

Shogunate of the Death-Gods

"I have found the way of the warrior is death." - Emmadai-O

There comes a time in the life of every man when he reflects on his life and looks to the sky. He faces his mortality. In the Shogunate of the Death-Gods, the Samurai call this "looking to Yama". It is a phrase with complex associations. A Samurai who is looking to Yama is a learned, cunning opponent. He values his life but he knows the limits of its worth. He has sons to carry on his legacy, so his duty to Clan has been fulfilled. Therefore, he knows the conditions under which he would sacrifice his very life. A Samurai who is looking to Yama may walk in the Way of Annihilation, preparing himself for passage into the Wheel of Karma. He is a seasoned foe, cynical to the ways of men and Kami, unyielding in his devotion to the Shogun, Emmadai-O, whose company he longs for. If your foe is looking to Yama, defeating him will be costly.

Looking to Yama is a weakness in young Samurai, though. They have not perfected the blade, so any focus they pour into the Way of Annihilation will leave them vulnerable. They have not read the classics and they still hold faith in unseen spirits. They have no sons. Reflection brings only confusion without end. He is blind to the machinations of his enemies, lacking the wisdom to distinguish friend from foe. Looking to Yama is not looking at your enemy. The youthful Samurai should not pretend at playing blind swordsman. He should keep his vision resolutely upon the Chrysanthemum Lands and her splendors. Life is everywhere, but it is not eternal. There is plenty of time to cast one's gaze to the Yama Lands.

The Shogunate of the Death-Gods has two distinct regions; the wild Chrysanthemum Lands and the subdued Yama Lands. The Chrysanthemum Lands are a series of volcanic islands atop a sapphire-colored brine ocean. The southern-most islands glow a brilliant green, like a serpent coiled around unripened bananas. Even the black igneous rock that juts from the sea has a matte texture that makes the ocean that much more radiant in its blue. In the central islands, particolored blossoms and burgundy maples make up the painter's palate of the region. Fortresses, made of red lacquered wood and blue glazed ceramics, dominate every location of military importance. The islands of the north are considered dour by their neighbors, but even they are a riot of neon yellows produced by sulfurous springs and deep crimson where blood, spilled in the high mountains snows, froze and never thawed.

History of the Chrysanthemum Lands

The history of the Chrysanthemum Lands is a tale scripted, like theater, by those in power. You will find many accounts. Some are similar while others diverge and conflict wildly. Some are ancient and discredited. Others are new and artificial. It may be that the truth lies somewhere between them, but this is simplistic. To put a fine point on all of this, let us say merely that objective history is impossible to claim in the Chrysanthemum Lands. And, if we are to say that real truth is impossible to find in this world of Karmic illusion, why then not make history yet another tool at man's disposal? Why not compose the best, most useful history? This may be the Shogun's thinking, for the man himself has provided us with the two most popular histories. They are mutually exclusive; they cannot both be true in a literal sense. The first account was the official recollection of the Yamato government. It was the only state-sanctioned telling of history for uncountable eons. When that government was replaced with the Shogunate, a new, more materialist perspective became the official point of view. Even after generations, the old history is still alive and well in the minds of the common people. There is also a third account of history, provided by the Tengu, strange, immortal forest creatures. Their stories fly in the face of every official account.

The Tale of the Chrysanthemum Lands (The Yamato's Account)

When the Sun Goddess woke to the first morning, dragons played upon the ocean. The Sun Goddess made a chain of islands to recline upon. This made it the most sacred place in the universe; a land of plenty, fit to comfort a goddess. It flourished with plant and animal life and it was populated by Kami, spirit creatures. They were beings of holiness and goodness, but insubstantial and flighty. The Sun Goddess set the sun in motion and left for a palace in the sky. There, she was attended by dozens of celestial suitors who continuously vie for her affections. Their motions in the heaven drive the fates of men, for they influence the will of the Sun Goddess whose fate decides everything. Her will is verdure and bounty, for she is a loving custodian.

Because the various interactions with her suitors, the Sun Goddess was forced to create humanity or else face the prospect of marriage. She chose to make creatures in her image, so that she would not be forced to wed the assembled Pantheon. The process was an ongoing one, with a number of failures, including creatures called Tengu. Although more ancient than human beings, they are bestial and crude. When the Sun Goddess finally got it right, she turned away and in the blink of an eye they had multiplied geometrically. They stratified along family lines, forming elaborate Clans in every local regions. When the Sun Goddess realized the plight of the people, she sent a great unifier from outside of the tribal Clans. He had been trained in the arts of war by the ferocious Tengu and was fated, by the Sun Goddess herself, to emerge victorious in any struggle.

The unifier gave himself the title of Yamato, a title higher even than Emperor, for it carries connotations of heavenly priesthood as well as royalty. Emperors can emerge by the chaos of the mortal realms, whereas the Yamato can only exist through the will of the Sun Goddess herself. Indeed, the Yamato may very well be the most beloved suitor of the virgin Goddess. What he seeks to accomplish, he accomplishes. Despite the unending fertility of the Chrysanthemum Lands, he grew dissatisfied with his people's mortality. It was, he felt, a great waste of wisdom and virtue. Death, he felt, must be conquered for mankind to become enlightened like the Kami native to the Chrysanthemum Lands. He entered a period of deep study and meditation. When he emerged, he had undergone a technique which had made himself immortal. This process involves brutal martial arts and a rigorous and dangerous regimen of meditation. Although the process took years to master, the Yamato bade his family and government to retreat to the monasteries to perform this technique. Death had been conquered and the Sun Goddess smiled upon the world.

The Yamato government was highly centralized. The world was ruled locally by many Clans who took orders from the Yamato directly in his glorious palace. This meant that all the power was centralized in the Yamato's court. This kept wars from burning across the countryside. Conflicts were settled at court, fairly and under the scrutiny of the Yamato directly. Consequently, the military was a handful of specialist Clans. The government was immortal, so the notion of war had been made obsolete. Mankind was free to enlighten themselves to live in the spirit land of the Kami. The bureaucracy, called the Kuge (Pronounced: KU-Gay), were more powerful by far than the local rulers because of their closeness to the Yamato. This is by design. Loyalty, in the Kuge, was the means of gaining power. In contrast, the Clans comprised the warrior class, called the Buke (Pronounced: BU-Kay). Although the Clans were unified and made no war on one another, they put down rebellions regularly and were therefore a warrior people. The Kuge were immortal, one and all, while the Buke did not often have the available time to devote to meditation. Therefore, the Buke were the lesser nobility in all ways.

This is where the Yamato's account ends. Indeed, this is where the Yamato abdicates the

Throne of the Chrysanthemum Lands. The secrets of immortality leaked to the common people and the world drowned in human flesh. The Yamato returns to the world and slays the Immortals, reclaiming leadership as the Shogun. He reveals that his name is Emmadai-O, Lord of the Death-Gods. His new order repudiates the existences of the Sun Goddess and the Kami. What follows is the later Shogunate's account.

The History of the Shogunate of the Death-Gods (The Shogun's Account)

The Yamato Era

Mankind arises from the ocean by some naturalistic phenomenon, perhaps by the action of a dragon or the moon. The Shogun rejects the notion of the Sun Goddess and the Kami: they were ever fiction. The Way of Annihilation, because of its primitive fatalism, is therefore the true spiritual path. The process by which the world is created is therefore a mystery for philosophers. It may have simply always been. The primitive early people of the Chrysanthemum Lands invented notions of Sky Goddesses and Kami against the will of their betters. In time, the primitive people were conquered by a great scholar who named himself the Yamato. Taking advantage of the common superstition of the time, he claimed divine rights for expediency's sake, realizing truth would ever evade the commoners. The people prospered under his rule all the same.

It came to be that they begged the Yamato to extend their lives and being a compassionate lord, he sought out the relevant secrets. The process was relatively simple and much faster than anticipated, most of the population were Immortals. The Yamato was all the more loved but it was clear that the will of the people had a number of unintended consequences. Children were no longer permitted to succeed their parents. Modes of thought stagnated in the absence of new blood. After a few hundred years, much of the habitable land was being occupied. There were huge food shortages. It was clear that the will of the people may have been mistaken. It came to be that life became, essentially, worthless in the face of eternal starvation and exposure. In order to undo the mistake, the Yamato left the Chrysanthemum Lands to seek a secret. It had become far too noisy for effective meditation.

The Yamato discovered a place beyond the sky, made of nothing but cobblestones, upon which were written a frightening sutra of emptiness. It took a hundred years, but the Yamato was enlightened in this place, which he called the Yama Lands in opposition to the Chrysanthemum Lands. He called the sutra which he discovered the Way of Annihilation. In naming it, its contents became words of power. Like a sword, the Way of Annihilation does nothing to promote life. The sutra was intended to bring merciful and necessary death to the fertility of the Chrysanthemum Lands. The Yamato had also learned that he had been wrong to coddle his people. He would reveal the truth of everything, immortality and world history alike. In his absence, the number of Immortals had increased exponentially. They overflowed the land and into the sea, living lives of eternal drowning. The Yamato rescued the Kuge, the court officials, and gave them all swords with which to spill their entrails. Seeing that they were unwilling, the Yamato dropped to his knees and declared his true name to be Emmadai-O. He bade his government to follow his lead and disembowled himself in front of the entire Kuge. Those that were loyal to his word returned from the Wheel of Karma as Shinigami, Gods of Death. The shade of Emmadai-O was there as well, transformed through the Way of Annihilation. He declared himself Shogun, supreme commander of the Death-Gods. They would be the true deities in the absence of real Kami or Goddess.

The Shogunate and Bakufu Established

The Chrysanthemum Lands wallowed in abject suffering for a while longer while the Shinigami trained for war. One year later, the old temples where once the people sacrificed to the Kami

shook in the night and the Shinigami invaded the Chrysanthemum Lands. They exterminated all of the Immortals, staining the Chrysanthemum Lands entirely red with human blood. Because the old government had passed through the Wheel of Karma, the Buke, or samurai class, inherited the rights of governance. In this way, the Clans shall always check one another and ensure that no single power could rise and be tempted to oppose the Shogun. It has now been 400 years, but the wickedness of those Immortals in ancient times lingers on. Their Souls are forced to work off the great debt of life they stole from their future incarnations. They return as Bakemono, monsters whose only purpose is to be slain by heroes to work through incarnations as quickly as possible. After so many years, the Immortals do not seem to be working off their wickedness with any expediency. The Bakemono plague the Chrysanthemum Lands, but the Shinigami send them through the Wheel of Karma when they can.

The courtiers of the Kuge are mostly all slain and forgotten. Now, it is the warrior caste of old, the Buke, that controls the Chrysanthemum Lands. The Buke rules as they wish among themselves but are given orders by the Shogun and his Shinigami. This is the Bakufu Government, currently ruled by the powerful Shiga Clan, but this government exists in a state of never-ending civil war. The Clans rise and fall as is their nature. Usually, the narrative of this struggle is one supremely powerful capitol Clan opposed by the united force of the Clans of the surrounding islands. The nature of the struggle is usually decisive and rarely destroys large segments of civilization or infrastructure. It does, however, mean the complete annihilation of at least one Clan although it is possible that multiple may be doused in the period of a generational war. This means that becoming the most powerful Clan virtually assures that, at some point, one's Clan will be extinguished to the man. This is the nature of the thing. It is pleasing to the Shogun: it sends him hardened, brave warriors and near-endless supply of grave goods to fuel his glorious ghostly empire. It keeps his people tough and fatalistic. These, it seems, are the virtues the Shogun finds most valuable.

One hundred years ago, because of unique events, the struggle for control of the Bakufu took an unexpected and dire turn. The Clans united along roughly equal lines, creating two extremely powerful Clans of equal power. This period is known as the Tachiuchi Wars (War of Opposition) and is the bloodiest era of the Shogunate since the slaying of the Kuge. Although it was a period of unparalleled brutality, it is also the era most romanticised in song and tale, for the loss of life was beautiful to the Shogun. The two Clans of that era were the Tachi (red) and the Uchi (white). The modern Clans, Aki, Shiga, Getsui, Hana, and Gojou, descend from the victors of the Tachiuchi Wars, the Tachi. The Uchi were entirely slaughtered but their names are in no way reviled by history. Because they died in battle or of self-inflicted wounds, they are held up as paragons of Bushido. The modern Clans revere them higher than their own ancestors. Many Shinigami passed through the Wheel of Karma into their stations in the Yama Lands during the Tachiuchi Wars.

