

# Holly Lisle's



# Create A Culture Clinic

A Step-by-Step Course in Creating  
Peoples and Philosophies for Fiction



NONFICTION

THE  
WORLDBUILDING  
COURSE

# **Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic**

A Step-By-Step Course in  
Creating Peoples and Philosophies  
for Fiction

**THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE: BOOK II**



OneMoreWord

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## OneMoreWord Books by Holly Lisle

Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic (THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE: Book I)

Holly Lisle's Create a Culture Clinic (THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE: Book II)

Hunting the Corrigan's Blood (reissue)

Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic

Mugging the Muse: Writing Fiction for Love AND Money (free)

Available here: <http://shop.hollylisle.com>

## Other Books by Holly Lisle

### KORRE

**Hawkspar: A Novel of Korre**, for  
release in 2007

**Talyn: A Novel of Korre**

### ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELS

**Night Echoes**, for release in 2007

**I See You**

**Last Girl Dancing**

**Midnight Rain**

### THE WORLD GATES

**BOOK I: Memory of Fire**

**BOOK II: The Wreck of Heaven**

**BOOK III: Gods Old and Dark**

### THE SECRET TEXTS

**BOOK I: Diplomacy of Wolves**

**BOOK II: Vengeance of Dragons**

**BOOK III: Courage of Falcons**

**Vincalis the Agitator**

### ARHEL NOVELS

**Fire in the Mist**

**Bones of the Past**

**Mind of the Magic**

### GLENRAVEN NOVELS

**Glenraven** (w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley)

**In The Rift: Glenraven II**

(w/ Marion Zimmer Bradley)

### DEVIL'S POINT NOVELS

**Sympathy for the Devil**

**The Devil and Dan Cooley**

(w/ Walter Spence)

**Hell on High** (w/ Ted Nolan)

### CADENCE DRAKE NOVELS (SF)

**Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**

### STAND-ALONE FANTASY

**Minerva Wakes**

**When the Bough Breaks**

(w/ Mercedes Lackey)

**Mall, Mayhem and Magic**

(w/ Chris Guin)

**The Rose Sea** (with S.M.Stirling)

### BARD'S TALE NOVELS

**Curse of the Black Heron**

**Thunder of the Captains**

(w/ Aaron Allston)

**Wrath of the Princes**

(w/ Aaron Allston)

### About the Author



Holly Lisle is the author of more than thirty pro-published novels (and counting), including recent novels **The Ruby Key** (Orchard Books, Scholastic), **Hawkspar** (Tor), **Talyn** (Tor), **Midnight Rain** (Onyx, NAL, and is published internationally in many countries and languages. She's been writing professionally since 1991, and has been making a full-time living at it since 1992.

For most of that time, Holly has been paying forward to other writers by writing about writing on her website, <http://hollylisle.com>, putting together and for quite a few years running a writers' community, doing a weblog, and more.

You can receive her writing information, inspiration, and encouragement via her newsletter, available here: <http://hollylisle.com/newsletter.html>

#### Her other writing courses include:

- **Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic**  
<http://hollylisle.com/cap.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic**  
<http://hollylisle.com/cc.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic**  
<http://hollylisle.com/cal.html>
- **Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic**  
<http://hollylisle.com/cac.html>
- And this course, **Holly Lisle's How To Beat Writer's Block**  
<http://HowToBeatWritersBlock.com>

Dedication

For Matt

## **Acknowledgements**

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The remaining errors, of course, are all mine.

## Table of Contents

Why Create Cultures?.....	2
How To Use This Book .....	5
ORDER OF WORK .....	5
What You'll Need .....	7
Your Notebook Layout.....	9
Organizing Your Information.....	11
Protect Your Work.....	14
Discovering Culture .....	16
All cultures share the following characteristics: .....	16
Writer culture.....	17
EXERCISE 1—Discover A Local Culture .....	21
EXERCISE 1-A (Optional But Highly Recommended)—First Cultural Short Writing .....	21
EXERCISE 2—Create a Subculture or a Counterculture .....	22
Thinness.....	25
Home Life.....	27
The First Piece: Singles, Pairs, and Groups .....	31
Single Life .....	33
Exercise 3-A: Single Life Questions.....	34
Paired Life .....	38
Exercise 3-B: Paired Life Questions .....	42
Family Life.....	46
Exercise 3-D: Family Life Questions.....	49
The Life Cycle.....	53
Exercise 4: Life Cycle Questions .....	58
Home Life.....	83
Exercise 5: Home Life Story or Vignette.....	85
Communities.....	86
Exercise 6: Community Questions .....	87
Religion .....	105
Exercise 8: Religion Questions .....	110
Government .....	124
Exercise 9: Government Questions.....	126
Rules of Advanced Techniques.....	134
Art and Artifacts.....	136
The Cultural Library.....	140
How to fill out the Cultural Library Sheet .....	140
Books, Scrolls, and Oral Histories .....	142
Music and Dance.....	146
Housing and Architecture .....	150
Science and Magic .....	155
AUTHOR'S GRANT OF LIMITED REPRODUCTION RIGHTS.....	159



Conclusion..... 172  
Coming Soon To [Shop.HollyLisle.Com](http://Shop.HollyLisle.Com)..... 173  
About the Author ..... 174

**Index of Worksheets and Cover Sheets**

HOME LIFE INDEX (cover sheet)..... 161  
COMMUNITY INDEX (cover sheet) ..... 162  
RELIGION INDEX (cover sheet)..... 163  
GOVERNMENT INDEX (cover sheet) ..... 164  
Cultural Artifacts Sheet..... 165  
Cultural Library Sheet..... 166  
Cultural Music Sheet..... 168  
Buildings and Architecture Sheet..... 169  
Science and Magic Sheet ..... 170  
\_\_\_\_\_ Sheet..... 171

# **SECTION ONE**

## **Why and How**

## **Why Create Cultures?**

### **Or "I Write Mainstream, So I'm Off the Hook ... Right?"**

No writer is ever off the hook where culture is concerned, because every story ever written is, was, or eventually will be about cultures.

Really.

There was a science fiction story once in which a man was able to disguise the fact that he was alien by wearing a hat on his head to cover his antennae. All men wore hats almost all the time, so he didn't stand out. The writer assumed that hats were essential to men, and that men would always wear them. And then the culture changed, hats went away, and the story now seems broken.

Novels set in the time of the writer frequently assume culture, and hope the reader will share (or at least comprehend) the culture the writer is assuming. These novels are written for the day and the moment; they'll be unreadable in twenty years. If you want to write for the ages, your writing has to have complete, working subsets of all the cultures you wrote about IN the novel. Every single time. Cultures change. Dickens and Twain are still comprehensible today because they included right in their stories everything you needed to know about how their worlds worked. Their contemporaries are gone because *they* assumed that their readers would live in a world just like the one they lived in, and would simply understand all the things they left out.

Deeper novels draw out the cultures as richly as they draw out the characters. Novels set in the present *show* the present and those cultures working in it, and through the lives and actions of the characters demonstrate how their cultures work for and against them, and how the characters work for and against their cultures.

Novels set in the historical past *show* how cultures and life paths most of us have forgotten create unique problems and shape the people who inhabit those worlds to deal with those problems. Novels set in the future must extrapolate multiple cultures that contain features our world might someday have, while those novels set in worlds that never can be play with cultures that contain features no culture in our world can ever have.

From romance novels to Christian fiction to chick lit to Stephen King and Dean Koontz, to coming of age and coming of middle age and other literary novels, to *Harry Potter* and *American Psycho*, you as the reader are immersed in the details of lives lived within a set of cultural expectations, or lived outside of those same expectations.

