

Fiat Lingua

Title: The Birth of a Planet (and three languages)

Author: Roger F. Mills

MS Date: 08-05-2010

FL Date: 01-01-2012

FL Number: FL-000004-00

Citation: Mills, Roger F. 2010. "The Birth of a Planet (and three languages)." FL-000004-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <<http://fiatlingua.org>>. Web. 01 Jan. 2012.

Copyright: © 2012 Roger F. Mills. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

THE BIRTH OF A PLANET
(and three languages)

Roger F. Mills

In late Spring of 1976 my first university teaching job, in a town whose name I do not wish to recall, was nearing its end, as the man whom I'd replaced would be returning from leave in the Fall.

For several years I had been reading a lot of science fiction, starting with Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and branching out from there into the rest of her opus, and many other authors' works. During my year of teaching, every Sunday meant a trip to the well-stocked local bookstore for my *New York Times*, then a foray into their science fiction section to look for anything new or old that looked interesting—especially anthologies that contained stories by Le Guin, or sometimes, just anything with eye-catching cover art.

I had probably re-read, yet once more, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Being at loose ends, with two months to go before my lease expired, I began to fantasize a similar story—sometime in the 2500s, a research ship from an organization called the Galactic Union has detected an Earth-like planet with intelligent life, indeed, an advanced civilization (advanced, say, to the level of 1970s America, with a few improvements). A young Terran in the crew, John Rodriguez, is sent down in a little shuttle-craft to make first contact, and he encounters a race of telepathic¹ cat-like beings, quite large and bipedal, with black fur (and so first dubbed “*Panthera erectus*”) who are remarkably human. These are the Kash, and they call their planet Cindu (pronounced, and originally written, “Chindu”), and the city where he has landed is called Holunda (sounds like “jolunda” to Hispanic John²). He forms a close friendship with a young Kash man, Shenji, and learns, among other things, that the Kash maintain telepathic contact with their “Cousins,” related “great-cat” species still living in the wild—this colors their religion, and contributes to their species-wide sense of the unity of all life. He learns that there is another intelligent species on the planet, the Gwr (rhymes with “her”)³, evolved from a more-or-less simian ancestor; they live in the northern latitudes. They are not telepaths, but are universally acknowledged to be extremely clever, and have been responsible for much of the technological development on the planet. Unfortunately, they have the bad habit of not thinking things through, and a long time ago two Gwr nations had engaged in a week-long nuclear war

¹ The Union's first-contact people are also trained in telepathy, to facilitate matters until languages can be acquired.

² In fact, I first wrote Kash with a Spanish-based orthography.

³ “Kash,” by the way, means ‘people’ and supposedly derives irregularly from the verb *kayi* ‘to live, be alive’; “Gwr” means ‘free’ in their language.

with primitive, very dirty nukes that not only destroyed their nations, industry and infrastructure, but also polluted their lands and killed off, by immediate as well as lingering radiation, almost half their population. The Kash, uninvolved in the dispute and relatively safe in the temperate and tropic zones, suffered no damage, and thanks to prevailing winds, very few effects from the radiation. But the Gwr lost their majority and controlling status and became, for a long time, an impoverished minority, and the Kash gained control of the planet's destiny from that time on.

John Rodriguez travels to the capital of the most important Gwr nation, Bau Da, where he is kidnapped by nationalists and sequestered in a wealthy partisan's hunting lodge, isolated in a dense and snowy forest. One day, alone in his room, he begins to "hear" primitive telepathic messages from outside—and looking out a window, he sees a group of small "cats" evidently hunting in the underbrush and strategizing telepathically. He manages to make his presence known and "speaks" with them, but the little animals, surprised and unused to communicating with humans, are a bit fearful and unwilling to help. They do agree to send one of the larger, more adept Cousins to speak with him, and perhaps help him escape. This is accomplished, and he is guided for several days by old Broken Tail through the cold wintry forest to the hermitage of a Kash religious order, with whose help he contacts a nearby military outpost where there are Kash personnel. Ultimately he returns to Holunda and his friend.

