

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 52

Monteverde:  
Memoirs of an  
Interstellar Linguist

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## Preliminary Note

At the start of the century, the Society for the Study of Interstellar Languages sent Terran linguist Rachel Monteverde to the outer planet Aanuk to study the language and culture of its inhabitants.

The result of her investigation was a work of over three hundred pages, *The Monteverde Report: A First Approach to the Study of the Languages of the Outer Planet Aanuk*, published as the author's doctoral thesis on her return from her trip. A few years later, Dr. Monteverde decided to also publish a condensed version, together with the personal notes she had written during her stay on Aanuk. This work became the essential manual for linguist explorers who wished to study the languages of any inhabited world....

From an Interview with Dr. Rachel  
Monteverde by H.S.A. Jartum.  
*New Galactic Encyclopedia*

But let's go out into the garden, my dear Hannah Sweet Angelica, what a beautiful name you have; there we'll have tea and some pastries I've prepared myself. At this time of year the garden is the best place in the house to spend the afternoon; it is the coolest, we'll be more comfortable speaking there. Would you like some milk with your tea? I always take it that way. I sit among my plants and flowers, and I talk with my son Narsak when he is home, or I read, or I simply devote myself to my thoughts, to remembering... As you must know, we old people take pleasure in our memories, so you can ask me anything you want about those years I spent on Aanuk, but don't let me wander too much, I am too used to doing so, that's another habit of us old people...

Aanuk... Out of all my memories, without a doubt that time is one that has remained as vivid as ever. Sometimes I'm surprised that it all comes back to me with such intensity, as if it had taken place only recently. Of course, Aanuk didn't just give me that report you've read; it also gave me my son, so it would be impossible for me not to remember that world every day, every time I look at him. Were they the best years of my life? I don't know; it always seemed sad to me to speak of the best years, the greatest years, especially when one still has life ahead

of one in which to find another love, to live new experiences; not even now, as old as I am, do I want to make such an accounting. Oh, I warned you, I'm already drifting, my mind wandering across distant planets... You've come here for me to talk about Aanuk. You'll know that they called it Planet Paradise...for even though it was a small and remote world in the Outer Zone, it was so warm and lovely that for a long time it became a refuge and a place of rest for starsailors, explorers, and adventurers, until, little by little, the fame of its exceptional climate and landscapes made it also the destination of the most luxurious tourist cruises; no millionaire could boast of being an exotic traveler if they had not been there. This was all during the first two decades of the century, as you no doubt know; and then came the economic crisis of the '30s, which affected almost all the developed planets, ruined so many of those millionaires that it was impossible to maintain any regular tourism to a world as distant as Aanuk, and in general to any planet of the Outer Zone. Aanuk disappeared off the maps of stellar travel agencies, for it could only offer visitors its beauty, and what use is beauty when it proves or seems unattainable—haven't you noticed that sometimes the people who are most attractive are often more alone than others who are less attractive, precisely because few dare to try and seduce them? That world was forgotten; and remains forgotten today.

When I received your letter, my dear friend Hannah Sweet Angelica, requesting this interview with me, I was surprised that someone so young, not being a linguist, would have chosen Aanuk as their subject of study and for a project as important and ambitious as the New

Galactic Encyclopedia no less. I thought that, rather, the subject had been assigned to you; that's quite common in those kinds of works. But when you told me that already in your adolescence you had read *The Monteverde Report* and had done so with great pleasure, like someone reading a novel full of adventures and that was why you had volunteered to write about Aanuk, I knew that it would be easy for me to tell you everything you wished to know, to answer your questions.

Now I shall tell you that it was precisely this vein of possibilities that the planet held for tourist companies that encouraged them to make such large donations to the Society for the Study of Interstellar Languages. Large but profitable donations, because they knew that Linguists had become the most expert intermediaries, at that time, among the various cultures of the galaxy. Businessmen needed them as interpreters, in the first place, and also to teach Inter to the natives of Aanuk, for few tourists wanted to waste time in learning more than a dozen words of the language of that world; instead they demanded that they be offered, at all times, the comfort of being attended in the galactic lingua franca. Although there were, indeed, a few who came to that outer planet with the whim, or the true interest, of knowing not just its nature but also the inhabitants' ways of life and culture. There was no one better than a linguist to make a direct contact with Aanukiens possible. And the Aanukiens were a pacific people, friendly, courteous, who made absolutely no resistance to those pretensions. As so often happens in these cases, the profits obtained from their world thanks to tourism barely enriched their

own coffers, except in what truly interested us, the foreigners. And nonetheless, they didn't seem to mind.

Shepherds, nomadic farmers, miners, artisans in clay and metal, the Aanukiens were descendants of a group of Terran colonists who in the first centuries of the Great Expansion lost their way en route to Iliria, a planet of the Intermediate Zone that needed workers for its mines. The drifting ship of those emigrants managed to land at last on a small world, isolated but with a yellow sun and good conditions for settling. Whether or not they wished to, these castaways couldn't contact any other human settlement; without a doubt, they had been given up for dead; and when they were rediscovered, several centuries had passed and that planet belonged to them and they belonged to that world.

Read again what I explain in the first chapter of my Report.

## Aanuk

(From original Monteverde Report)

There was never a war on Aanuk. This might seem strange or even unbelievable, but only for those who don't know its inhabitants. For one need only to engage with them for a few days to accept without reservation that pacific past.

It is not that there has never been any kind of struggle between individuals or groups on Aanuk. These struggles have arisen, from personal questions, or to dispute a territory, a river, a flock. But war, understood as a confrontation planned and organized by rulers or groups of powers, as a state of permanent and global hostility, is for the Aanukiens only something that has happened on other worlds, something that teachers try to explain to the children.

