by the Adepts, and in their totality comprise the whole Dharma of Buddhism and the history of the world. (*CW* 4:350-51)

The Kumbum tree is as much a mystery as the Senzar writing that appears upon it.

Some of what Blavatsky says about Senzar raises it from the realm of the ordinary to that of the extraordinary--indeed, of the fantastic, if her comments are taken literally. She links Senzar with such different writing systems as hieroglyphics and devanagari. She identifies a Japanese word as a Senzar form of Sanskrit. She says that the legendary Kumbum tree's leaves and bark are impressed with Senzar symbols spelling out the whole of Buddhist teaching and world history. What kind of language can be and do all those things?

The Ancient Mystery Language

When Blavatsky talks about Senzar itself, she provides a very ancient genealogy for the language. She says that "there was a time when the whole world was 'of one lip and of one knowledge'" (1:229), which is to say that "there was, during the youth of mankind, one language, one knowledge, one universal religion" (1:341). In this idea, HPB is echoing Ralston Skinner, who in a passage quoted in *The Secret Doctrine* postulates "an ancient language which modernly and up to this time appears to have been lost, the vestiges of which, however, abundantly exist" (1:308).

Blavatsky frequently repeats this idea, mentioning "the one sacerdotal universal tongue" (*CW* 14:196), "one universal esoteric, or 'Mystery'-Language . . . the language of the Hierophants, which has seven 'dialects,' so to speak, each referring, and being specially appropriate, to one of the seven mysteries of Nature" (1:310), and she says that this "secret language, common to all schools of occult science[,] once prevailed throughout the world" (*CW* 5:306).

This "secret sacerdotal tongue" is Senzar, the language in which was written "an old book," the original work from which the books of Kiu-ti were compiled. The books of Kiu-ti are a series of occult Tibetan works, of which the Book of Dzyan is one (1:679, de Zirkoff ed.). The "old book" was taken down in Senzar "from the words of the Divine Beings, who dictated it to the sons of Light, in Central Asia, at the very beginning of the 5th (our) Race." But Senzar itself is much older than that,

for there was a time when its language (the *Sen-zar*) was known to the Initiates of every nation, when the forefathers of the Toltec understood it as easily as the inhabitants of the lost Atlantis, who inherited it, in their turn, from the sages of the 3rd Race, the *Manushis*, who learnt it direct from the *Devas* of the 2nd and 1st Races. (1:xliv)

The foregoing passage is of considerable interest, since, in providing such antiquity for the history of Senzar, it has effectively indicated that Senzar is not properly a language at all. In commenting on sloka 36 of stanza 9 from the Anthropogenesis series, in a passage called "The Fourth Race developed Speech," Blavatsky says:

The Commentaries explain that the first Race--the etherial or astral Sons of Yoga, also called "Self-born"--was, in our sense, speechless, as it was devoid of mind on our plane. . . . The Third Race developed in the beginning a kind of language which was only a slight improvement on the various sounds in Nature, on the cry of gigantic insects and of the first animals The whole human race was at that time of "one language and of one lip." (2:198)

Obviously, it could not have been much of a language or of a lip. Indeed, this primeval sort of communication is not what we would call language at all. Since Blavatsky says that language, in our ordinary sense of the term, was not developed until the Fourth Race period, that which was learnt from the Devas of the First and Second Races and inherited from the sages of the Third must be something other than ordinary language.

Whatever Senzar was, HPB tells how it came to be a secret, sacerdotal "language" (*CW* 14:180-81). After reiterating the claim that "there was in antiquity one knowledge and one language," she says that the knowledge together with the language in which it is expressed became esoteric after the submersion of Atlantis, "and, from being universal, it became limited to the few." The memory of the esotericizing of "the 'one-lip'"--or the Mystery-language--, "knowledge of which was "gradually denied to subsequent generations," was preserved in the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, concerning a time when human beings were prevented from understanding each other's speech because of their sin of presumption.

As a result of the esotericizing of Senzar, two languages came into use in every nation: "(a) the profane or popular language of the masses; (b) the sacerdotal or secret language of the Initiates of the temples and mysteries--the latter being one and universal" (*CW* 5:297). This divided state of affairs is not, however, to continue indefinitely. When Blavatsky remarks "that the whole cycle of the universal mystery language will not be mastered for whole centuries to come" (1:318), she implies that the once generally known and now esoteric language will again one day be fully mastered by humanity.

The existence of sacred languages is well-known throughout the world. Latin was, and to a limited extent still is, such a sacred language for Western Christendom. Hebrew is such a language for Judaism. Sanskrit is for Hinduism, and Pali for Southern Buddhism. Sacred languages are used in scriptures, for rituals, and often for scholarly writings on religious subjects. Such sacred languages may be intended by *The Theosophical Glossary's* entry for *mystery language* (220):

The sacerdotal secret jargon employed by the initiated priests, and used only when discussing sacred things. Every nation had its own "mystery" tongue, unknown save to those admitted to the Mysteries.

