

The Function of Emesal as a Cultic Sociolect

by

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“Some of [Sumer’s literary] works are exceedingly beautiful; others are perhaps less readily enjoyed by a modern reader, yet appeal as bearing witness to a strange, long-vanished world.”¹

Introduction

The Sumerian language is considered one of the oldest written world languages (Alster 1997: xvi), appearing in Southern Mesopotamia (see Figure 1) around the middle of the Uruk Period (4000-3100 B.C. [Jacobsen 1987: xi]). Sumerian was written using cuneiform, a picture writing at first, which turned to signs for phonetic values that evolved into a stylized form. The earliest written texts have been described as administrative documents and, used for economic purposes over the larger geographic context, were more like abbreviations of transactions or receipts rather than replications of spoken language (Leick xx-xxi). The earliest written literary texts appeared around the Early Dynastic III period (2600-2350 B.C. [Jacobsen 1987: xi]). Sumerian literature comprised numerous genres, from myths and hymns to wisdom literature and royal inscriptions² (Jacobsen 1987: xiv); the quantity of these texts and their detailed contents revealed that, as Jacobsen puts it, “an extensive and varied oral literature must have existed, ready to become fixed” in writing (1987: xi).

By the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 B.C.), Sumerian literature was thriving, and had reached what Jacobsen describes as a “classical period,” with a push by some rulers not only for the preservation of older literature, but also for the creation of new

¹ Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Harps That Once...* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Print.

² Jacobsen provides a more complete genre list: “myths, epics, hymns to temples, gods, or kings, laments for temples, gods, or human beings, wisdom literature, including proverbs, fables, Edubba texts, and copies of then-ancient royal inscriptions” (1987: xi).

literary works (Jacobsen 1987: xii). However, with the “catastrophic” end of the Third Dynasty of Ur³ came the end of the Sumerian civilization (Jacobsen 1987: xii) and Sumerian as a spoken language faded into extinction (Daniels and Bright 37), replaced by Akkadian as the main vernacular. Sumerian as a written language continued on, though, “as a language of learning and culture in very much the role that Latin played in Europe in the Middle Ages” (Jacobsen 1987: xii): during the Isin-Larsa or Old Babylonian period (c. 1800-1595 B.C.), which followed the Third Dynasty of Ur, schools obtained much of the literature from the court of Ur (Jacobsen 1987: xii), using those literary texts as teaching models (Alster 1997: xviii).⁴

Written Sumerian continued after the transition to Akkadian most likely due to its religious, rather than administrative, associations.⁵ By the time Mesopotamia was undergoing these linguistic changes, the written religious corpus was well-established, and within it, the Sumerian dialect Emesal was intrinsic to lament literature, on which people depended for their protection; to have forgone this religious linguistic tradition for a new one in Akkadian would have shattered the religious constancy of which Cohen speaks. Thus, despite the end of the Sumerian civilization, Sumerian literature endured thanks to its preservation and transmission through Old Babylonian schools and through its later translations into Akkadian.

³ The “catastrophic” end to which Jacobsen 1987 refers was due to an attack on Ur by the Elamite rulers (of what is modern-day southwestern Iran), which left Ur decimated, its ruler taken hostage.

⁴ In fact, according to Alster, “most of the texts known to us...were actually written in the [Isin-Larsa] schools as models by the teachers or as scribal exercises by the pupils” (1997: xviii).

⁵ Cohen explains: “Of all society’s institutions the one most impervious to change has been religion. Religion attempts to provide man with a constant, secure relationship with the world about him and thus, in an attempt to impart this feeling of constancy, religious institutions hold precious that which is oldest in their tradition, the greatest symbol of constancy” (1988: 12-13).

It is necessary to preface the ensuing discussion of Sumerian language with a brief discussion of how modern scholars study this dead language: Jeremy A. Black states that much of our understanding of Sumerian is derived from our understanding of Akkadian – our understanding of which, in turn, is derived from its relationship to other (modern) Semitic languages (1998: 21). Black acknowledges that our "knowledge of the Sumerian language" is "incomplete" and, thus, causes a lack of satisfaction in understanding and interpreting Sumerian poetry (1998: 20). He goes on to discuss the difficulties of interpretation that ensue from this lack of knowledge, such as "ignorance of the precise meaning of a word" (21) and a lack of "historical framework" (23) – both of which concern how external cultural context (whether implicit in the language itself or as part of the greater historical context of the text) affect our reading of a text. What this all means is that translation of a language so far removed from modern societies is ultimately the subjective view of an outsider, attempting to make sense of the fragmented pieces she has come upon.

This paper is my personal attempt to make sense of the fragment pertaining to Mesopotamian culture that is Emesal: Emesal is one of two dialects of Sumerian, and appears to have been used exclusively as a literary dialect. A difficulty in studying Emesal is due to lapses in the archaeological record: Some compositions were so long as to be copied either onto a larger tablet, more susceptible to breakage, or onto several smaller tablets, more susceptible to being separated, resulting in the modern archaeologist's problem of unearthing an incomplete record (Cohen 1974: 29). From the extant record of Sumerian literature, Emesal is evidenced in three contexts: first, myths

and hymns written in the Sumerian main dialect, Emegir,⁶ with female speech written in Emesal; second, historical laments with sporadic use of Emesal;⁷ and third, religious texts with consistent use of Emesal⁸ (Löhnert 2008: 423-424). It is this third context of Emesal, in religious texts, that is the main focus of this paper, as it appears to have been the primary – and certainly most purposeful and consistent – use of Emesal. Traditionally, scholars have classified Emesal as a female dialect or women’s language, meaning that it was used exclusively by women. A sociolect is a dialect or variation of a language that is employed by a specific social class or group; as Schretter indicates, a female dialect is a gender-specific sociolect (1990: 121). I argue that Emesal was not a female-specific sociolect, or female dialect, as traditionally held, but rather a cultic⁹ sociolect based on its exclusive use by the gala priesthood¹⁰ for the purpose of religious lament literature.

⁶ Emegir is commonly referred to as the “main dialect” of Sumerian due to its use in all areas of Mesopotamian society, and as the main spoken vernacular (i.e., prior to the transition to Akkadian).

