

# Strange Nations

A Worldbuilding Resource

WHITE MARBLE BLOCK

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## Introduction

*Strange Nations* began a little more than five years ago (as of November 2015), as the unimaginatively-named “Culture Column.” During its run of four years, the column covered twenty-nine different cultures. Each culture was written so that it could be dropped into your setting with little-to-no adaptation required.

After it closed, I took a year to expand the entries, write up a new one (Ksauofron), and polish everything up (as well as add some shorter entries from another column of mine; these can be found in the appendix). The project was then put on Kickstarter, where I was able to secure enough funds to outfit the book with art.

There are only a few references here to outside culture, all of which are either extremely vague or refer to other cultures in this book. The latter is especially true of Kehrquos, whose entire shtick is that it is a multicultural city comprised of several of the groups discussed in this book. Kehrquos is intended to be an example of how some of the cultures can be fit together, but the purpose of this vagueness is to make it easier to fit these cultures into whatever setting you have.

Actual magic is also extremely limited. The tinkers of Feytown, Chicago, have magic, but it is explicitly described as working on different principles from whatever other magic may or may not exist in the setting that you drop it into. The only other entry to mention magic outside of the context of belief systems and superstition—Kehrquos—has lost that single reference, which felt uncharacteristic

both in the context of the rest of the book and in its own right, since magic was otherwise unmentioned in Kehrquos.

These cultures were always intended to be used by anyone, for any reason, which is the biggest reason that I went to Kickstarter in order to get money for the art. I had originally considered putting this book and its contents into the public domain, but I eventually settled on releasing it into the Creative Commons in order to ensure that the material could continue to fulfill its purpose no matter how many settings and transformations any of it went through.

You can use these cultures for any purpose at all. Drop it in your tabletop campaign? Fine with me. Put half of them together into a single setting for your for-profit fantasy series? That’s fine with me too. I have no delusions about what the reach of this book will be, but I still have always looked to Lovecraft’s treatment of the Cthulhu Mythos as my model of how to feed creativity. If I can help a few people to build new worlds, and those people are able to pay it forward in kind, then I’ve accomplished what I set out to do.

You can contact me at [callmebrotherg@gmail.com](mailto:callmebrotherg@gmail.com), or find my current fiction project, “Heroes Save the World,” at [heroessavetheworld.wordpress.com](http://heroessavetheworld.wordpress.com). If you’d like to support more projects like this one, then check out [patreon.com/WMBsaltworks](http://patreon.com/WMBsaltworks), where you’ll also be kept up-to-date on what I’m working on, or go to my store at DriveThruRPG, where I’m listed as [WMB Saltworks](http://WMB Saltworks).

## How-to-Use

Each culture begins with two or three sections:

- *Setting assumption* explains the sort of world that I intended for this culture. Usually, this will be pretty open, such as generic fantasy world.” Other times it will be a bit more specific.
- *Influences* isn’t always there, but in many of the cultures I thought it worth pointing out one or a few real-world cultures which I had mined for inspiration.
- *Changing it up* gives some ideas for how to adapt the culture to other contexts, “Generic fantasy world” cultures can be adapted to post-apocalyptic or even science fiction settings, “Post-apocalyptic Earth” cultures can be adapted to fantasy worlds, and so on. In some cases, this section may also talk about just changing the environment rather than the world, or a basic idea or two.

After these sections is another table of contents, for easy navigation within each culture.

Some cultures have sidebars. Occasionally this is to provide additional information specific to the culture, but more commonly the sidebar provides general information about a particular subject, such as concrete in the preindustrial world or how to prepare maize. At the end of this book is an index of all the sidebars and a brief overview of each one so that you can locate this information more easily.

Where no particular sex or gender is meant to be implied, the gender-neutral pronoun set ze/zem/zir is used in place of he/him/his and she/her/hers.

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## Aerrec-a

**Setting assumption:** Really soft science fiction

**Influences:** Maasai, Polynesian, Scottish

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The aerrec-a work just as well in a fantasy setting as they do in soft science fiction of the level of *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. If they are aliens, then “cattle” is just a translation convention and new figures may (or may not) have to be worked out for the size of their herds and pastures. If the aerrec-a are just another non-human race of beings in Fantasyland, as they are in the write-up for Kehrquos, then one can keep the given explanation for their memory transfer or ascribe it to some kind of magic. If the latter, it is entirely possible that they are actually carrying the spirits of the dead in their bodies, exactly as they believe themselves to be doing.

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The aerrec-a are reminiscent of trees in their appearance. They stand between six and eight feet tall, with northern aerrec-a being short for their kind even if they stand above most other people. Their skin is tough, bumpy, and gray, more like bark than leather but not an actual shell. Aerrec-a have four arms and are completely hairless.

The most distinctive aspect of the species is their genetic memory, which is not passed on to their offspring but instead passed on through the digestive process. This strips out those memories (or the patterns which those memories form in junk

### Note on genetic memory

By the time that you’ve finished the first paragraph, part of you may be going “But memory doesn’t work that way!” Keep in mind the setting assumption: The Aerrec-a are intended for worlds that are closer to *Star Wars* than *The Moon in a Harsh Mistress* on the Mohs Scale of Science Fiction Hardness.

portions of the DNA) and incorporates them into the eater’s own body.

A system of ritual cannibalism has sprung up in order to keep these memories going through the whole village. Under this tradition, the deceased are divided up and eaten by all the adults in the community. Consumed memories are not fully in the mind of an aerrec at all times. Especially strong memories may be called up at will, and may actually come up on their own if triggered appropriately, but most memories must be retrieved whilst one is in a trance state. This state requires nothing more to enter than intense concentration and sufficient time, but it can be aided by the use of hallucinogenic substances. This carries with it a danger, however: As the aerrec- a understand it, cannibalism makes their bodies play host to the spirits of the dead, and it is possible for one to be ghost -ridden and overtaken by these memories. In reality, as a personality is in part made up of memories, the ghost-ridden are those who have become unable to distinguish between personal and foreign memories.

It is possible for the living to acquire the memories of the living, simply by eating part of someone before that person has died. Aerrec-a who have been partially cannibalized in life are pitied, for their spirits have been broken apart, whereas cannibalism after death is supposed to make it possible for the spirit to dwell in each of the village’s bodies equally. The only way to rectify this condition (if the village believes it to be possible at

all) is to kill and eat the parties who committed the act.

## Religion

The greatest punishment which can be dealt to an aerre is to be denied ritual consumption after one's death. This effectively condemns the victim to what can only be thought of as a kind of damnation. The myths vary on whether this is the destruction of the soul (and whether *that* is instantaneous or gradual, and if it be painful or without sensation) or eternity in some sort of limbo state. Each village is thought to have its own afterlife, which is contained in and made out of the minds and souls of the villagers. Only by being consumed can the dead be granted entrance into these other worlds.

Villages consume the flesh of their own dead, exceptions being made for criminals and exiles, and they also sometimes consume the great warriors of other villages, whom they have slain. Normally villages will exchange corpses after a battle if it is necessary but villages will keep the bodies of great heroes if they can manage it. This is considered to be par for the course for anyone with a reputation to speak of. There is no distinction paid to the afterlives of different villages, however, which dampens the undesirability of this fate. The important thing, for most aerrec-a, is to end up in an afterlife at all, not to end up in a specific one.

Trees are the focus of much respect thanks to their age and an understanding of the origins of petrified wood. Most of the aerrec-a believe that all stone ultimately comes from trees (actual petrified wood is simply younger), making them the source of one of the most important resources in aerrec society. Not to mention that trees themselves form another highly valuable resource, from wood for tools and charcoal to a source of food. In the center of each village is a tree that had been planted there when the village was first founded. The tree is supposed to predict and reflect the conditions of the village,

## The High Trees Dynasty

The High Trees Dynasty is among the smallest of the cattle-dynasties. Being in such a position has forced them to adopt an especially diplomatic way of dealing with other cattle-dynasties. They may be just as interested in getting into a scrap as the next cattle-dynasty, as it is in raids that an aerrec's worth is usually proven, but they try to make sure to not involve themselves unnecessarily in conflicts, and they pay an unusual amount of attention to the surrounding relationships of a target village.

This cattle-dynasty is unable to survive the protracted conflicts that many other cattle-dynasties get wrapped up in, so a secondary means of proving oneself has developed. High Trees are known for exposing themselves to the elements for days without food or drink and, through it all, remaining motionless. In the process they call up the memories and spirits of their ancestors.

so when the tree dies it is time for the village to move somewhere else.

In other languages the word *oron* is usually translated to mean "god" but it is debatable how well the term applies. The aerrec-a don't believe in universe-creating beings, certainly. The universe arose out of Absence all on its own. The oron-a *are* primordial beings of usually great power, however, even if they can often be confronted on equal or near-equal terms by sufficiently prepared priests and magicians. Their status as primordial is peculiar, as it is applied to individual oron-a even when those individuals are regarded to have been recently created. Depending on who you ask, the oron-a either reside in stone or *are* stone.

The local stone-gods are paid homage and left gifts by the priests when stone is carved out. Every wall, house, and stone tool has a stone-god. Their personalities vary as wildly as any aerrec, and their power relative to each other can also differ. Like Japanese kami, there are stone-gods of all

magnitudes, and the respect which is due to them is determined by a combination of their magnitude—river pebbles are owed less respect than mountains—and utility—sharp arrowheads are owed more respect than a dull and broken knife. Those aerrec-a who are close enough to beaches to be familiar with them often have mixed feelings about these places. On the one hand, there are uncountable millions of stone-gods in such places; on the other hand, it is not hard to imagine that these grains of sand are the rubble of some forgotten iconoclasm or war, like a graveyard of the gods. Whether the beaches are home to “living” stone-gods or not is a matter of debate.

When a village has been destroyed, that is clear proof of the weakness of the stone-gods of the village’s wall and houses and weapons (or perhaps of those stone-gods’ anger, which is an equally valid interpretation). Trees are treated with respect because they will eventually become stone, and so they are seen as being stone-gods in embryo.

### **Cattle-Dynasties**

Wealth is measured in livestock. They provide meat, leather, milk, bones, and many, many useful things can be made of out of these. There are close-knit associations which exist between villages that are typically extremely old, with shared customs and a well-developed sense of togetherness and unity. One of the most distinguishing features of these cattle-dynasties (to use a popular, if less-than-totally-accurate translation) is their different fighting styles, but this is far from the only point on which they differ.

### **Magic**

The magicians weren’t always so. They were originally just healers, perhaps with a bit of ritual significance but still just healers. There are, however, many venomous snakes in the homeland of the aerrec-a, and it became an indispensable skill to be able to treat snake bits. From there it was only

### **The Red Stones Dynasty**

The Red Stones are infamously aggressive even among the aerrec-a. They have had much experience with the High Trees over the generations so they are adept at breaking out of holds, and the use of throwing weapons comprises a major part of their warriors’ educations.

They don’t take anything at all very seriously, least of all torture and slaughter. Other aerrec-a revile them for this and for many other behaviors, including their refusal to play by the rules of honorable combat, such as they are. The Red Stones will go so far as to steal the bodies of their dead after battle if they cannot retrieve them through negotiations, thus denying the souls of their dead to those who had killed them.

For their neighbors, however, they do not make trouble, and so their neighbors do not make it easy for those who would like to see the Red Stones cattle-dynasty wiped out.

a short distance to becoming the go -to people when you had an actual snake that needed to be handled. Their ability to control snakes—long considered to be demons, lesser gods, or other things entirely depending on where you were—translated into the appearance of having control over the primal forces of life and death. Their mystique was only added to by the care with which they protected their secrets from all who were not a part of the ancient chain of teacher and student.

Modern magicians are paid a mixture of fear and respect because of their powers. Even now these are based primarily in medical knowledge but also include knowing the kind and strength of luck of different words (very important; you don’t want to die because your battle strategy was filled with unlucky words) and whatever tricks that the magician’s predecessors have learned and passed down. In some ways aerrec magicians are similar to the stage magicians of today; it’s less about what





you can really do and more about what others think that you can do, or how little they know about how to manage to do it.

### Within the Village

Aerrec-a live in half-dugout shelters which stand somewhere between sod houses and cabins of stone (of which there are a fair amount in their lands). They are very good at stonework. They erect stelae at the places where the bones of their dead are buried. These stelae not only include information on whose bones exist there, how they died, and who their immediate family were (and where *they* were buried), but also who ate them and the year and season in which the stelae was erected (which is not always the same as the time of death, which historians do well to remember). This last attribute plus the immense respect paid to the stelae is especially important because the stelae are placed at territorial borders. To those aforementioned historians the stelae provide a year-by-year record of the shifts in power of the cattle-dynasties and even the villages.

Villages are built for defense. You may not usually need to fear your neighbors, even if they are members of a different cattle-dynasty, but warbands travel far and when famines come you may have to watch out for your own flesh and blood, to say nothing of nearby villages who don't share your ancestry at all. Villages are surrounded by strong stone walls with buildings at the perimeter, and a holding area at the center for the meat animals. This area is usually encircled by a wall as well in order to make it harder for raiders to steal the animals.

The word *gvini* is most often translated as “chief” or “king” but more literally means “killer.” At first this may appear to be a slight oddity, since the ruler is by no means the only one in the village who does any killing. He is, however, the only one who does any killing of criminals. It is unclear whether he killed lawbreakers because he ruled or he ruled

### The Creeping Spiders Dynasty

The Creeping Spiders have long dealt with foreign cultures, and they have created a system of etiquette expressly designed to minimize incidents with outsiders.

They are more passive outside of battle than other aerrec-a, preferring to act based on what the other party does (and preferring to act as little as possible in general, in order to gather information and reveal little in turn) but this ends when the situation turns violent.

Creeping Spiders train to use two weapons at once in a complementary fashion.

because he killed lawbreakers—or, put another way, whether responsibility begot authority or authority begot responsibility.

It probably isn't right to say that metal is scarce, exactly, but it isn't so common that the aerrec-a like to make their weapons entirely out of it. Instead they carve out shafts of wood, into which they fit metal or stone edges.

### Between the Villages

A sense of shared kinship and shared customs (even a similar way of fighting, as noted before) is what binds individual villages together, but the alliances that exist between cattle-dynasties are maintained through arranged fosterage. These are not immediately seen as being between cattle-dynasties, however.

First, two villages are in danger of fighting (which will be disastrous if they are neighbors, since such close proximity is bound to lead to the extermination of one village or the other in time) or else they wish to seal an agreement, perhaps over the use of a river that both are nearby, or a trading pact. If they are part of the same cattle-dynasty then shared lineage is enough to ensure peace and that everyone follows the agreement. At least, if it isn't

then there isn't anything else that can do the job. There are times when brothers will kill brothers, and fosterage will not change that.

But when there is no relationship to handle this job, when the two parties are from different cattle-dynasties, then what is there to be done? *Create* a relationship, obviously. In such a situation, important individuals exchange an equal number of

their children. Or more accurately, you send fewer of your children if you think that they are more important than the children of the other village, and this is considered insulting enough to make them reject whatever you were negotiating about, so nobody does it unless they are in a position of great strength *and* have a deep desire to insult the other. One of the side benefits of this arrangement is that, while it is seen as a practice which is performed

### Some figures on cattle

If cattle-dynasties deal with real cattle, then the following information may be useful. Nutritional demands will likely vary from human norms. Whether other animals besides cattle are kept will also affect how many are necessary.

Many cows weigh in at about 1,300 pounds and yields 430,000 calories alone from the usual cuts: 110lb of protein and 255lb of fat. Unfortunately, numbers for organs, &c are a little harder to find except in piecemeal.

If we assume that the difference between cattle and human flesh is minimal (there is less difference between cattle and humans than between pigs and humans, at least) then we can turn to the work of James Cole for help. In his paper "Prehistoric Cannibalism," Cole calculates that a 143lb human contained 81,500 calories, between skin, other organs, and what we might call "conventional cuts." Adjusting from 143lb to 1,300lb, this comes out to a total of 740,909 calories per 1,300lb. Some breeds of cattle reach ranges of 2,500-3,300lb.

Modern dairy cows produce 8 gallons of milk a day. This is the result of breeding for increased milk, however; early cattle may have produced as little as a tenth of this amount. 8 gallons of whole milk comes out to approximately 18,472 calories. It is important to note that milk is consumed far more than meat. Kenyan pastoralists eat only 22lb of meat a year on average, and only rarely does any of it come from cattle. Up to 60% of their caloric intake comes from milk. Assuming similar values to human blood, cow or horse blood (both consumed by various cultures) would clock in at about 450 calories per milliliter.

Calculating the exact ratio of cows to grazing land is difficult without knowing how productive the land is. Cattle eat 4% of their weight per day when foraging, or 18,980lb per year (1,460%). Assuming that the land produces 9,500lb of grazing mass per year (Bermuda grass and ryegrass produce more, fescue produces less), then one cow needs about just about two acres. Most ranchers go with 3-4 acres for a mother/calf pair.

Various pastoral cultures have anywhere from 5-50 head of cattle per person. Among the Maasai, fifty is a respectable amount for a man. This would require that each person's herd would require roughly 100 acres for grazing.

While the aerrec-a do not typically move their cattle far distances, some figures on transportation may still be useful. While cattle can move up to 25 miles a day, a more efficient pace is 15 miles. Moving them faster will cause weight loss, reducing the value of the herd if one intends to sell them at the end (simply relocating to new grounds, however, would permit a faster speed).

between villages, it has consequences for the cattle-dynasties as a whole. Even if you haven't sent off your own child to another village the effect is nearly the same if the same has been done by your cousin (or distant relative, rather, but the aerrec-a don't distinguish between degrees of kinship further than child, parent, and sibling).

### **Adulthood and Marriage**

The aerrec-a are polygamous. This probably has something to do with how the dangers of male life, between manhood hunts and general warfare, make for an imbalanced male-to-female ratio. Any man who wants to marry must prove his worth with wealth and killing. The first is proven the same every time: by paying the bride's family a number of the meat animals which he owns. The latter changes depending on whether he has yet been recognized as a man.

The first necessary killing which a male aerrec makes, which is performed to prove his worthiness to become an adult and marry for the first time, is performed on a manhood hunt. Future killings must be performed against enemy villages. It is important to note that it doesn't matter how many you kill on these excursions, whether it be one or twenty. A single excursion only proves your worthiness to marry *this* time, because they are a meant to prove your current skill. For this reason, raids are rarely village-wide massacres.

Manhood hunts are dangerous affairs, as one might gather. The target of the hunt is the slishty, a six-limbed creature that only stands two feet tall at the shoulders but has claws sharp enough to scratch granite, climbs (and jumps down from) trees, is as intelligent as a chimpanzee, and hunts in packs as large as ten. More aerrec-a die on manhood hunts than in raids, owing to the relative inexperience of those participating in them. Generally speaking, only senior wives—who guide the hunters and keep them steady—go on more than one manhood hunt.

The senior wife of a man has male status once her husband has married a second time, which gives her a superior position to her fellow wives and puts her on equal standing with the men. The senior wife is also commonly chosen as a guide during manhood hunts (especially those performed by her sons or other close relatives) and runs her husband's household and herd in his absence. In especially combative villages where the men can be gone for most of the year, senior wives are the de facto leaders of the village instead of the actual chief.

Love is expressed verbally only on rare occasion, as the aerrec-a do not especially prize verbal communication in general. A couple could go twenty or thirty years without a single verbal expression of affection and nobody would think it odd. Affection in aerrec society is displayed through actions instead, primarily physical contact of some sort.

Women and adult males increase their physical attractiveness (and demonstrate affection) through extensive scarification, especially on the legs and back. Scarification is usually performed by the magicians, who are the best-prepared for treating wounds. Geometrical art, designs mimicking battle wounds, and spells are the most common. Ashes and soot, representative of the element of Absence, are mixed into the wounds in order to irritate them and promote scarring.

### **The Castes**

In the past, aerrec society was based on a caste structure. While it has abandoned most of this heritage, evolving past the sort of society where every part of one's life has been preordained by the circumstances of one's birth, it is nevertheless colored by it, and colored strongly enough that it bears an examination. As with many caste systems, the one which the aerrec-a displayed was influenced by their religious and cosmological beliefs.

## The Seven Fundamental Substances

In the aerrec worldview, the universe is made of seven fundamental substances. Each one develops into the next. Harvae, or Absence, is the first of these. It is not only itself but is also decay, or the process by which all things are broken down into Absence or nothingness once again.

The second orod is Horv, or Space, in the sense of three-dimensional space. It symbolizes potential, because all things which exist, are only able to exist within space and are made possible only through the existence of space.

The third of the Ektarv (lower) substances is Es, or Sky. This is the matter which makes up the firmament. It extends from the clouds to the planets to the stars.

The Raes (upper or terrestrial) elements are found only in the world as we know it. Tis, or Fire, rises up from the element of Sky and symbolizes change. While Fire has a creative, life-giving element, it also carries with it a destructive element that prevents fire itself from directly transforming into to a living form. Further transitions are necessary.

Five eventually cools and settles into Forb, or Earth. This substance begins as ash but is capable of becoming, over time, many other substances. Rather than being symbolic of stasis and permanence (which is the province of Sky), Earth symbolizes transformation.

Over thousands of years Earth is refined into Vix, or Water. This substance retains the life-giving aspect of Fire (previously quiet and slumbering in Earth) but leaves behind Fire's destructive aspect.

The highest of the elements is Hut, or Flesh. This substance makes up all living things, from the simplest fungus to the aerrec-a themselves. Flesh is more vulnerable to the decaying process of Absence than any of the other elements, however.

Living things are forced to consume both Flesh and Water in order to stave off death. Consuming Flesh allows organisms to repair themselves quickly but is itself ridden with decay. Because of this, Water (which is pure decay) must also be consumed regularly.

At first glance plants would appear to not need flesh, but fertilizers often include the substance of Flesh (such as dung) and improve plant growth. The one exception to this rule, then, is stone, which is seen to be a purified form of Flesh. Plants are, while not the pinnacle of elemental development, still more highly-developed than animals. It is the most developed of them, the trees, who eventually become stone and purify themselves of all Absence.

Starvation and aging are seen as two forms of the same thing: being overcome by the substance of Absence. No matter by how much one is able to stave off decay it will still occur to some extent, hence aging. Failing to stave it off at all causes a much faster onset, however, and this is called starvation.

## Status and Position

One's place in society, or Rank, is determined by two factors: Status (arraevark) and Position (arratvark). Status, which is inherited from one's mother, plays the biggest amount of influence in where one fits in society. Position is inherited from one's father and determines one's place within that status. Inter-marriage between high status and low position, or low status and high position, is only slightly uncommon. In most cases matches such as these will be almost traditional, with the superior family having married into the dregs for generations.

The seven Statuses are named after mythical figures who are said to act as patrons for those who claim their name. They are referred to by many other terms as well, most commonly by the type of

clothing which is traditionally associated with arraebark: Rings, Gloves, Daggers, Ribbon-coats, Robes, Shawls, and Scarves. In the past Status was more akin to caste, complete with ordained duties, but this has died away as of the present. It exists today mostly in the concept of certain lines of work being “especially appropriate” (dosgorora) for that Status.

The Gviui-a were the original rulers of the First People. Thanks to the hereditary nature of rulership in their culture they often still are, though there are exceptions here and there. Jewelry was associated with the rich and the powerful, as it usually is, and the ring in particular held a particular attraction for the aerrec-a, for whom it symbolized the world.

Purity of both body and spirit is important for all of the aerrec-a, but this is especially so for those who are charged with acting as representatives of their people before supernatural powers. In some cases impurity can offend, and in other cases impurity has negative consequences just as naturally as spilling dirt into the soup will invariably spoil the meal. A Kotkvi wore gloves as a way of keeping zir hands clean so that ze could keep them safe from accidental contamination. In time naked flesh itself was seen as not being sufficiently pure for most ritual purposes, even when it had been kept from contamination of either the physical or spiritual sort. In time, nearly every Kotkvi would have at least one extra pair of gloves on zir person in case ze needed to rapidly don a clean pair.

Because of the need to remain separate from the magicians, who are believed to anger the spirits through the use of their spells, Kotkvi-a cannot undergo scarification. They are also not permitted to eat in the same dwelling as a magician. Some cattle-dynasties believed (and occasionally still believe) that bloodshed contaminates a Kotkvi and demand strict pacifism from them, and sometimes even vegetarianism.

These rare exceptions aside, however, every male fought. Yet it was the Tal -a who were the first to join in every battle and the last to leave it. At night they stood guard over the herds, when the village was on the move they scouted ahead, and when war broke out they were sent first to make sure that the enemy’s walls broke too. For this reason, they are signified by bearing an all-metal knife, which hangs from the waist.

Even today they have a reputation for being vicious and are sometimes given leeway in murder cases for this. A Tal who commits murder is seen, at worst, as being broken in a way that prevents zem from understanding when the fighting is over. The perpetrator is not allowed to walk away but neither is ze to be exiled. Instead ze is killed and eaten by zir fellow Tal-a. This practice serves only to increase the instability of the Tal-a but it is unlikely to stop any time soon.

The role of the trained builder cannot be understated. While the crafter makes zir own tools and the others also each play their own essential roles, the Nod Shaevki-a literally make the village—and figuratively, too. The villages could not operate in the way that they do without the walls that surround them and their pens. Each village wall is a work of art, and cattle-dynasties have styles of building that are as distinctive as their ways of fighting. The builders are distinguished by their use of the hooded robe.

The Kark-a are traditionally crafters, responsible for the production of every tool in the village (save for the builders’) no matter its role or the material of its make. They wear coats with strong strips of fabric descending from the sleeves behind the elbow. These strips are tied to tools for easy access and hands-free transportation, much like a utility belt.

Magicians, who comprise the Arraevark Vaerrorb-a, are associated with shawls. This simple piece of clothing was often used to keep them warm during

the nightlong vigils which they would keep over their patients. Nowadays magicians usually own two shawls: one for function and a lighter one purely for show when the temperature is too high to wear the first.

Everyone participated in protecting and raising the herds but in the old days only the Saer-a tilled and raised the crops. Their scarves, now often ornamented and elaborate, were originally scrap pieces of fabric were used for numerous purposes. Among these was tying things together but the most important was protecting the face against the uncomfortably strong winds (and the debris that they could kick up) which could rise up in the grasslands where the best grazing land was found. In some villages, where this land was far away, the saer-a would live in temporary communities away from the rest of the village, with only some builders (to make and maintain walls) for company.

There are likewise seven Positions to match the seven Statuses. These are associated with and named after the substances of the Lok Orod, though they are most often referred to be color. Each Position is associated with a color, which is used to specify the bearer's Position and is usually displayed in connection with zir torov arraev (badge of Status). A Saer of the Zarb position might have a green scarf or simply have a piece of green fabric tied to zir scarf.

The most common and superior form of Flesh is plant matter. This makes green (Zarb) an obvious color to associate with the highest of all substances.

The simplest match to make, of course, is the usage of blue (Kol) to represent the substance of Water. This color is most often derived from a mixture of copper, iron, silica, and calcium, but other methods also exist, such as using a solution of certain plants and ash or lime.

Crocoite, arsenic, gold, ocher, and magnesium are a few of the different substances which can be used in the production of yellow, which is the color of Earth (Saeusae). It is a transformative color. Members of this Position are stereotyped as being indirect and sometimes are thought to be untrustworthy for the same reason. An indirect person, who see, is more likely than a direct person to poison you when ze wants you dead.

Pale red (Ouaut) is considered to be its own color, much like Russian differentiates between what English-speakers consider to be two shades of blue. The aerrec-a produce it from red ocher. Ouaut is linked to Fire and passion.

Deep Red (Vov) comes from the same source. Hematite, lead tetroxide, and certain shrubs and insects can also be processed to get this color. This color symbolizes the substance of Sky.

White (Foulou) is most often produced from chalk, calcite, lead white, and gypsum. Representative of Sapce, it has qualities of power and potential and associations with the supernatural. It is commonly believed that all magicians are of this Position.

The final color is black (Foshoko), which symbolizes Absence and death. It is made from substances like soot. Because of the associations of this substance it is especially common to produce black coloring from ground charcoal made from animal remains, especially when magicians use the color for their spells.

Numerous terms exist for Statuses and Positions. These range from simple names like Blue Robes (Kark Status, Kol Position) to more esoteric names like Balances of the Fourth Degree (which makes reference to one of the symbolic attributes of the figure Tal).

## The Ardwmus

**Setting assumptions:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Bedouin, Southwestern Amerind

**Fine-tuning/changing it up:** Details about the size of the desert and the number of Ardwmus tribes in it are left vague so that they can be adjusted for a small desert as easily as for a desert taking up half of an entire continent.

While there doesn't appear to be room in the world for the Ardwmus to fit into a contemporary setting, they could easily be adapted to, say, a post-apocalyptic setting. The American Southwest would probably require the least amount of adaptation, but cacti, great horned owls, and other species *are* found elsewhere in the world now (cacti are common in India and Australia, for example), so it isn't the only option.

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The Ardwmus tribes are a matriarchal society situated in a desert environment featuring primarily barren, rocky plains. In the east of the desert, forming the eastern boundary between the desert and the rest of the world, is the Elzitar, or field of dunes. The Elzitar lies downwind from what had once been a great river.

### The Ancestors

Ardwmus religion centers on the worship of one's ancestors, specifically one's earliest female ancestor. This individual, called the lineage-mother, is traced through the matrilineal line. An Ardwmus

### On "w" and "u"

In writing down words from the Ardwmus language, vowels which appear twice in a row are repeated separately rather than turned into a different sound.

This is troublesome when it comes to the "ooh" sound, which under other circumstances would be written as "oo" or "uu." As the Ardwmus language does not use a "w" sound (the closest equivalent is closer to "r"), this letter has been used to substitute in place of "oo" or "uu." In this case it is quite literally a double-u.

tribe generally shares the same lineage-mother. While there are cases where two lineages are in the same tribe, there is never a case of being spread out among multiple tribes.

All of one's ancestors are venerated, especially those who have done something particularly noteworthy, but it is believed that only the lineage-mother possesses any supernatural ability to help her descendants. Requests are not made of her directly, however, except in the rarest of cases. They are instead directed toward one's other ancestors, who are viewed as intermediaries. Invariably they will prove to be more effective than if one were to ask for something on one's own.

In order to gain anything from the ancestors, a sacrifice must be made. The greater the sacrifice the more likely that the request will be fulfilled, and the greater the gain from its fulfillment.

### Funeral Rites

The body is considered to be of little value after death; the thing which made it a person is now gone and all that is left is the inanimate shell. The Ardwmus waste nothing which they do not have to waste, and so the corpse's possessions are taken. A woman's possessions are usually given to her children, and a man's possessions are given to his

nieces and nephews. The body is then left for the scavengers.

The soul is believed to be separate from the intelligence housed in one's body, and upon death it has nowhere to rest. The world looks very different to those whose eyes are not clouded by flesh, and without a means of finding direction the dead are doomed to be lost forever.

Luckily, there is a means to prevent this fate: by placing a part of one's soul in another object, the greater part of the soul will be able to find its way. It will know its own location relative to the shard, and thereby know the location of all other things relative to the shard. Even when the shard is carried by the tribe, the dead will remember the paths which their tribe takes and know its location according to the date.

After she becomes a full member of the tribe a woman is given a newly-made bone knife. She uses this to cut herself in order to coat it with a portion of her soul, which is contained in the blood. The knife will remain with her for all her life. It will be used only in emergencies, so that the risk of breaking it is minimized. A man is similarly cut, but place some of his blood on the jar which contains the soul-knife of his lineage-mother.

The soul-knife of a woman is kept safe until the tribe's nomadic path brings it to the Elzitar. Each tribe keeps vast collections of soul-knives here, hidden deep beneath the sands and away from outsiders. Because each member of the tribe knows the location of this burying place, a dead woman is capable of divining her location by way of knowing where she is in relation to it, until she has grown used to the way that the world looks to her new perceptions.

The souls of men, however, use the container of the lineage-mother's soul-knife in order to get their bearings, as this is where their own soul fragment

lies. It is in this way that the warriors of the lineage protect its greatest treasure even after their deaths.

In order to provide time for the newly-dead to find their way, requests are not made of the deceased until the tribe has passed by the soul-knife field two times.

### **Gender Roles and Hierarchy**

It can be put most simply like this: the men control matters which take place outside of the tribe, and the women control matters inside the tribe.

Hunting and conducting warfare, for example, are matters for the men. They are more expendable from a reproductive point of view, and equally so from the point of view of the tribe. More domestic matters, including the day-to-day running of the tribe, are handled by the women.

While hunting and warfare may take place outside of the tribe, it has not been lost to the Ardwmus that the initial conception of the idea to go on a particular attack or hunt is made within the tribe. It is for this reason that the women must first approve any such venture; it is the women who decide when to go to war and when to hunt. After the decision is made, however, the men have control of the situation.

Among men, rank is determined by marriage. Those who are married have authority over those who are not married. Those who have more wives have authority over those who have fewer. Those who married their first wife earlier have authority over those who married their first wife later, if they have the same number of wives. For this reason, marriages do not occur on the same day.

Among the women, rank is determined by children. Those who have children have authority over those who do not. Those who have more children have authority over those who have fewer. Those who have grandchildren have authority over those who



### The many uses of the cactus

Depending on species, a cactus will have seeds that can be ground and eaten. Most edible cactus fruits are described as tasting something like strawberry, fig, or watermelon, depending on species. The fruits can be eaten as is or processed to make jam, jelly, or juice. The roots of some cactus species can be eaten. Edible cacti are usually high in calcium and Vitamin C (in fact, cacti were one of the first cures for scurvy).

Some cacti attract insects which can be processed to produce a red dye, as mentioned elsewhere. Most often, artificial nests are hung over the side of the cactus, creating an inviting home for local parasites. Once the insects inside, the nest can easily be capped off and the insects recovered.

The saguaro cactus, after being parasitized by the small birds which commonly nest in it, can be harvested to get a “saguaro boot,” for use in water storage. The needles of most cacti, but especially the saguaro, can be used for sewing. Large cacti can be used in the production of furniture or tent stakes, or and the fiber of many species of cacti can be used for weaving.

The most useful cactus genus may be the “prickly pear,” or *Opuntia*. They grow well enough to be considered a weed in some places and can grow up to twenty feet high. The pads and fruits of the prickly pear may be removed of their needles and eaten. This may be done most efficiently by rotating them over a fire or rolling them in sand or gravel.

The pads are high in various vitamins, protein, and fiber. They also aid water retention in the body. In addition to being eaten raw or cooked, they can also be pickled for long-term preservation. They taste most like string beans.

The pulp can be used to treat inflammation. Other medicinal uses include treating constipation, alleviating drunkenness, and treating minor wounds and insect bites. Alcoholic drinks or hallucinogens can be made from the fluids of the pads and stem. The mucilage can be used in water purification.

do not. Grandmothers of the tribe are equal to each other in authority, and the majority rules when they are at odds with each other. This qualifier is rarely relevant, however. The Ardwms prefer to debate for long periods of time until one side or the other has been convinced, rather than force everyone to submit to the will of the majority.

It should be noted that for the matter of female authority, only children who have been given their second name count.

### Children

It is not guaranteed that children will survive. For this reason, they are given “birth names,” or simple placeholder names such as Nyayen (First Daughter), or Dezhw (Second Son). These act as a

way to play an amount of emotional distance between parent and child in the all-too-likely event that the child dies. Only once the parents decide that the child will likely survive will she be given her “growing name.” This name usually relates to an animal, like Toaz (vulture) or Hugina (mouse), and is not gender-specific.

When a boy is of fifteen years old, or when a girl has had her first menstrual period (which may not be well until fourteen or even later), they are deemed ready to begin preparing to become adults. A boy will henceforth be ready to participate in raids and more dangerous hunts and girl will be ready for marriage. To become a man, one must kill someone from outside the tribe, while womanhood is earned by successfully giving birth to a child. At this point ze is given their soul-knife or zir blood is

coated on the lineage-mother's jar, and they are given the last name by which they will be known, their "living name."

Men who wish to marry a girl must offer a bride price to her mother. This usually takes the form of the spoils of the hunt or valuables taken in war. The mother is then free to accept the price, reject it out of hand and deny the right to further negotiation, or demand that a higher offer be made. Ardwmus society is polygamous, not least in order to allow the best men to thus father more children, but also because the requirements for manhood are not restricted to a single tribe. All of the tribes demand the death of an outsider, and a good number of a tribe's unmarried males will be killed by each other in war as they try to earn their manhood.

Two other matters also accompany the rite of passage for a woman: firstly, the grandmothers of the tribe tattoo her back in the sacred symbols of that tribe, with carmine dye harvested from cactus parasites. Secondly... Children are of the utmost importance to the Ardwmus. The tribes will do anything at all to keep them safe, but they are also all too aware of the necessities of life in their harsh environment. No single thing is more valuable than a firstborn child, but more valuable than the firstborn alone are all of the children that will be born in the future. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward and so, in order to receive the greatest reward possible, the firstborn will be left behind on the sands when the tribe next moves on. No lesser sacrifice is fit to be given to the lineage-mother. To find such a child, called a zol if it is found, is extremely lucky for both the child and the finder. The zol is considered to be exceptionally blessed and possessed of a great fortune.

### **Domesticated Animals**

The Ardwmus do not have any animals serving as livestock, which is partially due to their rigorous, if complex, system of hospitality laws. It is normally alright to kill an enemy, or even a bystander who

stumbles into camp. There is no dishonor in this. But anyone who the tribe extends compassion and aid toward, the same has been adopted by the tribe and cannot be harmed any more than the tribe can harm one of its native-born members.

The Ardwmus follow this law without regard for species. If they cared for goats, then the goats would be members of the tribe. Then they could not be killed, to say nothing of being *eaten*. Nevertheless, the Ardwmus have other reasons to rear animals.

Most tribes keep a small flock of ostriches, which are used for their eggs and also to carry supplies. The birds can be ornery, but they are well-adapted to the local environment and suited to their tasks. Less common are ichneumons, or mongooses. These are trained to keep the camps clear of rodents, snakes, and other pests, and to steal away the eggs of birds.



Great horned owls (or “tiger owls,” as the Ardwmus know them) are trained as hunting birds and sentries. They can seize rabbits, lizards, and most local birds, and can be used to flush out or distract larger animals. Tiger owls not on the hunt are trained to circle the camp and raise a ruckus when large animals approach.

### **Diet**

The Ardwmus obtain their food from hunting game and from wild plants. There are no taboo sources of meat in their culture (except humans, anyway), so they will readily set upon anything which they are able catch. Bows are primarily used for hunting, although traps will also be placed whenever the tribe is expecting to remain in the same place for a few days.

Slightly more than half of the Ardwmus diet consists of plant matter. It is mainly nuts and legumes gathered from the many hardy varieties of plant which grow in the desert. Also of the importance are the various species of cactus in the desert and the yazgwin, a kind of tuber.

Many of the other food-producing plants of the desert have secondary uses, most often usable in cloth production. It is the cactus which has the most uses, however. The majority of cactus species produce an edible fruit of one size or another, and most of these fruits are extremely juicy. The main body of the cactus is often edible as well after the spines are dealt with, and in some species the skin can be used as a container. Finally, certain insects parasitize the cactus and can be used to produce a carmine dye, the principal source of ink for the Ardwmus. In addition to tattoos, this ink is used to decorate the tribe’s tents.

After the cactus, the yazgwin is possibly the most important plant in the desert. It is able to deal with minimal hydration, is extremely nutritious, and preserves well. The plant is also hard to come across simply by accident and only a small amount

of it grows aboveground. Most tribes know of several places where there are large amounts of yazgwin. These locations act as a sort of storehouse, capable of keeping the tribe from starvation even if all else fails.

### **Clothing**

The Ardwmus wear loose clothing made from leather or woven from one of the various plants which exist in their desert homeland. Strong gloves are used as well. The head is protected by a hat, woven from plant matter, which bears a resemblance to an extremely flat chupalla. A scarf is usually wrapped around the head in order to protect the ears and neck.

In ritual contexts the Ardwmus wear veils of tiny bone beads strung along threads. These veils are time-consuming and difficult to create, and so they are carefully passed down from generation to generation. In times of war, raiding parties will don larger masks. These are made by taking the skull of a large animal, sans the lower jaw, and mounting it against a leather or cloth base. Hyenas, coyotes, and caracals are commonly-used.

### **Stories**

Storytelling among the Ardwmus is, as with most societies, an important part of the culture. Lessons, rules of life, and advice are all contained in poetic form and wrapped in mythic narrative.

The story of Uyin the Rabbit, which exists in one form or another across most of the tribes, contains almost step- by-step instructions of how to hunt rabbits, and also of the many mistakes which can be made. Those are, of course, the very first thing which The Fool Hunter does. It even manages to include lessons on proper behavior with regard to one’s ancestors. There are few stories which do not contain some sort of lesson. (Spoiler: the story of Uyin the Rabbit is ultimately about how *to* hunt rabbits. The ending doesn’t treat him well.)

Much importance is put on stories of other kinds as well. Once the day's duties are done with, the tribe often partakes in uligir. It is a kind of improvisational theater which starts and ends spontaneously. It can even take place during periods of work.

Different members enter and leave the uligir of their own accord. In this way a single session can last an entire day but begin and end with entirely

different collections of members. Players take on new personas and refine them throughout the uligir before ultimately casting them off as they cease to participate. A particular persona can, after being cast off, be seen by another to be interesting and worth picking up in a future session. If this happens often enough, the persona will eventually acquire a traditional status and likely be used by various players for generations to come, being refined and altered all the while.

## Arward Lartvon

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Inca, Israeli Kibbutzim, Scottish, Roman

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** While one of the sidebars (“Wait, how fast did you say again?”) gives some sample geographical and population sizes for the sake of example, the size of the country is otherwise left to be determined by the worldbuilder. Their native mountain range is stated to be quite long, but this can also be changed without causing any problems.

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The Arward Lartvona (sing: Arward Lartvon) are a people who live along a sizeable length of the Wendeko Wando Dolkar, one of the longest mountain ranges in the world. Militaristic, meritocratic, and in possession of excellent transportation and communication systems, the nation of Arward Lartvon is a force to be reckoned with.

### The Military

Regardless of sex, every adult Arward Lartvon is a member of the military. Young men and women are eligible to join and fulfill a two- year length of active service when they come of age at seventeen. Only people who have served out this term are considered to be full adults, and all political appointments likewise require prior military

service. This is not a period of life which one truly ever leaves: anyone who has given military service must regularly exercise zir skills, take part in mock formations, and the like.

Veterans may be called back into active service at any point until they reach the age of fifty, should it be ordered by the king or one of his duly-appointed representatives.

Even though there are only a few concrete disadvantages built into the system, most Arward Lartvona are members of the military. The social pressure and threat of ostracism is enough for most people. Military service provides many opportunities as well, however, including what may possibly be the greatest opportunity of all: if ze displays sufficient tactical brilliance and courage on the battlefield, then even the lowest-born Arward Lartvon can rise through the ranks and become a noble.

### Class Structure

Usually, class is something that you are born into. You inherit your class from your mother. This is possibly a result of the peculiarities surrounding inheritance of the kingship, but both practices have been in force for so long that it’s impossible to tell for sure. Each class is associated with a particular metal, with which that class shares its name. Only members of that class are allowed to use their associated metal. In certain situations members of other classes may *handle* it but that is as far as it goes.

The head of society of is formed by the altaore (pl: altaorea) class. These are the nobility, and only they are allowed to use steel. They are also the only class to use their associated metal so extensively, making everything from weapons to tools to cups from steel.

Err, or gold, is used as a sort of promissory note when supplies are requisitioned. It can only be used in exchanges with the government or other authorized parties, such as especially large and government-sponsored merchant groups. This makes it effectively valueless to anyone who values their current status of not being imprisoned for illegal gold trading.

Gold is used exclusively by the erra, and outside of their caste only government officials are allowed to so much as touch it. Others can use gold indirectly, but erra are required to physically transport it from one place to another (even across a table). Erra are craftsmen, transporters, miners, and others who deal with the production and distribution of non-agricultural goods. Due to the importance of these goods, they occupy a position directly below that of the altaorea.

There are three subgroups in the erra, each lying on the threshold between this and another class. They are considered to be members of both so that they can be permitted to prepare the metal of that class. For example, there are smiths who are in charge of forging objects of steel. These are considered to be nobles in their own right and are called erra-altaorea. The erra-kodra likewise craft with copper and the erra-darda make the jade implements of the darda. Only the darena craft with their own metal, in just one of the ways that they stand slightly outside the normal system.

The kodra are the copper-class. They are principally farmers but also comprise numerous other occupations, pretty much anything not covered by the others. They fill the ranks of the priests, doctors, and so on. Most of their experience with smiths comes from the erra-kodra, since nearly every village has one. Copper is used primarily for other special tasks but, as a matter of longstanding tradition, any arrowheads which a kodra uses will be made from copper. Most tools are instead made out of iron.

The darda are a sort of pseudo-class. Membership here is earned rather than inherited by one's mother. Theirs is the class of jade, which is considered to be a metal by the Arward Lartvona. Other people may disagree with their conclusion, but the Arward Lartvona forgo the tactic of "classifying substances as metals if and only if they're actually metals" in favor of less rigorous method of "classifying substances as metals if they're metals, but also if they're the restricted material of a social class.

Jade is used mainly in order to create the signet rings which are used to authenticate a dard's identity and the styluses with which they write out their decrees. Darda are government officials, from clerks to good storage overseers to governor's aides (the governors themselves are part of the nobility). No matter how low or menial the position, government service first of all requires military service. While the bottom of the dard class is side-by-side with the kodra, it offers the opportunity to rise above all that and, with luck, skill, and determination, occupy that small area of prestige which lies between the erra and the altaorea.

The darena claim a matrilineal line of descent from the brother of the first king in Arward Lartvoni history. They occupy a special place in the country's social structure for that reason. According to legend, that king was once the target of an assassin, who would have succeeded in his plot had the king's brother not discovered and poisoned him. Arsenic is the restricted metal of this class, which has several important duties. Among them are foreign relations (only a daren can be an ambassador), assassination, and the physical handling of the king.

One of the most common tools of the darena is the noonol or poison drink. Every daren is expertly schooled in the knowledge of poisons, but they know more than just how to kill a person. Many have more medical knowledge than all but the

finest of kodr doctors, and a better grasp of politics than many governors.

The word for iron is derdon, and this is also the word for “adult” or “citizen.” Only people who have fulfilled their military obligations are able to claim this status and use its metal. Young men and women currently in their first period of service are termed aldi derdon datarako, or “temporary adults.” With this status they can wield the iron weapons which are used by most members of the army, but if they desert then they will lose the privilege too. Because all adults are derdona by dint of their service in the army, all adults are permitted to handle iron.

### **The King and God**

In the early days of Arward Lartvona’s history there was a conflict between the king, whom the people call the arrar, and the nobles. The latter had begun to chafe under the absolute power which the arrar held, but rather than overthrow him outright or establish some kind of Magna Carta they struck upon another solution. Instead of choosing his heir from among his sons, the arrar would instead examine the ranks of the nobility. From them he would choose a promising young man, and adopt him into his family in a process called adolloo. In this way, every noble family (or arovkat) would have a shot at putting one of their own on the throne, and the chance of getting a competent arrar were no longer up to chance.

The arrar’s reign, or raona, is not considered to be official until he has been crowned. This cannot occur until the day after he has achieved a military victory. Accordingly, upon the death of each arrar, his successor launches an attack against a neighboring power. In this way the country’s borders expand just a little bit more each time that the crown is passed down.

Or so was the intent. At some point in the past it was recognized just how much of a nightmare this

made relations with neighboring countries, and there were times that the folly of a young king had almost led the country down to its utter destruction. It came to pass, however, that one enterprising king, wealthy in years and wealthier still in wisdom, examined the fruits of his latest war and also the risks that might come from starting another one so soon. He decided to cheat the system, to declare this conquered region to be a protectorate rather than an official territory of the country. All subsequent kings have done likewise after a great war. When it comes time to go out to the field of battle to earn a crown, the king-to-be incorporates towns which have proven their loyalty in years past, staging a mock combat against them in order to satisfy the demands of tradition.

Even in real battles, however, the emphasis is not on killing. Both in Arward Lartvon and in neighboring countries, various customs are in place in order to reduce casualties. The most notable of these is that no battle can begin any earlier than in the afternoon. The purpose of this practice is to allow the worse-off army to retreat under the cover of darkness as soon as the sun sets, giving victory to the side which would have likely won anyway, but without the loss of so many lives.

The first born son of the king was never in the line of succession even before the system of royal adoption was put into place. This, too, was an attempt to reduce the prevalence of death, in this case of the firstborn. There was little reason, after all, to kill him when he wasn’t going to be the king anyway. Called the lashananro, the firstborn son was instead given other duties. Among the possibilities included the position of arragi-atjako waosu, or master of the royal household (which is nearly as prestigious as the king’s own station); arwadaki shandoko, or high general of the armies; or governorship over one of the provinces. Nowadays, every child of the king is a lashananro.

The name of the god of the Arward Lartvona is ARNAV. The same is also their word for “breath.”

### Wait, how fast did you say again?

Most cultures in this book draw pretty evenly on their influences. The Arward Lartvona, however, were based *very* heavily on the Inca. The reason for this intensity of focus is that the Inca did so many ridiculous things that you might never believe they were possible unless I could point to an actual culture that did all of them together.

Among other things, the rate of 20 miles per day might be an *undershot*. According to *Provincial Power in the Inca Empire*, by Terence D'Altroy, Inca runners (responsible for transmitting messages from one end of the empire to the other) could make journeys of almost 150 miles per day. It probably helped that they were chewing coca leaves at the time, but whatever.

Inca runners weren't soldiers or merchants, however, and they were operating on a relay system, so this isn't the final word in deciding the speed of an army. Roman soldiers were able to march 20-30 miles a day with weapons, armor, and supplies. The mountainous terrain should reduce this a little bit, but "yellow hemp" is another word for ephedra, which can be used to produce methamphetamine. The Chinese used it as a stimulant since the Second Century BC, though it really only exploded when soldiers on both sides of the conflict started to use meth in World War Two.

(No, I will *not* be using the sidebar to teach you how to process ephedra)

On to the other ridiculous claim that has been made in this section: Rapid communication via bagpipe.

Bagpipes produce 115 decibels. At a distance of one mile, this goes to 40 decibels, or one-fourth as loud as an ordinary conversation. Difficult, but well within the threshold of hearing according to *About Decibels*, by Gregg Venderheiden. If you place two bagpipers one mile apart from each other, then it will take 4.7 seconds for the sound from the first to reach the second. At this speed, a message could travel one hundred miles in eight minutes. Assuming that it takes two minutes to receive a message and another two minutes to transmit it, though, this turns into 408 minutes, or almost seven hours.

To see what this really means for communication, let us first assume that Arward Lartvon is the same length as the Inca Empire: 2,500 miles. A relay of Inca runners using coca leaves would be able to traverse this length in a little less than 17 days. Spaced out at one mile intervals, a team of bagpipers transmitting a two-minute-long message would need scarcely more than seven days to do the job. Time taken to receive and transmit by far takes the biggest slice of the pie: a message which required no downtime at all would take only a few hours to transmit.

For comparison, keep in mind that a Roman army on full march could travel, at most, 30 miles a day. The same trip would take them more than 83 days to complete. Some Roman couriers were able to travel 60 miles a day, which would still take almost 42 days. Even the famous Pony Express, which used a relay system of ponies to travel up to 75 miles per day without stop, would take a month to travel 2,500 miles (to say nothing of their difficulty in doing the job across mountainous terrain).

True, this would require 5,000 bagpipers, assuming that there were only two bagpipers to a station (one on, one off), but the Inca had a population of twelve million. This is easily enough to justify appointing several thousand bagpipers through any sensitive areas and well-traveled routes.



There is no difference between the two; ARNAV is omnipresent in the world and is contained in the vital force which animates all living things. In this way it *is* all living things. ARNAV is in every arnav, every breath. It *is* every arnav.

Wind instruments are holy for this reason, since they are logically perceived as making music via the direction of ARNAV through their structures. Engaging in exhausting activity until one can hardly breathe in a devotion unto ARNAV, a temporary expulsion of the god for a brief moment. Through this expulsion one can be cleansed in plain words, but is nevertheless recognized as being in effect: it is quite impossible for a woman to have children if she is unable to touch her husband (and she is liable to be frustrated in other ways as well). So long as any touching of the king's person is done out of sight, where its occurrence can be denied, children are explained as being the result of divine interaction. It is not that ARNAV sires them, making the children half-god, but that a kind of spontaneous generation occurs.

This emphasis on appearances rather than substance crops up in other social concerns as well. Virginity is highly prized, for example, and the presentation of the bloody sheets is an old tradition. It is customary, however, for the husband to cut himself and wipe some of his blood on the sheet if it isn't bloodied naturally. The woman will be inspected for any self-inflicted cuts, but her new spouse is very pointedly spared from any of this examination. So long as nothing is public and everything can be denied, spouses are generally permissive to one degree or another about infidelity. There are more than a few cases of "divine intervention" besides the queen's, and if a woman's child more resembles less her husband than the man who passed through town some months ago, well, who is to say what ARNAV cannot do?

God is breath, and being run ragged until deep breathing sets in is both a devotion and a means of



exorcism. The soul is contained in one's possessions. They are gotten rid of after a person's death so that ze will not come back to haunt the living, and this process is helped along by the fact that so few possessions are had.

### **The Backbone of Civilization**

Arward Lartvon is a very large country, but it has managed to remain tightly knit despite this for three main reasons: dataroa (bagpipes), wajua (way-stations), and Duan Arralodak (the Grand Highway). A complicated code of pipe notes has been in use for centuries, and bagpipers are placed closely enough together that they can hear the notes coming from other nearby bagpipes. These notes include not only the message but also periodic intermissions which denote the message's origin and its destination and intended recipient. Through the dataroa, a message can travel one hundred miles in a matter of minutes.

On a “strong march” through the mountainous terrain of Arward Lartvon, an army, merchant company, or other group will generally make a distance of twenty to thirty miles in a day. When such speed is necessary, travelers will make use of a plant called “yellow hemp.” The plant can be chewed as is, or its extract can be used to make a tea. Overuse of yellow hemp can cause skin reactions, trembling, and nervous reactions (and death too, sometimes...), but yellow hemp tea is widespread anyway.

Wherever one is in the country or its protectorates there is a waju within fifteen miles. These are largish structures guarded by actively-serving soldiers and filled with enough supplies to last a few hundred people for a week.

The country puts much emphasis on storage, and there are larger structures for the purpose of storing yet more food. Almost any food which the Arward Lartvona make is capable of being preserved for long periods of time. At any given moment the country has enough food stored to last it for five to ten years of famine. This is helped in no small degree by a heavy tax on crops. These larger storehouses, or *dudanaja*, are located inside fortresses called *lelo -ana*, or *dig-ins*. The *lelo- ana* are heavily built *into* the *Wendeko Wando Dolkar*. Oftentimes there are only a few entrances and many cunningly-disguised ventilation shafts to betray the presence of a *lelo-an* large enough to hold five hundred soldiers and several years’ worth of food.

Every town, city, waju, and *dudanaj* is connected by *Duan Arralodak*, the Grand Highway. It is a vast system of roads which is constantly being repaired and expanded. A soldier in active service spends just as much time performing upkeep on *Duan Arralodak* as ze does in more obviously military affairs such as training, guard duty, or raiding.

### Freeze-drying

Potatoes are most famous for it, but both meat and vegetables can be freeze-dried using simple methods.

Food is set on the ground at high altitudes where nighttime temperatures drop below freezing. A cloth is then laid over the food. In the morning, it is exposed to the sun.

Over a period of several days, workers use the cloth to wring out moisture from the food (replacing the cloth in the process) and leave it to sit out another night of freezing.

### Cuisine

Because of its height *Wendeko Wando Dolkar* effectively has a range of climates. All sorts of food can be grown at this altitude and situation or that one. A grain-like plant called *kinwa* or *goosefoot* plant is one of the staples of the *Arward Lartvoni* diet, second only to the potato. Unlike many other cereals it is an excellent and balanced source of amino acids and proteins. On long trips *Arward Lartvona* eat “the mother of all grains” together with animal fat in order to have a complete diet which supplies them with all their nutritive needs. Potatoes, of course, are *the* main food of *Arward Lartvon*. Every meal includes it and every farm grows it. There are hundreds of varieties of the crop and even more ways to incorporate it into a meal.

Sauces are made from an edible form of clay called *sulat*, as well as from the entrails of the *cas*, which is elsewhere known as the *cavy* or *sea rat*. The *cas* is a popular source of food since it can subsist on table scraps and breeds extremely quickly. As with other animals, it is often it is cooked by stuffing hot stones into the carcass. The entrails can be eaten on their own or used to make a potato sauce. *Casa* are often made into strips of freeze dried jerky meat called *chazen*. Most *kodra* and even many *erra* will eat little meat but that of the *cas*’ except in times of famine. Hunting rights are extremely controlled.

Bush meat must be exchanged for other forms of food that so that it can be preserved and put into the dudanaja, where it will eventually find its way onto the tables of darda after it grows so old that it cannot be kept from spoiling for much longer. Even farm-raised animals are often more valuable for the crops which they can net in exchange than for the meat which they could provide immediately.

Arward Lartvon has access has access to large bodies of water, so another common part of the diet is seaweed. It can be eaten either fresh or dried, but despite its commonality it is not stored in the dudanaja in great amounts. It can also serve as a desert by being boiled in sugar, which is imported from foreign lands.

Water also brings in much meat. Communities living near such places are the exception to the rule on what kinds of meat one might eat. Limpets, skates, rays, sharks, mullets, seabirds, mussels, sea lions, dolphins, mussels, and abalones are all harvested with regularity.

Frogs, caterpillars, beetles, and ants can also find their way onto the dinner table. Mayfly larvae can be eaten raw or toasted and ground in order to make easily-stored loaves. On those days that the mayflies enter their adult stage they will be lured through special perfumes and caught and eaten en masse.

Chili peppers are also common. They are eaten on their own or ground into a powder or sauce. Occasionally chili peppers are even made into a sort of jelly or used in drinks and many people stuff the peppers with other foods. Spicy-if-not-as-much chili pepper leaves are eaten even more often. As they're more valuable, it's often a better choice to sell the actual peppers when you're a lowly kodr farmer.

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### **Social and Military Organization**

Society is heavily centered on the group, not the individual. Even in the noble families the whole is greater than the sum of its separate parts. Without this mentality, in fact, it might have been harder to convince the other altlaorea to agree to the current system of success. As the predominant social unit among the altlaorea is the arovkat, or noble family, in other classes and situations it is replaced by the coven, the doldu, or the arwat.

A coven is a group of kodra, and comes from the word which is used to refer to a village's population, colenoswo. The men and women of a coven keep most of their property in common. Distribution of the coven's production is determined by a council formed of councilors called jasharra and local darda. The position is jasharr is granted to any member of the coven over the age of fifty. Roughly meaning "old one," it appears to have a link to the word "arrar." Perhaps it hints at a connection between kingship and old age in earlier times. Cowena are usually organized along lines of villages or, in larger populations, neighborhoods.

Only a few items are allowed for private possession. These are referred to collectively as ilrodatea. They are almost never worth very much from an objective standpoint and are instead valuable only to the possessor. Most ilrodatea are small carvings or other minor works of craftsmanship, usually given as gifts to a loved one. Whatever value is had by a piece of the ilrodatea is usually due to its craftsmanship. Few problems come from someone having an extremely valuable piece in their ilrodatea, though, since it's rare for someone to just sell the small sculpture which one's spouse spent

weeks or even months working on. It doesn't matter much even when that happens, anyway, because most cowena don't let you keep whatever you got for selling part of your ilrodatea. At that point, after all, you have money, not private possessions.

Doldua are much the same, but serve the erra rather than the kodra. Like the cowena, they possess a certain amount of collectivism. Here, though, private property (even private property of great value) is more tolerated. An err must hand over four-fifths of zir income over to the jasharra of the doldu. The jasharra use this to provide basic necessities for the doldu's members, buy and maintain equipment necessary for the doldu's members to do their jobs, and even set up a reserve of funds in case of hardship. The dudanaja are in place for widespread shortages, true, and while one who is suffering from a smaller-scale deprivation might be given supplies, this will only occur after the cowen or doldu has exhausted its own reserves. Moreover, relief will be given only if those reserves are judged to have been sufficient proof that the continued shortages are not the result of poor forethought and planning.

While the doldu will be based on location in places with a smaller population of erra, doldua in larger towns and cities will also be defined according to the exact trade of their members.

An arwat is a group of twenty-three soldiers. While it can be broken up further into jejana or shawara, the arwat is considered to be the basic building block of the army. It is where most social connections and emotional ties are formed (or have been formed already, since much effort is made to raise arwata from people who are already familiar with each other).

Most soldiers are those called voldadea, and within this station are many different ranks and degrees of honor. An individual voldade can be more highly-lauded than the high general of the armies because

success and honors do not necessarily translate into promotion through the ranks. Success at one level, after all, does not necessarily mean an ability to succeed at the next. This is especially true in the lower ranks, where a man might be able to conduct himself well enough or even command a few others, but could fall apart and fail if needed to direct hundreds.

Four voldadea are led by a larentjaol, and this forms the five-soldier shawar. Two shawara are led by an ajlo-lodar, forming the eleven-soldier jejana. Two jejana come together to form a full arwat. With its commander, the ovoa-lodar, the arwat is twenty-three bodies strong. The ovoa-lodar takes orders from the next link in the chain of command (the kalotaon), and when the arwat must split up the three lodara will attach themselves to jejana or shawara as necessary.

### **Love and Marriage**

Marriages are arranged at birth and made official and consummated at the age of fifteen. Marriages are usually arranged between children born in the same year, but if there's a difference then this occurs when the eldest becomes fifteen. As with other cultures with arranged marriages, romantic love is not considered to be what leads to marriage. But it is not considered to be a product of marriage, either. Nor is sexual desire, for that matter.

The cause for this interesting circumstance is the collective rearing of children in the cowena and doldua. This system includes the habit of having the children sleep in the same building, called a shasoar, and other activities which intentionally or unintentionally form and tighten early bonds between children. Either it arose because most people will have a child or two before they set out for military service (which one can hardly bring a child along on) or the timing of military service was seen as less than terrible because of it. Regardless, children in these classes (and most of the dard class, too, since it draws its members from the other

classes) are raised together from a young age. Orphans are virtually unknown except as a technicality, as someone whose birth parents happen to be dead.

Unfortunately, they fall prey to the Westermarck effect. Without every consciously realizing what's happening, the children slip their peers into the group tagged "don't get sexually attracted to these people." While the altaorea marry outside of the close-knit groups that they're raised in (which is to say that they marry outside of their families) and manage to dodge Westermarck's bullets that way, they are subject to the same arranged marriages as everyone else is.

Love is associated with short-lived flings instead. Travelers through the area (most often soldiers) and other strangers are *very* popular. Probably this is the cause behind the high tolerance which the Arward Lartvona hold for infidelity so long as appearances are maintained. In higher-population areas where one could conceivably meet someone who was reared with a different group of children, most married people have a specific waotal, or extramarital lover. In the altaorea and darena this is often the sibling of one's spouse (while sexual desire isn't so hampered among the nobility, the tradition of having a waotal is still present). People in smaller towns, unfortunately, just have to make do with attracting the attentions of travelers.

There are a few other traits common among classes other than the altaorea and darena. Most of these lower-class lower-classes citizens have more difficulty forming deep friendships or developing strong romantic relationships. Arward Lartvona easily display commitment with those around them (and indeed have very active social lives and a large number of casual friendships) and display passions with their waotala, but intimacy is far harder to develop.

## Taxation

The jasharra of a coven are in charge of collecting taxes. They pass them sideways to the local darda, who are themselves often jasharra or at least had been born into the coven. The darda then pass the taxes upwards to the next-highest administrator until it reaches the appropriate point.

Erra are taxed in a different manner. They must instead provide a certain value of goods to the government upon request. For example, a blacksmith might be called upon to make a number of swords. After handing over these goods, the erra will be given an amount of gold coins (or jarga) with the current year and the sign of the governor or another administrator. Should the err meet zir quota but then be called upon for further services, then ze can prove that nothing more is owed, according to the number of jarga in zir possession. An err who has given sufficient service to the government already cannot be further called upon without being given compensation. At the end of the year, an err can return each jarg in zir possession for a token payment of food or other goods, which is usually enough of an inventive that nobody needs to get imprisoned for hoarding jarga. As an extra bonus, whatever is gotten in this way need not be tithed to the doldu.

Altaorea are the ones who receive the axes. They are required to put half of everything which they receive into the dudanaja, which goes to feed the armies and many darda in times of plenty and absolutely everybody at all other times. Other darda, employed directly by the altaorea, must be paid by their masters and not out of the dudanaja. The remainder is distributed between the members of the noble family, including the king if they claim him as one of their own.

Darda and darena do not pay taxes, and they are fed, clothed, and housed at the expense of the government (or their masters), but they receive only minimal wages as a result. Those who are

actively serving in the army, and not just in standing in reserve, do not pay taxes either.

### **Funerary Practices**

The soul, or adow, isn't seen as something which you house in yourself. It isn't even something which you have with you when you're first born. Instead, the adow begins to develop as you form ties to physical things, particularly things which you yourself own.

Because of this, one of the most important things to do after a death occurs, even before the cremation of the body, is to take the possessions of the deceased and throw them away in the hope that the spirit will follow them. Sometimes, however, the spirit develops an attachment to other objects, or even people, which can cause long-term hauntings if not dealt with. If the children of the deceased are young, then their names are commonly changed, and on at least one occasion an entire house was burnt down in order to send away the spirit which was haunting it.

It is not clear whether this belief has anything to do with the collectivism of the Arward Lartvona. It is plausible that it developed as a way of discouraging attachment to material possessions (and possible, though less so, that their collectivism arose in response to their belief about hauntings). There may not be any connection at all; any perceived links may just be modern historians drawing lines between similar but ultimately unrelated dots.

In addition to their duties to dispose of the arrar's corpse, the darena are in charge of casting away his possessions.

Souls are not quite evil, or even actively malevolent. A decent comparison might be to raccoons: they aren't bothersome when they're in the woods, somewhere else, but people are not known for wanting raccoons in the house. Not for long, anyway.

## Balas

**Setting assumption:** Flat world

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The Balasans don't have to live on a flat world. They can hang off the edge of a canyon wall too, whether it is fantastically immense or more realistic in size. Either way the placement would help in defending against attacks. They could also exist in other kinds of worlds, such as on the trunk of a gigantic world tree.

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Imagine a world shaped like a square. It is tens of thousands of miles long and just as wide, and more than a hundred miles thick. If there is anything to be found Below, on the opposite side of the world, then nobody Above knows what it is. Even when you cross over the edge, gravity still pulls at you in a “down” direction that is relative to Above rather than to your present position, on one of the four smaller sides that comprise “the thickness of the world.”

Nobody has yet managed to design a ship that can in some way swing over the edge a second time once it reaches Below. Some have tried to climb down in those dry places that go over the edge, but they too inevitably lose their handling at some point and fall forever. It is a long way for any expedition to climb, after all. Over the years, fewer and fewer people have been interested in the idea of falling forever if they fail, and each new failure forces everyone else to reevaluate just how certain they are that there is anything worth finding on the other side anyway.

This is precisely why the people of Balas chose to live along the thickness of the world. In their stories, they say that their ancestors built directly

into the face of the walls, and that the tunnels were only added later. They needed a place where they could hide from those who wanted to kill them (and who still do, if for no other reason than that the stories of these people have probably turned their ancestors' enemies into demons by this point).

Balas is made of hundreds of buildings that hang off of the thickness of the world, as well as a network of tunnels which serve primarily as storage space and as routes to Above. There are only a few of these routes. Each of them is not only well-hidden but easily-destroyed just in case it should be compromised (as has happened three times so far in the city's history). Nobody in Balas seriously gives credence to the idea that the tunnels came before the buildings.

The city's structures are built from stone, concrete, and even metal. All of them were built to last. There is little maintenance that needs to be done to them. Some time ago, experiments were carried out in growing trees in the thickness of the world and shaping them as they grew, in order to create structures such as bridges. While four bridges so far have been created in this manner so far, it is only recently that the first granary—with a hollow ten feet tall and wide, and eight feet long—has been considered finished and ready for use. The buildings are connected by rope, ladders, bridges, and stairways carved into the thickness of the world. Even now some construction is underway, slowly expanding the city of Balas as its population increases.

### Cuisine

The people of Balas are ever mindful of space requirements. Accordingly, most of the city's food comes from fish and other seafood, which are caught in the onrushing flood of falling ocean that borders the city on one side. “Oyster racks” are set up for the farming of filter-feeding animals such as

### Manufacturing concrete

The earliest known use of concrete dates back to 6500 BC in the Levant, and was used by the Assyrians, Greeks, Nabataeans, Romans, and others. The exact methods and ingredients for creating concrete have not remained constant over the years, however. The Romans made their concrete out of three parts pozzolanic ash to one-part quicklime (made from heated limestone), and fresh water. They called it *opus caementicium*. Surprisingly, the Roman method not only produces superior concrete compared to modern methods but also results in lower carbon emissions at the same time.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, however, the techniques for producing this kind of concrete were lost, not to be rediscovered again for almost a thousand years.

Additives were extremely helpful (and still are, even if the additives are usually different). Volcanic ash (such as the Romans used) would allow it to set underwater. Horse hair and certain clays both made it less likely to crack while setting. Blood (usually from pigs) made it more resistant to frost. While Roman concrete has lasted for thousands of years, recent studies suggest that adding silica fume could produce a concrete capable of maintaining its integrity for even longer.

oysters and clams. Vine-growing plants cover the face of each building. Hives are built into the walls so that honey may be collected from them.

Chickens are fed mostly on product deemed unpalatable by the townsfolk. They are raised more for their eggs than their meat. Both food items, however, are considered a luxury even with the efficiency that goes into raising them. Pigeons and other flight-capable birds are raised for a more stable source of meat. They roost in the city, where they are taken care of and where they know that their nests are safe, but they fly elsewhere to get their food. Larger animals are generally unable to manage in the city, but goats have been able to find a place and can be found anywhere that people can reach (and a few places besides). They are raised mostly for their milk, but unneeded males are slain for their meat as soon as they are weaned.

Ayukatatis is a soft, sundried cheese. Peppered, it is called shinyas. Olwenu is a cheese which has been brined, cut into large cubes, and then left to sit in goatskin until it is eaten. Kacmarcik is a buttery, soft and acidic cheese which has been allowed to develop mold. Ekalutis is cheese which has been fried in a pan with salt, cucumbers, and lots of peppercorn. Sallennu is a soft, smoked cheese typically served with honey.

As mentioned above, fish is a prominent part of the Balasan diet. Becku is made with salted fish, tomatoes, and grapes. Brookshau, a loanword meaning “fish with everything,” is made with boiled fish, tomatoes, peas, eggs, and wine vinegar. When boiled with milk, it is called tassicker. Vanleyas is fish with tomato sauce and brined white cheese. Tomatoes or bell peppers may be stuffed with egg and fish; this dish is called a viraszabo.

Cleatayas is soaked dried bread or barley husks topped with chopped tomatoes. Despite what connotations exist in many other cultures, however, the rarity of grains means that the food is not associated with poverty. Open-faced sandwiches (or something close enough) are generally made out of hard cheese: starnjerji is topped with fish, tomatoes, and cucumbers.

Besides hard cheese and the occasional slice of bread there are other alternatives for making a meal portable. Musketis is a kind of sausage, a goat’s intestine that has been cleaned and filled with fish, bits of tomato, and beans. Simliondar is a dish made by wrapping grape leaves around cheese and beans.

Chaimyas is a thick stew of goat’s meat, beans, squash, and tomatoes. These and other dishes may



be supplemented by condiments. Jensda is a liver paste that is made from goats and <sup>iii</sup>generally seasoned. Sorion is a thick sauce made from tomato paste, honey, vinegar, water, and peppercorn, and is used for marinating fish. Chekleyas is a fermented mixture of honey and water. It may be used in combination with other dishes or drunk on its own.

Balas has a few dishes which are odder than most. Balada, or “the hollow mask,” is prepared by skinning and opening up a goat’s head, and then adding various vegetables to the brain inside. The head is then boiled for several hours, cooking the meat outside and making the inside into a sort of stew.

Chipayas, which means “glassy fish,” is a method of preparing certain kinds of poisonous fish. These are allowed to sit and ferment in the sand for many months, and then hung for many more. The process leaves the fish putrefied and with a strong ammonia flavor, but rather harmless. Because of the space that it takes up, it is a sign of status to be able to make chipayas.

Every scrap of waste matter is collected for fertilizer. Everybody is taxed, and when the night soil is accepted by the city’s captains it is going to be the preferred form of payment. It does not cover all of the tax owed, but it covers enough to be worth handing over (which is exactly the point).

### **Law and Government**

Administrative positions in the government are all determined by lot. They range from the captains who oversee ten families each (but never their own or their neighbors’, in order to reduce corruption) to the fifteen councilors who administrate over Balas on a citywide level.

A third of each administrative level is replaced every five years. Every time that replacements are due, every eligible individual (i.e. every male over

twenty and every woman over thirty) not already a part of the government puts zir name in for drawing. The drawing is traditionally performed by the blind, and will determine who among the people will join the captains.

Those who are already serving in the government also put their names in, but their pools are smaller. Those who are presently captains and are among the one-third due to lose their position will put in their lots, and some of them will be chosen to replace the stewards who oversee the captains. The rest will be dismissed. So it goes until the prefects each put in their names, and all are dismissed except for those five who become councilors.

The laws of the city are not written down in the form of statutes. They are instead maintained in the social mind, being based on precedent. When an individual claims offense by another, the highest authority necessary will examine the matter. If they are overseen by the same captain then it is the captain who will preside over them, and if they are very disconnected then it might reach as high as the prefects. The one who presides over the case will hear each side and take testimony from any witnesses (precedent states that two witnesses, not counting the accuser or defendant, are necessary for any claim to be accepted as fact, no matter whether it be an action or a detail about someone’s appearance). The presiding authority then reads records of cases which are of a similar nature to this one and determines which party is guilty and what the consequence should be. If the defendant is found innocent, then the precedent is for the accuser to be declared guilty of the crime of abusing the resources of the people.

### **The Calendar-gods**

There are gods for every measure of time, for every year and month and every week in the month and every day in the year. A god *of* years, too, and a god of centuries, and a god for each century in a millennium from the first to the tenth, and for each

millennium in a million-year eon. There are even gods for the smaller measures of time.

The Balasans have measures of seconds or snaps (their basic unit of time is most often measured by a steady snapping of the fingers), and every hundred seconds makes a minute. Fifty-five minutes makes an hour, and fifteen hours makes a day. Five days make a week, ten weeks make a month, and five months make a year. There are also gods for half-measures, those periods of time which must be added in order to round out units of time where necessary—the half-measure hour is thirty-nine minutes long, the half-measure week is four days long, and there are two half-measure months of nine weeks each in a year, plus an “outside week” of normal length in order to bring the year to a total of three hundred and sixty-five days. The problem, which the half-measures are intended to rectify, is that the Balasans insist that “full” measures of time be divisible by five.

There is a star in the sky for each of these gods, and any citizen of Balas can point out the stars of the gods who preside over zem, as determined by the exact time of zir birth. There are many books in the city, and many of those books concern themselves with the qualities of the various gods. The god who dwells in the twenty-fifth second of the minute is slow to anger but fearsome when finally driven to it. The god of the fourth month of the year is cold and cares nothing for the plights of all but a few people who have caught its attention.

Each god influences the time in which it exists. The god of this eon, the Tenu, is destructive and hates the Balasan people. For this reason, the whole world and its people turned against them and they must hide on the thickness of the world in order to avoid destruction. In many (*many*) thousands of years, this eon will pass and the time of the city of Balas will come again. And perhaps it will. Already a great many generations have passed into legend, and the ancestors of the Balasans have become legend. There are few among the people who live

Above that would see the connection between the modern Balasans and their ancestors, and in time this disconnect will grow all stronger. Or perhaps the people of Balas will find their way Below and set stakes there.

At the moment, however, the Balasans must live along the thickness of the world. They do this to avoid not only the notice of their physical enemies but also the notice of the Tenu itself. Every five years, the Balasans make a sacrifice to ward off the hatred of the Tenu and to please the god which will someday replace it (for it is a harsh god, and though it loves Balas it will nevertheless demand much from the city). Three of the councilors who are due to be replaced will draw lots, and the one who draws the white stone will be set afire and thrown out of the city. By this act, the councilor takes all of the sins of the community with zem into the void.

The most influential of the gods are the five gods of the week: The Sidda, the Batis, the Simsa, the Baraji, and the Virayas. According to the decree of the Tenu, the motions of the moment are governed most strongly by the reigning week-day, more than the reigning second or year. Were it not so, and the Tenu had (for example) decided for the reigning eon to hold the greatest power, then the fortunes of every week-day would be like unto the next, just as many seconds and years are, and the power of the Tenu would have destroyed the Balasans utterly.

The Sidda, whose day and color are blue, reigns over knowledge. It is always laughing at something, usually innocent mistakes. In so doing it hopes to remind people that those mistakes don't matter as much as they think. It is always looking for an opportunity to help, and scholarly books are always published on its day.

The Batis, whose day and color are tan, reigns over warfare. It can raise the dead if it is sufficiently impressed by their deeds in life and the reason for



their desire to return from the underworld (apparently, it is not impressed very often). The poor venerate the Batis, knowing that there are more kinds of life than one and that poverty can be a death in a way all its own.

The Simsa, whose day and color are purple, reigns over memory. It was responsible for killing a great demon in an earlier eon (some say that this demon *was* the earlier eon, and that the Tenuu gave the Simsa power over the third week-day in thanks for this deed). It poses riddles to anyone who attracts its notice; there is no gift for succeeding, but there are terrible penalties for failure.

The Baraji, whose day and color are gold, reigns over the hearth. It lays both blessings and curses on the home. All of its acts must be balanced against each other, meaning that it must sometimes lay curses down upon upright homes which can bear them better than a more-troubled household could bear going without the Baraji's blessing. And some must suffer without the relief of its blessings, for there are none who could take the balancing curses which would have to be dispensed as well. As this is so, the Balasans can be content in whatever misfortunes they bear, for they are thus assured that it is all for a greater good (it is said by some that

even the misfortunes of the whole city exist for this reason, and that their exile and the reign of the Tenuu is so only in order to bring about some much greater blessing or avert some far worse fate for another country).

The Virayas, whose day and color are black, reigns over marriage. Just as importantly it is a patron for physicians, whose science of medicine was first created by the god. The Batis may bring back the dead, but it is the Virayas to whom people pray in order to avoid death in the first place. It is also responsible for storms.

Owing to the need for some innovative architecture and the religious importance that time holds for them, the people of Balas have a highly-developed science of mathematics. It may very well be the best in the world. Pure mathematicians, despite the term, also dabble in philosophy—like the Pythagoreans, the Balasans cannot quite separate numbers and philosophy from each other. They are only slightly less-valued than the astronomers, who catalog and measure the movements of the stars, planets, and other celestial bodies, and who study generations of accumulated knowledge about astronomical phenomena. They use this to infer more information about the gods, both individually

and collectively, and use *that* to develop hypotheses about the future. The veracity of these hypotheses is considered to be testable, most often but not solely through astronomical events. Perhaps uniquely, then, the Balasans have turned their theology into a science whose ideas can be tested and proven, and they do not rely solely on the interpretations of preexisting scripture, the words of priests, and revelation from supernatural beings.

