

The Splendour of Shényu

by M.A.R. Barker

Many players of “Empire of the Petal Throne” have asked for information on the Shén, the great reptilian race which inhabits the hot lands south of Livyánu. Of all of the nonhuman races of Tékumel, the Shén, the Pé Chói, and the Ahoggyá seem to be the most interesting to players, and in a number of campaigns players have asked to play the part of one of these beings. It is especially difficult to take on the role of an alien creature, of course, and referees should perhaps advise this only for exceptionally imaginative players. It is not just a matter of being nearly seven feet tall, covered with black scales, and tremendously powerful; there are important mental and cultural differences as well. Some of these will be explained below, while other, more subtle attitudes may perhaps be left to the players to develop.

Historically, the Shén worlds lie around Antares (alpha Scorpii). When man first encountered them, they had already developed interstellar flight and what humans called the “three-light drive”, a modification of the torque-stress interdimensional drive used by mankind. At first the Shén were neutral to man, but they soon determined that if they remained passive, the aggressive human worlds would expand and envelop their region and stiffly resisted human attempts to push them off. A series of small engagements resulted, and both sides suffered losses. Eventually men and Shén came to realise that this was a fruitless enterprise—the logistics of interstellar war are too difficult to make it profitable—and the Treaty of T’kru (the Shén world capital) was signed. Trade developed, and mutual respect also came into being. Although ferocious in battle, the Shén had never been needlessly cruel—and fortunately at this time in human history the forces fighting the Shén were followers of the Transporters, a highly moralistic, authoritarian, almost prudish sect. Neither side thus committed atrocities, and peace came easily once war was done.

The Shén accompanied man to Tékumel as trading partners, setting up a largish mission on the southern continent. This region was too hot for humans but suited the heat-loving Shén very well indeed. Shén records, like human history, do not extend back to the “Time of Darkness”, when Tékumel and its sun were cast into a pocket dimension of their own, but it is clear that volcanism, storms, and tidal waves swept away much of this original colony, leaving only a small enclave in what is now Shényu. The Shén epic, “the Recital of Ss-tr”, describes in allegorical terms the founding of the city of Ssoruá and the struggles of the earliest settlers. Volcanic activity continued for centuries, both in the southern continent and in the region of the Spouting Mountains in Shényu. Nevertheless, the colony persevered and eventually prospered. There was little conflict with the humans, who were based farther to the northeast in what is now Tsolyánu and Mu’ugalavyá, and the ancient strongholds of the native races, the Ssú and the Hlüss, were ruthlessly exterminated.

It may be useful to describe the Shén in more detail than was given in “Empire of the Petal Throne”: the “male” Shén (really the egg-creator) is the tallest of the species, ranging up to almost seven feet in height. The “female” (the egg-layer) is smaller and more delicate. The third sex (the egg-fertiliser) is of intermediate height. The males have gleaming black scales, a glittering crest of spiny points which can be raised or kept flat against the skull, a beak-like snout, and three-fingered hands with an opposable thumb. The females are of a blue-black-grey colour, and their crests are smaller. The egg-fertiliser is sometimes hard to identify for humans, since he (she? it?) is similar in appearance to a male, somewhat less black, with tinges of grey on the belly and on the inside of the limbs. All Shén have greyish areas around their reddish eyes, which have a vertical black pupil. There are some further sub-species of other colourations as well, but these tend to be from egg-groups (cf. below) outside of Shényu. In their own land the Shén wear little clothing, preferring only a harness upon which to hang a pouch, a weapon, etc. Those who emerge to fight in human armies, however, often lacquer their crests in metallic colours, wear a metal-link belt with a small metal groin guard over a loincloth of red or blue cloth, and add epaulettes of metal to their harness. Shén also enjoy having more complete body armour and use scale mail sewn on leather, a helmet of metal (copper trim is preferred) or of Chlén-hide (which they do not like but wear when necessary), vambraces and greaves of metal, etc. Shén females wear nothing more than a harness, although they may lacquer designs on their dorsal scales, and the third sex, the egg-fertiliser, tends to copy the fashions of the males, although with subtle differences which can be perceived by a Shén but which humans may not be able to identify.