⁷ Namely, ‘Eridu Lament,’ ‘Uruk Lament,’ ‘Lamentation over the destruction of Sumer and Ur,’ ‘Nippur Lament,’ and ‘Lament over Ur’ (Löhnert 423-424).

⁸ Löhnert notes that in these religious texts, Emesal is used without any indication that a woman is speaking (2008: 424).

⁹ “Cult,” as herein used, refers to a group of people responsible or dedicated to the worship of a specific deity.

¹⁰ The term “gala” is Sumerian, while “*kalû*” is the later Akkadian equivalent. The terms can be used interchangeably in that they refer to the same social group of Mesopotamian priests; however, the employment of one term over another by a scholar generally indicates the respective time period that the scholar is addressing (i.e. prior to or following the rise of Akkadian as the main vernacular of Mesopotamia). For the purpose of this paper, gala will be used since the discussion focuses on the Sumerian dialect Emesal.

Emesal and its Historically Problematic Classification

The theory of Emesal as a gender-specific dialect was first put forth in the late 1800's by A. H. Sayce, a British scholar who compared the variations of Emesal from Emegir to variations of the language of women in the Caribbean from that of their husbands; specifically, Sayce viewed these sociolinguistic differences as a "lack of connection between the married couple, which, as in the Caribbean, he concludes was based on the differences in races. He concluded that in Sumer the women had the upper rank in the family, while in later Semitic (societies) the woman came to have a subordinate role" (Schretter 1990: 105). As evidenced here, Sayce failed to consider the context of Emesal, who used it, and how it was used, as did many of the early scholars that followed Sayce in his suggestion. Since first being brought to the attention of scholars at the end of the seventeenth century, Emesal continues to be described and defined in various ways by modern scholars: some scholars, such as Dietz Otto Edzard (2003) and Anne Löhnert (2008), describe Emesal as a sociolinguistic dialect, or sociolect, of Sumerian, while other scholars, such as Gordon Whittaker (2001), argue more specifically that Emesal is a literary gender-specific (i.e. female) dialect attributed to goddesses. There are still other scholars that fall somewhere in the middle, attributing the Emesal dialect to the social function of the gala priests while associating Emesal with the speech of female deities. What these modern scholars can agree on is that Emesal was linked to the gala, and was not a dialect employed by lay people (men or women) in daily life.

The difficulty in discerning the group of people with which Emesal was affiliated as well as how it functioned in Sumerian society stems, in part, from the difficulty in

determining the literal meaning of “eme-sal” itself. Whittaker, in support of Emesal as a women’s dialect, explains: “The noun eme is Sumerian for ‘tongue,’ and, by extension, ‘speech’ and ‘language.’ The modifier sal is more elusive. Its sign, derived from an Uruk IV depiction of the pubic triangle, can be read in a number of ways: munus or mī ‘woman,’ gal₄ ‘vulva,’ and sal” (2001: 2)¹¹. From this discussion on the lack of clarity regarding the meaning of sal, it can be understood that the argument for Emesal as a women’s dialect comes, in part, from claims that sal means “woman” or some derivative thereof. Whittaker supports his favor of this interpretation with the fact that the use of Emesal appears to be restricted to divine female figures in cultic literature (2001: 3). On a similar note, comparing rituals recorded in Emesal to those of the Dumuzi cult, a cult known to have been comprised of women, it has been suggested that rituals recorded in Emesal thus indicate their performance by women (Michalowski and Veldhuis 2006: 106 – footnote 5). Edzard, prefacing his translation of eme-sal with “The meaning of the term is not completely clear,” suggests that sal, translated with Akkadian’s raqu, may mean “‘thin, fine tongue’” and refers “to a highpitched voice” (2003: 171). Some scholars have used this translation as an indication that Emesal was employed by women, who generally have a higher vocal register than men, or that this description was used to refer to a group of men with feminine qualities, such as eunuchs or homosexual men (Edzard 2003; Roscoe 1996). Similarly, Bachvarova interprets “emesal” as “tongue (of a) woman,” but argues that it originated as a regional dialect¹² associated with a group of women who had a reputation for their lament performances (2008: 20). She attempts to

¹¹ Whittaker does not provide a translation for “sal,” maintaining that the sign is “elusive” and only acknowledging that it was mistakenly translated as “woman” early on (2). One typical definition of sal, not indicated to by Whittaker, is narrow. Whittaker goes on to explain that scholars’ understanding of the sign sal comes from Akkadian translations.

¹² Bachvarova suggests northern Mesopotamia, “where Sumerian died out first” (2008: 20).

discredit the interpretation of “slender tongue” among similar translations as well as the claim therein that the dialect insinuates a feminine vocal register by stating that such a claim “ignores the fact that the dialect’s idiosyncratic features include lexical items and morphemes” (2008: 40). Another classification of Emesal, which I aim to support herein, is its use by the gala priests.¹³

Mark Cohen views Emesal as being the purview of the gala, and by doing so, he distinguishes Emegir as being not thus associated with the gala (1974: 56). He states that Emesal compositions are “usually easily recognizable as such” due to the presence of Emesal, even though Emesal compositions typically include Emegir (56).¹⁴ Additionally, the presence of isolated Emesal renderings in otherwise complete Emegir texts does not alter their classification as Emegir texts and thus texts not generated by the gala (Cohen 1974: 56). Therefore, while Emegir and Emesal are viewed as separate dialects, Emesal texts are typically not composed entirely in Emesal, and there are instances in which Emesal renderings are found in isolation in an Emegir text.¹⁵ However, by the end of the Old Babylonian period (c. 1595 B.C.), Emegir texts cease to be copied,¹⁶ yet Emesal texts

¹³ Cohen defines Emesal as “The dialect of the Sumerian language peculiar to the *kalû*-priests” (1974: 57), and claims that the identification of an Emesal composition “most assuredly” links its origin to these priests (56).

¹⁴ Cohen further states, “when a composition deliberately employs *Emegir* for narration and *Emesal* for direct discourse or *Emesal* for one speaker and *Emegir* for the others, the classification of the composition regarding dialect is extremely problematic.” He cites the *Destruction of Ur*, suggesting that “the *kalû*-priest intentionally used the *Emegir*-dialect in order to emphasize by dialectal contrast those portions of the lament uttered by the goddess with those of the narrator. It would appear that this dialectal counterpoint was intended for dramatic presentation” comparable to the early standard in Greek drama for recitation by one person or a chorus (1974: 56).