All this will sound familiar to any fan of Le Guin's novel. I did, however, introduce one little plot twist: in their final weeks together, Shenji and John both come to realize that, in some way, they are in love with each other. John begins to wonder if he might stay on Cindu. (I should mention that Shenji, like most Kash men, is bisexual, tending perhaps more to the gay side. John, on the other hand, has been conditioned to suppress all sexual feelings, due to the Union's belief that sexual relationships on long space voyages might be disruptive.) There is an abortive attempt to have sex. Finally, there is a poignant farewell as John goes to his shuttle to return to duty on the mother-ship, both men sadly aware they will never meet again, due to the vagaries of inter-stellar travel across light-years. End of story.

With all this roiling around in my head, I sat down one night with compass and ruler and, reviving another youthful habit, began drawing rough maps of Cindu. Later, helped by some cartography books from the library, I drew some more correct (I think) projections. I pulled figures out of thin air for the size of the planet, distance from its sun, the length of days, the year, time-keeping and the calendar, and so forth. And since I was a certified linguist, naturally there had to be languages.

As a teen-ager I had invented two or three languages—basically clones of Latin—but then gave up Tolkien's "secret vice" (which we now call *conlanging*) due to ridicule and, of course, graduating into the real world of college, then the Army, then a couple 9-to-5 jobs. Finally, I found my way to graduate school at the University of Michigan, to indulge

my real interest, languages and their histories. Starting in Romance Linguistics, I soon decided it was already a well picked-over corpse. Then I encountered the Buginese language of Indonesia in a field-methods course, under an inspiring teacher who also taught Bahasa Indonesia, and realized that Malayo-Polynesian languages were a fertile and relatively unexplored field. So began my interest in the Indonesian area, where I eventually spent a fascinating year doing doctoral research.

Although my field is historical-comparative linguistics, I did not start with “Proto-Kash” as I should have, even though I knew there were some 600 million Kash all over Planet Cindu, speaking a great many languages (someday I should work on this...). Still, my dialect of Kash, spoken on the large island Yanatros where John and Shenji had met, took shape quickly, not dissimilar to Bahasa Indonesia in its phonology, bisyllabic word structure and relatively easy grammar, but with some added features (for I still loved Latin and the Romance languages), such as two genders, case and number forms for nouns, and a bit of verbal conjugation and tenses. The derivational system was like (and yet unlike) that of Indonesian, but the vocabulary was 99% invented, even though I never balked at snitching a few words, or variants thereof, from some of the more obscure regional languages of Indonesia that I’d researched.⁴ A writing system was devised, and a preliminary grammar was written down in several notebooks during the time between the end of term and the expiration of my lease. On July 1, 1976, I left that town happy to return to an uncertain future back in Ann Arbor, resolving to become a cab driver if no other academic job was forthcoming. None ever was, unfortunately, but I never had to resort to the Yellow Cab Co., either.

Now began another conlanging hiatus. During the 1980s I did find ways to make ends mostly meet, hung around with friends, went to concerts, rehabbed an old house, planted a garden every year, bought a TV and otherwise wasted time. The Cindu fantasy story-line did undergo a major change—now it was Earth that was contacted by the Galactic Union, Shenji was their emissary to us, and a middle-aged earthling (strikingly like, ahem, myself) became his assistant. He and this “assistant” met various world leaders (except Pres. Reagan, whose advisers apparently feared he might be subjected to some sort of mind-control. If only...!). In 1990 I moved to my present location, went to work on another old house (which took eight years); then, in 1999, I bought my first computer.

