

TENRA BANSHO ZERO

SETTING BOOK

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Tenra Bansho Zero: Tales of Heaven and Earth Edition is dedicated to my brother from Japan, Satoru Hosono (1973-2006), without whom I would never have been introduced to the wonderful world of Japanese-born role-playing games or the people who play them. I hope you achieved your namesake.

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of Tenra. It took me six years to get here, to put the last bit of punctuation of the last sentence of this work. I thought I'd have it done in two. I'd say that this work was a challenge, having classical examples of nigh-untranslatable ancient Japanese grammar, constant references and call-outs to Japanese religion and history, and a vocabulary that spans more kanji than I thought I'd ever learn. However, "a challenge" would be an understatement: This book thoroughly kicked my ass. I was the Dan vs this book's Gouki.

In the end, I won, and here it is. The first licensed Japanese tabletop role-playing game, in English.

When I took on this project, I had a limited understanding of the rules (basically, I knew how skill rolls worked), and a simple grasp of the setting. I picked up the license to Tenra because of its focus, the "Hyper Japan as Written by Japanese" effect. The book was pretty. There were a lot of cool-looking characters I imagined I could play.

As time went on and I got deeper into the book, I began to realize that I was falling in love with it. I play a lot of role-playing games, and the lessons that came from this book, the rules focused on character backgrounds, personalities and goals, the setup and scene-focused play, the rewarding of fellow players for good role-playing... All these elements were things that I was always searching for in a tabletop game, I just never knew it until I saw it for myself. It was sheer luck that they were in this book that I picked up simply because "It was pretty".

I was set, I knew enough that I could understand and run the game, and was well into the translation. I was in love with the rules, and thought there would be no problems with bringing the game out in English. And then I met the author at a cafe outside of the FEAR, Inc offices in downtown Tokyo. That's when things started to get interesting.

After meeting with Jun'Ichi Inoue (the author and primary illustrator of this book) and Tarot Suzufuki (the president of FEAR, the company which produced Tenra Bansho and other great Japanese TRPGs)—both great guys—I started changing course in the translation of this book. This game deserved more than a slap translation into English and then a kick to the presses: It needed to be more than looked at, it needed to be played. And to be played, it needed more: More history, more information, more cultural notes, more everything in order for people who didn't grow up in Japan watching weekly samurai dramas and reading ninja manga to be able to understand the game enough to play. So as I was translating the book, I started adding this "More" myself.

What you now hold is that "More". This book contains the contents of the original Japanese Tenra Bansho Zero rulebook; most of the data from the game's supplement "Tenjo Tenge"; and data from the six mail-order Tenra mini-supplements. It also includes about 30% more content than the original book in cultural notes, history, language, advice, and an entire sample setting prepared in advance for you to set your early scenarios. Hopefully you'll find it enough to get into some exciting role-playing sessions with your friends.

I picked up this game as a hobby project. One thing leading into another, and I found myself writing this introduction six years later. The game is no less awesome for the wait.

Enjoy. Keep your sword sharp.

TALES OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

This book is not a simple art book, it's a rulebook for a tabletop role-playing game.

In this game, you and your friends will take on the role of characters in the land of Tenra: Heroic warriors, onmyoji sorcerers, skillful ninja, Buddhist monks and Shinto priestesses. You will act out the roles of those characters, telling a story in the process. Half of this game describes the setting of

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Tenra, which is the stage in which to set the stories: This is the book you are reading now. The other half of this game contains the rules needed to play the game with your friends: That is the rule book.

You'll create a story by playing the game. Like a console or computer adventure game, you will take on the roles of characters, adventure together, and fight powerful enemies. However, you'll be inventing all the character dialogue live as you play: The twists and turns, the excitement and fun, the drama and action, will all come from the creativity of the players.

Read the book, gather some friends, and go create tales of Heaven and Earth.

HOW READ THIS BOOK

This book set (the Setting and Rules books) is both a guidebook to the world of Tenra and a book of rules for playing a game. Unlike normal books, you will likely not read them from cover to cover, from start to finish. It is likelier that you will jump from place to place through the books depending on your role.

If you plan on facilitating a game of Tenra Bansho Zero, you are likely going to take on the role of the Game Master (GM). You should first familiarize yourself with the colorful introduction of the book. From there, you should browse through the rules chapters of the game. Look through the world section to learn about the world of Tenra. Then start planning out your first game.

If you plan on playing the game, you should also familiarize yourself with the colorful introduction section of the book. After that, browse through the world section to learn about the setting. Then go through the character sections, reading deeper into the character types that interest you. After that, read through the books at your leisure: Familiarize yourself with the rules of the game.

Regardless if you are player or GM, keep a finger on the glossary in the back of the book of rules (in

the other book). If you were to read the book in one direction, you will be introduced to each unusual term in their order throughout the book. If you jump around as above, you'll need to occasionally look up the new words you find. Both rules and setting concepts are covered in the Glossary section of the rulebook, so reference it if you don't know what an Annelidist, Kiai point or Fate roll is.

If you have the time and energy to read both of the books in their entirety, feel free to do so! However, you do not need to read either book in full to begin to play the game.

A NOTE ON JAPANESE AND ROMANIZATION

There have historically been many attempts to romanize the Japanese language, and several standards exist. Rather than staying within the lines of one standard like Hepburn, Kunrei, Nippon, or JSL, I used a hybridization of Hepburn as a baseline (since it focuses on pronunciation), with a tighter focus on readability and pronunciation: Using the letter H for some long o sounds in some places, leaving a single o or u in others if it was more pleasing to the eyes or ultimately assisted in pronunciation by English-speakers.

For the casual reader, I hope this hybrid makes the book easier for you to read. For the linguist irritated that the romanized Japanese in this book wasn't pigeonholed into an existing standardization system, then sorry: It is this translator's firm belief that the existing standards are ass for long written works.

If you study Japanese, and this book lights a fire in you, I highly recommend buying a copy of the original Tenra Bansho Zero in Japanese. You'll find some cool lingual nuances and playful experiments and liberties taken by the author.

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

In the archaic tongue of the native language of the world, Tenra means “All the land under heaven”. To the people of Tenra it simply means “The World”. Though Tenra is composed of four huge continents that stretch from East to West, there’s not a large variance of climate or ecosystem in the land of Tenra as a whole. There are no known areas that do not see the same four seasons experienced everywhere else. The humans that spread across this vast land come from a single race, and even people from opposite ends of the known world share—for the most part—a similar language and culture, as well as similar customs and backgrounds.

Each of the continents is divided into a number of geographic regions called provinces (*shu* in Japanese), and within those provinces lie numerous autonomous countries, often referred to as domains. The domain, also commonly called country or kingdom, is the largest administrative unit. Each domain or country has a ruler known as a regent. Regents are appointed by the Shinto Priesthood itself, and they govern their domain under their own discretion. Their official title is “guardian of the domain”, and they rule their domains in any manner they please. Under the regents are the vassal lords who help rule the domain, as well as the regent’s retainers who maintain order in the household and the government.

The stories say that the Priesthood controls the history of Tenra from behind the scenes, but these stories will always remain rumors, as the Priesthood never publicly exerts any strong political force in the open. The regent is the only true, authentic ruler of their domain.

In ancient times, the Shinto Priesthood of Tenra prohibited countries from going to war senselessly with one another. However, long ago, the Priesthood issued an edict declaring, “All domains are permitted to resolve conflicts through military force”. As a direct result of lifting the prohibition

of inter-domain military actions, a state of perpetual war has existed throughout Tenra for the past 400 years. Because the regents have the authority to make war, they often exercise that authority to expand their territories and power. Even now there is no end of war in sight.

In the name of territory expansion, or simply self-defense from aggressors (be it true or not), rulers have been able to increase their war-based resources as well as develop the technology to aid in their battles. The results of this state of constant war are easy to see: Autonomous unmanned killing machines called kongohki; Mentally controlled and piloted mobile weapon platforms known as yoroi armours; Humans with heightened combat efficiency called samurai and kijin. A world of endless battles. The land of perpetual feudal war. Soil ruled by and stained by blood and steel. That is the world of Tenra.

TOKIWA, THE SOUTHERN CONTINENT

The southern continent is called *Tokiwa* or The Land of Fire. It is located at the southernmost end of Tenra and is known for its yearly torrential thunderstorms which occur in the summer. It is also known for the occasional unexplainable, mysterious artifacts which sometimes wash up upon its shores. There is no small number of groups that make it their purpose to find, claim and try to understand these artifacts. Most of the domains of the southern continent of Tokiwa are under the influence of the Priesthood of the Southern Court.

IZUMO, THE WESTERN CONTINENT

The western continent is called *Izumo*. This land for some strange reason has more *ayakashi* (spirits, monsters, and fey creatures) than other lands in Tenra. Of particular note is the ancient battle of the monstrous nine-headed dragon Yamata-no-Orochi and the great armour known as Susano-O, which was one of the most regarded historic events in the land. After the division of the Priesthood in the wake of the Fall of Jinrai, the Northern Court came to rule most of the domains of Izumo.

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

HIDEKAMI, THE EASTERN CONTINENT

The eastern continent is commonly known as *Hidekami*. It is a rough land of complicated geographical features, steep mountains and deep forests. Because of that, development and expansion was never as rampant here as in the other continents. After the division of the Priesthood into the Northern and Southern Courts, the resident domains were able to resist and even boycott the influence of the Priesthood. Domains like Asobe and Tsuboka lead the fight to resist the military and political might of the Priesthood, and they make use of the high-impenetrable geographical features in their struggle.

YASHIMA, THE CENTRAL CONTINENT

This central continent, known as *Yashima*, is the birthplace of all the humans in Tenra. This is the land where the ancestors of modern Tenrans descended from the stars. It is the political and social heart of all Tenra, and the staging ground for the ongoing internal war of the Shinto Priesthood.

EDO, THE IMPURE LAND

Edo is the Buddhist word for “The Impure Land”, and in Tenra refers to the small continent southeast of Yashima. It is referred to in whispers as, “The place where all the evil in the world gathers”. This place was originally a penal colony, but today it has become a great lawless land occupied by villains like pirates and bandits. Even the Priesthood can’t control this land. Since it is a land of total anarchy, samurai and other warriors sometimes go there for personal training. Other domains also use Edo for military experimentation, like the testing of new armours.

BEFORE THE COLLAPSE

KI-SHU, LAND OF THE ONI

This area is named Ki-shu, or “Land of the Oni”, because there are many oni villages there. Most of the heart engines that circulate Tenra and power armours are “made” there. There are six domains

in Kishu: Kaira, Kotoshiki, Ryuuko, Kasanagi, Magatsuno and Kikoku. There is a severe escalating confrontation between Ryuuko and Kaira; Ryuuko suppresses the native oni, while Kaira has an open politic which includes human and oni alike.

RYUURIN-SHU, THE DRAGONSCALE TERRITORIES

This province is named the Dragonscale Territories because of a line of mountains that stretches across it gives the impression of giant, barbed scales. There are six domains in Ryuurin-shu (Inao, Hakusen, Iiba, Ouga, Enozu, Torigoe), and each country is ruled by a regent who has a unique, strong personality and code of rule. In fact, the regent of Hakusen, Buren, doesn’t even call himself “regent”. He does this to refuse acknowledgment of the control or influence of the Priesthood.

SAIRIN-SHU, THE WESTERN ISLES

Sairin-shu is a collection of island nations, and consists of six small landmasses: Kotonari, Akito, Funashi, Momotsu, Nise, and Ikami. Each of these islands is its own country. Since each country is separated by the sea, their leaders haven’t been pushed into a state of war with each other for a couple hundred years.

NANBOU-SHU, THE IRON RIDGE

Nanbou-shu is a long landmass in the south that looks like a wedge. This land is also known as the “The Iron Ridge”. The continent is divided by the high, treeless peaks of the Kaina mountain range, which stretch out from the center of the land. There are eight countries in the Iron Ridge: Tsugumi, Touga, Utsuro, Igami, Kijikura, Naruhane, Kanuma, and Tokobuki. This land is a hotbed of strife and war, and the borders of the countries are always changing. Utsuro and Naruhane have started to become the more powerful domains in the region.

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

SUNAI-SHU, THE CRADLE

This land of prairies and gentle sloping hills is the true geographical and political center of Tenra. It contains important domains like Jinrai (the central region of the Priesthood), Houga (which houses the head temple of the great Buddhist Phoenix Sect) and four other countries: Hinomori, Suma, Miyasuzu, Takasumi. Though there are not large scale wars in the Cradle, it doesn't mean that it is in a state of peace. It is a political hotspot known for its conspiracies and schemes.

GI-SHU, THE LAND OF WOE

Surrounded by the sea on three sides, Gi-shu is a land of mostly forests. This land is made up of five countries: Suzunari, Miyashino, Kagari, Hakuse, and Sakahami. It is a political powder keg, and the most unstable region of Tenra. Though there are no huge battles happening currently (save for a bloody civil war in Kagari), the countries of this region are always in political hot water. The situation in the Land of Woe is always unstable.

TOU-SHU, THE EASTERN LAND

The Eastern Land is surrounded by the Yaosu mountain ranges in three directions, and is made up largely of huge prairies. The domains of Tou-shu are a little isolated by the mountains from the other neighboring territories, so there are rarely attacks into the area from other domains. However, within the Eastern Land the domains are almost always at war over new territory and newly discovered mines of metals, soulgem and scarlet steel. There are four countries in Tou-shu: Kagari, Kyosen, Migusa and Togo.

AFTER THE COLLAPSE

THE DRAGONSCALE TERRITORIES

After the fall of the Phantom Star, the domain of Ouga lost its regent and most of its land. The whole region was thrown into chaos and civil war. The Northern Court of the Priesthood made Ouga into the new seat of their power. Inter-domain wars in

the Ryuurin-shu domains quickly ended when new regents claimed power over their domains and the Priesthood stabilized the region. However, peace never seems to last forever, and there are now signs of a large war on the horizon. It seems Hakusen is mobilizing for war, and all other regions save Ouga and Enotsu are potential targets.

THE WESTERN ISLES

The fall of the Phantom Star completely obliterated the domains of Nise and Ikami. Other countries suffered huge amounts of damage from tsunami, flooding and earthquakes. Momotsu lost half of its territory, while Kotonari and Funashi became split in two by the sea. Each country is busy with reconstruction, inter-domain conflicts and even civil war. Many assume that it is only a matter of time before new domains form from the divided islands.

THE IRON RIDGE

Luckily, this region wasn't directly affected by the Fall of Jinrai, but the inter-domain wars are getting worse and spreading all over the land. Public order and lawlessness is at its worst point ever, with rule by the sword being the only thing preventing the region from slipping into total anarchy. Utsuro and Naruhane are fighting each other again and again in a seemingly endless war of attrition.

THE CRADLE

During the Fall of Jinrai, Kirai, Miyasuzu and Houga, once the centers of culture and society in Tenra, were completely annihilated. The north half of the region sank into the Soratsuzumi Sea. The former domain of Hinomori was renamed New Jinrai, as the Priesthood's Southern Court moved to this location and made it the new base of the Priesthood. There are currently wars between the domains of the Cradle and the Dragonscale Territories over the islands left between them in the Soratsuzumi Sea.

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

THE LAND OF WOE

The Fall of Jinrai did not particularly affect this region, but the original domestic disputes and inter-domain rivalries continue as they did before. The civil wars in Kagari ended shortly after the Phantom Star fell to the earth.

THE EASTERN LAND

The domain of Kagari in Tou-shu (not to be confused with the similarly named domain of Kagari in Gi-shu) and the border between the Eastern Land and the Oni Lands sank into the sea with the impact of the Phantom Star. The Phoenix Buddhist sect claimed political power in the shattered country of Togo and moved the head temple of their order there.

THE LAND OF THE ONI

The former domain of Kikoku was destroyed during the Makuu Nindo Revolt. A new Kikoku formed from its ashes, a country ruled by and for the oni people. Ryuuko is currently attempting to invade Kikoku in order to cleanse it of the oni, and these two domains are always at war. Kaira is currently supporting Kikoku.

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

A TIMELINE OF TENRAN EVENTS (IMPERIAL YEAR 2555 TO 2744)

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
Keishin 6	2555	1st Month	The ayakashi Yamata-no-Orochi appears in the Eastern Continent. The yoroi great armour Bloodfire is completed with the aid of the wandering armour-crafter, Sumeragi-no-Amatsu Okifune
		10th Month	Yamata-no-Orochi falls at the hands of yoroi operators Randou Touta and Aida Tsukasa
Keishin 12	2561	8th Month	The colossal gun battery Exterminator is used to defend Ashiro Castle
Keishin 31	2580	3rd Month	Year One of the Chishin Dynasty. Emperor Keishin dies
Chishin 10	2590	4th Month	40 defectors attempt to leave the Priesthood, but are secretly deposed
Chishin 22	2602	10th Month	The Priesthood bestows the Castle of Ash to the domain of Miyashino as their seat of power
Chishin 30	2610	6th Month	The Bright Lotus sect of Buddhism announces its separation from the Phoenix sect
Chishin 45	2625	3rd Month	Year One of the Shoshin Period. Emperor Chishin dies
Shoshin 15	2640	9th Month	Year One of the Washin Period. Emperor Shoshin dies
Washin 10	2650	10th Month	Yoroi armour crafter Tsurube Kenan dies
Washin 11	2651	3rd Month	The Oni Rebellion of Kouhou begins
Washin 12	2652	4th Month	The Massacre of the Kingdom of Inao occurs
		9th Month	Yoroi craftsman and Shinto Priest Redo Kensune presents his Manja-Raka, a 40 meter tall great armour, inviting both praise and criticism throughout the domains of Tenra
Washin 14	2654	10th Month	Asagimaru the Hunter disappears
		12th Month	Miyashino's Regent, Shingai Shuuzen, dies. His nephew, Sukemaru, takes his place
Washin 15	2655	3rd Month	Serpent-Wolf clan warlord Saki-tatsuya is captured in the Tsutaka region of the domain of Kyousen
		5th Month	Saigetsu Hayao (Childhood name Hebimaru), uses the armour Omega Dragon to free Saki-tatsuya from Tsutaka Prison in Isuzu
		7th Month	Sunami becomes a vassal lord. Gamou Doan, 28th generation Phoenix abbot, moves their headquarters to the domain of Togo. "A darkness comes here to Tomoka from which we cannot hide"
		8th Month	Katou Yasosuke, also known as Birdman, disappears
		9th Month	Tactician Zen Kouin of the domain of Kagari disappears while offering tribute at Mount Jinrai

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
		11th Month	Buren of Hakusen is betrayed by his trusted retainer on the way to an exhibition for new kugutsu. He escapes to safety with the power of the Spirit Sword of Takefutsu
		12th Month	The oni monk Makuu Nindo interfaces with the Girl-Who-Dreams, and the Makuu Nindo Revolt begins. Mt. Kannabi (“mountain where the kami reside”) appears in the domain of Hinomori overnight. The Bridge of Heaven, a silvery bridge which extended from the capital of Jinrai to the heavens, collapses. The Phantom Star, actually a piece of the Bridge of Heaven, falls and destroys Jinrai. Massive dust clouds from the fall cover Tenra and marks the beginning of the Two Month Night, an event which silences all Sha-powered equipment and magic. Refugees from the Central Continent begin to migrate into the province of Nanbou, the area affected least by the Fall of Jinrai. The domain of Kousen, taking advantage of the chaos, invades and acquires the kingdom of Kagari. Relatively weak ayakashi collectives known as spirit packs begin to appear throughout Tenra, perhaps drawn to populated areas by growing fears of commoners
Washin 16	2656	1st Month	Year One of the Genshi Daigo Period. The Phoenix Buddhist sect is given governance of the domain of Togo and changes the Japanese characters in Togo from “Beacon of Enlightenment” to “The Enlightenment of the East” to symbolize the change. The Southern Court of the Priesthood announces its return on Mount Kannabi in the domain of Hinomori and changes its name to New Jinrai. The Northern Court of the Priesthood announces its restoration and constructs Genshikyo, a floating castle (around 30 square km) in the kingdom of Ouga. Empress Genshi Daigo, a young girl around 13, shows herself to the public without a mask, which is the first time in history an emperor or empress showed his or her face in public. Sunami becomes regent

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
		2nd Month	The Kikoku War begins its final campaign. All across Tenra, all shiki spirits temporarily lose their power: This affects all armours, kongohki, samurai transformations and shinobi powers. All floating castles fall beginning with the Castle of Ash in Miyashino, but Genshikyo is spared this fate. Regents and leaders all over Tenra lose much of their power due to ever increasing inter-domain wars throughout Tenra: Some attempt to make land grabs while others are further weakened. Due to the temporary dispelling of shiki, many samurai and shinobi lose their lives on the battlefield. Shiki spirit power returns and immediately thereafter a gigantic wedge-shaped object carrying the symbol of the Priesthood, the battleship Yamato-Takeru, is sighted in the sky over the domain of Ki. The Two Month Night ends. The Northern Court begins to reveal methods to manufacture soul mirrors and supporting technology to the various domains. Mass production of inferior quality meikyo, now known popularly as kimenkyo (mechanical mirrors), begin
		3rd Month	Meikyo/kimenkyo crafting as a profession is born. The Phoenix sect Buddhist monk named Immovable West (Sairoku) becomes the first professional crafter.
		4th Month	Using the technological knowledge provided by the Northern Court (namely surgical techniques, anatomy, and antiseptics), the Furaei Institute—the Taoist Sorcery institute in Ouga—begins experiments to give humans the supernatural power found in the native oni people. This makes possible the surgical techniques necessary for the development of <i>kijin</i> technology

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
Washin 17 Genshi Daigo 3	2657	5th Month	Armour craftsman Redo Kensune, supported by the Northern Court, publishes his Laws for Machine Enhancement Surgery for the standardization of the creation of yoroi armours and kongohki. The Makuu and Kikoku armies engage in their final battle, the Battle of Flowing Grass: During this battle, the Makuu army unleashes the Zedaishu, an elite army of oni and half-oni, who use their unique Resonance-based sword fighting techniques to easily defeat the Kikoku army. The Makuu Nindo Revolt ends and Makuu Nindo himself gains rulership of Kikoku, which becomes “The Land of the Oni”. The pictographic characters that make up Kikoku’s name are changed from “Oni’s Lament” to “Oni’s Revelation”
		10th Month	The domain of Kazanagi acquires the land of neighboring Gaira and begins salvage work in the Soranotsuzu Sea, created by the collapse of the Bridge of Heaven. The trading city of Tsushima is established as the salvaging base of operations
		3rd Month	Motowa and Iriteru become meikyo crafters. Master Raiden, a former yoroi armour pilot from Shimagoe known as “The Scarlet Lightning Bolt”, is selected as one of the first 20 operators for the newly mass-produced “Crusher” kimen armours (Today, Raiden is a Bright Lotus monk named Matsusaka Raidou)
		5th Month	The colossal bridge called “The Great Urato Bridge” is constructed in one night
		11th Month	Inao domain tactician Yoribe Hyouzen, with his goal of creating a troop of immortal soldiers, creates the elite “Red Wind Army”. The scientization and institutionalization of Taoist Sorcery begins. Various schools and factions of Taoist Sorcery become more specialized as they focus on particular techniques and methods
Washin 18 Genshi Daigo 4	2658	2nd Month	The kugutsu maker Kikka Yorimasa from the domain of Kagari creates the world’s first line of kugutsu specifically designed to operate meikyo. They are called “Interfacers” and the first one was named Magatama. While the abilities of a yoroi armour with an Interfacers at the helm are greatly increased, the bonds between the armour and Interfacers can become so strong they both eventually became unable to operate separately from one another

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
		3rd Month	The naval battle between the Northern and Southern Courts over the Great Urato Bridge intensifies
		8th Month	Yoroi armour craftsman Nakato Enkai of Kotoshiki creates a stable flight mechanism. Koyama Uchiie's "Thunderstorm" becomes the first armour to have instruments installed providing the armour with continuous flight. Taoist Sorcerer Kuuchi Enkai of Naruhane, with gunsmith Fujikura Tessai, create the massive rocket named "Heaven's Guard" which they use to launch the kongohki Thunderfire into space. Thunderfire safely escapes the atmosphere, and many of its observations were recorded, such as "It's hard to believe that this great sphere is Tenra...", "I can see lands south of the Southern Continent", and "A boat of some kind is floating in the black sky", but it soon disappeared without a trace
		9th Month	Sandou Anna, leader of the Oni Zedaishu order, bears 2 children, Ryuuki and Suzuhime
		10th Month	Zen Kouin, backed by the Northern Court, becomes regent of the domain of Kagari
		12th Month	In Kaira, the soul of the great leader Retsudou is inserted into the meikyo of a kongohki-tiger named Fang-of-Lightning. Sandou Anna, lured into studying the corrupt forms of the oni resonance powers, disappears and Ryuuki and Suzuhime are each adopted by different parents
Washin 20 Genshi Daigo 5	2260	4th Month	In the domain of Kanuma, the Bright Lotus Insurrection—a lay movement—seizes power of the Bright Lotus Buddhist sect. The Cleansing War breaks out between the domain of Ryuuko and the Kaira-Kikoku United Front
		7th Month	Hisomi Deigan dies by the hand of Makuuu Nindo. The Cleansing War ends with the domain of Kikoku winning. Ryuuko now falls under the jurisdiction of Kikoku, and for all practical purposes, Ryuuko becomes a vassal state of Kikoku. Eba Reikisai, an oni who lost his horn, becomes the new regent of Ryuuko
Washin 21 Genshi Daigo 6	2261	9th Month	The Naruwa War breaks out between the domains of Sakahami and Kagari

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
		10th Month	Kaira makes Tsushima an independent free trade city and power over city is handed over to a wealthy merchant group called the Shining Wisteria Association. Misura, a monotheistic, messianic religion that emphasizes the equality and freedom of all humanoids (including oni), is founded. The founder of Misura is unknown but it is thought to be a human adaption of oni religion, originating somewhere in the south. The Northern Court and warlords attempt to suppress Misura but rather than oppressing the religion, the Sourthern Court tolerates it, at least in Kikoku
Washin 22 Genshi Daigo 7	2662	2nd Month	The Last Dance War breaks out between the domains of Inao and Iiba
		3rd Month	Th e Red Wind Army fi ghts numerous battles in Harumi and Miyoi and their ferocious fi ghting style earns them the names Blood Demons and Vampires
		4th Month	Th e Naruwa War ends with Kagari losing half of its territory
		9th Month	Th e Red Wind Army is completely wiped out in Sugi-hazama. The Last Dance War ends with Inao gaining only a small portion of land
		10th Month	Yoroi rider Kubi Kiriko appears in Ushima, which is one of the salvage bases at the Soranotsuzu Sea. Northern Court backed regent Zen Kouin commits suicide, causing the domain of Kagari to once again fall into civil war
Washin 30 Genshi Daigo 15	2670	8th Month	Year One of the Genshi Hazukan Dynasty. Northern Court Empress Genshi Daigo dies. Buren dies of an illness (stomach cancer). Trusted retainer Mashira Hideyoshi is appointed regent but never actually takes the title of regent, instead calling himself an advisor.
Washin 35 Genshi Hakuzan 5	2675	3rd Month	The Kantoba War begins with Kaira declaring war on the oni nation of Kikoku. Dansu Heidatsu, a black-masked man calling himself the Cloaked Lord, is called to Kaira to serve as their tactician. Sandou Ryuuki, Mada Rasuo and Nakabe Maka rescue Suzuhime of Kikoku from the hands of Dansu Heidatsu
		8th Month	Dansu Heidatsu is killed by Sandou Ryuuki (son of Sandou Anna) of the Zedaishu. The Kantoba War ends with Kaira losing only a small portion of land

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
Washin 38 Genshi Hakuzan 8	2678	1st Month	Mashira Hideyoshi dies of diabetes and leaves his son to take his place. Takeshina Yasuie, the guardian of Hideyoshi's son, seizes power and prevents Tadaharu's ascension
Washin 45 Genshi Hakuzan 15	2685	1st Month	Bright Lotus believers in the domain Kanuma are excommunicated
		3rd Month	The Bright Lotus sect in Kanuma are overthrown by the former regent and their 25 year rule of the domain comes to an end
Washin 51 Genshi Hakuzan 21	2691	2nd Month	The Clear Wind War between the domains Kotoshiki and Iiba begins
		9th Month	Fang of Lightning, a kongohki of Kaira, goes missing during a mission and has not been seen since
Washin 55 Genshi Hakuzan 25	2695	3rd Month	The Clear Wind War ends when the ancient relic they were fighting over disappears in the middle of the final battle. Both sides suffer equal losses
		9th Month	The number of salvagers looking for the "Five Colored Dragon" suddenly increases
Washin 63 Genshi Hakuzan 33	2073	2nd Month	Year One of the Genshi Yousen Dynasty Northern Court emperor Genshi Hakuzan dies
Washin 64 Genshi Yousen 2	2704	1st Month	Year One of the Seishin Dynasty Southern Court emperor Washin dies
Seishin 4 Genshi Yousen 6	2708	7th Month	The Pankou, blond haired, green-eyed nomads, arrive in former Bunashi domain in Sairin province. They claim it for themselves and rename the domain "Yuuen"
Seishin 5 Genshi Yousen 7	2709	8th Month	Year One of the Genshi Houshi Period. Northern Court emperor, Genshi Yousen, dies after seven years of rule
Seishin 9 Genshi Houshi 4	2713	5th Month	The Batou Rebellion begins in the domain of Kotoshiki
		9th Month	Long retired doll maker Shou-un announces the creation of Longmoon, the 9th kugutsu of his "Princesses of December" model line
Seishin 11 Genshi Houshi 6	2715	10th Month	The Batou Rebellion is suppressed and the leader of the rebellion Batou Kyouma disappears
Seishin 23 Genshi Houshi 18	2727	2nd Month	The yoroi of Kubi Kiriko washes up on the shore of Seirin trading port with her frozen dead body still inside
Seishin 37 Genshi Houshi 33	2742	6th Month	Yoroi crafter Redo Kensune announces his newest creation, an armour named Violet Sunflower. He disappears shortly after

TENRA, THE GREAT LAND

Dynasty	Year	Month	Event
Seishin 38 Genshi Houshi 34	2742	5th Month	Year One of the Genshi Shuntoku Dynasty Northern Court emperor, Genshi Houshi, dies
		10th Month	Southern Court emperor Seishin falls ill and is confined to bed
Seishin 40 Genshi Shuntoku 2	2744	1st Month	Year One of the unified Nagara Dynasty. Southern Court emperor Seishin finally relinquishes power to Prince Nagara of the Northern Court and the reign of the Southern Court comes to an end

BUT WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

This is just a sampling of two hundred years in the history of one version of the world of Tenra, filled with a bewildering number of events, only very roughly explained (if at all). Within each line, hidden in each date, are stories to be told and adventures to be had. Feel free to use these events as the basis of your own games of Tenra Bansho. Never be afraid to change the history, or add your own events, and make the world your own.

SACRED AND INVIOLEATE, THE PRIESTHOOD IS IMPENETRABLE

Simply hearing the name of the Shinto Priesthood is sufficient to ward off curiosity; the average inhabitant of Tenra will make no attempt to inquire further, as they know comprehending the Priesthood is impossible. No attempts at resistance are made, either, as they know that defying the Priesthood is likewise impossible. The Priesthood is the keeper of the most advanced technology on Tenra, and the shadow ruler of the world.

The Priesthood's realm Jinrai was located in Tenra's central province of Sunai-shu. The Priesthood built their capital on the outskirts of the Great Takamagahara Forest, at the foot of Tenra's largest mountain Mount Jinrai. Here the Shinto dynasty was able to fend off all foreign invaders for generations.

The Priesthood granted the use of meikyo soul mirrors—one facet of Priesthood technology—to the regents, the outward rulers of Tenra. Using their unsurpassed technology as leverage, the Priesthood historically control the flow and spread of warfare across Tenra.

However, none are immune to the passage of time, and even the monolithic Priesthood has experienced dramatic change.

In the fifteenth year of the Washin dynasty, Mount Jinrai—the symbol of the Priesthood—collapsed, annihilating the capital city completely. Additionally, the fall of a heavenly body called the Phantom Star destroyed the entire northern half of Sunai-shu. There were no survivors of the country once called Jinrai; it had been replaced by an immense sea that came to be known as Soratsuzumi, the Sea Which Touches the Heavens.

All thought that the Priesthood had been destroyed. None could have escaped such devastation... Or could they? This faint, nagging suspicion was confirmed soon enough when the Priesthood rose again.

The Priesthood had changed unmistakably, however, emerging from the apocalypse as two separate entities: A Northern Court and a Southern Court. A new era had begun—the Age of the Northern and Southern Courts.

THE NORTHERN COURT

THE OPEN PRIESTHOOD

After the destruction of the Sunai province by the impact of the Phantom Star, the sky above Tenra's central continent was choked with sand and dust for two whole months, blocking the sun's rays entirely. When the Two Month Night (as this period came to be known) ended early in the 16th year of the Washin dynasty, the Priesthood's Northern Court announced its birth loudly and clearly.

A floating castle appeared in the sky above the northern wastelands in the domain of Ouga in the Ryuurin-shu province. The Priesthood proclaimed its return, naming its airborne capital Genshikyo, and announcing the accession of new empress Genshi Daigo. This day went down in history as the first ever public appearance of a Priesthood emperor or empress.

Until then, the Priesthood had become inseparably identified with the masks constantly worn by its members. Seeing the face of a high-ranking member of the Shinto Priesthood was a heretofore unthinkable event, but on that day the new ruler of the Priesthood revealed herself to be a charming young girl, her features uncovered and exposed to the world.

The surprises continued. Empress Genshi Daigo announced the establishment of a new "open" Shinto Priesthood, promising an end to the pervasive secrecy. She was true to her word,

revealing the knowledge behind the manufacture of meikyo. Until that point, it was the most jealously guarded of the Priesthood's technological marvels.

In the past, the regents—the kings and rulers of the domains of Tenra—had desperately sent messengers to the Priesthood, hoping to snatch up the few meikyo the capricious Priesthood saw fit to bestow upon them. Now, however, the secrets of meikyo production were available to everyone (with some unpredictable results).

People were about to learn that changes in the Shinto Priesthood mean changes in Tenra society.

Or perhaps the essentials remained unchanged after all. The Northern Court never revealed the entirety of its knowledge and technology, and Tenra's wars continued unabated. In fact, the chaos escalated, with war breaking out between regents loyal to the Northern Court and those who owe their allegiance to the Southern Court.

TECHNOLOGY REVEALED

It goes without saying that, of the technological knowledge made available by the Northern Court, the single most influential was that pertaining to the manufacture of meikyo soul mirrors. With every country now able to create their own, the quantity of meikyo possessed by each nation increased exponentially.

Unfortunately, the quality and capabilities of meikyo created by outsiders pales in comparison to those manufactured in secret by the Priesthood. It is for this reason that non-Priesthood meikyo are called kimenkyo (mechanical mirrors), to distinguish them from their superior cousins.

The exact reasons for the difference in performance between meikyo and kimenkyo are unknown. It could be that outsiders simply do not possess the necessary ability and experience to create high-quality meikyo. Or, perhaps the Northern Court has simply seen fit to withhold some core knowledge pertaining to meikyo manufacture.

According to the available lore, a meikyo consists of a mirror-like polished disc inlaid with countless gold designs, appearing much the same as the old bronze polished mirrors that are often found in old Shinto shrines. It is important that the disc is as flat and its surface as free of distortion as possible. However, few craftsmen are up to the task, and this may be a major reason for the difference in quality. When a secret analysis of a Priesthood meikyo was carried out it was discovered that both the slimness of the inlaid gold lines, the density of the patterns inscribed, and the complexity of the patterns themselves were beyond anything the craftsmen had seen before. As it is, painstakingly engraving patterns of golden wire into the mirrored surface demands both an incredible amount of craftsmanship as well as time, with a single kimenkyo requiring months to complete.

The engineers who manufacture kimenkyo have become known as *crafters*, and they have devoted their lives to honing their skills, creating more accurate meikyo copies. Assuming the Priesthood truly has revealed the entirety of their meikyo knowledge, the day they accomplish their goal may yet arrive.

Despite being clearly inferior to meikyo, the capabilities of kimenkyo are sufficient enough. And unlike the priceless, rare meikyo, kimenkyo may be mass-produced—albeit not easily—assuming the necessary ingredients and craftsmen are available. In the same manner as a meikyo, it is possible for a user to merge with a kimenkyo and connect their soul to it. While there will be some difference in performance, kimenkyo can also be used in the creation of Armour and kongohki. These so-called Kimen-Armour and Kimen-Kongohki may not be as individually capable as those using meikyo, but they have made up for the performance gap in sheer numbers. The advent of kimen armour and kimen kongohki has had a drastic effect on the way war is waged on Tenra. Now that kimenkyo have become widely available, many are attempting to find alternative uses for the technology, especially in the realm of Onmyojutsu.

The kimenkyo and drive shafts used by armour and kongohki are constructed with a type of ultradense metal called scarlet steel. The market prices of soulgems and scarlet steel continue to skyrocket, with no decline in sight.

After the Northern Court revealed the secrets of the technology, it ceased supplying the regents with meikyo, causing their price to soar. However, meikyo mirrors themselves have not become completely scarce; the existent meikyo were not confiscated, the Southern Court continues to release new meikyo to loyal regents, and trade of meikyo mirrors hidden from the watchful gaze of the Northern Court continues. Incidentally, with the introduction of kimen armour and kongohki, the price of soulgems, the other vital component, has also skyrocketed.

The mechanized soldiers known as kijin—a recent battlefield innovation—are also due to the Northern Court's technology, albeit indirectly. There had been several attempts at replacing human organs and limbs with mechanical parts using *onmyojutsu* (the art of sorcery), but success had proved elusive until the onmyojutsu guild in Ouga incorporated the knowledge of physiology and anesthesia granted by the Priesthood. While their research into human soulgem implantation hit a dead end, they made kijin mechanization possible. After that, as a byproduct of the Northern Court's yoroi armour and kongohki standardization edict, reliable kijin technology became available to rulers throughout Tenra almost immediately.

It is important to note that the Northern Court has not unveiled the secrets behind all known Priesthood technology, and while the ruined capital of Jinrai may lie at the bottom of the Soratsuzumi sea, many of the meikyo and other technological marvels it holds are still intact.

Several salvage outposts have been established along the coast of the Soratsuzumi, and recovery

operations are underway. Strangely, the Northern Court has done absolutely nothing to block or limit this non-Priesthood salvage. The Southern Court has strictly forbidden the recovery of sunken Priesthood technology. Wary of letting the North-allied regents corner the market on recovered loot, salvage missions by vassals of the Southern Court are conducted in secret.

The largest Soratsuzumi salvage outpost is a city called Tsushima in the country of Kaira. Originally intended as a simple port of trade, the rapid influx of treasure-hunting speculators has lent the city an unusual atmosphere. Built on reclaimed land with very little planning or zoning, the island city has become a veritable labyrinth, with the lay of the land confusing even longtime residents. Many locals live aboard ships as well, making Kaira regent Tamiki Soujou's reign a tenuous one at best.

While none compare in size to Tsushima, similar outposts dot the Soratsuzumi coastline. Government recovery operations are carried out, but civilian salvage is both more common and larger in scale. Those who actually dive into the ocean and carry out the salvage are called Digger Clans (Moguri-Ya), and they sell the recovered treasures to dealers who operate in a way similar to black-market fences. The final purchasers of salvaged goods are generally the fief rulers or regents that created the outpost, and transporting such items outside of the domain without permission is strictly prohibited. However, with rulers of distant realms desperate to obtain such treasure and willing to pay a much higher price than legal clients, smuggling

The difference in performance between meikyo and kimenkyo is represented in the rules by the presence or absence of a "meikyo bonus," which provides bonus dice to actions. Kimenkyo do not accumulate karma, and therefore armour and kongohki utilizing kimenkyo may not apply a meikyo modifier to their attributes. See the rules section for more details.

is rampant. Among the diggers, rumor has it that the parties offering the best prices are none other than the Northern and Southern Priesthoods. Most transport is handled via sea-lanes, and the smugglers have also become known in local parlance as Crossers in local slang.

The majority of recovered items are so damaged as to be of no practical use, however small items in reasonably good shape tend to fetch prices of tens of ryo, and the sky is the limit for larger intact objects. Some salvaged material is completely unidentifiable, but weapons such as firearms and swords are relatively frequently recovered and sell favorably on the market. These weapons do not require bullets or gunpowder and also possess greater destructive power than their non-Priesthood equivalents. Priesthood armour and kongohki are especially in demand, and even if he sells it through legal avenues, the lucky diver who manages to recover one of these can expect to earn enough money to finance several hundred years' worth of luxurious living.