### **Art**

There are two main instruments which have long enjoyed popularity with the Balasans: the drum and the triple harp, a three-string version of the instrument which we all know and (may or may not) love. The drum is a symbol of life, and its beats mimic the beating of a heart.

Their currency might be said to comprise an art form too, or at least a mode of fashion. Rings and bracelets of particular sizes and substances are called *derru*, and are worth exact sums. Depending on how intricate the artwork is (or whether there is any at all), the value might be modified further. By being worn they are closer at hand and easier to protect than currency held in a bag whose bottom might be split open. Wearing these rings and bracelets also lets the bearer display *zir* wealth. The movements of the rich will actually be hindered by the weight of so many tokens. Poorer people who want to appear as if they have more money will mimic the way in which the rich walk while they are so encumbered.

## The Dry-farmers

**Setting assumption:** Post-apocalyptic New Mexico

**Influences:** Southwestern Amerind tribes (esp. Pueblo tribes)

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The Dry-farmers are most at home in New Mexico but they can be slotted into other deserts without too much trouble. It might require less adaptation to make them suitable for a fantasy setting than for another location on Earth. If this is done, then the nature of their apocalypse could be magical rather than nuclear.

Their apocalypse could be entirely made-up, for that matter. Who says that their myth of a Fall has to be more accurate than any other culture's, or that the Place of No Honor has to have really been a bad place? A few aspects of their culture have to be changed ever-so-slightly to account for this, but there is no shortage of real-world cultures with strict purity laws and no basis in a nuclear past.

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Life on the Dry isn't too bad, all things considered. The Dry-farmers who live there have a higher standard of living than some outliers. More than the Vulture People, certainly.

Life isn't easy, but it is worth living. A Dry-farmer knows where ze stands—a peace journey's distance from a place of the Oldtimers. From a place their people were sworn to protect forever, till they were wise enough to riddle out the old meanings that lay behind the codes, and not by remembering the

stories but by finding the answers in the living world. Beneath the Dry is the birthright of their people, and till they have grown wise enough to inherit it they will protect the world from it.

And isn't that something?

### Who are they?

They call themselves the People. Most folk do. Others, though, they call these folk the Dry-farmers. They found a place to set down roots—the Dry of all places—and they know how to make the land work for them like no-one else can. They know when and where to plant, and how to nurture the ground just so. Which crops to set down before which others, and which to set down after all the rest. It is careful work, precise work, and everyone will starve to death in the winter if it isn't done right, but the Dry-farmers' calculations and hidden knowledge make it so that nobody else can do what they do.

The Dry-farmers don't make war on anyone that doesn't make war on them first, and everyone else is pretty fine with that. One less problem for the other kith-folk to deal with and one less drain on manpower. With their guarded secrets their surplus is enough that they can trade more than anyone could get by running the land on their own. It's a good system that keeps them safe from conquerors, and raids... Well, it doesn't do as well for protecting them against raiders like some of the Clovites are. But that's life, isn't it?

It is partly because of that problem that the Dry-farmers build their homes into cliff-sides and canyon walls. These cluster-blocks often extend outward with walls of layered rocks and concrete rubble but are always, always built far into the rock too. Each cluster-block can have up to a hundred and fifty rooms of various sizes and functions, ranging from sleeping quarters to work areas to

commons-places to storerooms and more. While the markers can often be unnoticeable to outsiders, the cluster-blocks are divided into small collections of rooms for each extended family and the Dry-farmers know those tells that show where the divisions begin and end.

There are some people, a lot of them Clovites or Cessnans, who live in the old cities, but those are dangerous places to be for too long. Sometimes there are sick -spirits lurking about from the Crashing-Down Time. Sometimes the buildings just aren't secure. And there are always other people there already, people whose ancestors had been willing to take the risks and who, having survived in these places for so long, are better-equipped to keep their homes than you are to take them.

No, it's in the cliffs and the canyons where the real safety lies.

### Religion

The most important aspect of the Dry -farmers' culture, they believe, is their religion. It is not merely a collection of superstitions and codes of behavior, oh no. There are few that believe any specific detail to be true, and yet they will all agree that these details are of the greatest importance. Everything is symbolic, everything is allegory. This is not the result of a jaded outlook but a core principle literally as old as the religion itself.

The legends, you see, were deliberately fashioned by the Dry-farmers' ancestors. Their objective was to transmit important truths down through the generations, past the furor of the Crashing-Down Time, until the People had reached the point where they could discover this information independently and by their own power. What a sick-spirit really is does not matter as much as what it does and how it can be fought. By placing these things in a readily-understood context the Dry-farmers can identify and combat them more easily.



Like the followers of many other religions, the Dry-farmers believe that there was a better age that preceded this one. This was interrupted by the Crashing-Down Time, when sick-spirits were unleashed on the world to wield pestilence and “unclean fire” to slay whole swathes of the “flood

of humankind,” a term which refers to the innumerability of all people in those days. The sick-spirits were so unleashed because of the misdeeds of the people, who had “ripened blackly” (or decayed) in that time. Much knowledge was lost in the Crashing-down Time but wise seers had foreseen the day, having been warned by God. It was they who imprisoned the most powerful of the sick-spirits so that they, at least, could not participate in the Crashing-Down Time, and it was they who encoded the wisdom of the path in those legends that are even now passed down from parent to child in Dry-farmer society.

It is for this reason that the Dry-farmers refer to themselves and to all other people as “Aftertimers,” living as they do in the Aftertime of Humankind’s Glory. Despite this outlook, however, they are a fundamentally optimistic people. To their way of thinking, the Crashing-Down Time was for all practical purposes the absolute worst period in the history of the world. It pales in comparison only to devastations visited upon it in times before God created humanity, as when God destroyed a race of dragons by bringing down a flaming star upon their lands. If this is true, however, and God spared some of humanity where God did not spare the dragons which preceded them, then there is hope for humanity and today must be a pretty good day in comparison. Indeed, the Dry-farmers believe that most days are, at least on average, better than the days preceding them.

They are a forward-looking people, the Dry-farmers. Their eyes are firmly trained on the future. One day, they believe, the world will enter a new golden age, one that will be brighter than the first. It is the duty of the Dry-farmers to make this possible by preventing “backsliding” events, which could undo some or all of the progress made since the Crashing-Down Time, and by accelerating the rate of improvement wherever possible.

There are two chief aims in Dry-farmer religion: remembering the past and experiencing

communion with God. The first is achieved through studying texts and committing to memory long passages of verse. Everyone is required to learn how to read but they are permitted to write things down (especially in manuscript form) only in certain situations. The benefits of a strong, oral communication-based memory are just too strong for the Dry-farmers to stomach losing it. In fact, inheritance rights are determined according to which of a person’s children can recite more of certain records from memory. Whoever is able to achieve this feat receives one-half of the inheritance (two-thirds if there is only one other child) and the first choice of what to take. Oral memory is so vitally important to the Dry-farmers because, among other reasons, it is through storing the secrets only in their heads that they are able to keep other people from learning those techniques that allow them to not only survive but thrive on the Dry.

Their second aim requires one to understand the nature of God and, really, the whole world, which is best seen as a complex, interlacing network of thoughts of different intensities. All the world is mind. The physical body is not an illusion but a different intensity and type of thought than, say, light, which in turn is different from what contemporary philosophy and neuroscience recognizes as thought. The system of the world, with organisms eating other organisms and humans using tools to effect changes in the world, is a system of thoughts interacting with other thoughts. Eating is nothing less grand than the incorporation of other thoughts into one’s own thoughts. Sick-spirits are a particular kind of warped thought that can cause various kinds of “mind death.”

Where this really comes into play, though, is in relation to God, who created the world through speech (words, to be specific). What God said did not merely create the world. It *became* the world. In effect, the world and all that we experience (and all that we are) is not just the result but the very essence and being of God’s dialogue with God and

God's word, both God's creation-speech and God's commands, are indistinguishable. God speaks, and the Word is God; this is how the creation-speech is not a monologue but a conversation between different parties, who are collectively God and individually God, united and disparate. By transmitting the record of God's Word, then, the Dry-farmers are both God's heralds, announcing God's future return to the world, and the very instruments of that selfsame advent.

It is the belief of the Dry-farmers that this will culminate not just in the coming of God to the world but in the transmutation of the world *into* God (in some way that transcends the manner in which the world currently is, after a fashion, God already). The Dry -farmers that live today are destined to be the ancestors of the God-generation, which will be God in the flesh and the Word in the flesh, and thus the vehicle through which the whole world will be deified. This is called the time of Glory Sun. It is because the Dry-farmers are intent on bringing this event to pass that their holy men are called priests of Glory Sun.

The Dry-farmers are very big on their rituals, many of which involve purity. Just as many others involve storytelling or another means of remembrance (keep in mind the first aim of their religion), but no matter what the object of the ritual, a major component is their mode of dress: the celebrant (the one performing the ritual) is "painted" with charcoal dust and wears a kind of trunked mask.

### **Purity Laws**

Ritual purity is a major focus for the Dry-farmers. It is nearly an obsession. Fire is a great and important part of it, not as a force of purity in itself but as a tool. The Dry- farmers are very concerned with any people who so much as look as though they pay any kind of special reverence fire, which is considered to be too dangerous to regard except in

a cautious, even paranoid manner. Fire is more a necessary evil than a beneficent spirit.

Water, which is similarly a tool for instilling purity, must first be made holy by heating it until it boils. Frequently these two methods for granting ritual purity are combined. Food must be purified by fire and the mode of doing so is more often than not through boiling, and it is never eaten without at least rubbing it down with holy water.

The hands are also frequently subjected to ritual cleansing via holy water. Before any religious activity is performed or any pure object (such as purified food) is touched, one's own hands must be restored to a state of purity. This and other minor rituals are performed without ceremonial dress.

Even diseases can be made pure. Blood is taken from those who are sick (some are intentionally made sick for the purpose of collecting samples, if deemed necessary) and purified by fire. If cleansed successfully (no ritual performed by human hands is perfect) then the sick-spirits will protect anyone who is given the treated blood. Blood is usually drawn and returned via tools called "snakebite needles." These are most often made by attaching a pig's bladder (for holding the blood) to a quill (through which the blood passes from and to the body).

The practice is not without its problems. Most significantly, the Dry-farmers have no way of preserving purified blood, which means that they must wait until an epidemic begins among their own or another kith-folk before they can begin to purify sick-spirits, and the amount of blood that can be donated sets a cap on how quickly a population can be protected. Nevertheless, having this process is far, far better than having nothing at all, and there are many outsiders who willing to work with the Dry-farmers in order to receive purified sick-spirits for their communities.



### What is a kitty-lizard?

The Dry-farmers are based on a number of solutions which have been proposed to an interesting problem: if nuclear waste remains dangerous for thousands of years, then how do we make sure that our descendants won't be endangered by it, even if our present civilization collapses?

The "Place of No Honor" and the Dry-farmers' "atomic priesthood" are two of the proposals which have been used here. Another interesting idea is to genetically modify "radiation cats," living Geiger counters whose fur changes color in the presence of certain radiation levels. The ability of the cat to change color in response to unseen but very real danger will be immortalized in various forms of art so that this knowledge will survive any kind of collapse. For example, the very real song "10,000-Year Earworm to Discourage Settlement Near Nuclear Waste Repositories (Don't Change Color, Kitty)," a catchy tune by Emperor X that goes like so:

*Don't change color kitty.*

*Keep your color, kitty.*

*Stay that midnight black.*

*The radiation that the change implies can kill and that's a fact.*

*The radiation, whatever is,*

*is something we don't want,*

*'cause it withers our crops and burns our skin*

*and it turns our livestock gaunt.*

(For those who want to know what it would sound like at the Place of No Honor, check out their tracks "Simulated Geological Aeolian Warning System" and "Simulated Litho-Acoustic Repeller/Emitter")

The problem is that this is a pretty slow response system. What if you want to know *now*? Fur can't change color instantly or even quickly, and to breed naked cats whose *skin* changes color you would need to insert new genes. If you are going to do that, though, then why not take something which already *has* those genes and then tweak them a little? Kitty-lizards are genetically-modified chameleons who turn a particular shade in response to radiation. Like cats, they can eat certain pests, and they consume less resources overall. The injunction to kill kitty-lizards who don't change color is an old instruction meant to keep the gene pool pure.

Most animals are impure by default but not *essentially* impure, which is to say that they can be cleansed. Dogs, however, are vermin of the highest order. This only augments the Dry-farmers' antipathy toward the Vulture People, who are perceived to use dogs in a variety of roles in their society (incorrectly, it should be noted, as the Vulture People actually use coyotes and share the Dry-farmers' distaste for dogs). This is only to be expected, though, seeing as how the Vulture People aren't even human. This is reflected in their capricious natures, for they are as likely to trade with you as they are to kill and skin you and use your hide for their masks.

Other animals that are especially disliked are ravens and rats (coyotes, too, but those are seen as just a kind of dog). Against these stand "kitty lizards," which are unique in that they are pure by default—it is very hard to contaminate a kitty, and only the most powerful of sick-spirits dare to try it. This is seen in their special ability to change the color of their skin in the presence of certain kinds of sick-spirit, which is a sign that one must leave the scene immediately. Interestingly, not all lizards are so blessed. The ability is found among almost all Dry-farmer lizards (those found lacking are put to death) and in outsider cats descended from the same. That this should be so is only further evidence that the Dry-farmers are a chosen people

who have been selected to lead the world into the time of Glory Sun. Lizards in general, but more especially kitty-lizards, are lauded in songs, stories, and all kinds of visual artwork, especially painted pottery.

The laws are more questionable to contemporary society where they lead to infanticide. Newborns must be taken in to the priests, who examine and compare them against the “Ideal Image of Humankind.” Deformities or more than minor blemishes mean that the child must be deemed a host for sick-spirits. Left alone, they will gather power and might introduce more sick-spirits into the numbers of the People by reproducing with them. This is clearly seen in kith-folk who do not take such care to avoid contamination, like the Vulture People, and who consequently suffer an even higher rate of birth defects. The Dry-farmers will take spouses from other kith-folks when it is necessary to keep the gene pool fresh, but they refuse to do so with any kith-folks that freely let sick-spirit hosts breed with the rest of the population. The Dry-farmers are also known to refuse to extend their medical aid to these kith-folks if they are being ravaged by plague. It is the better part, after all, to let the servants of the sick-spirits reap the wages of their service, and thin the ranks of those who are no longer truly human.

The purity laws are very influential on what can and cannot be eaten, and how. The thyroid gland, kidneys, liver, and brain are all out, as well as most fat, meat next to the bones, and the marrow. Red meat (at least as they define it) is also off the menu—if cows weren’t already hard enough to keep in the desert, this would only reduce their usefulness. The Dry-farmers focus instead on ostriches (which can eat a variety of foods and easily deal with water restrictions), rabbits, and pigs.

### **Cuisine**

Ostriches are famed for their eggs, leather, and quills, which are important both for writing and

for making snakebite needles. Rabbits are farmed for their meat, which is not considered to be red by the Dry-farmers and for their fur, which can be sheared like a sheep’s. Their urine and manure is also used for fertilizer.

Pigs are the holy grail of these animals, which are sometimes referred to as “our three cousins.” They eat nearly anything and breed quickly, their meat is nutritious (and not considered red), and their bones are adequate for being made into flutes and various tools. More than that, though, their hair is used to fertilize crops (which their droppings can also do), their organs can be made into bags, and their skin can not only be leathered but also turned into a gelatin for improving butter, cleaning drinks, creating another kind of glue, and more. Besides all this, their milk... well, in the face of inherent difficulties in raising cows on the Dry, pigs were turned to instead and selective breeding has resulted in a pig that is just a *little* easier to milk.

Pig’s milk, which has twice as much fat as a cow’s, can be drunk as is but is more often mixed with rennet from the stomach in order to produce cheese (which is usually grated), cream, and yogurt. Besides this, the Dry-farmers will also eat roadrunners, doves, hawks, porcupines, rabbits, rats, and reptiles (especially rattlesnakes), but none of these are farmed.

More important to their diet are the various plants that they raise on their land, including several forms of maize, a great many kinds of bean, summer and winter squash, goosefeet, pigweed, tomatoes, cumin, sunflowers, chile peppers, walnuts, asparagus, rhubarbs, and pinon nuts. Especially hardy plants grown by the Dry-farmers include peas, broccoli, lettuce, radishes, cabbage, kale, rutabagas, celery, mustard spinach, onions, garlic, peanuts, turnips, and watermelons. A little more than half of the Dry-farmers’ diet is made of plant matter.

One particular plant is sacred above all others to the Dry-farmers: “reddening maize.” This variety of maize is typically yellow but will, like Dry-farmer kitties, change color as it grows if the area is home to a certain kind of sick-spirit. The Dry-farmers grow a variety of blue maize as well which they most commonly eat in the form of a thick, hot gruel. Blue maize contains more protein than most varieties and tastes sweeter and nuttier than other maize when used to make tortillas. It is also more resistant to pests and therefore more suitable for long-term storage.

Greenthread, an herb which only women are permitted to harvest, is a yellow-flowered herb that is found in a variety of places. It is used along with honey to make cota tea, which is enjoyed for its own sake and also for its various reputed curative properties. Greenthread is also used to make yellow dye.

The Dry-farmers have built canals and reservoirs for the purpose of better irrigation for their crops. Besides biological fertilizer they also make use of sheets of “forever stuff,” a substance from before the Crashing-Down Time, and bottles and jars. The surplus is placed in storage pits below the ground, where they are kept in jars and covered pits lined with stone.

The most popular dish is the hatch, a catch-all term for a stew made primarily from beans and meat, with whatever other extras happen to be on hand, especially popped corn, pieces of tortilla, and chile peppers. Other common foods include pork rinds with a thin layer of meat (“adriana”), anise-flavored biscuits coated with lard (“Michaela galleta”), chile peppers filled with melted pig’s cheese or stuffed and fried in a batter of ostrich’s egg (“chucho peppers”), and pork sausages seasoned with chile pepper and onion (“milled sausages”). Calabash is made from frying onions, garlic, and any other vegetables that are on hand, and then using them to fill a green summer squash. “Iron tortillas” are

stacked on top of each other and filled with chile sauce, fried eggs, and blue maize.

To any of these they might add various sauces, such as a paste of chiles, onions, and tomatoes. Avocados can be mashed and seasoned with chopped onion, tomatoes, lime, and chiles to make urbina. Alvarez (or “mouse sauce”) is a paste made from almonds, chicken, chiles, spices, and tomatoes. Honey is added to some dishes before eating, especially those that are intended to be kept for a long period of time.

### How to prepare maize

Eaten off the stalk, maize leaves a lot to be desired. Overdependence on unprepared maize will rapidly lead to pellagra, a form of malnutrition caused by a niacin deficiency.

This can be averted by subjecting the maize to a process called nixtamalization, where it is soaked, cooked, and steeped in an alkaline solution, washed, and hulled. The process can take anywhere from a couple of hours to a whole day, depending on technique.

In addition to unbinding the niacin in maize it also improves smell and flavor, reduces the number of mycotoxins present, adjusts the balance of amino acids present, and allows it to be turned into dough.

The necessary alkaline solution was historically made from a combination of limewater and/or ash, which could be collected from certain plants, plain wood ash, or mussel shells. Nixtamalization may have arisen from the practice of dusting maize with ash or lime in order to keep them ward away insects while in storage.

The solution, along with any residue from the maize after hulling and washing, can be discarded or used in the production of a kind of bark paper called amate.

## Dress

Dry-farmer clothing is most commonly made out of wool or plant fibers. They are adorned with diagonal, asymmetrical patterns that are unique to each camp but whose center masses are shared by the whole tribe. Ceremonial cloaks may be made from ostrich feathers and partly dyed with greenthread flowers.

For important rituals the Dry-farmers don trunked masks made out of pigskin leather laid over a wooden frame. Each Dry-farmer possesses zir own mask, which is never used again after its wearer has died. The masks are commonly decorated with glass seed beads and ostrich feathers.

## The Place of No Honor

It is a dread place. It is the primary reason for the People's existence on the Dry instead of in some other, more fertile land. The Place of No Honor is a place where great and terrible sick-spirits were imprisoned in the years leading up to the Crashing-Down Time, and the Dry-farmers stand watch to make sure that none are able to break them out. One day, it is said, they will be able to go down into the Place of No Honor and make use of the powers that are interred there, but this is a long time off indeed.

It is a place covered with a surface of pitch-black stone that makes the area unbearably hot. It is a

place with spiked pillars that rise from the ground like a forest of thorns and rattlesnake fangs breaking through the hide of the world. Granite slabs stand near the edges, displaying barely-understood scripts and screaming faces. The hated dead are cast here at the bases of these slabs and thereafter left to rot in the sun. The worst of them are hung from the slabs, high above where scavengers can reach them, so that their bodies will be suspended forever above the ground.

Only the priests of the Glory Sun come here intentionally, and they do so only after purifying feasts. They come bearing their trunked ritual masks and crowns made out of cactus needles, and bring their color-cats with them as well. Here they maintain the rows of reddening maize that are carefully grown at the edges, where they demonstrate that they have not lost their ability to give a warntelling. The priests also come to initiate new members into their ranks. There is a great black maze that leads to the depths of the Keep sitting beneath the black-stone ground, and next to the walls of this maze they tell the Deep stories to the new priests. Those that have learned the Deep know that it was not just the sins of humankind that brought down the horrors of the sick-spirits, but their folly. For humankind had sought to command the sick-spirits in war against each other, and in so doing all peoples were brought down low. New priests also learn the languages of the tablets, record their names beside one of the screaming faces of the granite tablets, and view the star charts that are displayed upon the same.

## Elves

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Transform them from raiders to an empire in order to make them a greater threat. Let them loose on Earth, secretly hunting in alleys or walking between shadows. Turn them into aliens, whether they look even vaguely humanoid or not. Make them into a sort of plague, a poisoning of the land— elf-shot was once thought to have poisonous properties too, and it is not a very far jump to think that perhaps they befoul whatever they touch. Where the elves have gone, cows are weak and give spoiled milk, the crops are withered and discolored, and nightmares greet the people in their sleep. Only fire can purify what has been corrupted.

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The elves say that they were thrown out of the heavens for being too noisy. One can only hope that what they call the Good World Above is actually some kind of Hell, or that they misunderstood the reason for their banishment. There can be no justification for having any hope at all in a world where the worst sin that the elves committed in the eyes of the divine was that of being too noisy. Some people say that the elves are incapable of understanding the horror of what they do, but you need only look into an elf's eyes to see that this is naïve thinking at best, and willful self-deception at worst.

### Physiology

Elves aren't totally alive. They aren't undead either, so far as anyone can tell, but it still might be most fitting to use the words of Terry Pratchett and call them "differently alive." While they require air in order to speak, of course, elves have no other

reason to breathe; they can neither suffocate nor be poisoned by toxic gasses. Elves need to drink between one-half and two gallons of liquid a day but no liquid in particular is needed. They will settle for water if they have to but prefer the tastes of alcohol and blood (many elf bands will even mix the two together). Elves that do not meet this requirement will slow down until they eventually stop moving altogether a week later, and elves which drink more are stronger and quicker to react. Food is not required, though they will readily consume living beings, and elves have teeth that are perfect for shredding flesh and cracking bones. It is not uncommon for someone to experience that up close and personally when an elf decides not to bother with killing zir victim first.

### Social Structure

Elves are almost always born in identical pairs. Twin-less babies are considered dead and given funerary rights. This is reflected in the band's hierarchy. Elfish bands are ruled by twin brother captains who share equally in all things. This includes not only authority and mates but also death. Normally the twin of a slain elf continues to live but a captain without a brother is like a twin-less newborn, considered no longer alive.

And soon enough he really won't be, because elfish funerary rites are ghoulish affairs where the body is ripped open with knives, claws, and even teeth by as many as a dozen participants before it is treated as any other piece of meat and divided up for consumption. In the case of the captains this last step is put off long enough for the eldest pair of twins to read the entrails in order to determine who should lead the band next.

Others whose twins have died are in slightly better circumstances, but not by much. The so-called Wretched are at the bottom of the pecking order, last in everything, and despised by all. This is not to

mention that the loss of zir companion causes them to suffer what may be the sole pain that an elf is capable of experiencing, like a gangrene of the spirit. Not that this helps to improve their sense of empathy at all; Wretched are even nastier and more violent than normal elves.

The captains have the sole right to mate and reproduce in the band. Males who infringe on this right are killed. One might suppose that they would find an outlet in other species for any frustrations they might have, but there is some undefined quality in non-elves that makes them filthy and undesirable in the eyes of even the most desperate elf.

Children are left to fend for themselves as soon as they can walk on their own. This causes less deaths than in other intelligent species given that they don't need to find food. So far as anyone can tell, the elves do not suffer from the incestuous relationships that their breeding practices cause.

### **The Forbid Dance**

They say that they were thrown out of the heavens for being too noisy. Everyone knows that tale if they've heard of elves at all. Even you have heard it now. It is embedded in the mind as the image of burning buildings and torn corpses cut by wicked bone-knives and stuck full of elf-shot. But it is hard to figure out where they got the idea that they were too noisy, if you somehow spy them while they're on the prowl.

Elf bands move in double file as quietly as cats—with captains in the front—and whether they're at camp or on the move they barely speak above the level of a whisper. It is when they've found something to kill that the story of their being here makes sense. As quickly as they turn to dust in death, the silence becomes sheer noise. The air is filled with the sound of shrieks, which resemble more than anything else the sound of pigs squealing in a slaughterhouse. It is the sound of death. There

are only a few who survive an elf raid in life that manage to escape it in their dreams at night too.

The elves call their raids the Forbid Dance. It is savage ritual and hedonistic indulgence wrapped together. The scene is full of the screams of killer and victim alike, combining into a twisted melody where, if you listen from your hiding place, it seems almost like each terrible note fits perfectly into a greater structure. It is not a far leap to imagine that through the killing and the torture and their own exultant cries they are creating for themselves some horrifying symphony.

The maenads of Greek myth could do no better than the elves, who rarely leave survivors and never leave anyone—living or dead—physically intact. You can always tell the survivor of an elf raid by appearance. The eyes have lost their light, the skin is scarred. There are missing fingers, maybe an ear or even an eye gone as well. The elves always have their fun. Even the villages themselves can be said to be killed in the Forbid Dance. Few people are interested in setting foot in a place of mutilated corpses, burned-out buildings, and booby traps set down for the express purpose of hurting anyone who decides to enter. When the elves leave a town, they do not intend for anyone to be want to enter it again.

Elves make a number of gruesome accessories from their victims, like necklaces of fingers, rudimentary armor made from tied-together bones and leathery skin, and knives carved from bone. They are infamous for these knives, as well as for their three-foot-long blowguns, whose "elf-shot" can reach distances of thirty feet and are capable of killing by piercing the throat or heart as easily as by poison. When thrown with enough force a bola can crush bones, and thorns and pieces of sharpened bone are tied into the rope so that the weapon not only ensnares and breaks but punctures and slices as well. Another weapon common to the elves is the rope javelin, a piece of sharpened, barbed bone or stone attached to a long rope. The head of the



weapon is thrown (sometimes propelled from an atlatl) and then the rope is pulled back, dragging the elf's target with it.

Those who wield one of these weapons will see and hear the spirits of the people who had been killed by the elf with that weapon. These spirits will torment the wielder until the weapon has a new owner. They bear no ill will toward the weapon's wielder per se, but whether these are truly the souls of the elf's victims or just fragments or shades that have been left behind, they do not possess enough presence of mind to understand that the person they are tormenting is not an elf. The elves themselves are able to perceive the spirits but it seems impossible for the spirits to wear their killers down. In fact, they actually seem to get some enjoyment out of talking to and taunting the spirits, which only adds to the fury of the dead.

The Forbid Dance must have something to do with it, many theorize. It is, of course, possible that this curse is somehow intrinsic to the elves' very being but the Forbid Dance almost seems to be a *dedication* of some sort. There are strange markings carved into the bones. When the Forbid Dance is over the air is silent save for the whimpers of the

still-dying and the slish-lash of working blades—and the elfish whispers of names that inspire dread without any knowledge of what they mean.

But there are hints here and there, clues carefully gathered over the generations from centuries of survivor accounts. Elevated altars built with the bones of birds and men to the chant of "loth, loth." The words "kootoonloo rel loonath nagl," frenziedly whispered over and over with each word emphasized in turn, while the elves split their victims' bodies in what almost seems to be an attempt to give them the appearance of having eight limbs. "Azat nor azat," as skulls are broken open and the elves turn their attentions even to their own kind, and countless other events that appear time and time again.

Nobody can figure out what the Forbid Dance is supposed to be. A magical ritual to harness the energies of pain and death... A sacrifice to the alien things that the elves whisper of or a festival in their honor... An attempt to *summon* those monsters... The possibilities are endless and so, it despairingly seems, are the numbers of the elves, always lurking just beyond the edge of civilization, in the dark and wild places from which they cannot ever be rooted out for long.



## Fduen Maggulu

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Norse mythology, Germanic etymology

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The fduen maggulu are a Predecessor race who, contrary to the usual tropes and what others may think of them, do not consider their Golden Age to be over. They simply have different priorities than the civilizations which are living in their shadow.

Feel free to boost their tech level. Perhaps the lands of the fduen maggulu are covered with shiny mirrors and turning wheels. If they had managed it well enough and still had some left, then there might still be the lingering scent of rock oil—the dwarves are very well-positioned to secure petroleum and other fossil fuels, after all. If so, it is unlikely that they would allow lesser civilizations to access these resources, which would effectively stunt the development of the younger races.

In a pinch, their social structure and psychology can be used as the basis for an alien species in a science fiction setting, again adjusting their tech level as necessary.

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Others call them dwarves, but they call themselves the fduen maggulu (sing: fduen maggul), or “stone people,” as do their cousins the trolls. At different times in their history the term “fezelefafjon” has also been popular. The word means “culture,” and it implies that the stone people are the only ones to

### Cog calculators

The Curta calculator resembles a cross between a high-end camera and a pepper grinder. Slides are moved up and down to select integers and the crank is moved up or down according to whether it is adding or subtracting. The crank is turned and the result is shown on the top of the cog. The top can be twisted so that a single turn of the handle is treated as two, three, or more turns.

Curta calculators require an immense amount of precision in order to manufacture. Dwarves without the necessary facilities could likely make larger ones if they knew how one operated, however.

possess a true culture; every other society is a “non-culture” by extension. Thankfully, most other species don’t speak en dalu and so they fail to catch this meaning or its implication. The trolls do, since their own language comes from the same roots as en dalu, but the two species don’t often come in contact with each other anymore. Besides, as any troll would have to admit, their own people’s glory days are far behind them. The dwarves, it could be argued, have a point there.

### Technology

Together with the trolls, the dwarves are called the alk dratte or “old race,” and they deserve the name. By the time that humans began working copper, the old race was only a short distance away from entering its industrial age. Both civilizations collapsed long ago, and the trolls never recovered, but the stone people have clawed their way back from the brink. If they decided to band together then the stone people would have a fair chance at conquering the world, but they are content to remain in their lands. Not dissimilar to how some historical civilizations have seen it, they *have* conquered the world, so far as they are concerned. Few dwarves go above ground and even they do not consider it to be a proper home for dwarves.

The people of the surface, the odurflachu, can have their lands so long as they respect the territories of the stone people. As the dwarves see it, they are beneficent landlords who do not feel compelled to charge rent.

The dwarves have pursued scientific advancement for long enough that great civilizations of the alk dratte rose and fell before the other species discovered writing. They also had enough time to lose it, and then to regain some of what they had lost, and dwarven reflects this. They have primitive semi-automatic weapons which can hold up to ten rounds at a time, printing presses, steam-powered wagons, sheet glass, pumps which move water and air, and similar devices. They have tapped natural gas in many places. It flows through a system of pipes and locks which lead to lights scattered throughout the local settlement. Where there is no natural gas, machinery is constructed to adapt the systems to coal and steam power.

Even the youngest of dwarf cities are more than five centuries old. The greatest of them are, with few exceptions, mostly connected by way of underground railway. Even today these rails are occasionally used as they were intended but it is more common for them to be walked now. Analytical engines and other mechanical computers (or guchanefu) are used in every aspect of city life, from managing food stores and mining. Dwarf clothing nearly always has a pocket specifically for the storage of a cog calculator (rufhnur) similar to Curt Herzstark's design.

### **Family Matters**

Only one in five dwarves is a female. This has influenced fduen maggul culture like nothing else has managed to do. Stone people are born in triplet sets and most women will give birth four or five times over their lifetimes. Giving up to up to eight sets is not unheard of. And yet most triplet sets will have no females, and it no one in living memory has borne a triplet set with more than one.

### **Death and overworking in Japan**

The dwarf phenomenon of “death by exhaustion” is inspired by Karoshi, which means “death by overwork.” When the “epidemic” of karoshi was at its pinnacle it was not uncommon for employees to work 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, for years on end.

Even today it is not uncommon for employees to only cease working in the early hours of the morning and be expected to get back to the office by 9am. 16-19 hour days are not the norm, but neither are they unheard of.

Most karoshi-related deaths are caused by heart attack or stroke as a result of a combination of stress, lack of sleep, and (often) inability to eat properly.

The number of sets of children that a dwarf woman will give birth to is not determined by personal inclination. With so few females, every stone woman has a responsibility to reproduce. It is a matter of biology. Dwarves reach sexual maturity at the age of thirty, at which point the female has a window of fertility stretching from thirty-five to sixty-five. This might seem large enough, but children are generally spaced eight years apart. Pregnancy itself takes a full year, the mother does not become fertile for another five years (unless her children die), and it is believed necessary for a mother to devote her attention to her current children for a few years more.

Siblings in a triplet set are, consequently, very close to each other. Partly for this reason it is very rare that a dwarf will start something on zir own. Whether it's a smithy, a trade association, or a mercenary band, it is usually a gror-gradur, or brother-band, that founds it. Most male dwarves become dedicated brothers (gror-dudekurdu) who work loyally and fully for their families, fighting even to the dead. Dod ozuraged (meaning “death by exhaustion”) is a common cause of death for dedicated brothers. There is a twenty -year

difference in life expectancy between dedicated brothers and other stone men.

This phenomenon arises because dwarf society enshrines value in the clan to such an extent that the individual is commonly not just ignored but outright objectified. Dedicated brothers are cogs in the machine, and it isn't really a problem if they die sooner than they would under a less grueling regimen. They are productive to the end, after all, whereas a longer life would see them enter a period where they were mostly just a drain on the clan's resources.

Though rare, there is a not-insignificant number of male dwarves who forgo the dedications and focus entirely on their own efforts (either individually or as a triplet set) to rise in dwarf society and prove themselves worthy of having a wife. Others leave the cities to get their wealth through practicing their trade with another species. This is especially true of dwarves who aren't too talented compared to others in their clan. That practice has led humans and others to immensely value dwarf craftsmanship while unaware of the skill of a dwarf who is considered a master by *other* dwarves.

The average dwarf male will never marry a stone woman (a truewife or zollugadd). Not only are there few women to marry, but dwarf society is polygamous. Stone men who acquire the means to marry one zollugadd are likely to acquire at least one more in their lifetimes— as the saying goes, wealth tends to breed wealth. Only having a truewife gives social prestige. However, because of the low number of females and the difficulty in proving oneself worthy of marrying one of them, there are a number of perfectly acceptable alternatives. One may marry another male dwarf (each is called a “cheuduggadd” in this instance) or even a member of another species. A human spouse, for example, is called a zwerugadd. Interspecies marriages wouldn't be permitted except that dwarves aren't cross- fertile most of the time (and such offspring, when they result, are

themselves infertile and reviled). Notably, nattgaddu (trollwives) are not accepted. Despite their differences in appearance and size, both species are fully fertile with each other, as members of the old race.

In the past, were commonly made against rival halls in order to steal women away. Even today the negotiations for marriage are very, very secret and usually made to seal an alliance. It is thus absolutely necessary to have some sort of power or other quality able to motivate one family to ally with another. Given their rarity, female dwarves are held in high esteem, and as consequence of this they are taught many valuable secrets. Often enough a forge or production shop will be overseen by a forfdandur, or matron, a truewife (more rarely, another kind of wife) who handles many of the day-to-day administrative functions of the place.

### **Food and Intoxication**

Dwarves are almost entirely carnivorous. It is perfectly possible for a dwarf to eat nothing but a carnivorous diet from birth to death and be as healthy as anyone else. Protein-rich insects are commonly eaten and bats are an expensive delicacy.

Despite this ability to focus on meat, fungus is a major source of nutrition for dwarves. Several sugar-rich varieties have been created for us in the production of fungus ales. There is not really anything else which grows in the underground domains of the stone people, but imported fruits and vegetables are enjoyed as luxuries.

Dwarves have almost grotesquely-enlarged kidneys and livers in compared to other humanoid species. They are, for this reason and others, extremely resistant to disease. Despite the ritualized corpse-eating practices of the stone people they only rarely suffer from kuru and other diseases associated with cannibalism.

The corpse-eating itself has been around for long enough that it persists simply through force of being a tradition, but historians believe that it may have originated as a way to make use of as many resources as possible. Nutrition is not something to be found in great supply beneath the surface.

Inebriation is a holy and respected state for the *fduen maggulu*. It breaks down the borders between one's mind and the divine, and temporarily alters the personal self. The term *gurufulf*, and its respective connotations of intoxication or substances which cause it, is applied to other kinds of altered mental states as well. Dwarf society strikes a healthy balance by attaching a sense of religious awe to the state; there can be consequences for those who abuse the gifts of the gods.

In addition to making alcohol, the stone people also import psychedelic plants and grow several varieties of mind-altering fungus. Tobacco, strong teas, coffees, and chemical drugs are also in common use. Most cities have one or more *rufu roggud*, or intoxication lounges, where *gurufulfu* substances and other foods can be partaken of. Dwarf society has, however, very little patience for those who are drink too much and too often to do work. Stone people who experience the divine intoxication too often are usually seen as taking advantage of the blessings of the gods, not taking them in proper moderation.

There's work to do, besides.

### Schedules and Calendars

As the stone people live below the ground, they do not depend very much on the seasons or even have any reason to be concerned about the path of the sun. Nor, for that matter, do they have much of a chance to regularly check on its current position. The dwarf year is organized instead into 438 days of twenty hours each, organized into 73 weeks, six days long. The weeks are given very straightforward

### Don't worry about kuru

Nowadays, cannibalism often brings up the matter of kuru, a prion disease discovered in Papua New Guinea. It was spread most virulently through the Fore tribe's practice of ritual cannibalism. In general, the delivery method here seems so reliable that it deserves a mention in any discussion of widespread cannibalism.

While prion diseases are nasty stuff, and while cannibalism, absent of any other factors, is definitely an invitation for such diseases if continued indefinitely, a study by University College of London revealed that this process *doesn't* go on absent of any other factors.

In a nutshell, there is a gene in most humans today which protects against prion diseases. If you started in on cannibalism today, then you might have some other problems (like a difficult conversation with the neighbors) but getting a prion disease would likely not be one of them.

More importantly, where genetic resistance to prion diseases doesn't exist, it soon arises after the need appears. We see this in the case of the Fore tribe, where resistance developed in the space of a couple of generations. Dwarfs, if they were vulnerable to begin with, are probably safe by this point.

As an interesting note, this is why the mad cow epidemic from a few years back turned out to be overblown. The genetic signature protecting against prion diseases is just that widespread, and everyone who contracted the disease turned out to be missing this innate protection.

names such as *forfdu-ukun* (first week) and *druddeanddu-ukun* (thirty-eighth week). The days of the week are named after the Six Virtues.

The reason for this particular calendar arrangement springs from the stone people's sleeping patterns. Dwarves sleep for twenty hours out of every sixty, slipping in and out of sleep like clockwork so long as their natural cycle is undisturbed. While sleeping,

a dwarf's vital functions are extremely slowed and many non-dwarves might mistake zem for being dead. This is made easier, incidentally, by the dwarf's blue-black, bruised-like skin, which bears resemblance to a corpse whose blood has begun pooling within the body.

Stone people can, if they so wish, prevent themselves from falling asleep or else wake up prematurely. They snap back into wakefulness with surprising speed should something in the environment disturb them. A dwarf's eyes will not close during sleep, either, adding sight to the list of senses which it can use to passively monitor the environment. Sleeping schedules are regulated. With the beginning of every day, a third of the population snaps awake while another third slips into unconsciousness.

### **The Six Virtues**

True culture rests upon a foundation of the Six Virtues. Without the Six Virtues, any society is sure to crumble with the passage of time. It is for this reason, the dwarves say, that the trolls fell, other civilizations have progressed so slowly, and the dwarves have managed to recover at all from their own collapse.

Fageleaur is typically translated as "honor," but more broadly translated it means filial piety and devotion to the family. Dedicated brothers demonstrated fageleaur by turning their lives entirely to their families, abandoning any possibility of personal advancement or marriage in order to serve the clan. Until a male dwarf marries he will never gain the prestige and respect owed to a dedicated brother.

Gudgormurfkap is citizenship, justice, altruism, and selfless service. It is an extension of the greatest virtue of all. It is made manifest when a dwarf puts personal concerns aside and works for the benefit of the whole hall. Certainly it is for selfish reasons that a dwarf will pursue a wife, but

stone men who seek one also demonstrate gudgormurfkap. It is impossible for the fduen maggulu to continue as a people if the species is not propagated.

Gufluddfoghud is determination and persistence. A virtuous dwarf never falters and never retreats, but only makes strategic withdrawals and tactical fallbacks in order to return to battle some other time with a greater advantage. The Six Virtues are divided into two greater virtues and three lesser virtues, and this is the most important of the four lesser virtues. From it, the other three spring forth.

Mrunnun is reason and logic, which depend on the virtue of gufluddfoghud. Without it one will eventually abandon mrunnun, as abandoning reason for blind faith or prejudice becomes easier and more attractive. Problems cannot be solved without determination and persistence, but mrunnun is nearly just as necessary.

Zedunfkap is knowledge and understanding. But to truly have knowledge, one must have reason and logic in order to sort out fact from falsehood. It is sedunfkap which has granted dwarf society its great technological achievements, but no proper dwarf forgets that there are merely the tangible products of gufluddfoghud, which allows the constant use of reason and logic, which allows the acquisition of knowledge. And it is the two greatest virtues which allows the dwarves to avoid the fate of their troll cousins.

Aurbodemhud is reverence for spiritual things and wisdom, and respect for others and consideration for their needs. This is the natural result of zedunfkap, for any person who has a true knowledge of the world will develop aurbodemhud as a consequence. It is not merely reverence and respect, but knowing why these things are necessary.

## Etiquette and the Social Sphere

When every square inch of spare has to either be found or excavated, and is naturally enough not in great supply, stress can rise dramatically and politeness is paramount. Dwarves are extremely careful about what they say, and they are just as careful to always give the other person the benefit of the doubt and to confirm what was actually meant with that seemingly-antagonistic statement or action before anything is done about it.

Other minor traditions have arisen from this, such as never opening gifts in front of the giver, in order to avoid appearing more interested in the gift than in the person who gave it. Only after the giver has departed will the gift be opened, and even then only in private, preferably in the dwarf's own resting-chamber.

To avoid an appearance of pride and arrogance it is best to allow a mutual acquaintance to handle introductions between two or more strangers. If no mutual acquaintance can be found, then they will find another person who will take that role on zemsself. The dwarves will tell this person who they are (while speaking in the third person) so that ze can then introduce them properly. Should there be no third person at all, then the dwarves will find something else (a stalactite, a maggot, a cup). They will explain who they are to this object and then remain silent for a moment after this before carrying on in their business. In her commentary on stone people culture, the noted scholar Chauul of Wasser noted simply, "It's kind of surprisingly adorable." "For a bunch of unsettlingly corpse-looking cannibals," she did not add, unless later copiers have redacted it.

Stone people have no concept of personal space. It's common for them to touch or brush against each other in communication, transit, or day-to-day life. In fact, most dwarves grow so used to the constant physical contact which comes just from accidental actions that they can grow unnerved

without it. A dwarf who has to go without physical contact from anybody for more than a couple of waking periods is an unhappy dwarf indeed.

Dwarves don't put much stock in facial expressions except among those that they share a dwelling-chamber with. While ventilation often takes care of the worst of it now, in the older days there was always a constant concern with dust being kicked up from work. Even though their beards provide some help, they eventually resorted to wrapping their heads in cloth for a more perfect system. In some settlements dust is still a problem, and everywhere else it's simply become a matter of tradition. A dwarf with a naked head is like Vladimir Putin marching around the Kremlin without pants. It isn't quite totally indecent (assuming that he still has some sort of underclothing going on) but it's going to raise a few eyebrows anyway. And somebody is probably going to say something. Probably.

## Cities and Society

Each of the species making up the alk dratte, from the dwarves and trolls to other, less numerous (and often extinct) species has their own legends about how that first civilization of theirs arose, and what became of it. The trolls, for example, say that there was a caste system in place among the alk dratte. The dwarves were craftsmen and soldiers in this social order, but grew unsatisfied with their lot and departed to forsaken places because of this.

The dwarves themselves say that they have always lived under the ground, and there is evidence to support this: their sleep cycle, which doesn't take the sun into consideration, is optimized for a sunless environment. As well, their beards (grown by both sexes) appear to function as a filter against dust kicked up in the tunnels.

There is also evidence to conflict with the dominant narrative: dwarves who include above-ground vegetables in their diet are slightly healthier

than others. As well, while they take to the surface like a fish to water (which is to say, without any problems at all), if they stay for too long then they are prone to developing claustrophobia upon returning below-ground.

Dwarf societies go through several stages of development. It all starts with a single clan or klinin of stone people, who find or excavate a space within the earth. Any given clan centers itself on the palaff. The word is usually translated to mean “hall” but is, according to Chaul of Wasser, more accurately translated “manor.”

The hall usually starts out small, with a few golkagguru or dwelling -chambers for each individual family. These chambers are large enough to hold fifteen or twenty people at a time, plus supplies, and storerooms and hzel kagguru (resting-chambers, barely big enough for a dwarf to sleep in and use to store some personal possessions), but to say that this is large is to forget that *there are going to be fifteen or twenty dwarves in there, and quite often*. A dwarf who marries more than once will need to have the resources to expand the family-area, with its attendant dwelling-chambers and storerooms and resting-chambers.

A family is headed by the farun pderk, the father patriarch, who has been married at least once and so gotten the right to be considered the head of his own family. Considerably prestige is gained from this so long as he’s married a truewife. Farun pderku answer to the blessed grandfather (or zulfimned gufdufar), who presides over the whole clan.

There are many palaffu which are home to only a single clan and its forges, storehouses, and other rooms, but areas which are advantageous for some reason (such as natural resources or trade routes being nearby) will be settled by numerous klininu. As their palaffu expand they’ll begin to come closer to each other and the clans will likely choose to merge their halls together as one structure. At this

second stage of city development, planning is haphazard. It all really depends on where and how the halls start to come close to each other.

As time goes on, and clans actually begin to petition to join the growing and united palaff, the council of blessed grandfathers will instill organization into further development and the brief period of chaotic expansion will ease back into orderliness. In time it may come to hold as many as fifty clans, each made up of many families, all with their own family-areas, and additional rooms as determined to be necessary by the presiding council.

## Religion

The fduen maggulu worship two primary groups of divine beings: the hzet larzu, or *white worms*, and the hufkud ftagfaru, or *remembered ancestors*. The remembered ancestors are the closest to the stone people, who are able to rest easy in the knowledge that if they live righteously, adhering to the Six Virtues, then their names will be written down in the Fdoru og Hullige Gakun az Ennfeldu Nazn. Or, the Great Book of Recorded Names, put more concisely as the Gakun az Ennfelpu. Each family has its own book, in which it records the names of dead family members who are judged to have lived a proper life. The “books” are stone tablets

(sometimes incorporated into the walls), so that a name which has been written down cannot be removed without destroying the whole book.

The remembered ancestors guide their descendants both subtly and overtly. Many of them have small prayers written specifically to them. Some families own small books, made of paper or stone, which are filled with the prayers, praises, and songs written specifically for their own remembered ancestors.

As the centuries pass on, the remembered ancestors will grow into the true gods, the corpse-feeder gods, the maggot gods which the stone

people call the hzet larzu. Depending on which dwarf you talk to, either the hzet larzu are literally maggots of some sort or this is merely a metaphor for their developmental state, feeding upon a once-living, slowly-decaying world. In either case it would be agreed upon by both dwarves that the white worms will at some distant date in the future achieve a third stage of divinity. This state will be beyond both that of the remembered ancestors and that of their own, but there is little consensus on anything more. There are a thousand schools of thought on what this will mean for the rest of the world.

Regardless of whether the term is metaphorical or not, however, maggots are highly-respected. Corpses of a sufficient age are eaten with the utmost care in order to avoid eating maggots unawares. Any maggots which are found are not only removed but given a small piece of flesh. Maggots are seen as agents of life and change, and also of healing, due to their use in wound cleansing. They are eaten, on occasion, and sometimes in great amounts, but it is a crime against the gods to do it unawares. Any pious dwarf will do so only as part of a ritual, and will make sure to give a prayer of gratitude before ze eats.

Spiders, on the other hand, are demons through and through. They are the incarnation of sinfulness in the eyes of the fduen maggulu: they do little work on their own, instead content to sit around on their webs or in their pits. When prey comes, they ensnare it through trickery and then subdue it with venom (not all species of spider are harmful to dwarves, but it is known that they're poisonous all the same).

Make no mistake, cunning and tricks are not inherently reviled in dwarf culture. The problem comes when tricks and deception are used to get out of work, especially at the expense of others. There is a story told to illustrate this point, telling of how spiders were once a larger and mightier race but were cursed to become small, because when

they were given the blessing of inebriation they built webs so that they would have nothing to do but drink all day long.

The stone people take great pleasure in consuming spiders and tearing apart their webs, but they are also cautious about it. There is another story which some tell, of spiders three times the size of any dwarf. They are said to dwell in the deepest caverns of the world, and they prey upon the souls of stone people whose names are not entered into the Gakun az Ennpeldu upon their deaths.





## Feytown, Chicago

**Setting assumption:** Alternate history Earth

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Faeries will make the biggest impact in a world without any magic (if you are feeling adventurous, consider slotting them into a science fiction setting; the harder the better), but the only fundamental thing about them is that they come here from another world.

Even if there is magic elsewhere in the setting, their particular brand of it is bound to set them apart. It may be lower-powered than normal or even right on par, but it will definitely be different. If there are specific countermeasures against magic in the setting, then it is likely that the magic of the Good People operates according to different principles and ignores these countermeasures as if they did not exist.

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When they first learned our languages they introduced themselves as the Good People. Devouring languages as readily as children do, however, they were quick to take on other names, such as “fates” or the ever-popular “faeries,” the latter of which is their official designation in most countries. Many take on names such as “knackers,” “tinkers,” or “quinqui,” although the most common is “tinsmith.” Like linguistic magpies, they are prone to grabbing any name that grabs their fancy, even controversial ones like “gypsies.”

The Good People are fluid in both body and mind. They are able to change their physical form like water, but also suffer from a regrettable tendency to experience “psychological shifts” with little to no warning.

Feytowns have existed in the world ever since 1923, when the Good People began appearing from nowhere in ones and twos and threes. They had nothing but what they could carry on their backs, fleeing a war of which they (and subsequent expatriates) would not speak further. The number of new faeries grew quickly with each passing year. By the end, twenty thousand faeries were appearing every year, usually in groups of forty to eighty.

On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1948, the flood ceased, and it would not be until exactly twelve years later that new faeries would appear, this time at their lowest rate ever. Since then, no more than a hundred faeries have appeared each year. There are presently three hundred thousand faeries worldwide today, with thirteen thousand having been born on Earth. Three-quarters of the United States’ thirty-seven thousand faerie population is in the Chicago neighborhood officially called North Lawndale, and otherwise known as Feytown, Chicago.

### Faerie Magic

In addition to their aforementioned fluid bodies, which is believed to be a side effect of the altering nature of the magic which they contain, tinsmiths are able to use their magic to perform small tricks like making rotten food edible again. Each such trick requires individual training and practice, and using them requires both physical and mental exertion. Because it takes less effort to simply make the appearance of something, rather than to give it a real underlying substance, faeries make illusions far more often than actual changes.

Their ability to change shape bears repeating. At the age of twenty, a faerie is the same size as an adult human, and so long as their general mass is maintained they can take just about any form.

From completely ordinary human to a collection of tentacles and things, it's all good.

Practice is necessary for details, however, and most faeries take some time simply to make the conceptual jump necessary to realize how much physical appearance matters to humans. Even after this is done, it can take years to successfully master another person's exact appearance and take it without making any mistakes.

### **Faerie Psychology**

One of the reasons that faeries have such a hard time understanding how importance faces are to humans is that they put more stock in identifying people by how they act than by how they look. This would more readily make sense if it were not for the fact that they change personalities like they change clothes, and with less notice. Most faeries have four or five "core" personalities that they shuffle through on a regular basis, and can exhibit a surprising amount of flexibility even within these personalities. Each personality also usually demonstrates its own separate mental disorders, if any exist to begin with.

According to the Good Folk there are still minute similarities between each personality. They recognize each other by noticing these "tells." Humans have to be content with simply becoming familiar enough with a faerie to know zir various personalities. The faeries depend very much on personality, however, and find it hard to tell people apart simply by sight. This is another obstacle in the path of a faerie who wants to perfectly imitate someone.

### **Faeries and DID**

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) was previously called Multiple Personality Disorder. Because of this, it might be a good idea to clarify the differences between DID/MPD and what faeries experience.

Characteristically, memory sharing between personalities or identities in DID is impaired, if not outright nonexistent. Conversely, faeries only experience memory impairment if they are suffering from another psychological disorder. Each of a faerie's personalities also share the same sense of self, which is not always true in DID.

In this respect, what faeries experience is perhaps more akin to, say, bipolar (or quintipolar, if you would), but it bears keeping in mind that the difference between two faerie personalities can be quite detailed. A particular personality may have particular tastes in food, opinions about opera, literary interests, and mannerisms which the other personalities lack. Moods are also variable within each personality.

It would be inaccurate to say, more example, that a particular personality is the "manic" personality. Humans are liable to fall into this trap if they are unfamiliar with faeries in general, but personalities which could be accurately described as "the manic one" or "the depressed one" are about as common as humans that could be labeled in the same way.

### **Devices**

Faerie magic is normally low-powered and tiring, but there is more than one way to work a wonder in the world. The pre-1948 expatriates brought over objects which they refer to as "devices." When powered by a faerie, a device can produce exactly one kind of effect.

Devices which cause an otherwise-standard magical effect, but more powerfully than what could be worked by a faerie alone, are called "grand" devices.



Similar devices, called “aid” devices, produce a normal effect but with less effort. About a quarter of all devices instead have a magical effect in themselves, such as a coin that always lands on one side, or a whetstone which can completely sharpen any substance in only a few seconds. This last category of device called “complete.”

Some of the most common devices include unbreakable mirrors, spoons which add a particular flavor when stirred in a soup (the flavors vary), and almond-sized cubes which provide 2,400 lumens of light (equivalent to a 150-watt incandescent bulb). The most important device may be the Hong Kong Disk, a circle which can be sped up or slowed down with a touch by any faerie. With an eight-foot diameter it is the largest known device. At present it produces 100 terawatt hours (TWh) per year, a rate comparable to (and presently exceeding) the Three Gorges Dam. The greatest problem at present is designing equipment to handle the stress associated with higher speeds, but the device is not capable of infinite acceleration. “Peak Disk,” as it is sometimes referred to, is believed to be somewhere around 170 TWh/year, but there have been difficulties with properly measuring it at top speed.

### **The Magic Joint**

It’s called by many names: Fog, Phederrur, Sweatmeat, Fantasy... The most common name, however, is “buttermilk,” and there isn’t a person alive who has any idea why. What is known is that it first appeared in Liverpool’s

Feytown in 1926, and that it is produced through applying a bit of magic to marijuana. While any faerie has the innate potential to make buttermilk, the process requires training just as any other trick of magic does. Since its creation, buttermilk has held its own against other drugs, even the magical sort such as ghost eye (a particularly intense variant of cocaine), and it runs for a high price.

Users of buttermilk find themselves experiencing their deepest desires until the effect wears off. There is no physical effect, but for understandable reasons it can be risky to use buttermilk even once. Psychological addiction is common, and mental issues arise when a long-term user is denied their regular fix. Overdosing is not a problem either. Overuse does not intensify the effects of the drug, but it can be refreshed with hourly doses for as long as a person has any of the stuff left.

### **Outer Feytown**

The area which is known as “outer Feytown” or “the edges” generally comprises the three or four outermost blocks on any side. It is populated by an even mix of humans (mostly Jewish or African-American) and Good People. This is the area of Feytown that is strongest in the minds of tourists, and any Chicagoan who realizes that someone is intending to go to Feytown will offer a quick word of warning to stay in the edges.

There is plenty to keep the tourists entertained there, however: Outer Feytown is full of fortunetellers, ghost-talkers, “authentic” tinker cuisine restaurants (usually leaving out the less palatable dishes), and deviceshops which specialize in devices that even humans could use. And forgeries. Lots of forgeries. That bottle which produces clean water may just have a nice filter, or be under another enchantment which won’t be working for much longer. And magic beans don’t exist, no matter what the shopkeeper may tell you.

As in Deep Feytown, empty lots are often full of tables set aside for the playing of foa. It’s rare to find more than one empty table in a lot. Most collections of tables keep this in mind, and the single empty table is for “express games,” where you’re expected to leave after a single game.

## Deep Feytown

It is believed that the magic of the Good People is ultimately a force of change, as is demonstrated by the fluidity of their bodies and minds. There is another side effect of this phenomenon, not as readily apparent. Areas with a heavy, long-term faerie presence become “semi-static.” In a semi-static area such as Deep Feytown, home to most of Feytown’s twenty-eight thousand tinkers, architecture may become larger on the outside, or gain new doors. Objects may change shape or color. The entire course of a street may change.

The tinsmiths seem to navigate Deep Feytown easily enough. They are never caught by surprise when they turn a corner and the layout is different from what it was last week. Indeed, that’s why they turned that corner, because it is now a shortcut to their destination. In short, spatial relationships, forms, and even physics itself, are all more on the level of strongly-considered guidelines than out-and-out laws. This is the chief reason, though, why it’s considered common sense and not discrimination to discourage the faerie and human populations from mingling too freely.

## Music and Board Games

The tinsmiths brought with them many cultural traditions, but there are a few which bear special mention. Marunay ched is a form of chanting accompanied by drums. It has a few distinct styles determined by the speed of the chanting, whether the speed of the drumming is consistent with or opposed to the speed of the chanting, and whether the chant is performed by one person, by several, or by one person in conjunction with another chant by several other people. A final distinction is made between complex poetic works and the nonsense mumbling and shouting made in a trance-like state. Marunay ched has proven popular with

Chicago’s human population, and the so-called Chicago Blues genre has been influenced by, and in turn influenced, marunay ched.

It’s almost impossible to travel through any Feytown in the world and not hear someone chanting somewhere. In Chicago’s Feytown there are twenty-four faeries, called tseer sayas, who spend the majority of their day wandering through the streets, alone and in groups, performing marunay ched. It is not uncommon to see a tseer saya walk down the street and then to hear everyone else spontaneously burst out into the appropriate chant until ze passes out of earshot.

Foa, on the other hand, is a complex strategy game often referred to as Faerie Chess (not to be confused with fairy chess). It is played on a hexagon-shaped board with blue, green, and white spaces, ten spaces long on each side. One player holds twenty-two pieces, the other holds ten, and only one kind of piece is held by both of them. The two players each have their own objective, and it is indeed possible for both players to win if they accomplish their respective objectives within two turns of each other. This *of course* means that a rematch must commence with all possible haste. Considering the Good People and their love for the game, though, this may be exactly why a win for both sides is possible at all.

Spectator gambling on the results of these games is very common. Along the edges, though, as opposed to in Deep Feytown, it’s less “gambling” and more “taking advantage of the tourists.” Many games will have a few faeries standing by and watching, half out of interest and half because they’re waiting for a chance to play.

## Religion in Feytown, Chicago

Faerie religion, or at least what’s been explained of it, is very practically-minded. For everything that it is possible for the mind to conceive, from luck to malaria to the act of being caught in a hurricane at

sea, there is a spirit, or “irraal,” for it. Faerie religion, as it is, consists of doing things to convince beneficial spirits to do things, and to convince harmful spirits to do things too, but to do it somewhere else— it’s impossible to get an irraal to just not do something at all.

Marunay ched plays an important role in this process. There are chants for many different circumstances, and one of the duties of a tseer saya is to keep all of the random irraals of Feytown convinced to do what the Good People want. The game of foa is also said to have a religious component but, as with so much else in tinker culture, no further elaboration has been provided.

Good fortune is another important concept in tinsmith culture. A lucky person, to the faeries, is not someone who experiences luck but someone who is a source of luck. They grow it, so to speak, like farms of good fortune, and by spending time around them you can pick it up for yourself through some kind of felicitous osmosis. Such individuals, who can be either humans or faeries, are called “abundant.”

Some individuals who are purported to be abundant make a small living off of hanging around people for a length of time, long enough for some of their generated good fortune to rub off. In human circles, the practice is usually called “luck prostitution.” As with many things about the Good People, the jury is still out on how much basis in fact the idea of abundance holds. There seems to be something going on, but to what degree, under exactly what circumstances, and whether it is an independent phenomenon which the faeries have identified or just a product of their magic, are all matters that have yet to be settled.

### **Cuisine in Feytown, Chicago**

“True” tinsmith cuisine no longer exists, as no one was able to bring any food over from Faerieland, but they have found alternatives. Carrots and other

#### **Carrot whiskey?**

There are more kinds of alcohol out there than you might think, and the Good People are by no means deprived by their dietary restrictions. Besides the famous potato, alcohol can be made from sources such as cassava, ginger root juice, milk, or even the roots of the pineapple tree.

Carrot “whiskey” requires added sugar, lemon juice, raisins, and other unacceptable ingredients in order to be palatable to humans. Faeries would have to get by with artificial flavoring or just go without.

Bread can be made from arrowroot, cassava, potatoes, and taro.

Mock tomato sauce can be made by dicing and pureeing carrots, beets, and onions. Lemon juice or balsamic vinegar may be added if the mixture is too sweet, but they would have no place in authentic faerie cuisine. Faeries who care about it could add straight Vitamin C, however.

There’s also a company out there called Nomato, but that’s more relevant to humans than faeries. Faeries don’t exactly know what they’re missing, and are pretty loyal to faerie-made products anyway.

plants which “grow in the ground,” as the faeries put it (as opposed to plants whose edible parts grow aboveground, or “from” the ground) are generally the only plant matter consumed. The faeries have a mild fascination with cubes, which manifests to some extent in other forms of art but most prominently in their food: cubed carrots, cubed potatoes, cubed taro, cubed meat, cube-shaped loaves of bread, etc. They are very interested in the practice of growing cube-shaped varieties of plants, but for obvious reasons care more about cube-shaped potatoes than cube-shaped apples. Carrots in particular are important. Most faeries have a few carrots with them at any given moment, and it is common to see carrots left abandoned on the ground. These are believed to be offerings to the irraals.

Bread made from potato flour is common. It is used in the making of “Feytown pizzas” (or “Svendelmaus Pizzas”, after a local pizzeria) as adaptation (or mutilation) of the Chicago pan pizza: heavy on meat, lacking plants which are “grown from the ground,” a crust made from one of their breads, and a substitute tomato sauce. Real tomatoes are unacceptable, after all, but the first tinkers seemed to believe that the Platonic pizza had meat, sauce, cheese, and a crust.

Meat makes up a heavy part of the tinker diet. There is a heavy emphasis on mollusks, reptiles, and small poultry. Fish is usually prepared on the spot. For smaller species (such as goldfish), the only preparation is putting the fish in alcohol or a sauce for a few seconds before swallowing it.

The most controversial dietary practice of the tinsmiths involves the preparation and consumption of a living cow eight days after the first snowfall of the year. The ritual is accompanied with elaborate performances of marunay ched. There are always calls to ban the practice when winter draws near, but the only government to do so, France, quickly lifted the ban four days later, before the first snowfall. The tinkers, for their part, have declined to explain what is so important about the practice.

Alcohol is indulged in so long as it is made from plants which do not “grow from the ground.” Dairy products are used only on rare occasions. Carrot juice is, unsurprisingly, very popular, as is “carrot whiskey.”

Of note is the so-called “Howell’s hagfish,” which certainly resembles but is not even remotely a fish, as recent gene sequencing proved. Unlike actual hagfish, they have jaws (three rows of them!). They were discovered in 1922, a year before the first faeries appeared, and continued to manifest in advance wherever the Good People appeared. They are proving to be dangerously invasive species (they eat lots of things, but their poisonous slime

kills most predators), but their hyper-efficient metabolism means that they could turn out to be a useful food species, if only humans can develop a taste for them.

### **dha Cerruu Cerreir: The Feytown Mob**

The name is translated literally into “the Iron Hand,” although this is more properly understood as being along the lines of “the Evil Eye.” Iron isn’t lethal to the faeries, just a severe allergen, and the concept of the “iron hand” or “iron touch” carries connotations of sickness or ill health. In other words, it bears a similarity to the concept of the evil eye in human cultures, but with the implication that the bearer of the iron hand will harm zerself in order to get to zir target (both parties, after all, are allergic to iron).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the name, dha Cerruu Cerreir is a criminal gang, perhaps best understood as a kind of Faerie Mafia. Until recently the game dominated the buttermilk trade in Feytown and kept rackets on the deviceshops and ghost-talkers. It kept good relations with both faeries and humans in Feytown and the surrounding neighborhoods by providing generous donations to the ill and to broken homes, and making sure to get a job of some sort, even untrained labor, for anyone who was unemployed. Some of the most well-constructed homes and apartments were financed by dha Cerruu Cerreir and then cheaply sold to anyone who needed them.

The good will more than outweighed any financial loss, and they made ends meet anyway, even if the gang rarely made much of a financial profit off of such public relations activities. And, of course, they have plenty of purely legitimate sources of profit, too. Most members of the gang hold a day job or at least a cover at one of several restaurants owned by dha Cerruu Cerreir, and these are held as neutral ground for any other parties in Feytown (or, indeed, anyone who can travel to them).

Most of that is still true. Two months ago, however, the gang suddenly stopped distributing buttermilk and turned in everyone who was involved in its production. Now everyone is waiting to see what else will come out from the gang's leader, Lur Dek Kude (Long-Coat Jim, if you're going to insist on English).

Rumors are ranging from a deal made with the police to a plan made long ago to destroy a major

source of buttermilk. Some are even saying that it's just a simple case of how drastic a psychological change can come over some of the more magically-powerful faeries (like Lur Dek Kude), who receive greater mental instability hand in hand with greater magical endurance.



## The Fox Courts

**Setting assumption:** Contemporary Earth

**Influences:** East Asian Fox mythology

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Drop their physical appearance, and the Foxes could be fairies, bird-people, demons, ghouls, cynocephali, perhaps even djinn, although you might want to change a few pieces here or there in order to suit the change. They are an old civilization, but unlike most other beings who remember when humanity was young, they were helped *by* us as much as they helped us. Whether they are aliens, fairies, or something else, this makes for an interesting dynamic for your Predecessors.

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“The dead and the living walk different roads, but foxes are between the dead and the living. Transcendents and monsters travel different paths, but foxes are between transcendents and monsters.” Ji Yun, *Notebook from the Thatched Cottage of Close Scrutiny*.

To describe the Foxes in clinical terms is perhaps a kind of betrayal to them. What are the Foxes, *truly*? “Earnest scholars, dedicated rakes, devoted lovers, seductresses *par excellence*, tricksters, poltergeists, drinking companions, karmic avengers, and always, always great moralizers.”

The Foxes consider themselves, treat themselves, as a kind of poetry, so it is fitting to describe them thus, in flights of fancy and with a force of boundless creation. But no matter what else is said

of them, no matter how cruelly served the Foxes are by the styling of the words which follow, remember this: that between the paths of light and darkness, between immortals and demons, there walk the Foxes.

Or maybe they’re just sneaky little bastards.

### General Physiology

The Foxes are natives of (and found predominantly in) Japan, which they call Wo-ko-ku. In physical measurements, they are a little bit smaller than the average Japanese. In some respects, they have some other similarities to humankind, including a bipedal stance, but in many others they are, as they call themselves, Foxes. No one who looked at a Fox in its natural form could mistake it for being human, at least in good lighting.

Foxes are nocturnal like their common brethren, with whom they do not seem to share any strong relationships, it must be noted, but only a few incidentals of appearance and behavior. The Foxes also live for hundreds of years, which they ascribe to the former fact. It is their belief that the sun’s rays incite aging and that the way to prolong life best is by avoiding it. While humans are at their healthiest when they have regular exposure to sunlight this belief is based in fact when it comes to the Foxes. Foxes that are regularly exposed to sunlight are not only more prone to cancer than others of their kind but also age faster as well. It is entirely possible that a fully diurnal Fox might not live much longer than the average human.

Reproduction occurs around the middle of summer. With a nine-month gestation period, like humans have, Fox children are born around the middle of spring, after any unseasonable cold snaps should have passed. While this pattern has a biological basis the Foxes wouldn’t plan it any other way. They have a cultural aversion to the idea of

childbirth occurring at any earlier time, as demonstrated by their feelings about humans with such an unfortunate birthdate.

Fox children are very sensitive to the cold until they are three months old. The sensitivity is great enough that a chill autumn's night could kill an infant Fox in a few minutes. An additional difficulty that is suffered by Foxes in early life is blindness. The condition is only temporary, leaving them around the age of five months, but it is still a period of exceptional vulnerability. Either because infant mortality was once so high in this early period or because of the symbolism behind gaining sight for the first time, Foxes only receive their permanent names after they have reached this milestone.

### **Psychology**

By human standards, Foxes are insane. They are slow to act, as is appropriate for being with such long lives. As a culture they prefer misdirection to open confrontation, especially the violent kind. Their duels are fought not with the blade but with barbed wit and plans within plans. They are loathe to put themselves in severe danger either proactively or by a failure to think ahead and act appropriately on future possibilities, so they cache food and magic and squirrel away all sorts of items for the rainy days that may or may not come.

There is *always* a third way between violence and retreat, the Foxes believe (and it is not violence if your foes are impaled on their own swords, by their own hands). Their ways are not our ways. They suffer from pareidola to a far greater extent than most humans do. In many of them it even comes to the edges of schizophrenia. They find connections that make no sense. They are paranoiacs because they sense danger begin every corner and this is in part why they are such packrats. On the other hand their minds are as well-developed for creating traps just as much as for detecting them, and trying to match wits with a Fox can be an awful trial indeed.

They often talk to themselves. Their speech is disorganized, rambling, and incoherent. They wander from topic to topic, going whithersoever they go, and they provide answers which do not correspond to any questions that were asked of them. If their minds are like mazes, then it may not be incorrect to suggest that the Foxes are often utterly lost in them.

Other peculiarities abound. They climb trees with abandon, as if it were a mild compulsion that can only be fought off with strong reasons and considerable effort. Their gazes are flat and expressionless. They develop sleeping problems, the least of which is insomnia, as they get older and older. They are obsessive-compulsive (one might even say control freaks) and this behavior manifests most interestingly in their obsession with avoiding sickness.

Oh, the Foxes go over their plans again and again. And they like their belongings to be arranged just so, despite how difficult it is for humans and even some other Foxes to understand the logic behind an individual Fox's placement. But they absolutely do not abide sickness.

### **Spirit and Ritual**

In fact, a large part of their religion (such as it is) concerns itself with ritual cleanliness. There is a conflation of ritual and physical cleanliness, in that one cannot be clean in spirit without being totally clean in body. Minor failures of purity are only temporary and are easily amended by fixing them at the source (Foxes really like taking baths) but it is possible to stain the spirits through acts so damaging that further action must be taken to restore one's former purity.

While it is not strictly immoral and is even regarded as necessary for many Foxes to undergo, for the good of the Court, spending more than a few days as an active participant in human society (rather than as one who simply exists at the fringes of it) is

an act that requires extensive purification thereafter.

Purity is regained in other religions through practices like washing, but the Foxes repair the damage incurred by major infractions via ritual eating and purging. This seems to be based in symbolism like that found in sin-eating, but where the sin-eater takes the sins of the community upon zemsself as a scapegoat, the food being the vehicle for and representation of these sins, in the Fox Court things are a little bit different. The food is ingested not to take on impurity but to represent the taking-in of impurity which is already there. The tainting having thus been mirrored, the food is then regurgitated in order to symbolize the expulsion of that impurity. Despite this, bulimia is actually less common among Foxes than humans.

The sick are made impure by their sickness. After they have recovered they must purify themselves. Meat is impure by its nature and must be roasted or boiled before it is eaten in order to avoid contamination. While there is technical debate among some humans on the matter Foxes consider both fish and insects to be “meat.” They also consider Venus flytraps and similar plants to be meat, on the basis that anything which survives by eating another thing is to be considered meat.

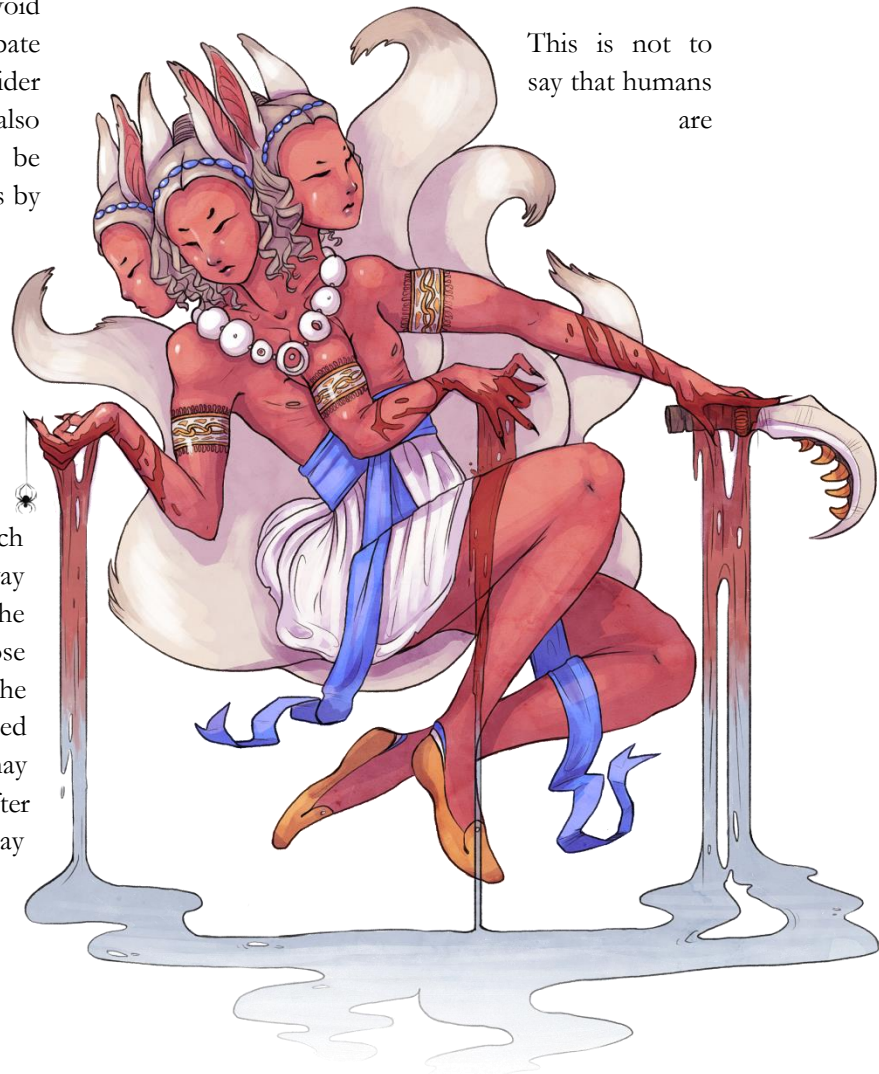
Their religion is the Land, Wo-ko-ku. It is a holy Land, a sacred Land. It was the first to be fashioned in the beginning of time, and was hallowed and consecrated to Spirit itself. It is the embodiment of purity, and to depart from the Land or to touch the soil of any other place is defiling to the soul in the highest degree (which is why the Foxes are only rarely encountered away from Japan). For Wo-ko-ku is a reflection of the islands of the immortals. These islands are those which are visible in the night sky, and to which the Foxes wish to ascend. After they have sojourned in the islands of the immortals for a time they may return and be reborn as new Foxes. And after many such turnings of the wheel their souls may

be purified enough to enter the celestial realms, which... do not actually exist yet. Maybe. But that’s a different matter.

That some of these ideas have vague similarities to Buddhism—especially their concept of reincarnation—has not been lost on the Foxes. It is their opinion (held as fact in their circles) that the Buddha was either a mad-Fox (as evidenced by his travels far from Wo-ko-ku) or someone who heard the ramblings of a probably-drunk Fox. Those who adhere to the latter interpretation hold a dim view of Buddhism and similar philosophies on the grounds that they are the product of a criminal. Either way, humans have gravely misunderstood the matter. Reincarnation is a truth, yes, but only for Foxes.

And who would ever want to be a human? Oh, for a little while that is fine of course, but humans cannot ascend to the islands of the immortals or transpose to the celestial realm.

This is not to say that humans are



unimportant. They may have the greatest importance of all. As one may have gathered from the description above, there is some uncertainty as to whether the celestial realms are an actual thing right now.

More properly the celestial realms are named To-shi-to-shi, or The City, The City. For as far back as their tales can be dated the Foxes have understood the celestial realms to be a metropolis, and humans have been seen as the means of their “realizing Heaven,” as some Foxes have put it. Perhaps To-shi -to-shi exists elsewhere right now and it will be extended or called forth or summoned here. Perhaps it does not yet exist, but it will be built in the future.

Either way, the “realization” will be an actual, physical engineering project. It will culminate in the conversion of Wo-ko-ku into a single interlinked city, so that the City and the Land are one and the same, indistinguishable from one another.

The Foxes worship a single deity, Tan-ya-ba the Fox of Thee Stations. In English the usual pronoun set is they/them/their, which serves the deity doubly well because it notes their plurality and avoids assigning sex to them. This in turn is useful because they are considered to be of both sexes, a unified being like a kind of Fox Adam Kadmon, Wadj-wer, or Loki (all of which, the Foxes would almost certainly agree, are muddled versions of the true deity). Ta-ya-ba is a deity of fertility, power, and immortality, the creator of the Foxes and “They (that) Will Come with The City, The City.”

They are usually depicted with a more feminine appearance. Sometimes they have three faces on a single head or and at other times they just have three heads. They are always shown with three arms, usually with a spider hanging from one finger, suspended on silk. Life springs out of Tan-ya-ba’s bleeding arms and in some depictions, the blood turns into a river as or soon after it hits the ground.

These wounds in their arms are inflicted either by an enemy or by Ta-ya-be themselves.

Tan-ya-ba has three heads, three guises, which are their titular three stations: Mi-no-ru, Tsu-bu, and Toch-I. These names mean, respectively, Real(ness)/Water, Grain, and Land. The last specifically refers to the actual plot of Land which a person farms. In this respect Tan-ya-ba has many Toch-I heads, as many as there are farmers on the Land. These three stations are referred to, without strong consistency as to pairing role with purview, as “the hand that makes the blade, the hand that wields it, and the hand that passes it to another.” This passing-on may be either as an end to conflict (giving it up for peace) or as a perpetuation of it (giving it to another so that that person may continue the fight after one’s death). Despite the theme of conflict, however, the blade is usually a sickle rather than a sword.