When the writing works, we get magnificent fiction that tempts us to look twice at our own lives, to question our own assumptions, to get more out of our existence than we did before. And the writing works when writers understand the cultures about which they're writing, and are able to look at them and identify the cultural assumptions that exist, and then are able to *use* those assumptions to shape their characters and their storytelling.

When the writing doesn't work....well, you get one million 1970's Harlequin Romances in which a nineteen-year-old virgin fell in love with a thirtysomething power-addled jerk, and was thrilled to be talked down to, dragged around against her will, and taken by force, because she knew that *love would change him*.

You also get Westerns set in Too Much, Texas, and SF flowering in the belly of a generation ship and fantasy galloping through Elfhome and historical romances primping in Regency England, and suspense novels skulking through the dark heart of Paris...in which the cool settings are nothing more than painted paper backdrops, because the characters all came from yesterday's Wal-Mart, complete with vocabularies, attitudes, and expectations.

You get stories in which characters do incomprehensible things for no discernable reason.

You get novels in which people end up nearly wrecking their lives over a misunderstanding that two four-year-olds could have solved over the phone, because the writer couldn't see the possibilities for real conflict inherent in his world.

You get crap, in other words.

You don't need to get crap. You don't need to read it; far more importantly, you don't need to write it. Creating and comprehending the workings of living, breathing cultures, whether real or fictitious, will give you enough deep, powerful conflict for a lifetime of writing; will permit your characters to act in ways that are surprising and sometimes shocking, but that make sense for them; will give you more good, strong, compelling story ideas than you know what to do with; and will make your stories, no matter when and where they're set, feel *real*.

Better yet, creating cultures is an entirely doable process. It isn't always straightforward. Once in a while it will drive you batty. Occasionally it may require more of you than you really wanted to give. Mostly, though, it's incredibly fun, and fascinating, and more often than not you'll have to stop before you want to, simply because...well, you do have to write sometime.

And the end results for your fiction, no matter what sort of fiction you write, will be worth it.

## How To Use This Book

**SECTION ONE: How and Why** is devoted to general set-up—making sure you know how to use the book and have the supplies on hand when you sit down to work on your culture in order to make the experience as fun and stress-free as possible.

**SECTION TWO: Basic Culture Building** is further divided into the following categories: *Personal, Community, Religion,* and *Government*, and contains discussion, examples, and exercises designed to help you develop the heart of your culture while avoiding common mistakes.

**SECTION THREE: Advanced Techniques** For each question you answer, you can choose to explore deeper using the advanced techniques. These techniques include creating non-existent books, religious rituals, songs, artifacts, and other tangibles that exist in the world you're creating, adding necessary detail to your culture.

**SECTION FOUR: Worksheets** holds a stack of organizing tools to help you keep track of the work you've done, where you filed it, and what it contains. Most, though not all, of the worksheets are indexing tools.

### **ORDER OF WORK**

- Read all of Section One.
- Put together your starter Culture notebook, or add a Culture section to the back of your Language notebook for the same culture.
- Read or skim Sections Two and Three, using bookmarks or Post-it® notes to mark a few questions that interest you and/or directly relate to the story you want to tell.

- Go to the first Basic Culture-Building question you marked, and modify it, if necessary, to fit your world. (If you're working with aliens, different genders than male and female, sentient animals, or any other variants on the assumed basic human characters, change the terms to fit your needs.)
- Answer the question in your word processor, or on your lined paper.
- Decide whether you want to move on to the next question (broad development) or want to continue to explore the same question using advanced techniques in Section Three (deep development).
- Continue working through your chosen questions in this manner, or answer your own questions that arise naturally from your previous questions, working in any order through the book, and always considering the options of broad development and deep development.
- When you know what you need to know to write the section of the story you're working on, **stop backgrounding and start writing.**
- Come back to the book when you get stuck or aren't sure how things in your story work. Pick a related section, answer a few questions, do another exercise or two, build some more tech or design some clothing or whatever you need at the moment, and then head back to your writing.

In most instances, you'll have much more fun with the process if you let your culture grow naturally and pick up spontaneous details as you write, rather than trying to anticipate all its details before you get into the story.

## What You'll Need

### Getting Organized

Organizing your created language information was easy. Languages lend themselves well to worksheets with columns, and with rules that relate back and forth between sections.

Cultures are much messier.

I could assume that you've already done *Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic*, and simply tell you to drag out your language notebook and add the next section of tabs and sheets behind the language section, with a big divider between sections that says CULTURE.

But on the fairly likely chance that you figured creating languages for fiction was about giving your characters a few funny-sounding things to say (it's not), instead of building and discovering the single most critical aspect of any culture and how that aspect (language) shapes everything else that comes after it (it is), I'll start from the beginning.

Remember—if you have already built your language or languages, set up each culture you're building behind its related language, and realize that you have a serious head start, both in organization and in culture development, on the folks who are starting from scratch with Book II.

You'll need:

- A sheaf of lined, hole-punched school-type paper for answering questions and working out your culture ideas. Or, if you think better while you're typing, a word processor and a hole punch and a sheaf of paper.
- One three-hole binder per culture (or group of cultures per writing universe). I highly recommend side-bound pressboard report covers. They will only take up as much room as you use,



unlike three-ring notebooks, and they are less likely to damage your pages than a three-ring notebook.

- Tabbed page dividers to go in between sections of your culture. This is not a must-have, but those tabs can keep you sane when you're flipping rapidly between home life, community, religion, and government sections of your culture, and I recommend them with all my heart.
- Do-it-yourself culture-creating kit, which should include:
  - Black ball-point pens or other pens with quick-drying black ink for filling out forms (you don't want to smudge something critical because you wrote it in a smooth but slow-drying gel, and glitter inks, fluorescent ink and other colored inks will not reproduce well when you photocopy your notes)
  - Quadrille (1"=4 squares) paper if you can get it—I MUCH prefer quadrille paper over plain paper because those neat little squares become the most useful things in the world when you're figuring how much space people need to live in, or walk past each other in, or how many furs that coat you developed would need, or how many people could fit into the carriage you drew, and countless other essential things. If you can't find quadrille paper, then plain white printer paper. Either way, you may end up needing a lot. Purchase a minimum of fifty sheets—this should get you through a stack of cultures, but I've had a couple where I used that much for just one.
  - A set of fine-tipped drawing pens of variable width for designing houses and clothes and jars and carriages and weapons and everything else. I recommend Tech-Liner drawing pens because they're both good and relatively cheap, but any sort of technical drawing pens with black ink will do. You want widths from 0.1mm to 0.5 or 0.7mm. (In a pinch, you can use a ball-point pen or magic marker, or a brush and India ink, but carefully test

your ink to make sure it won't bleed through to the next page.)

- A metal straight edge or decent-quality ruler
- Scissors and glue. If the cultures you are writing about are in the present and you can find pictures of things you need for your world by cutting them out of magazines, it will save you drawing things. If you're scavenging artifacts, it can be useful for keeping them in one place.
- If you're working from the print edition of this book, you'll also need access to a copier, to copy off the worksheets.<sup>1</sup> Or you can e-mail me at [holly@hollylisle.com](mailto:holly@hollylisle.com) and ask me to send you the PDF worksheets so that you, too, can print them from your home computer.

## ***Your Notebook Layout***

Set up your notebook as follows:

- INDEX (tabbed divider)
  - HOME LIFE INDEX (cover sheet)
    - Cultural Basics Sheet
    - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
  - COMMUNITY INDEX (cover sheet)
    - Cultural Basics Sheet

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- Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- RELIGION INDEX (cover sheet)
  - Cultural Basics Sheet
  - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- GOVERNMENT INDEX (cover sheet)
  - Cultural Basics Sheet
  - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- HOME LIFE—Section A (tabbed divider)
- COMMUNITY—Section B (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here
- RELIGION—Section C (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here
- GOVERNMENT—Section D (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here

## ***Organizing Your Information***

This is the page-numbering scheme I use, which will allow you to continue adding pages to your culture's notebook over the months and years while keeping track of all your information. If you just stick pages into the folder, you'll still be able to find your work eventually, and just by making sure that the pages are bound in, rather than stacked on shelves or tucked away someplace you're sure you'll remember, you'll stay ahead of the game.