¹⁵ Generally, in the examples of this occurrence of an Emesal rendering, the Emesal is the name, title, or speech of a goddess (Cohen 1974: 32).

¹⁶ The end of the Old Babylonian period resulted from a Hittite raid on Babylonia, coupled with a Kassite invasion. Cohen provides several suggestions for the cessation of copying Emegir texts at this point following the Kassite takeover: scribal schools closing due to political issues, as put forth by Benno Landsberger; “a conscious scribal selection process, maintaining compositions whose themes met the needs and taste of the moment,” as put forth by William W. Hallo; acceding to “administrative pressure to de-

continue to be generated¹⁷ by the gala well-after this time, which I emphasize as indicative of the religious importance of Emesal texts.

Being dialects of the same language, Emegir and Emesal are similar (see Figure 2): Emesal “is found in a one-to-one relation with eme-gi₇(-r) in phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax” (Edzard 2003: 171). Where Emesal differs from Emegir is in spelling and sound. The Emegir transcription phonology that is generally accepted by scholars consists of the following phonemes: b, d, g; p, t, k; l, m, n, r; h, ng; s, z, š; a, e, i, u (Schretter 1990: 31). In Emesal, there are various alternations of these phonemes, which yield softer pronunciations (see Table 1 below). Proponents of the theory of Emesal as a female dialect have used these softer alterations as indicative of female speech, and, as mentioned previously, some early scholars viewed the mere existence of these differences as indicative of a women’s language. As will be further discussed in the next section, Emesal was used primarily in laments that addressed an angered deity, with the purpose of calming the deity; I see the development of the softer, more soothing pronunciations represented in Emesal as a means of successfully realizing this state of calm.

emphasize Sumerian for the more practical Akkadian”; or the “wholesale abandonment of Sumerian” (1988: 12).

¹⁷ This transmission of Sumerian literature was, of course, gradual: “First, with but a few exceptions, the main dialect compositions ceased to be passed on. Second, bilingual compositions employing main dialect Sumerian with an interlinear translation were authored. And thirdly, from the corpus of the Old Babylonian emesal material some of the lamentations with the rubric balag and much shorter compositions called eršemma’s continued to be utilized. The eršahunga, probably attested in the Old Babylonian period without a rubric, along with the Sumerian šuilla, blossomed by the middle of the first millennium B.C. In addition, an Akkadian interlinear translation was developed for these emesal texts” (Cohen 1988: 11-12). Regarding the main dialect religious texts, Cohen proposes that such texts were originally commissioned by the king or were composed for public events, and then later yielded to the mainstream Akkadian (1988: 13).

Table 1: Examples of Emesal Phonetic Alterations¹⁸

	Emegir	Emesal	Emegir	Emesal	Emegir	Emesal
Phonetic alteration:	ng → m		g ^u → b		d, t → s, z, š	
Examples:	nga → ma nge → mu ngi → me		aga → aba dugud → zebed		a.da.gur → a.za.gur an.dah.šum → an.sah.sum	

Many of the Emesal alterations deal with the softening of consonants, as are the cases with the above examples. It is interesting to note that some of these alterations originate in the same area of the mouth (e.g., d, t, s, z, and š are all made at the front of the mouth), whereas others do not (e.g., the guttural g^u is, obviously, made at the back of the throat, while b is labial¹⁹). What all of these changes have in common is the softer pronunciations, revealing that the Emesal laments were recited orally, and that there was a need for these laments to have an auditory-pleasing quality to ensure the success of their correlating rituals.

¹⁸ For a complete list and discussion of the known phonetic alterations in Emesal, see Schretter (1990).

¹⁹ Involving the lips, particularly pronunciation with the lips closed or nearly closed.

Lamentation Genre and its Connection to the Gala Priesthood

Emesal appears to have been primarily reserved for use in religious literary texts, specifically lamentations. It is necessary to understand the historical meaning of lament as it referred not solely to mourning a person as it does in the modern sense of the word, but also to address the loss of a structure, the absence of a deity, as well as to address earthly suffering on a much broader scale. Jacobsen believes that all Sumerian literary works can be loosely defined “as works of praise,” explaining how the lament genre developed: such praise, Jacobsen states, “can be for something extant and enjoyed, a temple, a deity, or a human king,” but can also “be praise of something cherished and lost, a destroyed temple, a god who has died, or a dead human relative” (1987: xiii). Jacobsen surmises that the lament and hymn genres derived from incantations: the lament developing from spells meant “to bring back what was lost” and the hymn developing from spells meant to rouse its subject into “proper effective functioning” (1987: xiii). In that sense, it can be better understood how lamentation extended beyond personal mourning to earthly suffering in a broader scope, with the purpose of “focus[ing] the attention of the gods on human suffering and persuad[ing] them to relieve it” (Bachvarova 2008: 18); to this end, Mary Bachvarova states that “lamentation was considered useful in encouraging the fertility of the land and the prosperity of humans” (18). Similarly, Löhnert classifies Mesopotamian laments into two general categories based on their purposes: “Personal laments and laments for the benefit of a community” (2008: 423). Much of the scholarship concerning Mesopotamian laments does not address in great depth how this lament literature was used for personal mourning and individual use. Renger states, “From Gudea, one finds a description of the activities of

the gala: ‘At the cemetery of the city no hoe was placed, a dead man was not buried. The gala did not play the harp, he did not sound a lament’” (189), which indicates that the gala did indeed perform their laments for personal ceremonies and not solely for communal and cultic purposes. In fact, these specialized religious and city laments may have originated out of the tradition of personal funerary cults – known to many ancient cultures, such as the Egyptians – of which female mourners following the funerary procession are a prominent and standard inclusion.

The Origin and Identity of the Gala Priesthood

While the term “gala” is often translated as “lamentation priest,” (see Figure 3) there is, in actuality, no term for “priest” in Sumerian or Akkadian: “The term [gala] refers to someone who acts as a mediator between man and god, is responsible for the performance of cultic actions as well as for the care of the gods, and is thus sustained by the society for his religious service” (Löhnert 2008: 422 – footnote 6). According to an Old Babylonian text, the gala were created by the god Enki²⁰ for the purpose of soothing the rage of Inanna (Kramer 1981: 1):

Enki heard these words, and took counsel with himself in the kigal,

He fashioned for her [Inanna] the gala, him of the heart-soothing
laments...,

He arranged his mournful laments of supplication...,

He placed the aḥulap²¹-uttering ub and lilis in his hand.