### **Diet**

Foxes like to eat beetles, grasshoppers, and other insects, and in modern times they are fond of chocolate-covered ants. They also eat snakes, frogs, small mammals, grapes, tubers, and pork, and enjoy drinking wine. They prefer eating foods that are associated with the earth in some manner, such as roots, rabbits, and moles.

They do eat human corpses from time to time but this behavior is very rare. It is not frowned upon, in the sense that it is considered ritually impure or shameful, but it is considered to be part of a well-rounded starvation diet. Foxes are capable of living on human corpses alone for years, even decades, but the meat is distasteful enough that there is no reason to do it if other sources of food are available. It is similar to how most Westerners regard the prospect of eating worms and beetles.

Because Vitamin D accelerates their aging, Foxes avoid fatty fish like tuna and catfish, liver, mushrooms, and similar foods. They are

inordinately fond of eggs and will eat them raw or hardboiled, with or without the shell, but these are eaten only rarely. The practice of egg-eating could be likened unto drinking alcohol in human cultures: most (not all) consider it to be permissible, but it is possible to indulge past the point of social acceptance.

## **Magic**

The Foxes have a number of small magical tricks to their name. The greatest of these, or at least one of the most important, is their ability to take human form. It is part of the reason that they are associated with the dead, because they require both oak leaves and a human skull to change shape. The skull has some relation to what kind of person a Fox can change into, based on factors like the original possessor's physical appearance, emotional make-up, and loved ones. Some Foxes wear these skulls on their heads like macabre little hats.

Foxes come into their greatest power when they become a hundred years old. Such White Foxes know what is happening from far distances away, can beguile both humans and Foxes, and make people lose their physical senses, either one by one or all at once.

## **Dens and Lairs**

Foxes prefer to live in liminal places: near to humans, but not belonging to humans. In the domain of humans, but not inhabited by them.

They are often found in isolated monasteries, without humans who may or may not know what they are. They may insinuate themselves into insane asylums, as either patients or doctors. Because they need human skulls to transform into human shape, and can subsist on human corpses in a pinch, they often live near graveyards. They may live in abandoned houses, which often come to be regarded as haunted (if the houses were not sought out specifically because they were already thought

to be so) and in the rafters or attics of inhabited houses. Occasionally, in a circumstance that is rare but not unheard of, they may take up residence in a specific room in an inhabited house and eventually develop a crippling fear about ever leaving it. These rooms are usually in the basement, where this is possible (Foxes have a... burrowing thing).

Whatever their situation, they like to have thick grass growing around their dwellings. Overgrown lawns on the grounds of old houses are especially liked. Foxes possess their own hunting grounds. They will refrain from bothering humans who infringe upon their rights, in the way that one humors, rather than punishes, an especially slow child who keeps getting where ze shouldn't be, but they demand that other Foxes respect the grounds that are "in their charge."

## **Social Structure**

The majority of the population can be termed "field Foxes." These are tricksters, farmers, and drinkers, and even a few autodidactic scholars. They may be wandering priests or drifting philosophers. They are often connected to uprisings (if they didn't start the party then they at least want to get in on the fun while it is going) and their involvement in any kind of significant number is generally a herald of some manner of social change.

Above these are the celestial Foxes. They are distinguished not so much by holding special rank over the field Foxes but by secret knowledge and unofficial influence. Both classes are organized into clans which the Foxes refer to as "dynasties," and celestial dynasties are each built around a kind of mystery cult. These cults initiate their members into additional light and knowledge regarding Tan-ya-ba that is not known to outsiders. Those who are aware of the teachings of multiple cults and perceive inconsistencies in them will usually regard all of the teachings to be true, each shedding light on an aspect of Tan-ya-ba that would otherwise be

unknown. From their knowledge comes their influence, for they are usually perceived as having special wisdom.

Dynasties are rooted, in story and song, to a certain homeland island, but their actual hunting grounds may be just about anywhere. Almost constituting a class of their own, despite officially being celestial Foxes, are the Transcendental Foxes or the Dynasty of the Magatama. These are the highest members of the Court of the Foxes. Though the other dynasties ultimately choose the Dame Regent of the Court it is from the Magatama that all potential members must come. Reflecting their role in presiding over the Court, they may be referred to (only collectively, never individually) as “the sword in the hands of Tan-ya-ba.”

The most ancient of the Foxes, the aptly-named Old Foxes, are asexual, even aromantic. For such a people as the Foxes, who are not known for abstinence, this transition grants them an incredible focus. It is as if they are making up, with singular bloody-minded determination, for all of the distractible centuries that they have lived before. The Court is not able to benefit from such wisdom in its Dame Regent, however, because she must give up her position once this condition overtakes her. Perhaps the Foxes feel that such wisdom comes at the cost of being out of touch with what Foxes really care about. Old Foxes are given the appellation “Blessed” by all Foxes save the Dynasty of the Magatama.

### **Customs**

Foxes prefer to keep pigs and cats for pets over other animals. They really, really don't like dogs and, for their own part, dogs don't like them either.

Foxes are interested and skilled in a wide variety of artistic pursuits including painting, dance, and music. They most enjoy a certain art form that is now peculiar to them (it once existed elsewhere among humans but has since died out) is at first

analogous to headhunting, which it may in fact be, in a literal sense. At once both a game and a craft, one element exists as a kind of scavenger hunt for a kind of skull that fits certain broad criteria. The other half of the game is the art of repairing it and painting it so that it becomes a kind of bizarre sculpture of a human. A human with a very prominent skull behind his horrifying face, anyway. A major theme of their artwork, whatever it may be, is equilibrium.

They are especially adept at pottery. It is an important art form to the Foxes, nearly a sacred one. They make their pottery by hand rather than with the wheel or powered machinery, and make markings in their work with their nails before it sets. The importance which pottery holds for them may be due to the fact that they are the craft's originators in Japan, but they were responsible for other advances in the region as well and tool-making in general is not as prized as pottery.

While the Foxes were responsible for the Paleolithic Japanese using ground stone and polished stone tools about 20,000 years before the rest of the world, it was the Japanese themselves who made the leap to bronze and handed this to the Foxes. This effect of having jumpstarted a civilization only for it to turn around and repay them technological dividends may have influenced the development of their To-shi-to-shi concept. There is a striking parallel there of Foxes aiding humanity so that it can, through greater advancement under its own volition (in this case city-building) can translate back into benefits for the Foxes. Whatever effects it may or may not have had on their mythology, though, the gift of bronze has certainly made it beloved in Fox Court culture.

Clothing is preferably woven from bark. Traditional clothing includes a kind of red skirt that is worn by both sexes. Earrings are also worn by both sexes.

At marriage, female Foxes are partially shaved so that they can tattoo their mouths and forearms. The tattoos declare that she now has power, for she is respected and her voice will be heard by the Transcentinals of the Fox Court, for she now has a household (otherwise “her voice is silent” and her opinions are to carry no weight in the Court’s decisions). Betrothals are made while those concerned are still children, by one who has been appointed as matchmaker but is removed from the local community (or communities) to which the children belong.

Marriage is not, however, the same as comradeship

(or “teamship,” as the Foxes call it). Foxes also pair off into teams, as humans in many cultures (and Foxes themselves) do for marriage, and many of the aspects of human marriage are handled in the context of the team. In human terms, spousal pairs are like work partners (as these betrothals are usually arranged to secure alliances, etc.) and teams are comparable to deep friendships. To the Foxes, sex (expressed within the spousal pair) and romance (expressed within the team) are very separate and not guaranteed to come together in the same individual. Teams and spousal pairs may be one and the same, but not always or even usually.

## The Gairriru

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world.

**Influences:** Hill cultures—Appalachian, Scottish, &c.

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The gairriru are modeled most strongly after various hill cultures, and that is where they would feel least out of place. This does not mean that they can only be placed on the hills and mountains, however. Nothing about them specifically demands a mountainous backdrop.

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The gairriru are fighters, plain and simple. For them, warfare in all its manifestations is an art form and the pursuit of this art can be said, with little exaggeration, to be the sole aim of the gairriru. The very name gairrir means “warrior.”

The formal, extended terms for men and women, pirsuno’compionot and pirsuno’virdag, translate into the roles which each is expected to take in the pursuit of this highest art form. The term na’cumbonteinti, on the other hand, means “non-fighter,” and is a grave insult when directed at anyone but a small child (it is also a term to refer to foreigners).

The gairriru do not engage in monogamy, but instead in group marriage. Because new spouses can be added to the marriage at any time, even the youngest of these unions have lasted for centuries. Called the marriage clans, or motremneu’denoste, they are the basic building block of gairriru society. Within the confines of the ‘denoste, sexual relations are quite unrestricted. Members are able

to choose partners from any or all of their spouses, and change their decisions as they please (there is no formal decision-making in this matter, after all). While any child will of course have a birth mother, this position is considered to be of little importance in itself. All members of the ‘denoste act as mothers and fathers to all of the children which have been born to it.

### Ritual Kidnapping

Asonzo’sicaist, or ritual kidnapping, is one of the most important milestones in a gairrir’s life. When a child reaches the age of thirteen, the marriage clan of his (or her— both genders participate in this rite of passage) birth will contact another ‘denoste, which will kidnap the child. After a week passes, the first marriage clan is free to send a force to liberate their charge. In the rescue attempt both sides are limited only to methods which will not cause permanent harm. The practice of ritual kidnapping would, after all, die out in short order if it regularly resulted in cripples and corpses. Even so, the tradition thus allows for the two ‘denoste to display and prove their skills. As the child will also most likely be married into that same ‘denoste when the time comes (in two years), the practice also lets both parties prove themselves to each other, the first that it is worthy of having the child, and the second that it has likely produced someone worth marrying.

But enough of the rescuers. As all this is going on, the center of the rite has spent at least a week being tortured. In this way the kidnapping clan is able to display its talents at lobror, or “carving,” and the child can display zir ability to resist pain. Both are considered high art forms, and grown gairriru display their lobror scars with pride.

Lobror, which actually consists of all methods of purposefully inflicting pain, not just cutting, is restricted solely to the place of women. They are



able to achieve just as much prestige, if not more, in this art as man can in their own art form.

Pirsuno'virdag, the word for "woman," literally translates to "torturer." They are also, unlike the men, able to practice the specialty of the other sex if lobror proves unsatisfactory for them. It may be frowned upon, but it is nevertheless permitted.

Their monopoly on carving extends to other realms as well. Surgery, barbering, and similar activities are considered to be extensions of lobror as well, if not so prestigious. The general practice of medicine is not restricted, however. The gairriru do not consider the surgeon and the apothecary to be performing the same role, even if they both have the well-being of the patient as their aim.

As a clan will typically choose for its children to be kidnapped by 'denosteu which they are close to, there are some interesting side effects. Most notably, lobror will be performed on a child by people who, perhaps as recently as a few weeks ago, were laughing and playing with zem. Of course, there is not as much dissonance here for the soon-to-be gairriru as an outsider might think. To the warriors, lobror is no more different than tattooing, or any number of other hideously painful rites of passage that are performed by actual cultures in the world. That it is being performed by people who are currently family friends, and who will likely be one's wives in a only year or two, can actually *lend some comfort*.

The 'virdagu, for their part, take great care in their jobs. It is never forgotten by them that they are both giving and receiving a great honor by performing lobror. This is true whether their patient be a child undergoing ritual kidnapping or a foreign prisoner. A third of the point of taking prisoners, after all, is to perform lobror on them and so give them the opportunity to practice the art of resisting pain.

The second reason, of course, is to be able to demonstrate one's skills in carving. The final point to non -ritual kidnappings is the riscoti, or the ransom payment which the prisoner's marriage clan will pay in exchange for those who were taken. Unless an exceptionally valuable person has been taken, the riscoti is first paid on a one-for -one basis. If one 'denoste has seven prisoners while the other has five, then they will trade prisoners until there is only the matter of the 'denoste which still has two prisoners taken from the other. If the ransom payment is left unpaid for long enough, and the hosting 'denoste is sufficiently impressed by their prisoner's ability to suffer lobror, then they have the right to open up a place for him.

### **The Camp of Battle**

Prisoners are acquired through ritual battles called asonzou'boloru. These battles are typically held not between individual marriage clans but by between alliances of several clans to each side. Often there is another matter at stake with the 'boloru, such as territorial disputes or the avenging of grave insults. These matters are to be resolved, however, with the paying of the riscoti. If the matter at hand was a dispute over a particularly fertile piece of land, then both sides will aim to force the other to pay the ransom in the form of accepting the right of that marriage clan to take the land. So it is the taking of prisoners which 'boloru center around.

War is declared after the end of a period of negotiations in which the location of the ritual battle and other details are settled. The various alliances then assemble at the chosen tomp di boloru, or "place of battle," and the battle begins. It starts with a series of single combats and eventually works its way up to battles with as many as ten people on each side. Both sides gain prestige in each battle, based on the difficulty of the maneuvers which they make, their success, and the flair and elegance with which they act.

It is for their role in the asonzou'boloru that a male gairriru is called a pirsuno'compionot, or "champion," with another possible translation being "dueler."

Alliances are generally formed along the lines of a common interest in the outcome of this particular 'boloru. In the aforementioned example of a territorial dispute, the winning alliance would then divide up the land in a manner which had been agreed upon previously.

Alliances may also be formed on the basis of simple tradition, perhaps due to generations of intermarriage. At the place of battle alliances bring all the finest luxuries with them; asonzou'boloru are something to be enjoyed.

The one exception is the oturmintodu, or "endurance war." Here, the alliances set out on a forced march to a far-off location weeks away, in order for the champions to be as worn down as possible before they begin battle.

## Cuisine

Soups form a principal part of the gairriru diet. This is especially true of sap'helmuthoru, or fish soups, which are soured with vinegar and fermented wheat bran.

A mixture of milk, sunflower oil, and salt, together called a caseywar, forms the base liquid for nearly all soups (including fish soups). It can be taken with the cleaned stomach lining of a pig for a mixture called sap'lestlow, which is highly effective for curing hangovers.

Cauliflower and pumpkin soups are also common. The latter is called sap'hallok. It is accompanied by a sweet bread called pon'brook, which is made from the rinds of the pumpkin, along with raisins, butter, milk, and eggs.

Balls of minced lamb or pork, called bluker, are mixed with spices and onions during the initial preparation and then glazed with egg yolk shortly before serving. Blukeru are typically served as a breakfast food, along with the day's first meal of fish soup and cirvizo'liamo, or plum beer.

The gairriru do not war, or practice for war, every minute of the day. Most of their time is spent working the crops, collecting fish from the numerous lakes and rivers of their land, and caring for the "log-thick pigs" (so -named for their size, which is nearly twice that of a normal pig). These, along with dogs, comprise the domesticated animals of gairriru society.

Wraps and stuffed breads of various kinds, called kaikau, are prepared ahead of time and eaten later on in the day, in the fields. Kaikau'durellu, the most common kind, are flat things which look almost like swollen pancakes. They have fillings such as cheese, jam, eel meat, or the liver offal of a pig. A kaikau'dikie is a ball of meat, heavily seasoned with onions, mustard, salt, and beer, and then coated with bread. Kaikau'hendriku are made from yeast dough and filled with cottage cheese.

While less common, stuffed bell peppers are served with meat (usually eel) and onion inside. Bread is nearly always used in combination with some other food, but boiled wheat, sugar, and walnuts can be used together to make linwod, which is traditionally served on its own at the end of the day. A drink called latimor is held almost as highly as warfare. Each marriage clan keeps secret its methods of producing its own variety of the alcohol, which is a sort of liqueur of sour cherries and honey. It is one of the prime exports of the gairriru.

## Folk Traditions

Archery is no longer a widely-practiced art, but most gairriru still have a bow. They are longer used in ritual warfare in most cases because ranged weapons are somewhat more difficult to use in

these combats. The fact that they exist at all points to their origin as predating the modern traditions of the gairriru. Recognized as weapons of war even now, albeit weapons which are used by only a few marriage clans, they are still carried by most gairriru for the purpose of making music. By placing part of the string in one's mouth a crude resonator is created, and a variety of tones can be produced by plucking the string. The bows are played both alone and in groups of up to thirty. Even one-on-one fights require a third person, for it is hardly a proper battle if it is not set against the music of the bow.

The gairriru do not have a true religion so much as they have a collection of constantly evolving folk practices. Held by the various 'denosteu, they are always intermingling as the clans' children, who grow up with one set of practices, marry into other 'denosteu and pass on a synthesis of the two to their children.

It is generally accepted that it is bad luck to eat during a storm, for example, but setting fire to a meal can end a run of bad luck, and marriages should not be entered into immediately after the end of a 'bolor. Many 'denosteu believe that ravens bring messages from the dead. Even a ritual battle can come to a sudden halt as all parties engage in ricentu, or raven-watching, in order to divine what messages (if any) are being delivered.

The importance of pigs in gairrir culture is in part due to the belief that they can be used to soak up the spirits which cause disease. Not only do these spirits prefer to infest pigs (which are better able to suffer through the resulting sicknesses than humans) but ingesting pork can help by causing the spirits to enter it.

### **Craftsmanship**

Metal is an almost sacred thing, not given any specifically spiritual attributes but nevertheless treated with care and reverence. It is used only for the production of weapons, and only metal may be

used to produce sharp edges. Weapons made from bone or stone, or other hard materials, are not permitted to be used. Few are those who do not know how to work metal into a usable shape, and both men and woman can gain great respect by producing finely-crafted weapons and instruments of torture.

In a sense, even utensils are shown care in their crafting, but it should come as no surprise that the gairriru view these more as "small weapons which happen to be useful for eating" than as simple utensils. This is especially warranted since forks are rarely used and spoons are nonexistent, even for soups. Rather, knives (or forks, much less often) are used to stab whatever is large enough and deliver it to one's mouth. Once there is nothing else that can be obtained in this way, the bowl itself is brought to the mouth and the rest of the soup is drunk down.



Knives, or haivu, hold a special place in gairrir culture, with as many different specialized terms for knives as there are for rituals or for soups. They are small objects, simpler to make than larger weapons, with an almost infinite versatility in form. The small thin knives generally used for eating are called haivu'turtarou, while a haiv'dolet is a double-sided knife with a three-inch blade on both ends of the handle.

Knives are an important part of gairrir fashion and nearly all of them, regardless of their purpose, sport a small hole at the end of the grip. Gairrir clothing is covered with hanging strings which can be looped through these holes and then tied off in order to suspend the knife from one's clothes. Gairriru collect knives and gift them away all throughout their lives, and hanging from a fifty-year-old gairrir will be dozens of knives of various shapes and sizes, attached to zir shirt, trousers, and cloak.

Gairrir society lacks an official currency, but knives are handed over as everything from simple bartering chips with a generally-recognized value, for rougher and less beautiful examples, to highly-valued gifts that will be prized by the 'denoste for untold generations.

### **Death Customs**

That fifty-year-old gairrir will, incidentally, be dead in ten years. Zir time is coming to undergo asonzo'tollesto, a series of ritual combats where zir opponents no longer are restricted from dealing killing blows. The first fight will be against a single opponent, but the number will increase by one with each successive fight.

While outsiders often see it as a cruelty second only to that of subjecting thirteen-year-old children to lobror, the gairriru see this as ritual as no less glorious. By engaging in asonzo'tollesto, an elderly gairrir can gain prestige and, more, avoid the indignity of having to deal with the slow dulling of

zir senses and wits, the fading of zir memory, the weakening of zir bones, and the all-too-acute sense of just how much has been lost even when ze has forgotten what, exactly, has been lost.

Death is a constant presence weighing on the minds of the gairriru. Women die in childbirth, and sometimes their children go with them. Disease takes the young and the old alike, and sometimes plague refuses to spare even the healthy. Demons come in the night and take who they will.

As much as war and torture are art forms, that art is a means of coming to terms with death in order to practice the greatest art of all: the art of dying well. Midwives are an important part of the process of giving birth to a child. Just as important, however, is the death-watcher, whose role is called upon at many other times as well. During ritual kidnappings and the practice of torture and scarification, during battles, when sickness comes into the household— at any time when death may enter reasonably be expected, a death-watcher is called upon.

Where it is possible, the death-watcher has been trained in zir duties. Where it is not possible, just about anyone will do. The role of the trained death-watcher is handed down from generation to generation. Most often from mother to daughter, or from aunt to niece, but if no suitable candidates are available, then it may be handed to a son or nephew. In some cases, the death-watcher will adopt someone to take the position, whether as a daughter or, if the adoptee's parents are still living, as a niece.

The first portion of a death-watcher's payment is often a pittance. After each of the deceased's heirs have taken one of zir knives, the death-watcher selects one for zerself. The knife may be poorly-made, if there have been many heirs, or be of finest craftsmanship if the heirs have agreed to leave it alone for the death-watcher.

Where the deceased had no knife, or there are none left, a clay model of one is made. No matter how fine the knife is, however, it comes to nothing. The death-watcher snaps the blade in two pieces, symbolizing the death which has occurred, and then curses it. Such a knife is not permitted to be sold, and there isn't anyone who would be willing to buy it anyway.

The only other thing which a death-watcher receives in exchange for zir services is room and board. While a battle is engaged, the death-watcher sits in the place of honor and is given first choice of every dish. At one's home, the death-watcher is

still fed, and meals are brought in to where ze sits with the sufferer.

At the close, when death has come and gone, the death-watcher rings a small bell for every year that the person had lived. Ze is then called upon to make an accounting of the deceased. This done, it can be known whether to give honor to the name of the deceased or to speak no more of zem ever again. Regardless, someone is then sent out to accompany and care for the death-watcher on zir next journey, whether to zir own home or to another "house in which death is crouching."

## Ghosts

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Make them vampires, who retain a healthy consciousness of their deaths. Make them changelings, who have grown into their fairy blood but cannot return to the land of their ancestors. Ghosts work well for any group of beings who have no place in human society but also cannot leave it too far behind.

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If the dead still live in some sense, despite being vitally challenged, then it should be utterly unsurprising that they will try to reassemble society wherever they should find themselves whether it be in an afterlife of some sort or in the world that they had always inhabited. And if they should remain trapped here then it only makes sense that the society of the living will affect the society of the dead.

These societies are most often called ghost towns or necropolis but they are only rarely abandoned settlements. Despite everything else there is still a connection, however tenuous, to mortal society and the dead do not usually feel comfortable in such places. More often they reside in decrepit, rundown buildings, alleys that are frequented by only a few due to their sinister reputations, and other places which rarely if ever see the presence of the living, yet are not entirely removed from them. Ghosts prefer areas that are themselves more or less abandoned, but are also not far from places populated by the living.

## The Purpose of Society

Pure habit is not the only reason that the necropoli organized themselves. Certainly it would not be unexpected for the dead to develop societies of their own simply because they are used to inhabiting societies, but if it were a matter of comfort and habit then there would be many more ghosts who decided to strike out on their own. Why, then, do almost all ghosts organize themselves into communities?

The restless dead stand on a narrow rope above a deep chasm. To fall one way is to lose your sense of identity and humanity (or whatever species you happen to be). To fall the other way is to cling too tightly to the affairs of the living and grow totally obsessed until you can no longer tear yourself away from them. Either choice is undesirable. Being part of a necropolis can give the balance needed to avert them both,

## To Be Dead

The mind of a ghost is far from as plastic as it was before ze died. Experiences which the ghost does not pay zir full attention to have a tendency to slip into a fog of half-dissolved memories and eventually disappear entirely. It takes a longer time to master skills, too. Typically, it takes ten thousand hours of work for a human to master a skill; ghosts require a whole four hundred thousand hours to do the same thing. On the bright side, experiences that do get a ghost's full attention (which would of course include something that the ghost had spent more than fifty years at practicing even if ze had spent every hour of every day at it) will almost certainly remain as fresh in a thousand years as they are today. This lack of plasticity in their minds works for memories from their lives, too. While these memories will not become clearer than they are now a ghost's pre-mortem memories will not fade.

Emotions are a tricky thing for ghosts. Hormones and other bodily processes are obviously absent, which goes far to deaden their ability to naturally feel emotions. The mind is a determined thing, however, and while ghosts do not genuinely feel new emotions they are able to substitute the feeling of that emotion from other times. There isn't too much of a problem here since the feeling of comfort and satisfaction from laying down in bed after a long day of tired labor is not too radically difficult from any number of other occasions of comfort and satisfaction. Where trouble does arise is when the pool of existing feelings is not deep enough to properly substitute for a new experience. Someone who has never felt any kind of romantic love beyond a juvenile crush is not going to be able to experience a more mature breed of romantic love.

Emotions are strength. Emotions are power. Emotions are what let ghosts become more than ineffectual shades visible only to each other. With emotion a ghost can summon up the ability to physically handle objects or let mortals perceive *zem*. They can be used to change a ghost's very appearance once *ze* understands that it is malleable and takes advantage of that knowledge. Emotions fuel the actions of bodythieves, who rely on strength of passion to overwhelm, break, and rule their victims' wills.

### **Social Structure**

The most important distinction in a necropolis is between those who have received proper funerary rites and those who have not. Ghosts can always tell the difference, even if they can't explain how this is so to the living. It is more than just a social distinction; there is a genuine importance to this. A ghost whose remains were given the proper rites is able to keep *zems*elf mentally and emotionally stable with less effort. Whatever else a ghost is or does, there is nothing that can surpass this distinction except for bodytheft.

To steal control of a physical body is the ultimate crime in a necropolis. It is also proof that there really is not anything in mortal society to be had by ghosts. Bodythieves are not so connected to their victims that they can, through those stolen bodies, feel new emotions.

Bodytheft, like every crime, is punishable by exclusion. This works on two levels. A necropolis is by its very nature a tightly-knit thing. Most ghosts will emotionally suffer from even temporary exile or disfellowship. Necropoli are also necessary for maintaining the psychological well-being of a ghost. So long-term exclusion, to say nothing of permanent exclusion (which is the fate of any bodythief), is going to guarantee a slow slide into insanity for as long as it lasts.

These are not the only categories which ghosts can get stuck into. There are those, for example, who continue to dabble in the lives of the living. This can be normally dealt with through a short period of exclusion if it becomes an extreme problem. Until that point comes these ghosts are allowed to do as they do, but they cannot be said to have any respect.

Cats do not have a good reputation either in the necropoli. They can see ghosts and smell and hear them, and cats don't like them. It takes more than a cat's bite to destroy a ghost, true, but getting bitten still hurts more than anything that a ghost could have experienced in life. *Cat handlers*, called *edenae*, likewise do not hold a good reputation in the necropoli. They are necessary if the necropoli want to hand out corporal punishment or keep out undesirables but nobody can much like someone who gets along with cats of all things. Downright eerie it is.

Better off are the scholars, who spend at least twenty hours in study every day. These ghosts run the risk of growing too attached to their work, and it is not unheard of for a scholar to lose *zems*elf in it. Strictly speaking there is no need for the scholars





but many necropoli fancy themselves to be keepers of history. It is a rare necropolis that does not have at least a single ghost who has taken it upon zemsself to master as many arts as seem to be dying out.

Mere age confers status of its own. The ancients are those who have remained in the necropolis for at least two thousand years. They have usually been scholars for at least a few of those many centuries—the dedication to a single craft gives to a ghost a sense of purpose which may have been lacking before. Ancients are, in necropoli where they are not absent, the ones principally in charge of governance. Only permanent exclusions require approval from more than the ancients, and this because such a punishment cannot be undone.

### **Art**

It was the centuries-long work of certain scholars that resulted in the musical style called Ratkuat. The name means “screaming” but is more accurately defined as “lamentation.” It can only be performed by those with great focus and emotional strength because it requires the use (and creation, for that matter) of an instrument called a kaeus, which is traditionally a long reed with six finger-holes and a thumb-hole. Proper manipulation of the instrument creates a low, mournful sound. The songs usually relate to death, separation and pain. They were first used to help the newly dead (and a few ghosts who had problems of other kinds) to deal with their troubles.

Visual art is stylistic and symbolic. Care is taken to make the landscape three-dimensional but beings (whether living, dead, or animal) are flat and their size is relative to their importance. Physical attributes exist (or not) so as to signify things of importance.

Ghost stories, so to speak, are usually told in order to call up emotions and make their audiences *feel*. It is not surprise that they are typically love or war stories, sometimes both, and nearly always epic in scale.

## Gosom Kom

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world  
**Rejiggering:** The religion of Gosom kom, and the culture mostly strongly associated with it, was originally published across six articles. The intent was to focus on particular aspects of the culture one at a time in a way that would make it easy to grab this piece, but not that, as desired. The caste system, religious tenets, and family structure all complement each other but are sufficiently independent that you can take one without having to take anything else.

This is especially true with regard to the sections on food, drink, and eating habits. This was primarily influenced by medieval European cuisine, especially German, Polish, and Ukrainian, along with smaller influences by the Byzantines, Ottomans, and ancient Romans. Useful stuff, if you're looking to figure out people might eat in the usual medieval fantasy setting.

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Nimembqodom Gosom kom Nimbobi'mbom is usually translated to mean "The Way of Improvement and Everlasting Exaltation." It can be shortened to Gosom kom, or The Way. Physically, it is centered around the city Oado Ri've (formally called Oado Ri've, dipnod nolo kivo, or Oado Ri've, the holy city). It is doctrinally centered on three principles: the sacredness of family, the need for a harmonious relationship with nature, and a constant improvement of one's place via reincarnation, which achieved through constant attention to the first two principles.

### Sacredness of Family

Followers of Gosom kom believe that every living thing's place in existence is preordained, from the highest god to the lowest insect. In cultures where caste systems exist it is very easy to see your ordained place. In others, the view is taken that your ordained place will not be made manifest unto you until later in your life, just as a caterpillar only becomes a butterfly with the passage of time.

The religion has an obsession with categorization and matters of relative status. In places where it has taken root, one can expect to be able to find out the exact relative status of and respect due to a food, occupation, ethnic group, or family.

There are no real equals in Gosom kom. Are you and another person both of the same ethnic group, from the same city, and even of the same occupation and position in that occupation? Then perhaps one of your families is older, or due more respect for some other reason. Perhaps your

families are exactly equal in all possible ways (improbable, but technically possible) but one of you is a thirdborn child while the other is fifthborn, or you are both firstborns but one of you was born on an earlier date, or even on the same day, *but earlier than the other person*. No matter who you are, one of you is superior to the other and there is a system for figuring out who that is.

Within the family, each generation bows to the previous generation. Each person has a distinct rank within their generation based on their birth order and their parent's birth order. For example, a firstborn son would be dominant over his younger siblings, but if his father were secondborn, and his aunt firstborn, then he would be inferior even to the fifthborn child of his aunt.

This is the principle of Tin'veom Kisi'olbi, to obey these rules of status and to give honor to the family by acting in the appropriate way at all times and in all places. Honor is given to your family by obeying the rules of status outside of the family as well, and by being pious to the gods, temperate in all things, loyal, and tolerant of the weakness of your inferiors, while avoiding recklessness, dishonesty, irresponsibility, and the envy of those who have been preordained to a station in life higher than your own.

### **Harmony with Nature**

Of equal importance is the concept of living in balance with the rest of the world. Followers of Gosom kom do not necessarily believe that they are, for example, stewards over the world. Just as the superior elements of society must refrain from abusing the inferior elements, however, intelligent beings must not abuse nature.

This idea also plays into avoiding recklessness and irresponsibility. By practicing the principle of Olpame kimbom Osop, a person ensures that the world is stable and sustainable, just as obeying the rules of status will ensure that civilization remains

stable. Oftentimes there are entire occupations devoted to making sure that, for example, trees are being planted in numbers and at a rate sufficient to replace the trees which are being cut down. Or to make sure that the current reproductive trends of prey animals are not so low that the current rate of hunting will outstrip those populations' ability to recover. In fact, Gosom kom puts an emphasis on domesticated crops and animals exceeding that which is found in most other cultures. Hunting is considered to be highly unsavory, and is associated with the lower classes.

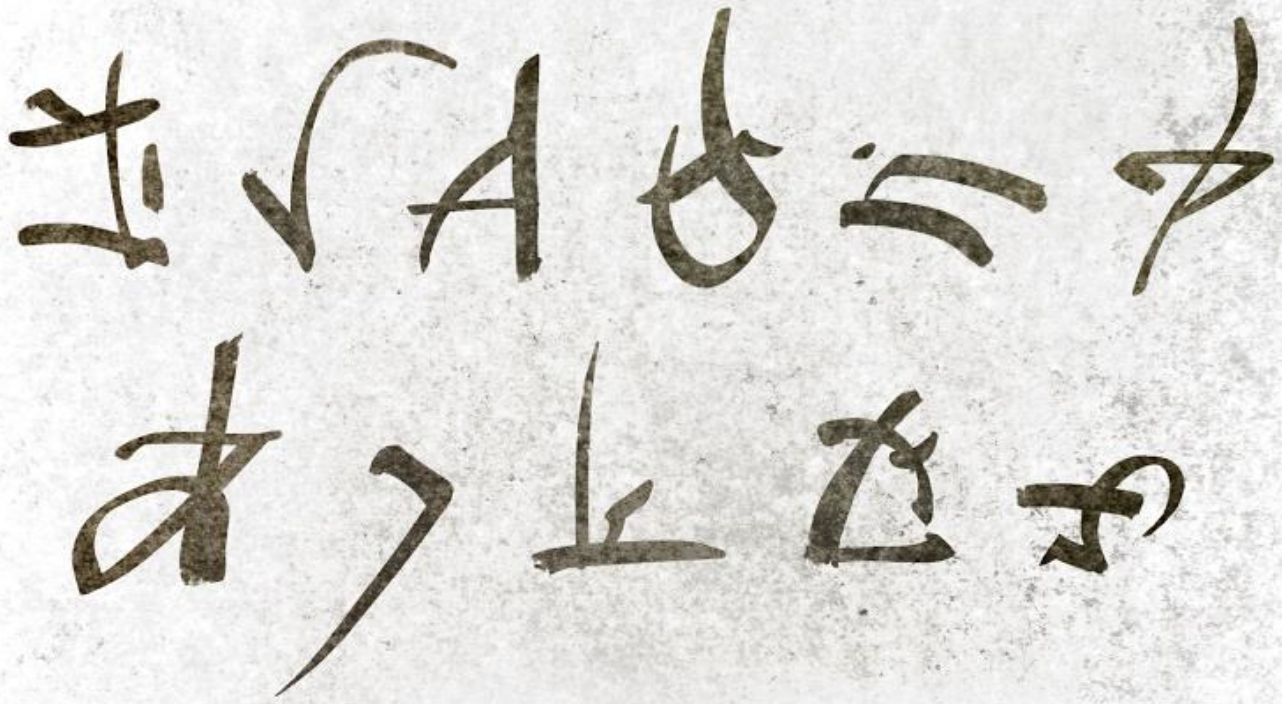
### **Improvement of Station**

By obeying these laws, you are able to obtain what is called Nimembkodon Liemkolmore. Those who act in accordance with these principles will be preordained to a higher station in their next lives. Usually this station will be just barely higher than one's current status, so that someone who makes buttons for a living might make candles in zir next life (candles are slightly more important and profitable). If ze is especially virtuous then ze might be able to move ahead just a little bit further than that.

The ultimate goal for any person is to be preordained to become one of the Ossou Oordo. Depending on accounts this is either the station of godhood or of their choice servants. Just as there is no orthodoxy on their nature, so too is there no One True Doctrine on whether anyone has become an Ossou Oordo yet, and many people that no one actually has.

### **The World of Passing-Through**

Before moving on to their next life, even the most virtuous must first spend some time in Piloko, the World of Passing-Through. Piloko is usually thought to be an entirely different world than this one. Some people, however, believe that it is a physical place which can be reached in this world, usually by sailing south past the civilized lands, past



those lands which even today remain unsettled, and still further south.

Piloko is a land of cold, where damned souls are bound from head to foot in iron chains. The chains keep them restrained to stone slabs. It is a place of eternal winter, where the sun never rises and where terrible winds race across the landscape, so strong that they flay flesh off the bones of those imprisoned here.

The amount of time which a person spends in Piloko depends on the crimes which ze committed. Liars must spend a single day here for every falsehood that they have told. Thieves must spend a minute in Piloko for every handful of grain which their stolen goods could have purchased. For every person that ze has killed, a murderer must spend a gita (equal to ten thousand years) chained to one of the stone slabs of Piloko.

The most infamous of the land's residents is the blasphemous and murderous king Loto Bali Kisepo, who is said to have eaten flesh with every meal. It is said that he *invented* the Hundred

Thousand Atrocities over the course of his reign, when he sought to commit a new act of evil every day and eventually had to create new ones after running out. It is said that he has been sentenced to eighty-nine lexis in Piloko, each lexi equal to three million years.

At the end of his punishment in Piloko, he was to be preordained to be a royal governor. You can, after all, only sink or rise so far at a time for deeds done in mortality.

He was only *sentenced* there, though. Some people say that he isn't still suffering in Piloko. Ridops are people (if they can be called that) who have managed to escape Piloko. For their defiance of Kedolom Liemkolmore, the Cycle of Reincarnation, they are placed at the very bottom of the stations of life. Even worms and poisonous insects are more highly-placed than a ridop.

A ridop cannot be mistaken as anything else unless it takes pains to disguise itself, so they often wear heavy clothes in order to cover their skinless, bleeding forms. Even then they can be noticed for

what they are, however. A ridop is always, always shivering, for it is never able to forget the terrible suffering which it experienced in Piloko. Ridops have personalities as varied as the people they once were, but in their debasement they are made one and the same. Consider the case of a kindly person who told but one lie in life, committing no other crimes, but who could not bear the one day in Piloko which that lie sentenced zem to and fled the World of Passing-Through. That person will remain a ridop until the end of time, as low in station as King Loto, and will be driven to kill zir fellow people in order to stay warm.

Nor is zir new station any protection against further stays in Piloko. Every year, on the longest night of the year, King Loto Bali Kisepo is said to escape from Piloko. Many parents keep their children inside for the next five days, until King Loto is captured and brought back to Piloko again until his next escape.

### **The Priesthood**

The religion of Gosom kom is run by priests called epopods. Each of them has been raised from birth to one day enter the clergy. In some countries the epopods also form the whole ruling class, while in others they are merely a part of it or are an entirely separate wing of society. Even in countries where they do not officially partake of secular affairs an epopod can wield great influence.

Both sexes can join the priesthood, which is important because they are both forbidden from marrying outside of the holy order and encouraged to have children early and often. The priestly population is very large. Epopods begin their schooling from an early age and are trained in the interpretation of scripture and myth. Upon being fully inducted into the station of zir parents, an epopod will have memorized not only the stories of zir religion but also have read hundreds of extensive commentaries on them. Someday, zir

own commentary might be added to the collection of studied material.

Epopods also preside over marriages, embalm the dead, and oversee the observation of holidays, which are many and often long-lasting. Gosom kom encourages the creation of holidays in order to celebrate anything worth celebrating, meaning that most countries have many holidays for the sake of great heroes, certain events in history, martyrs of the faith, and so on. In some countries there is a holiday for every day of the year.

The more common holidays do not involve major celebration but it is not uncommon for a day to most often be referred to by the name of whatever event or person it is dedicated to. Less common holidays are for the new moon and full moon. These inspire minor celebrations which might last for a few hours during whichever period of time little work will be done. Celebrations for the solstices can often last for up to a week, especially if the preceding months have given the people much to be thankful for.

### **The Pantheon**

There are nine gods worshiped in Gosom kom. Besides these nine, however, there is a tenth whose name is Dopno Mot, about whom little is known. He is said to be living as a human due to inappropriate actions in his life as a god, which caused him to fall from his station. Perhaps he will become a god again in a few hundred thousand years and be worshiped once again.

One of the most important gods is Ovos, the goddess of spring. She gave knowledge of all kinds to humankind and continues to bless them by allowing the harvest to be made each year. There are many statues of her set beside lakes, and it is said that she moves to a different lake each day. Ovos regularly challenges wicked mortals to duels when they cross her path, and drags their souls to Piloko herself after killing them. Despite this

behavior she sees it as a mercy, for she is shortening their stay in Piloko by preventing them from committing further crimes.

Yotgolot is the goddess of mountains, of the wind, and of cities. She is worshiped mainly by the village folk, because cities are just so much more interesting to her and villages, consequently, must work harder to grab her attention. Her followers send prayers to her on a daily basis. Military outposts also frequently erect altars in her name. She will often work against the efforts of humans whose actions threaten to outshine her, so ambitious people almost always try to promote her worship in tandem with their scheming.

Nildipnilon is the god of battle and of poetry, which often go hand in hand. His followers, who are often women, carry many distinctive charms on their bodies. He has altars in many cities. As is true for many of his siblings he can be an antagonistic force. In his case he is known to increase the difficulties of great warriors who have attracted his attention, in order to see how much they can handle. He cares little for those who cannot emerge victorious from his tests, but rewards the successful with yet-greater challenges.

Rikroom is the goddess of torment. Most of the gods live primarily in the paradisiacal land of Riybo, but Rikroom spends most of her time in and presides over Piloko. She is said to lead the yearly hunt to retrieve King Loto and she dispatches hunts for other ridops. The Lash Goddess is associated with oaths, for breaking them earns a whole year in Piloko, and is worshiped heavily by the elderly. Most villages have a small shrine erected in her name. She hinders especially virtuous mortals in order to see if their virtue is true or if they can be turned to evil through excessive hardship.

Ikyemak is a goddess connected to dancing, life, money, and rain. For money she is worshiped by the poor and the wealthy alike. For her station as a goddess of dance she is worshiped by the cultured.

For rain she is worshiped by farmers. For life she is, of course, worshiped by everyone at one point or another.

Kisonolom is their mother, though each of the five had a different father. She is the goddess of both famine and the friendships which can help a person to weather times of deprivation through mutually aid. Kisonolom is often also portrayed as a war goddess since war often leads to famine and sometimes is even caused by it. She is worshiped extensively by the poor.

Omok Idep is the god of orphans. He is also associated with the wilderness and with the hearth, both of which are places where offerings may be made to him. He is prayed to by those whose families are dead or suffering. Only a few people dedicate themselves entirely to him. These choice souls are marked by their ritual scars. He sends dreams to the virtuous to give them signs of what their next life's station might be. Omok Idep is also the target of the jealous, one-sided affections of Yotgolot of the Mountains.

His father, and Kisonolom's brother, is Uovo, the god of the sky and of fire. He is associated with horses and worshiped by merchants. Mountain shrines in his name are not uncommon. Like his son he sends dreams, but Uovo delivers them to those who are in distress in order to give them hope. He is said to have an unhealthily antagonistic relationship with Nildipnilon in particular, but has a certain dislike for all of his nieces and nephews, on account of their interest in making life difficult for humans.

### **Dietary Staples**

Matkin bread is one of the most common breads. It is low-quality, made not just from grain but also, commonly, legumes. It is used to feed horses, the poor, and anyone else who can't afford more expensive bread. Much of it is not exactly edible (like grain husks), making it low in calories but high

in fiber. Root vegetables and other ingredients are frequently added to the mix.

Matkin, like other kinds of bread, can be broken off into pieces and used as a sop to be soaked in a soup or other liquid before being eaten. Members of the higher classes will commonly have it pre-cut so that they do not have to break it themselves at mealtime. Stale bread can be carved into a square and used as a trencher or a sort of plate for food. Afterwards it can often be soaked or covered with a sauce or given to the poor.

Olive oil is very expensive. Alternates exist in poppies, walnuts, hazelnuts, and similar foods. Butter and lard are also common, especially since they're not exactly low in fat content. A bit of pudginess is never a bad look on a person who doesn't know for sure that ze's going to be eating well next month.

The grains most commonly eaten by humans are millet and wheat. Barley and oats are more often given to horses and other animals or used in the production of beer. Peas, beans, acorns, and walnuts can be ground up and added to bread to stretch out supplies. Cabbages, which can be turned into rolls, are among the most widely-consumed vegetables, along with peas, beans, and onions.

Most of the meat on the dinner plate (or slice of stale bread) is beef, sheep, pork, or chicken, all of which can be made into sausages. Fish is usually jellied rather than eaten immediately. It is an exception to the usual rule of boiling. It is more commonly roasted and smoked, then served with mushrooms.

### **Common Dishes**

A base of wheat flour and fat is often combined with beer, cheese, and a potato-based thickener in order to make beer soup.

Many people eat a dish called cluney, which is like many meals, made from wheat. Other ingredients include milk, eggs, almonds, sugar, and flower water. Mashed flowers can be used on their own or added to many different dishes. Salads, in fact, regularly include flowers.

A smithmeal is a kind of flat cake. It can be made out of any kind of grain and be of many different thicknesses. It can be eaten plain, covered with a sauce, or stuffed with meat or some other food. A dannis is a kind of smithmeal cake with a cheese filling, and is most often served with strawberries. Depending on how the harvests go, this usually ranges from "special treat which the lower classes can have, if not every day" to "sign of wealth and power." Yeast is occasionally added to smithmeal cakes.

"Wartime" or "Revel" stew is the most common name for a concoction made of scraps, leftovers, and "Hey, I don't know what this plant is called or even how it tastes, but I'm *pretty* confident that it isn't poisonous and I'm hungry enough to find out for sure," and cooked in an intestine or stomach so that proper pots aren't needed. Moakler stews are made from thin strips of tripe (usually beef) and carrots, and seasoned with parsley, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Wealthier people often add imported paprika and marjoram.

Trip-soups are generally made from a base of chicken's blood and equal amounts of sugar and vinegar. Other animals can also be used. It includes pieces of dried pears, plums, or cherries, apple vinegar, and (in more expensive recipes) honey. It is usually served with noodles, boiled potatoes, or smithmeal cakes.

Leftover foods are commonly turned into "palmer" or "handy" fritters when the opportunity presents itself. Especially since some foods can be a bit messy and the dough covering makes it a bit cleaner. The dough also adds to the meal's portability and easy storage. Despite how the

fritters are made, nearly every food in it is actually boiled.

Gelli is a soup made from soured rye flour and boiled meat, usually some kind of pork. Mended salads are made from chopped potatoes, pickles, eggs, chicken, and onions. Another potato-based dish, the kenglas, includes only a coating of butter and raw egg. Potato pancakes, with flour, egg, and onion or garlic, are common, especially when there are only scraps of this and that left of the potatoes and nothing else can really be made out of them.

Slope dumplings are made from a mixture of flour, eggs, onion juice, and salt. They are boiled in large casseroles in salted water, or in soups, and then served immediately after cooking. Popular varieties include handsome dumplings, with river fish and hard-boiled eggs instead of the usual beef. Nieves are made with chunks of potato, meat, and cottage cheese. Rider's meal is any dish made of minced fish with eggs, onions, garlic, and milk. It is fried and then rolled in breadcrumbs.

## **Beverages**

Miller's wine is any wine mixed with cinnamon and heated before serving. Despite the seasoning it is not a highly-regarded drink. Alcohols other than beer are considered to be unclean, and corruptive to both the mind and spirit. Koyjeff is generally the drink of choice for those who are low-classed enough to drink wine but not so low-classed that they can't afford cinnamon. Increasingly it is becoming a way to *fake* wealth.

While there are also several varieties of beer, another common alcoholic drink is ger's heart, which is made from black or rye bread. It is further flavored with fruits like strawberries or various seasonings. Most forms of ger's heart are made at home rather than by professional brewers.

Milk is boiled for hours, often overnight, until it has a brown crusty coating. After this is done it can be

easily stored for a couple of days without any problem, even at room temperature. Milk is rarely used even in baking before it has been boiled. In situations where fresh milk cannot be obtained for drinking purposes, which is a common enough situation, almond milk is used instead. Almond milk is considered to be only slightly inferior to the true stuff.

While the consumption of most forms of alcohol is frowned upon, there are alternatives. Helmet's juice is a drink which made from dried or fresh fruit, boiled in sugar water, and then left to sit and cool. It is not uncommon for soldiers to use their helmets for this purpose when they are not permitted alcohol. Whey is also a relatively common drink, especially among the rural communities and lower classes.

Tailor's tea is used by everyone who can afford it, which is generally anyone who isn't living from day to day. It is believed to help prevent colds, tuberculosis, and kidney problems, relieve them when they do occur, and cure dizziness, stomach problems, heartburn, and hangovers. It can be used to spice meat by soaking the meal in it. The leaves can be chewed raw for flavor. If treated properly it can also be used as a poison which first causes cramps, then paralysis, and finally, if the person is allergic, death.

## **Desserts and Luxuries**

"Sure-brook" is the name given to a popular kind of sauce, made from pounded raisins and cinnamon mixed with meat and white wine. Pears and syrup is a dish that frequently makes use of it. So do honey-cakes, which, along with fruits and syrup-filled sweetbreads, are traditionally given to guests by those who can afford it. Even poorer households will sometimes stretch themselves to the limits in order to get these supposedly minor luxuries, if they know that someone is going to be coming by.



Cakes called lackeyes are made with eggs, sugar, and ground nuts. They do not specifically use flour, but sometimes bread crumbs are used to one degree or another, so flour is at times used at a step removed. Icing is made from sugar and mixed with other seasonings. A lackeye can have several layers. Abbey bread is the name given to tiny balls of unleavened bread mixed with hazelnuts and dried fruit pieces, coated with honey.

The “bear’s gift” is a very rare dish which is usually only served on special holidays. It is a grain pudding mixed with walnuts, sugar, and raisins. Poppy seeds, honey, milk, and even rice are also frequently added. Its rarity is due in part to its customary pairing with toffee-like candies called darkbirds, which are eaten on a regular basis only by the upper classes.

### **Schedules and Dining Habits**

There are usually only two meals: dinner, which takes place around noon or the early afternoon, and supper, which takes place in the evening. As you descend through the classes on a figurative tour through society, and the more that regular physical exertion becomes necessary, the more often you will find the people eating small extra meals, and the more numerous those meals will become. It is a sign of status and power to not need any other meals than dinner and supper, in fact. In the upper classes it is traditional to have nothing but a small amount of tea or another beverage in the early morning and to have a dinner which is almost as light as one’s supper.

A more normal breakfast is eaten by people who will be working that day, including members of the lower classes, and also children and the infirm. Workers will commonly receive a vopsom, or an allowance of money to purchase some food to keep their energy up while on the job.

It is utterly disrespectful to eat on your own when there is company that you could eat with. Even

when every last one of you are strangers to each other and you only happen to be in the same place at the moment because you’re all new to the city, and you all got lost and happened to wander into the same alley, if there is someone else around when it is time to eat then you need to eat together. The only exception made to this custom is for the sick.

Dinners and other meals eaten at the workplace are held with workers, overseers, and the employer together. A rich noble and his family will dine with the household servants.

Forks are not usually present. It is expected that everyone will bring their own knife. It is a gesture of utmost respect to give someone a knife for their use at your table.

### **The Caste System**

The castes, which they call brotherhoods, are heavily stratified. Every person and every caste has a specific place in society. Each caste is divided into many subcastes, each with its own place within that caste, and there are no equals among castes or subcastes. Even the lowliest tax collector is due more respect than the greatest merchant.

Around ten subcastes will be provided for each caste. They will be accompanied by an explanation for how they’re placed where they are and a good idea on where other occupations would fall.

People cannot generally move between castes or even subcastes. When there is not enough work to go around, however, a person can fall through the cracks to the lowest of all the castes and thereby become an untouchable beggar. When this unfortunate event occurs it condemns zir posterity to be beggars as well. Most people, for *some* reason, choose death over this fate (or forging papers and joining one of the other castes).

### **The Hands Which Hold the Pen**

The highest of the brotherhoods is called Nimdokshelon, or the “hands which hold the pen.” This is the caste which is concerned with administration. Tax collectors (lomnipym) are one of the lower groups, mostly due to unpleasant associations with business and merchants. Above them are the clerks (lomgyly dyser) who handle the day-to-day affairs of administration. They pass paperwork along and act as the public face of government most of the time. They have an equivalent in the higher-ranking deacons (lomkeokam) who do the same thing for the religious orders. Ferryman (lomnilouv) are considered an integral part of keeping the government running. They’re in charge of moving along the rivers and large lakes. Footmen (lomniry) are in charge of enforcing the laws which higher subcastes issue.

Immediately above the footmen are the clock keepers (lomsav). These individuals would be part of a lower caste were it not for how vital it is that the clocks be maintained. Without proper timekeeping the government could not run half as well as it does, and this caste is made of not just those who administrate but also those who make it possible. Further up are mariners (lompolemel) who work out at sea, judges (lomuokep), navigators (lommezebodal) who also act as captains on ships, and then priests (lomepop) as the higher end of the middle is approached. Administrators (lomnimdokshel) head the equivalent of government departments (or sup-departments when very large) in towns and cities. They answer to chancellors (lomvomrisal), who can be in charge of entire population centers or similarly-sized systems.

Only nimdoksheloms can use the horse, which is a valuable and much-revered animal.

### **The Fountains**

Below them is the olouom caste. They are called “the fountains,” as fountains have long been used as symbols for sources of knowledge. Every subcaste here is involved in imparting education, even the dog trainers (olounisode).

Teachers (olaubyly) are in charge of the general education of higher-caste children with the money for schooling but not for a private tutor (subcastes do their own apprenticing for their particular jobs, however). Despite their importance, teachers are subordinate to horse trainers (olaunisode), on account of that animal’s own importance. No subcaste is more important than that of the private tutor (olaupep).

### **The Eyes Which See**

If the olouoms are fountains, then the espys are the water which issues from them. The majority of the knowledge-oriented occupations are found in this caste. For their historically unrefined origins in comparison to doctors, herbalists (espykim) have low associations. They are in fact one of the few subcastes this high which are permitted to drink alcohol of any kind. Water-scrigers (eskor-vleb), doctors who ply their trade through tasting, smelling, and testing the patient’s urine in order to discover the ailment, are similarly exempt. Astrologers (esnilopo) are not concerned solely with fortunetelling. They are actually more astronomers than anything else.

Above them are the philosophers (esouse hos), who focus primarily on ethical and religious questions. Librarians (esnymdok) watch over knowledge. Mathematicians (esouse podipadek) produce no immediately-useful knowledge, but their work is a useful foundation for the pursuits of others. Apothecaries (esonadik) rely on chemist-derived remedies rather than natural cures. They are directly below the barber-chirurgeons (esvykil). The highest subcaste belongs to the plague doctors

(esvoshok), who risk their lives in order to deal with virulent contagions and, in less pestilent times, battlefield conditions.

### **The Hands Which Build**

The nipshenoom are primarily concerned with construction. Bricklayers (shedykom) are right at the bottom, next to the roofers (sheodon). Stonemasons (sheoshody) possess more skill and demand more respect. They are placed toward the top of the middle third. Engineers (sheoglydo) and architects (shealkedik) are at the top.

### **The Smiths**

The saboms are toolmakers. Despite the meaning of their name, not every subcaste deals with metals. Bone carvers (tomdysom) are barely considered to be part of this caste. They may drink alcohol freely. Stone carvers (bomnipouad) are much higher. They are not to be confused with the stonemasons of the nipshenoom, though they often aid the latter.

Locksmiths (bomdykom) are better than stone carvers by dint of dealing with metal and a very important good. Tinsmiths (bomnodile) mainly create utensils. They are some distance below mirrorers (bomvilpem), who have their station due to the intense value of mirrors in any society which can't mass produce them. Slightly above the mirrorers are various smiths, including knife smiths (bomnerov), blacksmiths (bomshir), silversmiths (bomnilok), and blade smiths (bompimipo). Armorers (bomnipesek) are at the top of this caste. A single good piece of armor can fetch a small fortune, and some armorers are richer than some chancellors.

### **The Assemblers of Society**

The pipshyods count among their membership such alcohol-drinking dregs as the button-makers (pipshydom). More respectable are candle makers (pipnipshyod), hat makers (pipdane), and oil

makers (pippemik). Around the middle of the caste are more general clothiers (pipnokoem), leather makers (pipkised), the all-important papermakers (pipkildor), and weavers (pipnininim).

Potters (pipnilek) make things even more useful than clothes. Then there are the barrel makers (pipnokoy) and the intensely-in-demand nail makers (pipgop). A house might be burned down because it costs less to build a new house than to buy new nails for that house. Clockmakers (pippimildoe) are higher than all these. They are in turn outranked by joiners (pipgaemil), who often do repair jobs. Cabinetmakers (pipnide) are where the higher subcastes of the pipshyods truly begin.

### **The Makers from Nothing**

Shaum Zoky means something along the lines of "makers from nothing. Its members primarily deal with the creation or acquirement of raw materials and food. Brewers of alcohols (zonipshod) are the absolute lowest of their number, of course. Woodcutters (zokoy), fishermen (zomisoim), and other low subcastes are able to drink alcohol without condemnation.

Beekeepers (zonidilmok sishou) produce a substance both practical and tasty. Some distance above them are bakers (zolade) and chicken butchers (zokobemb), who are the lowest of several dedicated butchers. Then there are the cheese makers (sokigy).

Sineheards (zoshoshe) and shepherds (zobipshoso) are even more important. While stone carvers are not highly placed in their caste, stonecutters (zoshody) are. As the source for most of the food in the country, however, farmers (zonidome) are the most respected subcaste.

### **The Beautifiers**

It is in this caste that alcohol-drinking becomes more common. The smiths and the assemblers of

society only make things out of what others have created, but their products have inherent use. The nimblodems... don't, to put it simply. They are the highest of the impure-yet-touchable castes.

Books themselves are valuable but, paradoxically, those responsible for creating them are not considered to be so. Bookbinders (nimgesek) and printers (nimvid) are two of the lowest subcastes. They are below even the limners (nimsepmil), who do low-skilled painting.

Illuminators (nimpimilom), who provide the illustrations for books, are considerably better. Glass painters (nimkobo) are where they are purely due to the value of glass. They, and higher subcastes, are forbidden from having any alcohol but beer. Higher further are writers (nimnimsyer), who write parables and allegories, but also compile the information discovered by other castes. They are below the composers (nimkapnaril) and the gem cutters (nimnadam), who are the highest of all.

### **The Spreaders**

The nimbikoloms are the second of the impure-yet-touchable castes. Their low status is due to the fact that they make nothing of themselves. They only distribute the works of others, and they do this for *personal gain*, no less.

Moneylenders (nimkel) are some of the very lowest people in the caste, below even the rag and bone men (kopomireo kom) and traveling peddlers (konimgo). The fact that they are often some of the wealthiest members of the nimbikolom caste goes to show that status isn't everything. Along with the likes of cloth merchants (kokoem), spice merchants (kolipnou-lipnou), and booksellers (konimbio), they are permitted to drink alcohol.

Fuellers (kohyissil) mark the point where the subcastes begin to deal with hard infrastructure (clothes are necessary, but not in the same way as coal). They are close below hay merchants

(kogilope), who sell the inedible and uneaten portions of the harvests sold by grain merchants (koshege-she). Metals merchants (kopido) are at the top of the nimbikolom caste.

### **The Unhearing Ears**

Servile labor is not well-regarded. The Nilkuekpodoms are as far down as a person can go without losing all respectability. Unhearing ears generally serve in high-caste families or in organized businesses serving the public.

Laundriers (nikashe) and scullions (nilnembom) are the lowest of the low. Water carriers (niloel) and gardeners (nilkishim) are only slightly higher. In the mid-range are courtesans (nilnisovyl), who can be of and serve either sex, and more general servants (nilniso).

Watchmen (nilgilil dyser) and scribes (nilvovom-nip) are the lowest members of this caste who are not permitted to drink alcohol. At first it may seem odd that cup-bearers (niliko) are above even the watchmen. The reasoning may be clearer, however, when it is understood that they are expected to sample the drinks and dishes which they offer, making them a line of defense against poisoning as well.

Stablemen (nilrimirvo) take care of their employer's horses. Some distance above them are the diplomats (nilkonsapod), who manage relations between businesses, nations, households, and other groups. They have no small amount of status in their caste and are directly below the stewards (nilnisoim) who keep tabs on their employer's supplies and finances. Seneschals (nilromb) manage the entire household or business and are in charge of any other unhearing ears that may be in their employer's service.

### **The Untouchable Ones Which Writhe**

Their name is hardly a ringing endorsement. As it suggests, coming in contact with them or something that they have touched confers ritual impurity. Because of this condition of permanent ritual impurity, the perkerjaans are all allowed to drink alcohol and are the only caste allowed to hunt game. Crimes against them are rarely investigated.

Beggars (pernimbiper) are the absolute lowest subcaste in society and are forbidden from pursuing actual work. Many turn to thievery in order to survive. Reflecting a bit of prejudice against people who don't make anything, actors

(pernisokam) and acrobat-dancers (pernimole) are hardly better off.

There is a distinction between writers and storytellers (pernimkambim) in that the latter have no one to pay reliable wages to them. They must wander from town to town, ranking above acrobat-dancers but below musicians (perpyrer). Higher up are dung carters (perkovou), knackers (perkmovkil), and oysterers (perdelop). They all earn a more-or-less honest living but deal with situations considered to be filthy. Rat catchers (perdekir) are even more important. Along with oysterers they provide a source of food for other untouchables.

The very highest of the untouchables are those who are called the gravediggers (pernimbose kishil). Their connection to death causes most people to be torn between disgust, respect born from fear, and reverence.

### **Family Relations**

Families are built on a hierarchy of respect, loyalty, obedience, responsibility, and above all the hierarchy which determines who receive which of these virtues. Inferiors give obedience to their superiors, and superiors are responsible for the care

of their subordinates, for helping them, and for keeping them safe from abuse. Respect and loyalty are mutual virtues which are given by both inferiors and superiors; inferiors respect their superiors for how the latter carry out their familial responsibilities and superiors respect their inferiors for displaying obedience, while both are loyal to each other against outside influences.

Each generation is inferior to the generations which preceded it and superior to the generations which follow after it. A man is inferior to his parents, aunts, and uncles, and superior to his children, nieces, and nephews. In each generation, women hold superiority within the family while men have superiority in all matters involving outsiders. After this has been settled, birth order determines status within a single generation, taking into account the sex and birth order of the preceding generation as well. For example, take the case of three cousins, all children of different siblings, who are, respectively, a firstborn son, a secondborn son, and a fourthborn daughter. Regardless of their own birth orders or ages, the children of the fourthborn daughter are superior in intrafamilial matters, followed by the children of the firstborn son and then the secondborn son. In all matters concerning outsiders, the children of the fourthborn daughter are actually the most inferior of the three.

No matter where you may fall in the family, you always know your place.

### **Marriage**

Depending on one's situation—especially one's class in society—marriage can occur in many different ways. Among the dregs of society the predominant practice is xilgorompol, or “walking marriage.” Xilgorompol is a form of serial monogamy where both sexes remain with their respective families. Men may offer to warm the beds of women who catch their fancy, and if he is accepted then he will travel to her house around

dusk and return to his own house with the coming of morning. While these relationships can be dropped very easily it is considered bad form to carry on two or more walking marriages at the same time.

Children who have been born into a walking marriage are not considered the responsibility of their father (although it is embarrassing if the mother does not know who their father was). Instead, while men will often give gifts to their children, they are expected instead to provide for the children of their sisters. One of the beneficial effects of *xilgorompol* is that the demand for children of one sex or another does not exist on a large scale. Women are needed in order to carry on the family name (the children of your sons will not be part of your family, so it falls to the children of your daughters to carry on the family line) and men are needed in order to support the children of those women. Quite handily this avoids the common problem of preferring sons to what can be a dangerous degree. Less fortunately, this is practiced by low-class families in particular, which means that because status is not determined by wealth then there are still a great many poor families with that problem (it is not for the respectable elements of society after all, no matter how poor they are).

Marriage is typically only condoned within caste boundaries. In larger population centers, where it is possible to find a member of your subcaste who is not also a member of your family, it is very frowned upon to marry even outside of your subcaste. Sometimes it is even dangerous to do so (and of course it is *always* dangerous to marry outside of your caste, no matter how small your town is).

Most women perform at least some amount of work related to their subcaste even when they have children, especially if they are in a place which has a small population, and they certainly perform the work up until this point. This makes marriages between members of different subcastes a slightly more complicated affair than normal. When a

mixed couple has children, the daughters will belong to the subcaste of the father and the sons will belong to the subcaste of the mother. This may be a deliberate attempt to provide another way to balance out the bias for one sex over another (your son will carry on the family name, but only your daughters will carry on the family trade), although the effect is obviously muted in large communities. Whatever the original reasoning for the practice, this is one of the issues that is brought up whenever someone is trying to explain why another person erred in marrying a member of the wrong subcaste.

Women may divorce their husbands, or vice versa, with far less difficulty than in some societies. While the initiator of the divorce is expected to care for the children, most women have a working knowledge of their subcaste's trade. It may be difficult to make a living as a single mother but it is not impossible. The dower, or *pouol*, is another safety net. It is a sum of money paid by the husband to his wife, which is her property alone. The dower is typically invested in some way in order to lighten her load, should she find herself divorced or widowed.

In those classes which do not practice walking marriages, eldest sons are expected to marry and sire children. Other sons are permitted to be practically single, but for appearance's sake they must still be married... after a fashion, at least. The practice of *uomdypol*, meaning "spirit marriage," is the marrying of a living person to a dead one of the opposite sex. Because divorces are not incredibly difficult to obtain, the spirit marriage can be dissolved at a later date should the living party eventually decide to marry in a more standard manner. For the time being, however, the son is now free from any pressure to marry (unless it becomes clear that his eldest brother will not be able to carry on the family line). Spirit marriages are also performed when a widower decides to marry again. It can be considered bad luck—even deadly luck—to be the next wife of a widower, so a man will instead marry a woman who is already dead,

divorce her three days later, and then marry the woman who he is actually interested in.

Qiuomompol is another form of marriage not uncommon to this society. When families, nations, or other groups are feuding with each other, especially violently, each will marry one or more of their daughters to the family of the other. So far, so standard. Where qiuomompol differs from similar practices, though, is that this a temporary matter. Once each side has had at least one child come out of the marriage and these children have lived for at least two years, the women will divorce their husbands and return to their families. Just... not with their children. While other cultures consider it a hard thing to attack the family that your daughter has married, here it is considered to be just as hard, if not harder, to attack the family that is raising your grandchild or niece or cousin. This practice also allows the family's daughters to regain whatever independence they had before the marriage. Unfortunately, remarriage to their husbands is not an option, since it is believed that too many women would return to an unhappy marriage if that were the only way that they could be with their children.

Virginity is prized, but even is considered even more praiseworthy is participation in a qiuomompol. Certainly one is not a virgin after having returned from one of these marriages, but in exchange one has made a great sacrifice and given up a child (not to mention several years of life) for the sake of peace. It is not just an honor for a woman to have married in qiuomompol but an honor to be allowed *to marry* such a woman after she has returned.

Families with qiuomompol brides in their lineage make much to-do about it.

## Education

Education occurs in one of several ways. Firstly, wealthy and upper -caste families, especially which are involved with the government or some other

administrative or aristocratic function, will hire one or more private tutors for their children. Less -prosperous families will pay teachers to take on entire classrooms of children. In villages, towns, and small cities alike, these teaches may work on their own, but in larger population centers there are also oqokipes, or

“great schools,” where a number of teachers are organized together in order to teach groups of children. Typically, each of these will cover certain subjects that are not part of the expertise of the others.

Regardless, these kinds of education are general, rather than being specific to certain trades. Teachers of this sort are therefore used either when the parents believe that a broad education is necessary for the child to perform zir adult duties (such as when the child is expected to grow up to inherit and administrative position or noble status) or when the parents want their child to be set apart from those families which are unable to afford the education. Again, wealth is not the official basis of status here, and so it is possible for low-caste families to have enough money to pay for a good education. A tax collector's child is a member of the highest caste in society, but those who live in outlying regions will never receive the sort of education which the child of some fuellers or booksellers would be given.

Apprenticeships are the most common means of education, and they can come in one of two forms. Where it is possible, by dint of having enough people in the area who know that trade, a blacksmith's child will not be trained by zir parent but by another blacksmith (who probably knows the child's parent very well, since blacksmiths stick together, like fuellers, tax collectors, tutors, and everyone else). In smaller places, children are taught the family trade by their parents, and the duty of a mother is in fact seen less as actually rearing her children and more as giving them a proper education in the family trade. Certainly,

parental responsibilities are handed off to the person who takes the children as her apprentices, and houses, feeds, and clothes them as she would her own children (and their master is invariably a woman, unless the children were given to an unmarried man).

## Holidays

Duvelts are not proper holidays. Instead, these are workless days that are given to servants whose positions are either redundant or not vitally necessary. Most servants have five of these each year, and any number of them may be taken with at least one week's notice. Especially large households, employing more servants than usual, will give even more duvelts to their staff.

Remembrance Day, or The Remembrance of the Fallen, commemorates the deaths of soldiers who have been killed in wars. It is often connected to Liberation Day, which celebrates the (possibly mythical) date on which the country overthrew its domination by a foreign power. That this other country does not exist anymore does not prevent a certain amount of prejudice from being directed at its geographical and cultural heirs.

The Traveling Week is a holy period of time that celebrates the days during which the gods made those men and women who founded the nation. It takes place shortly after the harvest should have been completed. During this time most businesses are closed, and even many servants are given leave during this time, so people will often take advantage of the holiday to travel to family members living within a couple days' distance.

One's Naming Day is more than just an anniversary of the date of zir naming (an occasion that is more important than one's birth, because being given a name signifies being given an identity). A person's hair is associated with past events, and so the person at the focus of a given Naming Day is shorn in a special ceremony. This act frees the individual

from any supernatural afflictions which may have been acquired in the past year.

This hair-shaving ritual has something in common with Water Day, which takes place on the day after the first rain of the year. On this day people take outdoor baths in order to cleanse themselves of the spiritual filth which past misdeeds may have inflicted upon them. The baths must be taken at least partly with water from the previous day's rain (even if it is just a single drop) in order for them to have this cleansing effect.

Crossroads Day is celebrated once a year in honor of the spirits who watch over, fittingly enough, crossroads. They protect not only physical, literal crossroads but any other point where two different paths intersect, including the metaphorical crossroads of a person's life.

While crossroads of all kinds are believed to have a little bit of bad luck inherent to them, the spirits of a crossroads will scrub away this taint so long as they are properly mollified with offerings of dance and food.

Loaf Day is the festival of the wheat harvest. Farmers bring to the festival a loaf which was made from the newly-harvested first crop of wheat. Those who are paying annual rent on their land are bound to make their payments on this day.

Loaf Day is the festival of the wheat harvest. Farmers bring to the festival a loaf made from the newly-harvested first crop of wheat, and if a man is paying rent on his land then he is bound to make his payment of crop on this day.

Harvest Day is actually the festival for a second, smaller harvest, in those areas where the winter comes in late enough and the crops grow fast enough for multiple crops. Fruits, especially berries, are fully ripened shortly before Harvest Day, and the event sees a number of community



gatherings, races, and reunions with distant loved ones.

Mothering Day is not observed by many people. Its importance exists only for travelers and migrants, who make every effort to be, on this day, back in their hometowns, called the place of their mothering. It is traditional for the employers of such individuals to give a few days off to their workers in order to give them time enough to make the journey and then return after Mothering Day.

Relic Day is another festival day, celebrating any artifacts—of both religious and local significance—which are in the community's possession. Anyone can put their relics forward for display, whether they be an influential member of the clergy or a lowly beggar, and many times it can be hard to discern which, if any, are genuinely valuable; be cautious if someone claims to be on such hard times that you can not only buy a relic but can do so at a suspiciously affordable price.

## The Hiders

**Setting assumption:** Science fiction

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** If you are willing to allow the existence of aliens in your fantasy world, then the Hiders are as capable of being found by dwarves who dug too deep as they are by intrepid explorers investigating the core of a dying sun.

It is a little harder to rid them of their technology in full, but in order to slot them into a fantasy setting without having to be bothered by the presence of a greater galaxy, then they could be an old predecessor race, perhaps even the creators of the presently-existing civilizations. Having created or come across some terrible force, however, they fled to inhospitable regions of the world (volcanoes, the ocean depths, and so forth) and minimize the use of their magic in order to evade detection. Perhaps these Hiders even have a bit more hope, if it is possible for them to just outlast whatever it is that they fear.

And if one wished, they could just easily be discovered somewhere on Earth (or, more likely, *in* the Earth).

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They discovered the secrets of fire a billion years ago. Agriculture, scarcely a millennium later. They split the atom five thousand years after that, and then it was less than five hundred years before they came onto the galactic scene.

And nobody else has ever noticed anything but the smallest fragment of their civilization.

Technically, each of those fragments is its own civilization. Some of them have not had contact with anyone since they dispersed all of those millions of years ago. But they have stagnated in some ways (and have done so intentionally), and so they remain nearly identical to each other. It was one of the many decisions which they made in order to preserve their species, in this case from themselves—how could they recognize each other and so avoid conflict if they had no commonalities after thousands or even millions of years without contact?

Essentially they are paranoids. As far as most species can perceive it they are emotionless. They base their decisions instead on a coldly-calculated prudence, like interstellar octopi. That prudence told them that the universe had already had billions of years in which to produce another civilization, and that even a difference of a couple of thousand years between the two would present a technological gulf that the younger of the two would never be able to surmount. Unfortunately, if both sides had reached a minimum level of progress then neither side would be able to survive. By the point that relativistic kill vehicles were feasible, weapons only became more destructive and ever harder to defend against.

While others may think that they overreacted, the Hiders considered the most reasonable response to be to, well, hide.

And hide they did. They hid in every manner possible so that if one group failed it would not doom the whole species. They accelerated to relativistic speeds in the hope of going so far that all other possible life had gone extinct. They constructed carefully-designed Dyson spheres around unsettled solar systems, whose emissions blended into the cosmic background radiation and were thus utterly undetectable except by the pull of gravity. They have made rogue stars out of red

dwarfs, which they follow through the void. Others are hiding out there between the stars as quiet as mice, and come near a star system (always a different one!) just once in a millennium, harvesting just enough from the system's Oort Cloud to survive for another length of time. They have burrowed beneath the surface of inhospitable planets like our Mercury, hollowed-out the diamond cores of carbon-based worlds, and devised ways to protect their ships in the core of a star.

### Physiology

The Hiders most closely resemble a centipede out of all the organisms to live on Earth, except that the Hiders are ten feet long, two feet high (but capable of rearing up to a height of six feet), and have two pairs of translucent, vestigial wings. Their eyesight is decent enough, though it is focused almost entirely on ultraviolet light, but

their primary senses are touch and hearing (which is just an extension of touch anyway, since it depends on vibrations). This arrangement more than suits the Hiders, whose very distant ancestors did indeed love the light but whose even more recent pre-sentient ancestors were derived from burrowing stock. These predecessors, the Homo Erectus to the Hiders' Homo Sapiens, relied on billions of stiff hairs to give them a perfect awareness of the tight tunnels in which they lived. On their nocturnal excursions to the world above, made when it was time to mate or when ambushing prey near and in their tunnels didn't supply enough food, the Hiders' ancestors employed a form of echolocation.

Hiders are hermaphroditic but not necessarily asexual. A Hider that is bereft of mates will still reproduce but it is also capable of mating more than twenty times and can incorporate genetic information from all of its mates into the next



generation. This is partly due to the large number of offspring that a Hider will have but also because the information from one mate will overwrite some of the information from another mate, leading to a child that genuinely has more than two parents that have contributed to its make-up.

Modern Hiders heavily regulate reproduction in their resource-scarce society, so that only a minority of the population will ever be given a release from sterilization. Fewer still will ever be granted that release for a season on multiple occasions. The contents of each egg sack will then be carefully examined and as few as sixteen embryos from each egg sack (out of as many as nine hundred eggs) will be allowed to survive.

### Resources

The Hiders are omnivores. Nevertheless, they prefer a mostly carnivorous diet. And yet in the interest of efficiency their present diet does not reflect this. They have an even greater preference for avoiding extinction, after all. Their primary (nearly sole) food source is a slightly-engineered vat-grown substance similar to algae, whose closest pronunciation is “cayer.” It can survive off of the most basic substances and can process many forms of waste matter, both biological and otherwise. This is a very good thing since the Hiders are endless re-users and recyclers.

This alga is, in the whole civilization, the only other organism present alongside the Hiders. Nothing else proved to be efficient and useful enough to preserve (and “preserve” is exactly the right word to use, because the Hiders pushed their world into its star so that nobody could come across it later and start wondering where its inhabitants had gotten off to). Besides the algae the Hiders make one tiny indulgence in eating their dead instead of rendering the corpses down for the vat-forms. Only the most productive and valuable members of the enclave are granted the privilege of this meal more than once. Everyone else gets just a small

amount upon reaching adulthood, so that they know what they are missing and will strive to get it again.

Below this level on the energy pyramid the enclaves differ from one another in how they supply themselves. They range from the resource-rich (but still miserly) enclaves inside of stars to poorer, much hungrier enclaves that rely on the core heat of a dying world or must subsist on what they can from the interstellar (or even intergalactic) dust. Some are even worse off than all of that and have *no* means of resupplying themselves. When the lights go out for these, they will have gone out forever.

### A Philosophy for Survival, of Survival

There are a number of things that could have made the Hiders’ task much easier. Simply redesigning a few minor points of brain structure (especially the parts in the third segment of the body—the brain runs through the whole thing) would drastically reduce the frequency of mental illness. Other minor changes would have drastically affected mortality rates, and greater changes would allow them to survive their harsh environments with greater ease.

Nevertheless, they have made no such changes. How are they to recognize each other should two enclaves meet each other by chance after eons of separation? Though it is scarcely considered anymore, the first Hiders did entertain the fantasy of being able to last until such a time that they could be sure that any other potential civilizations had died out, perhaps through the same internal warfare which the Hiders are striving to avoid. It was with this idea that some of the enclaves took to relativistic speeds and hoped to get as close to the end of time as they could—besides all of this, *they* want survive. Perhaps it was the nature of species to change but it was also in their nature to be conquered and overcome if they were less powerful, and the Hiders were trying to avoid that one too. If their species were to change so much as

to become another one entirely then how could they be said to have survived.

(Somewhere along the line, the Hiders must have gone crazy.)

The one change which they allowed was one that drastically reduced the rate of genetic mutation. Controls on reproduction are there solely to reduce it even further. Only a very few rare mutations are allowed to survive, and where possible these mutations are spread to other enclaves in the hope that by doing so the Hiders will not experience any significant genetic drift.

Only the most minor of development is allowed and all within carefully-determined parameters that may not be crossed.

Another cut-off source of potential is complex A.I. The Hiders determined, ages ago, that it was too much of a risk to their civilization. A couple of pre-diaspora incidents convinced them that any artificial intelligence complex enough to escape whatever restrictions and limitations had been set for it. It would not necessarily destroy them but if it did not then it did not because it *chose* so, rather than because it *could* not. And it was not in the capacity of the Hiders to tolerate existing solely on the sufferance of another entity. Every moment would be spent in the fear that something might go wrong or that it might change its mind. If they were taking pains to avoid attracting the notice of a force capable of annihilating them then they had to take pains to avoid creating such a one as well.

### **Communication**

The Hiders needed to be absolutely invisible if they were going to survive. There was no telling just how carefully attentive their neighbors were. Every year, too, widened the gap between those who had come before them and closed it between those who had come after the Hiders, because much scientific research took resources that the Hiders did not

have or it had the potential to attract notice. The Hiders knew, moreover, that, had they developed early enough to conclude that they were the first to do so then they certainly would have kept a close eye on the rest of the universe. But leaving the enclaves with some amount of connectedness might be helpful. What was decided was for some of the enclaves to be cut off from the others and for some to be in contact with certain others but none outside of a particular group. If communication were useful then it would be able to help the Hiders, but if it were ultimately disastrous then only a subset of the enclaves would fall.

No enclave knows the location or path of any other enclave. Those that are in communication with others, however, may sometimes leave messages in a dead-drop fashion. When the situation is appropriate an enclave will take some inconspicuous matter and inscribe the necessary message, on a microscopic scale and in a code known only to the enclave that it is in communication with. If an enclave is in communication with others, then it will regularly scan over material that it comes across to search for possible messages.