HPB puts such great emphasis on the unity of the one mystery language of Senzar that, if we are to understand literally the statement here that every nation had its own (by implication, distinct) language, then what is intended must be something like the sacred languages of various religions rather than the primordial mystery language called Senzar. Generally when HPB talks about the one universal mystery language, she means something considerably more basic and mysterious

than a run-of-the-mill sacred language. HPB does sometimes use one term for several referents, so we should probably distinguish between the one primordial mystery language of all humanity, which she calls Senzar, and the various mystery languages of individual cultures, which are sacred languages like Latin, Hebrew, and Sanskrit.

Blavatsky's history of Senzar traces it back to the primordial times of our world cycle, before humanity had a physical tongue to speak with or a mind to think with. It was the common possession of nascent humanity before language proper had developed at all. Then a point came in the evolution of our species when a great disruption occurred, symbolized by such myths as the Tower of Babel, the Flood, and the destruction of Atlantis. Primitive communion was broken, a disjunction separated what is consciously known from what is subconsciously remembered, and a portion of the human mind sank into the waters of the unconscious as another portion became consciously active.

The myths of Babel, the Flood, and Atlantis seem to speak of such a separation within the human soul by which the conscious and unconscious aspects of our mind came into being as separate modes, replacing the undivided and undifferentiated mind of proto-humanity. Senzar was the common language of humanity before that division. After the differentiation of conscious from unconscious mind, Senzar became the "esoteric" language, that is, the language of the unconscious, which the initiated adept translates into the public exoteric languages of the conscious mind.

Language, Languages, and Writing

To make sense out of the mysteries surrounding Senzar, we need also to consider the meanings of the word *language*. Like most other words, it has more than one use. If we understand a word in one of its meanings, whereas it was intended by its producer in a different meaning, the result is confusion and misinterpretation.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary has six main, including fourteen subsidiary, meanings for the word *language*, two of which are of especial relevance here. The first meaning is

the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a considerable community and established by long usage.

Examples cited for this meaning are "French language," "Bantu group of languages," and "classical Latin is a dead language." Another meaning, however, is

a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings.

Examples cited for this second meaning are "finger language," "language of flowers," "language of painting," and "mathematics is a universally understood language." Restricting our consideration to these two meanings out of fourteen, we can construct a language "tree" to show some sorts of things that have been called "language" (figure 1).

Language in the first sense, which is ordinary human language, can be either speech or writing, the first being language proper and the latter a visual representation of spoken language.

Speech can be either (1) literal in its use, so that by it we mean exactly what we say (and a spade is a spade); or it can be (2) figurative, symbolic, so that by it we mean something other than what we say (and a spade--as in the suit of cards--may then stand for a sword, which is a symbol for the intellect). Ordinary literal languages include our ordinary, everyday uses of English, French, Bantu, Tamil, ancient Latin, and a great many others. The figurative uses of language include allegories, like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; parables, like those in the gospels; and myths, like those about the ancient Greek gods.

There are two kinds of writing. One consists of characters representing the sounds of a language, called (3) phonograms. The other consists of characters representing the words of the language, called (4) ideographs.

Each phonogram may stand for an individual sound, as the letters of our own alphabet do, or it also may stand for a whole syllable, like the characters in a Japanese form of writing called kana. A rebus is a punning form of writing in which signs representing things are used to stand instead for the sound of the thing's name; for example, a

picture of a bee followed by a picture of a leaf might stand for *belief* (bee-leaf).

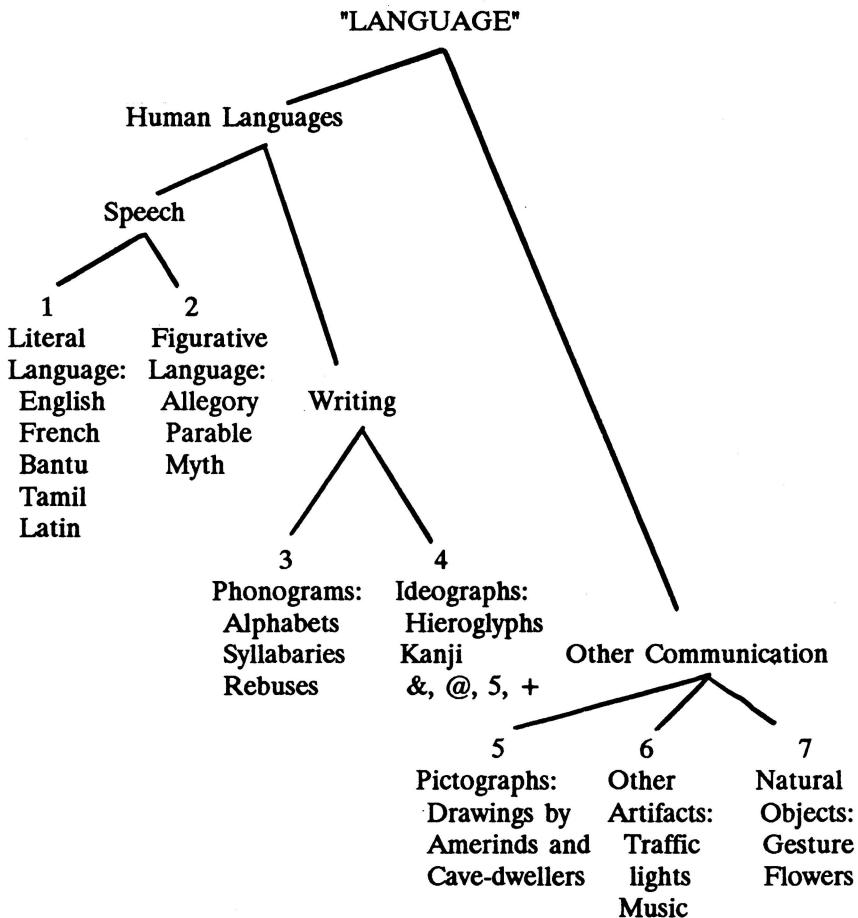


Figure 1: Types of "Language"

