A key etymology

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In the process of writing "The mother of all morphemes" (1991), where I explored paired collocations in SE Asian languages involving the antonymic morphemes MOTHER and CHILD, my attention was focussed on the strikingly parallel words for *lock* and *key* in Thai and Indonesian/Malay:

Thai: mê̂ɛ 'mother' / lûuk 'child'

     mê̂ɛ kuncɛɛ   'lock'
     lûuk kuncɛɛ   'key'

Indonesian/Malay: ibu 'mother' / anak 'child'

     ibu kuntji   'lock; skeleton key, master key'
     anak kuntji   'key'

The words **kuncɛɛ** and **kuntji** are obviously related, but even if one believes in Austro-Tai,[1] such artifacts as keys and locks hardly go back to the super-remote period of presumed Tai-Austronesian unity (ca. 4,000-6,000 B.C.). The unanalyzable dissyllabicity of the Thai form militates against its being an item of inherited Tai vocabulary,[2] but there is no plausible Austronesian etymology for the Indonesian/Malay form either.

It seems clear that both of these words are loans from a common source. Pallegoix *(loc. cit.)* attributes the Siamese form to Chinese:

     kŭnchë   'Clavis' *(vox sinensis)*
                    'Clef' *(mot chinois)*
                     'Key' *(Chinese word)*

However, there is no evidence at all that **kuncɛɛ** and **kuntji** are of Chinese origin. [Many Southeast Asian languages have a different word for 'lock/key' which does seem to be borrowed from Chinese 鎖 (Mandarin

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[1] The Thai and Indonesian words for 'child' are supposedly cognate. < PAT *valak (Benedict 1975:250-1); cf. also Benedict 1992:149-57, note 3.

[2] The modern Thai spelling of this word has a palatal nasal at the end of the first syllable ɳ ɡɯɯɔ/kuñcɛɛ/ (see Haas 1964:37), but Pallegoix' old Siamese-Latin-French-English Dictionary (1854:368) spells it with a dental nasal, ɳɯɯɔ, and transliterates it as /kŭnchë/. In either case, the first syllable has no plausible independent meaning (nor does the second).

suǒ)³, e.g. Thai ฅ sôo 'chain', Burmese θo' (Wr.Bs. ၏ so'), Lahu šɔ̂
(the tone shows this not to be a native Lahu word).⁴]

If the source of Thai kuncɛɛ and Malay kuntji is not to be traced
to Chinese, neither can a reasonable etymology be found in Sanskrit/Pali or
in Khmer. In other words, the origins of these forms must be sought
outside the Sinosphere, the Indosphere, or the Khmerosphere.

In fact the "technological" semantic content of these key-words
encourages us seek to an extra-Asiatic etymology, in the *Eurosphere*.
Portuguese (Pg.) seems like a promising place to start, since it is to
Portuguese explorers, traders, soldiers, and missionaries that we owe
several items of cultural vocabulary widely adopted in the 16th and 17th
centuries across genetic lines in East and SE Asia, e.g. SOAP (< Pg. sabão;
cf. Bauer 1992:125-37) and MUSKET (e.g. Mon sənat, Khmu snàat.
Written Burmese se-nat, Lahu nâʔ, Pa-O Karen tənàt, Tai Nuea naat) <
16th cent. Pg. soldier's slang, espinharda 'the spiny one; the prickler'
(see Matisoff 1988:747).

The usual Pg. word for 'key', chave, is from Latin clāvis,⁵ which is
also the source of the usual words in the other Romance languages: French
clef or clé, Spanish llave, Italian chiave. While this root has made
it into some Asian languages via Portuguese (e.g. Hindi chabi), it can hardly
serve as the origin of kuncɛɛ/kuntji.