It isn't much, but perhaps it's better than nothing.

### **What Little Remains**

The really unfortunate thing is that, in their attempt to survive no matter the cost, the Hiders have paid a very dear cost indeed. They have focused entirely on survival at any price to the extent that, in a manner of speaking, this endeavor is the sum of their culture. They survive yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and perhaps until the stars have burned out and the atoms begin to fall apart, but when they have survived every other living then what will they do next? Continue to survive, and probably without any difference in their lifestyle or standard of living. By the time that they feel safe in living out of hiding they will not have the resources to spare the luxury

of redeveloping a complex culture. At present they deny riches because stealth often requires that they pass it all up. In the future those riches will have been spent up by others and long decayed.

The Hiders have their songs, which fit into a very old and well-developed musical style. They have a minor superstition about ghosts, a few folk tales, and some magical traditions which survive as a handful of fragmented details (and which may just as likely be the dim memories of yet other folk

tales). Even their histories are sparse, and many enclaves do not concern themselves with anything that has happened in the long years of nothing-but-survival, so that their history effectively ends at the diaspora and there is only a long darkness from that time until living memory.

One must wonder if the Hiders have suffered extinction despite (and because of) their best efforts.

## Hijawel

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** First of all, as described below, it would be a simple matter to convert the hijawel from “werejaguars” to a number of other animals. The hijawel would be hard to justify in most sci-fi settings but could easily be transplanted to Earth. If the story is set in modern times, then either they have had to change their M.O. or they are on the verge of extinction. Possibly both.

If there are were-creatures of the traditional sort (that is, their condition is infectious) then they will likely be mistaken for that sort, with all the good and bad which that implies. If there are other were-creatures of *any* sort then the hijawel will probably relate to them on a special level, but they could be extra aggressive as easily as they could be more pleasant with these other shifters. If they could possibly be made to be friendlier with neighboring peoples then they could easily find a niche as interpreters, given their knack for languages, but that might take some doing.

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The hijawel (sing: hijaw) are a species of shapeshifters. They are able to change from human to jaguar, or vice versa, in a couple of minutes, with no stable intermediate form. Flesh seems to change shape and color as smoothly as flowing water. To the hijaw, the process is painless, even relaxing. The condition is innate, not infectious, and they can breed among themselves as easily as they can with humans and jaguars.

Their mindset is what you might expect to see in a synthesis of human and jaguar. In many cases, only

minor changes should be necessary to adapt this culture to a different animal form.

It will work best if the species is predatory and not extremely social, however. Their society has been designed with the assumption that, being a cross between one species which is quite sociable and another which is decidedly less so, the hijawel would develop a society somewhere in-between. Bears, tigers, and perhaps even crocodiles would be good choices, alth. Wolves, lions, or leopard tortoises would be decidedly less so. The first two would have tighter tribes, and the third is not exactly known for carnivorous tendencies.

They are organized into tribes of twenty to thirty members, but these groups may be best-described as loose cooperatives. The members operate on their own more often than not but band together for activities which would benefit from numbers. The cooperative shares a common area where hijawel will go if they want to be assured of meeting another member of the tribe. On any given day there will be at least one hijaw sleeping there.

In order to prevent themselves from depopulating their territories of prey, they move around whenever the hunting gets light. This means that while they can easily have been a fixture in the local region for a long time, they are also perfectly capable of turning up in an entirely new area. They will go wherever the hunting leads them.

As noted before, hijawel tribes are very mobile, sometimes taking a specific path around a wide region, swinging back around and completing the circle every few years, while others wander more or less aimlessly and just go where the hunting is good, especially if the entire region back home is suffering a decline in prey.

## Tools

Any hijaw can make basic tools, but some are better-skilled than others. Talented craftsmen can provide higher-quality goods than others in the cooperative would otherwise have. They trade these in exchange for other things, such as food, or even tools which that craftsman doesn't know how to make as well.

Hijawel change forms frequently, but clothing is unaffected by the change, which poses the obvious question of how they are to carry their tools. The solution, embraced wholeheartedly by the shapeshifters, is to use a pack. It doesn't quite enter "ingenious design" territory, but any hijaw can be counted on to be in possession of a pack with adjustable straps and extra pockets on the outside. A well-made, durable pack is one of the most prized possessions which a hijaw can have, and one member of the cooperative is usually responsible for making packs for the others.

Other tools which can be counted on to be in a hijaw's possession are knives (most for preparing food) and hand axes (for attacks in human form). The hijawel of some cooperatives make several axes each, specially designed for throwing, while others make throwing sticks, sometimes inserting a lining of edged bone or stone, or sharpening the wood itself.

The emphasis in hijaw culture is on small objects in order to maximize how much can be fit into a pack. Long and thin objects which can be easily fit through a strap (like a throwing stick) are also common.

## Communication

It would be a mistake to characterize the written form of the hijawel as primitive or underdeveloped. The script contains only some three hundred symbols, each representing a different concept, but any hijaw would be happy to state that those three

hundred symbols are exactly as many as they would ever need. Written records are simply considered unnecessary most of the time, and in fact would only be dead weight. Being on the move as often as they are, books are often worse than useless. The hijawel script, which they scratch out with claws or knives, is most often used to mark trails or territory boundaries, or leave short notes in the commons area for an absent member of the cooperative.

The hijawel also possess two spoken languages, called kal and kakesh, which are used in their human and jaguar forms respectively. Kal is by far the more complex of the two. Kakesh has about eight hundred words, and to an untrained observer it is indistinguishable from growling. A hijaw can try to use kakesh in human form but the result will sound slurred, and ze will have to take care to be especially slow and clear in order to make sure of being understood. Whether ze speaks in kakesh or in kal, a hijaw's voice is distinctive enough (to other hijawel) to serve as an identifier. Every human has a unique set of fingerprints and, so far as they are concerned, every hijaw has a unique voice signature.

A final form of language demonstrated by the hijawel is entirely musical in nature. Thigh-bones are the most common material used in the construction of the tukubol, a sort of flute which is used not simply for the purpose of music-making but also for the telling of stories. The first language which a young hijaw learns is kakesh, but after this is okeebil, the language of the tukubol flute, so that the child can understand the stories of zir tribe.

The production of tukubolel is generally done by a single hijaw. A tukubol -maker does not craft a mere instrument but a work of art, with unique etchings covering every square inch of the object. Those who are most well-versed in the tukubol stories are called kojomenilel (sing: kojomenil). By its nature the cooperative is a usually anarchic or voluntaryist gathering of individuals who, as the term suggests, cooperate when the need arises but



otherwise try to not get in each other's way. These two roles, together with the pack-maker, occupy a unique place in the otherwise nonexistent hierarchy of the cooperatives. They have no official standing, but they have the authority of one who is greatly respected.

Learning several languages is no problem for the hijawel. Indeed, it's not really a problem for human children either, and there are some similarities between the two. The language center of the hijaw brain simply doesn't ever let up. This is a great boon to the migratory hijawel, who may have to learn many languages from scratch over the course of a lifetime.

One might reasonably suspect that they developed so many languages simply because their brain was screaming to be exerted even more than it already was. This section doesn't even begin to go into the codes which are shared between siblings, twins, children and their mothers, or the members of a cooperative. All through their lives they devour languages like a particularly well-seasoned piece of meat, and the ease with which they learn new languages causes them to treat the matter almost as a game. Indeed, for some hijaw cooperatives it truly is a game, and members of the cooperative compete to create the most complex or interesting language. If it garners respect, then it may inspire new variants, like linguistic pastiches, but ultimately the whole "genre" will be abandoned entirely, and with little fanfare, to be replaced by the next attraction.

### **Hunting, Diet, and Parasite-Spirits**

Hijawel are principally meat-eaters who will eat anything if it's large enough, and many anythings if it isn't. They have a special taste, though, for those species which are closest to them: humans and jaguars. This is partly literal, as the hijawel genuinely consider these two to taste better than any other prey animal. Humans and jaguars are also their chief competitors for food, and so killing one not

### **Jugging and storage clamps**

The process of *jugging* begins with putting small pieces of meat in an earthenware container. Brine, blood, or gravy may be added, and the whole concoction is stewed. Red wine vinegar may be added to prevent coagulation of the blood. It's basically like pickling. Except gorier.

A *storage clamp* is a heap of root vegetables (sometimes as high as six feet), covered with a two-to-three-inch layer of dirt. Some sort of covering, like grass or straw, can be used to reduce erosion, and may also be used as a bed for the plants.

If made well, the contents of the storage clamp should last for months, but become progressively less useful as heat and humidity increase. A narrowly-constructed storage clamp can be easily harvested over a period of time.

only nets one a meal now, but reduces the amount of non-hijawel on the hunt. To be clear, this is not to say that the hijawel prey exclusively or even mostly on humans or jaguars. Both of those are top predators, and any species that made a business out of eating only top predators would be on very shaky ground, all of the time. These two species are simply preferred. Hijawel will take humans and jaguars when and where they can get some, but they will be satisfied with any other kind of meat.

Werejaguars hunt primarily around dawn and dusk. They prefer to stalk and ambush their prey, and if it is necessary they are able to follow their chosen target for days without being detected. Both shapes are used throughout the hunt, depending on which would be the most suitable at any point along the way, and this makes their carrying packs quite useful.

Whether they attack as jaguars, using their powerful jaws to crush bone, or as humans, using axes or one of the other weapons in their possession, they go for the head and aim to break through the skull. Hijawel strike from above when the environment

allows them to do so, which it often does, since they are most commonly encountered in jungles or forests.

The idea is to knock their victim to the ground and then immediately strike the head.

After a successful kill the victim is brought to a secluded area and the hijaw begins to butcher the corpse and render it down to many pieces. Unless circumstances do not allow it, for reason of either limited time or an inability to make a fire, the hijaw will cook most of the meat. Usually only what can be fit into the pack will be left alone. If the hijaw is already well-fed and is comfortable with preserving and hiding the leftovers in the general area, though, additional meat may be left over.

Once the hijaw is finished with these matters all that is left will be the bones, cracked open and emptied of their marrow, and the heart and lungs of the shapeshifter's victim. While the hijawel do not have a complex faith system, many cooperatives believe in the existence of spirits called chikinoyel, which latch on invisibly to other living things and drain them of their vitality. It is this process, called chikob vibil, which causes the infirmities that are associated with old age. In an attempt to sate any chikinoyel which may be attached to zem, the heart and lungs are left uneaten so that the chikinoyel can grow full on that instead. The hijawel grow old and weak anyways, but it is simply understood that no hijaw is able to hunt with enough regular success that ze can keep zir chikinoyel fed entirely on hearts and lungs.

Hijawel are intensely familiar with the properties of the plants in any territory which they have inhabited for long enough, even if they do not often eat plants. Some tribes have grown to add poison to their repertoire of weapons. There are less deadly applications to their horticultural knowledge, however. Many hijawel develop a liking for certain seasonings and carry some with them in their packs (another benefit of living in a cooperative is that

one will hear of new sources of favored seasonings that much faster). Plants which are unusually high in nutrients will also be consumed, especially in lean times. If a plant can be easily preserved, all the better.

Food is preserved through several different methods. Meat and blood is jugged in earthenware containers and then placed underground to make sure that others will not steal it. Plant matter can be dealt with in the same manner, but storage clamps are also common. These are usually located in the cooperative's common area so that there will always be at least one person on hand if something goes about disturbing the stored food.

### **Breeding and Life Cycle**

While the hijawel generally keep to breeding amongst themselves they are capable of intermixing with humans and jaguars. The hijawel themselves have a sort of passive awareness that there is a danger in not bringing in new blood from time to time, but most cooperatives live too far apart from each other to be easily accessible for mating purposes. Accordingly, any region which has had a hijaw population for at least a decade will have stories of wild strangers with eyes the color of dying leaves. Those who have had local populations for longer will also note that when the stranger is made, he will often return for the child.

Certain villages are known to have arrangements of one sort or another with the local cooperative, to the effect that they are safe from predation so long as these strangers are left untroubled and their children are protected. Most communities recognize the connection between these strangers and the half-jaguar beasts who often prey on their neighbors, but to deal unkindly (to say nothing of dealing violently) with them or their offspring is to bring down the wrath of the rest of the cooperative. Besides, as mentioned, a village once-visited will be visited again, and even in the absence of formal

agreements there is a noticeable link between regular visitations and safety from the hijawel.

There is only a sixty-percent chance of the child being a hijaw. In the case of children born to human or jaguar mothers, the only sign of their shifty heritage will be their yellow eyes, the dull autumn yellow of a hijaw. They will change shape for the first time at any point between early childhood and middle-age, at which point they begin to age like hijawel. In hijaw mothers, if the child is not also a hijaw, then it will be miscarried within the first month.

Should mother and child both be hijawel, however, then the pregnancy will last just short of five months. During most of this time the mother will be able to change shape freely. For the last three weeks, however, she will have to remain in her jaguar form. At the end of this period she will give birth to a pair of cubs, which will usually be done in the common area of the cooperative. For some time following this event there will be several females in the common area at any one time, and males (who can have a tendency toward infanticide) are denied the right to be anywhere close to the area.

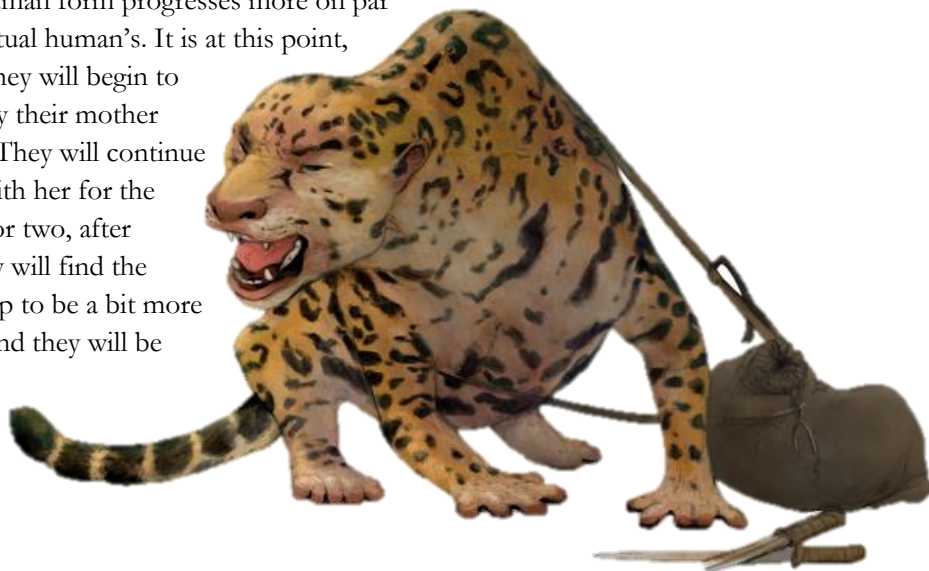
The cubs are blind for the first two weeks and are able to change shape after their sixth week. They initially look to be about six or seven years old in their human form. By the sixth month their appearance could be judged to be twelve or thirteen years old, at which point the physical development of their human form progresses more on par with an actual human's. It is at this point, too, that they will begin to accompany their mother on hunts. They will continue to work with her for the next year or two, after which they will find the relationship to be a bit more strained, and they will be

treated like any other member of the cooperative.

They grow old quickly as well; a forty-year old hijaw is no fitter than a human would be in his seventies. While damage to the teeth and claws is not as serious for hijawel as it is for jaguars, given their ability to use tools instead, the overall degradation of ability which they suffer causes most hijawel to die in their mid-thirties.

Despite their short lives, however, they are not to be underestimated mentally. A hijaw which looks to be twenty years old will be only seven or eight at most, and at best is only a few years older than that on an emotional level. They learn *extremely* rapidly, however. Even at the end of their lives hijawel pick up new skills and languages at an astonishing pace. A hijaw which finds zemsself placed in an entirely new area can become totally fluent in the local tongue in a matter of months.

They have keen minds for technology as well, and anyone who would seek to trick a hijaw would do well to remember that they notice very, very much, and that the general simplicity of their tools is a result of their mobile lifestyle and not an inability to learn how to make more complex tools.



## Iditt

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Greek

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Locating the city near or at wetlands, high altitudes, or cold climates will have specific effects on the city, as mentioned in “Other Methods of Mummification.” The first is an especially good idea if you’re planning for the city to be in the process of industrialization. Peat bogs are full of, well, peat, which yields up to 17 megajoules of energy per pound, compared to 24 megajoules from coal—lower, but comparable.

Or perhaps, for a science fiction setting, the people of Iditt are making use of advanced medical technology. The brain cannot be preserved, at least not in a fashion which also preserves the personality, but the body can be kept more or less functional. Whether the brain is degraded or has been replaced by a computer, the corpses of the dead can be used for basic tasks. One might wonder if this is very efficient, compared to making more traditional automata, but perhaps the people of Iditt have an aesthetic or even religious motivation for reusing the dead.

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Iditt is a city of necromancers. Its inhabitants are entirely dependent on corpse labor and use it in

every industry. For this reason, they live in a world unlike any that is lived by their neighbors.

### Families and Governance

The city is democratic, with most positions in the government determined by vote. These positions have associated assistant positions, assigned by appointment. Each family is a single entity for the purpose of voting, and the vote is cast by the family’s patriarch (or by his mother, if he is dead and the one who would have succeeded him is not yet thirty years old). Women marry into and become a part of their husband’s family. Each family has a collective soul which is said to persist after death—it is believed that every member of the family is eventually joined with this soul in a nirvana-like state (for the individual souls, that is, rather than the family soul itself, which is fully aware). The deeds of each component part of the family soul serve to weigh it down into damnation or elevate it into euphoria, and both states are being experienced at once. The family soul is suffering pain in proportion to its sins and experiencing peace in proportion to its virtuous acts.

There are no prisons in Iditt. Any criminals are flogged, fined, or executed. Fines are more common by default, and if the criminal cannot pay then ze will receive a number of floggings equal to the value of the difference. A citizen who has been flogged at least four hundred and ninety-two times is executed and then raised from the dead. If ze has caused offense to only one person, then the proceeds of zir post-risen work are given to that one party. If offense has been made to many parties, then the earnings are divided between them in proportion to the grievousness of each offense.

### The City at War

The city is neutral in the wars and conflicts which afflict its neighboring city-states. Iditt acts only

when its interests are threatened. It is possible to seek asylum at the city for sixty-four days, but the city will expel you after this.

Despite their neutrality, there is one time when they can be counted on to deploy even when they are not directly endangered. Years of training are required before one can even hope to be licensed as a necromancer (it is perhaps as difficult as becoming a taxi cab driver in London), and the license must be renewed every four years. Necromancers who practice their craft illegally are painfully killed and then rebuilt into monstrosities called cruels. Each one is a unique and abhorrent work, usually made from multiple illegally-practicing necromancers, and they represent the pinnacle of what necromancy is capable of doing: too many arms, mouths ripped open all over the body and filled with sharpened teeth, and spiked armor created from bones and cloaks made from human leather.

It takes immense medical knowledge and effort to make these constructs work. The point, however, is not to efficiently manufacture soldiers but to make an example of unlicensed necromancers. The cruels are usually kept in storage, where they are carefully maintained until it is time to acquire another body for raw materials. The city holds no allowances for even outsiders. It is when foreigners are practicing necromancy that the city's armies are at their largest, with the cruels leading them to show their targets what fate inevitably has in store for them. And inevitable it is, no matter what is done. There was once a necromancer whose army was able to fight long enough for him to escape into hiding. The city's investigators found and unearthed his bones after searching for eighty-four years.

In modern times the cruels are often used in surgical strikes. They retrieve the necromancer so that ze might be killed over a long period of time, and after the necromancer has been obtained the rest of the army moves in to crush whatever city had harbored the criminal.

Wartime is probably the most horrifying time, despite all that goes on even when the city is at peace. There are corpses with plate armor sewn into their skin and knives replacing their teeth and affixed to their fingers. There are horses which never tire, and have scythes protruding from their sides, with which they cut down the city's enemies as they charge through the ranks.

There are fighting hounds and wolves with steel jaws that lock in place, and multiple rows of barbed teeth which tear as they are pulled out of flesh. Cosmetic mutilation and tattoos are used to inspire fear in enemies. The city meticulously maintains something called The Cloud, a swarm of two thousand eight hundred and sixteen locusts and other biting insects, which is deployed to sow chaos in sieges and other important conflicts.

### **Other Undead**

Undead rats see battlefield use but they are more often used as pest killers. Heads mounted on walls and poles act as sentries. Lip reading is used to communicate with them, with prosthetic lips for heads whose flesh is rotting away. Sometimes they are intended as alarm systems, and the upper chest and lungs are included so that they can scream at the sight of an intruder. A few of these are taught like a dog (albeit one capable of talking) and ask questions or demand passwords.

There are assembly lines staffed by endless rows of arms and corpses, hollowed out so that their masters may place things inside them. Few people bother with things like *bags*, for that matter—headpurses are especially fashionable right now. There are also remote viewing heads, whose bodies write out what they see, and animate hands that operate by touch and scour the city in search of what their masters have requested. There are messenger birds and delivery dogs, all mundane enough in appearance until one gets close enough



### Family souls for real

The concept of the “family soul” in Iditt is presented here as a mere spiritual position. It may be wrong, it may be right, and probably it’s the first one. Either way, though, it’s in the same class of beliefs as Plato’s Forms.

What if there were something tangible to it, however? Iditt’s necromancy is presented as not being able to produce anything capable of complex thought, but it need not be that way. Perhaps all raised corpses have something of their original intelligence, or perhaps there is another spell which is simply used far less often. The possibility that is most interesting to me, and which explains why family souls exist as they do, is that higher cognition is only capable when a certain physical mass is reached.

No matter how it works, Iditt makes the family soul a physical thing by grafting together the brain matter of its dead. The result is a new identity, greater than the sum of its parts but not without an awareness of those once-disparate selves. It is at once each of those beings and something more than them.

These family souls are held in deep vaults called “cathedrals of the soul,” where they can be kept safe. Citizens of Iditt regularly descend to the cathedral of their family soul to pay homage and get counsel. The wisest family souls are consulted even by government officials.

to see that the message has been sewn inside their empty bodies.

Every family has a corpse to perform normal service. They may replace its fingers with utensils when it is time to cook: nobody cuts the vegetables as quickly as a man who has knives on his fingers. The practice is old enough that it is unclear whether this was inspired by the battlefield use of knife-fingered corpses, or if it was the other way around.

### Fashion

Beauty is a strange thing in this city. Death is attractive. This is not to say that suicide is in fashion, however. It isn’t like that. Acceptance of the inevitability of death, however, is mainstream, and the city’s inhabitants act accordingly.

Agedness is tied not only to wisdom but to death as well. Gray or white hair is common even on the heads of people so young that they need to use powder to get that color. Paleness is prized. Calluses are intentionally acquired because of the attractiveness of toughened flesh, and salt is rubbed into the skin for the same reason. Scars are not loved, however. The dead do not heal, so they do not scar. The Iditti therefore go to great lengths to make sure that wounds heal without any trace.

### Preparing for Death

It is of the utmost importance that each person, as death approaches, makes sure that zir corpse will be intact. It must be of maximum utility to the people who will be left behind. This is the most important act that any citizen will perform, and even a great person might be damned in the family soul if ze was perfectly capable of preparing zemself yet failed to do so. The process begins when the citizen either reaches the age of sixty or begins to suffer from some incurable, lethal or disfiguring disease like leprosy.

The preparation starts with spending one thousand and twenty-four days (one hundred and twenty-eight sets of eight) eating a diet made of nothing but salt, nuts, seeds, roots, and bark and engages in intense exercise in order to shed as much fat as possible.

After this has been accomplished there is a second stage—also one thousand and twenty-four days in length—in which the diet is further restricted to only salt, roots, and bark, and a drink called broda.

The tea's main ingredient is the poisonous sap from a nearby species of tree.

It causes vomiting and diarrhea so that the drinker will lose bodily fluids even faster, and causes the body to become unpalatable to all manner of pests from rats to maggots. It even kills many bacteria in the body.

Then comes the third stage, when one is locked in a stone room, barely large enough to fit into let alone move around in. The rest of the room is packed with salt, and then it is sealed tight. Sixteen days later, the tomb is reopened and the corpse is given over to the necromancers.

Despite the care that is taken to make sure that every corpse begins its existence as functional as possible, not all of them are in working order. It is mainly a matter of age. Eventually, wear and tear just cannot be repaired any longer, especially if the corpse has seen combat. When this happens, its bones are taken to be made part of one of the great cathedrals which are scattered around the city. Each cathedral is the center of one of the great philosophical schools that the city has birthed. They are based on foundations and walls of mortar and stone, but are ornamented with bones, which are used to make everything from bizarre sculptures and chandeliers to benches and stair railings.

### **Cuisine**

The variety of food in Iditt tends toward simpler fare. Grains, of course, and all kind of sourdough and flat breads. Nuts are frequently flavored with spices. Orchards and vineyards are maintained and harvested by the dead, and their crop is either eaten as it comes or turned into cider or a mash. Most alcoholic drinks are made from fruit. Strong beer (called "danar") is very rare.

Andikit is a sourdough bread made from rye flour, chopped rye kernels, and linseeds. Expensive

versions substitute beer for water and may add barley malt. Another variant is marhanna, which is made of a mix of ground rye and whole rye berries. Mortain is a flatbread whose dough is left to ferment before baking. It may be eaten with eggs, honey, or stew. Gulick has a filling of bean paste.

### **Philosophies**

Because the dead handle most of the labor necessary to maintain the city, necromancy has created a large leisure class. The living generally either work the administrative jobs which keep the government running or they are necromancers—the richest and most powerful class in the whole city, so essential they are.

Others are involved in creative pursuits. Iditt is an artistic powerhouse with many old traditions and many more philosophical schools. The leisure class has created an environment that is conducive to thinking and creativity, whether it be used to develop mathematical concepts, master forms of art, or consider philosophy. The last of these is by far the most popular and influential product of the city. There are hundreds of Iditti philosophy schools, or "styles" (as in being a style of thinking about the world), which have been developed since necromancy became dominant in the city. Many of them are concerned with a particular aspect of the world, so that one may adhere to multiple styles without fear of inconsistency.

### **The "World-As" Styles**

To many Iditti the most important question is about the state of the world. What is it like? What *is* it? There are three philosophical styles which have arisen in order to answer that question.

The World-As-Organism style claims that the world is a living thing with its own life force. Other living beings are smaller manifestations of the world that are separate from but also part of the world and which must live in balance with it. Each



party strengthens the other so that, by strengthening the spirit of the world, people in turn strengthen themselves, and by strengthening other people the world is strengthened. Charity is emphasized here for reasons of enlightened self-interest. Whatever one does to help others will indirectly help oneself, while whatever harm one inflicts will indirectly harm oneself. *This*, say proponents of World-As-Organism style, is the nature of the peace and damnation of the family soul. Where the World-As styles are concerned, this is the dominant philosophical style.

According to the philosophers who support World-As-Corpse style, the world *was* a living thing but now is dead. Living things are, far from being integral parts of a system that includes the spirit of the world, nothing more than maggots ambulating on a dead thing of titanic proportions. Conservation of resources is essential, because corpses neither grow nor replace parts of themselves that have been consumed. Once the world has been fully consumed and there is nothing left, civilization will collapse and all living things will starve. This is not a happy style of thinking.

The last of these styles is World-As-Inanimate. The world may be neither living nor once-living, but this does not mean that it is static. Far from it, say this style's adherents. Just as rivers are continually replenished by rainwater, so too is the world a self-replenishing system. It does not always replenish itself quickly. This means that, while there should be no fear of resources being permanently used up, care must be taken to harvest them more slowly than they replenish themselves. This philosophical has much in common with World-As-Corpse, but lacks the inherent nihilism. There is no inherent meaning to the world, the style agrees, but it does not follow that meaning cannot be created. Unlike its pessimistic sibling, this style does not deny the existence of the family soul (common among World-As-Corpse philosophers). It claims that the terms of the family soul's peace and damnation are determined by society, whose beliefs subtly

### Self-Mummification in Buddhism

The method of mummification practiced by Iditt is adapted from the Shingon school of Buddhism in Japan. The differences between the two processes are described below:

Each of the first two stages lasts for one thousand days, not 1,028. Some grains might be eaten, in addition to what is described in "Preparing for Death." Some monks apparently also swallowed small rocks.

The sap in the second stage comes from the urushi tree and functions as a kind of embalming fluid. It is made into tea.

The third stage also lasts for one thousand days. It does not involve being packed with salt. Instead of suffocating, the monks are starved. Each day the monk rings a bell from inside the room so that it is known when the monk died. At the end of this stage the monk is removed and the state of the body is discovered.

Self-mummification as the Shingon practiced it was not always certain. The greatest amount of success came from the Shingon of Yudono. The water from this mountain contains high levels of arsenic. Like urushi sap, this arsenic would have remained in the body and further decreased its hospitability for the microorganisms involved in decomposition.

Self-mummification has also been practiced in China and India, and the Shingon method may have been devised by Taoists. The Taoist tradition believed that self-mummification was not suicide but a means of attaining immortality. Many who practiced this devotion believed that the self-mummified were merely in a deep trance, and that they would reawaken in several billions of years at a time when their services would be needed.

influence the component parts of the family soul, and whose guilt or lack thereof in their actions is what determines their experiences. It is therefore imperative to train people to feel peace from what

is desirable for society and to feel guilt from that which is undesirable.

### **Ethical Styles**

Absolutism switches between periods of complete abstinence and utter indulgence. They indulge in order to quell their baser instincts. After they have finished this hedonistic spree they return to a period of calmness and peace wherein their urges are satisfied and no longer bother them. Different strains have arisen in this school over such questions as how long the two phases should be—some say that it is a personal choice, and others that they should be equal, or that the period of abstinence should be two or even three times as long as the period of indulgence. However quickly it is done, these thinkers swing back and forth between two extremes in the belief that the highest virtue is balance in one's life. Finding and permanently existing at a true balance is impossible to do, however, so it is necessary to go from one extreme to the other. By canceling each other out, they effectively create a balance.

Historic-Measurement proposes that ethical matters may be determined through the observation and exact measurement of the world. Its philosophers often disagree on what, exactly, the goal of life should be: Does one look for things which improve one's own happiness or the happiness of society in general? What about long-term happiness versus immediate happiness? Does happiness matter at all, or is something else more important? Despite these questions, they are all in agreement with the idea that it is possible to then look at the past (both recent and ancient) and conduct research in order to determine, from raw facts, what kind of behavior is best for the family soul.

The exact opposite of the Historic-Measurement style is the Transcendent-Awareness style. This style of thinking says that it is impossible to conclude, through the use of mere reason, what

should be done in order to maximize peace and minimize damnation in the family soul. Instead it is necessary to engage in behaviors which cause ecstatic modes of experience which can put oneself in touch with the family soul, like long periods of chanting and other repetitive behaviors, fasting, and breathing exercises. It is possible to communicate on a fundamental level with the family soul, and after the experience is over one can sift through the experience in an attempt to understand what was learned so that it can be applied to one's life.

### **Styles of Divinity**

Styles like Personal-God deal with the nature of gods and the family soul. Like many other styles they often give their two cents on the kinds of actions that confer peace upon the family soul or damn it, but because this input is not their main purpose they are not considered to be ethical styles. The Personal-God style states that there are a great many gods in the world, all equal in power or near enough, and each god is concerned solely with one person (some strains of the style do say otherwise on the relative strength of gods, but it is still no use if another's god is more powerful because it is not your god).

The qualities of an individual's god, including personality and what that god considers to be proper or improper behavior, must be learned by that individual. Others can help with this task but even so it is still a fundamentally personal responsibility. Only by acting in accordance with the desires of one's god can its aid be obtained.

According to the Two-Minds style the family soul is not wholly separate from the physical world. It possesses a link to this world in the form of the family's still-living members.

Through meditation and other techniques, such as the ingestion of mind-altering substances, the will of the family soul may be learned and followed. The

family soul is responsible for its own peace and damnation: it offers peace to those parts of it that have furthered its agenda and tortures itself in order to punish those who have hindered it. The family soul is the true mind, of which one's personal awareness is merely a temporary and expendable extension.

Ultimate-Law is hard to place. Its first and most basic assumption is that there is a divinely-ordered set of laws that not only govern the state of the universe but also proper moral behavior. Discovering these laws is not what Ultimate-Law is really about, however. Even when its philosophers search for a knowledge of the laws, each discovery is merely a means to an end. The goal of this style is to discern and understand the so-called Ultimate Law not in its ethical sense but merely in the sense of its relationship with the divine, in order to allow its philosophers to infer certain characteristics about the divine.

## Meta Styles

Some philosophical styles are concerned with the nature of styles of thinking themselves. The philosophers of Unentanglement examine other styles of thought line by line and precept by precept. They pick apart these things and look at the individual pieces in order to understand why *these* pieces exist within *that* style. In so doing, it is hoped, they will discover the essence of the style. This will allow them to then remove all unnecessary aspects of the style and create a simpler style of thinking that can be understood and defended more easily. Most of these philosophers focus on a single style in particular, which they make their life's work.

The inverse of the above is Self-Examination, whose philosophers seek to examine their own thought processes and styles of thinking in order to figure out why they possess these and not others.

### Other methods of mummification

After being removed from the salt-packed room there are a few other things which might be done in order to further mummify the body.

After they removed its organs the Egyptians cleaned the body with palm wine and spices, and then filled it with cassia, myrrh, and other spices. After this was done it was placed in a kind of salt called natron for seventy days, not unlike how the Iditt do it. Poorer people skipped the organ removal and filled the body with cedar oil, which liquefied the organs. The cedar oil would be removed after the body had been placed in salt.

The mummy's bandages were coated with a gum with both waterproofing and antimicrobial properties.

Mummies of the Torres Strait were produced by sitting corpses in the sun or smoking them over a fire after removing their organs. In the latter case, fat drained off the body might be mixed with ocher to create paint.

The Maori mummified heads. They would begin by removing the brain and eyes and sealing the orifices with flax and gum. The head was then steamed or boiled, smoked, dried, and finally treated with shark liver oil.

The Mud-Coat Technique of the Chinchorro involved coating the corpse in clay and gypsum.

If Iditt is located on or near wetlands, then it might use peat bogs to preserve the dead. Such a location would also give the Iditt access to a super-effective fuel source. If Iditt is industrializing, peat will only add to their advantages.

If they live at a high altitude (perhaps near the Arward Lartvona) or in cold climes then mummification through freezing is also possible, either alone or (with greater effectiveness) as an aid to other techniques.

This is done with an aim similar to that which is had by Unentanglement: creating a mode of thought that is more efficient and reality-based than whatever the philosopher already possesses. These philosophers put out less work than any others because most believe that their personal discoveries are, well, personal, and would not do any good for someone else. Each person must examine the self alone and not allow any other person to do it. This style of thinking was an outgrowth of Personal-God.

What Last-Language attempts to do is examine how languages influence thought, which these philosophers consider to be very important. How

would a style of thinking have been influenced had it been written in one language or another? What if the philosopher who created that style was raised as a native speaker of this or that language? How much does the essence of a style change when it is translated into another language? Most importantly, is there (or can there be, if it does not exist) a language which is uniquely qualified to be the language through which one could express the style of thinking that most accurately explains the world? Most philosophers of this style hope so, at least, and it is from this concept (that the language, once discovered, will do away with the need for any others) that the style's name is taken.

## Irem

**Setting assumption:** Ancient Earth

**Influences:** Mesopotamian

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Irem works just as well in just about any fantasy world, whether you still want to set it in the distant past or are interested in making the city contemporary with the cultures of your world's present time.

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### A Summary of Recent Discoveries from the Shatt al-Arab Library

I doubt that there was a single scholar in our field that did not rejoice when we understood the true contents of the Shatt al-Arab Library. At first the records were welcomed more as a linguistic curiosity than anything else—the tablets were clearly some dialect of Sumerian, but a dialect heretofore unknown to modern scholarship. At that time they were most remarkable for being the first known form of shorthand, predating Greek brachygraphy by several millennia. As we began to decipher the script the Shatt al-Arab Library seemed to be an example of some sort of curious forgery, purporting to be the records of a city that was thought to be pure myth by any reputable scholar. But as we continued to translate it became apparent that there was more than fantasy to this myth, and there were again glad tidings to be had in our field.

The tablets do not refer to their city as anything but “our city” or “the Pillars,” the latter reference being the first clue to its mythic links that we had. The earliest extant commentaries that we possess on the city were translated and expounded upon in the Middle Ages by Arab scholars, who called the city Irem of the Pillars in what seemed to be a groundless conflation of this one myth with another from the Quran. This oft-repeated reference to the city as “the Pillars,” however, gives us reason to rethink our conclusions.

The Shatt al-Arab Library also sheds light on another name which we have heretofore known scarcely anything about. In Babylon we have what we now know to be our first mention of the city, which was described as being long- lost even in times of antiquity. According to historians the Babylonian reports were passed through many hands and many languages until their translation into Arabic, and did not seem to contain the city's name, either from the beginning or after a damnation memoriae- like redaction. The end of the story, we thought, but it is now becoming apparent that the Dilmun civilization, until now as invisible to archaeologists as the Hittites once had been, is far older than we had dared to imagine.

We are proud to announce that, for the first time, we are getting a glimpse not only of this city but also, if we might be so bold, the origins of civilization itself. The more that we translate, the more that we learn. The more that we learn, the more that we suspect Irem to truly be, as its people evidently believed, the first city.

For your consideration, we present to you the highlights of our discoveries thus far.

### **An Early History of Irem: Myth and Extrapolated Reality**

Most curiously, the Dilmun-Irem Culture refers to its city as the birthplace of human civilization but not of humankind itself. In the beginning, the Shatt al-Arab Library states, mankind was formed in “the place where the sun sets” by gods left unspecified in the text. In time there were many people and a king, Lulu (“Mankind”), was given unto them. Again contrary to what we might expect, the DIC described itself as descending not from the king but from an adulterous union of his wife and a god referred to by no specific name but by various epithets: Sha naqba imuru (“He who Sees the Unknown” or “He who Saw the Deep”), Shutur eli sharri (“Surpassing All Other Kings”), and Adadda sarrum samu (“Grandfather King who Lacks/Thirsts”). You will note the first two as having been applied to Gilgamesh in other contexts.

The product of this union was a boy-child called Qayin (“Spear”), who was taken away and taught at the feet of the Mushussu, other children of Adadda who continue to figure prominently in the DIC’s mythic history. Qayin married one of his half-sisters, who bore him a son. With the wisdom and the might of the Mushussu behind him Qayin built a kingdom of his own, which was apparently centered in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. In order to govern it effectively he built a city “after the pattern of the other [children]” and named it after his son, whose name we wouldn’t know except for this reference.

In time Qayin died and control passed to his son Dilmun/Irem, who passed it to one of his own sons and so on. At some point authority was divided between “twelve princes,” who appear to have been representative of various factions of potential heirs during a power struggle only a few generations after Qayin. From Dilmun/Irem on, the descendants of Qayin enjoyed a close relationship with the Mushussu, who seem at times

to be either gods in their own right or “merely” the powerful children of one or more gods. Over the course of generations there was a gradual withdrawal of the Mushussu from normal temporal affairs.

After they finally withdrew completely from the world of men all communication with them was dependent on a group of middlemen, humans not of Dilmun/Irem’s bloodline and yet favored of the Mushussu for reasons of personal merit.

They lived alongside the Mushussu as attendants and were responsible for going out to Dilmun-Irem to request its ruler’s presence in the court of the Mushussu. They would also come forth to inspect the city and make reports back to their masters, and at these times they could be asked to petition the Mushussu for an audience on behalf of the rulers.

Carefully analyzing what we have been given, we see an attempt to separate the people of Dilmun-Irem from and then reunify them to another, unknown culture (perhaps the rest of humankind in general), with these attempts probably happening at separate times. They are descended from their patron god, Adadda, but in so doing they are no longer descended from the “first among kings,” who later records explain is the sole source of the right to rule. Without his blood they are usurpers only, and so it seems that later on the story was amended so that Qayin married into this bloodline. That it was not Qayin but his son in whose veins flowed the blood of both their god and the first among kings may explain why Dilmun-Irem bears his name.

It is probable that Qayin himself is more myth than fact and that Dilmun/Irem is the true founder of the DIC. Perhaps in yet older stories it was he that was the son of Adadda, until such time that it was recognized that he needed also to be a descendant of King Lulu and so the character of Qayin was devised. We might safely assume that the later

organization of the twelve princes as related to us reflects their actual origin.

The gradual withdrawal of the Mushussu is likely an attempt at explanation the present absence of these beings from day-to-day affairs when, according to earlier myths, they were heavily engaged in the operations of Dilmun-Irem and many lived in the city itself. These early stories go so far as to portray the Mushussu in the most mundane light imaginable: one legend makes casual reference to two of the Mushussu working in the fields alongside humans.

The DIC probably originated from the same mountains later held to be inhabited by the Mushussu. Despite their inhabitation of the lowlands a kinship with the mountain people seems to be remembered in the latter's role as intermediaries. Whatever they thought of themselves, the mountain people were regarded by the DIC as priests. It is easy to imagine the rulers of Dilmun-Irem making regular pilgrimage to the mountains and paying homage to Mushussu idols and to their caretakers. Nevertheless, in order to retain power against them it was made clear that their status among the Mushussu was due to reasons other than bloodline. They were descendants of Qayin but not of Dilmun/Irem, and for that reason were unfit to rule under the god

which not only humans but also the Mushussu served.

### **Divine Birthright in the Dilmun-Irem Culture**

In the mythology of the Dilmun-Irem Culture there are a number of deities referenced. Adadda sarum samu is the chief of them all and their patriarch. His true name is never revealed (perhaps even forgotten by the period that the Shatt al-Arab Library dates from) but only ever talked around in a manner reminiscent of the sacred name of YHWH. The whole people of the DIC descend from Adadda, which is taken to be the distinguishing feature between them and the rest of humankind.

The DIC considered themselves to bear a divine heritage, which gives them not only the right to rule over “the sons of Lulu and Azalulu” but the *responsibility* to rule and mediate between them and the gods. In this respect they appear to be a type of the “kingdom of priests” described later in the Book of Exodus. While there were, so to speak, priests that were priestlier than the rest, the whole people were responsible for maintaining the relationship that kept the world in balance. Qayin had assumed certain obligations in accepting the air of the Mushussu and while his covenant gave him and his descendants great power it also made them



responsible for the actions of their lesser brethren and all of mankind in a position that they had not held before.

Before the covenant which was made with Qayin, humans were apparently regarded as like unto vermin by the Mushussu and would neither be hunted down nor given mercy where their mere presence was inconvenient. Now, however, they were given rights for the sake of Qayin, who, it is said, “grieved for the slaughter of his people and sorrowed for the sake of their lamentations.” From the time of the covenant with the Mushussu humans were given various liberties and protections, but were humankind ever to break their end of the deal- a deal which Qayin made for them without their knowledge or consent- then the Mushussu would take it upon themselves to punish the species as far as they deemed necessary. Even the whole species might be exterminated if the offense were great enough.

Special attention was given to “the Twelve Who Are Descended [from Dilmun/Irem],” who were regarded as the most favored of the most favored. Just as the DIC as a whole was responsible for mediating between mankind and the gods, the Twelve were responsible for mediating between the rest of the DIC and the gods.

### **The Mushussu**

Save for Adadda sarum samu, the DIC pantheon universally belonged to the ranks of the Mushussu (“red/splendorous snakes”). The Mushussu were depicted in DIC art as crocodile-esque beings that generally moved on all fours but were apparently able to handle objects with their forelegs, as shown by several carvings in the Shatt al-Arab Library and implied by references within the texts that describe them as performing various activities that could only be done with hands. They were far older than humankind by a long way: one of the tablets says that they were created by Adadda one hundred thousand *sars* before the birth of Qayin. If each *sar*

was equal to three thousand years, as it was in the Babylonian system, then this would put the timeline of DIC mythology on a scale comparable to Hinduism.

The deity most immediately relevant to Dilmun-Irem was curiously named. Literally translated her name was “of the Pillars,” but in such a context that it implied noble position, for which reason we translate it in full as “The Lady of the Pillars” or “The Lady of our city.” Among the Mushussu she appears to have fulfilled a kind of governing role over Dilmun -Irem specifically, almost another layer in the lengthy series of intermediaries that appears to be the theme of the DIC. Some Mushussu served under her in various roles. Others, equal or superior to her, dealt with the city from time to time as required by their positions but only insofar as the affairs of Dilmun-Irem were relevant to their purviews. Any time that they were dealt with, the Lady was brought into the matter in order that she might also petition for the sake of Dilmun-Irem.

Her husband was Gusilim, who interceded in disputes between cities (including Dilmun-Irem) and other border conflicts. While apparently of greater influence within the society of the Mushussu he had much less to do with Dilmun-Irem than his wife. At those times that he did intercede in the affairs of men he was *incredibly* fair-minded, to the point that it could be inconvenient. The Lady, on the other hand, could be counted on to favor Dilmun-Irem in almost any circumstances, even to her own detriment.

Vying with The Lady for importance was Ti-amtum, “She who Bore Them All.” While The Lady is the patron goddess most immediately relevant to Dilmun-Irem, owing to her special interest in the city, Ti-amtum is her superior. In what may be a parallel to the theological mechanics of the DIC, Ti-amtum appears to mediate, when it is necessary, between the rest of the gods and Adadda. She is given a luminal, genderfluid status



by being, as well, She who Bore Herself. In this aspect she is regarded as moving from some manner of existence and into the phenomenal world by being both mother and father to herself. It is at these points, apparently considered to exist in multiplicity, that she serves as mediator for the Mushussu and Adadda, who is at various times her father and/or consort.

Allat-gizil (“Allat of the beneficent tree”) was one of two guards that protected the gate that led to Adadda’s idol (specifically mentioned as his image rather than the deity in person, which even the Mushussu were at times afraid to behold), doing so with Namdumuzid (“loyal [adopted] child”). She was held to have some influence over medicine despite being said to have little proficiency in healing herself. Rather, she was supplicated in order that she would give permission to other deities when healing was requested. Namdumuzid’s sex is unknown; the figure is almost only referred to according to the formula “Allat- gizil and Namdumuzid,” and the sole exception states that Namdumuzid is the other deity’s *dam* (“spouse”), which can refer to either sex with equal ease.

Other Mushussu mentioned include Nirah, who served as minister to Gusilim, and Basmu, “the Venomous Snake,” notable inasmuch as he is never described in any manner but simply said to be present or referred to at various points in the Shatt al-Arab Library. Even that he is male is an assumption. In addition to their mountain homes the Mushussu were said to have palaces in the sea that surrounded the world.

It is possible that stories of the Mushussu gave eventual rise to the mountain divinities of many other mythologies. Even the *dwerg* of Germanic mythology, with their skilled craftsmanship, association with death and oaths, and connection to another world (via their mountain homes), may have been derived to some extent from the Mushussu.

## Outside of the DIC Pantheon

Other equally or more powerful beings exist and are referred to as *ildli* (something like “[the] various/several [other] gods”), and they were the beings actually responsible for the creation of humankind as described above. Nevertheless, the DIC did not pay them homage, because Adadda sarrum samu had chosen them to be his adopted children and elevated them from the position of slaves (which corresponds to the general feeling of humankind’s role in other Mesopotamian mythology, showing us how old this idea was and possibly its origin). Some of the *ildli* possibly correspond to more generally-accepted Mesopotamian deities but they are only described a little bit. Other *ildli* do not have such analogues (at least based on the limited information that we have been given in the Shatt al-Arab Library). It is among these that we have a number that are described as “*azen, halapatu, niganu*” (“violence/violent/destructive, to be destroyed/forsaken/forbidden from worship, that which is forbidden [because of disease]”). If these gods truly have no counterpart in common Mesopotamian mythology then it may indicate a general abhorrence of these deities (we can only speculate as to the reasons) and eventually a successful erasure of them from the general consciousness, though the Babylonian reports still make reference to the AHN demon Kith tar lu, or the Sleeper on the Rocks, from whom they similarly distance themselves and make clear that they do not regard as a god. The AHN group presents interesting possibilities about an entirely separate, possibly more ancient, pantheon of gods of which we had not even known of until the present.

Ti’amtum was said to have a son named Marutuk, who was described as rebellious and an outcast and appears to be a version of Marduk. He is not properly one of the *ildli* but is said to be worshiped by other cities, and his cult, like that of the *ildli*, is banned in Dilmun-Irem. Though described only a little, he shares some characteristics with the AHN demon Kith tar lu,

which similarities were stamped out by the time that later Mesopotamian mythology enters the record. Whether these are original characteristics of Marduk or peculiar to the DIC's conception of him cannot be known at this time.

In an alternate creation myth given on another tablet, the origin of mankind is not elaborated on and it is said that the ildli brought human servants with them from their homeland when they first settled in "the place where the sun sets," rather than creating them on the spot. This legend omits any reference to Qayin's wife, which may mean that it is the older of the two.

### **Government and Nobility**

The ruling body in Dilmun-Irem was the Twelve who Are Descended [from Dilmun/Irem]. They were "great men," defined by their descent from the city's namesake. They deliberated and voted on actions to take like a miniature Senate. Many matters never went as high as to reach the Twelve, but when such things did they could spend weeks fighting over which course to take. Or minutes, depending on how quickly one side or the other drew the undecided members to its way of thinking.

The most senior among them was called the Chief Seat, and in theory he was their leader. In practice, however, it would seem that he would have had very little power indeed. His vote had all power and overrode the rest of the Twelve when it could be cast, but in most meetings of the Twelve he was restricted to an advisory position. He was only permitted to cast his vote in order to break a deadlock in the decision-making process after the Twelve had cast their own votes and no side had claimed a majority over the others. With eleven votes being cast normally, ties would not have come up often in the normal process of things. It was in the interest of the Chief Seat to engender as many factions as possible within the Twelve in order that he might be given the opportunity to exercise control more frequently. It was equally in

the interests of the Twelve to compromise as often as they could, and it seems that the strength of the Twelve over the Chief Seat depended on how solidly he had built support behind himself before ascending to his position and whether or not they could swallow their pride more deeply than the Chief Seat could fire it up.

While the reason for the limit on the Chief Seat's power is unknown, it came into play in a big way when disaster struck and the rest of the Twelve turned on him. The Chief Seat was responsible for the prosperity of Dilmun-Irem, and he was just as responsible for its crises. Moreover, in dealing with Adadda sarrum samu he served when necessary as proxy for the rest of the Twelve, who in turn did so for the great men, who mediated for the rest of Dilmun-Irem, who mediated on behalf of all mankind. Via this process it was the Chief Seat who stood alone before Adadda and the Mushussu when one and one alone had to do so, and when the sins of the race hung over the city like the sword of Damocles it was the Chief Seat whose neck took the blow. By refusing him a vote except in the case of a tie, it would be possible for a vote to sacrifice the Chief Seat to be made unanimously. The manner of his sacrifice is unclear but ultimately involved his being impaled by a stake (the process as described recalls Vlad the Impaler, among others). After his death he would be dragged through the city and left outside the city to be eaten by scavengers. The same punishment was inflicted upon blasphemers, incidentally, perhaps showing a belief that both were guilty (whether personally or by proxy) of violating the covenant made by Qayin.

The other significant power group in the city was the almarratu ("widows," specifically of noble prestige). These were the former wives of great men of Dilmun-Irem, and their status was measured in how many times over they were former wives. While it isn't clear how it played out in practice (though additional votes are a possibility) their influence was based on how many husbands they had survived.

The almarratu essentially controlled the matter of succession in Dilmun-Irem. They decided who a great man would marry (if they permitted him to marry at all) which obviously affected one's progression into the Twelve. Though the Chief Seat nominated great men to fill empty places in the Twelve, and the Twelve voted to accept or reject the nomination, one had to be married in order to accept the position (a technicality which in at least one case led to a successful nomination before the man chosen for the job was given to marriage).

The almarratu also played a role in the decision-making process. The Twelve Who Are Descended could propose actions to take, but it was required that the almarratu give their approval before the Twelve worked out the details (and tried to stretch their initial proposal as far as it would go without actually breaking the letter of it, one would imagine). The sole exception was in voting to sacrifice the Chief Seat, a decision that was as entirely out of the hands of the almarratu as it was the Chief Seat's.

While no mention is made of polygyny, the Shatt al-Arab Library makes it clear that polyandry was accepted and even common among the descendants of Dilmun/Irem (and technically legal but apparently socially unacceptable for the common people). About a third of the women of the upper class were never given an opportunity to marry and were left with a choice between remaining unmarried and giving up their current position to marry a common man. Both were damaging to her social influence in different ways. Meanwhile, those that married great men were able to wield much influence through their husbands. A divorce could be issued by either party with only the consent of the almarratu, which was a final check on their husbands.

The restrictive marriage practices of the great men, designed to "prolong the memory of Dilmun/Irem" and "save his blood/people," may have had long-term consequences. There are

references in several tablets to unspecified "demons of family" that may have had to do with proverbial sayings, beings analogous to familial gods, a number of unfortunate incidents in a family's history that were taken to have a common (supernatural) cause, or genetic disorders. If true, this may have been the ultimate cause of Dilmun-Irem's collapse. Whatever their actual nature, they were regarded in most cases to be, essentially, punishments levied on them as proxies for their ancestors' misdeeds.

Standing apart from the normal social order were the igabbu, one of the most complicated words in the DIC. It was a compound word whose constituent parts together meant "[our] father's eyes," but both parts had additional layers of meaning. The word used for "father" could also mean "official" or "witness" and carried a connotation of great age. The word for "eyes" specifically referred to the carved eyes of a statue. Together it all but points to a religious rather than state function, apparently referring to the eyes of an Adadda idol.

Our Father's Eyes were responsible for investigating treason against Dilmun-Irem, which included acts of blasphemy (or blasphemy included acts of treasons; the exact nature of the relationship in the DIC is unclear). They appeared to operate with a minimum of supervision and despite nominally answering to the Chief Seat in his role as high priest and mediator for Dilmun-Irem, the histories thus far translated show that it was not uncommon for

Our Father's Eyes to investigate even him. The major check on their power seemed to be that, while they could investigate and were ultimately responsible for delivering punishment, they were not permitted to actually deliver punishment except on the authority- and thus with the blessing- of the Chief Seat. Those cases where they found the Chief Seat guilty were always turned over to the Twelve.

Based on remarks from one of the tablets, it appears that at least some of Our Father's Eyes were believed to be apathetic about crimes which fell outside of their purview.

Both the Twelve and Our Father's Eyes are regularly described with language commonly ascribed to divine beings or spirits of at least moderate influence through the use of the "digir" determinative, which similarly precedes references to Adadda, the Mushussu, and the other gods. In our writing system today the same effect might be had by using capitalized pronouns (He, His, Him; They, Theirs, Them).

### Lived Religion

The spiritual center of Dilmun-Irem was a mud brick ziggurat that served as a temple to Adadda sarum samu. The temple was both a mountain and an altar. It was built in reflection of the cosmic mountains where the gods lay buried or where the Mushussu lived (there appears to be some conflation of the two, giving the sense that the Mushussu are both dead and alive, and perhaps this living death was seen as the reason for their seclusion from the world).

The temple was staffed by a variety of priests. There were asipu and masmasu. The former were in charge of the purification of individuals (necessary before performing any rituals at the temple). The latter were in charge of what could be thought of as purification of the temple itself but more accurately was a kind of *///*-purification. It was believed that unless it were regularly "made diminished" just as mortals were required to be purified and exalted from their own base standing, then even the holiest man would "come under the curse and condemnation of demons several" and sicken and die.

Besides these other kinds of priests were the zammeru ("singer, male singers that specialized in lamentations in order to bring the people to

humility and the Mushussu to mercifulness); naru, female singers whose songs were meant to draw the attention and stoke the emotions of the Mushussu (they were always present when the zammeru sang but could themselves perform without their male counterparts); suzigu ("penitents"), who practiced self-mutilation in order to make atonement for minor breaches of the covenant that didn't warrant the Chief Seat's sacrifice; and kurkudu ("watchers" or "all-observing"), who acted as doorkeepers and watchmen for the temple (Allat-gizil and Namdumuzid were likely understood to be divine kurkudu).

At the end of the New Year festival, which lasted twelve days and took place in the Spring, the Chief Seat was symbolically married to the Lady of Dilmun-Irem. The most senior of the almarratu served as proxy for the Lady. In order to reinforce that the marriage was to the Lady and not to the Widow, if the two of them had actually been spouses then they would need to divorce before the ritual could be performed. As the Chief Seat was so often a proxy for the people of Dilmun-Irem this hierogamy represented the union of the Lady with all mankind, ensuring her personal dedication to its welfare.

There was very little use of idols, and the writings are careful in every case to make clear that the idol is representative of, and not identical to, the being depicted. "Lest our children become betrayers" is the reason given for this care every time that it comes up. The idols, rather, were proxies for the Adadda and the Mushussu. Incense and other offerings were placed before them in order to continue to show one's dedication to them even in their absence. Drawn symbols were more common proxies, especially in household shrines, and the Shatt al-Arab Library only tells of idols being used as proxies for Adadda, the Lady, and (most rarely of all) Ti-amtum.

The other place of major spiritual importance was the unupukiri ("sacred orchard," specifically one

that is irrigated). It was near one end of the city. This positioning placed it upriver along the Idlurug, an unidentified river that flowed through Dilmun-Irem. The most important trees (indeed, the only ones specifically mentioned, although other species are said to have been present) were pomegranates. Also called kiskanu (“holy tree”), the pomegranate symbolized the prosperity which came to Dilmun-Irem and all mankind as a result of the covenant that had been made with Adadda. This is probably ancestral or at least strongly related to the “tree of life” imagery that is so strong in ancient cultures. The Chief Seat dwelt in the unupukuri in a tent with an unknown number of rooms. The tent was intended to keep the Chief Seat in constant remembrance of the nomadic lifestyle that had been held by Qayin before the city was built. Rather than depend on stakes, it was tied down at the bases of nearby pomegranate trees. One of the texts explains that this was meant to reinforce the importance of the covenant in the Chief Seat’s mind. Were it broken, thus would cease the prosperity of the city. In symbolic terms the pomegranate trees would die. This would in turn leave the tent without support and cause its collapse.

In his role as resident (and caretaker) of the unupukuri, the Chief Seat was referred to as En nukirik (either “[the] master gardener” or “gardener ruler”). It was from this position that had religious influence, and his most frequent duty was the daily burning of incense outside the door of his tent, followed by drawing in the dirt certain symbols not described in the Shatt al-Arab texts. Were it necessary that an inquiry be made of Adadda, incense would be burned at the same time before his idol. After this was done bones would be cast by certain priests and analyzed by others. These were called *suzigu* and *baru* (“askers” and “observers”) and it does not appear that they ever rotated duties. Their divination was made to determine the will of Adadda- not necessarily what was definitely going to happen but what he intended to happen. This was an important

distinction between Adadda, though mighty, was not omnipotent, and this was judged to be the reason for divinations that failed to correspond to subsequent events.

Certain families were recorded as having particular Mushussu attached to them, most often because of an ancestor of theirs who had attracted its attention. These families passed down particular prayers, unique to their Mushussu, that were said to be necessary to draw its attention and prove that they were of the correct bloodline (and, according to some of the prayers recorded, remind the Mushussu of the obligation that it had assumed on itself).

### Daily Life

Dilmun-Irem was the center of life for the DIC. The few satellite towns that may have surrounded the city would have done nothing to deemphasize its importance.

As was often the case in antiquity, beer was almost like liquid bread or a kind of thin porridge than a true drink. It was rich in nutrients and generally purer than water, and probably consumed on a daily basis (as was the case elsewhere in Mesopotamia). Consequently, the production of beer was a respected, but restricted, occupation. Early in the city’s history the right to brew beer was given exclusively to women. It appears that shortly thereafter those who were in the business managed to make this a *hereditary* right. From then on the brewers of beer became an influential faction within the city, at times more powerful than any other faction among the common people (few in the upper class were part of it in the beginning, and the requirement of blood descent caused their number to gradually dwindle).

Beer was sacred in Dilmun-Irem. It was said that beer was a gift from Adadda *sarum samu*. Once, before Dilmun-Irem was founded, Qayin had been hunting for many days without finding game. With

he and his family on the edge of death, he prayed to Adadda. One of the Mushussu then appeared and granted them daily amounts of beer until they found game.

Four other substances came next in importance: honey, butter, oil, and wine. Each of these was associated with a slightly-different form of pottery. Honey was symbolic of the power and immortal lives of the Mushussu because of its healing and preservative properties. The DIC did not cultivate bees. Instead they acquired it through trade and from wild bees (from whom they would also harvest pollen, which was eaten and called bee's bread).

Butter came exclusively from goats (cattle do not appear to have been used by the DIC). It was made by filling a goat skin halfway with milk and inflating it with air. The skin would then be hung on a tripod and rocked back and forth until the butter was formed. It was a staple food that could be eaten alone or mixed with other foods like beer. Spices were frequently added as flavoring.

The particular kind of oil used most frequently by the DIC was grape seed oil. While some of it was produced natively from grape vines in the unupukuri, this was restricted for consumption by the Twelve, priests, and a few of the almarratu. Most grape seed oil was imported from elsewhere. Foreign grape seed oil could not be consumed by the Twelve or by priests. The next most important oil was olive oil.

The most highly-favored wine was that of the pomegranate, of course, though grape wine came in as a close second and was enjoyed by those to whom pomegranate wine was unavailable. It was used often in religious rites, especially during the symbolic marriage of the Lady and the Chief Seat. This was the only time that the Chief Seat was permitted to drink wine of any kind.

The DIC people loved music. Romantic songs especially, which comprise the bulk of the songs that have been recorded. Music was called the "voice of Adadda." It was stated in one legend that it was for the sake of our music that we found favor with Adadda. From time to time he would fall victim to fits of murderous rage or hunger (it is unclear) and it was the responsibility of the zammeru and naru to make the music that would calm him. The lyre and the pipe are the instruments most- commonly referenced in the tablets, almost to the exclusion of all other instruments.

While the DIC used the lunisolar calendar year and the 3,600 year-long *sar*, as was standard in Mesopotamia, it also used another large time unit based on the transits of Venus. These occurred when the planet moved directly across the Sun (from the perspective of astronomers on Earth, of course). A pair of transits would happen within eight years of each other and then the cycle, two hundred and forty-three years long, began again. The DIC seemed to regard each transit in the cycle as either "superior" or "inferior," and believed that this system of marking great periods of time by Venus was given to them by the Mushussu. It was used for both civil and religious purposes.

While no distinctly DIC artifacts have yet been located outside of the Shatt al-Arab Library, according to their records Dilmun-Irem had, by the height of its power, grown wealthy on trade. It was a source of copper itself and a trading post in general. Babylonian records support this description and imply that, besides Mesopotamia, it also traded with the Indus Valley Civilization. The first maps of the world (or what was then thought to be the world) were drawn by the DIC, which was also known for its cartographers.

Drugs of all varieties were used extensively in the DIC. Cannabis, referred to alternately as "the lily of the white lake" or as "lion's fat" (the latter growing more common over time), was used to relieve bladder trouble, bronchitis, insomnia, and

rheumatism. Opium poppy and its product carried two main names throughout the history of the DIC: *hul gil* (“joy plant”), referring to the plant, and *itudbur* (“moonglow” or “moonlight”), referring specifically to the drug, which was collected in the morning in keeping with later Assyrian practice. It was used exclusively for pain relief (and less medicinal practices) rather than for execution. Sponges soaked in opium were in particular used as an aid for surgery, and one tablet advises the use of opium for calming distressed children.

Whatever the side effects of such casual usage were, the DIC benefited from or weathered them. Where we begin to see the signs of rot in the DIC they come not from these or any other drug used throughout the DIC’s history but one that, while referenced to in the past, for all practical purposes is only introduced late in the accounts. Called *emessisi* (“yellow leaf”), what makes it most curious is that we quite frankly have no idea what it is, as it doesn’t seem to correspond to any Old World plant or drug. What we do know is that while cannabis, opium, and others received metaphorical names it appears that *emessisi* was literal (or else its visual depictions were also metaphorical), and that it came from somewhere in Central Asia.

While it was the opinion of the Babylonians that *emessisi*-chewing was the direct cause of the DIC’s downfall, the DIC itself regarded the drug’s usage as merely a symptom of the times and felt that their society had begun to crumble a little earlier. As *emessisi* had always been known of by the DIC, it seems more likely that the latter scenario is correct and social change merely opened the gates to something that had always been there.

### **City Organization**

As stated earlier there were two hearts of the city: the temple and the sacred orchard. Both of these were connected by the river *Idlurug*, which ran along the south side of the temple and through the sacred orchard. As was befitting such an important

part of the city, it bore other names as well. It was associated with both life and death and, in this aspect, cyclical time. It brought life to the city and it took death away.

Its other primary name was *Kaskadda* (“way/road/journey of the corpses”). The majority of Dilmun-Irem’s citizens were disposed of after death by setting them on a simple raft and letting the river take them away. Little importance was attached to the bodies of the dead in these cases, although there did seem to be some concept of a continued relationship between one’s soul and one’s bodily remains.

Offerings to the *Mushussu*, who were believed to care for the dead who had caught their fancy, were placed with the dead before sending them on their way and these were supplemented at various times of the year with additional offerings. These were made with the intention of currying favor with the *Mushussu* on behalf of the dead, almost like a divine bribe. These practices lent the river a third name, *Kianag* (“place of libations to the dead”), which was sometimes used to refer to the temple that sat alongside it. That in turn appears to have led to occasional confusion between the river and the temple and, later, the sacred mountain which the temple was symbolic of, so that in later parts of the city’s history there were some who believed that the *Mushussu* lived in the river.

The importance of the *Idlurug* to the DIC is reflected in this verse from the *Enuma Elish*: “For Dilmun, the land of my landy’s heart, I will create long waterways, rivers and canals, whereby water will flow to quench the thirst of all beings and bring abundance to all that lives.” More than “waterways, rivers, and canals,” the *Idlurug* was also the basis of a simple-but-effective sewer system that extended through much of Dilmun-Irem. These dual roles, fertilizing the land and carrying away waste, bringing life to its inhabitants and transporting the dead, led the river to be viewed as both good and evil, life and pollution.

The upper class was not sent away on the Idlurug but buried outside the walls of Dilmun-Irem. A mound was built over the burial site, ostensibly in imitation of the temple and the cosmic mountain of the Mushussu. No grave goods were taken with them except for a gold or copper death mask (it appears, but is not yet a certain fact, that only the Twelve were honored with gold). According to one tablet they were buried vertically and head-first.

Reference is frequently made to “citadels” in the center of the city, apparently so-called as metaphor for their use as strongholds against hunger and death. They were granaries administered by the Twelve for the purpose of famine relief. It appears that the entire harvest was handed over to the city’s government at first, and then allotments were given out to the farmers irrespective of how much had (or had not) been collected. Others in the employ of the government were paid from these same stores.

The buildings of the city were packed tightly together and generally entered into through the roof. Many quarters of the city could be traversed by rooftop alone, without ever having to condescend to the streets (such as they were) below.

### **The DIC and Gilgamesh**

The connection between Dilmun-Irem and Gilgamesh is not clear. As noted above, Qayin’s divine father is called by several titles which were also had by the figure Gilgamesh, among them “Surpassing All Other Kings” and “He Who Saw the Deep” (which appears to be, in the DIC, a reference to the seas where some of the Mushussu dwell).

It is also worthy of note that, in his titular Epic, Gilgamesh was required to pass through Mount Mashu to reach a place called Dilmun. That it was a snake which ate the Flower of Immortality should not go without notice either.

There is another figure in DIC mythology who bears some similarities to both Gilgamesh and Adadda sarum samu, called Dumubanda, who is also reminiscent of qualities of the serpent-dragon Illuyanka, Tammuz, and even Prometheus. One record refers to Dumubanda as being of mixed human and Mushussu parentage but all others, including that account which most focuses on him, say that he was a pure Mushussu. He is always said to be a son of Allat-gizil and Namdumuzid, but Namdumuzid’s sex is, as mentioned above, unknown and so his exact relationship to them is unknown. It is not out of the question that they both were female and that Dumubanda’s birth was some sort of miracle. Nor it is impossible that Dumubanda was adopted—the very name “Namdumuzid” implies that the bearer was adopted, so there are already associations here. Adoption would make Allat-gizil’s repeated (and sometimes successful) seductions less scandalous for the DIC, but gods have always played by a different rulebook and it is possible that the myths simply failed to condemn them on this account.

In either case, it is said that Dumubanda ruled over humans for a time (or was a close adviser to their rulers). Where the myth most strongly converges with the Epic of Gilgamesh is in how he grew sorrowful for the mortal state of humankind and sought to rectify this. Rather than go up to steal the Plant of Immortality for his own self, however, he sought to do so for all humankind. Alas, the result was much the same as it was for Prometheus: condemnation and excruciating punishment.



## Kehrquoos

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world; incorporates aerrec-a, Arward Lartvon, dwarves, ghosts, Rooquers, Shipborn, and Traveler Clans.

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Kehrquoos is many things. It is a city, a monument, a cathedral, a god, and even a wizard (of sorts). Depending on who you ask about it, this is not merely a case of a single name being applied to different things. As any Rooquer would make clear to you, Kehrquoos is a god, a Swook, whose body is architecture. There are some—and not only among the ratlings, either—who would claim that the city is also a fundamental part of the Swook and, therefore, the god, and that all of these things grow in strength, breadth, and potency as one entity.

The city itself is an old one—by dwarf timekeeping, more than twenty generations of brothers have been born into the mountains' embrace since the first stone was set. It was built for a single purpose: to provide the infrastructure that was necessary for building and maintaining the god that would be created there. Long ago, a ratling storyteller named Kehrquoos was given a divine vision in the deepest bowels of Reroota, a stern and terrible Swook who was built out of unyielding granite and petrified wood, and lined with obsidian. The Swook was as much a part of the volcano that formed its walls as it was its own structure. Three times so far the volcano had erupted, altering the nature and

disposition of Reroota each time but never destroying it. In the ratling's vision the cathedral-god ordered Kehrquoos to go east until he had found a place where the weak devoured the strong.

In time Kehrquoos came to the shore of an ocean. He was at work building a ship to send him even further when he saw a swarm of black rats devouring an eagle. The bird was unable to fly away by dint of the dozens of rats which were weighing it down. It could barely even twitch in agony, let alone keep the rats from eating it alive. It was not very difficult to interpret this occurrence as the sign which had been spoken of by Reroota, and there was additional significance for a ratling in the manner in which the rats had overcome the eagle—“unity of purpose” is how the storytellers put it, rather than “overwhelming numbers.” After he had fed on a steady diet of mild poisons and hallucinogenic roots and fungi for four days, Kehrquoos relayed instructions on the “kooto”, or (roughly) what the s=Swook was supposed to be like or be about. After he did this Kehrquoos was ritually strangled to death and flayed, after the manner of the worshipers of Reroota. His skin was carefully preserved and on it was written the kooto which he had dictated, while the rest of his body was left as an offering to the eagles in order to thank them for what their brother's sacrifice had made possible.

It would be nineteen years before construction of the Swook began—the kooto was a manifesto, not an architectural blueprint—and generations more before the process was complete. Kehrquoos was built on a patch of rock bordering the ocean and then extended out to and beneath the water. In some places reaching so deeply that diving bells were required in order to make sure that the builders had oxygen, because they would have drowned in the time that it took for them to go from the surface to their destination. Numerous “breath rooms” now exist in the Swook's lower

chambers, intended to provide respite and supplied with air by pots of algae and lichen, fed with offerings of dead animals and waste matter, and given light through an intricate system of mirrors. The Swook is built out of blocks of fossilized coral, limestone concrete, mud, and bone. Every Rooquer who died in the city during the Swook's construction, and many more Rooquers who lived in other lands but wanted to take part in the honor of being part of the Swook, contributed zir bones to Kehrquoos. Unlike other Swooks, Kehrquoos is believed to be, at least in part, an amalgamation of many Rooquers, all those whose bones have been mixed in its structure. The most prominent of these is, of course, Kehrquoos himself.

### **City of Many Colors**

The city of Kehrquoos has been an important trading center for slightly more than three hundred years. The city proved to be well-positioned for maritime travel, which made it a minor-but-respectable seaway post for a century, and development elsewhere suddenly linked it to an overland trade route as well. Humans were the first to capitalize on this in great numbers, but they are far from the only significant non-Rooquer population.

Nonetheless, there are many groups of humans that have a stake in Kehrquoos. A few rookeries of Shipborn have made this city a regular stop along their trading circuit, as have two Traveler Clans, one of which developed as intimate of a relationship with the city as any humans could. Arward Lartvon has included the city within its territory, offering protection and a degree of self-governance in exchange for certain considerations.

Besides humans and ratlings there are three other significant populations inhabiting Kehrquoos. The dwarfs maintain a constant influence despite not having a breeding here, and they have done so for more than a century. The aerrec-a came in part due to the shipborn, who had much contact with them

and spun tales of a great city that was a god, where every person could make a fortune so long as ze had the luck, god-favor, and wits to not be turned into the means of somebody else's fortune-making. Finally, the city is also home to a large number of ghosts, whose numbers have grown slowly but surely over the centuries, and who have found that there are plenty of places in Kehrquoos even for the dead.

### **Cityscape**

Kehrquoos has grown and changed over the years, so that today there are a number of major districts of importance to the city. The area surrounding Kehrquoos the Swook is inhabited solely by Rooquers who work for the Swook in some fashion, whether by performing maintenance or communing with the "willful mind" of the Swook.

Besides this, the most important part of the city is Harborbridge, an artificial peninsula of steel and stone that extends into the ocean for nearly a mile and provides a place for docking and trade. Harborbridge is so large and so filled with amenities that a crew need not ever step onto genuine land in order to sell their cargo, spend their gains, and resupply. This suits the Shipborn just fine, and has made it very attractive to them. Kehrquoos the Swook and Harborbridge are well within view of each other, the city's two greatest artifices standing practically side by side. Almost a miniature city that is contained matryoshka-style within Kehrquoos, the district even has a residential section. This is filled mainly by ratlings, aerrec-a, and the odd trader whose crew disliked zem enough to leave zem behind but not enough to maroon zem on a desert island.

The Wishtaw derives its name from the bastardization of an old Arward word for "old." It is not a single contiguous area but seventeen different places of varying size which have been abandoned for one reason or another. Some reach below the ground into great crypts whose presence

contributed to the perceived aura of “We should really get out of here” that is associated with the Wishtaw. Most of it has a less superstition-fueled reason for abandonment, however, though this does not mean “sensible reason.” One area has been abandoned because a confused mess of inheritances, deeds, and contracts collided with a rash of plague-induced deaths so that to this day, seventy years later, nobody knows for sure who owns what, which is a rather important matter to settle before anyone can do something with the land.

The Warrens are the oldest area of the city. When Kehrquos was originally built it was by ratlings, who are pretty small compared to most other intelligent species. The architecture of the Warrens reflects this fact. It is inhabited almost solely by ratlings to this day (although there are a few dwarfs present as well) for the sole reason that everything there is built much too small for anyone else to be comfortable. Someone who is in need of sanctuary for a time can plead *zir* case to the inhabitants of the Warrens, who are willing to hide those that they feel are being unjustly persecuted. The Seat of Kehrquos, the city’s governing body, is aware that the Warrens have been responsible for hiding many criminals over the years. Unfortunately for anyone who wants to address this, the Seat is dominated by Rooquers, and as a result it has failed to do anything to end the practice.

### **Ratlings in the City of Rats**

The Rooquers do not mind all these different types of people sharing their city (not that most of them know about the ghosts). The ratlings were here first and they are still the dominant power in the city, no matter whether this is realized by most other people. They not only have numbers on their side but are involved in many essential positions in the city. Furthermore, the city is a melting pot in which their culture, as much as any other, has affected the rest. In spirit and demographics both, Kehrquos is without a doubt a ratling city.

The Rooquers are underfoot everywhere—and overfoot, too, as Kehrquos is connected not only by streets but also by rope-lines, third-floor bridges, and ladders. Anyone in the city could tell you that. Any business with a dozen or more employees has at least one ratling on its staff, and even the smaller ones usually have a reason to pay a ratling for services rendered.

They are not just everywhere. They’re *connected*. They understood early on that they needed to stick together if they wanted to keep anyone from pulling the rug, and the city, out from under them. If you mistreat one Rooquers then you will find that others will refuse to buy your services, sell food to you, or so much as give an acknowledgement when they bump into you (and suddenly an awful lot of Rooquers are bumping into you). They usually do not go for the violent approach. Simple refusal to cooperate with one who has been thusly outcast from common society will have to struggle to make ends meet or leave for a new home. There is no risk of incurring the wrath of Arward Lartvon, either, although this is not for military reasons. The ratlings might be able to hold the city successfully if it came to war, but the reason that they accept the county’s patronage at all is because it is easier and more profitable (not just economically, but also culturally and scientifically) to keep the Arward Lartvona as their friends, and Arward Lartvona reaps its own benefits from the relationship.

This connectedness has other advantages. Kehrquos ratlings love to gossip. There are many who make their living from having an ear for what would be valuable information to someone, or tracking down the routes of gossip to find a specific piece of information on demand. While the ratlings can certainly keep a secret, those who have no personal connection to said secret have as little problem with spreading it as most humans in the same situation. Helped along by how strong and fast these lanes of communication are, common wisdom states (just a bit unfairly, but not too much) that if a ratling knows something today then every

ratling will know it tomorrow. They have a knack for hearing the ring of truth (or the lack thereof) in a yarn, at least, so while you usually cannot trust whatever you just happen to overhear a pair of ratlings talking about, you can trust a ratling to sort out the wheat from the chaff if you have assigned zem to do it.

### **Dwarfs in the Ratling City**

The phenomenon of brother-bands is well-known, and as a general practice it needs no further discussion outside the “Dwarves” chapter. The brother-bands of Kehrquos first came to the city relatively recently, as the dwarves would measure it. They were attracted to the city by its thriving trading industry, which promised great rewards for the cunning and the industrious. Most dedicated brothers among the dwarfs will remain such for the rest of their lives, but some harbor ambitions of one day having the privilege of marrying a true - wife. It is this latter kind of dwarf, dedicated or not, which comes to Kehrquos more than any other.

Kehrquos dwarves are a curious lot. They have been brought together and divided again by a number of loyalties and motivations. Speaking generally, even the most ambitious of the brothers here remembers from whence he came and retains loyalty to his family. Those who do forget and forsake their blood, thanks to the distances involved, find that they must keep this change of heart a secret. Should one be found out as treacherous or negligent then he will be hounded by other dwarves, who will take offense to his faithlessness even if they are not kin. Despite coming from different clans and sometimes entirely different parts of the world, the dwarves of Kehrquos form a band of their own. They share no bonds of kinship but they may not be a minority, but they are one with power and influence disproportionate to their size—thanks to their business savvy and craftsmanship—and which is composed entirely of immigrants. The dwarves realize the dangerous position that this puts them

in. Sticking together is a matter of survival. So far, it has been exceedingly rare for a dwarf to think that he can sell out his brothers in the city without seriously endangering himself.

They are an incredibly close-knit group, understandably. Any dwarf who enters the city is thereafter under the unofficial jurisdiction of the Council of Many Brothers. He will live where the Council tells him to live, work the occupation that the Council chooses for him, and suffer the punishments which the Council lays down for his misdeeds. After he has lived in the city for two years he will—assuming his respectability is intact—be admitted into the Council, which gives a single seat and corresponding vote to each brother.