But a (very) small extra investment in time on each bit of culture-building you do will permit you to maintain a clean table of contents that never needs to be thrown out and completely rewritten, and that will allow you to get your hands on each bit of information that you need.

To get this great gain, you have to do three things.

1. You have to number each page
2. You have to file each page with like-numbered pages
3. You have to write down the page name and number in your Index.

You can, of course, add additional levels of organization to each of your sections, and in sections where you're creating a lot of complex information, doing that might not be a bad idea. In sections where you only have a few pages, though, and you're pretty sure you've done all the work that you ever want to do (maybe Government, or Religion), use the following basic plan. This is the organization method I use for all my stuff, including areas with extensive backgrounding—I occasionally have to hunt a little for a bit of information that I need, but the hunt is never excessive.

Here's how to number your pages so you'll always be able to find your work:

- At the top of each page you create, include a title. For example, Party clothes of the wealthy New York socialite.
- In the top right-hand corner of every page of background you do, add a Category Letter. The categories are:
  - Home Life—A
  - Community—B
  - Religion—C
  - Government—D
- Next, add an Information Type Letter. The information types are:
  - Basic information—a
  - Art and Artifacts—b
  - Cultural Library—Books, Scrolls, and Oral Histories—c
  - Music and Dance—d
  - Housing and Architecture—e
  - Science and Magic—f
  - Other—g
- Finally, you add the page number.

So if you do a series of sketches of shoes and boots for your culture, you could have the following sorts of headers:

- Home clothing of the wealthy New York socialite A-b-1
- Party clothes of the wealthy New York socialite B-b-1
- Church clothes of the wealthy New York socialite C-b-1
- Politicking clothes of the wealthy New York socialite D-b-1

All your actual A pages will be filed in your Home Life section, while B pages will go in your Community section, and so on.

If you do any Advanced Techniques development in your culture, each section will be further subdivided into basic information and information from advanced techniques.

Any time you want to go back and add new pages, title them, number them, and update your table of contents in the front of the Culture section of your notebook.

With this numbering system, there is no trying to keep things in alphabetical order, no erasing and rearranging entries. Everything falls into usable and findable categories, and the titles at the tops of pages will help you thumb through the notebook to rediscover things you forgot you put in there—serendipitous finds that can give you new ideas for your story.

## ***Protect Your Work***

Make sure that every time you do a sheet, you promptly put it in the notebook. Be a little paranoid as the project grows and you become sure the culture is one you like and might want to use for more than one book. Photocopy your work and store it in a safe place.

Bank box? Maybe.

Parents' house? Only if they know its value to you.

Personal fireproof safe? If you can swing the price of one, sure.

But *someplace safe*.

The point is that once you've used your culture in a published work of fiction, you want to know that your background will be safe for the rest of your working career. If you lose it and you want to go back one year or ten years or twenty years later to work in that world, you have a mountain of work ahead of you before you can step back in and pick up where you left off.

And you might discover that you simply cannot get back a working version of the culture you need; that you've forgotten how your gods or clergy work, or why men live separately from women until the women have had at least one child, or whatever it was that you'd designed.

You don't want to end up there.

# **SECTION TWO**

## **Basic Culture Building**



## **Discovering Culture**

### **Why Everyone Has Culture, Even If They Don't Know It**

We'll start right in with our working definition of culture. By making sure you've covered all these areas in your story, you can be sure that your culture and your writing will be understandable to people who are reading your books long after you're dead. You will have included the necessary information to make your written world live and breathe.

#### ***All cultures share the following characteristics:***

They are comprised of people:

- who share **common ground**
- and are born of a **shared philosophy**
- who adhere to **specific goals**
- which require **the setting aside of differences**
- and demand of each member **personal sacrifices of time, effort, and resources**
- in order for **all members to work for the good of the group**
- and to **survive, propagate, and grow beyond the lifetimes of current members**

So you're looking at this, and you're going, "All cultures? Really?"

Really. If it's a culture, it will have these characteristics.

You can build cultures full of nice people, or cultures full of rotten people, or cultures full of passion-driven lunatics, but all of these cultures will meet all of the requirements listed above.

Let's create an overview of a current culture right now.

## **Writer culture**

The Writer Culture is comprised of:

1. People whose **common ground** is sitting down and pulling words out of thin air and committing them to some sort of storage medium, like paper, or pixels, or clay tablets.
2. Writers who **share the philosophy** that they have something to say, and they are by God going to say it, and with any freakin' luck at all, someone else will eventually read it. And maybe pay them to do so. (Though getting paid actually marks one of the shared goals of the much smaller Pro Writer subculture of writer culture.)
3. Writers who **adhere to specific goals** which include finishing individual pieces of writing, sending writing out to editors, achieving publication, doing more words per month than they did before, and so on. These goals vary depending on the specific tribe of the culture you're talking about, and there are tribes whose goals apparently include using every word in the OED before they die, but let's not mock them. They, too, live to write.
4. In Writers' meeting places, writers generally **set aside differences** by avoiding discussion topics like politics and religion and ecology and sticking to shared loves like word counts and revising their latest work and how badly their last three days have gone because their characters aren't speaking to them—because Writers know that being able to talk about writing is more important than chancing pissing off a fellow Writer by discussing whether there is any essential difference between Republicrats and Democans, or why anyone cares.

5. Members of the Writer Culture **make personal sacrifices** by investing the hours that other people blow watching television or sleeping to isolate themselves and put words on paper. Screen. Whatever. Members of the Writer Culture pour more blood and sweat and more tears than they will admit into nailing a scene, creating a story, conveying a world, and doing it right, because they realize that doing it right matters. If you are a Writer, you get this. (If you are a member of the Television Culture, on the other hand, you're thinking, *What do you mean, Blow watching television. Don't you understand that TELEVISION IS LIFE, you Neanderthal?*)
6. Members of the Writer Culture **work for the good of the group** by sharing info, time, skills, techniques, and suggestions with other writers, because being a member of the culture can be tough going, and it's hard to find others who belong. By offering what they have learned to newer writers, members of the Writer Culture ensure that they are not alone, and they validate the core philosophy of the group, that words matter, that stories matter.
7. And by supporting newer Writers, they work to ensure that the Writer Culture will **survive, propagate and grow** even when they are dead, and that the art of telling stories—and telling them well—will persist and thrive. The Writer Culture expands by volunteerism—that is, its membership is self-selected by interest, inclination, and desire to belong.

Along with **cultures**, there are:

**Subcultures**, which share all the basic tenets of their main culture, but which:

- Add additional goals, or forms of personal sacrifice, or requirements to the personal philosophy
- NARROW the common ground the group shares, making membership in a subculture more exclusive but also more restrictive than membership in a culture

- Frequently propagate by cherry-picking membership from the main culture

**Countercultures**, which are cultures that espouse values that contradict those of the culture we view as *main* in our context.