THE SOUTHERN COURT

THE PRIESTHOOD WHICH REMAINS CLOSED

The other branch of the Priesthood is the Southern Court, which has established its stronghold New Mount Jinrai just south of the province of Sunai-shu in the country originally called Hinomori (renamed Jinrai by the Southern Court). The Southern Court continues to revere and serve Washin, the emperor of the pre-disaster Priesthood, and consider the North's Empress Genshi Daigo a reviled usurper. Additionally, it was outsiders who named the factions the "Northern Court" and "Southern Court"; the so-called Southern Court simply refers to itself as "The Priesthood".

Unlike the progressive, "open" Northern Court, the Southern Court operates in exactly the same manner as the original Shinto Priesthood: Forbidding outsider intrusion in the region surrounding Jinrai, outlawing accurate mapmaking

and the analysis and production of meikyo, and continuing the age-old taboo of impersonating Priesthood members. Even despite the loss of Mount Jinrai, the Southern Court appears not to have been affected by the disaster. They are now as the Priesthood was before.

On the central continent, the remaining lower half of the province Sunai-shu as well as the provinces of Gi-shu, Tou-shu, and Nanbou-shu are under the control of the Southern Court. The Northern Court, on the other hand, counts Sairin-shu, Ryuurin-shu, and Ki-shu (with the exception of the oni nation of Kikoku) as its own territory. The Soratsuzumi Sea can be thought of as the border between the two Priesthoods' domains. The Eastern Continent is loyal to the Northern Court, while the Southern Court rules the Western and Southern Continents.

The Southern Court's stronghold, New Mount Jinrai, was initially called Mount Kannabi. Appearing literally overnight in the period immediately preceding the Phantom Star impact, this unnaturally smooth silver peak, like a half-buried sphere, is thought to have been an underground Priesthood facility.

The Southern Court vehemently opposes the North's handling of Priesthood technology, and it imposes strict sanctions—both directly and indirectly—on those regents who dare attempt to research or utilize this technology. They are especially opposed to the production and use of kimenkyo. Some regents attempted to secede from Southern control through the use of large quantities of kimenkyo imported from the North. The revolts were crushed, however, when the Southern Court revealed its ability to simply deactivate kimenkyo during battle.

The Southern Court is not completely unreasonable, however; it grants a relatively large number of meikyo technologies like soul mirrors, armours and kongohki to loyal regents in the border territories so as to guard against the North's mass-produced kimenkyo.

SHRINE MAIDENS AND PRIESTS

THE PRIESTHOOD OUTSIDE THE PRIESTHOOD

The Priesthood is divided into a hierarchy of ranks and led by the emperor. All Priesthood members of the rank *Kakari* and higher are required to wear masks, and they rarely appear in public. While Empress Genshi Daigo is an unusual case, showing one's face is absolutely forbidden, and this restriction holds true for both Northern and Southern Courts. However, not all Priesthood members spend their lives cloistered away in the fortresses of New Mount Jinrai in the Southern Court or Genshikyo in the Northern Court. Some members of the clergy are recruited from the general populace, and others born to the Priesthood are selected to live among the people of Tenra. These agents belong to the lowest rank, Taira, and are generally referred to as *onshi* or priests if male, and *miko* or shrine maidens if female.

The agents known as Shinto priests are typically commoners ceremonially inducted into the Priesthood, and their role is to visit regions without shrines selling productive amulets and conducting rituals. They are frequently called upon to administer at weddings, and they sometimes are hired to summon rain to drought-afflicted farmlands. Establishing shrines in new villages is another important task handled by the *onshi*. As traveling agents of the Priesthood, *onshi* are granted complete freedom of movement. *Onshi* carry an official pass that allows them to cross through any border or checkpoint in Tenra, and regents and fief-holders are absolutely forbidden to harass or hinder Shinto priests in any way, no matter whether their loyalty lies with the Northern Court or the Southern Court. The masks worn by *onshi* are small, concealing only the area around the eyes, and under certain circumstances it is permissible for them to reveal their faces.

Miko, also known as shrine maidens, are priestesses who work at local shrines, helping with ceremonies

One of the major duties of a priest or shrine maiden is to travel the land, finding villages without shrines, and reporting back to the Priesthood. In this war-torn era not even shrines are immune to the devastation of battle. After contacting the Priesthood, their next task is to establish a shrine. They receive a holy relic from an established Shinto Priest of rank *Kakari* or above, and enlist the aid of the local residents or feudal ruler in erecting the building. Once the shrine has been constructed, the relic is housed inside and activated via a number of rituals and ceremonies.

and rituals. They are often recruited from the village where the shrine stands. They are experienced with handling *meikyo* mirrors and the en-shrined holy relics, and some *miko* even pilot the great mechanized *yoroi* armours. Female agents who work as their male counterparts do, traveling from place to place, are usually called “wandering *miko*”.

It is possible for Taira-ranked Shinto agents to be promoted to higher levels, and there have even been three recorded cases of commoners rising to the elite echelons of the Priesthood.

PRIESTHOOD RANKS AND SKILL LEVELS

Priesthood ranks are tied to skill levels. For example, Agents of Taira rank may not raise their Shinto skill above Skilled level (2) without the GM's permission. Additionally the Kiai Skill Boost effect may not be used to increase the Shinto rating in regards to rank. This rule applies equally to both Northern Court and Southern Court Agents.

Kakari Rank—Advanced

Agents possessing a Shinto level of 3 are Kakari-ranked members of the Priesthood, replacing their eye mask with a larger one that covers their whole face. Kakari-ranked Agents are generally assigned a single shrine. They handle a greater amount of sensitive information and are held to high standards of secrecy. Agents ranked Kakari and above are expected to gladly devote 90% of both their income and time to serving the Priesthood. Those unwilling to make this sacrifice will not be promoted to this level.

Ka Rank—Master

Agents with a Shinto skill of 4 are considered Ka-ranked members of the Priesthood. Ka rank Agents almost never appear in public, and even then they usually only interact with regents and other members of the elite class. They have the power to summon Priesthood kongohki.

Bu Rank—Special

Those with Shinto rated at 5 are Bu-ranked Agents. Among the Priesthood, Bu rank Agents are treated as Kami themselves, and their word is considered the very voice of the Emperor.

TRANSCENDENT TECHNOLOGY

Humans reached Tenra from elsewhere, and the Priesthood is known to have already existed at the point in time in which the first human stepped upon the land. While the origins of the Priesthood itself are obscure, the Imperial Chronicles they keep (spanning over 2600 years to date) are the definitive history of mankind's activities in Tenra.

Some theorize that the Priesthood alone crossed the oceans and invaded Tenra, and that all non-Priesthood humans were Tenra's original inhabitants. However, this theory is contradicted by *oni* folklore. If the oni are correct, then *all* humans are in fact descendants of the Priesthood, and their powerful technology once belonged to all mankind. It is unknown how the Priesthood came to monopolize this technology, but there is no denying that this control has allowed them to become the undisputed rulers of Tenra.

The Priesthood is a force to be reckoned with, and their power stems from their advanced technology. Most technology available in Tenra is founded in onmyodo (Taoist magical knowledge, practiced by onmyoji) and utilizes the magical gossamer-like power that enshrouds Tenra known as Sha. However, despite their unrivaled command of all onmyoji-related matters, the Priesthood does not appear to value such knowledge very highly. The reason for this is that the majority of the technology the Priesthood guards most jealously does not involve the native sha force of Tenra and is, in fact, completely different from the technology developed on Tenra.

The true extent of the Priesthood's technological might is easy to imagine when one considers the fact that their original stronghold, Mount Jinrai, was an immense floating mountain topped with a bridge that literally extended into the heavens. The Priesthood also possesses great flying battleships (such as the ones used during the Makuu Nindo Revolt) and fearsome kongohki robots capable of such devastation that they put the standard models

The holy relics enshrined by the Priesthood are actually fixed, stationary terminals connected to the Tenra-wide Meikyo Network. All meikyo in existence are registered with the Network, and by accessing the terminal all active meikyo in the vicinity can be sensed. However, Taira-ranked agents (like low-level wandering priests and shrine maiden) are not granted the authority to access meikyo and kimenkyo via the Network.

to shame. As if that were not enough, agents of the Priesthood can use their Shinto magic to call down lightning and stars from the heavens. These marvels are but a small part of the technology hoarded by the Priesthood.

The Shinto Priesthood are feared and avoided by all. But despite having enough power to easily take over the world, they seem to prefer exercising their power indirectly through control of the regents, acting as the shadow rulers of Tenra. What could their aim be? Certainly not to unify or bring peace to Tenra. A deep analysis of the Priesthood's actions shows that they have done nothing but aggravate the chaos and bloodshed sweeping Tenra.

Perhaps maintaining this state of warfare and confusion is their goal. If someone were to unite the nations of Tenra, they would have power rivaling that of the Priesthood. As long as the Priesthood maintains the current bloody state of affairs, it rules unopposed. Should one force grow too strong, another can be created to oppose it, or careful manipulation can cause it to break apart from within. The history of Tenra has seen countless cases of powerful nations torn by civil war or brought down by powerful enemies, and inevitably the fifth columns and opposing factions operated with the support of the Priesthood.

However, with the split into Northern and Southern Courts, the Priesthood's iron grip appears to be slipping. Warfare tends to inspire a great deal of

technological innovation, and much of the recent development in Tenra has occurred independently of the Priesthood's control. Both courts war with each other, and Buren, the leader of the increasingly powerful domain of Hakusen, has openly declared war on the Priesthood. The Makuu Nindo Revolt is another important recent example of a conflict that ended in an undesired manner for the Priesthood.

The Priesthood kongohki are terrifying instruments of power. While they are most commonly used as guards around Genshikyo and New Mount Jinrai, they are also sent to deal with rebels or to eliminate those who threaten the Priesthood's secrecy.

Priesthood kongohki are vastly different from the conventional models in terms of both appearance and capabilities. From the few recovered destroyed kongohki it is known that they are not powered by heart engines and use some unknown substance instead. Priesthood kongohki were also unaffected by the magic-halting effects of the Priesthood's might during the Makuu Nindo Revolt, which suggests that they were created by some means other than Taoist sorcery. Some suggest that the meikyo used in Priesthood kongohki are not inhabited by souls at all, and are instead operated via remote control.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

Comprised of a number of adjoining fiefs led by feudal rulers, the domain is the largest political unit known to Tenra. While most domains are home to anywhere from a few clans to a dozen or so, expansive domains ruled by 20 or more lords are not uncommon.

Domains are ruled by a single regent (*Kabane*), who stands at the top of a hierarchy of vassal lords and manages the territory as a whole. A regent is an officially recognized Shinto Priesthood-authorized representative of a domain. Simply ruling over multiple fiefs and possessing the force of arms to rival a regent is not enough to be admitted among their august ranks; an aspiring leader must contact the Priesthood and obtain the explicit recognition of the Emperor. Should his or her application be approved, the new regent is granted the court title *Tsukasa*, which may then be appended to the domain's name and incorporated into his full name. For example, the official title of the Regent of Iiba, Shimeki Masataka, is *Shimeki Iiba-no-Tsukasa Masataka*.

In the modern day, with the Priesthood divided into feuding Northern and Southern courts, the decision of which court to seek approval from (i.e., which court is treated as legitimate) is a very delicate choice indeed.

VASSAL LORDS

Just below the regents in stature are the vassal lords (*Ryoushu*) who manage the various fiefs that make up the domain as a whole and aid in the governing of the domain. Most lords are granted their territories by the regent in recognition of their loyalty and accomplishments and it is almost unheard of for a regent to intervene in the affairs of a vassal lord's fief. (After all, managing a fief is the lord's job, and if that lord is doing his job properly the regent should not have to become involved.) Because of this compartmentalized feudal system of

WARNING! INFORMATION OVERLOAD!

This section contains a lot of flavor text about the ways that the government and society works in the land of Tenra. It is filled with all sorts of optional pieces of knowledge like Japanese feudal naming systems, heraldry, positions of office and the like. It can be a bewildering amount of information to take in, and in the end is a great look at the way governments in Tenra work. However, at the same time it is not information that is needed to start playing a fun, dramatic action-packed game of Tenra Bansho.

In other words, feel free to skim through or skip sections of this chapter as you see fit. It might be fun to incorporate little bits of this knowledge into your games, but don't feel that you need to memorize this all or bring it all onto the gaming table.

leadership, it is not unusual for different fiefs within a single domain to be ruled in drastically different manners.

Vassal lords are granted the court rank of *Kami* (as in "protector"; not to be confused with the Shinto gods known as Kami). As with the Regents, this rank is incorporated into a lord's official title. For example, the lord of the fief of Takanami named Nitani Ryuudou would be referred to under formal circumstances as *Nitani Takanami-no-Kami Ryuudou*.

Despite their inferior position in the hierarchy, some domains house vassals whose power and ability rivals that of their regent. In those domains the regent's position is a tenuous one. In this age of treachery and war, the lower ranks constantly plot to overthrow their masters: It is a common occurrence for weak regents to be supplanted by one of their own vassals.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

Tenra domains are in a constant state of tension, with regents scheming to keep their vassals from getting too powerful, while their vassals eye the regent's throne like hungry, stalking tigers.

CASTLES

HOUSEHOLD RETAINERS AND RONIN

Regents and their vassals are served by a variety of household retainers. The relationship between these rulers and their retainers can be summarized as one of favor and service. The retainers serve their lord or regent, and in return the ruler favors their retainers with payment (in the form of money, treasures or a rice stipend) or land.

Types of Retainers

The following types of retainers are listed in order of their rank, from high to low.

- Senior Elders (*Shukurou* and *Karou*): These experienced retainers act as aides and advisors to a ruler, helping manage both the political and military aspects of government. The highest-ranking elder aides are called shukurou, which is short for the Japanese word meaning “an accomplished elder of great moral standing”. Just below the shukurou in status are the karou. Along with the ruler himself, these Elders are the top administrative officials.
- Lesser Elders (*Chuurou* and *Waka-karou*): These experienced aides assist the senior elders. Collectively the elder aides, from the venerable shukurou on down to the comparatively young waka-karou, are called the elders, or *rouchuu*.
- Scribe (*Yuuhitsu*): This official acts as a ruler's secretary as well as managing all government documents and records. The scribe serves his master directly, and therefore occupies a special position outside of the normal hierarchy.
- Ministers (*Bugyou*): These individuals manage a specific area of the government. One minister might be in charge of a fief's towns, another may oversee the local temples and shrines, and a third may act as an accountant, etc.

- Watchers (*Metsuke*): Acting as informants, watchers supervise the activities of a ruler's retainers and report directly to the vassal lords or regents.
- Minor Officials (*Shoyaku*): These retainers are assigned to handle a variety of specific government functions.
- Regional Authorities (*Gundai* and *Daikan*): These officials are placed in charge of rural, outlying regions. *Gundai* handle county-sized regions, while *daikan* act as the direct managers of a populace, basically as a mayor.

Ronin

When warriors are without a master to serve—either exiled when their domains are destroyed or forced out of their positions by espionage—they become ronin. In this age of upheaval, it is not uncommon for warrior houses, weak vassals, or even regents to be destroyed utterly, forcing their retainers and soldiers into the ronin lifestyle. Many of these disenfranchised soldiers are ill equipped for life in the civilian world, with few lacking the talent and experience to become merchants or craftsmen. Those ronin with families to support face an especially grim life without a master to serve.

Those ronin with martial arts abilities become wanderers, earning their keep with their sword arms as mercenaries hired in a temporary capacity or as bodyguards. The truly talented need not fear starvation, and some even come to enjoy the freedom of the ronin lifestyle. Most ronin, however, hope to earn a name for themselves and subsequently a position with a new warrior clan as quickly as possible.

Vassals

Regents are served by a number of vassals and servants, each of whom is ranked according to their family status or relationship to their master. As a domain becomes stronger and wealthier, competition between these different types of vassals tends to intensify.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

- Chief Vassals (*Kokushuu*): These vassals are directly subordinate to the ruling regent, usually friends and trusted advisors. They are ranked higher than any other type of vassal, including regional lords.

- Clan Vassals (*Ichimon*): These vassals are blood relatives and children (legitimate or otherwise) of the regent. Preserving a regent's bloodline is an important matter, and their position as family comes with accompanying hereditary powers.

- Hereditary Vassals (*Fudai*): These are vassals that maintain leadership roles under the regent no matter who they are or which family they come from. They are leaders of especially large warrior houses that rule over vast territories and possess their own castles. They are frequently entrusted to rule over lands bordering on the regent's own territory, and they often control soulgem mines and other areas of strategic interest.

- Outsiders (*Gaiyou*): Not originally loyal to the regent, these vassals and their lands were absorbed into the domain through expansion and conquest. Lacking the chief and hereditary vassals' history of loyal service, these outsiders are frequently viewed with some amount of suspicion, and they are relegated to preside over less important lands far from the capital. Their territories are small and relatively poor, and they are not allowed to possess much in the way of military or economic power.

- Military Vassals (*Gun'ekishuu*): These part-time warriors are conscripted to fill out the ranks as foot soldiers in times of war. Poorly trained and lacking in morale, these vassals are basically farmers with the warrior-class rights to bear weapons and possess a surname.

- Intermediary Vassals (*Chuugen*): Not considered vassals as such, this class consists of the domain's farmers. As a part of their tax they are expected to help as temporary labor on military projects such as castle construction and fortification, and they occasionally serve as conscripted soldiers, hence their inclusion here.

- Small Vassals (*Komono*): These "smallfolk" are peasants who pay a portion of their tax obligation as drafted combatants. In times of war they are rounded up by their military vassal masters, loaned shoddy weapons, and sent to the battlefield to fight and die.

The Caste System

Despite the presence of a class system, with the world in a state of upheaval an individual's personal power tends to have more relevance than the hereditary caste into which he or she was born.

With the world of Tenra under military control, however, the warrior class can expect special treatment and they tend to look down upon members of the other classes.

As an aside, the world of Tenra is based on medieval Japan and the caste system present during that era. Just because the world of Tenra includes class-based discrimination, this should not be taken to mean that game players are expected to engage in such behavior themselves.

CAPITALS

MIYAKO: THE CAPITAL CITIES OF TENRA

The term capital in Japanese, *miyako*, is used to refer to a domain's central place of government. It is the city where the regent resides. The word *miyako* carries with it connotations of beauty, culture and elegance. Capitals worthy of the *miyako* name are architectural wonders indeed.

Because the capital is the most important city in any domain, regents spend extravagant amounts of money trying to construct a bigger, grander, and more defensible capital than those of their neighboring rival regents. Just like the expression "the clothes make the man", it can also be said that the capital makes the regent. A capital can often be considered the regent's personality and psychology given true physical form.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

Geomancers and Capital Construction

Geomancers use part of a specialized branch of onmyojutsu that studies the mystical side of urban planning and civil engineering in order to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune to a city (an art also known as Feng Shui). While these geomancers were originally independent onmyoji, over several generations their practices and beliefs have intermingled with various folk religions. Nowadays geomancers and the strange powers they wield can hardly be considered onmyojutsu anymore. In their purest form, these geomancers are tasked with bringing out the best of a city's potential by using a unique combination of urban engineering, mysticism, and artistic ability.

In the domain of Kiyo, geomancer Agachihara Norimasa wrote a treatise on castle construction, still considered the best work of its kind. In it, he describes the ideal capital as “bordered on the north by mountains, on the east by a vast river, on the south by an expansive lake or ocean, and in the west by a major trade route”.

Life in the Capital

Called “city folk”, most capital city-dwellers are commoners who staff the warrior clans' estates or work as merchants or craftsmen. Which residential district an individual calls home is determined by his or her profession. Living in a different district is generally forbidden, and each district has an office that maintains a roster recorded with the names of all the local residents.

While the lifestyles of city folk are rarely luxurious, the promise of a brighter future—as humble clerks dream of one day becoming shop keepers and apprentices look forward to succeeding their masters—lends cities a sense of vitality rarely found in the countryside.

The Burgeoning Metropolis

As capitals grow, they begin to attract more and more migrants from surrounding territories. Many are farmers in search of work during the off-season, and other newcomers arrive in search of cultural and intellectual stimulation. However, among

these law-abiding folk lurk lawless drifters, roaming gamblers, and other ne'er-do-wells: the yakuza. Hiding on the edge of society, crime their primary vocation, these yakuza are the bane of both the common folk and the ruling class. The names of these wanderers are of course not listed in the district census rosters, so they plague a city like ghosts.

Yakuza simply refers to wanderers who aren't registered and who usually do not contribute to society through taxes. These are often lone pickpockets, blind masseuses, traveling musicians and the like. However, some members form gangs or organized crime families and aim to control criminal activity in areas of the city. These are the traditional yakuza that we think of when we hear the term mentioned.

Of the farmers that move to the city, many come to reject the hardship of rural life entirely and make their stay a permanent one. Others come to the city with the express goal of leaving their farms behind. City life is far from paradise, but it is often an attractive alternative to the back-breaking labor, misery and desperation of the farming life.

The decline in the number of farming households is a serious concern to the feudal lords, who depend on the country villages for food production and tax income. To counter the decline they periodically round up ex-farmers and ship them back to their hometowns by force, a process euphemistically referred to as “Homecoming”.

People arrive in the city with dreams in their hearts. The majority of them have those dreams shattered, sending them trudging back to their homes in defeat, but those that remain swell the ranks of the capital's populace, adding their own hopes and wishes to the collective tapestry.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

THE FARMING LIFESTYLE

No less than 80% of Tenra's population is made up of farmers and other folk involved in agriculture, and the very economy of the land depends on and is measured by the rice harvest.

The *koku* is a unit of measure used to describe the average amount of rice consumed by a single person over the course of a year, and the number of koku produced by a domain is frequently used to estimate that domain's wealth. A domain that produces a large number of koku is able to feed a larger population, and a domain that is able to feed a larger population is able to field a larger military force.

With rice such a valuable commodity, those involved in planting and harvesting it have an immeasurable impact on society at large. As a result, the feudal lords have placed farmers above craftsmen and merchants in the caste system, second only to the warrior class.

However, despite their relatively high position in society, farmers tend to be poorer than the castes they outrank. Their feudal masters take more than half of the rice they produce in taxes, leaving very little for the farmers to eat themselves. Instead, the farmers must be content with crops exempt from this tax, subsisting mainly on a mixture of chestnuts, millet, barley, potatoes and other vegetables.

The physical aspect of the agricultural lifestyle is likewise harsh. They work the fields from dawn until dusk, and after their evening meal farmers tend to devote time to a side business such as weaving straw sandals. They go to bed early to conserve lamp oil, an expensive luxury. Living so close to nature, they must endure the full force of its cruelty; farmers are forced to cope with a variety of trials such as floods, parching heat, and plagues of locusts, with their cramped huts as their only refuge.

One of the few pleasures of rural life is the village festivals, or *matsuri*, held a few times every year. The autumn festival is especially large in scale, and after making the proper offerings to the kami gods and spirits, the farmers celebrate the harvest with drinking, feasting (on white rice and not the less valuable crops for a change), singing, and dancing. Village youths have romantic interludes with their ladyloves and the farmers forget their oppression and misery in an explosion of energy and emotion.

Village Leadership

Village farms are managed by landowners, who rent plots of land to the common farmers in exchange for a percentage of the harvest. Unlike the humble landless farmers, these landlords are listed on the official tax and census records, and it is they who are responsible for collecting the rice tax and dealing with the vassal lords.

Some landowners live a half-farming, half-military lifestyle. Most of them make up the lowest class of warriors, but by rounding up the farmers in their care a handful of them are able to raise a military force capable of rivaling even the vassal lords. The land under their control is called an estate, which is considered distinct from an officially recognized territory.

Military Vassals and the Labor Tax

While the landowners generally manage farm and tax related affairs, in times of war they are expected to take up arms as a military force and serve as ashigarufuot soldiers. "Ashi" means "foot", and "garu" means "light"; this refers to the fact that these light-footed soldiers are very mobile and very lightly equipped, able to run dozens of kilometers a day in packs. They are farmers first and foremost, however, and many of them are young men that have never held a sword or spear.

When a given village is unable to fulfill the conscription quota set by the vassal lords, landowners must make up for the deficit monetarily. In order to avoid this, landowners generally force their landless tenants to accompany them into battle. And because there are additional separate

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

Over the course of their adventures, the PCs will have cause to visit a variety of rural villages. Some villages will be unremarkable, others may be full of refugees struggling to cope with the devastation of war, and still others might be home to unusual customs or traditions. One scenario may involve PCs protecting a village from ruthless bandits, while another adventure might see PCs entering a village with the express purpose of burning it to the ground. Just as blacksmithing techniques differ between domains, villages likewise vary. Some villages are devoted to farming, while others may have economies based on metal-smithing, for example.

Once the PCs have a good idea of what a standard village is like, the GM need not go into great detail describing irrelevant details of rural life. What is important is conveying to the players whether they are dealing with a normal village or one with something unusual or troubling about it. This will help the PCs better decide how to react to the setting and its inhabitants.

quotas for both intermediary and “small folk” vassal troops, it is not uncommon for a village’s entire population of able-bodied men to be shipped to the front lines, leaving behind only women, children, and the elderly. Bandits often choose such times to strike, with devastating results.

Riots

Accustomed to a life of oppression at the hands of their betters, most villagers are resigned to their fate. They think of themselves as powerless and weak. However, under certain circumstances, these humble peasants have been known to take up arms and riot against their masters. These riots can consist of anywhere from just a few disgruntled farmers to massive hordes made up of like-minded rebels from neighboring villages. The standard course of action is for them to march to the regent or vassal lord’s castle, and it is not uncommon

for them to strike out at the merchants and landlords who have grown fat through the peasants’ misery by destroying their estates along the way. Rampaging peasants also occasionally burn down nearby villages for not participating in the riot, angered by the lack of unity.

The rioters’ demands are usually for concessions related to the yearly harvest tax or for a discount or forgiveness of a village’s accumulated debt. Whether or not a riot achieves its goals, the ringleaders (or sometimes the entire mob) can expect to die in a public crucifixion. The village that spawned the riot can also look forward to heavier taxation in the years to come, as their rulers make an example of them so as to discourage resistance in the future. Still, sometimes the ringleaders have their demands heard and met, and that is the reason why some people riot even though they themselves can expect to be punished harshly or executed.

Flight

Riots are not the only method of peasant resistance; there are quieter ways of rebelling against oppression than violence. Occasionally the entire village populace will simply abandon the fields and flee elsewhere, vowing not to return until their demands have been met. Some head to the mountains, others go to live with relatives in other villages. No destruction is involved, no shouting and no tumult, only silence and stealth. This too can wreak havoc on a regional or domain economy, especially in times of misfortune.

WANDERING

TENRAN TRAVEL

With very few exceptions, travel is conducted on major thoroughfares. Developed over the course of generations, these roads serve as Tenra’s most important means of transportation and network of communication. Both swift travel and with it the spread of culture to the far reaches of the realm are the benefits of a healthy road system.

Traveling the world of Tenra can be a difficult experience. The world of Tenra is a large one and lifestyle expenses such as room and boarding can vary widely between domains. Not all currencies are accepted in all regions, as well.

Tenra Bansho Zero does not include exacting rules for determining a PC's personal wealth, and detailed price lists have likewise been omitted for the most part: One to three copper pieces/mon can buy most common goods or services like items of clothing, meals, stays at inns, etc; more would be required for exquisite or high quality goods and services. The GM should feel free to tailor such details to her particular story needs. The number of shuriken possessed by Shinobi PCs, etc, should also be handled in the same manner; a PC can generally be expected to have enough for his or her purposes unless running low on supplies suits the GM's story.

Cities naturally spring up alongside the major thoroughfares, and there is generally a high degree of safety maintained. The further one strays from the major highways, the more a traveler must beware, as outlaws and bandits are a constant threat. Defeated soldiers frequently turn to lives of crime, and pirates likewise threaten the sea-lanes, stalking merchant ships.

Despite the dangers of long distance travel, the flow of people and goods continues unabated as many have no choice but to embark on journeys.

LONE DRIFTERS

Some travelers are solitary souls who claim no attachment to any particular homeland, with no true destination in mind. These drifters are frequently looked upon with scorn and suspicion by more sedentary folk, and the ruling elite often considers them dangerous and unpredictable elements of society. Despite the general low opinion

of them, however, rootless wanderers play an important role in spreading information and goods to the more isolated regions.

Having severed all ties to conventional society, these wanderers are not concerned with tax obligations or military conscription, thereby possessing an amount of personal freedom unthinkable to the common man. This liberty is a double-edged sword, however, lacking a master also means that one cannot rely on the protection provided by a vassal lord or regent.

Commonly encountered drifters include itinerant Buddhist priests and monks, traveling entertainers, and yakuza gamblers. Buddhist monks spread their religion while working towards their own personal enlightenment. Entertainers—such as musicians, puppeteers, acrobats, dancers and monkey trainers—travel in an effort to bring their particular brand of entertainment to new and wider audiences. Gamblers and mercenaries seek adventure and financial gain, lured by the stench of conflict, war and money.

The ranks of the wanderers include ascetics, opportunists, artists, and simple thugs, all of whom choose life on the road as a means of fulfilling their disparate goals.

ROADS AND CHECKPOINTS

In the past, Tenra's central continent was crisscrossed by six major roads (*do*): the Karatsugume-do, the Onomasa-do, the Towatari-do, the Koumi-do, the Suou-do, and the Ioki-do. However, the fall of Mount Jinrai damaged these highways considerably. The majority of the Koumi-do in the Cradle Lands was completely wiped out by the disaster, and the Towatari-do linking the Ki-shu province to Mount Jinrai via the province of Tou-shu has also been rendered completely impassable.

The least damaged road was the Suou-do, stretching from the province of Nanbou-shu to the former Mount Jinrai. The Suou-do now reaches the Southern Court stronghold of New Mount Jinrai, and has regained some of its former glory.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

THE KARATSUGUME-DO HIGHWAY

There are guardian statues along the major roads and highways of Tenra. In reality, they are relay terminals in the Priesthood's meikyo information network.

Efforts have been made to repair the cataclysmic damage suffered by the six major roads, and new routes have also been established. The Northern Court, for example, has forged the Kose-do, connecting the Karatsug ume-do and Onomasa-do. Their Southern Court counterparts have likewise blazed a new road linking New Mount Jinrai with the province of Tou-shu, called the Futsumi-do. After the damage and reconstruction, the modern six highways are the Karatsugume, Onomasa, Kose, Suou, Ioki, and Futsumi.

The basis of Tenra's largest transportation network, these major roads branch out into countless smaller trails and paths. Various regents constructed these roads for the most part, but records also show Priesthood involvement in the past. The Priesthood also placed countless stone sculptures of spiritual guardian kami—figures intended to protect travelers—along the roadside as well.

Tenra's roads are dotted with countless border checkpoints, established by the regents in numbers rivaling that of the guardian kami sculptures. Intended to serve as strongholds to repel enemy attackers, these checkpoints are often guarded by armour, and today even the weaker domains are able to post kimen armour at their borders. The armour-rider who first engages the enemy in battle is called the *First Sword*. This a title with great honor associated with it, so some armour-riders look for an opportunity to engage enemy forces at a checkpoint.

In addition to their obvious military function, these border checkpoints are also used to regulate the flow of people and goods, acting as a sort of combined immigration/customs office. Personal identification in the form of a travel pass is required. There

THE POINT OF BORDER CHECKPOINTS

The purpose of checkpoints is to hinder travel and act as an obstacle for PCs. Most PCs are wanderers and therefore lack proper travel permits (and anyone who would willingly give up a travel permit to a PC likely has an ulterior motive), and deciding how to deal with a checkpoint should add excitement and tension to a scenario. Getting a travel pass might also be one of the goals of a scenario.

are three types of travel passes, each issued by a different authority. Forging a travel pass is considered a major crime and punished harshly.

- **Standard Travel Pass:** Issued by government offices in every domain, standard travel passes can be purchased for a cost of about 10 mon and are generally available for use on a same-day basis.
- **Temple Pass:** These passes are issued by the Phoenix and Bright Lotus religious sects, and allow inter-domain travel. However, filing for and receiving a temple travel pass requires both time and effort. They are not issued to members of other religious sects.
- **Heaven Pass:** Issued by the Priesthood, Heaven Passes (also called Amafuda passes) are available in two varieties: one from the Northern Court and one from the Southern Court. These passes allow complete freedom of movement in domains under the influence of the issuing Court. Heaven Passes are not granted to anyone who is not a member of the Priesthood.

ACQUIRING A TRAVEL PASS

Ruling clans and major temples issue travel permits to permanent local residents. Drifters, on the other hand, are out of luck.

DOMAINS AND REGENTS

DRIFTER PCs

Many player characters will be wanderers and drifters, as this lifestyle allows them to adventure without being unduly constricted by societal expectations (female traveling warriors, etc). Players should feel free to portray their character as they see fit without worrying too much about how the average Tenran or feudal Japanese citizen would behave or speak.

NO ROADS OR CITIES ON THE MAPS?

Roads and cities have been intentionally omitted from the large Tenra maps in an effort to encourage the GM to place them in any way she sees fit. If a given scenario setting requires access to a road, the GM should feel free to have one located nearby and declare which road it is (feel free to borrow a name from one of the roads listed, or invent a new road name). On the other hand, if having a major thoroughfare would hinder the scenario, the GM is free to declare that none are present.

WAR AND TENRA

Tenra has existed in a state of constant warfare for the past four hundred years. Ever since the Priesthood gave the Regents explicit permission to wage war upon one another as a method of resolving disputes, the chaos has not subsided even once.

War is a means to an end, and battle is just another tool of diplomacy. It is used by the ruling elite to acquire wealth and territory or combat rival ideologies.

Wars of expansion are common. When a population expands, food consumption inevitably rises as well, and in order to increase food production, more arable land is required. Without land and a steady supply of food, villagers will desert their homes and flee elsewhere, wealth becomes scarce, and the domain as a whole is weakened. And because land is a limited resource, the only way to increase one's territory is to steal it from a rival. Wars of expansion generally conclude when either the invaders have been fought off or the attacking forces manage to conquer enough land for their purposes.

Ideological wars are a very different beast, however. In this type of war, the object is to crush the enemy, stamp out their rival philosophy, and replace it with the aggressor's own. Even positive personal philosophies (such as fostering the wellbeing of the average citizen) can become warped and hideous when an obsessed Regent attempts to enact them at the national scale, and ideological wars tend to be intense and brutal.

THE CHANGING FACE OF BATTLE

Warfare on Tenra has changed in recent years, as the introduction of new technology to the battlefield has resulted in bloodshed unparalleled in previous generations. Since the introduction of *kimenkyo*, mass-produced *yoroi armours* and *kongohki* have been deployed in greater numbers than ever before, with the result that a single modern skirmish can easily result in as many deaths as several historical battles combined.

Along with the supernaturally powerful samurai, new super-soldiers incorporating implanted mechanical enhancements have also taken to the field. Like the samurai, these so-called *kijin* (machine people) have given up a piece of their humanity in exchange for superhuman prowess in battle.

Normal human troops fire at their enemies from behind fortifications, wielding new weapons capable of transforming tens or even hundreds of foes into chunks of lifeless meat with a single volley: machineguns. It is just one of many new efficient killing machines made possible by the easy availability of gunpowder.

Some claim that the wars of the modern day are more merciful. That it's better to be shot full of holes by rifle fire, blown apart by artillery shells raining down from the heavens, or crushed by formations of armour. Better to be snuffed out instantaneously than suffer the slow, agonizing death of a spear wound to the gut, a fate seen all too often on the battlefields of the past.

Living in the trenches, covered in mud and the blood of their companions, has left the soldiers half-crazed. They fight and die, all the while waiting for the artillery shell to fall, or for the massive armour wheels to crush them into paste.

Unable to contain his fear, one soldier stands up, firing his weapon randomly into his surroundings. One of his mates calmly gets to his feet and puts a hole in the panicked man's head.

"Shut up, already, you're giving away our position" he mumbles, his eyes completely devoid of empathy or reason.

The bloodshed provokes yet more violence, and soon there is not a sane man to be found.

The artillery round fired scant moments before chooses this fortification as its final destination and explodes. The trench is buried by earth and chunks of flesh before being ground flat by the invading armours.

As an example of modern Tenra military composition, we provide the army of the domain of Iiba in the province of Ryuurin-shu.

Positions without an individual's name specified are staffed by multiple people.

Commander-in-Chief

Shimeki Masataka

Strategist

Masaki Shouei

General

Shimeki Fujitaka

Military Observer

Kusuwa Routa

Military Commissioner

Takanashi Kouri

— Signal Officer

— Artillery Officer

— Spearmen Officer

— Supply Officer

Chief of the Guard

Shimeki Kouryou

— Personal Guard

Samurai General

Kugayama Shikkou

— Samurai Corps 1-10

Armour General

Shimeki Mai

Kijin Chief

“Four-Armed” Tetsujuu

Those listed above make up the central command staff. Just below them in the hierarchy are the vassal lords, who act as the generals of their individual armies.

The following is a summary of an example vassal army, that of feudal lord Shitara Gakuei, lord of the Igami territory Kougai. Positions without an individual's name specified are staffed by multiple people.

Warrior General

Shitara Gakuei

Spearmen Generals

Shitara Hidekazu

Rokkaku Muei

—Spear Corps

Artillery Generals

Shitara Danjou

Kunou Ikkon

Mayuzumi Honoka (mercenary)

— Ohju Troops

— Gunpowder Troops

Ashigaru Generals

Shitara Souza

Kurume Jingo

Kuruwa Souzen

Yashiki Ikkou

Armour Riders

Shitara Asuka

Kudou Yuuta (kimen)

Tanayama Kengo (kimen)

Samurai General

Ooyama Fugen

During times of war, armour riders and samurai generals are placed under the direct command of the headquarters.

WAR AND TENRA

This scene could have occurred on any battlefield, and episodes like this have become a common part in conflicts throughout the world.

Research on new and devastating technologies, such as weapons able to produce clouds of poisonous gas able to affect a wide area and high-altitude firebombing by summoned shiki spirits, is progressing smoothly. In this modern age, a battle is no longer a clash of individuals; human beings are merely cogs in a grand killing system. Conscripted foot soldiers, experienced warriors, even generals are just expendable parts in the machine, to be used up in an efficient manner.

It's obvious to all that the future of warfare is heading in an even more brutal, savage direction.

A BATTLEFIELD IN TRANSITION

Warfare on Tenra is currently going through a transitional phase, as militaries attempt to cope with the new technologies released by the Priesthood's Northern Court, such as the manufacture of gunpowder and the advent of kimenkyo technology.

Trench warfare is becoming widespread, as armies attempt to protect their own troops with defensive

MODERN ASHIGARU

In most cases, the foot soldier (*ashigaru*) of the modern battlefield has a gunpowder firearm as his main weapon. Making long-ranged attacks possible as well as boasting devastating close-up firepower, gunpowder has made even the conscripted, poorly trained ashigaru a credible threat on the battlefield.

Ashigaru have happily adapted to the use of firearms. After all, the more enemies they kill, the greater their reward; and the faster the battle ends, the sooner they can return home to their families.

fortifications while gradually advancing towards the enemy lines. Recent conflicts have seen the introduction of new types of kimen armour capable of simply rolling over trenches and destroying both the fortifications and their inhabitants. Awe-inspiring cavalry charges and jousting between armour are quickly becoming things of the past.

Wars once fought with muscle and skill will soon be won by bullets and machinery.

These new wars spawn more casualties than ever before, and engagements ending in the complete massacre of the losing side are becoming increasingly common. Thanks to the Northern Court's newly-released surgical knowledge and the *kijin* machine implantation process based upon it, critically wounded troops that would have died in previous generations are being revived, treated, and sent back to the fields to deal more death.

STRATEGY

THE QUIET WAR

If the clash of armies is the "active" war, the pre-engagement strategizing and reconnaissance is the quiet war. Information such as the size and composition of the enemy forces, their transport speed, and the location of their supply train can all have an incalculable effect on a conflict's outcome.

Most rulers guard their domains' borders with special-purpose reconnaissance armour and kongohki, using them as a sort of early warning system. When an intrusion is detected, news is swiftly dispatched to the rulers via a shinobi or conventional messenger. Some regents speed up the rate at which information is transmitted by using permanent shiki spirits able to instantly share their senses with their masters. However, the heart-gems required to give permanent form to a summoned shiki are hard to come by, making this practice unfeasible for most feudal lords.

Just as the defending forces try to gather as much intelligence as possible, the invading army tries its

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hardest to hinder reconnaissance operations and take their opponents off guard. Planting agents charged with the task of spreading misinformation is one common tactic.

Even after a battle has begun, the information war continues. Tenra's wars are large in scope, and frequently the front lines are located far from an army's command post. In an effort to keep the generals better informed of the current battlefield situation, the military leadership will invariably have several combination scout-messengers on staff.

The task of a scout-messenger is a difficult one, and there are many ways in which enemies can disrupt their activities. Finding and either capturing or killing an enemy messenger is particularly effective. Sending impostor messenger bringing false information to headquarters is one tactic, and another option is to send forged orders to the front lines. If the location of the provisions can be pinpointed and the supply lines cut, an enemy army can simply be left to wither on the vine. Another, more direct method of disrupting command and control is to send assassins into the enemy command post to kill the leaders. Shinobi and kongohki are most frequently chosen for this type of mission, and the fact that such valuable military assets as kongohki are deployed is powerful evidence of the importance placed on the information war.

