
Name Calling: Group Identity and the Other among First Age Elves

By Angelica

"...languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories."
(JRR Tolkien, letter to W.H.Auden from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p.214)

The essay "**Quendi and Eldar**" (1) seems to be on a first reading mainly concerned with linguistic matters: a discussion of different roots in Elvish languages and how these roots evolved into different denominations for Elves and other beings. But the discussion of these names contains a wealth of social considerations and indications about the ways the different Elvish groups considered themselves and how they related to each other.

Eldar / Avari In the beginning

The first name Elves gave themselves upon Awakening was **Kwendi** (*P. Q. and C. E. the Speakers, those who form words with voices, Q. Quendi*) different from the other beings who did not speak (2). This wide reference would be narrowed to *the Elvish people as a whole, different from Valar and Maiar*, when they met these other speaking beings, and later, back in Middle-earth, *different from all other Incarnates* (3).

This initial uniformity of all Elves disappeared with Örome's call and the debate prior to the Separation. These were defining events in Elvish history which generated feelings of hostility and bitterness and a sense of betrayal that were never overcome but persisted along the millennia. Two groups became separate and opposite: those who rejected the call and stayed in Middle-earth (**Avari**, *CE. the refusers*) (4) and those who followed Örome, whether they actually made it to Aman or not (**Eldar**, *Q. the Marchers, the Star-folk*) (5).

These two words were from the beginning loaded with implications that went far beyond the descriptive. *Eldar* resulted from fusion of two different concepts: originally it meant "*the Star-folk or Elves in general*" while there was another word, **Eldo**, used for "*the Marchers*". The similarity between these two words caused the distinction soon to disappear. Eventually *Eldar* absorbed the two meanings and became the chief word for Elf in Quenya. It did not include the Avari, who because they had refused to join the March were likely not considered part of the **Eldalië** (*Q. the Elven-folk*) (6). Additionally, the root that would evolve in Quenya into the name **Avar/Avari** was in CE **abar**, which means recusant, one who refuses to act as advised or commanded and it might have been first made to describe those who refused to join the Westward March (7).

The Avari, of course, had a radically different perception of the situation: rather than renegades they viewed themselves as the only true Elves. This is shown clearly by their languages: the word **Kwendi**, *the People*, and its derivations in the different Avarin dialects always referred to those who had stayed in Middle-earth, but never to Elves in general. In this way, the Avari also marked a clear distinction between themselves, those who had always held true to their origins, and the Eldar, the deserters (8).

Light / darkness

Two compounds were created at the time of the debate, probably by the party favourable to Öromë: ***kala-kwendi** (*the Light folk*) and ***mori-kwendi** (*the Dark folk*): those who wanted to see the light of Valinor and those who refused the invitation of the Valar and seemed to choose the dark (9).

These words disappeared from the language of the Elves that remained in Middle-earth but would survive in the languages of Aman: in Quenya, for instance as **Kalaquendi** (Q. *Light-elves*), those who lived in Aman and **Moriquendi** (Q. *Dark-elves, Elves of the Dark*), those who stayed behind, whether they had joined the March or not (10).

The exiled Noldor reintroduced this distinction into Middle-earth with even stronger implications. The term *Kalaquendi*, conveyed a notion of superiority over the other groups due to the contact they had had with the light of the Trees and with the Valar and the knowledge and powers they had acquired in Aman. *Moriquendi*, which had always hinted that those who had rejected the call were those drawn to the darkness of Melkor (11), now received an added idea of inferiority to the disdain it already carried.

This soon brought about conflicts with the **Sindar** (Q. *Grey elves*), Ælwe's subjects (12) (*Moriquendi*, according to the Noldor) who found this distinction offensive as they had chosen light over darkness though, for different reasons, they had never gone overseas. As a consequence, *Kalaquendi* disappeared from common use and *Moriquendi* was restricted to those Elves who had recently arrived in Beleriand or who did not have Ælwe as their lord, namely the Avari (13), not considered part of the **Eldalië** by the Elves of Aman (14).

