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Peaceful Coexistence of Religions in the Mesopotamian Civilization across Ancient History

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Abstract

Mesopotamia witnessed, through its different historical eras, the emergence of civilizations, states and kingdoms in the north, center and south, and the multiplicity and diversity of their nationalities and religions also throughout the ages, starting with the Sumerian civilization and then the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations. Although Mesopotamian civilization exposed to foreign occupation and barbaric aggressions in many of its periods and eras, it remained unified within its different civilizations, nationalities, and religions. They all lived together peacefully under the ancient Sumerian civilization, which had the cultural heritage that formed the base of the solid civilization from which the rest of the other old Iraqi civilizations started. All old Iraqi civilizations forgot the plurality and diversity of nationalities and religions through the existence of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence between them, which consequently reflected on the prosperity and development of all aspects of life from religious, political, economic, social and cultural perspectives. Even during the periods and eras of foreign occupation, Mesopotamian kings emphasized and stressed the need for tolerance and peaceful coexistence in all aspects of life. Mesopotamia remains the original and pioneering civilization in everything. The article discusses the peaceful coexistence as well as religious and intellectual tolerance in the Mesopotamian civilization.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, peaceful coexistence, tolerance

1. Introduction



Throughout its long history, and despite the diversity of its religious and social textures, Iraqi society is characterized by a state of peaceful coexistence due to several historical, social and cultural causes and factors. Most notably, the common cultural heritage of the ancient civilizations that were established on the intellectual, social, and legal principles united Iraqis in one identity. The Arab Islamic civilization which is based on the principles of unification, cooperation, and tolerance helped spread peace among the diverse Iraqi society. Due to political, sectarian conflicts, wars, and terrorism, the peaceful coexistence and tolerance among the different societies of modern Iraq is no longer the same as the peaceful coexistence and tolerance which were prevalent in ancient Iraq.

Peaceful coexistence, as a modern term, emerged from the political vocabulary of Bolshevism. The term is particularly used by Lenin. Then, it is used widely and repeatedly in the speeches of the Soviet statesmen since 1920 (Aaron & Reynolds, 1956).

Karpov (1964) states that:

The peaceful coexistence policy is not a tactical move on the part of the Soviet Union. Our desire for peace and peaceful coexistence springs from the very nature of our socialist society in which there are no social groups interested in profiting by means of war or by the arms race... We cannot even discuss this principle in terms whether we should "accept" or "reject" it. The point is that today peaceful coexistence is *an indisputable fact* of international life and not someone's request or suggestion. Peaceful coexistence is an objective necessity stemming from the contemporary stage of the development of human society (858).

The five principles of peaceful coexistence is a treaty signed between China and India in 1954 which facilitated the trade, pilgrimage, and travel by the people of the two countries, namely China and India (Van Eekelen, 1967). *The principle of the peaceful coexistence is based on five principles: (1) peaceful coexistence between the two parts, (2) both countries should not interfere in each other's internal affairs, (3) equality of members and mutual benefit, (4) each country should show respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other country, and (5) mutual non-aggression* (Van Eekelen, 1967; Izueke, Okoli, & Nzekwe, 2014).

Although the aforementioned five principles of peaceful coexistence were not mentioned in the Charter of the United Nations, but if we have a look at the Charter, we will discover that it is based on the peaceful coexistence principle (Karpov, 1964). The United Nations Charter



itself states that people of the countries should live together in peace and tolerance and they should all unite their strength to achieve international peace and security (Karpov, 1964). Many other articles related to the UN Charter also stressed the necessary need for peaceful coexistence and tolerance between people, countries, and governments. Articles which emphasized peace, equality, tolerance, anti-racism, anti-sexism, ant-religious distinction, and security can be found in article 1 (1, 2, 3, 4), article 2 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) of the UN Charter. UN Charter opened with the following basic principles (Charter of the United Nations, 1945: p, 2):

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and

to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS.