An ideograph, on the other hand, stands for a whole word and represents its meaning rather than its sound. Egyptian hieroglyphics used ideographs, as does another form of Japanese writing called kanji, which is derived from the Chinese ideographs. We use a few ideographs in English: & and @ (the signs for 'and' and 'at'), numerals like 5, and the signs of mathematical operations like + for 'plus'. Some of these signs are used in all European languages, though pronounced differently in each language; thus 5 is "five" in English, "fünf" in German, and "cinco" in Spanish, but it always means the same thing.

Language in the second sense, a nonlinguistic sort of communication system, includes (5) pictographs--pictures that are intended to convey particular meanings, such as those drawn by the American Indians or the cave dwellers in Europe. It also includes the symbolic use of things we make--(6) artifacts such as red and green traffic lights, or music that conveys ideas and feelings. In addition, it includes the symbolic use of (7) natural objects: we can read meanings in facial gestures, or we talk about the language of flowers, in which pansies represent thought; lilies, purity; and forget-me-nots, remembrance.

The fact that so many different things can be called language is not a recent discovery. Ralston Skinner, in a passage quoted by HPB (1:308), points to this very fact:

To clear up an ambiguity as to the term language:
Primarily the word means the expression of ideas by
human speech; but, secondarily, it may mean the ex-
pression of ideas by any other instrumentality.

It is, however, easy to confuse the many senses of language, and any of us may do so when we talk about ways of conveying meaning. We often confuse speech with writing in a careless manner of talking about one or the other, and so did Blavatsky. Thus she remarks, "The Devanāgarī--the Sanskrit characters--is the 'Speech of the Gods' and Sanskrit the divine language" (CW 7:264). On the one hand, she correctly distinguishes between devanagari, the characters for writing Sanskrit, and the Sanskrit language or speech itself; but at the same time, she refers to the written characters as "speech," an obvious inconsistency. Blavatsky may have been thinking of the Sanskrit word as meaning 'speech of the gods,' but its etymological sense is rather 'divine city (writing).'

Devanagari is a cross between an alphabet and a syllabary. It has some letters that represent vowels (when the vowels form syllables without any consonant) and other letters that represent consonants plus the vowel sound /a/. Diacritic marks (signs like accents) are added above or below a consonant letter to show that it is followed by some vowel other than /a/ or that it is followed by no vowel at all. Although an unusual form of writing, devanagari is clearly one in which the characters stand for sounds. Therefore it is puzzling when HPB remarks:

Real Devanagari -- non-phonetic characters -- meant formerly the outward signals, so to say, *the signs used in the intercommunication between gods and initiated mortals.*
(CW 5:306)

The writing system we know as devanagari has clearly phonetic characters. So either HPB means that earlier the characters had some additional, nonphonetic value, or she means that the historical devanagari developed out of or was influenced by or replaced some earlier nonphonetic system of writing. The importance of this remark about devanagari is that it shows one must be careful in interpreting what HPB means. A facile interpretation is likely to be wrong.

It is even possible that the "real devanagari" HPB refers to may not be a writing system at all--at least, in the strict sense of a system of visible marks that represent the sounds or words of a language. In the *Glossary* (316), the term *symbolism* is defined thus:

The pictorial expression of an idea or a thought. Primordial *writing* had at first no characters, but a symbol generally stood for a whole phrase or sentence. A symbol is thus a recorded parable, and a parable a spoken symbol. The Chinese written language is nothing more than symbolical writing, each of its several thousand letters being a symbol.

Several different things are combined in that statement. Chinese writing is properly speaking ideographic; that is, its characters stand basically for word meanings rather than word sounds. When, however, a pictorial symbol stands for a whole group of ideas or thoughts that might be variously expressed by a sentence or group of sentences, it is a pictograph and is not properly writing at all, but rather a form of communication out of which primordial writing may indeed have developed. An

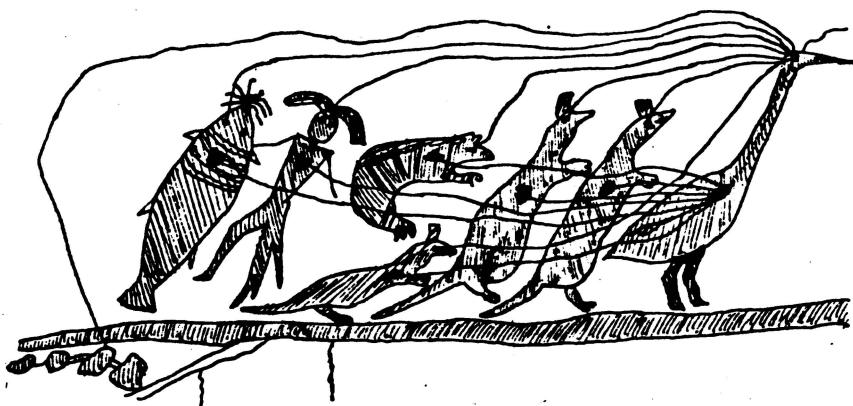


Figure 2: An American Indian Pictograph

A petition sent by a group of seven tribes, indicated by their totem creatures, asking for fishing rights in four lakes. Lines connecting the eyes and hearts of the seven indicate that they "see eye to eye" and are of "one heart" in the request. The line from the leading figure (a crane totem) to the lakes indicates that they are thinking about those bodies of water.