To address the difference between those who had been in Aman and those who had not a more neutral naming was devised: the new words: **Amanyar** (Q. *those of Aman*) and **Umamanyar** (Q. *those not of Aman*), which did not have such negative connotations (15). But again there were also the **Avamanyar**, *Those who did not go to Aman because they would not*, that is, the Avari (16).

With us / Against us

For the **Sindar** the Avari as a whole remained secretive, hostile and untrustworthy, dwelling in hidden places in woods and caves (17). Sindarin reflected these feelings but not using the idea of light and dark as Quenya did. The Sindarin equivalent to Eldar was **Celbin/ singular Calben** (18) (*all Elves other than the Avari*) but which at some point came to mean any people in alliance against Morgoth regardless of their race. The Avari were called **Moerbin** (*sing. Morben*), but this was not a synonym for Dark-elves (S: *Mornedhel*): at the beginning it meant anybody coming from outside Beleriand and did not refer specifically to Avarin elves but could include other Elvish groups (the Nandor) or races (Men or Dwarves). It was when the Nandor were recognized as kin and Men and Dwarves clearly joined in the War, that the Avari became the only *Moerbin*: those who never allied with the Eldar in their Wars although they were Morgoth's enemies. In the unlikely case than an Avar joined the Sindar, he would become a *Calben* (19). The contrast *Celbin/Moerbin* suggested that the latter weren't as committed in the War and they could be hostile and treacherous to the Eldar who might even take this lack of involvement as an indication of an alliance with or loyalty to Morgoth. This of course, was not

true since no Elf ever fought for Morgoth. It was assumed that if captured, the Avari's resistance was weaker and they were cowed and dominated more easily than the Eldar (20).

Noldorin temperament / Avarin resentment

The Noldor always regarded the Avari as inferior if they considered them at all. This was despite the fact that the first Avari they met on their return claimed to be *Tatyar* (that is the 2nd original clan that would eventually become the Noldor) so distantly related to the exiles. However, this ancestral kinship didn't draw them any closer since the combination of Noldorin arrogance and Avarin resentment and jealousy proved to be too much for a friendly coexistence to develop to their mutual advantage (21).

The Noldorin choice of words to talk about themselves and the other Elvish groups they had met in Beleriand leaves little doubt about their attitude: the use of *Eldar* (that is, the Marchers) as the chief word to refer to Elves in *Quenya* shows that the only ones they considered kin were those who had decided to go while those who had not joined the March did not deserve to be counted among the Elvenfolk (22). Also it is worth remembering that the derogatory term *Moriquendi*, with its implication of inferiority, was ultimately reserved to the Avari (23).

To conclude

The Eldar saw the Avari not as long-divided kin but as a foreign and hostile people, separate and different, so alien that they were not only *not* recognized as members of the same race but even confused with their enemies: on first encountering Orcs, the Eldar thought they were Avari who had turned evil and savage in the wild (24).

Moreover, *Avari* was used as a slight when applied to other Eldarin groups. The Noldor, always convinced of their own superiority, considered the Teleri (whether in Aman or in Middle-earth) Avari at heart since they had been the most reluctant to leave Middle-earth (25). In turn the Teleri claimed that it was the Noldor who were really Avari and had returned to Middle-earth when they realized the mistake they had made when they went to Aman: there they didn't have enough room there for their fights (26). Among the Sindar of Doriath, to call somebody *Morben* (that is, Avari) was also an insult: Turin, who had been raised there, assaulted Saeros because he had tauntingly called his mother *Morben* - instead of *Morwen* (27). The Doriathrim hostility to Men in general was also shown by calling them *Morben*, instead of using their distinctive name (28).

In turn, the Avari never seemed to have been able to overcome their bitterness towards the Eldar after the initial Separation and their jealousy and resentment at the Exiles. Thus they could never profit from the knowledge the Eldar had acquired in Aman or in Doriath but anyway suffered the consequences of their War and their defeats.