Once I figured out e-mail and how to access the Web, just about my first search was for “invented languages”, which brought up a list of several hundred! And here I’d thought I was the only one weird enough, crazy enough to do that! I’d known about Zamenhof and Esperanto, but it wasn’t the same; I was aware of Tolkien but not the extent of his work—and here was a whole world-wide community! I joined the old Langmaker mailing list, which was a lot of fun and full of interesting people (I would mention in particular the

⁴ They remain my secret, but perhaps some day, some naïve scholar will happen upon the Kash dictionary and declare, “Good heavens, I’ve discovered some sort of aberrant Malay-Polynesian language!”

brilliant Jonathan North Washington, then in his teens, who also helped me learn a good bit about the computer and netiquette), and in 2001 eventually found my way to the CONLANG List (thanks to Pablo David Flores). In the meantime, the computer—oh magical typewriter!—unleashed my inner author. I wrote about the history of Cindu, and since my first Kash vocabulary lists had been misplaced, spent one entire winter creating words for the dictionary (including the word for ‘dictionary’, *añakrangota*), which led to lots of additions and some changes to the grammar (but none to the phonology, which remains as it was in 1976). A detailed phonology and morphology took form, along with most of the syntax, and a Kash font. Thanks to *Websites for Dummies* and *HTML for Dummies* I created a website in 2001, and it’s been all downhill since then.

But what about the Gwr, all alone up there in the frozen north? I knew only that they spoke a monosyllabic tonal language, like Chinese or Vietnamese (of which I was and am totally ignorant). I had created several possible sound systems with five tones, and a few words and phrases borrowed into Kash. I also knew that they liked to playfully distort people’s names, replacing the correct syllables with homophones or tonal variants to produce obscene or insulting meanings—so I knew there would have to be lots of pairs like /li/ (high tone) with some respectable meaning, versus perhaps /li/ (low-rising) that might mean ‘wicked’ or ‘stupid’ or ‘smell of a unwashed crotch’ etc.—this promised to be great fun.

Linguistically, I knew that tonal languages do not just pop up out of nowhere, as there are certain routes by which monosyllables and tones derive from earlier polysyllabic, probably toneless, proto-forms. For example, initial voiceless sounds tend to end up with high tone, voiced initials with low tone (and are often devoiced)—thus *pa... will > **pa (hi), while *ba > **ba (lo) or **pa (lo). Stress patterns can matter—unstressed vowels tend to vanish, and the resulting consonant clusters can develop in unusual directions. Unstressed syllables can get scrunched up into more clusters, or lost, or affect sounds in remaining syllables. So in this case I did create Proto Bau-Da Gwr, one of the major branches of putative Proto Gwr, ancestral to all the yet-unborn Gwr languages. It had a rather simple sound system: just three vowels */i a u/ and a common consonantal inventory */p b t d k g q, m n ŋ, w j r l s h/. Proto-forms were (rare) (C)V(C) but mostly bisyllabic (C)V+(C)V(C), with few restrictions on C or V occurrence; stress could be on either syllable. Then the work began: devising rules to produce modern Gwr forms that would, hopefully, resemble those in the sound system I had already sketched out. In a sense I was working backwards—here are some existing CVC+tone forms, with phonemes X Y and Z, but where did they come from? The resulting 49-page document, full of generative phonology rules and jargon, derived this system (compare it with the one above!)—

--17 vowels (/i e æ, i a, u o ɔ/ (short and long) plus unusual central/retroflexed /ɚ/ (the “vowel” in /gwr/), a huge number of diphthongs (V + glide [j,w,ɔ], and glide [j,w] + V) and triphthongs ([j,w] + permitted V+glide diphthongs). The vowels are written “i e è,

ÿ r a, u o ò”, the diphthongs “iw, iy, èy, ow, ay, oy” etc.; historical *iy, uw, aə etc. become long i:, u:, a:.

--23 consonants /p b f t d s ts dz tɛ “dl” ʃ dʒ ʃ k g q, m n ŋ, w j l h/. [tɛ] is a retroflexed [t] with (Engl.) r-like release; I’m not sure how to represent its voiced counterpart “dl” in IPA—it’s a retroflexed [d] with retroflexed lateral release, roughly as in English “middling”, also not unlike “gl” in “glue”. In word-final position, only /h, ŋ/ and /q/ (as allophonic [ʔ]) occur. These sounds are written “p b f t d s ts dz tr ll ch j sh k g q m n ng w y l h”. There are five tones—high, low, mid, high-falling, low-rising. (Confession: I stole “tr” from Vietnamese, where, as I recall, it represents much the same sound as in Gwr.)

