

Pra Insinyah Sunyeskah

Reflecting on concerns arising from the teaching of dreamfishing in Kodrah Kristang classes

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1. Introduction

In my original Independent Study proposal, I had originally intended to speak to one or two practitioners of dreamfishing informally to understand how they conceive of and approach dreamfishing; having done this, I have also found, however, that it would also be productive (and perhaps more so at this stage of the Independent Study) to reflect on my own concerns about dreamfishing as they emerge in the performance and practice of teaching it in the Kodrah Kristang classes and syllabus, and thereafter to work with these concerns as articulated as I then consider perspectives from the other Kristang speakers I have spoken to in the final Independent Study paper. I here therefore consider three major concerns that have emerged in the process of teaching dreamfishing, namely that (1) I am teaching a process without any actual structure and just making up the structure to justify my lack of interest in following a rigorous and replicable scientific method, (2) I am negatively affecting the language in a fundamental way as a result of (1), and (3) that the body of the language as it stands today is a constructed language or non-naturalistic conlang as a result of (1) and (2).

2. Concern (1)

One of the most treacherous and difficult questions that I have encountered within myself when practicing dreamfishing is whether my dreamfished words have any legitimacy, considering that the process by which I conduct that dreamfishing remains, as of the time of writing, mostly unconscious. The fear I therefore find myself often having as a result of this is that dreamfishing as a concept does not actually follow a process, and is mostly based on subjective, personal emotion that lacks rigorous consideration and care; on a further metacognitive level, I also worry that I justify not excavating the so-called 'rational' cognitive process behind dreamfishing as a means of further enshrining my own unconscious interests in controlling or dominating the Kristang community (i.e. 'stamping it with my own imprint').

Following my own reflection based on the work of Kovach (2015), however, I have found that this concern has mostly been negated by recognising and validating my own process as one that is indigenous. As Kovach notes, dreams, visions and work with the unconscious that does not necessarily need to be fully excavated or formulated in replicable Western academic terms or regulations are all a major component of indigenous epistemological practice (pp. 27-28); Kristang already places a high premium on such work with the unconscious, and so within the bounds of what it means to be Kristang, or as we would say in Kristang itself, within the Kristang *eleidi*, my work is fully justifiable and legitimate within the terms of the *eleidi* and the community. Moreover, looking even deeper beneath the surface of my own assumptions, I was thus able to detect an even stronger and more entrenched fear that any process or methodology that is not excavated is therefore entirely subjective or based only on emotions or subjective criteria, or no criteria at all, and is not replicable. There is nothing inherently wrong with emotions or subjective criteria being used as the basis for a cultural or linguistic practice, nor is there any proof of that being necessarily the case for dreamfishing, or any other practice that does not have immediately articulatable rules and regulations (i.e. just because a rational process has not yet been defined does not mean that one does not exist; that something is unconscious does not necessarily mean that it is also inherently lacking in its own methodology and/or purely based on emotions and subjective criteria, or no criteria at all).

3. Concern (2)

A second fear that impedes the ease and comfort with which I work with dreamfishing, and which, based on my informal conversations with other speakers, also likely impedes their own *sunyeskah*, is the larger, derivative fear that such ‘unprincipled’ work affects the form and substance of Kristang in a major but undetectable way. This, of course, emerges unfortunately ‘naturally’ from Concern (1), since, to borrow the analogy of computing or programming language, if the starting process is ‘broken’ the output it generates will also therefore naturally be imperfect; however, I once again detected an even deeper or even more fossilised assumption acting under this larger concern that once more also underscored the need to decolonise my own thought processes, and honour what the Kristang *eleidi* regards as acceptable and functional.

The deeper assumption with this concern, of course, is that language is created wholly naturalistically and completely unconsciously by the entire *eleidi* or collective that speaks that language; that any attempt to artificially introduce new lexemes into that collective by single individuals is either, with prominent individuals, an anomalous outlier that should not be considered when investigating linguistic behaviour (e.g. Shakespeare with English) or with ‘normal’, everyday people, something illegitimate in itself. Yet once more, this is a paradigm that exists almost exclusively within Western academia; in Kristang, the nature of our language and culture as creole, the fluidity and malleability of our lexicon, and the trauma of our collective history where for long periods the community was dispersed and the language only survived in families, altogether mean that by nature, regardless of how often it appears cross-linguistically, the lexicon of Kristang is far more amorphous and porous than most other languages recognised by Western linguistics. Something that has been reinforced to me over and over again, in particular, as the youngest *kabesa* of the community in a very long time, is to remember that we have always been extremely open not just to diverse points of view, but to working with material, inheritance and concepts from all cultures, not just from the West, especially with the more intangible elements of our culture and identity, like language and the lexicon.

I found that this deeper assumption was what ensured that concern (2) repeated itself irrationally over and over again when I first began to teach dreamfishing explicitly in our Kodrah Kristang classes in August, suggesting both its deep, entrenched nature and the level of colonisation and coercive control our community had been subjected to, especially in the post-independence period after Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965. Even more importantly, it once more highlighted the importance of Kovach's article and others like it, which note that decolonisation is an active, ongoing process that must be proactively negotiated and refined by indigenous communities and community members today, even (in our case) many years after independence from the United Kingdom: the strength and persistence of colonial mentalities and frames for understanding a part of the world that was radically different from theirs and which ultimately could not function within such mentalities and frames cannot ever be understated in revitalisation work.