Countercultures, in order to be real cultures, must:

- Contain each characteristic of a culture in a fully-formed fashion.
- Provide a complete philosophy of their own, not simply state "We're against what Main Culture stands for."
- Provide creative, not destructive, goals for its members. This can be a little tricky to sort out, because creative goals are not necessarily positive. Back to Writer Culture and creating a Writer Counterculture—here is a negative but creative Writer Counterculture goal. "We will require that our members maintain their amateur status and write only with the goal of sharing their work privately." A destructive (or non-culture) goal would be, "We will ban anyone who is professionally successful." This might seem like two ways of saying the same thing, but a culture defines itself by what it is. A rabble never goes farther than defining itself by what it isn't. A lot of groups that think they're countercultural are, in fact, merely rabbles. A genuine culture always offers something concrete and tangible to its members.
- Propagate by recruiting membership from those dissatisfied with the main culture **who want to create something different and, in their eyes, better**. People who are dissatisfied but whose total vision of the future consists of wrecking the main culture are NOT members of a counterculture. Again, they're a rabble. All culture is about building something. It may be something worse or something better than that which currently exists, but the primary engine of countercultures, sub-cultures and cultures is **creation**. I cannot stress this enough. It is the heart of understanding cultures.

I'll use a final example to demonstrate what I mean by negative and positive goals. I'll use war and peace. It's a universal issue—every culture and every subculture has had to find a way to address it, and common ground is hard to find. I'm going to give some examples of answers here. There are many, many more that I have not included.

- Rabble statement: "We are anti-war." This is a meaningless statement. Under most circumstances, almost all cultures are anti-war. War sucks. But this does not tell us what sort of peace the rabble considers adequate.
- Too vague statement: "We are pro-peace." Everyone except lunatics is in favor of peace of some sort. However, peace comes with a lot of different conditions. What are the conditions that the culture imposes on peace? (There are always conditions.)
- Pure pacifist culture: "We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others or ourselves even if we are overrun and slaughtered or enslaved by our enemies."
- Partial pacifist culture: " We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Passive defensive culture: "We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Active defensive culture: "We will not attack first in any situation, BUT we will defend others and we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Passive offensive culture: "We will attack first in a few limited situations wherein we judge that we (but not others) are about to be attacked, AND we may or may not defend others, BUT we

will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."

- Active offensive culture: " We will attack first in a few limited situations wherein we judge that we (or our allies) are about to be attacked, AND we will defend others and we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Aggressor culture: "We will attack to gain slaves, loot, and territory, and we actively advance our culture through rape, murder, and genocide, enslavement, forced conversion, and warfare, AND we may or may not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened, or for any other reason that suits us."

### ***EXERCISE 1—Discover A Local Culture***

Study a group you're aware—test of locally, whether that group consists of nurses or cops or fishermen or teenagers in Goth outfits, or businessmen, or folks at a local church or synagogue or temple.

Look at your group through the lens of the seven characteristics that all cultures share, and write down how the group you're studying fits each of the seven characteristics (or how they fail to fit them). Decide whether or not this group is currently a fully-formed culture. If it isn't, figure out what you could add to it to make it into a culture. Write down each addition.

### ***EXERCISE 1-A (Optional But Highly Recommended)—First Cultural Short Writing***

Write a short-short (200-1000 words) story (has a beginning, middle and end) or vignette (plotless slice-of-life piece) in which you explore the culture you've either discovered or modified into a culture, from the point of view of a character who is a member of that culture.

This exercise is recommended because it will help you discover weaknesses you might tend toward in writing about cultures. You don't need to do it if you have already done some culture building and written other stories using your cultures. You'll be able to dig those out and find out where you've gone right, and where you've gone wrong.

## ***EXERCISE 2—Create a Subculture or a Counterculture***

Using the characteristics you uncovered in EXERCISE 1, create a sub-culture to expand or a counterculture to oppose the culture you explored. Make sure that in each of your seven steps, you describe what your sub-culture or counterculture is, and *not* what it isn't.

## Function Versus Dysfunction

I probably don't need to say this—for a lot of you I'm sure it will be pointless added information. But because there is a largish subgroup of writers who focus on the dysfunction of their characters, and treat dysfunction in the culture as if it were the culture, and not something going wrong in the culture, I'm going to go ahead and add this very important point.

### **Cultures work. That's why they survive.**

Dysfunctional groups and dysfunctional subcultures die. That's what dysfunction means—something that does not function. Dysfunctional cultures don't actually exist—so long as some portion of the culture is holding together and doing what cultures do, it is still a functional culture, and it will either rid itself of the dysfunctional groups, or change them—but it is not a dysfunctional culture. A dysfunctional culture is a dead culture.

Feel free to create dysfunctional groups and subcultures and countercultures if you like—that's fine, so long as you know that's what you're doing while you're doing it.

But when you're developing your culture (or trying to get your head around the workings of an existing culture), understand that no matter how loathsome you might find the culture or make it, it must meet the seven criteria a culture needs in order to survive in order to be a culture, and that, within its own boundaries and definitions, it is a *functional* culture.

That is:

- its members share **common ground**
- born of a **shared philosophy**
- they adhere to **specific goals**
- which require **the setting aside of differences**
- and demand of each member **personal sacrifices of time, effort, and resources**
- in order for **all members to work for the good of the group**
- and to **survive, propagate and grow beyond the lifetimes of current members**

Members of dysfunctional groups within cultures will lose or intentionally destroy their common ground; will lose their goals or will have "anti" goals (that is, they will take stands against things the culture as a whole stands for without being able to explain what they are "for"); will emphasize personal differences (diversity over commonality); will refuse to make personal sacrifices of time, effort and resources; will consider their own good exclusively rather than the good of the group; and will fight against the propagation and survival of their culture.

These people and groups are not parts of subcultures or countercultures, because their dysfunction prevents them from meeting some or all of the requirements of a culture. They are, within the culture, a sort of virus. The culture, to survive, must either



develop antibodies to them and rid itself of them, or succumb to the anti-survival poisons they spread.

Remember, genuine countercultures offer alternatives and bring people together to build something better (though **they** will define "better" and their definition may not be yours). Dysfunction builds nothing, and drives people apart.

Now that you've gotten your head around what a culture must contain in order to be a working culture, let's move on to creating working cultures, and figuring out how to fix any broken cultures you may have already created.

But first, a simple word of warning.

## **Thinness**

### The Biggest Problem With Invented Culture

You've read books that feel like they're taking place on a small stage. You just know that everything that is happening up there in front of you is everything there is. If you walked past that charming little cottage set and the three delightfully costumed actors, you'd find nothing on the other side but dressing rooms, guys shoving the next sets into place, and an annoyed director waiting for bigger applause to the lines he crafted so carefully.

You can feel the illusion.

That's bad.

So you head into your own work, and you're writing along, and maybe everything feels fine, or maybe you get an inkling that you can hear guys pulling on ropes and scooting sets into place on the other side of your nice little backdrop. So you stop. You read back through and look at what you've done and you discover, depending on the genre you're writing in, that:

- Your fantasy novel contains only paladins, clerics, bards, rogues and healers, and maybe the occasional barmaid or whore.
- Your literary novel contains only university students, postgrads, professors, and maybe the occasional irritated parent.
- Your romance novel contains only twentysomething women and well-employed thirtysomething men, and maybe the occasional unplanned pregnancy.
- Your suspense or mystery novel contains only scumbags, victims, and detectives, and the occasional useful cop.

- Your science fiction novel contains only geniuses—whether human or alien—and one token woman.

Or something very like this. You discover that you don't have a world. You don't have a culture. You don't even have a societal cross-section that could survive for a week on a desert island. Nobody knows how to cook, nobody knows how to start a fire, nobody knows how to find food, or how to tell what's edible, nobody knows how to keep excrement out of the drinking water (or the genre equivalents).

You aren't writing rich and full and round. You're writing a skeletal woman on a catwalk, and if you take the time to listen, you can hear the wind blowing through her ribs.

That's not gonna be good for anybody.

In writing, skinny is horrible, thin is bad, stocky is survivable, fat is where all the flavor is....but bloat sucks.

