

Issue Three | Spring 1994

Joyful Sitting Amongst Friends

Readership of The Eye has so far increased by 25% each Issue, but there hasn't been a corresponding flood of interesting letters. Many readers are people who are drawn to Tékumel but can't yet run games because of the lack of a set of rules, and I get the feeling that they're a bit intimidated by the idea of contributing to discussions between the dyed-in-the-wool "Tekkies". I can only repeat what Professor Barker himself has said: everyone's version of Tékumel is valid. Let's have more debate, discussion and ideas!

To kick off, Paul Snow's remarks on swordfighting last Issue brought this response from **Paul Mason**, who is studying tai chi sword in Japan:

What most people forget is that there's quite a sharp distinction between fighting an arena duel and the chaotic free-for-all that happens in adventures. In the sword styles I've learned, there are a large number of techniques designed to deal with opponents in various directions (rear, side, etc) using unexpected ways (high or low, swing or thrust). With these, the trick would be to take advantage of an imperfectly coordinated attack, knock off one enemy quickly and recover in time to parry the other. That's hard in a "duel" situation, but easier in a free-for-all where you have furniture or terrain to play with. A Hluss facing three opponents has to use its superior mobility to deprive at least one of them of a clear attack. Mobility is the key, and this tends to rest with the way the referee judges the situation. The problem with rolegaming combat systems is they tend to have a very static feel, because representing mobility is difficult and leads to horrifically tedious rules.

Yeah, which is why one must never become a slave to the rules. Take two militiamen approaching a drunken legionary outside the winemakers' clan. If they whip out their swords then the legionary will do the same, and the players are going to find they've brought their options down to one simple inevitability. They're going to have to seriously injure or even kill him. The rules (any rules) tend to take their thinking this way. A more sensible approach is the freeform one—how do they get up close to disarm him? The answer is: one of them keeps the legionary's attention while the other circles round and draws his sword before moving in close. When the legionary turns round, he's going to find he's already facing an armed opponent. If he doesn't give it up straight away, the other militiaman can always leap in from behind and grapple him. Any decent rules can handle that situation. The trick is not to let the rules intrude until you need them.

Michael Cule: The suitability of various systems for use with the complex world of Tékumel is an old topic and one that won't go away. I like GURPS and I find it allows conflicts to be resolved speedily enough not to interfere with role-playing. Your remark that it was "roll-playing not role-playing" doesn't fit with the people I know, apart from the small number of rules lawyers that appear in every group. The solution to this is to take the hardback edition of the GURPS Basic set and every time they quote the rules at you, strike them smartly over the head with it.

I do regret my "roll-playing" crack now, because it implied there are serious flaws with the GURPS system, whereas in fact I think it's one of the best two commercially-available rolegames around. The only problem I have is the one-second combat round. It makes everything seem like slow motion when you're running to get into a fight that you know will probably be all over before you've covered ten yards.

Michael Cule: On divine intervention—the reason fanatics get bonuses is not that they love their god but because they strive to make themselves like him, to be more in tune with his interests and instincts, more on the god's "wavelength". Why would Pavar have written down all those details about the gods' natures and predilections if they weren't important?

Beats me. History is full of people like that, though, isn't it?

Paul Snow: The Lament to the Wheel of Black was useful and enjoyable. What source is Mark using to draw this story together?

Mark has been privileged in being given access to some of Professor Barker's extensive notes and maps. A little has to get added, of course, to work those notes up into an article. But I'd say that a good 80% of the details came straight from the Professor.

Paul Snow: I have a player who is particularly interested in mythology and religion in games, so I answered various questions by giving her the article to read. The main thing she took from it is that while the Lords of Stability and Change look like trivial mirrored pairs on first reading the list in the Sourcebook, the story told in the Lament shows a more complex development.

It's back to my point about primary sources from last Issue. I much prefer the view of the gods that you get from the Professor's novels, Ebon Bindings, the Adventures on Tékumel solo books, and so on. These are the real Tsolyáni perspective, whereas game-based products can give only a secondary interpretation of what they're about. Also, I'm more interested in mythology than theology. The former concerns the deeds of the gods, whereas the latter just comprises men's ideas about what they're like.

Paul Snow: One thing not explained by the Lament article is the transformation of Ksarul into a god of knowledge. I suggest that when the gods constructed the Blue Room it was originally to be totally sealed from the rest of the universe. Thámis spoke against this as he wanted to comprehend every corner of the whole universe. So a window was constructed through which the Doomed Prince could be forever scrutinised. It is through this window that visitors to the Blue Room can see the table upon which the Keys are placed as Ksarul's followers collect them. Equally, it is only through this little window that Ksarul can now perceive and interact with the universe. As he lies asleep with his powers diminished, he desperately seeks the information he needs to escape.

It sounds convincing. The truth, however, is unknowable.

Paul Snow: On religious belief, we should always remember that the Tsolyáni worship the entire pantheon of Pavar's deities. This is something that Professor Barker recently wanted to make clear. While clans and lineages may be devoted to one god, as I see it everyone prays to Avathe if the harvest looks being bad, and the man whose performance in the bed-chamber has been a bit lacklustre will certainly light some suitably rigid green candles to Dlamelish.

Jeff Riley: Back in the first Issue you said that sorcerers couldn't really cast spells in six seconds. Yet *Swords & Glory* states explicitly that they can!

Actually I was talking about sorcerers as described in folklore. (Balinese and Scandinavian folklore in point of fact, since I've never read any Tsolyáni folklore.) The latest official line, as given in Adventures on Tékumel Part One, is that it takes one minute to cast a spell. *TIRIKELU* adheres to the old six-second rule, but I have played in games that do things quite differently. Patrick Brady's GURPS Tékumel campaign, for instance, has nothing that you can definitely identify as magic. All sorts of weird things happen, but usually they lie in the "grey area" that Paul Mason discussed last Issue. Curiously, this actually works to make players more superstitious than they are when using a traditional "mortars-&-flamethrowers" magic system.

Paul Snow: We are surrounded by many events that could be described as magical by someone with a different world-view. An example of this is the All Blacks performing the Haka before a match. Clearly here we are seeing ritual group magic that has for many years given them a plus on their rugby skill, and quite possibly a negative modifier to the opposition.

And on Tékumel a Qadarni battle will begin with a ritual of boasts and challenges designed to whip each side up into a frenzy. How clear is it to a Tsolyáni soldier that this is just good psychology and not magic? I'd expect them not to make any distinction, but presumably somebody does because "real" magic is against the rules of a Qadarni.

Paul Snow: When it comes to integrating such effects into the game, I would point out there is a real-life belief that charms only work if invoked. People who say "touch wood" do their best to find something wooden to touch as they say it.

A crucifix or St Christopher's pendant is touched if its powers are needed. So if a character is willing to spend a half-round action to grab his Karakan talisman then I'd be happy for it to have a game-effect. +1 to hit on the next attack only would be a reasonable return.

Or maybe it ought to ward off bad luck rather than giving good luck. I suggest that taking a full round at the start of a fight to invoke your Karakan charm will allow you to ignore fumble results throughout the fight. A Vimuhla charm is the one to give a modifier to attack—and then maybe only as long as you don't resort to parries. Still, I'm getting bogged down in rules discussions again...

Paul Mason: In the first instalment of *TIRIKELU*, did you really mean for clan apprentices to get 8000 Improvement Points? This means that a Standing Reed clan-member might have 40 levels of the Warrior skill before he's even grown up!

Yep. Not even Hrugga himself had 40 levels of Warrior. Friends, turn to page 6 of your *TIRIKELU* rules with Tipp-Ex in hand. That should read 800 IPs, not 8000.

Mike Havant: And what about the tax rate of 1%? That seems remarkably low. Hardly worth collecting, in fact.

It would still amount to about fifty million Kaitars a year across the whole country, which I think is worth collecting. The figure of 1% came from the Tékumel Sourcebook, but I have no other confirmation so it could be a misprint. It is low by the standards of most historical cultures, certainly: in India during the reign of Asoka the rate was 25%,

Byzantium charged 10%, and ancient China wavered between 3% and 30%. But you have to remember that the Tsolyáni state does not have the same overheads. Almost all legions are privately funded by clans or temples. There is no state welfare such as the Romans had. However, the Tsolyáni do have a welfare system (better than modern Britain's, in fact) in the form of the clans. Your clan will protect, shelter, feed and care for you even when you are too old or sick to fend for yourself. So maybe you should think of the contribution to the clan (about 10% to 20% of your income, depending on status) as a tax of sorts.

Mark Wigoder-Daniels: I find players get confused between the two intelligence attributes in *TIRIKELU*. Instead of "Cleverness" and "Reasoning", I suggest "Common Sense" and "Scholastic Ability".

That would be clearer, but possibly less elegant. It's difficult to think of Odysseus as having nothing more than good "common sense"! Cleverness is nous, wit and native cunning; Reasoning is thoughtfulness, penetration and logic. Captain Kirk has high Cleverness, while Spock is the one with the Reasoning.

Paul Mason: I haven't seen anything from *Theatre of the Mind* in a while...

To be fair to TOME, they can only publish what they have. Apparently the third solo book (underworld adventures) is only two-thirds completed and Mitlanyl (the gods book) is still being typeset. (The Mitlanyl cover painting is gorgeous superb, incidentally.) There's also some hard part of the Sourcebook, if agreement can be reached with Tadashi Ehara, who has the rights.

Brett Slocum: Too much of the art in the Different Worlds editions was sloppy—like the blonde in volume two.

Professor Barker never got to look over that artwork, and also commented to me that a Renyu would never be equipped with armour, sword and shield. Since volume two is now due for a new printing, maybe TOME can take the opportunity to put in some decent illustrations.

Paul Mason: I get the feeling TOME have been hit by the Curse of Tékumel.

Baloney. If Tékumel has foundered at times over the years it is because it's often been handled by small companies that are not really geared up to publicize it. I would think that Tékumel has the potential to be as popular as, say, Glorantha—certainly in Britain and Europe.

Aidan Dixon: I think presenting material for a variety of different rules systems is a good idea, but please maintain the variety. TOME doesn't seem to be rushing to produce a latest set of their own.

I've heard a rumour that the Adventures on Tékumel RPG now exists in proof copy, so maybe it will be out in a year or so, but I agree that TOME don't seem to be giving it top priority.

Aidan Dixon: That sounds me, as I'd rather see which material. It suggests that TOME won't be pushing the RPG particularly hard, when and if they produce it—source in turn suggests that most people will stick with whatever system they're playing now.

Yes, and this leads to a curious state of affairs. Lots of people are using *GURPS* and *RuneQuest* for their Tékumel games. I've also seen *AD&D* and *Rolemaster* variants. At present these circulate by means of the computer net. It's hardly a satisfactory arrangement, since there is no guarantee of authenticity or quality. Also it deprives Professor Barker and TOME of remuneration—as well as Avalon Hill, SJG or whoever. You would think that the various companies involved could get together and come to some kind of licensing or co-publishing deal.

Mark Wigoder-Daniels: Sandy Petersen ran a *RuneQuest* Tékumel adventure at the Baltimore Con in January.

I wish I could've played in that! And look, it illustrates this crazy situation I'm talking about. Sandy is one of the world's top rolegaming authors, and there he is with a system he's written just for his own use. Why isn't somebody publishing it, for goodness sake? Incidentally, while on this topic:

Jeff Riley: I'm making the switch to using RQ3 rules, but retaining the *Swords & Glory* magic. Universal spells obviously translate as Sorcery, and temple spells are Divine Magic, but where do the generic spells fit in?

They're all Sorcery! The temple spells are not Divine Magic because they are not in fact supplied by the god in question. The Grey Hand spell, for example, is the "intellectual property" of the priesthood of Wuru. That just means that the spell is a well kept secret. There's nothing to stop a priest of Hrsh from learning that spell if he was able to co-erce a mage of Wuru into teaching him. He'd be hunted down and killed by the Black Y Clan, sure, but the point is that there's no obstacle in theory—whereas RQ Divine Magic is supplied directly by a god, and so cannot be acquired by unbelievers.

Martin Helsdon: Using descriptions in the published sources, I've made some sketches of a Ssú. There are three problems areas. The first is the skull—none of the illustrations match the text, so that the Ssú portrayed as spine they're made of putty instead of "rolled paper". Secondly, the internal structure: a Ssú either has a very flexible spine central to the column of the torso, or a cage like structure similar to Larry Niven's Kzin. The former seems more likely and, as the upper torso displays the symmetry of two upper limbs, it seems safe to Assume a series of rods holding the inner organs. The skeleton of a Ssú must be very evolved and I don't think they really are related to the Hluss.

Perhaps only a closely as both are related to other indigenous Tékumelani life-forms with the same basic form? Humans are relatives of creatures as diverse as the crocodile, the bat and the elephant, after all!

Martin Helsdon: The spinal flexibility is needed to allow the Ssú to rear up onto its hind legs. This is very unstable, so the Ssú must be very sinuous. Perhaps this aids the creature's "hypnotic" effect. It must also have a factor in the evolution of Ssú intelligence, as it would require a sophisticated nervous system.

You could say the same for the Ahoggyá. I always thought the reason Ahoggyá seem a bit slow-witted is that so much of their brain capacity must be devoted to correlating all the limbs and different sensory inputs.

Martin Helsdon: The final point is the skull, described as man-like but with a vertical ellipse of a mouth. This suggests that the jaw is very different from a human's, possibly composed of grinding mandibles.

Giovanna Fregni's pictures in the Tékumel Bestiary show teeth at the top and bottom of the jaw, like in a human, which certainly is rather odd if the mouth is a vertical oval.

Paul Mason: With regard to the Tsolyáni world-view, players need to shift their pride away from the usual line of "I am Karsan hiMekkudal of the Clan of the Scarelt Sandal" to more of an "I am the glorious Karsan of the Scarlet Sandal's Karsan hiMekkudal."

Geertz says on this topic: "The western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more-or-less integrated motivational and cognitive universe is (however incorrigible it may seem to us) a rather peculiar idea within the context of world cultures. I know just what he means.

Mark Wigoder-Daniels: I asked the Professor about the population of Tsolyánu, and he gave a figure of 275 million.

Really? That's remarkably high. Even with an average across the whole country of one person per hectare (which is larger than China throughout most of history) I'd previously estimated it at "only" 80 to 100 million.

Mark Wigoder-Daniels: But you're forgetting the effect of the priestesses of Avathe! They have sorcery that can vastly increase the agricultural yield.

I'm dubious. If that's the explanation, it would make the Temple of Avathe hugely powerful. Also, it would mean that there have to be at least two thousand sorceresses of 14th level or higher whose sole task is to tramp around the countryside casting Fructification spells. Possibly Professor Barker was quoting the figure for the entire Five Empires? We'll try and find out by next Issue.

Nathan Cubitt: What I'd like to see in The Eye are very condensed notes on the Tékumel background, almost revision note style. These would be a useful prop-up for the referee.

Others have said the same. There'll be something along those lines next Issue. Incidentally, this is as good a place as any to plug Nathan's fanzine *Delusions of Grandeur*. The latest Issue has articles on King Arthur's Celtic roots, how to get better characterization in games, a little piece on Tékumel, plus lots of letters, reviews and other stuff—even a cartoon strip! It should appeal to people who liked *Imazine* (surely the standard by which all zines must be judged) and costs £1.20 per Issue from Nathan Cubitt, 35 Seymour Avenue, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk NR30 4BB.

Tom Zunder: My feeling is that a continuation of recent history extending into the events in Barker's campaign would be very welcome. I like the sound of the events he has let rip in his campaign.

I've picked up a few snippets from the computer net. These cover the period up to the winter of the year 2365.

Most cities are apparently under martial law, there has been considerable civic unrest, and travel is severely restricted. Princess Aremala and Princess Ma'in are both in Tumissa. (I shall refer to them as princesses even though, strictly speaking, they have no Imperial status now that their brother Dhich'une is on the Petal Throne.) Aremala is under the protection of the priesthood of Avathe, having recently returned from "down under" in the land of the Urunen. Ma'in had been staying with the Governor of the city, but is now at the temple of Dlamelish.

The Emperor recently broke his alliance with Baron Ald, leading to a battle in Bey Sü between Yan Koryani and Imperial troops. The temple of Sárku was sacked and the Governor impaled. Subsequently, Prince Mridobu showed up in the city and helped forge an alliance between Prince Taksuru and Baron Ald. Things are coming to a head...

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