While those involved in reconnaissance and espionage rarely receive the kind of public acknowledgment or recognition given to conventional warriors, they fulfill an important battlefield role. Those who underestimate the power of military intelligence are destined for defeat.

The Role of Onmyoji

Physically weak in general, one might not expect the Taoist sorcerers known as *onmyoji* to have much of a presence on the battlefield. However, the truth is that with their intelligence and supernatural talents they make excellent staff officers and reconnaissance specialists.

IS CAVALRY EXTINCT?

Massed cavalry charges were once considered the glory of the battlefield, but the spread of repeating gunpowder firearms has relegated mounted warriors to the sidelines of modern conflicts. No matter how strong a cavalryman's armor and how expert his skill with a lance, he simply cannot hope to stand against a merciless hail of bullets.

THE ADVENT OF DRAGON KNIGHTS

Cavalry troops have not been eliminated entirely, however. New mounted warriors called Dragon Knights (*Ryuukihei*) have taken to the fields, bearing guns instead of spears, wearing lighter armor, and riding on enhanced warhorses. They charge across the battlefield at speeds previously undreamt of, their rifles roaring like their mythical namesake.

First and foremost, onmyoji rule the skies. While shinobi and kongohki are confined to the ground, onmyoji can use summoned shiki spirits to conduct airborne patrols. Shiki also make the aerial transport of supplies and troops a possibility. Even without conventional aircraft, air superiority has become an important concept to Tenra's military leadership.

Onmyoji are a powerful resource that rulers planning a battle are willing to fight to possess, as he who fields the most onmyoji frequently has the advantage. However, because individual onmyoji tend toward extreme individualism (or outright mental instability, to put it in a less flattering manner), they are rarely willing to sell their services for vast sums of money alone, and are motivated less by personal gain than by curiosity and a desire for stimulation. Attempting to force a stubborn onmyoji into service will only end up creating a powerful foe, and onmyoji have also been known

THE NEW MASTERS OF THE BATTLEFIELD

As stated before, a variety of new weapons have been introduced to the battlefield in recent times. Some rare innovations are quickly found impractical and discarded, but taken as a whole the state of military technology is evolving and improving rapidly.

to resign their positions over the most trivial of reasons.

The question of how to tempt the mighty and capricious onmyoji into military service is one that constantly plagues the ruling elite.

THE PROCESS OF WAR

SCALE

The wars of Tenra are every bit as massive as the lands they take place on, and even an average regent's holding tends to cover an area equivalent to half the size of Japan. When the regents of major domains go to war, it's not uncommon for hundreds of thousands of soldiers to take to the battlefield. Even minor skirmishes among feudal lords commonly see troop deployments numbering in the thousands.

In the world of Tenra, conflicts among vassal lords are generally labeled *battles*, while those between regents are called *wars* or *major wars*. Generally, if the total number of troops (including both armies) is 100,000 or less, the engagement is a battle. If the number of soldiers deployed by both sides combined exceeds 500,000 total, it is a major war.

The largest war to date was the Suemai Revolt, which occurred long ago in the 22nd year of the Nigimi dynasty between the domains of Iiba and Inao, and involved a combined total of more than 1.6 million soldiers.

TENRA'S LARGEST ENGAGEMENT

A combined total of 1.6 million soldiers were deployed during the Suemai Revolt, which took place during the 22nd year of the Nigimi dynasty, and saw the Inao domain pitted against the Iiba military. Here is a breakdown of the Inao forces:

- Total Number: 806,366 troops
- Armour: 18 (including 3 Great Armour)
- Kimen Kongohki: 120 (5 of them officer class)
- Kimen Armour: 283 (12 of them general class)
- Samurai: 13,198 (27 of them general class)
- Kijin: 41,008 (30 of them officer class)
- Cavalry: 77,055
- Soulgem Riflemen: 30,937
- Riflemen: 65,677
- Archers: 85,275
- Ashigaru: 196,700
- Low-ranking troops and civilian-fighters: 249,004
- Ninja/Shinobi: 13,000 (estimated)
- Miscellaneous (Onmyoji, Buddhist Monks, Annelidists, etc.): 4,089

In contrast, the most one-sided conflict on record is the Battle of Himetori Pass, in which a mere six warriors reportedly stood against and eventually fought off a vassal lord's 10,000 man strong army. However, many intellectuals doubt the veracity of accounts, dismissing it as a fairytale not unlike the legend of the Inao warrior who killed 100 troops in a single encounter.

STAGES OF BATTLE

Even something as violent and chaotic as battle has a standardized pattern, involving a progression through a series of relatively defined steps.

When both armies take to the field, an armour representing the aggressors shoots a noisemaking

A SAMPLE VASSAL LORD'S ARMY

This is a summary of a vassal lord's army, as seen during the Suemai Revolt. Because of their outsider status (they are not the leaders of a domain, they control regions within a domain), the lord does not have access to any meikyo armour troops.

- Total Number: 14,606 troops
- Kimen Armour: 3
- Samurai: 25 (3 of them general class)
- Kijin: 368 (5 of them officer class)
- Cavalry: 1,160
- Soulgem Riflemen: 529
- Riflemen: 1,915
- Archers: 827
- Ashigaru: 6,362
- Low-ranking troops and civilian-fighters: 3,141
- Ninja/Shinobi: 20
- Miscellaneous (Onmyoji, Buddhist Monks, Annelidists, etc.): 902

arrow (*kabura-ya*) as a symbol of the army's hostile intent. This arrow is answered with a second arrow fired by an armour from the opposing forces. This ritualized threat and defiant response (termed the "*ishu-okuri*" and "*ishu-gaeshi*," respectively) is the accepted way to announce the start of a conflict, and a tradition dating back to ancient times.

Along with the exchange of arrows, armour and artillery pieces on both sides will fire an opening volley. This is more for intimidation purposes than to cause actual damage, however, and few casualties result.

Next, the archers, riflemen, and soulgem rifle troops begin to open fire with their ranged weaponry. Cavalry troops and armour charge into the fray, and the battle is joined. Once the battlefronts are joined, samurai and other enhanced warriors wade into the melee, unleashing their might. In recent years, with the spread of firearms, battlefield engineers have

been used to create trenches and fortifications from which riflemen attempt to fend off cavalry charges.

The End of the Battle

Small-scale battles typically finish when the opposing general is killed in combat and his head taken, or when the enemy army has either been wiped out or suffered enough casualties to cause it to rout. Large-scale wars do not end so easily, however, as both armies generally possess a multitude of leaders and soldiers who can make up for combat losses.

In the past, the Shinto Priesthood was often called upon to broker a cessation of hostilities. With a few notable exceptions, Priesthood intervention was generally fair, and its decision and authority accepted by both sides. However, ever since the Priesthood split into two hostile Courts in the 16th year of the Washin dynasty, the situation has become much more complicated. Now, when a regent loyal to the Northern Court makes war upon a counterpart allied with the Southern Court, Priesthood mediation is no longer an option, and recent wars have become bloodbaths of nigh apocalyptic proportions.

After the Battle

An end to the fighting itself does not necessarily mean that the war has ended, and most consider the resumption of diplomatic ties between the nations involved the true signal of a conflict's conclusion. Official declarations are exchanged, and with much careful deliberation treaties are signed, thereby making the changes to the involved domains' borders and political interests official.

In cases where one power is completely destroyed, the victor assumes the right to total control over the loser's entire territory. Absolute victory such as this is a rare occurrence, however.

REWARDS FOR BATTLEFIELD ACHIEVEMENT

When a war ends, the officers and the soldiers under their command are rewarded for their military

accomplishments. Such recognition is vital to the smooth function of feudal armies, and a lack of fairness in this department can have a tremendously deleterious effect on morale.

Conscripts, mercenaries, and other low-ranking troops receive a cash reward for their heroics. Appointment to a higher rank is unlikely, unless the individual is responsible for a major feat such as killing an enemy general or saving the life of an allied lord.

Professional and vassal warriors are generally rewarded through an increase in territory and/or income (i.e., *koku*, representing bushels of rice). Gifts of famous swords, excellent horses, or notable tea vessels or other works of art are also common. Some lords honor superior warriors by allowing them to incorporate a part of their master's name into their own (e.g., the Regent Shimeki Masataka may grant permission for an underling to call himself by a new personal name including either "Masa" or "Taka", such as "Masayori" or "Noritaka," etc.)

Just as heroics are generously rewarded, cowardice and ineptitude are harshly punished. Unlucky warriors are usually subjected to a reduction in income or territory, and low-ranking soldiers tend to be flogged or subjected to public humiliation. Perpetrators of serious intentional crimes detrimental to the army as a whole (such as the misappropriation of vital supplies, or flight from the enemy) are executed with few exceptions.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF AND HIS GENERALS

The commander-in-chief (*Soutaishou*), a position almost invariably held by a regent, is the ultimate leader of a domain's armed forces and all the hundreds of warrior houses that make up the military. Despite his nominal leadership, however, his subordinates' armies pledge their loyalty to their direct leaders, and not the distant regent. As can be imagined, this feudal structure leads to a certain degree of instability and mistrust, as a leader must beware of treachery at all times.

BATTLEFIELD REWARDS

First Into Combat (Ichiban Yari): 1 ryo and 1 keg of sake

Claiming Ashigaru kills: 1 barrel of rice per 100

Claiming the Kill of a Samurai: 1 barrel of rice
Defeating a Kimen Armour or Kimen Kongohki: 1 ryo

Retrieving a Meikyo: 1 ryo

Scouting and mapping enemy positions: 5 ryo

Reporting critical intelligence that changes the tide of battle: 10 ryo

Defeating an Armour or Kongohki: 10 ryo or more

Defeating a general: a promotion to a higher position or 20 ryo

Saving the life of an allied general: the hero may incorporate a part of the leader's name into his own

Saving the commander-in-chief's life or taking the enemy commander-in-chief's head:

an automatic promotion to a position of rank plus territory. Alternatively, the gift of a Kugutsu

The commander-in-chief is assisted by a number of generals and strategists, and the headquarters is staffed by military observers (*Gun-metsuke*), the Regent's most trusted retainers (*Hatamoto*), and a variety of other high-ranking specialists. Due to this concentration of elite leaders, wiping out a command post is effectively the same as destroying a domain's government.

The generals command the armies, acting under the direction of the commander-in-chief, and also provide advice and assistance. Given their critical importance, the commander-in-chief tends to choose blood relatives as his generals, as loyalty is a must.

The commander-in-chief and generals are aided by strategists and tacticians, who are consulted on a wide variety of martial affairs. These officers are almost invariably onmyoji sorcerers.

WAR AND TENRA

The military observers are akin to internal police or political officers, and are present to ensure that the rules and regulations are followed by the troops. They pay special attention to the actions of the vassal lords, attempting to sniff out any signs of treachery or insubordination.

The military commissioner (*Gun-bugyo*) is responsible for much of the lower level strategizing and supervision. Immediately below him on the hierarchy are a variety of other officers, each devoted to a specific type of corps (e.g., spearmen, riflemen, signal corps, archers, supply staff, etc.).

Finally, the trusted retainers lead the commander-in-chief's personal guard. Tasked with protecting the command post, these elite troops enjoy a prestigious position even in times of peace. Many members of the guard are selected from the Regent's blood relatives and family clan so as to ensure a greater degree of loyalty.

SOULGEMS

WHAT ARE SOULGEMS?

Soulgem, or *ohju* (sometimes commonly referred to simply as “gems”), is a lump or ball of a rare and precious metal. Scarlet in color, the size of one soulgem bead is usually around a thumb’s fingernail in diameter. It has unusual powers and properties, the most common being that it is able to store up spiritual force inside of itself, and later use that power for various purposes.

Soulgems have been especially used in the military field. Inventions sprung up like the “Gem-style firearm” and “Gemblades”. Soulgem is a material which explodes when it is hit with a percussion hammer that has special carved magical seals or sigils. Gem-style firearms work using this explosive power to fire a projectile. Soulgem weapons like gemswords work by amplifying the kinetic force of the weapon and even the sharpness of the blade with the explosion of spirit force released when activated. It is impossible to reuse a soulgem, as it breaks apart into very small particles after being used.

Samurai, as opposed to normal warriors and swordsmen, have soulgem beads imbedded directly into their bodies. They have these beads implanted into their flesh and muscle during the samuraization surgery, which transforms them permanently into a living spirit conduit. Onmyoji sorcerers use soulgems to amplify the power of their shikigami spirits, embedding soulgem into their prayer strips when summoning these fey creatures. Soulgem essentially works like a storage battery of spiritual force. In these cases the soulgems don’t break apart, so they can be reused any number of times.

Soulgem beads are traded at a high price like a valuable treasure. Powerful people who use soulgems value them highly because it requires advanced and specialized skills to excavate soulgem from the mines of Tenra, purifying and refining this base mineral into a soulgem capable of holding a charge of spiritual energy.

There are some people who specialize in managing every thing relating to soulgems, from excavation to refinement to distribution. These sorcerers are masters of the art of Feng Shui, and are called geomancers.

GEOMANCERS AND SOULGEM MINES

Gems are excavated and purified like any other metal. However, soulgem is a rare metal and it is extremely hard to find a soulgem mine. If a powerful person gets word that a soulgem mine was found, she would do anything to try to control it—even if it was located near the border of a neighboring domain. In fact, it is this very thing that causes many inter-domain wars. Geomancers work to find new gem mines and excavate them. Much like other sorcerers, geomancers tend to be solitary individuals which don’t often interact with others. They just try to do their job and tend not to associate with other people in doing so. The locations of soulgem mines are top secret among geomancers, and they pay extra attention to hide both the existence of such mines—and themselves—from other people. They often use money and influence to create small, isolated villages near the gem mines and rarely leave until the mine is exhausted.

Geomancers meet regents, lords, or merchants every once in a while to sell them soulgems. The geomancer will often just simply state the number of available soulgems that they have to sell (or are interested in selling), and a set price. They rarely accept any negotiation beyond that. This makes for quite a one-sided business style, but there are few who have antipathy to them. This is partly because the need for soulgem is so great, but mostly because the geomancer rarely exploits their power by setting the price of their soulgems as high as they possibly can. They are interested in making good profit from the sale of soulgems (on top of their own motivations), and the best way to keep business regular without causing antagonism is to set the prices fairly, albeit high.

SCARLET STEEL

Scarlet steel (sometimes referred to simply as “scarlet”) is a kind of precious metal which looks like a beautiful vibrant red metal sparkling with gold powder. It is said that in the far away lands to the East, this material is called “Orichalcum”. It is often described to appear like a delicate golden-red color, like a mixture of twilight and crimson. Lots of soulgem material is required to purify and refine scarlet steel, and ordinary people almost never see scarlet steel in their lifetime. When written in the old languages of Tenra, the word for scarlet contains a mantra which means “the power of the gods”.

Scarlet has both hardness and malleability, and excellent conductivity for spiritual energy. Because of these properties, scarlet steel is used as a material for crafting armours. Blades made of scarlet are much sharper than their steel counterparts, and with the proper spirit of its wielder, can cut far better than a steel sword. When a sword is crafted from scarlet steel and makes use of soulgem for power, the sword is referred to as a gemblade. All gemblades have a firearm-like trigger mechanism for expending soulgems.

The True Meaning of the Gemblade

Swords. They are considered the symbol of military arts, and are thought to carve into maturity the very souls of the warriors of Tenra. Therefore, many warriors carry swords. Skilled warriors who use seemingly more useful weapons like spears or naginata (long-bladed pikes) are in the minority, such is the hold of the sword on the warrior psyche.

Even among gem-based weapons of extraordinary destructive power, sword-based weapons are particularly preferred by the warriors of Tenra. Having a beautiful sword made from scarlet steel is a huge honor for warriors, and considered proof of merit for deeds done. Special gemswords made by famous named swordsmiths are traded at an exorbitant price.

There is a well-known anecdote of a samurai who performed meritoriously in battle and in service

to his lord. He wished nothing more than to be granted an inherited gemsword from the feudal lord. But instead, the lord offered him so much more: Lavish, extravagant gifts, an official government job, and a huge dominion to rule over. They say that the samurai ended up killing the lord because his wish was refused. This story is an extreme example, but it shows the value of the gemsword in the psyche of the warriors of Tenra.

There are two different methods to discharge soulgems in gem-style weapons. The first is known as “revolver style”. The gem is loaded into a cylindrical ring revolver-body, and is discharged one at a time. It is possible to discharge, or “fire”, soulgems repeatedly in a revolver-style weapon. The second method is called “automatic style”, because of the way the soulgem chamber is automatically reloaded after each discharge. Automatic style weapons are designed with newer technology, and have a better rapid firing and loading capacity. However, automatic style weapons can have more accidents than their revolver counterparts, like the possibility of jamming.

Which weapon a warrior chooses is largely a matter of personal taste. However, bushi, vassal warriors and samurai who have a more old-fashioned or traditional spirit tend to prefer the revolver-style weapons.

Soulgems Kill

It is impossible for a soulgem to accidentally discharge itself. Even if soulgem is smashed with a rock, broken, or blown up, the spirit charge sealed inside of the soulgem simply vanishes into mist without thirst for human blood. This means that soulgem absolutely requires someone to activate it to make it work. The user’s clear intention of killing is the thing that activates and propels the soulgem, killing people. As an aside, gunpowder (see below) does not have this kind of intention or directivity: It can be activated without killing intent, and it can be used without direct human involvement. For this reason, gem-style weapon users generally despise gunpowder-style weapon users: The difference is an aesthetic difference, and gem-style weapon users

GAME RULE: USING GEMS

Weapons for hand-to-hand combat which expend soulgems can cause more damage to enemies. When the attacker hits an opponent and depresses the trigger, she can cause more damage. For every soulgem expended, one additional point of damage is caused. The attacker can choose to expend soulgems once the attack hits, she does not have to decide before the attack roll is made. In effect, the attacker has connected with the flesh of her enemy; she then pulls the trigger on the gemblade to increase the force of the blade, and the rupturing of the wound.

Gemblade Katana

Damage: +5, Rate of Fire: 2, ammo 6

When your attack hits with this weapon, the damage dealt is the difference between the attacker's roll and the defender's roll plus five (see combat section for more on damage). You can then choose, if you want, to use soulgems for this attack. Since this weapon's rate of fire is 2, you can choose to use up to 2 gems ("Bang! Bang!"), and damage will increase to either +6 (+5 plus one gem) or +7 (+5 plus two soulgems). Once you use all 6 charges in the barrel, you will have to take a half-action and reload.

think that the use of gunpowder weapons shows poor taste.

SOULGEM VS GUNPOWDER

GUNPOWDER, A NEW TECHNOLOGY

As mentioned previously, new technology which emerged after the breaking up of the Priesthood into the Northern and Southern Courts had a huge influence in changing the face of war in Tenra. The invention of gunpowder-style firearms was a

completely revolutionary incident. Before that, the word firearm was synonymous with weapons which used the explosive spiritual power of soulgems. Needless to say, soulgem is a valuable material and not everybody is able to use it easily. For example, it was impossible to provide soulgem-based weapons to general private soldiers in times of war.

However, the discovery of gunpowder has changed this situation completely. Gunpowder is inexpensive and far more abundant than soulgems. These features are extremely advantageous even though gunpowder has several of its own weak points, like its weakness to moisture. But even farmers who had just been drafted into war could defeat horse-riding warriors with a gunpowder rifle. Soon the powerful warlords who recognized this fact started to order the mass production of gunpowder-style firearms, providing them to private soldiers. Many workshops were established, and some of these small makeshift factories introduced the concept of division of labor in an effort to streamline and speed up the production process. As a result, the system that mass-produced standardized firearms efficiently soon became considered more important than artisans who took time and effort to carefully craft firearms by hand.

SPECIAL WEAPONS

SOULGEM WEAPONS

Gemblades are special swords that can harness and amplify the willpower of its user into a kind of spiritual explosive force. These swords have chambers where soulgems are explosively crushed, usually in the base of the blade or the hilt of the sword. The explosive spiritual energy produced by crushing soulgems is delivered to the blade and creates a surge of positive kinetic force, both propelling the blade while instantly sharpening it. At the same time, a shock wave breaks out from around the blade and makes it vibrate with force. These combined effects make gemblade attacks very destructive and powerful. If a warrior discharges a soulgem at the same time a gemblade has cut into flesh (for example, once an opponent is stabbed

with the sword), the flesh rips apart and tears away, causing great damage because of the kinetic energy and accompanying shockwave.

The Armour Hunters

The Zakt-8R Ultimate Edge (Hachiren Zankoutou, or “Eight-Repeating Ultimate Cutting Blade”) is the latest creation in the attempt to create a hand-held weapon capable of defeating the powerful mecha of the battlefield, the yoroi armours. The Zakt-8R was invented by remodeling a type of short sword normally carried by armours themselves. It has a large central revolver-like chamber which has the ability to discharge eight soulgems at the same time. It was made with the simple idea to use armour weapons to fight against armours. However, due to its extraordinary weight and low center of gravity of the Zakt (designed with armour and not human body standards), more advanced or agile sword techniques cannot be used when wielding it.

The Gunlance Rifle

They say that a simple bullet, accelerated to frightening speeds through use of an ultra long gun barrel, has the potential to destroy large armours with a single shot. The gunlance is the most powerful portable projectile weapon for Tenran soldiers. Appearing to be a standard old-model rifle with a long barrel, it uses the explosive reaction and shockwave of the crushing of soulgems to fire metal bullets at extreme velocities, turning the rifleman into a walking rail cannon.

On top of that, the gunlance has a close combat attachment called an “explosive spiker” attached to the lower part of the rifle’s barrel. The spiker is a spear-like length of sharpened fine steel or scarlet steel about the length of one’s forearm, and as wide as one’s whole thumb. By itself, it looks like a simple long, fat metal stake used for impaling enemies like a bayonet. However, when fired the soulgem explosion causes it to erupt from the gunlance with almost unimaginable force and extend to its full length, causing massive impact damage to whatever was at the end of the bayonet. Even the fiercest armour riders are cautious enough to try to stay out of the sights of a gunlance wielded by an

experienced or famous handler: Rifle bullets can cut through the shell of a yoroi mecha armour like a katana cutting through a field of wheat, while a spiker can drive holes through anything it touches.

It should be noted that by current technology and traditional crafting methods, the katana-based gemblade cannot “fire” bullets like gunlances can. It only uses the explosive power of soulgem to enhance the cutting power and force of the blade, not fire bullets at ranged enemies.

White Heat Palm

The White Heat Palm—also referred to as an Incinerator Palm—is a mechanical replacement for the hand and wrist made with pure scarlet steel, with ducts throughout its form which hold soulgems. Killing intent from the user’s spirit is amplified by the glove, then circulates through the ducts and makes the scarlet generate heat. The white heat palm gets so hot (until it glows incandescent) that it begins to evaporate the very moisture around it. A simple thrust with a charged white heat palm can melt away even steel without leaving any pieces behind. While small and close-contact, the white heat palm is surely the strongest known hand weapon in Tenra.

The white heat palm for armours has less soulgem density (due to the spaced-out gem ducts and space required to heat) than similar kongohki models, so it is less efficient and powerful than the same weapon used by a kongohki. A kongohki equipped with white heat palms is one of the most dangerous weapons on Tenra.

CULTURAL ADDENDA: MONEY, TIME, AND MEASUREMENTS

This section contains little bits of cultural information that can be lightly sprinkled into a game of Tenra Bansho to give it some flavor. Please do not feel constrained to use only the measurements below in play. Feel free to start a game in “November”, call a meeting at “One O’Clock”, walk “Northeast”, walk “a mile” or “a kilometer”, or pay in “copper coins”. These are just here to add a little setting flavor in your game where you might want it.

TIME

The general counting system of time goes like this: From 11pm to 1am is *Ne* (rat) and continues around the clock with the twelve signs of the Chinese Zodiac, each at intervals of 2 hours: *Nezumi, Ushi, Tora, Usagi, Tatsu, Hebi, Uma, Hitsuji, Saru, Tori, Inu, Inoshishi*: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Boar.

Also, urban areas often have a different and confusing counting system: With 12pm as the number “nine”, moving clockwise and counting down at 2 hour intervals from 9 to 4, then repeating again at 6:00 PM with “nine” again. For example 1pm is “nine half”, 2pm is “eight”, 3pm is “eight half”.

DIRECTION

The twelve signs of the Chinese Zodiac are used for direction, too! Consider North as “Rat” and move clockwise through Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, etc. Each zodiac is separated by about 30 degrees. Northeast

is called Ox-Tiger (*Ushitora*), Southeast is Dragon-Snake (*Tatsumi*), Southwest is Sheep-Monkey (*Hitsuji-saru*) and Northwest is Dog-Boar (*Inui*).

Northeast is an unlucky direction in Japan, and is sometimes called Devilsgate (*Kimon*), and Southwest is sometimes referred to as Reverse Devilsgate (*Urakimon*).

MONTHS AND DATES

In Tenra a lunar calendar is used which was invented based on the waxing and waning patterns of the moon. This is because Tenra’s society is deeply rooted in agriculture. The Shinto Priesthood, on the other hand, in its official records makes use of a solar-style calendar.

Each month has three different readings: That is, January might be called “*Mutsuki*”, “*Iwaizuki*” or “*Kasumisomezuki*”, depending on who is speaking or writing. The first name below is the common name for the month, the other two are more poetic names for the month used in writings, songs and the like.

January: Mutsuki, Iwaizuki, Kasumisomezuki

February: Kisaragi, Imemizuki, Yukigezuki

March: Yayoi, Sakurazuki, Yumemizuki

April: Uzuki, Hananokorizuki, Hatsuhazuki

May: Satsuki, Tachibanazuki, Hubukizuki

June: Minazuki, Kazemachizuki, Narukamizuki

July: Humitsuki, Tanabatazuki, Haki hazuki

August: Hazuki, Hagitsuki, Tsubamesarizuki

September: Nagatsuki, Momijitsuki, Kirodorutsuki

October: Kannazuki, Shiguretsuki, Hatsushimotsuki

November: Shimotsuki, Kaguratsuki,

Yukimachizuki

December: Shiwasu, Harumachizuki, Mifuyuzuki

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The weights and measures used in Tenra are referred to as the *shakkanhou* (the old Japanese style system of measures and weights). The *shakkanhou* were originally based on the size of the human body.

CULTURAL ADDENDA

Units of Length

One *ri* = about 3.9km (36 cho)

One *cho* = about 109m (60 ken)

One *ken* = about 1.82m (6 shaku)

One *shaku* = about 30.3cm (10 sun)

One *sun* = about 3.03cm

Units of Capacity

One *koku* = about 180L (10 to)

One *to* = about 18L (10 sho)

One *sho* = about 1.8L (10 go)

One *go* = about 180ml

Units of Weights

One *kan* = about 3.75kg (1000 mon)

One *kin* = about 600g (160 mon)

One *ryo* = about 37.5g (10 mon)

One *mon* = about 3.75g

Units of Dimension

One *cho* = about 99.2 hectares/2.4 acres (10 tan)

One *tan* = about 992m² (300 tsubo)

One *tsubo* = 3.3m²

MONEY

There is no official monetary system across all of Tenra. Each country, kingdom and domain manufactures its own coinage, and only highly purified coins are traded amongst merchant-travelers. In the central continent, silver coins from the country of Kisen in Sunai-shu province, or gold coins from the Hatsuse kingdom in Gi-shu province are well known for their refined quality: No merchant refuses those coins. The shapes and styles of the coins differ from domain to domain, but the names of the coin, and their worth, are roughly the same. The standards are still based on copper, silver and gold. People often refer to them as “coppers, silvers, and golds”

One *ryo*: (4000 mon). Gold coins, usually a large size silver coin coated with gold. Think of one coin as the modern equivalent of “One thousand dollars” in terms of purchasing power and economic weight. They make a distinctive metallic clinking sound when tossed around.

Silver coins: There are many kinds of varying value (from dozens to several hundred mon). They are used to purchase extremely refined goods and services, or a lot of small goods or services (a common inn room for a week or longer, etc).

Mon: Commonly carried and used copper coins. Used to purchase most everyday goods, meals, lodging, etc. Pretty much every small good or service costs about one or two mon.

ARMOUR-RIDERS: DEMONS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

The result of experimenting with creating armament based on *onmyojutsu*, and one of the fruits of technological development on the battlefield: These are the *yoroi armours*. Steel giants standing over twice the height of men, those armour riders who possess an aptitude for controlling these giants interface with the armours, making their hearts and bodies one. Armour riders control their armour with such fluidity that they seem almost alive.

In battle, the armours exhibit amazing power. Possessing great destructive force both at close quarters and from afar, they are frequently employed by their commanding armies, spreading waves of fear over their enemies as if an apparition of a demonic god.

Manufacturing armours requires an incredible amount of manpower and financial expense. Possessing even a single armour is a symbol of great political and financial power.

In recent years, the use of the mass-produced *kimenkyo* as a replacement for traditional *meikyo* armours has contributed to a deterioration in the quality and effectiveness of the pilots. However, the abilities of the mass-produced *kimen*-armour are not too far behind the abilities of their traditional hand-crafted stronger brethren, and are still far many times more powerful than even companies of footsoldiers. For the foreseeable future, the armours are an important weapon of war, and a powerful military technology.

THE ROLE OF THE ARMOUR

On the battlefield, the armours are the very banner of the armies they represent, as well as a battery for remote bombardment before sword meets sword. Even a single armour functions as a force capable of devastating a rival army. These iron giants, over

twice the size of a man, can steel their comrades by their mere presence while bearing down on the nerves of the enemy. Moreover, these giants' quick movements, those giant steel arms swinging their weapons towards the enemy, are enough to remove any thoughts save for terror in their opponents. Additionally, off the battlefield, the armours function as a status symbol of a country or household's prosperity.

To construct an armour, it is not enough to merely have an *onmyoji* that can construct the sinew and muscles that move the giant, nor a skilled armour-smith to forge the equipment and wrap the body in steel. There must also be the *meikyo*, or soul mirror, which is set in the center of the armour. The *meikyo* soul mirror allows humans to interface with the machine and control it. There must also be a heart-engine that serves as the source of the armour's power. Finally, there must be a rider who can fuse with the armour. There are many important and necessary parts required to make fully functioning armour—all of which are rare, valuable, and hard to obtain.

Possessing an armour and employing it in battle is concrete proof of the power of a noble line, both financially and influentially.

Those specialists who operate the armours, those few who are able to climb inside the armours and bring them to life, are called armour riders. As armours are valuable items that reflect a high social standing and power, most riders are the daughters (and occasionally sons) of noble houses.

To operate or "interface" with an armour, one's heart must be pure and untainted by sin and worldly karma. The less tainted the soul is, and the lower a rider's karma is, the stronger armour they can command, and the more functionality they can draw out of the armour.

Because of this, those who are to become armour-riders are almost always shut off from the outside world from an early age, and overly protected as if they were a doll in a box or glass case. Their every

ARMOUR VS ARMOR

Armor is the word given to the often lacquerware-made armor that humans sometimes wear into battle (usually only higher ranked soldiers and lords).

Armour, with the Queen's English spelling, is the word used to refer to the *Yoroi* of Tenra, the 3-5 meter tall mecha killing machines. They are also called *Yoroi Armours* or simply *Yoroi*.

It shouldn't be too confusing, because human-donned armor simply doesn't appear that often in the world of Tenra: It offers little protection from gemblades, ninja arts, cybernetic claws and soulgem rifles, and thus these days it is more for show than for actual pragmatic protection. There are no rules regarding human armor, nor benefits from wearing it in the game.

whim is catered to, and their education only focuses on good, simple lessons. Thus, armour-riders are often very young, simple-minded, and pure. For them to climb into an armour and win in battle again and again for their lords, they are essentially forced to never grow up, to never become anything more than children.

However, the lifespan of the armour-rider is nevertheless a short one.

Humans, merely through the facts of their existence, gain karma over time. They understand the world, and come to love some things, hate others, and find one's place in the world. Gaining karma is an effect of growing into adulthood. Some riders never even make it to adulthood before they lose the ability to pilot their armour: There comes a time when the armour simply stops responding to commands, or refuses to power up. That's when the armor rider's life effectively ends, and a new one begins.

Of course, this is all contingent on whether or not the rider can survive the violence of the front lines of war. Even giants of steel can fall in battle.

MEIKYO

WHAT IS A MEIKYO?

The *meikyo* (in Japanese, "Clear Mirror") is the brain of both armours and kongohki—a circular steel device interlaced with delicate circuitry which bears a resemblance to the magical polished bronze mirrors found in shrines. It is often referred to as a "soul mirror."

The meikyo is the only mechanical control system for armour on Tenra. It is through the proper application of this meikyo that the control and movement of armour and kongohki is made possible. Without the meikyo, they are nothing more than mere masses of mindless metal.

It cannot be forgotten that armour, as well as the kongohki, exist for the purpose of commanding the tide of battle. For that reason, various feudal lords preparing for battle will often plan to secretly secure spare meikyo for new armours or kongohki. However, meikyo soul mirrors are not a simple thing to come by. They are extremely expensive, but they are not prohibitively expensive to a noble house or domain lord. The reason that acquiring them is so difficult is that there are so few of them to go around.

Pure meikyo can only be created by the Shinto Priesthood. The forging and crafting process, as well as the list of required materials to craft a meikyo, is a restricted art. This art has been kept a secret for a long time within the Priesthood, a secret which has never completely escaped its confines. Even if the technological processes were to leave the Priesthood (and they haven't), no one trained outside the Priesthood would have the ability to craft the delicate layered circuitry found weaved inside a meikyo. A meikyo is a technological marvel as well as an inspired piece of art, the crafting techniques of which are kept absolutely secret in the

INTERFACE RULES

To interface with an armour, two conditions have to be met:

- The pilot must possess the "interface" skill.
- The combined Karma of the rider and the armour's meikyo mirror must be less than 108.

If these conditions are not met, then even with an interface helm, the armour's meikyo will not be accessible. The pilot will be locked out.

Furthermore, if while piloting the armour, the combined Karma total goes over 108, the soul of the pilot becomes trapped inside the meikyo and becomes unable to escape.

While interfaced, the armour's stats for Body, Agility and Senses are used. All general skills are rolled at a level equal to the rider's interface skill.

CLEAR MIRROR?

In Japanese mythology, the gods granted the first emperor of Japan three sacred treasures: The grass-cutting sword, a mystical gem called the magatama, and a meikyo, a clear mirror made of bronze. The clear mirror symbolizes honesty and wisdom, as it clearly and perfectly reflects its surroundings. From that point on, there has been a historic connection between polished mirrors and the native Shinto religion. Many real-world Shinto shrines have a bronze or metal mirror on a dais.

In Tenra Bansho Zero, too, the symbol of the power of the Shinto Priesthood is the clear mirror. It refers to both the hyper-advanced technology meikyo are based on, as well as the mirror-like objects themselves.

bowels of the Priesthood compounds at old Mount Jinrai.

However, the Priesthood is now currently divided into the Southern and Northern Courts, with the Northern Court Priesthood having opened the art to the masses (to at least some degree), so that even average people of great skill can create their own mass-produced meikyo replicas- the *kimenkyo*. However, there is a world of difference between these mass-produced replicas and genuine Priesthood meikyo, and even now the demand for true meikyo is still great.

MEIKYO AND THE SOUL

Through interfacing with the armour—placing one's soul into the meikyo and fusing with armour—armour-riders become one with the machine, able to manipulate the armour's giant body as if it was their own.

While interfacing, the armour-rider's soul is temporarily separated from her body, and inserted into the meikyo. In this state, the armour-rider is in a form of coma, and cannot feel any physical pain or discomfort such as hunger, exhaustion, or pain. The sensation is like floating softly in a comfortable, welcoming darkness at first. Then, when connecting with the armour, the rider sees through its eyes, and follows status readouts on the condition of the armour and the environment.

As power to move is given to the armour through the heart-engine, they can move without need for fuel. However, the armour rider is not so lucky: While interfaced, it is often the case that many riders forget their need for food or sleep, and so caution is needed. Even if the body of an armour-rider is destroyed, their soul and consciousness will live on inside the meikyo, and thus the armour will still continue to function.

The meikyo possesses something that appears to be a kind of "gate" inside it, separating the world between the rider's consciousness and the mind of the armour. If a soul is too tainted by karma, it

cannot (in most cases) enter the meikyo. The soul is locked out, the doorway to enter the armour's meikyo is blocked and impassable. The rider can no longer power up nor command her armour, and thus returns from the blackness back into her own body.

Paradoxically, for the kongohki—which depend on the possession of shattered souls steeped in karma—this gate functions as a cage. Sealing away memories, the temporarily constricted soul expands within the meikyo, and the shattered soul becomes trapped inside. This clear, robotic pseudo-consciousness then wears the kongohki's metal flesh as if it were its own.

OBTAINING A MEIKYO

It is said that even a single meikyo is enough to change the very fabric of a country. Even so, acquiring one is not a simple task.

There are only two ways to acquire a meikyo. The first is to inherit (or steal) one from someone who already has one. The second is to beg the favor of being granted one from the Priesthood.

The previous example is a simple one: The meikyo could be part of a transaction between two lords, or be recycled from a broken armour or fallen kongohki. This is the most simple and straightforward method, and is used all throughout Tenra.

The latter, being granted a newly-forged meikyo from the Priesthood, can only be accomplished in the southern part of Tenra, and only in the domains controlled by the Southern Court of the Priesthood.

To acquire a meikyo, the lord or a representative must go to worship at New Mount Jinrai (or for those domains located outside of the central continent, one of the nearby Great Shrines). Only once they are granted permission may they receive the meikyo from one of the highest-ranked officials from the Priesthood.

In the Priesthood's Northern Court, the process for creating quasi-meikyo soul mirrors, known as *kimenkyo*, has not replaced receiving true meikyo. However, the influx of new meikyo imported from the Southern Court is so numerous that the number of armours and kongohki that are equipped with genuine meikyo has not changed too drastically in recent years.

KIMENKYO

DEVELOPMENT OF THE KIMENKYO

The Priesthood is split into two factions. One of the factions, the Northern Court, revealed the secret of how to produce meikyo—the most fabulous and once most highly protected of the Priesthood's various secret arts. Meikyo analogues created in the towns through this leaked method are called *kimenkyo*, or “mechanical-style mirror”. However, their abilities are a far cry from that of true meikyo. Because it is now possible to mass produce the techniques that give rise to the meikyo, the process was massively reformed, and arguably improved upon over the years.

The two heavy hitters of the battlefield—the armour and kongohki—are now able to be manufactured on a large scale. This became the single largest revolution in warfare in the entire history of Tenra. Although these kimen-armours and kimen-kongohki pale in comparison to hand-crafted meikyo-equipped armours and kongohki, to the average soldier, they are still gods of death on the battlefield.

MASS PRODUCTION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The mass production of armours and kongohki that was born from the *kimenkyo* caused a revolution in the way that war is carried out on Tenra.

These mass-produced kimen armours could be used in ways never before conceived of for standard meikyo armours. For a single large investment, armours could provide a number of war-related

SOUL MIRROR, MECHANICAL MIRROR?

Meikyo comes from the secret techniques which lead to sleek, hand-crafted armour and kongohki that are supremely powerful. The true techniques behind this technology are still guarded by both courts of the Priesthood. The meikyo mirrors themselves are often called "soul mirrors" because of the need to project one's soul through them to operate them successfully.

Kimenkyo is the blocky, unrefined mass-produced technology leaked to the masses by the Northern Court which leads to armour and kongohki that are still quite powerful, but still way behind their meikyo counterparts. You don't need to project your soul through it to use it; kimen mirrors operate more like self-thinking computers or calculators. They are sometimes called "mechanica mirrors" or "kimen mirrors".

Kimen armours and kongohki often look blocky, mechanical, retro, or even steampunkish. They are designed to be pragmatic and quickly producible. They rarely look like their original meikyo counterparts, which are arguably true works of art.

functions such as searching for the enemy, replenishing supplies, or even transport and carriage.

Additionally, an armour-smith came up with the idea of creating standardized armours that would be easy to fix, or exchange parts with on the fly—an idea that would drastically increase the usefulness of the armour. If a leg or arm is destroyed, a new one could be attached and the armour sent back into service quickly.

Moreover, the Priesthood of the Northern Court, after their split, withdrew the former ban against high altitude flight. Utilizing this policy change,

both armour-smiths and onmyoji started research into the art of aviation. As a result, avionic equipment for armours and kongohki has been developed, and the collection of enemy camp information and placement from high altitude has become an essential part of warfare. An age of information-based warfare has begun, with the flying technologies a key component.

Unlike the Northern Court, in the Priesthood of the Southern Court the ban on high altitude flight still stands. Thus, in provinces controlled by the Southern Court, especially the controlled airspace around New Mount Jinrai, avionic armours mysteriously meet with collisions of unknown cause or simply disappear. Until the present day, the number of airspace infractions (both intentional and accidental) was close to one hundred recorded incidents. But now, there is not even one avionic armour which has entered within 200 miles of New Jinrai and returned home to tell the tale.