The central feature of Shén culture, perhaps, is the division into “egg-groups”: i.e. lineages of individuals descended from the same male and female (the egg-fertiliser, who comes along after the eggs are laid to fertilise them, may be different). A Shén receives cooperation, support, and assistance from his/her/its own egg group. With other egg-groups, neutrality or downright hostility is to be expected, and this is perhaps the main reason why the Shén have never developed into a unified, world-conquering species on Tékumel. The plants and drugs which were used to suppress this inter-egg-group hostility on their own world are no longer available on Tékumel, and thus the Shén behave instinctively much as their ancestors must have done on the hot, rocky plateaus of Antares IV before these tranquilising substances were discovered.

The egg-group division is primary for the Shén, and this has resulted in the many small “states” north of Shényu: these are enclaves of egg-groups which have split off from one of the central egg-groups of Shényu, gone through a period of “neutrality”, and then, as time passed, drifted far enough away genetically to be classified as “hostile”. Shén informants have stated that in every clutch of eggs there are always some infants which do not “smell right” (the actual Shén term is untranslatable). The mother weeds these out, killing and eating them as she finds them, but occasionally some escape to run away. These exiles often die of starvation or are caught and killed, but a few survive to reach the northern enclaves. If they are lucky, they may find an egg-group to which they “smell right”, and they are then accepted into that group. They may occasionally meet other “exiles” and found a new egg-group of their own. This natural process tends to fragment Shén society and to create continual trouble.

The matter is complicated by the recurrence of the “mating season” during the hottest months of the year, when the temperature in Shényu reaches approximately 60° C. (approx. 140° F.). During this period males from the same or different egg-groups will fight each other on sight, if there is a female with one of them. This fighting is instinctive, and weapons are not used—just teeth, claws, and tail. Females are kept sequestered, usually in the care of the egg-fertilisers, who do not participate in the fighting. The Shén are largely monogamous, forming permanent unions with just one mate, whom they protect and with whom they live. The egg-fertiliser sex, however, is not part of these unions, dwelling first with one couple, then with another, within their egg-group, fertilising each couple’s eggs in turn. Each yearly clutch of eggs produces infant Shén within about a two-week period, and these are cared for by the mother and by older female Shén who are past the egg-laying stage. Many of these infants die before maturation, killed by their brothers and sisters in rough play within the “nest”. Whenever there is too great a preponderance of one sex, the elderly females also weed out the weaklings, snapping off heads and eating the excess infants. This is only too often the fate of infant egg-fertilisers, not too many of whom are required by the egg-group for its continuation—but it is not correct to apply human standards here!

The exact structure of Shén government is not clear. Senior males seem to dominate within each egg-group, and the larger egg-groups in turn dominate lesser, neutral or friendly-related ones. Elderly females appear to have a strong say in matters affecting the egg-group as well, but the third sex, the egg-fertilisers, have no political or social power and go about performing their endless task with no desire to do otherwise. Each Shén city is organised around a centrally powerful egg-group or cluster of related egg-groups. The elderly males regularly meet (except in mating season) in a sort of loosely democratic council, in which one’s status is determined by age, prestige (e.g., due to the size and power of one’s egg-group), and personal charisma. This council, called the H’rg-Ssá, organises the functions of government: trade, shipping, policing, military matters, etc. Within Shényu, these councils cooperate with those of other cities, since all are of friendly-related or neutral egg-group lineage. There is no such cooperation with the fragmented hostile egg-group states to the north.

The Shén are great traders. Much of their commerce is internal, with the Ch’r melon (their main dietary staple when at home—from which they make a bitter, pungent bread-like cake, edible but not pleasant to humans) forming their main trade item for the interior to the coast. In return, the coastal cities supply fish, crustaceans, insects of various types (also part of the Shén diet), and other sea products, as well as items traded in from human cultures. Although not very much given to aquatics themselves, the Shén also maintain a large fleet of ships for trading purposes. For their galleys, the Shén purchase human slaves, since they themselves dislike rowing. They also have a strong navy of fighting ships, sometimes powered by sails, sometimes rowed by hapless humans. The Shén mine gold (hexes 0921, 0822, and 0918 being their major mine sites), but this they use largely as a trade item. They prefer copper for their own decorations, and this is mined in hex 0721 at the headwaters of the K’r’r-gr’ü River. Gems—mostly opals and carnelian—are found in hexes 1021 and 1022 and are traded out to daring human captains by the Shén of the little principality of Rá at a settlement on Sarír Bay (hex 1126). Iron is also mined (probably in hex 0814), but this is kept a secret, and humans are not permitted to view these workings.

