

On keys and wedges: comment on Sagart's discussion note

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Laurent Sagart is certainly correct about the Indic etymology (cf. Sanskrit/Pali *kuñcikā*) for Thai *kuncē* and Malay *kuntji* 'key', which he first pointed out to me on a street corner in Paris in October, 1994. I am grateful to him for setting me straight about this. Clearly I must abandon any notion that these forms for 'key' were somehow imported into Southeast Asian languages by Romance-speaking crew members of ships who used a word descended from Latin *cūnēus* 'wedge' (see LTBA 15.1).¹

Yet, as I already replied to Sagart on that occasion, maybe there remains a grain of truth in my hypothesis after all. What if Latin *cūnēus* 'wedge' and Sanskrit *kuñcikā* 'key' are themselves related?

As far as I can tell, neither the Latin nor the Sanskrit form has a particularly solid Indo-European etymology. Pokorny (1959:626-7) refers Latin *cūnēus* to a PIE root **kū-* 'spitz, Spiess' ("pointed; spear"), underlying also, e.g. Sanskrit *śū-ka-* 'Stachel eines Insekts, Granne des Getreides' ('stinger of an insect; beard of ear of grain'), with the *-n-* interpreted as a non-radical element deriving from the second morpheme of the extended form **kū-no-* 'Spitze' ('point'). Ernout and Meillet (1959) are not so sure. Under the article *cuneus* (p.157) they note:

"On rapproche skr. *ṣūkaḥ* 'barbe d'épi, aiguillon d'insecte', av. *sūkā-* 'aiguille' et skr. *ṣūlaḥ* 'broche'; de plus, lat. *culex*, *le tout hypothétique* [italics mine]. Un terme technique de ce genre a des chances d'être emprunté. On penserait alors au gr. *gōnios*, venu en latin par l'étrusque; cf. les autres mots en *-eus*: *baltēus*, *clipeus*, etc."²

¹ I was actually first guilty of offering this etymology in my paper on augmentatives and diminutives (Matisoff 1991, notes 18 and 33). Several months after Laurent's verbal correction of my LTBA paper, I was chagrined to find that I once actually knew better! In a stack of papers dating from 1986-87 I found the scrawled note "KEY - Thai *kuncē* < Hindi *kunchi*", which was apparently based on a personal communication from Chris Court.

² "This has been related to Sanskrit *ṣūkaḥ* 'beard of grain, stinger of insect', Avestan *sūkā-* 'needle', and Sanskrit *ṣūlaḥ* 'spit, skewer, peg, pin'; also to Latin *culex* 'gnat, midge', *all this hypothetical*. A technical term of this sort is likely to be borrowed. One could then think of Greek *gōnios* which entered Latin via Etruscan; cf. other Latin words in *-eus*: *baltēus* ['girdle, esp. to hold a weapon'], *clipeus* ['round bronze shield'], etc. (Greek *gōnios* is a rare variant of *gōniakós* 'angular', ultimately related to *gōnu* 'knee'.)

As for Sanskrit *kuñcikā*, it too is conventionally derived from a verbal root, this time one meaning 'to bend'. As Sagart notes, Pokorny (op. cit.:589) assigns it to PIE **keu-k-*, with a "velar extension" (*Gutturalerweiterung*),³ citing the Sanskrit verb forms *kucāti*, *kuñcatē* 'zieht sich zusammen, krümmt sich'. This root **keu-* is in fact an abstract base form for a large number of 'loosely related derivatives with assumed basic meaning "to bend", whence "a round or hollow object"' (Watkins 1985:30-1), including many with "labial extensions" (**keu-b-*, **keu-p-*).⁴ The nasal element in Sanskrit *kuñcikā* is not considered to reflect part of the PIE root, but rather to be a secondary infix that crops up in certain verbal and nominal formations.⁵ Monier-Williams (1899/1970:287) assigns *kuñcikā* to an infixed Indic root *√kuñc-* 'make crooked; bend, curve, curl'. On the other hand, Mayrhofer (1992:361) sets up an uninfixed Indic root *√KUC* 'sich zusammenziehen' ('contract oneself; tighten; curl up'), but contradicts Pokorny and others by hesitating to relate it to PIE **keu-k-*:

"Nicht zu sichern ist der Zusammenhang mit Fortsetzern eines idg. **keu-k-* 'krumm' in air. *cūar* 'krumm', nhd. *Höcker* usw. (...Pok 589...)." ⁶

In fact, my Indo-Europeanist colleagues assure me that many etymologies whereby nouns are supposedly derived from verbal roots are notoriously speculative (p.c.'s, Gary Holland, Andrew Garrett). If we discount for the moment Ernout and Meillet's Greek-via-Etruscan etymology for Latin *cūñeus*, we are left with the conventional wisdom that in the Indo-European semantic area wedges were associated with pointedness, and keys with curvature. Yet perhaps that is 'putting too fine a point' on the matter! Wedges may be rounded on their butt end, like pieces of pie; and keys certainly have points at least as saliently as curvature, or else they would not fit into a lock. What the two types of objects have in common, it seems to me, is their insertability into an opening. What I am suggesting for the sake of argument, therefore, is a PIE root **kun-* 'insertable object; wedge; key', where the nasal was part of the root, and not an extraneous morphological element; by the same token the *-c-* in *kuñcikā* does *not* reflect part of the root, and would have to be of extraneous origin.

³ Among the English words descending from this velar-finalled allofem is *high* < PGmc **hauhaz* 'arched, vaulted' < PIE **kouk-o*.

⁴ English has several Germanic-derived words supposedly traceable to this labial-finalled variant (e.g. *heap*, *hop*, *hive*), along with many others borrowed from other branches of Indo-European (e.g. *cup*, *cublit*, *cymbal*).

⁵ A similar element appears in Latin *-cumbere* 'lie down, recline' (presumably via the notion of lying down in a curled-up position) and Greek *kumbē* 'boat, bowl'.

⁶ "One cannot be sure of any connection [of *√KUC*] with reflexes of a PIE **keu-k-* 'crooked' in Old Iranian *cūar* 'crooked', Modern German *Höcker* 'bump, hump, knoll', etc. (contra e.g. Pokorny 1959:589)."

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