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The Land of the Manifest Spirit

Journey with Steve Foster to a far corner of the globe

At the end of each month, all official dispatches submitted to the Emperor are copied onto sheets of gold to form a new volume of the Book of the Mighty Imperial Deeds of the Great and Glorious Petal Throne. This book is kept in the Hall of Blue Illumination in the Chancery, where persons of status may view it upon application to the Lord Provost. A second ‘Inner Book’ contains additional secret information and is for the eyes of the Emperor and his ministers only.

What follows is an extract from a recent volume of the book. It deals with a land lying far to the west of any known Tsolyáni maps. This can be used in a campaign in either of two ways. Firstly as a springboard for introducing new players, since the social organization of the land is rather simpler than that of Tsolyánu and may thus provide a suitable provenence for player characters when the players are not familiar with Tsolyánu. Alternatively, this could be a place for characters to stumble across, either during the course of a very long sea voyage or (as was the case in my own campaign) after discovering a ancient tubeway system.

The report comes from Tegelbei hi-Nranta of the Golden Sunburst Clan, a scholar of the Temple of Thúmis.

Know ye, O Divine Son of the Mighty Gods, that I have returned from a most distant and intriguing land far to the west. I undertook this journey with my employer, Hetepek hiAztlan of the Clan of the Silver Links, whose wife Chamakiyang hails from that distant land and who arrived here in Tsolyánu under most strange circumstances.

Geography

Chung An Satar, which means ‘Land of the Manifest Spirit’ in the tongue of its natives, comprises two large islands lying some six thousand tsan to the west of Tsolyánu, which is to say about three thousand tsan west of the Tsolei Isles.

The two islands, which total about one third the land area of Tsolyánu, are separated by a narrow channel, the Straits of Ajong, only ten tsan wide at its narrowest point. A chain of mountains, which includes some peaks estimated at more than six tsan in height, runs the length of the islands and forms a small archipelago off the south coast. The snow on the highest peak is often whipped up the winds into a strange spiral shape which hangs in the air. The early inhabitants of the island believed this to be the manifestation of their deity, and named the peak Chung An: the Manifest Spirit.

Climate

The mountain range divides each island into a western plain and an eastern coastal strip. The climate in the broad western plain is hot, humid and varies little, reminding me of Penom during midsummer. The main seasonal variation is in rainfall. In the ‘dry’ season thunderstorms occur roughly every four days. In the ‘wet’ season this rises to every two days. In the mountains the climate varies rapidly with altitude, and here is found everything from desert to coniferous forest to glaciers. The eastern coastal strip is dry and much less fertile than the rest of the islands.

Inhabitants

There are two population groups in the islands. The majority of people belong to the Kutung ethnic group and are somewhat taller and more slender than we are. Their skins range in colour from a brown very similar to that of the Tsolyáni to a paler yellow hue characteristic of the aristocracy. It seems that in this land a person’s skin colour depends only on exposure to the sun.

There is a smaller ethnic group, the Miang, who mainly inhabit the infertile eastern plain. They make up about one sixth of the population. The Miang are tall—barely shorter than the N’lüss—and very lightly built. They have upturned noses and large ears. The Miang are peaceable and friendly, but rarely hold any positions of power.

History

It is thought by scholars of Chung An Satar that the Miang were the original inhabitants of the islands, and the Kutung arrived from the west about six thousand years ago. The newcomers quickly replaced the original Miang civilization, probably by taking advantage of the their good nature.

The Miang have a verbal tradition which tells of the ‘Ship of Priests’ which arrived many thousands of years ago. This was probably a contact between the Miang and the Engsvanyáli Empire, but I know of no other record of such an encounter taking place.

There are few ancient ruins in Chung An Satar. Both the Miang and the Kutung cannibalized old ruins for worked stone rather than engage in the practice of Dítłana. However, the mountainous regions and the eastern coastal strip contain ancient urban areas which were abandoned and never dismantled.

Society

The Kutung have a caste-based society. The highest caste is the old aristocracy, the Kutukiang, who may be recognised by the noble suffices -kiang or -iang attached to their name. There are no Miang members of this caste. The Kutukiang provide the most senior army officers and many lower-ranking officers. They totally dominate the navy, which is viewed as a good career for an aristocrat.

The next highest caste are the priests, the Thaleng, who use the suffices -leng and -aleng on their names. Lower ranks in this caste drop the suffix altogether and use the honorific Leng as a title. For example, Jammaleng would be a high ranking priest; Leng Jamma would be a low ranking priest. The priestly caste accepts only practising priests, their wives and young children. Children of priests who decide not to enter the profession themselves become members of the lower Pulom and Satom castes.

The Pulom caste is the merchant caste. Although slightly lower in status than the Kutukiang and Thaleng castes, they are powerful by reason of their wealth. Members of this caste use the Pulom honorific with their names, for instance Pulom Khimshu. The Pulom fund a substantial part of the army and provide many lower and middle-ranking officers.

The Satom, to which most of the Miang belong, is the lowest caste. Members of this caste are called by their profession and some nickname. Thus, Sruang Memi means ‘Farmer Boss- Eyed’, Tajong Pagar means ‘Labourer Gap-Tooth’, and so on.

The people of Chung An Satar are monogamous. Within each caste, people live in houses occupied by extended families, usually all descendants of the same grandparents or great-grandparents. It is also common for couples and smaller families to live apart in their own houses. These small units usually grow into one of the larger extended families over time.

