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Count Your Blessings

Paul Mason ruminates on religion and everyday magic

Tékumel is a world where magic is real. A very high proportion of the population (excepting those who live in magically barren areas such as Tsolei) have personal experience of magic, and regard it in much the same way that we view electricity. In other words, they don't understand how it works, but they're rarely surprised by it unless they see something extraordinary. A peasant witnessing his first Doomkill might exhibit much the same reaction as the British visitor to Japan who comes across a wristwatch-sized TV set for the first time – though the peasant might be a little more scared!

At the same time, true magic is clearly definable. Almost all magic on Tékumel requires the sorcerer to “Reach Through” and draw other-planar power (the exception being that other planar power is not strictly essential for psychic sorcery).

In Tsolyánu, at least, magic is controlled by the temples. It therefore has a religious element. In our own world, magic also had a religious element. In a sense, religion is what happens when magic gets too populist. Many activities are rather ambiguous from this perspective. For example, the priestess of a small Avánthe shrine in the countryside south of Hauma is petitioned by a local family to bless their fields. The family offer proper gifts, both as offerings to the Goddess and by way of appreciation for the priestess's services, according to custom. The priestess proceeds to the field and performs a ritual of blessing in which she calls upon Avánthe to fructify the ground. What is going on here, considered in more rules-orientated terms? The priestess might be casting a Fructification spell. Or she may be attempting some form of divine intervention. Or maybe she's just reciting a meaningless ritual which has no objective effect on the fields. The farming family do not think about this; they don't even consider these separate possibilities. To them, a religious ritual is taking place which (they hope) will lead to a good harvest. Whether other-planar power is actually used is irrelevant.

Mummery

I think we should consider this religious role of sorcerers and non-sorcerous priests a little further. How widely does society recognise the clear-cut distinction between sorcery, which draws on other-planar power, and the grey realm of mummery, ritual and religious custom? The answer is surely: hardly at all. In his introduction to *The Book of Ebon Bindings*, Quren hiKetkolel writes: “The unlettered term all of these procedures ‘spells’, yet they have as little in common with the charms of the village witch-woman or the tribal shamans of far Chayakku as does a fish with Thenu Thendraya Peak.” In context, I think we can take ‘the unlettered’ to mean those who have not benefitted from a temple education. Even those who are aware of some of the theories of Reaching Through and The Planes Beyond are unlikely to have Tsemel Quren's depth of knowledge, and thus are unlikely to be quite so dismissive of the charms (magical or otherwise!) of the village witch- woman.

What proportion of the population are capable of using magic? Clearly enough so that every temple in every city has at least one sorcerer. Maybe even enough that almost every village has a sorcerer of some sort. So our ‘unlettered’ population has experience of magic, but not so much that they are any less prone than humans of any other era to turn to charms, fakery and the gods. In the last of these, of course, they are not mistaken. The gods really do have the power to affect the course of events—though whether this only occurs in situations of ‘Divine Intervention’ (as described in the *EPT* rules) or at other times too is a subject I want to come back to later.

First, I want to discuss how to represent ‘grey magic’ a little more in the game. Because of the clear rules distinction between other-planar magic and foolery, players and referees often tend to glibly dismiss blessings, charms, talismans, and so on as being entirely worthless. This is not really defensible. Tsolyánu is a superstitious society. Those infamous bazaar sorcerers simply would not exist if they had no credibility at all. What's more, there is good reason for thinking that bazaar sorcerers do have power of some kind. Most talismans and charms bear glyphs, some of which might be accurate enough representations of a demon glyph to allow the entity a slight influence on this plane. Whether the influence will be quite what the bazaar sorcerer claims it to be is another matter. (A little learning can be a dangerous thing...)

Secondly, bazaar sorcerers are likely to practice astrology and divination. (These are also offered by temples, of course.) Such disciplines generally don't involve Reaching Through. Yet they are essential to Tsolyáni society. Whatever the personal views of the referee and players, as far as the population of Tsolyánu is concerned, astrology is true.

What this means is that the referee should provide an atmosphere of sufficient ambiguity that grey magic can thrive. This doesn't require that talismans and charms provide bonuses to rolls, or otherwise have a rules effect on the game. However, it does require that the players have every reason to believe that such a thing is possible. If a character believes that obtaining a shield dedicated to Nurgashte will give him some extra protection in combat, it makes it much easier to role-play if the player can believe that it is at least possible the shield might have some slight influence on the rules.

