

The Tongues of Our Ancestors

By Mo Holkar for the Golden Cobra Challenge 2015. Draft v0.2 20151026

A freeform role-playing game for four people. Play time: two hours.

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Introduction

The Tongues of Our Ancestors is a game about conquered peoples. It looks at the different fates that may befall the cultures and traditions of people who are conquered by a more powerful nation, focusing specifically on language as an example and representative of the indigenous culture in general.

“Words were power, words tried to change you, to shape bridges of longing that no one could ever really cross [...] Tigana, let my memory of you be like a blade in my soul.”

Tigana, Guy Gavriel Kay

Conquering tongues

It's no coincidence that conquering powers have often sought to suppress or exterminate the language of the people who they overcome; or that, in later times, bemusement or ridicule is a common reaction when folk attempt to revive their language as part of a distinct cultural heritage. The hope seems to be that removal of a language makes the expression of an identity other than 'subject of the conqueror' literally unthinkable. But history shows that these tongues of our ancestors sometimes have the power to speak on down the generations...

- After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, in 1570 CE Nahuatl (the tongue of the Aztecs) was declared by the Spanish monarch as the colony's official language. But during the 20th century, governments insisted on the use of Spanish, and Nahuatl was marginalized. Today, not much more than a percent of Mexicans speak Nahuatl, and it's the primary language for only a tenth of those.
- The Chinese annexation of Tibet has seen the Tibetan language maintained with official status, and it's the main language used in schools. Chinese has penetrated only the upper echelons. However, use of Tibetan among those who fled the country into India is in danger, with Hindi and English taking over.
- Greenland was colonized by Denmark from the 1700s CE onwards, and the native Greenlandic language repressed in favour of Danish. Since home rule in 1979 CE, Greenlandic has been revived and is now the sole official language of the territory, with Danish reduced (officially) to minor status. The Greenlandic version of Norse, used by earlier Viking settlers, died out completely prior to the modern colonization.
- The Mozarabic group of languages, descended from Latin, were used in southern Spain under Moorish rule up into the 14th century CE. Conquest by the Catholic Monarchs extinguished them in favour of the language then known as Castilian, now Spanish.

In the game

When you play **The Tongues of Our Ancestors**, you will be in the position of people on different sides of the conqueror/conquered barrier, at different periods as the history of the

conquest develops. The fate of the conquered tongue will be in your hands. Will it still have meaning to its descendants? It's for you to determine.

Requirements

At the minimum you need:

- Four people, at least one of whom has read these instructions and so can facilitate play.
- A room or other space to move around in.
- Pens, paper, index cards; or a whiteboard or similar; for making notes.
- 12 beads in each of two different colours, or other such tokens. Put these in a pool where everyone can reach them.
- A small opaque drawstring bag, or something similar.
- A six-sided die, or other such randomizing device.

Ideally you would also have:

- Another four small opaque drawstring bags.
- Control over mood lighting.
- Seclusion.

... but you can get by without those.

Setup

Introduce yourselves

Each player, in turn, say who you are, the pronouns that you prefer to use, and a little about yourself. Say which language (or languages) you consider to be your own native tongue, and where you were living when you learnt it. Do you know if any other language has ever been native there? Were there earlier languages that were, or still are, spoken there? If they're not spoken any more, how recently did they die out, and how did it happen? Have there been attempts to revive dead or dying languages? What about in your family: did your own ancestors speak another language that has, or hasn't, been passed down to you? Share anything interesting from these reflections with the other players.

Hi, I'm Mo: I prefer the pronouns he, him, his. I'm a game designer by profession; a long-time role-player just getting into freeform in the last couple of years; and I'm also interested in historical linguistics. I speak British English natively, and have always lived in England. English of one kind or another has been the dominant language here since the Anglo-Saxon occupation of the 5th century CE, when it displaced Celtic tongues. But subsequent conquest by the Normans in the 11th century CE did not displace English as the dominant tongue of England: the rulers eventually abandoned their own Norman French, and started speaking English like their subjects.

My father is from India, and as well as English he speaks Hindi and Marathi natively, plus bits of Gujarati. But my siblings and I don't speak any of these Indian languages at all.