A Brief Summary of the Sutra of Life (The Daitengu's Account)

In the beginning there was a white lotus and upon it was a blue ocean. There were islands in this ocean. The two inhabitants of the place, immaterial Kami and flesh-and-blood Tengu, lived in harmony with one another. Tengu were permitted never to love, for they are wild and angry hermits first and foremost. However, two Tengu succumbed to love and married with the auspices of the Kami. Their love was sinful though, and inappropriate for those of their kind, and the children of this union were cursed. These offspring were human beings, who escaped into the wilderness to inbreed into a prideful and violent people. They set out making quite a clamor and they invented a thousand and three ways to kill each other. Tengu take pride in

their brutality and will not hesitate to sever a limb. Humans, on the other hand, are downright nasty.

I, the Great Daitengu, Lord of the Crow-Monks, sought to unify their people under one such as myself so that their people would also know the pleasures of a warrior race at peace. Flying upon an ensorcelled cloud, I visited every Tengu in the Chrysanthemum Lands and asked which of the human beings was wisest. All of the Crow-Monks agreed: Emmadai-O was clearly the most learned and thoughtful of all mortals. He was an accomplished healer, scholar, martial artist, and strategist. He was well versed in ethics and Tengu classics. He had reverence for the Kami. So I, the Great Daitengu, taught him the ways of Tengu long-life so that he could rule his people for a long time. Indeed, he conquered the whole of his people. Now, he was well taught not to give anyone the techniques of immortality. Tengu do not love, but mankind could never resist it. If the secret were to get out, it would be a crime to echo through the generations. Mankind would not resist the urge to make more of their kind with a such a gift and the result would be overpopulation and suffering on an unimaginable scale. It would damage the cycle of reincarnation forever.

Emmadai-O was an excellent leader for a time, but the weight of years sat upon him. Tengu long-life is ill suited to human beings. Reincarnation is healthy for their kind. In his hubris, he taught his peoples tales of a Sun Goddess and false Kami. He called himself Yamato and taught his people that he was an avatar of this Sun Goddess. Fearing the treachery of lessers, Emmadai-O even gave the secret of immortality to his favored underlings, in imitation of when I taught it to him. Those underlings in turn distributed it to their cronies to ensure loyalties. Emmadai-O had not treated the secret with proper reverence and his people would pay for his failure. The Kami were furious, not with human beings, but with the Tengu and consequently fled the world, never to be seen again. Mankind did not notice, but to my people, it was very much like losing one's soul.

Soon enough the harmony of the Chrysanthemum Lands had been entirely broken. Emmadai-O cleaned up his mess at the cost of his soul by slaying the Immortals, including himself. With so much blood spilled, the job was yet undone. The unquiet souls of the Immortals would not simply be content to be born as a mortal once more. They were forced to bear the shame of living as monsters, fit only to be hunted. Furthermore, when Emmadai-O became the Shogun, he plunged the world once more into a state of perpetual bloodshed. He ensured that his people would never be unified and know the joy of a warrior people at peace. The passionate rage of those slain cling to the Chrysanthemum lands, allowing them to defy reincarnation. Yokai, mad ghosts, return in wraithly form to torment the living because the way of reincarnation is broken. I, the Great Daitengu, cannot be relied upon in matters regarding human beings. Therefore, I do order all Tengu retreat from the lands of men in favor of the old wild places where once the Kami dwelt. We shall live in their houses in their absence.

The Chrysanthemum Lands

What can be said of its color that has not already been said? Let us then focus on its other qualities: the air that carries song further than other sounds. The soil which gives two rice plants for every seed planted. The graves of mothers who died giving life to twins. The Chrysanthemum Lands seem to magnify and brighten living things. Even the people who live there are in awe at the level of abundance. This is especially important because their world is, geographically speaking, quite small. Their islands are craggy and volcanic and civilization flourishes best where the sea meets the land. Only Shiga Island has any strip of land worthy of being called a plain. Even this place cannot be cultivated properly, for it has not seen a

generation in which the march of troops did not spoil the crop there like a plague of Kappa.

It is worth noting that in the Chrysanthemum Lands a slim majority of pregnancies are twins (one male and one female). In a majority of such births one twin dies in infancy, although this is by no means universal. Consequently, when times are good in the Chrysanthemum Lands, the population can explode rapidly. There is simply very little room to house teeming masses of humanity. Inevitably conflicts arise over resources of one sort or another and lives are lost. Bakemono claim a number as well.

Samurai Clans

Samurai are noble clan-based warriors who follow Bushido. In the Yamato government, they were lesser nobles and their station was called the Buke. In those days, they were pawns in the games of the decadent immortal courtiers. They were not permitted the secrets of immortality, partly because their ways were the ways of death. When all the world had stolen the secret techniques of long-life, the Samurai Clans rejected them. Even in ancient times, the Buke was, if not an out-right death cult, than certainly a fatalist sect. The Buke resented the Kuge because the Kuge lived long lives of luxury while the Buke perished face-down in enemy latrines. When Emmadai-O realized that his civilization had been betrayed by the culture of the Kuge, he committed Seppukku. Those Kuge who did not follow his lead were themselves slain by the Emmadai-O. However, because Emmadai-O rejected Kuge culture, he elevated Buke culture, and the Samurai ethos, to the level of doctrine. He named himself Shogun, supreme commander of military forces. He abolished bureaucracy, giving the Samurai Clans a mandate to govern amongst themselves as they saw fit. Who then controls the capitol? The Shogun has no preference of Clan. Ownership of the reigns of the state is a matter to be decided on the field of battle. This government is called the Bakufu (rule by Buke). The members of the Bakufu are Samurai, which means "Retainer" or "one who waits upon".

Clans come and go. Each Clan arises in a local area, but generally, through alliance, conquest, intrigue, or other method, their territory extends out. There are literally hundreds of Samurai families, but they currently fall under the umbrella of one of five greater Clans. These Clans are organized in a number of ways, but they are overseen at the top by Daimyos, or Men of Great Names. It has traditionally been the case that the most powerful Clan occupies the capitol and makes the Bakufu their puppet. This is the case by design. All Clans covet the seat of power. No Clan can hold it forever, for the jealousy of the surrounding islands inevitably draws them into an alliance. A period of chaos, called Ran (literally meaning 'Rebellion') follows whenever a ruling Clan is toppled. In this state, every Clan looks out for themselves and tries to confound the efforts of other Clans. Ran is something to be feared by the common people. Although the world is in a constant state of war, Ran chews entire clans beneath its teeth and digests them until they are forgotten to history. The worst instance of Ran was during the Tachiuchi Wars in which two mega-Clans vied against one another, breaking the established patterns of history.

Older samurai can sometimes be contrary or antagonistic to Shinigami. They've seen enough to be familiar with death and it holds no mystery or glory. They see through the lie that death is virtue in itself. It is as if by looking to Yama they have pierced the Veil of Silence. What better metaphor for cheating death than thumbing one's nose at the reapers of Souls? Consequently, Shinigami subtly try to keep the Samurai population as young as possible. This is no difficulty at all. As long as the Chrysanthemum Lands remain in turmoil there are few Samurai who survive long enough to question the nature of things. In this way, the Shinigami really are Shiso Kiesatsu, Thought Police: they simply prevent certain ideas from gaining purchase by preventing the conditions under which they would arise. The culture censors itself.

The formation of the modern Clans comes after the end of a unique period in Shogunate history. The Tachiuchi Wars ended with a single, unified, victorious Clan. Of course, the families which comprise this Clan eventually formed alliances against one another. The result of these posturings in the wake of that period of Ran are the five modern Clans. Shiga Clan arose in what is now called Gojou Island and became the most powerful of the Clans. Their conquest of the capitol made Shiga the rulers of the Bakufu. Eventually, internal rebellion within Shiga lead to a split in the Clan, as the Gojou faction of Shiga claimed ownership of their own island, renaming it after their family. Now, the Clans stand mostly allied against Shiga. However, even this alliance does not prevent wide scale warfare between the allied Clans. Inevitably, some Samurai will inadvertently insult another Clan and such insults must be repaid in blood. If a duel is satisfactory, the Clans will meet on the field of battle, alliance or otherwise. Honor is a higher priority than victory, therefore, honorable combat takes precedence over strategic alliances.

Aki (The Bloody Clan)

Pronounced: Ah-Kee

Aki Island is by far the most volcanic. It is the northernmost island as well and although it snows frequently, the land itself is not a cold one because of the heat that comes from the ground. Consequently snow is the most common precipitation but it never accumulates. Because Aki is so inhospitable it is home to a large number of Akuma. They roam the sulferous springs and come out of the badlands to steal victims to eat. The Island itself is thought of a similarly ferocious thing and the people of the other islands believe that it is a cursed place. Drawing on these fears, justified or otherwise, the local alliance of Samurai families is named after the place itself. Aki Clan take on the aspect of the land, appearing as demons of legends when they take to the battlefield.

Aki promote this image to fullest, taking the image of a snarling Akuma as their Clan's symbol. They like to think of themselves as warriors so ferocious that they lose their humanity to become better killers. Aki collect the scalps of those Samurai they have killed and this is the means by which the families give status and title. If, after defeating and killing an opponent, they still respect the opponent, they will carve out and eat their heart. This is a supreme act of honor to the Aki. Consequently, Aki are said to be a "bloody" people. Their standards are usually in shades of pink and red of blood. After at the end of a battle, Aki Samurai are almost always saturated in gore from endless beheadings and the occasional meal of a human heart. Aki usually wear the image of an Akuma or demonic Monogatari as their face-mask if they have one. The image of Aki as devil-warriors is an effective one. Gojou, Hana, and Getsui would certainly rather be allies of Aki than enemies. During the Tachiuchi Wars, the Aki family (not Clan) distinguished themselves as the most ferocious warriors. It was said that their Kajijutsu was supreme among all the Samurai. However, when the Uchi Clan was destroyed and Tachi Clan disintegrated, Aki was overwhelmingly the most aggressive in fighting for the Chrysanthemum Throne. In their haste, they alienated the other families who had once been part of Tachi Clan and this proved to keep the Throne from their hands. Instead, Shiga Clan, who proved to be superior politicians, seized the reigns of the Bakufu for themselves. The rivalry between Aki and Shiga, consequently, is quite ugly.

Getseui (The Clan of the Moon)

Pronounced: Geh-T'su-Ee

Getseui Island is just as mountainous as its cousins, but every square inch of it is covered in a very thick bamboo forest. Civilization can only be maintained by eliminating bamboo where fields, roads, and houses are to be. Their roots must be dug up periodically to keep them from simply destroying everything. This is used as a metaphor for Getseui Clan, who think of themselves less as killers of men and more as pruners of the wild flora (promoters of life).

Getseui are full of this kind of crazy, paradoxical wisdom. Their philosophy is so resolved and uncaring that it comes around to the other side to embrace whimsy and mystery in the absence of meaning. They are thought of as being a little unpredictable and manic, but the reality is that they are actually of a consistent temperament. It is just that the temperament is so complex that it can seem bewildering and chaotic. As an example, a Getseui Samurai might challenge a foe to a duel to the death by throwing his sandal at the enemy and then invite him to walk in the garden. Of course, the real reason to go to the garden is to kill one another, but the Getseui prefer to craft elaborate metaphors and subtexts instead of speaking plainly.

This is because, like the Moon, Getseui waver between an eternal compromise between light (the Way of the Kami) and the darkness (the Way of Annihilation). Rather than purging the old religious order, the Getseui Samurai patronize the Kami God-Houses for weddings, the Festival of Verdure, and to celebrate the births of children. The Getseui have no fear of the Yamabushi, many of whom defend Getseui Island from the other Clans while the Samurai are engaged elsewhere. Getseui are also devotees of the Way of Annihilation, whose rituals they use for their funerals and birthday observances. Getseui Samurai practice the Way of Annihilation at a younger age than is considered wise for Samurai. This is at the instruction of their highest Sensei, a Tengu who has rejected the company of his countrymen in favor of the company of humans. While it is true that Tengu mostly oppose the Shogunate and the Way of Annihilation, the Getseui Sensei says nothing regarding the Shogun and speaks only praise for the ascetic Way of Annihilation. In this way, Getseui treads the line between loyalty to the Shogun and harmony with the beings and customs of old. Getsui Island even celebrates the Festival of the Moon, which is associated with the Way of the Kami. Many Getseui Samurai make their points by speaking in cryptic riddles and aphorisms, perhaps as a means of increasing their mystique. Getseui associate themselves with the color of pastel yellow, which they see as the color of a moon of good fortune (as in good fortune in battle).