The greatest law of the Council is “Your brother’s crime is your own.” The dwarves have managed to remain in the city for so long in no small part because they have built up a reputation for being law-abiding and honest to the extreme. There have been a few cases of “mistakes,” of course. Perhaps a drunken brother has gone into the wrong house, or a craftsman has accidentally handed over a poorly-made instrument rather than the better one which it so closely resembled, but these have been isolated instances. The victims have always been well-compensated for their trouble, and the dwarves responsible have almost always gone on the “shamewalk,” which is a traditional practice among the dwarves.

What is not known by only a few, even among the authorities, is that there is no such thing as a shamewalk. The reclusive nature of the dwarves in general helps the Council of Many Brothers to spread many false stories about their culture, and the shamewalk is one of them. When the Council learns that a crime has been committed it springs into action and—knowing that his actions will reflect badly on the whole population in Kehrquos—locate and execute the perpetrator. He will be eaten, and what remains of his body will be ground into powder and scattered across the

waters so that no trace of him is left to be found. The manner in which this execution is unknown even to most dwarves in Kehrquoos—some say that criminals are drawn and quartered, others that they are impaled and left to die, or that they are flayed and boiled.

Dwarves usually live in groups of four to ten in living spaces one floor above the places where they work. Most people assume that these shophouses have only storage space above them and not a place to sleep or prepare meals. Accordingly, the hard-working reputation of the dwarves has only been enhanced by those among them who apparently state that they literally sleep at their places of work.

Dwarves do not only intermarry with the other species but occasionally will also accept them into the ranks of the Council. These sun-brothers (the term is used regardless of gender) are another essential part of dwarf power in the city, because they give a kind of influence to the dwarves which is not easily recognizable as belonging to them. Many important figures in Kehrquoos, especially aerrec-a, are secretly sun-brothers. Dwarves generally accept adults as sun-brothers, but have occasionally taken in foundlings.

### **Ghosts in the City of Rats**

The dead are a curious case in Kehrquoos. As a matter of custom they restrict themselves to the Wishtaw and utilize secret routes to travel between its separate sections. These routes are designed to minimize the chance of encountering members of the living. Some of the more ambitious of the city's ghosts hope to make the Wishtaw a single contiguous area, but this is a process that is slow in the going.

By far the oldest of the ghosts in Kehrquoos were ratlings in life. Even though Rooquers do not produce ghosts nearly as often as other species do, the length of time for which they were the city's only inhabitants of note means that, with the

exception of a single ancient ghost whose species remains unknown, all of the really important ghosts are ratlings. Another significant group, laying on the opposite end of the spectrum, belongs to the dwarves. For some as-yet unknown reason almost every dwarf who dies in Kehrquoos returns as a ghost. Most of these, however, were lawbreakers, and even the most minor of these criminals usually fails to play nice after having been pulled apart and impaled on a pointy stick.

There is a solution to this problem, of course. The ghosts of Kehrquoos are just a little bit more accepting of cats than other necropoli tend to be and, either because of this or contributing to it, cats infest most parts of the Wishtaw. While most ghosts still do not want anything to do with cats (they have a nasty bite, after all) there is no shortage of ghosts available to handle the cats and to set them on any ghosts who were unlucky enough to be dwarves in life (due to the number of dwarves who turn out to have been bad, the necropolis of Kehrquoos does not discriminate).

The ghosts of Kehrquoos are unique in another way as well: they are not completely averse to interacting with mortals. The Sutredi Traveler Clan is recognized as a group with which specially-appointed ghosts may interact. In exchange for having a place to be where most other people do not venture and for having friends in spectral places, the Sutredi perform tasks which would require the ghosts to leave the Wishtaw, keep other people out, and work to further the interests of the necropolis— setting the groundwork for expanding the Wishtaw is just one of their missions.

### **What's at Stake for Arward Lartvon**

The principal benefit that Arward Lartvon gets out of its deal with the ratlings is a representative on the Seat of Kehrquoos. The Seat is a council of fourteen people that takes care of most of the administrative tasks in the city (or at least decides

how to delegate them). Twelve of the councilors are installed for one-year terms in general elections (you can vote if you own at least one room in the city, but you must come personally). They may serve only once (and *run* only three times) and at the end of their term they choose one of their number to stay for an extra year in order to guide the new councilors and fill the thirteenth position. The last position is filled by Arward Lartvon's representative. This mostly serves to allow them access to records and let them know what the Seat is doing, rather than give them much weight to Lartvoni interests. The Seat is ratling-dominated, after all, and the ratlings prefer to stick together in front of outsiders.

Their position on the Seat of Kehrquoos is not all that Arward Lartvon gets out of the deal, however. Arward Lartvon has also been given the assurance that Kehrquoos will not permit the presence of the country's enemies. It may use Harborbridge for its small navy, and station troops in the city. Finally, Arward Lartvon has permission to request that the Seat institute a draft on its behalf. The Seat need not comply, but Arward Lartvon has spent a very long time building a close relationship with Kehrquoos so that its people will see the Arward Lartvona as friends and close allies. If a draft ever be called for, the troops will be placed under Lartvoni command. From the ratling population alone Arward Lartvon could easily increase its military strength by half its current size, to say nothing of the potential troops to be had by calling back veterans among its own people into active service. No taxes or tributes are exacted from Kehrquoos, but the trade is good and it is only a matter of time before Arward Lartvon is able to call a draft.

### **Travelers to the City of Rats**

In connection to Kehrquoos, two Traveler Clans are worthy of note, the Sutredi and Imercreddi. They share a tie to each other which neither of them is willing to acknowledge (when their

members are aware of it, anyway, since few of them are, especially among the Imercreddi).

The Sutredi are outcasts in the city, gutter caravaners. The original nucleus of their clan arose from cast-offs and exiles from the Imercreddi many generations ago but some were lured away in later years by their distant brethren. Whether they made a poor bargain is debatable. Their futures may not be gilded but as individuals they have a peculiar freedom that is unknown to most of the Traveler Clans. No Merchant Prince stands at the center of the Sutredi, nor any captains at their caravans, as they are still called. The caravans pass and enforce their own laws as democratic mobs whose rules can come and go in a matter of days, or even hours. So long as every adult is present (those who are currently adults are in charge of determining when a child can now enter their ranks), anything goes and the majority rules. If it is necessary to join the caravans for an issue which concerns the whole clan then each caravan will send a representative and any decision might be made. Even the whole method of voting is subject to change, but the Sutredi have thus far avoided giving all of their power to any group of individuals, save for their representatives (whose positions exist only for days at a time, and who may even be replaced in the middle of a conclave).

Calling them robbers and thugs is not totally inaccurate, although it is becoming less true as time goes on. They despise any authority above their own and consider themselves to be outside of the scope of any laws which they did not choose for themselves. Besides this they have retained their ancestors' cultural disregard for outsiders. This does not translate into a law-abiding people, and the trait was only intensified by the Years of Silence, on which only the rest of Kehrquoos is silent (not that the Sutredi talk much of it to outsiders).

What happened during those years is not exactly clear, but there was no shortage of violence

directed toward the Sutredi, and when it was over there were a lot less of them left (and less of some other groups, too). Many, perhaps even most, of the Sutredi do earn a living from street performance or from other more *interesting* but still legal occupations, like “things-finding” or investigative work, but some are definitely employed in criminal enterprises and as a rule none are too inclined to follow the city’s rules. The trouble is said to have started because of the activities of these latter Sutredi, but Arward Lartvon began to insist on fixing the situation when events spiraled out of control. Soon enough, various other minority groups in the city also insisted on intervening.

Today the Sutredi still lurk in badly-lit alleyways and abandoned zones, but they keep a much closer eye on their members than they did before. They still consider the laws of Kehrquoos to be nothing but laws for the *citizens* of the city (because few of them own a place of residence, few of them are able to vote, and this hardly helps them to feel like part of the city). They inhabit Kehrquoos but they are not its people, and they are content to fit into the cracks. They recognize that the city’s people do not appreciate this, however, and they tolerate less now than ever before anyone who is so foolish or unlucky as to get caught.

The Imercreddi are less than fond of their cousins (and generally unaware that they even are cousins). They are the primary overland medium of trade for Arward Lartvon and its neighbors. These countries are rarely in a state of complete warfare with each other but are often embroiled in minor border conflicts (the Larvtona win small pieces of land, lose others, and the world turns round and round) and so have little trust for each other’s citizens. The Imercreddi are a neutral, trustworthy third-party that can go between them all with less scrutiny than landed citizens would be able to get away with.

Because of how little official attention is paid to them, Arward Lartvon employs many of them as

spies (and accepts as a cost of operations that the Imercreddi are probably selling this information to its rivals as well). Others do the same, however, and everyone knows that changing how they treat the Imercreddi will throw the whole game off the table for both espionage and trade.

Arward Lartvon’s quirk of preserving all of the food that can be preserved is a great boon to the Imercreddi. They also maintain a profitable trade in alcohol and have become authorities on and historians of innumerable varieties of strong drink, which they themselves abstain from as a business practice. It is difficult to be a teetotaler connoisseur but the Imercreddi manage to do the job. It is more important to avoid suspicions of sampling (or tampering, even) than it is to taste the stuff. Aroma, color, and other tells have to suffice.

Between the most common foodstuffs and the rarest of rare wines they also sell dwarf handiwork, baubles purchased in far-off lands and delivered by the shipborn, and “far workers,” aerrec-a that have sold themselves into indentured servitude in order to see the world. These aerrec-a sometimes stay within the caravans (the Imercreddi find them to be useful) and if the trend continues long enough and becomes tradition, then the aerrec-a could easily develop into a group of camrelidji.

At present the Imercreddi are led by an austere young woman who ascended to her current position a few years ago, after her mother’s death. Her selection over her many siblings has not done a good job of keeping the family united, no better than the fact that she is obviously the product of an extramarital affair. While the Imercreddi are not puritans they are still stricter about their monogamy than literally every other culture around them, and what makes her parentage a matter of concern for more than her family is the rumor that her father is Lartvoni— and, what is more, that she is corresponding with him even now. The neutrality of the clan is becoming suspect, and if it is for good reason then it may soon transpire that Arward

Lartvon has acquired the foreign intelligence necessary to launch and win a much larger war than before. Especially if it can convince the Seat of Kehrquoos to proclaim a draft.

### **The Aerrec-a in the City of Rats**

The aerrec-a of the city either are themselves or are descended from far workers of the sort currently being employed and traded by the Imercreddi clan. The Shipborn who traded with their villages told them of a greater world, and they wanted to see it, or at least they had a need to escape their current surroundings (blood grudges can sometimes cause a whole village to resettle itself at Kehrquoos). Some went to other regions instead, but most set food on land again at Kehrquoos.

There have been aerrec-a in the city for more than a hundred years, which means that there are many of them in the city who were born there. During this time they have experienced a number of bumps, but they have settled in and become a regular and valuable component of the city. Both these aspects of the aerrec experience have been shaped strongly by Arward Lartvon, which rallied the citizenry to demand measures to restrict the cannibalism of the aerrec- a (ratlings, it turns out, are remarkably concerned about the possibility of being eaten by people more than twice their size). Arward Lartvon also offered its full support in enforcing the restrictions, which neared but never became a total ban.

The aerrec-a responded by carrying on the practice in secret where necessary, but those secrets were brought to light and required bribes and threats to put back again. Shortly thereafter, corruptible officials were replaced and given grave threats from above. The aerrec quarter on Harborbridge eventually exploded in a riot that sent the Sutredi running to ground and the Imercreddi just running away. The dwarves, themselves aware of certain practices of their own, gave cautious aid where they could do so without notice, but mostly they saw

and waited for some clear result to manifest. What eventually occurred was a lifting of the restrictions, however reluctantly, and a very strong interest in the aerrec-a on the part of Arward Lartvon: already formidable warriors with a native martial tradition, the package is made all the sweeter by a genuine lack of fear in the face of death so long as they will be cannibalized after they fall.

There are rumors that Arward Lartvon triggered the riot in order to see how the aerrec-a would perform.

One of the most important cattle-dynasties (even if they no longer have cattle) is called the Salt. In their homeland they are bear-killers and practiced poisoners, but here they have become entrenched as a criminal organization, one whose eyes are looking far afield for future locations to which to spread their tentacles. Their chief aim is to secure the permanent dominance of their own people wherever the aerrec-a find themselves, but the world is unfriendly to newcomers and they are willing to look out for their species as a whole, provided that the others recognize the dominance of their friends and protectors (most do). Besides a bit of pride in their species, it keeps the other ones grateful and indebted to the Salt. During the restrictions period they were instrumental in turning delegates of the government to their side, and they ensured that organization persisted in the riot. Now they are working on smuggling—both overseas and overland—and preparing to infiltrate the military when Arward Lartvon begins general recruitment.

Other aerrec-a may usually respect the Salt, but that does not mean that they are connected to crime in any other way. Few are interested in going any further than remaining silent on the Salt's activities and refusing to testify against them, which they feel no trouble with on account of the role that the Salt played during the restrictions period (as the Salt planned). Most aerrec-a have found work where a strong arm (or several) is necessary or in keeping





after livestock and other animals, especially of the kind liable to take off a hand if they are not treated cautiously. Aerrec magicians also have their place in the city. Armed with their native knowledge and the mystique that comes from being from a far-off place (natives to Kehrquoos keep their birthplace hidden), they find themselves in high demand by all ranks of society for curses, healings, and fortunes.

### The Waters

A few outlying farms help to provide for Kehrquoos, but Arward Lartvon is the source of most of the produce. The Sea, however, is a target of great attention. Every week, many hundreds of ratlings leave shore in strange crafts that almost bring to mind flotsam, peculiar but reliable boats that they use primarily for storage. The Rooquers themselves spend most of the time in the water (they even attach themselves to the boat by rope and float in their sleep).

Every day, larger ships depart and others return, bringing with them their loads of fish, pearls, precious shells, and other valuable goods. Larger ships also come and go, bringing straight timbers of great length and exotic beasts from distant lands, as well as immigrant workers with contracts of indentured servitude and other visiting travelers. The Shipborn frequent Kehrquoos and through their lines of communication are responsible for spreading knowledge of the city throughout the known world (and the known world of the Shipborn is considerably larger than that of anyone else).

Other ships, generally possessing joint Lartvoni- and Kehrquoos- crews, patrol the limits of the waters exploited by the city. This area is a great many times larger than the city itself. One of the principal duties of this fleet, besides keeping watch for possible raiding parties, is hunting sharks. The ships trail chunks of bloody meat behind them to lure sharks away from more-frequented zones. Extermination comes as part of the job and there is

no need to waste perfectly good shark, so processing takes place aboard the ships as well. Sharks can help to fill out the dinner plate, of course, but sharks are reputed to have many magical applications, and there are many ways in which one could make a nice trinket out of this or that.

### Religion

The Swook is a guardian for the ratlings and for every other inhabitant of the city, which, according to some, is itself a part of the Swook. Until the building of Kehrquoos, the ratlings paid little attention to the concept of an afterlife. The presence of ghosts confirmed that the spirit had at least the potential of life after death, but unlike for most others the matter mostly stopped there. It was concluded by most storytellers that ratlings had no afterlife just as they had no gods, but where the ratlings sought to change the latter they were content with the former. Perhaps their spirits only stayed here rather than travel to some far-off blessed isle, but all the same their spirits stayed, and having gods and the continuation of existence *somewhere* they were therewith content.

Until Kehrquoos, that is. As the god was formed from the ever-continuing souls of innumerable ratlings, Kehrquoos is also the god of the afterlife. For every ratling whose bones are a part of its framework there is in the Swook a most glorious continuation of existence, but the Swook is also a bridge to another world, one of its own making, to which every other Rooquer may depart after death.

There is no room for the punishment of the wicked in this other world; paradise is not to be denied to anyone. Of themselves the ratlings had no concept of punishment after death, save for the firm belief that everyone would someday, eventually, understand the full consequences of their actions for better or for worse, and they have not since developed anything more. The afterlife is a place to rejoice in, and it is for *everyone*. It is largely a place of

perceptions, capable of being shaped with a thought. The past may be viewed, the future foreseen, any place in existence witnessed as it is, was, or will be. Eternity is a long time (especially to Rooquers), but should it exist the afterlife provided by Kehrquos just might do a passable job of providing a way to pass those long years without end.

Kehrquos is staffed by a horde of live-in priests who serve as combination maintenance crew, tour guides, and officiants for the daily offerings of milk and fish that sustain the Swook's power. They are always more than happy to lead a newcomer through the Swook's innermost bowels, and some of those newcomers ultimately stay to serve as priests themselves. Most often this is because of the widespread belief that even a non-ratling may enter the afterlife which is provided by Kehrquos, provided that ze die within its walls (ratlings, on the other hand, have the option of doing so no matter where they die).

The Shipborn find the Swook's great towers and the lights of those towers to be of grave importance as lighthouses when they come in to Harborbridge, and this has shaped their perceptions of the Swook as a god. Its role as a god of protection is taken *very* seriously by those rookeries which deal with Kehrquos, some of which have made use of the Swook's priests to design rookeries that could, like many buildings on land, serve as shrines to it. Both Shipborn and Rooquers are delighted with the idea of the Swook's servants sailing on the ocean, and several have found a point of interest in the designation "little world" in light of the belief that Kahrquos has created one. For many Shipborn, death on such a rookery guarantees their transport

to whatever world was departed to by the creators of the floating islands. For these and for others, Kehrquos is a lighthouse or navigational constellation for the soul which allows the dead to get their bearings in relation to the afterlife.

At least officially, Arward Lartvona tried to ban the cannibal rites of the aerrec-a because the practice was spreading through the ranks of its own military forces, especially among the upper ranks. Its practitioners believed that ARNAV was present in all things but not *equally* so. By eating the corpse of a volunteer, one could increase the concentration of ARNAV in oneself, which in turn granted increased divine power. In the face of the riot on Harborbridge, Arward Lartvon was forced to tolerate this peculiar doctrine, at least in the city. Elsewhere in the country, anyone who is caught at it will more than likely face a heavy punishment, but in Kehrquos it is beginning to spread even to civilians, and it may in time become a widespread practice of the aerrec-a are integrated into the military.

A different religious fad, more popular among the inspectors and nobles if only for a lack of funerary behavior, is the totem-cult, which fuses the concepts of Swooks and stone-gods. Most of its adherents see a potential god of epic proportions in the Wendeko Wando Dolkar mountain range. Their ultimate goal is to carve and shape it into a structure that will realize this potential. Once it has been awakened or birthed, the god will usher in a golden age. The majority of the aerrec-a, for their part, easily see Kehrquos as being a stone-god itself, and its presence leads more aerrec-a here than to any other place in the world. After the ratlings, most of the Swook's priests are aerrec-a.

## Ko Netko

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The balance of power does not have to shift very far for Ko Netko to take a more dominant position in its alliances. Suddenly the situation has shifted, and its neighbors are no longer partners in a profitable business relationship; they are protectorates, or lower than that, and their rulers live only at the sufferance of the lords of Ko Netko.

Whether the rest of the world is boosted as well, increasing the nation's level of scientific development would suit them very well. They already require a sidebar explaining how they can exist in a typical fantasy world without being too advanced for their surroundings, after all, so you might find that you actually like them better this way.

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Ko Netko is a nation whose people, the Netkots, have never had to worry much about wars of conquest. There was simply no-one insane enough to want their land. The water is often contaminated with deadly diseases, as is the insect life. It can be hard to find very fertile ground, and even so...

Perhaps it's magic. Or maybe it's just another disease, with a very long dormancy period. Or there's a build-up of chemicals that causes it. Or maybe the explanation is something that could

only be explained with a two-hundred-page paper with four hundred different eight-syllable words which nobody outside of a highly specialized field of science could hope to understand. The people of Ko Netko do not know what the cause is, but they know the effect: Every twenty-three to twenty-five years, the land fails to produce all but the barest amount of food. Sometimes it produces nothing at all.

They store all the food that they can, but most of the food they can grow does not last long before wasting, or is hard to cultivate in their land, or both. They would leave, except that this is their land, and it has been theirs since before recorded history, and at any rate the neighboring lands are settled as well, and Ko Netko does not have the means to wage a war of conquest. They would import food, except that what little they can export must go to provide for imports of even greater necessity.

Ko Netko is a nation obsessed. Its people will stop at nothing to change their situation, to adapt their land to their needs, to adapt themselves to their land's abilities, to stop the generational onset of slezhi slotzo, the dying of the land.

They are quite the little nation of busy scientists, scrabbling to figure out how to improve their situation in any way possible.

### Sottoronne: Sacrifice

Cannibalism. The Netkots are not ashamed of it. On the contrary: they are proud of it. When slezhi slotzo sets in, the oldest and the weakest of the people go to their deaths immediately, so that they can cease taking up valuable stores of food and immediately begin contributing to those stores. As others die, they are harvested as well.

They do not limit this practice to their own, however. Their history does not recall wars among

### Diseases of Ko Netko: Zreki

Zreki is perhaps the least dangerous of all the diseases to plague Ko Netko. It is generally carried only by shrub rats, who can transmit it through their bites. It lasts only a day or two in humans, thankfully, and starts quickly. Within an hour of infection, the victim's speech will slur and zir hearing will degrade. Slight seizures occur sporadically, and the victim's deafness will be no defense against the screeching sounds which are hallucinated by most sufferers.

themselves, for even in their distant past they recognized how useless it would be when there was more to gain from joining together and raiding other people, whose lands were not so fickle. For a time, the Netkots were known for their raids, in which they seized food and the means of getting more— weapons, slaves, tools, and so on. They have a different reputation today, but once upon a time they were bandits from a badland.

This tradition died long ago, however. They have a self-propagating population of slaves, and when they are in need of more they use their limited resources to import more. Every country has its undesirables, and Ko Netko is as good a penal colony as any. The Netkots let their neighbors bother with war now, and in return they make available the fruits of their research.

Ginkets, as the slaves are called, are no longer eaten immediately as they were in the past. The current system has been in place for nearly three hundred years, and a ginke has much to offer before zir death. So that the Netkots may focus their attentions on important research, the slaves work the fields and rice paddies, and perform all other necessary work, such as construction and food preparation, which does not immediately relate to scientific pursuits.

There are, occasionally, slave uprisings, or at least attempts at them, but the price for failure is high, the ward for rooting out conspiracy is higher, and

the allies of Ko Netko are more than happy to lend their strength in putting down an uprising. Nobody wants to lose the benefits of being friends with Ko Netko, not when its research rewards them so.

When the slaves are unable to work (or have been accused of being part of a conspiracy to rebel, or have committed some other crime), then they become test subjects. Ko Netko has developed no idea of “human rights” (or rights for any other intelligent species). If the idea exists anywhere at all in their world (which it very well may not) then the surely understand why it would be considered important by other people. But the fact of the matter is this: If there is the slightest possibility that the test will in some way lessen the effects of slezhi slotzo, then no number of deaths, no matter how agonizing, can be anything *but* justified.

After the work, after the tests, when the ginkets are finally dead, they serve one final time: as food, as tools, as clothing. This is Sottoronne. Once it meant the willing sacrifice of oneself for the good of the community. It has now come to represent everything which is sacrificed in the Netkots' near-holy war against slezhi slotzo.

Ko Netko works toward a future where the land is bountiful. They are not looking for a promised land, running with milk and honey; they intend to *make* one.

### Fields of Study

Ko Netko society revolves around the six Tednots, or Fields of Study: Tedno Nonlo, the study of society; Tedno Nonsi, the study of mathematics; Tedno Notso, the study of medicine; Tedno Sotro, the study of astronomy, literally, but more loosely and more accurately the study of history; Tedno Zhitno, the study of chemistry; and Tedno Zpeto, the study of agriculture.

### Note on technology

As first glance, it might seem that Ko Netko would fit only in a high-technology world, seeing as how they have been following scientific pursuits obsessively for the better part of three centuries. However, what is the most visible part of technological progress is relegated solely to a single Study, Chemistry, and while they no doubt have discovered gunpowder, or something like it, how much they have used it is a flexible matter. Of far more interest to them, with regard to the Study of Chemistry, is how plants and animals are affected by various concoctions, and as with everything, gunpowder will be of interest to Ko Netko only so far as it might affect slezhi slotzo. And they most certainly will have thought long and hard before giving it to any of their neighbors, who they try to give as little and as useless information as possible while still retaining those countries' loyalty.

Similar points can be made for nearly all other technologies associated with industrialization. The sciences which Ko Netko pays the most attention do not generally lend themselves to mechanical and engineering advances (true, they pay attention to mathematics, but only as a tool for enhancing their other Studies). Ko Netko stands a very good chance of being like the Mayans, in that they have stunning advancements in certain fields, but still, somehow, manage to overlook things like the wheel (although the Netkots themselves have not overlooked this particular advancement).

In short, they can fit into just about any world, regardless of the general level of technology.

These are rough categorizations, and what they translate to does not fully encompass everything which they involve.

The Study of Society is more properly a field of psychology, but Ko Netko is interested in how societies function. More specifically it is interested in how the social order can be adjusted further in order to make it easier to go through slezhi slotzo. Individual people are nothing more than components of the society in which they live and are only important so far as they relate to society. This study is at first glance the easiest on its ginke test subjects, but anyone who this has no idea of the mind games which the Netkots can devise. And, of course, how people deal with excessive torture can be just as informative as anything else, though it must be admitted that they generally get that information from research results shared by other Tednots.

There are technically no test subjects necessary in the study of Mathematics, which is the second-smallest of the Tednots. It exists purely because it still provides benefits to Ko Netko's crusade, often helping the work of the other Fields of Study. Still,

while it doesn't have any test subjects, its researchers also make heavy use of data acquired by other studies.

The study of Medicine is the study of the body, done in an effort to adapt it better to the land. Tests are made to see how little food is necessary for a person to get by, which nutrients are necessary, and what happens without them. Members of this study slice open still-living ginkets in order to garner yet-more information on the body. After three centuries one might think that their knowledge of vivisection could be expanded no further, but in that belief one would be wrong. Researchers in Medicine also subject them to diseases of all kinds in order to test cures. Even the exact amount of blood necessary for a person to live might one day prove to be a vital piece of information, and accordingly the Netkots have hundreds of case studies of the effects of different amounts of blood loss. They have also discovered blood types.

Astronomy is the smallest of the Fields of Study, and the only one which can truly be said to have no ginke test subjects. The study of Astronomy involves the stars, record-keeping, and historical

models, with each being studied for the benefit of the next. History is studied in an attempt to glean useful information from the past, the age of seven and continues until the age of fourteen. At this point the adolescent Netko, along with zir peers in that year, takes an exam.

Based on its results, zir Second Phase education will focus on one of the six Tednots, or more rarely on one of the two auxiliary fields, especially old records relating to the dying of the land as it occurred in previous generations. The study of Astronomy has generated hundreds of different calendar systems for every possible use. Also encompassing metallurgy, the study of Chemistry is by far the most important when it comes to exports. Ko Netko may also sell biological weapons of a sort and send its doctors to the courts of the highest kings, but Ko Netko is also responsible for developing both demolitions and the most advanced alloys and forging techniques in the known world. Poisons, too, fall under the auspices of this Field of Study, and the most common tests are those administered in the hopes of seeing how the subject reacts to this substance or those two substances in tandem.

Most of the tests which are administered in the study of Agriculture are performed on plants. Work is often done in conjunction with the field of Medicine, however, to determine the nutritive properties of newly-developed strains and plants imported from abroad.

## Education and Research Teams

Education is divided into two phases. The first of these is a general education which begins at the age of seven and continues until the age of fourteen. At this point the adolescent Netko, along with zir peers in that year, takes an exam. Based on its results, zir Second Phase education will focus on one of the six Tednots, or more rarely on one of the two auxiliary fields, Administration and Child-rearing. This period will go on for another ten years. Once the Netko is through ze is able to cast aside the customary facemask of the student and is assigned to be an assistant on a research team in zir Field of Study.

Research teams are the basic building block of Ko Netko's society. They work together, live together, eat together, and for all intents and purposes (including more carnal matters) are married to each other. The old term for "spouse" was in fact retooled to have its modern definition: research partner.

Each research team works on a specific project, receiving a new one once it is finished. Assistants remain as such for six years. They manage minor details of the project which do not need a researcher's attention but nevertheless require more knowledge of the Field of Study than a ginke can provide.

Upon finishing zir sixth year as an Assistant, a Netko will become a full researcher. Ze will either remain with zir current project or be assigned to a

### Diseases of Ko Netko: Glero

Glero is a more dangerous disease: it is highly, highly contagious, being transmissible with only the slightest transfer of fluids. Its onset begins with bloating before a high fever and visual hallucinations develop. The worst thing about glero is not what it does alone, which can put someone out of commission but usually lasts no longer than a week. It's the psychological factor.

The first victims of a glero epidemic can often conclude that they are suffering from djesi, which is far more deadly. It begins with bloating as well. Quickly, however, djesi proceeds to soreness of the throat and chest pains, before it causes a series of ever-worsening heart attacks. It is spread through contaminated water and is a constant source of fear for the slaves who work the rice.





newly-formed researched team which has been assembled to tackle another project. Managing the team is the director, who does the same work as zir subordinates but is also tasked with settling disagreements and keeping the team moving together in one direction.

Research teams are formed and disbanded by the chief director in charge of that Tedno in that city, and the chief director also controls how many resources each team is able to command from the Tedno's budget in that city.

Beyond their capacity as test subjects, ginkets fulfill another role in research teams: bovrots (sing: bovro), which means "carryman." Carrymen are responsible for basic, untrained tasks such as retrieving and transporting needed materials, like the name suggests. The position is given to a ginke as a reward for good service, and there is room for further mobility: slaves who become familiar enough with the team's project can become Assistants. Such a ginke has a keen mind and will likely become a researcher one day. Even when, as is most often the case, the research team has taken a liking to their carryman and undertakes to train zem, the job is still a formidable one. The lowest of Assistants has spent ten years studying the relevant Tedno, and only the keenest of minds can play catch-up in any reasonably length of time.

While a ginke is still a ginke even when ze is also an Assistant, or even a full researcher, there is not really any difference between their lives and those of free members of the research teams. At least two research teams currently have a slave as a director and, because the child of a ginke and a Netko is a Netko, several higher-ranking Netkots are descended from slaves.

Noticeably, Ko Netko uses the term ginke/slave in a general sense, but never refers to any particular workers or groups of workers as slaves, but instead as bovrots or carrymen.

## Refusal to Surrender

The people of Ko Netko have dedicated themselves to the six Fields of Study for three hundred years. There are some projects started in that long-ago time which are still going on, and the Netkots give honor to those who went before them in the act of lodno: their refusal to step and aside and give up. This is their determination to press forward against all difficulties until the prize has been won, and the dying of the land has finally been halted.

Other cultures worship their ancestors by making burnt offerings, or by praying to them. The people of Ko Netko practice lodno, and refuse to surrender to the travails of the age. Even should they die before their work is through, they have not failed. The knowledge of Ko Netko has increased just that little bit more, and those who follow them will practice lodno as well. To never falter, never fail, never accept defeat and the inevitability of slezhi slotzo: this is how the Netkots pay honor to the dead.

Especially brilliant Netkots are mummified after dying, instead of eaten. This mummification is believed to tie their spirits to this world, delaying the time before they pass on to whatever world comes next. The Netkots are rather sketchy on what happens in the world-to-come, since they believe that very little information comes back from it, but what little they know points toward the presence of slezhi slotzo there as well. The work which is done by the living will serve the dead as well.

So important is the unlimited, all-embracing sacrifice of sottoronne that this is viewed not as a release, as non-cannibalistic cultures might see it, but as a great sacrifice. When it is necessary to communicate with the mummified person, a ritual is performed involving the consumption of hallucinogen-laced ginke meat. As mummified Netkots have been kept from passing on, they

know little more about the world-to-come than the living do, but their aid can still be useful in work on current projects.

### **The Matter of Food**

Rice. The land is so barren, but the water is still fruitful— if prone to harboring diseases— and rice is the staple crop of Ko Netko. It can be eaten as is, beaten into a cake form, or used as a filler for pine bread or meat. Not generally renowned for its flavor, rice is also frequently used in soup, along with blood and shrub rat meat. Mostly, though, the Netko suffer through eating rice on its own or along with pine bread, and the second is hardly better.

Hardy cereals, like a sixty- year- old strain of barley called Novarind's, are also grown in Ko Netko. There are also several species of mushroom which seem to fare mildly well, including one which is used in the previously-mentioned attempts to contact the mummified dead.

After rice, however, the most important plant in Ko Netko is the pine tree. It can be harvested for its nuts, its needles can be used for a tea called rafial, and the white inner bark of the tree can be eaten as is, turned into a thickener for rice soups, or ground up into a flour in order to make flyn bread.

The diet of a Netko is not exceedingly high in meat. Almost a quarter of it derives from sotoronne, even after the supply is increased by the fact that the ginkets eat even less meat and are not permitted to benefit from this source (which is the sole distinction to remain between a Netko and a sufficiently-promoted ginke). Shrub rats, however, are able to live off of anything. They are fed off certain species of plant which provides little to no nutrition to the Netkots and grow in areas where even the hardiest of more useful plants cannot take root and thrive.

Charcoal cookies are a common food as well. They are especially used during the lean years leading up to the onset of slezhi slotzo, when as much food as possible is even stored away, and during slezhi slotzo itself. They are made from pine flour and charcoal.

### **Objects of Manufacture**

Nothing is wasted by the Netkots. Even bones are made into tools, and whether it comes from a ginke or a Netko skin can be made into leather and used for bags, books, gloves, and more. Underclothing is made from woven needle grass, a hardly plant which isn't edible but is still quite useful. It can also be made into paper and baskets. Clothing is loose and billowy, with pockets and pockets and more pockets. There's nearly always something which needs to be put somewhere, whether the draft of a report, a couple of charcoal cookies, or a vial of sreka virus.

Leather is also used to make the face masks which students wear outside of their living quarters. It is an intensely liberating feeling to be able to walk outside of one's quarters without that mask after graduating from a Second Phase education and becoming an Assistant. No-one, not even researchers in the Study of Astronomy, can point to the ultimate origin of the practice, but before the rise of the present social order the masks were worn by children, slaves, foreign visitors, and others who were not adult Netkots.

### **Games They Play in the Wasteland**

The art of falsifying information, called jotfe, is a sport of sorts in Ko Netko. Under other circumstances, providing fake research in a report is as much of a mortal sin as for any other scientist, but when one plays a game of jotfe the report is declared to contain fake information from the outset. A period of time is given for other research teams in the same Field of Study to examine the information and determine the single piece of

falsified data. Success goes to the research team which discovers the misinformation first or, if it cannot be discovered in the time allotted, to the research team which generated the report. In the latter case they must obviously point out what was wrong in order to prove that they did not submit a completely correct report just to beat everyone. In addition to simply being entertaining, jotfe causes research teams to constantly stay in practice for detecting fake data.

There are also games which are associated with specific Tednots. Researchers in Medicine will often make bets on which disease killed a given test subject or on the side effects of the latest cure to be put into testing. Netkots engaging in Chemistry during their Second Phase education will often be presented with a dead ginke, already dying before ze was poisoned by the instructor, and be asked to determine what was used. Research teams in the Tedno of Society play at seeing who can inspire particular actions in their respective test subjects, and without using techniques previously determined to work.

Suicide comes and goes in popularity, but is presently on the wane.

### **Besides the Science**

Despite Ko Netko's focus on research, not all Netkots are assigned to research teams. Some, alternately, are placed in child-rearing teams, or administrative teams. Child-rearing teams are made up of a pair of Assistants for each instructor, an instructor and a carryman for every ten -to-twenty children, and a director for every ten instructors. Each year, there are child-rearing teams which have no children, either being newly-formed or having seen off their charges past the First Phase of education, and they are given a new batch of children, up to a year old.

Before he becomes a true instructor, someone in the Field of Child-rearing will have handled two

### **Diseases of Ko Netko: Votna**

People can be infected with votna as easily as they can get the flu, but luckily it is quite easy to treat and even to vaccinate against. Like the flu, however, these vaccinations do not carry their usefulness over to the next year. Its presence is signaled with a tingling in the extremities a day or so after infection. This will last for another few days before it is joined by a difficult in concentrating, regular loss of recent memories, drowsiness, and irritability. The disease will take its course after several months but lost memories will never be recovered, and someone who is regularly infected with votna will have severe gaps in zir memory.

sets of children from the age of one to the age of seven, first as an assistant, and then as their future instructor, modeling his curriculum over these years in anticipation of their personal situations. Basic matters such as simple arithmetic and literacy are handled prior to First Phase education, and it is expected that the instructor will have given them a firm grounding in these by the age of seven. For the next seven years, the instructor will continue to see to their needs, making sure that they mature mentally and emotionally, and provide them their First Phase education.

Unless they are part of an especially important project, a research team will eventually spend a ten-year shift managing a batch of Second Phase students. It is not unheard of for a new Assistant to find that zir research team had specifically requested zem after seeing, or hearing from close colleagues, of zir skill with something relating to their project.

Running Ko Netko is the Field of Administration, which oversees the field of Child-rearing, the six Studies, and all other aspects of Ko Netko. Administrative Assistants oversee teams of carrymen working in food production.

Full administrators handle entire harvest-fields, oversee the maintenance work on an entire city

district, or similarly large tasks. At the top of the Administration Field are its directors, who control the flow of resources to and from each team in their own Field and that of the Child-rearing Field, and the flow of resources to and from the six Studies, whose chief directors then manage their resources within that Study.

While Ko Netko is made up of several major cities, and a few smaller towns devoted entirely toward materials production, these cities operate more or less independently. They usually come together only when dealing with outside matters or for the sharing of research information. Having three research teams in different cities working at the same problem might be seen as a waste of effort, but each research team will probably attack the problem in different ways and find information which the others will not.

### **The Language of Ko Netko**

As has probably been noticed, the language of Ko Netko, Dengi, is heavy on the letter “o” and hard consonants. Plural words are, through sheer coincidence, signified with an “s” on the end, but where the word ends with a vowel it is instead giving a “ts.”

Old Dengi (Pirso Dengi) *sounds* the same as Modern Dengi (or Sedne Dengi), but as can be seen with the shift in meaning of the word *zpono* from “spouse” to “research partner,” the actual meanings of the words have been altered since the society of Ko Netko entered its current state. Modern Dengi also has about three times as many words, although synonyms have mostly been excised from it. In cases where a word had more than one meaning, new words were made in order to spread the meanings around. In the interest of not needing to complicate the system with signs to show the exact pronunciation, new words were not made on the basis of minor differences in pronunciation, and spouse/research partner, for example, is the same whether it is said as “zpo-

noe,” “zpah-noe,” or “z-pone-oe.” Another Netko, knowing how each letter might be pronounced, will easily figure out what you’re saying.

Especially in context of what else you’re saying, and *that* is where homonyms are recognized. Two words may sound alike, but their meanings will be so entirely different that they will not be used in the same context. In this matter the Netkots are rather exact, and they frown on the practice of exaggeration and metaphor, since then it can be rather hard to tell if you’re saying that you will be doing something which is quite normal with your research partner tonight, or if you will be doing something quite strange with your bookcase tonight.

For the sake of clarity, each word is written with its own character. New characters, for new words, are passed only with the approval of the relevant authorities in the field of Society.

### **The Morality of Cannibal-Scientists**

Some Netkots enjoy what they do. Probably even most of them. Why *not* enjoy your job when you do it well? Sometimes they enjoy it so much that they begin to do their work not because of the constantly hammered-in mindset that this work is necessary, but because they just like doing it. Sometimes it gets to the point that a Netko gets out of bed in the morning just because ze wants to see how a ginke reacts to the new chemical that ze designed. Whether the reaction provides any useful information is irrelevant; ze just wants to see what happens.

The casual disregard which the Netkots hold for the ginkets is clearly demonstrated in their games. Of course, these games are also intended to provide new and valuable information, even if it is valuable only because it shows that a particular line of inquiry will not bear any useful fruit. The Netkots are obsessed with figuring out a way around the catastrophe which befall them almost like clockwork, and even if they are still experiencing

the dying of the land the Netkots are living far better than they did three hundred years ago. They know that everything which they do is for a better future, and the average Netko would put zemsself up as a ginke as quickly as ze offers zir flesh up for consumption when the need is there, except that a Netko is most valuable to Ko Netko as the one performing the tests, and not the one being tested.

A discussion on whether the people of Ko Netko are evil, or simply very, very nasty, ruthless, and desperate, is a little too much for this book. Kantian ethics condemns them. Utilitarian ethics can't make

a final judgment until the end. Aristotle would probably disapprove.

*However*, if they are evil then it is not because they perform horrible experiments for the fun of it, because they do *not*, as a nation. If they are evil then it is because these ends do not justify those means, because acts are wrong in themselves, or for some other reason. But as a people the Netkots are not self-consciously malevolent. Like most people on the wrong side of the line, they view themselves as being very, very good, and doing only what circumstances force them to do.

## Ksauofron

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy.

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Ksauofron is a religion. Specifically, it is a religion that can be dropped into any setting with only minimal modification, and which also displays the sorts of oddities and inconsistencies that are so common to most real-world religions. This is in contrast to too many constructed pantheons, where, for example, the god of thieves is only associated with things which would *make sense* to be associated with a god of thieves.

Real religions are rarely so neat and orderly.

The name Ksauofron applies to both the religion and the pantheon which its adherents worship. Its origins are unclear and oftentimes stretch so far into the past that the religion would almost appear to be native to that land, if it were not for a minor detail here or there which makes this possibility an *impossibility*. In several other places there *are* no such details to disprove the idea that Ksauofron originated there, and even the local language conforms to the linguistic patterns found in the names of the religion's divinities (when those names have not simply changed to suit the region).

But the religion could not have come from *all* of those places, even if together they lend insight into some of its development. Ksauofron stretches past the borders of nations and even of worlds and universes. Sometimes it pours into a new land with only a single missionary, whose origins are unknown to that land's history, and sometimes it issues forth from the dreams of a visionary.

In short, however you treat Ksauofron in your work, it is as much "canon" as any other treatment.

The religion also does not appear to have been the result of a single culture's development. Rather, it is the result of several cultures mixing together at various times and in so doing mixing together their deities. Various ideas about what kinds of cultures were mixed into this pot, and at what time and in what manner, have been developed in the course of investigating some of the more interesting irregularities of Ksauofron.

It should be pointed out that nothing in this appendix presents the deities as being real, so to speak. When it is said that a deity is this way, or does that thing, what is meant is that this is a portrayal or belief about that deity. Whether or not they exist is something that one can't be made sure of even in a setting where they walk around and have a physical presence. It could always be something else just masquerading as them, after all.

### Overview of the Pantheon

There are nine gods in the pantheon of Ksauofron, and they are all connected together through either blood or marriage. Lauulo, god of life, and Roluwu, god of runaways, are commonly accepted to have been the first gods, though some hold that there is an exception. Roluwu has had no children, so it is Lauulo from whose loins have come nearly the entire pantheon (perhaps due to his status as the god of

life). Laulo's daughter is the goddess Plew, who had two sons, Sonnaus and Tol. Tol, like his grandfather's brother, has no children ascribed to his name, while Sonnaus has had two children of his own: a son, Mauonla, and a daughter, Afolnu, who in turn had a son named Scorr.

Into this family married the Matchless Goddess, Dauukh, whose origins are said to be unknown in all stories except for those told by that priesthood that is dedicated solely to her name. She is bound to the other gods by her wife, Plew.

Unlike in many pantheons the gods seem to frown on incest just as strongly as their worshipers. This simplifies the family arrangements very much, though it should be noticed that Dauukh appears to have no compunctions about occasionally sleeping with her granddaughter-in-law, Afolnu. Or at least nobody seems to have any compunctions about telling (and, usually, believing) stories about her doing so. It may be the lack of a direct blood relation between the two of them, or perhaps it is a holdover from the culture which Dauukh is commonly accepted to have come from.

In Ksauofron, the gods are not believed to be interfertile with each other. Mortals must be involved in the equation, and every god (save for Laulo, Roluwu, and Dauukh) has a mortal parent as well as a divine one. Of the many children which a god will almost certainly have, all will have a bit of charm in their lives, but as their current numbers make apparent it is very, very rare for such a child's divine heritage to fully show itself.

The gods are all associated with many different aspects. These aspects may differ in many ways—including sex and even personality and appearance—from the “primary” aspect of the deity that is most commonly thought of and associated with zem.

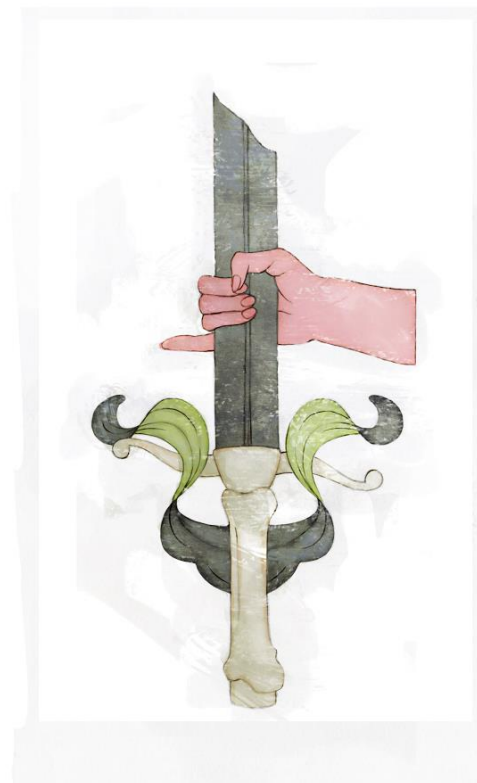
The occasional heresy does add one or two gods to the equation but these are very uncommon. Even

rarer is for such an arrangement to be found in the region's orthodox manifestation of Ksauofron.

### The Death Goddess and Her Wife

Two main deities hold great influence in the pantheon of Ksauofron. Dauukh is the first, and she is the goddess of *death*, the end of everything that is. She is portrayed as being somewhat short, and also plain in appearance, with her beauty not coming from her body (which is not to say that she is *ugly*). Rather, it is said to come from her force of personality. Even the other gods cannot help but be entranced by her; how else could she seduce her granddaughter-in-law Afolnu into bed time and again, despite the reservations which the latter is often said to have?

There is a certain maliciousness that is associated with Dauukh but it is not directed at anyone in particular. She simply knows what she wants and is



willing to do whatever is necessary to get it. It's really incidental to her status as a goddess of death. In that respect she is, if not exactly sympathetic (you can only comfort so many millions of people before they begin to blur together), then at the very least not sadistic about it, either. Death is a thing which must exist so that the old continually gives way to the new and there is always room for new generations. Perhaps it is sad, but it is also necessary. Dauukh keeps death going because she must.

With ashen skin and eyes the color of fresh leaves, dark grey and light green are the colors that are associated with Dauukh. She is a goddess of the peasantry and wears the peasants' clothing. Youths often go through a phase of paying special attention to her—not out of morbid obsession but out of thankfulness that they have not (yet) been chosen to be among those who must be cut down in the prime of their lives. It is not uncommon for the physically afflicted to turn to her once more, thankful that the day will come when she will release them from their current pains.

There are many, many public depictions of Dauukh in most cities, and on any given day somebody has kneeled before any one of them and offered up a prayer. It is extremely hard to convince her to return a dead person to the world of the living but she is more easily convinced to give advice, especially to those who carry the blood of the gods. Especially if they are women —Dauukh's lustfulness is well-known, and her dalliances with mortal women stand a good chance of outnumbering the affairs of all the other gods combined. There is a difference between love and lust, however, and it can be safely said that she *loves* only her wife, Plew.

One well-accepted theory is that Dauukh was the primary goddess of a nation that conquered the true originating land of Ksauofron. In turn, the conquerors assimilated into the more numerous

native population or were forced out, but Dauukh remains embedded in the cultural consciousness.

In her aspect as Sauowauor -Dauukh she is the wild goddess of *civilization*, a young woman with a lean build and eyes as gray as her skin. The "Dauukh-by-Conquest" school of thought draws some of its evidence from this aspect of Dauukh, explaining the contradiction of a death god also being a god of civilization as being a result of Dauukh's origins in another culture.

Prior to the conquest, these theorists believe, the natives had a more tribal existence, perhaps even one that was semi -nomadic. The invader's chief god would not only come to take a prominent place in the pantheon of Ksauofron but also be associated with the ways of civilization which the invaders brought with them. Some go so far as to theorize that the invaders were sea-farers, pointing out that the primary symbol of Sauowauor-Dauukh is the astrolabe.

Another aspect which lends credence to the Dauukh-by-Conquest theory is that of Naukurwes-Dauukh, goddess of *metalworking*. It isn't a stretch to assume that the invaders who brought "civilization" also brought with them advanced metalworking. It is assumed by these scholars that either the natives had no metalworking or they had only bronze and copper and that the introduction of iron was enough to cement the association. Another possibility is that the superior weapons and armor of the invaders caused many, well, *deaths*, and that the slaughter caused metal to be associated with death. Naukurwes -Dauukh is portrayed with the head of a dog and carries with her a divinely-blessed bell, the size of which differs from portrayal to portrayal.

*Dance* is the purview of Nulsau -Dauukh, who moves with the sort of unearthly, seducing grace that is infused into her personality in all of her aspects. Emphasizing this aspect, dances associated



with Dauukh are traditionally never accompanied by music.

It comes as no surprise that she is associated with *charisma*, as Husau-Dauukh, but in this aspect the deity is a *male*. Like with all of her male aspects he lacks Dauukh's usual lust. There are no official stories to explain this but it is generally assumed by the laity that men do nothing for her, to the point that she can't even get excited *as* a man. Another possible explanation put forward by some believers is that she doesn't want to risk having a child, but this does not perfectly explain why she does not go for men in her male aspects.

As Fer-Dauukh she is the goddess of *fog*. She often obscures the thoughts of those who would oppose her chosen servants, confusing them and making them prone to foolish mistakes. It is often claimed by those who make a series of unrealistically-massive mistakes (and just as often accepted by those who hear the claims) that they had been cursed by Fer-Dauukh for some reason or another.

Plew is the other major deity of Ksauofron, elevated no doubt because of the association with her wife, Dauukh. Most likely she was no more important than any other deity prior to Dauukh's inclusion in the pantheon. She is the goddess of *snow* in most places where the religion has taken root. Lands where snow is not especially common (or doesn't even exist) will usually emphasize another of her aspects.

Her hair is commonly red and curly, and her eyes are dark red (sometimes they are depicted as flames). She is said to frown only rarely, taking all but the most grievous of misfortunes in stride. Commonly thought to be the result of an evolution in culture from hunters to warriors, and a perceived association with the former in olden times, Plew is portrayed as wearing armor most of the time. She is often worshiped by the common people. The most fanatical of her followers are easily distinguished by the many charms which

they carry with them. Every year that a person is dedicated to her name ze will craft (or buy, in some lands) a small amulet which is tied into zir hair. The more charms in a person's hair, the longer that that person has been dedicated specifically to Plew.

Outside of the cities, where the snowfall can be especially dangerous, there are more than a few sacrifices to her. These usually take the form of animals, slain on altars of stone. There are many stories about her adventures with her father, Laulo, and she often hears entreaties for help by mortal warriors.

As the male Nauowau-Plew, Dauukh's spouse is the god of *diviners* as well as others who search for a way to foretell the future.

This association likely caused (or was caused by) her aspect as the goddess of *fate*, Lukau-Plew. In snow-deprived lands this aspect is equated with Plew to the point that the goddess is not uncommonly referred to as Lukau and is called Plew-Lukau in those uncommon situations where her dominion over snow becomes important. It is otherwise rare for him to be the land's dominant aspect of Plew (and even rarer for any other male aspect of hers), but even in those cases he is all the same married to Dauukh. Perhaps as a result of her sexless marriage Dauukh is in these cases regarded as even *more* eager to jump into an attractive woman's bed (and to pull said women in after her, if Dauukh senses reluctance).

Regarded as a holdover from Plew's now mysteriously-disappeared connection to hunters, Ruorkhaus-Plew is the tireless god of *slaughter*. She is very tall but has some slight plumpness around her stomach area. This is usually considered to be the result of good living rather than pregnancy, but it differs from land to land. Ruorkhaus -Plew wears a suit of armor forged by her father in his aspect as Llesrau -Laulo, and cooled in the blood of her victims. She usually holds a two-pronged pole weapon that is in many cultures called a "man catcher," but the weapon is far from non-lethal

when used against unarmored flesh. Few worship her; all fear her, and men go mad when Ruorkhaus-Plew passes by them invisibly on the battlefield or through scenes of extreme carnage. Occasionally, it is said, she possesses people, and drives them to commit atrocities in order to slake her bloodthirsty nature.

Another important aspect of Plew is Fesnaus-Plew, the goddess of *borders*. She helps her wife Dauukh in passing the spirits of the recently-dead from this world to the next. She, too, has seen a great many departed souls, but while this has blurred them somewhat she still remembers what her wife does not: Of the souls who come under her care, this is *not* one of a billion repetitions. Accordingly, she does her best to remain empathetic and to comfort them.

Likely as a result of her marriage to and association with Dauukh, the goddess Olnauun-Plew has dominion over the *returned dead*, or those souls who refuse to remain dead (or are not allowed to do so) and in some form or another return to (or simply do not leave) the land of the living. After Lukau-Plew, this is the most common dominant aspect of Plew in snow-deprived regions and, occasionally, even in some places where snow is common. Cults to Olnauun in snowy or high-altitude regions commonly practice a kind of mummification in the cold night air and regard as blessed those who die in the winter, when their preservation can be carried out most successfully.

### **The Eldest of the Gods**

Laulo, the patriarch of the Ksauofron pantheon, is the god of *life*. He is divinely beautiful, of average height but very muscular, and wears peasants' clothes colored light grey and brown. Most of his dedicated followers are found solely in his priesthood. They treat others with the utmost respect, allowing everyone to move before them, no matter the situation, and always stopping to allow those who have fallen behind to catch up. A

couple of entertaining stories have been written about what happens when multiple priests of Laulo meet each other and all of them try to get the others to move along the path before them.

He has a mercurial relationship with Dauukh, to say the least. There is an association in him with sleep and dreams; he sends horrible dreams to wicked mortals, sends peaceful dreams to the virtuous, and plants warnings and messages in these dreams. It often seems that dreams are the only way in which he communicates with mortals. There are even many stories of a woman finding herself pregnant after a certain kind of dream.

In most cities there are many altars dedicated to Laulo.

One of the more obvious paradoxes in Ksauofron is that, while Naukurwes-Dauukh is the goddess of metalworking, it is Llesrau-Laulo who is the god of the *forge*. Some scholars take this to mean that the natives worked metal prior to the invaders' arrival but that, as mentioned before, their superior equipment caused a permanent association of metalworking with their chief goddess.

Building in general, however, is still (with a few exceptions) in Laulo's province. This can be seen in the case of Usshauokau-Laulo, a goddess of *architecture*. She is, as a matter of convention, portrayed as being exactly twice as tall as the next-tallest person in whatever work she is in, whether that be a small infant child or an eight-foot-tall giant of a man. Her eyes are grey as ash and her skin appears to be made out of granite. It is said that her robes and hat (which are all that she wears) are made from the skin of a dead goddess, but it is not known who this dead goddess is. Some of the faithful say that it is the skin of Olnauun-Plew, who, as the goddess of the returned -dead could quite plausibly be one herself. The implications of filicide sometimes cause negative associations to be carried by Usshauokau-Laulo, or even by all of Laulo's aspects.



The goddess of *law*, Ruwnucausr-Laulo, is a young, wolf-like woman with crimson eyes and a uniform covered in sword designs. In her presence, no-one can speak falsehoods, not even unintentionally and unknowingly. She is not, however, able to see the truth that is in one's mind, meaning that it is possible to keep a secret from her by simply refusing to speak at all. And many do so, in order that they do not find out that their most precious-held beliefs are false after all.

As the elderly god of *trappers*, Suffausr-Laulo is held in high regard by many rural communities—much to annoyance of those scholars who try desperately to find that irritatingly-missing connection between Plew and hunting, and refuse to listen to the advice of others who say that, given Laulo's aspect as the god of trappers, it is more plausible that the link to hunting lies with him.

One of his many minor aspects is that of Rhunewr-Laulo, the god of shadows. He rules over unclarity and things which can exist only in the presence of their opposites.

Especially when it comes to his aspects, versus her personality, Laulo's brother Roluwu bears several similarities to Daukh. There are some who say that the one is a reflection of the other in Ksauofron. However, it must be said as well that there are just as many who say that this first group is full of itself

and is pointing to superficial similarities. This group occasionally holds up Plew instead, saying that the contrasts are more important.

Roluwu is portrayed most often with little clothing, and this is usually dyed blue. Once upon a time the Outcast God was rejected from the company of his family. The crime which he committed varies according to the story—and the cult of Mauonla - Roluwu maintains that he committed no crime and left of his own volition in order to travel the world—but he is considered to have since made reparations. He is kept in the prayers of *travelers*, *wanderers*, and *rejects of all stripes*.

Just as Laulo has a sometimes-troublesome relationship with his daughter-in-law, so too does Roluwu have an unpredictable relationship with his niece, Plew. There is some contrast in their demeanors; whereas Plew rarely frowns, Roluwu rarely smiles. Moreover, he most often smiles not because he is happy, but because he wishes to disguise the fact that he is unhappy. In both cities and small villages there are a number of depictions of him, and those who are traveling often stitch his symbols into their clothes. Like Plew, he is known to help mortals, although he does not restrict his aid purely to warriors. He is a more inclusive god than that.

It is most principally because of Raunoskau-Roluwu and Rork-Roluwu—respectively the gods of *seduction* and of *lust*—that some scholars wonder if perhaps there are connections to Daukh. It is arguably strange for a goddess to be even more lustful than the god of lust. These links are, of course, tenuous at best.

Another oddity in Roluwu's aspects is Reen-Roluwu, the god of *goodness*, whose existence is likely the reason behind the belief of some that he committed no crime and instead departed voluntarily. Equally plausible to others is the idea that Reen-Roluwu exists because, as one who descended further into depravity than any other

god, only he, upon his redemption, could truly understand the nature of good.

Further complicating the affair is the aspect of Wauorra-Roluwu, the overly ambitious goddess of *villainy*, whose many plots have been hampered by the confusion and temporary idiocy brought on by Fer-Daukh. She is truly a monster not just in soul but in body as well. She has bony plates on her head instead of hair, two hands at the end of each arm, and eight legs. It is said that to look into her eyes is to relive one's most dreadful nightmares.

As a final point of contrast with Daukh (dances to whom are made without music, one will recall) there is Noraus-Roluwu, the goddess of *music*. Like Wauorra-Roluwu she also has bony plates in place of hair. She wears armor that is generally thought to be carved from bone. Most representations of it have the torso resembling a set of many interlocking rib bones.

### **Plew's Sons**

Sonnaus is the god of *summer*. He is talk, with a hearty build, and wears opulent silver robes. He is worshiped strongly by the common folk but few follow him strictly. Most places will have a statue or two of Sonnaus if they can afford it.

By way of his mother Sonnaus is the son of a soldier who was involved with Plew during a way in distant history. He has a strong friendship with Roluwu, with many stories existing about their exploits. These usually consist of them trying to one-up each other with ever more daring deeds. While he can bless the causes of warriors he is also known for making their jobs even more difficult. He places obstacles in their paths in order to judge whether they are worthy of his help.

Even if they weren't asking for his help.

The movement of the sun through the sky is often used to provide one of the most basic units of

measured time, and so it should not come as a surprise that the god of *the passage of time* is Furrurau-Sonnaus. In this aspect Sonnaus is said to be a young child in the morning, a man in the afternoon, and an elderly invalid in the evening. Furrurau-Sonnaus wears the costume of a minstrel and carries a miniature sundial with him at all times.

Sonnaus also has a prominent female aspect, Neeswuor-Sonnaus, the goddess of *doorways*. She has the head of a tiger (often some other feline when tigers are nonexistent locally, although it has also happened on occasion that the tiger head remains and is regarded as the head of a fantastical beast). She carries a mirror with her and seems to share some duties with Fesnaus-Plew. According to some depictions, while Fesnaus-Plew is the one who rules over the borders and determines who may pass through them, it is Neeswuor-Sonnaus who makes it possible for them to do so, just as one may give a person permission to pass through the gates while another is responsible for actually opening them.

Sonnaus has experienced many heartaches and suffered many pains on his journeys with Roluwu. It is thus fitting that he is the god of *sorrow* as Ressew-Sonnaus.

Contrasts come into play again (in this case, with his brother) as he is cast as Neel-Sonnaus, god of the *moon*. Some scholars are of the opinion that he was, so to speak, originally Sonnaus-Neel, but that at some point his aspect as god of summer became dominant over and subordinated his role as god of the moon. Most of these people consider the dawn of organized agriculture in pre-Ksauofron culture to be this point, as the growing months could arguably have been more important than the moon.

It is harder to determine where remembrance comes into play here. Nevertheless, he is also regarded as Naunes-Sonnaus, god of *memory*.

Being the god of the *sun*, it is not too hard to see why Tol is Sonnaus' brother. Like his mother and his brother, Tol has connections (if tenuous) to warfare. There are those who theorize that together they represent a once-dominant aspect of pre-Ksauofron religion, perhaps as a sort of three-faced god. He carries no weapons, preferring to fight with his fists, but does wear armor and a flaring helmet.

Strangely, Tol is often worshiped by lawbreakers. He has some associations with Roluwu for this reason, which has resulted in numerous occasionally-empty temples being built throughout lands with a significant number of believers. The temples are staffed by volunteers who come and go as they please and there is no hierarchy within the walls; one simply enters and finds a job to do.

Tol has had many adventures with his niece Afolnu, which are usually ill-fated for him and humorous and most enjoyable for her. Like his brother, Tol places challenges before certain types of people. In his case, however, he prefers people who are seeking redemption, hoping to see how truly they really want to be redeemed.

There is nobody else that is better-suited than Tol, however, to be the god of *thieves*. The lengthily-named Khauoauwaur-Tol is a tall, broad-shouldered man with a bald head. Like Neeswuor-Sonnaus he carries a mirror, and like Wauorrua-Roluwu he has multiple limbs (four arms, in this case). He is believed to be able to appear and disappear without a trace, so that particularly talented thieves are often considered to be manifestations, or at least gifted children, of this aspect of Tol.

Conversely, Haurausr-Tol is the goddess of *healers*. She has the form of a bald-headed crone with a severe outfit and is adorned with many ornaments. Many of the priesthood of Tol are especially dedicated to Haurausr-Tol and spend long hours in her temples helping the injured and the sick.

As god of the sun it is an easy fit to also make him the god of *fire*, Llauosau-Tol.

With the moon god's lack of prominence, it seems that Tol has been given dominance over most parts of the sky. A rather fringe theory is that his aspect as Suaul-Tol, god of the *rain*, comes specifically from the mixing of his mother's primary purview, snow, with his own major associations, fire and the sun, either of which are enough to turn snow into water (or rain, rather).

### **Sonnaus' children and grandson**

While she is often regarded primarily as a crop deity, Afolnu is the goddess of *abundance* in all things, not just abundance in crops. She is portrayed as being tall (often in the seven-foot range) and muscular, with brown hair that reaches down to her shoulders. She is said to only rarely frown. This is perhaps a consequence of her being the goddess of abundance and, thusly, not having the opportunity to become familiar with deprivation. As with many of the Ksauofron deities, Afolnu wears a set of armor that has been made after the local fashion.

Afolnu is heavily worshiped by women. Those who have dedicated themselves specifically to her have several holidays which they alone follow. Mountainous and hilly regions often carve depictions of her into foothills. She has taken part in many misadventures with her grandmother Plew (and her affairs with Dauukh have been mentioned several times already). She is known to give help to those who are in dire need of it.

Huswaurk-Afolnu is the goddess of the *harvest*. She takes the form of a crone who is even more inhumanly tall than Afolnu is said to be. She wears a utilitarian uniform with a hood, suitable for working in the fields. Plants grow around her with every step that she takes, and with her hands she cuts them down and sifts them.

Like all of Afolnu's aspects, Sauowausr-Afolnu, god of *rivers*, is portrayed as being very tall. He is usually perceived to be a bald teenage boy whose body is made out of water. He wears a uniform made from human bones and a net, and has four legs, with which he can walk on water.

Llur-Afolnu is the god of *autumn*. He is another peculiar-looking god, portrayed as neither wearing nor holding anything at all save a shield, and having the head of a golden-eyed rabbit. A few scholars perceive a connection between Llur-Afolnu and the god Wauolkaus -Mauonla, the god of *winter*. They suspect that Llur may have been Afolnu's predominant aspect before agriculture became widespread and gave way to Huswaurk, who in turn gave way to other more generalized Afolnu.

The harvest is connected to its ultimate end, consumption. In this way Afolnu is tied to food in general. She is the goddess of *cooking* as Seeca-Afolnu.

As Eukhr -Afolnu she is the goddess of *oaths* as well. She presides over the promises that are made by kings and lovers at harvest-time.

Afolnu's brother, Mauonla, is as beautiful as his great-grandfather Lauo. The god of *midnight* is a tall, slightly plump god who is prone to small fits of anger. Mauonla is often worshiped by youths before they move on to Dauukh. His dedicated followers can be distinguished by the specific prayers which they offer daily to him. His is slightly associated with lakes, and most of his shrines are located near inland bodies of water.

Mauonla has a rough relationship with Sonnaus. He fights with his father on a frequent basis but this seems to have a touch of good nature to it, as few myths speak of them as being on bad terms with each other in general. Epic heroes can often count on a visit from Mauonla but quite strangely he is rarely said to offer any sort of help or advice (or,

for that matter, to hinder anyone or test them). Rather, he just seems to be interested in meeting such people and talking for a little while.

Cauorrau-Mauonla is the goddess of *killings*. She is a woman of short stature, with a shark's head and a persistence to match. There is no afterlife for those who meet her after their deaths. In places where Cauorrau-Mauonla is widely believed in there are rituals that are designed to keep the deceased from being hunted down and eaten by her.

Perhaps hinting at a closer connection to Plew in the past, another of the god's aspects is Wauolkaus-Mauonla, god of *winter*.

Sauunr-Mauonla, god of *dreams*, travels with Lauo as the latter moves in and out of the sleeping minds of mortals. It is Sauunr-Mauonla who carries sleepers' dreams in the bag that is slung over his shoulder.

The god of the *seas* is Raur -Mauonla. He can raise storms and great waves, or smooth out the sea and make even the fiercest tempest die down.

Scorr is the youngest of the gods according to the mythology of Ksauofron, but according to some scholars his cult is the oldest of them all. Despite the fact that Dauukh and Sonnaus are each also associated with something that is in his dominion (and are much more strongly associated with it) he is nevertheless considered to be the god of *sky*, *death*, and *summer*. Scorr is short and willowy, usually possessing a sorrowful demeanor and wearing simple dyed robes.

Scorr is often worshiped by the wealthy and by those who would like to become wealthy. Such people wear their hair done up in a ponytail in reflection of Scorr's. He has a relationship with Roluwu, as merchants are not only wealthy (or trying to become wealthy) but are also often travelers too. Half of his temples and holy sites are on the road for this reason. Despite this association, however, he is said to travel more

often with his uncle Tol. Those who are able to get his attention can often get advice from him that, while peculiar-sounding at first, is sure to bring success to one's next endeavor.

Care should be taken in supplicating Scorr, however. Unlike many other deities, you can somewhat expect what you will be getting from Scorr because if he gives you anything then it is what you wanted. But that is, often enough, not only something which was not what you really *needed* but something which, in hindsight, you would have been much better off not having at all.

Kholnausr-Scorr is a fully-grown woman with the head of a locust. This likely signifies an old, now-forgotten animosity between herself and Huswaurk-Afolnu. *Thunderstorms*, which are the purview of Kholnausr- Scorr, can be quite damaging to crops. Her eyes are made of the purest silver and rest deep in their sockets. She is usually portrayed as wearing human skins. This may refer to a cult of human sacrifice which existed in the past and may perhaps even exist today. It may also be related to the coat of skin that is sometimes associated with Lauulo's aspects.

Sauoshaur-Scorr is a short, elegantly-built old woman whose head is covered with many spines. She wears clothes that are covered with signs of divination and carries a trumpet with which she heralds her arrival. Sauoshaur-Scorr is the goddess of *riches and great wealth* and is paid special attention by those who are wealthy or hoping to become so. She is commonly connected to Ferauoskau- Scorr; the relationship between great wealth and *politics* is quite clear.

### **Beliefs**

While each of the gods of Ksaufron has zir own dedicated priesthood, there is another group of clergy (about the size of all of the others combined) which serves the pantheon as a whole. It is these clergy, the raulauser, with whom people interact

most often and provide what are the most commonly-accepted stories about the gods.

Ksauofron has a rich mythology, with not only nine gods of hundreds of total aspects but also trickster demons, mischievous spirits, and monsters. Demons and most spirits have no direct relation to the gods (although some individual examples do serve one or more of the gods, and all of them can be interfered with by the pantheon), but nature spirits, also called nature "souls," are commonly servants of one god or another and most monsters are the creations of the gods. Those which are so, are called ruraunr, which loosely translates to "created." Often, these monsters eventually work their way out from the control of their creators; even the gods are not free from making mistakes or being overthrown.

Among the worst of sins in Ksauofron are lust (not even the gods are immune from sin, and this goes triple for Dauukh), irresponsibility, thoughtfulness, neglect, and faithlessness. It is these last four which are paid special attention in the most common creation myth. The story goes that humankind was formed when Lauulo, while working at his forge, accidentally cut himself and some of his divine blood mixed with some ash from the nearby fire. Since that time, Lauulo has cared for his inadvertent creations. It is assumed that, by dint of being gods, his brother and his descendants have inherited this responsibility even though they had nothing to do with it. Dauukh is, perhaps curiously, rarely considered to bear the same responsibility as the rest of them, but is tied to the world in her own way.

Public affection, too, is somewhat frowned upon, even if it is not exactly considered to me a sin. Many outsiders (not that there are usually many going about in their cities, since the religion does not hold outsiders in high esteem) are astonished to see seemingly-cold individuals suddenly turn warm and loving once in the privacy of their own homes.

Conversely, charity, humility, loyalty, moderation, and selflessness are all highly respected.

### **Arts and Traditions**

Perhaps as a result of the synthesis of the Conquering and pre-Conquest cultures, the two primary art forms in Ksauofron-influenced cultures are most commonly metalworking and instrumental music. The latter of these is, half of the time, kept separate from dancing of any sort.

Coming of age rites for the general population differ greatly from land to land but usually involve a minor celebration with friends and family and are applied only to ten-year-old females. Among other things the rite involves a declaration from the subject of her intended profession. Soon afterward she will be apprenticed or in some other way begin training to enter into that field (assuming, of course, that she is able to apprentice into that profession, but as a matter of course most people make arrangements prior to the announcement). Males also begin their apprenticeships at around the same age but as for a general activity only females go through the practice of formally announcing their intentions. Possibly this comes from the invaders, who are believed to have had a more matriarchal culture, according to what little can be gleaned from religious study.

Both song and dance are important parts of Ksauofron. Dauukh is the god most strongly-associated with dancing, and those who reject her or feel that they have fallen out of her favor will only rarely dare to dance. It is her province and hers alone, and she can take umbrage with any enemies of hers who would think to intrude upon it. Meanwhile music is common among all of the traditions of the other gods. It accompanies the stories that are told by the Plew-raulau and the chants of Laulo's traditions.

Norauos-Roluwu herself is the goddess of music in its entirety, and music is used to wake the sun after

the longest night of the year and to give thanks to the appropriate gods for long times of good fortune. Music is closely tied to most societies influenced by Ksauofron, and then there is dance, Dauukh's art, which is separate from and equal to it. Its practitioners move with silent grace to a silent beat, giving honor to the goddess of death.

The raulauser priesthood perform their death rites only for the nobles. Marriage rites are highly informal affairs, usually involving a quick rundown of what is to be expected from all of the partners (namely, that they will exhibit charity, humility, loyalty, moderation, and selflessness in all their dealings with each other), and marriages routinely join together more than two people. A sort of ancestor worship is common in Ksauofron. Ancestors are not gods, strictly speaking, but they can still influence events. They also often serve one god or another, which gives them the ear of someone with a lot of power.

There are many holidays that are general to the pantheon as a whole. They celebrate equinoxes, great priests and rulers, heroes, the harvest (perhaps it is technically Afolnu's domain, but everyone appreciates a bountiful harvest), solstices, and full moons. Most people associate themselves with a particular major holiday (usually the full moon of one's birth, but other times the closest solstice or another celebration). They make it a point to hold a pilgrimage to a site related to that holiday (perhaps the birthplace of a ruler whose date of ascension they celebrate more than any other holiday, on account of sharing zir name with that ruler). The color yellow is one which has connections to the whole pantheon.

There is a strong oral tradition in the faith, although there are also three separate holy books. Each one is mostly the same but with a few key differences in each, which leads scholars to safely conclude that the books came at some point after the current form of Ksauofron— complete with Dauukh— was formed.



The raulauser, or general priesthood, is made up only of females. They are encouraged to marry and have children, partly because only women who already have raulauser priests in their bloodline can become members of the general priesthood. Upon entering the raulauser a priest is bound to a certain temple. She will be removed from the priesthood if she strays more than ten miles from that place at any point in her life. Consequently, temples are very large, with more than enough room to hold all of its inhabiting priests along with their families.

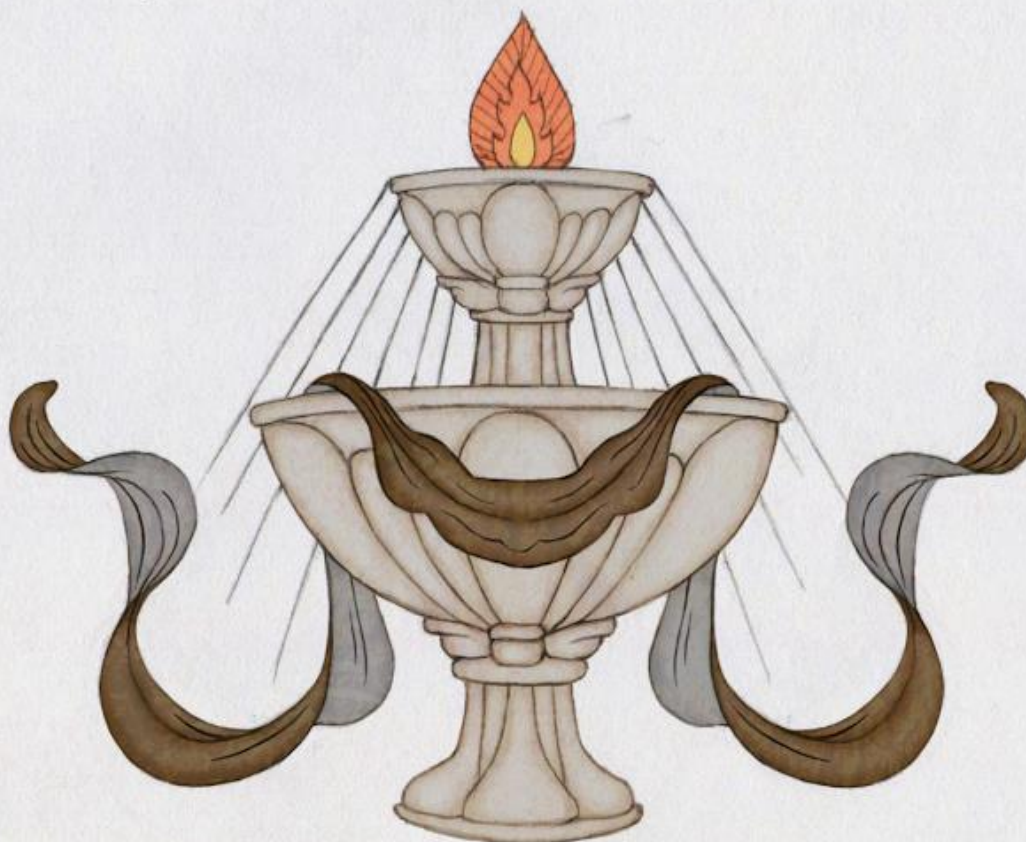
### Specialized Priesthoods

Dauukh's priesthood, the Dauukh-raulau, are similarly all -female. They act as leaders in the rituals that are carried out in order to attract Dauukh's attention or to give thanks to her. They are also ceremonial leaders in many communities, with a Dauukh-raulau holding a position on every council of note. Though this is only an 'advisory'

position, few disregard the advice of a priest of Dauukh. They are, finally, helpers to the poor and spiritual guides offering philosophical wisdom, especially to the dying (unlike the god to whom they are dedicated, he faces of the dying have not been made numberless and meaningless to them).

Again like raulauser priests they are bound to a certain location (but it is within twelve miles, not ten). They are also required to be ascetic and completely chaste. The definite reason for this is lost to time, but some historians and even theologians suspect that it was rooted in a need to offer penance for Dauukh's unrepentant lust.

Their sign is a closed eye made of simple shapes, and their color is saffron. They have a few books, which are light on mythology, heavy on wisdom and advice, and equally heavy on commentary on the previous. The Dauukh-raulau believe that the world arose from the dust of chaos and they hold



dishonesty to be the greatest of sins. It is in lying that all other sins hide, you see, and few would commit heinous deeds if they did not think that they could hide them with deceptions. Chastity is, as might be expected, their highest virtue. Death rites are a public affair, open to all, but are held only for Dauukh-raulau.

Unlike the raulauser and the Dauukh-raulau, but like the other priesthoods, the Plew-raulau are not restricted to particular locations upon entering the ranks of the dedicated clergy. As another point of contrast with her wife's priesthood, only men may enter the Plew-raulau. These priests act as spiritual guides and give advice on religious matters, especially where they might involve matters within Plew's purview. Because of Fesnaus-Plew they are often brought into negotiations regarding borders, especially international ones. The dominion of Ruorkhaus-Plew (and the general aid which Plew is known to provide to warriors) inspires occasional requests for the priesthood's advice in war. They also serve as judges over what is and is not holy in Plew's eyes.

Plew-raulau are ascetic and chaste, like the Dauukh-raulau, but they are elected by the people. Whenever a member of the Plew-raulau dies, someone from the community that he served will be chosen to replace him. The Plew-raulau are adorned with symbolic tattoos and scars specifically relating to animal parts. These tattoos and scars are common among many of the priesthoods, and are thought to date back to a practice which covered an entire pre-Ksauofron culture. The color of the Plew-raulau is black. Their highest sin and virtue are wrath and abstinence respectively, upholding what appears to be an unconscious tradition of emphasizing the rejection of those personality flaws which are seen in one's favored deity. Instrumental music has a part in the cult of Plew, and it is often mixed with the telling of stories passed down in a wide oral tradition.

Like Plew, Laulo's priesthood is made up solely of men. The Laulo-raulau act as historians and cataloguers of the past, and they are often ceremonial leaders in especially old places. They live a very ascetic lifestyle but generally have large families, as the Laulo-raulau are extremely encouraged to have children. As a symbol of their status as Laulo's priesthood they carry sizeable one-handed axes (which are occasionally associated with Laulo in his aspect as Llesrau-Laulo, whose first creation is said to have been the axe). Despite the fact that they carry the axes for symbolic purposes, the Laulo-raulau are well-trained in the use of these weapons should the need ever arise for them.

Their color is violet. They have a small musical tradition made of synchronized chants, with nearly a thousand different major chants of varying lengths, the shortest of which is three minutes long and the longest is five hours. The Laulo-raulau despise the act of showing indifference to the world, and value thoughtfulness.

