

GMing Shamanism

When GMing the shamanistic world-view, the GM will often be called upon to improvise, describing visions of spirits and the spirit world. Shamans may interact with these spirits to achieve things impossible for normal men. Good players will come up with unexpected uses for the spells listed, and ideas for new spells.

A GM is not required, however, to use the magic system just because he wants to have shamanism in his campaign. With only one or two exceptions, the spells listed are of an inherently ambiguous nature. The characters could conceivably use them without ever knowing if they really work. The GM need merely make all the die rolls in secret, and then tell the players what their characters perceive. They need not know if the vision was real or simply a hallucination brought on by exhaustion. Similarly, a player won't know for sure if his character is blessed, since he won't be certain that that arrow should have hit him in the heart, and not the arm. But the *characters* will probably believe without question that magic works and spirits exist.

Herbalism

Hallucinogens are not the only herbs used by shamans in their arts. Stimulants and plants with medicinal value also constitute a major portion of the shaman's craft. Many shamans will have the Herbarry skill. Medicinal herbs are useful in curing, and a shaman will usually try them before resorting to magic. Also, certain herbs are believed to drive off evil spirits - wolfsbane and garlic, for example. Finally, some herbs have spiritual power, making them useful in Spellcasting and other shamanistic rituals.

Performance Skills

In performing his magics, the shaman has two potential audiences: the people who seek his aid in one form or another, and the spirits with whom he must communicate.

Spirits: The spirits may require him to "perform" for their amusement before they will aid him. Friendly spirits may be drawn by the beat of the drum or other rhythmic signal, while evil spirits may be frightened away by shrieking and threatening gestures. Every shamanistic spell will have associated gestures, chants and motions designed to intrigue and involve those of the spirit world. Spirits are willful at best, and the heart of the shaman's technique lies in his ability to communicate and deal with them. Often this is much like dealing with recalcitrant children, and should be roleplayed accordingly.

Onlookers: Because of the often capricious and unpredictable nature of shamanistic magics, shamans must become masters of performance. Often he alone can see the spirits he speaks to and combats, so his reputation may depend more upon his ability to make his arts believable than the true strength of his magic. Virtually every successful shaman has some skill in the art of performing. Acting, Sleight of Hand, and Ventriloquism skills are all very useful to a shaman who must practice in the public eye.

Disease: Diagnosis and Treatment

In most shamanistic beliefs, disease can be brought on by a number of factors, from the action of evil spirits to a taboo violation or crime committed by the sick individual. The shaman's job is to discover the true cause and set about finding a cure.

The Aura spell is used for this purpose. Taboo violation might manifest itself as a dimming or staining of the person's aura, and the shaman may be able to sense feelings of guilt. A disease caused by a foreign object might cause a spot or spots indicating points of entry. A person who is possessed will have two distinct auras: his own and that of his possessor. And a person whose soul has been stolen will have no aura at all! The most common treatments are listed, by cause, below:

Physical Injury: The shaman uses the Herbarry skill, First Aid, and the Healing spell. The rest is left to fate.

Taboo Violation: The shaman uses Divination to discover the incident which provoked the disease. The situation is then corrected by a cleansing ceremony, sometimes led by the shaman, and often involving the confession of the patient.

Object Intrusion: If an object of evil origin is causing the disease, the Cleanse spell is employed to effect a complete cure.

Soul Loss: The shaman uses the Summon Spirit spell to retrieve the patient's soul from wherever it has gone. The soul resists with its own IQ, or, if it was stolen, the spell is resisted by the stealing spirit.



Possession: The shaman casts Exorcism to oust the possessing spirit from the patient's body. Then, if successful, the shaman must use the Spirit Trap spell to capture the spirit. If this second casting is not performed (or is not successful), the spirit will almost immediately attempt to possess someone else, perhaps even the shaman himself!

Psychopomp

Another important job of the shaman is to serve as escort to the souls of the dead. This assures that they will not return as malevolent spirits to haunt him or his family. This journey is often quite long and dangerous for the shaman, since he must first enter and then leave the realm of the dead.

Each journey requires the shaman to enter a trance state in which he seeks the soul of the dead individual and sends it on its way. To return, he must successfully make a HT roll. External factors such as herbal stimulants and repeated drum beats and chants which call the shaman back may modify this roll at the GM's discretion.

Initiation

A shaman's initiation is the time of his first true trance, heralding his first true journey into the spirit realm. It may be the result of long training, or accidental circumstance uncovering a gift hitherto unknown. The initiation trance is almost always quite long and usually involves a near-death experience in which the would-be shaman explores and returns from the land of the dead. Sleep deprivation and fasting are the most common trance inducers for initiation ceremonies. Various other rituals may also be required, such as the imbibing of hallucinogens or stimulants, and scarification.

Visions seen during the initiation trance are often considered prophetic for the shaman, indicating future aspects of his life. Death visions are not uncommon.

No spells may be cast during the initiation trance.

Magic Items

Magic items in shamanistic magic have inherent spiritual power, affecting anyone who uses or touches them. Such items are very rare, and always natural in origin, though they may have been reshaped by human hands. The GM should be very sparing in introducing such objects. A shaman gets an automatic roll vs. IQ+2 to realize an item is magical when he first sees it, and again when he first touches it.

There are three common effects for shamanistic magic items:

Bless: confers a blessing on the possessor. This effect may be specialized. For example, a magic spear point made from the fang of a sabertooth tiger killed in battle might provide a +1 to skill when attacking herd animals only. The spiritual nature of the tiger defines and limits the item's effect.

Curse: The item is imbued with a spiritual force hostile to humans, and to touch it or have it in one's possession will result in being cursed as with the spell. The power of the curse is left up to the discretion of the GM.

Power: The object is a repository of spiritual power. These are very rare and of no use to anyone but shamans. In order to draw upon this power, the shaman must touch the object while casting the spell. If his spell skill roll succeeds, the item provides 1 or more energy points of the spell's cost - exactly how much is determined by the GM. Should the roll fail, the caster absorbs all

Shamanistic Accoutrements

The dress and accompanying props of a shaman often have as much symbolism and meaning as the ritual he performs. The costume indicates not only a sacred presence, but incorporates symbols which constitute the shaman's view of the cosmos in which he travels.

Clothing is particularly important. Shamanistic ritual is never done in ordinary, everyday clothing, no matter what that might be. Some strip naked for the ritual, using body paint or tattooing to express the necessary symbology, while others don elaborate costumes. It may be as simple as a band worn about the head, a particular combination of jewelry, or a cap sewn with feathers or other important totemistic elements.

Masks are a common element, often frightening in aspect so that they might better ward off malicious spirits. During psychopomp rituals, the shaman may cover his face with animal fat to give himself an aspect of death.

Symbols of flight are also quite common, whether they be feathers, full wings, or artistic recreations of birds, representing the flight of the soul from the body as it travels to other realms.

Mirrors are sometimes incorporated to help the shaman view the world better, or to reflect the needs of mankind in their depths. Mirrors are thought by some to be the repository of the soul, and thus indispensable to the workings of the shaman.

Drums are another common accoutrement whose meaning varies. Some find their methodical beating necessary to enter the trance state. Others use them as a beacon or a summons, to draw the spirit world closer so that they may enter it. Still others use it as a link to the "real" world, providing a path for their return. The making of the drum is often a ritual in and of itself, the materials used having symbolic meaning to the shaman and the tribe, providing a stronger link with the spirit world. Some trances begin with the shaman narrating the history of the drum, even to the component elements - a drum made of deer bone, for instance, may incorporate the spirit of the animal.

energy loss; a critical failure will result in a disastrous backfire in which the object is either destroyed or Cursed (as above).

Spells

Shamanistic spells are a combination of Performance/Ritual and magical ability. Use the rules in the *Basic Set*, Chapter 19, for Spellcasting, with the final skill level being the lower of the shaman's ability with the spell and his Performance/Ritual skill.

Shamanistic spells require the shaman to enter a trance state unless explicitly stated otherwise. Shamanistic spells generally take longer to cast than their "standard" counterparts, though they have fewer (or no) prerequisites and often require less energy. Shamanistic spells may only be learned by those with the World Sight advantage (see p. 94).

Epilepsy

In most primitive cultures, epilepsy and other disorders which cause seizures are given considerable significance. Often, a person suffering from such a malady is thought to be possessed by demons, in communication with the gods, or to have some special power. Seizures occur when the person is in conflict with a spirit, or when his soul has entered the spirit world. Thus, epileptics may be regarded with a substantial amount of fear or respect - or both.

For game purposes (if the GM wants to incorporate epilepsy into shamanism in his world) an epileptic seizure should be considered an *involuntary* trance. It will come on suddenly, and last from a few minutes to as long as half an hour. The person can also induce the seizure deliberately (for details, see *Epilepsy*, p. B28). He will be completely unaware of his surroundings, and *nothing* will bring him out of the trance early. He will, however, be completely able to see and act in the spirit world. This means that he can use any spell which can be cast in a trance state if he knows it and has the time - and may see spectacular visions.

Upon coming out of the trance, he will suffer 1 die of fatigue damage, which can be recovered normally. This can be dangerous if the shaman used energy to cast spells during the seizure; if he does not have enough ST left to absorb the fatigue damage, he will lose HT as well!

Should the shaman have a seizure - either deliberately or involuntarily - in the presence of persons who do not know him, the following reaction modifiers apply:

+ 1 if they already knew he was a shaman and that didn't bother them. Now they know he's for real.

-1 if the viewers have seen seizures before, but didn't know he was a shaman; they don't trust him.

-3 if the viewers have never seen seizures *and* didn't know that he was a shaman. On a poor reaction they will flee, but not attack - it's best not to get involved where demons are concerned!

Information

Same as the magic spell (see p. M53). Additionally determines whether the subject has the World Sight advantage (or any other divine magic special advantage that the caster is familiar with).

This spell does not require the caster to be in a trance state. *Cost:*

3 (for any size subject). *Time to cast:* 3 seconds.

Aura

Banish

Regular; Resisted by Spirit's ST+IQ

Will send any spirit or soul back to the spirit world. To succeed, the caster must win a contest between his IQ + spell skill vs. the ST + IQ of the spirit. Add or subtract any modifiers for the caster's Strong or Weak Will. If the spirit loses, it immediately disappears, and must stay in the spirit world for one year. This spell may only be cast in the "real" world; the caster cannot banish a spirit from the spirit realm, though he may *be* banished from there by an unhappy spirit.



This spell does not work against undead or any spirit currently inhabiting a corporeal form.

Cost: The spirit's ST + IQ divided by 3. In most cases the caster will not know how much energy the spell will require, and may fall unconscious or even injure himself casting it.

Time to cast: 10 minutes.

Prerequisites: Summon Spirit and IQ 13+.

Bless

As with the magic spell (see p. M62).

Cost: 8.

Time to cast: 1 hour.

Cleanse

This spell cures any disease caused by an object implanted with the Pestilence spell. The caster can remove the object without making any incisions, usually by sucking. If the spell is cast successfully, the disease is completely cured - assuming such an object was the cause.

Cost: 8.

Time to cast: 2 hours.

Prerequisite: Healing.

Control Weather

Allows the shaman to make a slight change in the local weather patterns. He may request one single effect: cloud cover, rain, snow, windstorm, etc. The result is completely up to the GM's discretion, depending upon the oddity of the effect (rain in a desert is a lot harder than snow in the mountains). The change in weather is not instantaneous, but rather a gradual change that will take its course. Once cast, it is virtually impossible to stop. Successive attempts to change the weather within the same month are rolled at -3 for the first, -6 for the second, and so on.

Cost: 10.

Time to cast: 8 hours.

Curse

Regular

As with the magic spell (see p. M63). *Cost:* 3. *Time to cast:* 2 seconds.