PRODUCING THE KIMENKYO

To make a kimenkyo or kimen mirror, all one needs is someone who knows the art of meikyo crafting, or documents detailing the special techniques on how to forge a kimenkyo, as well as the necessary materials for forging.

The technique for forging kimenkyo can basically be learned from any higher ranked Shinto priests or priestesses dispatched from the Northern Court. This art, which was taught by the Priesthood, has been passed from pupil to pupil, and quickly spread throughout Tenra. There are now no shortages of kimen crafters.

In normal working conditions, a kimen mirror can be created in about three month's time.

The completed kimenkyo can be sold for approximately 100 ryo. Kimenkyo do not differ in ability or strength depending on their size. However, it is said that the difference in performance can be seen in the size and service life of a kimenkyo. Even though the kimenkyo should essentially possess

RULES FOR KIMEN ARMOUR

Kimen armours and kimen kongohki are mass-produced, but they too rely on onmyojutsu magic and high technology to function, just like their meikyo counterparts. However, they operate on lesser kimen calculating devices, and not meikyo soul-capturing devices.

This means that kimen armour and kimen kongohki do not benefit from the meikyo bonus to physical abilities that their meikyo counterparts receive. This fact accounts for the high difference in quality and operational functionality: Meikyo devices are always superior because their devices run on more natural, human urges.

However, there is a merit to not having a meikyo: There is no accumulation of karma in a kimenkyo; all karma gained while in a kimen armour goes to the pilot. This means that the pilot will never be cut off from the armour, and that the armour will never "trap" the pilot inside.

the same abilities, and thus be all worth roughly the same amount, there have already begun to be differences in market prices that cannot be overlooked. Prices could vary depending on which school or factory the kimenkyo originated from. Even now, there are locations or plants which are working with the limitations of kimenkyo and turning out quality mechanical mirrors.

ARMOUR CONSTRUCTION

HOW DO ARMOURS MOVE?

The shell of an armour is not so different from a standard set of humanoid full body armor, only made larger. Even when constructing armours, one

employs many of the same processes and techniques as when building standard body armor.

However, it is in the delicate internal structure underneath the steel shell for which the armour-smiths are needed. Armour-smiths are one of the specialist onmyoji trained specifically in the art of crafting armours.

The core of armour mobility is an onmyojutsu-crafted device called the "drive shaft". This synthetic muscle, which is fused to its surrounding metal parts, takes the spiritual energy gathered from the centrally equipped heart-engine and uses it to power the very will of the interfaced armour-rider. Due to the countless drive shafts moving intricately within the armour, the armour's gigantic frame can be moved just like that of a human.

Even if the construction of an armour is a difficult time-consuming endeavor, the equipping and repair of one is not such a formidable task. The outfitting and servicing of an armour is accomplished through Taoist sorcery. By forging the correct shiki and fusing it to the damaged metal, the damaged parts can be mended again.

However, no matter how skilled an armour-smith, there are two instruments that cannot be mended once broken: The heart-engine and the meikyo mirror.

An armour whose heart-engine is damaged is cut off from the power source that fuels its movements. It loses the ability to move even a single finger. Additionally, if the meikyo soul mirror is damaged, interfacing with the armour becomes impossible.

If both of these items are damaged simultaneously, the only option is to replace them both. Additionally, because the acquisition of both is exceedingly difficult, armours that are destroyed like this are often little more than useless junk, and are usually just broken down for scrap.

KIMEN ARMOUR-RIDERS

Pilots of kimen armour often choose this path as another way to achieve power, status or respect. Ex-armour pilots (those who were eventually rejected by meikyo armours) often take this path, as do people who wish to gain power without pursuing paths that would change their bodies completely like samurai or kijin. Crack open the shell of a kimen armour, and most likely you'll find just a normal human being staring back.

HEART-ENGINES THE SOURCE OF AN ARMOUR'S POWER

The heart that moves armours and kongohki—the instrument that supplies their mystic energy—is a spherical device called a heart engine, sometimes written heart-engine or heartgem. About the size of an adult's clenched fist, and usually surrounded in a case of steel, the heart gem is an irreplaceable part of the armour.

This, paired with its scarcity, makes it often fetch a high price in business dealings and underground markets.

Heart gems that are given proper treatment by onmyoji can supply an unlimited amount of soul energy. Installing the heart gem into armours and kongohki will provide the energy needed to move the drive shafts of the various parts of the body. Since it is the instrument that functions as the armour's and kongohki's heart, once a heart gem is installed into a machine, it is then called a heart-engine.

If the heart-engine is damaged, repair is impossible and a new one must be procured and exchanged with the damaged one. Conversely, if the heart-engine could somehow be taken from a damaged armour or kongohki, it is possible that it could be reused as the power source for a new armour or kongohki.

Of course, the knowledge of how to transplant the heart-engine between two armours is only known to the upper class—the onmyoji, the armour-smiths, the lords and their representatives—and remains a mystery to the common people. Even the fact that such a method of powering machines exists is not known by many.

In extremely rare cases, a large number of heart gems have been known to flow through the black market for a short time. Rumors flow freely of long hidden heart gem treasure troves of long-dead nations, or caches of gems that serve as the playthings of the Priesthood. Because of the recent increase of mass-produced kimen armours and kimen kongohki which also require a power supply, these rumored and rare heart engines have recently seen a sudden increase in price well beyond their past cost...

ONI AND HEART GEMS

While it is not commonly known, heart gems are actually the physical hearts of the native people of Tenra- the oni.

When one cuts open the chest cavity of a dead or dying oni, it is possible to see the rough shape of a heart fused to the center of the chest—an almost perfect sphere about the size of a large fist. This is a heart gem.

One theory is that the heart gem is the source of oni supernatural powers. If that is true, then it is possible to harness this organ, and give a shiki limitless renewable mystical power. This creates a semi-permanent drive engine for armours and kongohki.

Whoever first discovered this fact is not known. Perhaps it was one of the Priesthood secrets that was leaked—or perhaps even deliberately revealed—to the masses. But it is still a mystery as to why the Priesthood would leak any information as important as the heart-engines to the lower classes.

SHIKI PERMANENCE

By combining the heart-engine and a summoned *shiki* spirit, an onmyoji can forge a unique type of shiki.

In the same way that the heart-engine becomes the driving force for an armour, by using the heart gem as a medium for the shiki, the soul required to empower the shiki can be supplied permanently through the engine.

Normally, when forging a shiki spirit, the onmyoji places their soul energy into the incantation which summons the shiki. The shiki then consumes that energy, using it as fuel, and takes on life and motion. When the mystical energy the soul provided is used up, the shiki can no longer function and it dissipates. Now, what would happen if a heart gem was placed inside the shiki during the summoning? This shiki, once it takes on material form, would continually be supplied energy from the heart gem. Thus, the shiki would never dissipate due to lack of soul energy: It gains permanence, and only destroying the shiki will banish it.

Among those onmyoji lucky enough to possess a heart gem, there are those who keep this permanently functioning shiki next to them, using them as guards, messengers or assistants. An assistant who follows your every desire, and who needs neither payment nor support, is an ideal partner for those onmyoji who desire nothing other than the pursuit of the knowledge of their esoteric arts.

However, there is one danger that comes with the practice of implementing heart gems.

Heart gems, as their names implies, are the hearts of oni. Therefore, a part of the soul of the former owner of that heart lingers even after death. And because the heart lives on, that fragment of soul feels regret. It is laden with karma.

If the soul of the ill-fated oni is strong, it is possible that this shiki-oni will rampage the instant the shiki

is crafted and made solid, raging indiscriminately. For normal shiki, it is enough to merely run away if it cannot be controlled. If the soul energy that powers the shiki runs out, the shiki breaks apart, becoming little more than wasted prayer strips lined with glyphs of ink.

However, for those shiki who have been made permanent by use of the heart-engines, it is not that easy. There is no way to stop a rampaging shiki short of killing the shiki with weapons, or to somehow destroy the heart-engine.

There are rumors that some of the *ayakashi* (spirits that roam the land of Tenra) are actually rampaging permanent shiki. These wild beasts are called *chimera*, and encounters with these demonic creatures is often... unpleasant.

THE FORM OF THE ARMOUR

Armours are usually humanoid in shape.

This is because it is easier for the armour-rider to operate. The rider interfaces with the armour, putting their consciousness into a physical shape that is roughly the same as their own physical form. Humanoid shapes make it easier for the rider to smoothly operate the armour.

However, there is no strong compelling force to always craft armours to be humanoid in shape. As long as it is easy to fight in—that is to say, as long as it is a shape convenient for killing people—an armour can take on almost any shape.

Armours with multiple limbs, armours that are the amalgamation of man and beast, and so on are the more orthodox “sub-species” of armours. There is a class of armours called “living armours”, armours composed of both steel and organic parts, with an overlaying coating of flesh which house parasitic *annelids*. There are armours with changeable forms, which can be transformed between high maneuverability and high powered forms. There are also rare cases of “combination armours”, greater armours that are made up of two or more armours

ARMOUR RIDERS

of various abilities, to form a larger, highly versatile, powerful armour controlled at once by several riders.

However, in practice, when an armour's shape begins to become less humanoid, the maneuverability and efficiency of the armour tends to decrease. On the other hand, there are some weapons that simply cannot be equipped on a human form. There are also armours with fantastical or grotesque forms that are often employed for special cases, or for special terror missions.

Armour-smiths are endlessly experimenting by trial and error, attempting to make their armours stronger than any other. The non-humanoid armours of strange and fascinating design—these are the fruits of their studies.

GREAT ARMOURS: ARMOURS WITH MULTIPLE PILOTS

Usually, armours are operated by only a single rider. However for extremely large or heavily equipped armours, or times when a single rider cannot control the armour, there are gigantic armours that are set with two cockpits, two meikyo soul mirrors, and are operated by two armour-riders. These are known as “great armours”. The two riders' meikyo are joined through connecting cables. It is through this medium that the two armour-riders can easily communicate subconsciously and can instantly understand what the other is thinking faster than words can convey. This allows them to work together harmoniously.

The two armour-riders are essentially divided into a driver-pilot and a gunner-pilot: One person to operate the armour's movement, and one to operate the armour's equipment. If both riders attempted to control a single body at the same time, then unless they were truly united in spirit and understanding, the only thing that would result is catastrophe.

However, it is in fact possible for these two jobs to be exchanged, and depending on the situation, the

jobs of two riders are often swapped. For example, if the pilot rider for some reason becomes unable to interface with the armour, the gunner can pilot the armour, and attempt to return it home.

The two meikyo of great armours are not function-specific at the hardware level. For the most part, in order to operate the great armour's frame in an optimum capacity, having two armours riders is better than only one. However, for movement away from the battlefield, or other times when 100% efficiency is not required, it is possible for a single armor-rider to operate all of the systems on a great armour.

Additionally, if employed in battle, a great armour can almost always defeat two normal armours. The most amazing function of the great armours is their pure destructive capabilities. The great armour known as “Battle Crusher” of the Ouga domain in the province of Ryuurin-shu was able to, on its first ever foray into battle, destroy an entire enemy castle by itself. This is not a legend handed down and exaggerated through time; it is a recorded fact. This, along with the trampling waves of terror and destruction that are caused by the marching of the great armours, has caused fear of them to spread throughout the land. Their military power comes equally from their psychological effects and equipped weapons.

Certainly the great armours are much more powerful than normal armours. However, they also possess the same fragile weak points as normal armours, only in double the quantity.

The biggest danger is of the armour going berserk.

The longer an armour-rider connects with an active meikyo, the deeper and heavier that the combined karma of both becomes. If the meikyo and the interfacing armour-rider's karma exceeds the limit, the armour-rider will turn into an Asura, a lost soul. If there are two armour-riders, that danger increases two-fold.

ARMOUR RIDERS

The two armour-riders interface simultaneously, and are connected to two meikyo. Thus, if one side falls and becomes a lost soul, an Asura, there is a high chance of that madness instantly affecting the other armour-rider as well.

Even with the pain of raising two armour-riders, the danger of losing both of them in an instant, and the fact that the production of a great armour is much more difficult than that of a normal armour, the radiant draw of the raw military might of the great armour is enough to make any ruler's eyes swim with desire. Risks are calculated, and then often ignored on a gamble that could bring them absolute power, or absolute destruction.

Even with so many tales of failures, there are still a large number of those who desire the power of the grand armours.

KIMEN ARMOURS: THE NEW FACE OF WARFARE

Kimenkyo: The mass produced quasi-meikyo. Vessels of pure meikyo craftsmanship replaced with bulky, mechanical objects of computational power. These lesser quality mechanical mirrors, which anyone with the know-how and materials can build, have brought about the single greatest revolution to warfare on Tenra.

These are the kimen armours.

Once, armour-riders were an elite class, restricted to only those who possessed great skill and ability, and a noble bloodline. The largest issue with riders in the past was that, in order to interface with the meikyo, the pilot must have a soul that was not steeped in karma. A pure soul. A child.

However, with the appearance of the kimenkyo, this absolute law of armours has collapsed. The soul that interfaces with a kimenkyo can be any sort of soul—even one limited by the taint of sin or karma. As long as the control techniques for interfacing are known, one can operate a kimen armour. This is perhaps like a blessing from the gods for those

warriors who seek even more power, or for those armour-riders who have become so steeped in their own karma that they can no longer pilot true meikyo armours.

The lords and great houses are attempting to assemble great numbers of these powerful war machines. Certainly, compared to armours equipped with true meikyo, they are underpowered worthless armours. But against normal humans, they are a frightening war machine that spear-armed fighters cannot possibly hope to overcome.

One problem, in addition to actually building the kimen-armour, is providing the heart-engine that serves as the power source of the armour. Actually, ever since the development of the kimen-armour, the price of heart-engines has continued to rocket steadily upward due to demand. Heart-engines now cost several times what they once were.

For the kimen armours, their “mass-produced” nature means that most of the armours share the same shape and same function. Because of this, repairing or exchanging parts damaged in battle, exchanging weapons to match their situation in battle, or swapping out riders also trained on the same class of armour, is a simple task.

Compared to normal armours—which are considered by armour-smiths and onmyoji to be true works of art—the kimen-armours are nothing more than the bulky, weapon-wielding tools of war.

THE ONI HUNT

The fact that the physical hearts of oni are what are referred to as “heart gems” and “heart-engines” is a fact known by very few people.

Most human domains have created a culture of fear regarding the oni people, portraying them in stories as bloodthirsty savages, asura in flesh and blood, who feed upon defenseless people. This hysteria makes it easy for humans to steel themselves as they go about the slaughter of a humanoid race.

ARMOUR RIDERS

When a lord who knows the truth of the oni heart hears reports that there are oni within his domain, he will often call for an oni hunt. Under the guise of protecting his people from the oni menace, he puts out a call (in the form of edicts posted on bulletin boards near the borders of major towns and cities) to area soldiers, mercenaries and woodsmen.

“It is said that there are oni hiding in the mountains at the following location... It would be very dangerous if they were to find neighboring towns and villages. Therefore, I have called upon all able-bodied veterans to help clear this dangerous menace out of the area...”

And thus does a lord fuel his desire for highly demanded, prized oni hearts. If the populace heard of the truth, would they believe it? Perhaps at the individual level. But it will take a long time to heal the wounds caused by the spread of false rumors, misinformation and terror.

ONMYOJUTSU: THE ART OF TAOIST MAGIC

What is onmyojutsu? It is a way of studying the reason behind the existence of Tenra; it is a philosophy; it is a school of engineering to produce the magical armours and kongohki, as well as being the art of mechanical craftsmen; it is the magical applications of Taoist study.

However, first and foremost it is best described by three simple letters: Art.

If you were to look at the root of what onmyojutsu is, you would find that there is only one thing that onmyojutsu can accomplish: The manipulation of the gossamer-like power of Tenra called *sha*, a force which blankets the planet. This alone allows the creation of *shiki* spirits, the activity most associated with the idea of onmyojutsu. However, *sha* is the root of what forms Tenra. It influences the way all men think, and is said to be that deep, natural force which forms this ever-changing world.

They say that to have the power to manipulate *sha* is to have the power to manipulate and change the world as you see fit. To follow the way of onmyojutsu is to understand the world in various ways, and to be able to manipulate it through the force of one's will. Please consider, if you will: Tempering one's mind with the power of the *sha* produces a human will strong enough to change the very world.

There are many theories about how the study of Taoist magic began, but most theories involve a woman named Moonsong, herself a miko shrine maiden of the Shinto Priesthood, as well as a mysterious man called the Horned Monk.

In the most predominant theory, onmyojutsu was a secret of the Priesthood, and Moonsong brought it forth and let it out into the world. The Priesthood has stated publicly that there never was a miko agent

by the name of Moonsong. However, this theory is the most prominent, especially in light of the numbers of onmyoji of high skill who are also members of the Priesthood.

On the other hand, there is also a theory that onmyojutsu was originally an art of the oni people, and that the Horned Monk taught this art to the humans. He first taught Moonsong, who crafted the art into a form that humans could understand, and spread the art from there. However, because the oni currently living on Tenra don't show any signs of natively possessing powers similar to onmyojutsu, there are many who doubt this theory.

Even if there are still a number of mysteries remaining, there is no mistaking that the origins of onmyojutsu revolve around two people: Moonsong and the Horned Monk.

THE ART OF SHIKI SUMMONING

What are *shiki* spirits? They are defined by academics as "Proto-lifeforms born from the *sha*, given life and material form through a trained onmyoji, who in turn brings into being by the expenditure of mystical energy". However, this is not the only definition that correctly describes them. Onmyoji often refer to *shiki* as "living incantations that are drawn in order to control the *sha*"; or else they use the broader definition, "controlled *sha*". In short, all things created by onmyojutsu are referred to as *shiki* or *shiki spirits*.

The taoist sorcerers of Tenra rarely use magical effects like summoning fire or seeing visions of far places. Rather, they craft creatures from the natural magical *sha* power of the land, and form them into *shiki* spirits which they control; it is those spirits which can then breathe fire or fly stealthily while sense-linking their vision with their onmyoji masters. For this reason, onmyoji sorcerers are often called *summoners*.

To summon a *shiki*, a summoner imagines the form of the *shiki* she wishes to summon. She then crafts what is called a *prayer seal* using a summoning

YAKUMO, CLOUD OF NIGHT

In the domain of Migusa, he was a respected war advisor and a genius onmyoji. As such, he was favored to become the next general of the armies of that country. However, one evening as he was staring into the golden red sunset, he was heard to mutter “Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.” He then quickly summoned a few shiki that rampaged through the castle, killing all of the regent’s house retainers, after which he disappeared. He now has a bounty of 2000 ryo on his head for anyone that will find him and bring him to justice.

language of written marks, glyphs and squiggles. A seal is usually written on strips of paper using ink and a brush. It can be also drawn in sand, or dirt. In a pinch, it can even be “drawn” with one’s fingers in the air or on water, but this method is far more difficult. In recent days, some onmyoji equipped with kimenkyo computing devices use those devices to “encode” the blueprint of the shiki.

When the prayer seal is completed (usually drawn out on a *prayer strip*, a narrow strip of pure white paper), the onmyoji uses her will to awaken the prayer seal. The prayer seal starts gathering the Sha energy from the area, and this process is fueled by the summoner’s own spiritual reserves. When the seal gathers enough energy, the shiki takes form and comes alive.

A shiki is not a creature that is summoned, banished, and summoned again. Rather, every time a summoner brings forth a creature into the world, it is a new creature, experiencing life for the first time each time a summoning is complete. After the shiki takes form, the onmyoji commands it, either verbally or mentally. The shiki will follow all of those orders to the best of their abilities, and never turn against their master.

There are two basic kinds of summoning when it comes to onmyojutsu. One method allows the

onmyoji to carefully design the abilities that the shiki will be crafted with. This allows for shiki to be created with the exact design that the summoner had in mind, and thus is the more often-used way. The other way is for the summoner to quickly raise a creature, in effect pulling a creature out of the chaos without much regard for what abilities it has. The drawback here is, of course, that the shiki might not be equipped with abilities that the summoner is looking for (though there is a chance). The benefit to this method is that the controlled chaos of this ad-hoc summoning can result in the ability to summon shiki that normally would be too powerful for the onmyoji to summon or control. Which method the onmyoji uses will vary due to discipline, use, and need.

SHIKI AND TALISMANS

Shiki are sometimes fused with living or non-living matter in order to give it more power or to control it in some way. When shiki are mixed with other material in some way, and made permanent through the effects of an incantation, the result is referred to as a *talisman*. A talisman might be a good-luck amulet, a paper with calligraphic glyphs on it, a sword, an enhanced animal, or even an enhanced humanoid. Those talismans whose subject is a living thing, especially in the case of the soulgem-studded samurai, are considered separate from normal nonliving amulets like tools and mechanica.

Talismans possess a number of merits. First, the time required to write an incantation can be reduced. Rather than writing out an incantation at the time of casting, it can be prepared on a physical item and activated when needed. Second, by returning to a talisman, a suspended shiki can be preserved. Normally, shiki spirits dissipate back into the sha after a number of minutes, but if they are preserved in a talisman form, they can last longer. However, the strongest benefit of talismans is that anyone can use one. Talismans can be used even by people who cannot normally use Taoist magic, as long as they can expend the necessary amount of mystical power (“Soul”) to activate it.

EVERLASTING SHIKI

An onmyoji needs a heart gem to craft shiki that will stay alive indefinitely. It needs to be placed into the summoning seal before it awakens and gathers sha energy. Then the heart merges with the shiki, and grants it an eternal source of spiritual energy. From that point on, it cannot be dismissed nor will it dissipate. It must be destroyed completely.

ONMYOJUTSU IN THE MODERN WORLD

Onmyojutsu was largely developed for the creation and perfection of the art of crafting talismans. Because onmyojutsu is based on a power so chaotic that even following the same procedures would not guarantee the same results in a shiki, the noble lords were not satisfied with its performance. The form of magic which secured the usefulness and value of onmyojutsu was the ability to forge a shiki spirit into a form that could be preserved. From experimentation with forging permanent shiki were born the samurai, and their powers of war amazed the nobles all over Tenra. Following miraculous developments like this, it became only natural that in the modern day various countries would each employ onmyoji of their own. This also had a great impact on raising the status of the onmyoji from a group of mysterious loners experimenting in private to a highly regarded group who are to be listened to and respected.

Recently, developments have been made in the forging of shiki in conjunction with the use of a *kimenkyo* calculating device. With such a device, one could craft and summon a shiki quickly, utilizing what amounts to a handheld computer to assist with the crafting of the sha and the formation of the shiki. However, *kimenkyo*-style “shiki-slinging” attracts the ire of those onmyoji who are disposed towards the old traditions of drawing the shiki summoning runes by brush on strips of paper.

Nowadays, the various arts revealed by the Northern Court of the Priesthood have caused great changes in the ways of war. The value of shiki, as well as the value of the onmyoji mages who summon them, have increased dramatically. They are powerful tools of observation, information-gathering, and even general warfare.

THE LARGEST SHIKI

The size of a shiki, as well as the form they should take, is not defined by any set of rules. Thus, shiki spirits are forged in the images of the psyche of the onmyoji that creates them. Some onmyoji create shiki that are pleasant to behold, beautiful to all, while others create shiki that are horrific or whose forms enforce the use for which they were created. However, all things in the world possess limitations of some sort, even the creation of shiki.

First, the onmyoji cannot forge a shiki that she cannot imagine the form of, such as shiki that are too small that they surpass the bounds of human imagination. It is perhaps acceptable to say that if you can imagine the shiki, form and size do not matter, but the image demanded by onmyojutsu is not such a simple thing. For that reason, it is relatively easy to craft shiki that are anywhere from the size of a mouse to double the size of a human being. Smaller than that, or too much larger than that, and it becomes harder for an onmyoji to focus on the shape enough to craft it successfully—at least, not without lots of preparation and meditation.

So, conversely, how about a very large shiki? The amount of soul necessary to craft a shiki is proportional to its size. Thus, the more powerful a shiki is, the larger it tends to be. The soul expenditure can largely be avoided by connecting it to a soulgem for additional soul resources, but there is still a problem remaining. It is a problem concerning the quantity of sha that has been gathered and formed into the shiki. Shiki spirits are formed by drawing in the sha of the surrounding area and giving it physical form. However, there is a fixed limit to the amount of sha that exists

KIMENKYO

Kimenkyo (machine mirrors) are the mass produced, almost “knockoff quality” versions of meikyo soul mirror technology. The meikyo technology of the Priesthood is better crafted, its technology intricate, unfathomable and very powerful. But the kimenkyo’s power lies with the fact that it can be produced in factories outside of the Priesthood, and can be mass-produced. Kimen technology like kimen armours and kongohki have become easier to produce, and this stands to change the face of warfare on Tenra.

within a given area. Thus, the size of a shiki is also dependent on the amount of sha in the area. In order to overcome this limitation, the concentration of sha has to be increased through some means. Even looking at it from a time perspective, creation of an enormous shiki is difficult, as a great deal of time is needed to create giant shiki. The shiki’s size when it takes physical form is directly tied to the amount of sha that must be collected to form it.

To give an example of how large shikigami can normally become, let us introduce the largest shiki currently in existence:

The siege shiki spirit used to assault the great Kyosaka Castle, “Annihilation”, was around 25 meters in height, and extended over 40 meters in length. To be formed, Annihilation required the blood and sha of multiple live sacrifices. The size of the numerous soulgems that were woven into a spell strip covered a single sheet of paper which required an unprecedented 120 square meters of space.

SOULGEMS AND HEART GEMS

Soulgems as well as heart gems hold a particularly important meaning for Taoist sorcerers. Although there is often some confusion between the two, they are of course completely different things, whose use is just as different.

Soulgems are a special metal mined from the earth and formed into round gems. These soulgems contain a kind of ki energy within them which explode with magical energy when used. Their nature amplifies the ki, and they are used in the creation of magical seals of power. These seals gather energy, and they are where shiki take material form. A seal that has enough gems contained within it requires much less magical energy (Soul) to activate than is normally necessary.

Heart engines or heart gems are amber spheres that emit truly limitless power, almost like a perpetual generator of spiritual energy. They are rarer and more valuable than standard soulgems, and are an even more essential part of onmyojutsu. This is because by using the natural property of the heart gem, shiki spirits can be maintained indefinitely. Without the use of heart gems, a shiki will dissipate back into the sha after a few minutes.

Normally, the operational time limit of shiki is not nearly so long. A normal shiki will last a few minutes, while even shiki whose operational time has been extended by a master onmyoji is limited to only a mere hour. This is because of the nature of the sha. One of the characteristics of sha is that its form is always changing, and to fix sha into a single form requires an enormous strength of will. To put it another way, shiki will continue to stay in a single form only as long as the requisite mystical sha energy continues to be supplied.

If a heart engine is inserted into a shiki’s summoning seal during creation, it can supply the shiki with limitless amounts of power. Thus, the shiki receives unlimited operational time, and will not cease to function short of being destroyed.

THE VARIOUS ONMYOJI

Onmyojutsu is the art by which the sha is manipulated. This special art of the land of Tenra is possible exclusively thanks to the sha. There are many various and divergent arts which are contained within the framework of onmyojutsu, each one with its own methods, tools, and results.

ONMYOJUTSU

The most notable practitioners of onmyojutsu who have turned their art into a practical science are the armour-smiths. They use their proficiency of transforming the alchemical elements of the shiki and forging them into parts used by armours or kongohki. Using their hands and smithy tools, they create the minute details and engineer the parts required by the armour. These parts would be impossible to craft without the aid of Taoist sorcery.

Additionally, because the Northern Court of the Priesthood revealed the construction process of meikyo soul mirrors, sorcery-using artisans known as *crafters* were born. However, it is regrettable that the things they create do not even begin to compare to those meikyo created by the Priesthood. Instead, it is known as *kimenkyo*. However, because of the development of kimenkyo, each nation has begun mass-producing kimen kongohki and armours. What sacrifices there are in the quality of the constructed k imenkyo are made up somewhat by the fact that kimen works can be produced faster and cheaper than traditional meikyo works. Also, the lords of various countries who employ onmyoji are seeing the benefits of the application of onmyojutsu: Mechanics, advanced medicine, and other wonders are a direct application of magic into technology.

The next representatives of the division of the art of onmyojutsu are the kugutsu makers. They create dolls carved from simple wood, which are then given beautiful—almost inhumanly beautiful—forms. It can be said that they are the product of the most beautiful and true practice of onmyojutsu, which gives literal form and life to a sorcerer's will and imagination.

Those who handle onmyojutsu as a special ability every day are the samurai of Tenra. Even though they cannot use onmyojutsu themselves without training, they receive various abilities (and thus power) from the shiki that are sealed within their bodies. Additionally, there are also the shinobi and sorcerer-monks, two other special types of onmyoji.

While there are few people who know the true form of the ninjutsu abilities that the shinobi use, it is clear that they are similar in structure to onmyojutsu. It is said that the founder of ninjutsu was a master onmyoji, and that by the founder's hand onmyojutsu was specialized towards secrecy and information gathering. That onmyoji arranged the sorcery in such a way that the art could be taught and used by the practitioner without understanding the underlying reason, logic and structure behind it. The result of that sorcerer's efforts was the art of ninjutsu.

The sorcerer-monks (also known as “onmyo monks”) are Buddhist monks of the Phoenix order who act as guardians, skilled both in the arts of onmyojutsu and the disciplines of esoteric Buddhist knowledge. They practice a special and proprietary form of onmyojutsu that is different form of most onmyoji. They refer to the shiki as “Tenra's guardian spirits”, and practice the art of onmyojutsu in a way that is used for the defense of their order and their doctrine.

Onmyojutsu is a path. It is not limited to being a simple art; it is also a way of living one's life. Crafting formless matter into having shape and form, then making the decision of whether to use this talent for a cause, or to gain power and knowledge for one's self... The path is different for all people who walk it.

NO LONGER HUMAN

WHAT IS A SAMURAI?

“Samurai” is a general term used to describe human creatures that have been imbued with summoned shiki, thereby becoming a living, walking magical creature. The samurai are Tenra’s strongest warriors, having renounced their humanity in exchange for superhuman power. To the general populace they are monsters, no different from the *oni* or *ayakashi*. As a result, *samurai* is a title spoken with a mixture of awe and fear.

To what end do they use their supernatural might? Why have they gone to such extreme lengths in the pursuit of power? Few samurai would answer such questions, but they have their reasons nevertheless. Even those samurai lacking an ultimate goal will inevitably be forced to find one, lest they be consumed by the monster within.

Perhaps they want revenge. Maybe a past weakness left them unable to protect something or someone dear, causing them to seek power in a vain attempt to take back what they have lost. They could be driven by ambition, a burning desire to leave their mark on the world, even if it means sacrificing everything. Or maybe they seek something that can only be found at the very edge of becoming an asura. Perhaps their goal is one that only other samurai can comprehend, something that would make an average person laugh in disbelief.

Don’t get the samurai of Tenra confused with the samurai of historic Japan. A warrior in the service of a noble house or clan is referred to in Tenra as a clan warrior, a retainer, a member of the warrior class, or the traditional “mono-no-fu”. On Tenra, a samurai refers to only one type of person: The kind of warrior who has undergone the dangerous samurai surgical transformation, embedding soulgems and a shiki into their body in exchange for power.

Whether they became a samurai to fight, to live, or for some other purpose, an obsession with power is one common trait they all share. What they hope to accomplish with that power, however, is anyone’s guess.

SAMURAI TRANSFORMATION

The Samurai invokes the shiki spirit within her body by reciting a certain incantation and unleashing a burst of willpower, bringing about a miraculous metamorphosis into a shape only barely human. Transformed samurai vary widely in appearance: Sometimes their skin changes color, others sprout strange chitin-like protuberances on the surface of their bodies, and still others grow bizarre quantities of muscular tissue. The stronger the shiki spirit bound to a samurai’s body, the more drastic and visible the change. A handful of samurai even metamorphose into something completely inhuman when activated.

Samurai are living magical creatures, and must spend a set amount of stored spiritual energy (“Soul”) to transform. However, as with other spells, summonings and talismans, they can use soulgems to assist with the transformation.

THE PRICE OF BECOMING A SAMURAI

Samurai may possess incredible might, but they pay a staggering cost for that power.

In order to become a samurai, the individual must undergo a series of long and extremely dangerous surgical operations performed by an onmyoji. The samuraization procedure takes anywhere from several weeks to months to perform, and dying on the operating table is far from a rare occurrence. Death can result from any number of mishaps, but the most common problems in the procedure are caused by a patient’s physiological rejection of the implanted soulgems. Specialized shiki spirits carry out the actual surgical insertion of the soulgems, but the technology is still in its infancy. Attempting to join soulgems to a human body is a gamble at best.

SAMURAI AND SOULGEMS

Soulgems have become a sort of status symbol for samurai. Soulgems prove a samurai's prowess: The more they have implanted, the more powerful they are. Because of this, samurai tend to have their soulgems embedded in easily visible locations.

INCANTATIONS

As living magical creatures, the samurai transformation can be activated or deactivated not only by the samurai themselves, but by others as well if they know the proper incantation. This is usually a backdoor codeword. The samurai and onmyoji decide upon this codeword during the soulgem implantation process. This codeword/incantation is not used by the samurai for normal transformation; it's a carefully guarded secret phrase used for emergencies only.

If the samurai's shiki is capable of sensory binding, the codeword activator will be able to see and feel what the samurai perceives, as if the samurai were a bound shiki.

Aspiring samurai must also be wary of the onmyoji they hire as well. Onmyoji bind their patients to prevent them from blindly lashing out from the excruciating pain of the surgeries, and these restraints leave the patient in a completely powerless state, with no guarantee that the onmyoji will fulfill her end of the bargain. In addition, onmyoji frequently incorporate a number of safeguards or "tricks" into the shiki they implant in an effort to protect themselves from a rampaging patient. An honest onmyoji will only employ the bare minimum of mechanisms required for self-defense, but an unscrupulous practitioner could potentially turn the samurai into his obedient slave. A would-be samurai must trust his onmyoji surgeon unconditionally,

and such trust is a rare commodity.

Payment is another issue a potential samurai must deal with. Some onmyoji are willing to accept standard gold, but most demand scarlet steel, heart engines, or other valuable substances. In addition, the samurai candidate must provide her own soulgems for the operation. Onmyoji also frequently demand an oath of fealty from the subject, or else require that he or she act as a test subject for the sorcerer's mystical experiments.

After the operation, the samurai ceases being human in biological terms, having become something else: A fusion of human and spirit. Sterility is one noticeable result of the change: Samurai are unable to reproduce. Male samurai no longer produce living sperm, and female samurai are left barren. There have been no recorded cases of a samurai bearing children; even in the extremely rare event that a male samurai either impregnates his partner or a female samurai becomes pregnant herself, a miscarriage is the inevitable result. Becoming a samurai also has social consequences, and it is impossible for a samurai to live as they did before the transformation.

As you can see, aspiring to samurai status is gambling with both your life and your soul, and the odds are stacked against you. Even if you win, and survive to become a samurai, you still lose in a way. Some suggest, however, that the higher the cost and the gamble, the greater the power attained by the samurai will be.

SAMURAI AND SOCIETY

As stated before, the samurai of Tenra are not human. To the average person, a samurai is a monster like an *oni* or an *ayakashi* spirit. However, samurai are monsters more likely to be encountered in daily life. Average folk treat samurai with kid gloves, desperate to avoid earning their anger or otherwise spoiling their mood. They know an enraged samurai is fully capable of hacking them down with their bare hands as easily as a scythe cutting grass.

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While feared for their inhuman power, it is this power that helps the samurai through life. War is everywhere, and strength is a valuable commodity. With their skills in constant demand, the modern era is an ideal environment for the samurai. There is always a war raging somewhere on Tenra, and no shortage of bloodthirsty lords in desperate need of the samurai's talents.

Tavern keepers, brothel owners, and prostitutes also welcome the samurai with open arms. Flush with the spoils of war and accustomed to a lifestyle in which death could come at any time, samurai tend to be hedonists who live for the moment. Samurai make excellent customers, having no qualms about spending vast sums of money on transient pleasures. Samurai also make handy bouncers and bodyguards, but they invariably only stick around until the money runs out.

A perceptive reader will have noticed by now that it is not the samurai themselves who are in demand, only their power and money. Without a place they can truly call home, samurai are wanderers who rarely stay in one place for very long. The chance of being fully accepted by a town or village and living in peace is a slim one indeed, and the best a samurai can hope to expect is being allowed temporary residence.

With the field of battle the only place a samurai is truly at home, it is perhaps fitting that the battlefield is where the vast majority lose their lives. No matter how impressive their martial accomplishments, samurai are rarely appointed to the higher ranks in the feudal hierarchy. Back on the battlefield, it is inevitable that the samurai will someday encounter someone stronger than themselves on the opposing side.

Even should she accomplish the goal that led her to become a samurai in the first place, with no way to regain her humanity, there is no chance of returning to a normal lifestyle. Even if her power becomes nothing more than a burden, that power is the only thing keeping her alive.

Sometimes samurai are consumed by their own power. The shiki spirits that reside in a samurai's body are constantly attempting to assume control, kept in check only via their host's force of will. There is an ever-present chance that one day the samurai will lose this contest of wills, have her body stolen from her by the monsters within, and her remaining shreds of humanity quickly subsumed by her bestial nature. A fitting end for a monster, some would say.

It's important to note that samurai are well aware of the costs they must pay in the pursuit of power, but they are not deterred. They have no regrets. Or, even if they did, such regrets would be pointless. Once a samurai, always a samurai: There is no going back.

THE SIGN OF THE SAMURAI

Outside of wearing armor, it is difficult for a samurai to conceal their supernatural nature. With soulgems embedded in their face, arms, and chest, samurai are easy to spot.

Also, just as conventional onmyojutsu talismans are inscribed with mystical sigils and designs, the bodies of the samurai are similarly marked. Some boast of their samurai status by having these sigils visibly tattooed, while others prefer the more subtle *oshiroi-bori* ("white powder engraving") method that keeps them less noticeable. Patterns inscribed into the Samurai's flesh using white powder engraving only become visible when the Samurai is angered, excited, or transformed.

TYPES OF SAMURAI

The Phoenix Buddhist sect have accepted some samurai into the ranks of their warrior-monks, with sect leader Gamou Douan describing them not as monsters but as "Protectors of the Faith", able to call on the spirits (some would consider them protector-spirits, or even ancestral spirits) for aid. These protectors possess the strength of a normal samurai, as well as an unshakable faith and an ability to work within in an organization not seen in their

NO LONGER HUMAN

secular brethren. They are a powerful resource for the warrior-monks, who already tend to outmatch most feudal lords' armies in terms of morale and equipment.

While generally on the other side of the operating table, some onmyoji become samurai themselves. Combining their formidable intelligence and magical prowess with unmatched power on the battlefield, these samurai-onmyoji are terrible to behold. Their unparalleled knowledge of shiki and the handling thereof give them another important advantage over normal samurai.

Not all samurai were originally human. While rare, it is not unknown for animals to be implanted with shiki as well. The most frequently encountered animal samurai are horses (called *Tenba*, or "heavenly horses"), dogs, wolves, cats, and hawks, all of which see battlefield action just like humanoid samurai.

The samurai horses or tenba are able to gallop across the battlefields at speeds capable of leaving racehorses in the dust, and rendering enemy attacks impotent. Samurai dogs possess a quantity of strength and ferocity not seen in conventional war dogs, and sensory binding allows them to be controlled from a distance, allowing them to act as the commander's eyes, ears, and hands.

However, soulgem implantation is a difficult process at best, and the success rate of such operations on animal subjects is even lower than on human patients. It is for this reason that samurai animals remain so few in number. Additionally, even taking into account sensory binding, mentally controlling an animal is a difficult task that requires the animal be trained from an early age.

Despite the hardship associated with their creation, samurai animals have great potential as espionage agents. Some shinobi villages are conducting research into their use, and it is said that a handful of organizations have already had some practical success.

THE RELIGION OF TENRA

The birthplace of Buddhism in the world of Tenra is Bharata (also referred to as “Tenjiku”, or “The Garden of Heaven” in the Tenran language), a vast land they say is located far from Tenra in the West. The originator of the Buddhist heritage is Siddhartha, the one who himself became Buddha. Once Buddha attained enlightenment under a banyan tree, that event formed the explosive origin of all the sects of Buddhism in Tenra.

Though they say there are several hundred or even several thousand sects or practices of Buddhism in the land, the Phoenix, Ebon Mountain and Bright Lotus orders are the three largest sects of Buddhism in Tenra.

Even though there are many differences between the individual Buddhist sects, Buddhism itself is recognized as the official religion in Tenra. Of course, many small-scale religions or splinter sects exist among small or remote villages, but Buddhism—especially the more popular Phoenix sect—is the only religion that the Shinto Priesthood approves. The Priesthood adopted Buddhism as the state religion of Tenra and coordinated the spread of the religion across the land. Later, all the other smaller sects were born from the three largest sects, which all emerged initially from the Phoenix.

