

Kesh

Culture: African with Arabic influence (12th Century)

Primary Race: Human (Kesh) 67%

Secondary Races:

- 3% Human (Crusaders)
- 12% Tasloi
- 9% Ogres
- 6% Yuan-ti
- 2% Giants (Jungle)
- 1% Rakshasa

Race Status and Relations

The dark-skinned native humans of Kesh are by far the dominant race of this exotic continent. They are present in every place other races are found, and are the only true masters of their land. Most are affiliated with one of the continent's many clans, and live out their days in a close relationship with the land around them.

The clans vary dramatically in their goals and values, but certain traditions are strong among all of them. In particular, a native's first loyalty is to his clan, and his second is to his family. A man who commits atrocities against outsiders but remains true to his clan and family is considered worthy of respect, even by his enemies. Intermarriage between the clans is uncommon but not unknown, and is frequently practiced to seal alliances. Slavery is also common, and is the usual fate of those captured in battle or exchanged as hostages between hostile clans.

In general, the natives do not marry among the other races, but a few rare exceptions exist. Interbreeding is more common, resulting in a small population of mulatto humans and the occasional half-ogre. Mating between natives and Yuan-ti is common among the Vis'ra, but the children of such unions are invariably Yuan-ti rather than a hybrid race.

The northern coastal regions of the continent are dominated by a small population of crusaders from the Five Kingdoms, primarily devotees of Panteous and Uriah. Ostensibly drawn to Kesh to fight in religious wars, they are more often motivated by the lure of unclaimed lands and the natural riches of the continent. The north is rife with intrigues between the two factions, who have set up about a half dozen city-states governed loosely on the Kystfeldan model. Powerful knights have eagerly adopted the Kesh customs of slavery and bigamy, but have been slow to learn the hazards of ignoring tribal culture and traditions. The natives take advantage of them in any way possible, making a profitable living by trade and playing the various factions off each other. Even those who are enslaved by the crusaders have been known to achieve positions of great influence among their "masters."

The presence of the crusaders has not yet aroused much interest among the majority of the natives, though recent expansion of the territories plundered by the northerners has aroused a good deal of resentment. A movement is building just south of the crusader regions, where a chieftain named Asante Zuberi is attempting to rally the neighboring clans into a larger united force than is traditionally common.



Kesh Sun-Mask, worn by worshippers of D'lani.

The remaining secondary races are the focus of much superstition among the natives. They are alternatively feared, worshiped, respected or ignored depending on the region. Like the natives, nonhumans frequently govern themselves by the tribal model.

Tasloi clans dwell in the central and southern jungle regions, and are universally despised by most of the other races. They live primarily by hunting and raiding, usually preying on human settlements. Ogre clans eke out an existence in a similar fashion, but are more commonly found in the plains.

The yuan-ti are revered by the Vis'ra cult and shunned by all others. Their activities are typically confined to the jungles, but occasional plots surface in the plains and even the crusader city-states. It is believed that they have spies everywhere.

Jungle giants are extremely rare, and vary in temperament as much as humans. Some form small clans, while others prefer a solitary existence. It is not uncommon to find them living and hunting in cooperation with one or more nearby human clans.

The Rakshasa live secretly in the most civilized regions, despising all other races as their inferiors. They occasionally enslave humans, but such unfortunate typically do not survive long before being eaten.

Languages

The clans of Kesh live in near-isolation most of the time. The need for reliable communication in the face of such isolation is fulfilled by a common language which is shared by all the clans. Because clans frequently do not interact with others for months or even years at a time, the formalities of this tongue are strictly observed and are not permitted to change.

The elders of each clan are charged with the responsibility of teaching children the proper, traditional form of this tongue. This task is taken very seriously,

as the survival of the clan may depend up its ability to communicate with outsiders. The system is so ingrained in Kesh culture that clansmen from the deepest southern jungle can easily communicate with city dwellers from the northern coast—not only in the same language, but with the same accent.