Sindar / Noldor

We are one but we are not the same

The relationship of the different Eldarin groups was also full of divisions and misrepresentations.

Over their long years together in Beleriand, Noldor and Sindar tended to merge into one people. Eventually, the Noldor and the Sindar living outside Doriath ended amalgamating into one Sindarin-speaking people known as **Dúnedhil** (S: *West elves*) (29). But even the choice of Sindarin as common language, which should have been proof of their integration, had implications. The reasons behind this option can be found, in Elu Thingol's ban on the use of Quenya and in the greater skill with languages that the Noldor generally had, rather than in an act of good will. The Noldor never ceased to consider their language, Quenya, the chief language of the Eldar, the language of learning, the one that retained more closely the character of their ancient tongue, proof of their superiority over the others Elves (30).

For the Sindar, the Noldor, especially the Exiles, had a reputation obscured by their past: the different readings of the very name Noldor were telling. In all Elvish languages, there was a clear connection between the clan name and the idea of wisdom or knowledge, derived from a stem *NGOL meaning "*knowledge, wisdom, lore*" (31). But this same root in Sindarin (Q. *ñóle*, S. *gul*) was mostly associated with secret knowledge, especially possessed by craftsmen, probably inspired by Fëanor's skills and works. Moreover this word was often used in the compound **Morgul** (*black arts*), which connected the Noldor with Morgoth and implied that they had learned their arts from him and achieved their supremacy in them through their association (32).

Another instance of the Sindar's underlying animosity was the name they gave to the Exiles in their own language. Initially, the exiled Noldor were called **Ódhel**, pl. **Ódhil** (33) which was the name for all the Elves that had left for Aman but later became associated with the returned Noldor. Sindarin had retained an old word to refer to the clan: **Goldh** pl. **Goelydh** (from CE *ngoldo) and this gave rise to another word, **Gódhel**, pl. **Gódhil**, resulting from the blend of the two words. This root seemed to have been phonetically unpleasant to the Noldor who did not use of it although it was the Sindarin equivalent to Q *Noldo*, both coming from the PQ *ñgolodo (34). But, more important, it was the name they were called by those who were hostile and did not approve of their policies and behaviors, namely Elu Thingol and his subjects. By using this old clan name, they were trying to ignore the Noldorin residence in Aman, their main claim to superiority, and so show that all Eldar were on a par (35).

Conclusion

The view of Elvish society that Professor Tolkien gives in this essay shows clans clearly separated along lines dictated by their history and who could not overcome the past animosities, whether it was the initial Separation and subsequent March or the return of the Exiles. These Elves seemed to identify themselves as members of a group or clan, never a race: it was more important and meaningful to be a Noldo or a Sinda or an Avar than an Elf as a general statement of cultural identity. In their inter-group relations and behavior, their past and their background determined the view of themselves and their fellow Elves and they never seemed to have been able to recognize that they had more in common as Quendi than what set them apart as members of different clans.

Endnotes

1. Tolkien J.R.R., *The History of Middle-earth volume X, The War of the Jewels*, Part 4: Quendi and Eldar, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Harper Collins, 1995
2. Id., Appendix D, p 391. "The Ñoldorin Loremasters state ... *i karir quettar ómainen*."
3. Id., Appendix D, p 393. "But when the Elves ... present in ordinary language"
4. Id., The principal linguistic elements concerned, p 361. "*ABA 'refuse', 'say nay ... declined to follow Örome."
5. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 4, p 374. "The original distinction between ... or Elves in general'."
6. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 4, p 374. "When one of the Elves ... thinking of the Avari"
7. Id., The principal linguistic elements concerned, *ABA Quenya, p 371. "**abar* thus meant 'recusant ... the Westward March: Q. *Avar*, pl. *Avari*."
8. Id., Author's Notes to Quendi and Eldar, Note 9, p 410. "but wherever the descendants ... as compared with the Avari."
9. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p 373. "There also existed two old compounds ... the shadows of Melkor upon Middle-earth."
10. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p 373. "The lineal descendants of ... on the March or not."
11. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p 373. "The latter were regarded ... with the Valar and Maiar."
12. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 4, p 375. "All the subjects of ... *Sindar* or 'Grey-elves'."
13. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p 373. "In the period of exile ... were not subjects of Elwë."
14. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 4, p 374. "When one of the Elves ... thinking of the Avari"