Enki sent him who...to hold Inanna:

“Oh...queen, may your heart be soothed, seat yourself on your
throne,

The gala has made available to you the aḥulap-uttering laments of
supplication, a night(?) of supplication (Kramer 5).²²

²⁰ According to Kramer, Enki has long been considered the “patron deity” of the gala (1981: 1).

²¹ Löhnert describes this term as “the cry for sympathy” (2008: 429), revealing the emphasis placed on appealing to the heart of the goddess.

There are references to the gala priest much earlier than the Old Babylonian “The Fashioning of the *gala*.” According to Cooper (2006: 42), the gala is first referenced c. 2600-2350 B.C., but a predecessor to the gala priest, a *balaḡ*-performer, is referenced in lexical lists 500 years previously (c. 3100 B.C.). These earliest references to the gala priest place him in a funerary context, surrounded by women lamenters²³ (Cooper 2006: 43). This documentation of the gala’s early association with women lamenters has led many scholars to question the identity and gender of the gala. Cooper states that “Women may actually have served as gala in Presargonic Lagash, as they did later in the Diyala region according to the Old Akkadian or early Old Babylonian letters published by Al-Rawi” (2006: 43). Where Cooper acknowledges this possibility that women served as gala, Bachvarova seems much more convinced that this was indeed the case, claiming that the gala included “both male and female” personnel (2008: 20). Since lamentation is historically associated with women, as has been previously established, and the role of priest was also held by women (i.e., priestesses), it would not be out of the question for women to have been a part of the gala; however, what roles they may have performed within the gala, particularly in regards to the composition of texts is less clear. In general, “The prerequisites for Mesopotamian priests include a specific education, consecration, and means of distinction from the secular world. The affiliation to a temple is not

²² “The Fashioning of the *gala*” is often cited as evidence of the association of the gala priests with Inanna, suggesting that the gala were part of the cult for the goddess, and by extension, that Emesal was a female dialect. Some Emesal texts have been found in context of Inanna’s temple, though our collection of extant Emesal texts are addressed to, or meant to calm the anger of, a number of deities and not Inanna exclusively. While I classify Emesal as a *cultic* sociolect, I do not suggest that its users, the gala, were specifically associated with one deity; but rather, I suggest that their societal position applied to addressing a number of deities, the basis as to which divine addressee being dependent upon the occasion and location (i.e., the temple, festivity, or other contributing circumstances under which the lament was to be produced and performed).

²³ Cooper specifically states that “the earliest documented context for the gala’s performance is funerary, and that at both Baranamtara’s funeral and the non-funeral in Gudea Statue B, the gala is accompanied by women lamenters” (2006: 43), but it is not completely clear what he means by “non-funeral”; perhaps this is an early example of the gala’s performance of lament for an occasion other than a traditional funeral.

necessary” (Löhnert 2008: 422 – footnote 6), though it seems unlikely that a priest would not be affiliated with a temple belonging to the local deity. While there were women who served as priestesses – and we do know of the priestess Enheduanna, who is considered one of the world’s first (named) poets – references to the gala are always translated in the masculine. Historically, formal scribal education was reserved for boys, particularly of wealthy families (Kramer “History Begins” 5), though girls may have been educated at home; however, during the Old Babylonian period (c. 1800-1595 B.C.), there is evidence of female scribes. This appearance of female scribes during the Old Babylonian period coincides with the appearance of Emesal around the same time,²⁴ though this coincidence is not explicit evidence of a direct connection between the appearance of female scribes and of Emesal.

The sexuality and gender of the gala-priests has remained under scrutiny; scholars are divided in their stances on the matter, postulating theories that the gala was comprised entirely or partially of men, of women, of homosexual cross-dressing males, or of eunuchs (Roscoe 214-215). At the forefront of this debate is the historical association of mourning and lamentation with women, as seen in early Mesopotamia, as well as societies contemporary to Mesopotamia. Bendt Alster discusses characteristics of mourning in Sumerian literature that include the tearing out of hair; tearing of clothing, wearing old or untraditional clothing (i.e. a sackcloth), or undressing altogether (particularly removing fine clothing); and scratching oneself with a sharp object or fingernails (1983: 9). These behaviors are often exhibited in Sumerian laments by female figures; for example, in *Dumuzi’s Dream*, Geshtinanna, sister to Dumuzi, screams and

²⁴ Cooper (2006: 42) suggests that Emesal is attested slightly earlier, during the Ur III period (c. 2112-2004 B.C.).

claws at her eyes, mouth, ears, and thighs in her grief (Jacobsen 1987: 44). Such customs were not unique to Mesopotamia, however, as Alster makes comparisons to the Old Testament, from which he cites examples of mourning customs similar to those already mentioned, and concludes that wailing, rejecting ornaments, rubbing substances such as charcoal or dirt on the body, allowing hair to grow uncharacteristically long, fasting or rejecting pleasant foods, and “sleeping on the grave or in the open air” are additional mourning practices common “in primitive societies” (1983: 12-13). The prearranged behaviors discussed by Alster, such as hair-pulling and dirt-throwing, were also common to ancient Egyptian funerary practices, as executed by professional (female) mourners. Cooper confirms that this practice is indeed widespread: “Ethnomusicological studies represent lamentation, especially at funerals, as the musical province par excellence of women” (2006: 43). Furthermore, Bachvarova’s discussion of men utilizing female behavior to breach the barrier between the living and the dead (2008: 18-19) can be better understood through this gendered approach to misfortune and death. It is theories such as the one that Bachvarova puts forth that increase confusion surrounding the gender of the gala, and to the theory of Emesal as a gender (i.e. women’s) dialect.

