



The Dé Chói

A Tékumel Netbook

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The World of Tékumel

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The Pé Chói

“He who makes his home in the forest
Must bear its thundering silences
And the poignant loneliness of its depths”
—Pé Chói Adage

Of all the nonhuman races of Tékumel, the Pé Chói are temperamentally the most like Man. Yet this superficial similarity conceals deep and irreconcilable differences which make the Pé Chói one of the most misunderstood species in the Five Empires

So smoothly have members of this race adapted to human ways that there is hardly a human city of over five thousand which lacks its small and active community of these gleaming, chitin-armoured beings. Almost any urban street scene contains its quota of these tall, elegant creatures, the males a polished black and the females a chalky white, undulating along unnoticed in the human throng. The four upper limbs gesticulate in near human fashion; the great, wise heads turn this way and that; the lambent green eyes are aflame with very human-appearing interest, passion, and humor; and the long, segmented tails twitch restlessly to and fro, occasionally swinging all the way up over their owner's shoulder to emphasise a point or punctuate an assertion.

Those Pé Chói who have adapted themselves to the ways of Man have copied Man's clothing and accouterments as well. At home in the jungles of Dó Cháka, these beings wear no clothing or decoration, aside from a utilitarian belt for possessions or weapons, but in human cities one sees the Pé Chói garbed in kilts and jewels and ornaments. Pé Chói soldiers in the Imperial Legions wear armour of Chlén-hide and steel (although they do not like the latter, it being too heavy and cumbersome for their taste). Their officers sport the crested helmets and high Khéshchal-bird plumes flaunted by their human comrades, and those Pé Chói who have entered one of the human priesthoods wear symbols and talismans and emblems befitting their rank in their chosen sect. They do not attire themselves in the voluminous robes required by certain of these temples, however, preferring to maintain their freedom of movement.

There is very little prejudice against these beings in the human Empires. They are fully conversant with human customs and respect the laws and rites of whatever group they are with. They enter completely into the spirit of any company, and their flat, hissing laughter can be heard as loudly at human parties as that of their hosts. They have almost no body odour; even in their homes where they dwell together in large numbers a human can detect only a faint, sharp, acidic redolence. They are graceful and diplomatic conversationalists, rarely rude or forward, usually content to let others express themselves, and slow to anger. Humans find them loyal and straightforward, honest, and dignified. They are thus one species which dwells almost anywhere it pleases in the Five Empires, rather than being semi-restricted to “districts” or ghettos. Pé Chói children play with their human counterparts in the markets and alleys of the crowded cities; the ebon-hued males hold posts in the bureaucracy the priesthoods, and in certain occupations of a mercantile nature; and the bone-white females chatter and work with the womenfolk of the races of Man much as folk in the civilised worlds have done since long before the Time of Darkness.

Yet beyond all of the prosaic camaraderie the Pé Chói possess dimensions which no human has ever plumbed. Only a rare few “forest waifs”—human infants abandoned in the Chákas and brought up from infancy in Pé Chói villages—can speak their guttural, clicking language, and then only partially and imperfectly. No child of the race of Man can know the intricacies of the emotions, yearnings, and longings of the Pé Chói, and no human can even comprehend the Pé Chói concept termed “Ntk-dqékt,” and underlying and quite basic emotion—sentiment, desire, pain—which every Pé Chói is said to feel from the moment he or she is born until the moment of final death. This concept contains elements of loneliness, solitude, pain, endurance, patience, oneness and yet separation, and many other, unnameable (in human

words) feelings which make it more than and yet less than anything Man experiences. One might say that “Ntk-dqékt” approaches the old German ideas of “Angst” and “Weltanschmerz,” but these concepts, too, fail to embrace the totality of the Pé Chói term.

Perhaps the central core of “Ntk-dqékt” is a deep and restless melancholy. The individual senses a yearning for something which can never be attained—something which cannot even be named.

One feature which distinguishes Pé Chói from Man is a whisper of ancient, instinctive telepathy, a sense of identity which feels as though it should be stronger than it is, but which is now weak and attenuated. All a Pé Chói can now sense of one of his fellows is a dim, flickering twinkle of being, as though a lonely traveller looked out through the darkness and saw the light of a campfire across some impassable black river, a warm and friendly hearth which he can never reach. There is thus a longing for unity and mutual sharing, but each individual knows that this can never be achieved. Each being stands cut off and separated from that oneness of souls which should exist between all living creatures. When a Pé Chói dies, its little light of being dims and goes out in the darkness, and it is impossible for another to aid or to comfort or to be present even at this final passage.

Some Pé Chói symbolise the diffuse yearnings of “Ntk-dqékt” by employing the image of the Eternal Garden; the Forest of “Hh-kk-ssá.” This may well be an ancestral memory of their ancient home, but to many it is only a culmination of all of the sorrows of the Pé Chói being expressed as a concrete entity, a place in which there is sharing, where souls are united and joyous in their oneness, where at long last there is a place called “Home” in the truest sense. More will be said on this below. If indeed “Ntk-dqékt” is no more than a race memory and a yearning for what once was or might have been, one can at once sense something of the gap between the Pé Chói character and that of Man; as the Pé Chói put it, “Man adapts and is happy; we Pé Chói remember—and are grieved.”

The original home world of the Pé Chói is Procyon (alpha Canis Minoris). Long before Man had stretched out his hands to the stars the Pé Chói had developed space flight and the torque-stress interdimensional drive. Earth was no unknown to Pé Chói astrogators, and one of the first things the Pé Chói showed the first human expedition to their world was a collection of pictures and artifacts taken from earlier human cultures in the past. Clandestine visits to Earth were not uncommon, the Pé Chói said, and a number of interstellar races had made contacts and even toyed with the idea of colonisation. Only local rivalries and concerns had prevented the annihilation of Man and the establishment of Earth as a colony world in times past. As the Pé Chói leaders put it to the first human expedition, somewhat ruefully, “Now here you are...”