Agree the setting

First of all you have to decide, as a group, on the setting for your game. The basis is that a capable and effective power has conquered a weaker nation. Population from the conquerors has moved in, and they are administering the conquered territory. Peace has been established, and any resistance is confined to resentment. The conquerors are more advanced technologically, and (in their own minds at least) socially and culturally. And, most importantly: the conquerors speak a different language to the conquered. Options include, but are not limited to:

- historical (eg. Romans conquering Gaul);
- para-historical (eg. Macedonians conquering Rome);
- established fantasy (eg. Saruman conquering the Shire);
- para-fantasy (eg. the Wicked Witch of the West conquering Munchkin County);
- your own fantasy (eg. a clan of sorcerers conquering a province of fisherfolk);

- established science fiction (eg. Cardassians conquering Bajor);
- para-science fiction (eg. the Galactic Empire conquering the moon Endor);
- your own science fiction (eg. small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri conquering large bald creatures from Beta Centauri);
- ... etc.

The main thing is that all four of you should agree and be happy to play in this particular setting.

Define the conquerors and the conquered

Going around the four of you, each in turn answer one of these questions below. Just say whatever comes into your head and sounds plausible – it isn't important to get hung up on detail or on historical accuracy or whatever. Be as literal or as poetic/impressionistic as you wish. If one of the other players doesn't like what you've said, they can ask you to change it. Make a note of all the agreed answers on index cards, so you can all refer to them during play.

Some of these questions won't be relevant in some types of setting: skip them if so. And add any further questions that you think are relevant to your setting.

The Conquered:

- What are they called?
- What's their language called?
- What does it sound like?
- What sort of lives do they lead?
- How do they bring up their young?
- What would they probably have gone on to do, if they hadn't been conquered?

The Conquerors:

- What are they called?

- What's their language called?
- What does it sound like?
- What are their strengths?
- What are their weaknesses?
- What is their vision of the future?

It's important to remember, as you play through the game, that the conquest is complete and irrevocable. If there was resistance, it was put down quickly and effectively. There is no chance of successful rebellion – no prospect of freedom. That is not an element in this game. If the conquered people want to resist cultural assimilation, they will have to find subtle ways of preserving their identity via language. But they may not wish to, instead preferring to merge into the conqueror population: that's also completely fair and possible.

Also remember that, although for convenience these instructions refer to the conquered people as 'natives', they might have once been conquerors themselves – who absorbed or assimilated an earlier group of people who were living there before. This pattern of successive waves of conquest and absorption is very common in history.

Generations

The Tongues of Our Ancestors takes place through four 'Generations'. Depending on the setting, these might be literal generations – the people who were conquered, then their children, then their grandchildren, then their great-grandchildren – or, more likely in more modern/futuristic settings, each Generation represents a longer period of decades or even centuries. It's long enough for there to have been a significant change in the usage of the two languages.

The first Generation is immediately after the conquest: the other three are successively later. In each Generation a set of four representative characters will play out a series of Scenelets, and what happens in these will determine the fate of the language in the next Generation. (See below for more detail about what Scenelets involve.)

The four roles are as follows:

- Generation 1: Ruler, Trader, Producer, Homekeeper.
- Generation 2: Governor, Administrator, Thinker, Doer
- Generation 3: Legislator, Professional, Teacher, Student
- Generation 4: not defined in advance – you will decide who they are when you reach this point

In each Generation, each of you will play one of these four roles. You will make up the details of the characters as required by your setting – so the Ruler might be Julius Caesar, or General Charles Gordon, or Hazel the rabbit, etc. – but basically they will be the leader of the occupying forces. And likewise for the other roles.

Language skills

Each of the four characters is partly defined by their relative command of the two languages – the language of the Conquerors, and the language of the Conquered. For convenience in these instructions we'll call them NewTongue and OldTongue respectively: in your game they might be English and Welsh, or Danish and Greenlandic, or Quenya and Sindarin – whatever you've set up.

An individual's proficiency in a particular language is defined as follows:

- 0 = no knowledge at all;
- 1 = a smattering;
- 2 = enough to get by;
- 3 = fluency.

In Generation 1, the four characters have the following language skills:

- Ruler: NewTongue 3, OldTongue 0;
- Trader: NewTongue 3, OldTongue 1;
- Producer: NewTongue 1, OldTongue 3;
- Homekeeper: NewTongue 0, OldTongue 3;

Two characters can communicate if they both have language skills of at least 2 in one of the two languages, or if they both have at least 1 in both languages. If it's less than that, they don't have enough language in common to be able to communicate with each other.