So how do you start creating a culture that is fat and tasty, but not saggy and so overburdened it can't move?

You start one piece at a time.

## Home Life

### Who People Are When They're Most Genuine

I'm going to start you off with an excerpt from a novel of mine that is entirely and intentionally about the clash of cultures: *Talyn*. In the novel, I hit every variety of cultural conflict I could think of, from small and personal, to religious, to communal, to governmental, and in every combination I could manage. This particular excerpt, though, is a small sliver of a much larger scene in which I work my way through the changes that can be rung on conflict in family space.

The scene itself is simple: it involves the main character bringing to dinner a man with whom she is becoming romantically involved. The man is not a member of her culture. The section below shows the character's home, family members, and life, as well as her choice of date, who, when this snippet starts, has been arguing politics and religion with the protagonist's father.

*"I would love to have the chance to show you the whole of the Feegash plan for peace," Skirmig said. "You're perceptive and you know history, but you have not seen the inside of everything that we have so far accomplished, and I think you would feel better if you could just see how this will all work out." He smiled—that warm, beautiful smile that managed to take my breath away even as I was sitting there hating him and hating myself for having brought him to dinner—and added, "Change is hard. But sometimes good things can come from change."*

*"You'll have a time convincing me," my father said. "But I'll certainly listen while you try."*

*Skirmig, who apparently did not understand the challenge implicit in my father's words, smiled as if he had won a point. My mother saw the break in their conversation as the perfect opportunity to end it, though, and sent bowls round the table*

*bearing seconds while saying, "I had a letter from Gannan that he and Clavii reached Long Forshend safely, and have found a house, and that Clavii is expecting again."*

*Gannan is my brother, who was Senders, and who after the war took service up north in the Fallen Suns, and Clavii is his wife, and the babe she is expecting will make six for them, which puts Gannan at the top of the 'dutifully-producing-grandchildren-for-my-mother' list.*

*And this started what I think of as the Roster—which of my brothers or sisters have news of which other brothers or sisters, which of any of these are expecting children, which babes have learned to walk or speak or ride a horse or feed themselves, who has been accepted into apprenticeships or taken on an apprentice or received a commission or bought a new horse—and if horses are involved, all the particulars of that, since a new horse is almost as good as a new grandchild (so long as it didn't cost some fool fifty-thousand horse cash).*

*The Roster silenced Skirmig as neatly as any cork would have, and better, I could watch his amusement shade gradually into bewilderment and then into a sort of astonished horror as he began to get the feel for the real size of my family. There are, at the moment and in my immediate family alone, thirty-five of us, including wives or husbands of sibs, and children. Thirty-six when Clavii has this next one. We don't even count my father's sibs or their families, or my mother's sibs and their families. They wouldn't fit within the walls.*

*On occasion, all my sibs and all their children and my parents and I have been together at the same time. When we are, we have ended up in the kitchen. And when we are all together in the kitchen, we are all talking.*

*It can be a lot to take. Pada came to table with me once and swore she would never do so again, for all that the food was the best she had ever tasted—and I did tell my mother what she'd said about the food. Meals at Pada's are like sitting*

*through a funeral, and frankly, I think everyone there is mourning the death of the meal. I would have to think Pada's mother had never eaten food, she cooks so badly.*

*A regular Jostfarday dinner for Skirmig and his two brothers, one married with one child, could not be anything like the breathtaking babble we swim through at table. Though of course they don't have a Jostfarday in Ba'afeegash, but they must have **some** day for family.*

*I could see Skirmig starting to drown in the family ocean. And apparently, so could Riknir, for out of nowhere he leaned over, just turned eight years old but with some sympathy in his eye, and solemnly told Skirmig, "Tally is teaching me jewellery. I'm her apprentice. After table I'll show you my pieces if you'd like, since Tally says you like that sort of thing. My workroom is quiet; these lot—" and he nodded at the rest of my sibs "— don't go in there. It's my place and Da's."*

*In Skirmig's eyes, gratitude. "I'd love to see your work," he said. "Maybe I could commission a piece or two from you."*

*In Riknir's smile I could see that Skirmig had just grown wings and hooves and galloped straight into the heavens.*

This is a very short excerpt from a much longer scene that includes jewelry-making, cooking dinner, sports talk, awkward family humor, personal embarrassment for the main character, and some carefully tucked-away foreshadowing. This snippet, though, demonstrates the conflict that you can find in your story by allowing cultures to clash in small, personal spaces. You get to bring in a great deal of worldbuilding, of course, which is always great—writing about the equivalent of Sunday dinner in a Tonk family was enormous fun—but if you have a good grasp of your culture at the personal level, you can discover conflicts you didn't suspect existed, and you can explore them in directions and forms that most writers overlook.

We'll break these family culture explorations down into Singles, Pairs, and Groups, Life-Cycle, and Home Life—and here the terminology needs a bit of explanation.

- *Singles* is a pretty straightforward term. It refers to the group of people in the culture that, for whatever reason, has neither partner(s) nor offspring.
- *Pairs*, however, takes a bit more work. It includes the commonly-understood definition for *couples*, of course—that is, two people romantically involved, with or without childbearing as an eventual goal. Pairs need not be romantically involved, they need not be procreative in nature, they need not be self-selected. It is entirely possible for a culture to place two people who have no interest in each other together for the culture's goals, and never mind the goals or desires of the individuals.
- *Groups* as a term includes *families*—units that include at least one adult and one child (two generations)—but is broader, including the possibilities of culturally-enforced pools of breeder women or breeder men who could be mixed or matched for reproductive or other purposes at the will of government, religious, or community enforcement; harems; vast extended families that don't quite become tribes (tribes are a Community unit—we'll get to them); teams (in non-reproductive cultures); and a multitude of other possibilities that don't fit the mental image of *family*. I generally default to the term *families* when relating to personal lives, because as we get into communities, religions, and governments, the term *groups* can get fuzzy. However, as you're developing that section, remember that you can expand far beyond the limits of what you generally think of as a family.
- *Life-Cycle* is how the individual's life will change from birth to death.
- *Home Life* is where you'll develop how your families go through an ordinary day ... or an extraordinary one.

## ***The First Piece: Singles, Pairs, and Groups***

Some people were born to be single. They're completely self-entertaining and self-motivating, they love their own company, they prefer to inhabit spaces where no one else is going to borrow their razor in a pinch, and someone else wanting to talk with them when they have just thought of something utterly cool that they could invent, create, or explode does nothing but aggravate the hell out of them. For one reason or many, they end up carrying one-hundred percent of the challenges of their lives on their own shoulders.

The majority of folks end up with at least one other person with whom they can do fun things and things that aren't much fun at all, and with whom they share the challenges of entertainment, boredom, and bills. (Or food, shelter, and survival, depending on where they live and what their culture is like.)

A lot of those folks, after they get the hang of the entertainment, boredom and bills issues (and sometimes way before), then go on to make little people of their own, upping the fun quotient but also adding various monetary, societal, and sanity challenges to keep things interesting.

How cultures go about dividing their members into these categories is as variable as the people themselves. All the interesting bits are in the details. We're going to pursue Singles, Pairs, and Groups one category at a time, and ask interesting questions, and we're going to get interesting answers that will shed the first ray of light on how we fix our thin culture.

Before we get into this, realize that there are portions of these exercises that you are going to find very difficult. No matter who you are and no matter where you're from, you came from a culture that had specific expectations about who your parents were and what they should be like, and who you were and what you should be like. If you met or exceeded these expectations, you absorbed certain prejudices. If you challenged them, you absorbed other prejudices. If you failed to meet them, you absorbed a third set of prejudices. And no matter whether you're single, in a couple, or in a larger family



group, these prejudices put blinders on how you view your own culture, and how you view other cultures.