Gojou (The Joyful Clan)

Pronounced: Go-Ju

Gojou Island is lush and temperate, having both pines and palms. Much of it is moss colored, giving it an emerald color in the morning dew. Although beautiful, the Island is inhabited with Dokoro, skeleton Bakemono. They move fleshlessly through the forests in search of prey. The king of their kind, Gasha Dokoro, stalks as well, hounded endlessly by Shinigami. The face of death itself lives in the woods and this may explain the cultural development of the Gojou Clan. Their familiarity with death might explain why they fail to obsess over mortality where the ruling classes of the other islands focus so strongly on it. Gojou literally laugh in the face of death on a regular basis. Gojou Island was once the seat of the Shiga Clan. However, after Shiga captured the capitol, the lesser families of Shiga rebelled. Those that remained on the home island called themselves Gojou and opposed Shiga thereafter.

Where the lavender battle standards of Gojou Clan go, so too does it bring the sounds of song and mirth. Although the Gojou are warriors first and foremost, they are patrons of the arts and artists themselves. Therefore, their banners are the of the finest, most expensive dyes. Their retinue includes not only bodyguards, but also musicians, or even better yet, bodyguards who are also musicians. Gojou are very different from other Samurai in that they genuinely love life. They don't confess a desire to annihilate themselves at all. To many, this might seem weak or prissy. On the contrary, the Gojou cling to their existences with the greatest effort.

When referring to their own deaths in battle, they often make the metaphor of making your opponent “pay” for your life, so that it is not ended cheaply. Gojou do not invest themselves into a fight until absolutely necessary, either. They reject notions of “pure offense” in favor of a more measured, more conservative fight. It just so happens that this is an excellent strategy for long term and generational wars. If Shiga is toppled, Gojou would be in the best position to capture the seat of the Bakufu.

Hana (Clan of the Blossom)

Pronounced: Hah-Nah

No Island, at a glance, embodies the verdure of the Chrysanthemum Lands as much as Hana. The wild mountainous places are always rich with flowers all year. Different flowers blossom in different seasons, but every plant, it seems, has petals. To celebrate the land of their birth, the Hana Clan take the colors of pastel green in their banners and military regalia. Hana is a very densely populated beauty and houseboats extend the urban landscape into the ocean itself. Consequently, very little large-scale agriculture takes place. It is entirely unnecessary because the people pull all the sustenance from the ocean; tuna, crab, seaweed, octopus, shrimp, and (most prized) eel. The sea provides more than any rice paddy could (although, certainly, they do have rice).

Hana pride themselves most in the arts of Yarijutsu, although their Clan is proficient in a variety of weapons. Hana is unique in one regard: it accepts female Samurai. Upon womanhood, women of the Buke class must declare whether they are to be married or whether they wish to become Samurai. Half choose to walk the warrior’s path. The women Samurai of Hana have made themselves legendary, not necessarily for the heads they have collected (and they certainly have), but for their force of will. Female Hana Samurai wear the attire of Samurai, but they often approach it from a well-rounded approach rather than that of the specialist in the manner of the geisha. This might also be said of male Hana as well, in fact, for they have little respect for great, grim warriors who are also cads socially. Hana approach the art of war with the greatest degree of showmanship and sense of regalia, but always heartbreaking and tragic. Every stitch of their armor and standard are made to evoke images of beauty rather than horror. In this manner they break their foes hearts not by fear, but by envy and resentment. The Hana are key in keeping the other Clans united (as much as possible) against Shiga. Only they possess the diplomatic clout necessary to keep the Gojou supping with the Aki and the Getseui supping with anyone.

Shiga (The Heedless Clan)

Pronounced: Shee-Gah or Sh’Gah

Shiga control the seat of the Bakufu, which means they simply control the Bakufu. This is why the other Clans are united against Shiga: they hold all the cards. They control not only the state (supported by the Shinigami and the Shogun), but also the incalculably productive agricultural base. Shiga Island is significantly flatter and less rocky than any other island. It doesn’t have volcanoes or roaming hordes of monsters (although it sees its share of unique Bakemono and Yokai).

Shiga’s position is a precarious one despite their formidable strengths. Shinigami deal with them as the representatives of the Bakufu. They do not interfere with the inner workings of the Bakufu directly. To do so would take away the Clan’s claims of sovereignty. However, they do supply the Bakufu with heavenly armaments and the occasional Blood-Spilling Caste Shinigami. Presumably these resources are used to tackle threats to the Chrysanthemum Lands, such as

Bakemono. In practice however, Shiga Samurai use them to keep order, ie, assault rival Clans. Consequently, the blue banners and the interlocking squares of the Clan are a hated symbol in the other four islands. Shiga claim that they are hated for their greatness and this may be so, but they know that their days are numbered. They say that the world will never forget them, though. This may also be so, but there is so much struggle in the present that there is simply no time left for the past. Why would the future be any different?

Shiga believe reverently in the rightness of making war with literally no end. They believe they are the inheritors of the divine right evoked by the Tachi Clan in the Tachiuchi Wars. The narrative (in Shiga Island an nowhere else) is that the Shiga and the Tachi were one. In reality, every current Clan has a claim on the legacy of the Tachi. Only one Clan, however, rules the object of Tachiuchi War: Shiga Island. The reason is obvious. It is simply the best place from which to make war on the other islands. The Shiga very much embody the ideals of the Bakufu in this respect. Their civilization is built to bring war to the enemy. The citizens fanatical unto death, the Samurai brave to the point of feeling shame for living when so many other, greater warriors have passed through the Wheel of Karma. The image which best describes the ideal to which Shiga aspire is to address one's troops at a victory speech spoken as one's final words. Such moments are legendary and it is widely believed that they unify the Yama Lands and the Chrysanthemum Lands when they happen. The Shiga Clan symbol, two interlocking squares, is a symbol of the interconnectedness of the two lands. The two squares have names: "Live to die." and "Die to be reborn."

Daimyo (The Men of Great Names)

Pronounced: Die-Me-O

Although Clans have their own individual chains of command, each one is permitted to designate six Daimyo, or "Men of Great Names". These clan elders answer directly to the Shogun. If they disobey his altogether rare orders, they are slain. Their families are slain as are all Samurai serving them directly. This leaves vast swaths of a Clan in disgrace, often with no fault of their own. Furthermore, one of the Daimyos from each Clan must live in Crimson Gate Capitol. The Daimyos are rotated out from each Clan, meaning that every 12 or so years, every Daimyo spends some time in the loving hands of Shiga Clan. The Shinigami protect the guests of the Bakufu but intercede only in matters of life and death. Consequently, the Shiga can make life as miserable as they feel is warranted if the Daimyo made a nuisance of himself previously in battle. Daimyo, at least in spirit, are intended to be the six greatest heroes of each Clan. This is often not the case, at least, not in terms of numbers. If Daimyo membership were based on heads collected, there would be an entirely different set of people with the title. Each Clan is essentially permitted to put up whoever they want as Daimyo unless the Shogun intends otherwise. This means that Clans can withhold their greatest warriors but declare certain talented nobodies as their "Men of Great Names".

Ronin (Men-Tossed-in-the-Waves)

Pronounced: Ro-Nin

Most people in the Shogunate live near the ocean. These are a people who are familiar with the nature of ocean waves. The modern meaning ascribed to the Old Tongue term "Ronin" is Men-Tossed-in-the-Waves, as if adrift in the oncoming tide. This is an image familiar to people in the Shogunate (the men and the metaphor). Ronin have no Clan. They have no master. They are essentially mercenaries, although they are certainly Samurai and not Ashigaru. Noble Samurai consider them adrift in a real sense. They go from Master to Master, from war to war,

like crows seeking carnage. Commoners still quake in their presence, but they are no longer considered nobles. Although Ronin's children are themselves considered Ronin, they can never carry noble honor in a Clan's membership. Ronin are Samurai or children of Samurai who are stained with the shame of failure in battle compounded with a shirking of sacred duty to commit Seppukku. When a Samurai's commanding officer is slain on the battlefield, it is expected that those Samurai serving directly under him should either perish in battle deliberately or otherwise commit Seppukku. However, it is true that few Samurai actually do this even though Bushido and the Way of Annihilation demand it. Most opt to become Ronin, considered scum for all time. And Samurai do consider them scum. Many are quite capable warriors and, tellingly, many noble Samurai seek them out as Sensei. Unlike their noble brethren, they are either fighting or travelling to the next fight. They see considerably more combat than the nobility. Therefore, the older Ronin garner some begrudging respect from their betters.

Bushido

Pronounced: Bu-Shi-Do

Bushido is the way of the warrior. Combat without Bushido is merely violence. Bushido is a form of feudalism, but it is also a form of the Way of Annihilation mysteries, which gives it not only an aura of nobility but also of religiosity. It is intended to temper and inform the otherwise savage life of the warrior through meditation, social standing, and above all, a fatalistic acceptance of what shall be. Roughly, it is summarized by the Shogun's phrase "I have found that the way of the warrior is death." Bushido is expressly linked with the Way of Annihilation's mysticism. It is essentially the Way of Annihilation (the religion) adapted for use by the Buke. An earlier, less grim, version of the Code of Bushido existed during the reign of the Yamato.

The Code of Bushido

One's duty is to die with courage and honor.

One must treat their weapon with respect.

One must commit ritual suicide if they expect to die dishonorably.

One must perform orders without hesitation and without regard to success or failure.

One must act always with calmness, fairness, and propriety.

One must announce a challenge before striking.

Ninja Clans

The Bushido Code requires that a Samurai kill only on the battlefield or in a ritualized duel and only after declaring their intent to slay. They are not permitted to send enemies through the Wheel of Karma with attacks from behind or by poison. However, the random and complicated rivalries between the Clans require a shadow war to be waged between the battles themselves. This honorless war is fought in palaces and ditches. It claims wives, children, and friends. It is not enough to simply be successful on the battlefield to be a Samurai. He must also fight the shadow war, or else be consumed by it. He cannot fight it openly, or he will lose face. Instead, he employs Ninja for the tasks he is oathbound to avoid.

Ninja practice Ninjutsu, the technique of killing from stealth. They are specialists in this respect, throwing poisoned shuriken at unprepared targets. Ninja practice deceptions and dangers of every stripe, including traps, sorcery, and illusion. They are utterly reviled by the culture at large but they are a very necessary part of the struggle of the Clans. Those who cannot make allies of the Ninja are likely to be destroyed by them. The three Ninja Clans are often against the Shiga as often as the allies use them against each other. The Sakurakaze obsess over the way of Annihilation and begin to resemble Shinigami in their carefree acceptance of death. The Shinkan are the masters of the shadow war and are employed as Shiga's elite assassins. The

Taiyou are hidden death squads who worship the Sun Goddess by slaying her deniers.

Sakurakaze

Pronounced: Sah-Ku-Rah-Kah-Zay

Ninja of the Sakurakaze Clan are raised to be suicidal. They are not permitted the love of their parents and are offered the Way of Annihilation as a substitute. Consequently, assassins of the Sakurakaze Clan wield the powers of Shin-Do without fear of the harm it does to themselves. Although despised by Samurai for their lack of honorable tactics, they are none-the-less respectful of their contempt for their own lives. Few approach the fatalism of the Sakurakaze channelling the Thorn of the Last Flower with the God-Killer's Prayer upon on their lips. Among Ninja Clans, they are considered the most esoteric. They delve into the Way of Annihilation and prize mastery above combat prowess. They are more likely to learn spells other than Breath of the Snow Owl. The Sakurakaze are mercenaries but their prices are exorbitant which prevents them from being drawn often into conflicts. When their services are unclaimed, they train or defend followers of the Way of Annihilation. The Sakurakaze and Yamabushi are natural ideological foes.

Shinkan

Pronounced: Shin-Can

Ninja of the Shinkan Clan resemble Samurai most closely. Of course, they practice all of the facets of Ninjutsu, but they focus on Kenjutsu over Tantojutsu exclusively. They, more than any other Ninja Clan, focus on agility training and martial skill. Shinkan have notions of nobility like Samurai and they give an extreme deference to a respectful foe. Shinkan Clan are itinerants and nomads and easily fall into the role of Ronin, although they have no pedigree. This makes it easy for Shinkan Ninja to impersonate Samurai or Yamabushi for the purpose of infiltration. The God-Killer's Prayer is their commonly practiced technique of the Way of Annihilation. Shinkan gather in locations set up years in advance. This is their only Clan meetings. They owe their survival to their diffuse membership. They do not gather in large enough numbers to be punished in a collective assault. Shinkan has been held on retainer by the Shiga Clan for the past decade. Their service has been purchased for an additional two years, but after that, their contract is up for negotiation. Shiga may very well lose this powerful ally.