The native tongue of the Kesh is a power language, capable of commanding powerful magic. The need for precision when working magic further contributes to the purity of the language.

Most inhabitants of Kesh learn their language by oral tradition, but a complicated system of writing also exists which is used only by the very highly educated. The basis of this system is a 35-character phonetic alphabet, which is sufficient to represent every conceivable sound in the language. In practice, however, phonetic symbols are frequently intermingled with symbolic pictographs.

The use of pictographs in Kesh writing lends it a complexity greater than most other languages. While many of the pictographs used are common, and known even to the non-literate (notably those pertaining to animals, hunting and the gods), many others are used almost exclusively by secret societies. Different teachers focus on different symbols. (For example: the Vis'ra cult places greater emphasis on symbols representing serpents and reptiles.) Thus it is sometimes more difficult for a reader trained by one school to read the writings of an author trained by another. Whether to use a pictograph or symbol is entirely at the discretion of the writer, to the extent that it is possible for a clever reader to discern the identity of the author merely by the manner in which the symbols have been used.

Those who can read and write are commonly believed to possess supernatural or magical powers. As such, literacy in Kesh is controlled even more strictly than the oral tradition. The secrets of writing are jealously guarded by the few mage-clans, religious cults and secret societies who know them. Those who wish to become literate must have the approval of the elders of one of these societies. It is forbidden to teach Kesh writing to slaves and foreigners, and such a transgression carries a penalty of death for both the student and the teacher. Even natives who become literate without approval (or who learn it from a rival secret society) are sometimes hunted down and slain. Thus, it is not uncommon for those who are literate to conceal their knowledge.

Human crusaders speak the languages of their native lands, most frequently Kystfeldan and Versi. Lornish is used for official documents and communication between knights of different nationalities. The crusaders have made little effort to learn the local tongue, which they consider vulgar. They prefer to teach natives the vernacular of their homeland and employ them as interpreters. Mulatto children typically learn the languages of both parents.

The tasloi have their own tongue, which they speak in high, whispery voices. They can also speak the languages of monkeys and apes. About 5% of their kind have learned a pidgin version of the native tongue that they use when trading.

Ogres speak a guttural language of their own, as well as the languages of the tasloi and giants. Some also speak the native tongue.

The yuan-ti tongue is distinctive and widely feared, composed primarily of short, hissing phrases. They can also speak with any snake or snakelike creature. Those with human heads speak the native tongue as well as the languages of any human or humanoid clan nearby.

Giants speak their own language and the languages of clans of nearby humans and humanoids.

Rakshasa speak whatever language is most fashionable in the area where they are found.

Technology: Savage (Crusades in certain areas)

Government: Geriatric Oligarchy

The continent of Kesh is predominantly comprised of small clans with no central system of government. Individual clans are typically ruled by a chieftain (the oldest surviving male descendant of the clan's founder) and a council of elders.

Social Alignment: True Neutral

The clans of Kesh have widely divergent interests. Many of them struggle against their neighbors to bring about the conditions they prefer, but the net effect is a national apathy at best. Inconclusive infighting is common. A movement is gathering to unite some of the clans against the crusader city-states, but at present a vague desire to expel foreigners is the only issue upon which the various factions are in agreement.

Situations

Unusual organization, unusual social system, crusade/invasion, widespread use/tolerance of slavery.

Subsistence Systems

Agriculture, light
Banditry/Brigandage
Fishing
Forestry
Grazing/Herding
Hunting/Gathering
Mining
Raiding
Trade

Average Population Level: Sparse.

In the northern coastal regions where crusaders dwell, the population level is somewhat denser (low).

Recent Events

C.Y. 740: Plague

C.Y. 742: Raids/brigandage (crusaders)

C.Y. 744: War between crusader factions

C.Y. 748: Invasion (crusader expansion)

C.Y. 754: Rise of Asante Zuberi