Or what of the lay priest of Belkhánu who is careful to obtain a talisman against the undead before venturing into the Underworld? He might obtain an enchanted device which, when activated, casts the appropriate spell to repel Sárku's dread servitors. More likely, if he is not so financially fortunate, is that he'll obtain a general talisman which offers more generalised benefits. What he will be hoping for is a slight edge. For example, in situations where an undead has a choice of several people to attack, it might perhaps tend to go for the one who isn't wearing such a talisman. Or if there's a possibility that the undead might withdraw from a melee, the talisman might make it more likely. As I say, this doesn't in fact have to be true, but the player should be given the opportunity to believe that it might be.

Wallpaper

It has been suggested that charms and talismans are such an integral part of Tsolyáni culture that they can be effectively ignored in play. In other words, it can be Assumed that all characters are carrying such charms, and that they effectively cancel out. This is fair enough, but it does miss the opportunity to stress the superstitious, magico-religious nature of Tsolyáni thinking. It may seem like tediously unnecessary book-keeping to note down every charm or talisman carried by each character, but it could add much to the game. For example, such talismans will act as smoke screens for true other-planar magical devices. Having defeated a powerful Ksárul sorcerer, an unscrupulous party might decide to strip him of his magical possessions. Since he would be accoutred from head to toe with charms, talismans, wards and the like, it would be less obvious which was a genuine other-planar device and which wasn't. Given a bit of time, most parties would be able to sift through these using magic, but in a tense situation they might not have that luxury.

An interesting challenge might be to play a ‘sorcerer’ who possesses no psychic ability. Such a character's power would be based on a kind of mass psychology. If an imposing priest of Hrü'ü, complete with demon mask, declares to a bunch of villagers that their lack of hospitality for the impoverished nobleman he is accompanying is so displeasing to ‘certain occult patrons’ that their well water will henceforth taste bad, the villagers might decide it's safer to make at least some effort. Such a character would concern himself with rituals, portents, charms, astrology and the like. He might also find that a little prestidigitation goes a long way.

And of course, many real sorcerers also dabble in the grey areas. A Psychic sorcerer, asked by his clan to provide a charm to protect its latest mercantile venture, would surely oblige them—even if he privately doubted the charm's efficacy.

Divine Access

To consider a justification for why such grey magic might be more than just delusion and fakery, let's return to the Issue of divine intervention. For whatever reason, the Pavár deities periodically manifest in the world in response to requests from their worshippers. Sometimes they will fulfil the requests, while on other occasions they will utterly extinguish the poor soul who had the temerity to disturb them. But is this extreme manifestation the only way in which the gods meddle in the affairs of lesser races? I don't think so. Since the concepts of sin and damnation don't exist, the worship offered to the gods is probably mostly of the “If I please my deity, he will look favourably on me” variety. Some may be motivated to worship by sheer awe—but most people, flawed humans that they are, approach worship as a form of contract. Those temple rituals which don't employ other-planar power are, in effect, a different kind of magic. By acting in such a way as to please the deity, the priesthood hopes for a general benefit. In a way, they are attempting to obtain divine intervention, but of a rather more diffuse kind than the summoning described above. The Book of Ebon Bindings makes it clear that naming a demon on this plane may allow the demon some form of access. This same principle might then apply to the gods also. By performing a ritual, priests mollify their mighty object of worship, at the same time encouraging access to this plane for the influence of the deity. The gods are obviously beings of extraordinary mental powers, and thus are capable of exerting influence in a form other than personal intervention. However, being the fickle masters they are, such intervention would be unreliable.

The same principle governs religious ritual observance all the way down from the mighty rituals of supplication to the casual blessing of a rural priestess. In *The Man of Gold*, western Tsolyáni touch Harsan because they believe contact with a priest of Thúmis will bring them good luck. However sceptical you may be as players and referees, you can't deny that such belief is the reality in Tsolyánu. To be an atheist or agnostic on Tékumel is madness. In such a culture, superstition is the ruling paradigm.

Placebo

I have provided some justifications for allowing ‘grey magic’ and blessings to have a rules effect (or to appear to) on the game. Another persuasion for the cynics is the well known placebo effect. If a warrior bears a charm which he believes imbues him with some of the strength of Hrugga, then he will fight with more confidence. In effect, the charm may well work simply because he believes in it.

I am not arguing that the effects of grey magic and blessings should ever be so strong as to eclipse (or even approach) other-planar magic. But in order to convey the true superstitious nature of Tsolyánu, it's important to recognise its presence, and maybe cultivate a little belief among the players. I haven't included any concrete rules suggestions because so many differing systems are used among Tékumel players, but it should be obvious to referees that if they ever do allow grey magic to have a rules effect, it should be weaker than the weakest other-planar magic.

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