

Issue Five | Summer 1995

Joyful Sitting Amongst Friends

The last few months have seen the release of the new Tékumel rules, Gardásiyal, from TOME. Does this mean Tékumel will finally hit the big time? Not without help!

Brett Slocum: I want to encourage people writing Tékumel material to submit articles to the mainstream gaming magazines, as well as The Eye. This is one of the best ways to get new blood into the Tékumel fold. My recent GURPS Tékumel article in Pyramid and the publication of Gardásiyal will spark some interest and we, the Tékumel community, need to fuel that spark. I'm planning on writing an adventure and perhaps a more detailed world background (since my GURPS article was mostly game mechanics) for Pyramid or whoever will publish it.

Also, run events at game conventions. Use whatever rules you feel comfortable with, but get people playing in Tékumel. Last year, at a local convention in Minneapolis, Sandy Peterson (Runequest author) ran a Tékumel adventure using his Tékumel / RQ rules. It was well received. At the same convention this year, I'm going to run an underworld adventure using the Gardásiyal rules and the character archetypes provided with that game. (Fool that I am, I will also be running the Illuminati: New World Order tournament. I'm a fool because I've never run a Con event before and now I'm running two, one of which is a multi-round tournament. I understand that Contraptions in the UK will have a few Tékumel events. I hope to see more events at other Cons. Is anyone going to run some Tékumel games at GenCon or Origins? I certainly hope so.

If you do plan to run a Tékumel game at a convention, send me the information and I'll try to publish it here.

Dave Morris: In a society with high literacy like ours, it seems obvious that a "magic book" would be something that contained information—special information, sure, but just information. I don't think the Tsolyáni would actually see it that way. Literacy being so low, the very idea of the written word would be of something mysterious and magical. Just possessing a book could give you power—the fact of having it, not of having read it. It was like that in Ancient Egypt, so you have stories like the one about the wizard Setna, who apparently gained power from his magical library just as he did from his collection of talismans.

Yes, books certainly would be treated differently. Since the printing press hasn't been invented on Tékumel, books would be rare items that are passed from owner to owner over centuries. Each owner would annotate the text, making his own contribution to the worth of the book. I used to have a copy of Sun Tzu's Art of War which reproduced such annotations. It certainly brought home to me how important the history of an individual volume can be to its value.

Dave Morris: Back to Paul Snow's remarks vis-a-vis divine intervention. In all cultures you have activities that seek to imitate God: resting on the seventh day, fasting at Lent and so on. The idea is not that these activities gain merit, but that by doing them the individual becomes closer to the deity. I think this is why the Vimuhla berserker has more chance of DI—not that Vimuhla notices or cares what any individual worshipper does, but that behaving in that way helps the worshipper to become attuned, to be "one with Vimuhla" on the spirit plane. And that's what helps when he needs to call for DI.

On a related topic, I'm baffled as to why Dlamelish should be associated with rejuvenation. Wouldn't you think this would be the province of Dilinala, since her followers are obviously simulating eternal youth by maintaining their virginity? (Dlamelish as the dispenser of senescence, on the other hand... that makes more sense.)

I guess Avanthé would be associated with the natural cycle of the seasons, birth and death. Maybe worshippers of Avanthé regard aging as a part of the natural order of things and don't want to keep their youth. Presumably, worshippers of Dlamelish seek not youth but the age at which their sexual prowess is greatest.

Aidan Dixon: Much kudos for Martin Helsdon's art. It's a lot better than some of the stuff seen in official Tékumel publications. Only one reservation: how about some captions for those of us whose Tékumel lore isn't enough to identify the subjects from the clues in the pictures?

Martin's work certainly is fine. The pictures don't have captions partly because Martin hasn't given any and partly because I prefer it that way. The picture on page 4 [Histroy is Bunk], though, could easily be Zekkumet Ssamadan, the Godfather of the Foreigner's Quarter...

Aidan Dixon: Paul Snow's letter was interesting. My games of late have been tending more and more to the character-driven; I set up a situations and the PCs interact with it as they choose. I'd have thought that Tékumel was ideal for this sort of thing, with all its rich background detail. Sure, it's nice sometimes to play a straight dungeon (sorry, Underworld) smash-and-grab run, especially after a long day at work, but I would've expected most players to grab what Tékumel has to offer with both hands rather than sit around demanding to be spoon-fed a scenario.

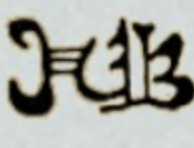
Well put, Aidan. Tékumel succeeds because of the world, not the rules. I've had many an enjoyable evening when players have forgotten the carefully-constructed plot and invented their own mischief. Why, that's exactly how we came to meet the Whisperer and be sold into slavery in the far east of Salarvya...

Dermot Bolton: I just saw a copy of the new Tékumel RPG rules last Saturday and my first impressions are not very favourable. The presentation is not to the standard I would expect, quite amateurish in my opinion. And did you notice that the back of the box is more eye-catching than the front? Within the books themselves the typesetting leaves a lot to be desired, I mean what are they doing using '%' and '\$' symbols to represent male and females?—very Tsolyáni don't ya think? Anyone can do better than that on Word for Windows!

Contents-wise it appears to be just a re-hash of the old Swords and Glory stuff, I think RPG rules have moved on a lot since the seventies so I'm puzzled at the apparent nostalgia. As for the actual system itself, well Swords and Glory was not the best then (apart from the magic) and still leaves a lot to be desired. And who ever heard of a 'complete' RPG boxed set where you had to buy an extra book to generate characters? One of the books looks like an old D&D manual for generating random adventures, full of tables and random encounters— not very useful. One other thing I spotted mentioned something about PC experience. (mis)Quote: "If a player role plays particularly well you may reward their character, e.g. a soldier could gain a Gold of Glory, etc." this is totally wrong! So do you mean to tell me that if I do a better job role-playing my low clan bodyguard than the guy playing a noble sorcerer I'll get rewarded with a Gold of Glory and he won't get 'owt? Whatever happened to status, bribery, skulduggery and all those other noble virtues that make Tékumel so fun? I sympathise with the motivation, but still I despair.