Taiyou

Pronounced: Tie-Yo

These so called "Ninja of Light" do not, as their name suggests, move in the light. Rather, Taiyou are the suicidal zealots who follow the Kami-Do and worship the Sun Goddess exclusively. They cast their lives aside in her name in defiance of that faith's prohibitions against self destruction. This is because they feel utterly and completely persecuted, their gods driven away, their Yamato betraying his Goddess, and of course the absence of the Tengu's wisdom. They reject the Death-Gods and the Way of Annihilation completely. Taiyou, therefore, never master Ninjutsu because they reject its sixth rank. Unlike Yamabushi, who are also warriors of the Way of the Kami, the Taiyou act as terrorists and actively attempt to hunt down all Shinigami. Predictably, such acts are performed as suicide attacks and are never really fruitful: A turn through the Wheel of Karma will not silence a Shinigami. Taiyou rail against the Shiso Kiesatsu, the Thought Police, who they believe are attempting to wipe their faith from the world. In reality, the Thought Police are the Veil of Silence Caste Shinigami, but the Taiyou are not sophisticated enough to understand the various departments of the Shinigami bureaucracy. Members of the Taiyou extend the notion of Shiso Kiesatsu to all enemies of the Sun Goddess:

Shinigami, followers of the Way of Annihilation, and the Bakufu Government.

Commoners

Most people are commoners, born with a twin whose fate was an early grave. Commoners are not all as lowly as rice-planting peasantry, but the Samurai rule over them ruthlessly regardless. Except for peasants, who are found wherever there is arable land, most commoners live in urban centers on the ocean.

Ashigaru

Pronounced: Ah-Sh'Gar-Oo

In modern translation from the Old Tongue, it means foot-soldier, although of a specific tradition. Ashigaru traditionally use polearms and heavy armor exclusively. They are the commoners with the most rank, for they are both soldiers and police. In times of peace, Ashigaru serve local governments as their muscle. Shinigami will sometimes enlist squads of Ashigaru for Yokai or Bakemono elimination missions. Ashigaru are permitted a percentage of spoils from any conflict they are involved in. Consequently, they often have extensive fortunes. Ashigaru do not adhere to the Code of Bushido, but tend to act closer to its spirit than civilians.

Peasants

The peasantry are virtually unnoticed by the Bakufu and this is by design. Peasants are a key component to the military machine. Just as an army requires rigorous discipline to be effective, the peasantry must follow their commands or face the discipline regime. Peasants are not permitted to travel beyond their prefecture. To travel, peasants must wear heavy placards, stating their destination and their prefecture of origin. They are required to work their fields or fish their local waters, but beyond that, they are essentially left alone. When Samurai and peasants share the same space peasants are expected to kneel in deference. Samurai are permitted to execute peasants at their leisure. Such a process requires only the smallest of justification, up to and including acting in a manner that is "unexpected". Particularly cruel lords test newly forged swords by stretching a peasant over a large rock and cutting them in half. It is said that such a soul will be reborn as a Samurai, since they contributed their life to ensure that a weapon is proven to be fully sacred.

Geisha

Beauty and abundance are the ways of the Chrysanthemum Lands and the Geisha are the ideal feminine image of this land. Geisha are performers first and foremost, granting inspiration to weary warriors. Geisha are truly compassionate souls for the Shogunate is a dangerous and tragic place where lives are short. Giving a moment of respite or even happiness is to be a healer of souls. The tradition of Geisha dates back to the Yamato Era, when Geisha were priestesses in service to the Way of the Kami. They have since become secular but retain a cultural respect that civilizations rarely bestow upon pleasure women. Even as commoners, Geisha can be fairly influential. Famous Geisha can gather large crowds of admirers who are often to listen to more than just poetry.

Local Government

The line between gangster and politician is razor thin in the Shogunate. Local governments, like the Clans, have a vertical power structure which means they have hundreds of people in the chain of command all of whom are only answerable to their direct superior. There are far more government positions than are really needed but this is merciful because very little ever really gets done by any one individual. Competition for these seats (which have useless, silly

names like "Guardian of Public Hygiene" or "Magistrate Prime in Matters Regarding Oxen") is fierce. The positions represent huge amounts of graft accessible to those with the power to take it. Bribes are how things are accomplished and muscle is how things are decided. Members of so-called "Local Councils" are not generally warriors on par with Samurai or even Ninja, but they practice Jutsu, for their way of life is essentially that of the warrior. Its battles are fought in back rooms and in the streets. It is a battle of "turf and title" and utterly lacks honor. This does not make it any less grim.

Monks

The Way of Annihilation is both religion and sorcery and it is Monks who focus their lives work to a perfect synthesis of both. Monks try to free themselves of worldly concerns, including their own lives. Indeed, some Monks poison themselves with preservatives to mummify themselves while still alive. Eventually, they sit down to meditate and never again rise. Most Monks wish to pass beyond Karma itself, ending the cycle of death and rebirth in favor of total consciousness. However, Monks consider it some consolation to serve a few incarnations as a Shinigami in order to free themselves more fully from the illusion of existence.

Yamabushi

Yamabushi were the dominant priesthood in the Yamato period, devoted to the Sun Goddess and possessed of ferocious martial arts. The Yamabushi upheld and lived in the God-Houses, temples of the Kami. They were driven out by the Shinigami who fell upon the Yamabushi and scattered them. Now, the jungle and Monks of the Way of Annihilation possess the God-Houses and keep them silent and unlit at all times. Yamabushi roam the wastes to avoid the ire of the Shogunate. However, should they be discovered and persecuted, the Yamabushi have no fear of death. The Sun Goddess will reward them with a better incarnation. Their martial arts are one of the required elements of Immortality and are consequently suppressed by the Bakufu. The old ways are far from gone, though. The Yamabushi still honor the Kami in the wilderness with their followers. They still send their best to train with the Tengu. They still keep the Festival of Verdure.

The Yama Lands

In a world of shouts, the Veil of Silence is a hush. It rushes out from the borders of the Yama Lands, protecting the Wheel of Karma from interference. The Yama Lands are aggressively serene. There are pagodas of black basalt, but their walls are white paper (tan if they have not been replaced in a hundred years). People walk the streets, some of which seem translucent and frayed at the edges. These are Shinigami, the Death-Gods revered in the Chrysanthemum Lands. The pagodas are their homes and bureaus. Some streets dead-end into immense white jade gates. Shinigami with business in the lands of the living can pass through these gates there, otherwise they simply collide with the wall beyond. The Yama Lands are lit by blue torches which give off very little light. Not even the blue light adds a color to the Yama Land: everything shines in greys and tans. The roads and walkways are paved with large, round stones inscribed with minute sutras of the Way of Annihilation. If one holds their ear to the stones, they whisper their particular sutra. It would have taken a thousand mortals a thousand lifetimes to inscribe the Yama Land's foundation stones.

Shinigami

Souls half-reincarnated. Spirits of death. They awaken in the Yama Lands to find that they have died. They are given a small hut to start with whether they are the lowliest of peasants or the most hailed Samurai of his age. If they are worthy to become Shinigami, they must endure a day or two of humility. If they are honored by the living they will receive grave goods.

The Shogun claims half. This is required as an act of loyalty and good faith. Failure to do so requires a nascent Shinigami to commit suicide immediately or else face multiple executions upon multiple turns through the Wheel of Karma. They will return from this experience, however, because the Shinigami's soul is given a number of reincarnations without being cleansed of memory. If the newborn Shinigami relents and pays the Shogun's ransom, they will be welcomed into the Yama Lands. Otherwise, they will once again be invited to commit Seppuku. If they do not, they will again be sent into a new life, each time becoming thinner and more translucent until such time as their soul simply drifts back into the Chrysanthemum Lands, to be born again without knowledge of their last incarnation.

The nature of Shinigami is the same nature as any ghost, really. Shinigami just hold a high place with the Shogun and are permitted a few turns through the Wheel of Karma with the blessing of their own memories. This is essentially the only thing that delineates a difference between a Shinigami and the Souls they diligently collect. Shinigami cannot sire children: family is only for the living. Shinigami possess some of their skill in life, but the Wheel of Karma is not forgiving in what it takes away. Shinigami do not lose knowledge in subsequent passages through the Wheel of Karma, only when passing from life to death. Despite the fact that their nature is that of a ghost, the Shinigami appear essentially human, at least at first. Provided they are not destroyed, Shinigami do not betray their wraithly nature. However, once they pass through the Wheel of Karma, they begin to lighten and ultimately fade. Such Shinigami look exactly like ghosts to most perceptions. Shinigami in danger of returning to the cycle of souls wear their nature most visibly. There are thousands of Shinigami but the number remains in flux.

The Shogun's Divine Assault

The Faithful Enumerator Caste Department of Karmic Records very recently discovered an anomaly with dire ramifications. What they discovered was that a smaller than expected number of Shinigami were appearing in the Yama Lands despite an upswing in carnage. It seemed as if, at the moment of their death, the candidates most likely to be destined for life as a Shinigami simply disappeared. Mortals discovered the phenomena as well; drownings with no body, duels that end in one party disintegrating, and monks who are pulled into a void just as they were about to achieve some great insight. As the Shogun does in matters of importance, he disappeared for some time to seek the necessary satori to solve the problem.

When he returned, he discovered that a new afterlife, unlike the Wheel of Karma, was aggressively poaching the finest Souls for its own purposes. This is unacceptable to the Shogun, for Souls this spiritually advanced cannot simply be squandered. The nature of this rival afterlife is of the utmost mystery, but unlike the Wheel of Karma, it is said that there is no return once there. He believes it to be the greatest test of the Way of Annihilation, a removal from the cycle of rebirth forever. It goes without saying that such a place must be stopped and he asks for volunteers for this purpose. Of course, the first volunteers were those Shinigami of exceeding faith and some great standing in the society of the dead. The Shogun, however, will not accept the petitions of those whose legacy is already established. Such glory would be wasted. Rather, only those of unproven stature (of Ichi, Ni or San rank) are permitted to travel there.

The mission is essentially one of suicide; no one can return. It is unclear the nature of the mission itself, for it is unknown what lies in such a place. It may be a mission of suicide destruction, where destroying the place also destroys those within. It may be that it is a cosmic

misunderstanding. There is no need to start a cosmic war unless it would provide a benefit to the Shogunate. However, the core nature of the mission is to end the tide of Souls that pass out of the Shogunate and into the arms of this alien land of the dead. The ritual means by which the Shogun sends his volunteers to the place beyond derives from the Way of Annihilation. Its completion requires that each volunteer kneel before the Shogun as he wields his katana. He strikes each of the assembled with a death stroke, but as the edge of the blade passes into the person, it merely pushes them into the strange lands beyond. In this way, the ritual is a passage from one land of the dead to the other.

Shinigami Castes

Shinigami have illusions about the nature of their existence: they are bureaucrats safekeeping the Wheel of Karma and serving its chosen Shogun, Emmadai-O. They may follow a hierarchy that is more horizontal than the vertical power structure of the Chrysanthemum Lands Bakufu, but Shinigami are smaller in number and need less governance. To organize and divide the considerable labor involved, Shinigami are assigned Castes. These Castes are not something given upon arrival as a Shinigami. Rather, individual Shinigami are reassigned depending on the needs of the Shogunate. Shinigami are also assigned an individual rank that carries between Castes (Ichi, Ni, San, Shin). Each of the Departments are assigned a rank and are filled with Shinigami of that rank. Shin ranked individuals constitute the Shogun's inner circle. There are only a handful of Shin and they constitute the bosses of the various Departments or special action missions. There is no direct command, but it is expected that individuals defer to those of higher rank, or if tied for rank, who serves the more prestigious Caste. The Castes are ordered by prestige with those Castes who interact with mortals most at the bottom and those who serve closer to the Shogun awarded more clout. So while the Blood-Spilling Caste is the least prestigious, a Blood-Spilling Caste member of the Department of Bakemono (Ni Rank) would still be able to boss around a Faithful Enumerator Caste member of the Department of Punishments (Ichi Rank) by custom. As mentioned before, this isn't a Samurai chain of command. Rather, it more closely resembles that of the Kuge bureaucracy of the old Yamato Government with a few Samurai ideals, including their amor fati love of death.

The Blood-Spilling Caste

The Blood-Spilling Caste is the least prestigious Caste because it is by far the most visceral of the Castes. Their targets are universally in the Chrysanthemum Lands which means they spend a lot of time there doing things that are considered by some to be immoral (killing thinking beings). It is no secret that the Blood-Spilling Caste periodically has difficulties with discipline, as the warriors of the Chrysanthemum Lands are usually assigned to this Caste. Samurai are not at all used to being of the lowest rank. Many dead Samurai cannot adjust and consequently sent through the Wheel of Karma until such time as they learn humility. Shinigami do not follow Bushido, for they believe that to act without regard to success or failure is willful stupidity. The Shogun wishes only success, but with the understanding that failure will be punished. Generally, such punishment is expected to be self-administered.