Someone with language skills of:	can communicate with someone with language skills of:
3/0	3/0, 3/1, 3/2, 2/3
3/1	3/0, 3/1, 3/2, 2/3, 1/3
3/2	3/0, 3/1, 3/2, 2/3, 1/3, 0/3
2/3	3/0, 3/1, 3/2, 2/3, 1/3, 0/3
1/3	3/1, 3/2, 2/3, 1/3, 0/3
0/3	3/2, 2/3, 1/3, 0/3

So you can see that in Generation 1:

- Ruler (3/0) and Trader (3/1) can communicate with each other;
- Trader (3/1) and Producer (1/3) can communicate with each other;
- Producer (1/3) and Homekeeper (0/3) can communicate with each other;
- ... no other pairs of characters can communicate with each other – eg. Trader cannot communicate with Homekeeper.

In subsequent Generations, the four characters that you play will have language skills (and so, will be able to intercommunicate) as determined by your own decisions and by what happens in the current Generation.

Defining the characters

Give the First Chooser marker to the player who speaks the highest number of different languages. They should then choose which one of the four 1st Generation characters they're going to play. The player to their left then chooses one of the remaining three, and so on.

Each character card has a set of questions on it: think about these for a few minutes, and write in the answers that correspond with how you want to play that character. Once everyone's done that, read out your questions and answers to each other.

Take your beads

Each player should now take beads from the pool to correspond with their language skills – eg. if you're using red beads for NewTongue and blue beads for OldTongue, then the player who's chosen the Producer should take one red and three blue beads.

Scenelets

A Scenelet consists of an interaction between two characters. In each Generation, there's the potential for exactly one Scenelet between every pair of two characters who can communicate with each other.

Which Scenelets get played?

So in Generation 1, there will be three Scenelets possible: Ruler and Trader, Trader and Producer, and Producer and Homekeeper – because those are the only three combinations of characters that have sufficient mutual language skills. In subsequent Generations there may be more or fewer Scenelets possible, depending on what language skills the characters have.

By looking at the set of language skills that the four characters have, establish what Scenelets there could be in this Generation that you're about to play, and write them down.

If there are two, three or four Scenelets possible, you'll play through all of them.

If there are five or six Scenelets possible, choose four of them at random, and you'll play through those four – ignore the others. (If it turns out that this way one of the characters isn't going to get to play any Scenelets, or hardly any, then redo the randomization – it's more fun if everyone gets a roughly fair share, but you don't have to be obsessive about it.)

What's the order of Scenelets?

The First Chooser chooses which of the available Scenelets to play first; then the player to their right chooses which one to do next; and so on.

What's in a Scenelet?

The frame and content of a Scenelet is determined by the two players whose characters are not taking part in it. So if in Generation 1 the first Scenelet is chosen to be that between the Homekeeper and the Producer, it's set up by the players of the Ruler and Trader.

First, the one of those two players who's nearest to the left after the First Chooser answers: what is this Scenelet going to be about? The answer here can be as specific or general as you wish. You might say "It's about the meaning of life", or "it's about how long to cook the potatoes for". Pick any topic that you think these two characters might have interesting things to say about that will shed light on the direction of the conquered people and of their language.

Then, the other player answers: where and when does it take place, and what has just happened to prompt it? Again, use your imagination and creativity to find things that will be interesting material for the two players. Don't deliberately try and make it difficult for them – this isn't a competitive game. Draw them a space that will let them make powerful, moving and enlightening patterns.

The two players involved should then stand up and play the Scenelet out, live.

Each Scenelet should last no more than a few minutes – it's up to the two players who aren't playing in it to timekeep. Be ruthless and don't waste time in buildup or in prevaricating – the two of you should aim to come in in the middle of interesting action/conversation, illustrate your characters' positions, say what you want to say, express hopes and frustrations, and end with a punchy conclusion. Think of it as a vignette that shows an outsider what life is like for your two characters as they interact together, and how their respective language skills affect that.

Lighting Scenelets

Depending on what control you have over the lighting in your space, you can create powerful effects as the game progresses. A simple structure might be to light the table during the mixing and character-creation phases, so everyone can see clearly what they're doing; and to light the open area where the two active players are while Scenelets take place.

If you've got access to coloured lighting then highlighting each Scenelet with the mix of the colours that you're using for NewTongue and OldTongue that's appropriate for the two characters involved will be effective. Or, more simply, highlight each Generation with a different colour to give the impression of a significant shift in time between them.