The Pé Chói worlds proved to be a relatively friendly and easygoing hegemony. As the centuries of contact passed, the Pé Chói were to become one of Man’s best friends, collaborators, and most useful tutors. There was also competition—the Pé Chói proved to be great barterers and explorers—but they lacked something of the human drive for expansion, colonisation, and (it must be said) aggression. It was on the advice of the Pé Chói that Man steered away from the deadly worlds of the Hlutrgú, then a localised but ferocious and powerful spacefaring species. They were again instrumental in keeping human ships away from Pelagus (sigma Sagittarii), which was inhabited by a race so dangerous and inimical that no species could approach them with impunity. Man came to depend upon the Pé Chói, and vice-versa, and when the planet now known as Tékumel was discovered, terra-formed, and colonised, the two races were working together hand in hand. Areas of forest were set aside, seeded with vegetation from the Pé Chói worlds, and given over to be developed as the Pé Chói wished. The Pé Chói had never preferred cities, and their domed dwellings and intricate forest pathways were woven into the woodland environment. The humans, by now acknowledged experts in the art of terraforming a world, chose other regions for themselves, left some to their other friendly rivals, the Shen, and proceeded to arrange the rest of the planet to suit the tastes of the motley interstellar clientele which followed the first colonists. The Pé Chói set up underground robot factories to produce the delicate machines and instruments for which their race was famous, dealt commodities of all sorts, and established workshops to provide themselves with all of the comforts of their home worlds.

As has been said elsewhere, the Time of Darkness caught all of the peoples of Tékumel unprepared. The blanking out of the stars and the stygian reaches of the pocket dimension into which Tékumel was cast came as a horrid shock to the Pé Chói in particular, separated at one blow from all of their fellows throughout the stars. The calamity of utter and final loneliness came down like an axe blade upon this sensitive and delicate race. Many went mad, others committed suicide, and still others pined away within a few years out of despair. Relatively few of this once proud and gregarious race were left to wander the deserted paths in the forests. The Pé Chói enclaves shrank almost to extinction. The robot factories fell silent for want of supervision. When the last of the great interstellar ships returned to report that there was now nothing at all beyond Tékumel's sister planets and its sun, the Pé Chói drew into themselves and prepared for racial death. The upheavals of the planet, torn from its balance in the fabric of normal space, ruptured the power systems, overturned the dwellings, and cut off communications. The Pé Chói prepared to die. Then, it seems, aid came from their old ally, Man: the optimism and willingness to adapt of the human race appear to have rubbed off on at least some of the Pé Chói, and a few chose to go on living. The Pé Chói are, if anything, impressionable, and Man's determination and perseverance must have affected them as it did other, more fatalistic races trapped on Tékumel. At first a few decided to continue living, then more, and at length the Pé Chói areas once again took on the aspect of a populated world.

Something had gone out of the race, however. The concept of "Ntk-dqékt" was born, and the Pé Chói seemed almost eager to return to the old, pre-space-flight conditions in which it had dwelt on their own planet. Within a few generations the Pé Chói had once again become an arboreal race of rather simple pastoral habits. The old sciences were still recalled here and there, and some knowledge of machines was retained even after the rest of Tékumel had lost it, but the spark was gone. Technology no longer appeals to the Pé Chói. "Now there is naught but a remembering," as the colophon to the Pé Chói "History of Ourselves" puts it.

The Pé Chói are not a very prolific race. There are just a few Pé Chói enclaves scattered around Tékumel. Although each knows through its racial telepathy that the others exist, they are far apart, and none knows how to reach the others. Only one of these Pé Chói regions appears on the present maps: that lying in the heart of the Dó Chákan forests between Mu'ugalavyá and Tsolyánu. This area is hilly and rough, covered with well-nigh impenetrable jungles of deciduous trees, undergrowth, and certain localised trees of other types. There are no cities, as humans would recognise them, in this area. Instead, hidden here and there amongst the vegetation, one finds small clusters of the dome-shaped Pé Chói dwellings. These are made of a secretion from the Pé Chói themselves, plus ingested leaves, bark, soft wood, and other vegetable substances. Each cluster of dwellings constitutes a "village," and these are connected together by narrow, tortuous pathways, many of which are concealed, or which wander up into the trees and follow along far above the ground for long distances. Some of these villages can be reached by men on foot, but others would require all of the skills of an advanced climber-forester. Those in the interior—the villages of the "unpurified" Pé Chói—are guarded by snares, nets, pitfalls, labyrinths, and poisonous traps which can be detected only by the Pé Chói themselves.

A description of one of these villages may be given here. Just to the west of the Tsolyáni city of Chéne Hó there is a largish settlement which is often visited by humans [hex 4403 of the map]. Its name, if it can be rendered into human symbols at all, is something like Nsík Tsú Nékw. The approaches to the village are not marked by anything a man can see. There is dark forest, tangled undergrowth, long vines, a barely perceptible route around the boles of the great trees; the suddenly there is a clearing. Pé Chói are all around. As one's eyes grow accustomed, the Pé Chói houses appear: low, rounded domes of chitinous substance, originally a whitish grey but darkened by weather and age to a mottled brownish green, covered with bits of leaves, twigs, and boughs. There are two or three wooden buildings constructed by human administrators and merchants in the centre of the clearing, but beyond these there is nothing one could call a major edifice anywhere. There are no identifiable temples or palaces or compounds, no marketplace, no central square.