Department of Yokai (Ichi)

This Department is the absolute least prestigious of all Departments. There is little honor in subduing Yokai, for they are not considered dangerous prey. A group of four Shinigami, a standard strike force, should be able to subdue a single new-born Yokai with little difficulty. Often these excursions include members of the Department of Souls who collect the target and return them to the cycle once more.

Department of Bakemono (Ni)

This Department is responsible for slaying Bakemono when they are found, from the lowliest Kappa to the highest Daikaiju. It is expected that most Shinigami of the Ni rank spend a decade or so in the Department of Bakemono to prove themselves against challenging foes before moving on to the San rank.

Department of Individuals to be Suppressed (San)

This San-ranked Department creates custom-built strike forces to combat specific problem areas outline by the Shogun. If a Shinigami runs afoul of the Shogunate, this is the Department that will hunt them across their various incarnations. Very rarely, but occasionally, an Immortal member of the Kuge is found and must be sent through the Wheel of Karma. The Department of Individuals to be Suppressed is not omniscient, though. They rely on the Department of Information in this regard. However, once a target is discovered, it is attacked by the Shogunate's most powerful and nimble fighting force.

The Ghost-Collector Caste

The Ghost-Collector Caste spends a fair bit of time in the Chrysanthemum Lands doing as their name suggests. To do this, their Department issue them artifacts, such as ritual bells or lanterns, in which to gather pacified ghosts. This is not a particularly prestigious post, but it is considered more honorable than killing, for what it is worth. Faithful followers of the Way of Annihilation who seek to become Shinigami often seek these positions, ignorant of other, higher positions. The Ghost-Collectors are the highest prestige Shinigami mortals see on a regular basis and seem, to them, to be as their name describes: gods of the afterlife.

Department of Souls (Ichi)

This Department consists of the common collectors of Souls who roam the land with enchanted lanterns which absorb passive ghosts. This is certainly the most rote of tasks a Shinigami could be asked to do, but there is more honor in being a reaper of Souls than being a slayer of bodies. Their Department hands any ghosts they find to the Department of Reincarnation. Most major battles fought in the Chrysanthemum Lands are overseen by a member of this Department to mop up stray Souls.

Department of Rituals and Observances (Ni)

The Department of Rituals and Observances oversees the seasonal sweeps in which Shinigami descend on the Chrysanthemum Lands to collect ghosts by use of enchanted bells. This is considered a very plush assignment, for it only requires a Shinigami perform duties once a season. Consequently, members of this Department are often artists or scholars or followers of other intellectual pursuits. The Shogun does not tolerate this sort of lifestyle for more than a few decades, however. He desires bold action.

Department of Reincarnation (San)

Because the fundamental nature of the Wheel of Karma was altered by the mass of Immortal Souls choking the Chrysanthemum Lands, it became necessary to oversee the process and help it along. Although the Wheel of Karma is not a physical thing, it is something that can be interacted with. Shinigami Occultists free the ghosts delivered to them by the Department of Souls and perform a prayer sutra before them. They are compelled to travel into the Wheel itself where they will reborn again in the Chrysanthemum Lands. Some Souls must undergo prescriptions of purifying torture before they can be permitted to travel on. The Department of Reincarnation uses rituals to prevent "high value" subjects from passing into their next life. The Department of Reincarnation is the ultimate goal of many who were Monks in life. They can be

the very caretakers of the cosmic principle they view as supreme (and to be surpassed).

The Veil of Silence Caste

The Veil of Silence is calculated to be of the utmost mystery. Its departments are very influential but it is true that they do not often throw their weight around. Even the ham-fisted Department of Doctrinal Purity acts rarely and usually with a desire to set an example. The Veil of Silence is responsible for much of the social engineering in both Lands of the Shogunate. Shinigami, for instance, customarily do not ask the age or histories of their fellows. Likewise, there are a host of secrets about the real mechanics of death and the Yama Lands that Shinigami simply do not feel mortals should know about. "Death must ever be a mystery, kept sacred" they say. The reality is that life in the Yama Lands can be disappointing. If mortals knew that half of their grave goods would be seized by the Shogun, they might be less enthusiastic about taking their shot at eternity (which is far from eternal; another disappointment). Many dislike the Veil of Silence, both Shinigami and mortal alike, and refer to them as the Shiso Kiesatsu (Thought Police).

Department of Information (Ichi)

This Department is responsible for gathering intelligence in the Shogunate. They keep tabs on reoccurring Bakemono. They suss out the locations of troublesome Yamabushi and pass their coordinates to the Department of Individuals to be Suppressed. The ability to pass for being mortal is prized among this Department, but by no means a requirement.

Department of Doctrinal Purity (Ni)

This Department is the real Shiso Kiesatsu. There are certain things that the Shogun does not wish given voice. Obviously criticism of him or his Way of Annihilation is forbidden. Likewise, the Department of Doctrinal Purity decries the existence of the Kami and the Sun Goddess. They attempt to frustrate the Tengu in their endless attempts to turn mortals away from the Shin-Do. Most importantly, this Department hides and suppresses the secrets of immortality so that mortals not once again upset the balance of the universe.

Department of Special Projects (San)

The Shogun forbids anyone, living or dead, to talk about the Department of Special Projects. Those who have served in it do not speak of their time while serving in it. They are permitted to display a particular mon and sign documents with an official chop only if they are serving in the capacity of the Department. No more can be said.

The Faithful Enumerator Caste

The Faithful Enumerator Caste are by far the closest to the Shogun and are given status commensurate with their loyalty. They are judges of sorts, magistrates of the dead. They, more than other Shinigami, are creatures of death for they operate purifying Hells and handle only the belongings of the dead. The Faithful Enumerator Caste serves only in the Yama Lands at the foot of the Shogun himself. They are called "faithful" for they are expected to be completely catholic in their toils. If a member of the Department of Funerary Offerings pockets a few trinkets, he can expect oblivion. If a member of the Department of Karmic Records falsified a file to send one her mortal enemies to the Hell of Sixteen Lusty Bulls, she would be undone.

Department of Punishments (Ichi)

Those souls who underwent Immortality in the Yamato Era damaged their spiritual nature virtually beyond repair. This Department administers divine punishments to those Souls damaged in this manner and those who are overly wicked in life. By applying these specially designed tortures, they can move Souls into higher spiritual states and away from becoming

Bakemono. They cannot claim these Souls for very long. The Wheel of Karma will eventually pull them to itself and give them a new incarnation. Members of this Department are simply functionaries, sent to record how long a Soul undergoes torment so that its “purity” can be determined the next time it passes through the Wheel of Karma. Although this Department is a highly spiritual one, it is of a low rank because it is rote work.

Department of Karmic Records (Ni)

It is absolutely essential for Shinigami to keep accurate records of each Soul’s passage through the Wheel of Karma. This Department gets vast quantities of scrolls from the Departments of Yokai, Souls, and Information. The Department of Karmic Records is in charge of determining what torments, if any, a Soul should undergo before being permitted to pass through the Wheel of Karma and reincarnate. These orders are carried out by the Department of Punishments. Frequently, a high value soul, such as a reoccurring unique Bakemono, will be tracked to where they materialize by the Department of Karmic Records. Shinigami can tell Souls apart from one another by the means of an occult ritual. In this manner, they can see the unique signature of each Soul, like recognition of a face.

Department of Funerary Offerings (San)

This Department is by the most powerful. Although it is ostensibly the Department responsible for the dispensation of grave goods when the arrive in the Yama Lands, in reality they are more like the Shogun’s personal cult. They act as his advisers, his guards, and an additional pair of eyes. When a Shinigami manifests, half of his grave hoods are claimed by the Department of Funerary Offerings and distributed to the Shogun’s purposes or as payment for loyalty to other Shinigami. This is the only economy of the Yama Lands, so this Department is quite influential. They operate the entire financial sphere of the afterlife.

Jutsu

Jutsu are combat styles or techniques named after the prime weapon or skill of the technique. Each one is a known, codified series of techniques and moves. Martial Arts Schools usually specialize in only one Jutsu, although specific Sensei may require their students to diversify. This is, however, not in the spirit of Jutsu: they are things to obsess over and specialize within. Kenjutsu is the art of the sword, but Iajutsu is the art of drawing a sword. Ninjutsu is the manifold arts of the Ninja, such as alchemy and the Way of Annihilation. Yarijutsu is the techniques of the long polearm whereas Bojutsu focuses on the staff. There are many and varied Jutsu centered on a wide variety of skills, however, Jutsu are ranked from 1 to 6. For instance, the second Rank of Kyujutsu is a strike which pierces shields.

Bojutsu

Pronounced: Bow-Ju-T’su

((Bojutsu is encompassed by the Polearm Combat Skill))

The staff is used primarily by Yamabushi and its art is called Bojutsu. It is a less lethal but altogether just as defensive as the spear. Both Jutsu rely on the same techniques even if the weapons themselves are fundamentally different. A staff can crack skulls as easily as a polearm cleaves arteries. It is also the most innocuous of weapons and cheap. Bojutsu flourishes mainly in monasteries. Few Samurai deign to learn its secrets but the Shinigami remember the forms.

Jittejutsu and Tantojutsu

Pronounced: Jit-E-Ju-T’su, Tawn-Toe-Ju-T’su

((Jittejutsu and Tantojutsu are encompassed by the Close Weapons Combat Skill.))
The jitte, a short forked blade, and the tanto, a short curved blade, are the most common weapons used in very close range combat. They are usually either weapons of last resort for Samurai or weapons of primary assault for Ninja. Close weapons are good for stealth missions to sap guards into unconsciousness and they are easier to conceal.

Kenjutsu

Pronounced: Ken-Ju-T'su

((Kenjutsu is encompassed by the Sword Combat Skill))

In the martial art of Kenjutsu, there is no greater moment of reverence than when opponents lock into a mutual slaying. Many plays are told about two swordsmen, having mortally wounded one another, recount their lives and deeds. The heroes die in one another's arms, sent through the Wheel of Karma with highest honors. This is the essence of Kenjutsu: ignoring oneself so completely that one kills their foe without regards to their own mortality. Although the sword is a highly defensive weapon, parrying does not dull romantic appeal of the mutual slaying, provided at the end of the battle, both sides are dead or dying. Other weapons, although perfectly capable of delivering a mutual slaying, are not associated as often with these auspicious events.

Kenjutsu is merely the art of the sword, broadly. There are other, more specialized Jutsu of the Sword which require mastery of Kenjutsu, such as Katanajutsu, Daitojutsu, and Wakizashijutsu.

Kiaijutsu

Pronounced: Key-Eye-Ju-T'su

((Kiaijutsu requires Attuned 4+))

Kiai: The shout that kills. A very rare martial-occult technique outside of the Way of Annihilation. Kiaijutsu focuses the soul's energy into a destructive shout. This technique is only for those who are greatly attuned to the Yama Lands, for it a technique that summons a bolt of pure destructive force.. By a great feat of this attunement, they can lay into an opponent at range, completely unarmed. Critics of Kiaijutsu say the technique has no "staying power". No human can sustain more than a few Kiai shouts without being refocused by external means. Still, three Kiai shouts could very well be enough to knock an opponent completely off-balance by the time he reaches you. He may never be able reach you. For this reason, many samurai occultists develop this martial art as a supplement to their already formidable techniques. Attunement to death and Yama is the prime talent for Kiaijutsu, so only those who are greatly or heroically attuned can call upon this technique.

Kyujutsu

Pronounced: Queue-Ju-T'su

((Kyujutsu is encompassed by the Bow Combat Skill))

The Technique of the Bow. Bow and arrow are considered the eternal weapons. They are the oldest certainly and there is weapon yet invented that rivals it. Kyujutsu is primal. It exists in the space between time and distance itself. The loosing of an arrow will fail if timed wrong even if given proper distance and location because its targets, human beings, are moving targets.

Kyujutsu requires precise breath control. Strength is prized in Kyujutsu even though it does not involve direct melee combat. A stronger archer can use a bow of stronger pull, thus giving it greater piercing power. ((Please do not increase your bow strength beyond the safe allowable limits. This is mentioned here to explain why Strong is a valuable in-game Trait for archers.)) The greatest devotees of Kyujutsu are people of exceptionally acute perception whose eagle-

like vision gives them greater accuracy. Their attacks, when in range, are next to impossible to evade. Each arrow in their quiver becomes a mere placeholder for a human life. Modern Kyujutsu is associated with the Yamato Government and the Kuge courtiers, who once used the technique by horseback.