Mixing

After each Scenelet, there is a Mixing. This will contribute to determining the progress or regress of NewTongue and OldTongue in the next Generation.

Each of the two players who took part in the Scenelet should choose two of their beads, without anyone else seeing. They can choose beads of whichever colour(s) they want, if they have both colours available. The choice should be based on what took place during the Scenelet, and how they see that dialogue between the two characters shaping the future direction of the conqueror/conquered society. So, for example, if it seems from that Scenelet like the conquerors are going to be pushing hard at culturally suppressing the conquered people, then it would make sense to choose two beads of the NewTongue colour – if you have them. Then both secretly place their choices into a central bag.

The player who asked the question that began the Scenelet now draws beads from the bag, one by one, until either (a) they've drawn three beads of one colour, or (b) they've drawn all four beads and found them to be two of each colour. In case (b) each of the two players involved in the Scenelet secretly puts one more bead into the bag, and the drawing player then draws one more bead from it.

The drawing player counts up the beads that they have drawn (it should come to three of one colour and 0, 1 or 2 of the other colour) and writes the totals down in the Mixing Table.

All beads are then returned to the two players who were in the Scenelet.

Then move on to play the next Scenelet, and so on until all the Scenelets to be played in this Generation have been played, with a Mixing carried out after each one.

At the end of each Generation

At the end of each Generation, there will be as many entries in the Mixing Table as there were Scenelets in that Generation – from two to four.

If there are four:	If there are three:	If there are two::
These will be the language skills of the four characters in the next Generation.	Each of the four players should now choose one of their beads and secretly put it in the central bag. One of the players (it doesn't matter which) draws beads from the bag until they either (a) have drawn three the same colour, or (b) have drawn all four beads but found them to be two of each colour. In case (b), all four players secretly put in one more bead, and the drawing player draws one from the bag to add to the four that they previously drew. (They are now guaranteed to have three the same colour.) Write the colours of the total beads they have drawn into the Mixing Table (be 3/0, 3/1, or 3/2): together with the three entries made after each the Scenelet: these will be the language skills of the four characters in the next Generation.	As with the case for three (middle column of this table) except do it twice – returning the beads to their players in between – so as to add two further entries to the Mixing Table.

First of all, all players return all their beads to the pool.

Choose characters

Pass the First Chooser marker to the left. The new First Chooser should choose one of the new characters for the next Generation, choose one of the entries from the Mixing Table to be the language skills for this new character (and strike that entry off the Mixing Table so no-one else can also choose it), and take beads from the pool accordingly. The next player to the left does likewise, and so on until each of the four players has a character and a set of language skills and beads.

How long has passed?

Agree together roughly how much time has passed since the previous Generation. If you're playing in historical times, it might be as little as one literal generation – these characters might be the children of the previous lot. In modern or futuristic times, it might be longer – decades, or even centuries. Decide on a period that you're all happy with.

Answer your questions

Each character has a set of questions on its card. You should answer these to yourself, and write in the answers. When you've answered, read the questions and your answers out to the other players, and leave the card face-up so they can refer to it if they wish to. This will allow them to bring interesting elements of your character into the game.

(In Generation 4, the four character types aren't defined like they are in Generations 1–3. You will have to decide what they do, as well as what they're like.)

What do the language skills mean?

Here are some explanations of what different language skills might mean, in terms of the kinds of characters who might have them. You don't have to stick to these, of course – go

with what you think will be interesting to play. Practically any kind of character can be given a particular set of language skills if you think creatively about how they came by them.

NewTongue	OldTongue	What this person might be like
3	0	A member of the conquering elite; or a native-born who has completely assimilated into the conquerors' way of life; etc
3	1	One of the conquerors who has reason to deal with natives, or who maintains an interest in them; or an assimilated native who is nostalgic for the old ways; etc
3	2	A conqueror who works closely with natives and fosters their ways; or someone who's thoroughly interbred but has a strong sense of their native heritage; etc
2	3	A native who's made great efforts to get in well with the new rulers; or has been rigorously forced to learn the new language; or someone of mixed heritage who wants to renounce the deeds of their conqueror forebears; etc
1	3	A native who has to talk with the conquerors as part of their work; or someone who fiercely clings to the old ways, refusing to renounce their heritage; etc
0	3	Someone who has no contact with the conquering people; or who has been brought up in isolation from the new ways; etc

What about the last Generation of the game?