Here and there under the trees are stands of smaller saplings, plots of bright yellow flowers, grassy mounds, and areas of apparently random tangled vines. All of these are in reality carefully tended parts of the Pé

Chóí food supply. The bark of the saplings is stripped, boiled, and eaten. The yellow flowers are the tops of plants which produce a long, green tuberous root, which is pounded, dried, and made into little cakes. The grassy mounds conceal clusters of very large, dark brown, spherical tubers which are fried or roasted. The vines bear tiny little white berries which are mixed with other condiments and eaten in season. Under the trees beyond the village itself one comes upon clumps of dark orange fungi, swards of segmented tubular grasses, looping vines from which translucent purplish fruit depend, and many other “crops.” Most of these items are edible by Man, although some are only marginally so, and a few (e.g. the greenish tuberous roots) are downright harmful, causing stomach pain and internal bleeding if consumed as the Pé Chóí prefer them. Most of these plants will be familiar to anyone who frequents the marketplaces of Tsolyánu or Mu’ugalavyá since the Pé Chóí grow them wherever they dwell.

There are several species which are quite palatable to humans, and a visit to a Pé Chóí village is thus by no means an ordeal. The Pé Chóí themselves are omnivores, as can be seen from an inspection of their teeth, and while they do not fancy human food very much, they can and do exist on it for long periods of time. It may be noted that in their own environment the Pé Chóí eat very little meat. Aside from a few forest animals, certain insects, and a number of species similar to snakes and lizards, the Pé Chóí eat little wild game, and they keep no livestock of their own. Those who live outside of their enclave have, however, usually developed a taste for it, and to put a Pé Chóí down in front of a roast leg of Hmélu is to watch it disappear within moments!

The Pé Chóí drink only mildly fermented juices of certain fruits (e.g. the purplish Dsach-nn-tk, just mentioned above); otherwise they prefer water. In human society, again, they have been known to take alcoholic beverages and even to maintain wine cellars of their own. They despise the Tsolyáni buttermilk drink, Chumétl, and most will not touch distilled spirits.

The round of life in a Pé Chóí village may at first appear incomprehensible to a human visitor. Some busy themselves manufacturing tools, weapons, and utensils. Others pay sporadic attention to the crops described above. The white females remain within the houses or congregate here and there. A few males go off together to hunt or fish in the tiny streams that wind through the forest. Children of both sexes race and run and romp. But there is no sense of urgency or of “business.” Many individuals seem to sit utterly motionless for long hours, staring into space or watching the trees. Others squat and scrape one another’s chitinous bodies. A few remain clearly asleep in one or another of the houses. There is no marketplace, and no money is used. An individual with something to barter wanders over to another who has a desired object or commodity, there is an exchange of crackling Pé Chóí gutturals, and the items change hands with a minimum of discussion. “The tedium,” one Mu’ugalavyáni forest officer stated in a report on his ten years as administrator in a Pé Chóí area, “is enough to drive a wooden post into epileptic fits...”

As stated above, there are no public or governmental structures in a Pé Chóí village. Their society is almost simplistically anarchistic on the surface, but it appears that every member of the community has an innate sense of “appropriate action.” Each village is as well-organized as a colony of Drí-ants.

Whenever a visitor approaches the village spokesman appears as if by magic. He—or she—is always empowered to deal with the needs and requests of the guests. This “provider” (Nipw-nchópk, as nearly as the Pé Chóí name can be rendered) is said to be an hereditary post, but this is far from certain. When one family tires of it, the task of “provider” is passed on to another lineage, usually without contest, election, or even much discussion.

When decisions require greater authority than that of the Nipw-nchópk, recourse is had to the Tií-pétk, roughly an “headman.” The duties of this hereditary official include many of the things which might be expected of a human leader, but they also comprise such un-leaderlike tasks as “seeing to the lighting of cooking first for the aged,” “catching and exterminating Chrí-flies which alight upon the food of guests,” “directing the placement of fungus beds,” and many other similar responsibilities. Again there does not seem to be much competition for this office, and the reasons for selecting one or another member of a

“family” for it are not clear to humans. If there is no member of the family able or willing to take up the responsibility, there is a minimum of discussion, and a new lineage is somehow chosen.

The Pé Chói capacity for “appropriate action” also governs activities requiring the cooperation of more than one village. Whenever the Pé Chói have assembled large scale work or military forces, the *Tií-pétk* of all of the participating villages commune together, and after a brief discussion a course of action is established. No one seems to dissent or refuse, and individuals appear to subordinate their own goals to the larger objective. This is not to say that the Pé Chói lack individuality and will; quite the converse is true. But when a group must agree upon a plan or come to a decision, the process seems to be almost instinctive, quick, and without later dissent.

The furnishings in a Pé Chói house are extremely simple. Each round domed dwelling contains but a single oval door. There is a clay hearth in the middle of the hard-packed earthen floor, and around this are platforms of wood and clay upon which the Pé Chói eat, sleep, prepare food, and perform other tasks. Several families are a separate domed house which contains sanitary facilities. There is almost no decoration, except amongst those Pé Chói who have adapted to human tastes. All of this featureless plainness, however, conceals excellent engineering and economy of design. The drainage system of a Pé Chói village is quite ingenious, and several villages are known to have running water, powered by forest streams. Wells, middens, cemeteries, gardens—all are laid out with care.