Ninjutsu

Pronounced: Nin-Ju-T'su

((The progression of Ninjutsu is as follows: Craft 2 (Alchemy), Survival 2, Thrown 2, Tinkering 2, Close Weapons 2 or Sword 2, and finally, Way of Annihilation 2. Each one is considered a "Rank of Ninjutsu". Therefore, Poison Training is the First Rank of Ninjutsu and Weapon Training is the Fifth Rank of Ninjutsu.))

Many Jutsu focus on the art of killing. Ninjutsu is a diverse technique, drawing upon many arts for the purpose of killing, specifically, from stealth. It requires a knowledge of basic chemistry to produce poisons. It trains in the art of thrown weapons to deliver the poisons. The path of the Ninja coincides with that of the Way of Annihilation. Ninja rely on the Breath of the Snow Owl for stealth and other spells to kill multiple opponents dead in their tracks. Evasion, larceny, and melee weapon training round out the training. Obviously Ninjutsu is the art of the Ninja, but many warriors learn Ninjutsu to add to their repertoire. No canny Samurai rejects a tool that will send his foes through the Wheel of Karma.

Shurikenjutsu

Pronounced: Sure-E-Ken-Ju-T'su

((Shurikenjutsu is encompassed by the Thrown Combat Skill))

This Jutsu, often associated with Ninjutsu, focuses on the art of throwing stars. The weapon is shockingly versatile, functioning well up close and at moderate distance. Shuriken can be poisoned and the slightest brush against the blade will inflict the poison. They are also easy to conceal, which is essential in the art of assassination.

Yarijutsu

Pronounced: Yar-E-Ju-T'su

((Yarijutsu is encompassed by the Polearm Combat Skill))

The spear is an excellent weapon. Very ancient. Very defensive. It defines a battlefield better than short blades. It insulates the wielder from those it murders. It takes very little training to become effective in its use. For this reason, many are quick to say that the spear is supreme among all weapons. Ah! But what of its utility in short range? It is true that one can "choke up" on the blade. It is a weapon which can be used by a man with no shame and also wielded by a woman with pride. Women Samurai, in fact, are considered supreme in the field of Yarijutsu: Techniques of the Spear. The polearm can best be described as controlling the flow of the battlefield, defining its space, tripping opponents, and landing deadly blows.

The Way of Annihilation and the Way of the Kami

The Way of Annihilation, in its complete form, is written on the foundation stones of the Yama Lands and comprise a series of sutras which, if read as a single text, would take 350 years if a Shinigami devoted themselves to the task full time. Shinigami rarely exist that long, and besides, they have other duties to attend to at the Shogun's order. The Shogun not only read the entire document in a century, but he also adapted the unthinkably complex philosophy as a way of life for his people in this time. If that wasn't enough, he also learned and mastered the Way of Annihilation as a form of sorcery usable by mortals. At the end of that century he

planned a celestial coup against his own government. Consequently, when the people of the Shogunate speak of the Way of Annihilation, it may not immediately be clear whether they are referring to the religious practice or the magical practice. The two are inextricably linked and Monks see little difference between the sorcery and religion.

The Way of the Kami is much older and has no spells of power, such as the Way of Annihilation does. It is merely a religion, albeit a very old one. During the Yamato period, the Way of the Kami was the state religion and the Kuge and Yamato were holy figures of this faith. The Way of the Kami was never practiced in a coherent, unified way and unlike the Shin-Do, the Kami-Do did not originate with Emmadai-O. Its origins are in the various folk traditions of the islands each of which arose mostly in relative isolation. The Yamato merely fulfilled an element already present in the Way of the Kami, the idea of a divine ruler chosen by the Kami to serve in their absence. Tengu thought also greatly influenced the Way of the Kami, for Tengu revere the Kami perhaps more than mortals. At the end of the Yamato Era, the secrets of Tengu long-life became essential tenets for followers, although these secrets have been expunged.

The Way of Annihilation as a Religion

"Form is emptiness, emptiness form" teaches the Way of Annihilation. It says that the Shogunate and the physical world are largely illusions. The true nature of the world is invisible to those beings caught within it, for physical existence, whether Shinigami or mortal, mires oneself in that illusion. The conception of this is that the Wheel of Karma hovers over the Shogunate and that the world is a manifestation of its gyrations, projected from one moment to the next. Pure enlightenment is said to be freedom from these manifestations. A perfect state of nirvana is believed to exist on the other side of the Wheel of Karma, but passage to this level of consciousness is at once the goal of every follower of the Way of Annihilation and an impossibility. It is believed that only Emmadai-O has become advanced enough to pass through the Wheel of Karma and into the realm of perfect wisdom; however, he has chosen not to do so, for mankind would have no hope of attaining this enlightenment without a guide. It is widely believed that one must kill their ego nature, their sense of self, in order to achieve nirvana. This leads serious followers of the Shin-Do to various ascetic practices. This goes triply so for Shinigami, who, although they retain the passions and memories of life, are expected to completely sever all ties with their living families or possessions. The Way of Annihilation has contempt for bodily needs, such as eating or sex. Shinigami are seen as being "more divine" because of their liberation from such physical requirements.

Numerous monasteries, funded by the Bakufu, dot the Chrysanthemum Lands and each have doctrines with various degrees of morbidity. Some embalm themselves, some cut slices off of themselves until they disappear entirely, and others simply spend days in meditation. The common people make pilgrimages to the God-Houses which have been reappropriated as temples in devotion to the Shin-Do, but the peasantry doesn't have much use for the Way of Annihilation. Although there are scores of faithful, the average person in the Chrysanthemum Lands aren't concerned with far off enlightenments or esoteric sorcery. They want to actually avoid death, a concept alien to the Way of Annihilation. In fact, the only rituals commoners use with any frequency are the funeral rites. There are no birth celebrations, marriage ceremonies, or other rite of living in Shin-Do. However, even peasants find meditation useful in their lives. All peasants participate in the seasonal rites of ghost gathering where Shinigami descend on the world of the living to collect those ghosts they missed. To perform this rite, peasants sweep out their houses (to sweep out the ghosts), which are then swept down the road, and finally, large gatherings sweep them to the gates of town or to the local God House where the

Shinigami arrive to claim them. This is what passes for a holiday in the Way of Annihilation and although Monks and Shinigami do not consider it grounds for celebration, the common people use it as an excuse to have a rather large feast afterwards as a means of honoring the passing of time.

The Way of Annihilation as Sorcery

Although the Way of Annihilation is a spiritual practice, it also has an element that can only really be described as sorcery. It draws upon arcane principles of form and nothingness, as does the mundane philosophies. However, the techniques of these rituals are intended to create potent and dangerous magical effects. When referring to the Way of Annihilation as a form of “magic”, people often make the distinction that the Way of Annihilation isn’t a thing of fairy tale logic. It does not give the ability to do simply anything. It has no effects that directly preserve human life and quite a number that end it with some efficiency. It is combative and requires violence in some form to complete many of the rituals. In this way, the sorcery assumes a state of conflict as being the one in which the Way of Annihilation can most properly be practiced. Its rituals are often quiet thought experiments as well, meditative practices that reveal the folly of self-valuation.

An interesting ritual exists in the Way of Annihilation which is called Kami’s Gift. During initiation into the Way of Annihilation, students are taught the various rituals. The Kami’s Gift requires that its practitioner give three gifts of food to a spirit, animal, or ghost-fairy. Oddly, of these beings, only animals truly exist. It is a widely held belief that this is the Shogun’s means of informing the world that the Kami do not exist. The only beings who fit the descriptions of Kami are therefore the animals of the forest and the things of our dreams. The Kami are as real as ghost-fairies, a paradoxical fiction and nothing more.

Much of the inner peace gained in the meditative rituals is spent on spells of great destruction. They summon the Ghost Heart Blade, a weapon made of the caster’s Soul. Such a weapon is a metaphor for violence: the seat of human will transformed into an icy thing that kills. Like ghosts, an initiate of Shin-Do can become invisible like the Breathe of the Snow Owl. It is said that those who die in the throes of the God-Killer’s Prayer stand a greater likelihood of becoming Shinigami, for their Souls are simply more powerful. By taking up the Devil Hunter’s Lantern, casters can grant allies power over spirits, both ghostly and elemental. If they know the Dead Maiden’s Tears, they can reflect the spells and curses of enemies upon them, revealing that power itself is an illusion and therefore insubstantial. By wearing the colorless robes in imitation of the Shinigami or as a legitimate Shinigami uniform, a caster is immune to manipulations and the dreaded Honor-Like-Reeds Curse, which turns friends against ally. This again reveals the truth that mortal relationships are temporary things, forgotten in the passage through the Wheel of Karma. Those who practice Shin-Do often practice battle sorcery, such as the Thorn of the Last Flower, which simply stops the heart of those it effects, reversing the flow of their blood and causing them to bleed from every orifice. There are less lethal techniques called the Writhing Black Tresses which binds targets to the spot and slows their movements as if held by unseen forces. All warriors, from Samurai to Shinigami, derive value from a study of the Way of Annihilation and the Weapon-of-Martyrs is one of the reasons why. It binds a weapon to a

users Soul and makes it a part of their spiritual being. In this way, petite girls with no strength to speak of can wield tetsubo or executioner's axes far in excess of their own weight through the Way of Annihilation. The body is an illusion; the will is the only true weapon.

The Way of the Kami

Pronounced: Kah-May

The nature of the Kami is a controversial thing, indeed. To hear the Tengu tell it, Kami were the original inhabitants of the world and they had the "essences" of things and nature within them. They were beings of harmony whose wisdom was itself a form of magic. Tengu claim that the Kami left because of the pride of Emadai-O and that this was disastrous for the spiritual nature of the world. However, the Tengu rejected the animistic religion called the Way of the Kami which flourished under the Yamato before and after the secrets of immortality were revealed. This spiritual practice, somewhat altered today, believed that the Kami had not in fact fled the world but were simply invisible. They also held that the Yamato was, in essence, a god on earth incarnating the nature of the Kami in the physical world. The goal of this faith was to master the martial arts and meditation techniques which grant Immortality (or, as the Tengu call it, Tengu long-life). However, when the Immortals were all slain the Way of the Kami was made illegal and its temples, the God-Houses, were claimed by Monks or left to ruin in the wilderness. Those ruined temples are now where Tengu dwell. The most important legends of the Way of the Kami involve the Sun Goddess and her suitors, the constellations.

The Way of the Kami is the older folk religion of the Shogunate which once was dominant in the Yamato Era. Because the Way of Annihilation is a very poor substitute for the high ritualism and life-affirming religion of the Way of Kami, it has persisted in relatively the same form it always has. The Shogunate and Shinigami long ago gave up on stopping the peasantry from celebrating the Festival of Verdure, the high summertime observance.

The two great Festivals of the Way of the Kami happen in summer (the Festival of Verdure) and the autumn (the Moon Festival). The Festival of Verdure is celebrated by eating food of the land, like rice, meat, and tofu. It is celebrated in honor of the Sun Goddess herself whose bounty is said to be the source of all plant-life. There are parades and neighborhood gatherings but more and more frequently the Festival of Verdure is marked by violence. To followers of the Way of Annihilation, such a celebration is to revel in the worldly and illusionary nature of human consciousness. Still, the people have a deep need for ritual which the Way of Annihilation cannot satisfy. This ensures that a very large number of people have been and will likely continue to be seduced by public displays of worship for a Sun Goddess who is said to be a phantasm. The Moon Festival is less controversial, for its night-time setting is considered one of the elements of the Shin-Do. This festival is mostly observed by eating seafood, the foodstuff that is most governed by the pull and ebb of the moon. As observed by the Way of the Kami, celebrants visit fortune tellers who craft tales about the celestial suitors who rule over an individual's destiny. As observed by the Way of Annihilation, it is a time for deeper, more hurtful meditations. Adherents are asked to deliberately probe images of their own demise to gain an acceptance of their passing.