Mesopotamian civilization, with all its long history of achievements, achieved the oldest social, economic, and political reforms. Mesopotamia made one of its great achievements when it transformed humanity from a primitive life into a well civilized life where it built the first cities, ruling system and laws, writing, arts, literature, science, knowledge, and many more other elements of urbanism and civilization (Baqir, 1986). Peaceful coexistence, as a modern term, means that all people should peacefully live and respect each other. It is based on respect for all races, religions, customs, traditions, norms, and beliefs. Ancient history has revealed



many forms of peaceful coexistence in the Mesopotamian civilization of old Iraq (Al-Nawab, 2016). This article explains the term “peaceful coexistence” from a Mesopotamian perspective which is based on respect for religions, customs, traditions, norms, and others.

2. Peaceful Coexistence

The concept of coexistence is one of the modern concepts which is used to stress the idea that different people, groups, and societies should peacefully coexist and live together. Coexistence is based on people’s awareness of accepting others regardless of their colours, religions, and creeds (Al-Nawab, 2016). Coexistence comes in the sense of consensus or collective agreement. It is one of the basic elements from which the social system is formed. It can be found in two groups or societies or even more when there is complete harmony and agreement between them. In addition to the complete harmony and agreement between different people, they should respect each other’s beliefs, ideas, goals, and the different or equal social roles they occupy (Mitchell, 1968).

Peaceful coexistence embodies, in its various aspects, the concept of harmony between the members of the same society or different societies and countries including their various identities, races, colours, and religions in addition to their trends, beliefs, and ideas. Peaceful coexistence is used to refer to the fact that any good, healthy, and civilized social system should be based on the commitment of all of its parts to the principles of mutual respect of freedom of opinion, behaviour, and thinking. Undoubtedly, peaceful coexistence rejects negative words such as marginalization, exclusion, immigration, violence, and conflict. On the contrary, peaceful coexistence is associated with civil peace through which people, communities, and countries can live their lives and practice their jobs freely and responsibly without being marginalized, displaced, and excluded.

1. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9)
2. “O mankind! We created (4933) you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)” (Al Hujurat, verse: 13).

Verse (1) is taken from the holy Bible and verse (2) is taken from the Holy Quran. Both verses stressed and emphasized the necessary need for living in peace and tolerance. The word “blessed” means ‘having a sacred nature; connected with God; very pleasant and joyful’. It is



used to refer to the peacemakers. The word “peacemakers” means ‘people who help to prevent or stop an argument, fight, or a war’; peacemakers are people who make peace especially by reconciling parties at variance’. The pronoun “they” is used to refer to the peacemakers: they are identified as “sons of God”. Undoubtedly, peacemakers work effortlessly for the sake of making peace between two parties or nations. The holy Bible stressed the importance of peace to our planet and the necessary need for living together in peace. The Holy Quran also stressed the need for living together in peace and tolerance. Verse (2) is used to strongly emphasize the need for unity and peaceful coexistence among mankind. The verse does not only address the Muslims. It is used to refer to all mankind who descended from one pair of parents. All tribes, races, and nations should love each other and live peacefully together. In other words, all people should not despise or hate each other.

Ancient Iraqis put their perception and concept of the issue of justice as a necessary need which should be achieved among all people. Therefore, ancient Iraqis put for justice a god due to its importance in the Mesopotamian civilization. God of justice is served as a protector of rights and justice. Guaranteeing justice in the Mesopotamian civilization can be traced back to the principle which stressed that the ruler should submit to and obey the rule of law and judiciary. The principle of the ruler’s obedience to the rule of law was and is still considered one of the basic principles to achieve justice at the present time. Such principle was used and applied in ancient Iraq. In the Mesopotamian civilization, the authority and power of the kings or the rulers was restricted by the rules of justice. There is a text from the latest Assyrian era (612-911 BC) which emphasizes that if the king does not spread justice and if he does not listen to the advice of his advisers, his life will be short, his people will revolt against him, and his kingdom will definitely collapse (Husien, 2015).