Personal adornment and craft work are also quite simple and streamlined, more pleasing, perhaps, to the Twentieth Century student of modern art than the somewhat perfervid *Tsolyáni*. Belts, pouches, and other leather goods (of *Vringálu* hide) share an economy of design and an elegance which would be much admired today. Basketry, pottery, metalwork in copper and gold, glassware, bone carvings, and delicate abstract sculptures of polished wood are all Pé Chói arts. Most of these products are considered curiosities and “primitive” by the highly ornate cultures of the Five Empires. The Pé Chói manufacture most of their own weapons and armour—unsuited, of course, to human use—and these items are etched with intricate swirling abstract detail, chased with silver and other metals, and occasionally set with the jades and opals which are found in the *Chákas*.

In spite of centuries of commerce, humans know really very little about the anatomy, sexual habits, or family life of the Pé Chói. The males, ranging from six to eight feet tall, are a polished black, with areas around the eyes and back to the fan-shaped ears being a lighter grey. The females are somewhat smaller; they are a chalky white, roughly six to seven feet tall, and again have grey shadings on the ears. The four upper limbs are used as hands, and these end in six delicate, bony fingers. The two back limbs are quite powerful and provide rapid locomotion through the forest. The feet are partially prehensile and are suited to grasping boughs and tree trunks. They are not suited for walking long distances on a hard surface, however, and for this reason the Pé Chói adopt a sort of leather boot or sandal when travelling in human lands. The long segmented tail is used primarily for balance. It is not employed for grasping, but a blow from this appendage can knock a man off his feet. Since it is needed for equilibrium it rarely brought into play as a weapon.

The original world of the Pé Chói was more desiccated than *Tékumel*, but it was covered half a mile deep with continent-wide jungles of interwoven leafless vegetation rather like a gigantic “jungle gymnasium.” The Pé Chói limbs are thus well suited to this type of environment, and damp or desert areas are not favored.

The lungs are very large, occupying much of the upper thorax, and it is interesting to note that the Pé Chói possess a set of supplementary “lungs” in the abdomen. These draw in air through tiny tubes hidden beneath the sliding sections of the chitinous abdomen and tail. A Pé Chói thus tends to lash his tail in battle, not out of fury but in order to gain extra oxygen. It is also for this reason that the Pé Chói hates to be immersed in water. Although there is some control over the opening and closing of these supplementary breathing tubes (much as a man may hold his breath), the individual may forget during moments of stress, flex his abdomen and tail wildly, and thus fill his secondary lungs with water—thus drowning even though his head may still be above water!

There are two Pé Chóí sexes. The genital organs are concealed (as are also the excretory organs) beneath the overlapping armored sections of the upper abdomen. They are revealed by standing erect and flexing the lower body forwards between the legs in a sort of S-curve. This has given rise to a number of jocular expressions in the human languages.

The black male Pé Chóí appears to be both sexually and societally dominant, while the white female appears submissive and more domestically inclined. This does not always follow, however, and one finds female Pé Chóí warriors in the legions at a ratio of about one female for every three males. Females also seem to function as village leaders, “providers”, etc. without discrimination.

An understanding of Pé Chóí family life is complicated by the presence of “neuters.” It is not known whether this is physiologically, psychologically, or culturally conditioned. Aside from one fertile male and one fertile female, one finds many family units with several more sexually inactive adults of both sexes. These “neuters” partake of the fellowship of the family but do not seem to show any interest in sexuality. Female “neuters” are generally indistinguishable (to human eyes) from fertile females, but male neuters tend to be a trifle smaller, a little less black (i.e. more of a dark grey in coloration), and also less aggressive. Some “neuters” also may later become fertile for reasons which are quite unclear, and after remaining inactive for some time, they may leave and form a fertile family unit of their own.

There is also a further option, found in many of the more remote Pé Chóí villages. Some communities have a “village mother”: a single female who produces all of the young, while other females become “neuter” workers. These “village mothers” grow to a larger size than other females, and they are especially honored, their advice is taken not only by members of their own village, but also others who may come long distances to see them, and special food is prepared for them.

It is theorised that the “village mother” and the “neuter” individual both represent an earlier evolutionary stage, similar to the ant and bee communities of old Earth. This stage is still a viable option, however, for the Pé Chóí, but the reasons for bringing it about in any given instance are not known. The Pé Chóí themselves insist that these are voluntary choices, but one must continue to suspect the existence of ancient instinctive drives here.

The Pé Chóí gestation period is about 180 days. Infants are born alive, enclosed in a soft, translucent sac, and each birth averages two or three children. Infant mortality is high, however, since the child’s outer integument remains soft and easily damaged during the first three or four months of its life. The Pé Chóí mother (or apparently any female) feeds the infant by masticating leafy vegetation and mixing this with a sweetish syrup produced from certain glands in the throat. As the child grows, its chitin becomes harder and turns a distinctive black or white, depending on its sex. The child reaches sexual maturity by about age ten, and by age fifteen the individual takes on all adult functions, “marries”, etc. From about age fifteen to age twenty-two the individual undergoes a period of restlessness and “wanderlust,” and it is during this time that the Pé Chóí may choose to visit human lands, join a military legion, participate in mercantile ventures, etc. This stage is past by age thirty, generally speaking, and the individual “settles down” to more sedentary pursuits. The life expectancy of the Pé Chóí is similar to that of humans (ignoring infant mortality, about sixty years). Elderly Pé Chóí can be distinguished by a particularly silvery hue to the black male chitin and a corresponding pearly-grey hue for females. When an individual dies, he or she is buried simply and without ceremony. The cemetery area of a village is avoided, but there are no great tombs or catacombs, such as may characterise human burial grounds in the Five Empires. Only those Pé Chóí who have adapted strongly to human ways are buried with grave articles for use in the afterlife. Some of these items, produced during the periods of the Engsvanyáli Imperium or during the Chákan autonomy under the Íto Clan, are quite distinctive and beautiful, however, and the tomb of Kchèk-nn-ssí, the High Minister of the Chákan ruler, Mílo hi-Íto, is one of the artistic wonders of Páya Gupá.