To create good, full cultures (these would be cultures that have the feel of the real world to them), you have to work past your prejudices. You have to see how other people could come to other conclusions about how people live apart or together (and all the myriad other issues we'll be dealing with in this book, from how they create religions to how they create governments to how they create civic services and public places), and you're going to have to first entertain the possibility that they might have valid points in what they're doing.

You certainly may, after careful exploration of what they've done, decide that they're out of their ever-loving minds. First, though, you have to see what they've done, and you have to understand why they did it.

You have to learn to live for a while inside their heads. Living inside the heads of some people in select cultures will give you headaches. Think of this as a good thing. When some pompous ass suggests that you have never suffered for your art, you can say with complete honesty that you have, even though you might never have suffered in a garret without electricity or running water while living on Mad Dog 20/20, rat fondue, and your toes when you got really hungry.

Headaches are sufficient suffering for the sake of art.

You've been warned. Brace yourself, get your notebook and pen, and let's go build the personal side of your culture.

## **Single Life**

Consider that in many cultures, and especially those with high infant death rates (which make replacing the die-off of the existing population critical to the survival of the culture), raising families is a cultural obligation, and those who fail to do so are considered flawed.

Consider that some cultures choose brides for prospective suitors, and marriage is not optional. Women of these cultures who are not wedded by a certain age have failed by their cultures' norms.

Consider that in some cultures, the right to be an adult male comes with the mandate to take a wife or wives, so any single men in those cultures are not even considered men, and are automatically failures by their cultures' standards.

### CONVERSELY...

Consider that in some cultures singleness is a gift or a sign of vocation—monks and nuns become perpetually single within the confines of their group in order to devote their lives to the spiritual pursuits their culture holds in higher regard than even new citizens.

Consider that in some cultures, singleness self-selected in order for the individual to single-mindedly pursue lofty and culturally-adored goals, such as the creation of art or science or the pursuit of exploration or war, makes the single person a hero.

And in some cultures, being single and male, or single and female, or single and of either gender (depending on the culture) is simply voluntary and accepted.

Keep in mind the fact that being single means different things in different cultures as you start creating answers to the questions below. You do not have to pursue answers to all of the questions. Some will be of no importance to the development of your specific culture, some will fascinate you and provide keys to what will become your later stories.

The possible variations when developing your singles are unending, and may have governmental, religious, and community overtones, as well as personal ones.

### ***Exercise 3-A: Single Life Questions***

Questions below may apply to both genders, or to either, and may vary by gender, by social caste, or other divisions within the culture.

**Remember, you are developing the rules for functional members of the culture.** People who do not function within the rules of their own culture, but who function within the rules of a culture that arose in opposition to their culture are countercultural. People who do not function in any culture are dysfunctional.

I've phrased the questions to allow the broadest possible choices in answers. This does make for some awkward phrasing.

- What are the methods by which a person of the culture is seen as being or becomes single?

Here we have such possibilities as being single by choice, being unchosen in a marriage market for some flaw, being set aside as sacred (Vestal Virginité, anyone?), lover or spouse sacrificed, murdered, or dead in an accident or of old age, and so on.

- Is singleness chosen by the individual or by others?
- Is singleness caused by death of a partner viewed differently than original-state singleness?
- How is singleness-by-choice (if an option) viewed?
- How is involuntary singleness viewed?
- What reasons exist for living single in the culture?

Consider the following possibilities: all mates are chosen in a single marriage pool once a year, singles are required to successfully complete some sort of eligibility test, family cannot

afford dowry, gender numbers are out of balance with far more men than women, marriage or pairing is forbidden to certain castes or classes, individual has the right to choose and prefers to be single, or something else.

- What, if any, are considered wonderful reasons for living single?
- What, if any, are considered acceptable reasons?
- What, if any, are considered unacceptable reasons?
- What social traditions are observed exclusively by single people?

These could be traditions like midnight promenades around the band in the center of town, the keeping of hope chests, special meals eaten at specific times of the year, and so on.

- Are there specific holidays?
- Are there specific foods, specific dietary requirements, specific cooking techniques that mark the state of being single?
- Are there specific garments to be worn? Specific hair cuts or styles, specific jewelry, specific skin markings or other decorations?
- Do singles have specific rituals to observe during their days?
  - Are the rituals of a private or public nature?
  - Are the rituals secular, or religious?
- What is the role of the single member of the culture in relation to paired and familial members?
  - Do singles maintain a place within their own families?
  - Do they have a specific connection to other singles, and if so, what?

- To pairs, and if so, what?
- To unrelated families, and if so, what?
- Does singleness affect status or caste, and if so, how?
- Does gender affect the above relationships, and if so, how?
- What are the expectations of single persons regarding work?

Singleness, like marriage, carries different expectations in different societies. In some, women are expected to be hidden away before marriage but are permitted to be in the public eye afterwards, in others, women are permitted to work when single but kept from holding a paying job once married. In the US, for many years only single women could be teachers, nurses, or librarians—they were required to leave their jobs once married. For men, some careers (like Catholic priest) require singleness; only two single men have been elected President (Buchanan and Cleveland). And different cultures will have different rules.

- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on are banned for single persons?
- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on exist specifically for single persons?
- When single persons work with paired or familial persons, will they find equal opportunities, or different opportunities? Will they receive preferred treatment, or substandard treatment? How, and why?
- What are the expectations of sexuality for single persons within the culture?

In some cultures, sex before marriage is required because the woman has to prove she's fertile before she can be a wife. In others, sex before marriage is an executable offense (usually

carried out on women). In some cultures, even being seen by men before marriage is criminal, and being seen by any man but the husband or sons is criminal afterward. These sorts of restrictions could be created for men in a culture, but I'm unaware of any parallels in real life.

- What taboos exist, if any?
  - What special freedoms exist, if any?
  - How does the gender of the single person affect what is forbidden and what is permitted?
  - How do singles interact with pairs and families in matters of sexuality?
- What is the unspoken social contract for singles? Write this out as "The perfect single male will appear to those around him as ..." or "The perfect single female will..." or, if there is no difference in the way the culture treats single males and single females, simply, "The perfect single person will appear...."
  - Every culture has conformists and rebels. Where, and about what issues, are singles in the culture splitting, with some conforming to expectations, and some rebelling from them?
  - What defines the single in the culture as either a success or a failure?
  - In what fashion does the single person go about changing life role to a paired or familied person?

## **Paired Life**

Consider that in many cultures, paired life is considered as simply the start toward inevitable familiness, and that failure to produce offspring may be viewed as disastrous, disappointing, a form of rebellion, or otherwise seen negatively by the families of the couple, and members of the culture outside of relatives. In these societies, any variance from the reproductive male/female pair is likely to be either forbidden entirely, or permitted only in a "we'll pretend we don't know" fashion, and non-approved pairings might face censure, criminal charges, and other negative consequences.

Consider that in some cultures, alternate gender pairings are acceptable, (in ancient Sparta among the warrior class, for example, they were required) but a pairing that will result in offspring is considered necessary simply to fulfill the duty of providing new members for the culture.

Consider that in many traditional cultures, pairings are chosen by parents, a professional matchmaker, some form of lottery, or another method that does not consider the wishes or preferences of the people being paired, and that pairings are permanent and no separations are possible.

### CONVERSELY....

In some cultures, persons in paired relationships are free to join and leave pairings voluntarily, though the manner in which they may do so varies. And cultural expectations of the outcome of their pairing may not include children, or may, depending upon their personal situations.

The possible variations when developing your pairs is quite broad, and may have governmental, religious, and community overtones, as well as personal ones. Consider primitive holdovers in modern situations, and modern-feeling developments in otherwise backward

cultures, before immediately settling on something that imitates your own culture.