Renger does not accept these historically feminine practices as conclusive evidence that the gala were feminine men or eunuchs; on this matter of the sexual identity of the gala, Renger states that “[While the gala] notably are often named in connection with the Ishtar cult[, n]one of this evidence obliges us to classify them as eunuchs or cult prostitutes. The argument that the gala performed his cult songs in the ‘female dialect’ Emesal is not conclusive [to his being a eunuch]” (1969: 193). Renger is not entirely dismissive of this eunuch theory, though, and interprets the limited evidence of the gala

having a son as potentially indicative of an adoptive son;²⁵ he also acknowledges that this interpretation suggests that the gala “could be a family tradition” (1969: 193). Löhnert considers the oral transmission of Mesopotamian texts, interpreting this relationship as the composer (i.e., father) that recites the text to the scribe or pupil (i.e., son), who then writes the text; she notes that in “colophons of the 1st millennium, where most often the writer is either designated as ‘son of’, ‘pupil’ or ‘young pupil’ (Akkadian *samallu* or *samallu sehru*)...” (2008: 433 – footnote 83).

Due to the complete lack of images of the gala and of lament performances, it is almost impossible to confirm or dismiss any of these theories. However, I suggest that if the gala priests were males cross-dressing or otherwise intentionally presenting themselves in a feminine manner, that this was an intentional use of mourning behaviors historically associated with women in order to ensure the success of the laments. This practice of gender-transgression would not be unique to the gala, as Will Roscoe provides compelling comparisons of the gala to the Greco-Roman *galli* and to the *hijra* of contemporary India and Pakistan (1996). In recognition of the historical association of women with lamentation and funerary cults, as well as the dynamic nature of culture clearly evidenced by the development of the gala and of Sumerian laments, I acknowledge the likelihood that the gala originated out of the practices of women lamenters. Furthermore, in the event that explicit evidence confirmed that the gala was entirely comprised of women, I would still maintain my classification of Emesal as a cultic sociolect, rather than a female dialect, based on their exclusive use of Emesal for religious lament literature.

²⁵ Renger states that “for the gala-priest Dumuluguala’ursag it is attested that he had a son Abdihi, who was also a gala-priest” (1969: 193).

Development of the Ritualistic Implementations of Lamentations

A well-developed oral tradition of literature almost certainly predated the advent of writing. Naturally, lamentations would have been performed orally; indeed, Jerrold Cooper states his agreement with Jeremy Black's proposal that "many extant ritual laments...were written down only in the later Old Babylonian period when parts of the southern clergy settled in northern Babylonia" and were previously "transmitted orally" (2006: 43). Cooper further notes: "Schretter (1990: 99-100 and 138) proposes that the reason Emesal texts first appear in OB is that they could only be written once Sumerian orthography fell under the influence of phonetic semitic orthography, and could express dialectal differences. Previous to OB there were emesal texts, but they were written with main dialect Sumerian orthography. But he puts forth no candidates for such texts, and none suggests itself" (2006: 43). However the Emesal laments came to be by the Old Babylonian period, the link between the ritualistic function of Emesal texts and the activities of the gala is indisputable. What scholars know of the activities of the gala varies depending on the time period; the greatest quantity of evidence regarding their activities comes from the second and first millennia B.C. (Cohen 1988: 14). During this span of Mesopotamian history, it is known that the gala were responsible for the recitation of laments at funerals; of scheduled lamentations on specific days of the month; of laments and hymns during razing and renovation to buildings and sacred objects;²⁶ and

²⁶ Temples were typically associated with a specific deity and, being such, contained images of the deity (such as statues) that were treated as if they were the deity in the flesh (the "širnamšub of Nininsina" translated in Cohen 1975 is an example of texts that describe the washing and anointing with oils of these statues). Thus, if a temple was intentionally razed for the purpose of renovation or reconstruction, the gala priest performed a lament ritual at the temple site in order to prevent the anticipated wrath of the deity upon this occasion (Jacobsen 1987: xiii).

of incantation-hymns to keep away evil figures at the onset of a journey (of a deity),²⁷ or the dedication of buildings and objects (Cohen 1988: 14). We are fortunate to possess a text that dictates directions to the gala priest for a temple ritual as an example of the context of the gala's recitations, as well as how they ritualistically implemented their laments:

When laying the foundation of a temple, in an auspicious month, on a favorable day you shall open the (old) foundation of the temple. When you lay the foundation of the temple, during the night you shall set up five offering tables, (one each for the gods) Sin, Marduk, Ninmah, Kulla and Ninshubur. You shall make offerings, scatter seed all about, kindle a fire and libate beer, wine and milk. You shall chant the lamentation *udam ki amus...* (F. Thureau-Dangin 42-44 quoted in Cohen 1974: 13).

From these directions, it is made clear that these laments were supplemented with offerings, and that the rituals were likely a lengthy and involved process.

Additionally, due to this realization that the gala's duties varied and, in turn, they adapted their laments for various purposes, the lamentation genre was developed accordingly. Sumerian lamentations are generally divided into five subgenres: the *eršemma*, the *širnamšub*, the *eršahuğa*, the *šula*, and the *balağ* (see Table 2: Lamentation Subgenres below).

²⁷ As an addition to the footnote above, the statues of deities were removed from their temples to be ceremonially paraded around the city during festivities, or to make an otherwise ceremonial journey.

Table 2: Lamentation Subgenres (Based upon discussions by Black 1991, Cohen 1974 and 1975)

Name	Length	Characteristic Organization/Properties	Date(s) Attested	Additional Notes of Significance
Eršemma	Single stanza; sometimes up to 100 lines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exclamatory opening passage that includes epithets, cities or temple names Mythical narrative of destruction of temples and laments over them Praise of divine addressee 	Old Babylonian; First Millennium B.C.	Black notes that this standard formula of the eršemma during the Old Babylonian Period appears to have been altered in versions of the First Millennium B.C., perhaps influenced by similar developments to the balaḡ: “the mythical narratives are absent, but the number of sections may be increased to two or three, with the final section being a prayer for the ‘calming’ or ‘cooling’ of the savage emotions of various deities” (1991: 24)
širnamšub ²⁸	Typically does not exceed one tablet*	Similar to the balaḡ	Old Babylonian	There are only eight širnamšub texts preserved; the minute collection of these texts, coupled with the absence of them after the Old Babylonian period suggest that the form was quickly discontinued.
eršahuḡa	Typically does not exceed one tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> address to deity lament request for pity, and for intercession (litany addressed to other gods) closing formula 	Old Babylonian; First Millennium B.C.	Black notes that not all of the sections listed (left) are included in every eršahuḡa composition; that their use in first-millennium rituals sometimes involved the king; and that the eršahuḡa is written in the first person, singular