From human lands, the Shén import glass, pottery (they are poor potters), more copper, Chlén-hide, wines (Shényu is too hot to support good grapes), cloth, condiments, and some food items.

Within Shényu the military is largely made up of males, although occasionally females are also found serving with their “husbands”. The permanent army is composed of “legions” (the Shén term is something like Gá-H´r) of 2,401 individuals; these are divided into seven Sh´r-G´ü of 343 individuals each; in turn these are composed of seven Chá-Ss of forty-nine individuals apiece, and each of these units contains seven Tá-K´r of seven Shén. The exact number of these “legions” is not known, but it is estimated that ten to fifteen are available around Ssoruá, another eight to twelve around Qeleqmú, eight to ten around Chrí, and an unknown number of others scattered around the land. It is difficult to assess Shén military power since almost all male Shén belong to one or another of these military units, yet when off-duty they are free to pursue other business and do not dress or act as “warriors”. The “army” of Shényu, thus, is rather a sort of well-organised militia than a separate, standing army. Most of these troops (if one can call them that) are armed in traditional Shén fashion with long halberds, their favorite axe-swords (a three or four foot long sword-like weapon with a heavy chopper on the end), and the small “pistol” crossbow, a hand-held, hand-cocked weapon which fires short quarrels. Occasionally units are armed with long spears and even pikes, probably in imitation of human infantry. The Shén are too clumsy to make good archers, although their field ballistæ and siege onagers are much admired by human military experts.

The Shén are also but indifferent magicians. They make use of such technological “magic” as Eyes, amulets, etc., but their use of spells is very poor and limited. This may be due to their clumsiness, to their mental “set” which keeps them from reaching through to the interdimensional force lines which provide power for magic on Téकुmel, or it may be because of the lack of strong force lines in this part of Téकुmel. Unlike the northern regions, this area (including Tsoleí), possesses few interdimensional force lines and nexus points upon which a magic user can draw for power. Spells, thus, may be used only once by a newcomer and then quickly grow ineffective. The Shén, it is rumoured, possess a number of ancient technological weapons, preserved from the period of high technology before the Time of Darkness. It is said that these include aircars and some powered artillery, but naturally this is kept a state secret by the Shén.

Indeed, the Shén have little need for more permanent military forces. An attack from the north would have to come from Livyánu, through the many small Shén states (which are similarly organised) and through the ravines and low foothills which stretch from Shrúké´el over to the great massif of the Spouting Mountains. Along the southern coasts of Shényu there is another natural barrier; the Mocháptla Swamps, an area of low bogs, tidal inlets, quicksands, and humid, low jungle. Although the Livyáni have occasionally warred with the Shén enclave of Mmatugúal and even once made an attempt upon Boch´ún, the great Shén city in the foothills of the Spouting Mountains, they have not tried to penetrate further south. Human and Shén settlements are intermingled in northern Mmatugúal, becoming solidly Shén as one travels south. So confident are the Shén of their isolation that they have not imitated the human Sákbe Road system except in Mmatugúal. South of the great Héng-Hr´üggash-Boch´ún road, the Shén roads

are at ground level, paved with great blocks of volcanic basalt, and only occasionally guarded by squat watchtowers and fortresses.

For game purposes, the religion of the Shén was simplified to agree with that of Tsolyánu; i.e., a Shén can be identified as “good” or “evil” and may worship any of the twenty Tsolyáni deities much as his human colleagues do. In fact, however, the Shén have two great deities of their own: the One of Eggs and the One Who Rends. So far as can be ascertained, the first of these deities corresponds to Avánthe (with overtones also of Hnálla and Thúmis), while the second is a counterpart of Vimúhla (with certain aspects of Hrü’ü and the scientific bent of Ksárul thrown in). The few Shén willing to discuss this matter have said that the One of Eggs is more passive, more interested in the continuation and preservation of society, more cohesive and constructive, while the One Who Rends stands for the instinctive violence which underlies the Shén temperament, the need to destroy and establish one’s individual power over others. There are also many minor deities, demons, and local forces (e.g., the sailors of Ssoruá begin each voyage with a sacrifice to Hú-Shrá, Lord of Winds), but these are not of the same level as the two major deities. It is quite clear that these deities exist for the Shén much as the gods of Tsolyánu exist for humans. It is only when Shén journey out of their lands to seek service with human societies that they may be found worshipping the “human” deities—apparently they are quick to identify their two great principles with the most closely related counterpart in the human pantheon, and so long as they are abroad, they worship this. Upon their return, they revert to the worship of their own deities.