example of a pictograph is an Amerindian drawing that depicts a petition for fishing rights by seven Indian tribes (figure 2).

Symbols can be pictures, like the Amerindian pictograph, or more abstract drawings, like the yantras of some forms of Hinduism. They can be other objects, either natural ones like the Himalayas or artificial ones like Stonehenge. They can be words, either spoken or written. Words are especially likely to be symbolic when they are used figuratively, in parables or allegories. Moreover the same idea can be expressed symbolically through a variety of alternative forms, in which case the alternative forms are equivalents (as HPB says, a "symbol is

thus a recorded parable, and a parable a spoken symbol"). So Skinner, as quoted by HPB (1:308), remarks about the ancient mystery language:

The peculiarity of this language was that it could be contained in another, concealed and not to be perceived, save through the help of special instruction; letters and syllabic signs possessing at the same time the powers or meaning of numbers, of geometrical shapes, pictures, or ideographs and symbols, the designed scope of which would be determinatively helped out by parables in the shape of narratives or parts of narratives; while also it could be set forth separately, independently, and variously, by pictures, in stone work, or in earth construction.

Skinner says of this mystery language he has hypothesized, which Blavatsky elsewhere calls Senzar, that it can be expressed in a concealed fashion in ordinary language through the symbolism of letter shapes and correspondences, but also through parabolic stories and visually in constructions of many kinds. The mystery language is thus not a single form of expression, but is rather a symbolic use of many different forms.

The word *language* can be used to refer to many different things: to human speech or written representations of it, to symbolic drawings and the symbolic use of objects of all types. All of those are varieties of communication systems. Cutting across the many senses of the word *language* as a communication system are two main modes of meaning: literal and symbolic.

Literal meaning is that by which things are themselves (as a spade is a spade) or represent other things simply and straightforwardly (as the word *book* represents printed sheets of paper bound together). Symbolic meaning is that by which things--words, stories, events, objects --represent other things in a complex and allusive way, by analogies and correspondences (as a cross represents matter, suffering, the world, and so on). Senzar does not seem to be a language in the sense of a simple communication system. Instead it looks more like a mode of meaning --the symbolic mode--applied to any sort of language system.

What Is Senzar?

So what is this "mystery language" of HPB's? What kind of "language" is Senzar? Blavatsky says that the hermetic philosophers (that is, alchemists) of the Middle Ages

renovated the ancient symbolical language of the high-priests of antiquity, who had used it as a sacred barrier between their holy rites and the ignorance of the profane, and created a veritable Cabalistic slang. This latter, which continually blinded the false neophyte, attracted towards the science only by his greediness for wealth and power which he would have surely misused were he to succeed, is a living, eloquent, clear language; but it is and can become such, only to the true disciple of Hermes. (*CW* 1:131)

In this passage, Blavatsky is clearly talking about alchemical "jargon" and saying that properly understood it is full of high meaning and also that it is a renovated form of the "ancient symbolical language," apparently a reference to Senzar. Similarly, Blavatsky says that the Jewish holy writings from the Pentateuch to the Talmud were written

in a kind of Mystery-language, were, in fact, a series of symbolical records which the Jews had copied from the Egyptian and the Chaldaean Sanctuaries, only adapting them to their own national history. (*CW* 14:170)

Again, what is meant by a "mystery language" here is an allegorical or symbolic use of narrative language, such as the biblical narratives of the creation, the fall, the crossing of the red sea, and so on (as interpreted in considerable detail by Alvin Boyd Kuhn, Geoffrey Hodson, and others). Blavatsky makes various references to such symbolism:

. . . the art of speaking and writing in a language which bears a double interpretation, is of very great antiquity; . . . it was in practice among the priests of Egypt, brought from thence by the Manichees, whence it passed to the Templars and Albigenses, spread over Europe, and brought about the Reformation. (quoted from Charles Sotheran, *CW* 1:126)

The Hierophants and Initiates of the Mysteries in the Secret Schools . . . had one universal, Esoteric tongue--the language of symbolism and allegory. This language has suffered neither modification nor amplification from those remote times down to this day. It still exists and is still taught. There are those who have preserved the knowledge of it, and also of the arcane meaning of the Mysteries; and it is from these Masters that the writer of the present protest had the good fortune of learning, howbeit imperfectly, the said language. Hence her claim to a more correct comprehension of the arcane portion of the ancient texts written by avowed Initiates--such as were Plato and Iamblichus, Pythagoras, and even Plutarch . . . (CW 13:153-54)