3. Peaceful Coexistence in Mesopotamia

In Mesopotamian civilization, peace and prosperity are signs approved by gods for the king who fulfills his/her duty and contract. Peace in the king’s land served as a sign of a responsible and effective king (Foster, n.d.). Around 2450 BC, a treaty signed between the king of Laksh, Eannatum and Umma. It was one of the famous treaties for solving problems in different societies, disputes, conflicts, and wars which happened between different states and civilizations. By this famous treaty, ancient Iraqis presented for other civilizations and even



our modern world the principle which argues that problems can be solved via negotiations using logic and wisdom, not through disputes, conflicts, and wars (Nussbaum, 1947).

In the Mesopotamian civilization, kings should give their people harmony, peace, and justice. The Assyrian king Assurbanipal issued in his coronation prayer a conclusion which emphasizes the necessary need for achieving justice, peace, and harmony as foster (2005) states “May the great listen when the lesser speak, may the lesser listen when the great speak, may harmony and peace be established in Assur” (815-816).

Religion was one of the crucial and most important foundations of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization. Religious ideas and beliefs often decide or determine the general structure of one’s behaviour, and influence his/her customs, traditions, habits as well as his/her intellectual and spiritual manner. Religion, in ancient Mesopotamia, focused on three main elements: religious thought, religious feeling, and rituals and worship. Studying different Mesopotamian religions is not an easy task due to the development of human thinking over time and the progress of its civilizational aspects. The stability of the Sumerians in southern Iraq and their economic and political prosperity helped to the emergence of a wide freedom of thinking and religious beliefs. Therefore, Mesopotamian religion became clear and reached its final and desired state in the Sumerian era in the middle of the fourth millennium BC. It should be noted the fact that Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians followed the Sumerian religion. They only made slight changes to the Sumerian religion such as the number of deities, their names and attributes, and other simple changes, but they did not change the essence of the national and original religion. This served as a wonderful image of peaceful coexistence and tolerance in the religions of ancient Iraqis (Yousif, 2018).

Ancient Iraqis worshiped many deities, close to 2500 deity. Despite the absence of sufficient information about the exact origins of the religion of ancient Iraqis, the deities (gods and goddesses) themselves indicate that they passed through vital and totemic stages before their complete formation in the ancient Sumerian era. The story of the Babylonian creation presents the names of ancient deities who were replaced by young deities such as Anshar, Keshar, Lakhmu, and Khamo. Thus, the deities continue to reproduce, and each new generation of them kills their fathers (predecessors). The vital stage in the development of the ancient Iraqi religion can be clarified by the sanctification of water, fire, and natural forces such as the sun,

the moon, planets, etc. The totemic stage is manifested by different animals which were used to refer to the deities. Ancient Iraqis depicted and worshiped their deities in the form of animals (Al-Ahmad, 2013).

As we said before, ancient Mesopotamia (the birth of civilization and religion), worshiped thousands of gods and goddesses. The following list illustrates the most famous Mesopotamian gods and goddesses. The names and definitions of each god and goddess are taken from (Qasha, 2008):

Anu or **Anou** (other names of **Anou** are **An** and **Ilu**). **Anou** is the greatest god, god of heaven and sky who with **EA** and **Enlil** form the triad of deities. **Anou** was worshiped in Uruk and Laksh.

EA is the god of the sea and water, the god of wisdom and the inventor of writing, arts, and sciences. **EA** is also called **Enki**.

Enlil has the city of Nippur, the god of the earth and destiny, the inventor of the chariot.



Figure (1): Enlil, Anu, and Ea who form the triad of deities in Mesopotamia (Taken from mythology.net)

Ninlil is the Enlil's wife. **Enlil** has sons. They are:

Inourta is the eldest son of **Enlil**, a warrior and farmer deity. **Inourta** has a second name, **Ningirsou**.