Since I had actually established this modern Gwr sound system before I knew where it came from, it turned out that according to the rules quite a few of my first creations were impossible derivations. Harrumph.

Then somewhere along the way, recalling interesting visits and experiences in Bali and Tanah Toraja in Sulawesi (ex-Celebes), and gleanings from the old Dutch ethnologies of isolated Indonesian tribal groups, I realized that there could be at least one such group on Cindu, perhaps living in the mountains of Yanatros (where my Kash language was spoken). Thus were discovered the Lañ-Lañ,⁵ and having introduced a few of their words as loans in Kash, I realized that a full-blown language was gestating. That took a while, because I decided it was going to have, *inter alia* (a) some sort of vowel harmony; (b) lots of grammatically relevant metathesis; (c) alienable and inalienable possession—these last two features based on two of my favorite Indonesian languages, Leti and Kisar; and (d) pronominal forms to indicate both subject and object of transitive verbs (hmm, Basque, anyone?)⁶. Once again, I haven’t bothered with a proto-language, which I’ll probably come to regret.

The Lañ-Lañ are really interesting. They are found only on Yanatros and a few surrounding little islands with little evidence of their having ever lived anywhere else. Like the Kash, they evolved from a “great-cat” species, apparently extinct; thus not the same one as the Kash, who still have living relatives. Kash are quite big—about 6’6” – 7’ tall on average; Lañ-Lañ are smaller, 5’4” – 6’ on average; almost all Kash have black fur, while the Lañ-Lañ tend to be tan but may be striped, spotted, or calico. They have little or no telepathic ability. Furthermore, crucially, Kash and Lañ-Lañ cannot interbreed successfully, as was discovered to everyone’s dismay after first contact some 2000 years ago.

⁵ As written with Kash spelling, where “-ñ = [ŋ]”; it means, in their language, ‘children [of the gods]’

⁶ Material on all three languages is available at <http://cinduworld.tripod.com/contents.htm>

Kash scientists are “pretty sure” that a million or so years ago, aliens of an advanced space-faring culture⁷ (or maybe just a bunch of mad scientists) travelled around the galaxies tinkering with the genetics of various creatures to sow the seeds of evolution toward intelligent life. It is also believed that artifacts from that era, possibly even one of the work-rooms, have been unearthed. There is, in addition, the wild Cousins’ vague and mysterious “ancestral memory” having to do with a long-ago “time of pain”. Thus the theory is that these aliens came to Cindu, encountered promising animal life, and “did something” to alter their genetic make-up. Obviously they worked on the “great cat” that became the Kash, and on the little “simian” that became the Gwr.⁸ But whence the Lañ-Lañ? Were they an initial experiment on a non-telepathic cat species, abandoned when the aliens happened on the more interesting Kash ancestor? Disappointed or disgusted with their first subjects, did the scientists ship them off to isolated islands? Or did some manage to escape from the laboratory? It is a major scientific question.

It isn’t easy being a god, with an entire planet as one’s plaything. I sometimes worry about the conceptual oddity that a planet with a billion inhabitants has only three language families. But my colleagues on the CONLANG List, and these projects, have certainly brought me joy, and enlivened what might otherwise have been humdrum “golden years” of retirement and encroaching old age. They have kept me off the streets, and as mentally alert and sane as I ever was.... And to think I owe it all to that first overpriced Gateway computer!

⁷ In Le Guin’s worlds these were the Hainish, and if I’m not mistaken, they visited Earth too.

⁸ It goes without saying that most Gwr scientists are skeptical of this theory for a variety of reasons, not least, of course, because it wasn’t *their* discovery. Harrumph again.