As the Egyptian hierophants had their private code of hieratic symbols, and even the founder of Christianity spoke to the vulgar in parables whose mystical meaning was known only to the chosen few, so the Brahmins had from the first (and still have) a mystical terminology couched behind ordinary expressions, arranged in certain sequences and mutual relations, which none but the initiate would observe. (CW 5:296)

It is hard to imagine plainer statements than those just cited. Clearly, the "one universal, Esoteric tongue" is "the language of symbolism and allegory." Blavatsky also speaks of the mystery language as involving ideographs, hieroglyphs, and pictorial representations. She claims that of all the sacred and philosophical works ever written, those whose texts were not already veiled in symbolism have been "copied in cryptographic characters" (1:xxiii-xxiv). Further she says:

The Secret Doctrine teaches us that the arts, sciences, theology, and especially the philosophy of every nation which preceded the last *universally known*, but not universal Deluge, had been recorded ideographically from the primitive oral records of the Fourth Race, and that these were the inheritance of the latter from the early Third Root-Race before the allegorical Fall. (2:530)

. . . placed side by side with the hieroglyphic or pictorial initial version of "creation" in the *Book of Dzyan*, the

origin of the Phoenician and Jewish letters would soon be found out. (*CW* 14:206)

We have now to speak of the Mystery language, that of the prehistoric races. It is not a phonetic, but a purely pictorial and symbolical tongue. (2:574)

The last cited statement shows that the Mystery language Senzar is not a spoken language, nor a system of writing that represents such a language, but is "purely pictorial and symbolical." In several places, Blavatsky is quite clear about the sort of thing the mystery language is. It uses written symbols that represent ideas, not the sounds of a language:

Moreover, there exists a universal language among the Initiates, which an Adept, and even a disciple, of any nation may understand by reading it in his own language. We Europeans, on the contrary, possess only one graphic sign common to all, & (and); there is a language richer in metaphysical terms than any on earth, whose every word is expressed by like common signs. (*CW* 14:101)

HPB's example is the Greek letter *Y*, which she says is understood as representing the two paths of virtue and vice, white and black magic, and various other things. Such meanings correlate with the shape of the letter, which suggests the dividing of a way and a forced choice between alternatives. She elaborates the same idea elsewhere:

. . . all the ancient records were written in a language which was universal and known to all nations alike in days of old, but which is now intelligible only to the few. Like the Arabic figures which are plain to a man of whatever nation, or like the English word *and*, which becomes *et* for the Frenchman, *und* for the German, and so on, yet which may be expressed for all civilized nations in the simple sign &--so all the words of that mystery language signified the same thing to each man of whatever nationality. There have been several men of note who have tried to re-establish such a universal and *philosophical* tongue: Delgarme, Wilkins, Leibnitz . . . (1:310)

"Delgarne" is probably George Dalgarno. He, Wilkins, and Leibnitz were three important figures in seventeenth-century efforts to design a "universal and philosophical" language. Dalgarno is little known today, but the other two were active in many endeavors.

John Wilkins (1614-72) was bishop of Chester but is best known as the chief founder and first secretary of the British Royal Society. Among his works is an *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, in which he invented a language and writing system that attempted to classify all reality and represent it unambiguously and rationally; Roget's Thesaurus was later based on Wilkins's classification of ideas.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646-1716), the philosopher and mathematician, was secretary to a Rosicrucian Lodge in Nuremberg (according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 16:385). He wanted to devise a way of symbolizing thought that could be used by speakers of all languages for peacefully settling disagreements and that would be free from the vagueness and ambiguities with which ordinary languages abound. The invention of universal, philosophical languages was a pastime, if not an obsession, of the seventeenth century.

It is clear from the foregoing passages that the mystery language is no ordinary spoken language, but is instead a symbolic representation that can be "read," that is, interpreted, in any language whatever. These passages seem to say that it was a kind of ideographic writing, but other of Blavatsky's comments make it appear more general than that. In speaking of Confucius and his interpretation of the hexagrams of the I Ching, Blavatsky says:

... the *Stanzas* given in our text . . . represent *precisely the same idea*. The old archaic map of Cosmogony is full of *lines* in the Confucian style, of concentric circles and dots. (1:441)

The Stanzas are like the symbols of the I Ching, lines and figures, circles and dots. Blavatsky frequently emphasizes the "geometrical" nature of the mystery language:

. . . it becomes easy to understand how nature herself could have taught primeval mankind, even without the help of its divine instructors, the first principles of a numerical and geometrical symbol language. Hence one

finds numbers and figures used as an expression and a record of thought in every archaic symbolical Scripture. (1:320-21)

From the very beginning of Æons--in time and space in our Round and Globe--the Mysteries of Nature (at any rate, those which it is lawful for our races to know) were recorded by the pupils of those same now invisible "heavenly men," in geometrical figures and symbols. . . . The *ten points* inscribed within that "Pythagorean triangle" are worth all the theogonies and angelologies ever emanated from the theological brain. For he who interprets them--on their very face, and in the order given--will find in these seventeen points (the seven Mathematical Points hidden) the uninterrupted series of the genealogies from the first *Heavenly* to *terrestrial man.*" (1:612)

One of the keys to this Universal Knowledge is a pure geometrical and numerical system, the alphabet of every great nation having a numerical value for every letter, and, moreover, a system of permutation of syllables and synonyms which is carried to perfection in the Indian Occult methods. (CW 14:181)

In keeping with such comments on mathematical symbolism, Blavatsky refers to the Stanza's account of cosmic evolution as an "abstract algebraical formula" applicable to all evolutionary processes (1:20-21).