The religious beliefs of the Pé Chóí have always tended towards a rather featureless and spartan monotheism. During the many ages of space flight this species could be described as anything from indifferent to apathetic towards religious display. Many of the fanatic human sects which colonised the stars

found neither comprehension nor sympathy from their Pé Chói comrades. After the Time of Darkness, however, the clear presence of beings so much greater than either Man or Pé Chói that one could call them “Gods” for all practical purposes militated towards some sort of religious formulation, and the Pé Chói belief in an impersonal “Primal Cause” became the “Father of Nests.” This rather vaguely structured deity became identified with Hnálla and to some extent Thúmis during Engsvanyáli times, and a certain amount of myth and ritual have now built up in response to pressures from the human priesthood and sects. the Father of Nests is seen as a black male (much to the despair of the priesthoods of Hnálla and Thúmis who would prefer a white or grey-hued deity). He is said to be the Creator of the Universe and the active principle of appropriate action, the one who unites Pé Chói society, and the exemplar of the Pé Chói identity. In typical syncretic fashion, the temples of Hnálla and Thúmis have entered the Father of Nests as an Aspect of their own deities.

The Pé Chói pantheon has not become a dualism, however, due to the introduction of the concept of the “Black Old One.” During Engsvanyáli times and up to the Second Imperium the rulers of the Chákas were the Íto Clan, worshippers of dread Sárku, Master of Worms. Many Pé Chói were enticed into worshipping this Lord of the Undead, and some interior villages in the southern reaches of Dó Cháka continue to do so. The doctrines of these Pé Chói are not well known since they are maintained as a secret, esoteric and somewhat mystical faith in the depths of the forests. The more visible cult of the Black Old One was developed under the patronage of the Tsolyáni Emperor Nriga Gaqchiké “The Spider” (ruled 984-1010 A.S.). This ruler attempted to strengthen the power of the Dark Gods in the west, and he thus employed every means to encourage the Pé Chói, the Páchi Léi, and other nonhumans to develop suitable forms of the Lords of Change for themselves. For political reasons this succeeded better in the southern areas of Dó Cháka than in the north, and there is now a split between these two regions on religious lines.

The Black Old One is also seen as a male Pé Chói. He personifies the principles of appropriate action—but for the purposes of eventual, continual change, the end of stability, and the establishment of Chaos as the final end of all things. These doctrines are closer to those of Lord Hrü’ü than to the tenets of mighty Sárku; the temple of Hrü’ü has thus established an Aspect of the Black Old One in order to please the Pé Chói, and there are temples in which this Aspect is emphasised in the southern cities of the Chákas, Tumissa, Mekú, and even Béy Sü.

The effigies of the Dark Pé Chói deity can be distinguished from the Father of Nests only by the iconographic symbols held by each. The Black Old One bears a writhing serpent, a lightning bolt of iron, Lory Hrü’ü’s symbol of a purple circle with a diagonal scarlet slash, and a black mace or sword of obsidian. The Father of Nests, on the other hand, is given a golden sphere, a stylised green branch, the double circle of Lord Hnálla (the infinity symbol), and a crystal chalice. Ritual and a love of ceremony do not characterise the Pé Chói, however, and these images are mainly found in the temples of the humans’ cities in which large communities of Pé Chói dwell. There is little or no overt iconography to be found in the Pé Chói area itself.

Those Pé Chói who have elected to dwell in human lands display a great willingness to adapt to the values and structures prized by Man. They thus tend to join human religions, become priests or priestesses, and participate in many activities which would be quite unintelligible to their fellows in the Chákan forests. Although the largest numbers of this species are members of the temples of Hnálla and Hrü’ü, there are good sized memberships in the sects of Thúmis and Ksárul, with lesser scatterings in the followings of other deities. Those who join a military unit have recently tended to pledge allegiance to Lord Karakán or to his counterpart amongst the Lords of Change, Lord Vimúhla. Pé Chói dwelling in Mu’ugalavyá have even become members of the temple of the Mu’ugalavyáni national deity, Lord Hrsh. The cohorts of the Tsolyáni Gods are less attractive to the Pé Chói, and one finds only rare individuals joining the temples of Wurú, Qón, etc. The sex-related goddesses, Avánthe and Dlamélish, and their cohorts, Dilinála and Hriháyal, are of little interest to the Pé Chói, and the very rare Pé Chói members of these sects are there only because of their adherence to the patronage of some human comrade. Pé Chói participants in the orgiastic rituals of these goddesses are almost unknown, unlike the members of certain other nonhuman species who appear to take a sort of perverse delight in attempting inter-species couplings.

The Pé Chói have little or no interest in theological disputation, unlike the Tinalíya and some other nonhumans. They say that they care little whether the Father of Nests and the Black Old One are the same or different from the associate human deities. A Pé Chói asked this question may reply, “When the wind blows, who cares from which divine mouth it emanates?” The Pé Chói concept of appropriate action is almost an instinctive thing, and they tend to become rapidly bored with discussions of values, right and wrong, and other human topics. Allegiance to the Father of Nests or to the Black Old One seems motivated largely by the tradition of one’s village, rather than theological choice, although if pressed, a Pé Chói may describe his beliefs in terms of an over all view of the “purposes” of the universe: Change versus Stability.