During Generation 4, you should still make entries into the Mixing Table after each Scenelet as normal. But at the end of the Generation, you don't need to create new characters. Instead, this last Mixing Table will be the inspiration for the Epilogue.

Prologue and Epilogue

Starting with the current First Chooser, take it in turns to make short statements about what life was like before the conquest – how the native people lived, how they related to each other, what were their hopes and fears. These are 'out-of-character' statements, as of a historian looking back at the past.

Then go round the circle again speaking as the character who you played in Generation 4. Each make a statement about how you see the future for your land and for its languages. How has the shift in languages (if there was one!) changed the way people think and feel about themselves, how they live?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Laura Wood and to Abstract Machine and the **Google+ Golden Cobra 2015** community for help getting these thoughts together; and to Laura again for looking the game over and for the Prologue/Epilogue and lots of other great suggestions!

Game materials

Print this section out for use during the game.

Mixing table

(don't cut this up, keep it together as one big table)

Generation	NewTongue	OldTongue	Character
Start of game	3	0	Ruler
	3	1	Trader
	1	3	Producer
	0	3	Homekeeper
Generation 1			
Generation 2			
Generation 3			
Generation 4			

Character cards

(cut these out individually)

Generation 1 Ruler NewTongue 3, OldTongue 0 Name: Personality: How did you become ruler? What are the principles by which you rule? How do you hope to be remembered?	Generation 1 Trader NewTongue 3, OldTongue 1 Name: Personality: How well respected are you by your own people, the conquerors? What do you think of the conquered people? Are they entitled to the same advantages in trade as your own people?
Generation 1 Producer NewTongue 1, OldTongue 3 Name: Personality: What is it that you produce (grow, catch, extract, make, etc)? Do you feel that you do well out of trading your produce to the conquerors? How much difference has the conquest made to your life?	Generation 1 Homekeeper NewTongue 0, OldTongue 3 Name: Personality: How do you feel about the conquerors who have seized your people's land? How has keeping your home become easier, or harder, since they established rule over you? What are your hopes for your descendants?

Generation 2 Governor NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: How would you like the people that you govern to think of you? How are you viewed by the distant rulers whom you serve? What are your ambitions for this land, as a province of the conquering state?	Generation 2 Administrator NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What do you administer? Do you see yourself as working for, or with, the government? – the people? How important is efficiency to you? How important is individual liberty?
Generation 2 Thinker NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What subjects do you mostly think about? How do the people who hear or read your thoughts view you? How much do you think thoughts can achieve, as against deeds?	Generation 2 Doer NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you're so busy doing? How do others view your activities (the government, the people)? How much do you think deeds are worth, as against ideas?

Generation 3 Legislator NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What do you think makes for good laws? Do you think the body of laws you work with at the moment is good? – is it practical, effective? What do you want your legacy to be?	Generation 3 Professional NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is your profession? How did you get to do that – did you have to qualify, did you have to seek appointment, etc? What are your ambitions – for your profession, for yourself and your descendants?
Generation 3 Teacher NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What do you teach, to what kind of people? What motivates you to keep at your work? What might you like to teach, if you could (maybe it's forbidden, or you don't have the skills yourself, etc)?	Generation 3 Student NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you're studying? Why? – what do you hope to gain from that? Do you feel you're better educated than your parents? Will your children (if you have any) be better educated than you?

Generation 4 Character 1 NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you do with your life? Why? – what made you choose that? (Or was it forced upon you?) How do you see the rest of your life shaping up?	Generation 4 Character 2 NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you do with your life? Why? – what made you choose that? (Or was it forced upon you?) How do you see the rest of your life shaping up?
Generation 4 Character 3 NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you do with your life? Why? – what made you choose that? (Or was it forced upon you?) How do you see the rest of your life shaping up?	Generation 4 Character 4 NewTongue __, OldTongue __ Name: Personality: What is it that you do with your life? Why? – what made you choose that? (Or was it forced upon you?) How do you see the rest of your life shaping up?

First Chooser marker

(cut this out)

**I am the First Chooser in this
Generation!**

I get first choice of which character I
want to play, followed by the player to
my left, and so on.

Then I get to choose which Scenelet
we'll play first, followed by the player
to my right, and so on.