²⁸ While Black defines the širnamšub as a hymn, Cohen grapples with the definition “incantation-hymn,” stating: “I have interpreted an incantation as being a formula whose very words have a magical aura, in and of themselves capable of expelling an evil force... The širnamšub(ba), on the other hand, lacks any such words or sentences, there being no mention of evil forces at all. Therefore the širnamšub(ba) is not an incantation; but rather on the basis of content and structure it must be considered a hymn, as the term šir in širnamšub(ba) implies” (1975: 594). Cohen seeks to differentiate between an incantation and a hymn rather than view the terms as interrelated, as the term apparently suggests. The term “incantation-hymn” seems appropriate for a genre that praises the qualities/actions desired as an incantation for them to continue; also, Jacobsen’s discussion of hymns deriving from incantations and spells, in my opinion, clarifies the issue.

				perspective (1991: 25).
šūila	Typically does not exceed one tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • address to deity • call to various gods and temples to assuage anger of the god 	First Millennium B.C.	Forty-seven šūila compositions are listed in a first-millennium catalogue; only four of these compositions are preserved (Black 1991: 25).
balaḡ	Characteristically long, sometimes exceeding a thousand lines: kirugu's (independent literary units of varying lengths) sometimes divided by gišgigal's (one line units)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • praise of divine addressee • narrative (of destruction and lament) • importunity (typically consisting of a litany of other gods as intercessors) 	Old Babylonian; First Millennium B.C.	During the First Millennium B.C., eršemmas were appended to balaḡs, whereas they had been separate genres previously, though they may have been performed together (Cohen 1974: 8-9).

*In comparison to the balaḡ, Black notes that the other subgenres typically do not exceed one tablet.

These variations of the lament genre indicate that the gala consciously chose to tailor texts to the occasion or function for which each text would be implemented and, more broadly, that these occasions and functions themselves differed and developed. While most of the attestations of these subgenres date to the Old Babylonian period and first millennium B.C., we must remember that our collection of Mesopotamian texts is incomplete and, therefore, we cannot definitively declare that these genres were not (at least orally) developed earlier. However, this evidence of the development and use of these various subgenres during the Old Babylonian and first millennium B.C. periods reveals the dynamic importance of the lament literature during these periods. Löhnert claims that, “despite the evidence that some of [the Emesal lamentations] attested over a wide area” during the Old Babylonian period, these Emesal compositions did not become “standardized” until sometime during the first millennium B.C. (2008: 433). Moreover, Löhnert views the “litanies and stock phrases” shared among the Emesal laments as reason “to assume that these Emesal lamentations were ‘newly created’ by an experienced priest for the use in a specific occasion or the daily cult by compiling several

sections that he knew by heart” (2008: 433);²⁹ this observation suggests the intimate proximity that the gala had to these laments, as well as a necessity to be prepared to compose a new text tailored to whatever occasion arose.

Being variations of the same genre, as evidenced by Table 2, all of the subgenres generally exhibit shared characteristics; Cohen summarizes these characteristics under praise, narrative and importunity.³⁰

These characteristics of praise, narrative, and importunity can be identified in Cohen’s translation of “UDAM KI AMUS: It Touches the Earth like a Storm”:³¹

(70) The honored one, the lord of the lands,

the unfathomable one, whose word is true,

whose orders no one can challenge,

Enlil, whose utterances are unalterable,

....like a single planted reed the eminent one tramples me down.

²⁹ This interpretation coincides with Jacobsen’s surmise that “an original oral work will have been memorized, worked over, and put in written form by a learned scribe” (1987: xi).

³⁰ He explains, “The majority of the content is devoted to praising the deity, such praise displaying to the god the sincere devotion of his supplicants, the laudatory verses assuring the deity that man understands his subservient and helpless position, recognizing the overlordship of the god. A second aspect of the praise might well be the cajoling of the god, by which he might grant the desperate plea of a beleaguered nation. The narrative in the laments describes the decimation of the land, the eruption of natural forces, foreign invasions, all unleashed by the god in his unbending wrath. Described are the reactions of the goddesses, bewailing the fate of their land, their temples and their people... The importunities are an attempt to halt the ruin of the country, the nation pleading that the heart and mind of the god be assuaged, that his favor and loving care return to his people. So too scores of other gods are invoked that they might also urge an end to a devastation that has not spared their temples and cities” (1974: 7).

³¹ From *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (1988). This is the lament to which the above-mentioned directions referred.

In this excerpt, the description of Enlil, the god to whom this lament is addressed, comes across as fearful recognition of his divine power and lends itself to the praise portion of the lament. So helpless in comparison to this god are his human subjects (represented collectively by the singular first person speaker) that they are trampled down swiftly and effortlessly as if they are “a single planted reed.”

Further on in the lament, there is the narrative element, which is characteristic of the lament genres:

(93) At your word the heavens rumble.

The word of Enlil causes the earth to shake.

...

(97) It is because of your word that a (normally) faithful ewe
abandons its lamb.

It is because of your word that a (normally) faithful goat abandons
its kid.

The (normally) faithful mother abandons her child.

...

(d+200) In that place where oxen are slain men are slain.

In that place where sheep are butchered men are butchered.

Troubles are hanging down in the front of the house.

Sighs are hanging down in its interior.

No one who feels happy passes by it.

...

From its threshold wailing is brought forth.

(e+209) From the...of the house sighs are brought forth.

In the narrative portion, the composers establish the metaphor of Enlil's anger as a storm that causes "the heavens [to] rumble" and "the earth to shake." The tactile and visual imagery of the earth shaking, presumably like an earthquake, is an image that even modern readers would recognize as evoking fear; the "word" of Enlil is so powerful and enigmatic as to move the ground previously believed to be a stable and constant element in their daily lives. The images of motherhood, representing a concept traditionally held as one of constant commitment and love, are flipped to an image of inexplicable and unnatural abandonment; similarly, the speaker has been abandoned by Enlil. Moreover, the imagery of the house in the next section brings forth the image of a house that has been abandoned to disrepair, just as the Mesopotamians have been left without divine protection. The diction utilized throughout (such as abandons, slain, butchered, troubles, sighs, and wailing) is morbid and despairing, lending to the voices of a people who are helpless against such divine anger.