This is not to say that the Pé Chói lack interest in things that humans link with religion. The entire race is highly psychic and possess a weak racial telepathy which permits every individual to sense the death of a fellow Pé Chói over a distance of many Tsán. They will argue heatedly and logically if they consider the principle of appropriate action is being violated. They are fine mathematicians and logicians, and a number of Pé Chói are included in the ranks of Téकुmel’s finest astronomers and astrologers. They are simply disinterested in many of the features which most characterise human religion.

One curious feature is the existence of a concept of a sort of “paradise.” This is the Eternal Garden, the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá mentioned above. Those Pé Chói who have settled in human lands tend to identify this idea with the Paradises of Teretané or the Isles of the Excellent Dead. To the Pé Chói this is a real and attainable place, however, and there are many who claim to have seen it. One of the imperial Auxiliary Legions takes its name from this heavenly woodland, and a portion of its charter reads “... And it is required that the Legion shall assume the guardianship of the Sacred Dell, upon which no follower of the Lords of Change may set eyes and live.” Later on in the same document the Imperium agrees with the Pé Chói that “no human shall penetrate to the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá, and to do so shall forevermore be a high crime against the godhood of the Petal Throne.” It may well be that this mysterious “forest” is partially on Téकुmel’s plane and partially in some small pocket dimension since one of the usual epithets used by the Pé Chói to describe it is “the place which cannot be seen save through the Circlet of Iron.” Some theorise that this “Circlet of Iron” is an ancient magical device, but others claim that it is the Pé Chói name for a natural rock formation in the northern forests of Dó Cháka. There are no reliable descriptions of the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá, but a few accounts exist, and these state that it is an endless, rolling delightful forested place, filled with easily obtainable food and drink, and somehow charged with “beauty which drives away the sorrow of Ntk-dqékt” (see above). The fruits and flowers of the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá have Pé Chói names which do not correspond to plants on Téकुmel, and it may be that these are lingering memories of the flora of the Pé Chói home world.

The Pé Chói penchant for logic and elegant simplicity can be seen also in their language. Their lungs, larynx, vocal chords, and other relevant organs are roughly similar to Man’s, but their differently shaped mouth, tongue, and teeth create resonances and timbres which are instantly identifiable as nonhuman. Some describe the Pé Chói accent as “flat and staccato,” while others hear it as “overly nasal, higher pitched, and somewhat sibilant or ‘hissing’.” The truth is, however, that the Pé Chói can master most of the languages of mankind with near-native proficiency. The converse is unfortunately not true; only those rare human orphans who are brought up by the Pé Chói from birth can produce any semblance of the clattering consonants, whistling sibilances, deep humming vowels, and breathy laryngeals of this race’s speech. Certain Pé Chói sounds are apparently not made with the usual vocal organs, and for these humans speakers must substitute finger snapping and other makeshifts, much to the Pé Chói hearer’s amusement.

There are, moreover, about six known Pé Chói languages, although three of these are said to be extinct now. The commonest is that spoken in the northern and eastern regions of Dó Cháka; another is the dialect employed by the western villages and the Mu’ugalavyáni Pé Chói; and the third is spoken by the “unpacified” Sáрку-worshipping villages in the interior of the Pé Chói area. The northeastern language is called Ts-kt, and it features an elaborate tonal system which can hardly be described without going into incredible complexities. Just to take one example, an element roughly rendered here as /tsopt/ denotes “parent.” Spoken in a low and breathy timbre, this syllable signifies “parent-in-general.” The same syllable

in a higher register and with what sound like strongly nasal overtones means “parent-in-specific.” With a rising intonation (symbolised by /’/) the word means “male parent” (with generality or specificity indicated as just noted); a falling and somewhat quavering tone (indicated by /’/) denotes “female parent.” The element /i-o-/ signifies “the following element is possessed” (the /i/ here standing not for the glottal stop but for a peculiarly Pé Chói ingressive post-velar click). With a long falling tone, /i-o-/ denotes “possessed by the speaker,” the same element with a high level tone means “possessed by the being spoken to”; again, /i-o-/ with a very low humming tone signifies “possessed by another being who is present”; and /i-o-/ with a falling-rising tone and accompanying nasality stands for “possessed by another being who is not present”; and /i-o-/ accompanied by a mid-level tone and glottal stricture means “possessed by an unknown being.” The language does not have formal categories distinguishing nouns and verbs; “I go” is simply a possessive noun phrase, “my specific going.” Tense, mood, aspect, etc. are indicated by a series of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes. While all of this is difficult enough for human learners, the major problem appears to be the elaborate complexities of syntax, and Pé Chói utterances seem like branching labyrinths of synchysis and aposiopesis. Nevertheless, the Pé Chói claim that their languages are far less redundant than those of mankind, and each apparent complexity in fact represents a truth perceptible to any who can cast aside his preconceptions.

None of the Pé Chói languages are “written” in the human sense of the word, although attempts have been made to adapt both the Tsolyáni and Mu’ugalavyáni scripts, utilising diacritics, special letters, and even coloured inks to represent the tonal registers. The original Pé Chói “writing” system consisted of a series of indentations pressed into a soft substance. These were then “read” with both the eyes and with the sharp and skeletal Pé Chói fingertips, which are sensitive not to our human sense of touch but to differences in height, depth, roughness, etc. The first “documents” written in this way were probably cylindrical sections of soft wood upon which the writer pressed the “characters” with his or her sharp fingertips, much as a human may make indentations in clay with the nails. Later, special substances and instruments developed, mechanical means of “reading” were invented, and a sort of “phonograph” was devised. After the Time of Darkness the Pé Chói of Tékmel went back to using a simple stylus with a metal or stone tip upon cylinders of wood or clay. These substances are fragile and do not long survive, nor do the Pé Chói share the human penchant for maintaining lengthy records. Each village thus contains a small store of these curiously shaped wooden or clay cylindrical “writings,” but they are largely mathematical, astronomical, or scientific in nature, and there are very few works of history, poetry, fiction, or other genres favoured by Man. No human, to the author’s knowledge, can read anything of the “written” Pé Chói languages.