The real everyday world of Buddhist practice is the passing on of shared myths, the study of scripture, praying to images of the Buddha, and being mindful of the spiritual world. The place where Buddhism starts to deviate from the everyday is in the application of Buddhist lore: A set of powers, protections, and other physical or otherworldly powers. Sometimes these powers emerge from strict training, book learning, or perhaps natural ability. Some monks have used these abilities to brush away evil or gain the divine protection of the Buddha. The monks use the basic skills and esoteric knowledge of Buddhism for only one purpose: To seek the salvation of the common people.

BUDDHISM AND SHINTO

The Priesthood follows the core doctrines and practices of Shinto, but even most Shinto priests and agents would say that they believe in or follow the precepts of Buddhism. Shinto and Buddhism live side by side in every person with no conflict, perhaps because the differences in their outlooks and practices are complementary: Buddhism spreads among its followers and requires faith to practice, yet Shinto is a set of practices and knowledge which requires no devout believers. Shinto knowledge involves appeasing the gods and spirits and living in harmony with the land while being aware of the celestial order of things, and has no real drive to cure people from suffering or their everyday woes, other than purifying the land and praying for good weather for crops.

When Buddhism came to Tenra, the Priesthood (as the backbone of rule and religion in the land) carefully considered its ramifications before unilaterally approving it, adopting it as a state religion. People of Tenra believe in and respect nature spirits. They also acknowledge, venerate and appease their ancestor spirits, a common practice of Shinto. At the same time, they worship the Buddha, often praying for guidance in everyday matters, or praying for relief from ailments or troubles, a common practice of Buddhism.

The two concepts, which appear to be at a glance two religions, are actually one organized religion (Buddhism) and one ordered system of knowledge and beliefs about how nature and the heavens work (Shinto). The belief systems are not mutually exclusive, and almost all humans in Tenra respect and believe in both.

LIFE

In Buddhism, all living creatures are precious and sacred. Deeper consideration is given to creatures with a will and consciousness (humans, oni, and conscious ayakashi).

WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

This is certainly too huge and daunting a question to answer conclusively in a few sentences, but the basics of Buddhism on Tenra are easy to grasp. The basic tenets which Buddhist monks believe in are this: Buddhists believe that life means suffering; suffering is caused by craving; suffering can be ended; and that there are practices that you can do to help end suffering (called the Noble Eightfold Path). Buddhist monks live a simple life: They read scripture, work hard, take care of the community they live in, and use prayers to put restless spirits at ease. They also often work as healers and scribes, and help with the gathering and burning of the dead.

Everyday people know the basic precepts of Buddhism and claim it as their religion. However, most people in Tenra don't read scripture, pray hours a day, or really do anything out of the way of their daily routine. When a family member dies, they will go to the local temple. When they need spiritual help or advice, they will go visit the local temple. On certain festivals or holy days, they will go to the local temple. However, everyday people usually don't do anything out of their way to seek enlightenment or pursue a monk's path. Nor would they call each other out for "Un-Buddhist behavior." Simply being born and raised on Tenra makes one a believer in Buddhism, just as it makes one a follower of Shinto and ancestor veneration.

Just like every religion, there are multiple sects. While some people who follow one sect might think that other sects are wrong-headed or flawed, they would never really go to arms over differences in Buddhist beliefs. However, some rulers may adopt one sect as their domain or region's religion (usually because they have some sort of control over that local sect), and go out of their way to push away the other sects.

But in the end, Buddhism comes down to a simple set of beliefs about the way the world works, the reasons for suffering, and has several sects with their own take on how to best end suffering and save people.

BUDDHIST MONKS AND THE POPULACE

The world of Tenra runs on a four-tiered social hierarchy, just like feudal Japan: Noble Land-owning Warriors, then Farmers, then Artisans, and finally Merchants. However, Buddhist monks do not fit into that hierarchy; they live entirely outside of it.

For example, monks are allowed to move across Tenra freely, traveling anywhere they wish; common people are required to register for a travel pass to live in a new town, to travel from one kingdom to another, or to even travel within one kingdom. Most Buddhist monks can travel freely, much like the Shinto priests and shrine maidens of the Priesthood.

Since their calling is nothing less than the salvation of the people of Tenra, the common people view monks gratefully as spiritual custodians. The Phoenix sect has a great deal of power in the present world, and their political power is boosted by official recognition from the Priesthood. The monks of the Phoenix sect work at many temples in various places, including the head temple of the sect. One might think that monks spend all of their time in spiritual training, but the reality of the situation is that they tend to have a lot of things to do: They act as ambassadors, scribes, healers, educators, and indeed spend more time among the populace than one would think.

The Ebon Mountain and Bright Lotus sects don't usually have temples, nor do they have a lot of political or regional influence. Instead, they spend most of their time traveling. The Ebon Mountain monks spend much time alone in the mountains training themselves rigorously, and sometimes come down to live among or help people. On the other

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hand, the Bright Lotus monks travel from place to place trying to create relationships with the townspeople. They spread the word of their faith through lectures or preaching. The status of the Bright Lotus sect amongst the people is similar to that of traveling entertainers.

THE DIVINE POWER OF BUDDHA

“Divine Power” or “Buddhist Magic” are the names given to the miraculous or mystical acts that some Buddhist monks can perform. They are abilities given to people who fully devote themselves to Buddhism. Or maybe it would be better to say that the abilities should be given, because the fact of the matter is that not all Buddhist monks have these abilities. Most monks know what the Buddhist powers are, or how to theoretically attempt to use them. However, most of the powers are only able to be used or controlled by the rare individual who is gifted with those mystical powers. Not everyone can pray for divine protection and receive it.

This divine power is like magic in a way. Monks and believers can do many things with it, like sending the wandering souls of people who died suddenly to the afterlife, healing wounds, exorcising evil and so on. These effects are only possible because of the iron will and strong faith of the monk.

The powers themselves do not vary between sects, but their beliefs about how the powers emerge, or how they should be used, do vary in the hearts and minds of the monks. The Phoenix sect calls the monks who can call upon these divine powers practitioner-monks, and summons them all to the head temple for training and special assignments. When one considers the huge number of Buddhist monks in the land, there are not really that many who exhibit those mystical powers.

On the other hand, the Ebon Mountain sect has a surprising number of practitioner-monks. It is believed that this is because of the intense spiritual and physical training they do in isolation, and for the fact that they individually seek out enlightenment.

However, they don't use their powers as a sect in an organized manner like the Phoenix do, because the purpose of using the power is a personal matter to them.

The Bright Lotus sect also has special practitioner-monks, but since their sect adopts the thinking that only Buddha can save people in the present world, the powers and the monks that wield them are viewed as a burden or an eyesore to true believers of Bright Lotus beliefs.

THE PHOENIX SECT

THE LARGEST ORDER OF BUDDHISM

The Phoenix or *Hou-Oh* sect is the largest Buddhist sect in Tenra, with several million believers. Originally established in a country called Houga, their head temple was moved to the domain of Togo right before the Fall of Jinrai. This order not only has social and political power in territories all over Tenra, but they also have their own military defense force for protection. The Phoenix sect military is comparable in a size and strength to that of a regent of a domain.

The edicts of the Phoenix sect require vigorous practice of mind and body to achieve enlightenment, and that they use force only to help the suffering people of Tenra. Their main goal is to teach every human being Buddha nature through the study, practice, and belief of Buddhism in order to help the common person to achieve enlightenment and end suffering. However, to have the influence to meet this lofty goal, they require authority and influence in the real world as well, through political and social means. This is why Buddhism, particularly the Phoenix sect, attempts to establish their influence among the populace.

Doushin, the first high monk of Buddhism, chose to bridge a relationship between Buddhism and the Shinto Priesthood. This was done in order to spread the influence of Buddhism as an officially sanctioned religion, as well as to establish a good relationship with the absolute rulers of the land in

TENRA'S THREE GREAT BUDDHIST SECTS

Phoenix (Hou-Oh)

The Phoenix sect is the largest order of Buddhism on Tenra, as well as the only order of Buddhism approved by the Shinto Priesthood. Their goal is to create a perfect world and provide salvation to the people of the world through Buddhist law. They have a strong connection to the everyday world, and the head monk of the Phoenix sect has as much political power as the regent of a domain. However, within the Phoenix sect, there are inconsistencies in belief, as well as corruption.

Though their principal object of worship is the great Buddha (Dainichi Nyorai), they also revere guardian deities like Acala, Kannon (Guanyin), and the common bodhisattvas.

Ebon Mountain (Bokusen)

The monks of the Ebon Mountain order don't have temples, objects of worship or even doctrines. The monks train themselves in body and spirit in their search for enlightenment

The founding monk of this order was from the Phoenix sect, but he renounced everything in his search for enlightenment. For monks of the Ebon Mountain order, beliefs about the salvation of the mankind are the arrogant thoughts of sequestered monks. Everything that gets in the way of one's personal search for enlightenment should be denied.

Bright Lotus (Myouren)

The Bright Lotus sect is the newest order, and became the most popular of the three sects amongst the common people. They pray to the Siddhartha Gotama incarnation of the Buddha for temporal salvation, and pray to the Maitreya Buddha (the Buddha of what is to come) for salvation in the next life.

order to not be seen as a threat. The result was to tie their allegiance officially to the Great Shinto Priesthood, which at the time caused a bit of a stir amongst the leadership of the sect. However, as a result of doing so and being declared the official religion of the people of Tenra, the Phoenix sect was able to extend its influence and reach ten times further than where it had previously been in a mere ten years.

But the sudden expansion of the influence of Buddhism also led to events that threatened the unity of the sect as a whole. Local temples and monks far away from the capital started to interpret the script in different ways. This led to a foundation of differing lines of thought and belief which caused a fracturing of the main line of Buddhism, producing many small sects. Obtaining a certain level of authority also led to some monks becoming too haughty, filled with a sense of entitlement and power. This led to a fair amount of stagnation, which led to the first major large-scale split: The formation of the Ebon Mountain sect, by estranged monks who were upset with or felt betrayed by that stagnation.

In order to unify the quickly splintering main line of Buddhism during this colossal expansion, they founded a nation for themselves. The land of Houga was given by the Shinto Priesthood to Jinin, the third brother of the main temple of Buddhism. Jinin then gathered all of the head temples and monks to this new nation in order to have one central authority, and one voice, for the pure belief of Buddhism. This became the foundation of what is today called the Phoenix sect of Buddhism. The nation of Houga itself became the head temple of the Phoenix order.

Today, though, the land of Houga no longer exists. Houga, which used to be situated between the domains of Sunai and Jinrai, is now at the bottom of the huge sea which was born during the Fall of Jinrai: The Falling of the Phantom Star and the Bridge of Heaven—obliterating the Shinto Priesthood's home domain of Jinrai and the surrounding regions—caused Houga and other

BUDDHA NATURE

The Mahaparinirvana (The Great Complete Nirvana) Sutra teaches that all things have a quality known as “Buddha nature”, which is basically a kernel of the possibility of enlightenment. All things have the ability to be enlightened. The path to enlightenment is the study which Buddhism dedicates itself to.

THE PHOENIX TEMPLE OF SUZAKU MOUNTAIN

The head temple of the Phoenix sect, this temple is known fully as “The Phoenix Sect of Suzaku Mountain” (The Suzaku is a vermillion, celestial bird of ancient cosmology.) It was moved brick by brick to the country of Togo shortly before the Fall of Jinrai. It is a temple whose grounds are as large as a city, a single city which venerates the Great Buddha. Surrounding this temple are four sister cities where devout worshipers live. This collection of the head temple and the cities is often conventionally called “Fudaraku”, or “The Incorruptible City”.

Though the temple itself has been transplanted to Togo already, it seems that more time is needed to create a stable infrastructure. The first thing that they must do is construct a new pagoda, which will be the linchpin of spiritual focus for the temple.

domains to simply vanish off the face of Tenra. The Phoenix sect could very well have been doomed to annihilation if it weren't for the fateful premonitions of the head monk, Gamou Douan, the 28th Head Monk of the Phoenix sect. He had a harrowing vision that saved their order: He told his followers, “An unavoidable darkness comes here to Houga, a dark Shadow from which we cannot hide”, four months before the Fall of Jinrai.

He led his order, and most of the people in his domain who believed in his vision, to the domain

of Togo. In Togo he created a new head temple and had his monks settle in this new land, despite opposition from other more pragmatic-minded monks as well as the government of Togo. However, the Phoenix sect was saved by his predictive visions. The Fall of Jinrai destroyed Houga as completely as it shattered the government of their new domain of Togo. Master Douan took this opportunity to seize political power and establish the Phoenix sect as the leaders of the domain in order to put things right in the chaotic region. He changed the Japanese characters which make up the domain name of Togo from “Spark of Enlightenment” to “The Awakening in the East”. Currently, the head temple is still working to protect its new home domain, as well as deal with the confusing and politically unstable situation surrounding the split of the Shinto Priesthood into two courts.

OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED MONKS

The monks who are officially ordained by the Phoenix sect have a mark of proof of their allegiance to their sect and its laws: A small red soulgem, called The Jewel of Buddha by the monks, is embedded in their foreheads. Only monks who are trained and approved for qualification at local Buddhist temples are sent to the head temple in Togo (and only that temple) to be granted the Jewel of Buddha. In Togo, and throughout other temples which assist in the training of new monk candidates, the Phoenix sect has developed a great training organization for potential or studying monks. They are quickly and uniformly indoctrinated with the scriptures and studies of the Phoenix order, which allows for more unity within the sect, as well as assisting with preventing the rise of heresy or corruption within the sect.

THE PHOENIX SECT AND MARTIAL ORDER

The Phoenix sect also has a military branch within the domain of Togo, Buddhist soldiers who fight willingly for the defense of their religion. There are warrior-monk soldiers among these ranks, as well as onmyojutsu-using sorcerer-monks (also called

onmyo monks”) who are practiced with Taoist sorcery as well as Buddhist discipline. The Phoenix sect’s military force also has yoroi armours, each sporting a different name of the Buddha or a Buddhist concept or tradition. Although it is a purely defensive force, the army of the Phoenix sect’s war potential, when considering the morale of its conscripts, is greater than that of most regular domain regents.

The armies of the Phoenix sect fight primarily to protect the head temple. However, there are splinter groups—most of whom remain secret to most monks within the sect—which operate like elite special forces teams, given special missions that are entirely offall records. There is the mysterious Kuze Order, a group of monks and other unusual warriors who work closely with the Shinto Priesthood. When the Kuze Order takes on a task, others give them plenty of room, knowing that whatever they are up against, it’s powerful and dangerous.

Within the Phoenix sect, there is the secretive order known to very few called “The Hidden 28th Chamber of the Merciful Phoenix Sect”, or “The 28th Chamber” in short. The 28th Chamber is a totally underground force whose existence is even disavowed by the head monk of the sect. Unlike the Kuze Order, one rarely sees the 28th Chamber coming: They operate in the dark, and in total secrecy. By those that know of them, the 28th Chamber is anything from an offensive force against the enemies of the Phoenix sect, to a group of secret assassins who work within the sect to weed out evil and corruption. Since the polite fiction states that the purpose of the Phoenix sect is the salvation of the people and finding an end to suffering, The 28th Chamber should not even exist. Their existence can never be known outside of a select few higher-level monks within the order.

EBON MOUNTAIN SECT

THE ROAD TO ENLIGHTENMENT

The Ebon Mountain or *Bokusen* sect is in a way the most heterogeneous sect. Even though there are many monks who belong to this order, they don’t have a consolidated creed or code as a sect. The closest idea that there is to a creed within the order are the words of the monk Bokusen (whose name in fact means “Ebon Mountain”, from which this sect took its name), who founded the sect: “The road to attaining enlightenment is a deeply personal matter.”

Bokusen used to belong to the Phoenix sect, and was an up-and-coming monk who was even recommended for service to the high Phoenix abbot at one time. However, after suddenly attaining enlightenment, he came to the personal realization that the Phoenix order was decrepit and stagnating. He immediately turned his back on the Phoenix sect and set off to create a new order. To create this new order he began recruiting other disillusioned monks from within the Phoenix sect.

Bokusen declared that only through experience could people grow, and that a philosophy that was concentrated more on conjecture and ideas than the physical world was worthless in the face of experiencing life for oneself. He asked his followers, “Why is it up to us to seek the salvation of the people? Why should we seek salvation for them?” None of them could answer. He beat them with a stick, and asked, “Is Buddha really someone to be so highly revered?” In Bokusen’s view, even denying the origins or principles of Buddhism was not taboo. Casting aside all preconceptions or common knowledge and starting to learn from scratch was the idea behind Bokusen’s vision of Buddhism.

Bokusen’s personal revelation was a product of his sudden enlightenment, something that others couldn’t easily believe in without experiencing a revelation for themselves. Rather than tying themselves to following the words of Bokusen’s revelations slavishly, they instead followed his

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precept of denying everything, going as far to say that they should deny following in the footsteps of Bokusen himself. An order, or perhaps something better called “a collection of monks with similar beliefs”, was founded; one whose main goal was to attain personal enlightenment by experiencing life outside of the monastery.

Monks of the Ebon Mountain sect train themselves every day physically and spiritually, aiming to eventually achieve enlightenment. But, even the originator of the order said that the way of attaining enlightenment is not a single road; that there are different paths to personal enlightenment for each individual. He also said that there is a limit to how much one can teach to others through mere words alone, and that even if one attains enlightenment it is impossible to codify the path to this experience. Therefore, the Ebon Mountain sect approves any action as a means to attain enlightenment.

Even if a monk follows a path which is confusing or incomprehensible to another monk, their path should not be questioned by another. This monk's path, while differing from others', might lead to the enlightenment of that single monk. Of course, monks who fake their way to enlightenment or lie to themselves or others about the path they are choosing quickly reveal their true colors in the end. Eccentricities or odd lifestyles are not always proof of seeking to attain enlightenment.

For the Ebon Mountain order monks, even the breaking of core Buddhist rules is accepted in the personal search for enlightenment. The most important rules in most sects of Buddhism are called the Five Commandments:

- One must not destroy life, or kill living things without meaning.
- One must not lie or speak untruthfully.
- One must not engage in lewdness or bawdy behavior.
- One must not drink alcohol.
- One must not steal.

The monks of the Phoenix order try to obey these precepts blindly, but the Ebon Mountain sect denies even these five commandments as inviolate. On the contrary, there are quite a few monks who either try to break these commandments or do so inadvertently on their road to enlightenment. They say even the originator monk Bokusen himself took a wife and was a heavy drinker.

Having no core rules also means that the Ebon Mountain order has no discrimination or distinction between monks. Differences of gender, and even difference of species, are considered a personal matter. Therefore, this order has not only many female monks, but also has oni and half-oni monks as well.

Most members of the Ebon Mountain sect don't affiliate with temples. Instead, they prefer to train themselves in the wild. Quite a few monks even die during their natural training. However, this tendency to train in the wild is an influence of the original monk Bokusen himself, who through training in the wilds, developed a new form of martial arts and a deeper state of enlightenment. Bokusen also disliked Buddhist statues and ornamentation. For him, they are simple statues carved from wood, not incarnations of the Buddha himself. He didn't believe the Buddha would dwell in something made by human hand.

Bokusen said that the nature of the Buddha can be seen in the natural world: The radiance of the sun, the grandeur of the mountains and the sound of streams and rivers. Therefore, most of the members of the Ebon Mountain order consider the mountains to be where the Buddha and Bodhisattvas live, and the sun the Buddhist incarnation of Mahavairocana (Dainichi Nyorai) Himself. The monks of the Ebon Mountain sect venerate Buddha through the natural world.

THE FIST OF ACALA THE IMMOVABLE

Tenra's Ultimate Killing Technique

The Fist of Acala, known in its long form as “The Fist of Acala, the Immovable Lord of Light”, is the

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strongest martial art in Tenra.

The bodies of the martial artists are trained thoroughly, and their fists become dreadful weapons as powerful and deadly as swords or spears.

The founder of the First of Acala was Bokusen the Ebon Mountain, the originator of the Ebon Mountain sect of Buddhism. It is said that he met with the incarnation of Acala the Immovable while doing penance in the mountains and was instructed by this bodhisattva in the essential points of the art. Monks of the Ebon Mountain sect often learn the Fist of Acala, not to blindly follow in the footsteps of the originator of the order, but because they believe that training their body as well as their spirit is one of the ways to enlightenment. Bokusen himself said, "A sound soul will simply not lodge itself in an unsound body." For this reason, many people consider "Ebon Mountain monk" to be synonymous with "martial artist."

The truly important part to this technique is the severe physical training that goes with learning it. In the process, the monk will learn the most advanced killing art on Tenra. However, it is an enigma for Buddhist monks—who are supposed to save people—to learn a martial art that teaches effective killing techniques. According to Bokusen, the Fist of Acala is like a sword that remains perpetually sheathed. Furthermore, the core Buddhist precept of not killing is meaningless to follow if one is not able to kill to begin with. This precept takes on true meaning for the first time, say members of the Ebon Mountain, when one actually has the power to kill, and kill easily at that.

In truth, the Fist of Acala is a defensive martial art. All the forms start in techniques which teach one how to elude enemy attacks. From there, powerful counterattacks are taught. In this way, the essence of the Fist of Acala is the way of taking an enemy's attacks and turning their momentum against them. One also keeps the enemy within their own killing zone while providing no opportunity for the enemy to slip into their defenses. A martial artist of the Fist of Acala will let their enemies attack first, reading

their attack, and then intercept with killing force at the exact moment the enemy commits their strike. That is the core of the martial art.

It may sound simple, but in actuality, it is extremely difficult. Above all else, you have to encourage your enemies to attack you first and even welcome their incoming attacks. It requires indispensable flexibility and speed to elude an enemy's attack, and a body tempered like steel to make your own attack into a one-strike kill.

Training for the Fist of Acala the Immovable is performed in the wild fields and mountains, never in a martial arts dojo. Again, this is not to follow in the footsteps of their originator monk Bokusen, but rather because practitioners realize that it is impossible to train the body for actual physical combat on a spotless wooden floor or clean tatami mats. Furthermore, the techniques of this martial art are not approved by the Phoenix order (they are even considered to be a heresy), and the Ebon Mountain sect do not have monasteries of their own, so in reality there are no dojos to teach the art anyway. The instruction of all essential points of the martial art are taught directly by practitioner to disciples, in whatever field, mountain or river the instructor happens to be teaching from at that time.

The Fist of Acala the Immovable is a martial art created by a monk in training, but in truth, it has no spiritual precepts or hidden meanings; it is a pure killing technique. This martial art is a large part of the reason that the Ebon Mountain sect is treated as heretical. It is hard for people to accept the fact of peaceful monks learning and training in a killing art. However, please remember that not all Ebon Mountain monks are martial artists. There are quite a few monks of that sect who don't believe they need the power to kill people to find their own enlightenment.

Although there is no moral code to the Fist of Acala, it has a set of common practices, or knowledge, that monks who learn the art take to heart when practicing the art. They are:

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- One: Never initiate an attack.
- Two: Do not use the techniques recklessly.
- Three: After that, anything goes.

These rules are too simple to call “knowledge”. Some uncouth people say that these rules are nothing but a joke that Bokusen issued randomly when questioned about the “rules” of the Fist of Acala. After all, it’s up to the monk to decide how to use their learned techniques: Enlightenment is a personal path.

The 108 Factions of the Lords of Light

Since the techniques of the martial arts are passed down from person to person within the Ebon Mountain sect and have no formalization or school presence, the original form of the Fist of Acala the Immovable Lord of Light has started to split into many different factions and practices. Since most of the sects have the words “Lord of Light” or “Radiant King” in their full name (being named after the “Radiant Kings”, the spiritual guardians of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas within the traditional Buddhist cosmology), and since there are so many of these factions, monks have started to call this diaspora of techniques “The 108 Factions of the Lords of Light”. Of course, it doesn’t mean that there are actually 108 such formal factions or sects; it is a poetic exaggeration. The number 108 comes from the fact that there are 108 sins or “defilements” in the Buddhist tradition.

Some representative factions of martial arts are the *Way of Kundali*, where its users try to boost offensive abilities to their utmost limits; or the *Art of Mahamayuri*, whose users combine quick attacks after fleet-footed leaping techniques. There are some sects which have become far different from the originating Fist of Acala art. *The Fist of Merciful Kannon the Thousand-Armed* is the most well known art which has reinvented itself into its own complete style. Even within the Fist of Merciful Kannon there are sub-sects as well. When classifying sects, they are commonly divided into the “Lord of Light” styles and the “Kannon” styles.

The main essence of the Fist of Merciful Kannon is super-fast strikes. It is a style of attacking enemies before they move. This style is named after Merciful Kannon the Thousand-Armed, because it is often impossible to actually see the hands moving when they strike. Practitioners, when in the middle of their quick series of strikes, appear as if they have many hands (as Kannon has one thousand arms, appointed to her to help the many.)

There are some Kannon factions that emulate the various manifestations of Kannon, and some of them primarily focus on weapon use over bare physical contact. The techniques of the Fist of Merciful Kannon are more aggressive than the Fist of Acala, and many of the people trained in this splinter art are not Buddhist monks. Despite the name “Merciful Kannon”, the practitioners are not always merciful. Unfortunately, many Kannon artists end up challenging Acala artists to duels to prove the strength of their art and themselves. This often leads to a life or death struggle between the two artists, because of the excellence and power of the technique on both sides.

The two largest martial arts factions are the ones based on the Fist of Acala the Immovable Lord of Light and the ones based on the Fist of Merciful Kannon the Thousand-Armed. However, this doesn’t mean that there are no other martial arts: There are some arts which have no roots in either faction: for example, Celestial Form Kung Fu. Like its name suggests, the essence of Celestial Form Kung Fu is creating explosive one-hit kill techniques through the support of emulating the power and grace of the stars in the night sky.

THE BRIGHT LOTUS SECT

TRUE SALVATION THROUGH THE BRIGHT LOTUS MANTRA

The Bright Lotus or *Myouren* sect also divided itself from the Phoenix sect. However, while Bokusen left the temple to found the Ebon Mountain sect,

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the Bright Lotus sect is simply a clique within the Phoenix sect which happens to consider the Bright Lotus Scriptures to be very important. The originator of the scripture, named Myouren the Bright Lotus, was until his death a Phoenix sect monk. It was ten years after his death that the Bright Lotus sect established itself as an official order of Buddhism.

It is said that Myouren was a very gentle person who gave more attention to helping people around him than to his own enlightenment, and because of this, he was loved by many of his pupils. They respected Myouren not only because of his personality, but because of the kind of Buddhism that he was seeking. He spent most of his life following the clearest, most base precept of Buddhism: Helping other people. He said to his followers, "Buddhist law has at its core but one thing to offer: It must lead to the salvation of the people, and that is all." Myouren was a leader of a study group similar to a small sect before he died. Many monks sought out his lectures, and although he gained a lot of followers and peers, he never tried to use that gain for social or political power within the Phoenix sect. He was, at his core, a person absolutely uninterested in worldly affairs of power and prestige.

The Bright Lotus scripture was compiled by Myouren, and eventually completed by his pupils who took over his work upon his death. At that time, the Bright Lotus scripture was the newest and simplest to understand. The essence of the salvation of the people was tied to six simple words: "Na-Mu-Myo-Ren-Go-Hou", or "Blessed Be the Bright Lotus, Amen." People would be saved by chanting this mantra over and over again. Because of this simple and reassuring idea, Myouren's scriptures became extremely popular among monks and townspeople. This momentum ended up giving birth to the foundation of the Bright Lotus school within the Phoenix Buddhist order.

The Phoenix sect officials were fine with the Myouren followers, until a notion that *only* the Bright Lotus scriptures could bring salvation started to become popular. From that point on, the Bright

Lotus followers were seen as a problem that needed to be addressed. Right around that time, an incident occurred where a number of monks of the Bright Lotus school occupied a temple and kept others out. They called themselves the Bright Lotus sect and declared independence from the Phoenix sect. Until they were recognized, they would not leave the temple.

The high monk of the Phoenix sect took their actions seriously, and believed that their order represented a heretical (and possibly evil) cult, purposefully misreading scripture for some mysterious gain. They sent monk-soldiers in to the temple to deal with the issue, and in secret mobilized the Hidden 28th Chamber (an elite and secret team of assassins and agents loyal to the highest members of the Phoenix order) against them. As a result, many of the so-called Bright Lotus sect were executed, and their move for independence ended up a bloody disaster.

Even though the Bright Lotus movement appeared to have died in the temple raid, the precepts of Myouren were not destroyed. A few Bright Lotus monks who survived the massacre played a key role in spreading the movement again. They worked with and helped the townspeople in several large towns, and with their help they spread the Bright Lotus scriptures again. This grassroots movement, while it gained momentum slowly, over time gained enough popularity and following to take its place as one of the three largest sects of Buddhism in Tenra. They do not have political power as an organization as the Phoenix sect does, but they have strength in the numbers of the commoners who believe in them, who number too large to count accurately.

Most Bright Lotus monks try to propagate Myouren's scripture by giving people lectures in town during their journeys. Some of them are *biwa* monks (a monk who is skilled with playing the *biwa*, a Japanese-style lute). These monks, being half monk and half traveling storyteller, teach the way to salvation in an entertaining, and even humorous performance. By becoming a popular grassroots religion, it is said that this sect lives the closest to

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the people: They boast the largest population of common believers. The mantra “Na-Mu-Myo-Ren-Go-Hou”, and the idea of salvation through repeating this chant, is known by many commoners in towns and cities. It has become a great and simple way to help propagate the scripture.

Recently, the Phoenix high monk Gamou Douan admitted that what their order did to the Bright Lotus followers was reckless and wrong and submitted an official apology. He also admitted to have at one time read and even hand-copied the scriptures written by the monk Myouren himself, which had been later sealed away as prohibited literature. The Phoenix sect has gone further to try to ensure that no further harm comes from inter-sect differences and officially accepted the Bright Lotus sect as brothers.

However, not all is peaceful in the Bright Lotus sect: They are currently facing a large problem. Bright Lotus scriptures tell the people to pray to Buddha for salvation in this world, and on the other hand it tells people to pray to Amitabha (an incarnation of the Buddha) for peace after death. On top of that, it is said that if one believes in the simple doctrine of the Bright Lotus, and prays to Buddha and Amitabha, that the bodhisattvas will bring them salvation and good fortune in the next life. In other words, even if they can't find salvation in this world, through their belief, it is possible to find salvation in the next world.

In this way, Bright Lotus believers who despair in this life, and who cannot hope to find salvation, will often act recklessly, thinking that they will be saved in the next life. They will often start riots if they are unjustly treated, or harshly worked. This doesn't mean that the Bright Lotus sect condones their actions or has something to do with these riots, but the regents of various domains have come to see the Bright Lotus belief as a threat to their absolute control of the lower classes. As a result, many regents suppress the religion or forbid it from their kingdom.

In the country of Kanuma in the Iron Ridge region, there are a large number of Bright Lotus believers gathering. They have found a strong base in that volatile environment, and as a group are skirmishing with local regents. These are common people, not soldiers led by generals. However, one cannot make light of the potential of revolution by people who aren't afraid to die. Though the monks of the Bright Lotus sect are trying to stop believers from plunging towards destruction, it's becoming more and more difficult. The religion of the Bright Lotus sect has struck a chord with many of the oppressed, and has started a movement which not even the monks of that order can control. A buildup of events is occurring in Kanuma, and it is only a matter of time before something big happens.

THE TRUTH THE MAKUU NINDO REVOLT

Makuu Nindo was the chief monk of the Enmu-ji Temple on Mount Asute in Kikoku, and unlike most of the other Ebon Mountain monks of his order, he actually oversaw a temple. Later, he started an insurrection in Kikoku, freeing the land and making it a nation for the oni people. Today, there is not a single person in Tenra who does not know his name. He is currently the regent of the oni nation of Kikoku in Ki-shu. He devotes his life to helping the oni and humans under his care. He is also of the oni people, the native guardians of the land of Tenra.

The lot of the oni people in Kikoku was unbearable. This land, which was traditionally rich in oni tribes and home to several oni artifacts and sacred places, was populated by humans led by regents who actively sought their murder. Even more so than other nations—who kill the oni when it seems convenient, or who chase off the oni if the common people fear them—the regent and lords of Kikoku wanted nothing less than the total annihilation of the oni.

The idea of establishing a domain specifically for the oni was simply a magnificent dream which

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nobody had ever thought about fulfilling. The oni themselves are not a race who prefer forming large orders or living together in huge groups: Oni tribes are rather small, and loosely organized. And in the region of Ki-shu, where oni hunting was particularly rampant, the local oni did little to resist. No one could have imagined the energy or power required to establish a country in these conditions where both oni and humans could live together.

Makuu Nindo contacted the oni god *Dii-Go*, known as The Speaker of the Earth. They say that Dii-Go whispered a truth, a deep secret, to Makuu. Makuu never revealed this secret to anyone, including his own son Silver Edge. Makuu Nindo declared then and there that revolution had come, and that it was time to take back Kikoku for the oni people. Dii-Go then helped Makuu summon many oni people to one place by sending the oni people visions and prophecies or contacting them directly through a dreamtime connected to the beating of the oni heart. Through the help of Dii-Go's incarnation, a person known only as the *Sleeping Girl*, Makuu was able to relay messages to all of the oni people through the voice of Dii-Go. Makuu was able to communicate with and coordinate all of the oni forces when the revolt in Kikoku started in earnest.

It was Dii-Go's power which halted the movement of the magical gossamer-like power of *sha* all over Tenra. Through Dii-Go, the oni people created a kind of epic-scale psychic barrier with their innate powers. This is the truth behind the events of the Makuu-Nindo revolt. As a result, all of the yoroi armours and kongohki simply stopped working, as if they were switched off. Samurai and shinobi lost their powers as well, and onmyoji sorcerers could no longer summon shiki spirits for aid. Interestingly enough, the barrier was not local to the battlefields on the lands and skies around Ki-shu: What happened in that region spread across all of Tenra. No one really knows if that was Makuu Nindo's intention or not.

However, it was not the end of the war, and regents of the local domains were not the only enemies the Makuu army had.

The Shinto Priesthood never approved of the existence of a domain ruled by oni, so they officially provided prototype kimen armours to area lords, mechanical mecha which did not require sha energy to function. The Priesthood certainly performed political intervention against the revolution from the shadows as well, calling in favors from other area lords and regents to aid in the struggle. In the end, the Priesthood ended up even sending some of their floating battleships to join the Kikoku forces in the war. The Priesthood had never directly intervened in any wars until that day, and so their actions were extremely unusual and even darkly foreboding.

Because of their intervention, however, the worst result for the Priesthood occurred: Makuu's forces infiltrated and took control of one of their floating battleships, which quickly turned the tables of the war. The revolt quickly ended, and the first country of the oni had finally been established. It became the only domain on the planet which the Priesthood could not control.

The name Makuu Nindo is synonymous with hope for the oni people. The example of Kikoku became a harrowing lesson for the Priesthood, and a defeat which taught the people of Tenra that the control of the Priesthood could in fact be resisted.

The dispute between Makuu and the Priesthood is far from over. In fact, it is moving on to a new stage. Rumors have crept up reporting that Makuu was somehow involved in the collapse of the Bridge of Heaven and the Fall of the Phantom Star. Another rumor is that the Priesthood has recently found the resting place of the physical manifestation of the oni god Dii-Go, deep under the earth.

POWER THAT CONCEALS WEAKNESS

NEW TECHNOLOGY, KIJIN

A *kijin* (literally “Machine Person”) is one who has replaced some or most of their natural body with technological marvels called mechanica. The birth of this technology was a wonderful boon. Just think of it: In this war-torn world of Tenra soldiers often lose body parts in battle, but with this technology lost arms, legs, and eyes can be replaced. There are those who would become samurai but cannot for various reasons, and the path of the kijin represents another path to a similar level of power.

The arrival of the kijin on Tenra has radically changed how wars are fought. This is mainly due to their sheer numbers; virtually anyone can become a kijin and strive to become more than human. Every feudal lord has since made them a part of their armies.

Of course, there is a cost. Because the process is low, it was difficult to recognize at first.

The price is one’s soul.

Kijin slowly lose their flesh and blood, their human hearts replaced by hearts of steel.

BIRTH OF THE KIJIN

Kijin are not a new development. Unlike other advances like the samurai or kongohki, they were not an instant success, the outstanding result of some genius sorcerer’s experiments. The success rate of the kijin conversion process was historically extremely low, so it was rarely performed by anyone other than members of the Priesthood. When the Priesthood split into two courts, this technology led

to a schism. Because of the liberal policies of Northern Court regarding giving cheap technology away to their vassal states, the necessary knowledge of sterilization, anesthesia, and human anatomy were applied to the conversion process.

In the country of Ouga, the onmyouji training institute called the Furaei Institute began the experiments that led to this technology. These were not originally intended to produce kijin so much as to create human beings who could mimic the supernatural abilities of the native *oni* people. The technologies discovered through this line of research unexpectedly led to the means to graft mechanica onto human bodies, thus establishing the foundations of kijin technology.

It is true that kijin lack the capabilities of a samurai. However, the fact that this technology allows the existing rare yoroi armours to be repurposed for better use, the additional fact that it does not require expensive heart engines, and the possibilities for its application to injured soldiers, all drew the interest of the nobility.

Now that kijin technology has been standardized and documented in the Northern Court’s government policy edict, The Laws for Machine Enhancement Surgery, they have proliferated at lightning speed.

Everything is proceeding as the Priesthood planned...

KIJIN CONVERSION

Typically, kijin conversion is primarily aimed at replacing limbs and the head’s sensory organs. The artificial parts are attached to the end of a missing body part, with ki-conducting fibers joining them to the subject’s nervous system. Sometimes, other organs are removed or replaced as well.

Although the success rate is now very high, the surgery necessary for kijin conversion is not a simple matter. Because countless nerve fibers must be attached one by one, this procedure requires a great deal of skill.

While the causes are not yet understood, many kijin are still troubled by pain or itching in their mechanica parts.

As complicated as it is, replacing limbs is a simple matter compared to dealing with the torso. Because it contains the heart, spine, and other vitally important parts, there are limits to how much subcutaneous mechanica can be implanted. Most other mechanica are attached to the outside of the body. Artificial organs and such are being researched, but their realization is some ways off, and total replacement of internal organs with mechanica is perhaps something that should wait a while.

However, once surgery is carried out, only mechanica can be attached to the point of contact. Even if the mechanica is damaged or broken beyond repair, replacement is the best option. Mechanica and their contact points are now standardized, making them easy to exchange or swap out if proper adjustments are made.

KIJIN IN BATTLE

In battle, kijin are very useful for a variety of situations. They have excellent mobility, making a kijin squad equivalent to an armour in terms of combat ability. Those with integrated weapons can use them with exceptional skill, making them many times more effective than a common foot soldier. Also, because they can use a variety of special equipment like machine guns or enhanced senses, many countries employ specialized kijin units.

Presently, kijin units are kept separate from conventional infantry, but as more and more countries employ them in greater numbers, they are ceasing to be an exception to the rule. In a given conflict the number of potential new kijin usually exceeds the number of kijin lost. While there are volunteers, the majority of soldiers who lose limbs in battle undergo surgery to become kijin: The government pays for the surgery, and if they survive the war, the patient can resume a somewhat normal life at home. Needless to say, this means that every

conflict leads to a swelling of the kijin's ranks. This is sometimes done against the subject's will, but given that this is usually performed on a soldier who would have died otherwise, it's difficult to criticize this practice.

However, kijin are ultimately created for the battlefield, and that is the only place where they truly belong, both physically and spiritually. Although it has been known for some time, it bears repeating that a kijin's psychological vitality and empathy, his ability to show concern for others, will usually decline over time. There are also those who readily commit atrocities, or who otherwise show a lack of humanity. Ultimately, they become machines of war in spirit as well as body. The degree to which this happens depends on how much of the body is replaced with mechanica.

Those who do leave home as a human and return from war as a kijin with extensive body replacements often cannot bear to go back to their families. The person who left to fight a war simply isn't there anymore. A kijin with nothing to come home to are quick to return to the battlefield, thinking it better not to be near their families and their former lives. Doing so, however, means being in more battles, and ultimately having more body parts replaced with mechanica. Rage and sadness alike are ultimately forgotten and the kijin finally arrives at his death. Perhaps they are happy to do so. Those who are so far gone that they can no longer embrace their humanity can at least be destroyed on the battlefield.

KIJIN UNITS

Kijin military units are used in a variety of ways. There are scouts that use enhanced eyes to search for the enemy, and assault teams with steel armor and integrated weapons. There are kijin with limited flight capabilities that take to the skies, and kijin with breathing apparatuses that allow for naval operations. It is well known that special naval kijin are employed for battles taking place in coastal regions or lakes.

Rather than using them for general military operations, the new trend is to arrange kijin into more specialized units according to their specialized capabilities.

The rulers of Tenra are hiding this inconvenient truth. It is no longer practical to attempt to conduct wars without kijin. They have become necessary to damage the enemy's armies, and having soldiers refuse the conversion would be troublesome to say the least.