The preface to *The Voice of the Silence* describes the *Book of the Golden Precepts*, on which the *Voice* is based:

The original *Precepts* are engraved on thin oblongs . . . They are written variously, sometimes in Tibetan but mostly in ideographs. The sacerdotal language (Senzar), besides an alphabet of its own, may be rendered in several modes of writing in cypher characters, which partake more of the nature of ideographs than of syllables. . . . A sign placed at the beginning of the text determines whether the reader has to spell it according to the Indian mode, when every word is simply a Sanskrit adaptation, or according to the Chinese princi-

ple of reading the ideographs. The easiest way, however, is that which allows the reader to use no special, or *any* language he likes, as the signs and symbols were, like the Arabian numerals or figures, common and international property among initiated mystics and their followers. (*Voice* 6-7)

Presumably Blavatsky does not mean that the same script can be read either phonetically or ideographically, making sense both ways. Such a script would be difficult to imagine. Rather she seems to mean that some parts of the *Precepts* are written in Tibetan or another ordinary language, whereas other parts are written in ideographs or symbolic signs, with an indication to readers of what sort of communication they are about to encounter. That is very much the kind of mixed text she has described the *Stanzas of Dzyan* as also containing.

The cipher-like appearance of Senzar is amusingly involved in an incident that gave HPB some pain. In a letter to A. P. Sinnett, Blavatsky answered a charge made against her of being a Russian spy:

Coulomb stole a "queer looking paper" and gave it to the missionaries with the assurance this was a cipher used by the Russian spies(!!) They took it to the Police Commissioner, had the best experts examine it, sent it to Calcutta[,] for five months moved heaven and earth to find out what the cipher meant and--now gave it up in despair. "It is one of your flapdoodles" says Hume. "It is one of my *Senzar MSS.*" I answer. I am perfectly confident of it, for one of the sheets of my book with numbered pages is missing. I defy any one but a Tibetan occultist to make it out, if it is this. (*Letters of HPB* 76)

Senzar must, then, be capable of looking like a cipher, though it is not what we usually mean by that term.

However, Blavatsky also associates Senzar with the pictographs of the American Indians:

The red Indian tribes of America, only a few years ago comparatively speaking, petitioned the President of the United States to grant them possession of four small lakes, the petition being written on the tiny surface of

a piece of a fabric, which is covered with barely a dozen representations of animals and birds. . . . The American savages have a number of such different kinds of writing, but not one of our Scientists is yet familiar [with], or even knows of the early hieroglyphic cypher, still preserved in some Fraternities, and named in Occultism the *Senzar*. (2:439)

The Indian petition Blavatsky refers to is the pictograph in figure 2 (p. 17). The fact that she calls Senzar a "hieroglyphic cipher" should not be given undue weight. Blavatsky did not use terms for languages and writing systems with the precision of a modern linguist. The context in which she uses the expression in discussing the Indian pictograph makes it clear that for her terms like *hieroglyph* and *cipher* simply denote a picture-like form of written communication. So all we are safe in concluding from her remark is that Senzar involved a pictorial representation of occult ideas.

In describing the "old book" referred to in *Isis Unveiled* and said in *The Secret Doctrine* to have been written in Senzar, Blavatsky remarks:

One of its illustrations represents the Divine Essence emanating from ADAM like a luminous arc proceeding to form a circle; and then, having attained the highest point of its circumference, the ineffable glory bends back again, and returns to earth, bringing a higher type of humanity in its vortex. As it approaches nearer and nearer to our planet, the Emanation becomes more and more shadowy, until upon touching the ground it is as black as night. (*Isis* 1:1, cited in SD 1:xlii)

Is it possible that the "illustration" described here is an example of Senzar, comparable to the Amerindian pictographs?

Senzar is identified with alchemical recipes, scriptural myths and parables, ideographs, visually evocative letter shapes, geometrical figures, ciphers, pictographs, and symbolical drawings. What all of these have in common is not that they are the same or even similar systems of communication, but rather that they are all examples of the symbolical mode of meaning. They are symbols pointing to a reality beyond themselves.

An Example of Senzar

Is Senzar quite unrecoverable, or is it possible that we have it all about us? In particular, can we have had an identified Senzar text lying under our noses ever since the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*? The proem to that work begins with these words:

An Archaic Manuscript--a collection of palm leaves made impermeable to water, fire, and air, by some specific unknown process--is before the writer's eye. On the first page is an immaculate white disk within a dull black ground. On the following page, the same disk, but with a central point. (1:1)

Later more symbols from the manuscript are described and reproduced:

The first illustration being a plain disk \bigcirc , the second one in the Archaic symbol shows \ominus , a disk with a point in it--the first differentiation in the periodical manifestations of the ever-eternal nature, sexless and infinite In its third stage the point is transformed into a diameter, thus Θ . It now symbolizes a divine immaculate Mother-Nature within the all-embracing absolute Infinitude. When the diameter line is crossed by a vertical one \oplus , it becomes the mundane cross. Humanity has reached its third root-race; it is the sign for the origin of human life to begin. When the circumference disappears and leaves only the + it is a sign that the fall of man into matter is accomplished, and the FOURTH race begins. (1:4-5)

One document that we are told is written in Senzar is the palm-leaf manuscript of the Stanzas of Dzyan. The content of the manuscript is described as these and other visual symbols. Of course, it is possible that the symbols are simply illustrations for a text of a more conventional sort, written in an alphabet or ideographic script also of a more conventional sort. But it is equally possible that these symbols--these circles and lines--are the "hieroglyphic cipher," the "geometrical figures and symbols" of Senzar. And indeed, the latter seems more likely, as the cut of Ockham's razor. Moreover, the version of cosmogenesis in the

Book of Dzyan is said to be "hieroglyphic or pictorial" (CW 14:206), an apt description of these symbols.

In her discussion of myths about the origins of the gods, Blavatsky quotes a sentence from the Book of Dzyan (1:434):

The great mother lay with Δ , and the \downarrow , and the \square ,
the second \downarrow and the \star in her bosom, ready to bring
them forth, the valiant sons of the $\square\Delta\parallel$ (or 4,320,000,
the Cycle) whose two elders are the \circ and the \cdot (Point).

Most of the geometrical symbols in that sentence stand primarily for numbers in an obvious way. The first five represent 31415, the number of pi (the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter: 3.1415). The next four stand for 4311 or 432, representing the number of years in a cycle totaling 4,320,000. The last two are more general symbols, zero representing the world boundary or ring pass not, and the point representing the nondimensional, unmanifested first logos. This sentence shows the use Blavatsky has described of geometrical symbols--that is, Senzar--in the Book of Dzyan.

Most significantly, Blavatsky speaks of "the 'Mystery language' of the prehistoric ages, the language now called SYMBOLISM" (1:309). If the "Mystery language" is Senzar, then Senzar is symbolism--a system of symbols that are traditional, secret in their interpretation, but also known all over the world. The symbols HPB describes from the palm-leaf manuscript are precisely the symbols we find from Polynesia to southern France (figure 3), from the oldest rock carvings of Africa to present-day dream symbolism. They are truly a universal language. They are Senzar.



Figure 3: Colored Pebbles from Mas d'Azil, Ariège (south France)

Conclusion

We can summarize what Blavatsky says or implies about Senzar as follows:

1. The Stanzas of Dzyan in *The Secret Doctrine* are based on an original Senzar version, and the original text of the Stanzas is described as pictographs and geometrical figures. The text of the Stanzas in *The Secret Doctrine* is not the original, but is a paraphrase or interpretation based on Blavatsky's understanding of the original and adapted to the reader's ability to grasp the ideas symbolized.
2. Senzar is the "Mystery language" used by initiates all over the world and from the earliest days of humanity. It is not a language known to philologists.
3. This Mystery language was originally the common property of all human beings and was, indeed, the one language of our race, but by the time of our contemporary humanity it has become an esoteric, that is, an inner or private system.
4. Although Blavatsky sometimes refers to it as "speech," the Mystery language is not normal spoken language, but is instead a kind of "pictorial and symbolical" communication.
5. On the one hand, the esoteric language is allegory like that found in the writings of the alchemists and Jewish scriptures.
6. On the other hand, the esoteric language is a form of written symbols, especially geometrical figures with a hieroglyphic, cipher-like appearance, that can be interpreted in various ways and by various spoken languages.
7. The Mystery language is what we now call symbolism: it speaks to our unconscious minds and can be only imperfectly translated into ordinary, logical language.

Thus we can think of Senzar as being the whole complex of sacred symbols with expressions of various kinds, but of two chief types:

- A. the archetypal symbols in myths and fairy tales, allegories and parables, alchemical recipes and biblical history--stories that have a hidden meaning underneath the obvious narrative, stories that bear "a double interpretation"; and

B. a visual representation of those archetypal symbols in pictographs or hieroglyphic and cipher-like characters whose meaning the initiated can interpret independently of any language.

If Senzar is the system of such symbols, many of the puzzles about it are automatically cleared up. Blavatsky's comparisons of Senzar with ordinary human languages are no problem. She used terms like *language*, *speech*, *hieroglyph*, *ideograph*, and *cipher* loosely. She was no philologist and had no interest in the detailed distinctions that academic scholars make when they talk about such matters. For her it was enough to convey a general meaning and let her readers work out the details for themselves. So the symbolic system of Senzar is a "language" in the broad sense of the term, but radically different from ordinary languages like Sanskrit, Latin, and English.

If Senzar is a system of verbal and iconic symbols, then we can understand why the Stanzas of Dzyan in *The Secret Doctrine* are necessarily imperfect paraphrases of their original. They are efforts to put into ordinary language ideas that can be expressed fully, albeit obscurely from the standpoint of language, only by symbolic signs and diagrams. That is exactly what Blavatsky seems to be saying in the recapitulation to volume 1 of *The Secret Doctrine*:

But such is the mysterious power of Occult symbolism, that the facts which have actually occupied countless generations of initiated seers and prophets to marshal, to set down and explain, in the bewildering series of evolutionary progress, are all recorded on a few pages of geometrical signs and glyphs. (1:272)

Those "few pages of geometrical signs and glyphs," the original of the Stanzas of Dzyan, have been paraphrased and explicated in many of the world's scriptures. They have certainly occupied, and bewildered, several generations of Theosophists since 1888, when H. P. Blavatsky published her articulation of them in *The Secret Doctrine*.