It may be noted here that comparatively few Shén opt for service in human territory. Most of these are young males, seeking wealth and excitement before settling down in Shényu. Very, very few Shén stay longer than two or three years outside of their beloved hot lands, and there is a distinct antipathy to the idea of bringing out one’s mate (and an egg-fertiliser) and setting up a colony in some human area. Only rarely, thus, are Shén females seen in human cities, and egg-fertilisers are even more rare. Shén missions and permanent trading enclaves in such cities as Jakálla, Khéiris, Tsámra, etc. may sometimes include females and children, but there is no feeling that this should become permanent, and after a tour of duty the Shén emissaries are rotated home.

Humans should also note that it is not possible to employ Shén of one egg-group to serve in a legion with Shén from some other egg-group. This produces instant hostility, which may result in violence. Such Tsolyáni mercenary Shén legions as The Legion of the Splendour of Shényu, the Legion of Gr-gá the Egg-Layer, the Legion of the City of Chrí, and the Horde of H’rk-ss the Eater of Eggs, are all composed of troops from the same or friendly egg-groups. On the other hand, the Mu’ugalavyáni employ Shén from some of the smaller states: e.g., Legion XI of the First Palace, “Pride of Xáx”, Legion XIII of the Third Palace, “Egg-Destroyers”, Legion IX of the Third Palace, “Iridescent Egg”, etc. Shén egg-group loyalties must thus be strictly observed even abroad.

To the Shén, men are the “Tsí” (a small monkey-like creature dimly remembered from their own native world); men move about too much, talk too much, and are too flighty. Men find most Shén reserved, rather cold and calculating, given to sudden and unintelligible violence, and

without any sense of humour. The Shén are infallibly honourable, within their own cultural limitations, and take no part in the calculated cruelties and sadism of human culture. They thus find men fickle and dishonest, hypocritical and vicious, while men find them stiff, overly righteous about their cultural ideals, and without any understanding of conflicting points of view. In spite of these gaps in understanding, however, the two races have learned to live together, sometimes even in relative harmony. There have even been joint human-Shén expeditions; e.g., the Livyáni-Shén attempt in 1,802 A.S. to drive the Hlüss off of Kushi'íl Island (hex 0428, etc.). There are Shén officers in human armies, and human captains of Shén ships (although no human has served in the Shén military, probably because of the egg-group social aspects of the Shén military structure). Shén and human merchants have often banded together to operate trading firms, and Shén travelers have even reached the northern cities of Yán Kór, enduring the cold and alien surroundings of those far-off regions.

As for humans visiting Shényu, it may be interesting to note the description provided by Hirikása hiTu'únmra, a Tsolyáni officer who was sent to negotiate for gold in 2,342 A.S.:

“On the next day we passed through the Straits of Vá-Mélek, with the low jungles of Shényu to starboard and the rotting swamps of Mélek-Táru Isle to port. All of this coastline is like that near Penóm: an endless wall of green jungle which overhangs the sea all along. The water flows in and out through the tangled roots of this swampy morass, and over all there is the hum of the biting flies. Not a sign of Shén habitation is to be seen, not a hint that behind this hedge of jungle there lies a mighty empire. My companion, the noble Sh´r-Mgá, sat stolidly in the bows, awaiting a sight of his homeland, which he had not seen for these three years.

“We spent the night tied to the roots of a rotting Sáyu tree, fearing the sandbanks and shoals that predominate in this passage. More, Sh´r-Mgá warned us of the small pirate craft which dart forth from some tiny inlet and raid passing ships which exhibit few signs of military power. Although our mission had a good twenty troopers aboard, we had no stomach to face an assault by half a hundred hissing Shén, and we lay silent and dark the night long.