Perhaps because of the role which his priesthood provides, Roluwu is often considered to have taught humans many important truths and to have given them many tools in the early years of their existence. The Roluwu-raulau are females all, and also teachers all. There is not a one of them who has not taken a field to focus on, to learn as much as possible about that subject and then dispense her wisdom to others. They often have luxurious lifestyles relative to the surrounding community, which can quite often evolve in accordance with the interests of the local Roluwu-raulau. If a small town's sole priest of Roluwu decides to take up an interest in chemistry then it is not at all unlikely that the town will soon begin to produce a larger number of alchemists, chemists, and even doctors (though not surgeons, likely, which is an important distinction). They marry in accordance with divine inspiration and usually have small families, preferring to teach others' children than to have many of their own.

The symbolic weapon that is carried by the Roluwu-raulau is the spear. It can double as a walking stick while they are on the move—not that they are often on the move for long, as they generally settle down in one place. Roluwu's sign is a complex pattern of interlocking circles, and his color is orange. There are several versions of (and even more names for) the holy book of the Roluwu-raulau, which speaks of many of the journeys of Roluwu and what he did and learned on those journeys. Those who dedicate themselves to Roluwu (whether they simply favor him above all other gods or actually join his priesthood) abhor envy, which leads some to think that his crime was in some way tied to envy, following the usual pattern of disliking the chief vice of one's patron deity. They celebrate diligence. Like the Plew-raulau, they have an emphasis on instrumental music. Death rites are given by the Roluwu-raulau for all those who die outside the borders of communities (and who were thus travelers) and involves ritually dividing up the property of the deceased.

Both sexes are capable of joining the Sonnaus-raulau, whose members serve to determine what is holy in Sonnaus' eyes just as the Plew-raulau do. Like the priesthood of Roluwu they also serve as teachers. Unlike their counterparts there, however, the Sonnaus-raulau do not have an exclusive focus. Instead they teach more generally. While it is very encouraged, in order to keep the focus of a raulau on zir god, chastity is not required. Marriages made under the auspice of Sonnaus are not usually between more than two people and the ceremonies are attended by the closest of friends and family. They are elected by those who have devoted themselves to Sonnaus and bear long knives as symbols of their position.

The color of the Sonnaus-raulau is black, like the Plew-raulau. Their chief sin is self-injury, and they hold faith in Sonnaus and one's leaders as the highest of all virtues.

As with the Sonnaus-raulau, both sexes may join the ranks of Tol's priesthood, which concerns itself with providing wisdom and advice to secular authorities when it is asked to do so. Celibacy is required but, interestingly enough, one must have been widowed previously in life in order to be eligible for membership. This results in the majority of their members being quite old, and that may be the point of it all, since the older you are the more experience you should have. Their sign is a blazing fire and their color is bronze, and they cover themselves with tattoos that correspond to various myths featuring Tol. The Tol-raulau reject despair and encourage loyalty, especially to the leaders of the greater community (even at the expense of the greater state to which one might belong).

The Afolnu-raulau are made up of both sexes as well. They act as diviners and as leaders in the governments of smaller towns whose focus is agriculture. They live extravagantly relative to the communities which they preside over but are elected by those same bodies, which at least in theory prevents the worst excesses and abuses of position.

The sign of Afolnu is a book with a stylized sun. Perhaps this is representative of an old connection to Scorr, the sun being as important to agriculture as it is. In those stories which involve Afolnu, trees and serpents appear often (with the latter commonly standing in as representations of Dauukh). Those who are devoted to Afolnu abhor gluttony and value tolerance.

Mauonla's priests—every last one of them female—are advisers in military functions. They are most often attached to strategic and tactical planning staffs, whether they be considered with the defense of a small town or with running an entire military campaign stretching across half of a continent. Each of them is permitted to ordain only one person through the course of her career, and she is required to find an apprentice within three years of her ordainment. Should the one which she

ordained die before that one fully trained a successor then she is permitted to take on a new replacement. If her ordained replacement had already begun to train another then it is this one who will be taken on. This restriction has to have occurred sometime after the creation of the priesthood, since otherwise it never could have grown to be so large, but nobody is sure of its origin. The Mauonla-raulau are taken from the ranks of experienced soldiers no less than twenty-five years old and typically have small families, if they have any at all.

The Mauonla-raulau and others who are devoted to Mauonla believe that mortals (here meaning any of the sapient species that are recognized as such, whether humans, lizardfolk, elves, or anything else) were as any other animal in the world, until it came to pass that the gods looked upon them and chose *them* to be elevated above all other creatures. In memory of the gift which the gods gave to all mortals, marriages involve the giving of many gifts, from the bride's family to the groom's and vice versa. The flanged mace is the sacred weapon of Mauonla and only his priests are permitted to carry it. The devoted of Mauonla harbor a particular hatred for apostasy and heresy and exalt the virtue of adhering unquestioningly to the will of the gods.

The Scorr-raulau are helpers to the poor, watchers over the orphaned, and healers of the sick, and their lifestyle is as impoverished as that of their charges'. Taken from either sex, their brothers and sisters are the ailing and the disadvantaged, and their children are those who would otherwise have no parents. To keep their focus on this new family they are not permitted to marry or have sexual relations. Each one of them is taken from the ranks of the unwanted, once an infant who was given over to another Scorr-raulau to serve the god in both this life and the next. The Scorr-raulau mark themselves with scars like webs of cracks in glass, highlighted with yellow ink tattooed into the skin.

Prominent symbols in myths that are connected to Scorr are the cave and the labyrinth (not to be confused with the maze). All songs are a devotion to Scorr, even when they are also sung to other gods. Marriages made under his auspice involve mock kidnappings (though to hearken back to the oldest marriage traditions of pre-Conquered culture) and may not be ended in divorce.

### **Women in Ksauofron**

Women have equal status in most societies influenced in Ksauofron and in many of these societies even have a higher placement in some or all positions in society, and to find the reason for this one must look no further than the gods and their priesthoods. Most importantly, of course, is that the two most prominent deities in the pantheon— Dauukh and Plew— are both female. While there is a varying degree of foulness put upon the female gender in some Ksauofron-influenced societies, because of the tendency to associate Dauukh's lust (which is not always looked upon favorably, especially when displayed openly rather than indulged privately) with women as a whole, they nevertheless retain social influence, being viewed as powerful and worthy of respect even if they are more vulnerable to temptation.

Simply by dint of the raulau, women find many positions opened to them. Only women are able to be priests to the pantheon generally rather than to a specific deity, and the raulau of Roluwu and Sonnaus make teaching most strongly associated with females. Few men who are not Sonnaus-raulau are considered to be very capable of teaching. The Mauonla-raulau must come from the ranks of soldiers and so while there is not a large amount of females in the military (most join with the intention to join the ranks of Mauonla's priesthood and so usually do not join unless they consider themselves to be exceptional) they do exist, and are widely accepted.

Women from the Tol-raulau advise secular leaders at every scale of power, as do the Dauukh-raulau, and the Afolnu -raulau are not only looked to in order to get a glimpse of the future but are often secular leaders in some towns. The existence of women in these positions because of priesthood affiliation has, especially in cases less connected to overt political power (such as teaching and the military), made these positions just as open to women with no connections to the gods.

### **Other Faces, Other Names**

As noted on other occasions, the line -up presented previously is not the only way that the pantheon of Ksauofron is seen, although it is by far the most common, and considered to be the “default.” Take the empire Erianthares, for example, whose March Empress (who is called “empress” even when male) is regarded as being of divine descent, and worthy of being worshiped. Husau is the god of charisma and, like in most places touched by Ksauofron, is the chief deity, being an aspect of Dauukh. It is through his influence that the March Empress is able to wield her influence like a hammer and scalpel both, and lead Erianthares through weight of simple persuasion. Wauorrua is typically the god of villainy, but she is more accurately regarded as the god of *evil* overall, and the source of all things which are vile and sinful.

The empire is the breadbasket of its region of the world, and it has swallowed up several kingdoms simply by reminding them that the alternative to joining was losing Erianthares’ imports. Because of this, the rain god Sual and the harvest goddess Huswaurk are given high placement. As the goddess of law, Ruwnucausr is a heavily-valued deity, while Ruorkhaus is the pregnant goddess of slaughter, called upon in times of war in order to bring victory to the empire, which has little knowledge of and no need for snow. Naunes is the god of memory, reflecting the Eriatharan respect for history, tradition, and remembrance. With its original territory lying along the coasts, Erianthares

has always been a sea power, making it an obvious choice to emphasize Rauur over Mauonla, and it should come as no surprise that Ferauoskau, god of politics, has more favor than the god Scorr.

It should be noted that “March” does not in any way relate to the month but instead to the term “marches,” which refers to the borders of a land. Erianthares traces its origins back to a noble whose domain lay in the marches between one state— whose king she was loyal to— and another. Ultimately, after a convoluted series of assassinations and civil wars, she unexpectedly found herself next in line for the throne, smashed the revolting factions, reformed the kingdom, and then turned it into an empire, starting with the acquisition of the lands which her old marchlands had bordered.

On the other side of things would be the Ialo, a tribal people restricted to a small corner of the world and made up of perhaps two thousand people in all. Suffausr is preferred to Lauulo, with trapping being one of the principal means of getting meat. Tribal life is always chancy, even when the worst that can happen when trapping is that nothing is caught, and the Ialo do not hesitate to hunt, which can result in not just failure but death. Lukau, then, is very important to them and is paid entreaties on an almost daily basis, for she is the one who determines who lives and who dies, who is starving and who is well-fed.

The valleys of the Ialo are near-perpetually foggy, and this light fog is seen as the physical manifestation of the goddess Fer, who is thus omnipresent and omniscient. Fer exists everywhere and knows all, and she can provide one with knowledge of even things happening in distant lands just as easily as she can rob one of the skills necessary to tie the most basic of knots. While Suffausr helps with trapping, Cauorrau, god of killing, helps with more active hunting, while Eukhr preserves the delicate foundation of the tribes by reigning over oaths and punishing those who break

them. Music is another piece of the framework of the Ialo tribes, giving prominence to Norauos, while Kholnausr and Neel and Hauraur—thunderstorms, the moon, and healers—round out the rest of the gods.

To the Ialo, the gods exist in— the gods *are*— the things which they reign in. Just as Fer is the fog which extends through their land, Neel is the moon, Lukau is fate, Norauos' presence is summoned through music because he *is* music, Cauorrau is the act of killing, and Eukhr is every oath that exists, made stronger with every oath sworn and wounded with every oath broken.

### Evil in Ksauofron

Evil is not usually given supernatural consideration in Ksauofron. As mentioned above a notable exception exists in Erianthares, where the goddess Wauorraua-Roluwu serves as the source of all evil, but this is not the general case. Instead, evil is usually just regarded in a “stuff happens” kind of manner. To put it a different way, evil is seen not as the product of a particular action or being, but the natural result of people being able to choose for themselves whether they want to give candy to orphans this morning, eat babies, or just sleep in until noon and forget about this whole “helping orphans versus eating babies” thing entirely. Why, there are even people who give candy to orphans *and* eat babies.

Trickster demons are often seen as malicious, but they aren't the source of all evil, or even born from evil, or even evil in the same manner of somebody who eats babies for the sake of eternal youth. Even if that trickster demon encourages somebody to eat babies for the sake of eternal youth (which is the closest that it would get to eating babies for this reason, since they aren't usually considered to be capable of aging and so don't care about eternal youth, which they more or less have already). Trickster demons, you see, don't operate on a human (or even divine) system of morality.

Ksauofron recognizes them as being alien beings, who have desires and will do things to sate those desires, and who quite possibly do not even recognize humans or gods as being anything besides especially clever (and powerful) animals, or even just unusually animate aspects of the environment. Depending on who has the upper hand in the situation, a trickster demon either sees them in the way that a human views an ant, being utterly inconsequential, or in the way that an ant views a human, being utterly incomprehensible and so powerful that one must simply *get out of the way* before Something Bad happens (like getting squished).

### Methods of divination

As noted before, divination is primarily the province of Afolnu-raulau and any other who attempted to take a glimpse of the future had best have a good reason for doing it. Idly disregarding their holy right and responsibility will not carry light consequences.

Divination is most often made to discover one's true fate— the point of one's life, the event to which all of one's past has been leading up to and will culminate in. She who knows her true fate will be able to prepare for it or even, if she is strong enough, change it. Usually this divination is performed in a forest between dusk and dawn (and, preferably, during the time that the leaves are changing color) and the diviner will offer a piece of newly-written music. No-one else may have heard the song prior to its offering and after this point all credit for its writing will be given to Afolnu.

There are other things which may be divined as well, however. Afolnu-raulau are well -trained in reading omens for many things in the entrails of frogs, which should be sacrificed at dedicated shrines when it is done for this purpose. Young women looking to find the one they are fated to marry can petition an Afolnu-raulau to interpret the entrails of a fully-grown bull, and more mundane

objects can be located by searching the entrails of a sheep.

Soldiers are capable of a darker sort of divination, one which not only reveals their fate but makes it easy for them to change it, but to perform it they must sacrifice and eat a snake (associated with Dauukh on occasion, as noted in the past, which thus makes this act a symbolic murder and cannibalistic consumption of the goddess of death, and thus a rejection of the natural order). Another less blasphemous means of divination, but one which is only slightly less terrible (for it is most common among cults of human sacrifice), is based on the rolling of dice which have been carved from human bone.

### **The Ruraunr**

Ruraunr is a word which means “creation” and refers to the creatures—monsters, it could be argued—that have been created by the gods. Each of the gods has one or more kinds of ruraunr, which are associated with that god even if it does not always obey that god’s commands, but Lauolo and Dauukh are responsible for most of the ruraunr.

The sruw-hesrau is the most well-known of Lauolo’s ruraunr. It is thought to be a discarded experiment from the earliest days of creation when Lauolo was still new to his craft. It can live off of any living animal but prefers to hunt humans, for which it carries a special hatred: the sruw-hesrau were rejected by Lauolo in favor of humans, they say, and they have not forgotten the favor that they lost. They resemble horses more than anything else (and some say that humanity’s dominance of horses is meant to be a reminder to the sruw-hesrau that they are not the masters of this world) but have wolf-like claws on their hooves and long, sinuous tentacles.

The sernner is a small canine creature which was created by Dauukh as a wedding gift for Plew. It is

said to hunt in large packs of up to eighteen individuals, and to have a deadly stinger at the end of its snake-like tail. It is often believed that those who travel in the mountains (where the sernner is said to live) and do not return have been killed by these beasts.

The beast called Rfauosauok ell khau Ssoaur Cauolr is another ruraunr created by Dauukh. It is a demonstration that sometimes the ruraunr can be limited to individual cases, and also a demonstration of the vengeance which Dauukh can pour out on those who have offended her. As is the case with many other ruraunr created by Dauukh it is connected to Plew as well, for the ruraunr is the mutilated and now ever-tormented soul of a cruel king who had killed one of Plew’s mortal daughters, centuries ago. The king now wanders the world looking in vain for his heart, and he kills everyone that he encounters in the hope that their hearts will fit in the cavity which was made in his chest.

Depictions of the wus nauolauoel most closely resemble a mass of short tentacles, flattened as if they were made out of cloth or paper. It is a ruraunr of the slaughter goddess Ruorkhaus-Plew. It is said to be invisibly present on battlefields where great numbers of soldiers have been killed.

The frunau was created by Roluwu, who formed it from the blood which he spilled during one of his many journeys. This time his travels took him over a great sea, where he was assaulted by terrible beings from the furthest depths. In response he cut open his hand and spilled the blood into the water. As each drop fell, it turned into one of the frunau, an eel-like creature without skin or scales and a blade at the end of its tail. The frunau fought with the monsters which sought to kill Roluwu, allowing him to finish his journey. Even now they will protect travelers from such creatures.

## The Conquerors

In closing it should be noted that the very matter of the Conquerors' existence in the first place is speculation. Wherever Ksauofron in its current form originated, the true birthplace for the religion is not known. There are far too many lands and worlds where Ksauofron dates back to before the beginning of written history. There are even more than a few places where it seems to have come from out of nowhere, even though it is ludicrous to think that it could have developed independently in multiple places.

Should the Conquerors have actually existed, however, there are a few things which might be figured out about them. They do not appear to have brought with them any deities except for Daukh, or if they did then those deities were subsumed by the native pantheon (perhaps by becoming aspects of the other deities). Perhaps the Conquerors were monotheistic. While one might wonder at what it implies for a culture's sole deity to be a death goddess, this may have merely been a single aspect of Daukh's nature, magnified when it was adopted into the native culture. Certainly it follows the same pattern as other native names (e.g. Raur, Sauunr, and Olnauun). This would make it a reasonable assumption that the Conquerors shared a common language family, that they overlaid their names and languages over most everything in Ksauofron, or that Daukh's current name is not the one by which the Conquerors called her.

While they are usually considered to have been matriarchal, the existence of a female deity (or even of a female priesthood) does not make it *definite* that they were. It is assumed, because of the associations of the goddess, that the Conquerors were superior metalworkers and that they may have introduced large-scale cities to the natives.

The strong association between Daukh and dance is a peculiar matter, since the natives could not have lacked dance (unless, of course, they somehow *did*,

but this would perhaps be more unusual than any other thing mentioned thus far).

## Miscellaneous Superstitions

There are a great many other superstitious practices which crop up wherever Ksauofron goes, too, of which the following are a mere smattering:

While it is not at all as intense and unpredictable as the relationship which she holds with Lauulo, it cannot be said that Daukh and the sun god Sonnaus are highly appreciative and fond of each other. They especially don't like sharing, and Sonnaus in particular does not like it when someone begins leaning toward supporting Daukh. Tombs are for obvious reasons associated with Daukh, and those who are not actually devoted to her, and may wish to call upon Sonnaus' help in the future, take care to never enter or otherwise deal with tombs while the sun is in the sky.

Cities are seen as Daukh's domain, as she is the goddess of civilization in one of her many aspects, and spitting is, in most cultures where Ksauofron finds itself, a highly disrespectful act. It is thus seen as inviting her ire to spit on the ground while within the walls or borders of a settlement; by spitting on the ground, you may as well be spitting on Daukh herself. Quite a few people instead carry a small cup, if they feel that they'll need to spit anything, and in some places the upper classes use this cup often enough that a cup hanging from one's belt or sleeve becomes as much a necessary accessory as a necklace or ring.

There is a heavy relationship between Afolnu and romance even though she isn't, strictly speaking, a goddess of anything close to such in any of her aspects. It exists nonetheless, however, and it's considered to provide luck (both in one's romantic pursuits and in other things) to engage in a good



round of flirting around the harvest-time, especially if one is directly involved with the harvesting.

Trickster demons are easily bribed and, more than anything else, they like to eat. Getting them to perform a service for you, whether that be cursing someone or simply leaving you alone, requires that you consecrate a meal to them, preferably below a full moon (when the god Neel-Sonnaus, connected to demons in many myths, is at his most potent). Trickster demons often congregate around holy sites, usually not bothering anyone but instead making their own requests of the gods, and so the best bet for making a successful offering (that is, one that is not only acceptable, but also *noticed in the first place*) is in making it at a place holy to one or more of the gods.

Purity is a funny thing, its definition varying from region to region and even from raulau to raulau. It is generally agreed by all concerned, however, that those who are impure (whatever that may involve) will not be dealt with kindly when the goddess of death arrives for zem. In those places where the snow still falls, a tradition has arisen of sacrificing a calf on a specially-prepared altar, to the goddess Plew, so that she might convince her wife to forgive

some of the wrongdoings of the one for whom the sacrifice is made. Preferably, that person will be the one making the sacrifice, but Plew understands the concept of extenuating circumstances.

The term “nobility” has been used a few times here and there and elsewhere, particularly when discussing the raulau. Ksauofron reaches quite a few places and not every society influenced by it—not even every society *dominated* by it—has an actual group of nobility as such. There is, however, a tendency for a social class at least superficially resembling nobility—upper class, holding power concentrated in family groups which tend to only rarely intermarry with the lower classes, and generally forming the bulk of those who have significant political power—to develop in societies that have been touched by Ksauofron. This social class can go by any of a thousand names depending on the individual variations and touches but is referred to as “nobility” here.

## The nSina

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy

**Influences:** Assyrian, Druze, Hopi

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Are you looking for another people to set beside the post-apocalyptic Dry-farmers and Vulture People? Perhaps the power for which the nSina are remembered was technological. Perhaps, though they do not quite remember the details, the terrible deeds which caused them to retreat from the world was its destruction: However the world fell, among the ancestors of the nSina are those who directly pushed the button.

In a science fiction setting they may live on a fortress world or in a number of secluded asteroids, located out in their system's Oort Cloud.

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“The nSina are coming.”

Parents say it when their children misbehave. A cultural artifact of a time when the nSina would descend from their mountains to walk between fire and horror.

Once upon a time there was no-one that could stop them. The tactical prowess of the nSina was unparalleled and their power unmatched. They were the first to master the secrets of iron, so many generations ago, and with it they laid waste to every people, at every turn. They drove refugees ahead of them and entire cities were slain by the men and women of those forced migrations, plundering what they could in order to survive just one more day of running.

And then it stopped.

The sovereign-speaker of the nSina had died, and his armies withdrew in order to determine who would succeed him. But each of his five child was more desirous for the throne than the last, and none of them would let it slip away. History no longer remembers which of them was actually elected by the people, but it remembers too clearly the terrible civil war that followed. The five factions fell upon each other with all the savagery with which they had ravaged the Eleven Nations. They fought each other and the remnants of the Eleven Nations, at turns allying with and against each other. The bloodshed lasted for six years, up until only one son remained—and he saw what he and his siblings had wrought upon their people.

It is now remembered as Ne ull-san, the Day of Triumph. Not for his victory over his brothers and sisters but for his victory over himself. On that day he saw the pointlessness of every war that they had fought and experienced for his own self the agony that his people had sowed for generations. It was he that ordered the records of the election to be destroyed, because it mattered not a whit who had had a greater right to the throne. All that mattered was that he had it now—and that he was relinquishing it. To replace him he organized the council of regents and appointed its head, the Wu weh-led, or He Who Is Waiting.

Under the direction of the Wu weh-led they fought one more war. It was not fought to end all wars by all nations, but to end all *their* wars. It was a war of would-be pacifists against those that would disobey the wishes of their abdicated ruler and the orders of his successor, and when the peacemakers won at last they buried those stained weapons forever and withdrew to the mountains. In order to ensure that they would never again descend to slaughter the people of the lowlands their sorcerers bound them to the mountains so that the spirit of any Sina who died away from those mountains would cease to exist by “being forgotten by God.” And just as they

would be forgotten by God so too do the nSina erase any record of and cease to speak of any person whose body cannot be recovered to be placed in its proper grave. To die away from the mountain is to be shunned for eternity.

Now they are the Waiting People. Waiting for the coming of God. Waiting for the world to begin.

Only that which does not change is eternal and only that which is eternal is real. But all things in the world change, which means that as yet there is nothing which is real. The world is a lie. It is an illusion. But this is not how things must always be. The world may as yet be a lie but it will become to *be* in a time beyond time, a timelessness that is not our time.

One day, God will come, and God will make the world. God will make the world by being Godself, for God is that which genuinely exists: God is truth, immanent in that God is in all things and is all things and is not anything that does not exist, and transcendent in that God is not in the things of this world, which are only the product of a lie. These descriptions, the nSina never fail to add, are entirely inadequate to fully explain the nature of God, who is above positive description. God can only be accurately conceived of in part and by speaking of what God is *not*, because all things in this world of the lie are false, up to and including the very words that are spoken in it. No word being born of the lie can be the uncorrupted truth, which is the reason why misunderstandings occur and communication is always so limited.

Some of the nSina have tried to describe the world that is coming. Even though this current world is not real God will nevertheless have mercy on it and remember all things that have not been forgotten by God. For this reason they will have existence within the thoughts of God, which constitute existence itself. In that great day, time as it is not now will begin. In that great day, there will be the peace which is not war, and the joy which is not

sorrow. For all their vagueness and all their attempts to describe the world to come by carefully reasoning it out step by step, however, all of the sages must admit that they still do not and cannot surely know its nature. Certainly not in a world where even the most rational argument must still be built out of the stuff of the lie and is in some unknown way incomplete if it is not wholly false.

## Cuisine

The most important animal in nSina culture is the goat. Goat's milk is used to make sour yogurt, white butter, and a variety of long-lasting, salted cheeses. Their wool is all-important in the cold winter months that come to the mountains. They are suitable watch animals and invaluable as beasts of burden because of their ability to traverse any path that a human can (unlike horses, say) and feed themselves along the way by browsing (unlike dogs). Even the strings of musical instruments come from the goat (the goat's stomach, to be exact). The nSina also raise pigs and dogs, but consider horses to be too difficult to work with in the mountainous environment to be worth the trouble. They have, where necessary, adapted goats and dogs to do much of the labor.

The nSina primarily cultivate maize and sunflowers. Sunflower seeds are mainly used with maize to make rowestin bread but may also be turned into a kind of sunflower butter. Sunflowers are also used to make a purple dye that goes into clothing and decorative body paint. Fruits include peaches, pears, grapes, and plums. Whiskey is produced from maize before the onset of every winter and fruit is usually added to give an additional flavor. Other cultivated plants include chile peppers, pumpkins, quinoa, beans, and potatoes. All of these can be used to make or at least supplement different kinds of bread (fahel fafasen, made from maize and beans and seasoned with peppers, is the most popular bread after sunflower and maize bread).

## Marriage, Law, and Representatives

The nSina are unusual in comparison to their neighbors because married couples do not fully share each other's assets. Before the marriage can be sealed there must be a contract written and signed by both of the parties, an additional representative from each of their families, and a representative of the town council. If each party for some reason has no extant family members (or at least none that can be found) then they must first petition another family to grant them a sort of limited adoption which neither takes nor gives any rights of inheritance relative to the two parties but does allow zem to represent and be represented by the adopting family. If the two are not from the same town then their respective councils will have to deliberate with each other and choose someone to represent the both of them. Traditionally the representative will come from the town in which the couple plans to settle.

After all this preparatory work has been finished, the council's representative validates the contract. This document specifies which assets are whose at the beginning of the marriage, how much of the increase of each of these assets will be received by either party, and, quite importantly, how "increase" will be defined and tracked. The "fruit of one's labors" is just one of the assets considered. Gifts given to one member of the couple are also given to the other and represent the only property that is jointly owned by the couple by default. In the case of divorce the division of property is generally straightforward and for matters of inheritance each spouse may determine their heirs separately.

The requirement for representatives extends to more than just marriages. Under no circumstances are any of the nSina permitted to speak for themselves in any kind of legal matter. Even the children of the sovereign-speaker had to debate their position through intermediaries (the records are all gone but according to certain oral tales passed through the ages, the disagreement, at first

tense but still civil, only spilled into open warfare because of one or more scheming representatives). It is believed that operating in this fashion helps to prevent passions from flaring and trouble from breaking out (it is hoped that one's representative will not be as emotionally-vested in the matter). To ensure the loyalty and dedication of the representative, however, she (representatives are traditionally female) must have a familial link to her client. Seemingly a more recent development than the ancient representative system, town councils adopt each other for the direction of their election to the council in order to legally appoint representatives when the need arises.

Currently, most of the power in the nSina nation exists at the town level. It could be argued that the nSina never really grew past their dedication to the very position of the sovereign-speaker, and in the



absence of an extant sovereign-speaker they doggedly follow the last one to have sat court in the Empty House. This may be supported in the tradition that the Coming of God will be marked by a child being born to the line of the sovereign-speaker, even though the abdicant had killed his children, castrated himself, and finally committed suicide in order to put an end to the line forever (and with it, any risk of a future heir attempting to take back the Empty House).

The Wu weh-led was clearly appointed to be a steward whose purpose was not ruling but safeguarding the Waiting People in anticipation of the Coming of God Unto the Place of God's People. For this reason the nSina have little tolerance for any Wu weh-led who oversteps what they believe to be zir bounds. The people are consistent in tolerating only interventions specifically requested by the towns, but just how many must request the Wu weh-led's intervention, and how many, if any, must be directly involved in the matter at hand, are things that the nSina go back and forth on across both time and space.

### **The Dance of the Land**

The nSina have not forgotten their history. Nor have they ceased to be master craftsmen in what they refer to as "the setting of death" (in the sense that one sets the blade of a sword into its hilt) or, more commonly after the Ban was raised, Ne lau-dah, or "the dance of the land."

They are no fools, and they know that no matter what the feelings of their old enemies at their most gracious and peaceful, there will inevitably rise times when one leader or another demagogue will

decide that it is in zir best interests to exterminate the nSina. Accordingly, it is in their best interests to make sure that they remain too terrible of a foe to be exterminated or, preferably, even challenged.

When nSina reach the age of five they receive training swords, which are called so not because they are any less capable of inflicting grievous injuries but because they are smaller and better suited to little hands. Irrespective of sex, they eat, work, and sleep with these swords just as they will with their "graduated" blades when they are older, and most forms of recreation either naturally developed out of swordplay or were retooled at some point in their history in order to incorporate the sword. They additionally receive training in other areas of combat, including rapid improvisation. Most any Sina is capable of killing with whatever is at hand. This obsession with combat is everywhere: goats are slaughtered and sunflower heads are decapitated (it's even in the phraseology!) with particular movements that reinforce the same violent techniques that are drilled into the nSina in their youth.

Ne lau-dah is not only a metaphor for war and killing. It also refers to an actual collection of dances ranging in purpose from marriage celebrations to mourning to harvest festivals. Slightly ritual and historical in nature as well, each of these dances is built on a series of lethal movements and can involve up to sixty participants. Taken as a whole these are the dance of the land, and they demonstrate to the nSina that, though they will never again be invaders, they will nevertheless remain capable of defending themselves against incursions.

## Pegdu

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy, post-collapse

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** There is no magic here, so it isn't hard at all to set it on a post-apocalyptic Earth. You don't need the world to end for the Pegdu to fit in, though. There are a number of other nations throughout history who have placed a high importance on learning; the Pegdu simply take the obsession one step further. A few things may have to be discarded in this case (how they treat books of different bindings, for example), but none of it is necessary.

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How civilization collapsed, or why it did, or how long it took to happen, are questions that are not very important. The Pegdu themselves are not even sure on the details. Whatever the truth is, it has probably become inescapably intertwined with generations of myths.

### Records

Despite the lack of sure knowledge about how the preceding civilization collapsed—or more likely because of this—there is a high value put on knowledge of the past. Books are a form of “high currency.” A traditionally-bound hardcover book with a given number of pages is worth an exact sum and is as admissible as a form of payment as any other kind of currency. In order to make it easy to tell the difference, it is illegal to apply a hardcover binding anymore. Modern books are instead produced by tying the pages together with string or,

where wealth is available enough, giving the pages a spiral binding.

There is an emphasis on records and stories in Pegdu, and not just old ones. Even in the smallest village there is someone that is responsible for meticulously writing down every turnip that grew, every apple tree that was planted, and every cow that got sick and for how long and from what. These records are then copied and filed and the originals are sent upward through one of a number of different channels. Perhaps it can be hard to find an exact piece of information in the central records (which are expanding faster than new indexing methods can be devised) but the point is, so they say, that *it is there*. Every possible detail about the present civilization has been and will continue to be preserved.

New stories are also welcomed. Poets do not have a particularly hard time finding noble patronage, and neither do other creative types. Assuming, of course, that they're actually *good*. There isn't much patience (or patronage) to be found by those who are not made of high-quality stuff.

This preoccupation with history comes up in familial matters, too. Most children spend some of their time attending memorization schools, whether these come in the form of expensive tutors, academy halls, or small classes whose teachers are paid in part by room and board. They are designed not just to impart information but to provide skills to use in order to retain volumes of knowledge. Books can and have been written listing the many mnemonic techniques devised. These schools are especially important to parents with daughters—the more educated that a woman is, the higher the bride price that must be paid to her parents. It is not unheard of for a wife to have been given a better education than her husband.



Something that the memorization schools focus on is genealogy. Family lines are traced bilaterally and even the poorest citizen knows all of the notable facts of zir family's history on both sides for at least the past five generations.

These histories usually also give attention to other academic subjects like mathematics and biology by inserting them where relevant (it is easy to insert a spot about the surrounding wildlife when the topic of the day is your grandmother, who was known for her hunting). Other learning is given to round it out but wherever possible the lesson does tie into the student's lineage.

### **The Monarchy**

The country is ruled over by two kings. One of these is a physical king and rules over this land (the whole world, in fact, although the rest of the world understandably disagrees on this point). The other is a dead king and rules over the spirit world. Upon the death of the living king, his second-eldest living son ascends to the throne of the living world.

The eldest living son is given a much greater honor and responsibility. Exactly one year after his father's death his arms and legs are bound, he is placed on an altar, and, while he chews on hallucinogenic roots, his mother, eldest, sister, or other close female relative kills him with hammer blows. First his limbs are struck, and then his chest and finally his head. Breaking the arms is symbolic of breaking the restraints which keep him tied, not physically but spiritually. Shattering the rib cage and the skull allows the prince's soul to more easily depart from the brain and the heart (the two places where the soul resides in life, which is why damage to one of these areas is so deadly).

The act of being sacrificed and the exact process involved allows the eldest son to travel to the spirit world and be recognized as the rightful heir to the throne which sits there. In the spirit world the king has authority over the beings which call that place

their whole—great undulating spheres that sing storms into existence, mottled-purple spinal column worms that spread disease, misshapen gremlin-like beings that steal small unattended objects, and more. His predecessor, meanwhile, is now able to abdicate and proceed to the underworld, where he will reign for a time over the dead until he is once again replaced.

Authority is a responsibility, not a privilege. Princes are raised on stories about how, if they do not serve their people uprightly, then they will be appointed as governors in the underworld until the whole world passes away in ice rather than be allowed to retire and concern themselves purely with personal affairs. Many kings still grow too used to their power and develop a feeling of entitlement about it, but such things must be accepted.

The governors (of the living world) are a *mostly* hereditary institution, not unlike the monarchy itself. They are appointed by the king to manage districts of Pegdu land as they see fit. The governors and their families do not truly own anything, and neither is it legal for them to do so. All of their so-called property is actually on loan from the king and can be recalled at any time. Any gift which is given to them is added to the property which is in their possession only at the sufferance of the king. None of this deters people from trying to be active participants in Assassination Day.

As with most other holidays, Assassination Day only comes around once a year. It is eagerly anticipated both by those who think that they can make it work to their advantage and by those who look forward to hearing the inevitable stories. On this day only, it is not only legal to kill the governor (but certainly not zir family) but doing so will be rewarded. Whoever does so may take the late governor's place, elevating zirself and zir family and receiving all of the authority and possessions of zir predecessor. The murderer will be responsible for caring for the late governor's family and will be removed from the position if this duty is not



adequately fulfilled. The actual rate of successful murders on Assassination Day is perhaps surprisingly low, but the royal bodyguards and inspectors are skilled to begin with and knowing what day the assassination attempt will occur helps a great deal when you're trying to prevent it. Overall, the rate of successful assassinations is lower in Pegdu than in other countries because they are concentrated on this day.

### **Soldiering and the Guilds**

The governors and the king see most of their power rooted in the guilds, organized merchants who are given licenses to deal in goods at every level from the acquisition and processing of raw materials upward. Guild licenses are usually the same except for minor details. A governor might arrange it so that a guild has exclusive logging rights to a forest on zir and that nobody has been able to touch for decades. The king might demand that, except for one guild, all renewals of licenses include the specification that the guild in question is not permitted to deal in diamonds. It is possible for a governor to give exclusive rights to work in zir district, which will ensure that all the guild money that flows there is at some point flowing through zir government's hands, as guilds must pay a certain amount of their profits (as specified in the license) to the district which has sponsored them. This will, however, be met with retaliation by the other governors. Licenses cannot be changed once they are given but no license can last for more than twenty years.

The guilds are not only responsible for the movement of goods through (and beyond) the kingdom and a not-inconsiderable amount of the income that the districts require to stay running. They fulfill a variety of roles. One guild may be responsible for maintaining the Great Roads in this district and taking tolls there, and another runs all of the academy-halls of the northern half of another district. There is something that every guild does, though, and that is form an army for the

benefit of the kingdom. Guilds have the right to conscript men to their service for four years. The guild's fighting men protect their employer's interests, are contracted to enforce the laws of the kingdom and the local district, and in times of war they march out to battle under the banners of the king and governors. Guilds which refuse to lend their aid in times of war will never be able to renew their license in any district, and they will have just as hard of a time getting that renewal if their armies are not up to par in both size and quality.

### **Religion**

The mainstream religion of the Pegdu kingdom is similar to many other monotheistic religions in the world: The Lady rules supreme over the universe with the Lord-Consort standing at Her side. Evil is the natural consequence of existence. Just as everything casts a shadow, the existence of anything good demands the presence of evil, which occurs naturally and, as a shadow, is not as potent as good. Good and evil are not proportionately distributed throughout the universe or even in time, which can give the illusion of there being more evil than good, but this is categorically not true.

The most distinctive thing about this religion in comparison to any of its neighbors who also worship The Lady is its doctrine that The Lady's children do not simply guide and assist humankind but are sometimes born into physical bodies. Great men and women will not merely be hailed as heroes in Pegdu. They will be considered gods, sometimes even before they have died. After their deaths, moreover, they continue to intercede on behalf of those who venerate them.

The Royal Family does not share this belief. They are followers of another religion, which shares only a few common elements with the other. According to the royals, godhood is the eventual result of any being's existence. The kings worship their ancestors because their ancestors will in time become gods. Because the limits of time mean

nothing to a god this means that, even though the first humans to walk the world are still progressing to godhood, one's own father is still a god even though he died only minutes ago. The stations which are traveled through by the eldest son of a king—ruling the spirit world, and then the underworld, and then worlds beyond these—are believed to be a fast track to divinization which, it must be noted, is still not so fast that anyone on it has finished the journey. At times in history this perspective on time has inspired some of the royals to worship themselves or even their as-yet unborn descendants, since by this logic even the unborn have also become gods. Only the Royal Family is permitted to follow this religion, but it also exists, barely, in very rural areas.

### Scavenging

The kingdom rests on the remains of a long-dead civilization and their ways reflect both this fact and the period following that civilization's destruction, when resources were scarce. Nothing is taken for granted and everything is conserved. If something is broken, then it is repaired. If it cannot be repaired, then it is broken down even further so that its parts may be used. Sometimes all that is holding something together is string and rubber bands (the kingdom has many rubber trees).

Wisdom is respected. A citizen cannot hope to be followed by everyone in zir town until ze is at least sixty years old, enough to be called a white-beard regardless of whether zir hair still has any vitality in it. Raw knowledge is worth its weight in glass (another useful currency). The library-palace of the kings is unmatched by anything else in the world, and the Great Roads made by that long-gone older civilization have required only minimal work to remain functional.

A widespread form of art which has received royal and gubernatorial patronage involves the manipulation and arrangement of metal wires to create sculptures. Corpse-rending factories make

efficient use of the dead for everything from glue and leather to candles and lubricant.

### Cuisine

Pegdu cuisine is full of pickled vegetables and—to an even greater degree—dipping sauces and dips. Rowlit is a shrimp paste made from fermented ground shrimp and salt, and shaped into blocks. Brunetorlog is a fish sauce made from anchovies, ginger, salt, and water. Gorjon is a fermented soybean paste which is most often used as a dip for various kinds of fungus. Pamelarke is a sauce commonly used with fish, and is made from garlic, lime, sugar, and vinegar.

Reluca are shrimp braised in pamelarke, sugar, and coconut water. Another dish that commonly employs pamelarke is kleinitie, which also includes head cheese, pig's ears, garlic, scallions, onions, and cloud ear fungus. An even more exotic dish is blixre, a combination of pamelarke, blood, cold water, and chopped and cooked duck offal. The result is sprinkled with peanuts and then left to cool until the blood coagulates into jelly.

Fostersam is a salad made from cabbage, cucumber, papaya, and turnips. Desitie is a salad of carrots, cucumbers, jellyfish, and sesame seeds. Medeljon is noodle soup with crab and egg. Pattiko is another kind of noodle soup, also including snail meat and green bananas. Fowlerog is made with noodles cooked in a tomato broth, beans, celery, mushrooms, and spearmint. Ludgerlog is a sort of mesh of thin noodles, topped with scallions or onions.

Sotschvud is a kind of pancake rolled around roasted meat and salted eggplant. Belcastrorlog is similar to the above, but sourdough is used instead and the pancake is rolled around cucumber, mushroom, and shallots.

Karasustyva are rolls stuffed with ground beef, shrimp, and mushrooms. Serfiko is spiced beef

rolled in a pepper leaf. Styvarke, the so-called “savage curry” of Pegdu, is almost a soup, a wet curry of beef soaked in vinegar, pickled carrots,

tomato broth, and various hot spices. Cabbage wraps filled with fried turnips, carrots, and shredded scrambled eggs are called skarbineca.

## Piyinis pu'Granshu

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Medieval English

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The most distinctive thing about Piyinis pu'Granshu is, as might be guessed after a look at the contents, the nation's system of courts. This is easily transferrable into whatever setting you fancy, whether the "forests" are replaced by not-yet-terraformed worlds (or space stations, or something else that nobles might like) or the guilds have influence over dozens of star systems or a massive archipelago.

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The most distinctive thing about Piyinis pu'Granshu is its system of r'aibilus lugunal, or "regional authorities." There is no one set of laws which applies to every citizen or even one set of laws for the aristocracy and another set for the commoner. Rather, there are four sets of laws: ciel pu'filups (the court of forests), ciel pu'geirpus (the court of guilds), ciel pu'virrus (the court of towns), and ciel pu'yinalshus (the court of kings). Respectively these apply to independent domains of the Lords, the trade organizations sanctioned by the crown, the commoners, and the Lords themselves.

### Common Elements

Regardless of which court the laws fall under there are common aspects applying to all of them. Most

of the responsibility for carrying out justice falls to the cunhoppus, or hundredmen, and the ullancus, or wandering judges. Hundredmen are recruited by the Lords and are employed to enforce the laws at the behest of the wandering judges, who are chosen by the king and are usually given authority within a single court. Hundredmen are not restricted to any one court. They are put in the service of this wandering judge or that one as the judges move in and out of the region.

### Ciel pu'Filups: The Court of Forests

The word "filup" is usually translated as forest, since most forests are indeed owned, personally, by a Lord (rather than being land which just so happens to be governed by the Lord). As zir personal territory the laws of a forest can be as loose or as strict as the Lord desires, and they do not have to match with the laws of any other court. Lords try to keep the laws simple, at least, and are required by their own court to include easy-to-access copies of all their laws in written form. This is for the benefit of the wandering judges, who may not be familiar with the laws of that particular forest. A Lord will usually have a couple of people, called forestrers or folusbiuls, to keep an eye specifically on zir forests.

### Ciel pu'Geirpus: The Court of Guilds

Trade organizations may petition the king for his recognition and the privilege to make their own laws. With its petition a guild must state its intended territory, a definition of its involved profession or (more commonly) professions, the laws by which it will operate, and an explanation as to why the king should grant their request. For example, the guild of masons of r'Iseub (or r'Yacconuliu Geirpus pu'r'Iseub) petitioned to be recognized as having authority in three particular cities. Within these cities they had authority over all workers in masonry construction, glassmaking, and other

work when it applied to buildings (meaning that only the members of this guild could, say, make windows or doors, though other guilds could make glass for the purpose of manufacturing bowls). Among their laws were that each member would need to pay regular dues both to help with administrative costs and to provide for a fund for those who had achieved full membership in the guild but could no longer work (as well as for the families of deceased full members), and that murdering one of their members was punishable by death and/or the seizure of the murderer's assets (if the presiding wandering judge ruled that the person was guilty, of course). By having authority in those cities and over those particular people the guild was also responsible for their actions.

The king may edit the petition as he so desires and then send it through the Royal Senate, which is the one instance in which the king himself may put something through. Should the petition pass, the guild-to-be may accept the altered petition or drop the matter. Many times a king will use a guild to affect the Lord or Lords in whose domain the guild will exist, as they represent an element which the Lord no longer completely controls. No more than once every five years, the Royal Senate may vote over a proposal to dissolve the guild.

### **Ciel pu'Virrus: The Court of Towns**

This is the simplest of the courts. By default, it covers everything that is not included under one of the other three courts. Peasants, soldiers, merchants, metalworkers, and more are all within the jurisdiction of the Ciel pu'Virrus (assuming that they do not belong in a guild).

Among its curiosities is that corpses can be dug up and put on trial if the deceased is suspected of committing a crime in life. Should the corpse be found guilty, its remains will be divided into ten pieces, which will then be scattered, and its burial mound will be desecrated. On the other hand, if the corpse is found innocent then the accusing party

will be responsible for paying the costs of a new funeral and burial. Some poor citizens intentionally instigate accusations against their dead loved ones in the hopes of securing a proper burial for them.

### **Ciel pu'Yinalshus: The Court of Kings**

Despite its name, the Court of Kings applies to more than just the king. The king, his family, the Lords and their families, and the counts and their families are all under the jurisdiction of this court.

The country is divided into twenty Lordships or suignuelius. Each Lordly family can determine the matter of succession in its own way. Some put it to a vote by the entire extended family. Others pass the office of suignuilial to the eldest eligible male (or female). Yet others pass it to the eldest male (or female) descendant of the last Lord. In three generations, too, succession can be determined in three different ways, as it is ultimately up to the reigning Lord to decide.

Lords manage their suignuelius more or less independently. They collect taxes, raise and maintain armies and/or militias, fund great works of art, and add additional laws to their Lordships.

### **r'Sunabu Loyar: The Royal Senate**

The country is a popular monarchy with a tricameral legislature called the Royal Senate. At the head of the Royal Senate are the one hundred censors (who form r'Sunabu Cubsuels), who are appointed half by the Lords and half by the king. They may not be members of the nobility, nor of any guild, and may not have children or wives. Their sole ability is to place a veto upon any law which makes it through the bottom two senates. Only twenty-eight vetoes are needed in order to prevent the law from passing. If it manages to do so, however, it cannot be removed from the body of laws (a restriction which requires all laws to have restrictions built into them already).

Immediately below the Senate of Censors is the Senate of Lords, r'Sunabu Suignuels, whose membership is logically enough made up of the twenty Lords of Piyinis pu'Granshu. The Senate of Lords is not permitted to introduce legislation, but it has sole responsibility for the monarchial election (their decision may be vetoed by the Senate of Censors, of course) and may also (with great difficulty) remove the king from his office. Upon the departure of the king from his office (whether through death or senatorial decree) the Senate of Lords must convene and make its death within two months.

Eligible candidates are comprised of the king's father, uncles, brothers, male first cousins, nephews, and any male descendants. If the chosen king is younger than twenty then a regent will be needed. By default this regent will be his mother, but the position will pass to his eldest aunt if he has no mother. If he has neither mother nor aunt alive and is not at least twenty-five years old (not just twenty) then he is not eligible. Of course, the decision must, as is always the case, pass through the Senate of Censors. With a majority vote the Senate of Censors may not only veto the decision of the Senate of Lords but choose their own candidate.

The lowest of the three senates is the Senate of Counts, or r'Sunabu Alisbiclaius. Legislation of any kind must be proposed in this senate and then passed there before it can enter the upper two senates.

The word alisbiclaiu is more often than not translated into "count," but it can also be interpreted to mean "companion" (the original meaning of the word "count" itself) or "governor." Each Lord is able to appoint any person as one of zir three counts, and is able to give each count any amount of land from zir domain to administer in zir stead. In addition to their seats in the Senate of Counts a Lord's three counts may act in their Lord's stead if they are able to provide his written

permission and can agree unanimously on what action to take.

The king is able to take ten counts of his own, but they may not be given territory as the king has no land of his own to give. This only makes up a seventh of the counts in the Third Senate, meaning that he may introduce legislation through them but cannot guarantee that it will pass. Combined with his lack of influence over the Senate of Lords (except in the rare situation that an entire Lordly family has died out and a replacement must be found), this makes it difficult for the king to pass legislation through the system. Due to his ability to handpick a full half of the censors and the need for only twenty-eight out of those fifty handpicked censors to veto any piece of legislation, while the king may not be able to create laws with ease he only rarely needs to deal with the passing of any law which he does not like.

### **Recreation**

While dogs have their place in Piyinis pu'Granshu, boars are better-respected. Pigs in general are intelligent and capable of following commands. They are common enough to be a staple food source for the country, and the Granshi people have bred their pigs for loyalty, strength, courage, and large tusks (and also for good meat, because most pigs are destined for the dinner table, despite the use that a few others are put toward). Lords will frequently go out on hunting expeditions with their boars. Neighboring countries which scoff at this practice have apparently never seen a boar attacking anything.

Coin games are common entertainment, especially among the rest of society. They include games similar to two-up, pitch and toss, and toad in the hole. Drinking games are also popular, especially Neck Knot, where the object of the game is to get out of a noose before you suffocate and die. Players will start without any alcohol in them, but after each round they will take another cup of their alcoholic

drink of choice until all but one of the players have withdrawn (or died). More than one Lord's position has been emptied as a result of a bad game of Neck Knot.

### Cuisine

Most meals are heavy on vegetables—such as arrowroot, beans, cabbage, rice, sweet potatoes, and yams—and spices, and often come in the form of a stew. Cattle are raised mostly for their dairy, most of which is turned into butter.

Michlaiu is one of the most common varieties, a clarified butter made with herbs and spices such as cinnamon, cloves, and long pepper. It is called shiellus if it is left to sit in a clay pot for some time. This variety is considered to have medicinal purposes. When milk is served it usually has cardamom added to it in order to make tansel.

Chandrak is an orange-red powdered mixture of cumin, cloves, salt, cinnamon, ginger, and other

spices. Grandeace is another spice mixture made from basil, black cumin, garlic, ginger, long pepper, rue, and wild celery. Jayenn is a sweet and sour sauce made from lime, chopped spearmint, sugar, and vinegar.

Rossaiu is a crumbly, mild-flavored cottage cheese with the whey drained out. It is often served alongside spicy food, as it has no flavor of its own.

Coband is a stew made from powdered chickpeas, garlic, ginger, minced onions, and chopped tomatoes. It is very thick and is often served on cabbage leaves. When it is served on rice noodles it becomes ovidaiu.

Rice noodles make up many other dishes. Tomal is served with a topping of grandeace. Drewinis is rice noodles with chicken, potato, and tomatoes. Boiled greens are served with rice noodles, shiellus, and spices as a dish called javel.

Boeis is a vegetable curry made from “false banana,” maize, and various beans. Rice noodles may or may not be included.

Orleinaiu is roasted barley coated with cinnamon. It is sometimes soaked in coffee. A lennart is a lump of flour (typically maize or millet) which has been cooked to a consistency resembling porridge or dough. The mix is rolled into a ball and dipped into a sauce or stew at mealtime. Waldriau is a similar dish. Commonly eaten by the poor, it is solidified porridge made from cornmeal and served in slices. If it is not cooked with alkali then overreliance on waldriau will lead to niacin deficiency.

Meat dishes are not especially common, and it is an indicator of wealth to be able to indulge in them. A “lord's dish” is a stew of beef, wheat flour, coffee, diced onions, garlic, salt, peppercorn, and various spices. Karabaton is a chicken stew with arrowroot, potatoes, and a little bit of banana. Pettwass is raw beef that has been minced and marinated in spices



and butter. It is served on a spongy, sourdough flatbread called odelaiu, which is made from the flour of the iron-rich teff plant. Another common bread is heathis, which is cut into squares or circles while it is still dough and then fried. Linerrins are fried pastries filled with spices and pieces of potato.

There is a small regional divide between the drinkers of fermented barley (olavishu) and fermented honey (brandeishu). Eaten alongside fermented honey is vicencaiu, a mixture of peanuts, sesame seeds, and imported caramel.

### **Salt**

Salt is the glory of Piyinis pu'Granshu and the source of its wealth. The very name of the country means "fields of white," referring to the great salt desert (possibly the remains of an old sea which had dried out long ago) which lies at the center of the kingdom. Originally it lay at the borders of several kingdoms, which unified in large part to collectively secure the salt deposit and remove the problem of losing profits by having to undercut each other. This area is the king's forest, and the only land which the king owns.

Only the Salt-gatherer's Guild, or r'Surcerruels Geirpus, is permitted to harvest salt from this place. The Lords and certain guilds (or the empowered representatives of either) are able to purchase salt from the guild, which pays a percentage of the profits to the king.

Because the salt tax is traditionally seen as the sole domain of the king, another method of taxing is chosen. Each Lord (and zir counts) may coin their own currency, which is either backed up by salt reserves or valuable in its own right, and this currency is usually given an expiration date. Once it is useless it can be brought to a representative of the Lord, who will reforge the coins and return nine coins for every eleven given that are handed over. The tenth will be put aside to deliver to the taxman, and the Lord's representative will keep the eleventh for zemsself as payment.

Salt is incredibly valuable and has a great many uses. It is even used to brush the teeth. Incredibly sensitive weighting systems have been developed, with merchants regularly using scales that give out measurements in terms of grains of wheat. Three to four scales are used in most dealings: grains (a seven-thousandth of a pound), hands (two-hundred-fifty-sixths of a pound), ounces, and pounds. Quarters and hundredweights (25 and 100 pounds) are occasionally used as well. Nearly everyone has at least the three lowest scales, and often on their person. Within the Ciel pu'Virrus, falsifying scales is punishable by the loss of a finger and ten times the finger's weight in salt. Guild, Forest, and King's Courts can override this but often do so in order to hand out an even harsher punishment.



## The Rooquers

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world.

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Rooquers fit best in a fantasy world of some sort, but they could work well in most settings which permitted the existence of anthropomorphic rats. They're less likely to fit in if some sort of Island of Dr. Moreau situation is involved, though. Changing their appearance to make them less obviously rat-people would make it easier to put them into most other settings, even science fiction. You could also set them at an earlier time in their history, back when they were not too far off from being orcs with fur and whiskers.

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The name Rooquer means “longtail.” It is by this name, or some translation of the same, that they are most commonly known to other species, and they are far from unknown in the world. The Rooquers are one of the most common intelligent species in the world, thanks to their incredible breeding rate. They've been aided as well by an intense curiosity and an industrious nature that, together, quickly turn initial exploration into rapid expansion.

In earlier days, they were marked just as strongly by more negative traits. There have been points in history when the Rooquers stood at the edge of exterminating every other species (and some were, in fact, driven to extinction). In the end, however, they were just as damaging to themselves as they were to their enemies.

Today's Rooquer may scheme, but if ze is more concerned with personal power than with the well-

being of the community then ze is the exception now, no longer the rule as ze would have been in the past. For all that they run frantically to and fro for the sake of their great projects, modern Rooquers are mellow in comparison to their ancestors. They have to be; they're descended from the Rooquers who didn't kill each other off for the sake of ambition.

In addition to their proper name and its translated form, they are also called ratlings by other peoples. They look much like rats, if rats were a little more than four feet tall and went about on two legs as often as they went about on four.

### Life

Rooquers breed quickly, and they live and die just as fast. Longtails reach physical maturity at the age of ten, and females are able to produce a pair of litters every year. As their society has evolved they have cut back ever-so-slightly on their rate of reproduction, and mothers usually have only one litter every three years. At five to ten pups a litter, however, this still results in an impressive rate of population growth for the Rooquers.

During times of war or other disasters, this self-imposed limit on breeding is lifted and the population effectively bounces back many times more quickly than normal. A major cause behind the limitation is this ability to easily induce population growth that is much greater than what Rooquer society is accustomed to. A faster-breeding population was also one of the primary impetuses the violent expansionism of the past.

This restriction is enforced by the heavy weight of social custom, almost an instance of common law. It is accepted, having been told and reinforced in the stories they are told, that pups must be killed if there are too many of them. Some ratlings simply abandon the pups, but this comes to the same

effect. The storytellers alone are permitted to lift this ban, as only they know when there is a need to grow their numbers.

Rooquers begin to suffer from sterility and physical infirmity around twenty but are still capable of serving as instructors at this time. A Rooquer can technically live to be as old as thirty years, but few pass their twenty-fifth birthday and many come short a few years even of that mark.

### **Family**

Given the limitations which are imposed on population growth, it may not appear to be so at first glance, but reproduction forms an important aspect of Rooquer culture. It carries an almost religious aspect, mostly divorced from the concept of marriage.

Longtails have a reputation in some lands for thievery, but it is cultural traditions that they most often pilfer. The idea of pairing off into spousal pairs is just one such acquisition. Like so many things which they've adapted to their own ends, over the generations the Rooquers have given their own spin to the concept of marriage. An incredible amount of emphasis is put on the idea that spouses and companions, and Rooquers marry close friends who bear traits complementary to their own, regardless of sex, gender, and other qualities.

Their marriages are very loose. They have only mimicked the custom of marriage and remade it to fit with their preexisting natures. They have never understood or gone to great effort to emulate the idea that marriages are exclusive affairs where sex or romantic love is concerned, and in many cases neither is a component of the marriage in the first place. Whether they even understand romance, on an exclusive basis or otherwise, is questionable anyway.

### **Citadel-Sculptures**

The ratlings have a curious concept of religion. They don't know where other people get their gods from, whether from a historical standpoint or a spiritual one, but the Rooquers pay heed to all of the religions that they are aware of and put at least a little bit of faith in each of them. As far as the Rooquers are concerned, all religions are true in one way or another and it's not a good idea to be on bad terms with any god.

These religions are not truly the religions of the ratlings, however, and their gods are not the gods of the ratlings. Indeed, when the ratlings were first born they found themselves, so they say, bereft of patron gods entirely. But they cannot simply adopt the gods of another people, despite being in need of some. Those other gods are not longtail gods, and the most that can be expected of them is that they will not bother the Rooquers.

The solution to this problem is as simple as it is audacious. "We will create gods of our own," says the wise Rooquer, and so they will and so they do. These gods are no mere invisible beings of ichor and transcendent nature, however. They are not natives of some ethereal realm, fickle shepherds distant from their flocks. The gods of the Rooquers are gods of stone and brickwork, gods whose home is where in the physical world, gods whose size reaches titanic proportions. Their might and their power is plain for all the world to see.

The Rooquers do not merely create their gods. The Rooquers build them and construct them. The word which they use is Swook, and the literal translation is "citadel-sculpture." Each one is an immense structure and takes centuries of work to complete. One Swook, named Kehrquoos after the ratling who was inspired to build it, is comparable in size to Angkor Wat and has spires tall enough let its overall height reach nearly that of the Eiffel Tower.

These are the only two things which can be said of all Swooks, however, because they are not merely god-buildings. They are works of art. Each one is an individual construction worthy of inclusion on any list of world wonders. Several generations of architects might spend their entire lives simply working at designing a Swook before anyone gets around to laying the first cornerstone. If it even uses stone—Kehrquos was constructed mainly out of blocks of fossilized coral.

Dozens of shrines are located in the general area of a Swook as well. It could be said that these are lesser Swooks, demigods or angels to the high deities which the Swooks represent. In contrast to this, the Rooquers build their own middens to be humble affairs. Seven square feet of space for each occupant is the norm.

Ratlings practice extreme dedication to their crafts. With their short lives they can't afford to branch out. They have to specialize. The same construction project might rely on the skills of many different mason schools, each of which is working with a specific technique. A Rooquer mason might learn brickwork, perhaps, or dry set style, and ze will learn every last technique which is known to that school, but ze will never learn another method of masonry.

## Diet

The Rooquers drink mostly milk and water. They have a higher tolerance for diseases and poisons than most species, lessening the importance of alcohol. The ratlings are famous for their dry cider, which is made from apples with a high acid content. They export it mostly in an alcoholic form but for their own use prefer to wait until it has turned into a vinegar. They are also known for a particular kind of mulled cider, made with cinnamon, orange slices, cloves, and myrtle peppers.

Insects and reptiles, especially snakes, are eaten. From their goats they get milk and many kinds of

cheeses. Their sausages are spiced and their almonds are sugared. Ratlings are fond of nuts, but even fonder of sweet nuts. Wheat is ground into a flour that can be turned into bread or roasted and made into a porridge. Thistles, artichokes, mushrooms, and onions are basic crops. Cabbages are considered a good cure for most minor ills. Lentils are a staple food for travelers because they are easy to transport. Bean stews are eaten regularly, usually thickened with liberal amounts of animal fat and sweetened with pieces of fruit or straight juice.

Rooquers really like water, and they're found on every coastline in the world. Except for the ones whose other inhabitants which have gone to great lengths to exterminate them, anyway. Whether they can get it directly or have to import it from their luckier cousins, they eat clam, eel, crab, shrimp, and fish, especially sea bass and salmon. Despite how plentiful it is, few Rooquers eat seaweed. It is considered to be poisonous or supernaturally unlucky according to folk tales dating back to the more aggressive time of their history. Some stories even say talk of seaweed that eats ratlings, or that will grow in a ratling's stomach and spread through zir body like a hideous mass of parasite worms. Most varieties of seaweed taste foul to a Longtail anyway.



## Magic

Storytellers, or serkasoo, are hardly just that. They are historians, because their stories are the stories of the past. All of the important deeds of long-dead Rooquers live on in their memories. They are advisors, because their stories contain the accumulated wisdom of untold generations. They are arbitrators, because their stories tell of earlier situations that mimic this one and tell of how these conflicts were resolved and what happened after. They are praise-singers, because their stories are sung and who better to say if a deed has merit than those who sing the stories of the great? Storytellers tell stories, and in so doing they hold the world and the longtail people in their paws.

They have deep connections to spiritual, social, and political powers, even among non-Rooquers. The ratlings themselves consider storytellers to be witches: speech has a power. It can civilize barbarians and make proud kings collapse to their knees in grief. Those who have been taught to wield it like a blade are nothing less than some of the most powerful, if also most subtle, wizards in the world.

The storytellers hardly have a monopoly on knowledge of the past, however. Stories and history are important for all Rooquers to know, to say nothing of other facts which the storytellers can teach. Over the long stretch of their civilization's history the serkasoo (and ratlings in general) have become adept at encoding important information using simple mnemonic devices. Stories are frequently filled to the brim with information, and not just about historical events. A group of young ratlings studying the blacksmith's trade may be told the story of a previous blacksmith in the community who became noteworthy for his deeds. In so doing they will learn as much about his techniques as a reader of *Moby-Dick* learns about whales and whaling. This requires a little bit of editing to any tale in order to make sure that it serves multiple purposes, and sometimes a tale is

totally made up for the sole purpose of passing down ethical and practical lessons, but the Rooquers make a distinction between fact and truth. The latter must be held by any story worth telling, but it can be present even within fiction.

The Rooquers have produced few writers compared to other species, even considering their greater population. Mostly this is due to low literacy rates. This method of storytelling, however, has given them a highly distinctive style which, like *Moby-Dick*, is usually either loved or hated, with little middle ground.

## Names

The first thing that anybody notices when a Rooquer is introduced is that ratling names are very long. Something on the order of Bosoooun-anvasua-yet-isalye-akkee-yet-alae is actually a bit on the short side. Rooquer names are generally just physical descriptions combined with occupation, translating into things like Storyteller-with-black-patch-size-of-paw-over-right-eye-and-missing-tooth-and-wide-gray-eyes. Someone who knows the language can get an accurate mental picture of any Rooquer simply by hearing the ratling's name, assuming that ze's willing to listen for a bit.

Real names, the longtail equivalent of Paul, are prestigious. They must be earned. Most ratlings who get them only receive their "historical names" posthumously, but every ratling in a story has received a historical name.

In day-to-day life most ratlings use nicknames that are a shortened version of their descriptive name, a different descriptive name which describes their character or quirks ("Twitches-frequently" or "Draws-with-charcoal" are both valid nicknames), or simply a couple of syllables that the Rooquer likes.

Descriptive names are determined by the community after a short period of observation,

after everyone has settled on which traits are important enough to mention. Nobody is going to include the storyteller's patch of black fur when that's been running in the family so long that it's

running in every family, for example. Historical names are granted by storytellers. But a personal nickname, ah, that is chosen by the Rooquer who bears it.

## Selkies

**Setting assumption:** Earth

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Do you need another species of alien for your science fiction setting? Drop the shapeshifting if you'd like, or turn it into something else, and then give them a different appearance. Boom, presto. You still have a bit of an issue with figuring out how their culture has been affected by advanced technology—assuming that you want them to be on par with the major civilizations of your setting—but they act and think in ways that are not human.

You can drop them in a fantasy setting without further alteration. Or, make them shapeshifters with an affinity for another species, like the Hijawel. You could go with marine life, like sharks or dolphins, or go with something else and adapt them where necessary.

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We catch hints of selkies in old legends. People of the sea who can take the form of a seal. The stories are romantic trash, most of them, the product of generations of bowdlerization and corrupted and corrupting details. People forgot, because they were never in a position to really understand it at all, just what selkies are really like. In the end, barely anything factual remained.

“Selkie women are the women you don’t understand. They are the women who know that they belong to another tribe, in another element. And so they seem as though they don’t belong in yours— and they don’t... Selkie women are the ones who look as though they came out of fairytales, because they did.” –Theodora Goss

It isn’t just selkie women, though. They are, if anything, the ones that we can relate to the most, for it is through and because of them that the lives of selkies and humans intersect at all in any meaningful way.

What *are* selkies like, then? Something magic, something Other, something that straddles a boundary between land and sea, human and seal, and not really belonging to either species. They don’t need sealskin to become a seal any more than they need a human’s skin to become human. They are both at once; they are never truly either. They are selkies.

As seals, or something near enough, they match no specific species. They most closely resemble leopard seals but generally top out at a length of nine feet, a little shorter than leopard seals, and their molars are underdeveloped and less effective at sifting for krill. As humans, they most closely resemble Inuit or Polynesians but are taller and thinner (in bone structure, that is— healthy selkies can usually be described as “chubby”). The whites of their eyes are almost completely obscured by their irises, which can be slightly off-putting if noticed.

Their senses of hearing and smell are superior to a human’s, as is their sense of touch, but to a lesser degree. Their vision is worse than a human’s in most ways. While they can see in the water much more clearly than humans can, their vision in the open air is impaired. Female selkies are slightly nearsighted, but males are highly myopic, to the point that they generally perceive shadowy “floaters” if they try to focus on anything more than a few feet away. While the females can navigate well enough by sight in the air, the males typically only use it as a weak supplement to their senses of hearing and smell. In both cases they are also strongly colorblind, so that they only register

green and blue and other colors fade into either one of these or into black or white.

### **Mindset**

Selkies are predators, pure and simple. They could be classed as a kind of psychopath but this would ignore that they really are just predators. It is not an abnormality. It is not a disorder. Approaching the issue from that perspective will not get you anywhere. In some ways they are no different from humans, who don't get thrown in the asylum after confessing that they enjoy hunting deer. Where the line is drawn between selkies and humans, really, is that our pattern-matching software (so to speak) recognizes the selkie as human and thereby makes the killing of a selkie as stressful as the killing of a human.

Selkies, on the other hand, suffer from no such matching error.

To scratch the surface, they view living beings as something like the rest of the world, distinct in their animate quality but fundamentally just a complex process. Killing a human is gutting a fish is smashing a clay pot against the wall. Two of them move, one of them makes noises with the intention of conveying meaning, but these differences only distract from the nature that they share with the pot.

Going further, however, all things are very, very real. Humans, fish, clay pots... Selkies believe that these things are alive, and it is only the animate quality of the first two that deceives one into thinking that the third, by lacking this, is not alive. The root of their behavior, then, lies in their "emotional architecture." Most humans find it bizarre that someone could, for example, have such a strong emotional attachment to a bridge that there was felt a desire to marry it. A lot of this is because most people don't psychologically model bridges as something to have that kind of emotional bond with. Similarly, as a rule people

grow attached to dogs more easily than snakes because dogs, as mammals and social animals, are far closer to humans than snakes are.

But as was stated above, selkies don't pattern-match like humans do. Appearance and behavior are enough to forge a sense of shared nature for humans but not for selkies. There is but one exception and that is when selkie females care for human children; a selkie mother will murder and starve herself to protect her children even if they are a different species from her.

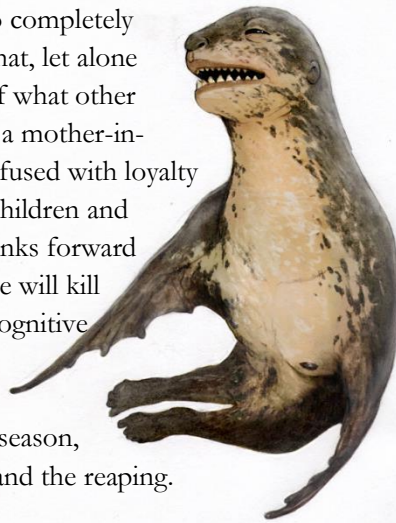
Such fostering is the chief cause of intersections between selkies and humans, and it happens regularly. Predictably, even. Before a female bears young of her own, she kidnaps one or two human children, preferably two or three years old, and relocates in order to raise them safely. The object is to practice the skills that will be necessary in the raising of her own children. Unfortunately, while selkies are good enough mothers to their own kind they aren't fit to raise humans. *Selkie* children are more self-sufficient than our own. It isn't unknown for a young mother-in-training whose experiences have heretofore mostly or entirely involved selkie children to leave a foster child alone for days as she conducts business elsewhere. In fact, it is often the case that her first child will die from neglect.

Those children that survive this period don't do so for very long. Sometime when the foster child is between ten and twelve years old it will come time for the selkie to stop practicing and return to her own people. Perhaps the selkie will do this again a few years from now, but whether she considers herself fit to raise a child of her own blood or not the result here and now is the same: the evidence is going to get disposed of. When the "fostering season" is over, she will kill the child like she kills all her prey. The way that a leopard seal kills.

Selkies don't consider it aberrant behavior to be devoted to human children. Neither do they consider it aberrant to brutally kill those children

after a few years. Both are completely natural feelings, each to be felt in their respective seasons. The concept is so completely natural to them that, let alone how she thinks of what other selkies are doing, a mother-in-training can be infused with loyalty for her adopted children and still, when she thinks forward to the day that she will kill them, suffer no cognitive dissonance at all.

Everything in its season,  
both the rearing and the reaping.



### **Social organization**

Turning in tune with the cycles of a long-running clock, selkie females head back to land once more seven years after their last jaunt to shore. They will run on this cycle regardless of their intent, whether it is to practice at raising children once again (selkie females will go through this three times, on average) or to give birth. Either way they will remain on land for several years, until they either kill their foster children or take their natural-born children out to sea.

Mothers-in-training are solitary, but other selkie females are organized into groups called colonies. These may be considered the foundation of selkie society. They are the link between the present and the past. Descent is traced matrilineally and a female, though she may wander, will remember the colonial affiliations of her ancestors and teach these to her children.

Colonies are amphibious social units. They feel at home both at land and at sea. They may integrate into human society as a group of a dozen or so eccentrics or, as is more often the case, live along the coast away from humans. Where they are just barely connected to human society they are almost always squatters or something similar. Not all of a

colony's members are out of the sea at the same time—they are usually at sea if they are not raising a child—but some are and the others must be nearby for their sake.

Males fit into selkie society in one of three ways. The first way is through the colony, which is a path taken by a few males. These adopt a female role and guise in exchange for a place in the colony, and they are considered to be fully female by selkie society at large. The second is by being part of a gang of nomadic, unattached males. The third is based in the lek, a relatively small domain ruled and protected by a single, definitively successful male.

Leks are maintained and defended against other selkies in order to demonstrate their holder's prowess. If the lek does not include a colony within its borders then one of the chief goals of the lek-holder will be to make it attractive enough that a colony will be established therein. Truthfully, that is always the chief goal of the lek-holder, no matter how many colonies may be present. Selkies are polygynous, and it generally is the lek-holder that fathers the colony's next generation (males playing a female role may have opportunity to mate, but selkies can tell parentage by scent and infanticide is common).

### **Mythology**

It might be most accurate to describe selkies as being “differently intelligent.” By raw force they are smarter than humans (from the standpoint of their pure ability to soak up information they are a lot like perpetual toddlers), but they are far less creative. Their way of life has worked for a long time and they are willing to be content with what it has garnered for them. Not for them the steady push of technological advancement which characterizes human society. Where they do channel creative energy it is in the direction of handling social conflicts (which occasionally turn physical) and the arts, their pottery and their stories. These may be both written and oral, and the latter are usually sung rather than spoken.



Even so, most of their work is simply variations (and unimaginative ones at that) upon a few settled themes. The originality of Selkie Shakespeare's plots could be outdone by most any human hack writer (incidentally, most selkies are bad liars). Where they concern themselves is not the What but the How, the way that the story is told. They are very good mimics, whether they're picking up languages or imitating human behaviors, but not less so at designing wholly new content. This may be the reason for the remarkable consistency of their mythology across both geographical and temporal distances.

They venerate the sun, first of all. It is the light and the life of the world, and they know it well. Still, it is an abstract thing to them. It is an ancient thing and far removed from the world, and it is concerned with other things than them. They are merely incidental beneficiaries of its power.

More important to them are the moon-gods. Over the course of the lunar month each one grows from the bloody remains of its predecessor (the waxing phases) and then tears itself to pieces (the waning phases). This they do in order to fashion souls from their spiritual flesh, to place in the bodies of newborn selkies as the younglings take their first breaths. Every selkie, then, carries a fragment of

one of the moon-gods and is both semi-divine and the holder of a great debt, for a god died to make a selkie what ze is.

The other relevant deity is the sea itself. It is a terrible and a majestic power. The sea knows all that it is a witness to, all that plays out in its midst, and so it is very nearly omniscient. The sea's awareness can only be escaped for a time, and even then it continues to nestle in their dreams and speak to them beneath the light of the moon-god.

Incidentally, a lot of selkies are horrible insomniacs. Sort of comes with the territory when you think that nightmares are what happens when your nigh-Lovecraftian god is angry (maybe with you, maybe not) and practically screaming in your sleeping brain.

The selkies believe in the existence of ghosts, but not in the ghosts of selkies, which go on to live in "the Deeps" after the die. Other beings, however, are without immortal souls, and so they have no place in the Deeps. These are left to wander the land until they dissolve into their constituent parts. Most do so immediately upon dying, but other beings last for months or decades in a painful, drawn-out dissolution.

### **Color vision in different species**

The ability to see color, and what those colors are, is different from species to species and even between some individuals in the same species. Humans have good color vision for mammals, but may actually have worse vision than other vertebrates on average. The ability to distinguish colors depends on the number of different color receptors or cone cells which are in the eye. Most humans have S, M, and L cone cells, which allow for the range of color vision which we enjoy. The majority of non-mammal vertebrates have four to five types of cone cells; nocturnal animals are prone to losing their cone cells, so you can blame our ancient ancestors for the fact that most mammals have only two cone cell types. Most arthropods also have four.

Among non-mammals (and rodents), color vision seems weighted toward ultraviolet light rather than infrared. Many mammals see in blue, gray, and yellow. This is a form of red-green color blindness. Marine mammals consistently lost their blue cone cells in returning to the sea. This is strange in many cases, because blue light becomes more common as one descends further into the ocean (blue cone cells are the most common type among fish), but researchers at Max Planck Institute have come to the conclusion that blue cone cells are the least important type for marine mammals living in coastal waters, where blue light is rarer. Because losing a cone cell is either unimportant or advantageous for animals in low-light conditions, by the time that any mammal made the full transition to deeper waters it had lost a cone cell which only then would have become useful.

Marine mammals, like selkies, have blue-green vision. In a nutshell, they are able to distinguish blue and green from gray, but not red from gray.

## Shangri-La

**Setting assumption:** Contemporary Earth

**Influences:** Tibetan

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** “The Hidden City” covers a few of the ways that Shangri-La can be treated in a contemporary setting. With greater ease, it could fit into a science fiction setting, perhaps as the population of a semi-terraformed planet which is only barely livable. Imagine a mountain rising up hellish fog, with only the higher atmosphere capable of sustaining life. The terraforming project may have failed, been killed, or be incomplete, but either way the reigning influence in the city is criminal. The culture could just as easily be transplanted to a space station; the mountain itself is ultimately not essential.

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Bordering the Tibetan Plateau is the vast Kunlun mountain range, one of the longest mountain ranges on the Asian continent. Imagine, for a moment, a vast mountain in this range, snow-peaked, reaching high to the heavens. Built into its side, facing Tibet, is a strange sight, a white -and -grey-and-silver thing. If you looked at it in just the right fashion, then it would suddenly shift form and become a vast city. Level upon level of strange white stone, silver metal, and concrete, some of them utterly disconnected from the rest, others linked by gently upwards-curving stairs and ramps. The city is slanted backwards, so that only a very

small amount of one level is overshadowed by the one above it.

This city is called Shangri-La.

It is populated by representatives of every major criminal organization in the world, and descendants of the same, and a small number of Tibetans who may, or may not, be descendants of the original inhabitants of a city which may, or may not, have once been something other than a city-state of lawbreakers.

### Social Structure

At the very bottom of society are the Tibetan marmi mdangs who, some say, are the descendants of the original inhabitants of Shangri-La. They themselves are divided on this issue.

Their low standing comes from the fact that, as a people, they do not have connections to any organizations of influence. Everyone else is in Shangri-La because of some connection, however distant, to a criminal organization. This general low standing can certainly translate into active prejudice with the feeling that the marmi mdangs are inherently inferior, but there is nothing that strictly prevents them from achieving power in Shangri-La. Which is not to say that any marmi mdang has ever been recognized as a quote-unquote “Power.”

One in eight people in Shangri-La are marmi mdangs. Racism is alive and well in Shangri-La on both sides of the fence, and is principally concerned with keeping the blood unmixed between the marmi mdangs and the rest of the population. Without this, the native Tibetans would likely have been integrated into the rest of Shangri-La’s population, which mixes among itself more or less regardless of ethnicity.

Above them are the Businessmen, or “transients.” These are those that do not live in Shangri-La on a permanent basis, instead staying only for short periods of time generally no longer than a year. They usually act as go-betweens for Shangri-La and the criminal empires run by its inhabitants. They are also the ones that bring in the imports. Despite the fact that most Businessmen do not stay for more than a few days at a time, the flow is enough that about a fifth of the entire population of Shangri-La is transient.

Seconds and Thirds are quite flexible in where they are placed on the rungs of the social ladder. They have more natural influence and authority than the Businessmen by dint of the fact that they have lived here for all of their lives and can interact with the city in a manner that the Businessmen could only dream of, but the proportion of highly-placed, greatly powerful people among them is not as high as it is with the Settlers.

While the term “Second” (for “second-generation”) applies only to those who have a Settler parent, the term “Third” is not applied only to third-generation inhabitants of Shangri-La, but whenever both of a person’s parents were born in Shangri-La. While Seconds are almost always involved in the business of one parent or another, Thirds (by being both more common and more removed from the business which brought their Settler ancestors to Shangri-La) are the most likely of any of the classes to just own a restaurant or a pawnshop or something else. About three-fifths of the population is made up of Seconds and Thirds.

Settlers were not born in Shangri-La. Unlike the Businessmen, though, they moved there permanently. Of the three permanent classes it is the Settlers who are the ones most likely to travel beyond Shangri-La for any reason at all. There are relatively very few of them (less than five percent of the population). Typically, either they are favored lieutenants of the Powers that were rewarded with a place in Shangri-La or they married

one of the citizens of the city. In a manner of speaking they are the most powerful group overall, even though all but one of the Powers are led by Thirds, since they have the highest proportion of powerful individuals.

Technically speaking, nobody needs patronage in order to settle in the city. Practically speaking, however, it is very hard to acquire both a permanent residence and a means of acquiring a steady source of income. Nearly everyone who settles in Shangri-La is either incredibly rich (very rare, as it is more likely that they would have gotten patronage by this point) or is working for someone who has cleared a place and secured a job for them.

### **The Gentlemen’s Agreement**

Shangri-La is the city of the lawless. It is fitting, therefore, that there is no law here. There is, however, the Gentlemen’s Agreement, and this amounts to much the same thing, except that it is entirely voluntary. Of course, if you do not want to follow the precepts of the Gentlemen’s Agreement and choose not to follow it, you will just as equally not be protected by it.