Tengu

Pronounced: Ten-Goo

The Tengu are an older people than mankind, and as they tell it, were the originators of human beings. By their telling, mankind is the cursed progeny of their own incestuous couplings. Humans of all faiths reject this telling: either they claim naturalistic forces generated the human form or else the Kami are responsible. Tengu are small in number, perhaps no more than two

hundred or so and they live by themselves as a rule. Some very few Tengu occasionally take human students but this rare. Tengu generally find humans repellent and everyone, Tengu and mortal alike, find the Crow-Monks mannerisms to be insufferable. They are simply incapable of giving respect. Uneducated people believe a lot of silly things about Tengu. They say they can turn into crows and fly at will, but this is hogwash. Some say the Tengu are Kami or even Bakemono, but this is simply a category error. Women are often told to avoid going out alone, lest the Tengu set upon them, but this is nonsensical. Tengu find women gross and want nothing to do with them. At the dawn of man, the Tengu were respected for their knowledge but were considered no more than savage animals during the reign of the Yamato. In modern times, they are considered much like demons although they are not purged like Bakemono.

Tengu appear as mostly human, save for long tumescent noses that sprout from their faces and wild eyebrows impossible for humans to grow. Some Tengu, of equal status as any other of their kind, actually have the head of a crow but this is certainly an ethnic minority. Tengu dress like monks or soldiers generally and although there are female of their kind they are most rare. All Tengu are disgustingly chauvinistic and even the women of their kind are hateful and dismissive of women. It is easy to see why Tengu live alone. They are simply odious to be around. They act as if they possess the sum of all knowledge and although they are very wise they demand, obnoxiously, to be the center of attention in a crowd. Many of them are drunkards, their cheeks and nose flush crimson with sake. Tengu are powerful warriors and their hands can transform into vicious bird-like talons. The martial art practiced by the Way of the Kami in their search for immortality is based upon the fighting style of the Tengu, who are naturally gifted with fearsome weaponry. The Tengu do not find non-lethal violence distasteful in the least and think nothing of breaking an arm or leg to teach a lesson or punctuate a particular point. However, Tengu find the making of war and any other form of murder as being the greatest of crimes. The ideal way of life, by Tengu reasoning, is a warrior living in peace. Tengu are immortal thanks to their long-life techniques.

Bakemono

Pronounced: Bah-Kay-Mo-No

The Immortals of the Yamato Era stole life from their future incarnations, a spiritual crime far more sinister than depriving life through murder. It is theft of life from beings who are not permitted to progress through the stations of enlightenment. When the Immortals were slain, revealing the truth of their so-called eternal lives, they were called to pay for their crimes. Shinigami aid in the purification of these Souls through a regime of hideous tortures, but it is not enough to progress them through their path with any speed. The magnitude of their crimes were unthinkable. Because their Souls were stained and made lowly, they can only reincarnate as lowly things, as objects, animals, monsters, and demons. Manifestations of reincarnated Immortals are called Bakemono, a diverse class of beings. Although there are "races" of Bakemono with distinct attributes there are unique and reoccurring ones that seem so mired in wickedness that they cannot progress beyond their current incarnation until some debt is paid. Bakemono are not universally hostile to human beings. Kappa can be as playful as they are murderous. Tsukumogami are rarely hostile to anyone at all.

Amanojako

Pronounced: Ah-Mah-No-Jock-O

When Amanojako are born, they appear as dwarfish gray gelatinous human forms. They begin life merely as thieves. They roam around looking for an ax and once they have hands on one

they begin stalking human prey. When they find a human, they kill them with the ax and cover themselves in their blood. Thereafter they transform into that person and set about trying to live their life. Amanojako are terrible at this, however, and are generally discovered by this stage. However, if an Amanojako finds a more suitable target, they will bathe themselves in the new person's blood and take their form. Amanojako are assumed to be the reincarnation of Souls whose lust for immortality was driven by their vanity. Their fate, therefore, is to be reborn into incarnations that have no sense of self. So empty are they that they must kill to have any identity whatsoever. Until they do so, they are insignificant, useless things. Afterwards, they become quite dangerous. There is always talk of Amanojako conspiracies within the Bakufu or Amanojako shadow organizations whose purpose it is to protect undiscovered Immortals.

The Bakaneko, Kitsune, and Mujina

Pronounced: Bah-Kah-Nay-Ko, Kee-T'su-Nay, Mu-Jee-Nah

Three types of Bakemono follow the same logic and arise from animals. The least criminal of the Immortals are reborn as animals. For reasons that are unclear, animals born with the Soul of an Immortal are themselves essentially immortal. After exactly one hundred years in this form, the animal becomes enlightened and gains self awareness. This process transforms them into a form which looks very much like that of a human being. It is said that they can take the form of the animal from which they descend, but if it is so, no human has ever seen this take place. The Bakaneko arise from cats and are by far the most destructive of their kind. They like to terrorize people in the manner of a cat playing with a mouse. The Kitsune arise from foxes and known as the supreme tricksters. Their manipulations can be innocuous but they can also move armies. The Mujina are the least hostile of the shape-changing animals. They arise from badgers and can actually be quite helpful. The Mujina are known to combat the Yokai, especially the Ohaguro (Faceless Ghosts), who the Mujina, for some unknown reason, have a great deal of empathy for. The shape-changers are, however, Bakemono and are considered monsters regardless of the level of evil they spread. Such Souls must return to the cycle by Shinigami doctrine.

Dokuro

Pronounced: Do-Ku-Ro

Very little is known of the Dokuro, who are nothing more than animated skeletons. The mechanism of their creation is simply a mystery. They simply roam the forests of the five Islands, especially Gojou Island, where Gasha Dokuro, the giant king of the Dokuro, resides. They seem to simply seek the destruction of mankind for reasons unclear. The Dokuro wield weapons made of bone and possess a strength greater than that of ordinary mortals. It is no difficulty to brand such creatures as being monsters.

Kappa

Pronounced: Cap-Ah

Kappa are green-skinned imps who reside in or near bodies of water. They are sometimes called fairies, for it is true that they love children and are generally playful and even helpful. However, beneath the curious, grinning exterior, there is a madness that lurks in every Kappa. Every once in a while, Kappa are overcome with the lust to maul a human and drag them into

the water. This may be because Kappa are born from dangerous undertow. Children are taught to avoid Kappa consequently and bodies of water that have them are marked by signs showing the image of a Kappa's silhouette. Kappa are not easily dealt with; they are rarely found alone and they are very, very tough creatures. They have short, albeit deadly, claws. However, the Kappa have a key weakness. Their heads have an indentation which holds water from the place of their birth. If the water is spilled, the Kappa dies. Because Kappa are top-heavy, knocking them down kills them utterly. The staff and spear are ideal for this in the hands of a trained soldier.

Tsukumogami

Pronounced: T'Su-Ku-Mo-Gah-May

The Souls of slain Immortals too wicked to reincarnate as an animal but too virtuous to reincarnate as a monster return in the form of a man-made object. If this object is permitted by the vicissitudes of fate to exist for one hundred years, the object gains consciousness and attains the human form, with some elements of its object-nature intact. This is called a Tsukumogami, which means Thing-Goblin-Spirit in the Old Tongue. This is a very imprecise name, though, for Tsukumogami are not Kami in the same way that Shinigami are not Kami. They are, however, more goblin-like; they are scurrying things which hide from the world of men out of fear. Tsukumogami are in fact very helpful if they can be made to trust humans, for they remember their origins as coming from mankind. Therefore, the Tsukumogami of a plow might till a peasant's field or the Tsukumogami of an umbrella shade a lady as she travels. Shinigami, however, send them on when they find them for the Shogunate is better served by moving these things along through the Wheel of Karma.

Unique Bakemono of Legend

Some particularly wicked souls seem to be mired in their own damnation. So deep were their sins, that they return every year to plague the world of men. The Shinigami Department of Karmic Records is supposed to be in charge of tracking the rebirths of these horrors, but it is a difficult thing to predict where all of them will be at any given time. Therefore, Shinigami react to Bakemono as they arise and have, in all probability, already caused widespread destruction.

Wanyudo

Pronounced: Wain-You-Do

Wanyudo was the chief advisor to the Shogun born in what is now Aki Island. When the Shogun bade the Kuge to commit suicide, Wanyudo fled the Yamato capitol and poisoned the wells of many villages in revenge against the Shinigami. When Wanyudo was finally caught, he was beheaded. However, when the head was displayed, it still held the Soul of Wanyudo who pronounced a series of curses against the Shogunate. Once a year, on a random day, Wanyudo appears in the streets of one of the cities of Aki Island and incinerates everything he can find. His new form is a wheel made of solid fire with a human face, the face of the headless Wanyudo. Although he can be defeated with swords and spears, every strike against him ruins a weapon from the warping heat. Therefore one needs a Ghost Heart Blade to combat him.

Gasha Dokuro

Pronounced: Gah-Shah Do-Ku-Ro

Just as the origins of the Dokuro are mysterious, so is the origins of their king, the giant Gasha Dokuro. Gasha Dokuro is so large that his rib cage is filled with the flailing forms of lesser Dokuro he has trapped within himself. In combat, he slowly releases the Dokuro to overwhelm his opponents. Whenever he is destroyed, which actually does not happen every single year, he reforms somewhere else on Gojou Island.

Eastern Daikaiju

Pronounced: Die-Ky-Ju

A tale has been told about a noble of the Kuge in ancient times who had foreseen the return of the Shogun in the stars. While the Shogun existed in a state of divine satori, this noble was inspired by his satori to invent a potion which would make his Immortal body into a terrible weapon capable of defeating Emmadai-O. He succeeded only partially and became a monstrous navy-blue salamander which breathed icy cutting wind. The Shinigami defeated him using the Way of Annihilation, which he had not predicted. For some time, the nobleman would reform out of the eastern ocean in this guise and again attack what is now known as Shiga Island. Each time he became larger, tougher, and his breath more destructive. Luckily, his power has since leveled off but he yet returns yearly to Shiga Island to assault the seat of the Bakufu. They call him Eastern Daikaiju or the King of Monsters. It is rare that he is able to cross the Eastern Mountains of Shiga before the Shinigami dispatch him. When he does, however, the results are terrible.

Yokai and Ghosts

When a person dies, their Soul usually passes into the Yama Lands and through the Wheel of Karma. However, because the Immortals tampered in the ways of life and death, they damaged the Wheel of Karma such that it does not perfectly compel Souls into its embrace anymore. Most of those who could not heed the call remain in the Chrysanthemum Lands as a ghost. These are passive things, mere presences. They barely remember their lives and they have no powers or curses.

Yokai, on the other hand, are nightmarish things driven to acts of cruelty and greed. The emergence of a Yokai are often seen as a sign of a life filled with angst of one stripe or another. Yokai mostly exist in the physical world. They can disappear immaterially, but not often and not for long. Ghost are naturally immaterial but can be made visible under the light of the enchanted lanterns carried by the Ghost-Collector Caste Shinigami.

Hanyo (Yokai People)

Pronounced: Han-Yo

Hanyo are not themselves Yokai, but they are a related phenomenon. Yokai are mad, half-conscious things. They follow instinct more than they follow reason, flawed or otherwise. As they are ruled by their passions, a certain number of male Yokai sire children upon female mortals. Children born in this manner are said to eat their twin in the womb and are thus born stained with the sin of murder. Life as a Hanyo is unenviable. The bodies of Hanyo are prone to disease and are universally hemophiliacs. It is as their very Soul were straining to leave

and reincarnate into a worthwhile incarnation. Hanyo are not trusted by anyone, peasant, Yamabushi, or Shinigami. Being Half-Yokai provides no benefit whatsoever. It is merely a curse.

Hebigami (Serpent Yokai)

Pronounced: Heb-E-Gah-Mee

Serpent Yokai derive from venomous people whose vindictive and hateful ways have cursed them emit vitriol beyond the grave. Even in their physical state Hebigami can pass through doors as if they did not exist, slithering under them or through a keyhole. Their touch carries a neurotoxin and they can spit poison at range. Hebigami can sense others of their kind and will sometimes team up to attack in packs.

Inugami (Dog Yokai)

Pronounced: E-Nu-Gah-Mee

When a person dies homeless in abject poverty their spirit, humbled by the experience, takes on the mannerisms and ways of a dog. The Inugami spend much of their time immaterial, as a hungering presence. They become material to eat garbage or to chase stray cats. Inugami are very territorial. Powerful Inugami can call packs of dogs and act as their alpha. The oldest of their kind command wolves.

Kumogami (Spider Yokai)

Pronounced: Coo-Mo-Gah-Mee

When Kumogami are immaterial, perceptive people can still feel their presence, spotting small spiders darting about in the shadows. Kumogami hole up in abandoned places like barns and temples and spins an immaterial web to snare prey. When a person arrives, they afflicted with a spiritual caging effect that allows the Yokai to descend into the material world to feed on their prey.