“On the morning of the next day we rounded Chá-Kág head [hex 0422], and before us there opened out a pretty bay of considerable breadth. Into this we sighted the city of Ssoruá. This lay dead ahead of us, at the mouth of the K´rr-grü River, and at first glance it seemed naught but a solid low wall of black stone, from which wharves and berthings of all ships extended out into the bay like tongues of stone. When we had tacked and come about before the city, we saw that this was a mighty harbour, full of great black Shén galleys, sailed warships, and craft from half a hundred ports. The city was only partly visible behind a long seawall of cut blocks of black stone, a tower here and a taller building there. Two Shén pilots came aboard, then and saw us into a berth beside a trading vessel with the red banner of Mu'ugalavyá on the port side and a Shén warship of black and crimson on our starboard. None came out to us, and as evening was drawing on, we took our meal as was our wont from our own provisions. Sh´r-Mgá took one of our dinghies and the two pilots and rowed off to visit his people, vowing to return for us at dawnlight the next day.

“True to his word, Sh´r-Mgá appeared the next morning, accompanied by four great Shén with many colours on their crests and all encased in copper armour. These, he told us, were the

representatives of the council of Ssoruá, and they were empowered to escort us to our quarters in the foreigners section of the city. We were rowed ashore in some style by eight great Shén, and when we disembarked upon the quay we were received by another of these creatures who wore a cloak of green feathers all sewn upon silk [an imitation of human official dress; Translator]. We passed along the wharves and under a lowering tower which was well guarded by a company or two of Shén in copper armour. I could see on the battlements an array of stone-throwers and great ballistæ which covered the whole harbour. I also noted as we passed through the gateway that the floor was of timber and could be removed and thrown down in case of assault, leaving the enemy to face a deep pit, which, as I could hear, was open to the tides of the sea underneath.

“Within the gate there was another enclosure of stone, pierced by several of the pentagonal doors favoured by these beings. Here we were halted while the Shén hissed and crackled in their own tongue, looking over our documents and inspecting the samples which we had brought. At length one of them who spoke passable Tsolyáni came forth and said that we were to be housed in the Foreigners Quarter and that accommodations were being made ready for us. We sat beneath an awning for upward of a Kirén [about half an hour; Translator], sweating and dripping in the abominable heat, and then a much more lordly-looking Shén appeared, all attired in harnesses of copper and gems. This we were told, was one Tá-H’rg, an official greeter from the Egg-Group of the Great Nest, the chief faction [not really—just the most senior egg-group; Translator] of this place.

“This Shén took us in tow, and we were led through the city like a pack of pet Rényu, all eyes upon us. The Shén build few tall buildings, preferring long, low stone porticoes and blank walls, pierced only by an occasional gate. Everything here is curved, few walls are straight. The copings of the roofs are rounded, and the few windows we could see over the walls on every side also are of oval shape. Somehow these curvings seem wrong to a human eye, and all of us felt ill at ease.

“Humans in Shényu are almost entirely restricted to the foreigner’s quarter. When we entered this, we all seemed to feel a sense of relief, and we caught ourselves glancing at one another almost like green troops who have emerged unscathed from a battle. Here there were buildings with square corners and of a form which was familiar. The Tsolyáni merchants of the White Crystal Clan have a large compound here, and to this we were led. Here we were welcomed with wine and water to bathe and food of reasonable quality—much welcomed by all of us after our long sojourn on our vessel. Rayásu hiTukún, the merchant chief of this clan here, provided us with all of our needs and told us what we might expect from the Shén. ‘Do not,’ he said, ‘hope for instant agreements and contracts. The Shén take their time, and their council will chew it all over a hundred times before making up their minds. You’ll be questioned and interviewed and talked at until you are ready to throw it all over and go home—and that’s when they will make you the lowest offer you ever heard of! You must be patient and cool about it all. The Shén admire that, and eventually they will come about.’

“This Rayásu had lived in Shényu for some ten years, off and on, making voyages home whenever the heat and the local diseases got too much for him. He further offered us pointers on behavior, saying, ‘The Shén will invite you to feast, and go you must. But don’t eat their accursed Ch’r melon, for it brings about a flux in the bowels the like of which you will never