Here's an example of what I've done with a pair relationship, getting as much of this couple's culture and expectations as I could into this one scene because the reader will never see one of the two characters again. I make a point to show the extent and type of the relationship during its dissolution, at the same time that I'm putting in the first very faint hints that this world is not precisely our world, though it looks a lot like it.

*Colly was yelling after him, but Heyr walked across the site, climbed into his white pickup truck, and pulled out. He had a cell phone in the truck. Soon as he was out on the street, he picked it up and hit "1" on the quick dial.*

*He heard two rings. Then a voice one degree too sexy for professional use said, "First National Savings and Loan, Nancy Soderlund speaking. How may I help you?"*

*Heyr had his window rolled down. He took another deep breath. Yep, it was still there. "Have to go, Nancy," he said.*

*There was a moment's silence, in which Heyr had time to wish he'd stuck to his guns about keeping his relationships uncomplicated.*

*"Go? Where?"*

*"I'm not sure. I just have to go."*

*Another silence. "Well ... for how long?"*

*Make it clean, he told himself. Make it quick.*

*"This is what I told you about when we moved in together, Nancy—that one day I was going to have to leave."*

*A very, very long silence followed this announcement, while she tried to figure out what he was talking about. Then, into the*



*silence, she screamed in his ear, "**That was FOUR YEARS ago!**"*

*"I know." He was going to have to let her get this out of her system. Have to let her yell at him. If things were different, he'd go home one last time and let her scream at him in person and punch him and maybe break things and throw them at him, but he didn't have the time. What he smelled was pure live magic, too fragile and too tentative to be left untended. He needed to track it down fast, before someone else got to it first and destroyed the source. "I'm sorry."*

*"SORRY?! You're **SORRY?! I have put four years of my life into us, into taking care of you and loving you and .... We don't even fight much, you son of a bitch, and now you're telling me that you're leaving me, and I get no warning? What, am I supposed to just go away now, and pretend you never existed? Find someplace new to live, and someone else to love, and act like the last four years never happened?"***

*"You don't have to go anywhere," he said. He stopped the truck at an intersection, closed his eyes, and sniffed. Trying to get a sense of the direction of the smell's origin. East, he thought. East, and maybe south too, though at the moment east was strongest.*

*"I don't? How do you figure that? I'm living in your house, unless you forgot."*

*"It's **your** house," he said. "I bought it for you. It's all in your name, and paid for. I didn't want you to not have anything when I had to go."*

*Suddenly she was crying. "What happened? Did you kill somebody? Have you been in hiding? Have the police or something tracked you down?"*

*"Nancy, I just have to go. I didn't do anything wrong, but I knew eventually I was going to find what I was looking for, and when I found it, I was going to have to leave."*

*Weeping on the other end of the phone. He could just imagine the looks Nancy was getting from the patrons in First National. She had one of those pitiful glass-walled offices that let everyone look in; he thought her job would have to be like working in a fishbowl, or being on display at a zoo. He wouldn't have been a banker for any amount of money, but banking was regular work, and the bank was warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and that mattered a lot to Nancy.*

*"Who is she?" Nancy whispered. "What's her name?"*

*He was going to war, and her mind was jumping to other women. Well, of course she'd think that. What did she know of war?*

*Heyr, following the road, heading east, smelled the scent of new life, of fresh beginnings, of rebirth, and the thought occurred to him that maybe it would be easier for Nancy if he **was** leaving her for another woman—if she could tell her friends what a dog he'd been, and how sneaky having a long-distance affair under her nose, and if she could hate him and badmouth him and feel justified.*

*"Her name's ... Hope," Heyr said. "You don't know her. She lives out east."*

*More sobbing, some words Heyr didn't even know that Nancy knew, and then she seemed to pull herself together. "We have four good years behind us, and I thought we had a lot of good years ahead of us. I'm leaving work now, and I'll see you when you get home, and we're going to talk about this. You and I—we're worth fighting for."*

*He sighed. "I'm not coming home. I ... won't see you again. I'm sorry. You can throw out all my things if you want. Or sell them. Or keep them." He'd reached the edge of town, and wild Wisconsin spread before him, hills and fields and forest. The road curled eastward, black and smooth and narrow, rolling up at the horizon into a copse of trees. "I have to go now, Nancy. You'll find the deed to the house and some money I left for you*

*and some other things in the red box under my side of the bed. The key for the box is in our safety deposit box, taped to the back. It's labeled Spare House Key." He took a deep breath, and gave her the lie, because lies were sometimes better than the truth. "I loved you more than I ever loved anyone, but I don't love you anymore. I'm sorry, Nancy. I really am. I wish you well, and hope that you'll someday find someone who's good enough for you."*

*She was yelling, but he cut her off.*

*Then, because he didn't want her to be able to call him again, he threw the cell phone out the window. He'd gotten the phone for her, so she could call him when she needed him, and now there was no more her.*

*Keep it clean. Let her hate him. Give her a reason to say, "Good riddance," and move on with her life.*

From *Gods Old and Dark*, Book III of the WORLD GATES series

### ***Exercise 3-B: Paired Life Questions***

Questions below may apply to both genders, or to either, and may vary by gender, by social caste, or other divisions within the culture.

**Remember that your answers are for functional, rather than dysfunctional, members of the culture.**

- What are the methods by which a person of the culture becomes a member of a pair?

For example: Elaborate coming out parties, fights to the death between rival males for high-caste females, some sort of spirit quest, negotiations between parents or governments (depending on the importance of the individuals), a lottery, an annual event where a priest or government functionary assigns all eligible singles to permanent (or temporary) pairings, the

choice of one individual from a list of eligible others, the choice of both individuals, or something else.

- Is the pairing chosen by the individual or by others?
- Are pairings that are self-chosen viewed differently than those that are made by others (if this is an option)?
- What reasons exist for living paired in the culture?

Some examples: sharing expenses, offering protection for each other, gaining a shared education, bonding for wartime or other dangerous situations where being friends will give each partner a reason to fight harder, to be with a friend, to be with a lover, or something else.

- What, if any, are considered wonderful reasons?
- What, if any, are considered acceptable reasons?
- What, if any, are considered unacceptable reasons?
- What social traditions are observed exclusively by paired-but-not-familied people?
  - Are there specific holidays?
  - Are there specific foods, specific dietary requirements, specific cooking techniques that mark the state of being paired?
  - Are there specific garments to be worn? Specific hair cuts or styles, specific jewelry, specific skin markings or other decorations?
- Do pairs have specific rituals to observe during their days?
  - Are the rituals of a private or public nature?
  - Are the rituals secular, or religious?

- What is the role of the paired member of the culture in relation to single and familial members?

Some examples: providing financial support for family members back home, writing regularly to keep members apprised of their progress, protecting family and loved ones from enemy incursions, regular visits, regular gifts, prayers at a shrine or temple, or something else.

- Do pairs still maintain a place within their own families? (Multigenerational households, or some other arrangement)
  - Do they have a specific connection to other pairs, and if so, what?
  - To singles, and if so, what?
  - To unrelated families, and if so, what?
  - Does being part of a pair affect status or caste, and if so, how?
  - Does gender affect the above relationships, and if so, how?
- What are the expectations of paired persons regarding work?

Not all jobs are open to people who are in relationships, depending on the sort of relationship and the person involved. Again, in theory at least, the priesthood and the nun vocation require celibacy, so any non-celibate pairing would be against expectations.

- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on are banned for paired-but-not-familial persons?
- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on exist specifically for paired persons?

- When paired persons work with single or family persons, will they find equal opportunities, or different opportunities? Will they receive preferred treatment, or substandard treatment? How, and why?
- What are the expectations of sexuality for paired persons within the culture?