The Pé Chói are also rather apathetic towards another area of intense interest to Man: politics. Those who dwell in the human empires do participate to some extent, but once more this appears to be in imitation of the activities of their human comrades. Those who live in the Pé Chói enclave in Dó Cháka do not even care whether they are ruled by the Tsolyáni or the Mu’ugalavyáni, so long as they are allowed to maintain their own way of life and are not too pressed by human demands. There have been efforts to attain local autonomy, and during periods of anarchy in the Five Empires completely independent Pé Chói states have arisen. Indeed, the “unpacified” interior regions of southern Dó Cháka are for all practical purposes independent to this day, and caravans and travellers from Páya Gupá in Tsolyánu to Pagús in Mu’ugalavyá prefer to take the southern route through Tumíssa westwards, rather than face attack by the Sárku-worshipping forest tribes.

Accurate records do not extend back into periods earlier than the Golden Age of Éngsvan hla Gánga, and although independent Pé Chói tribes and communities are mentioned in the Book of Priestkings of that dynasty, specific evidence of an organised state is lacking. During the Second Imperium, however, such an entity came into being during the Time of No Emperor (816-830 A.S.). It had a small Pé Chói village as its capital in a now inaccessible region of Dó Cháka [Hex 4302 of the map], and for a brief historical moment there were independent Pé Chói ambassadors at Khéiris and Tumíssa. Little is known of the structures of this “nation” except its name: Etk-mnútiikt-ssâ. In the 860’s the Tsolyáni Emperor Todukái Neqó “the Pillar

of the State” concluded the Treaty of Pagús with the Mu’ugalavyáni, and Imperial troops were sent in to crush the Pé Chói. This was done, but at a considerable loss of human life. Indeed, the Pé Chói were compelled to submit only through the use of Hláka mercenaries who set the forests ablaze and systematically slew many of the Pé Chói females and “village mothers.” This has not endeared these two nonhuman races to one another, although the Pé Chói hold little grudge against paid mercenaries.

A lesser form of localised autonomy was again achieved in the early 1500’s, but the reign of Metlunél V “the Esthete” saw the Chákas retaken by Mu’ugalavyá. The Pé Chói were forced to surrender to the “Red Hats” or were exterminated. The oldest and most prominent of the Tsolyáni Pé Chói auxiliary Legions, that of Tík-nékw-két, was decimated, and only a few escaped. Descendants of these troops later formed the spearhead of Emperor Kánmi’yel Nikúma V “the Pretender’s” invasion army in 1711 A.S. when Tsolyánu regained the Chákan homeland.

The other two Pé Chói Auxiliary Legions have quite different histories. The Legion of the Nest of Ttík-deqéq was created at the prompting of Emperor Nríga Gaqchiké “the Spider” in 1007 A.S. as a counter against those Pé Chói who served the Lords of Stability. It was devoted to the Black Old One and commanded much Imperial patronage. It was thoroughly trounced, however, only two years after its creation by the Legion of Tík-nékw-két, and its survivors fled into the interior of Dó Cháka, where they plundered all indiscriminately. Later it emerged to seek service with Emperor Targholél Nikúma “the Usurper,” and for a short time it was one of this ruler’s favourite units, accompanying him gloriously to Avanthár to stand guard beside the Petal Throne. When he was assassinated in 1062 A.S., the succeeding Emperor, Nu’únka “the Pious” commanded that it be disbanded and returned to Dó Cháka. Knowing that the Legion of Tík-nékw-két would slaughter it, however, its leaders took it by a circuitous route through the forests, gained some secret aid from the Íto Clan, and entered Mu’ugalavyá, where it took service as a mercenary unit. In 1314 A.S. the cruel Emperor Tontikén Riruné “Slave of Demons” bribed this Legion to return to the Empire. Then was committed one of the few really vicious acts in Pé Chói history. Once the negotiations with the Tsolyáni were complete, the Legion of the Nest of Ttík-deqéq slaughtered all of the human garrison of the city of Pagús, where it had been posted, looted the vast treasures of the city and of the temple of Hrsh, and fled back into Tsolyánu. This rich plunder never seems to have reached Avanthár, and it is said that some three million Káitars in gold, gems, ancient armour, and other valuables still lie buried beneath the humus of the forest floor somewhere in Dó Cháka. The Mu’ugalavyáni have never trusted the followers of the Black Old One since, and several punitive expeditions have been sent to “pacify” the Pé Chói on their side of the border. The Tsolyáni also have not wanted this Legion to remain a source of difficulty, and it was later posted all across the Empire to the Salarvyáni border, back to the Pijenáni frontier, north to Thri’íl, and finally to Tumíssa, where it saw service during the War of 2020. It was largely destroyed by the Plague of 2342, which struck only Pé Chói, but now Prince Dhich’uné has adopted it and is rebuilding it as an instrument for the Dark Temples. Most of its units are presently in Khirgár.