KONGOHKI

BIRTH OF THE KONGOHKI

At some point, someone wondered what fantastic weapons they might be able to create if yoroi armours could be made smaller and more maneuverable. However, there was always one major obstacle to this miniaturization process: namely, the need to fit a human being inside. The solution was to forego a pilot entirely, and instead install a soul mirror with a soul trapped inside a meikyo device.

They were first created centuries ago, and dubbed kongohki, a variation of the phrase “The Unbreakable Ones” or “Machine of Vajra”. Their strength was too terrible for any to stand in their way, and they spread fear across countless kingdoms.

That is how the kongohki were born.

Kongohki technology uses onmyoji sorcery to bind a soul in place. The body is created in much the same manner as a yoroi armour, but the mind controlling it is encased in a meikyo soul mirror. This meikyo contains the soul of a person who died with a great deal of karma (and who became a lost soul, or asura). The more karma they carry, the more powerful the kongohki becomes.

Because of their lightweight construction and speed, kongohki can use an ability called “Overdrive” in order to move so fast that the human eye can barely follow. Also, being animated by souls whose memories have been erased or sealed away, they obey their master’s orders absolutely, like well-trained dogs.

These are the Kongohki, Tenra’s peerless killing machines, demons made of steel.

THOSE WITH DEEP KARMA

ASURAS: THE LOST SOULS

Souls that carry deep karma cannot pass through a meikyo, and get locked out. Kongohki are created using this property in reverse, trapping these souls in place inside the meikyo. The lost souls of people who died with a huge amount of karma, known to the populace as monsters called asuras or “lost souls”, are compressed and sealed away by a sutra-chanting Buddhist monk. Once called into the depths of a meikyo mirror, the souls are expanded again and trapped within the mirror, unable to leave. While compressed and sealed, the lost souls are purified, erased, and rendered unable to escape.

One portion is not purified, and it is this part that remains sealed: the lost soul’s memories. The seal that holds an asura soul in place also seals away the memories of its former life. If that strong barrier is breached, all that karma and memories from the former life come rushing back. When the Buddhist monks have done their work well, the kongohki becomes a faithful servant and will follow all orders from its master. However, this memory suppression technique is not yet perfected, and there is a constant risk of instability. Should the memory seal come undone, the kongohki will regain the memories of its former life. A kongohki that remembers its existence as an asura is potentially a serious danger. As suppressing those memories a second time is very difficult, such kongohki are usually destroyed. That, of course, assumes that a rampaging kongohki can be stopped.

Incidentally, many of those who perform the rituals necessary to seal souls in meikyo to create kongohki are not legitimate monks. The majority of Buddhist monks of all orders believe that it is improper to deliberately force a soul to stay within the transient world when it should move on to the afterlife.

KONGOHKI

KIMEN-STYLE KONGOHKI

While the development (thanks to the aid of the Northern Court of the Priesthood) of the cheaper production model meikyo called kimenkyo was all but inevitable, it had a huge impact on the kongohki. Those kongohki with kimenkyo are designated kimen kongohki. While they are basically inferior to kongohki with a standard soul-mirror meikyo, they nonetheless have the same powerful Overdrive ability, and are suitable for mass-production and employment in war. They have since had a considerable impact on how wars are fought on Tenra.

The production process for kimen-style kongohki is the same as for a normal kongohki, except that the meikyo installed in the body is replaced with a mechanica mirror, the kimenkyo. The lost soul contained within a kimenkyo is actually no different from that held in a meikyo, and while kimenkyo are inferior in some ways, the mirror's ability to hold the soul in place is unchanged.

As they are relatively easy to mass-produce, many have been researching the possibilities afforded by employing kimen-style kongohki as weapons. One notable example is interchangeable mechanica, allowing the equipment attached to the arms and legs to be swapped for different types of missions. Naturally, this can include equipment to allow movement in the air or underwater.

RAMPAGE

Should the seal that suppresses a Kongohki's memories fail for some reason, the soul within is initially thrown into confusion. From there it will gradually begin to understand its situation: The fact that it is dead, that it was once human, and how not too long before death it became an asura. Furthermore, it will remember how it was forcibly "reincarnated" as a kongohki and used as a puppet for destruction and slaughter.

Most souls cannot bear the weight of this terrible reality, and lash out at the world around them,

becoming asura once again. These rampages are a way for the kongohki to take revenge upon those who stole their surcease, who took death itself away from them.

However, there are also those who doggedly pursue their orders of their own volition. These are strong souls that can look upon their previous lives as lost souls and reflect on or even sublimate them, getting over their previous sins and hardships. Such souls are truly reborn as self-aware kongohki, and might even be able to make use of this new existence as a second lease on life.

TYPES OF KONGOHKI

The steel bodies of kongohki are usually humanoid, as this is the optimum form for containing a human soul. However, there are kongohki that deviate from the human form to allow for greater power. There are those with additional limbs for extra mobility, or based on the shapes of animals, as well as more radical changes to the basic form for different types of warfare. These changes to the kongohki's form must be done during construction, and cannot be changed afterwards. A kongohki with a fish-like lower body intended for aquatic operations would have to remain that way from the day it was created until it was destroyed.

However, recent technological developments have allowed for kongohki with interchangeable parts that can be quickly swapped out. This is one of the key advantages of the kimen-style kongohki. In order to facilitate their mass-production, kimen kongohki are designed as a core unit to which various interchangeable parts are attached. This in turn helped provide the basis for Kijin technology. These killing machines—adaptable for virtually any type of mission—have been described by a master tactician and poet in a very short but succinct verse: "Tenra's Ultimate Power, Tenra's Ultimate Evil".

Kongohki tend to be divided into those with and without interchangeable parts. Those without tend to be fewer in number, but they nonetheless have many merits and are still constructed using newer technologies.

KONGOHKI

Aside from the physical body, a kongohki's capabilities are in part determined by the nature of its meikyo and the soul contained within. While the process of sealing a soul within a meikyo erases its memories, there are nonetheless those memories so deeply ingrained that they're very difficult to fully erase. The result is that some traits from the soul's former life will inevitably surface. They might remember sword forms learned in their former life, or retain a habit of compulsive stealing.

The soul of a swordsman whose pursuit of his art led him to become an asura can make for a powerful kongohki, and the soul of an onmyoji can be used to create a kongohki that can use onmyojutsu. Some have attempted to use this to their advantage in creating more powerful kongohki, but it presents many dangers. It's always best to avoid creating kongohki that will regain the memories of their former lives. Furthermore, the memory seal has to be designed to avoid causing the soul to forget all of the memories of its former life, leaving just enough memory without allowing it to become a lost soul. Clearly, this is an exceedingly difficult task.

Still, if it succeeds, the result is an extremely powerful machine. It has a kongohki's Overdrive ability and a tireless metal body. There are also kongohki designed to operate in extreme conditions indefinitely, or utilize bodies far larger than any human.

HEAVY ASSAULT UNITS: KONGOHKI EVOLVED

Heavy Assault Units are kongohki equipped with multiple meikyo mirrors. Kongohki can already be massive, with armaments to match, and this development allows them to become even more fearsome weapons. What's astonishing is that while they can reach the size of a mid-sized yoroi armour—even when they are loaded with so many weapons as to resemble a porcupine—they retain the kongohki's characteristic mobility. They are fearsome weapons indeed.

Similar to the larger armours, two (or sometimes more) primary souls control the body in tandem, typically dividing combat between close and long range. Other souls not used to command the overall unit will have had their memories completely sealed when they are bound, and have no self-consciousness at all. They can give simple responses, but their mental facilities are otherwise nonexistent.

There is one important drawback that has severely limited the number of countries that have successfully used heavy assault units in actual combat. The risk of the asura soul becoming unsealed and going on a rampage is far higher than with a normal kongohki. When several meikyo soul mirrors are placed so close together, they begin to interfere with each other and cause an accumulation of karma that accelerates their return to being lost souls.

Although there are many rumors of experiments with heavy assault unit kongohki, the very fact that they are difficult to create and control makes them unlikely to be seen on an actual battlefield.

NINJA AND SHINOBI

Those known as *ninja* are paragons who have trained their bodies with a unique martial art, and who have become masters excelling in the art of disguise, poisons, and medicine. Additionally, what separates them more from normal people than anything is the existence of their secret art of ninjutsu. They act as spies and intelligence-gathers in times of peace; and as scouts, messengers and assassins of people of import in times of war. The value of the versatile ninja is quite high. Thus, there is not a single country in Tenra which does not employ the use of their talents.

The groups that lead the ninja are called “ninja armies” or “ninja clans”. However, they are not groups in the sense of an official gathering of ninja, or a group that one joins in adulthood. Rather, it is an army, family or order that gives birth to new ninja, crafting them as they emerge into the world. Ninja are, from the time they are born, a member of a ninja clan: They are raised to adulthood in the strictest, most spartan training on Tenra. A ninja clan is both an organization which leads as well as one which creates and raises ninja. The laws of the ninja clan are absolute, and those who go against them are given a merciless death. All of the laws of the clan exist in order to create an organization that is completely unified.

For all their power, very few historical records exist on the founding of the original ninja or ninja clans. All that is known about the way in which the ninja came about is the name Makabe Genyuusai, the founder of ninjutsu. All other official documents and historical materials are gone: Not even a single page remains. It is still not even known whether the ninja existed first and created the first ninja clan armies, or if it was the ninja clan which formed first and gave birth to the ninja. It is said that ninja were given birth by Makabe, who was either a heretic onmyoji or an ascetic hermit: There exists no proof either way. The ninja, who live under a perpetual shroud of darkness, were also born from that

darkness. In an instant the ninja appeared, and in that same instant, they became a necessary force in the world.

A LIFE IN THE DARKNESS

It first needs to be said that the shinobi are little more than a tool, like a hammer or a scythe. They are employed by those with power, and are given responsibilities that cover a wide gamut of situations.

In battle they are appointed as scouts or messengers, while in times of peace they serve various functions such as spies or information gatherers. The defining characteristics of the ninja are their powers of secrecy and mobility, and it is to that sort of activity to which they are most suited.

The regents and lords of the land almost always possess at least one ninja clan in their service. If that's not the case, they will often hire 50 to 100 full-time ninja from a nearby trustworthy ninja clan. This is because the great power of the ninja is in their movements as a group. Additionally, because the number of jobs that are given to the ninja is so great, it is not an exaggeration to say that the number of ninja in any given country is always insufficient to the needs of those that would employ them. Nonetheless, their duties are often incredibly straightforward: Work from the shadows. They do not exist by being known for their accomplishments and achievements. Nothing they ever do will be recorded, nor will information about their achievements find its way outside of their shadowy world. While the ninja are a necessary force, their very existence must be denied and hidden.

What about the shinobi, though? Are they themselves comfortable with such an existence? Can they live in a world where their existence is cast away like the ashes from the burning of secret documents, an existence where they are never praised or extolled for their achievements? Do they ever want to use their impressive power to work towards their own personal goals?

NINJA VS SHINOBI

The terms are interchangeable when outsiders refer to the hidden assassins of Tenra, and are indeed used interchangeably in this text. Lords tend to use the word “shinobi” more often than “ninja”, as there is a nuance of glamour and mysteriousness in the term.

However, within the ranks of the shinobi, there is a clear difference: Apprentices and younger members of the clan are called “ninja”, and only the higher ranking members of the clan who employ the soulgem surgery known as the Dark Arts to fuel their powers are referred to as “shinobi”. Sometimes, depending on the clan, they are further called “elite shinobi”, “true shinobi” or “dark shinobi”

The answer to the former two questions is “yes”, while the latter is “no”. This is because the shinobi, as stated earlier, are nothing more than tools. It is something that even the ninja themselves realize. However, this very question is not something that they can comprehend. That is to say that, while they can think of themselves as the tool of another, they do not understand why that kind of thinking might be mistaken. They have been raised by their clan from birth, training together to become living weapons. There are no chances for them to individually doubt—or even reflect deeply on—their existence as simple tools. Therefore, they have no concept of the word freedom, and it does not even occur to them that there is such a concept.

For a tool, there is no need to see that which does not concern it. Mouths that voice opinions are nothing more than a hindrance or a bother. Ears that hear voices of those begging for mercy are a luxury that the ninja cannot afford. This says nothing of a mind that questions that which does not concern it, nor a heart that can feel emotions.

That which is taboo for ordinary people is, for the ninja, only natural. It could easily be said that they have been raised to possess a different sense of morals and truth from ordinary people. If ordered to kill, they feel no remorse about killing, and they thief and pillage with complete calm. For the ninja, the orders of their master—in addition to the orders of the clan—are important over all else. They use the techniques instilled upon themselves for the sole benefit of others. Whatever skills and techniques they master, the ninja never refer to their powers as working for themselves—only their masters.

The shinobi are a tool to be used, nothing more.

DYING IN DARKNESS

The world that the shinobi inhabit is a heartless one.

Even if they succeed in the duties assigned to them, they will not be praised. Because the shinobi are a tool, it is only natural for them to accomplish the tasks to which they are assigned. For example, let’s take the magnificent assassination of an enemy lord. While not divulging the name of the ninja is natural, even among the individual ninja, there are no awards or recognitions bestowed. The recognition goes to those that actually used the ninja to accomplish the mission, their lords and masters. For the ninja, they only receive their established recompense, which is paid directly to the ninja clan. No matter how difficult the task, they are seen as nothing more than the tools to accomplish a job.

Thus the world the ninja live in is utterly cruel, however excellent the techniques in which they train themselves. It is impossible for them to succeed at every task to which they are assigned... and in most circumstances, failing a task is directly connected to the death of the ninja. This death is not only limited to losing one’s life at the hand of an enemy: It is also rather common to meet one’s end at the hands of a member of the same ninja clan, a ninja that should have been considered a comrade.

NINJA AND SHINBOI

The commandments of the ninja code are minutely detailed, from the points of how one should receive and deal with an employer, to the corresponding punishment for breaking the code. According to the ninja code, if the ninja becomes a great hindrance to the employer, it is their duty to accept death as recompense. Additionally, the commandments and their punishments have been repeatedly trained into the ninja from a young age. Even a small infraction brings about a great punishment, and the execution of those who break a serious law is open to public viewing. Thus, it could be said that the ninja code is carved into the ninja's way of thinking from a young age. Consequently, ninja who are wounded and become a burden are immediately discarded and if captured, they would rather choose death than speak their employer's name. If they fail in their duty and flee home in shame, all that awaits them is death. No matter how excellent a shinobi, the ninja clan will not spare their life. If mercy was shown to even one shinobi, then the usefulness of the shinobi as tools would be compromised. That is to say that the clan would cease to be able to function as a group.

The world that the ninja live in is a dark world. The place where they will die is also just as dark.

THE VILLAGES OF THE NINJA CLANS

The ninja village which serves as the stronghold for the ninja clan is almost always a small, normal village deep in the mountains. This village is obstinately cut off from outside contact, and is often called a hidden village. From its founding, there have been no roads that stretch to the village, and no one that knows even of its existence outside of the ninja of the clan. The ninja village is arranged with the mansion of the clan master as the center, surrounded by the smithies that make the ninja weapons, as well as the dojos where ninja are trained in ninjutsu. Of course, there are also the ninja's houses, as well as the fields that keep them self-sufficient.

However, because the manufacture of the village is a simple one, even the large mansion of the clan

master is no greater than the house of an average agricultural town leader. The smithies are dispersed into different buildings depending on their use. Usually, ten or so lower ninja craft the tools of the clan under the eye of the middle-ranked ninja. The dojos where esoteric ninjutsu techniques are taught are not that large or glamorous. The martial arts techniques of the ninja are taught outside: Drills, exercises and physical training always occur in the middle of the mountains, outside of the village. In order to train the wits of the ninja, which is their greatest weapon, the forest—overgrown with trees and without sure footing—is most appropriate. There are no tatami-matted, clean martial arts training areas in ninja villages.

The village itself is almost completely comprised of arable fields. Even the shinobi are still humans. It is not as if they can survive without eating. However, in order to shut themselves off from contact with the outside world, they must be able to be as self-sufficient as possible. This land is cultivated by those lower ninja who are not currently employed.

Around the ninja village there are always a number of lower-ranked ninja dispatched to watch for intruders. Sometimes there are those who get lost from the main road and come close to the village, but through the use of ninjutsu by the lower ninja, they are led peacefully to a place far away from the ninja village without ever realizing. For that reason, the mountain where the village exists is often said to be a mountain where spirits like recluse mountain sages and tengulive. While it might be surprising, the ninja do not indiscriminately kill those who come near their village. That is because news of the event could spread, and people would begin to wonder if something was hidden in the forest. An exception however, is that if the intruder has a hostile aura about them, the ninja will apprehend him with deadly force as needed.

Other than the hidden main village which serves as their stronghold, there are a number of other separate smaller ninja villages called town outposts, or *machisato*.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF NINJA VILLAGES

Usually ninja villages are ruled over by one master or high-level ninja. Underneath the master are ten middle-ranked ninja, who in turn are responsible for ordering all the lower-ranked ninja. Within each rank are small cells of ninja ruled over by a middle-ranked ninja leader or low-ranked ninja leader. The smallest cell size is usually three or four ninja.

These separate village-looking entities are comparably close in proximity to human villages, and are used as places to get necessary goods as well as gain contact with employers. These town outposts are created on the outskirts of town, near large trading roads or villages, or commonly in the downtowns of great cities. While they are called town outposts, they are really nothing more than branch offices and safehouses of the ninja clan in the guise of stores or rows of houses. Additionally, temporary waypoints created in the line of duty for a particular mission are also called *machisato*.

While the main village is created so that its location is never known, the separate villages and the *machisato* are expertly hidden by the ninja so that the town outpost's true form may not be revealed, blending into the surrounding town.

THE DARK ARTS

ELITE SHINOBI AND THE SEALS OF POWER

The elite among the ninja clans are called *shinobi* or *true shinobi*. They are the mere handful of shinobi who have learned the way of what are referred to as *the dark arts* in order to assist them in their ninjutsu techniques. Within a clan, *ninja* is the common word for all who work their dark trade. But the true shinobi are the powerful ninja elites who stand apart from the rest.

The application of the dark arts is called “the seal of dark power”, a physical and psychic modification using soulgems which shinobi employ to assist them in the use of their unique ninjutsu techniques. In order to access that power, the shinobi's skill must be highly recognized, and a head shinobi of high rank must perform the modification surgery. The success rate of this surgery is not high, and is incredibly painful for the patient. Only those who are able to overcome the dangers to both life and sanity are able to survive and be called the shinobi elite. One can understand why the number of true shinobi is so low.

The dark arts are used to assist with ninjutsu techniques, and are basically a method which uses soulgems to create conductive conduits of ki energy throughout the body. Thinly shaved soulgems are implanted throughout the body, and must be situated in their proper locations through the use of special summoned shiki or with the help of annelids. The soulgems are implanted along the inside of the body in long thread-like chains. Because the threads run deep through the still living flesh, it is necessary to cut and rend the ninja's entire body. It is something that only those of sound body and strong will can endure. In recent years, the knowledge of anatomy and anesthesia which the Northern Court of the Shinto Priesthood revealed has been increasingly implemented in the surgery. Even so, the success rate has only risen slightly.

However, the benefits of implanting the seal of dark power are tremendous. The magical power which the shinobi use to fuel their ninjutsu techniques is amplified by the soulgems. The end result is that the shinobi can employ their ninjutsu techniques by using only a small amount of their spiritual (Soul) power. In short, they are able to use incredibly powerful arts multiple times, which would normally drain and exhaust a lesser ninja.

However, it is regrettable that the risk of the dark arts is not only the danger of mishap during surgery. Among the shinobi, there are many cases of the extremities suddenly rotting and developing necrosis—a frightening disease that is particular to

the shinobi. The cause is unknown, but it is said that the body rejects the implanted seals of power, and the ki can no longer flow through the original flesh. Additionally, all shinobi can no longer bear children, much like the samurai who also implant soulgems into their flesh. For that reason, before the shinobi clan performs the surgery, it is common to make the candidate bear a child. This is not out of any sense of pity, but rather that the offspring of someone great enough to become shinobi is an important resource to the shinobi clan.

Additionally, it does not need to be said that the shinobi's own body is the cost they must pay for their powers of ninjutsu. The various medicines that are used in the art have a terrible effect on the body. For example, for the instruments used in the technique called "Possessed by the Inner Beast", a large amount of a medicinal plant called *hiku* (also known by herbalists as "flying dog") is used. Hiku has the effect of activating stimulants and endorphins in the body for a short period of time, but if used too much, the user can become intensely addicted. The shinobi, who commonly use extremely powerful arts, often develop extremely negative conditions within their bodies over time.

Many female shinobi who follow a certain espionage path are called kunoichi. They act as the mistresses and harem residents of the famous and powerful, and are almost always ordered for long term espionage infiltrations in places where men are forbidden to go. They are also occasionally used to entwine themselves with an enemy lord and bring about his destruction. This is to say nothing of the fact that if they can become a noble's concubine, assassination becomes that much easier. For the kunoichi's special characteristics, the sterility that comes as recompense for the dark arts can be seen as a benefit rather than a detriment. If it is true, that using oneself as a tool is the main point of ninjutsu, then it could also be said that the female kunoichi embody the soul of ninjutsu even more than their male shinobi counterparts, to a horrifying degree.

Lastly, an issue for the ninja clan is the problem of shinobi fugitives or runaways. If normal ninja

assassins become fugitives, dealing with them is a simple matter; but a shinobi becoming a fugitive is a different matter entirely. The shinobi are powerful enough to take on one or even two entire ninja clans. Even with the combined force of an entire clan, the only end they would meet would be the total annihilation of the clan. Of course, just because they are shinobi does not mean that they are fugitives, but almost all confirmed fugitive ninja are shinobi. The only ones with the power to make it out of the clan alive are the shinobi elites: This is pure fact. In short, as a tool, the shinobi are beyond excellence. And unlike the more common ninja, it is almost impossible to stop them.

SCHOOLS OF NINJUTSU

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCHOOLS

Currently on Tenra there are over 100 different schools of ninjutsu spread throughout the land. Including even minor factions, it would be safe to say that there are as many schools of shinobi as there are shinobi clans of the various lords. However, all of these schools began with a single person. That person is the founder of ninjutsu, Makabe Genyuusai.

Even before Genyuusai left this world, there were already those called ninja, and they practiced the art of stealth or assassination. However, the ninjutsu style created by Genyuusai excelled far beyond all of these. You could dare say that while the ninja up to that point were human, those ninja who mastered his new ways of ninjutsu became more than human. Genyuusai was a rare onmyoji, and it is said that through using onmyojutsu, he was able to unravel the reason behind the world. The art and techniques of secrecy, darkness, shadow, and control that Genyuusai expended everything to create is the collection of arts known as ninjutsu.

Genyuusai never founded any thing that could be considered a "school" or "philosophy". After he founded ninjutsu, he disappeared from the face of the world without catering to the wishes of those people of influence who wanted to make use of that

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power. It was the two apprentices that Genyuusai left behind who founded what are now the two largest schools on Tenra: *Kage-Ryu*, the School of Shadow; and *Oboro-Ryu*, the School of Dream. Before long, internal strife in the School of Shadow broke out, and *Shin Kage-Ryu*—the True School of Shadow—was born. The School of Dream also had internal fractures, giving rise to the School of Stone (*Gan-Ryu*) and the Ghost Clan (*Rei-Ryu*). These factions repeated their rise and fall throughout history, and have split to become the multitude of schools that currently exists in Tenra.

Each time a school splits, each faction gives birth to a new form of ninjutsu.

Since the basic arts that the shinobi learn are not so visibly different, it could be said that the characteristic of a school is merely the difference in the ninjutsu that the school trains its ninja in. Therefore, the structure of the various arts are kept secret, and they are not divulged to those not a part of the ninja clan. Even to shinobi of the same school, only the form and actions—the way in which ninjutsu is used—is taught, and not the reasoning, logic, and foundations behind it. Conversely, shinobi who can create their own original version of ninjutsu arts or a new foundation of understanding of those arts usually become the head of a new school of ninjutsu.

EXPLANATION OF THE SCHOOLS

Let's introduce the exemplary schools on Tenra.

Of course, there are countless other schools of ninjutsu listed besides these, and even today, the secret feud continues between them.

The School of Dream; Oboro-Ryu

The School of Dream was founded by one of the apprentices that Genyuusai left behind, Kiba Ryuusai. It is one of the largest schools of ninjutsu on Tenra. It possesses a very orthodox version of ninjutsu, and is known for its establishment of the arts of the kunoichi.

The School of Shadow; Kage-Ryu

One of the largest schools on Tenra, the School of Shadow was founded by Kuzuhara Gensei, the other apprentice of Genyuusai. When compared to the martial-focused School of Dream, the School of Shadow is more skilled in the arts of illusion and secrecy. They are well known for their use of dogs and other animals in their ninjutsu.

The School of Stone; Gan-Ryu

The School of Stone originally broke away from the School of Dream, and was founded by Kiba Hougen, who incorporated the phantasmal arts that are the School of Shadow's specialty, and sought to create a more balanced and complete strain of ninjutsu. Hougen and his followers insist that this is the true successor of the ninjutsu that Genyuusai himself left behind.

The Ghost Clan; Rei-Ryu

The founder of this school, which broke away from the School of Dream, was a kunoichi. Ayame (Iris), from her work as an assassin in the School of Dream, created both the form of ninjutsu that the Ghost Clan employs as well as an order of shinobi assassins who make use of it.

The True School of Shadow; Shin Kage-Ryu

The True School of Shadow was born from a shinobi named Tsuchigumo the Land Spider, and was the end result of the internal strife in the School of Shadow. They took this name, and aimed to return their order to the true roots of the School of Shadow by further strengthening the characteristics of secrecy in the school. Even in modern days, the bad blood towards the School of Shadow is staggering.

The School of the Shore; Migawari-Ryu

Separated from a shinobi clan called Kuruwa-Ryu, the School of the Shore was founded by a shinobi named Kuro the Blackwing. Migawari-Ryu is a single group who has put warrior-ninja as the focal point of their group, and does not operate under any traditional form that could be reasonably called a shinobi clan.

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This school is famous for its founder having created the Migawari School of Marksmanship, an art of war which focuses on thrown and ranged weapons.

The School of Dust; Jin-Ryu

This school is known for its abilities in demolitions. It is a ninja group that is very conspicuous among the shinobi, and who greatly favor secrecy. The founder of the school is Ayamiki Raisei.

According to one explanation, the School of Dust was a school that followed the way of the School of Shadow. However, the path of ninjutsu that they follow now is completely different from the School of Shadow.

Other Schools

The schools introduced up until this point are largely representative of the ninja clans of Tenra. There are additional special schools, such as the Kami-Ryu school used by agents of the Shinto Priesthood, or the school used by the secret order of warrior-monks loyal to the Phoenix Buddhist sect.

Of course there are countless schools on Tenra, and even now there are more new schools continuing to be born.

THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF ART

A *kugutsu* (originally the Japanese word for "puppet" or "marionette") is a creature that was crafted by a human being in much the same way as a puppeteer crafts a lifelike doll. The bodies of the kugutsu are carved out of ancient sacred trees by human hands, and the soul that naturally forms and seals within it is the reflection of a natural creature or spirit called *kodama*.

Covered in a layer of magical gossamer (the very essence of *sha*, the magical force of *Tenra*), they form into a creature of flesh with a beautiful human form. They are then educated in much the same way as a human is educated. Through handiwork, effort, and magic, the kugutsu emerge: Alluring, pure creatures more beautiful than mere humans could aspire to be. They become the ultimate expression of art for the creator; literally crafting life itself from their own imagination.

A kugutsu can sweat, cry, laugh and even bleed just like human beings can. Once they take their final form and come alive, there is no longer anything alien about them. The only difference is that when a kugutsu dies, it reverts to the form of a lifeless wooden mannequin. They can live long, full lives in the guise of a human being, but in the end they are different.

It takes five to ten years to carve out and craft one single kugutsu doll. On top of that, not many kugutsu-makers exist. Even among the kugutsu-makers, there are very few that are noteworthy; extremely skilled kugutsu-makers whose names are well known. The kugutsu is a precious living work of art, and sometimes its beauty is ransomed for the price of all the gold of a kingdom. The value of a kugutsu crafted by an elite kugutsu-maker is so high that it can start wars between regents.

THE BEAUTY OF THE KUGUTSU

A kugutsu is the very essence of beauty. Because of their allure and rarity, they are creatures that have enormous value to the wealthy and ruling class. Their "value", in spite of the fact that they are living beings with emotions, is a concept easy to understand if you adopt the mindset of a potential collector: They are like a work of art, like a rare set of tea ceremony utensils made by a renowned craftsman, or a scroll of calligraphy written by a recognized master of the form.

However, because they are a work of art, there are few people who are of high enough station allowed to own them. Dilettante feudal lords, regents or kings could be said to monopolize the grace of a kugutsu. When dealing with a famous kugutsu-maker, they will outbid each other in attempts to flatter, bribe, or simply pay outright to put in an order or request for the craftsman's next piece. They push past each other in order to have their requests filled by the kugutsu-maker, and bear the price willingly for a newly born kugutsu. A person powerful or fortunate enough to be able to obtain a kugutsu admires their beauty, of course, but they are also intoxicated by the feeling of honor and privilege to possess such a fine piece of art. In fact, their status could rise well with the purchase of a kugutsu. In addition, they can be also given as great political gifts between lords or nations.

Above all other kugutsu, the ones carved by the legendary craftsman Shou-un are easily worth the value of a large kingdom, if not more. Every time Shou-un's new works are revealed to the world, great wars occur to scramble for the chance to possess them. These wars (be they large wars on the battlefield, or political shadow-war style maneuvering) for the sake of the possession of a piece of art in human form leave many people wounded or killed.

Ownership of a kugutsu is a status symbol for feudal lords or regents. Having a kugutsu in one's possession has great value in political dealings

between powerful people. No matter how much the price, it is often worth it for the value, status, and honor that the kugutsu brings.

Why do kugutsu-makers create kugutsu? Is it for money? The answer is no. They need an abundant amount of time to learn the skills of a craftsperson (usually through apprenticeship), not to mention the years involved in the actual carving and shaping of the mannequin's form. If they just wanted money, there are much easier ways to become wealthy. Moreover, it is impossible to create kugutsu that have real beauty or artistic charm simply for the love of money. It just doesn't happen.

Most of the kugutsu-makers have a mindset that can be summed up as "An attempt to create a thing of beauty, carving it out of nature, molding it from their own mind". Some suggest that the price of a Kugutsu may objectively denote how beautiful a creation it is. However, the real thing the kugutsu-maker seeks is the very ideal of beauty that resides in their mind's eye. For that reason, they usually don't show interest in the monetary value or the physical "worth" of their creations. They create an object of art for their own ideals, and to the craftsperson it does not matter what other people think of their works.

Why do they seek beauty in this form? Not many kugutsu-makers can easily answer that question. Many describe it as a calling, and after that, the answers differ from maker to maker. Furthermore, what constitutes beauty is different for every maker as well. However, for whatever reason, they invest their entire lives to answering the call of beauty, producing human figures of wonder.

HUMAN OR PUPPET?

It would be meaningless if a kugutsu was nothing more than a beautiful face. They cannot be kugutsu for their physical graces alone.

Their true beauty is greatly influenced by the beauty of their minds and spirits, not just their physical form. It is their heart—filled with the same

emotions that human beings possess—that make them truly remarkable. They are different from works of art for simple decoration. They are works of art that live with humans, as humans. They cry, laugh, get angry and become delighted; for this reason people find kugutsu so wonderful. Think about this, though: Kugutsu mannequins don't have any differing qualities of body or mind that separate them from human beings. Are they still simply dolls? What are the differences between kugutsu and humans?

Some kugutsu are actually raised as a human being and have no memories of their makers, having no knowledge that they were anything other than human. What would these kugutsu think if they were told, "You are not a human, but are actually a doll"? Are they capable of dealing with that knowledge?

Some kugutsu wish to be nothing more than just dolls, tools of human wonderment and living pieces of art. They want to live as an object, and to do so, they must abandon their emotions.

Kugutsu can think like regular humans. This means they suffer just the same as human beings suffer. But no matter how hard they wish, they cannot magically transform into a real human being. No matter how much they suffer, their emotions will not simply vanish. A heartless kugutsu-maker might tell his creation, "Suffering is a process which continuously improves you", or "You were created to suffer".

KUGUTSU AND VARIETY

Since the ideals of beauty and personal taste of each kugutsu-maker are different, their works have various differences when comparing one kugutsu to another. Even one maker will create several kugutsu which have different characteristics, even if they attempt to stick to one particular style.

They may have beautiful white or tanned skin, long or short shiny silky black hair, slender or oval shaped faces, or varieties of facial features

and complexions. Many kugutsu have a sort of stereotypical beautiful face based on the local notions and ideals of human beauty, but there are also a few of them that have a different kind of beauty in their uniqueness. Feudal lords will pay a high price for a simply good-looking kugutsu, of course. However, there are some buyers or collectors who find uniqueness a value, and treasure unusual kugutsu. Some people even think that only the unusual models of the kugutsu have any true value.

Appearance is not the only differentiating feature of kugutsu. For example, while most kugutsu are female, there are also male kugutsu as well. Female kugutsu-makers are often the producers of male kugutsu. Male kugutsu might be created by male makers as a result of the maker's artistic inquiry into the nature of male beauty, or maybe their patron requests one. They are quite rare. Rarer still are the androgynous kugutsu that are crafted without a definite gender (or which are both), usually as a form of artistic expression.

Kugutsu that have been trained at swordplay are often called "Blade Princesses" or *kenhime*. These kinds of kugutsu, or kugutsu taught to use sorcery as an onmyoji, are also both rare and highly valued. Many of these kenhime have not only a kind of pure beauty, but also elements like martial strength or a kind of acuteness of senses, reason, and wit. They are usually too weak and expensive to use for fighting on a battlefield, but many lords expect kenhime to shield them from assassins or to act as guards that serve from their bedrooms. Though most blade princesses are created by request from the lords that find a sword-wielding kugutsu appealing, there are some kugutsu-makers like Oboro Enshu who dedicate themselves to crafting a stronger and more powerful class of blade princess for artistic reasons.

In addition, there are many kugutsu with minor special abilities. All kugutsu—by way of their allure and innate magic—have the ability to manipulate people's dreams and create illusions with the technique referred to as the "Butterfly Dream". Some of them have the ability to hear the passing

thoughts of others or see things that normal people cannot see. They say that many of Master Reisai's creations have those kinds of mysterious abilities because they were carved from special materials. Essentially, all kugutsu at birth cease to age, but there are some that were crafted to grow older over time. "Kaori", a kugutsu crafted by Master Kumizuka Seigen or "Uzuki", one of the "Maidens of December" by Shou-un, are representatives of these kinds of aging kugutsu. However, some kugutsu like Uzuki were created to grow up much slower than human beings do. Will her current owner still be alive to see Uzuki mature and her innate beauty grow? Maybe Shou-un, in creating Uzuki, tried to find a kind of beauty in the people who look after and care well for their maturing kugutsu.

It is not very difficult to create kugutsu that grow up or grow old. Most makers simply try to avoid harming the kugutsu's beauty and shield them from aging. Kugutsu that age are not as rare as one might think, given that they are a walking piece of art. Many kugutsu are requested by a wealthy lord, and the kugutsu-maker can choose any appearance they want for the mannequin. There are a number of people who try to use kugutsu as their body doubles (lords who fear assassination attempts and the like). Body double Kugutsu must age, just as their owners do. As can be expected, many of these kugutsu do not enjoy living as nothing more than a charm or shield of protection for a rich lord.

Kugutsu Personalities

Kugutsu have a variety of personalities, crafted and nurtured by the kugutsu-maker and left to develop from there. Cute or sultry, determined or carefree, world-wise or aloof, the player should decide how to play their kugutsu character.

Many kugutsu (the "default" style) are trained in the traditional arts and style of Tenra, and are educated to a level to rival any scholar. These kugutsu are an enigma: They are the keepers of the knowledge of the old ways, the calligraphy, language, visual and performing arts (dance, music, ceremony), knowledge that is threatened with extinction in this

land of constant warfare. They are shining beacons of Tenran culture and the very embodiment of the graces of humanity, and yet they themselves are not human.

Most kugutsu characters that are not already discovered or owned by a lord keep their true nature a secret from those around them. They are like any other human, but with a terrible secret: They are a living mannequin whose possession could mean the rise or fall of kingdoms.

KUGUTSU-MAKERS

People who carve the kugutsu from trees, bring them alive with magic, then train and educate them are called kugutsu-makers, or *kugutsushi*. Sometimes their works have their worth appraised as equal to the very domain they live in. However, as mentioned earlier, they don't create kugutsu for money: They are artists who try to create a physical and spiritual embodiment of true beauty in this world. They are researchers of the essential nature of beauty, pursuing that research through the creation of their works.

Not many kugutsu-makers exist in Tenra. There are more nameless kugutsu-makers, or apprentices still in training, but there are very few famous craftspeople.

Famous kugutsushi are known for their uniquely stylized or simply beautiful kugutsu. As they become famous, the price of the kugutsu they make begins to skyrocket as well. However, in spite of obtaining enormous amounts of wealth or fame, many kugutsu-makers prefer to live outside of the court and away from other people. In most cases, they would like to spend their time concentrating on the creation of kugutsu, and noble courts and cities present nothing more to them than troublesome bonds that keep them away from their work. One of the other reasons they shy away from city life is because the sacred trees required to create a kugutsu lie far away from human cities and grow only in deep mountainous areas.

A kugutsu-maker travels various places to find a good sacred tree, after which they begin to carve the primal shapes of the kugutsu's body from it. As they cut the shapes away from the tree, they let the spirit of the tree attach to the pieces. After that, they begin crafting the body of the mannequin, including the fine details. It takes five or sometimes even ten years to create one single kugutsu, so the number of kugutsu created in one kugutsu-maker's lifetime is limited. If there was a way to attain eternal life, the kugutsu-maker would try to attain it at any cost, if for no other reason than for the ability to continue working on their craft.

There are some very famous master makers, the names of which are known to most lords and all collectors. Oboro Enshu is famous for creating the "Blade Princess" class of skilled fencer kugutsu. The oldest kugutsu-maker, Kagami Enkei, crafts kugutsu only upon request and does not spontaneously design his own. Miwa Sei-Ichiro Tokiyasu is a young up-and-comer who is gaining a strong reputation with his lines of kugutsu. He has crafted a few models at the same time with the same features.

However, Master Shou-un is certainly the most famous and mysterious master kugutsu-maker in Tenra. He is already a legend in his own time, and even people who live in the wilderness—people who have only heard rumors of what kugutsu are—have probably heard his name. Strangely enough, it was 200 years ago that his name first appeared in the history books, and there are more than 20 kugutsu (so it is said, anyway) that were created by him.

No one has ever seen Shou-un. No one knows anything about him, or even if he is male or female (The male qualifiers and pronouns used to refer to Shou-un are used only as a convention). One thing that is certain, though: Behind all of the other mysteries surrounding him, he is still to this day creating kugutsu.

Though Shou-un created some series or "lines" of kugutsu with poetic names like "The Eight Ministers of Ceremony" (*shikibu-hakkei*) or "Rain

Falls in the Capital” (*amefuru-miyako*), there are many legends surrounding his works. For example, the newest series of kugutsu, “The Maidens of December” (*juunitsuki-hime*) are also called “War Brides”, because every time he finishes a new kugutsu, wealthy or powerful lords fight over it, sometimes starting wars in an attempt through favor or force to claim it. In fact, several domains were destroyed in one campaign to claim one of Shou-un’s works. Surely they’ll come to be known in the history books as “The Beautiful Maidens of Ruin”.

The most beautiful kugutsu of Shou-un is said to have been Kokonoe, the Princess of Nine Spirits. She became a legend because of her purity of heart, as well as the uncanny fact that *she died a human being*. Even after long periods of time—through discussion, research, and fact-finding—nobody knows the truth about Kokonoe’s life or how she died. It is also not even truly proved whether she died as a human: Only her legend remains, and the legend is eerie and fantastical enough for people to accept. That incident was a big turning point not only for Shou-un but also for all kugutsu-makers. They do not know for certain if their works can become human, and a kugutsu can’t know for certain if her dream to one day become mortal is a frivolous fantasy or not, but that incident has caused everyone to think about the nature of the kugutsu a little deeper.

THE ILLUSION

The Illusion is the term for when the kugutsu-maker takes an unfinished mannequin, and—by using the spirit of the tree that it was carved from—creates the permanent form of human-like skin and human beauty. This “spell” called the Illusion takes a kugutsu from a human-like wooden puppet and transforms it into something that looks and acts like the ideal form of a human. The final result is a human form that is indistinguishable from other people.