Thank you for the impromptu review, Dermot. But surely there is something positive you can say?

Dermot Bolton: Saying all this I recognise that there must be some redeeming features, although the way its been marketed isn't one of them. Advertising? What advertising? You see I just can't help knocking it, I better leave it at that until I see it again on Saturday. Oh yeah, it has a nice map.



Well, the Gardásiyal rules certainly seem to have had a mixed reception. Maybe Dermot will have calmed down enough to actually try playing it next Saturday.

Phil Holmes: I've been thinking about the Civil Service. Since status plays such an important part in promotions, how can you be sure that the people who rise high will be competent? The answer is you can't, and I think this explains why the bureaucracy has so many branches with overlapping functions. That way there's a good chance that somebody clever will bob up to the top in at least one branch, and he's likely to organize things to give his own branch more control. In other words, where in our society you have offices with defined power that are assigned according to merit (in theory!), in Tsolyánu you have offices that are assigned according to status and then have to jockey for position. (This was why Walsingham's fledgling intelligence department gained so much power in Elizabeth's day—the time was right, and it had the right man at the helm.) Thus you have the Court of Purple Robes, the High Provost's Chancery, and the Omnipotent Azure Legion all directing things from the top. Hopefully at least one of them will end up being run by someone who's competent.

An interesting theory. Never Assume that the men in power are competent. (It certainly holds true for the British Civil Service.) With so many people and so little real talent it is easy to see why rising bureaucrats may have to hire adventurers to do their missions for them. After all, incompetent adventurers usually end up a tletlakha food!

Dave Morris: Nathan Cubitt thinks Tsolyáni youth might go in for body piercing as a sign of rebellion against their parents. I don't think that would happen. In a culture with strong extended family links, you get on with the same alienation between the generations as we have today. A teenager might find it hard to get on with his actual father, say, but he'd have a host of what we'd call uncles and older brothers to give that restlessness an alternative outlet. (A rebellious young warrior might transfer some of his affection from his father to a favourite uncle in the army, for instance.) Not only that, but a young Tsolyáni doesn't have much leisure for rebellion—he's an adult at 14, after all. These are reasons why Tsolyánu (and real world cultures like it) are so conservative.

Quite true. It's sometimes hard to remember that the Tsolyáni simply don't think like us and don't have the same social problems. A youngster who wished to demonstrate his independence of clan control would be more likely to become deeply involved with a legion or temple. A young woman always has the option of becoming Aridani.

Paul Mason: Referring to the Issue of Divine Intervention, it might be worth mentioning the Chinese approach to talismans. As far as I can tell there are two basic types: one is created by the magical cloud script, and contains the spiritual power of its writer (bit like a Tékumel scroll from a temple). The other kind, which can be mass produced, were basically contracts with spirits made by Zhang Taoling, the first Taoist celestial master. If these worked, it was because of the spirits honouring the deal they did with Zhang, not necessarily because of any intrinsic worthiness of the person using them.

Having said that, some of these talismans placed strictures on the user: not eating meat, abstaining from wine, women and song or whatever. I think the latter type is more like a Tsolyáni DI. It's like a contract that has been negotiated centuries ago (by Pavar?), and which has been ritualised. The stuff which you lose should go to the temple, because it's through them (or rather, through their ancestors) that you were able to gain assistance. However, this presupposes that DI represents an actual ritual which is formally recognised and taught. I need to be clear on whether this is, in fact, the case.

This could explain a lot. Prof. Barker points out several times just how insignificant an individual human is to a god. Maybe gods intervene on a whim, or maybe they are honouring an ancient agreement with Pavar. On the other hand, many societies believe that you must attract the attention of gods by some ritual or act. Perhaps DI is granted only to those who attract the attention of a god by a ritual of DI or through some feat of significance to the god such as recovering a Key to the Blue Room.

Bob Dushay: Martin Helsdon asked some interesting questions about the Ssú's internal structure. Professor Barker told me that the internal structure of the Ssú is something like an interior exoskeleton. The skeleton is wrapped around the muscles but the skin is wrapped around the skeleton like a roll of paper towels. The skull is a "solid endostructure". The interior of the hlüss is similar.

The problem with large exoskeletons is that they are impermeable and constrict the movement of internal organs such as lungs. That's why you don't get too many six-foot beetles on Earth. Maybe the Ssú's skin helps it to breath? I'd like to see a dissection of a hlüss or pe choi to see how they've evolved around the problem.

Bob Dushay: A random thought of my own: given the size of the Salarvyani Empire and the relative strengths of the seven great families it seems likely that the each of the families ruled independent kingdoms after the fall of the Sevengyali Empire and that they were either conquered or negotiated into an empire. The continued power of the seven great families implies that this combination was probably relatively peaceful. It also implies that the regional differences in Salarvya are much stronger than in any of the other Five Empires.

Bob, I think we have to disagree on this. I have a cynical enough view of human nature to say that such a situation could not last. Sooner or later some ambitious leader would try to take over the whole shooting match. Salarvya is a huge country, and communications are probably difficult along it because of natural geographic boundaries. I suspect that this more than anything has helped to maintain the status quo.

I'd also guess that it's no coincidence that modern Salarvya occupies the same area as the ancient empire of the Fishermen Kings. Maybe its history that keeps the Salarvyani together as a nation?