Nanna is the son of **Enlil**. **Nanna** is the god of the moon in the city of Ur and the protector of the Shepherd. Another name for **Nanna** is **Sin** in Akkadian. **Nanna** has a wife called **Ningal** and they have a son called **Shamash**. **Shamash** is the god of the sun and the greatest ruler. Babylonians believed that Hammurabi received his codes from **Shamash**.

Ninourta is the son of **Enlil**. **Ninourta** is the god of war and hunting, the god of the Mercury planet.

Zababa is the son of **Enlil**, god of war and hunting in the city of Kish.

Dambkina is **EA**'s wife and the mother of the god "**Mardouk**" in the Babylonian era. **EA** and **Dambkina** have the following sons:

Ninâ is the daughter of **EA**. **Ninâ** is the goddess of water. She has a temple in Laksh.

Mardouk is the eldest son of **EA** and **Dambkina**. **Mardouk** is the god of wisdom. Hammurabi raised **Mardouk** as the supreme god (the kings of gods). **Mardouk** had a son called "**Nabou**".

Nabou's mother was **Sarpanitou**. **Nabou** is the god of writing and the protector of writers.

Ki is **Anu**'s wife, the goddess of earth. **Anu** and **Ki** had a daughter called "**Ishtar**" who is the goddess of war and sexuality.

There are other gods and goddess who have different functions. Some of them are:

Adad is the god of weather, winter, and thunder. His other names were Ramman and Ishkour in the Sumerian literature.

Anounaki is the god of earth and sky.

Igigi is the goddess of hell.

Nergal is the god of diseases and war.

Assour is a national god. **Assour** had become the supreme god of all gods. He gave his name to the capital, Assyria. He created the sky of the god **Anu** and all humans. He is a warrior god represented in the center of a winged disc holding a bow. His wife is the goddess **Ishtar**.

Tamuz and **Jazida** are two gods guarding **Anu**'s door.



Figure (2): A clay tablet belongs to the epic of creation. It illustrates how god Anshar invites other gods to celebrate Mardouk's appointment as a supreme god (Amin, 2014)

Ancient Iraqis depicted their deities in the form of humans. They gave their gods and goddesses human characteristics in addition to their divine attributes. From a Mesopotamian perspective, deities are similar to humans in the sense that they think, work, eat, and drink. Also, deities get married and give birth to children. Their children also become gods and goddesses. Ancient Iraqis believed that gods and goddesses plan and direct the universe. Their gods and goddesses also meet in the deities' complex and decide the fate of humans whether good or bad (Yousif, 2018).