Basically, the kugutsu-maker imagines the appearance and mind of the kugutsu, then through

the spell of the Illusion creates it: The flesh, the curves, the face and features; then the mind, the resolve, the spirit, emotions, and personality. The process is not perfect, though. Extremely delicate measurement errors always appear in their physical features or personality because of the influences of the materials of the sacred tree that the kugutsu was carved from. These small imperfections, hardly noticeable, give the mannequin an even more human look and feel.

When a kugutsu dies, the Illusion disappears. The kugutsu’s body returns to the form of a wooden doll.

All kugutsu have the ability to see and control the dreams of humans, using the spiritual powers of their magical tree-born soul. This ability is called the Butterfly Dream, and it allows the kugutsu to appear in the dreamer’s dream and act as a guide. This ability—especially to collectors troubled by nightmares or stressful leadership decisions that affect their dreams—is yet another reason why kugutsu are preferred as evening companions.

Kagami Enkei’s kugutsu named Senka (“Flower from the Well”) is very good at using the Butterfly Dream. They say the sound of her flute can even lure a fully awake person into a daydream.

THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE KUGUTSU

When a kugutsu-maker begins the long process of creating a kugutsu, he starts by searching for what they refer to as a Sacred Tree. They say that the ancient, great trees keep a sort of natural tree spirit inside. These great trees of the deep uncharted forests are the kinds of trees that kugutsu-makers look for, as they are likely to be sacred trees.

Next, they carve all the major parts of a kugutsu (the head, right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, chest, abdomen, and waist) from one sacred tree. Using one tree is paramount: If they were to carve the parts from two or more different trees, the finished kugutsu probably could not move normally or fluidly.

After further carving hundreds of small parts from the tree's trunk—including joints and fingertips, a process requiring several years—the kugutsu-maker strings the parts together with a material called *holy thread*. Holy thread is a kind of string enchanted by an onmyoji which gathers the magical gossamer-like *sha* energy, and infuses it into the form of the kugutsu. The final steps are to plant silk thread in the head for hair, and then adjust the balance of all the parts. The kugutsu at this point looks like a finely carved human-like mannequin. When the body is ready, the kugutsu-maker applies magic to the thread, and—enhanced by the power of the spirit of the tree—the Illusion takes form: The doll takes on a human form, with human skin and features, and a true kugutsu is born. She breathes, she eats, she cries, she bleeds.

However, this is not the end of the process. Even if a kugutsu has the same features as a human being, her soul is completely blank. In human terms, the mind and spirit of the kugutsu is like a newborn baby. However, the influence of the Illusion spell is set, and while the personality will form from this point, the influences on the development and personality are either purposely or accidentally set by the kugutsu-maker in the last stages of the Illusion.

Now that the form of the kugutsu is set, the next step is to educate the kugutsu. The kugutsushi will train it to be a human being.

Out of all the processes of creating a kugutsu, this is the single most important process, and requires the most time and effort. The kugutsu-maker has to teach a kugutsu how to laugh, cry, walk, eat, speak, and—at the very least—provide it with a minimum knowledge of the world. Most of the time, the kugutsu-maker spends far more time after the actual crafting teaching the basics of various cultural and artistic skills to the kugutsu. Moreover, they have to try to establish and solidify the kugutsu's ego or personality as they desire. This process is filled with unspeakable hardships, efforts, and frustrations. However, since the kugutsu is a living work of art, they must not neglect the process of education

which decides the disposition, emotions and personality of the mannequin. It takes at least several years for any kugutsu-makers to complete the education of their works.

Except for the cases where the kugutsu was specifically requested by or tailored for a particular lord, the kugutsu-maker holds a traditional tea party. Vassal lords and regents from near and far are notified and invited to this tea party, where the kugutsu is revealed for the first time. Greetings are exchanged and the “work of art” is demonstrated through a small performance. It is during this tea ceremony where the value and price of the kugutsu is decided. Using a cheap turn of phrase, the kugutsu is essentially put up for auction to the highest bidder.

The participants in this ceremony try to judge how much she will be worth with their own eyes and offer their price (in money, gifts or both). If the lord doesn't have confidence in their own aesthetic senses, they will often have their court onmyoji or a kugutsu-maker join them and offer advice regarding the worth of the kugutsu.

The kugutsu is “married” to the feudal lord or regent who offers the highest price. Though the normal market price of a kugutsu is two or three million ryo, it is of course the case that kugutsu crafted by a master (or of particular allure or grace, or which possess peculiar skills) are priced higher than their counterparts. A kugutsu crafted by a famous master can be priced in the tens of millions of ryo.

However, it is said that there are some kugutsu-makers who don't want to sell their creations for money. These kugutsu-makers instead release them into the land in secret. Most of the time, the kugutsu knows the nature of what she is. On rare occasions the kugutsu-maker changes or crafts her memories so that she thinks she is human, until she discovers otherwise for herself.

Married kugutsu live without any inconvenience or worry, but they are still treated like birds in a cage.

It is rare that they ever have doubts about that kind of lifestyle, though, as they were educated from early on to regard this kind of existence as normal.

Also, kugutsu don't usually tend to stay in one place for a long time. Since they are nothing more than the property of powerful rulers and lords, they may change hands many times as political gifts. Other times, they are snatched away during wars.

However there are a few stray kugutsu that travel Tenra as wanderers. There are various reasons for these kinds of kugutsu. Some of them lost their masters in a war or assassination; others simply lost their master's affection and were cast from their homes. A few of them simply ran away and are living the lives of fugitives. There are also the cases of the kugutsu-makers who release their creations into the world secretly.

It's extremely dangerous for these stray kugutsu to travel throughout Tenra, as they are worth such an enormous amount. If someone realizes that they are in the company of a kugutsu, they would most likely attempt to capture and sell it. For this reason, most kugutsu disguise themselves as Buddhist nuns or traveling entertainers to keep people from detecting their true nature.

To what ends do these stray kugutsu travel the long highways of Tenra? Are they trying to find their masters, or perhaps the kugutsu-makers who created them? Perhaps they really don't know what they want either, and hope to find meaning at some point in their journey.

MUSHI-TSUKAI: THE ANNELIDISTS

Those who house annelids inside of their own bodies, and through symbiosis make use of their powers: They are known as *mushi-tsukai*, the annelidists.

Despite the fact that they are known as excellent surgeons or pharmacists, most annelid-users live and keep far away from normal townsfolk. There are few people who welcome with open arms the kind of person who befriends the spooky native parasites of Tenra; those who make their very bodies into a home for parasitic worms or colonies of bugs... people who have to do unheard of things like consume rotten meat to sustain them.

However—almost hypocritically—once an incident occurs where an annelid user's medicinal skills are required, townsfolk will quickly swallow their fear and hatred and turn to the annelidist for help. Almost every parent has at least once visited the suspicious man who lives in a shanty at the edge of the town when their child falls ill or gets hurt. Almost every lord hires scores of annelidists to be military surgeons during periods of war. People usually shun and abhor annelidists when they aren't needed, and then quickly turn to them when an emergency arises. To be an annelid user means to live one's life seeing these kinds of hypocritical, selfish acts with clarity every day. For many annelidists, their relationships with their worms are less parasitic than the relationship the Tenra commoner has towards the annelidist.

WHAT ARE ANNELIDS?

Annelids—often also commonly referred to as worms, bugs, *mushi*, or colonies—are parasites that creep into the bodies of living things and live by taking nutrients from their hosts.

Most annelids are actually quite symbiotic and usually trade some kind of favor or effect to the host

instead of leeching nutrients directly from their host like some kind of roundworm. The annelids of Tenra are highly developed and perhaps sense that they face danger if their host is in danger. For example, some worms heal the wounds of their host, or protect the host from danger, or even physically attack threats presented to the host. In exchange, the annelidist takes care of these worms and does what is necessary to feed them and keep them well.

Annelids usually hide under the skin, between the entrails, or inside the body cavities of their hosts, and emerge to use their abilities when needed.

As long as the host—their walking meat-colony—keeps the relationship mutually beneficial, the annelids will try to protect their host. If the balance shifts, the annelidist may find himself eaten inside-out or even physically controlled by his worms.

The people who are skilled in the positive use of annelid traits, and who can keep the symbiotic balance healthy for both user and worm, are the true annelidists of Tenra.

ANNELIDISTS

The annelidist—also known as annelid-user, worm-user or *mushi-tsukai*—can make use of living colonies of annelids within them to gain unimaginable abilities and resources.

Generally, they assume a useful role in society as a medical doctor or pharmacist. They are useful to society by the abilities that they are granted by the annelids. They are also sought out for the knowledge that they bear in the proper use, raising, and cataloging of annelids.

Though surgery techniques are developing in Tenra, the healing abilities of annelid users are still very important for townspeople who can't afford to see expensive medical doctors and surgeons. However, it is very true that annelid users are generally shunned by society. If someone who didn't know anything about annelids suddenly witnessed all manner of bug or worm crawling out of the body

of a stranger, they would certainly flee, screaming, “It’s a monster!” This is probably due to the natural visceral repugnance of the fact that these people essentially play with parasites. For people who know more about the annelidists, sometimes their unease is a reaction against the closed nature of annelidist societies: The annelid society calls itself “The Nest”, and the secretive words, gestures, actions and codes they use are unfamiliar and cult-like to outsiders.

Most annelid-users settle down on the outskirts of villages to avoid the public eye, or else make a living by traveling, selling their abilities and medicines along the way.

Perhaps it is telling that they are resigned to the fate of always being outside the world of normal common people, and yet their methods and skills are required by the very people who shun them.

CATCHING ANNELIDS

Annelid-users set out into nature when they hunt for annelids.

They find annelids in forests, mountains, rivers, or in the bodies of small animals that live there.

Catching and raising annelids is not a very difficult task when armed with the right knowledge. The only catch is that the amount of knowledge required is enormous. It’s only natural: There are dozens, perhaps hundreds of species of annelid. Each species has different traits, and every annelid is unique in its characteristics, needs and traits. When cultivating annelids, getting the types of worms mixed up can produce disastrous—if not fatal—results. If the cultivator makes a mistake, the host—that is to say, their own body—can be eaten from the inside out or fatally poisoned. One can never be too careful when handling annelids for the first time.

Annelidists usually try to create new types of mushi through cross-breeding, selective breeding and other techniques. The new varieties of annelids produced like this are generally stronger and easier to treat than annelids found out in the wild. However, the

ways to cultivate or raise them are a secret kept only amongst the highest ranking annelid-users. They rarely share their techniques with outsiders.

If an annelidist were to leak the secret of cultivating a particularly dangerous or powerful strain of annelid, they would certainly be punished severely by their peers.

SLIPPING OVER THE EDGE

To gain more power from the strange native bugs and worms of Tenra, all the annelidist requires is to host more of them inside of her body. To be more powerful, to be more helpful, or to simply understand the annelids more, often they introduce many strains of these mushi into their bodies. Also, since a lot of the users find a certain kind of love—or at the very least affection—for the annelids they care for, they often try to host a level of annelids far greater than is permissible by their body and powers of control. The humanity of the annelid user decreases without them noticing it. They gradually become more worm than human.

As the annelid side of the psyche grows, the annelidist starts to release control of their human side. They start to lose interest in human activities. They gradually disconnect themselves from their human relationships and become more and more attached—obsessed, even—with their annelids.

There is an invisible line that all annelidists straddle. Once that line has been crossed, she is no longer a human being; she becomes an annelid herself. She is nothing more than a worm, a bug, a mushi with a human face and body.

Annelids themselves are completely controlled only by their primitive instincts. They eat nutrient-carrying material, protect their territory, breed and then die. That is the summation of the behavior of all annelids. When an annelidist loses her humanity and falls into a pattern of primal annelid behaviors... suffice to say, it is a terrible sight to behold.

A strong sense of love and devotion to these creatures produces skilled annelidists, but is also paves the way to total annelid transformation. To lose one's humanity and fall victim to total transformation is considered one of the forbidden taboos of the mushi-tsukai. They state that annelidists are supposed to make use of annelids to help other people, and that they must not abandon their humanity and be controlled by their annelids. However, the truth is that for every master-level annelidist who is in tune with his parasites, there is an annelidist who goes too far and lets her mind, body and soul be consumed by the annelid-mind.

ANNELIDIST SOCIETY

Annelidists that live near each other tend to form extended communities with group structures like bees or ants. These communities may be formed as a reaction to the human society that shuns them. Or perhaps it's a natural state of existence for people already so close to the insects they raise.

They call these communities "nests". Usually, nests are created in unpopulated areas like in the mountains, places which are not too close to nor too far from human habitations. A nest is a compound which contains a number of buildings or shacks. They contain things like habitats for breeding and raising groups or colonies of annelids; facilities for growing, curing and mixing medical plants and herbs; laboratories for researching new strains of annelids and colonies. Though there may be some variations between nests, it is impossible to create a nest without these kinds of facilities.

Their societies have an organized social structure, with a "leader," or *kashira* at the top, and underneath the leader are middle managers called "ordinators" or *matome*. The ordinators usually report on and control the mushi-related activities and information in a wide range of space, from a province to an entire kingdom. Most annelid-users belong at least in name to their local nest. This means that they offer payment in the form of a tithe to their community for upkeep, research, and protection, or they do some work for the nest once

every six to twelve months.

Membership in a nest doesn't mean that they are tied to one place and cannot leave the nest. Annelidists who travel to a new area or domain can freely ask the leader of the new area to join their nest. This happens quite often, and there is rarely bad blood between nests, leaders, and the annelidists who leave them.

There are some basic rules when it comes to nests. As mentioned, members have to give small payments to their local nest and occasionally do work for the community. They also have to follow the orders of their leaders or ordinators and report on their dealings with regular people in order to share their clinical findings and breakthroughs with their nest. It is forbidden to expose information or research about new strains of annelids with strangers outside of the nest. It is also prohibited to pocket, kill or eat annelids that belong to the nest's research or breeding areas without express permission.

When these rules are broken, the perpetrator is punished by the members of the nest. Though there are several kinds of punishments, most of them revolve around taking away the annelid abilities of the perpetrator. Some punishments are enforced by agreement ("No using your abilities for three months"), and some are enforced by forcefully expelling, killing or force-hibernating the annelids inside the perpetrator.

One of the harshest punishments (short of execution) is exile. Annelidists who are exiled from their nests are called "exiles" or *hazure*. Exiled annelidists can never return to the society of annelid users, not even by attempting to join another nest.

The most forbidden taboo for an annelidist is to have too many mushi inside one's body, to the point of total annelid transformation in mind, body and spirit. The punishment for this taboo is almost certainly death... if the annelidist can even be brought down by the nest.

Many years ago there was a famous incident in the province of Sairin. There was an annelidist who completely transfigured himself into the form of a great annelid; a living, walking beast of an annelid colony, his mind shattered and his humanity lost. An entire kingdom was almost annihilated by that one person before he was stopped. As a result, even after the incident was settled, all of the annelidists in the country were rounded up and beheaded and a prohibition was enacted to forbid the entrance of all annelidists for a whole generation.

Upon hearing about the incident in Sairin, other nearby nations found a new level of wariness, suspicion and distrust of annelidists. For a while, annelid-users were continuously shunned and discriminated against. There were even measures enacted in various kingdoms preventing the unification (willing infection or implantation) of human and annelid. This was a time of great suffering for annelid users, their very power and usefulness to society stripped from them and declared forbidden: It was a true dark age for annelidists in Tenra. Later, most of those laws were nullified as the people realized their true usefulness to society, but annelidists take care to not create too much suspicion or distrust, and to always keep an eye out so that another incident like the one in Sairin will never occur again.

Hazure: The Exile Annelidists

For most annelid-users, the punishment of labeling someone a *hazure* or exile is synonymous with a slow, lonely death. If caught by the members of an annelidist nest, they have their annelids removed from their bodies as they are exiled.

Sometimes there are exiles which have such a talent for annelids, or such constitution of body, they can later find and implant annelids themselves in secret. They must of course keep their annelids hidden, for if they are found out by a local nest they will certainly be executed.

Most of those *hazure* who lose the protection of the annelid society quickly run to the underworld, applying their arts and skills in secret for the shadier

side of society in exchange for money or protection.

ANNELIDISTS AND CIVILIZATION

Annelid-users seem to isolate themselves from the outside world by living in their distinctive nest communities, or at least living away from other people. However, it is impossible for them to cut themselves off completely from the outside world.

They are the greatest and most skilled surgeons. They use their rejuvenation worm abilities to aid in surgery, and they have a vast knowledge of herbalism and medical plants used to cure ailments. The skills that they learn in cultivating the *mushi* are abilities that they put to use to help mankind. When people hear the word “annelidist”, they think of medical doctors and pharmacists that help and heal people.

When people are hurt or sick, they visit the cabin of the nearest annelid-user and ask for help. In return, the annelidist receives some boons like money, food, or supplies. However, the surgical treatment methods of annelid-users often induce shock in townspeople. They see the writhing figures of the annelids under the annelidist's skin as they draw out their rejuvenation worms to seal and treat the wounds of their patients. The patient returns home and talks loudly about what happened to try to make peace with the feelings of fear and horror they had. In doing so, the stories take on more and more embellishment the more they are told. Eventually, the story ends up twisting further and further. “Kagiya the Annelid-User healed me by using the worms under his skin! It was painless, and now I'm back working in the field, good as new!” eventually becomes “Those monstrous annelidists are walking corpses, with maggots under their skin that feed on the innocent!”

Another thing that often happens is this: A *mushitsukai* will often take care of the dead bodies of horses, cattle and other farm animals from nearby villagers when they die. This is because they need the animal meat to raise certain kinds of annelids. It

was only a matter of time before misunderstandings emerged from this kind of scenario. That is why the scornful slur “Corpse Eater” was adopted by fearful or bitter villagers when referring to annelidists. It is certainly this kind of lack of understanding and prejudice that keeps annelid users pushed away from normal society. However, the eccentric, secretive, and purposeful actions of the annelidist when raising and researching annelids is also hard for regular people to understand, and thus the cycle continues.

Urban Annelidists

This situation is a little easier to deal with in urban areas, though. People don’t give annelid users odd looks as much, since there are unusual people in big cities all the time. With traveling martial artists, strange sorcerers, and ruffian bounty hunters and the like wandering around, people don’t pay much attention to the eccentric behaviors of the annelidist. Besides, if an annelidist has great medical skills or a likable personality, she can be even liked by people and respected as a medical doctor. Meanwhile, other annelidists who try to work as medical doctors or pharmacists often prefer traveling from place to place, even more than living in urban areas or isolated villages.

The urban annelidists are the ones who tend to leak basic but guarded information about hosting or raising annelids. Perhaps it is out of loneliness, or wanting to make a connection with the people who aren’t outright afraid of them. In any case, they don’t usually reveal important secrets that would cause an uproar within their local nest; usually it’s just small stuff like how annelids work, or how to easily and safely implant annelids into one’s body. Just enough information is shared so that the local people and children understand how the worms work, so that they have no reason to fear or avoid the user.

There are strange people like martial arts masters or paragons of swordsmanship who amplify their abilities by implanting small amounts of useful annelids. These folks, with just a basic skill of annelid use, most likely received their skills and

training from talkative urban annelid users they have befriended.

Peddlers

Peddlers—also known as traveling pharmacists—wander from place to place, selling annelids or medicinal plants to the sick or to area doctors. After paying a small amount of money to the nests along their travel routes, they are left to do whatever they wish without being bothered. Many annelidists interested in seeing the world, or disgusted with the hypocrisy of living permanently in normal society, take up the peddler line of work.

WORMCHARM

ADMINISTERING ANNELIDS

Users of the wormcharm skill never fail at prescribing annelid treatments and can recognize the abilities of most annelids.

If you want to administer or implant annelids into a host (or yourself), you need at least a basic skill in the preservation and cultivation of annelids. In other words, you need to have at least the *skilled* rank (2) in the *wormcharm* skill.

Annelids can also be destroyed by those with the proper knowledge. Deworming poison—also called “the annelid killer”—is a secret poison whose very existence and the methods of concocting it is known to few. If an annelidist is cut or stabbed by such a poisoned weapon, most or all of the annelids inside the body will die within one to six minutes.

LIST OF ANNELIDS

This is an explanation of common Tenra annelids. Please see the annelid list in the rules for information on other annelids, and annelid costs.

Rejuvenation Worms

Rejuvenation Worms have a very strong instinct for survival. When their nest (in this case, the human body) is damaged, they start to repair it immediately. This species of annelid gains nutrients

through consuming and digesting raw or rotten meat. To keep rejuvenation worms in your body, you must consume rotten meat at least once a week. If the user does not consume rotten meat, the rejuvenation worms will eventually be expelled from the body and will look for a new host animal.

Talonfang Bugs

These creatures are sensitive to dangers perceived by the host's nervous system. When they react to danger, they immediately become as hard as steel, usually forcefully ejecting themselves from the host's body as claws or spines. They feed on the blood of the host, animals, or the enemy that they are used on.

Spinal Mites

Spinal Mites were created by breeding and improving upon a kind of annelid that lives in the cerebrospinal fluid of animals. A host user receives an ability which is kind of an extremely rapid neurotransmission speed. To engage this ability, the user awakens the mites by breathing in a concoction of poppy seeds. The spinal mites then secrete a slow-acting neurotoxin into the host's spine and nervous system which grants the host enhanced speed and reflexes.

Eye Stalkers

They used to be recognized as an organ of the three-eyed toad, a rare creature which lives deep in swampy areas. When the stalker is attached anywhere on a human body, it starts burrowing into the body of the host using hardened tails. Inside the body, they will grow and expand until they eventually connect to the host's optic nerve. Once this happens, the host can see the visions that the stalker itself has seen. These worms are often used as spying devices or reconnaissance, sent forward into areas, then retrieved and their intelligence viewed.

Mouth Creeper

The mouth creeper hides in the host's mouth or esophagus, and buries the rest of its body in the host's organs and bowels. They look like huge centipedes of up to 5 meters long. Their eggs must

be swallowed, and within 6 months they will reach their adult size. They are controlled by the user's subconscious will. They launch themselves from the host's mouth or body at an enemy, biting them and injecting them with a paralytic poison. Each annelid eats about 200 grams of animal meat per day.

Digger Wasps

In most cases an annelidist is indistinguishable from normal people. However, those who host digger wasps adopt changes to their bodies that others can easily notice. The digger wasps begin to consume areas of the host's body and build nests, usually on the back or other large areas. Over time, these wasps will form large nests and the annelidist will begin to appear to have swollen areas, a hunched back and the like. Annelidists tame the wasps and can make them attack their enemies.

Demon-of-Battle

The demon-of-battle (or simply "battle demon") annelid, is the strongest and most horrendous annelid known. They live coiled around the brain of the host, and when they sense danger, they jab antennae out the front of the host's forehead. These antennae transmit mimetic signals all over the body. It gathers the latent sha energy within the host's body as well as in the general area to help fuel a frightening host transformation. The host quickly mutates, gaining fearsome appendages, reflexes, strength and annelid-born weapons. Their combat ability is simply terrible to behold, to the point that it even has a kind of beauty.

Immortality Strain

When the host gets hurt, these annelids gather at the wound and start replacing the broken flesh and bone instantly, dying shortly after they heal the wound. The host literally attains immortality by their astounding resilience. However, the annelidist will still feel the pain of the wound which caused their "death." This means that the user, if they make use of these annelids, must experience the pain of death a number of times. This can take a frightening toll on one's psyche.

When the immortality strain is taken into the body,

they secrete a deadly poison. It is said only one out of one hundred thousand can survive taking this poison: Failure means instant, painful and unrecoverable death. Sometimes, in the stronger host, the poison simply leads to bizarre deformities in both the body and the mind (and the worms accept the host anyway, providing her with their unique gift.) It is the rare user who is left unchanged by the immortality worm's implantation.

Killing a host who has the immortality strain is very difficult. You must either cut off her head, burn her to death, or cut or inject her with a secret kind of annelid-killing poison.

More annelids, as well as all the rules for annelid usage, are in the rules section of the game.

ONI: THE CARETAKERS

From the outside, they appear to be fantastic monstrous beings that possess horns on their head—these are the oni people. However, there is a great difference between the oni of Tenra and the terrible man-eating oni of Japanese mythology that the very word “oni” evokes.

One theory rarely offered in polite company is that they are the guardians of this planet called Tenra—its original inhabitants—who have protected it since long before the humans crossed over to settle here.

Additionally, it is whispered through the ages that oni and humans are not actually separate races. The only existing clear difference between the two races are the horns growing from the heads of the oni, as well as the special organ called a *heart gem* within the oni’s body. It is possible for oni and humans to bear mixed offspring, and—excluding the horns—it is difficult to tell the two apart.

If you were to actually meet and converse with an oni, you would understand—as would anyone—how surprisingly calm and gentle a people they are. Even though they are a race whose form is different from that of humans, they are far from monsters.

A PERISHING RACE

To begin with, the name “oni” was created by the humans. The oni call themselves *Lu-Tirae*. This means “Supervisor” or “Caretaker” in their language.

According to oni legend, when “God” left Tenra, He created the oni to supervise and look over the land. Additionally, the humans were described as “those who will arrive in sailing ships.” It is not clear whether this legend is true or not, but at the very least it is clear that as long as the humans have recorded their history, the oni have been around. If the legend is true, then they are the legitimate owners of Tenra.

The things that separate the oni from humans are the oni’s horns and heart gems. Using these two organs as a source, the oni can use the inherent supernatural powers given to them in order to protect the land. The horns allow the oni to hear the voice of people’s hearts, while the heart gems allow them to freely use the powers of the land around them. Additionally these oni, are much longer lived than normal humans. Even normal oni have a lifespan of 200 to 300 years, and there are even those oni who have lived for more than 1000 years.

The physique of the oni is quite solid in comparison to humans, and their facial features are deeply carved. However—other than their horns—it is said that they are a race that closely resemble humans. In fact, there seem to be oni who break off and file their own horns in order to live among humans freely. In those situations, normal people could not distinguish an oni from a human being. This kind of thing happens often in lands where the oni are commonly hunted or executed.

Why is this race—a race of peaceful people whose natural talents exceed normal human ability—currently feared, hunted, and persecuted?

There is only one pragmatic answer: They are somehow inferior to the humans in some way. When comparing individual humans and oni, the oni are certainly stronger. However, to compare them as a race, they pale in number to humans: There are simply too few oni in comparison to humans. Oni bear children only once every few decades, and even that is not a definite figure. Currently on Tenra, there are few oni who can live out their lives in peace, as many of them are killed by humans for their heart gems. And because they cannot bear children nearly as fast as humans can, the number of oni will probably continue to decrease.

Once, when the humans came to Tenra, the oni welcomed them with kindness. However, the humans betrayed them: Robbing them of their land, of their lives, and of their future.

ONI: THE CARETAKERS

Because the oni were tasked with the care of the land and their people, the individually strong oni fought the humans to protect the natural resources of the land. They were strong enough to fight and win in limited conflicts. However, no matter how strong the oni were, they were not strong enough to continue winning forever. Even with the long life given to them to protect the land, they are currently being driven to obliteration.

Oni—The prideful guardians of a great land, a people who live as one with nature: Their fate is certainly that of extinction.

ONI FAITH

There are three important words in the oni language, which tie directly to their faith:

Yi-yil: God. The one who made the oni into the care-takers of the land.

Dii-go: "The Will of the Earth" or "The Earth-Speaker". The voice of the very land, which the oni people can hear.

Sha: "The Earth-Source". The very essence and power of the land of Tenra.

The oni possess their own religion. Because they don't possess an alphabet other than a few simple glyphs, the details can only be passed down orally. However, there is only one doctrine: "The world was given to us by God. Thus, we must protect it, until the day that God comes back to reclaim it."

According to legend, Yi-yil created the oni, gave them the source of the land, the access to hear the will of the land, granted them supernatural powers, then went away on a journey. He said that he would return one day when the right time came. For the time being, the oni are simply borrowing the land, and thus they must watch over the land and protect it. That is why they were named Lu-Tirae, the Caretakers.

The oni concept of sha is the exact same substance as what the onmyoji also call sha. *Resonance* (In the oni language, this ability, skill, power and state of

being is collectively known as *Tae Rayi*) is the oni power which allows them to directly manipulate the magical gossamer-like power of the land, called sha.

It is said of Dii-Go that "He sleeps in the land, and exists to transmit the will of Yi-yil". Dii-Go's connection to the oni people is their heart gem, which they use to feel and control the sha as well as hear the voice and will of Dii-Go.

The piety of the oni is focused on Yi-yil, the God-Who-Left, and Dii-Go, the Earth-Speaker. Dii-Go is the very voice and spirit of the land in which they live, and because of that, it could be said that this is the seed of their nature-worshipping animistic tendencies. Protecting the land is the very function for which the oni live, and it is the reason for their very existence. They respect and work with the land in which they live.

The faith of the oni is unwavering. Whether or not the legends are true is not an issue. That's because those who possess the resonance powers known collectively as *Tae Rayi* can actually hear the voice of the land, and the speaker of their God.

However, the once calmly resounding voice of the land is now, while far from dying out, turned into a muffled scream of torture from the strain that the humans have brought upon it.

It is unmistakable that the appearance of the beings called "humans" were, even for Yi-yil, unexpected. Because of the ongoing wars between men and oni, the oni are unable to manage the land as they once have. The land that was once greatly populated by the oni is now ruled by the humans, and the land where the oni remain is nothing more than mere leftovers. Currently, even the barest necessities for survival are difficult for the oni to come by.

The oni listen to Dii-Go's voice and believe in the orders given to them by Yi-yil. However, currently, a small number of oni are raising their voice in bitterness, calling out, "We are dying! This land is shattered! What have the gods done for us?"

ONI: THE CARETAKERS

For example, when Yi-yil returns, what will he grant us for guarding the land? Is it said that we will get an eternity of rest in exchange for the suffering that we know every day? For millennia, the oni have worked to protect the land without knowing the purpose of their actions, simply following their stewardship relentlessly. Newer generations of oni are starting to feel that there is no salvation in that.

This group of oni has discarded their beliefs, and through that, they also discard their identity as oni.

Oni are the race that was created in order to manage and watch over the land, and a great number of oni people still believe in this. They follow the voice of the land, and protect it until the day that Yi-yil returns... Even while knowing that this is the unwavering path leading to their very extinction.

SHA-LAZ: THE MARK OF FETTERS

These are the geometric tattoos that oni apply to their bodies.

Called Sha-Laz, they are intricate markings on variations of the three core oni letter-glyphs Yi-yil, Sha, and Dii-Go. They in fact represent reverence of their gods or their connection to other oni.

Because every year the fetters are “carved” (Even though they are tattooed on the body in ink, the oni themselves refer to “carving fetters”, not “tattooing fetters”) little by little by the hand of skilled elders, those oni who possess a large number of marks are known to be oni of seniority. Additionally, female oni are not carved with marks as large as the males: Their marks are more intricate and are almost never carved on their faces.

THE LIFE OF THE ONI

Without the three symbols that represent Yi-yil, Dii-Go, and Sha, the oni would possess no written alphabet. While they possess legends and stories, it could be said that even that is an extraordinary development. That’s because the oni communicate wordlessly, through a form that humans would consider telepathy.

One of the supernatural powers of the oni is that—through the power of heaven that is imbued in their horns—they can read each others’ thoughts. In these trying times, their power is waning, but it is said that once they were able to converse entirely through their minds, rarely needing to speak vocally.

In any case, it is possible to some extent for the oni to know what another oni or human is thinking by conversing through their minds. Naturally, the available vocabulary is scarce, and words that convey subtle nuances do not exist. The communication would appear to be more of an exchange of pictures than actual words.

Additionally, for oni, the idea of an individual is exceedingly sparse, and words that separate one oni from another—such as “I,” “You,” “He,” “She,”—do not exist. Of course, the oni do possess names, but instead of pointing to the individual, the name of an oni designates their job within the tribe. Individual oni are considered to be nothing more than a small part of the single consciousness to which all oni are connected.

By interacting so directly with so many other oni, the soul of an oni becomes extremely balanced, put into harmony with their true nature. The downside is that the oni are fundamentally not individuals when they do so; they are only part of a collective. However, it is not the case that all oni feel and think the same way: With the current wars with the humans, and exchanges of culture, there are also many oni that are beginning to question this old way of thinking. Additionally, those oni who were raised among humans possess a mental and social mindset that does not differ much from those of humans.

ONI SOCIETY

The actual life of the oni consists of taking from nature only the bare minimum of that which is required for survival. The men hunt; the women collect and treat plants and fruit. Because nature grants them such blessings, there is no need for

them to create fields and raise crops. The meat of their hunted game becomes food, while the hide becomes clothing, and the bones are whittled into decorations and tools. Additionally, they employ fire and eat roasted meat and fish, and make balled snacks from ground fruits, while using the juice for soup. Excess food is dried or preserved through salting, but there is not often extra food, and there is never any needless hunting, such as for sport. All of their diet's staples come from the land and are used without waste.

The oni have rich cultural traditions stemming from their long lives, and as a race, they possess great arts. Their music and handicrafts give praise to nature through simple patterns to create art of exceptional beauty. Personal adornments and sculptures are a prime example of oni craftworks. Clothing could also be said to be a form of craftwork. Ideals which can be expressed visually are exceptionally photo-realistic, while those which cannot are expressed through intricate geometric patterns. For example, the *Sha-Laz* bond symbols that the oni tattoo on their own bodies represent the essence of the voice of Dii-Go they feel in their hearts.

Additionally, the oni use wood and the hide and bones of animals in order to make percussion and stringed instruments, as well as various flutes. Using these instruments they can perform music of extraordinary beauty. Even if a human had never interacted with oni culture, the music of the oni—who can feel the world through their hearts and tap into the true nature of the physical world—would still be extraordinarily excellent to their ears. Their songs still resound in the hearts of humans who hear their songs, even though they do not understand the words. They usually hum their songs, and—when a clan receives a new child, when an oni reaches the age of adulthood, and at other various junctures throughout life—there are specific songs with which to celebrate the events. However, there are not many chances for humans to hear the songs of the oni. The only song that can often be heard by the humans is the oni burial song, which is often mistaken by them as a song of war.

This is the quiet lifestyle that Yi-yil wanted for the oni: Watching over the land is to preserve the current order of things.

Humans always bring disruption to the lives of the oni, and so the oni flee from the reaches of humans to live, hidden among the mountains. Their villages are places created far from the nations of the humans, and move as the humans encroach upon them. However, there is a limit to the amount the oni can run, and there are reasons that even the oni cannot leave their settlements. In the long run, battles will eventually break out, and in most cases, the oni are defeated. And thus they are hunted by the humans.

THE ONI AND THE HUMANS

The oni are hunted because of the desire of humans to collect their priceless hearts, also known as heart gems (or heart engines, when removed and placed into human technological artefacts). However, this is the reasoning for those men of power who know the oni's true form, as well as the value of the heart engines. The general populace of humans living on Tenra are led to believe that oni are simply the evil beasts of mythology, bent on killing and eating humans. Most people believe, through “common sense”, legend, news and rumor, that the mysterious oni are a form of monster or bloodthirsty asura. Because this common view was originally circulated by the ruling class, it works in their favor for spurring forth the hunting of oni. As long as the oni continue to live a hunted existence, they will never become peaceful neighbors to the humans.

Therefore, when naive human hunters or others find oni settlements among the mountains, it is assumed that those oni will eventually attack the neighboring villages. They will then return to their town, city or guard post and inform the lords of the land, begging for something to be done about the oni menace before they attack the human settlements. Thus the lords learn of the location of the precious heart gems.

Those lords will then send in oni hunting forces, made up of soldiers and mercenaries, with the pretense of protecting their vassals. Of course, because the oni are fearsome fighters known to be imbued with supernatural powers, the size of the hunting party must also be of proper proportions: That is to say, disproportionately large in comparison. The hunters lay siege to the village so that not even a single oni can escape, and the results of these tactics do not need to be mentioned.

This does not only happen to oni villages. For those oni who disguise themselves as humans for their travels, if their true form were found out, they would undoubtedly be eventually captured, disgraced, and killed. Thus, they continue to hide themselves. Even between dear friends, if an oni's true form was revealed to a human friend, she would probably be seen by the human as little more than a demon in human skin ("All this time, a demon has tricked me into befriending her!"). There are those oni whose true form is known, and are treated like a member of the lord's court; but that is only because their power is required, not because the lord trusts or respects the oni. The oni must always endure gazes of distrust and contempt. To have mutual trust grow between an oni and a human is an extremely rare sight.

MAKUU NINDO AND THE ONI NATION

As written above, throughout history, the oni have always been hunted by the humans, and the oni have not played a large part in the history of man. However, in recent years, this general rule has been quickly overturned. In year 16 of the Washin dynasty, the oni state of Kikoku, known as "The Nation of the Oni", was formed.

The oni nation of Kikoku was originally known as home to numerous oni, but they did not act together as a unified force. However, there appeared a single oni man that in a short time organized and brought together the oni inhabiting the mountains. That man's name was Makuu Nindo, the oni monk also known as Temple-of-Void.

He said to the masses, "Will we lay back and welcome extinction? If we turn this land over to mankind, they will destroy it. There is no choice but to fight."

At first, the oni did not accept Makuu's words: He was a revolutionary. None of the oppressed oni had thought like this before. The small-scale skirmishes between the oni and humans in Kikoku had not stopped. The reason that Makuu was able to bring the oni together was largely because of the influence of the nameless girl—known in some tales as "The Sleeping Child"—that *Gen-Ei* (Silver Edge), his son, brought along with him. The girl's identity was not known, and even now is a mystery. However, the oni throughout the oni lands followed Makuu and began to move as one unit. Thus, in the second month of the 16th year of the Washin dynasty, a cry of battle was raised in the Country of Kikoku, and the "Age of the Makuu Nindo Revolt" began.

It goes without saying that the main forces of Makuu's army were the supernatural weapons of the oni. However, surprisingly, a number of half-oni and humans also joined their ranks. Makuu Nindo's army attracted the influence of the hostility towards Yamida Yoshimitsu, the then-reviled representative of Kikoku. However, almost all those humans who lent their services to Makuu's army sympathized with his ideal of a country where both oni and humans could live together.

Makuu's army was 30,000, compared to Kikoku's army of 250,000. Additionally, Kikoku's army was equipped with a number of yoroi armours. Whatever powers the oni might have possessed, Makuu's army was at an unavoidable and overwhelming disadvantage. However, it was then that a miracle which changed the tide of battle occurred: The event known as the "Two Month Night" occurred, where the flow of all the sha throughout Tenra simply stopped. In this instant, all the armours and kongohki of Kikoku's army became mere scrap iron, and even the samurai and shinobi became powerless. In the beginning of the battle, Makuu's army had sustained 3000 casualties, compared to 18,000 casualties on the side of

MAKUU NINDO

Makuu Nindo, an oni who is always referred to by his Buddhist monk name (which loosely translates to “The Benevolent Temple of the Void”, also known as “Temple-of-Void”) is a monk of the Bokusen order who was employed at the Enmu-ji Temple as the head monk. He took in and raised oni children or other orphans who had lost their parents in war, and he himself was an oni.

It is said that the quiet woman, sometimes referred to as “The Sleeping Girl”, who stayed beside Makuu may have been an incarnation of Dii-Go, the Speaker of the oni God of the Earth.

Kikoku’s army. After that, even with a large investment of mass-produced mechanical kimen armours (which didn’t require sha energies to function) given to them by the Northern Priesthood, the battle turned against them. Even though Yamida’s army flanked Makuu with the Priesthood’s warships, their huge losses at the Battle of Nagashino signaled the end of a rebellion which took just three months to secure Makuu’s victory. The Japanese written characters that made up Kikoku’s name were changed from “Kikoku: Oni’s Lament” to “Kikoku: Oni’s Revelation”, and Makuu Nindo established a nation “By Oni, For Oni”.

However, was Kikoku actually Makuu’s ideal country? While on the surface, it seemed that oni and humans were living together in harmony, there was a long-held resentment of the humans by the oni, and a deep-rooted prejudice of the oni from the humans. An almost invisible strain permeates every relationship, every place where humans and oni live together. For now, it is held together by Makuu’s charisma, but he is walking a thin tightrope with every moment.

Recently, “Dirty Eyes” Shigami, the regent of the neighboring country of Ryuuko declared that he did

not accept the founding of this nation and began small skirmishes on the country’s border. It seems that a lot of time is necessary for Kikoku to become a true country at peace.

THE POWER OF THE ONI

RESONANCE POWERS

The powers of the oni were given to them by Yiyi. The root of their powers are the horns and heart gem (the oni heart) that only the oni possess. For humans, people born without horns or heart gems, the possession of these powers is completely impossible.

The powers of the oni are divided into two parts: The power of Heaven (*Alu*), which is based in the oni horn, and the power of Earth (*Dii*), which is based in their heart. It is dependent on the individual oni whether or not they are more gifted in *Alu* or in *Dii*. There are other powers that do not fall into these two categories, but oni that possess those special other powers are exceedingly rare.