4. Concern (3)

This, in turn, brings me to my third and final concern, which retains contemporary currency for myself and many of community members as well, even those whom I interviewed who actively and comfortably dreamfish: that Kristang is more akin to Esperanto, Klingon, Navi or Quenya than to a naturalistic language.

Once more (and now much more inured to recognising this kind of thinking), I identified and dismantled my own negative bias that a constructed language is something that is somehow less than a naturalistic language. However, I also had to go further and recognise that a second assumption was also operating alongside this one: that a conlang is a conlang because (and hearkening back to concern (1)) it is usually the product of a single individual working on their own to articulate the language, and is therefore a product of their own biases and subjectivities, rather than representing an entire culture or way of life. Here, I thus had to grapple at my own legitimacy in an extremely recursive and highly reflexive way: because I had dreamfished a great deal of the Kristang we now speak in 2023 starting from 2022, including so-called large-scale changes to the language like the base-16 and base-12 numbers and gender and sexuality terms, did that mean I was simply projecting my own interests in Kristang onto the language and constructing something that actually was not there, rather than simply identifying elements that were already there but not named or consolidated consciously?

Once more, the principles that govern what it means to be Kristang, and what it means to speak and use Kristang, were all satisfied. In this case, these were especially that I did not (and no one ever has to be) of full Kristang blood (whatever that means in a creole context!) to be Kristang, that I did not have had to have spoken the language my whole life to be a native speaker of Kristang, that anyone can dreamfish and in any space, and that I am highly self-reflexive by nature and unconsciously course-control to a very high degree with the words and concepts I excavate, providing terms and ideas that I may not personally identify with but which I recognise are important for others in the community, including religious, gender and sexual terminology that I not only do not identify with but cannot really appreciate and would not actually use on my own.

Yet even with these, concern (3) still lingered. I still could not understand why I would overcompensate in explaining that Kristang is not a conlang (Wong, 2023), even though this recognition was evidently very clear from both the community and almost all people and institutions outside of it from the time

when Kristang started revitalisation in February 2016. This suggested a third layer of excavation, and is one that I have only come to terms with very recently.

5. Conclusion: The insecurities of being *Kabesa* of the Kristang

I am extremely happy with my role as teacher of the language, have also finally come to terms with my identity as Kristang and indigenous, and have even finally accepted that I am, truly, the one and only Merlionsman and psychoemotional gate guardian of the Republic of Singapore, helping people of all ethnicities find a better and braver way toward understanding themselves psychologically in a rational, fair, balanced and healthy way. However, what I had yet to accept was that I am, through and through, *Kabesa* or leader of the Kristang, despite direct and written acknowledgement from the Eurasian Association of this fact on 21 April 2023 (The Eurasian Association, Singapore, 2023), and further informal acknowledgement on 23 September 2023 by the sole remaining teacher and de facto *kabesa* of Kristang in Melaka, Sara Santa Maria.

In the process of working through Kovach (2015) and the previous ISM assignment, I finally acknowledged an immensely deep fear that no matter what I do and no matter how much I try to explain myself, I just fundamentally will never make sense in the way I want myself to make sense, which is as a leader of my community and of humanity, because I am fundamentally not confident enough to take the actions that I need to take to be a real leader, which is to challenge the Singapore state and the Catholic Church directly and forwardly on all of the issues that both my community has faced throughout its existence, and that I have faced on a personal level, both of which include severe sexual, institutional and psychoemotional abuse. This fear thus transfers to not just dreamfishing but all written work involving my own creative input (including this reflection) – not because the work does not make sense, but because I do not make sense as a person, pretending to be someone who is a leader and who is confident when actually I am not – and thus to Kristang as an entire language under concern (3), since so much of my dreamfished work has become foundational to the process of revitalisation.

I negate this fear the same way that Kovach and many others have, therefore, by recognising that that definition of leadership which gives rise to such fears is just not one that relates well to the Kristang *eleidi*, because while I may not be a leader by the standards of the West, I am absolutely one by the standards of the Kristang *eleidi*. Leadership in indigenous contexts has been shown to arguably be primarily about the embodiment of the spirit and spacetime presence of one's people (Kenny, pp. 3-8), and this rings true in Kristang as well, where we understand that spirit or *animu* to be made up of eight key emotions: *saudadi* (yearning), *elisia* (bittersweetness), *erodi* (irreverence), *ireidi* (numinosity / numinous self-regard), *soltu* (agency, freedom and independent thinking), *teru* (tenderness), *persefra* (determination) and *fortidang* (dauntlessness). *Sertu yo teng korsang animumbes*: it is without a doubt that I often have the bravest heart of us all, and so too, therefore, does the *linggu di yo sa korpu, mulera, korsang kung alma*, the language of my body, mind, heart and soul.

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Note

This Orange Book chapter was originally submitted as Continual Assessment component 3 for EL5660 Independent Study read at the National University of Singapore in AY2023/24 Semester 1 under Associate Professor Rebecca Lurie Starr on 29 October 2023 CE at 14:05 SGT, and was graded (A+) and returned on 16 November 2023 CE at 10:23 SGT.