The Legion of the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá has been alluded to above. It is not an old unit, having been formed from the Pé Chói refugees resident at the city of Si’ís [hex 4406 of the map] during the Mu’ugalavyáni occupation of Dó Cháka. The Empress Aleyá “the Damsel of Purity” founded the Legion in 1900 A.S. and offered its leaders arms and armour. For reasons of their own, however, the Pé Chói chose to serve only as light infantry. During the later 1900’s this unit was sent upon a mad, fruitless quest into Saá Allaquí, but it managed to escape and returned in time to fight in the First Battle of Chéne Hó in the War of 2020. It gained some glory during this conflict but was reduced to only a handful of survivors at the Siege of Púrdimal. It was revived in time to participate in the suppression of the Íto Clan in the Chákan Uprising of 2045, however, and it is now posted in Butrús.

The Mu’ugalavyáni field two Legions of Pé Chói at present. Legion XIV of the Second Palace, called “the Slayers of Chkét,” is made up of troops from the north-western Pé Chói villages, who are linguistically and to some extent culturally different from the Tsolyáni Pé Chói. This unit is classified as medium infantry, and it has seen service in the War of 2020 and later against the rebellious N’lüss in the far north. It now numbers about 7,000 troops.

The other Mu'ugalavyáni Pé Chói Legion is called "Mandibles of Iron," and is listed as Legion XII of the First Palace. It is an experienced forest unit and is given patrol duty in the southern forests of Dó Cháka. Many of the troops are worshippers of Sárku and supporters of the dread Íto Clan. This Legion is smaller, with approximately 3,000 troops, but it is extremely skilled in scouting, guerilla warfare, and the duties of light skirmishers (even though it has the armour and resources to serve as medium infantry).

The Pé Chói seem to have no real military organisation of their own; within their own territories they divide everything into sixes, and each village thus fields as many squads of six as it can muster. These are combined together in larger units as needed. There is no tradition of a fixed command structure: utilising their almost instinctive principle of "appropriate action," the Pé Chói appoint a "Chk-tsê" (roughly translatable as "First one of Battle." This person may be given the leadership of anything from a single squad of six to a major task force of several thousand. There are thus "Chk-tsê" commanders of six, twelve, eighteen, thirty-six, etc., etc., and when a decision is to be made these "officers" gather together, commune briefly, and then by some mysterious method incomprehensible to humans, come to a solution that is carried out without confusion or dispute. The Pé Chói have no objection, however, to being enrolled in the cohorts of 400 preferred by the Tsolyáni or in the multiples of five favored by the Mu'ugalavyáni. "This is how it is wanted," a Pé Chói would say.

Aside from the military, there are many Pé Chói holders of high office in both Mu'ugalavyá and Tsolyánu. There are also a few in Yán Kór and a tiny scattering in other lands, but these are negligible. Perhaps the highest ranking Pé Chói in any human nation is Lord Ktò-típ-ssü, High Legate of the Palace of the Realm at Avanthár. This Pé Chói is now very old, having seen service in many capacities in Tsolyánu for nearly forty years. He has twice received the Gold of Glory from the Imperium, and three times been wounded in the service of the Emperor. Indeed, he was one of Emperor Hirkáne Tlakotáni's closest friends before the Emperor ascended the Petal Throne, and his loyalty to the Imperium is such that he was once offered the High Chancellorship, but refused, saying that it were best that a human should hold this incredibly powerful post.

Of the general, the leader of the ancient legion of Tík-nékw-két, a female Pé Chói whose name sounds something like Ptcht, is the most well known. She has introduced human officers and troops into the Legion, and her allegiance to the Imperium is unquestioned. She has opted to support the cause of the newly revealed Prince Surundano, the candidate of the temple of Thúmis, and her troops are now posted at Chéne Hó, where they have fought in several recent battles with the Yán Kóryani. The general of the Legion of the Nest of Tík-deqéq is on K-k-tk, a powerful male Pé Chói from the southern forests near Tumíssa. He is a close friend and ally of Prince Dhich'uné, and his ability and energy are much praised by the priesthoods of the Dark Temples. The Legion of the Forest of Hh-kk-ssá is led by one Mt-t-ik, an urbane and pleasant Pé Chói of middle years. This officer is also a male, perhaps a neuter, and he has always been loyal to the temple of Hnálla, in whose services he is regularly present.

In Mu'ugalavyá there are several priests and priestesses of both Hrsh and Vimúhla who are Pé Chói. The general of the Slayers of Chkét is an adherent of the former deity. His name is Tk-n-mtk, and his abilities as a strategist are widely praised; indeed, he has led his troops to three Qadárni victories over the Tsolyáni within the past ten years, and it is said that he will soon be called to Ssa'átis to serve on the Mu'ugalavyáni Board of the High Command. His colleague, General Ptèkw-tlún-tkík of the Mandibles of Iron, follows Lord Sárku; he is known as a cold and ferocious officer, and he is suspected of hidden loyalty to the Íto Clan, although he has been ruthless in his repression of the "unpacified" Pé Chói who oppose Mu'ugalavyá's control. It is said that he takes perverse pleasure in sacrificing human youths to the Lord of Worms, and this and other rumours have made him unpopular with the Mu'ugalavyáni.

The Pé Chói are in many ways deceptive: in appearance they are as alien to man as the ant; yet they work in friendly camaraderie with him. Their affable adaptability hides deeper waters, however, and it is doubtful whether any human can ever plumb the reaches of their intricate culture. One may well ask, what do the Pé Chói think of Man? What do they say amongst themselves when no human can hear? One human orphan,

brought up amongst this race is quoted as saying, “Man adapts; the Pé Chói remembers. But more, the Pé Chói say only that just as the Chrí-fly must have the dunghills of other creatures as its home, so we Pé Chói must share the world with Man...”