Death Vision

Regular

As with the magic spell (see p. M72).

Cost: 2. *Time to cast:* 15 minutes.

Divination

Information

As with the magic spell (see p. M55).

Cost: 8.

Charlatanry and the Shaman

Not everyone who claims to be a shaman has magical powers. In fact, a GM might decide that shamans *cannot* use magic, and that all their "casting" and trances are an act. If this is the case, the performance skills are vital to the shaman. He gives elaborate performances for the sake of his audiences, who *believe* that the spells really work.

Just because shamans don't actually have magical power doesn't mean that they are ineffective. Most anthropologists consider shamans to be primitive psychotherapists. Many of the "diseases" which shamans of modern hunter/gatherer tribes cure do not exist as far as modern medical science is concerned. They are thought to be purely psychosomatic, resulting from the belief on the victim's part that he is possessed, or has sinned, or is under spiritual attack. Since the victim also believes that the shaman has the power to cure him, the cures actually work. Furthermore, all the modern medical techniques in the world would be worse than useless against this sort of problem. The victim must *believe* in the cure.

Shamans may themselves believe that their powers are real, or they may simply consider themselves more intelligent and less ignorant than their fellows. Either way, the cures usually work.

Even if magic really does exist in the game world, there will still be fakes. These individuals must be talented to survive, and their performing secrets will be closely guarded. They will be very careful about choosing cases, accepting only those patients who are likely to recover anyway. Such a person will never be without a ready excuse for failure - "He has violated a taboo and not told me about it," or "The evil thoughts of someone here are preventing the spell from working." If worse comes to worst, a true charlatan can always rely on humility - "I do not know if my meager powers are great enough to drive out such strong evil!"

Shaman Critical Spell Failure

Roll 3 dice. The GM does not have to use this table; he is free to improvise as appropriate to the spell and situation. If a result on this table is inappropriate, or if it is the result that the caster actually *intended*, then roll again.

3 - Spell fails entirely; caster takes 1 die of damage.

4 - Spell is cast on spellcaster.

5 - Spell is cast on one of the caster's companions (roll randomly).

6 - Spell is cast on nearby foe (roll randomly).

7 - Spell annoys spirit; loud moaning is heard.

8 - Spell affects someone or something other than its intended target - friend, foe, or random object - roll randomly, or GM makes interesting choice.

9 - Spell fails entirely; caster takes 1 hit of damage, and his trance is broken.

10 - Spell fails entirely; caster is stunned (IQ roll to recover) and his trance ends.

11 - Spell angers spirits; causes all within sight to have nightmares for a week.

12 - Spell produces a weak and useless shadow of its intended effect.

13 - Spell produces the reverse of the intended effect.

14 - Spell produces the reverse of the intended effect, on the wrong target (roll randomly).

15 - Spell fails entirely; caster temporarily forgets spell - make IQ roll after a week, and again each following week, until he remembers. Caster can study the spell during this time, but it is a waste of time.

16 - Spell angers spirits; a prized possession is broken (GM's choice).

17 - Spell fails entirely; caster's right arm is crippled - 1 week to recover.

18 - Spell fails entirely; an angry spirit appears immediately and attacks the cast-

Time to cast: 1 hour.

Prerequisites: Death Vision, Summon Spirit.

Exorcism

Regular; Resisted by possessing spirits IQ

Drives out any spirits foreign to the subject, ending any possession or control of the subject. Caster must be touching the subject.

Cost: 6.

Time to cast: 3 hours.

Prerequisites: Summon Spirit.

Healing

Regular

Restores up to 3 HT to the subject. Does not eliminate disease, but will cure harm already done by disease or wound. This spell is risky if used more than once per day by the same caster on the same subject. Skill is at -3 for first repetition, -6 for second, and so on.

Cost: 1 to 3; same as amount restored to subject.

Time to cast: 10 minutes.

History

Information

Cast on any inanimate object (or 1-hex section of a large object), lets the shaman determine the past of the object, its user's personality, events of significance to the object, etc. - but no names! The history can be detailed or general, at the caster's discretion. Detailed history can begin from the present and work back, or begin at some other point in time known to the caster.

Cost: 3 for each month examined in detail; 5 for general sense.

Time to cast: 1 hour for each month examined in detail; 30 minutes for general sense.

Prerequisite: Seeker.

Pestilence

Regular

Infects the subject with a loathsome plague (caster's choice, though GM can veto an inappropriate selection) by sending a spirit to attack the subject, steal the subject's soul, or penetrate the subject with a disease-causing object (again, caster's choice). The effects are not immediate, but the disease will take its normal course.

Duration: Permanent until cured.

Cost: 6.

Time to cast: 30 minutes.

Prerequisites: Healing.

Remove Curse

Regular

Nullifies any curse. If for any reason the skill level of the subject spell is unknown, the GM's assessment is final.

Cost: 10.

Time to cast: 10 hours.

Prerequisite: Bless.

Seeker

Information

As with the magic spell (see p. M54).

Cost: 3. One try per week. *Time*

to cast: 30 minutes. *Prerequisites:*

Summon Spirit.

Sense Spirit

Information; Area

As with the magic spell (see p. M72). The caster need not be in a trance state.

Cost: 1.

Time to cast: 1 second.

Spirit Trap (VH)

Regular;

Resisted by spirit's IQ

Lets the caster trap the subject spirit within some object (which must be at hand). The spirit is imprisoned until it can possess the body of someone touching the "trap." It does so by winning a spirit combat (see above), but the spirit rolls at -2. If the trap is destroyed, so is the spirit - permanently. The spirit adds its ST to the object's in determining how easily it can be destroyed.

The wandering soul of a person, living or deceased, may also be imprisoned in this manner. *Cost:* 6.

Time to cast: 1 hour.

Prerequisites: Summon Spirit.

Summon Spirit

Information;

Resisted by spirits IQ

Lets the caster speak with a disembodied spirit or the spirit of a dead person. If in life the subject was a friend of the caster, it resists at -5. If the spell succeeds, the subject will answer one question, to the best of its knowledge (GM's decision), and one more for every minute it remains.

The spell may also be used to lure a stolen or lost soul back into the body of an ill person. In either case, the shaman must have met the living or conscious (in the case of soul loss) person. If the soul of a dead person is being summoned, the caster must be at the site of that person's death. Otherwise, he must be in the presence of the patient whose soul is to be recovered.

Duration: 1 minute.

Cost: 6 for the first minute; 4 for each successive minute.

Prerequisites: Sense Spirit; Death Vision.



TRADITIONS



Since before the dawn of time, man's search for meaning in the universe has shaped his thought into countless religions. This chapter offers a quick glimpse into a small number of these many faiths.

Animism

The belief that all reality is inhabited by spirits and souls, and that everything is in some sense alive, is called *animism*. Many animists, like the ancient Greek and Hebrew philosophers, believe that spirits and souls are some form of undefined matter. This belief in the "animation of the inanimate" is not limited to ancient or simple cultures. The proud car owner who pampers and polishes "his baby," the angry golfer who curses his club after a failed shot, the gambler who must have his lucky dice - all of these actions illustrate a form of animistic belief.

There are three basic forms of animism. Some believe in and worship the souls or spirits of people and animals, both living and dead. *Necrolatry*, the worship of the souls of the dead, is one form; ancestor worship (see below) is another. Both are widespread forms of animism. Other people believe in free-form spirits that are not associated with any object. This belief, known as *polydaemonism*, refers to the unranked masses of spirits of an animistic world, as opposed to the ranked deities of polytheism (see p. 131). Often both polydaemonistic and polytheistic beliefs are found in one religion.

The Human Soul

Many religions have elements of animism. Hindu and Buddhist beliefs hold that matter is an illusion, and that the soul-spirit is the only reality. Salvation is achieved when individuality is lost by absorption in the *Atman*, or *all-soul*. But most Western traditions emphasize the individuality of the soul-spirit.

The nature of the human soul has long been debated. A common belief is that the soul is an "inner double" which dwells within and pervades the body. Other views hold that the soul is localized, and dwells in specific parts of the body such as the throat, head or heart. Many believe that the soul cannot exist outside the body and that it is created at a specific point in time, such as at conception. Religions which believe the soul can exist separately usually also hold that it is created at conception or birth, or that it has an independent origin separate from the body.

Most religions believe that the soul survives after death. The soul may pass to an afterlife at once, or it may be delayed as punishment for deeds done during the individual's lifetime. Some believe that the soul exists only while living relatives remember the deceased; if they neglect to venerate the soul, it ceases to be. Many believe souls can continue to interact with the living, as guides, ghosts or other lingering spirits.

Reincarnation

A soul may enter a new body after death. Belief in reincarnation is common to many religions, especially Hinduism. Hindus believe that salvation is much too difficult to achieve in a single lifetime. All living things, including humans, exist in a complex hierarchical scale. How well an individual lives determines where upon the scale he will be reincarnated - those who do well are promoted, those who are mediocre remain where they are, those who fail are demoted.

Totemism

Totemism reveres a mystical relationship between an individual or kinship group and a totem. Totemism is common in tribal societies that practice ancestor veneration, from the North American Pacific coast to South America to the Eurasian plains. This totem might be a crafted object that a spirit inhabits, or it might be a living entity such as a plant or animal. If a totem is identified with a primordial ancestor, that animal-spirit will be a guardian or adviser to its living descendants. Harming a totem animal is often forbidden, even if one's life depends upon it. Slaying such an animal for food is unthinkable; some animals are to be slain only in ritual sacrifice, and are eaten only by priests and other holy persons.

Sometimes killing and eating a totem animal is considered to be a holy act of communion, establishing a link with the ancestor or the divine. This is thought to endow the participants with particular virtues, such as strength, courage, bravery or wisdom. In many societies cannibalism serves a similar purpose, granting the diners the chance to participate in the life of the deceased. In cultures that practice ancestor veneration, the dead might be consumed so that the living might share in an unbroken line of continuity that traces back to the first ancestor.

Finding a Totem

There are many different types of totems. Sometimes the link between a family and a totem-spirit is very strong and everyone knows which spirit protects which family. In other cases, each individual in the family must go upon a *vision quest* to find his personal totem. In many of these cultures, no one considers a person to be an adult until he has successfully completed such a quest. Finding this totem is an intensely personal act, usually carried out at puberty. The individual goes on a solitary journey into the wilderness. Usually fasting and other forms of self-discipline are employed. Sometimes hallucinogenic herbs or potions are used to aid the process. The seeker stays in the wilderness until his totem reveals itself. Seekers who fail are never heard of again. They might die, or they might go elsewhere, but if they return without their totem they are considered dead.

In some cultures one's totem is a vital secret; if the person speaks of his special totem at all, then the guardian-spirit will become affronted and leave. In other cultures, people are very open about their totems.

Shamanism

Strictly speaking, shamanism is not a religion but rather a series of techniques. Elements of shamanistic belief are common to many religions and there are many varieties of shamanism. The term is commonly used to refer to the beliefs and practices of those individuals who appear to have magical or spiritual powers.

The word *shaman* is thought to be derived from the Siberian Tungusic *saman* or possibly the Sanskrit *śramaṇa*, meaning ascetic. A shaman is considered to be a healer, diviner, magician, clairvoyant and escort of the dead. Shamans can attain a state of trance or ecstasy which enables them to enter spiritual realms and dimensions. During this tranced state, the shaman's soul is thought to leave his body and either ascend into the sky or descend into the underworld.

Cosmology

A shaman's calling is to break through the cosmic planes in order to communicate with those who dwell in other spiritual worlds. The most common cosmology is three-tiered: the earth, surrounded by a sky-world above, and an underworld below. A unique tree, mountain or pillar often represents the central axis of the world and provides a path of communications between the tiers.