There is no formal Aridani system in Chung An Satar. Most women are expected to become what we would term ‘good clan girls’. Women who do chose to enter some profession are tolerated once they have proved their ability, but rarely reach high rank and are often passed over in promotions. The army and navy are exclusively male preserves.

Religion

The Kutung have one main deity, Chung An, who is closest perhaps to a combination of Lord Thúmis and Lord Hnalla. Chung An has a helper-deity called Ankiang ‘the First Created’. Ankiang is said to have been the first human given life by Chung An, and was later raised to the status of a demigod. He is characterized as pragmatic and uncomplicated—more reminiscent of the hero Hrugga than, say, a divine Cohort such as Lord Cheggara. Ankiang is seen as the active principle of the pantheon. Storms, meteors and other strange events are said to be the hand of Ankiang rather than the hand of Chung An.

The adversarial deity in the Kutung pantheon is Nissi, God of Death. Nissi is best regarded as a combination of Lord Sáрку and Lord Belkhánu. The people do not view Nissi as a malevolent god, merely one with an unpleasant mission. He is intermediate in power between Chung An (who is his liege lord) and Ankiang. Much of Kutung mythology consists of tales of Ankiang foiling the schemes of Nissi.

Although Ankiang is not a true god, he is the popular deity of the aristocracy and of the majority Satom caste. He has no priesthood, and worship of him takes place at private shrines and a few public temples which are maintained by local people. The priestly caste and the merchant caste prefer the worship of Chung An, and occasionally Nissi, in formal ceremonies in large temples.

Lately a fanatical sect has taken control of the priestly caste and hence of the merchant caste. This sect, the Rujong, believe that Ankiang is a primitive myth and that the only true deity is Chung An. Nissi they view as simply the dark side of Chung An, and are not averse to using his methods to further their own ends. They live an austere, puritanical lifestyle based on the writings of Leng Miju, a priest who lived about three hundred years ago. The Rujong believe Leng Miju to have been a prophet of Chung An and hold that his teachings must be followed rigidly.

Government

The government of Chung An Satar is unlike any I have studied. The capital, Ajong Kuom, sits on the northern coast of the South Island at the narrowest point of the straits. Here the Kutukiang traditionally elect a ruling council of thirty from their own numbers. For the last eighteen years, however, they have bowed to preSsúre from the priestly caste and the wealthy merchant caste, and have been forced to accept a number of senior priests into the council. The council elects a leader from its own ranks, and this person has the deciding vote and some other autonomous powers. Lurukiang, the father of Hetepek hiAztlan’s wife, was a council member until his assassination, but never held the office of leader.

Over the last five years or so, the number of priests in the council has increased. Several of these were secretly members of the Rujong sect. Two years ago, the Rujong staged a coup and took over the entire council.

Kuliang, an aristocrat as his name suggests, took the office of leader. Since the coup, the council have formally imposed the law of Leng Miju. Worship of Ankiang is forbidden. The old aristocracy have been suppressed and many of its members murdered.

The coup has divided the land. There is a resistance movement led by Ramajiang, the last Kutukiang leader of the council, and his son Malakiang, a very capable and charismatic marine officer. The resistance has the support of the majority Satom caste, but the Satom lack the resources to challenge the Pulom-backed army, particularly now that it is backed by Kuliang’s power and the Ssú.

The Black Ssú

The island of the Black Ssú lies about four hundred tsan north east of Chung An Satar. These creatures have always been a problem in the region. Their frequent raiding missions to the northern and eastern coasts have forced the development of a formidable navy, but they are at once more devious and yet more tractable than their grey counterparts. Indeed, a number of treaties have been negotiated in the past via jurjek intermediaries. Jurjek are humans who have been captured by the Black Ssú and somehow mind-barred into becoming their servants. It is rumoured that some of the bravest merchants of Chung An Satar actually trade with the Black Ssú!



A Ssú Warrior

Tales and legends of the Black Ssú island tell of vast colonies of docile neuter-workers led by a small elite. It is thought that all the Black Ssú who leave the island are members of this elite. The Ssú are ruled by ‘Bassa’, which I suspect may be a jurjek rendering of some aristocratic rank rather than the name of an individual.

It is not clear how and when Kuliang allied with the Black Ssú, nor what benefit the Ssú themselves gain from the alliance, but it is clear that Kuliang is no mere jurjek. The arrival of a Black Ssú legion in Ajong Kuom a year ago was greeted with horror, but Kuliang has some means of keeping them under strict control. The populace have learned to live with them. Kuliang refers to these troops somewhat ominously as ‘The Legion of Nissi’.

I close my account with a description of the naval vessels employed by these people. Their ships are large and rely entirely on sail for propulsion. Most vessels have several masts, and their sails are rigged in a strange manner which permits considerable speed and manoeuvrability, even when sailing almost into the wind. The wooden planks from which the vessels are made are joined together in a curious overlapping fashion which gives them great strength. The vessels are armed with rows of ballistae and catapults, often hurling missiles soaked in burning oil.

This passage is followed by a glyph denoting ‘observe and report further’. The Secret Book, however, contains the following:

“The name Hetepek hiAztlan is known to us, as is his involvement in the death of Lord Langan hiTlakotani. His approaches to Lord Chiringga hiTishkolun for military assistance should not be discouraged. Send the drawings and descriptions of the foreign vessels to General Tlaneno hiVorodlaya.”

[\[Return to Top\]](#)