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15. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p 373. "The old distinction ... *Amaneldi* and *Úmaneldi*."
16. Id., The principal linguistic elements concerned, *ABA Quenya, p 370. "Compare also *Avamanyar* ... (an equivalent of *Hekeldi*)."
17. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Sindarin, 1, p 377. "but the Avari in general ... or in caves."
18. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Sindarin, 1, p 376. "Associated with these compounds ... Quenya *Eldar*, Telerin *Elloi*."
19. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Sindarin, 1, p 377. "Any individual Avar who ... became a *Calben*"
20. Id., Author's Notes to Quendi and Eldar, Note 9, p 408. "The implication that as ... with regard to the Avari."
21. Id., C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar, p 381. "The first Avari that ... they accused of arrogance."
22. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 4, p. 374. "The original distinction between ... thinking of the Avari."
23. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 2, p.373. "In the period of Exile ... not subjects of *Elwë*"
24. Id., Editorial Notes #7, p 418. "Whence they came, ... savage in the wild."
25. Id., C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar, p 381. "The Noldor indeed asserted ... being left in Beleriand."
26. Id., C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar, p 381. "This ill-feeling descended ... room to quarrel in."
27. Id., Author's Notes to Quendi and Eldar, Note 9, p 409. "Some of the Nandor ... in the King's hall."
28. Id., Author's Notes to Quendi and Eldar, Note 8, p 408. "Though *Morben* might still ... intended to be insulting."
29. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Sindarin, 3, p. 378. "*Dúnedhil* 'West-elves' (the reference ... to both Noldor and Sindar."

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30. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Quenya, 3, p.374. "In the use of the Exiles ... character of Elvish speech."
31. Id., C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar, Ñoldor, p. 383. "The variant forms of ... possessed by the Ñoldor."
32. Id., C. The Clan-names, with notes on other names for divisions of the Eldar, Ñoldor, p. 383. "In S the word ... learning from Melkor-Morgoth."
33. Id., The principal linguistic elements concerned, *KWEN Sindarin 3 (c), p.364. "Ódheil, pl Ódhil; besides ... from the old clan-name."
34. Id., The principal linguistic elements concerned, *KWEN Sindarin 3 (c), p.364. "Golodh was the S ... from PQ *ñgolodo."
35. Id., B. Meanings and use of the various terms applied to the Elves and their varieties in Quenya, Telerin and Sindarin, Sindarin, 3, p. 379. "Ódhil thus became specially ... his brother Olwe."

Abbreviations

Q. Quenya
S. Sindarin
P.Q. Primitive Quendyan
C.E. Common Eldarin

The ideas underlying this piece derive from a book by Tzvetan Todorov about the concepts of Self and Other in the Spanish Conquest of America. A *very* brief, *very* superficial summary of his main topic:

There are generically two possible attitudes when groups of people meet for the first time (he is talking about Columbus and the Indians):

- You can start from what's similar so you consider the Other the same as you, identical to you, which leads to assimilation, to projecting your own values on him.
- You can start from what's different which leads to seeing the Other in terms of inferior or superior.

Both approaches stem from the idea that the Self is the only reality, that the Self's values are the only values, that the Self is the universe.

Bibliography

Tolkien J.R.R., *The History of Middle-earth volume X, The War of the Jewels*, Part 4: Quendi and Eldar, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Harper Collins, 1995.

Todorov Tzvetan, *La Conquista de América: El problema del Otro*, Editorial Siglo Veintiuno, México, 1987.