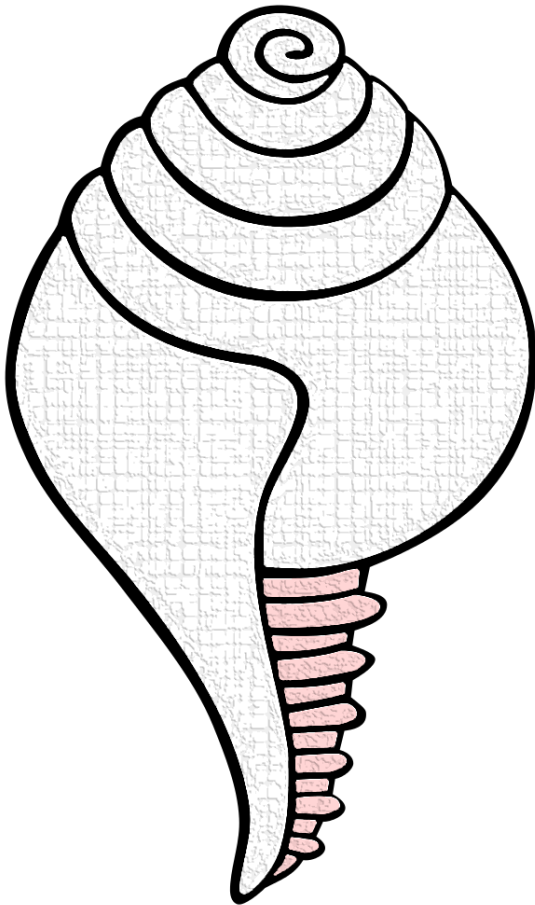
People display their willingness to adhere to the Gentlemen’s Agreement by placing a tattoo on (generally) either the face, the hand, or the shoulder. Among women, a growing fashion is to have the tattoo center around one eye or the other. The tattoo is, first of all, a series of four concentric circles, but the coloring is variable and additional ornamentation and design is permissible. Because it is acceptable to place the tattoo where it may be concealed it is best to assume that any given person has the tattoo unless you have good reason to think otherwise.

Those who do not bear the tattoo are neither protected nor restrained by the Gentlemen’s Agreement. They can do as they please. Choosing this course is not very popular, however, because one can also be *done unto* as others people. Many

influential groups take great pleasure in hunting down anyone that makes trouble for them.

The Gentlemen's Agreement details the many different crimes which are possible for one to commit, as well as the punishments for each. A certain degree of loose interpretation is sometimes taken when advances in modern technology make new forms of breaking the Agreement. A group called the Keepers of the Gentlemen's Agreement, or simply the Keepers, are employed by various groups to put forth most of the legwork and investment of time into tracking down and dealing with anyone who would break the Gentlemen's Agreement. As a matter of principle, they do not, either personally or as Keepers, deal with people who have not signed onto the Agreement.

It is also assumed that anyone who steps foot into the Business Districts of Shangri-La, where the



transients spend most of their time, have also agreed to act under the terms of the Gentlemen's Agreement. This is a matter of convenience for the Businessmen, so that they do not need to be bothered about getting tattoos for a brief stay. Nevertheless, temporary versions of the tattoo (such as through henna) have been popular among the Businessmen from time to time.

### The Powers

The Gentlemen's Agreement is enforced half by the weight of an entire city not only willing but eager to take advantage of anyone who would break the Agreement, and half by the force of the Powers, those groups in Shangri-La who are universally recognized as being the prime authorities of the city. The Powers are not officially its rulers, in a technical sense, but each of them has the power to break Shangri-La if they so choose, and also to restrain any such attempts from either the Powers or those below their level.

Accordingly, the Powers are in a place to ensure that their interests are taken care of. They cooperate with each other in order to prevent anyone from throwing their weight around at the other Powers, which would incite reciprocation and, in the end, only be wasteful. Their cooperation also has the aim of keeping them in a position of strength and ensuring that all relevant parties (read: the Powers) can benefit from their coexistence.

There isn't much to becoming a Power. The status is almost always applied to a family, which can run organizations, rather than any one organization, so one simply declares that one's family is a Power. After that, anybody who feels a little miffed at seeing this new upstart on the block, or anybody who wants the prestige that comes from being able to say that you brought down a Power, will shortly get to work. The current Powers are also likely to take it upon themselves to test their would-be newest companion. Eventually, the Powers will come to the conclusion that it is time to include

another chair in their meetings, or else things will continue as they did before and there will be one less family in Shangri-La.

There are currently six Powers in Shangri-La. One is a single individual—not simply the current head of the family, but that one man. The Devil Doctor is a man of indeterminate Oriental origin and a brilliant mind for poisons and plots. He is several hundreds of years old, and has always managed to stay several steps ahead of his enemies. Two of the families are British in origin, a third is German, and a fourth is French, but the bloodlines of all of them have become significantly muddled since they became entrenched in the city Shangri-La.

The last of the Powers, which has been established in the city since the 1920s, is the company Dewey, Noir, & Howe. The company principally deals with legal matters in the outside world but it has many other divisions, few of which are under its actual name. Since the death of the last senior partner Arpent Noir, in 1938, the company has been run by a group of eight directors. They maintain their company's unusual status as a Power through an impressive number of contacts and information feeds which reach into all but the smallest of matters in Shangri-La.

### **The Height of Fashion**

Fashion comes and goes in waves in Shangri-La. While the native Tibetan dress once had an influence, it has never been particularly strong for as long as the Devil Doctor has been present in the city and it is waning still. Modern culture is never highly popular either, except among new Businessmen and Settlers who were never among the former class before they settled in. It is generally felt that fashion needs a few decades to “age” before it becomes mainstream in Shangri-La, and the current fashion trends are something of a hodgepodge of the 1970s, the Edwardian Era, and the Nineteenth Century.



Norfolk jackets and homburg hats are popular among Businessmen who go to the city often, and also among many Settlers, who were generally frequent transients in the city before they found a place here. Businessmen prefer the style for its ability to make their status distinctive among the masses. They are outsiders, but Businessmen are, by dint of their presence in Shangri-La, working for someone with ties to the outside world, which forces some respect.

And yet the style is not “new” or “modern,” which are both undesirable traits that label one as being a little bit too unknowledgeable about the ways of Shangri-La. Someone who is dressed up in all of the newest fashions will find zemsself considered a fool and an easy mark.

The zoot suit has risen in prominence since the 1960s among those directly working for the company Dewey, Noir, & Howe, or else working with it in some other fashion. Contractors and consultants typically rent a zoot suit for the duration of their time with the company, such is the force of company spirit and tradition. The practice began in the 1950s, when it became associated with several members of the board of directors. Now it is used as a common means of displaying the fact

that the wearer has (or pretends to have) connections to one of the six Powers in the city.

Sleeveless shirts and crop tops are often seen on both sexes but these are outerwear, mere adornments for one's primary clothing. One bit of Tibetan fashion which has never gone away is the display of overly long sleeves, which can reach anywhere from just beyond the hands to all the way down to one's knees. Bodices and bowl cuts have been common among the women for a while now. Men typically wear blazers (often with the aforementioned long sleeves) or waist-length white jackets over sweaters or polo shirts.

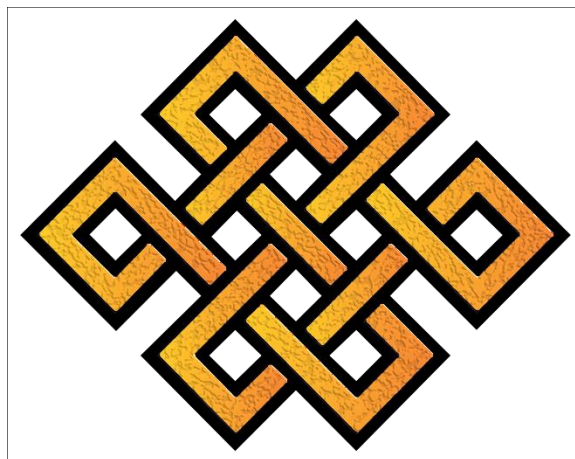
Men typically sport Caesar cuts. Bob cuts can be seen on both sexes, and so can gloves, which are usually tan-colored. Sideburns are worn without any other facial hair. One particularly noteworthy accessory, and one which is also worn by both sexes, is the chab chab, a piece of metal which is intended to hang from the shoulder of one's sleeve. Various tools such as toothpicks and knives (for filing the nails) hang from short, light chains on the chab chab.

Certain aspects of the Eighteenth Century are coming back among many Second women. Mule shoes and outfits reminiscent of riding habits are a common sight on female Seconds, who frequently do up their hair in French braids or simply wear it loose, about a foot past their shoulders. Corsets are also coming back, but probably for an entirely different reason. Incidentally, there was a choice bit of scandal recently involving a prominent restaurant owner, a whip, and someone who was most certainly not her husband (it was brought to the public's awareness shortly after it was brought to her partner's awareness, who ensured in a fatal way that it would get further circulation).

With the resurgence in popularity of the Eighteenth Century, many unfortunate children are being fitted in sailor suits. Their parents appear to be utterly unconcerned with the fact that, quite likely, their

children will not even see the ocean except in pictures, let alone ever have a need for a sailor suit. Knickerbockers are also still worn widely by children of both sexes. They have been for some sixty-odd years at this point, and it is unlikely that their popularity will recede any time in the near future.

Green, yellow, and pink are the most commonly-used colors. Pink has been considered a very masculine color ever since the 1940s. Incidentally (or perhaps not so incidentally, given the city's contrarian streak), this is exactly when the rest of the world finally stopped considering it to be masculine.



### **The Hidden City**

Of course, there is the question of how Shangri-La remains hidden from the rest of the world in this era of satellite photography and Google Earth. It isn't necessarily hidden to absolutely everyone in the world, however. There are probably officials in every government of note who are aware of it.

Why they do not do anything about Shangri-La is up for debate. The possibilities range from trading favors to the rumors that the Powers have nuclear bombs stashed away in such places as Washington D.C., London, and Moscow, and will use these to force certain governments of the world to keep the lid shut.

Regardless of the manner in which the governments of the world are kept from interfering with the business of Shangri-La, from that point it is easy to keep things quiet. Google Earth, for example, has respected requests to blur certain areas in our own world. It is not out of the question that certain areas are in fact absent entirely and have been replaced with false representations of the area.

It is also possible that Shangri-La just isn't hidden anymore, either. It has possible secured its status as an independent state, similar to Singapore, Vatican City, or Monaco. It may have given China an incentive to defend it. Shangri-La likely does everything that it can to prevent outside authorities from having firm evidence that there is any major wrongdoing going on in the city. In those rare cases that the Powers fail in this endeavor, it is of course an isolated incident and the majority of Shangri-La has no connections to criminal activities of any kind.

Dewey, Noir, & Howe is probably even further entrenched as a Power of the city in this scenario. It would be one of several groups, and the greatest among them, whose duty it is to ensure that everything which comes into Shangri-La appears to have a legitimate reason for doing so.

### **Cuisine**

Shangri-La has a population of about twenty thousand people, and all of them have to eat. All of the Powers are involved to one degree or another in the business of importing food. Even most other organizations at least import most of the food which their members consume. Employers in Shangri-La, you see, are generally responsible for feeding and housing their workers, whether that employer daily receives news on zir Mafia operations in New York City, or daily receives news on the sales in zir grocery store. It's factored into the employee's wages, of course, but it isn't good form for an employer with ties to the outside world, or to food, to not make sure that their workers are



provided with food. Other employers, who are without direct access to food, generally pay their works a little bit more in order to compensate for the inconvenience.

Tibetan culture has ingrained itself better in other areas of life than fashion. The two most common drinks are raksi and butter tea. The former drink is an alcohol that can be made from rice, millet, or mulberries. It is a strong, clear drink with a taste reminiscent of sake, which is itself enjoyed by Settlers, who have a knack for passing on the habit of drinking sake—without any of the accompanying rituals—to other Settlers before they die off.

Butter tea, on the other hand, is a tangy drink made from butter (usually but not always yak butter) and salt mixed in with tea. Citizens drink it even more than they do Coca-Cola (which is popular among those who can afford it) and water combined. They drink it when they wake up, they drink it with



breakfast, they drink it before they set off to work, they drink it during smoking breaks and during lunch and during their post-lunch smoking breaks, and they drink it after work is over but before they have headed home, and they drink it with dinner and later on in the evening, and then again before they go to bed, and to tell to truth... they still don't drink it as much as many native Tibetans.

Yoghurts, cheeses, and butters are all common foods. A cheese called chura hampo is an especially popular food. It takes on a form much like a candy and is eaten in the same manner and just as often. It is not uncommon to see a few people sitting on a bench somewhere, watching people pass by on foot and on bicycle, and just eating a few bars of chura kampo (and probably drinking some butter tea from a thermos as well).

The most common kind of dough is made from barley flour. Any restaurant or store can be counted on to have at least a few styles of dumpling or roll of its own, with this or that ingredient added to this or that degree. Stews of mutton or yak, with spices, mustard, and potatoes, are common dishes for dinner. Britain has also made some contributions here and there, often in its breads but also in staples like fish and chips and foods like rhubarb and sugar beets. Curiously, curry didn't find a home in Shangri-La until it came by way of British influence.

Curry powders are sometimes referred to as Hughes' seasoning, after its popularizer.

Roasted barley flour can be mixed with butter tea. Both are typically offered to guests, who are advised to drink the butter tea slowly because it will usually be refilled immediately after it has been emptied. Fried biscuits and bags of mustard seeds are also common.

Along with the temperature of the body and the environment, much medical emphasis is put on the digestion and having the right diet.

### Art and Music

Eight symbols are important and often used in Shangri-Lan: the right-turning white conch shell, the endless knot, the golden fish pair, the lotus flower, the precious parasol, the wheel of law, and the victory banner. They are used in artwork time and again and even referenced in place names. They are also traditionally taken as the personal symbols of the various Powers. The Devil Doctor, for example, is represented by the endless knot and occasionally referred to as the Endless Knot. The Doctors Mabuse have long been represented by the victory banner. Dewey, Noir, & Howe is represented by the conch shell. There is not a Power for every one of the eight symbols but this is because Powers come and go as they have the strength to be considered Powers. There have never, however, been more than eight Powers at a time for very long so far as anyone knows, and it is considered a very bad idea to declare one's family to be a Power when there are already eight.

Most paintings are done on canvasses of silk. They are usually portraits. The individual represented is usually located in the center of the portrait. The subject will be surrounded with abstract designs symbolizing events in their life, characteristics which ze has, and other important qualities.



Street songs are a common sound in the street. They are accompanied by dramyins (a seven-stringed lute) and usually relate to current events. Newspapers are the province of those who do not go to work each morning, while everyone else catches the news as they hear it sung (street singers, by necessity, compose catchy tunes very quickly). Another popular instrument is the jahlin, a sort of double reed woodwind.

Every few months there is some person or another who commissions the creation of a sand mandala, a horribly intricate design made from colored sand. It can take weeks for a trained team to produce a sand mandala, and this is without taking into account that each design is supposed to be made from scratch. When they are finished sand mandalas are sealed into glass, plastic, or another material in order to make them permanent. They are usually then set into some piece of the local architecture.

Literature is a highly-prized pastime in Shangri-La. Everyone, absolutely everyone, is an author. Few people are published, but that is hardly the point. You just simply can't expect other people to respect you if, by the time that you are living on your own, you have not written at least a few short stories. It is expected that, if you have guests, you will let them peruse one of your better stories they take partake of the tea and the roasted bread. Shangri-La is a roiling mass of literary evolution, with a dozen new techniques being tried out every day. Most of them are utter trash and would never have seen the light of day anywhere else, let alone become popular, but Shangri-La is a place where only nailing some particular trick is liable to give you any distinction.

### Infrastructure

In 1952, the city of Shangri-La held its breath and someone flipped a switch (metaphorically—it was, probably, actually a little more complicated than that) and the Bomb Plant, as it was called, turned

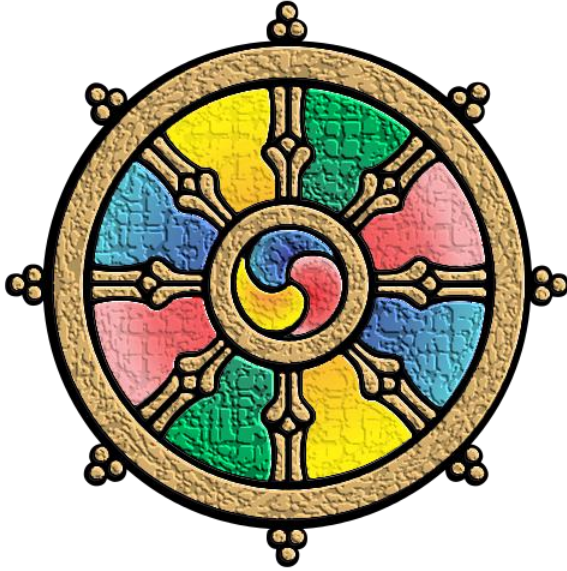


on. For the first time in its history the whole city would have access to electricity.

Shangri-La has always had access to coal, but this hasn't been the least expensive of commodities. Typically, if you had it then you used it for more pressing concerns than producing electricity, and so it was generally the fact that the areas that had electricity were populated by people who were important to the Powers. There had been people living there since long before electricity had been mastered, and if the Businessmen and the Settlers sometimes complained... Well, that was life, in Shangri-La.

But in 1952 there it was, and electricity was nearly as cheap as dirt in Shangri-La, as it still is. There are a few rumors that the Devil Doctor has a nuclear bomb resting beneath the city, made with stolen material destined for the Bomb Plant. He's probably the best person to have a bomb under the city, though; he is obsessed with Shangri-La, and it is questionable whether his sanity would survive if he blew up the city. He hasn't been outside of Shangri-La for more than a century.

Essentials such as water are taken care of by private groups rather than by any sort of governmental agency (there is, after all, no official government in Shangri-La to do the job) but the Powers are generally their employers, just as it is with the Keepers of the Gentlemen's Agreement, and they cooperate with each other in order to make sure



that nobody is going to die for want of the essentials. It is the Mabuse Family, for example, which manages most of the water supplies of the city, while Dewey, Noir, & Howe imports much of Shangri-La's grains through its subsidiary European Health Logistics.

### **Crime and Currency**

Guns are not allowed in Shangri-La, much to the great sorrow of Arpent Noir, a famed guns enthusiast who, by the time that he moved to the city, had more guns than the average American has dollars. Guns have been judged to be far too much trouble and far too inviting of danger, and so the Powers hit upon a very effective means of gun control: anyone who carries a gun in Shangri-La, or tries to bring one in, is executed on the grounds of breaking the

Gentlemen's Agreement, which was modified in the 1840s in order to add this penalty.

All forms of assault are punishable under the Gentlemen's Agreement, typically with a fine. All forms of currency are accepted in Shangri-La and for any purpose, whether it is for paying one's fines or for paying for a purchase, so long as the currency has an exchange rate with the pound sterling (which has been the dominant currency of the city since

1843). Dewey, Noir, & Howe works to keep track of the current exchange rates for every currency from the American dollar to the Zambian kwacha. The company will issue, in exchange for the currency and a small extra fee, a script of its own that is accepted throughout the city as being equal in value to the pound sterling. One can get pounds sterling as well, but that's a little bit more, as the company encourages keeping the money flowing in the city itself.

### **A Day in the Life**

The average citizen of Shangri-La is not a criminal. She works in a restaurant, or she is a trash collector, or she works in a grocery store. As part of her paycheck each week her employer probably gives her a week's worth of food. Otherwise, she simply receives more cash than she would if she were performing equivalent work for someone who did provide food—and it is always cash, no matter what. Checks are rare in Shangri-La. She doesn't bother with housing payments, because part of what she would earn in another part of the world goes straight to whoever owns her place of residence. It is entirely possible that everyone in her apartment block works for the same person, or at least the same organization. Employers like to work out discount group deals with landlords, and like it even better to be the landlords themselves.

She drinks enough butter tea that it is quite possible that a vampire could not drink her blood without getting sick. When she gets home, she probably takes twenty or thirty minutes to take out the latest story that she is working on and add to it. Or she may go through her notebook of ideas, developing other stories or considering how to best use the latest idea which she came up with, and wondering whether it has been done before.

After dinner she will go with her friends to the cinema. She will hope that that one in-theater narrator she prefers to listen to will be working that day. What the movie is, exactly, is less important

than who will be providing the commentary for it. She will walk or bike there, because the streets are narrow and cars are uncommon. The few powered vehicles are generally motorcycles.

She knows that the city in which she lives is on questionable terms with the rest of the world, but this is just something that she knows in an intellectual kind of way. It isn't something that she pays much mind to. It is a distant thing.

She wears the concentric tattoos of the Gentlemen's Agreement on her left shoulder, but also has it placed over her right eye. She thinks that the design just looks so amazing like that. She lives in a city that is run by criminals but she feels safe enough to walk down even the meanest alleyway, which in New York City would be considered only mildly gruff. At least, so long as you adhere to the Gentlemen's Agreement.

But she does, so that's all good.

She may also have multiple husbands. Tibetan-style polyandry never died, not until it mutated into a

more general habit of having multiple when one wasn't sane enough to realize that having one partner was plenty frustrating enough.

But we won't extend our exploration of the day's activities quite *that far*.



## The Shipborn

**Setting assumption:** Post-Apocalyptic.

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** The only thing which makes the Shipborn fit into a post-apocalyptic setting is the Floating Islands, but this hardly keeps them from working elsewhere. There is no shortage of fantasy worlds with old, fallen civilizations. Check the end of the sidebar on “What are the Floating Islands?” to see ways to play around with the concept.

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The Shipborn took to the seas long enough ago that their history before this time is unknown both to themselves and to the rest of the world. They take a dim view to having children with outsiders, though their features are similar to ethnicities from the topics. Some historians, assuming that this custom of theirs has always been with them, claim that they came from somewhere along the equator.

### The Rookeries

For a people who live their whole lives on ships, the Shipborn do awfully little shipbuilding of their own. Nearly all of their ships are purchased from others (or, more rarely, stolen after the crew was slaughtered on the high seas). This is more understandable in light of their desire to stay afloat as much as possible. There’s nothing quite wrong with the land, per se, but it doesn’t feel right. It doesn’t move. It’s just... there. It’s entirely alien to someone who wasn’t allowed to so much as take a single step onto a dockyard until ze was fourteen,

and maybe not even then. Most Shipborn must wait until the age of twenty to get that privilege.

So for most of the Shipborn, life begins and ends on the sea. Or in the sea, if they get thrown into it prematurely. They call their ships rookeries in common parlance, but there’s another word that they use from time to time, one that is full of awe and reverence: little worlds.

The Shipborn may use another people’s ships, but they are modified as extensively as possible. New rooms are partitioned or torn open, hideaway compartments are carved out, and passageways are obstructed or sealed entirely. The usual rookery is a crazy maze of corridors and rooms that be easily navigated only by its inhabitants, and is riddled with booby traps and ambush points. The only way to successfully assault a rookery with minimal losses is to just set fire to the thing and hope that the crew doesn’t have any other tricks up their sleeves, like floating mines or divers who can mess with your ship from below.

### The size of a rookery

Shipborn prefer larger ships, but just how big can they get? The *Mary Rose*, an English “great ship” from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had a crew of 415 men. The *Henry Grace à Dieu*, from the same time period, was even larger. It was 165 feet long, four decks high at its tallest point, with a total tonnage of 1,000, and had anywhere from 700-1,000 men aboard.

The “seventy-four,” which became the standard ship of 18<sup>th</sup> century navies, was between 160 and 180 feet long, and had a crew of between 500 and 700 men. The seventy-four had a main deck out in the air, two gun decks, a deck called an “orlop,” and finally a storage deck.

The absolute largest complement on a sail-propelled ship may have been had by the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Orient*. It was 214 feet long, had four decks, and 1,079 men aboard.

## The Floating islands

Depending on who you talk to, there are between eight and fifteen of them in the world. They date back to before the Shipborn moved out to the seas. They are *why* the Shipborn moved out to the seas. Without them the Shipborn wouldn't be able to maintain their culture.

Each floating island supports hundreds of people at a time, not to mention an equal number of transients, based in whichever ships happen to be docked at the floating island at that moment. Rookeries regularly dock at the floating islands so that crew members (and their genes, too) can move between rookeries, trade, and maintain a collective culture which would otherwise surely fragment.

They aren't really islands. For one, they move around, going from one place to another according to a pattern known only to the Shipborn. They're made out of a strange metal unlike anything that the Shipborn was encountered or even heard of anywhere else. They are capable of submerging themselves miles beneath the waves for weeks if necessary. Their fuel source is a similarly strange liquid which, in all the centuries that the Shipborn

have been measuring it, doesn't seem to have been consumed even in the slightest.

They are the little worlds of dead gods, not floating islands. The Shipborn can even hear their spirits when the dead feel that it is necessary. They are never seen but still see everything, and they speak from behind the walls. They are the ones who taught and still teach the Shipborn how to pilot the floating islands and alert the crews to necessary repairs. These never go beyond minor issues which the spirits can instruct them on and which the Shipborn can acquire the necessary materials for. The little worlds of the dead gods were crafted for the ages.

It is hard to overstate their enormity, and important to grasp their scale. At 362 feet long, with twenty decks, they are simply massive. On any given floating island there are usually around two thousand people living there full-time.

There may be up to three thousand Shipborn either living there on a temporary basis or staying at a docked rookery.

They are supplied well-enough that, in an emergency, a floating island could support its permanent population for six months. The floating

### What are the Floating Islands?

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. So says Clarke's famous Third Law. Though they do not realize it, the Shipborn are living in a time long ago a general societal collapse. They may be descended from the very people who first manned the floating islands all those many generations ago, but it is also possible that they found the floating islands in a derelict state at some point.

The floating islands are, essentially, very large submarines. The "spirits" which exist behind the walls are AI, who are understandably disappointed by what's going on but can't do much more than they are. Or maybe they were overly specialized for their role and don't have the knowledge required to push science forward.

Perhaps they are so specialized that they don't even have the context to understand that there was a collapse, and all that they know is that there is a crew present, the crew does not appear to be from any of the recognized hostile nations, and the crew needs help. If the floating islands boast a terrific weapons array, perhaps they are unable to use it because the local AI need certain codes which nobody has.

It is also possible to rejigger the floating islands so that they are some kind of magitech or even entirely magical. Maybe the sorcerers of the First Age made them, or perhaps they are the living, hollowed-out bones of the Primordial Giant.

islands are able to grow more than enough mushrooms to keep scurvy at bay. In addition to trawling for fish, they grow kelp on bamboo frameworks and raise oysters in bags and cages lowered into the sea.

Floating islands have a top speed of 22 knots. This makes them fast enough to serve as whaling ships, and as some of the best in the world. Whales are important not only for providing trade goods but also for their nutritive content. Not all rookeries are engaged in whaling, but each of the floating islands typically accounts for bringing in several dozen whales each year.

Like the rookeries, each floating island has a strict hierarchy, but the authority of the island's captain does not extend to the vessel of any other captain. While onboard the floating island, any Shipborn from another rookery or floating island must hearken to the local captain's directives, but that's as far as it goes.

Nevertheless, the floating islands together constitute a kind of informal authority by dint of their ability to refuse any request to dock. A rookery whose people have offended the floating island in some way will not be permitted to do business with it any longer until amends have been made. If this is a personal matter, or if the floating island is taking umbrage where none should exist, then there are other floating islands to dock at. But if a rookery is committing broad offenses or habitually flaunting the authority of the captains, then this ban will quickly extend to the other floating islands. In this way a certain minimum standard is enforced, not through force but through the ability to withdraw one's association with another party.

Due to this ability the floating islands take on the duty of arbitrating conflicts between rookeries. If a floating island is called upon for such a task, then the rookeries involved will not be allowed to carry out their business at that floating island before the

case is heard and decided upon. Thereafter, it is every party's choice to follow the pronounced judgment or not, but a rookery will find itself blacklisted by one or several floating islands until it fulfills whatever terms have been levied upon it.

## **Religion**

The Shipborn have a hodgepodge faith built mostly from other religions that they have encountered. As a people they have no real defining religion. Instead, each rookery picks and chooses from the pieces of other belief systems which catch their fancy. It is only because that the exchange of people between rookeries leads to an exchange of ideas as well that there are any common elements among their religions, and most religious observation is disorganized anyway.

The Shipborn usually worship a single abstract deity. This deity works with a host of created sub-deities that are also worshiped, and usually more often. It is easier, after all, to understand and venerate a being with an established personality and form than to do the same thing for something which is just as much a general concept as it is an entity. These sub-deities may be considered to be emanations or aspects of the greater Deity, exalted once-human helpers, or any number of other things, sometimes several of them at once. The gods and heroic figures of other religions usually find their way into this group of beings.

Another of the widespread traditions of the Shipborn is each rookery's possession of a small shrine made from animal bones, most commonly including sharks (or their teeth, anyway), dolphins, sea turtles, and snakes. This shrine is believed to have divine or at least spiritual qualities and is the target of prayers and sacrifices.

## **Cuisine**

For obvious reasons, food preservation is a vital concern for the Shipborn. Fruit is candied with

sugar solutions or dried. Pickling is common for vegetables and meat. Preservation through salting is also common, since the necessary ingredient is in plentiful supply on the open sea.

Processing that salt is another matter, but the Shipborn have taken care of it as well. The floating islands are capable of desalinating water in great quantities, and there are near to a hundred smaller devices which can fit in and serve a rookery. Most little worlds, though, use greenhouse-dependent systems in order to replicate the normal hydrological cycle. Regardless of the method employed, the main object is acquiring desalinated water for drinking and for the gardens.

When the rookery is in an area where the schools are plentiful, nets are lowered into the water in order to catch fish as the rookery travels along. Fish are eaten as they are or processed into a sauce for use as a condiment. The Shipborn use fish sauce on everything, and consume more fish in this form than they do in the more conventional mode.

Eel is another item commonly found on the menu. Like those few fish which escape being turned into a delicious sauce, their fate is often to be jellied. Shellfish are not eaten as regularly but still find their way onto the dinner table often enough to bear mention. Whale, whether harvested directly or procured from the floating islands, is also an important part of the diet.

Inedible substances, regardless of their source, are used as fertilizer for the small gardens which most Shipborn maintain on their rookeries. These are by no means productive enough to make the rookery self-sufficient. Most fruits and vegetables must be bought when the ship hits port. But every little bit helps, does it not?

Because it is so difficult to grow vegetables on a rookery, and nearly impossible to grow fruits, most of their supply comes from the land bound. This then has to be preserved, so eating fresh fruits and

### Salinity tolerance in plants

Plants don't like salt. This is a problem when you're trying to grow them on a boat. The salinity of seawater measures out to 35 ppt (parts per thousand) or 50 dS m (deciSiemens per meter). According to the report *Tolerance of Vegetable Crops to Salinity*, we find the following:

Onions are unaffected at 20 dS m but suffer a yield loss of 50% under a solution of 30-35 dS m; no information is available for higher concentrations. No changes at all were observed in carrots in concentrations of up to 16 dS m. The authors apparently got bored and stopped there, so there is no data about concentrations of up to 50 dS m.

Other plants basically *suck*, generally speaking. In general, you would have to bring even onions inside under high surf spray, and you would still get less yield than on land. A rocking wooden ship that gets splashed and sprayed all the time is just a bad place for a land plant, is all.

On the other hand, we don't know very much about mushrooms except that *some of them* are pretty tolerant of salt. Such as *Agaricus bernardii*, the "salt-loving mushroom," which is found all over the world in salt marshes and coastal grasslands. Also, you can eat it.

vegetables constitutes a special occasion in itself. Many celebrations are moved up or down the calendar in order to coincide with the rookery making port.

### Occupational Fields

Rank, from lowest to highest, consists of boys, ordinaries, ables, and hands. Shipborn progress through each of the ranks in turn. Boys perform general work in all fields of work to the best of their abilities. A five-year-old will obviously be doing different work than an eleven-year-old, of course, but none of will require great proficiency. Boys get shuffled around between different fields of work,

doing everything from helping to maintain the stock to fetching medical supplies.

When they become ordinaries at the age of fourteen they are assigned to a specific field. At this point they begin to take on more than minimally-skilled work. At twenty they are promoted to the rank of able and begin to specialize within their field.

Finally, they will be recognized as proficient in their field and promoted to the rank of hand, somewhere between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-two depending on their progress. Most hands receive their position at thirty. Only upon becoming a hand is one considered to have all of the rights of an adult.

Within each rank and occupational field there is another system, based on seniority. Individuals receive full titles according to their respective

positions within this pecking order. The thirdmost senior ordinary working for supply would be called the Third Stock-Ordinary, for instance. The most senior of proficient doctors on the ship would be referred to as First Hospital-Hand.

There are a great number of different occupational fields (or duties) which can be held: arms-hands (law enforcement and repair), hospital-hands (medical), intelligence -hands (Shipborn who are actually in charge of selling to outsiders when they make port, translators, those who deal with representatives of foreign powers), and counsel-hands (in charge of maintaining the crew's mental health and assigning occupational fields to boys on the verge of becoming ordinaries). There are different many jobs within each field. Stock-hands, for example, can be cooks, supervisors over the storehouses, pursers, or bookkeepers. Regardless of their specialty they are fully expected to be able

### **Scurvy sucks**

And then you die. An otherwise healthy person can get away with skipping the Vitamin C for several weeks before scurvy sets in, but 10mg a day is sufficient to keep anyone's head above the water no matter how badly off they are.

Now, everyone knows about getting their vitamin c from fruits and veggies. Fewer people know about getting them from mushrooms. And because mushrooms can be grown below-deck anyway, their salinity tolerance is actually kind of... not that useful.

According to "The Nutritional Value of *Pleurotus Ostreatus*," oyster mushrooms grown in soybean straw clock in at 15mg of Vitamin C per 100g, or roughly 67.5mg per pound. By setting up a 6'x6'x6' five-tiered rack, 8 to 10 pounds of oyster mushrooms can be harvested a week. Assuming a low count of 8 pounds, that's 540mg a week, or enough for almost eight people.

Your average "seventy-four" ship, with 500 to 700 crew members, would need between sixty-four and ninety of these racks. This would take up between 13,824 and 19,440 cubic feet. Whether that would be an efficient use of space is an entirely different question, considering that, on the higher end of the scale, you might not have any room for the people you're trying to feed. With that in mind it might be better just to rely on mushrooms to supplement other sources (like those below).

Whales are a prime source of Vitamin C. Whale epidermis, if eaten uncooked, supplies 38mg of Vitamin C per 100g. One pound of whale skin is enough to supply the minimum requirement of Vitamin C for about nineteen people. Other sources of Vitamin C include the kelp farms (3mg per 100g) and seal brain (15mg per 100g).



to hold their own in any of the other jobs of their field should the need arise.

While the floating islands of course have members of all of the duties, and in no small number, their presence elsewhere depends on the individual rookeries. Those ships which spend an abnormally long time away from the floating islands or regularly go through stressful situations (some rookeries more likely than others to attack foreign ships) will have more than one counsel-hand, and arms-hands will be more common on rookeries which have reason to expect a lot of hostile action (such as our aforementioned pirates).

The concept of gender, at least linguistically, can be confusing for outsiders. It is based on the stages of life (specifically rank), instead of physical sex or anything else more easily understandable. In the pidgin language that the Shipborn have developed from tens of languages new and old (especially one *extremely* old language), they use different kinds of pronouns repurposed to specify particular ranks.

From a more strictly sociological view their concept is gender is... Possibly incapable of being understood by foreigners. Perhaps it doesn't even exist as other societies hold it. But in their dealings with cultures holding to a binary system the Shipborn hold that boys and hands are male and that ables and ordinaries are female. Or at least that these are the proper pronouns to use.

### **Marriage and Children**

Though they use male and female pronouns, the concept of gender amongst the Shipborn is related more to age and rank than to biological sex. Regardless of whether it might really be more accurate to reverse the pronouns, and regardless of how much landbound cultures might want to explain to the Shipborn that they should come up with entirely new words because *really, we do not think that this means what you think it means, and there is actually no word in our language that will work*, this is age-

based gender identity is more than a linguistic quirk. It relates to some sort of dichotomy, even if outsiders are not sure of exactly what it is. Boys and hands are considered to have a gender unique to them, while ables and ordinaries have a different gender. That one gender is ascribed maleness and the other femaleness is mostly a result of the Shipborn's observation of the power structures in the societies around them, and a desire to keep relations with those societies smooth.

Shipborn are married before they even become ordinaries. It's a rare Shipborn who isn't living with her husband by the time that she's fifteen. For the next fifteen years or so, until she is considered proficient in her occupational field, she will remain in that marriage (barring extraordinary circumstances, anyhow). After reaching the rank of hand, Shipborn are released from their marriages and usually spend a few years "between" until they remarry. Possibly again and again; polygamy is common for hands who are prestigious enough. The Shipborn who bears a child is the one who has authority over that child, regardless of rank. Childbearing Shipborn can expect to have four children on average, not including any claimed by early mortality, and might even have another one or two after becoming hands.

Marriages are arranged and made as early in life as when the younger partner is nine, but usually no sooner than twelve. Cohabitation and consummation do not occur until said spouse becomes an ordinary. Otherwise she would belong to one state and not the other, and while the Shipborn seem to be merely curious about the concept of homosexuality as it applies to other peoples, they hold a stigma against sexual activity between members of the same rank-based state. Same-gender relationships are taboo to the point that they are a marooning offense. That can be dangerous if you're too far from land, because it gets carried out immediately.



There are as many marriage ceremonies as there are religions in Shipborn society but one of the most common traditions (indeed, it might be regarded as *the* Shipborn wedding tradition) starts with the placement of various obstacles in a path lying between the groom and the bride. These obstacles must be bypassed by the groom in order to show his worthiness and to demonstrate his willingness to surmount all problems and dangers in order to be a proper companion to his spouse.

But what becomes of the children, whenever they happen to be born? Hopefully they won't be born at the wrong time, for one thing. There are a handful of very bad omens which the Shipborn keep an eye out for. These include being born on a moonless night, or when there has been no wind for at least three consecutive days. The first omen indicates that the child's spirit was eaten. Not so much because "baby's soul was eaten, therefore *empty moon*," but more "moon is empty, therefore demons are out and about, therefore *demons ate my baby*." The second omen predicts very, very bad luck for the child. Letting the child live would hardly be a mercy. His luck is liable to be contagious too, enough that the whole rookery might sink just so that the world can take a shot at the child. In these cases the infant is anointed with oils, placed in a small boat, and set out to sea. No rookery which encounters the boat will take it in, not even if the child is still alive.

Should the child be more fortunate, however, he'll soon be given a name. After bearing a child, the first thing which the Shipborn sees will be made into the name given to the child. Obviously there are a lot of names that have to do with weather or the ocean. Shipborn are luckily born into a culture which, being seafaring, has a great many different phenomena and properties relating to water and weather. Of note is the not-uncommon practice of the name-giver keeping zir eyes shut until someone informs zem of something interesting. There are stories of some Shipborn keeping their eyes shut (or just keeping something over their eyes) for days

or even weeks at a time just so that the child will have a particular name.

Head-flattening begins within the first month of life in order to enhance the child's future attractiveness. Pieces of wood are bound to the infant's head in a way that will result in the top of the head becoming perfectly flat. This continues for twelve months with occasional readjustments of some of the pieces of wood in order to prevent deformation elsewhere.

### **Interpersonal**

Fashion is used to mark differences in rank. Exact kinds of clothing are not restricted to rank. It's the details that matter. Members of all ranks wear jackets, but the jacket of a boys or ordinary lacks a skirt and buttons, and an able's jacket will have square buttons instead of the round ones that a hand's jacket will sport.

Some hats have brims, others lack any leather, and depending on your rank you may have gloves that are long or that reach no further than your wrist. Married couples cannot wear the exact same kind of clothing, but it is traditional for them to wear the same colors. This may be as simple as making sure that the same color is included *somewhere* in their respective outfits or as thorough as wearing the exact same color schemes, adjusted only for rank.

Punishments are usually permanent and of a lasting nature. If you are not marooned off the side of the rookery then you will be tattooed, so that everyone will know what you did, how long ago you did it, and what kind of punishment was given to you. For this reason, it isn't normally possible to escape the past. Even leaving for another rookery isn't enough, at least on its own.

There is an out for those who want to take it. By accepting banishment to another rookery, procedures will be performed to remove the tattoo, including excision and dermabrasion with shark-

skin sandpaper. No anesthetic of any kind is used during the procedure. Not even alcohol can be drunk. The pain of this process is part of the cost of shedding the signs of your crimes and becoming one of the Grace-Given.

The Shipborn don't have a strong concept of personal space. Growing up on a rookery means that every spare inch of space onboard is being used for something, and often for more than one something. Outsiders, were they allowed into the bowels of a rookery, would be hard-pressed to get around without bumping into somebody every ten minutes. The Shipborn, of course, are more than capable of dodging each other whilst on the move but it's a skill which takes practice or very slow and careful movements.

The "quarter space" of a Shipborn, that area of the rookery in which ze can place zir own possessions and get some sleep, is in most cases scarcely larger than the room which ze takes when laying down. This is only doubled after marriage (the couple's quarter spaces are combined) and even the quarter space of the rookery's captain is only three times as large as normal. This space is utilized as best as possible by suspending one's possessions from the ceiling. Quarter spaces that border a wall are prized, since it gives a Shipborn another surface to hang things from. People usually sleep on hammocks, which not only make maximum use of available space and can be put away when not in use, but also prevent the user from being thrown onto the floor by a sudden lurching of the rookery.

## Sopaube Syelao

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world, post-collapse

**Influences:** Medieval Christian monasteries

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Forget the apocalyptic angle. Maybe something else made the people retreat into themselves, or perhaps they never retreated at all, and they are simply very fond of their mountain-fortress. When there are bandits and enemy armies about, after all, it is pretty easy to wish that you had a mountain-fortress to hole up in.

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More than five centuries ago, the world ended. The Riders in Black tore the civilized world apart. Where they went they set fields and towns ablaze, tore down walls and libraries, and destroyed books and the learned men above all. Their work lasted for generations as they rode across the whole world, and for generations more they remained in wait, returning to strike down anyone who tried to rebuild civilization. So it went, from then until now, until thirty years had passed without anything but the barest rumor of the Riders in Black, until the only threat which remained came from savages and barbarians and the Riders' misguided worshipers.

And between then and now, when it seemed as if the whole world would descend into chaos and never return, there was a mountain. And in that mountain were men and women who waited, and labored, and protected the promise—not a guarantee, only a promise—of the world's salvation.

It was a small place in the very beginning. The monastery was on the mountain, and not yet the

mountain itself. Rumors spread of the Riders in Black and the abbot had the foresight to see what the end of it would be. It was to their advantage that the monasteries of their faith strove for self-sufficiency; that meant that the basic groundwork was already there and they needed only to expand it. The Holy Mothers were sent for, convinced of the full extent of the emergency, and brought back for safekeeping. Craftsmen, scholars, and all other kinds of skilled men were retrieved and given shelter in the monastery. And the monastery became a fortress, and the fortress was expanded until it became the mountain itself. It was a city in its own right by the end of things.

### Hierarchy and Faith

Everything revolves around the Holy Mothers, the Prophets, who create each other in the cycle of endless birth and rebirth that is called Prellyp. The three Holy Mothers have been blessed by the Unnamable Gods. It is they alone who are able to hear and interpret Their will. They return each generation, the grandmother committing suicide by hemlock when the eldest daughter of her eldest daughter has turned ten years old, in order to give her soul sufficient time to rest before she reincarnates as her granddaughter's daughter. In order to ensure that she has this time, it is not permitted for a Holy Mother to marry until she has turned twenty.

Without the Prophets, the whole faith would have crumbled in time. There would have been no-one to hear the voice of the Unnamable Gods, nor anyone to interpret and add to the Three Times Holy Canon in order to ensure that the faith followed the Gods' will as was intended for the people of *this* time and not as it was intended for previous generations whose circumstances could be and often were markedly different. To name just an immediate example, the faith has just recently had to go through a period where all civilization

was in danger of being snuffed out like a dying fire, and this understandably required some changes in how things were done.

More important than this, however, there would be no-one who was fit to repair the Prime Library, which is written in a language that has no name (giving it a pithy descriptor like the Nameless Language might be accurate in a way but that is also giving a name to a language which, according to the Prophets, is *required* to have none). The Prime Library is an authoritative collection of every book, letter, and page in the Three Times Holy Canon, and only the Holy Mothers are allowed to write in its language (or even learn how to read it). Without the Holy Mothers and the Prime Library, the scriptures would, over time and through translation and retranslation, become almost unrecognizable.

The prominence of the Holy Mothers notwithstanding, women do not otherwise have high status. They are barred from holding many positions of authority. When the Prophets arrived at Sopaube Syelao they loosened these restrictions by allowing the existence of mopsoype, or women who take male status.

These individuals wear males' clothing, take wives, are referred to in the male pronoun, may hold positions as men and own property, and participate in male duties such as farming, which takes place in terraces on the higher levels of the mountain, behind numerous chokepoints protected by strong walls.

### **Child-rearing and Marriage**

Until they have matured at the age of fourteen, children are considered to be the property of their maternal grandfather. They have a few basic rights to guarantee their physical safety, but not much else besides that. Newborns are given names based on the week and the day of their birth. They are counted as one-year-old already upon birth and become another year older with the passing of each

New Year's Day, which occurs on the day of the year's first planting. This can result in a difference of up to two years between a person's given age and zir age as it would be determined in many other cultures.

Bundling, or sharing the same bed while wrapped in different blankets, is a part of normal courtship behavior in the monastery-mountain. It is expected that the young couple will not engage in any of the activities that would be more appropriate for the marriage bed than the courtship bed. Sometimes the parents are justified in believing that this will actually mean something. Other times they must go to great lengths to forget just what activities they themselves got up to when they were bundling at that age. And sometimes they sleep in the hall and require that the bedroom store remain open. The last rarely happens, though. Bundling begins when both children are usually too young to be thinking about sex, and it is seen as an insult to suddenly get suspicious just because the couple is getting older.

Bundling facilitates long and uninterrupted conversations. Everyone has fond memories of whiling away the long hours of the night with talk, sometimes till dawn arrived. It also fosters the development of a kind of intimacy which, while physical, is as far from anything sexual as a shoe is. The ultimate goal of courtship and bundling is to refashion the couple into being a *couple* as opposed to two people who share a bed and are permitted by their religion to do some interesting things in it, *finally*. After a decade or more of courting someone since you were both very young, there is no-one else who knows you as well or who can ever have as much influence over you as that other person did. Even were you to spend the next thirty years bundling with someone else, they were not bundling with you and talking to you during the most formative years of your life. That is an experience that you will not find with any other person.



The wife's family forever has authority over her, even after she has married. If the husband fails to meet any expectations which the wife's family has, then her family can collect both her and her children and take them to her parents or any of her relatives. Others have very little sympathy for anyone that this happens to; unless his wife's family has a bad reputation the husband is assumed to have done something to warrant the behavior. Even if his wife and children someday return he may never escape the stigma of being a man who provoked his wife into abandoning him.

### Cuisine

It may have originally been a loosely-worded prohibition against cannibalism, especially if there are multiple sapient, bipedal species in the world (or there were thought to be) and the Prophets at the time wanted to be more inclusive in their injunction. However, it happened, though, the ban against eating the meat of any animal with only two legs is now strictly interpreted. Since the Riders in Black arrived the Prophets have conclusively ruled that bears, though they can stand well on two feet, were fit for consumption on the grounds that their primary mode of locomotion is on four legs and that even a dog may be used to walk on its hind legs with sufficient practice. Prior to this point, the matter was up in the air, but the Prophets tried to open up as many possibilities as they could in the belief that too many restrictions would have had a negative impact on the people when the Riders in Black were already making things hard enough. Besides primates, the other group of animals affected by this commandment is birds. Since blood and the marrow in the bone are both considered to be meat, these may not be consumed, but poultry are still kept for their eggs, which are not considered meat so long as they are not allowed to develop.

The people subsist mostly on various kinds of soup. Fitzscot is a beetroot soup made from meat stock, many kinds of vegetables (whatever is on

hand, really), and fermented beetroot juice. Chatmanoj is a soup of pork, pickled cucumber, onions, parsley, and tomato.

Jinaurkiat is a kind of cabbage soup, famous for the fact that (strangely) people do not quickly tire of it. It includes garlic, flour, meat, mushrooms, and onion, and like many other soups is eaten with rye bread. Bartelsoy is a mushroom soup which is made by heating cabbage, vinegar, and butter together. This is added to brine along with mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, and pickled cucumbers.

Shipperry is a cold soup made from boiled potatoes, cucumbers, eggs, radishes, and occasionally meat or alcohol. The solids are diced and added just prior to eating.

Pyrdiaz is a clear fish soup with potatoes, parsley, and leek. Burggraf is a variant of pyrdiaz with minimal vegetables, arguably more like a fish broth than a soup. Fypkenzy is a soup of pearl barley, pickled cucumbers, and kidney meat. It is often eaten in accompaniment to alcohol such as kaderalao, which is made from fermented rye. It has a low alcohol content. Riekero is another alcoholic drink—originally hailing from beyond Sopaube Syelao—which is made from potatoes, and sylaotodd is made from apples. All three commonly have raisins added to them.

When not used for alcohol, apples may also be pickled—making tuttleryo—or turned into applesauce. A mixture of applesauce and raisins is spread on very thin pancakes (called “fransisyryp”) to make penaaj. Fransisyryp wrapping boiled meat and onions is called kaehnsoy. Wrapping cabbage, chopped hard-boiled eggs, and tomato paste, it is derosaj.

Noodle soups like pel guerricoj lao (“noodles with mushrooms”) and pel aureausoy lao (“noodles with milk”) are also common. Pel devonao lao (“noodles with pork”) is a dish which often includes cinnamon. The heartiest version is pel iacopoj lao



(“noodles with potatoes”), which consists of noodles, mashed potatoes, and onion.

While meat is most often an ingredient in Sopaube Syelao’s many soups, it is occasionally the main attraction. Shalpyr refers to any meat which has been cooked in porridge and then served cold. Laomew is offal which has been baked in a pot and wrapped in cabbage. Pork is especially common: Manusyl is minced pork wrapped in a dough of flour and eggs, and alistaery is pork which has been chopped and jellied with parsley and bits of other vegetables. Both dishes are served with garlic. Sheamew is a kebab of meat and onions.

The most common form of bread after plain rye is kempsteriat, in which are baked eggs, fish, mushrooms, and onions. Nikitabe is a salad of beans, boiled beets, carrots, onions, pickled cucumbers, peas, and potatoes.

### **Storytelling**

There are two storytelling traditions: the Fypauryo Uroj and the Fypauryo Pypao, or the Oral and the

Written. Stories which are part of the oral tradition are primarily stories which are meant to instruct on or illustrate some point, like parables and just-so stories. There is usually a minimum of characters and some or all of them may be talking animals. Oral stories rarely take more than a few hours to tell. They have poetic elements like rhyme schemes and alliteration to aid retention in the memory. A common figure in these stories is the character Popyelp Jupupfot, a wise man who exposes the pride and foolishness of everyone from beggars to the Holy Mothers by playing a fool himself and questioning everything often enough that Socrates himself would get annoyed by it.

The written tradition has a historical focus. These stories are long. They include many characters, who sometimes spiral off into subplots long enough that we might consider them to be books in their own right, and these characters may be followed for years. Books whose plots unfold over the course of a century or more are not uncommon. They also reference each other a fair amount. Some of them are nearly impenetrable if you haven’t read all of the other stories that they reference or comment upon.

## The Traveler Clans

**Setting assumption:** Generic fantasy world

**Influences:** Roma

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Any number of transportation methods could be employed by the Traveler Clans. Wagons, horses, carts, and dog sledges are some of those mentioned, but these hardly exhaust the possibilities. The Traveler Clans can be placed in just about any region, whether plains, woodland, or tundra.

As often is the case the Traveler Clans can be ported into a post-apocalyptic society without much fuss. Their bulldogs would require time to be bred into existence, but could just as easily be substituted for some other kind of dog. Pit bulls are very reliable, despite their fierce reputation (indeed, their loyalty is in part responsible for that reputation). Alternately, their culture can be laid over a future society. Their modes of transportation will almost certainly be different, but there will still be the same disregard for landed peoples, the same contracts between parties, and so on.

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The Traveler Clans are so -named because of the means by which status is acquired in their society, and the use to which it is put: what sort of transportation you own, and how much of it you

own. They are a pre-industrial civilization depending primarily on beasts of burden, although a few of the traveler clans have also expanded into water-based travel to one degree or another. Work animals are not the only factor, however. Drawn vehicles such as carts and wagons are also important.

In the end, status is determined by how much you can transport from one place to another and how fast and how well you can do it. This is because all these things in turn affect your ability to move goods from one place to another, and to make something off of it.

While one can refer to the entire society as being of the Traveler Clans, and there is no other name for their society as a whole, this quickly breaks down if the attempt is made to apply it to the lower class, the milishi, who stay rooted to one location in most cases. Only the camrelidji and the suritchi move from place to place, and it is not exactly uncommon for them to consider the landed people to not even be truly part of their society or, sometimes, even entirely human.

The “i” suffix does not exactly identity signify in the language of the Traveler Clans. Instead it conveys the idea of shared association or union. For example, (assuming that we applied it to English words), one dog and another dog might be either “two dog” or “two dogi.” In the former case, we simply have one dog and then another. In the latter, the two are part of the same pack or kennel, or have some other relevant relationship. Furthermore, a dog, alone, cannot be part of a group.

With this suffix, “fighter” becomes “of the fighter people” (or more properly “fighting people”), and “buyer-and-seller people” becomes, similarly, “of the buying-and-selling people.” Meanwhile,

“landed” works perfectly well even alone, and requires no change when translated.

### **The Milishi**

At the bottom of the social strata are the milishi, those who are “of the landed people,” who exist in the villages and towns of the Traveler Clans’ lands. They are often prevented, by dint of having landed blood, from owning the animals most closely associated with transportation. In most cases, though, they do not have the resources to get them even if permitted to do so.

Milishi live either in villages or towns, which are categorized according to the nature of their home economy. Villages are the more common of the two. They produce the goods necessary to provide for most of their needs and then an amount of raw materials for the central town, especially the agricultural output needed to feed them. Each town, meanwhile, is devoted to (usually) a single industry. The town takes from the surrounding villages any surplus necessities and raw materials for the purpose of producing manufactured goods.

Due to the manner of the relationship which exists between villages, towns, and merchants, art as something in and of itself is generally unknown. Paintings, as the mere application of colored inks applied to a piece of paper, are not consistently produced. A town may, however, make use of artisans who apply paint to the goods which the town produces, in order to raise their value. Musical instruments are produced, and there is at least one town whose chief industry is the product of instruments.

The actual fact that divides the landed people from the true Traveler Clans is that they do not move from place to place. More than this, however, there is the general feeling that there is something else which divides them: the milishi produce goods. This can occasionally cause strain between various

clans, and even within some clans, for reasons elaborated on elsewhere.

### **The Camrelidji**

Somewhere in the mix are the camrelidji, those who are “of the fighting people,” and whose place in society is not so rooted. While technically they occupy a place between the landed people and the merchants, it’s an accepted fact that any given camrelidji clan is really just below the clan of their employer. This is due to their military might (besides their training, it is the obligation of the employer to provide arms—their nature determined in the contract—for zir fighting people) and to the fact that the camrelidji are often used as extensions of the clan to which they are attached.

Every merchant prince has matters which he considers himself too high to deal with personally, and this attitude can travel all the way down the hierarchy through zir entire clan. Furthermore, it is also simply prudent in some situations to send, not a merchant, but someone well-versed in many methods of killing people while similarly avoiding being killed. Unless it requires the specialized knowledge of a particular merchant, most envoys are camrelidji who have been empowered to act in the name and stead of their employer.

The camrelidji are descended from men and women originally hired on a short-term basis to protect the bodies and goods of the earliest merchant princes. Where they went they brought their families along, for the suritchi and their caravans were always on the move. As each generation grew up, it became apparent that they had a richer future in store by continuing the trade of the last generation, than by joining the villages and the towns. It was simply natural, moreover, to offer one’s services to same clan which had employed one’s parents so long as something truly offensive had not occurred.

It has not been forgotten, even now, that the fighting people are hirelings. This works to their advantage on occasion. It is the recognized right of a camrelidji clan to not renew its contract but to instead seek new employers if it has been offended or abused. The use of this right of withdrawal is brandished as a threat whenever the clan feels that it is necessary. Most merchant princes have several fighting clans in their employ but the total loss of even a single clan is devastating, especially since this leaves open the possibility of their one-time servants running straight to the whichever suritchi the prince is currently having the worst time with and giving up vital information.

This right was officially recognized by the suritchi two centuries ago when they realized that they simply had no room for negotiation. The camrelidji had united on this matter, and if a single merchant prince agreed then the fighting people would be perfectly capable of declaring, en masse, for that one man, which would leave everyone else in a most undesirable position. The clans typically made twenty-year contracts, and the contracts of several important camrelidji clans were coming up for renewal (or lack thereof) within a few short years.

The services of the fighting people, despite their name, are not limited only to the protection of the suritchi, their caravans, and the landed people. The last are all under the auspices of one merchant prince or another, and who may reasonably expect protection in the face of danger, due to their being responsible for the production of virtually every good. As mentioned earlier, they also serve as couriers and representatives. Most merchants have a favored camrelidji to whom they turn for counsel, trusting that their adviser, being outside of the ranks of the suritchi, will be unbiased. Indeed, when a young merchant begins to come into zir house, and prepares for zir first venture, it is very common for either the most well-established suritchi in the clan or the new merchant's father to ask one of zir older, most trustworthy camrelidji to offer a contract of service to the new merchant.

Sometimes these last for only a single term of service. Other times the camrelidj will continue to present a new contract as each one in turn approaches its expiration date.

Finally, the fighting people also take part in the basic duties which are necessary for a caravan to move from place to place and generally function at all. While the bulk of the labor goes on the shoulders of those suritchi who have not acquired so much as a cart, nearly everyone pitches in. It might be by physically lending a hand or by offering up the payment necessary to decline active participation in such things. Not only do non-participatory Travelers not get paid for any day that they do not pitch in, they also must pay in penalty a little bit more than their labor was worth.

### **The Kareli Clan: Camrelidji**

Unlike other camrelidji, the Kareli are always up for hire: any amount of them, to anyone, for any purpose, for no longer than a year at a time. Because they do not deal exclusively with the suritchi (even some *milishi* have hired them at times), the suritchi as a collective people do not deal with them at all. A suritchi who does will find zerself thrown out of zir caravan and zir clan, let the rest of the camrelidj blacklist not only the offender but also the people who gave zem social identity. They disapprove, to say the least, of this clan that does not make generational contracts with anyone.

The Kareli are used to moving around and do not typically engage in open combat. Rather, they disguise themselves and attempt to achieve their missions through the most roundabout (but still practical) method possible in order to blindside their target in a place ze didn't even know existed. In answering the typical question of whether one should go through the front door or the back door, a Karel will not answer "through the window," as many people do when trying to come up with an unorthodox answer. More likely the Karel will

choose to climb onto the roof in the middle of the night and cut a hole through it so that ze can come down from above. So long as the target is unlikely to have even considered that anything like it is possible, let alone set up a defense against it, the Kareli will consider it as a possibility. They will develop several different methods of using that route should they choose it, in the event that one method or another proves to be unfeasible.

### **The Slupini Clan: Camrelidji**

The Slupini travel, but they do not have a very great range. They are employed by the suritchi of the Glaski Clan and have been given the duty of circulating through all the villages and lands which are frequented by the Glaski in order to keep the peace. They have been “in contract” with the Glaski for seventy years now and are mid-way through their fourth contract of service. They enjoy a better relationship, as compared to other camrelidji, with the milishi whom they protect. Many Slupini spent their time in specific areas, or wards.

They have a reputation for hawk-sightedness. There are about five more bands of Slupini than there are wards, and a band does not move on from its current ward until a new band has arrived to replace it, so that no ward will ever be left without a protecting presence. They are situated near an often chaotic border, where raiding parties from one side or another have been known to come over to take supplies whenever hostilities are rising between the two greater nations. For this reason, the Slupini are highly-valued guardians.

The idea of gaining protection from the competent camrelidji is enough to make more than one neighboring area attempt to gain the patronage of the Glaski in order to get a share of the safety offered by the clan’s guardians. There are only so many Slupini, however, and the other two camrelidji clans that are in contract with the Glaski do not have the necessary prestige. Nevertheless, as

the Slupini grow in number the lands of the Glaski will grow as well, and it is only a matter of time before the Glaski become thomithi suritchi.

### **The Suritchi**

At the very top of society are the suritchi, or those who are “of the buying-and-selling people.” Like the fighting people they are organized into clans, each one led by a merchant prince who is able to pass on zir title to any other member of the clan after zir death. There have, in fact, been more than a few female merchant princes in the history of the Traveler Clans, and some of the clans are quite matriarchal as a matter of tradition.

The merchant prince is responsible for keeping the clan intact, and it is expected that ze will be the wealthiest of any suritch in the clan. There can often be... difficulties if the merchant prince fails to keep to this expectation. A merchant prince in such a situation can be impeached in a vote by the rest of the clan’s families. While they still appoint their successors (some aspects of tradition can remain even under strange circumstances) there is little opportunity to game the system by profiting from contract-breaking until one is deposed and then appointing a sycophant. A deposed merchant prince is stripped of zir possessions and exiled.

Clans are further divided into small caravans. Each caravan contains a number of families, each one with a single vote. Votes are cast to make community decisions such as naming the captain of the caravan, who is responsible for delegating responsibilities, carrying out punishments, and ensuring that the caravan is profitable. There is a particular incentive for fulfilling the last responsibility and keeping the caravan running well in general, as the captain is owed a percentage of the profits of each family. In most caravans, the captain receives five percent of the profits of each family, and the position is held for anywhere between two and five years before the contract expires and the families vote again.



### Status signaling

Travel by foot is both the lowest and highest form of transportation, depending on whose feet are being used. To need to walk with one's own feet from town to town is a pathetic situation. It is appropriate only for the milishi and nupi (who are, of course, nothing more than milishi who refuse to be landed like they should be. Even the camrelidji (who would like to contest the use of the word "even" and its implications) move from place to place in wagons or on the backs of animals. However, more prestigious than owning even a very fine horse is having a quartet of servants (almost always nupi) to carry you. This implies not just the resources to hire them but also the resources to keep them well-fed and clothed, and to do so continually, and still feed oneself and one's family. Many litter-bearers are more finely -dressed and better-fed than some suritchi in the caravan and sometimes their very employer. Keeping litter-bearers who are fat in the cheeks and decked out in gold does a better job of showing off one's wealth than almost anything else.

However, not only are these suritchi paying for a mode of transportation four times over (and a mode of transport which as a higher upkeep than others, no less!) but they must still have transport at hand to carry all of their other supplies, including everyone's food and the goods which they will be selling. Even some merchant princes will swallow their pride for the sake of their wallets and forgo being carried by humans in favor of putting that money in a better investment.

The captain also pays a tithe of zir own, sending it up to the merchant prince. This amount is usually equal to between two and ten percent of what ze makes (both on zir own and from tithes received). This amount is agreed upon during the negotiations for the contract which the merchant prince must sign in order to authorize the caravan's formation. Unlike most other contracts, this one is permanent and ends only if the caravan violates its terms. The merchant prince, on the other hand, is liable to lose

zir position if ze breaks the contract, but most caravan contracts require nothing from the prince's end save recognition of the caravan.

This has on occasion resulted in an ailing merchant prince setting up a contract which would be most undesirable for any prince, and then appointing someone which ze dislikes as zir successor. The head of the family, as determined at marriage, is the official holder of any profits which that family receives and pays the other members of the family as their work warrants.

The head also holds the family's vote. Families must own their own means of transportation. Someone who wishes to start a new family must acquire something large enough to hold their belongings and whatever it is that they will be selling. Most people also wait to buy an animal before forming a family. Only the lowest of the suritchi will pull their own cart, and the memory that they once traveled on their own feet will remain in the minds of other suritchi for years to come. Marriages often involve a pooling of resources in order to halve the time spent saving up for such things.

It is upon becoming an adult member of the suritchi that one may be blessed with the service of an elder camrelidj. It should be pointed out that while the camrelidji make clan-wide contracts with the clans of the suritchi, this only serves the purposes of restricting the fighting clan's potential employers and hammering out the principles which will apply to every contract of employment. After this is accomplished it is up to every individual camrelidj and suritch to seek each other out. These individual contracts usually last for periods of ten years.

Most suritchi can be divided into binyini suritchi, who are "of the little merchants," and thomithi suritchi, who are "of the big merchants." The primary distinction here is that the binyini suritchi are caravans which go from village to village,

occasionally swinging back to the central town in order to sell the raw materials which the town needs, and to buy some of the town's manufactured goods for distribution through the villages. Thomithi suritchi, on the other hand, are caravans which go from town to town, buying the manufactured goods which are produced there. They occasionally stop by in a village for the purpose of selling something but primarily are interested only in buying necessities such as food. For the purpose of buying well-crafted goods the villages get better prices on most things from the thomithi suritchi but more often encounter, and get better prices on the central town's products from, the binyini suritchi.

Intermarriage between clans or classes is frowned upon. In fact, marriage between families of the same clan is one of the main ways that they retain social cohesion. Caravans of the same clan generally stick to the same geographical region, but not always, and where different clans border each other it is the stigma against intermarriage that keeps their customs from mingling together too much.

While the suritchi have their own lands—these being populated by the milishi—they also trade with other peoples. They adapt their practices here accordingly. For example, not everyone else adopts the system of villages and towns as practiced by the suritchi.

### **The Skuboli Clan: Suritchi**

The Skuboli are a suritchi clan which has abandoned land-based modes of transport. A century and a half ago they traded these in for the wide rivers and the near seas. There are divers among the Skuboli who acquire oyster pearls and dye snails, but a not-insignificant amount of their wealth comes simply from fish.

There are frequently comments (although never in their presence, except by the foolish or powerful)

that they do not deserve to be considered suritchi, seeing as how they produce the goods that they trade and do not engage themselves solely in the movement of goods.

### **The Kameeri Clan: Suritchi**

To walk from town to town is pathetic, but to walk around in one's encampment is hardly something to snicker about. Unless, of course, you are a Kameer.

Their camrelidji servants may not exhibit the same behavior, but this only goes to show the Kameeri that there is yet one more step beyond not walking on the road. From the time that a Kameer is able to acquire an animal to ride upon ze will only get off of it when inside zir wagon or tent. Even then ze will go to great lengths to make sure that zir feet never come in contact with the bare earth, which carries the danger of dirtying the spirit as easily as it dirties the skin.

If the Kameer has a wagon then ze will feel safe in not wearing shoes while inside it, but a tent is too close to the ground. If a tent is where the Kameer must reside, then ze will only take off zir shoes in the event that they are being switched for another pair.

The Kameer also have a distaste for foods which have come in contact with the ground. Their ancient progenitors likely turned to vegetarianism after growing disgusted with the difficulty that is inherent in trying to keep animals from ever touching the ground. Even in a diet limited to plants, however, there are still restrictions: Only plants such as tomatoes or wheat may be eaten, for the edible portions of these plants rise above the ground.

### **The Nupi**

Of particular interest are the nupi, who are "of the pack people." They are considered to be no higher



than the milishi— indeed, there is generally considered to no difference at all between the two groups—but they comport themselves as if they were themselves suritchi. They generally cycle through villages and towns in the same manner as the suritchi. Most often they even attach themselves to caravans, providing their services as laborers of a non-specific fashion, doing whatever tasks happen to be necessary at the moment. In return they receive a minor wage and, often, the right to stow some of their material on the transportation of their employer.

Both of these things are important, as the nupi carry everything else they own on their backs (hence their name). They are not generally permitted to have carts if they accompany a suritchi caravan. However, remaining with the caravans provides a measure of protection, as the camrelidji do not make contracts with either the nupi or the milishi. It also provides the opportunity for upward mobility. Many suritchi are able to trace their line back to a nup who managed to become successful enough to find a caravan that would host zem.

## Cuisine

Sourdough breads and thick stews are staples for the Traveler Clans. The camrelidji and suritchi combine these two staples into a campanell, or soup bowl. Campanelli are loafs of bread that have been hollowed-out and filled with stew. The stew usually contains tomatoes, turnips, beans, and mutton, which is jerked even when it isn't part of the stew. As a rule, Traveler breads are as heavy as their stews, and a campanell can be prepared refit with the top (which was removed earlier), and be put away for nearly an entire day for the bread is in danger of coming apart. Caravans thus prepare their campanell ahead of time, before they set out on the day's journey, and remove the soup bowls as needed during mealtimes.

Breakfast for both milishi and Travelers consists of flatbread, which they make initially using nothing

### Why the bread doesn't sog out

There are a few ways to keep bread from sogging out over the course of the day, actually. Choose the ones that you like:

- A layer of cheese over the bread will keep moisture away. This is more easily done with sandwiches than with bread bowls. The latter form would require that you take the time to apply thin, moldable sheets of cheese to the inside or else pour melted cheese.
- Older breads are stiffer and will take longer to get soggy. You get bonus time if they've been hollowed out and left to get stale.
- Don't hollow out the loaf! Mold a layer of dough over a bowl, then bake both the bread and the bowl together. After it's finished, remove the bowl from the bread and you'll have crust inside and out.

And, of course, make sure that your stews are thick. Thin, runny soups will obviously turn your bread into a soggy mess much faster.

more than flour, water, and salt. Either after the baking is done (in the case of the Traveler Clans) or immediately before eating (the milishi), the flatbreads are seasoned with pepper.

Horses and oxen are commonly found in the possession of Travelers and milishi alike. Along with milishi-raised sheep they are a source of meat. Horses are more common among the Travelers than the milishi so they are consumed more often than oxen, but in any event both are raised for the purpose of labor and are eaten only after they can no longer service this purpose.

It is the suritchi who are responsible for the infamous "blue chickens" of the Traveler Clans. This breed, named for the color of the feathers which run along the back of a blue chicken's neck, are know quite well in lands frequented by the Traveler Clans, thanks to a personality that is better-suited for a swarm of hornets. Which is to

say, they are very territorial, and much meaner about it than they have any right to be.

Whenever it is possible the blue chickens will be surrounded by the rest of the caravan. The block will be continually prodded along with long sticks at random in order to keep them moving and give them only one direction to go unless they want to be flattened by those people who are coming up from behind.

### **Music**

Music centers on singing, or *sirkeen*, and has a one-two beat that keeps with the motion of marching. Most songs gave a lengthy introduction with only a single participant before they move on to the main body of the song, which is intended to be sung in a group and often contains numerous self-references in a plural form. The length of the introduction is intended to allow someone to suddenly start up a song and give anyone who is nearby enough time to get a feel for the rhythm before they join in. Most songs do not have any single speed and, also, despite the one-two-one-two nature of *sirkeen* there is a difference between, say, one-two-stop-one-two- stop and one-two-stop-one-two-one-two-stop.

There are a good many songs about how terrible it is to be alone, without even a *milishi* to sing with (obviously, most *milishi* sing slightly different versions of these songs). After waxing long on this subject the introduction ends, and others join in on the song as it turns toward one's own fortune in having singing partners available, and the joys of a proper round of *sirkeen* singing.

### **Clothing**

The *milishi* typically wear tight clothing that is primarily designed to protect them against the elements. It is woven from wool in the winter or plant matter in the warmer months. Across the two lower levels of mainstream society, belts are

exceedingly common. Loops are included to accommodate tools (*milishi*) and weapons (*camrelidji*, and arguably this is still in the "tools" category).

Both *milishi* and true Travelers put holes through the middle of the coins that they use (even in lands where this is not, strictly speaking, permitted by the law). They string these coins through bracelets and use them as hair decorations, for ease of access and so that they can display their wealth. Besides this, however, the *camrelidji* and *suritchi* generally abstain from adorning themselves in favor of adorning their transportation (especially if that transportation is human). Even many merchant princes may dress plainly, though their wagons be richly-decorated.

### **Gristle Bulldogs**

Far from being the even-tempered, small bulldogs which are most often known today, gristle bulldogs have much more in common with those dogs' ancestral stock. Their aggression is more refined, however; it is directed primarily against strangers, like a Doberman, rather than at nearly everything that moves, like many of the older bulldog breed.

They are intelligent, patient, and attentive, which makes them excellent guard dogs. The males of the breed weigh between 150 and 250lb and stand around 32" high, with slightly smaller adjustments (about thirty less pounds and three less inches) for females. These measurements are comparable to a mastiff, making gristle bulldogs a frightening sight for anyone who would challenge them.

There are no other varieties of bulldog which have made such an impact upon the Traveler Clans. For this reason, they are referred to simply as "bulldogs" (or sometimes even just as "dogs") in everyday situations. The breed is believed to have originated with the *camrelidji*, and some contracts between *camrelidji* and *suritchi* clans explicitly state

that only one of the fighting people may own a bulldog.

While gristle bulldogs generally serve as guards and watchdogs, it is not unknown for Traveler Clans in northerly climes to set them on sledges when the snows fall.

## Vampires

**Setting assumption:** Contemporary Earth

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** Vampires can work just about anywhere you want them to be. They are not inclined to be open about their existence, because they have cultural (indeed, rather speciesist) reasons for remaining separate, but they will bow to necessity if pragmatism requires that they take the reins and rule openly. Vampires have the potential to live for a long time so even in times and places where cultural diffusion occurs slowly, from their own perspective it happens to be more than comparable to the rate of cultural diffusion in modern humanity.

Since magic is one of those things that can vary wildly from setting to setting, the vampires presented here are *capable* of using magic, but it is not inherent to their condition. If the vampire could have used magic in mortality, then ze can use it in undeath (assuming that this doesn't disqualify the vampire in itself).

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Despite the lack of inherent magical power, vampires don't want for much. They are far stronger, faster, and tougher than the living stock from which they were derived, and with a better sensory suite to boot, and that's good enough for them.

These vampires may be best thought of as machines after a fashion. Blood is a fuel. A vampire will not go mad with hunger if it starves, no more than a car low on gasoline will hold up a rest stop. Vampires know when they need blood and, except in the early months after their Change when a few of them are still settling in, vampires never have a

problem with wanting to get the blood that they need. Even the hungriest vampire is still perfectly in control of zir mental faculties, because this is the best way to ensure that the vampire will keep on living. Ze needs no encouragement to drink blood, and a frenzy would only endanger zem.

They don't have the difficulties that you might expect of them because they don't think like people do. A vampire, from the very moment of its Change, no longer considers an intelligent but non-vampiric being to be anything more than a pig—an intelligent animal, perhaps, but still meant for the figurative dinner table. Younger vampires may cling to other beliefs for their first few months but this is purely out of habit and shock. To borrow from Daniel Dennett, they now only believe that they believe that non-vampires are better than cattle, much as some people believe in God, and other people merely believe that they believe in God. Many vampires who took the Change willingly, and with reverence and forethought for what it meant, never have to suffer through this period at all.

Because vampires are predators of mankind, and other intelligent creatures as well if they exist: If the vampiric condition has been designed, then it surely wouldn't have been made to include such flaws as the ability to empathize with the prey. And if it were natural, then it is not out of the realm of possibility that, through some quirk of chance, one vampire's Change carried with it a change in mindset and that was all the edge that it needed to prove fitter than the others. A vampire with no problems about eating humans is going to out-compete the angsty ones in short order.

### Between the Living and the Dead

The living are cattle. Every vampire knows this as firmly as ze knows the color of the sky at noontime. There is never any question about it once the vampire has finally settled into zir new existence

after the Change. More dependent on tradition than natural instinct is the perception that there is something *wrong* with living culture.

Vampires do not have any problem with making use of raw knowledge and tools even if they are created by mortals. A hacksaw is a hacksaw is a hacksaw, and a book on chemistry is a book on chemistry whose accuracy and value is not dependent on whether the author was bound by the mortal coil and by mortal frailties. Keeping up with the times is actually a major concern for most vampires and it is rare to find an old vampire who doesn't know how to drive a car or use the internet. Probably, that elder dating back to the Crusades knows more about some technology than *you* do. Not being able to keep up with the times is a fast track to death.

What vampires do have an issue with is mortal literature, music, sculptures, and other art forms. A vampire who reads *Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* will not be regarded any differently by zir peers. But if ze does not want to be seen as akin to having some kind of (probably) non-sexual fetish, then ze will have to hide zir complete set of the *Foundation* trilogy by the same author. Vampires who dabble in human cultures are informed that they are making a crude mistake, if young, and ostracized, if they are old enough to know better.

It is not proper, the vampires say, for predators to share in the works of their prey. The lion must not lie down with the lamb, and neither is it permitted for the lion to listen to the lamb's latest musical composition, even if that lamb is named Beethoven. They do not lack the same drives which spur mortals on to make and enjoy creative works, however, and in their long history vampires have created their own artistic styles. They have managed to develop a collection of work which is impressive in both size and quality. After matters of survival have been taken care of a vampire has little to do but indulge in whatever hobbies ze has

and continually get better at them over decades and centuries. Perhaps they lack Beethoven, but they have music which would have driven that man to envy if only he could have heard it (and not all vampiric music can be heard by human ears).

### **The Undead Mind**

One of the things that influences vampires the most is the way that their minds work. There is no natural limit on how long a vampire can live, and vampires know this. From the instant that the Change has finished settling in, a vampire feels it to zir bones that most of the problems that ze will face from here on out can be solved simply by *waiting them out*. Because of this, vampires most often operate in two different time scales, which they usually refer to as

“reactive-time” and “meditative-time.” The former reacts to snap judgments and reflexive actions made within the space of a couple of seconds (which would actually be slightly long for reactive-time), like moving out of the way of an attack. The latter refers to the majority of actions taken by a vampire, which are made only after much deliberation. Some vampires will take years to come to a decision about something.

And that is just fine, because a vampire still has a potential eternity ahead. It pays to take the time to deliberate on things before committing to a course of action. A human, on the other hand, has less than a century to live regardless of the decision made. Maybe not even half a century. A human who wants to test new car and make sure that it works well will probably turn it on, drive it down the street and back, test the breaks, flip the lights on and off, listen to the engine, and call it done job. A vampire is more likely to take it apart piece by piece, inspect each part, and then make sure that ze is putting everything back together exactly how it needs to go, and *then* drive it around for a bit in controlled conditions before finally considering it to be in perfect working order. Vampires take less

risks and spend more time on things because it pays to play it safe if you don't ever get older.

Puzzle pieces fit together better in a vampire's mind, too. They may take a little bit longer to get to the end than a human does, but that's just the vampire's typical deliberate slowness. All but the stupidest of vampires would be able to get a mathematics doctorate with only a little difficulty. The equations just seem to assemble themselves once the basic concepts are understood, and it's a rare vampire who needs to reach for pen and paper very often.

Vampires have a curious relationship with sensory data and their reactions to it. As was mentioned previously, a vampire doesn't launch into a feeding frenzy if hungry. Ze is simply made powerfully aware of zir ever-increasing need for blood by way of a sensation which is distinctly "hunger" without being unpleasant. To give another example, vampires are aware of it when they are hurt but are perfectly capable of pushing past their reactive-time actions and continue to subject themselves to that pain. Vampires are not masochistic (as a rule) and only allow themselves to suffer further pain when there is a reason for it.

When it comes to baser drives they sometimes don't feel anything at all. For example, vampires are, as a rule, totally asexual, and a significant minority are even aromantic.