The reason is that Aanuk is a planet that is so fertile, offering so many natural resources, that it is almost never necessary to fight for them. Of course this overabundance and the profligacy of nature also explain the slow technological development of the Aanukien people. They have electricity, steam machines; however, there are no cars, nor trains, nor planes, nor telephones. No hurry, either.

Among the inhabitants who arrived on that first shipwrecked craft, there were experts in solar energy, and sunlight was hardly lacking on that planet, which also boasted solid coal deposits in the mountainous regions. Their descendants learned to use both sources. But only when the first sedentary populations arose did they begin to use electricity, whose generation was learned by



the youth who, many centuries after that first planetfall, left Aanuk for other planets; until then, the Aanukiens had made do with fire, obtained from wood or coal, for cooking or illumination, or if necessary to warm themselves on cold nights.

The planet has a single colonized continent, in the Northern hemisphere: they call it The Land. It contains three climactic zones: the north is a mountainous region, then comes the forest and the plains, which end in the sandy beaches of the south. There are also numerous archipelagos, uninhabited, for the population is very reduced and prefers to congregate on the continent.

The basic nucleus of Aanukien society is the tribe. During the winter, these tribes live on the prairies and plains of The Land, near rivers and lakes, in settlements of tents and cabins. They cultivate part of the fields and leave the rest for the livestock. But during the summer it is so hot that the grasses shrivel up, and plagues of mosquitoes awaken and invade everything (a curious fact: in the Aanukien language there is an expression, *kivalapai*, whose literal translation is “to dream of mosquitoes” but whose figurative and familiar meaning is “to have nightmares”). Since the harvest has already been gathered, the inhabitants of these settlements pick up their tents, bring together their herds of sheep and goats, and head toward the forest, where the climate is more benign, and there are fresh pastures and no mosquitoes. They form long caravans, each adult mounted on a *kiita*, an animal that looks like a hybrid between the terran horse and the camel and that is the primary mode of transport for Aanukiens (the elderly and children are transported in carts that are pulled by *kiita* as well), well supplied with

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the yields of their crops (cereals and pulses, basically).  
They will remain in the forest until autumn.

(Continuation of the Interview)

I always wondered why the Society for the Study of Interstellar Languages had chosen me to travel to Aanuk. I had just turned twenty-five and had finished my studies on Earth; I had never undertaken a solo mission. But despite my youth I wasn't just another linguist; I was the daughter of Gabriel Monteverde, one of the best Linguist-Explorers who had ever existed, who had worked on the most diverse array of worlds across the galaxy, almost always taking me with him, ever since my mother had died. His exploits were almost legendary in the Society. So I knew that I had been chosen more for my father's merits than my own, but trusting that I had inherited his abilities as a Linguist and also (they hoped, and they weren't wrong) his ambition and pride as well: the Society didn't usually undertake such costly endeavors if it weren't with the goal of obtaining the best results. They wouldn't forgive me, I knew, if I returned unsuccessful, and they also knew that I wouldn't forgive myself either.

But there was something more, something that I guessed then and now understand more clearly. For this was no ordinary mission; the Linguists had agreed to negotiate with the tourist companies not just for the economic benefits that these had provided; there were reasons, secret goals in their interest in Aanuk. For only they knew of the existence of another people, in addition to the Aanukiens, who inhabited the outer planet, a people who hid themselves to the north of The Land and who apparently had a language unique in the galaxy: the Fihdia. We only had a few pieces of information

about them: that having arrived on Aanuk after the planet's other inhabitants, they kept themselves isolated from the start and chose to settle in the northern mountain caves; and this was the most surprising characteristic: they were all blind. It seems that this was a hereditary illness that, even if it had only affected a part of the Fihdia on their arrival on Aanuk, due to their isolation and endogamic nature, it spread to more and more individuals until it became a genetic defect of the entire population. This ailment had conditioned them to live in caves, where the lack of vision didn't matter and where they felt more secure. This had been their way of life for at least three centuries now.

Evidently (a curious adverb to use here) researching the language of a blind people would be a challenge for any linguist. Why then did the Society disguise its intentions so furtively? My father had already given me the answer a long time ago: sometimes the thirst to know can become something else, an unbridled ambition for recognition or success (and it is called vanity) or for power, and the Linguists were drifting, with alarming speed, in this direction. They had realized that every new language they learned was another currency in the treasury that made them rich, not in money, but in their controlling power: they were coming to be the only ones able to communicate directly with the peoples of the galaxy, the best mediators between these and the businessmen and politicians, and thanks to that ability the Society for the Study of Interstellar Languages was already then (and continues to be, doesn't it?) one of the most important lobbies when facing any planetary government.

But let us return to Aanuk, and my work there with the Aanukiens and with the Fihdia.

I arrived on the planet on one of those luxury tourist cruisers, a spaceship like a five-star hotel. It offered guaranteed stable gravity and maximum comfort: individual cabins, doubles, and suites; it even had a pool, as well as an artificial solarium, a cinema, a bar, a casino, shops, restaurants offering the specialties of any inhabited planet; its gigantic dancehall not only had a human orchestra, but it also was located within the spaceship in such a fashion that part of its roof was a glass dome through which one could contemplate the galaxy. Operated by a crew of twenty and a service staff of thirty, it had the capacity for up to fifty passengers, although only twenty-eight traveled on that journey, and I was included as service personnel, in second class, of course.

Nonetheless, if there was something worthwhile in traveling in that spaceship, it wasn't the luxury, which neither then nor now interested me beyond a scientific curiosity, but because on reaching that outer planet the captain offered us a panoramic flight above The Land. The description of what I saw is in my Report. Read it again: