

Introduction

The nation of Tsark is a sageocracy, a peaceful community of orcs and humans with a peculiar outlook on the world that leads to very different motives and actions to many other nations. They are isolated, but not isolationist by outlook - merely cautious given that almost all their neighbours exist in an imperialistic or expansionist mode. At the centre of their spiritual practice is the Virtue of Peace - though they do not conceive of the virtues in anything like the way the Empire does, the fundamental drive to empathise, to accept, and to understand is key to Tsark culture. Violence has no place in their society.

People

The people of the Mountains of the Moon are a mixture of humans and orcs. There are perhaps one human for every eight orcs, but there is little separation between them, and they live as one. Most positions of responsibility are filled by orcs, but this because of the number imbalance rather than anything else. The exception to this rule is the sages and adepts based on Visoko and the island of Zabor. The sages are exclusively orcs, and the adepts are exclusively human. These two groups together represent the core power structure - such as it is - who keep the communities of Tsark together.

Example archetypes of the people of Tsark are:

Sages, those wise orcs who guide the philosophy and religious underpinnings and ultimately the moral and political direction of the territory.

Adepts, those humans who use zaboravi's auras and their own learning to see that the sage's advice and vision is enacted.

Cuvari, those Tsark-folk who staff the border defences. Among all Tsark-folk, they alone are trained in the use of weapons, though the vast majority have never used them. To choose this life is to set yourself apart for the greater good of the community; in Tsark's literary and oral tradition, they are tragic figures.

Prijатели, magicians who focus on the dealings Tsark has - mainly at the Disc of the Ogledano - with the Day realm (and mostly Sinokenon) - though they are diplomats more generally, and *prijатели* also work at the Skouran embassy

Kabaddist, someone who is a kabaddi star. Popular folk heroes, they are often also found working in the quarry or in other jobs that require heavy labour.

Culture and Customs

The people live in small settlements scattered across the valley of Tsark, collections of stone huts with thickly-thatched roofs. Each village is built around a larger building which is used as a communal meeting hall. Here, people come together and voice concerns and ideas they have for improving their local area; they appoint representatives to go and liaise with other villages when it is necessary, and visiting adepts and sages come here.

Each village - especially those in the population centre of Obrotnik - contains step-like terraces cut into the rock, which allow even those based on the steeper parts of the valley to grow a selection of crops and keep a small number of wool-providing animals - primarily llama and hardy sheep. They are not cultivated for meat but only for their wool and milk.

They also keep chickens, but again this is only for their eggs. Tsarkians are vegetarian - believing that they should live in understanding and harmony with animals, rejecting slaughter.

The llama are not a load-bearing animal - they could perhaps carry the weight of a child, but nothing more - and no heavier animals exist. People walk when they need to travel, and transport grain and even stone or ore via hand-drawn wagons.

Many of the settlements also have a sunken oval arena cut into the rock called a vellut. In this, the game of kabaddi is played - it is much like the game that exists in the real world.. The game is very physical, a team endeavour that involves a mixture of wrestling and endurance, and it is a popular sport. Sometimes, a whole village will turn out to cheer the competitors on, and indeed competition occurs across villages, sometimes - at the Grand Vellut Arena - involving much of the populace. Vellut provides a way for people to channel physical exuberance and even conflict into something which is ultimately good-humoured and not founded on violence.

When they are not working or playing kabaddi, people spend a good deal of time meditating - sitting by themselves in comfortable positions with their eyes closed doing nothing but breathing slowly. Occasionally this meditation is accompanied by gentle music or spoken poetry. They also spend time engaging in quiet discussion and conversation in similar settings. While nobody is solitary, it is recognised that time away to recharge, especially after a heated discussion, ultimately leads to better resolutions than never giving each other space. Meditation and kabaddi are, in this way, two sides of the same coin, both ways in which the people of Tsark avoid conflicts spiralling out of control.

The role of sages and adepts to Tsark's culture is fundamental. The sages are the guardians of Tsark's history, philosophy, wisdoms, view of the world - they are mediators, advisors, full of pithy sayings and abstract ideas. While anyone - human and orcs alike - can learn with them in their sanctuary on Visoko or as they travel around the territory giving advice to all who need it - the whole population is encouraged to take an interest in such things - only orcs actually gain the rank of sage. There is a general agreement that orcs are fundamentally more spiritual, whose natural inclination towards connection and communality, and ability to connect with dead sages past who were their ancestors, gives them insights into inner mysteries. In theory, a human could pass the intense scrutiny and judgement of peers that leads to acceptance as a sage; in practice this doesn't happen. It is much more likely that such a human might take a different path, to being an adept.

An adept's job is to solve practical problems in ways which are informed by the underlying spiritual principles of Tsark. While the sages give sayings and gnomic utterances, an adept learns to give people the practical means to solve a problem - once two villages have agreed that a common resource like a stream or a field will be shared, it is an adept's job to make sure that the right fences are built, or the paths are laid so that both can access. It is the adepts who consider Tsark's defences - the actual buildin, maintenance and staffing are done by the cuvari, but the architectural thinking of working out how to build a fortress which protects in non-lethal ways - how to make it Tsarkist - that is the job of the adept.

In short: in the fragile utopia of Tsark, it is the sages who pronounce the what, and the adepts who devise the how.

Abridged History

The territory of Tsark was presumably originally populated by the people or persons or beings who made the buildings attributed to “the Sentinel”, dotted across the terraces of Obrotnik are squat watchtowers. Unlike the rest of the architecture in Tsark, these were clearly built by someone thinking with martial intent. Whatever the history of these buildings is, it is outside the memory or history of those that lived there now.

Tsark was for a long time a sparsely-populated territory hosting a few small tribes of orcs - the Kamen Quarry existed at this time, and the Maze of Zora was built at this time, making invasion from the west difficult enough that it never occurred. The tribes - whose names correspond to the current region names - thought of themselves as the people of Tsark, and had a complicated philosophy a little like the one the Tsark-folk hold to today, though with much less emphasis on the spiritual force of Peace or on eschatological concerns. Still, the general philosophy was a pantheistic one that conceived of all orcs joining a single creator spirit after death. These tribes did get into conflict with each other, but the reasonably intensive farming needed to live well here meant that these were never large. The Wall of the Luge was originally built as a communal memorial for all the tribes that lived in the valley - a neutral place where the dead would be remembered, carved in stone, and things could be mediated and discussed.

During the Pre-Highborn era, a woman named Khotep, leading a group of proto-Highborn and a small tribe of orcs (probably a subject tribe of the Druj, or their predecessors), came from the west. They were fleeing conflict and the brewing wars between the proto-Highborn and the orcs - Khotep, a Paragon of Peace if that was a term that made sense, had managed to forge an alliance between her followers and some of the orcs, but it led to their rejection by both sides. The people of Tsark took them in. The message of peace and understanding she preached, her human followers' existing beliefs stemming from their home, and the beliefs of the orcs of Tsark all combined at this time, producing a flowering of a developed belief system much like the one they cleave to today. The distinction between sages and adepts comes from this early history, though things began to develop over time.

The number of humans was smaller than it was now, of course, but the unification of the orcs of Tsark and the inclusion of the humans and the other orcs had created a coherent and mixed political entity. At some point, contact with Skoura was made, and their strong belief in their Creator may have also had some influence on Tsark's outlook. Some of those that followed Khotep did not stay in Tsark, but continued west to Axos, settling in Solokha. This opened up links with the “Citadel of Peace” and Tsark that continued for some time.

Indeed, those links continued up until the disaster at Solokha that caused the deaths of much of the population. Those that survived travelled east, leaving Axos behind them and throwing themselves into the arms of Tsark, who were happy to take them in. It was at this

time that the Fengari Gate was built, and Tsark settled into the strongly isolated mode that typifies it to this day.

Over the years, Tsark has had some contact with members of the Empire. They have either been convinced to leave and have their memories erased, they have elected to stay and join Tsark, or they have been imprisoned - humanely but securely - on the island of Zabor until their death. These have mostly been Urizen who have made the trip, though a few others too. Accordingly, Tsark has a pretty good idea about what the Empire is like in a broad sense, though they are most unfamiliar with the western nations. Similarly, they have some awareness of the Grendel, and are sadly very familiar with the Druj - one of the reasons they have stayed so carefully hidden - but have never had any direct contact. Due to the mixed nature of their society, they do not really distinguish between human and orc foreign powers.

Tsark Military Concerns

The people of Tsark do not in general make or own weapons; they do not sharpen knives except for cooking, they do not wield spears or use the bow. Neither are they armourers. The exception to this are the cuvari, who choose to be trained in the use of weapons purely to staff the borders. They expect that they would die to an invading force; they are not an army nor would they ever be. But they choose to understand violence and how it can be enacted. Mostly they staff the forts, especially the Sentinel's Watchers.

The adepts, guided by the wisdom of the sages, have over time devised a number of non-lethal, or at least non-aggressive ways of repelling intruders.

- The Maze of Zora, expanded and reconfigured over the centuries, is full of cutbacks, collapsing floors, hidden passages and twisted paths, making it difficult to move an army through. The maze can even be - with some effort from the cuvari who staff it - reconfigured, meaning only by seizing control of it can an invading force truly master it. Only the most skilled of the adepts know all its secrets.
- The Sentinel's Watchers, which while much like conventional watchtowers, are intended to mostly be used to be a set of lit beacons across Obrotnik, allowing communication to be used to help the inhabitants block the path of an invading force by collapsing suitable paths and terraces in a coordinated manner. The cuvari are trained in how this would be conducted.
- The Wall of the Luge, a wall so vast it sits across the entire territory. Into it is carved a memorial for every one of the Tsark people who has lived - it is tied up with their identity. It can only be climbed by means of ropes and pulleys - making it trivial for Visoko to be cut off without harm in the event of an emergency except by the most determined invaders.
- The Fengari Gate. This is a large gate across a narrow part of the Zamok Pass with cliffs on either side. Any force wanting to move into or out of the territory would first have to make sure they controlled the Gate. It takes hours to open the gate, teams of cuvari working flat out. On the advice of the sages and the devisement of the adepts, there is a final twist, not obvious at all - an army invading from the east will also find that the ground in front of the gate can be made to collapse, slowing their advance

and, theoretically, allowing more time for negotiations to happen or terms of surrender to be agreed.

At its core, then, the Tsark military philosophy is: do not make war. When invaded, try to stop the enemy; if that fails, see that you can flee; if that fails, talk. Seek surrender over destruction but accept destruction over a fall into all-out war.

Tsark Economic Concerns

Tsark Religious Beliefs

Tsark Magic Traditions

Tsark Territories

Look and Feel

The people of Tsark dress in clothes that are practical yet colourful - woollen skirts and tunics seem common, dyed in intricate patterns. The patterns contain stories of their families and friends, and they are generally heirlooms, passed down and added to from generation to generation.

Tech

The adepts use a substance called zaboravi, grown on the island of Zabor, to help give people the power to behave in a way congruent with the way of life the sages advise. Zaboravi can be used in a similar way to liao, with ceremonies (always dedicated to Peace) much like the ones the Empire understands - but, carefully prepared and sometimes with the assistance of Night magic, it can also be used to allow people to cast aside unwanted memories or to even change their fundamental selves.

Other Links