The lament ends with importunity:

(f+226) May both heaven and earth calm you!

Urash, the place of the late barley,

Enki, Ninki, Enmul, Ninmul...

...your wife Ninlil,

your older sister, the lady of Kesh,

the clamorous one, the lady of Nippur,

the great princely son, Nanna-Suen,

your beloved child, Inanna

...

(f+266) "May you not abandon your city!" may each utter to you!

...

"Indeed, you are its lord!" may each utter to you.

May each utter a prayer to you!

"Indeed, you are its shepherd!" may each utter to you.

May each utter a prayer to you! (Cohen 1988: 138-143)

Just as Cohen described, the people invoke the power of other gods in an attempt to calm Enlil, thus halting the destruction and allowing the city to return to a state of normalcy. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Jacobsen sees the Mesopotamian city-state as the estate of a god, and the human subjects created for the purpose of serving the gods (1967: 200-201). This view of gods as rulers of the Mesopotamian city-states is reflected in this

passage, in which the composers have put into the mouths of the other gods a reminder to Enlil that he is responsible for this city.

Additionally, Mesopotamian laments such as this one would have worked on more than just a textual level; as Jacobsen puts it: “[To the ancient listener] The gods’ leaving, the places’ being destroyed, was the loss of all bearings, and the very monotony of the litany, the same for each new name, must have been felt as the hammer blows of inexorable doom” (1987: 448). The repetition, poetic elements, and morbid tone evidenced above, in addition to the fact that these laments were ritualistically performed to the accompaniment of musical instruments, would have functioned on auditory and visual levels as well. An area of contention among scholars concerning *balaḡ* lamentations is the *balaḡ*-instrument itself, from which the genre’s name originates; scholars generally take a stand supporting *balaḡ* as either a harp or as a drum. Cohen notes that “CAD B p. 39 sub *balaggu* [declares], ‘That *balag* was originally a harp is certain from the pictograph in the Uruk IV/III period’,” but Cohen suggests that the term may have later changed to refer to a drum rather than a harp, particularly during the second and first millennia B.C. (1974: 31). Cohen provides a few reasons in support of this suggestion: first, the “enumerated parts” of the lamentations seem better accompanied by a drum than a harp; second, the *balaḡ*-instrument supposedly has a *kippatu* (‘hoop’) similar to the *alû*-drum, and for which there would be no need on a harp; and third, it is known that recitation of the *eršemma*, which was often inserted into *balaḡ*s, was accompanied by the *ḫalḫallatu*-drum³² (1974: 31). Renger supports the theory

³² Cohen notes that during the First Millennium B.C., *eršemma* texts often include “instructions ‘to the accompaniment of the *ḫalḫallatu*-drum,” a seemingly unnecessary statement since the very term *eršemma*

that the balaḡ instrument is a harp, but specifies: “The gala accompanied his songs on various instruments: only the balaḡ=balangu (harp) for the Neo-Sumerian period and the šēm=halhallatu (a percussion instrument) for the Old Babylonian period are certain” (Renger 1969: 191). Will Roscoe, alternatively, suggests that the harp was employed for the accompaniment of hymns, whereas the drum accompanied at least one genre of the laments, though he does not specify which type of lament (1996: 214).

means ‘wail of the *halhallatu*-drum’” whereas texts of the gala do not mention the balag-instrument (1974: 31).

Comparison of Emesal Laments to other Mesopotamian Literature

A comparison of Emesal laments to other Mesopotamian texts reveals two main similarities of significance: first, that variations of purpose or function dictated variations within the same corpus of texts, and second, that these written compositions reflect ritual performances. First for comparison is the versatile literature of the Dumuzi cult. The god Dumuzi, as he is most commonly known, has several different names and forms that vary based on the seasonal features with which he is associated: Dumuzi or Tammuz for the shepherd; Ama-ushumgal-anna for the god of dates/the date palm; and Damu for “the son” (Jacobsen 1987: 1). The cults for each of these aspects differed in their ritualistic practices according to these associations: the cult of Dumuzi ritualistically celebrated his marriage to Inanna and lamented his premature death; the cult of Ama-ushumgal-anna only celebrated his marriage most likely due to the fact that dates have a remarkably long storage life and, thus, there is no “sense of loss” to be expressed; and the cult of Damu only lamented his early death with the dry summer and did not celebrate a marriage rite because Damu is depicted as a youthful boy connected to the rising of sap in trees during the spring (Jacobsen 1987: 1).³³

Additionally, Jacobsen notes that the variations in the Dumuzi texts reflect “differences of form and purpose” (1987: 2). The variations in the laments appear directly connected or derived from rituals, while the others, such as the myths or texts dealing with the courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna, appear primarily for the purpose of entertainment (1987: 2). Interesting characteristics of “In the Desert by the Early Grass”

³³ Also note that the manner of Damu’s death differs from that of Dumuzi, reflecting the differences in their associations (Jacobsen 1987: 1).

include that the text seems to have been composed “from many and various sources,” which were, according to Jacobsen, “actual ritual laments used in the wailing for Dumuzi” and that “Both laments [by the god’s mother] are put in the mouth, it seems, not of the sorrowing mother but of a narrator” (Jacobsen 1987: 56), which may indicate a ritual performance of the text as well. Also included in this text is a “long litany listing various local forms of the dying god by name, and telling where they lie buried” (Jacobsen 1987: 58), which is common in Emesal laments, as previously established, as well as in lamentations of societies contemporary to Mesopotamia.