Spirits and deities which dwell within these other worlds can - and do - affect the lives of humans in the middle world. It is the place of the shaman to intervene and communicate with these spirits.

Shamans are common in cultures where the high god is seen as inactive and its role is being filled by nature and ancestor spirits. In other cultures there are divisions between shamans, depending upon whether their actions are benevolent or malevolent. Shamans are highly respected and even revered, but they are usually feared and isolated. While people may rely upon the shaman, they often also blame the shaman when harm or misfortune befalls a community.

Vocation

A shaman either inherits his vocation, or is called to it. Potential shamans are often chosen at a young age from specific lineages and carefully taught and trained until their initiation. Sudden calls of vocation are also associated with illnesses or the arrival of sexual maturity.

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Early Buddhism denied concepts of caste and held that there was no soul, that the concept of self was an impermanent one. One's destiny was determined by karma (see p. 15); those who are not enlightened could be reborn as anything from a god, to a ghost, to a hellish being. Some sects of Buddhism hold that the dead person remains in a transitional state for a specific period of time before being reborn.

Nonhuman Spirits

The most common type of nonhuman spirit is the *nature spirit*. These are associated with some natural object such as a river, lake, mountain, tree, rock or plant. Some nature spirits are connected with forces and processes of nature such as thunder, lightning, fertility and rain. These spirits are related to their objects in the same way that a human soul is related to a human body. Nature spirits have varying degrees of power and definite personalities.

Some spirits are not connected with a natural object or phenomenon, but are rather defined in terms of their intrinsic moral character. Angels, good faeries, demons and devils are prime examples of these *ethical spirits*. "Good" spirits are thought to be benevolent toward humans and their aid is sought through offerings and ritual. "Evil" spirits are considered to be selfish and malevolent - they must be placated with offerings or warded off with protective rituals and charms. Some evil spirits can possess a human being, causing abnormal or dangerous behavior. They may be expelled through rites of healing and exorcism. Other spirits are not necessarily "evil" or "good," but too alien or indifferent to be useful. The realms of spirits often have complex hierarchies governed by sovereign spirits. These sovereigns are either equal in power and opposite in disposition, or totally unequal in power.

Divine spirits are beings of great power, and may even be deities. The ancient Greeks made distinctions between their gods and goddesses and the nymphs and satyrs. But often this distinction is unclear and varies greatly. The spirits of Japanese Shinto vary in power from the smallest spirits of rocks and trees to the great spirits who created the world. Generally divine spirits are more "human" in both personality and intention than ethical or nature spirits. Over time, some powerful ethical spirits may evolve into true divine spirits.



Ancestor Veneration

Ancestral spirits are rarely actually worshiped, but rather placated through rituals of honor and homage. They usually require sustenance and attention in order to exist. Those who venerate their ancestors commonly believe that needs and obligations do not end with death. It is the duty of living descendants to care for their ancestors - as their ancestors continue to care for them.

Ancestral spirits are often concerned about the welfare and fortune of their living kin and may intervene in the affairs of the living. If they are pleased and placated by dutiful service, these spirits may offer protection and advice. If angered by neglect, they may torment, haunt or curse the living. Divination is often used to determine how happy these ancestors might be. Sometimes an ancestral spirit might possess a descendant in order to offer oracular advice. Ancestor veneration usually adds stability to the family unit. It can also provide a means of dealing with death - those who fear death may be comforted knowing that they themselves will be remembered and venerated.

Domestic rituals are usually of vital importance. Food, drink and other valued objects are commonly offered at ancestral shrines. Wooden tablets or carved sticks and stools are often considered to be merely representative of ancestral spirits, rather than any sort of permanent home.



Shamanism (Continued)

A shaman's initiation usually involves extensive rituals that result in an ecstatic or visionary experience. Serious illness might duplicate this. Common imagery associated with such experiences includes visions of death and dismemberment, reduction to a skeleton and the cooking and consuming of the body. After this visionary destruction, the shaman's body is restored, more powerful than ever. The shaman also travels, journeying to the sky or underworlds where he meets helpful spirits. Often he also learns special languages, used only for communicating with the spirits.

The shaman becomes able to enter states of ecstasy at will, and break the plane of normal experience. To do this, the shaman is aided by spirits. Only a limited number of these spirits are controlled by a shaman. In shamanistic performances, he will speak in the voice of his familiar spirit. The shaman is not thought to be possessed, but rather touched or transformed, since he remains in control of the ritual.

Duties

Illness is thought to be caused by the loss of the soul or vitality, or by the projection of objects into the body by spirits from these worlds. A shaman travels forth and rescues stolen vitality, or removes the damaging objects. Thus a shaman is also a healer, for only the shaman has the power to deal with malevolent spirits.

Shamans are also psychopomps - escorts of the soul and the dead. This is the most dangerous of the shaman's duties, for it requires that he undergo a symbolic death. He might also escort the spirits of sacrificial animals to their intended destinations.

Other duties of the shaman include finding lost persons and objects, and controlling the weather. Shamans might also engage in spiritual battle with each other, especially in the form of animal spirits.

Shamans often wear highly symbolic costumes and masks. These masks are not used to disguise the shaman, but rather to represent a particular mythical personage or divine spirit. Drums and rattles are other common tools of the shaman.

Dualism

A dualistic worldview believes in two irreducible and ultimate principles which continually oppose each other. They are equally matched, although this may vary from time to time. These principles are both contrasting and complementary - neither can exist without the other. Sometimes each principle is thought to contain a minuscule amount of its opposing quality. The well-known yin-yang symbol is a classic depiction of this. Often these principles are abstract forces involved in an ethical or cosmological struggle. These forces might be personified by opposing deities, or even opposing pantheons.

On a personal level there is the dichotomy of spirit and mind. Mind cannot function without spirit to drive it; spirit cannot express itself without the mind. The relationship between body and soul is also important. Some hold that the soul dwells temporarily within the body - others believe the two cannot exist separately and that the death of the body brings about the dissolution of the soul.

On a grander scale, dualist forces are more abstract, yet balance between them is necessary to ensure a cosmic well-being. Deities are often concerned about maintaining this balance and use both divine and mortal agents. The struggle between order and chaos is a common theme. This is not an ethical or moral conflict - chaos is change, a state in which chance is supreme; order is a stable state of uniformity. Order applied to primordial chaos brings creation, but too much order results in stagnation and the loss of creativity. Balance is needed to ensure prosperity.

Other dualistic forces such as light/dark and good/evil are common religious themes. Light and dark are opposing forces, but their conflict need not be an ethical or moral one. Darkness can be associated with the cold, night, winter, death and mystery; light can represent purity, brightness, fire, summer and warmth. An eternal battle between good and evil often involves absolute archetypes - good is good and evil is evil and never the twain shall meet. This struggle can be supernatural and cosmic in scale, or a conflict between individuals. Such struggles will be dirty, for these boundaries are unclear. Individuals of either side may find themselves compromising their morals to achieve their goals. In this view of duality, everything is in shades of gray. Good cannot exist without evil, and vice versa, for each bears a little of the other within it.



Rituals vary in nature from private offerings to rites involving the entire living lineage. Daily commemorative rituals are common, as are special private requests for advice at times of fortune or crisis. Anniversaries of deaths are important and are often remembered by special rituals. Other rites keep the ancestor up-to-date on family concerns and gossip. Although these obligations may be delegated, it is usually the head of the household who acts as an intermediary between the supplicant and a particular ancestor. In Japan, the daily domestic ritual is often performed by a spouse or close relative.

Public rituals generally address the entire collection of ancestors, both recent and distant, as a group. These rites tend to occur at temples or other sacred locations. Festivals of the Dead and cyclical agricultural rites are examples of this type of public ritual. These rites are usually performed by the senior member of the family on behalf of many relatives, often from multiple households. Non-religious forms can include such traditions as a "roll-call" of friends or classmates who have perished (especially in war.)

Earth Religions

Worship of the earth, in its many forms, is the oldest and most widespread form of religion. Earth religions are commonly concerned with the cycles of the world, birth, death and rebirth, the seasons, and the mystical nature of planting, growth and harvest. Often these religions are dualistic and the deity is personified in male-female terms. The earth is often pictured as the nurturing mother-goddess, while the god is often seen as Lord of the Hunt.

Earth religions often have shamanistic and mystic elements - in many cases hidden knowledge and teachings are not revealed until after a formal initiation or some other test of enlightenment. Most earth religions believe that the divine is manifested in everything and everyone who lives. All life is interconnected, and what affects one part of the world affects the rest. Thus all that lives should be respected. Death is not feared, but seen as part of the natural cycle of the world. Life springs from death, allowing for change and new creation. Free will is a basic tenet in many earth religions. Some may emphasize growth, transformation and personal enlightenment, while others are ultra-conservative, wishing to preserve old traditions at all costs.

Rituals celebrating the change of the seasons and the cycle of life, as well as healing and protective ones, are the mainstay of earth religions.

Polytheism

Many religions revere a pantheon of related gods. These gods are usually seen as ruling separate spheres such as astronomy, weather, the elements, life cycles, conflict and culture.

Family Pantheons

This type of pantheon is usually structured in ways that echo cultural values. (The GM must decide if the culture is mimicking the mores of the gods, or if the culture sees their deities in terms of their own society.) If monogamy is the social norm, then the gods will echo this. Marriages and children abound, and much of the politics of the gods revolves around family-type crises and sibling rivalries. Often societal mores (such as those which forbid incest) are ignored by the gods. The very fact of their divinity allows them to break their own rules. If priestly or royal lineages feel that they have been touched or ordained by the gods, they will often ignore such rules themselves.

Court Pantheons

These pantheons are rigidly hierarchal, and have enormous celestial bureaucracies. The supreme being is seen as a ruler, and is often not worshiped directly. Lesser deities serve as lords and officers of the court and report directly to this ruler. Demigods and other divine servants make up the bulk of the bureaucracy.

Opposing Pantheons

Sometimes a pantheon faces opposition from an entirely different pantheon. The relationship between these pantheons might be strictly dualistic, regulated by a neutral force which strives to ensure that the struggle remains balanced. In other cases, differing pantheons might vie for control over a particular world or

Popular and Folk Religion

These religions are characterized by their complexity and their important role in everyday life. Ancestor veneration, fertility rites and sacrificial practices are vital, along with a pantheon of personified deities and beliefs in demons, ghosts, spirits, exorcism and divination. Popular religions are "melting pots," and usually adopt new thoughts and practices with ease.

Most of these religions began in China and Japan, but are now found anywhere in the world to which people of those countries have emigrated.

Household Deities

In popular religions, ancestors and household gods are connected to an enormous celestial bureaucracy. Family members usually turn to their own - more approachable - household gods for protection from misfortune and illness, and appeal to them for fertility, wealth and family harmony and well-being. These deities watch over the family as well as they can, reporting difficulties to their divine superiors.

Small icons or idols are commonly placed upon the altar in each home, along with images of respected ancestors. This altar - the center of family worship - is often located in the main room of the house facing the front door. Other icons of celestial or agricultural deities are also popular. Sacrifices of food, incense and wine are offered at regular intervals. Sometimes every significant aspect of the home or family life is personified in some divine form and given proper and continual ritual attention. An example of an important household god is the Chinese "stove deity," whose image is enshrined above the kitchen hearth. Responsible for the behavior of the family, he reports once a month to the local city gods. Once a year he reports to the head of the pantheon.

Beyond the Household

Outside the household, ancestor worship may be practiced in clan temples and is often associated with educational and economic activities. City neighborhoods and rural areas are usually divided into divine jurisdictions. These local gods, called *t'u-ti kung* in most areas of China, are responsible for the fertility of their particular area. Families in the area usually maintain shrines on a rotating schedule. Shop and trade groups, secret societies and small religious sects all have their own patron deities and saints. Such groups often ignore the normal class strictures of the society and are open to people of varying education and social levels.

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Popular and Folk Religion (Continued)

Deities

The deities of popular religions often began as human beings and were deified over time as a reward for their works. Deities with a history of triumph over difficulties are particularly popular. These deities usually owe their existence and status to worship by the living. Temple deities are commonly worshiped with great pomp and ceremony. Special offerings, processions and other entertainments may mark their birthdays. Annual festivals are often extremely popular and are strictly observed.

Hostile Influences

Some supernatural forces might work unceasingly to bring disorder, suffering and death to the world. Such hostile forces are usually called "demons." These unlawful forces can be subject to divine command, but they are usually unruly and highly uncooperative. Repeated invocations, prayers and other strenuous rituals are required to restrain these forces. Such exorcisms underline the continual struggle between the gods and demons, illustrating the semi-dualistic nature of popular religions.

Leadership

Hereditary leaders, such as the heads of families, are usually responsible for rituals performed in clan shrines and temples. Leaders of secret societies and sects also tend to inherit their positions. Village temples are served by elders who are often selected by lot and serve for a specific period of time. Spirit-mediums, spirit-writers, healers and magicians are charismatic leaders who have divine or shamanistic ability. They are employed by families who require special aid to heal disease or deal with spirits. Fortune-tellers and geomancers may be consulted when a family needs to build a temple or find a grave site.

Morality and Ethics

Health, long life, harmony, prosperity, continuation of the family and protection from harm are some of the goals important to adherents of popular religions. They may achieve these goals through familial piety, honesty, reciprocal consideration, loyalty to friends, frugality and diligence.

Most adherents of popular religions believe that after death the soul goes to purgatory; once there it will be judged according to concepts of karmic retribution. This passage through purgatory may be aided through purchased prayers and sacrificial rituals. When the soul's guilt has been purged, it passes into the final court, which decides its next existence.

sphere. Younger pantheons might try to overthrow older ones, as Zeus did Cronus and Odin and his brothers did Ymir.

Free-form Pantheons

This type of pantheon is a loose collection of deities. Dozens, hundreds or even thousands of deities might band together, perhaps beneath a charismatic, yet unorganized, leader. This organization is very chaotic, although the deities themselves need not be. New gods and spirits are constantly being born or recruited, older gods fading away or being forgotten. Alliances and rivalries change and shift from moment to moment, or they endure for all eternity. Such deities often have small spheres of influences, or share a large sphere with several others.

Satellite Pantheons

These pantheons are often descendant or splinter groups. If a pantheon grows too large, younger deities might decide to leave and form their own separate alliances. While they are somewhat isolated from the general affairs of the major pantheon, they can be called upon in times of great need.

Geographical Traditions

African

African religions are not usually concerned with dogma or thoughts of personal salvation. Deities and spirits are worshiped because, along with people and animals, they maintain the diversity of an established, natural order. The goal of one's life is to maintain this order. The divine is honored through everyday activity.

Reverence for a supreme being is found in almost all African religions. Triune images are common. These forces flow from the divine to specific clans or locations, such as streams and trees. Humans can call upon each force. In some cultures these forces take on a distinct individuality and are thought of as ministers who serve a greater chief. The divine is invoked through these lesser forces. If the supreme being has entirely withdrawn from the petty affairs of earth-folk, these servants portion out divine favor. This explains disease and ill fortune - the supreme being is good and benevolent, but one must worry about the intermediary spirits. Often the supreme being is thought to be either female or androgynous. Esoteric philosophies often insist that reality and the divine are androgynous, created out of the balance of universal female and male qualities. Matrilineal cultures are common, and the divine is often viewed as a celestial Queen or earth-dwelling Mother.

An unusual theme in African religions is that the divine expresses its active benevolence by remaining in heaven. Everyday life continues without its direct intervention. If the divine comes too close, then sickness, madness or death results. Those struck by lightning are thought to have been chosen by the divine. Shrines are erected to the spirits of these people, for they have become divine intermediaries. Rain and lightning storms are treated with great reverence, worshipers begging the divine to go away.

African belief commonly holds that each individual has numerous "souls." Spiritual and physical health must remain in harmony with the environment. Healthy social relationships are vitally important in the maintenance of spiritual balance. Loyalty and generosity to family members - as well as regular sacrifices to ancestral shades - ensure inward peace and external well-being. Ignoring obligations can cause illness, bad luck and even death.

Native American

Native American religions vary greatly, although they do share several common themes. But even religions that hold the same basic concepts and ideas can have different ceremonies, customs and mythologies. The importance of religion also varies from tribe to tribe. Some, like the Zuni, give a special reverence to religious rites, while to others religious practices are an integral part of everyday life.



Codal Systems

These religions have an extensive series of laws and philosophies. They might not involve the divine at all, but rather provide a system of law and ethical thoughts to maintain social behavior. Proper actions, dress and speech are all determined by these long-standing laws. Adherence to these ensures personal prosperity and fulfillment. If the religion acknowledges a deity, that deity is usually considered to be the ultimate judge.

Dispute and Settlement

Many interpersonal disputes do not need to be taken before either a clerical or civil judge. They are commonly dealt with by avoidance behavior, fighting, prayer, verbal insult and feuding. A codal system defines the exact lengths and means to which participants may go to solve the problem.

Legal disputes are typically handled in formal ways, before either religious or civil authorities. There are many ways to settle such arguments. Punishment might be of the "eye-for-an-eye" variety, imprisonment or a standard fine set by the community.

Contests of wit or skill are common. Physical combats may be used to settle charges of assault or murder. The outcome is seen as a divine judgment.

Ordeals may be used to settle conflicts concerning honor, truth, purity, treason and betrayal. They are painful physical tests whose outcome depends upon divine justice. Refusal to submit to such an ordeal is often taken as an admission of guilt. These tests can be relatively harmless, or can involve burning, scalding, bleeding and poison. If innocent, the accused will not be harmed. In the Middle Ages those accused of witchcraft and sorcery were often bound and thrown into ponds or rivers, in the belief that if they floated, they were guilty. If they sank, they died - but they died free of accusation and guilt.

A *moot* is an informal gathering of the community to discuss the conflict. These meetings are organized by the family and neighbors of the disputers. Domestic disputes are commonly settled at a moot.

A court system deals with conflict through formal procedures. Judgments are given out by officials who have both authority and means to enforce their decisions. In a codal religious state these judges - and all other associated officials - will be clerics. Divine or magical means will often be used to ensure truthful testimony and to inflict punishment.

Atheism

There are many forms of atheism, which denies the existence of divine beings and principles. Some hold that any non-believer is an atheist. But some religions actually incorporate atheistic beliefs, such as Theravada Buddhism, which includes the concept of *anatta*. Anatta denies the Brahmanical/Hindu belief in selfhood. Early Buddhism viewed the *atman* as an unchanging, undying, perfect spiritual essence that resided within the body. Anatta insists upon the unreality of the self and denies all cravings and desires, so that the true reality of the divine can be understood.

Atheism is likely to be a common philosophy in a world where gods are absent or inactive. If scientific law and rationalization take the place of mysticism in explaining the way in which the world works, atheism will flourish. An atheist requires irrefutable, rational proof of divine power. An oppressive regime might insist upon a policy of atheism, outlawing all religious worship to secure its own power. If the religion's deity depends upon worship, such political action could influence the deity's power, or even destroy it. In such a situation, a cleric's life would be difficult indeed.



Hunting tribes often have loosely-defined mythologies which describe both a heaven and a world of humanity, sometimes with vague references to an underworld or a cosmic tree. Agrarian tribes often re-enact highly-detailed mythologies in elaborate rituals and ceremonies. A worldview of layers (underworld, human world, otherworld) is common and is often associated with the concept of a world tree. Within the mundane world, tribal areas are strictly defined, usually by geographical terrain. The traditional lands of the Navajo, for example, are defined by four holy mountains. Cross themes (symbolizing the four winds and the four corners of the earth) are very common throughout prairie, plains and southeastern tribes, as are sacred-circle designs. These are incorporated into village layouts, holy lodges and campsites. The Sun Dance lodges of the plains tribes represent the sacred universe.

The Supreme Being

While the concept of a supreme being is common in many tribal traditions, it is not universal. Often seen as a creator, its degree of involvement with people is not standard. While supreme beings may seem to be more powerful than the other gods, they are not always seen to be leaders of those gods. They are usually thought to be intangible or invisible. Often natural phenomena are viewed as manifestations of the supreme being. The supreme being is commonly associated with food (which is provided through the bounty of nature) and the connection with heaven, which symbolizes power and authority. Supreme beings often seem to be distant from humanity (though not unaware of their needs) and are rarely mentioned in mythic tales and stories. A divine representative (such as the hero, the trickster or the twins) is usually the focus of such legends.

The supreme being is often associated with the sun, especially in parts of the American southwest, and is common to both sedentary and nomadic peoples. The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona consider the sun a powerful divinity, though only the Hopi regard the sun as creator, and perform special ceremonies at the solstices intended to modify the sun's journey. Gulf and Mississippian traditions are theocratic, with a priest-chief believed to be a divine substitute for the supreme being, the sun. The sun is primarily believed to be a male deity, although some, like the Eskimos, Algonquin, Cherokee and Seminole, depict the sun as female.

Supreme beings are often believed to manifest through atmospheric phenomena such as wind, thunder, lightning and rain. Thunder is often believed to be caused by spirits in bird-form: their flapping wings produce thunder, and lightning flashes from their eyes. Thunderbirds are a common motif in native American art and are often depicted in multiples of four - one for each of the four directions.

The Cosmic Pillar and the World Tree

Another common theme is that of a cosmic pillar holding up the heavens; often this pillar is symbolized in ritual by a sacred pole. Such poles often record the mythic legends and history of the tribe. Such practices are especially common among the coastal and plateau tribes of western Canada. Sometimes the cosmic pillar actually represents the cosmos, or even the supreme being, as in some of the Sun Dance rituals of the prairie and plains tribes.

The concept of a world tree is even more widespread than that of a cosmic pillar. The Iroquois revere the "tree of heaven" from whose roots the mother goddess fell down to earth. While especially common to agrarian tribes, the

concept is shared by hunting and fishing tribes as well - the Tlingit of north west America believe the world tree is represented by the Milky Way. The concept of the world tree implies a belief that the divine is keeping constant watch over a specific people; as such the world tree is often represented in annual festivals and shamanistic rites.

Goddesses

Moon cults are not as common as solar cults, though many divine spirits are believed to have lunar qualities. The creator-goddess of the Shawnee is associated with the moon, and the Zuni revere a goddess called the "moon mother," as do the Apache.

Agrarian tribes commonly revere an earth-goddess, often viewed as an all-powerful deity. As the goddess of birth, she represents the continuance and renewal of life. Vegetation goddesses are very common and often closely linked with the earth-goddess. Some tribes, such as the Pueblo Indians, make a distinction between the Mother Earth and the Corn Goddess. In some cultures numerous goddesses represent a variety of plants; the Iroquois revere the Corn Sister, the Bean Sister and the Squash Sister.

Living with Spirits

Often, certain geographical areas are considered to be the abode of spirits. The Dakota and Cheyenne revere the Black Hills as such a place, while the Pueblo Indians venerate lakes and other openings in the earth as places from which their ancestors emerged long ago. Mountains are also often regarded as holy places; spirits that dwell there are usually greatly feared. The Shoshoni regard the Grand Tetons with trepidation.

While some spirits are feared, others are guardians. A specific spirit - often represented by a specific animal - guards members of a particular clan. Taboos often prevent members of a clan from harming their guardian animal/spirit, or totem. In much of Northwestern America, the totem is a guardian spirit who once helped the clan's ancestral founder. The totem poles common to coastal tribes are heraldic or historical representations, and not necessarily images of gods. Elsewhere - for instance, among the Iroquois or Zuni - members of a particular clan are believed to be actual descendants of their totem. Protective talismans and medicine bundles are often thought to be given or blessed by totem spirits. Guardian spirits may also be found by performing a vision quest. Such quests are often part of puberty initiation rites. In some tribes, such as the coastal Kwakiutl, people with the same guardian spirit join together in secret societies. Such societies have their own traditions, mythologies and rituals which only members share. (See also *Totemism*, p. 127.)

Medicine Men and Shamans

Shamans and medicine men are important members of many tribal societies. The word "medicine" was used by translators to describe various manifestations of supernatural power. Often these supernatural gifts have been received through visionary quests. Ordinary people believe a shaman or medicine man is more mystically gifted than they. Medicine men or shamans also heal, and most importantly, use their powers for the benefit of their societies. This service to the community often gains the shaman both prestige and political power. Not all native American "medicine men" are shamans; only those



Agnosticism

Agnostics believe that, given the limits of the mind and human perception, it is impossible to truly *know* if the divine exists. Agnosticism does not actually deny the divine, just one's perception of it. Agnostics do not *believe* in the divine, but they can, perhaps, be convinced otherwise. Agnostics could be found in any game world where divine activity was unknown or exceedingly rare.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the philosophical study of the nature of the intangible. It uses scientific methodology to study the nature of reality and challenges all belief, even the assumption that the divine exists. Metaphysicians describe their work as a study of ultimate, irrefutable proofs.

What Exists?

Plato conceptualized what he called *the form*: an archetypical structure which denotes some primal aspect or substance. A *particular* - a concrete object which took on an aspect of a form - only received some appearance or element of the form's reality and was unable to attain the purity of the true substance. Aristotle argued that *forms* were actually abstractions of *categories* of reality apparent in a particular. These are abstractions of universal substances, while Plato claimed that his forms truly existed and could be discerned, not by the eyes of the body, but by the eyes of the soul. This conflict between the reality and the abstraction of primal substance was later dubbed the problem of the existence of *Universals*. Other philosophers took the argument even further, denying even Aristotle's abstract categories of substance. Some held that any sort of classification was artificial.

Most modern metaphysicians discuss reality in terms of processes and events. The terms "soul" and "mind" are used interchangeably. Material substance occupies space, but mental substance - with God as the supreme example - exists in the mind. Life consists of the intertwining of these two disparate substances. Space and time are often seen as being ultimately unreal. Reality does not endure throughout time, nor is it subject to the dimensions of space. Time and space are by definition limited - one space excludes another and no two times can be simultaneous. God is infinite and omnipresent and so must exist outside of time and space.

who can establish contact with the spirit world are called shamans. Medicine men are often religious authorities without this special talent. Many tribes have female medicine "men" and shamans, especially native American tribes in northern California and Oregon. Transvestitism is very common in some North American tribes, such as the Netsilik, Sioux and northern Californian tribes. Such an individual (often called a "berdache") represents both male and female aspects, thus holding a particularly potent supernatural power.

South Asian

South Asian traditions have a common belief in the interaction between people and spirits. Often there is an underworld inhabited by the dead, deities and spirits - but some cultures do not believe in an afterlife at all. Divine forces are usually believed to be invisible and limited in power. Many deities are utterly dependent upon regular sacrifices, and get angry if they are ignored.

Benevolent deities are rarely supplied with material offerings - worship and attention pleases them more. Possession by a deity or clan spirit may occur when the worshipers need to be reminded of some failed duty. The supreme deity - usually associated with the sky or sun - is rarely given more attention than the lesser, earth-bound deities. There is no concept that such a deity stands in opposition to any "evil" force, or that there even *is* such a malevolent, hostile force.

Divine forces are totally indifferent to the moral conduct of their worshipers. So long as the proper offerings and rituals are carried out, the divine will grant protection and blessings. Breaking a *taboo* will bring misfortune, but not divine retribution. Few tribal languages have a word for "sin." A priest's duty is to maintain good relations between the people and the gods. He is not responsible for influencing the behavior of his fellows. Priests discover the causes behind ill luck and illness, and if a god or spirit is responsible, then they act to appease divine wrath.



Southeast Asian

Almost all of the religions in this area are dualistic, with strong oral traditions, shamanism and ancestor worship. Many



see the afterworld as a mirror image of the living world. Illness and death are believed to be caused not only by malevolent spirits, but also by sorcerers. Shamans not only perform cures, but also determine who or what is to blame for the problem.

Sacrifice of domesticated animals, and even people, is a common tradition. Large animals are offered (usually burned) to gain large favors. Hunter-gatherer tribes practice a form of self-sacrifice by offering their own blood. The ultimate sacrifice is a human head. Raids to obtain these are often an important part of mourning and funeral rites, and heads are often mounted upon gates or walls. The ghosts of such heads become guardians of the community, and protect the village from spirits which might cause illness or crop failures.

Melanesian

These societies revolve around commercial transactions and reciprocal giving. Conscience and morality are achieved through reciprocal relationships. Transactions determine both kinship and friendship. It is necessary to understand the powers of nature to gain success in farming and hunting. Secret rituals and spells, usually chanted jingles, grant some control over rain, blight and other natural disasters.

Ancestors and clan guardians are seen as benign, yet sometimes troublesome spirits. People must appease these spirits by offerings of produce and pigs. These are made with great ceremony; such feasts are used to extend one's range of transactions. It is impossible to equally reciprocate the powers of a storm or earthquake. When a person (such as a sorcerer) shows such nonreciprocal power, he should be struck down to restore the balance of power. (Sorcerers are thought to be responsible for illness and misfortune, caused by their attempts to express power over other people, even spirits.) The individual is first forced to admit to his mortality, and then is often killed for denying the harmony and necessity of the equivalent transaction.

Polynesian

Ceremonies abound in these societies. Rituals involving pig and human sacrifice and even cannibalism are performed in elaborate temples of stone and wood. In such cultures, personal integrity lies in the legitimate use of coercive power. The identity, power and worth of an individual depends on maintaining the favor of a multitude of gods.

The supreme being is seen as an obscure force, vaguely associated with the East and the rising sun. The creative forces are a duality. The primary creator is male, associated with the sky, birth and harvest. The female is both a destructive and creative force, associated with the earth, underworld, earthquakes and volcanoes. From this mating of earth and sky was born a host of lesser deities. Many other spirits arose independently. Every bush, grove, stream and even sea current was the province of some spirit or another. These spirits are appeased by feasts, rituals and sacrifices. All crafts and abilities have divine patrons or spirits, as well as enemies who strive to thwart such activities.

Mana in such a culture is the "demonstrated power of effectiveness," and is evidence of divine favor. A high chief has the most mana. Lesser chiefs are subject to him and so have less mana. In some tribes, only men have mana; women have none, but they can drain male mana. In other tribes, only women have mana or other divine power. A hierarchy of priests offers advice and organizes all the various feasts and rituals. *Seers* have animal familiars and are consulted

Maltheism

Maltheistic religions are those which encourage or support "evil" activities, particularly those against people. Their deities are dark and twisted beings, with no redeeming qualities. They encourage their followers to perform violent, sadistic acts of worship. A clear understanding of the nature of evil is central to these types of religions. There is an evil, and they are it.

Worshippers are drawn from the malcontents of society, the sadistic, the insane, or those who seek their own survival. If a maltheistic deity is intent upon devouring the world, people may flock to its worship in the hope that if they must die, they might at least be eaten last. Maltheistic religions are usually underground, hidden things which rebel against the societies of which they are a part.

Examples of maltheistic religions can be found in literature, such as Lovecraft's cthonic deities. There are no documented examples of true maltheism in the real world. Many religions which the popular press, and others outside the religion, consider "maltheistic" - such as the worship of the Hindu god and goddess of destruction, Shiva and Kali, and Satanism - are in reality fairly ordinary religions meeting the spiritual needs of humans. (A Hindu, for example, believes that Shiva and Kali destroy such things as worldly desires, making it easier for an individual to avoid accumulating karma. Satanism is a religion of rebellion - followers do everything backward to obtain prosperity.) Unfortunately, a religion can get a reputation as maltheistic, from something observed and misunderstood (as has happened with voodoo), or because the religion is so secret that rumors about it are not contradicted. At that point, the twisted, the violent, the sadistic - those at the margins of society - begin to claim membership as an excuse for their transgressions. Their beliefs may have little or nothing to do with the religion or its actual practice.

Maltheistic religions can, however, play a part in a game world, especially if a GM wants a clear-cut "bad guy." These types of religions may also be useful in horror campaigns or classic quest adventures, where the characters are the only hope remaining between the evil gods and the destruction of the world. (See, for example, "The Lord Beneath the Ice," *GURPS Horror*.)

Whose Chaos Is This, Anyway?

Part of the problem in discussing chaos is the definition of the term (which, like the term "chthonic," has meanings that predate Lovecraft). "Chaos" has very strong connotations to gamers - connotations that don't apply in a religious perspective. These particular *gaming* connotations mostly stem from Moorcockian fantasy.

Chaos in a religious sense deals not only with randomness but with change, and with life and death. Some hold that life-force by its very nature is chaotic, since life *is* change. Chaotic deities often deal with creative/destructive forces, cycling through them from one divine aspect to another - chaos to substance, substance to chaos - or even both forms existing together. The worship of Kali is a prime example. Much of India still worships her as a divine mother, but until the 19th century (and British interference), the Thuggee sects also flourished in northern and central India. These groups worshiped the chaotic and destructive form of Kali, Bhavani, and chose their sacrificial victims to honor her. Not only was the sacrifice an act of worship, but the manner of death - strangulation or decapitation - was as well. These acts echoed the goddess's own actions. Devotees decorated her statues with the severed hands and heads of her offerings, and heaped the bodies at her feet. Sometimes a valued worshiper was sacrificed as well.

In some religions, chaos is seen as the absence of all restraint, a state of anarchy and disorder, a whole-hearted denial of all societal mores. Society often views such worship as divinely-inspired madness. The most devoted worshipers of Dionysus, or Bacchus, sometimes came together in drunken bands that roamed the countryside, attacking and even dismembering any who would not join in their revels. Some thought that Dionysus himself led such bands, while others believed that his followers merely copied the god's debaucheries.

for divinatory advice. They are susceptible to trances and spirit possession, but they do not share the healing abilities of the true shaman. In some tribes only women can be true shamans.

Tapu is the concept from which the term *taboo* is derived. In meaning, *tapu* is a combination of "sacred," "holy," "forbidden" and "not done." There is a definite connection between *mana* and *tapu*: at one end of the scale is coercive power and freedom, at the other many restrictions. As the gods have power over people, so people desire power over others.

Australian Aboriginal

Oral traditions flourish in Australian societies. Guardian spirits and tutelary deities - usually associated with specific places or kin groups - are very important. Religion is vital to both economic and political activity. These cultures have a strongly developed sense of moral integrity and identity.

Australian aboriginal belief starts with the *Dreamtime*, during which creatures with human, animal and divine attributes wandered about. They flew through the air, traveled underground, transformed themselves, hunted, made laws and generally created the order of things. This order has continued down through time to the present, and is remembered in myth and story. People, animals, plants, stars, rocks, streams and winds are all seen as part of the Dreamtime. Some myths are the property of specific totemic groups, others are known to all. All the myths, activities, rituals and stories that came from the Dreamtime are considered to be a part of a sacred heritage: they make the *Law*.

Status and prestige within the group is dependent on one's understanding and interpretation of the Law. Elders govern aboriginal life according to their wisdom and this law. Birth is seen as a reincarnation of a Dreamtime being. The place where the child is born (or where the mother first felt it kicking) determines the totemic attributes of the child. People who challenge the harmonies of the Law, such as sorcerers, misuse the Law for their own selfish means. Thieves and adulterers are considered sorcerers, as are those who cause illness and death.



SAMPLE RELIGIONS

8



The Divine Court

Once upon a time on the far islands, a young man knelt within his family shrine and prayed for help in his courtship. One of the ancestor-kami had a very soft heart and decided to take matters higher up. So he cleansed himself in the fumes of incense that filled the shrine, dressed himself in his best intangible robe, and flew upward, toward the mountain of minor courts, toward Hai'si'ka, the Court of Domestic Relations.

Hidden in the clouds upon the mountain's highest peak was the finest castle that the ancestor-kami had ever seen. He swept in through the door and was confronted by the seventh minor undersecretary to the fourth subminister. The ancestor-kami bowed deeply, kneeling, touching his head to the floor the required five times. With great respect he explained his task.

Fortunately for the ancestor-kami, this was a very slow day for the seventh minor undersecretary to the fourth subminister, who went to speak to the sixth minor undersecretary to the fourth subminister. After some consideration the sixth minor undersecretary agreed to carry the plea further.

As so the petition continued on, from minor undersecretary to subminister and then on again, until finally the plea came before the second subminister himself.

The second subminister was a grand old kami, dressed in five fine intangible robes, his offices decorated with wispy clouds in the Edo style. He shook his head sadly and looked down at his first undersecretary.

"This appeal really should have gone through proper channels, to the Ministry of Record. They are the ones who handle family alliances."

The first minor undersecretary to the second subminister cleared his throat tentatively and offered, "The subminister is of course correct. But the ancestor-kami points out that since the petitioner and his intended are ninth cousins four times removed ..."

The second subminister frowned slightly, then nodded. "Well, that is all right, then. Make out the papers."

And so the first minor undersecretary to the second subminister did just that. He handed the papers to the second minor undersecretary, who took them to the third minor undersecretary and so on until finally the seventh minor undersecretary to the fourth subminister stood once more before the ancestor-kami, papers in hand.

Continued on next page ...

The preceding chapters give you all the tools you need to create imaginary religions - like these six samples. There are religions here for aliens, for spacefarers and netrunners, for medieval or near-future times, for strange cultures. Now create your own ...

T'Si'Kami

From before time Herself began, there was the iShaka, the Breath. And in the darkness the iShaka whispered, and from these whispers were born the Winds of Time. Fierce and free, the Winds blew through the Celestial Heavens, scattering Light from Dark, and Water from Land. And as Light fled from Dark, the Celestial One stepped from the Shadows and called the Winds to order, sending one to each of the four corners of the World. But the Fifth Wind remained and clung to Her Fingers. Then She spoke, and Her Voice was the iShaka and it breathed upon the Fifth Wind, scattering it from Her fingers. Through the Heavens the scattered fragments fell, until they came at last to rest upon the rocks at Her feet, bringing Life where there once was none. And so the kami, the children of the Fifth Wind, gave birth to ShiShaka.

The ShiShaka rarely leave their island homes. Family ties are of utmost importance to them - someone without a family is not truly alive. Their society is extremely stratified, each family having rank according to the occupation of its members. Each island has its ruling family, with several noble families beneath that. Fishers and sailors rank next - they are given high respect, for it is they who dare the treacherous currents of the Da'kasha sea. Beneath that are craftsmen, merchants and farmers. Families make alliances within their own ranking. Only the noble and ruling families ally with those of other islands.

All ShiShaka follow the ancient tenets of T'Si'Kami. This is "the Way of the Spirits." All aspects of the world and nature, the wind and rain, fire and water, lightning and thunders, forests, rocks, mountains and trees have their own guardian-watchers, the holy *kami*. The human spirit is different, for only humans do not have a kami. Their souls are called *tala* and are received at birth from the ancestor-kami of the family. A *tala* departs the body at death and floats upon the winds of time until 49 years have passed. The living must remember the deceased during this time; if they do so well, then the *tala* joins the ancestor-kami. If they do not, the *tala* may become *ni'kami* - a spirit which will torment them until they change their ways. If a person has no family to perform the rites and the *tala* is forgotten by the living, it is lost forever upon the winds of time, never to become a kami.

The living have specific duties, according to the T'Si'Kami. First, they must be grateful to the kami, and diligently observe all the festivals and ceremonies, performing their duties with all sincerity, cheerfulness and purity of heart. They must give help where help is needed, without thought of reward. It is important that they think long and ponder upon the will of the Kami. And finally, they must live their life in harmony according to the will of the Celestial Empress, praying that the country will flourish, according to her need and will.

Organization

The Celestial Empress is the head of the Divine Court. There are many *Hai'ka'i* - minor courts with their own *Hai'do*, or Minister. These courts handle

the affairs and appeals brought to them by each island's *Hai'no'sai*, or divine lobbyist. The most important of the minor courts is the *Hai'si'ka*, Court of Domestic Relations, which handles all matters concerning internal family problems and obligations. The *Hai'ki'lan*, the Court of Honor, deals with matters of personal duty, or *jiri*. The Court of Record, the *Hai'i'hai*, deals with the histories and alliances of each family. Pleas to avert divine wrath are handled by the *Hai'so'ki'da*, the Court of Appeals, and even the lowest ranking ShiShaka can pray for attention from the *Hai'da'ki*, the Court of Common Pleas.

Major appeals to the kami of the Divine Court are generally made by the family head. Direct personal appeals are allowed but considered somewhat disrespectful. It is better manners to appeal to the family kami, or ask a wandering priest to intercede. Once the problem has been brought to the attention of the court, the relevant *Hai'do* may either question the family kami further on the matter, or pronounce a judgment.

Each of the *Hai'ka'i* has specific colors associated with it, as do their festivals. Five is a holy number, for there are five holy winds, five elements of the world and five stages of life.

In contrast to the divine bureaucracy, there is little hierarchy among the mortals of ShiShaka. The head of each family or clan serves as its priest and is responsible for the household rituals. An alternate may be appointed for the minor rituals, but it is considered disrespectful if the family head is absent from the greater rituals. In addition, enlightened individuals can serve as wandering priests. A visit by such a person is a great honor.

Shrines

The *Shi'da'kami* is the center of each dwelling, no matter how great or humble. It is here that the kami are worshiped. While each family strives to create the best shrine it might afford, simple elegance is preferred. The altar is stone or dark wood and upon it is a veiled mirror. Hidden from sight within the altar is the *Sh'kein*, a sealed vase that holds the ashes of ancestors. Bone chimes hang about the room, and a gong calls the family to worship. Incense and fragrant *shokha* wood are burned upon a brazier. A bone flute lies upon the altar carved from the thighbone of an illustrious ancestor, it is played during the greater rituals. Swords and silk paintings are also revered as holy objects and often found with the *Shi'da'kami*.

Rituals

Minor Rituals

The ShiShaka are very concerned with purity; minor purification rituals are performed before all important actions. Each family has several *Hara'jashi*, purification wands made from the bone of an ancestor.

The *Ke'sai* are personal rituals and usually take place in the home. The *Ke'sai* rituals ensure external (or physical) purity and are performed before joining a festival celebration or before visiting a shrine or other holy place.

Upon entering a shrine or other holy place, a second purification ritual must take place. The *Ha'Sai* purifies the adherent spiritually. This rite is performed by a priest who passes one of the family's *Hara'jashi* over the supplicants.

Other minor rituals include daily offerings of highly stylized prayers and poetry. These may take place either in the family home, or in an outdoor location of particular beauty or sanctity.

The Divine Court (Continued)

The ancestor-kami bowed many, many times, and, tucking the scroll into the depths of his intangible robe, he flew back to the shrine where the young man still prayed. He laid the papers upon the brazier and the fire leapt up. The young man exclaimed in joy, for he knew then that his boon had been allowed, and after much thankful prayer he left the shrine to seek out his bride.

GMing the Divine Court

Bach spirit, once adequately sent on by its descendants, enters the Divine Court, working its way through the many levels of the spiritual bureaucracy. Ancestor-kami are expected to hear appeals from their descendants, which they may or may not choose to answer.

How can this be handled in game terms? Using the *Miraculous Magic* system (see pp. 113-115), give each family priest the Divine Favor advantage, with the family's ancestral kami as the patron deity. The base cost is 15 points, and the kami will respond to requests on a roll of 15 or less. Reaction modifiers indicate the ancestral kami's status in the Divine Court.

Any appeal for aid must first capture the attention of the ancestral kami. The family priest performs the appropriate ritual, rolling against his Performance/Ritual skill. If he succeeds, roll to see if the kami is listening. Kami will never appear for an improperly performed ritual.

By responding, the family kami has indicated a willingness to present the problem to the *Hai'ka'i*. The GM then checks results against the NPC Reaction Table (pp. B204-205), to determine the ancestral kami's luck with the courts. The kami's reaction modifiers (as determined in the Divine Favor advantage) are considered, as well as the worthiness of the request:

- +1 if the request is very simple.
- 1 to -3 if the request is complex or unreasonable.

+2 if the request is just; -2 if unjust.

Wandering priests are different, in that they appeal directly to the *Hai'ka'i*. Thus they take the *Hai'ka'i*, rather than an ancestral kami, as a patron. The *Hai'ka'i* has a base cost of 20 points, and the reaction modifiers determine the priest's influence with the *Hai'ka'i* spirit.

Appeals often take days or even weeks to clear the levels of divine bureaucracy, but there is always some response.



Funeral Rite of the ShiShaka

In the predawn darkness the small braziers burned fiercely as Shana-ka sprinkled powered incense over the flames. At the doorway his small sons stood in silent vigil, the mirrors in their hands dark and veiled.

Shana-ka stepped closer to the bier of his father, bowing deeply before lighting the thin candles that lined the edge of the bier.

Soon it would be time to leave. He could hear the muffled sounds of the household procession forming outside. Bowing again, Shana-ka turned to a small gong that hung beside the bier.

With his balled fist, he struck the gong, once for each year in his father's life. He paused between each strike, letting the mournful reverberations fade slowly away.

When the last sound was gone from the incense-heavy air, Shana-ka turned, bowing to his brothers, who now stood behind him. Silent, he stepped aside, letting them take up the honor of their father's burden.

Slowly the bier was carried from the family shrine, the youngest sons of the clan walking so seriously before. After the bier, Shana-ka walked, darkly resplendent in his crimson robes, the long golden tassels knotted and tangled in mourning. In his hands, Shana-ka carried the Sh'kein of the house, a fine tall vase of greatest antiquity.

Continued on next page . . .

Major Rituals

The most important rituals of the ShiShaka are those concerning the five stages of life.

Sai'wak'i-Rite of Birth

It is the duty of the mother's sister to take the newborn into the Shi'da'kami, where the father presents the child to the ancestors. If the mother has no sister, the duty falls to a favored female cousin. Five days after the birth both mother and child are purified. The child is named by the father's mother; if she is dead, the father gives the child a variation of her name. If the father is dead, his brother or a favored male cousin stands in his place. If the mother did not survive the birth, the child is given a variation of her name.

Sai'ko'do—Rites of Childhood

There are three rites of childhood, all involving purification and presentation. When the child is weaned a silken cloth is touched with the child's blood and then burned. When he first walks, a lock of hair is cut and burned upon the altar. When the child first speaks clearly, he is anointed before the altar and given his second name by his mother's mother. If she is dead, the mother gives the child a variation of her name. If the mother is dead, this duty falls to the mother's sister, or a favored female cousin.

Sai'ot suri -Rite of Adulthood

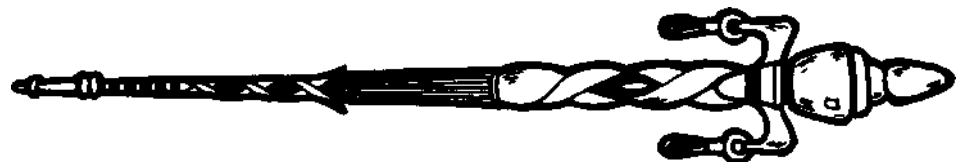
At puberty the child is tested and questioned about tradition and duty by the eldest of the clan. If successful, the child is pronounced an adult and given his adult name. If not, the child is sent to study with the priests and the rite is repeated after 49 days. If there is another failure, the child remains a child forever, becoming a ward of the priests, never to marry or assume adult responsibilities.

Sai'kan'ai -Rite of Marriage

Five days before the marriage (which usually takes place during the Tsu'ki'shi Festival), both the bride and groom are secluded in the shrine, tended to by their same-sex siblings. It is a time for private prayer and devotion. On the day of the marriage, the elders of both families gather in the shrine with the couple. A lock of hair from both is knotted together, then burned. A common cup of rice wine and sticky-rice/almond balls are shared. The elders call upon the kami for their blessings, and then they leave the shrine for the clan hall to celebrate.

Saishi'nu -Death

Death is a time of solemn and elaborate ceremony. The body is taken to the Da'kein, the clan shrine. It is here that the funeral and cremation take place. The ashes of ancestors are burned with the body and then placed within the Sh'kein for return to the family shrine (see sidebar, pp. 143-144).



Festivals

Shi'ga'shi - Festival of the Turning of the Year. Houses are rigorously cleaned in preparation for this festival, which lasts the first week of the year. Doorways are decorated with finely braided ropes. Special foods are enjoyed and ritualized visits made. Students visit their teachers, children visit their parents.

Da'ga'shi - Festival of the Lesser Year. This festival occurs a little after the *Shi'ga'shi*. Rites of purity are strictly adhered to during this week-long festival. At the end of the festival the shrine fires are lit, and special rice offerings are made.

Ka'an'shi ~ Festival of Beans. This festival is a lighthearted family ritual. Children throw toasted beans from the house, along with chants and much laughter, chasing out ill luck and calling the little kami to visit them.

Hin'a'shi - Festival of Dolls. Elaborate displays of dolls are set up within the main room of the house. These dolls represent the nobles of the Courts. Toasts are made and drunk. Marriage arrangements for children are often made at this time.

Ha'Kami'an'shi ~ Festival of the Spring Kami. This is the day set aside to especially honor the kami that watch over the town or village that the family lives in.

Hi'gan'shi — Festival of Family. This is a time to visit family and far-distant relatives, bearing gifts of wine, rice and incense. Grave shrines are also visited at this time.

Ma'sa'shi - Festival of Flowers. This is a day for family celebrations. The family climbs to the top of a nearby hill and gathers wild flowers. Special toasts and offerings to the wild kami are made. Rice-field ceremonies are also very elaborate at this time.

Seku'an'shi - Festival of Wind. As with *Hin'a'shi*, an elaborate display of dolls is set up within the main room of the house. Streamers of bright silk are hung from the rooftops, and armed dolls are set up at the doorways. Arrangements for children's training and apprenticeships are made at this time.

Su'jin'shi - Festival of the Water Kami. This festival is of utmost importance. During this long festival, many rites of purification are performed. On the last day of the festival, special rites are performed in the shrines of the village and town deities. The Celestial Empress herself performs secret rites on behalf of the people.

Tan'a'shi - Festival of Stars. This is an ancient festival, honoring the distant kami of the Celestial Heavens. Poems are written upon bright scraps of paper or silk, and tied to bamboo leaves. At nightfall, the leaves are placed upon the water and allowed to drift away.

Bon'shi - Festival of the Dead. This is a serious, yet joyous, festival, for this is the time when the ancestral kami are welcomed back into their homes with gifts of food and incense. Graves are tended and decorated.

Tsu'ki'shi - Festival of the Moon and Winds. This is a time of joyous celebration, in which many parties are held. This time is considered to be particularly fortuitous for marriages and betrothals.

Funeral Rite of the ShiShaka (Continued)

Behind Shana-ka the rest of the household followed, the men silently carrying faggots of dark shokha wood, the women carrying wrapped bundles in their hands. Their white garments were torn and streaked with ash, their unbound hair wild and tangled.

The procession made its formal way up the curving mountain path, toward the Da'kein, the most holy shrine of the Clan. The younger brothers waited silently while the other men carefully built the Ka'pan'an from the shokha wood they carried. Then the body of the Eldest of the Clan was laid to its rest upon the Ka'pan'an.

Silently the clan stood, and waited.

Then, when the first pale glow of the dawning sun touched the high mountains. Shana-ka raised up the Sh'kein. Behind him, the women of the clan dropped the scarves from the chi-dai chimes they carried.

Shana-ka stepped forward, and slowly tipped the Sh'kein toward the bier, his voice strong yet sorrowful as he poured the ancestral ashes upon the body of his father.

"Most honorable Kana-ka

We speak your praise

We remember your wisdom

We honor your spirit

We mark your passing

We rejoice in your reward

Rejoin us now

O father

Rejoin us now

O honorable clan

Rejoin us now

O light of the heavens

Rejoin us

Remember us

Rejoin us . . ."

The chant continued, Shana-ka's voice accompanied by the eerie chimes shaken by the women. The Sh'kein empty of its ashes, he stepped back, the ancient vase nestled in his arms.

As the sun crested the mountain peaks, he nodded to his young sons. Each stood at one end of the bier and they unveiled the mirrors they carried, holding them to catch the rays of the rising sun and so set the bier alight.

The eerie chiming of the chi-dai was soon joined by the crackling of the flames.

And when naught but ash was left, Shana-ka knelt and reverently gathered up the ashes of his father and ancestors, and refilled the Sh'kein.

Their duty done, the clan returned to their home, the Sh'kein replaced once more within the family shrine, that Kana-ka's wisdom should not be lost.

FLATLINERS

He was a punk like any other punk, but he had a talent along with his attitude. A talent for the box. The first time he wired into the Net, he thought he'd found God. People laughed. But he wasn't lying...

GMing Net Shamans

Trancing

Trancing is particularly important for Net shamans. Without the trance, they are simply talented netrunners. With it, they become much, much more. First the shaman must connect into the Net with a neural interface. Then he uses one or more of the techniques listed in the main text (see *Shamanism*, pp. 118-119) to transcend the usual Net experience and attain a trance. The Autotrance advantage is particularly useful for Net shamans.

Breaking a trace suddenly is quite traumatic for the shaman. The only real way to do this is to unplug him from the deck - even physical damage will not affect him otherwise. Should this occur, the shaman must roll against HT. On a failure, he goes into systemic shock, taking 2 dice of damage.

Performance

Unlike their more primitive counterparts, a Net shaman has no need to put on a grand display or performance. If he wishes to convince others of his abilities, he can plug them in and let them piggyback along. This tends to disrupt his concentration, however, and all rolls to establish the trance state are at -1 for each additional person.

Piggybacked viewers will get the shaman's view of the Net. Any interaction with the ghosts or spirits he encounters will appear to them as unusual entities within the Net. However, only the shaman may interact with them. The others may only watch.

Talents

Physical healing, psychopomp duties, and magic items have little meaning in the cyberpunk world. The Net shaman's talents are turned more toward vision and observation than the other shaman duties, though there have been instances of curses, blessings, and spiritual healing. Some claim to have been haunted by malign spirits or *gremlins* at the behest of Net shamans. For the most part, the shamans are still defining the scope of their abilities. The GM should allow anything that has a proper feel and does not unbalance the game too much.

Continued on next page...

The Net started simple, just wires connecting machines. But it's more than that now. A whole new world, some say - a place inside the mind if you're a runner, a place that leads to every other place, even some nobody really expected. It was the punks that realized it first. The bad boys, high on life and too many drugs, ready to burn their mark into the world. They found the first one cold at the keyboard. Flatlined. The powerboost took down a whole block of the city. But not the Net. Nothing could take down the Net at that point. It happened again, here and there, discounted by the corps and the feds... who cares about a stupid punk? But the street learned. The street knew.

They'd found God.

Well, maybe not God. But something. All these years of mystic mumbo-jumbo, who'd have thought that computers would show the Way? Not the corpzecs. They still didn't believe it. But the street knew. The machine. That was it - the missing link. The one perfect accomplishment of man that made him worthy in God's eye. Linked to the Net, those with the touch could find it. Even, with practice, use it. Man to machine to God - that's what the street knew. Cyber became more popular than ever. Metal, wires, electronics - the cold, pure logic - that was the path. The Way. The corps laughed, but they're not laughing any more. Shamans, they call them - Net Wizards. They touch God and bring him back.

Now the corps are getting scared.



Shamans

Shamans are netrunners with a special talent. Punks, mostly, they combine the simple skills of any runner with an inborn talent, an ability to use the cold, featureless landscape of the Net to reach something beyond. Nobody really understands it, least of all the Net designers. The Net traveled beyond the sight of any one person long ago, beyond everyone but its true master - the shaman.

Plugged in, wired, often cybered, shamans turn electron dances into dreams of reality. The Net creates its own world for them, filled with graphic images, the river-like streams of data flowing, the buzz of minds and realities that sculpt the texture of the Net, and the flickering afterimages of phosphor-dot ghosts. No two shamans view the Net the same way. Each plays a slightly different tune, a different construct of reality. But they all see the ghosts - the flimsy coils of energy that extend in and out of the Net, the machine, themselves, wrapping misty fingers about all who live and breathe, connecting them to all of that which does not. The first shaman fried his brains out in the contemplation of his new world, body cold at the keyboard, eyes turned upward in an expression of ecstasy. The word on the street was that he'd finally found God. Flatline - that was their nirvana, their paradise. To encompass the whole of the universe in a single instant.

It is a terrifying fate to some. But for those willing to search, there is almost unlimited power. Power to reach these ghostly filaments, and bind them to a purpose, to see beyond the normal vision, to call them forth or send them hence, to tap the raw, wild power beyond and find uses for it here. It is dangerous work, magicking the Net, focusing the power of the machine to drive the world beyond the world, but its benefits are many, and quite real. Its potential stretches far beyond the grimy world of the street. Many shamans die young they all die eventually, in the contemplation of their art. Most say they are the lucky ones. The ones who found something real. While they live, they are worshiped on the street - cared for, protected, coveted, and feared.

Abilities

So what can the shamans do? Much like their primitive namesakes, they transcend this world to enter a realm of ghost and spirits. Using the cold logical progressions of the Net, they gain a true view of this and other worlds.

What this means to the individual shaman can vary greatly, especially since most are still self-taught. Some things are common, however. To attain this new "sight" the shaman must first plug into the Net, and then enter a trance state. Some find this an almost natural occurrence; others need hallucinogenic drugs, meditative exercises, or periods of fasting and physical deprivation to reach it. While tranced, the shaman is completely unaware of anything that occurs about him in the physical world.

His awareness of the Net, however, is incredibly heightened. He gains an almost instinctive understanding of the geography of the Net - not of any particular subsystem, but of the thing as a whole. It is, to him, a huge living landscape that stretches out before him. He can ignore normal movement rules, simply willing himself to a particular area. He can even "hop" systems, moving from one local network to another, as long as any sort of physical connection exists, completely bypassing usual security rules. His "vision" is far more than the usual direct line-of-sight. If he concentrates on a particular locale in the Net, he can gain an immediate understanding of its architecture and current operating status, though not anything detailed or lengthy - he will know that a

GMing Net Shamans (Continued)

Spells

There are two different categories of spells for the Net shaman. The first relate particularly to the Net itself, while the second are the more traditional effects relating to the spirit world.