endure again. If they give you meat, look it over well, for they eat the infants of their own species which they have no love for—the meat will be a bit greenish and of a dark hue. This they may find delectable, but humans sicken on the stuff. Instead, you must eat only the blue fruits that they call G'ár, and the long yellow pulpy things which are the peeled stalks of the Mmí-gr plant. If the Shén are ill-disposed towards you, they may offer you the flesh of a human slave—although they have little sense of humour, as befits a man, they can be sardonic and cleverly insulting at times. Mostly, however, you will find the Shén solicitous hosts, aware of the differences between your diet and theirs, and you may thus expect courteous treatment. Indeed, they may provide you each with human women for the night; these are slaves upon whom they wish you to beget further children so that they need not purchase further wretches from our lands. You may go in to these women or not, as you choose; the Shén are indifferent to our couplings. Of one matter I must warn you; make no attempt to wander about in the city or the countryside unless taken there by a Shén guide. We humans are not permitted outside of certain clearly understood areas in this nation. If your business takes you outside of this city, you must obtain permission and a Shén guide in order to travel, and should you journey to one of the northern Shén states, you must be guided to the border and arrange with the Shén of that place to take you into their territory, for no Shén of Shényu can cross the borders of Qonú, Xáx, Gái, or Shrukhe'él and live. Rá, I have heard, is somewhat neutral, —Oh, of course, there are renegades who leave Shényu and join the northern states [a reference to the egg-group membership mentioned above, of which Rayásu may have been ignorant; Translator], but travel between these lands does not occur, and trade consists of simple barter—you pile your goods on the border, and then we come and pile ours; then we take what is agreed upon from a distance.'

“Rayásu then went on to narrate several further instances of Shén behavior and to describe the plight of human travelers who had fallen afoul of their many customs and laws. As it was late, I bid my comrades good health and went to bed.

“At dawn I was awakened by a servant who brought a copper plaque for the Shén council. I dressed in what finery I could muster, took my comrades with me, and ventured out of the foreigners quarter in the company of four ceremonious Shén soldiers attired in copper harnesses and helmets. Once again we traversed that curious city. After some time I inquired of our escort if any spoke our tongue. One did, and I questioned him as we walked. ‘Why,’ I asked, ‘are there no market places in this city?’ The Shén pointed from house to house and replied, ‘Each great house you see is a nesting place; these belong to one or another egg-group, and within an egg-group all is free. We use little money here for exchange, since we know what is to be taken and what is to be given. If you were to give me your Tsolyáni sword, any egg-brother of mine could demand it of me, and I would give it. In turn, I might demand some thing of his. Only in limited matters, thus, do we need coins—mostly in matters dealing with foreign trade. These we can mint aplenty, for we possess much gold.’ I knew from this that he was aware of the substance of my mission.

“We arrived at a mighty hall of finely cut basalt blocks. The Shén decorate very little with carvings and paintings, as we are wont to do, and their architecture is thus of a serious and rather ominous mien. After passing through several courts, we were shown into a room furnished upon one side with low daises, such as we humans enjoy, and upon the other with three-legged stools of copper. Seated upon these were seven old Shén. Never before had I seen an aged Shén, and I

was taken aback to see that this race indeed ages much like our own: the crests of these Shén were highly lacquered, but yet they drooped and seemed less stiff and springy; the patches of grey around their eyes had widened and become almost a sickly white; their limbs had become thin, and their musculature was plain in front, where their bodies are softest. One stepped forward to greet us, whom I took to be their ruler [actually the senior-most member of the predominant egg-group of the city; Translator]. This being spoke to us in Shén , which is a language of hisses and growls and gargles to human ears. Another, younger Shén stood by to translate. We were welcomed to Shényu and provided with a gift of a golden armlet each. After this ceremonious greeting, our host inquired our business, and without further delay I expounded our mission to him. [The details of this need not be given here; Translator]. At length we were served basins of cold water, a mercy in this hot climate, and then wine, which I think was Livyáni in origin. As we stood to leave, I was given a message by one of the guards that Sh´r-Mgá awaited us outside and would conduct us to his house for midday food.

“I had known Sh´r-Mgá for two years in Tsolyánu, had served with him in the Imperial Army, and had been as close to him as one brother can be to another. Yet I felt him an alien when we stepped out into the steaming sunlight and saw him standing there, all proud and powerful in a new harness of copper all set with garnets and bits of opal. At his side he wore an axe-sword of steel, and upon his head a flared helmet of copper burnished so bright that it hurt the eye. With him were several of his family [egg-group; Translator], and these conducted us most ceremoniously through further streets of enigmatic nature, past two great central rounded buildings which Sh´r-Mgá said were temples to the gods of this race, and at last to an unmarked gateway in one of the interminable winding walls.