In examining other texts associated with the goddess Inanna, specifically the “Hymn to Inanna,” the similarities between the hymn and lament genres – as derivations from incantations – can be seen. Jacobsen finds it likely that the “Hymn to Inanna” was performed at an annual reenactment of the marriage between Ama-ushumgal-anna and Inanna, in which the king portrayed Ama-ushumgal-anna and the queen portrayed Inanna (1987: 112). As part of this rite, there was a parade comprised of cult personnel in the service of Inanna, guards portraying warriors, young men portraying captives and women as harlots, and “solid citizens of the town, carrying harps and other implements designed to soothe and pacify the goddess” (Jacobsen 1987: 112). The parade actions show how a cult and a ritual derive from actual societal groups and “events.” What these comparisons also reveal is that these literary genres did not exist in isolation from one another, reflecting the widespread patterns of Mesopotamian religious beliefs.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is not to dismiss entirely the theory of Emesal as a female dialect; but rather its aim is to demonstrate how the evidence of Emesal's usage by divine female speakers and the gala's application of mourning behaviors that are historically associated with women more appropriately suggest that Emesal functioned as a cultic sociolect. The classification of Emesal as a female dialect is problematic because it implies that the dialect is employed exclusively by an entire social class or cultural population of women, and fails to sufficiently acknowledge the usage of Emesal by the gala, which was primarily (if not at least in part) comprised of male priests. Even if there were explicit evidence that the gala was fully comprised of women, I would still maintain that the exclusive use of Emesal by the gala for religious purposes implies that it functioned as a cultic sociolect.

In conclusion, I add to the scholarship of Emesal my definition that it is a dialect or variation of Sumerian that was used by the gala priesthood, specifically for the purpose of laments that benefitted the community. I have by no means exhausted the sources concerning Emesal, lamentation, or the gala; however, based on the research presented herein, I cite as reasons for Emesal's classification as a cultic sociolect: the restriction of Emesal to the gala's performance of laments; the softer, more soothing pronunciations of Emesal; the gala's use of feminine behavior historically associated with laments; as well as the fact that these Sumerian laments continued to be used well into later periods – even after Akkadian was adopted as the main vernacular. Emesal continued to be used in this function for around two thousand years, revealing its importance to Mesopotamian literature and society. Language is an intrinsic part of culture, as evidenced here.

Understanding a language allows us to understand some of the finer details and intricacies of specific social groups, such as the gala, what their purpose to society was, and what motivated them to do what they did. Emesal may be a dead language, but we are fortunate that it has not been completely lost to us, as it is a valuable gateway into understanding the complexities of the Mesopotamian culture.

Figure 1: Map of Ancient Mesopotamia – Mesopotamia was located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is modern-day Iraq. (Map by Leick 2010: x)



Figure 2: dimer-dingir-ilum (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/P393779>) – There are three tablets that form what Schretter describes as “the most important lexical list for knowledge of Emesal” (1990: 13). The list is named after the first line of the first tablet (dimer-dingir-ilum), which provides the corresponding terms for Emesal (left), Emegir (middle), and Akkadian (right [Schretter 1990: 13]).



Figure 3: Curse of Agade (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/P469679>) – References to the gala are made in this lament (note that gala has been translated as “lamentation priest”):

198. gala-mah mu-ta ba-ra-ab-tak4-a

#tr.en: and the chief lamentation singer who survived those years

199. u4 7(disz) ge6 7(disz)-sze3

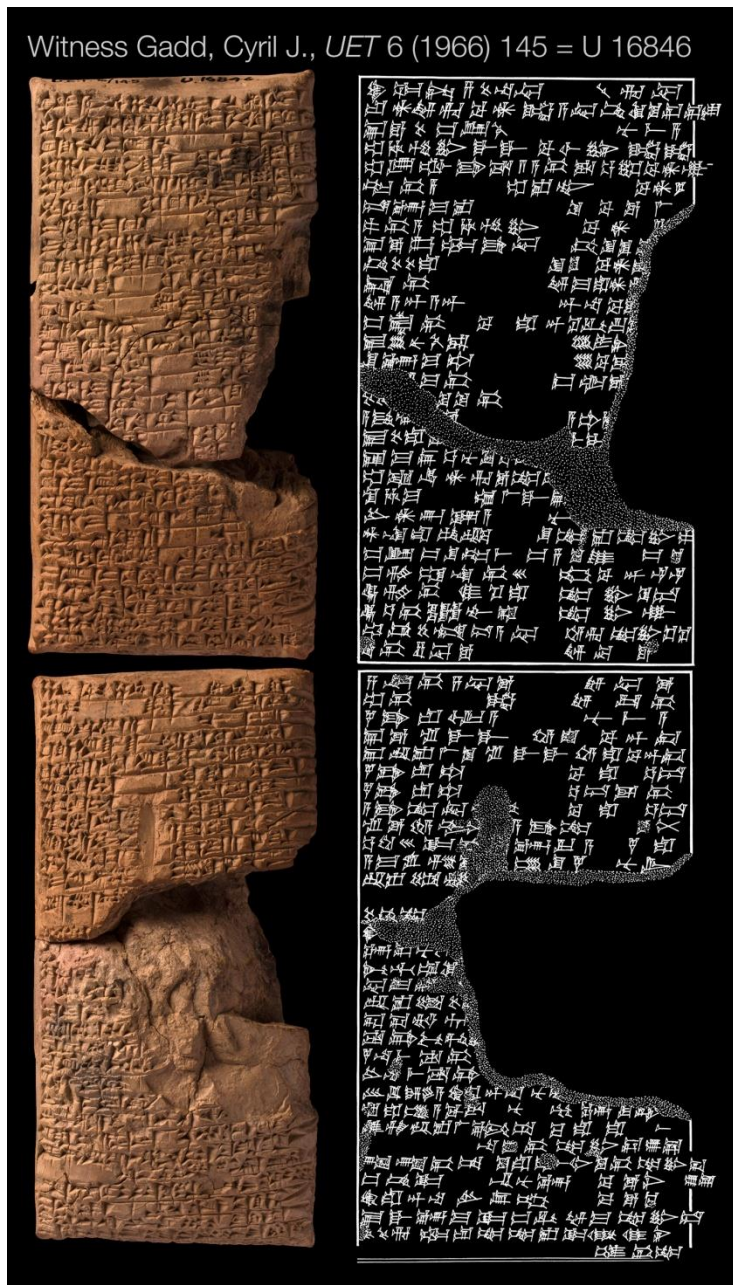
#tr.en: for seven days and seven nights

200. balag 7(disz)-e an-ur2 gub-ba-gin7 ki mu-un-szi-ib-us2

#tr.en: set up seven balaḡ drums,

201. ub3 me-ze2 li-li-is3 {d}iszkur-gin7 sza3-ba mu-na-an-du12

#tr.en: ub, meze, and lilis drums made them resound to Enlil like Iškur.



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