Net shamans may learn to duplicate program effects with their own powers. To do this, the shaman takes any single program and learns it as if it were a Mental/Hard spell. Casting time is equal to the program's usual execution time, and the shaman's Speed Index is his DX attribute divided by 2. Energy cost is measured in fatigue, and is equal to the equivalent program's complexity. His skill in casting any "spell" can never exceed his Cyberdeck skill. Since the shaman is, himself, performing the effect rather than having a program do it, any successful attacks against the spell affect *him* personally. For example, a crash would force the shaman off the Net and out of trance (with the associated HT roll).

Continued on p. 147...





GMing Net Shamans

(Continued)

Net shamans may also learn to cast a limited number of the usual shaman spells. The Banish, Bless, Curse, Death Vision, Divination, Exorcism, History, Remove Curse, Seeker, Sense Spirit, Spirit Trap, and Summon Spirit spells are all applicable. The effects of each should be translated to the cyberpunk milieu by the GM. Additional spells may be created by players, subject to the GM's approval. Spiritual spell effects are particularly draining for a Net shaman, and will most likely be accompanied by power surges and local system crashes of the Net. A successful roll against his Cyberdeck Operation skill must be made, or his deck will be ruined.

Spell failures are particularly nasty for the Net shaman. Net-effecting spells which fail are treated exactly as programs which failed to execute. Critical failures will either dump the shaman out of trance and off the Net (with the associated HT roll), or "freeze" him in his current locale, unable to escape - usually, whichever is worse. Spiritual spells which fail will always result in the destruction of the cyberdeck, and force the shaman to make a HT roll at -2. On a successful roll the shaman takes 1 die of damage; if he fails, he takes 3 dice. If it is a critical failure, the shaman flatlines.

program is being executed and a general sense of its purpose, but not exactly what data is being accessed. Most shamans still rely upon the standard programs for attack and defense, but some have found that they can duplicate program effects by using their enhanced interaction with the Net. In this case, shamans will learn "spells" that are roughly equivalent to program abilities.

These abilities are enough to unnerve the few corp execs that are aware of them, but shamans are more than super netrunners. In addition to their heightened awareness of the Net, they can push beyond, into the true realm of spirits and ghosts. From there they can duplicate many of the traditional shaman's abilities - gaining visions of the present, past, and future, summoning spirits or "ghosts" to their aid, altering events in the form of blessings and curses, and cleansing or curing those affected by maladies of the spirit. Some even claim to speak with the ghosts of past shamans, gaining valuable insight. This is the least understood part of any shaman's powers, and is always associated with dangerous electrical surges on the Net. Shamans go through a lot of cyberdecks. And their fate is always the same. Eventually they are either overwhelmed by the forces they are attempting to control, or they reach some new level of fundamental truth beyond which life has no meaning - Flatline. There is no halfway, no catatonia, no near misses. When a shaman goes, it's always spectacular. The survivors dream of attaining this final moment, the ultimate ecstasy where they become one with God.

Training and Initiation

The discovery and training of those with shaman talent is still quite haphazard. Most still realize their ability on their own, and (if they survive the initial experience) train themselves by trial and error. As the gangs grow, however, and the Net shamans learn more techniques, they are more likely to be sensitive to those with the talent around them. Many of the larger gangs have apprentices or assistants aiding the primary shaman.

It is even possible for multiple shamans to join together on the Net, and add their individual energies together to achieve a much greater effect. This takes a great deal of cooperation on all sides, however, and has not often been attempted.

The Tribe

Like the shamans, those who follow them are mostly punks - street trash. They have found their new savior, the power that can lift them even higher than the almighty corps. Shamans are revered, or at least respected. And the machine becomes their ally. The tribe members cyber themselves as much as they possi-

bly can, for only in the cold purity of logic can they hope to find their future, their enlightenment. The flatline - the symbol of ultimate rebellion, the crimson line and heartbeat symbol on the black background - is their icon, their hope life recorded, seen, enhanced and then erased by the machine. They are often fanatics.

Organization

Each shaman builds a gang of followers. These are his people, his tribe, who protect him as much as he protects them. Different gangs are often quite introverted, keeping secrets from one another, even to the point of gang warfare. Only one thing binds them together - hatred of the corps and feds that rule their world, and desire to realize power through that of their shaman.

When a shaman dies, the tribe either searches for a new shaman to lead them, or disperses, its members often joining other tribes.

Corps

The one true enemy of the Flatliners is the conglomeration of corporate and government entities that provide the backbone of the Net they rely upon. To the corps, the Flatliners and their shamans are parasites, drawing resources out of the system and returning nothing. Many of the shaman's more impressive magicking results in severe power demands on the system, all too often leading to local outages and system crashes.

Most corps completely disregard the mystical claims, chalking them up to fanatical ranting and hacker's tricks. Some few, however, have begun to realize the grains of truth behind the wild claims. They have one of two reactions: fear, followed by intense search-and-destroy efforts, or curiosity. No few shamans have been "collected" for experimentation.

What has happened to them is not exactly clear.

Truth

So, what's really out there? The folk on the street don't really know, and those shamans who reach an understanding always die in the process. There is speculation, of course, leading to two schools of thought.

The first holds that the true power is the Machine. In its design, man has finally overreached his own potential, and created God. These believers glorify anything related to computers - cyber, robotics, electronics, and so on. They believe that the machine is the perfect form, and they wish to attain it as quickly as possible.

The other school of belief is a more philosophical one. They hold that it is the interaction between the neural interface of the netrunner and his own subconscious mind that brings about the state in which penetration into the next world is possible. The machine merely provides a convenient pattern of consciousness that touches the soul of the shaman runner, and allows him to reach beyond.

The truth of the matter is left for the GM to determine. It may be one of these two, or something completely different. Whatever the case, there is *something*, and its true nature should not be easy to discover.



THE KALM OF SEQUAN

In the beginning was the seed, planted deep within the void. And as Time grew, so did Sequan, the Great World-tree. Glorious are the branches of Sequan, for they reach to the upper world, the heavens, the realm of C'lanan. Strong and deep are the roots of the Sequan, for they delve far into the underworld, the realm of Kas. Upon the center of the world, the Sequan stands, the way to all that is.

The Tale of Kis and Kas

Long ages passed and the world was empty and quiet, and the realm of Kas lay empty, and began to rumble. These rumblings grew so fierce that they shook the very trunk of the Great World-tree, and rattled the branches that reached into the higher realm. So hard did they shake the tree that a spirit fell from the Realm of C'lanan and fell into the middle world.

And this was Kal, the first shaman of the Kalmis. But Kal was lonely, and so after a while she gave birth to twin sons, who were very unlike each other. Kis was born in the normal way; but Kas refused to follow and be second born. So he clawed his way out of the side of Kal and she died. She was buried in the earth and from her body grew all the holy plants and herbs. And from her blood the Kalmis were born.

Kis and Kas went their own separate ways. Kas created fierce and monstrous animals, ferka and brahgs and ools, and huge biting ickles. Kis made all the useful and harmless animals, like threnkies and klare and rits. Kis and Kas followed the rits as they flew, and they led them back to the little Kalmis, as young and helpless as plets they were. Kas growled and immediately began to gobble up the Kalmis, but Kis hit him, and Kas died, and went away into the lower realm. It was then that Kis taught the Kalmis to fight, to kill and eat. And it was Kis who first traveled to the Realms of Kas, to speak to the spirit of the first shaman, Kal. And when he returned he brought back with him the first kahan.

And so it is that the Kalmis came to be.

The Kalm are a reclusive cat-like race inhabiting the lush jungle world of Sequan. They are mistrustful of the off-worlders who trade for the rare pharmaceuticals found on Sequan. Their society seems primitive to many, but their history stretches back nearly three millennia. In ancient times they were a warring tribal people, but now they are a strictly hierarchical society. Personal and family honor is of vital importance to them and blood feuding is common. Yet they consider themselves to be peaceful folk - so long as honor is held holy.

Castes

There are three castes of Kalmis - the Claw, the Pride and the Ka.

The Claw is the warrior/hunter caste. Consisting of both males and females, they are responsible for provisioning and defending their lineage. They mate within their caste, or with those of the Pride.



The Pride makes up the bulk of Kalm society, consisting of non-warrior adults and children. A child may be adopted into the higher caste if one of their parents is of the Claw.

The Ka are the spiritual and temporal leaders of the Kalm. There are three sub-castes within the Ka - the *Shika*, or shamans, the *Shani*, or scholars, and the *Seda*, or leaders. The Shani are responsible for the extensive oral histories and lineage records of the Kalm. The leaders rely both upon their wisdom and upon the knowledge of other realms gathered by the Shika.

Belief and Practice

Religion is an integral part of Kalm life. Their world consists of three realms - the upper world of the heavens, the middle world in which the mortal Kalmis dwell, and the underworld of Kas. Off-worlders are thought to come from distant realms beyond the heavens, and so dealing with them is left to the Shika.

Once a Shika has undergone his initiation, he can enter a state of trance at will to travel in the spirit. The upper world is the world of spirits and knowledge. It is to this world that the Shika travel to confer with their spiritual helpers. These spirits help the Shika gather and prepare the pharmaceuticals that Kalmis and off-worlders both value. Each Shika has several spirits which will aid him, both here and in the middle world.

The lower realm is the underworld of Kas, Lord of the Dead. It is Kas who guards the spirits of the dead and judges the honor of the living. At death each Kalm is guided here by a Shika to be judged. If honor is pure then the soul may remain. If at fault, the soul is devoured by Kas, forever lost to its lineage. Souls that remain may be contacted by a Shika at the request of their family if needed.

The Kalm belief in the mystical relationship between the three realms can be seen in the practices of everyday life. Honor is of utmost importance. The Kalmis have no written language and a spoken oath is unbreakable. To call a Kalm a liar is to touch off a blood feud.

Each named adult has a *kahan*, or ritual knife, that is not only the seat of his soul and honor, but is considered to *be* his soul. The handle of this knife is carved from the bone of an ancestor. If the kahan is lost, a Kalm will do anything within the bounds of honor to regain it. A Kalm without a kahan is considered to be cursed, caught between the worlds of the living and the dead. A Shika would certainly be sought to help find the kahan in such a case. If the kahan is destroyed, then the Kalm is considered to be worse than dead - with the soul dead, the body must follow. Suicide, in some public and spectacular manner, is the only recourse. A kahan-less person - such as an off-worlder - is considered, at best, to be a child. At worst, they are mere animals. Only members of the Ka (and those of the Claw specifically bound to protect them) deal with off-worlders.

Rituals

Kalkah - Rite of Naming. It is vitally important that a Shika (preferably female) be present at a birth, especially a birth among the Claw. The Shika protects the newborn soul during the trauma of birth, and travels to the underworld to find a soul-patron for the child among its ancestors. Such a soul-patron acts as a spiritual guardian for the child until its Rite of Souling. (Until the Rite of Honor, the child is known by the name of the ancestor, with the prefix *da-* attached. Thus, the ward of the soul-patron Glyss would be called *da-Glyss*. Bone once belonging to the ancestor Glyss would be blessed and prepared to become the hilt of the child's kahan, should it survive to adulthood.)

Kalkahan - Rite of Souling. This rite marks the transition from child to adult. The adult-to-be is presented with the kahan before a gathering of ranking adults. A ritual battle takes place between the supplicant and a Claw warrior of the same lineage. The warrior slashes the supplicant three times (one for each realm) while the supplicant attempts to kill the warrior. The battle complete, the newly-made adult bloods his kahan in his own blood and claims an adult name. (If by some fluke the warrior is killed, the supplicant claims that name. This is the only instance in which blood feud is *forbidden* over a killing. Rather, it creates a deep bond between the new adult and the offspring of the dead warrior.)