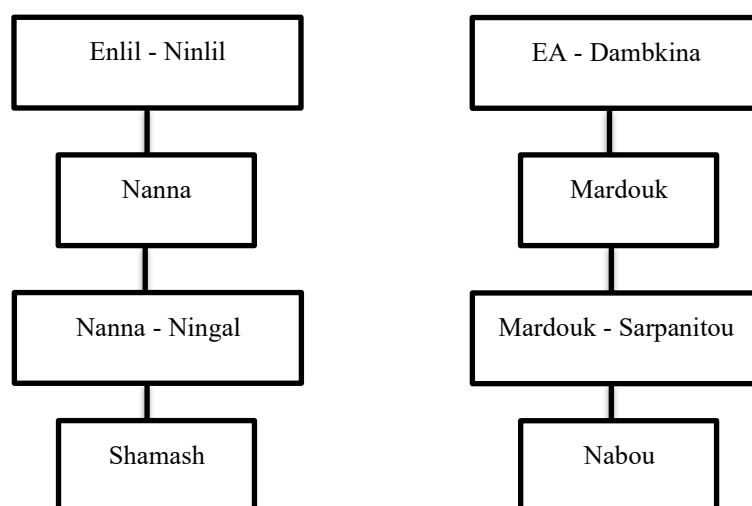


Figure (3): Wives and sons of some of Mesopotamian deities

Until the end of the Mesopotamian civilization, various Sumerian deities remained in the religious heritage; hymns, songs, and chants were presented to them, and temples were built for them. Ancient Iraqis did not neglect any deity. All deities were worshiped and respected. Even after the kingdoms of Babylon and Assyria were established in the second thousand BC, when the god “Mardouk” was chosen as the supreme god in Babylon, and Assyria in the north, the old members of the Mesopotamian deities such as Anu, Enlil, Ea (Enki), Sin (Nanna), Shamash (Autu), Adad (Ishkour), Ishtar (Inanna), Ninourta, and Ningal were respected and never neglected. Thus, the entry of the Amorites or the Eastern Canaanites from Syria to Iraq did not make any significant change in the Mesopotamian pantheon. Even the deities they had worshiped in Syria (Amuru-Marto) lost their religious status in Mesopotamia (Qasha, 2008).



Every human wave entering Mesopotamia worshiped local Mesopotamian deities alongside their own deities which soon became sacred to everyone else. This is a rare phenomenon which shows the extent of harmony and peaceful coexistence of religions and people in the old Iraqi society and the lack of differentiation and distinction among its people (Al-Ahmad, 2013). Historical sources showed that Mesopotamian civilization is a wonderful example of peaceful coexistence. One such peaceful coexistence occurred in the time of king of Laksh namely, Cudia. The period between the end of the Akkadian era and the Kutian occupation or the Kuti era (2116-2015 BC) is a historical and important period for the peaceful coexistence which happened between different civilizations. This wonderful period of peaceful coexistence occurred during the reign of king Cudia. Cudia reigned during the rule and occupation of the Kutis. His reign was characterized by prosperity and peace. Cudia emphasized the crucial need for freedom of religions and worship. Cudia also stressed the need for respecting others' deities and religions. Cudia's wit and wisdom, which are represented by his emphasis on peaceful coexistence among different communities during the domination of the barbaric Kuti invasion, helped spread a wonderful life for all the different individuals of his kingdom, a life full of prosperity, peace, harmony, and progress (Al-Nawab, 2016).

Cudia's principle of peace and prosperity can be summarized as follows:

- Respect **our** deities and religions
- Respect **their** deities and religions
- Talk positively about **our** deities and religions
- Talk positively about **their** deities and religions

4. Conclusions

Peaceful coexistence is to live in peace with each other. It is based on mutual trust and respect. Coexistence is based on learning to live together accepting diversity in a way that guarantees a positive and peaceful life and relationship with the other. The need for coexistence in countries of different races and religions is crucial since it can magnet people to live in harmony, agreement, and conformity. Peace depends on coexistence. If there is coexistence in a diverse community, there will absolutely be peace in the same community because it is impossible to separate them. Therefore, coexistence is a natural result of a state of peace.



In our current time, peace and coexistence are associated with politics, religions, and society. It is necessary to know the fact that politics has negatively influenced peaceful coexistence in multiple communities and deprived millions of people to live in peace and harmony. We found that the matter is different in the Mesopotamian civilization. Despite its exposure to numerous aggressions and conflicts, it achieved peaceful coexistence that deserves to be set as an example, a wonderful example of peace and harmony between members of the same community and members of different communities.

If we compare our current Iraq with that of the Iraq of Mesopotamia, we will definitely find out that our old ancestors worshiped thousands of deities and had many religions than our current Iraq which only has Muslims majority (Shia and Sunnis) on one hand, and minorities represented by Christians, Yazidis, and Sabian Mandaean on the other. Undoubtedly, our ancient Iraqi ancestors were able to live in peace and harmony. As for modern Iraq, unfortunately, and for sectarian, religious, and political reasons on one hand and the wars, conflicts, and terrorism modern Iraq witnessed on the other, Iraqis still lack to live in peace together. This research recommends the crucial importance of peaceful coexistence between the people of the same nation. The research also recommends that people of modern Iraq should benefit from their old ancestors who, despite all the barbaric aggressions and conflicts they encountered, were able to live in peace and harmony.

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