We can also understand the association of Senzar with devanagari and Egyptian hieroglyphs. By its etymology, devanagari is a form of "divine" or "sacred" writing; so is Senzar. Hieroglyphs are based upon symbolic pictures and thus fall into the same broad class as the symbols of Senzar. It is not that spoken Sanskrit or Egyptian are related to

Senzar, but rather that Senzar consists of sacred symbols, as devanagari also does, and that Senzar and hieroglyphs reflect the same archetypal images. Devanagari and hieroglyphs both express, in varying ways, the primordial symbolism that Blavatsky calls Senzar.

Blavatsky's odd remark that "Amida" is the Senzar form of "Ādi" (CW 14:425) is also explicable. Since Amida (or Amitabha) is one of the representations of the power of the primordial Adi Buddha, it is a symbol of that power. Adi Buddha is the absolute, which cannot be described or conceived, but can be symbolized, for example, by the figures of the Dhyani Buddhas, of whom Amida is one. If Senzar is a system of symbols for expressing the otherwise inexpressible, it is quite correct to say that "Amida" [the personification of boundless light] is the Senzar form [symbolic expression] of "Ādi" [the Absolute]." Far from being a mistake, HPB's comment is a simple truth, but symbolically expressed.

Blavatsky tells us that the marvelous Kumbum tree is a fact. Whether, however, it is a botanical as well as a symbolic fact is unclear. It is certainly the latter. The tree in whose branches the universe grows, the tree that produces the letters of the alphabet as its fruit, is a widespread symbol. It is a species that includes the ashvattha tree of the Gita, the Yggdrasil of the Northmen and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, upon whose branches appear the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and which therefore includes in embryo the whole of the Torah.

That the Kumbum tree should grow in Tibet and bear the sacred symbols of Senzar on its leaves and bark is harmonious with a view of Senzar not as an ordinary language, but as the primordial symbolism of the human species. The tree of humanity--which stanza 7 refers to as "the man-plant, called Saptaparna" (1:231)--spontaneously produces those symbols that HPB names Senzar. They are written upon our souls as Senzar is said to be upon the leaves and inner bark of the wonderful Kumbum tree.

The Kumbum tree is the Cosmos and the microcosm of humanity. However deep one goes into the Kumbum tree, peeling away its bark, one discovers the sacred letters of the Senzar alphabet empressed there. However deep one goes into the fabric of the universe or into the levels of the human soul, one discovers the primal symbols of the Ancient Wisdom, the Secret Doctrine, in living shapes. We and the

universe in our unity are the source of that Doctrine. We are the Kumbum tree that bears that Wisdom.

To literalize HPB's statements about the Kumbum tree--to suppose that it is a tree like an oak or a pine, only queerer--is to miss the significance and the magnificence of the symbol. The marvel of the Kumbum tree is not that it is a sight for tourists. The real marvel is that we are that tree. And so it is with other theosophical marvels. So it is with Senzar.

Senzar is the one language of the youth of humanity because it is the collection of symbols found worldwide and throughout the ages. It goes back to the earliest, prephysical and preintellectual, human races. Symbols are universal, for they arise spontaneously in the dreams and visions of all humans everywhere and have been recorded with remarkable consistency throughout human history, as C. G. Jung and his followers have demonstrated.

Ordinary language is a product of the mind and could not exist before the mind was activated, as HPB makes clear in her history of human speech. However, symbols are prelinguistic and prelogical. Their proper place is not the conscious mind, but the unconscious. They belong to our most remote past and speak to us irrationally and therefore most powerfully.

Senzar is "the Mystery-language of the prehistoric ages, the language now called Symbolism." It is our first, our common language, the language of the unconscious, the universal language of symbolism--the one language that expresses the one knowledge. And that is marvel and mystery indeed.

References

- Blavatsky, Helena P. *Collected Writings*. 14 vols. Ed. Boris de Zirkoff. Wheaton, Ill.; Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966-85.
- . *Isis Unveiled*. 2 vols. Ed. Boris de Zirkoff. Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972.
- . *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett and Other Miscellaneous Letters*. Ed. A. T. Barker. Pasadena, Cal.: Theosophical University Press, 1973.
- . *The Secret Doctrine*. 2 vols. 1888; Centennial Edition, facsimile reprint, Pasadena, Cal.: Theosophical University Press, 1988.
- . *The Secret Doctrine*. 2 vols. Ed. Boris de Zirkoff. Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978.
- . *The Theosophical Glossary*. Los Angeles: Theosophy Co., 1973.
- . *The Voice of the Silence and Other Chosen Fragments from the Book of the Golden Precepts*. London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1892.
- The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K. H.* Ed. A. T. Barker. 3rd ed. Ed. Christmas Humphreys and Elsie Benjamin. Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1962, 1972.