We must widen our semantic net by reflecting on the physical nature
of keys in the 16th century. One common type must have been a long,
triangular, wedge-shaped bar or pin, to be inserted into a homologously
shaped groove of a lock. A key is in fact only a subtype of WEDGE, defined as
'a tapered piece of wood or metal designed for insertion into a narrow
crevice'.⁶

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³ This exact character is not in GSR series #13, though the homophonous character 琔 [GSR
13b] 'small; fragment' is reconstructed as OC *swǎ / MC swá:, with the notation that this was
sometimes also used for 'chain', in which case it was alternatively written with the "metal
radical", 鎖.
⁴ A number of other Lolo-Burmese forms for CHAIN / LOCK / KEY reflecting a *stopped
syllable (e.g. Atsi and Maru tsoʔ, Ahi and Sani dʐu⁴⁴, Hani tsu⁵³, Luquan ntʐu²²) are
reconstructed in Matisoff 1972 (Set #79) as PLB *Ntsə(r)ok, though the relationship
(allofamic cognacy or borrowing) between these forms and the Chinese morpheme is still
unclear.
⁵ Allofams within Latin include clāvus 'nail' and clāva 'club', all ultimately from the PIE
etymon *klēu- 'hook; peg'.
⁶ The English word *keystone* is defined as a 'wedge-shaped stone in an arch'. The etymology
of Eng. *key* itself cannot be traced beyond English:
    key < ME key(e), kay < OE cǣg(e) < ?.

We have now hit paydirt. The Pg. word for WEDGE is cunha < Latin cŭneus[7] 'wedge' (cf. Eng. *cuneiform*). A derived verb, cŭneāre 'to secure with wedges; to shape like a wedge' is attested in Classical Latin, with semantic extensions into the idea of 'jamming tight, as with a wedge', yielding Romance forms like Provençal conhar 'keilen' (to wedge). Spanish acuñar 'Münzen prägen' (stamp coins), French cogner 'stossen' (push, bump) [Meyer-Lübke 1935:221-2)][8]. Other French derivates of this etymon include coin (< OF coing, coign) (1) 'key; wedge' (2) 'corner', and coincer 'cram into; wedge into'; whence come our English words coin (1) 'small piece of metal, used as money; metal money collectively' (2) *[Architecture]* 'a corner or cornerstone' (< ME coyne 'wedge, design stamped on a coiner's die, coin') and quoin: (1) 'an exterior angle of a wall or other masonry; a stone serving to form such an angle; cornerstone' (2) 'a keystone' (3) *[Printing]* 'a wedge-shaped block used to lock type in a chase' (4) 'a wedge used to raise the level of a gun'.

Other Romance forms cited in Meyer-Lübke *(loc. cit.)* under cŭneus 'Keil' (wedge) [#2396] and cŭneāre 'schliessen' (close, lock) [#2392] include:

Catalan cuny (wedge), Spanish cuño 'Münzstempel' (die for stamping coins), French guignette 'Kalfateisen' (caulking iron), Rumanian încuia 'verschliessen, verstopfen' (close up, block up);

Corsican inkañolá 'sparen' (lay by, save up);

Logudoro (conservative Sardinian dialect) kondzu 'Zapfen am Pfluge' (peg on a plough), kundzare (close up, lock up), inkundzadu 'abgeschlossene Grundstück' (locked-up premises);

Campidanese (South Sardic) congadura 'Verschluss' (closing up, locking up); Old Campidanese incungiai 'Getreide einheimsen' (get in the grain crop).

As we can see, this etymon for WEDGE / CLOSE WITH A WEDGE / WEDGE TIGHT must have been widespread throughout the Mediterranean region during the period of first European contact with East and SE Asia.

The resemblance of this Old English form to Japanese kagi is entirely fortuitous!

[7] This Latin word apparently cannot be traced back any further. It is interesting that neither Latin cuneus nor English key has any known antecedents.

[8] Thanks to my colleague, Yakov Malkiel, for referring me to the relevant entries in this work.

We can only speculate on its exact route of transmission to Thai and Malay. It would be interesting to find out about the ethnic mix of the crews of Portuguese vessels in the 16th century. Were elaborate locks and keys a salient feature of the coffers of treasure with which European traders tempted their Asian counterparts?