“Within at least it was cool. The outer hall lay in semi-darkness, lit only by four tiny clerestory windows high above. Sh´r-Mgá passed through this into a courtyard where there was a well and a pile of produce, apparently newly unloaded and ready to be stored within. Then we were ushered into an inner chamber where several more young Shén sat upon copper stools. Knowing our preference, Sh´r-Mgá had laid out mats upon the floor and a white cloth in the centre of the room. Food of our usual human type was laid out there: a central dish of spicy stew, loaves of Dná bread, fruits, ewers of water and of wine, ho´ó [a Livyáni grain dish rather similar to rice], and other things. In front of the Shén were platters of greenish cakes [the Ch´r-melon product mentioned above; Translator], long skewers of darkish meat (about which we made no inquiry), and a variety of fruits of every hue. As we sat to eat, a pack of young Shén ran into the room, snapping, growling, and making rough play with one another. These Sh´r-Mgá said were his children, sired before he had left for Tsolyánu and now grown almost to full adulthood. Unlike us, the Shén matures within five years and takes his full place in society in about seven. Sh´r-Mgá also brought forward a Shén of smaller stature, whom he introduced as his ‘wife’, although the term does not exactly apply. She quickly disappeared again. The females have quarters deep within the nest-group warren, and the egg-laying rooms are said to be far underground. We were not invited to see those areas, nor had we any desire to do so. The acrid, pungent odour of Shén is strong enough in a Legion barracks at home; here it was overpowering. We were also introduced to several individuals whom Sh´r-Mgá said were the egg-fertilisers of his group—more complex relationships than we could comprehend in one sitting! Almost apologetically, Sh´r-Mgá stated that it was their custom to entertain guests with singing and

music; yet he felt that we might not enjoy their music and could not comprehend their singing. We urged him not to feel disturbed and took our leave.

“When we were once more in the familiar rooms of the foreigners quarter, Rayásu came to inquire of our adventures. When I had related all to him, he exclaimed, ‘You are fortunate! This Sh’r-Mgá is a member of the egg-group to which the seniormost council members also belong. Your business will prosper, and you may only have to spend a few weeks in this accursed heat!’ ‘Good host,’ I asked, ‘if the race of Shén is as organised as they appear, and if they are as powerful as I know them to be, then tell me why they do not form a mighty army and venture forth to take away the lands of men? Do they not covet, as we do? Their troops are brave in battle and as clever as we. Today I have seen that they dwell in an organised society and can surely muster all that is needed for military adventures.’ Rayásu replied, ‘My lord, this is not entirely clear even to me, who have dwelt in Shényu now on and off for many years. It has to do with their lineages, I think: members of one egg-group cooperate only ill with those of others. Even when there is friendship between two of these great families, there is not the will to go forth upon a dangerous enterprise together. Indeed, Shényu could exterminate all of the little Shén states to the north, but as you see, they do not. They are a conservative race, one much given to its homeland and its ancient places. When young, they do set out upon adventures, but when they attain an age they return here to their blessed heat. Although they do produce individuals who desire foreign adventure, most Shén will remain within their families and homes after maturity. Some time back I am minded of one R’r-Ssá, a mighty Shén who had seen service in the armies of Tsolyánu. Upon his return here he set about building up a legion of his fellows to return to Tsolyánu and establish a new mercenary company there—perhaps to colonise, who knows? From his own egg-group he got some cooperation—thirty to fifty individuals who agreed to go with him. From his related lineages he got less, and from more distant egg-groups he got still less, until it became clear to him that no Shén-organised Company of Foreign Persons (as the devilish Yán Koryáni have named one of their legions) could go forth from here. Dissatisfied, he set sail for Tsolyánu, and I have heard nothing of him since.’ I replied, ‘I believe he now serves in the Legion called Splendour of Shényu; I met him a year back when I was in Béy Sü. He seemed then a restless, frustrated person.’ Thus we continued our discussion until the servants called us to the evening meal.”

Hirikása’s further adventures in Shényu are of interest, but space prevents their narration here. It may be noted that he eventually got his trade treaty and returned to Tsolyánu laden with gold and trade goods. At this writing he serves as a High Legate in the Palace of Foreign Lands in Jakálla, where visitors may speak with him further of these matters.

Note: The Macintosh does not properly place accents over the letter “r”, and the result (´r) can be mistaken for a glottal stop-r (‘r). Examine the accent carefully in these instances if you want exact spelling for the Shén words. The ASCII document, which contains the accenting conventions in codes, makes these clearer.