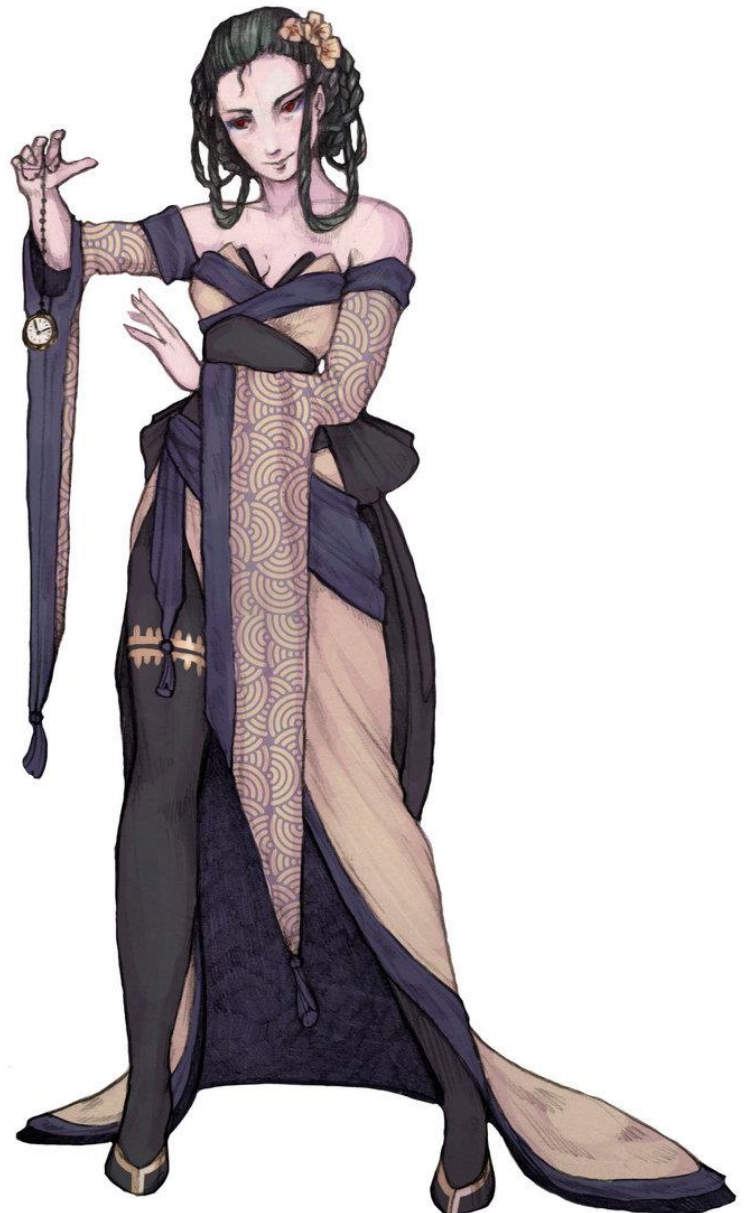
### **Vampire Senses and Artwork**

First of all, vampires don't have the exact sensory outfit that humans do. As one might expect, this has a noticeable effect on their artwork.

It is obvious that a vampire would have better night vision than a human. Their sight suffers in bright light, which also causes discomfort to their eyes, and so their visual art is made in dim light. Because they can see well enough in dim light, this doesn't affect things too much. And because they are

tetrachromatic, with four types of cone cells in the eye instead of three, vampires see a wider range of color than humans do. A piece of vampire artwork might be brilliantly colored or quite plain to human eyes but to other vampires there will be dozens of different shades clearly visible in what the human perceives as being a single color. At least one vampire artist spends decades painting abstract works that looked like monochrome canvases to humans.

Stylistically, representations of actual things are seen as the province of sculpture. Paintings and drawings are usually abstract. They portray things which can't be portrayed as easily in sculpture (although vampires have done some very impressive things in three dimensions as well).



The nature of the vampiric mind lends itself easily to algorithmic art. They've been making it for centuries before humans conceived of it, making this perhaps one of the few art forms that can be said to be truly more vampiric than human.

As alluded to previously, vampires have a wider range of hearing which is overall more sensitive than a human's. The low end of their range is just slightly below a human's, while they can hear a full octave higher and can pinpoint, within an inch, the source of a sound within ten feet of their position. Vampires are nocturnal after all, and while they have better night vision than humans this is far from their most important sense.

Their music is usually fast, and because so much of it exists in an auditory range that normal humans can't reach, the common screeching and nonsensical pauses and lengths of silence often turn it into just... noise. Bad noise. Sort of like heavy metal except that this time it isn't the musician's fault. While smell is often linked to memory in humans, vampires have a stronger connection between hearing and memory. Their increased range and sensitivity has led to music being the most prized of their art forms.

Along with hearing, vampires depend strongly on their sense of smell, which is comparable to that possessed by a scent hound. Their olfactory capability has also led to vampires developing "scent concerts," where they arrange smells in particular sequences in space, time, and the manner in which they are revealed. Vampires aren't able to truly eat normal food. Ingesting blood along with it can help them to keep it down for a few hours (or for as long as they keep drinking blood on a regular basis). Food, then, is just as much of an art form with vampires as it is with humans, albeit with heavy shades of Roman indulgence and the subsequent vomiting that is noticeably absent from most human cooking shows today.

Vampires experience bitter and salty flavors most intensely of all, with no aversion to either even in

### Blood and food

Vampires typically abstain from human art, and they certainly have come up with dishes of their own, but with respect to food it seems that they are also willing to be dirty fanged magpies.

Blood sausage (also called black pudding) is made by cooking blood with a sausage filler of some kind until the blood is thick enough to congeal. The fillers most often used are bread, fat, oatmeal, and rice. Sometimes, when bread is used, the resulting mash is flattened and turned into a kind of pancake instead. Other vampires deep fry it or eat it with jam.

"Blood tofu" is made of congealed blood that has been cut into cubes and cooked. "Butchery dumplings" are made out of blood and barley flour, and may be soaked in a soup made from potatoes and onions.

Another dish calls for mixing blood with fish sauce, and then adding crushed peanuts, mint (which also finds its way in dishes like blood sausage), and diced organs. Black soup is made of blood, salt, vinegar, and boiled meat. Salads of all kinds are also popular, and most often use blood as a dressing.

strong amounts. Sweet flavors are dulled somewhat compared to humans. All of their dishes, as a matter of course, include blood. A vampire can certainly keep it down for a couple of minutes even without blood but ze won't enjoy it as much without at least a subtle hint of that metallic flavor. The blood of intelligent beings, of course, is preferred. Not only is it the only nutritious form of blood but it's also the tastiest. Best of all is when there is the flavor of adrenaline to give it a delicious kick not unlike umami.

Finally, vampires have a strong literary tradition. Many of their stories are spread orally as often as they are in written form, and some are by custom never written down. Manuscript versions of these stories are destroyed wherever they are found. Among the various other mnemonic devices which

vampires use, music is composed specifically for that story in order to fix the words in with the beat. In fact, many vampire stories might be better described as songs that happen to last for hours.

Many of their stories take place either in short periods (there is an entire genre of stories whose plots unfold over exactly fifteen minutes from beginning to end) or over generational lengths of time. In either case they involve only vampire characters. The novel *Song Inside His Head*, written in the early Twentieth Century and several hundred thousand words long, is still highly scandalous for its inclusion of a human supporting character. In some circles it is considered to be as bad as or worse than actual human literature.

Traditionally, no reference is made to a character's history prior to *zir* Change, and the scene fades to black whenever non-vampires are about to be present. If necessary, when the story picks back up the characters will find a reason to summarize what happened off-screen.

“Bad” characters do not move with the times but stay firmly where they are. They indulge in human arts and sometimes even interact regularly with mortals. “Good” characters, on the other hand, are on the right side of the lines between the living and the undead, are virtuosos of one or more styles of art such as watercolors or violin (it is considered self-indulgent to have author characters), and adapt so quickly and easily to situations that a human might consider the protagonists of some novels to have no consistency to them. A vampire, on the other hand, would realize that the character is simply being a proper vampire and changing as the situation demands.

Vampires have no art forms that rely on their sense of touch. This is actually very faint in comparison to the tactile senses of the living. It registers only pain and a basic degree of pressure without regard for texture.

## Religion and Philosophy

Vampire ethical philosophy seems to have a few traces of legalism. It teaches that society's rules need to be clearly stated and that the consequences for breaking those rules must be similarly clear. Authority, too, rests not in individuals but in the positions which they hold. Their society is not highly structured, however, and this system is followed not by emperors or princes of the undead but by leaders of “gangs” (or bands or crews or companies) of one to three dozen vampires. These gangs typically carve out for themselves specific territories where they have exclusive hunting rights and access to other resources.

Nowadays vampires prefer to live in urban agglomerations such as Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai in Europe or the so-called Boston-Washington Corridor. These metropolises and their ancillary cities are treated as a single whole because one can travel from one urban center to another well within the space of a single night and with hardly any issue at all.

Most cities, if there's been a vampiric presence there for long enough, will have two or three gangs that are more influential than the rest (if indeed there are any others, which doesn't always happen). Individual gangs throwing their weight around usually get mobbed, and whenever all of the gangs try to deal on a mostly-equal level (usually because they just overthrew the previous gangs that had been dominating the scene) a few of them will always prove to be powerful enough to kick the others back down.

Whether it's the Buddha on Earth or Pelor in Eberron, it's a religion for the lambs, not for wolves. Vampires typically either have no particular religion (generally leaning more toward agnosticism or else an acceptance that divine powers exist but that vampires should not worship them) or follow a distinctly vampiric religion called The Uplifting



Truth. Its center is not a truth that is uplifting, but a truth about *an* uplifting or lifting-up.

At its focus is a nameless goddess who called by such titles as the Cold, the All-Knowing, and the Glorious. She is the second living thing to have existed—the first is Her father, whom She dismembered in order to create the universe from His body—and She created the first vampire.

There will come a day when all vampires are examined by the All-Knowing, and as a group they are given a judgment, according to their collective works. Because vampires will either stand or fall together in the end, there is an extra pressure to ensure that there are no defectors, so to speak.

Upon zir death a vampire will be examined by the All-Knowing and be given a judgment according to zir works. This judgment will note especially whether the vampire obeyed the Redeemer's decree to not touch the culture and ways of zir prey, but only that of zir own people.

Vampires fall short in Her eyes most often for feeding irresponsibly and without regard for others of their kind, taking upon themselves the ways of the herd or displaying excessive pride where it is unwarranted. Blasphemy against the Cold is, interestingly, not thought to be an issue. Should

Her judgment be harsh, then all vampires will be mauled in their spirits and cast into the barren places, where there will be cursed to hold a half-life for the rest of eternity. They will be forced to wander aimlessly and to stay away from civilization, alone except for chance encounters with travelers from afar, whom they will be compelled to devour in order to keep their isolation complete. Some vampires hold that the mother of vampires has already inflicted this fate upon a few vampires—as a warning for others. These believers tell stories of ghosts who prey upon even vampires when the latter have ventured too far away from where the hunting is good. It is said that their merit was of no concern when they were chosen for this fate, so that it would be clear that merit would be of no concern for anyone else, either. If they are to be saved—and some surely deserve that—then it is up to their kin to live according to the precepts of the Glorious.

Should Her children pass muster, then they will become servitors of the goddess. They will be blessed to sit at Her right hand until the end of time, ruled only by She Who Is Ruled By None. And then, when time ends and all other things with it, save for the All-Knowing and her servitors, She will tear them apart as was done previously to Her father and use their dismembered remains to make new universes.

## The Vulture People

**Setting assumption:** Post-apocalyptic New Mexico.

**Influences:** Southwestern Amerind Tribes (esp. Apache)

**Fine-tuning/Changing it up:** While the Vulture People still betray their regional roots, it is easier to port them to another inhospitable region than it is the Dry-farmers. In particular, they would do nicely beside the Ardwms. Along with the Dry-farmers they could also be placed in post-magical apocalypse, rubbing shoulders with the likes of the Shipborn, Pegdu, and perhaps even the monastery of Sopaube’p Psylao. In the assumed setting the “lands further south” are Central America and their language is Spanish, but it is an easy matter to make the lands further south something else entirely, relocate them, or even turn the Vulture People’s language into a creole of the common tongue and something older and/or ceremonial.

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The life of the Vulture People is that of the war of all against all. They are everywhere, and they are on the fringe, fighting a way against the world, a war that the world started. They have been spared from destruction only because they can go where no-one else can, living in the places where only they can prosper, and because their enemies war amongst themselves as much as with the Vulture People.

Nevertheless, despite the omnipresence of war, the Vulture People understand the concept of a ceasefire. Only a ceasefire, though. There may have been a time, once, when wars could truly end and the fire-ghosts of the dead could be laid to rest

forever, but that time passed away generations ago. The fallen demand vengeance and their blood cries out from the ground where it was spilled, and there is no other way to sate their hunger but to carry out their demands. If blood is not answered by blood then they will seek it out themselves, and the dead are rarely able to distinguish between the living.

No, it is far better for those alive to carry out the grisly work of atonement.

### Relations with Others

One could say that the Vulture People’s relationships with others (and even themselves), or at least the hostile ones, are centered in some way on the head. There are many places that will pay for the scalp of one of the Vulture People, either simply to have proof of the kill or because of the magical powers that their body parts are reputed to have.

Conversely, the Vulture People are often known to their enemies, and even their allies (few would call them friends), as headhunters. Their mobile dwellings and pack dwellings are adorned with them, decorated heads hanging on lovingly-crafted threads and the polished skulls of beloved foes passed down from generation to generation. Almost every great legend is tied in some way to a skull, even if the legend requires a little bit of rewriting to make the relationship fit better. The idea is that the stories which the Vulture People tell didn’t happen in some far-off place, involving strangers so distant in time and space that they may as well not exist, but to one’s own ancestors, and there is the skull to prove that it was real and it is relevant.

Their preferred language is a creole of the land’s common tongue and something derived from the speech of lands further south. It has developed far enough from both that there are few outsiders who

can reason out its sounds into concrete meaning. They keep it secret, and they often do the same to their grasp of outsiders' languages. That most of them know exactly what the others are saying is a secret that they keep close to their chests. Only a handful are permitted to reveal that they know it.

To compensate for this, they rely on a hand sign pidgin and, where necessary, engage in silent barter. It is crude, certainly, but it gets the job done and allows the Vulture People to maintain the advantage that their secrets afford them.

### **Cuisine**

Most of the food that the Vulture People eat can be divided into three categories: meat, wild plants that are gathered wherever they are found, and hardy plants that mostly grow underground. The latter are beneficial because they can be cultivated and safely left alone while the Vulture People make their nomadic migrations through the desert, ensuring that no-one will come across their food in the meantime.

Most of their meals are designed to be eaten on the move. One popular (and rather complex) dish called vaca de mateo is made from minced raw beef marinated in a mixture of chili powder, clarified sheep's butter, and herbs and other seasonings, including salt, sesame oil, spring onion, minced garlic, sesame seeds, black pepper, nuts, and raw egg yolk. Like most of their meat dishes it is served in a tortilla.

Unlike in most societies, the Vulture People's bread is made from grain that has been allowed to sprout. This bread, referred to as "the grammar," has slightly more trace minerals and protein and less fat and carbohydrates than bread made from the same, but undeveloped, grains (not that the Vulture People know about trace minerals and carbs). A kind of wheat pudding, rabinna, can be and often is made from sprouted grains as well.

Freshly-dried chiles are collected in string-bound bundles and hung from any surface that will allow it, especially near doors, and sometimes from the same strings that also suspend a head or two. These chiles are given to guests to show hospitality.

Except in the rare case that it is eaten raw, meat is jerked, or dried through a method utilizing low temperatures, and then salted or smoked. Even if it will be used in a tortilla it will be rolled into balls in the meantime. These "colindurs rolls" can be eaten raw or be chopped up for use in a tortilla, which may be soft and rolled up like a scroll or fried hard into the shape of a bowl.

Almost any kind of cactus fruit is edible, and the Vulture People are well-acquainted with the ways of distinguishing these from the few that aren't. An alcoholic drink called davlandi is made from the syrup, which is acquired by boiling and drying the fruit.

Of the animals that they eat, the most common are porcupines, rabbits, turtles, fish (where there is water), and wild pigs. The latter are especially popular in eagon, a dish of cubed pork marinated and cooked in red chile, garlic, and wild marjoram. Fish are caught using woven baskets, and turtle shells are used for a variety of decorative purposes.

### **Domesticated Animals**

The Vulture People are apathetic to dogs at best and antipathetic at worst. As an alternative they have domesticated the coyotes. Vulture coyotes howl rather than bark and are very friendly (sometimes too friendly) but quick to express a dislike of confined spaces. They are faster than most dogs and certainly possess a much higher endurance, being capable of going up to nine hundred miles with only a little food in their bellies. They are, however, a little less intelligent even if they are more capable of surviving on their own, but this is of little importance to the Vulture

People, who use them as an aid in their persistence-style hunting.

The other three domesticated animals used by the Vulture People provide them with dairy products, among other things. Sheep are a source of wool (though the climate is usually too hot for this to be used for clothing, so the wool is usually turned to other uses) and the Vulture People's main source of butter.

Horses are the primary beasts of burden for the Vulture People, though coyotes are also used in a pinch because of their endurance. No butter is made from their milk, which takes "considerable skill" to procure, but it is frequently fermented by being placed in a wooden container suspended from the horse so that it gets jostled around during riding. The milk has a sour and pungent taste and the dregs are poured back into their containers after one is finished drinking, no matter how much or how little is left. Unfermented, it is useful as a laxative.

Camels are the rarest of the four animals, common enough to not be at all unknown to the Vulture People but rare enough that they are still a greater status symbol than the horse. Their milk, unlike that of the sheep and the horse, cannot be turned to cheese, and they are hard enough to milk in general, but the camel is valuable in the desert environment and their milk, no matter how hard to acquire or how different from the varieties that the Vulture People prefer, is nevertheless highly-regarded on the basis that camel's milk implies access to a camel. For that reason, it is almost never sold, but only given as a gift.

### Social Structure

The Vulture People live on the edge, perhaps more than the other people of the lands north and south. While this has made them cruel by necessity, it has tempered their sharpness and taught them mercy in other respects. As much as they will bear claws

against outsiders, they cannot do the same as their closest ones. Their bands would self-consume like a raging fire on too little brush.

It was said among the Bedouin people, "I against my brother, I and my brother against my cousin, I and my brother and my cousin against the world." This is not so for the Vulture People, who may quarrel with their cousins and certainly war against the world as surely as it wars against them, but may never turn against their closest ones.

The extended family is connected through a lineage of women who live together. Men enter into these units upon marriage, leaving behind their parents' family. It is traditional for all siblings of a given sex from one family to marry all of the siblings of the opposite sex from another family, irrespective of the numbers on either side of the equation. If there is a gross imbalance then tradition may be waived, but just as often it is not. Betrothals are usually arranged while the eldest children are only fourteen winters old, and their younger siblings grow up knowing their future spouses well in advance of their coming of age.



As only maternity can be established with certainty, only the mother's line is traced in the genealogies and ownership of property. The Vulture People practice ultimogeniture, in which a woman's youngest will care for her mother and her husbands in their old age.

After immediate relatives come the rest of the extended family, the band. Bands are organized into tribes, which can be summarized as "them toward whom one owes basic hospitality, for reasons of shared language, dress, and the predictability of their customs (for theirs are yours)." Milk, preferably mare's milk (or even camel's milk), is a common element of that aforementioned hospitality thing. In one sense, one enjoys amicable relationships with the tribe because they can be trusted, which in turn is true because their behavior is predictable. Who can say what the Dry-farmers will do, or any of the other people of the lands north and south?

One can go to war with other bands in the tribe, however, the same as with any other people. Thou and thy brother together, yes, but not necessarily thy cousin with you. Among their own people they prefer to establish control through gift-giving. One is indebted by the reception of a gift until it can be repaid, and the ability to bestow an exorbitant gift not only establishes one's relative power but also secures their services for the foreseeable future. That said, it is possible to switch allegiances by receiving a gift from another person that is large enough to pay off your debt, so these relationships are not entirely stable.

Their prey is usually taken down through persistence-style hunting, as mentioned above. The Vulture People hunt in a relay style. They set up several hunters at certain increments along the trail which they expect to force their prey to follow. As one hunter begins to grow tired another is ready to take her place, and their respective coyotes are on hand to keep the prey from getting off track. Rinse and repeat until the prey literally dies of exhaustion.

(In a pinch, chasing your prey off a cliff also works pretty well)

Both sexes participate in hunting, and generally with the same techniques and with their personal coyotes, but men and women hunt different animals. Hunters share one half of their take with others in the band. When everyone is pulling enough it works out about the same as if kills were hoarded, but by sharing it is ensured that hunters will be provided for even as they go through unsuccessful spells.

Capital punishment is carried out by hanging, followed by dismemberment. Fun!

### **Religion**

Unlike, say, the Dry-farmers, the Vulture People do not kill those whose physical forms fail to live up to some mythic Ideal. Such individuals have been touched by the Spirits Around, and they are given place as their status warrants. Outsiders may collectively refer to them as shamans but in truth they may occupy any number or combination of roles.

Many are lore-keepers for the band. They are entrusted with remembering the most distant things about every story of every head in the band's possession. Some may be sin-eaters, ritual outcasts who eat only "the beggar's portion" of a kill and reside on the symbolic borderline between humans and spirits, where they can intercede on behalf of the tribe. Yet others may be considered "crazy-wise," sacred clowns who are given permission by dint of their very nature to exist outside of the established order of things. They may not be punished for most crimes, but their actions show both where the traditions must be discarded and where they must be kept, depending on the successes that they enjoy in their labors.

The Vulture People venerate fire, which is the center of what might be regarded as a kind of

complex “spiritual ecology” in which wood is fed to fire, which is in turn “held” by steel through the forging process. Fire is the bridge between the dead (the dry stuff burns the best, after all) and the transformed.

Dogs are vermin, spiritually imperfect and unclean beasts that are hated by the Vulture People. Where they are found they are killed, and they are never eaten. They are lesser cousins, even impure abominations, to coyotes. It is a matter of great annoyance to the Vulture People that many other people do not consider there to be a difference between dogs and coyotes, and regard the Vulture People as having respect for and using dogs.

Hunters fast for a day and a night before they hunt. This is done with the intention of purifying and focusing them. During the hunt they wear masks like animal heads in order to confuse their prey and direct their victims’ anger elsewhere to other animal species. After the hunt they offer prayers while they butcher the animals, dispose of their bones (it is not given to humans to eat the bones of the dead), and distribute the meat. These prayers are offered with

ground -up maize and culminate with an anointing by dust.

### **Camp Life**

In their camps or out of it, the Vulture People do not talk very much. Not verbally, at least— their creole tongue has a signed counterpart (with no real relation to the pidgin used for bartering), and Vulture People with their hands free will usually be aflutter in animated but silent conversation. A contributing factor to this state of affairs is the relatively high proportion of deafness among the Vulture People; while some tribes skew higher or lower, in most of them 1 in 30 are deaf. Their deafness is genetically recessive, so the condition is present throughout the community rather than clumped in a few primary family lines. Unlike most communities with genetically recessive deafness, their sign language is not only universal throughout the community (albeit with tribal dialects) but is also complex. It is likely that the language is older than the Vulture People (or that its origins predate them, anyway).

## Zombie Apocalypse Cultures

**Setting assumptions:** Zombies happened, and then the world as we knew it came to an end. It's been a few years since then, long enough that there are adults who were born after it all went down, but not so long that nobody remembers the world as it used to be.

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### The Freeway Republic

When the world is dying all around you, the best thing to do is get the hell out of Dodge. Where you're going doesn't matter so much as the fact that you're going, because the cities are death traps and the shambling dead are everywhere. It wasn't just in the dead, after all—the contagion was in the air itself, and anybody who died for any reason would come back in minutes.

Maybe the outbreak could have been contained if it had been an outbreak per se, but by the time that anybody knew that something was wrong the sickness had already crisscrossed the globe and too many people were infected. By now, nobody even knows where it came from, if anybody ever did.

A lot of people have hunkered down in survivalist hamlets, guarding against the outside world and turning into miniature police states to keep themselves protected against the contagion that's sleeping in their own blood. The Freeway Republic never stopped moving, though. Nomadism worked for them, and they had the technical proficiency to keep it working for them.

In a world that's died back and moved on from civilization, anybody who wants to stay on the move has to deal with certain logistical problems. Horses are a feasible solution but without training

for both rider and mount, you might get yourself killed. You're limited, too, by the number of horses that you have access to—before the world collapsed, the population of horses in the U.S. was dropping. They're great for whoever has the know-how and the numbers, and most people who have one probably have the other, but that does rule out horses for most people.

Walking just requires your legs, which most people have, but it presents a different problem: because your carrying capacity is limited to what you can put on your back or pull in a handcart, for as long as you restrict yourself to walking there's no way to transition out of being a scavenger society. You'll survive, but you won't progress.

It's easier to be a technological society on the go if you use motor vehicles. Your biggest problem, more than repairing and replacing broken parts, is keeping your vehicles fueled: your first thought might be to keep them topped up with gasoline scavenged from gas stations, but refined fuel degrades in mere months if nobody is taking care of it. A survivor community based around an oil or gas well could get by, but their mobility will be limited to the surrounding area. Ethanol is an obvious replacement, but it can be dangerous to convert some of your food supply into fuel when you don't have the sort of oversupply that was seen in the pre-collapsed world.

With a fair amount of lateral thinking and technical expertise, though, there's another resource that's ripe for the taking, and available pretty much everywhere you go: zombies. If as many as one in ten people survived the collapse (and that's so optimistic as to be laughable) then that gives you nearly five hundred million zombies, minus however many have been dispatched between then and now, and plus however many more people have died since then.

After a zombie has been dispatched, what you have is meat and chemicals, the same as you get with any corpse, and there are a few ways to process it, depending on whether you want biogas or biodiesel. In the first case, you build an anaerobic digester and let it get to work, producing both biogas and a slurry that's fit for fertilizer. If you're on a time constraint or biogas just doesn't meet your present needs, then the fat can be rendered into biodiesel with relatively little setup—just some heat, container that won't burn, a strainer, and something to stir with. What you're left with is a light yellow fluid that's fit for any diesel engine, though you'll need to be careful about it solidifying. Unlike gasoline and even vegetable-based biodiesel, under the proper conditions this “fat diesel” will last for years rather than months. If you don't have the time to stick the rest into a digester, then chop it up. Meat and bone meal, or MBM, has significant quantities of nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, and other useful elements.

This, then, is how the Freeway Republic operates: In winter, move into an area. Clear out the zombies, whose meat has mysteriously but conveniently been mostly preserved for you, and start processing them. In the meantime, prepare some fields for planting to be ready for spring. Go back to your digesters and furnaces and retrieve fuel and fertilizer as it is produced. You've brought some with you, so use the oldest stuff first and store what you're making until you need it. When it's time, harvest your crops. If there are enough zombies to last you through another year of this, then stay around. Otherwise, make a big push to get the stragglers so that you don't leave anything behind when you depart in the winter. The cycle can vary some depending on the local growing seasons and other factors but will more or less conform to the above description.

By volume, biogas is a less efficient fuel than fat diesel. During both world wars, the Europeans found themselves suffering from gasoline shortages and had to rely more heavily on biogas,

and solved the problem by creating “gas bag vehicles,” which had a frame set over the top of the vehicle, on which was placed a large bag filled with biogas. Biogas compression is often a problem for the Freeway Republic as well, and the solution is the same. This limits the effectiveness of biogas to larger vehicles, like buses, which can carry larger bags and accordingly move further without needing to be resupplied. As a compensation, though, because the bags are not pressurized there is no risk of an explosion.

The governmental system of the Freeway Republic is modeled after that of the departed the United States, but with modifications to suit their lifestyle and avoid perceived issues with the older system. The Free Republic is divided into a number of convoys, which are in turn divided into caravans or extended family units.

Convoys are mostly independent from each other. They are expected to pull their own weight as much as possible, and may put down stakes in different areas. Nevertheless, they remain in regular contact with each other, do not leave each other behind, and act as a single force in their dealings with other people. Some convoys range a little further away during their travels, either scouting ahead or keeping abreast of the flanks, but even so they don't go too far from the periphery. Within a convoy, however, the caravans typically stay together.

When two people marry, one spouse leaves for the other's caravan. It is customary for a husband to join his wife's caravan, but not mandatory. Same-sex marriages are permitted but whether they are frowned upon depends on a couple of factors. If infant mortality is higher than normal, then they are seen as selfish unless they have children on the side—adultery is not technically approved of, however, so some people will still be disgruntled. On the other hand, if adults have died and there are now too many children relative to parents, then previously-childless same-sex couples are a godsend, because they can watch over the excess without having children of their own to worry



about. Infertile couples and the like run into the same situation.

By whatever method it prefers (e.g. election, sortition or random selection), each caravan selects a Representative, who can be of either sex. The Representatives in a convoy in turn elect one of their number to the office of Captain until the Free Republic puts down stakes or uproots them again, or a year has gone by, whichever comes up. The Captain's role is limited to breaking ties (which is rarely necessary, since the convoys take pains to keep an odd number of caravans) and acting as dictator when the Representatives declare a state of emergency. Even then, a Captain cannot stay in office for any longer than usual, and must give up the office as soon as the state of emergency has passed. After serving as a Captain, the office cannot be taken up again unless one-half of the presently-serving Representatives are also ex-Captains.

Representatives also select another two of their number (neither of whom can be the Captain at the same time) to the Senate—unlike in the fledgling United States there are no concerns about proportional representation, not least because the founders of the Freeway Republic didn't conceive of themselves as any sort of federation. A Senator serves for up to two years, but can be removed by a vote of no confidence by the convoy's Representatives. It is customary to replace one Senator at a time, to make sure that the other has some experience with the position. The Senate meets at least four times a year, and in their first meeting of the year picks someone from outside the Senate to serve as President of the Freeway Republic.

The President does absolutely nothing except open the meetings. Younger citizens see nothing peculiar about this, but it's very amusing for those who are old enough to remember the departed United States. Nevertheless, it has become a little bit of an honor for whichever convoy the President comes from. Also, because there is no term limit, former Presidents tend to be successful Senators, as they have watched the proceedings for a few years and

are probably friends with a lot of former and current Senators.

The House of Representatives and the Senate both have great power in their respective spheres. The Representatives, for example, decide when a caravan should be split in two (usually to replace a caravan that has been wiped out) and appoints judges to oversee legal disputes. The Senate decides where the Freeway Republic should move, appoints ambassadors to meet with other groups and generals to kill them with those meetings go sour, and so on. On any measure, voting is done blind: a slip of paper, colored stone, or other marker is dropped into a bucket, and once all of the Representatives or Senators have cast a vote, the bucket is overturned and the votes are counted. If there were more than two options available, then whichever option got the least number of votes is removed and voting begins again. It's expected for each voting period to be very quick, since everyone has already had time to hash out the pros and cons and now the group is just deciding which one to go with, so by removing choices one at a time, there is no incentive to vote for the lesser of two evils out of fear that your preferred choice won't get enough votes and will therefore amount to being a vote for the greater evil.

### **Le Grand Réseau**

When the world is dying all around you, the best thing to do is head for shelter. Head underground. That's what you do when there are nukes on the horizon, and it's a fairly good response to ravenous corpses, too. It's a little unorthodox, maybe, but when your brother or grandmother wants to eat you and can run as fast as any living human but without tiring, living in the open just isn't an option. The only people who might manage it are those with motor transport, but

Other people retreated to rooftops and the upper floors of skyscrapers, destroying the stairs behind them. Some used ladders to get around, and if they had been given enough time then maybe they would have built rope-bridges between buildings,

never to worry about the zombies beneath them unless they happened to fall.

They didn't have the time, though. Zombies can climb. They're single-minded monsters, yes, but it turns out that they have at least a little hand-eye coordination, and if they don't have anything else to climb on then that's no problem, they can get into a pile and crawl on top of each other.

For some of them it was luck, and for others it was because they had noticed, or just guessed, that zombies could climb, but a few people went in the other direction, heading down instead of up. Some went into sewers or subways, but in Paris they went into the interconnected mines and catacombs that wormed beneath the city. The largest of these networks lends its name to Paris' community of tunnel-dwellers: Le Grand Réseau.

It was a dangerous gamble, to be sure, and people who went into the sewers or the Paris Metro, or for that matter some of the other quarry networks, didn't make it. This is a place of close quarters, with little to no opportunity to run and as much danger of being crushed as of being bitten if the hordes get in. Nevertheless, some people got into Le Grand Réseau, set up barricades in both directions to keep things from wandering in, and slowly pushed further, setting up new barricades all the time, until the network was fully secured.

The key to the success of these "cataphiles" was the very thing that makes most people balk at the idea into tunnels. For one, it's easier to barricade a hallway or tunnel than to build a circular wall. Fewer materials are required, too, which means that it can be made thicker for the same cost. As well, it's impossible to be swarmed from every side in such conditions. The agility of the dead is less of a concern here—like three warriors standing on a bridge, a great number can be handled by forcing them to come a few at a time and from an expected direction.

Today the tunnels are secured by multiple layers of defenses. Not one but many barriers would have to be overcome for any appreciable amount of the

tunnel network to be overrun, and at any point along the way only so many of the dead can present themselves at once. Attacks are rare, though; this practice is a reflection of the survivors' caution rather than a dire necessity.

The cataphiles cannot stay underground forever, though. Though Vitamin D deficiency is mostly dangerous to children (rickets can be quite fatal) and is more unpleasant than absolutely deadly for otherwise-healthy adults, it shouldn't be ignored. Eggs and cheese are serviceable supplements, but you can't raise chickens or cows in darkness and neither can you grow crops underground.

This problem is addressed in much the same way that the catacombs themselves were cleared. Both underground and in the sun, surprisingly low-tech methods are viable. Harking back to the Greek phalanx and the Roman testudo formation, each cataphile in a "tortoise squad" carries a large shield that can be held in front—protecting its bearer and the next person to the left—or above, hanging a ceiling over several people in the formation. Those on the edges can turn to the side or behind to raise the shield on these fronts, and the shields are built to hook together to make a breach more difficult to achieve. The resulting formation is virtually impermeable, no matter the numbers or speed of the dead that assail it, to the point that the cataphiles will be more concerned with being crushed beneath the weight of too many dead than with being bitten.

The shields are large enough that not everyone has to raise one, even above ground (where shields cannot be focused at the front). The other tool of a tortoise squaddie is the spear, which is not just any stick with a sharp bit of metal on it but (today, at least) is modeled after the bear spear. Especially in the tunnels, fighting the dead is not unlike hunting a bear (albeit a number of them at once, usually). The two even share a propensity to stay moving long enough, even after being hurt terribly, to kill someone else before they go down for good. Beneath the spearhead is a crosspiece that keeps the target from pushing forward and advancing on through the spear. The crosspiece is weighted and

good for crushing, but it is preferable to driving through the head instead. Those in the middle of the formation are responsible for either raising shields to form a ceiling or thrusting spears past their comrades.

There is much room for developing greater proficiency with a spear but to achieving a minimum level of competence is simple. This was especially important in the early days, when the dead needed to be cleared away *now*, but is still useful today.

Because the dead are so obliging in their habit of rushing toward any sign of living humans, a tortoise squad has to do little but sit tight and make a lot of noise in order to clear out every one of them in earshot. Once it appears that the immediate area has been secured (an operation that will typically employ multiple tortoise squads, to be on the safe side), others will come out and begin erecting prefab barricades. Under the watch of the tortoise squad, these will quickly be reinforced by tougher walls, made with stone from the Réseau's quarries and from scavenged architecture—the cataphiles dislike buildings that are more than a couple stories tall, on the basis that a great tower makes for a better wall, and there's always a worry that one of the dead will *somehow* get up there and then fall down from the sky. Or maybe the cataphiles just don't like heights all that much anymore...

Most exits from the le Grand Réseau lead to cellars, which are seen as safer points of transit than those which are out in the open. Every door between the cellar and the outside world is reinforced (or walled up entirely, as the windows are), and sometimes there are extra barriers beyond that. Even inside, the doors have peepholes, and where the walls are thick enough there will be two doors, the outer one being made of bars. Leaving the building for the outside world, one will enter a small clearing with gardens, spiked walls (not to kill but to ensnare the dead), and a few sets of doors. The doors have peepholes and come in pairs where possible (which is most of the time, because now the walls have been made by the cataphiles themselves). Because the outer door is barred, it is possible to look

through the peephole, fail to notice that one of the dead is on the other side, and then open the inner door without being fully open to danger. The risk of this happening is low, especially in places that are very secure, but the cataphiles have no need not to be cautious. Two lines of defense may usually be enough, but they will keep up ten anyway because if they maintain only nine, and nine fall, then it may mean the death of everybody and not just a few.

First secured by tortoise squads and then guarded during their construction, each clearing has enough space for a garden and in turn leads to another few clearings (except on the periphery, of course). Most of the gardens are small enough that they are effectively enclosed by fruit walls, a miracle of engineering dating back to the 1500s and an ancestor to the modern greenhouse. Without any high-tech tricks at all, the wall absorbs heat from the sun in the daytime and releases it at night. The area around a fruit wall can be up to twenty degrees Fahrenheit hotter than otherwise, and crops ripen more quickly than usual. Furthermore, as these gardens grow so does their effectiveness, because more heat is retained and the wind is blocked more effectively.

In addition to their crops (mostly potatoes, vines, and small trees), the cataphiles also raise chickens and pigeons (who forage elsewhere but know that their nests are protected here), rats, goats, and bees. Lots of bees. Bees are good for flowering trees like those that produce fruit (and the same are good for the bees) and they produce honey in the bargain. There are many garden complexes, each one based on a different exit from Le Grand Réseau, and each one can generally keep care of a couple of hives. Half a square kilometer of gardens can take care of enough bees to produce 250 pounds of honey in a season. At 86 calories per ounce, that amounts to 344,000 calories, which is almost enough to keep a single person alive for half a year. That's ignoring the need for nutrients that you can't get from honey but when food is scarce, calories are calories, and honey is a good addition to anybody's winter diet (especially since it can preserve some of your other stores).

### **The USS Richard M. Nixon**

When the world is dying all around you, the best thing to do is get to where they can't get you. When "they" are corpses hijacked by fungal spores with an unsettling tendency to carry on the air, it's difficult to find a place to set down a proper quarantine. Reliably upwind is good, but offshore is even better, and you can't go further than an aircraft carrier.

The USS Nixon is one of the largest aircraft carriers in the world, and with the collapse of civilization that status is unlikely to change anytime soon. When the world started to fall apart, it was docked at a U.S. Navy station in Washington state. Its activities during the collapse were limited to the West Coast, and they were still in the Pacific Northwest when they received their last signal from the federal government, some eighteen months after the outbreaks began. Now, many years later, the USS Richard M. Nixon has permanently anchored itself a few miles off the coast of Oregon, where the prevailing winds reduce the risk of fungal spores being swept in from the mainland.

Left alone, infection is a death sentence. It is mere hours before symptoms appear: Bruising occurs more easily, as the blood vessels weaken. Coagulation is impaired, sometimes leading to full hemophilia. Within a few days, the sufferer is coughing up blood, a state called hemoptysis, at which point the only possibility is death, even if the infection's progression is halted at that point. If it is allowed to continue, then in a few days the fungus will turn the body to its service: the respiratory and digestive systems will be adapted to sustain developing spores, and the nervous system will be hijacked to direct the host in the direction of nutrition and victims. The threat of the infected will last for a long time, because when food supplies run low the fungus can pump its host full of chemicals that preserve the body, lungfish-like, for long stretches of time, and the spores remain viable for a long time after the host has finally died (and gone dry and brittle).

This is only if the infection is allowed to progress, though. There are very few true fungicides when it comes to the infection—even sulfur is more properly a "fungistatic" that only prevents the fungus from developing further. Advanced medications can kill the infection but these are beyond anybody's ability to produce now, so supplies are limited. Someone who is infected can keep the fungus at bay indefinitely with a supply of fungistatics, but failing to stay on schedule (or even contracting another serious illness) will allow the infection to pick up where it left off. Treatment has to start as soon as possible, because once hemoptysis has begun, the body has reached a point where it is depending on the fungus to repair the damage (and it may be contagious, moreover). Still, while the inhabitants of the USS Nixon strive to remain uninfected to begin with, there are communities of survivors who have kept their infections under control, and a rare few are even immune or at least mostly resistant.

At present, the USS Nixon keeps itself as politically separate as it is geographically distant from them. For a long time, this was simply because it was unaware of the existence of other communities. Shortly after the federal government dissolved, the ship's inhabitants declared the Emergency Nixon Government (ENG). While there was some resistance to the idea at first, the military ultimately subordinated itself to an Acting President that had been elected from the rescued civilians that were aboard. The ship's population is too small for things like a Congress to be necessary but the survivors wanted to keep the general shape of a civilian-led government. The officers of the ship were interested in this more than anyone else—the civilians could easily be persuaded to accept military rule, given whose ship this was and whose intervention had saved their lives, but it wouldn't have set a good precedent. Establishing military rule might be okay now, but it would be harder to remove with every year that passed.

Maintaining the subordination of military power to civilian rule is not easy, though. The biggest problem is that every adult has to serve at least two years in the military to get the privilege of voting,

in order to make sure that everyone can pull weight in the event of an emergency (the law was certainly supported by the military, but it was passed by the Acting President and the ship's council, has to be renewed by both parties every ten years, and can be overturned by a supermajority of civilians in a referendum). About a quarter of the population does not serve and therefore neither vote nor serve in public office. To try to address the power imbalance that might arise and ensure that the civilian government is generally run by civilians, citizens are ineligible to run for public office for five years after they have left military service, and anyone who has spent more than four years in the military is permanently ineligible for the office of Acting President.

The Nixonian Guard, as the military is often referred to nowadays, has a number of responsibilities: scavenging in cities, collecting food from the mainland, and exploring up and down the coast and inland along rivers. It is through these expeditions that the USS Nixon discovered the presence of other communities.

The USS Nixon remains semi-isolated from them because the ship's population are currently divided on what to do about them. The civilian government is in favor of extending its influence over these communities and reestablishing the rule of law (or more specifically, rule of the ship's law) in these places. The Nixon Officer's Corps (NOC), which consists of the commissioned officers of the Guard, is mostly opposed to this course of action, however, and there is one privilege which they retained while subordinating themselves to the civilian government: if they choose to deploy outside the USS Nixon then they must follow the directions of the Acting President, and they certainly cannot take action unilaterally, but they can also refuse to deploy in the first place.

This privilege was retained out of the fear that the Guard might otherwise be ordered to undertake no-win missions by inexperienced civilians, which is one part of the reason that the NOC opposes a war of reunification—and make no mistake, a war it would almost certainly be. Neither the NOC nor

the civilian government are under any illusions about the relationship that would exist between the USS Nixon and the mainlanders. It would be a sort of vassalage at best, where the ENG extends a measure of protection, scientific expertise, and so on in exchange for food, fuel, and soil.

At present, the ENG is living a little too close to the edge for its comfort. About five and a half acres' worth of soil has been distributed over the top deck of the USS Nixon, with more soil in additional gardens in the lower decks. Using specially-prepared raised soil beds, each acre of open-air gardens can grow about 200,000 pounds per year of a salt-resistant strain of potato. With 15,000 pounds removed for use as seed potatoes the following year, there are a little more than one million pounds of potatoes left, or enough to fulfill a quarter of the caloric needs of 2,000 people. When the odd wind from inland comes through, the hatches are sealed tight and afterwards the decontamination teams go out with gas masks, as they do when the Guard embarks on expeditions to the mainland. Decontamination of the gardens typically involves sulfur, which remains a fungicide on spores that haven't implanted themselves in a human body, and is good for the potatoes themselves.

Below decks, kale and tomatoes are fed by grow lamps hooked to the USS Nixon's nuclear power supply. Fish, shellfish, seaweed, and even barnacles are harvested from the wild (with pains taken to not overharvest), and additional food is taken from expeditions to the mainland. Together, it is enough to keep everyone alive but not enough for anyone to be too comfortable—there is enough stored food that if the potatoes were lost (perhaps to disease) then the USS Nixon would survive, but at that point they would be eating into their emergency stores with no way to reverse the trend without starting farms on the mainland. Only the potatoes are salt-resistant enough to survive in the open-air gardens, and while this variety of potato probably exists somewhere else in the world, nobody has a clue where that "somewhere" might be.

Fuel is another concern for the USS Nixon. The lifespan of its nuclear reactor has been greatly extended by the fact that the ship is not moving and its power supply is being supplemented by petrol, but it *will* run out at some point and in the meantime fuel for the secondary power supply has to be collected on a regular basis. A trading relationship with survivor communities would alleviate all of these issues, but the USS Nixon arguably needs more than it can give in return. Even the promise of a sense of national belonging is unlikely to work: The Emergency Nixon Government may consider itself a successor to the

federal government but other communities may not see it that way, and the promise of belonging only work if they'll actually feel like the old government is back. Furthermore, any true integration into the political structure would risk upsetting the internal dynamics of the USS Nixon. Most civilians might be okay with extending the franchise to other communities in theory, but it wouldn't take too many communities before they suddenly have half of the pull that they used to have and the idea turns severely unattractive. The only stable situation, as the NOC sees it, is separation or subjugation.

## Appendix: Peculiar Philosophies

A small collection of odds and ends from another column of mine, whose contents weren't individually large enough to warrant their own section. Some of these are philosophies or theories, a couple of them are subcultures, and one is a religion.

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### Cultured Cannibalism

While they do pride themselves on having all the refinements and attainment of high culture, cultured cannibals get their name from a different kind of culture. You see, if the saying is true, that “you are what you eat,” then you have to eat humans in order to stay human.

Unfortunately, if we allow that people who do not eat people do not remain human, you can't stay human by eating other folk (everybody give a sigh of relief now). Those people-shaped things, after all, are just mongrel agglomerations of all the random things that they've eaten. What you have to do instead is grow your human meat in the vat, from specially-grown tissue *cultures*.

Supplemental vitamins are added to the meat, taken in pill form, or put in the water (most cultured cannibals frown on drinking anything but water and cloned blood, preferably their own). Some cultured cannibals also undergo surgery to better adapt to their diet and resort to genetic engineering for the sake of their children.

There are two primary divides in cultured cannibalism today. The first is on whether “the pure human state” can be recovered upon being lost. It is the opinion of the transcendentalists that the cannibal position can only be coherent if one supposes the existent of a “super-material” human identity that exists beyond the flesh. Once lost,

then, it can never be regained. Naturally enough, they give greater prestige to those who have always lived on the diet, as opposed to “imitators,” and they were the greatest force behind using genetic engineering to adapt future generations to the Diet.

The materialists on the other hand say that they are concerned with the origin of the matter with which their flesh is made and remade, and they say that as the flesh is lost and replaced, true humanhood can be regained. Some simply treat this as a matter of fact. Other materialists have developed a wide range of rituals that they feel should be conducted over the course of one's seven-year “purification.”

The second divide, which is not so easily put into a few neat boxes, is over the kind of culture that should be had by pure humans. Some, such as the Transformationists, believe that elements of “semi-human” culture, such as Mozart, can be taken either in whole or adapted. Within them are differences of opinion over which elements are okay and how to treat them.

The Neo-Culturalists, on the other hand, believe that *nothing* from “the old world” can be safely appropriated by the future pure human culture. Some of the most extreme among them do not even accept the use of books or CDs, and wish to create entirely new forms of media through which they may transmit their culture.

### Geometric Philosophies

A pair of interesting thought systems with some very strong opinions about geometry and what it means. Specifically, right angles.

Anti-Anglists *hate* them. Right angles do not occur in nature. They're unnatural. They're like a spit in Nature's face, and they're ugly, disgusting, and abominable. Geometric Humanists (not to be confused with traditional Humanism) take the opposite approach. They love right angles, for the reason that right angles are always human-made and the product of reason.

Meanwhile, everybody else looks on and wonders how anybody could get this obsessed. Even the mathematicians tend to get weirded out by it.

## Literary Disentanglement

Did you think that "Death of the Author" was as bad as it could get?

Well, you were wrong. Literary disentanglement picks up where Death of the Author left off.

If Death of the Author says that the creator cannot comment on his completed work, then we find that there is one more step that we can take. The author's commentary on *zir* work is made of *zir* words, just as *zir* work is. Both are products of *zir* mind. Where the Death of the Author falls short is in supposing that there is any difference between the two: the work itself is as valid as the author's commentary. Thus, it is just as invalid.

Death of the Author assumes that the author is incapable of properly commenting on *zir* work and yet capable of bringing it forth as it should be in the first place. Disentanglement theory recognizes that *ze* can do neither. The work that the author produces is flawed as the commentary. The process of disentanglement is the process of perfecting it: the critic carefully analyzes the work to excise those words, paragraphs, chapters, and even characters that do not truly belong in the work and grafts material that should have been there from the beginning but were not, and this on account of the incompetence of the author.

This new, perfected version of the work, the work as it should have been all along, is what the critic comments upon. The author may protest that it is not what *ze* wrote, but one does not favor a child's scribble over the very sun that it depicts. Even so the critic does not waste *zir* time with the half-formed marble block but sets *zir* sights fully upon the Adonis that he has carefully freed.

## Pure-Humanism

Did you know that some humans, aren't? At least, if one thinks that worth and belonging come from genes and species. Most groups of so-called humans are not pure *homo sapiens*. Some people owe

as much as 6% of their genes to Neanderthals or Denisovans, in fact.

Pure-Humanism is the latest flavor of scientific racism, and a definite throwback to worse times no matter how much modern language it employs. The philosophy holds for the reclamation of "Homeland Africa" from all foreign and impure interests, and the forced emigration of these same people.

Proponents of Pure-Humanism view the history of Africa through the lens of conquest, domination, and exploitation by a non-human hybrid species. The response to this must be total, final, and without negotiation: a return to the old order, in which pure humans own and profit from their homeland and live alone from the other species, as it was in the days when the richest and most powerful civilizations were (of course) ruled and peopled by pure humans.

The present order is an aberration, and the rising generation would do well to prevent it from happening ever again, say the Pure-Humanists. On the other hand, no animosity is to be held toward the Neanderthal and Denisovan peoples. They are not to be held guilty for the sins of their fathers, and even their fathers cannot be held truly guilty—a mad dog cannot be faulted for its actions. Just as one should not torture a dog simply because of its animal nature, so too should Neanderthals be treated with compassion.

The Pure-Humanists envision a society in which true humans rule over all thinking beings and travel to Africa is restricted, but this is not a policy of extermination. Just as preserves are and will continue to be set apart for other animal life, so too will there be large reservations on which Neanderthals will be allowed to live and even, to a large extent, manage themselves. Just under close human supervision, of course.

While Pure-Humanists share some basic ideas with groups such as the Nuwaubians, they regard these others as having been "led away by Neanderthal deceptions," by which they mean religion. Pure-Humanism is thoroughly antitheistic and prides itself on having based its ideas on objective science—which, it is said, cannot be disputed by



any right-thinking person or Neanderthal. Groups that talk of gods and suppose Caucasians to have been descended from monkeys or jackals, on the other hand, are regarded as insults to the cause, ridiculous, and even a little disgusting.

## Response Realism

Pragmatists to a one, the Response Realists hold that you cannot truly know the reality of your circumstances. You may be hallucinating, be a brain in a vat, or be subject to some other strange situation. Rather than say “we will settle for what appears to be real,” however, they decide to assign reality to something more easily figured out.

Perhaps spinning off from Philip K. Dick, who held that “reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away,” the Response Realists have devised a system of consensus reality. So long as the majority of people are experiencing the same thing, then it may as well be treated as being real. In other words, reality is that which is experienced with other people.

They then go a little bit further beyond this and state that reality is also defined as that which you have no control over. Because it is not subject to your will, it cannot be the aspect of a “dream,” so to speak. This goes hand in hand with the idea that reality is experienced with other people, because the hermit’s world is more easily bent to its inhabitant’s will than the world that is inhabited by someone who interacts with dozens or hundreds of people.

For this reason, the Response Realists divide objects into two rough categories: Garbage Response Agents, or “predictables,” and Complex Response Agents, or “variables.” Reality is determined by your relationship with these, and increased control over a Complex Response Agent reduces the complexity of its responses until it is transformed into a Garbage Response Agent.

According to most Response Realists, as we continue to master our environment the world is slowly become less real.

## Seafarism

*“The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.”* Genesis 1:2 (NLT)

According to most of the old religions, in the beginning there was only chaos. From the chaos came organized matter. Chaos was the sea, its lord a leviathan or sea dragon, and what was brought forth was dry land. Variations on the theme occur nearly everywhere, whether the connection to the sea is lost or the battle is forgotten and the People simply send a diver to the bottom of the sea to bring up mud for land.

What they all agree on, however, is that the sea came first. God inhabited this landless expanse, and then God erred: Before the Fall of men was the Fall of God. God’s own creative nature was bound in the same act of binding the chaotic sea and bringing forth the land. God did not create us but *become* us, and now we are locked into a cycle of reincarnation.

Will the cycle come to an end? Perhaps. The Seafarers are divided on the issue. Some believe that an increased awareness of our quasi-divine nature and former lives is all that we can hope for. Others think that we might be loosed from our mortal coil forever, perhaps (and this is a matter of heated debate as well) by escaping from the lesser sea of the waves to the greater sea of the stars, that these adherents call the Shoreless Sea. The rest disregard space altogether and call it a distraction, although some wonder about the seas of other planets and wonder if there is something to be learned, say, in Europa, or in the potential oceans of other star systems.

Whatever the greatest accomplishment may be, it is to be done by living upon the surface of the waters. Seafarers live in ships for as long as they are able to, and a rare, lucky few live there for their whole lives from cradle to grave, when they are sewn into a weighted shroud and lowered below the waves (a favored place for Seafarers is over the Mariana Trench, though it is doubtful that anyone’s body has actually reached the trench proper).

The Seafarers look toward the development of floating islands and floating cities with great

interest. Several cruise ships have been bought by members in the past and are now crewed entirely by Seafarers. The cruise ships represent an important source of income for the faith, although it is made of entirely voluntary donations on the part of the owners and operators, as is also the case for the various merchant ships that are run, crewed, or owned by Seafarers.

Perhaps the most important tenet of the Seafarers is encapsulated in Aleister Crowley's teaching, "Do What Thou Wilt." This is so because you are a fragment of God Divided, and in acting on your innermost desires you translate the will of God into the world. This does not require that people subject themselves to each other's wills. Indeed, such an idea is anathema, for no fragment of God should think itself above another fragment, for all are equal fragments of God. If God cannot be released from the constraints of ordered matter then God may at least be unified in society, but the domination of one fragment by another both perverts and prevents this.

Accordingly, all beings have the perfect right to withdraw themselves as individuals from association from other beings and as a group to exclude, shun, and remove individuals from their presence. Criminals, who can be defined as anyone that acts against the collective will of the combined body of God, cannot be locked up or executed or even forced to pay fines, but a people that have been offended may remove themselves from association with the criminal, even to the point of excommunication and exile.

Living on ships makes this a lot easier, which the Seafarers hold up as an incidental proof of their philosophy. Where it is possible, criminals are left behind at the nearest port. Otherwise, they are generally set to sea in a small boat (larger Seafarer ships have one or more boats specially set aside for the purpose). There have been a couple of cases of criminals being marooned on uninhabited islands, but this practice is frowned upon.

Seafarism is thoroughly anarchist, viewing nation-states as they exist now as an indefensible violation of the rights of individuals. While some Seafarer ships have declared independence from all nations and have become effectively stateless, many hope

that with the establishment of an actual floating city they might be able to create an organization that will be more properly recognized by the nations of the world.

This is desirable for more than reasons of pride: while the Seafarer nation would not be governed as modern states are, were it recognized as one then it would be able to issue identification, passports, and other papers that would make it easier for otherwise-stateless Seafarers to get along in the world without having to subject themselves to any other powers.

## Simulation Buddhism

The world of your senses is an illusion. A series of ones and zeroes (or stranger things, perhaps).

Here is how it works: the only thing that is keeping you from simulating a world, with a host of conscious minds inside it, is knowledge of what you want to simulate and the processing power to simulate every subatomic particle involved (assuming that you want to be extra thorough). The question is not "Is it possible?" but "When will it be possible?" And once it becomes possible, it will only become cheaper and easier to do. Which means that it will become ever more common, just as today's video games are far more complex than ENIAC ever was.

How much longer will humanity survive? Give it another hundred thousand years, give or take, and world simulations will be easy and commonplace. But then the question arises: If you allow for the fact that there will be tens of thousands, maybe even millions, of complex world simulations made throughout history—what are the odds that this world around you is as real as you think it is?

You are not in the Matrix. To say that you are in the Matrix is to imply that you were put there, or that there is some sort of meat body that is "more you" than the you that is reading. According to Simulation Buddhism, if there *were* a Matrix, if it were possible to make these comparisons without falling into a trap of false implications, then the point would have to be stressed that you are not Neo, you are not Morpheus, you are none of the people that you might think to compare yourself. You are Agent Smith. You are a *program*.

If other pop culture analogies are necessary, then you are in *TRON*: there is no “you” that exists outside of the simulation.

Simulation Buddhism is not a philosophy about “getting out of the box,” as it were, or escaping the simulation to get into the “real world.” Because—and this is the good part—any simulation that runs for a long enough time, or that runs under the right parameters, is itself going to begin to run simulations.

Not only are you in a simulation, but so are your creators. And theirs. And *theirs*. It may not be turtles all the way down, but it’s such a very long stack of

them that it may as well be infinite. You are never going to get out.

So why worry about it? Simulation Buddhists take the lessons of the Buddha and apply them in a context that the Buddha never dreamt of. They are unattached to the things of this world, because this world is a false one rather than that unattainable Material First World that started breeding turtles in the beginning. Moreover, if this world is not real, then you, as a product and “pure inhabitant” of this world, are also not real.

And if you can make peace with that, then things will be just fine.

## Backers and Backer-Named Dishes

The art in *Strange Nations* was made possible through the contributions of 172 backers on Kickstarter. One of the basic backer rewards offered was for a dish to be named after them.

Following is a list of dishes named after backers, and then any a list of contributors whose names were not used for dishes.

Backer name	Food	Description	Page #
adamnemo42	Sallennu	Soft goat's cheese that has been smoked; typically served with honey.	30
Adjacent Cow	Vaca de mateo	Minced raw beef marinated in a mixture of chili powder, clarified sheep's butter, and herbs and other seasonings, including salt, sesame oil, spring onion, minced garlic, sesame seeds, black pepper, nuts, and raw egg yolk. Served in a tortilla.	233
Adrian Smith	Adriana	Pork rinds with a thin layer of meat.	41
Akiazoth	Alistaery	Pork, chopped and jellied with parsley and bits of other vegetables. Served with garlic.	215
Alberto Rodriguez	Pyrdiaz	Clear fish soup with potatoes, parsley, and leek.	215
Alex Bradner	Slope dumplings	Dumpling made from beef, flour, eggs, onion juice, and salt. Boiled in large casseroles in salted water or in soups.	86
Alfredo Pena	Penaoj	Mixture of applesauce and raisins spread over very thin pancakes.	214
Andrew C. Durston	Colindurs rolls	Jerked meat rolled into a ball.	233
Andrew Tuttle	Tuttleryo	Pickled apples.	214
Andy Kitkowski	Andikit	Sourdough bread made from rye flour, chopped rye kernels, and linseeds. Expensive versions substitute beer for water and may add barley malt.	110
Aureus	Pel aureausoy lao	Noodle soup with a base of milk. Means "noodles with milk."	214
Ayukata	Ayukatatis	Soft goat's cheese which has been dried in the sun.	30
Bieeanda	Jayenn	Sweet and sour sauce made from lime, chopped spearmint, sugar, and vinegar.	183
Brand Robins	Tomal	Rice noodles served with a particular mixture of spices.	180
Brennan Taylor	Tailor's tea	A kind of tea which is not only drunk but used to spice meat. The leaves may also be chewed raw.	86
Brian Foster	Fostersam	Salad made from cabbage, cucumber, papaya, and turnips.	176
Brooklynite	Sap'helmuthor	Fish soup, soured with vinegar and fermented wheat bran.	72
Brook	Pon'brook	Sweet bread made from pumpkin rinds, raisins, butter, milk, and eggs.	72

Bryant Durrell	Kaikau'durellu	Flat bread (resembling "swollen pancakes") with fillings such as cheese, jam, eel meat, or the liver offal of a pig.	72
C P	Dannis	Flat cake filled with cheese. Often served with strawberries.	85
Caitlin Jane Hughes	Hughes' seasoning	Curry powder.	198
Casey McKenzie	Caseywar	Mixture of milk, sunflower oil, and salt.	72
Charles Lawrie	Chipayas	Any one of various kinds of poisonous fish which has been allowed to sit and ferment in sand for many months, and then hung for many more. Definitely an acquired taste. Name means "glassy fish."	31
Chris Gwinn	Yazgwin	A kind of extremely nutritious desert tuber.	17
Chris Longhurst	Cubed potatoes	Exactly what it sounds like. Fairies have a fascination with cubed foods, and perceive a difference between, for example, cubed potatoes and literally every other form of potato.	60
Christian Peter	Sotschvud	Pancake rolled around roasted meat and salted eggplant.	176
Christina Rowe	Rowestin bread	Bread made from maize and sunflower seeds.	169
Christopher Lackey	Lackeye	Cake made from eggs, sugar, ground nuts, and (sometimes) bread crumbs. The icing is made from sugar and mixed with other seasonings. May have multiple layers.	86
Christopher Sulat	Sulat	An edible form of clay.	24
Clayton Culwell	Odelaiu	Spongy, sourdough flatbread made from teff flour.	181
Colin Urbina	Urbina	Dish made by mashing avocados and seasoning them with chopped onion, tomatoes, lime, and chile peppers.	41
Craig Brown	Rider's meal	Any dish made of minced fish with eggs, garlic, and milk, and fried and rolled in breadcrumbs.	86
Craig Weinstein	Chaimyas	Thick stew of goat's meat, beans, squash, and tomatoes.	30
Crispin Moakler	Moakler stew	Stew made from thin strips of tripe and carrots, and seasoned with parsley, salt, pepper, and nutmeg.	85
Cultist of Sooty	Olwenu	Goat's cheese that has been brined, cut into large cubes, and then left to sit in goatskin until it is eaten.	30
Damien Brunetto	Brunetorlog	Fish sauce made from anchovies, ginger, salt, and water.	176
Dan Kempster	Kempsteriat	Kebab of meat and onions.	215
Dan Ridley Hallock	Sap'hallok	Pumpkin soup.	72
Daniel C Wong	Chatmanoj	Soup of pork, pickled cucumber, onions, parsley, and tomato.	214
Darkbird	Darkbird	Toffee-like candy, eaten by the upper classes	87
David Belcastro	Belcastrorlog	Sourdough pancake rolled around cucumber, mushroom, and shallots.	176

David Brookshaw	Brookshau	A dish of boiled fish, tomatoes, peas, eggs, and wine vinegar. Means "fish with everything."	30
David Starner	Starnerji	A slab of hard goat's cheese topped with fish, tomatoes, and cucumbers.	30
Davide Orlandi	Davlandi	Alcohol made from cactus fruit syrup.	233
Dennis Kadera	Kaderalao	Alcohol made from fermented rye. Raisins are commonly added.	214
Derek Guder	Helmet's juice	Drink made from dried or fresh fruit which has been boiled in sugar water and then left to cool.	86
Desiree Ward	Desitie	Salad made from carrots, cucumbers, jellyfish, and sesame seeds.	176
Devon	Devonao	Noodles with pork and cinnamon.	214
Dickie Pearce	Kaikau'dikie	Ball of meat that has been heavily seasoned with onions, mustard, salt, and beer, and then coated with bread.	72
Dillon Burke	Shiellus	Clarified cow's butter made with herbs and spices, and left to sit in a clay pot for some time.	181
DivNull Productions	Sap'lestlow	Dish comprising the cleansed stomach lining of a pig, flavored with a mixture of milk, sunflower oil, and salt.	72
Drew Wendorf	Drewinis	Rice noodles served with chicken, potato, and tomatoes.	181
Eden	Brandeshu	Fermented honey.	182
Eric Biencourt	Lennart	Lump of flour (typically maize or millet) which has been cooked to the consistency of porridge or dough, rolled in a ball, and then dipped in a sauce.	181
Ewen Cluney	Cluney	Dish made from wheat, milk, eggs, almonds, sugar, and flower water.	85
Fitzpatrick, Scott	Fitzscot	Beetroot soup made from meat stock, many kinds of vegetables, and fermented beetroot juice.	214
Gabriel Bartholomew Shea	Sheamew	Dish of eggs, fish, mushrooms, and onions baked in bread.	215
Gary Kacmarcik	Kacmarcik	Buttery, soft, and acidic goat's cheese that has been allowed to develop mold.	30
Grandy Peace	Grandeace	Mixture of basil, black cumin, garlic, ginger, long pepper, rue, and wild celery.	181
Guerric Samples	Pel guerricoj lao	Noodle soup with mushrooms. Means "noodles with mushrooms."	214
Gustavo Campanelli	Campanell	Any loaf of bread that has been hollowed out and filled with heavy stew. The stew usually contains tomatoes, turnips, beans, and jerked mutton.	223
Harrison11106	Alvarez sauce	Paste made from almonds, chicken, chile peppers, spices, and tomatoes. Name means "mouse sauce."	41
Hollow Mask	Hollow mask	Dish made by skinning and opening a goat's head, and then adding various vegetables to the	31

		brain inside before the whole thing is boiled for several hours. Proper name is "balada."	
Iacopo Benigni	Pel iacopoj lao	Noodle soup with mashed potatoes and onion. Means "noodles with potatoes."	214
J. Michael Matkin	Matkin bread	Bread made from grain, legumes, and often root vegetables (among other things).	84
Jack Gulick	Gulick	Flatbread with a filling of bean paste.	110
Jacob Bartels	Bartelsoy	Mushroom soup made by heating cabbage, vinegar, and butter together, and adding to brine with mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, and pickled cucumbers.	213
Jacob Eland Alexandrowiz	Coband	Stew made from powered chickpeas, garlic, ginger, minced onions, and chopped tomatoes. Very thick, and often served on cabbage leaves.	181
James Heath	Heathis	Bread cut into squares or circles while still dough and then fried.	182
James Van Doren	Howell's hagfish	A species of pseudo-fish from Faerieland. Nutritious, but not attractive to most humans.	61
Jamie Revell	Revel stew	Stew of leftovers that has been cooked in an intestine or stomach so that pots are unneeded. Often eaten by travelers. Also, called "wartime stew."	85
Jane Lawson	Abbey bread	Tiny balls of unleavened bread mixed with hazelnuts and pieces of dried fruit, and coated with honey.	87
Jay Broda	Broda	Tea made from poisonous sap. Used in religious rituals.	109
Jeff Vandine	Koyjeff	Any alcohol (except wine) with cinnamon added to it.	86
Jens Alfke	Jensda	Condiment made from goat-liver paste; generally seasoned.	30
Jesse Fowler	Fowlerog	Noodles cooked in tomato broth. Includes beans, celery, mushrooms, and spearmint.	176
Joe Depeau	Kaikau'hendriku	Bread made from yeast dough and filled with cottage cheese.	72
John D Kennedy	Kenglas	Potato coated in butter and raw egg.	86
John Riegerix	Orleinaiu	Roasted barley cooked with cinnamon. Sometimes soaked in coffee.	181
Johnn Fourr	Gorjon	Fermented soybean paste. Most often used as a dip for various kinds of fungus.	176
Josh Gardner	Chucho peppers	Chile peppers either filled with melted pig's cheese or stuffed and fried in a batter of ostrich's egg.	41
K. M.	Ekalutis	Goat's cheese that has been fried in a pan with salt, cucumbers, and lots of peppercorn.	30
Karl Joachim Bøe	Boeis	Vegetable curry made from "false banana," maize, and various beans. May or may not include rice noodles.	181
Kevin Flynn	Flyn bread	Bread made from the white inner bark of the pine tree.	144

korrekturratte	Waldraiu	Cornmeal porridge served in slices.	181
Lauren Rieker	Riekero	Alcohol made from fermented potatoes. Raisins are commonly added.	214
Liam Murray	Cirvizo'liamo	Plum beer.	72
Lilavati	Chandrak	Orange-red powdered mixture of cumin, cloves, salt, cinnamon, ginger, and other spices.	181
Luca Lettieri	Reluc	Shrimp braised in a particular kind of sauce, sugar, and coconut water.	176
Manu Marron	Manusyl	Minced pork wrapped in a dough of flour and eggs. Served with garlic.	215
Marcus Burggraf	Burggraf	Clear fish soup with minimal vegetables; arguably a broth more than a soup.	214
Mark	The Grammar	Bread made from sprouted grains.	233
Mark Watson	Marhanna	Sourdough bread made from ground rye and whole rye berries.	110
masada631	Jinaurkiat	Cabbage soup, with garlic, flour, meat, mushrooms, and onion.	214
Matthew Karabache	Karabaton	Chicken stew with arrowroot, potatoes, and banana.	181
Matthew Klein	Kleinitie	Dish made from a particular kind of sauce, head cheese, pig's ears, garlic, scallions, onions, and cloud ear fungus.	176
Matthew McFarland	Bear's gift	Grain pudding mixed with walnuts, sugar, and raisins. Poppy seeds, honey, milk, and rice may also be added.	87
Max Kaehn	Kaehnsoy	Boiled meat and onions wrapped in very thin pancakes.	214
Mendel	Mended salad	Salad made from chopped potatoes, pickles, eggs, chicken, and onions.	86
Michael Beck	Becku	A dish of salted fish, tomatoes, and grapes.	30
Michael De Rosa	Derosaj	Cabbage, chopped hard-boiled eggs, and tomato paste wrapped in very thin pancakes.	214
Michael Kruckvich	Michlaiu	Clarified cow's butter made with herbs and spices such as cinnamon, cloves, and long pepper.	181
Michael Surbrook	Sure-brook	Sauce made from pounded raisins and cinnamon mixed with meat and white wine.	86
Michael Tree	Michaela galleta	Anise-flavored biscuits coated with lard.	41
Michael Wood	Linwud	Bread made from boiled wheat, sugar, and walnuts.	72
Michel Cayer	Cayer algae	A particular algae-like species which is used by the "Hiders" as the basis for many meals.	98
Michele Gelli	Gelli	Soup made from soured rye flour and boiled meat.	86
Mike Reilly	Shalpyr	Any meat which has been cooked in porridge and then served cold.	215
Mikhail Ban	Javel	Dish made from rice noodles, boiled greens, clarified cow's butter, and spices.	181
MollyMock	Cleatayas	Soaked dried bread or barley topped with chopped tomatoes.	30



Nathan Ferguson	Sorion	Thick sauce made from tomato paste, honey, vinegar, water, and peppercorn. Used for marinating fish.	31
Neil Smith	Smithmeal	A flat cake, made from any kind of grain. Can be eaten plain, covered with sauce, or stuffed.	85
Nikitas	Nikitabe	Salad of beans, boiled beets, carrots, onions, pickled cucumbers, peas, and potatoes.	215
Noly	Fransisyryp	Very thin pancakes.	214
Olivier Thill	Simliondar	Grape leaves wrapped around goat's cheese and beans.	30
Ovid	Ovidaiu	Chickpea stew served on rice noodles.	181
Owlglass	Handsome dumplings	Dumpling filled with river fish and hard-boiled egg.	86
Pamela Sedgwick-Barker	Pamelarke	Sauce made from garlic, lime, sugar, and vinegar. Commonly used with fish.	176
Paul Rossi	Rossaiu	Crumbly, mild-flavored cottage cheese with the whey drained. Often served alongside spicy food, as it lacks a flavor of its own.	180
Peter "Wiggles" Underwood	Skarbineca	Cabbage wrap filled with fried turnips, carrots, and shredded scrambled eggs.	177
Peter Bryant	Blixre	Combination of a particular kind of sauce, cold water, and chopped and cooked duck offal. This is then sprinkled with peanuts and left to cool until the blood coagulates into jelly.	176
Petter Wäss	Pettwas	Raw beef that has been minced and marinated in spices and butter. Served on bread.	181
Philippe "Sildoenfein" D.	Ger's heart	Alcohol made from black or rye bread, and flavored with fruits or seasonings.	86
Pierre Parent	Ludgerlog	A mesh of thin noodles topped with scallions or onions.	176
Rachel Sizemore	Rabinna	Wheat pudidng made from sprouted grains.	233
Richard Greene	Medeljon	Noodle soup with crab and egg.	176
Ross Shaw	Danar	Any beer with a high alcohol content. Also called "strong beer."	110
Russell Tassicker	Tassicker	Fish that has been boiled in milk, serve with tomatoes, peas, eggs, and wine vinegar.	30
Ryley Crowe	Karasustyv	Roll stuffed with ground beef, shrimp, and mushrooms.	176
Sarah	Shipperry	Cold soup made from boiled potatoes, cucumbers, eggs, radishes, and occasionally meat or alcohol. Solids are diced and added just prior to eating.	213
Scragglefoot	Chekleyas	Fermented mixture of honey and water. May be drunk or used as a condiment.	31
Sean Patti	Pattiko	Noodle soup with snail meat and green bananas.	176
Selene	Tansel	Milk served with cardamom.	181
Shinya HANATAKA	Shinyas	Soft goat's cheese which has been dried in the sun and seasoned with peppercorn.	30
Smith	Serfiko	Spiced beef rolled in a pepper leaf.	176

Stephan Szabo	Viraszabo	Tomatoes or bell peppers stuffed with egg and fish.	30
Stephanie Bryant	Mortain	Flatbread whose dough has been allowed to ferment before baking. May be eaten with eggs, honey, or stew.	110
Steven Lord	Lord's dish	Stew of beef, wheat flour, coffee, diced onions, garlic, salt, peppercorn, and various spices.	181
Steven Savage	Styvarke	Wet curry of beef soaked in vinegar, pickled carrots, tomato broth, and various hot spices. Called the "savage curry of Pegdu."	177
Svend Andersen	Svendelmaus pizza	A kind of pizza: heavy on meat; no plants which did not grow entirely in the ground (tubers, &c); crust made from one of a few peculiar breads (potato, arrowroot, &c); fake tomato sauce.	61
taichara	Linerrin	Fried pastries filled with spices and pieces of potato.	182
Taylor Eichen	Chazen	Strips of freeze-dried cavy (guinea pig) jerky.	24
Teddy Lattimore	Latimor	Liqueur of sour cherries and honey.	72
Theodore Miller	Milled sausages	Pork sausages seasoned with chile pepper and onion.	41
tim densham	Bluker	Ball of minced lamb or pork, seasoned with spices and onions and then glazed with egg yolk prior to serving.	72
Timothy Eagon	Eagon	Cubed pork, marinated and cooked in red chile, garlic, and wild marjoram.	233
Todd Beaubien	Sylaotodd	Alcohol made from fermented apples. Raisins are commonly added.	214
Tomer Gurantz	Novarind's barley	A hardy strain of barley, recently-developed.	144
Topi Turunen	Olavishu	Alcohol made from fermented barley.	182
Tory Middlebrooks	Musketis	A kind of sausage made by cleansing and filling a goat's intestine with fish, bits of tomato, and beans.	30
Travis Mueller	Miller's wine	Any wine mixed with cinnamon and heated before serving.	86
Trip the Space Parasite	Trip-soup	Soup made from a base of blood and equal amounts sugar and vinegar. Includes pieces of dried pears (or plums or cherries), apple vinegar, and sometimes honey.	85
Ultimate Nieves	Nieve	Dumpling made with chunks of potato, meat, and cottage cheese.	86
Vespero	Vicencaiu	Mixture of peanuts, sesame seeds, and caramel.	182
W David MacKenzie	Fypkenzy	Soup of pearl barley, pickled cucumbers, and kidney meat. Often eaten with alcohol.	214
Wilhelm Fitzpatrick	Rafial tea	Tea made from the leaves of the pine tree.	144
William Scott Palmer	Palmer/Handy fritter	Fritters made from leftover food and dough. Very portable.	85
Zach Van Stanley	Vanleyas	Fish with tomato sauce and brined white goat's cheese.	30

## Index of Sidebars

The sidebars in *Strange Nations* frequently treat on topics that can apply to more than a single culture. You do not have to be using the Shipborn to be interested in avoiding scurvy, or be using Balas to care about concrete. This book will therefore close with an index and summary of all sidebars, for easy reference.

**Blood and food**— Lists a few foods that incorporate blood. The blood salad dressing is false. Pg. 229.

**Carrot whiskey?**— Unconventional sources of alcohol and bread, plus mock tomato sauce. Pg. 60.

**Cog calculators**— How Curta calculators work. Pg. 47.

**Color vision in different species**— Color vision in amphibians, birds, insects, mammals (with special mention for marine mammals), and reptiles. Evolution of color vision. Pg. 191

**The Creeping Spiders Dynasty**— Details a subgroup among the aerrec-a. Pg. 7

**Death and overworking in Japan**— On death from overwork. Pg. 48

**Diseases of Ko Netko**— Three sidebars, each detailing a different disease endemic to Ko Netko. Pp. 139, 141, 145.

**Don't worry about kuru**— Cannibalism, kuru, and how populations become resistant to prion diseases. Pg. 50.

**Faeries and DID**— Faery psychology. Pg. 55.

**Family souls for real**— Treating the concept of “family souls” as something that actually exists. Pg. 109.

**Freeze-drying**— Freeze-dying with preindustrial methods. Pg. 24.

**The High Trees Dynasty**— Details a subgroup among the aerrec-a. Pg. 4.

**How to prepare maize**— Proper preparation of maize, and why that's important. Pg. 41.

**Juggling and storage clamps**— How to preserve food through juggling and the use of storage clamps. Pg. 103.

**The many uses of the cactus**— Nutritional, medicinal, and other uses of various species of cactus. Pg. 15.

**Manufacturing concrete**— History of concrete manufacturing and notes on various additives used. Pg. 30.

**Note on genetic memory**— Assures the reader that I'm not insane, and I know how memory works. Pg. 3.

**Note on technology**— Fitting Ko Netko into a preindustrial setting. Pg. 140.

**On “w” and “u”**— Explains the logic behind the spelling of Ardwmus words. Pg. 13.

**Other methods of mummification**— How the Chinchorro, Egyptians, Maori, and Torres Strait Islanders practiced mummification. Pg. 106.

**The Red Stones Dynasty**— Details a subgroup among the aerrec-a. Pg. 5.

**Salinity tolerance in plants**— Which plants (and mushrooms) can tolerate salt. Pg. 205.

**Scurvy sucks**— The effects of vitamin c deprivation and how to avoid it without eating plants. Pg. 206.

**Self-mummification in Buddhism**— The process of self-mummification, as practiced by certain Buddhist monks. Pg. 111.

**The size of a rookery**— Size, tonnage, and crew of various ships from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Pg. 202.

**Some figures on cattle**— Weight, caloric content, milk production, and other numbers relating to cattle. Pg. 8.

**Status signaling**— Explains how travel by foot is either stigmatized or prestigious depending on context. Pg. 221.

**Wait, how fast did you say again?**— Rates of travel for Inca runners, Roman armies, and the Pony Express. Notes on Ephedra or yellow hemp. Notes on bagpipes and decibels. Pg. 22.

**What are the Floating Islands?**— Details the Floating Islands of the Shipborn. Pg. 203.

**What is a kitty- lizard?**— Proposed methods to encode warnings about the danger of radiation over thousands of years. Pg. 39.

**Why the bread doesn't sog out**— Methods to keep bread bowls from sogging out. Pg. 223.