Mononoke (Possessing Yokai)

The Blood-Spilling Caste Shinigami consider the Mononoke to be the worst kind of Yokai to face. This is because Mononoke are possessing entities, naturally immaterial but capable of possessing mortals. Once possessed, the Yokai controls the person and is invulnerable to attack until that person is killed, driving them out. Mononoke possession is an unnatural mental influence that is easily blocked by those with any kind of mental training. Shinigami, and all other beings whose nature is tied to death, cannot be possessed by Mononoke. Only those who have purified their spiritual essence have any hope of attacking a Mononoke in its natural form. Therefore, trained exorcists are brought in specifically to deal with them when they are found.

Ohaguro (Faceless Yokai)

Faceless Ghosts are frightening, but not malicious as other Yokai. They cannot become immaterial at will, but rather, they disappear into such a state when under direct light. They prefer to exist physically and therefore seek the dark. Generally, Ohaguro weep or mumble self-defeating phrases. Those who come near them are afflicted with fear of their empty

faces. Yet, one pays a terrible price for having this grip them; for some time afterwards, they are afflicted with a total amnesia and remember nothing of who they are, though they retain knowledge of all skills. When someone approaches within striking distance of an Ohaguro, it bursts into violence with bone claws.

Yama-Uba (Witch Yokai)

It is said that those who die with deeply shameful secrets awaken after death knowing the forbidden secrets of black magic. Such Yokai are called Yama-Uba, curse-slinging old women of grim disposition. Yama-Uba are by far the most cannibalistic of the Yokai and are sentient enough to converse about which parts of the human anatomy they like best (even if they have never actually tasted them before; the Soul is mad). Yama-Uba know the Way of Annihilation whether or not they did in life and they can invoke primal magic to place shackles on the arms of any aggressor.

Shogunate Speak

Although the Old Tongue was forbidden to be spoken by the Shogun, this has widely been interpreted to only mean that actual sentences spoken in the Old Tongue were forbidden. Therefore, although the language as spoken is entirely dead, a very large number of words and short phrases found their way back into everyday speech. Some commoners specifically use the Old Tongue to communicate certain concepts although they themselves have no idea how to actually speak the language itself.

Jutsu

Pronounced: Ju-T'su

Technique. A talent, skill, or mystical practice.

Satori

Enlightenment. A moment of pure epiphany. Very advanced scholars can meditate upon a subject and call a state of satori upon themselves.

Sensei

Pronounced: Sen-Say-Ee

Teacher. A term of respect.

Seppukku

Pronounced: Sep-Oo-Koo

A ritual suicide, performed as a cutting of the abdomen. Traditionally, a second decapitates the target to end their suffering, but in wartime sometimes no such second can be found.

Shiso Keisatsu

Pronounced: She-So Key-A-Sot-Sue

“Thought Police” ie, the Veil of Silence. Mortals know that some authority figure censors Shogunate culture but they have no idea that it is operated by Veil of Silence or even Shinigami. Many mortals strongly dislike the vertical power structure of the Shogunate and refer to those who lord over them as “Thought Police”: Shiso Keisatsu. The Old Tongue is used specifically to

reject the Shogun's common tongue.

Shin-Do

The Way of Annihilation. Often translated as "Death Path". Shin-Do is used more often to denote the Way of Annihilation as sorcery as opposed to as a religion, although it can be used for either, making the distinction between the two much less significant to the people of the Shogunate.

(Pass/Send) through the Wheel of Karma

To pass through the Wheel of Karma is to die. To send someone through the Wheel of Karma means to kill them. People in the Shogunate of the Death-Gods do not refer to the act of killing. The word itself is a part of their vocabulary and they do know what it means. They just consider that particular phrasing to be artless and unfit for the public discussion. They react to the infinitive "to kill" as we would react to the phrase "to kill like a dirty dog". Its just too cold, too brutal. Instead, they use the infinitive "to send through the Wheel of Karma" as a substitute. There are many people in the Shogunate who make slaughter their profession and they prefer not to think of what they do as what it really is. Of course, the souls do find their way through the Wheel of Karma all the same, but its just not polite to mention just how they get there.

Yamabushi

Pronounced: Ya-Ma-Boo-She

Warrior priest. Yamabushi are itinerant preachers of the Way of Kami. The old priesthood of the Kami was turned out of their God Houses and sent to roam the wastes. Because common people are not allowed to travel, they must avoid cities, preaching only in the rice fields or at gatherings in the wilderness. Because the Bakufu has banned the preaching of the Way of the Kami, they often come into conflict with local authority. Consequently, Yamabushi are skilled warriors.

Yosh!

Ready or energized. A term too useful to be eliminated in the Shogun's common tongue.

An Out of Play Discussion of the Shogunate of the Death-Gods

Arrival

As mentioned in the setting, Shinigami are volunteers of low prestige; their story has yet to be told. Shinigami characters can be Ichi, Ni, or San rank when they start play. Players may choose rank based on Department or by preference. Characters cannot, however, be Shin rank when they begin play. Shinigami arrive in the Fractured kneeling as if they are before the Shogun.

Mortals enter the Fractured in a somewhat different state. They appear in moments of intense meditation or just moments before their death. They arrive no worse for wear, liberated from the curse of disease and old age, as if they had truly entered into an afterlife. Because of how they arrive, mortal characters from the Shogunate arrive either in a state of almost having died or almost having achieved ultimate enlightenment. Neither event actually occurs; they are taken just moments before they reached their fate.

Lifespan

Its true.

This setting fetishizes death and killing (in-game of course). There are social elements that demand someone or another go down in a big way. This is doubly true if you play a Shinigami. They think very little of going through the Wheel of Karma. Now, because we are LARPing, and miraculous return from the dead is “de rigueur”, dying almost certainly will not end your character... immediately. There is, however, a finite amount of times you can come back. Shinigami begin to show just how close to their final return they are by how ghostly they appear. Much more so than characters from other settings, it seems very likely that characters from the Shogunate of the Death-Gods will retire by simply dying too many times. If you intend to roleplay a stone-cold Shinigami suicide warrior, expect a slightly shorter tale than other Shogunate concepts. It is worth noting, however, that this is very much in the spirit of the setting:

The brevity of the experience enhances its sweetness. And when its over, you get a new, wiser incarnation.

Shinigami and the Alabaster Tribe from A World With No Shadow

Shinigami want to destroy the Fractured while Alabaster Tribe wants to settle it. While its not entirely out of the scope of the game to ultimately unmake the great fissure of the universe, the narrative of the beginning of the game will not be to immediately end the game. Therefore, the Shinigami’s overweening desire to shut down the Fractured should not immediately draw the Shogunate into violent conflict with A World With No Shadow. It is quite possible that this conflict may boil to the surface when relevant, but it seems the height of arrogance to start a war about something theoretical. Admittedly, in the real world, this is almost always why wars are fought, but it seems to me that the Shinigami could only stand to benefit from Alabaster Tribe infrastructure in their quest to destroy their rival afterlife.

Taiyou Ninja Clan

Taiyou are badguys, plain and simple. Not appropriate as a PC unless they are a repentant member, fleeing the revenge of their... oh, well you get the idea. I’m sure there will be 4am suicide ninja NPC raids against traitors to the Sun Goddess, so keep Monstertown (the NPC central area) aware of your desire to play one, should the need arise at 4am to murder you.

The Five Things Every Shinigami Knows

Every Shinigami from the Yama Lands knows...

...how they died.

Shinigami are ghosts who serve the dead Shogun. In order to come into their service, they must have already met their mortal doom. Therefore, Shinigami (generally) know the circumstances of their death. Although their Shinigami forms appear roughly mortal, as they go through the Wheel of Karma, they begin to appear more as the ghosts that they are.

...their Caste.

Shinigami serve the Shogun in four Castes (listed in order from least respected to most respected): Blood-Spilling Caste (the Shogun’s warriors), Ghost-Collector Caste (Shinigami mystics), Veil of Silence Caste (the Shogun’s spies and secret police), and the Faithful Enumerator Caste (bureaucrats of death).

...their Rank and Department.

Shinigami serve in a complex, but diffuse hierarchy. They are expected to defer to those above them, but unlike mortals, there are no legal (only social) punishments for disobeying a superior. The Ranks, from lowest to highest, are Ichi, Ni, and San.

...that death is mere a single pass through the Wheel of Karma.

To die is to pass through the Wheel of Karma and this erases the memories of mortal souls. However, Shinigami do not lose their memories and return to their Shinigami incarnation as long as they are not destroyed too many times. Shinigami fear death much less than mortals do.

...that they are travelling to end the threat of the rival afterlife.

All Shinigami entering the Fractured do so at the behest of the Shogun. Their mission: to stop the rival afterlife from poaching prime Souls from the Wheel of Karma. Shinigami of all Castes are permitted to travel at the edge of the Shogun's blade. It is assumed such a mission is one of suicide, for there no means of getting back.

The Five Things Every Mortal of the Chrysanthemum Lands Knows

Every mortal, commoner or Samurai, from the Chrysanthemum Lands knows...

...their beliefs on the nature of death.

Death is a familiar thing in the Chrysanthemum Lands and its people are forced from the earliest ages to come to terms with the phenomenon. The Way of Annihilation is the dominant ideology and stresses the impermanence of life and the importance of dying with honor. The Way of the Kami is suppressed but stresses reverence for life, its focus on reincarnation, and its goal of eternal life. The Tengu have other, stranger perspectives that mortals sometimes borrow.

...their place in society.

It is honorable to play one's part and the Chrysanthemum has a thousand and one positions to fill within its vertical power-structure. Peasants toil at the bottom of this structure and the Samurai rule from above. Geisha, Ronin, Yamabushi, and even the corrupt local politicians have their place.

...the island of their origin.

Although the beauty of the living world's five islands are named after the Samurai Clans, their beauty transcends mortal ownership. Shiga Island is flat and bountiful, the prize of all warfare. Getseui Island is covered in bamboo that must be pruned or else it will destroy all civilized structures. Gojou Island is forested and overrun with monstrous skeletons. Aki Island is heated by volcanic springs throughout the year but is mountainous and home to Akuma demons. Hana Island is a floral garden and most beautiful of all.

...the narrative of their family.

The people know that family is a joy only given to the living and therefore exult in their people's history. Samurai and Ninja Clans especially take their familial connections seriously. These warrior societies are intended to produce father-son continuities that preserve the political status quo. Commoners simply take pride in their origins.

...the dangers they have faced.

The living take pride in the fact that they are still living. Most mortals have faced a time in their life when they would not have survived if they had not simply been lucky or canny. Yokai, Bakemono, brutal Clan warfare, starvation, disease, and suicide are challenges which must be faced in order to continue living.

Inspirations

The Films of Akira Kurasawa (Movies)

The most famous “samurai” director and with good reason. Even his non-samurai movies seem to speak to the ideal, such as “Red Beard” (a youth is mentored by a grim country doctor) and “Stray Dog” (a policeman loses his gun and becomes obsessed with returning it). Obviously *Seven Samurai*, *Hidden Fortress*, and *Yojimbo* are his most iconic, but I think the ones most relevant to the Shogunate of the Death-Gods setting is are his Shakespeare adaptations. Kurasawa loved his tragedies the most (as do I) and made *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*) and *Ran* (*King Lear*) in this spirit. The world of the samurai in the Shogunate operates on the dramatic principles of these movies most: their lives are full of madness, treachery, and resignation. There are no acts of heroism, merely acts of honor, which are themselves some form of suicide or another.

Death Note and Bleach (Anime)

Shinigami have been a motif in Japanese art for hundreds of years, but it was only recently that they were given a narrative outside of “non-western grim reapers”. The anime *Death Note* explores the society of Shinigami more like western grim reapers, but with the ability to decide who lives and who dies. *Bleach* could certainly be said to inform the Shogunate more, from its rich and strange Soul Society bureaucracy to the wielding of souls as swords. The Shinigami of the Shogunate do not entirely follow the logic of either vision, but they can be good places to look for inspiration for the types of people who might be found in the Yama Lands.

The Works of Nabeshima Naoshige (Philosophy)

Naoshige was a high born samurai who served various factions in the wars which lead to the formation of the Tokugawa Shogunate. His philosophy was virtually unknown in his life but became tremendously popular in the Edo Period during the “Pax Tokugawa”. He is really the gentleman who coined the phrase “I have found the way of the warrior is death” which essentially sums up his ideal. Although highly fatalistic and romantic, actually adhering to these principles would make one a suicidal murderer, as brutal as ineffective in combat. However, the metaphysics of the Shogunate explicitly support this kind of nonsense as a viable tactic.

Secrets of the Samurai (Nonfiction)

A scholarly treatment of Japanese martial arts. This work was indispensable for my research for this setting.