Additionally, the long life that the oni have been gifted with is also a manifestation of their powers. Although the loss of their heart gem means death for an oni, there are those oni who lose their horns, and thus the ability to hear the inner voice of the land and other oni. They can still live their lives out without being in telepathic contact with their community, but without the strength of the land to aid them, the oni must subsist on only their own powers. These oni are called “orphans”. Their existence is cut off from the collective conscious of the oni. However there are those who choose to cut their own horns off and live their lives as orphans through their own volition.

ALU: HEAVEN

There are two “Resonances” (called *Tae Rayi* by the oni) which are powered by the oni horn. One is “*Alu*”, or Heaven, which comprises the largest portion of Resonance.

ONI: THE CARETAKERS

It allows a mutual communication and empathy, almost like telepathy, between other oni as well as other living creatures. The other part of Alu is the power to hear the voice of Yi-Yil, the oni god, through concentration. From this, it can be understood that the oni's horns act as a kind of antenna. If an oni cuts her horn(s) off, she can no longer hear the words of her people, or her god.

If so, what would happen to the heart-powered meikyo or kimenkyo technology they now inhabit?

DII: EARTH

Dii, which makes use of the power of the oni heart, applies to everything other than Alu. It is their connection to the Earth, which draws strength and power, and a connection to the land, through the very life force of the Earth. Tae Rayi cannot be used without the support of the oni heart engine. That is because, in the end, when an oni loses their heart, it certainly means that they are dead.

HEART ENGINES

While humans in general fear oni enough to drive them from their lands and kill them, the heart gem is the greatest reason that the humans hunt the oni. It is an organ in approximately the same location as the human heart, a sphere of amber the size of a clenched fist. It continues to supply its limitless power ever after the oni has died. When it is removed from the oni's body and used in human equipment, a heart gem is called a heart engine.

It is widely encased in metal and used as the power source for the yoroi armours and kongohki. It is also used as an element that imbues magical summoned shiki spirits with their permanence. It could be said that it is the most precious material on Tenra. Because of the vagueness of the term "heart engine" and the shady methods used to collect them, it is true that very few people who work with high technology ever recognize these "super batteries" as once being a part of a living person.

But for oni whose heart was donated to the machinery, it is whispered that a fragment of their soul lives on inside the heart. Was the will of the oni so strong that their fragment will awaken one day?

AGENTS: REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Despite the Priesthood's reputation as the inscrutable shadowy rulers of Tenra, not all of its members stay hidden away in their fortresses. In fact, since the fall of Mount Jinrai and the rift between the Northern and Southern Courts, members of the Priesthood have become more visible and active than ever.

The members of the Priesthood most often encountered by members of the outside public are Taira-ranked drifters such as shrine maidens (*miko*) and wandering vendors of protective amulets. They visit regions without established shrines and serve in a variety of religious capacities. They are often hired by villagers to intercede with the Kami on their behalf, summoning rain, or praying for good fortune. Traveling agents are also customarily hired to purify the land and pacify the Kami before any large construction project is begun. Despite their membership in the formidable, monolithic Shinto Priesthood, these agents are a familiar and comforting sight, completely unlike the aloof regents and feudal lords that rule the lands.

Dedicated to specific purposes such as household safety or prosperity in business, the protective amulets sold by these agents are inscribed in a special ancient script known as Kamiyo, the language from the Age of the Kami. However, these low-ranked agents are incapable of reading Kamiyo, and whether or not these good fortune charms actually work or not is a question that can only be answered by the gods.

All this is just the outward face of the Priesthood, however. Just like the Kakari, who are assigned to a particular region and shrine, the Ka-ranked Agents who almost never show their face in public, and the venerated Bu-ranked Agents, the Taira are members of the Priesthood with a distinct purpose.

Wandering agents act as a part of the Shinto Priesthood's Tenra-wide information network. They are granted the use of Heaven Passes or Amafuda, special passes that allow the unrestricted freedom of movement through Tenra's many checkpoints and border crossings. Agents are expected to report all that they see and hear to the Priesthood, omitting nothing. With regards to this task, individual agents' desires or intentions are irrelevant; they must pass on the entirety of the intelligence they have gathered.

According to current speculation, the number of wandering agents exceeds 200,000. They are the loyal eyes and ears of the Priesthood members cloistered away in New Mount Jinrai and Genshikyo.

However, no matter how many Priesthood spies are in circulation, there are practical limits on the speed at which information travels, and waiting for news to flow from the regional shrines to the Priesthood headquarters is akin to sitting around waiting for gossip. Agents instead transmit information directly to their superiors. They do not actually travel back to New Mount Jinrai or Genshikyo: Indeed, most low ranking agents have never set foot inside these strongholds. Instead, they make use of their Priesthood-issued meikyo soul mirror and the holy relics distributed throughout the world, connecting directly to the Tenra-wide *Meikyo Network*, a technological marvel that allows the instant transmission of data. The majority of known settlements have a shrine housing a holy relic, and establishing shrines in villages lacking one is another of the drifting agents' major duties.

It must not be forgotten that these agents—recruited from the humble general populace—have access to incredible technology. Every agent possesses a meikyo, a soul mirror regarded as the most priceless and coveted tool on Tenra, as well as the ability to access the Meikyo Network. Through the Network, they can invade any active meikyo and render enemy kongohki and yoroi armour powerless, or even control hostile armour themselves. Legends suggest that under

AGENTS OF THE PRIESTHOOD

THE AMAFUDA PASS

Most shinto priests carry a special travel pass known as an Amafuda, or “Heaven’s Pass”. Simply displaying the Amafuda allows the bearer free travel through any border checkpoint. Amafuda consist of a finely engraved black metal etching affixed to a featureless black metal plate. The pattern inscribed on the Amafuda is said to be unique for each agent, and high-ranking agents can scan the pass and access the agent’s personal details (including name, age, and the missions the agent has carried out.)

KAMIYO SCRIPT

A unique mode of Priesthood communication, Kamiyo consists of 27 characters that create phonemes when paired together. In order to avoid confusion when transmitting orders and the like, certain defined code words and set phrases have been adopted.

Only agents of rank Kakari (Shinto rank of 3) and above have the ability to decipher Kamiyo script.

extraordinary circumstances, they even possess the power to call on the aid of the eight million Kami themselves. However, leaking knowledge of the Network and its powers to outsiders is one of the Priesthood’s most strictly forbidden taboos.

Not only are agents the eyes and ears of the Priesthood, they are the hands as well. In times of crisis, they are often ordered to intervene directly in matters to protect or promote the Shinto Priesthood’s interests. However, Priesthood involvement is always shrouded in secrecy, and in some cases even the Agent himself may not be consciously aware of the action he is taking on the Priesthood’s behalf.

THE NORTHERN COURT AND THE SOUTHERN COURT

The schism within the Priesthood has led to slightly differing roles for agents loyal to the Northern Court and those who owe their allegiance to the Southern Court.

While the Southern Court preserves the secretive pre-cataclysm ways of the Shinto Priesthood, wandering agents loyal to the Northern Court are expected to facilitate the spread of technology. The agents need not teach engineering themselves; simply transporting experts with technological expertise to regions with a dearth of such know-how is sufficient.

The Northern Court forbids the monopolization of technology. This is not so much an effort to promote fairness as it is to limit the possibility of a particularly well-equipped rival arising. However, this policy applies to medicine as well as more martial technologies, and the common people have benefited from the Northern Court’s apparent largess.

Because of the opposition between the Northern and Southern Courts, regions formerly represented by one agent dedicated to a single Kami are now frequently served by two agents. These agents rarely venture into each other’s territory, however, and unlike Northern-allied and Southern-allied regents, they do not openly wage war on their counterparts.

The use of the Meikyo Network to transmit information remains unchanged by the sectarian conflict. While one might expect the Network to be divided along party lines like the geography of Tenra itself, this appears not to be the case. In fact, such a split may not even be possible.

THE CODE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The Shinto Priesthood maintains a number of rules and taboos that its members are expected to honor.

AGENTS OF THE PRIESTHOOD

SHINTO OR BUDDHISM?

A few pointers to help remember which is which:

Temples are Buddhist, *Shrines* are Shintoist. *Monks* and *Nuns* are Buddhist, *Priests* and *Shrine Maidens* are Shintoist.

Note: “Buddhist priest” is also an acceptable term for a Buddhist monk.

Shinto belief focuses on the natural world, the spirits of nature, and the purification of places and people. Buddhist belief focuses on how to live one’s life, and tending to or putting to rest the spirits of the dead.

1. *Protect the Secrecy of the Priesthood*

Over the course of their duties, members will likely be exposed to a number of the Priesthood’s secrets. Agents are forbidden to reveal these secrets to outsiders (i.e., individuals lacking the Shinto skill), and such infractions are punished harshly.

2. *Gather Intelligence for the Priesthood*

During their travels, agents witness a variety of events and hear news of current events. Agents have a duty to report everything they learn to the Priesthood, leaving no detail out. Information is transmitted during the prayer ceremonies. Conscious withholding of information is prohibited and agents who do so will be heavily sanctioned.

3. *Income Must be Tithed to the Priesthood*

Taira-ranked agents such as *gyoshi* (male priests) and *miko* (shrine maidens) must tithe 10% of their income to the Priesthood. They may use the rest of their money as they see fit. Agents of the higher ranks are expected to give up 90% or more of their time and money to the Priesthood; but in exchange, the Priesthood covers all of their lifestyle expenses.

PRIESTHOOD RANKS AND SKILL LEVELS

Within the Priesthood there are several structured ranks. Each member of the Priesthood knows their immediate superior, as well as their area peers. While the higher-ranked members of the Priesthood often stay within the confines of their fortresses, sometimes they abandon their masks and interact with the public incognito. However, they take all precautions to never be discovered.

Taira Rank

Taira-ranked agents are the lowest ranked agents of the Priesthood. They serve as the eyes, ears and hands of the organization. They do the majority of the work for the Priesthood; from small missions like purification ceremonies, information-gathering, diplomatic meetings and shrine upkeep, to larger missions like placating kami or ayakashi, sabotage, infiltration and black ops. Taira-ranked agents are given their own meikyo soul mirrors and are forbidden from accessing meikyo other than the ones they carry. These Taira-ranked agents are the backbone of the organization and serve as its public face.

Kakari Rank

Agents possessing a Shinto level of 3 are Kakari-ranked members of the Priesthood, replacing their eye mask with a larger one that covers their whole face. Kakari-ranked agents are generally assigned to a single shrine. They handle a greater amount of sensitive information and are held to high standards of secrecy, yet still often interact with the outside world. Agents ranked Kakari and above are expected to gladly devote 90% of both their income and time to serving the Priesthood. Those unwilling to make this sacrifice will not be promoted to this level.

Ka Rank

Agents with a Shinto skill of 4 are considered Ka-ranked members of the Priesthood. Ka rank agents almost never appear in public; and even then, they usually only interact with regents and other members of the elite class. They have the power to summon the powerful Priesthood kongohki.

AGENTS OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Bu Rank

Those with a Shinto skill rated 5 are Bu-ranked Agents. Among the Priesthood, Bu rank Agents are treated as Kami themselves, and their word is considered the very voice of the Emperor.

THE AYAKASHI

What are ayakashi? The word comes from an interpretation of the single Japanese character which loosely translates to concepts of "Fey", "Spirit", and "Monster". Some people say that ayakashi are creatures born in areas where a palpable aura of hatred, fear, and other dark emotions linger. They are impossible to classify as we do living creatures; we may see or touch them, but their nature is unknowable, and barely classifiable. They are like ghosts: They don't exist, yet are absolutely real.

Is this contradictory concept hard to understand? Then that is as it should be: For there are things which humans cannot understand, things that we simply can't craft into words, and creatures whose origin and behaviors are unknowable. Our human brains simply have little or no common ground with these creatures. They exist, entities on the edge of human reason. People have taken to calling these phenomena "ayakashi", or "spirits".

Ayakashi have dreadful supernatural powers, patterns of behavior, or weaknesses that people cannot understand. They don't die, at least not naturally. Even if they are killed, spirits will eventually come back to life again. To truly rid the world of a troublesome spirit, it cannot simply be killed, it must be destroyed.

TYPES OF AYAKASHI

By the definition of ayakashi explained above, it is impossible to classify spirits as we do animals or people. However, humans have been able to settle their unease when it comes to the unknowable ayakashi by being able to find four basic types which can be used to categorize most spirits. Scholars and wise men divided ayakashi into four categories on the basis of their special characteristics: These are the *henge* ("the different"), the *tsukumo-gami* ("the artefact spirits"), the *yokai* ("the monstrous") and the *ara-mitama* ("deep spirits" or "gods of the wild"). However, as these categories are merely defined by people, there are many exceptions and mistakes.

HENGE

Let us start with the *henge*. The henge were living things which somehow changed into a spirit. They still retain some semblance of their animal or human form, but they are also much greater than that form as well. They often take the form of animals or half-animals, though larger than normal and possessing great intelligence, wisdom and spiritual energy. Creatures like *tsuchigumo* and *orochi* were spirits that adopted an animal form in entering this world. Other classical Japanese folklore creatures like the *nekomata* or mischievous *youko* foxes were animals which crossed over and became spirits. There are also many humanlike henge as well. It is possible that some annelidists or *kijin* with lost souls may be called henge as well.

TSUKUMO-GAMI

The *tsukumo-gami* were nonliving things that changed into something else. Perhaps it was a handheld object, maybe it was a large object or even a place. However, over the long years it slowly came to be possessed by a living spirit and became... something else. Perhaps the spirit was once a human spirit, pulled from nature and given a shape and form which it did not desire. Or perhaps the spirit is a collection of deep feelings of other humans or ayakashi, which congealed and settled over time into a living entity. *Daidara-Bocchi* (spirits that were once *yoroi* armours), fey weapons created from the manifestation of human grudges into physical form, or hallucinatory villages spawned from a twisted ideal of utopia, are all *tsukumo-gami* artefact spirits.

YOKAI

The *yokai* take shape from the power of pure human hatred, or from a lost soul. They are living curses of the land, born to hate humans (which most eat or kill.) They are the monsters in the dark that people think of when they hear the word ayakashi. Beautiful human figures that dance in the snow, ghosts that feed on the nightmares of people, and flame spirits which kill people by burning them to death are examples of yokai. Unlike most of the

THE AYAKASHI

other ayakashi, though, the reason that they exist, as well as their monstrous goals, are often easily understood or discovered by people: They exist to cause suffering. The yokai are knowable. And they are to be feared.

ARA-MITAMA

The *Ara-mitama* are extremely powerful spirits. It's probably better to say that the ara-mitama are more like gods than other ayakashi. They are great, vague entities that the very spirit of the earth created and brought to life. Some ara-mitama seem to be the physical embodiment of the Shinto Kami. Others seem to be spirits born of sin or evil, and are a curse which the very earth expelled into physical form. The dragon guardians of the sea and the great wolf gods which protect the land are two famous examples of deep spirits. The only thing that a lone human could possibly do in front of one of the gods of the wild is fall to his knees at their overwhelming power.

THE SPIRIT HUNT

To destroy an ayakashi, one needs power. However, power alone cannot destroy an ayakashi. It's true that spirits are often stronger than humans are, but that's not the only consideration. Rather, the problem is that the ayakashi's form, motive, and weaknesses are hidden. Until one knows something of an almost unknowable creature, it cannot be destroyed. You can "kill" its physical form by blade and magic, but it will soon return to the world. And it will surely come looking for the ones who killed it.

To destroy a spirit permanently, one must discover that spirit's weakness. Only then can this weakness be exploited and the ayakashi destroyed for good.

Within the Phoenix Buddhist sect, there are monks who are trained to hunt out and destroy spirits. They are called upon by that order for their services and even paid when the ayakashi is destroyed. Most of these "Spirit Hunters" are onmyoji monks: Trained warriors who have the skills of both an

onmyoji Taoist summoner, as well as those of a Buddhist monk. Once a particularly problematic or dangerous ayakashi is discovered, the local temple will send correspondences to other nearby temples inquiring about spirit hunters. Local spirit hunters will pick up these missives and travel to the temple, find out what they can about the spirit, and attempt to destroy it.

It is ironic that many of the spirit hunters end up becoming renegade monks. The monks are given a pittance to risk their lives and souls to destroy unknowable, dangerous creatures continuously. It is only natural that this inhuman work takes its toll on a human mind. Some of these monks start to commit horrible crimes against people or take immense pleasure in killing spirits—all spirits, including the "good" or "natural" ones. Hunting down these outlaw monks who have lost their way is also the duty of the spirit hunters.

HUMANS AND AYAKASHI

No matter how powerful ayakashi are, since they confuse and scare humans, interactions between humans and spirits almost always lead to conflict. No matter how human a spirit may be, when the physical world meets the spirit world, tragedies almost always occur.

How does contact happen between humans and ayakashi? Unlike campfire stories would have us believe, the incidents of the lone ayakashi which haunt an area and attack nearby humans indiscriminately are actually very rare. Most of the time, the interaction between the spirits and humans occurs because the humans step into territories long held by the ayakashi: The deep sea, the high mountains, the deep forests, ancient ruined oni villages or bloody battlefields are where the ayakashi are born, and where they make their homes.

A human will step into an area which they consider part of their land (truth be told, there are not many

THE AYAKASHI

places left which humans haven't laid claim to, even if they have never set foot there), but that land will actually be the secret dwelling of an ayakashi. Because of a misunderstanding, the humans are usually the ones who encroach or attack first. Once an ayakashi becomes angry or gets a taste of human blood, it often goes into a rage until it calms down naturally or becomes sated.

In the case of local spirits like the henge, who may appear and cause light trouble, the local lord of the area will usually raise a small force to subdue them. Henge are the most readily encountered of the spirit types and are usually the easiest to deal with. Even so, sometimes an entire army may have to be readied to fight some of the larger or more powerful henge. If a conflict reaches that stage, great losses can be expected against an orochi spirit or the like. It's not rare that samurai or even yoroi armours are crushed by the greater henge spirits.

The spirit hunters secretly deal with dangerous yokai ayakashi, as they are dangerous to the ill-prepared. A team of properly equipped spirit hunters can be more effective than an army of common soldiers in hunting down a dangerous ayakashi. The proper research and understanding of the spirits—especially the henge and yokai—are instrumental in destroying one of these creatures permanently.

The ara-mitama are dreadful ayakashi which can rarely be matched. An entire army would be wiped out in the face of a single ara-mitama if they stood between it and its goal. Make an ara-mitama angry, and people will die: That is all there is to it. It is even customary in some locations to offer sacrifices of money or people to beg of them for peace. Ara-mitama are particularly dangerous because they live in the spirit world, a place where humans can not normally reach, so unlike other ayakashi, they cannot be tracked to their lair to be destroyed: Their lairs lie in spaces unreachable for most human beings.

In recent years, phenomena called "spirit packs" have been seen. These spirit packs appear in areas near human civilization, or even in places where

many people live, like in cities. Individually, the ayakashi are easy to overlook. They are not powerful, many of them do not harm humans directly, and they do little more than haunt a particular area. However, the problem is that there are many of them, with more arriving every day. Once a spirit pack appears, soon larger and larger spirits follow closely behind them. Spotting a spirit pack means that that location is about to see trouble soon. There are rumors that spirit packs are little more than the physical manifestation of the fears, anxiety and unease of local people, but those stories are often forgotten when the larger ayakashi begin to show up in their place and make trouble.

Meetings between humans and ayakashi don't always have to lead to calamity, albeit peaceful coexistence is extremely rare. There are spirits called half-ayakashi or half-spirits which look like a blend of human and ayakashi. There are also many folktales of human-form ayakashi living within human civilization, and even getting married and bearing children. If such a half-ayakashi child is discovered by other people, though, it would certainly be avoided and detested. It's a sad fact that most of the folklore and tales involving humans and spirits living together so often end as tragedies.

WITHIN THE SHADOWS OF TENRA

This chapter presents several organizations to use within your own Tenra sessions. Some are clearly antagonists, others protagonists, and most are a mixture of both. Feel free to use them in any way you see fit, including changing the core facts about the organizations, their goals, and their outlook: Some might actually be good, others might secretly be evil.

KIMENTOH: THE DEMON MASK FACTION

THE DEMON MASK FACTION: HUMAN OR MONSTER

The Demon Mask Faction or *Kimentoh* is an evil secret society bent on the complete overthrow of the Shinto Priesthood. Their conspiracies go far and deep across the domains of Tenra.

All of the members of this order wear masks, and all of them use aliases when they do activities for the faction. Very few of the members know who any of the other members are save for the person who brought them in. In this regard, they are a perfectly hidden political—perhaps terrorist—organization.

The Demon Mask Faction are responsible for various crimes like arson, burglary, and even the conspiratorial planning of great wars that change the fate of an entire country. While their crimes (if uncovered) look scattered, disparate, and even minor in sin, all of them are connected to their true purpose: The fall of the Priesthood and taking control of the political entities of Tenra in its stead.

The cold and calculated actions of the Kimentoh are to the foundations of Tenra as the flapping of butterfly wings are to an eventual storm: Things will often start with a small incident that appears completely unrelated to the Demon Mask Faction.

This incident leads to another, which leads to another, which then escalates quickly into a political or social disaster so large and uncontrollable that it envelops an entire domain. These are the kinds of actions that the Demon Mask Faction set into motion.

Some people even whisper that the Kimentoh were the ones in the shadows pulling the strings behind the events that led up to the great wars that happened in the 15th year of the Washin dynasty, even including the Fall of Mount Jinrai, the Makuu Nindo revolt, and the Two-Month Night. Who knows to what extent these rumors are true and which are simply baseless speculation?

It was the Demon Mask Faction that started to develop and employ the first kimen-style mass-produced kongohki, providing the technology in secret to local regents and lords. This development led to a revolution in warfare, and the Kimentoh are the only ones who know what the eventual repercussions of that technology will be. The Demon Mask Faction members refer to their kimen kongohki as “bricks.” They leave their bricks on the battlefield when their forces need to retreat or withdraw. Bricks are extremely problematic obstacles not only because they are formidable opponents—even in one-on-many combat (and thus can hold off enemies for a long time while their leaders escape)—but they will also often self-destruct in an explosive ball of fire and metal when they fall.

The Kimentoh is divided up into four classes: *Kou*, *Otsu*, *Hei* and *Cho*. This is the equivalent of “Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta” or “1st Level, 2nd Level, 3rd Level, 4th Level” in Japanese. This ranking system is also commonly used for machine parts, including mechanica (*Kou* is the highest class, *Otsu* is lower than *Kou*, *Hei* is average, etc). The *Cho* rank is the lowest: They are new members of the order, usually underlings to the other members, and their missions usually involve simple stealing, fighting, distractions and the like.

One *Hei* works as a squad leader (or cell leader) to

a number of Cho. She is given the right to make immediate decisions in the best interest of the order in battles and other conflicts. A single group will usually consist of a number of Cho and one Hei, who work together for a common mission or goal.

Otsu class members are the battalion leaders who oversee the projects of several Kimentoh cells. These are the true leaders of the order, the ones that do the planning and manipulate resources to carry out their plans. They set conspiracies in motion and make sure that they are carried through. They also are sometimes involved in missions that also involve Hei and Cho members.

The Kou class members are special: They are the most dangerous members of the order, selected for their ferocious abilities (usually in combat, espionage or leadership). When a Kou-rank member of the Kimentoh appears during a support mission, things are going to become dangerous for the opposing side. It is said that there are only about ten of these Kou-ranked members in the whole organization.

The Demon Mask Faction conspiracy runs deep. Many of their members are domain regents or area lords, high monks of the Phoenix Buddhist sect, or wealthy merchants. They don't set their sights on outright open military conflict with the Shinto Priesthood (they would simply lose such a battle, and they know it). Instead, they are setting their sights on something higher than that: A decisive and quick replacement of the entirety of the Priesthood with their own rule. It will take time for this final plan to be set into motion, and until then the Kimentoh will work from the shadows, etching at the pillars of the Priesthood's power.

No information exists at all on the leader of the Demon Mask Faction, Kiryu Kouga (also called *Kouga the Dragonfang*). Even the highest members of the order do not have a single piece of information about who he is under that demon mask. Kouga will contact the leaders when he puts a plan in motion, wherever they may be. That is all they need to know.

KUZE-SHU **AN ELITE ORDER OF SPECIALISTS** **UNDER THE DIRECT CONTROL OF THE** **PRIESTHOOD**

The *Kuze-Shu*, or Kuze Order, is a special mercenary group which was organized by a Phoenix sect monk of that name. The Kuze Monk is under secret orders direct from the Priesthood, and the order follows him. The Kuze Order has one single purpose: To protect the great capital city of Jinrai from the enemies of the Priesthood. The word "Kuze-Shu" comes from the characters meaning "suffering, justice, and group", implying that the Kuze Order is an allegiance of people who will do whatever it takes, undergo any hardship, and cause any amount of suffering in order to fulfill their duties as protectors of the Priesthood.

The Kuze Monk (His true name was unknown) traveled from place to place in Tenra looking for skilled people who would make good protectors. He then assisted them in their training: Alone at first, and then together as a team, improving their abilities and helping them work together within a group. The Kuze Order he formed became the linchpin of the defense of the capital, an invincible combat team strengthened through fierce training, magic, medicine, and through the powers of their unique abilities.

Until the events of the Fall of Jinrai, the Kuze-Shu existed as an elite secretive task force, given orders in secret to protect the city of Jinrai from dangers of war and conspiracy. As a team, they functioned much like a combination of secret service, spy, and special weapons and tactics force. Surprisingly few wars or assassinations broke out in or near Jinrai: Surely some of this is due to the Priesthood's untouchable spy network, keen machinations and hidden technologies. However a great deal of the credit goes to the Kuze Order and the missions they worked in secret for the Priesthood.

What happened, then, when the Priesthood split apart into the Northern and Southern Courts after the Fall of Mount Jinrai?

For a time, the Kuze-Shu was divided and in conflict. Some of the members believed they should follow this new Northern Court. When the Southern Court appeared, some members believed that they should follow the more pure dynasty. Yet others thought to disband the order altogether. Eventually, they decided to split the Kuze-Shu into two factions: One faction would protect Genshikyo, the floating capital city of the Northern Court, and the other faction would watch over New Jinrai, the new home of the Southern Court. The Northern Court faction of the Kuze Order called themselves the Blue Dragon Order, and the Southern Court faction of the Kuze Order changed their name to the Adamantine Order. The Northern Court Blue Dragon Order would be led by One-Eyed Saikuro, and the Southern Court Adamantine Order would be led by Ran the Meikyo User.

Their original leader, the Kuze Monk, had died long ago, but his indomitable will was sealed into a meikyo soul mirror. Ran the Meikyo User—an extremely talented user of soul mirrors—was able to duplicate his very soul into two meikyo, entrusting one of each to each of the two orders. Each of the orders now has their own incarnation of their great leader the Kuze Monk, one born into the Blue Dragon Order as the Blue Dragon Monk, and one born into the Adamantine Order as the Adamantine Monk. In doing so, the Kuze Monk became practically immortal and is now the spiritual leader of each of the orders.

By splitting the soul into two, though, over time differences started to show in the personalities of the Kuze Monk. Over time, they—as well as the orders that they guide—began to grow and change differently because of their experiences after the split. Even so, the two orders do not war with each other directly; rather, they spend their energy protecting their court of the Priesthood, hoping that one day the two courts will rejoin.

THE HIDDEN 28TH CHAMBER

CLAWS OF THE PHOENIX

The Phoenix sect is the largest order of organized Buddhist belief in the land of Tenra. They hold influence over entire nations and have an extensive network of agents who work for them in the light and shadows of society. Samurai, sorcerer-monks (Buddhist monks also trained in Taoist onmyojutsu magic), and warrior monks fill the ranks of the active agents who work directly for the temple. These monks form an army which defends the temple and its interests from being attacked. However, one should not mistake this force for a purely defensive army.

In the violent history of Tenra, belief is a strong force. It can become an obstacle for leaders who want to have absolute control over their own people. People who believe in another power or force higher than the lords of Tenra will be hard to conquer and break. This is why the roots of belief—the organized Buddhist religious sects of Tenra—come under immense political pressure, or even occasionally outright attack, when they get in the way of those seeking power or influence. The world is also filled with ayakashi, monsters which often prey on the believers of Buddhism. Some have reached inside the order, corrupting monks from within. Monks have long since trained with weapons and armed themselves to protect their beliefs. They defend themselves, their temples and their believers as they attempt to help their order spread and thrive.

As the Phoenix sect grew and spread across Tenra, the leaders of the sect recognized the fact that simply defending themselves from fey monsters and mysterious entities, the internal attacks of heretics and splitting sects, and the occasional threatening regents and lords, was not good enough. “A good offense is the best defense”: This was taken to heart as the Phoenix sect explored ways to attack the roots of its problems. They began to organize a group of monks within the order who would seek and destroy dangers to the order: Namely, the fey creatures that

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prey upon people.

The heads of the order started to label the fey creatures that haunted the realm heresies, as their very existence was an imposition to the salvation of the believers of the faith. From there, it was decided that an order was needed to operate in secret to ferret out the natural evils of the world. These heresies threatened the faith and lives of the believers, and so they must be exterminated wherever they were encountered.

A high monk named Gamou Douan ordered a gathering of monks within the Phoenix sect: Monks who were known to be particularly strong keepers of the faith, and monks who were known to be skilled at hunting demons and other ayakashi. They became “The Hidden 28th Chamber of the Merciful Phoenix Sect”, also known simply as “The 28th Chamber”, a task force created with the sole purpose of destroying demons and other creatures that harmed the Phoenix sect.

The Phoenix sect is founded on the doctrine of “The Salvation of the People”. For this reason, they could not publicly maintain an organization which would potentially be required to harm or kill other people, even if it meant that in the long run they were saving lives. This is why the 28th Chamber is an entirely informal order and there is no mention of this order in any Phoenix sect documents, scriptures, missives or other writings. The sect maintains absolute secrecy from the outside world, and most Buddhist monks—even high ranked monks—know nothing of this force. Anyone who joins this order is immediately considered to be dead, and information on them within the order will be changed to reflect that. They are given new monk names, and some may even change their looks depending on the situation.

The order mainly uses the magical secrets of Buddhism, as well as religious doctrine merged with onmyojutsu, to attack their enemies. However, most members are also experts with direct combat as well. For example, one of the veterans of the order who often shows up in dealings with the Hidden 28th

Chamber is a monk named Rapture (His full monk name is “Rapture, the Monk of the Keen Eye”). Rapture is extremely skilled with melee weapons, and always carries with him his Buddhist ringed staff which secretly hides a blade within. His specialty is dispatching fey monsters with his sword. He performs a fearsome version of *iai-jutsu* (quick-draw sword fighting) which is so fast that it is said that the human eye has trouble following his movements. Rapture quickly dispatches monsters, sending their souls to the afterlife at the end of his blade.

There is also a team of onmyoji monks who are skilled with performing the samurai surgery, crafting mechanica, or manipulating meikyo soul mirrors for the order. Monks of the 28th Chamber who turn into asura often have their souls wiped clean of suffering by a monk and trapped within a meikyo rather than sent to the afterlife. When a new member joins the 28th Chamber, they can also pick up these esoteric new skills just as easily as they adopt their new name.

When the Hidden 28th Chamber hears that there is a new “heresy” about, they immediately move in to investigate.

Often they will come by rumors that ayakashi or oni are wandering near populated areas, inflicting harm upon the people. These rumors will drift from temple to temple until one of the members of the 28th Chamber hears of it. From that point, an operation to hunt down and destroy this heresy is set into motion. They will go anywhere in Tenra, even leaping across continents if need be, to hunt down and destroy the enemies of the Buddha.

Usually, the members of the order work by themselves or with a partner. The current leader of the Hidden 28th Chamber is Black-Red Sky (His full monk name is “Black-Red Sky, the Monk Born of the Era of Corruption”) and he decides who to assign to a particular operation after considering their unique skills and the risks involved in the mission. If it gets back to Black-Red Sky that the mission failed, then he sends more monks. The

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Phoenix sect must not yield or fall to the enemies of the Buddha.

The Hidden 28th Chamber of the Merciful Phoenix Sect also acts as a secret internal investigation unit within the Phoenix sect itself. They overturn the unpleasant secrets in hidden temples far and wide. They root out corruption from within the order. If they find that there is something or someone that is corrupting the order from within (for example, a corrupt Buddhist monk who uses her status for evil, wealth, or irredeemable debauchery) then the 28th Chamber will put an end to it decisively, using even assassination if needed. If a high monk at a temple dies of mysterious reasons and another monk is quickly chosen to step in and take their place, chances are that the 28th Chamber was behind it.

Now, by itself, the order greatly benefits the Phoenix sect. The monks of the 28th Chamber all believe in their mission, which is the salvation of the people of Tenra. To that end, the 28th Chamber will willingly and easily sacrifice their lives to stop a rampaging ayakashi demon, or to secretly assassinate a local lord who is causing great suffering to the believers of the Phoenix sect. They will also secretly ferret out fallen monks within the order—those monks who are so evil that they cannot be turned back to the path of righteousness, or monks who have done great evils in the name of Buddhism—and end their reign of terror quietly. While there is a great potential for misuse and abuse, the 28th Chamber has historically been a true, righteous, and pristine order that harms only in the name of the salvation of the people of Tenra.

The only problem is that the reasons for the existence of the Hidden 28th Chamber have been changing little by little, over the course of many years.

Their basic belief and mission, “Destroy the Enemies of the Buddha”, have, of course, not changed. However, those “Enemies of the Buddha” have recently taken on a new meaning: No longer simply monstrous demons and spirits, or corrupt monks who spread evil, the interpretation of “The

Enemies of the Buddha” has started to include groups who are generally opposed to the Phoenix sect.

The 28th Chamber’s changes have started to become more apparent since they have begun to attack other sects of Buddhism. No longer content with destroying evil sects, they have started to turn even on the other two great sects of Buddhism, the Bright Lotus and Ebon Mountain sects. There are even rumors that Bright Lotus and Ebon Mountain monks are dying under the same mysterious circumstances that coincide with 28th Chamber assassinations.

There are other stories told—by those few who even know of the order’s existence—like that the 28th Chamber has recently been in conflict with the Kuze Order several times. Does it mean that the Phoenix sect now believes that the Shinto Priesthood is an enemy of Buddhism? Everyone knows that the Phoenix sect has a very close relationship with the Priesthood and that they are on friendly terms officially, so this recent news has been very disturbing.

It’s not clearly known if the head monk is ordering these apostasies, or if it’s all the work of a single man, the monk named Black-Red Sky. The individual monks of the Hidden 28th Chamber must not doubt or refuse Black-Red Sky’s orders, though: Doing so means losing their faith in what they were chosen to do, and denying the very reasons for their existence. A painful schism—its actions and aftermath held in secret—seems inevitable.

MEMBERS OF THE ORDER

Since the Hidden 28th Chamber of the Merciful Phoenix Sect is an informal and secretive order with a disavowed existence, it is hard to get an idea of its makeup. Here are some of the members of the order, whose existence has been confirmed.

ZEDAISHU

THE SWORD-ART OF THE ONI PEOPLE

Under the leadership of the capable Makuu Nindo, the Makuu army was able to overthrow the government at Kikoku and create a land for the oni people. The Makuu Nindo Revolt was expertly planned and executed by the rebellion's leader, but we cannot ignore the influence of the Zedaishu in the final victories of that campaign.

The Zedaishu order was formed by oni and half-oni who came from far and wide to gather in Kikoku, sympathetic to Makuu Nindo's cause. For the most part, these oni covered their horns to live hidden in human cities, or maintained their identity as they lived in human society, suffering abuse at the hands of the humans.

Together, these refugees created a sword technique jointly called Zedai-ryu. They created an order that was crafted in the ideals of Makuu Nindo, an order which expressed their unique oni identity instead of attempting to cover it up. Zedai-ryu actively employs the unique abilities of the oni people: Their *resonance* powers of telepathy and telekinesis.

The word *Zedai* comes from an old Tenra-Japanese expression meaning "showing one's ornamental hairpin for all to see". In this situation, the "ornamental hairpin" of the oni people is, of course, their unique horns. The oni picked up on this expression, taking it to mean, "To live without hiding the fact that they are oni". It expresses their ideal of independence, and has recently gained a wide following especially among younger oni.

The fundamentals of the Zedai-ryu sword technique involve foreseeing the movement of one's enemies. This can be done by the oni by using their native resonance abilities to sense and manipulate the sha, the gossamer-like strings of intangible power that blanket the world. This technique has become a blade of justice to restore the rights of oni and half oni: They have been oppressed for generations, and only they can wield the supernatural power required to use this technique.

At first, the Zedaishu numbered less than a dozen.

As the oni gathered in Kikoku, joining the forces of Makuu Nindo and aiding in the rebellion, their numbers swelled. By the time of the final battle of the rebellion against the domain of Kikoku—the Battle of Flowing Grass—the Zedaishu had over one hundred members.

After the Makuu army won the war, Makuu Nindo changed the written name of the Zedaishu order, replacing the Japanese character for *ornamental hairpin* with the character for sake. This comes from the famous speech that the venerable oni monk made at the end of the war, in which he stated, "Now, at long last, we oni have a land of our own. We no longer have to hide our identity, or live in the shadows. We can rest and drink *sake* under the light of the warming sun."

There were six who created the original Zedaishu order, and yet none of them assumed leadership of the group. However, at the end of the Makuu Nindo Revolt, the only member of those original six still alive was Sendou Anna. She became the default leader of the order, and still leads the Zedaishu today.

Even though the Zedaishu helped the Makuu army win the revolution in Kikoku, the day to day situation of the oni people is still very severe. For example, with the appearance of mass-produced kimenkyo technologies like armours and kongohki, there has been a steep increase in demand for heart engines—the steel-covered gem-like perpetual engines of spiritual energy which are actually the very hearts of the oni people.

Currently, the Zedaishu is keeping busy protecting the oni people all over the world. If they hear news that a large army is moving out to hunt oni for heart gems, they would definitely show up in that domain and put a stop to it. They battle atrocities head-on, be it an army bent on genocide, or the powerful or greedy leaders who dispatched that army in pursuit of their own interests.

THE ZEDAISHU STRAY

There were some oni who refused to follow Makuu Nindo's drastic changes, and preferred to keep themselves apart from him and his followers. Even though Makuu had the blessing of the oni god Dii-Go, his ways were too wild, his measures too extreme, for many individual oni as well as oni tribes.

Within the Zedaishu, there was also a group of people who had the same thoughts. They were eventually labeled "The Zedaishu Stray", oni who had gone against the very will of Dii-Go.

Most of them become vagrants and wanderers. For the identity of the oni people, it is impossible to go against the will of Yi-Yil and Dii-Go: One oni is connected to all oni, and all oni are one. Thus, stray members of the Zedaishu take on an existence that is neither oni nor human, outcasts of both worlds.

THE HYAKKI SWARM STEEL KILLING MACHINES

The technique used to seal souls away in meikyo mirrors is far from perfect, no matter how deeply the process is studied and refined. Sometimes kongohki regain the memories of their previous life (even though they were designed to be sealed tightly away) and start to rampage indiscriminately. When that happens, it is impossible to control them.

Most kongohki begin to lash out violently if they regain their memories. They died as an asura in their previous life, so their memories are usually primal, fearful, and violent. Only the ones who are strong enough of will to accept the crimes against humanity that their machine body performed in this life, or evil enough to revel in the sins they committed as a kongohki, can come to accept what has happened. They can control themselves, finding a new sense of self with their regained memories.

The Hyakki Swarm (expanded, their name is "The Hundred-Machine Ninja Swarm") is a group of those kongohki who have regained their memories. They have decided to use their new body and

their new life for nothing more than the pursuit of destruction and fulfillment of their basest desires. They offer their unique services to the highest bidder, reveling in the completion of cruel, inhumane tasks.

The Hyakki Swarm is a group of demons who need no food, no rest, and have but one goal: Absolute destruction. They put up a front of a mercenary army for hire. But in truth, they will not stop until they have destroyed every village and killed every last living creature on Tenra.

THE FIVE FROM KASUMIDANI NINJAS FOR HIRE, FEARED BY MANY

It's said of this group of wanderers, "They'd even work for Hell if the devils paid them enough." They are a group of five elite ninjas who call themselves "The Five from Kasumidani". Though they call themselves ninjas, the abilities they have are not limited to ninjutsu. Amongst the five, they have various skills like sword arts, Taoist magic, and the use of annelids.

They are known to move always as a five-man team, and never take on a challenge alone. They have learned early on to work together flawlessly: Five skilled veterans means five times the ability brought to any challenge.

Their principles and outlook are simple. They will help anyone who pays them. That's all.

The Five from Kasumidani will somehow find people who have both a lot of money, and a lot of deep secrets. They offer their services to those people, helping them take care of the root of those secrets and making them disappear. They gain the favor of those people, and soon after, a contract is drawn up which trades a large sum of money in exchange for their help.

The reasons why they are so particular about money, even though amongst them, they clearly have so much power, are unknown. Where the

WITHIN THE SHADOWS OF TENRA

money goes after it is earned is also cloaked in mystery.

The key to the mystery may be within the name of their order, a place called “Kasumidani”, and a figure named “the liege”, of whom they often speak of in whispers.

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