Not all paired relationships will be sexual, but for those that are, cultures can be very restrictive about who can have sex with whom, what constitutes sex, what constitutes crime, and who will be held blameless or will be punished for a relationship that the society does not approve.

- What, specifically, are the expectations toward childbearing, and how may they be met?
- What taboos exist, if any?
- What special freedoms exist, if any?
- How does the gender of the paired person affect what is forbidden and what is permitted?
- How do pairs interact with singles and families in matters of sexuality?
- What is the unspoken social contract for pairs? Write this out as "The perfect paired male will appear to those around him as ..." or "The perfect paired female will..." or, if there is no difference in the way the culture treats paired males and paired females, simply, "The perfect paired person will appear...."
- Every culture has conformists and rebels. Where, and about what issues, are pairs in the culture splitting, with some conforming to expectations, and some rebelling from them?
- What defines the member of a pair in the culture as either a success or a failure?

## **Family Life**

What constitutes a family is one of the biggest variables across cultures. A family can be everything from two parents and a kid, (or one parent and a kid), to a complete selection of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters and their spouses and children all living under one roof, or in a single expanded compound.

Families can permit one husband and one wife; one husband and multiple wives plus concubines and slaves; one wife and multiple husbands plus concubines and slaves (though I think these have existed almost exclusively in made-up worlds, because there is no biological benefit to one woman having a male harem); communes of shared males and females and their offspring; and on to whatever your imagination can devise.

In many cultures, families that are producing children are held in high regard because they are contributing the single, essential product that will keep the culture going—children.

However, caste and social status can affect how families are regarded individually, and countercultural movements that regard children as unwelcome can affect how they are regarded as a whole. Anti-reproductive cultures can be religious, as with the Shakers; social, as with the “child-free” counterculture in first-world countries currently; or governmental, as with the Chinese ban on families with more than one child.

And this brings up the issue of gender of the child. Some societies create gender imbalances by infanticide or abortion; China is currently creating a massive male imbalance because boy children are considered a blessing. Since each family can only have one child, many women will selectively abort female fetuses in the hopes of having a male. Girl children can also be given away to be adopted out to other families, often in other countries. The situation in some parts of India and in some cultures within India. Girls represent a massive financial disaster to poor and middle-class families, because the family must provide a huge dowry in order for the daughter to be

marriageable. Unmarried daughters live with the families and are a financial burden to them, too. So many infant girls are aborted before birth or killed after. Situations for girls in India may remain horrible throughout life; husbands of women who provided inadequate dowries sometimes set them on fire so that the men can then marry another woman with a dowry.

Depending on culture, families also face challenges when they produce too few children, or too many. In rural settings, cultures support large families that can work together, farming or running other family businesses. The higher-tech and more crowded the culture, the less necessary children are seen to be.

Though we could make an argument regarding Jim-Jones-cult-type "drink the Kool-Aid" groups or Charles Manson groupies as families (after all, they referred to themselves as families), they really need to be considered as communal groups, which drops them into the Community section. They can sit there in all their awfulness, representative of dysfunctional, self-destructing communities.

Issues between cultures that value families and those that don't can make for fascinating storytelling conflict.

Here's a mother-daughter pair from my first novel, *Fire in the Mist*. The book is set in a society much more primitive in many ways than our own, but I wanted to make the culture have its own contemporary feel, too. This short section from the opening scene uses language creation and cultural development to establish that. I would do a lot of things differently in that book if I were writing it today, but I like the opening.

*In front of a fieldstone cottage, on a crisp spring morning, Risse Leyeadote and her leggy, dark-eyed daughter, Faia, hugged each other goodbye.*

*Faia pulled away first and grinned. "I love you, Mama. I will see you soon."*

*"Such a hurry. My youngest daughter cannot wait to abandon me for the flocks and the fields."*



*"Oh, Mama—!"*

*Risse laughed, then held out a wrapped packet and a necklace. "Take these, Faiachin. I have more than enough jerky here to get you to the first of the stay-stations, and I have finished the work on a special amulet—added protection against wolves. And I am sending my love. You have your erda?"*

*Faia nodded.*

*"Wolfwards?"*

*Another nod.*

*"Knife? Herb bag? Matches? Needles?..."*

*Faia nodded at each item on her mother's list until finally she burst out laughing. "Mama! How many years have I been taking the flock upland? I have everything I need. I will be fine, the sheep will be fine, the dogs will be fine, and I will see you in late summer with a nice bunch of healthy lambs and fat ewes."*

*Her mother smiled wistfully. "I know, love. But it is a mother's job to worry. If I did not, who would? Besides, I miss you when you are not here."*

*Faia's face grew serious for a minute. "I always miss you, too, Mama—but it will not be forever."*

*Her mother nodded. "Have you said your goodbyes to Rorin or Baward yet?"*

*Faia caught the conspiratorial inflection and winked. "To Rorin, yes. Last night. Baward is going to meet me at the Haddar Pass pasture in about a month, and we are going to—ah, graze the flocks together for a few days."*

*"Are you, now?" Her mother smiled a bit wistfully, remembering long summers in her own youth spent "grazing the flocks" with one young shepherd or another. "Remember to use the*

*alsinthe, then. Well, I'm glad you aren't going to be up there alone the whole time. Really, Faia, there seem more wolves than usual this year. Do not forget to set the wolfwards. Not even once. Remember, Faljon says, 'Wolves need not knock/at the door that's open.' "*

*Faia hugged her mother again, then whistled for the dogs. "I know, Mama. I know." She hung the brightly colored chain of the silver-and-wolf-tooth amulet around her neck and tucked the jerky into one of the pockets of her heavy green felt erda. "Love you, Mama."*

*"Love you, too, Faiachin," she heard her mother call when she was halfway down the slope to the pasture.*

Faiachin, *Faia thought, and winced.* Sometimes she still thinks I am five years old instead of nineteen.

### ***Exercise 3-D: Family Life Questions***

Notebook, pen, and onward, then. Once again, remember that your answers are for the functional, rather than the dysfunctional, members of the culture.

- What are the methods by which a person of the culture becomes a member of a family?

Some possibilities: Marriage—voluntary or otherwise—and remarriage, living together, adoption, invitation, birth.

- Must the family come from a previously recognized pairing, or can it be legitimate from other sources? That is, is there only one way to be an acceptable family in the culture you're creating?
- Are there methods by which families can be approved by their culture? Disapproved?

- What reasons exist for living in families in the culture?

Extended families offer great childcare options, small families offer privacy and the maximum amount of independence, families with nearby relatives can provide help and reassurance to families just dealing with their first children or with difficult finances, any families can provide emotional support and encouragement to family members. Families can also be mandatory in the culture.

- What, if any, are considered wonderful reasons?
  - What, if any, are considered acceptable reasons?
  - What, if any, are considered unacceptable reasons?
- What social traditions are observed exclusively by family people?
  - Are there specific holidays?
  - Are there specific foods, specific dietary requirements, specific cooking techniques that mark the state of being paired?
  - Are there specific garments to be worn? Specific hair cuts or styles, specific jewelry, specific skin markings or other decorations?
- Do families have specific rituals to observe during their days?
  - Are the rituals of a private or public nature?
  - Are the rituals secular, or religious?
- What is the role of the family member of the culture in relation to single and paired members?
  - Do families still maintain a place within their families of origin? (Multigenerational households, or some other arrangement)

- Do they have a specific connection to other families, and if so, what?
- To singles, and if so, what?
- To unrelated pairs, and if so, what?
- Does being part of a family affect status or caste, and if so, how?
- Does gender affect the above relationships, and if so, how?
- What are the expectations of familial persons regarding work?

Families can provide division of labor, with some members going out to work, some staying home to provide care for children and take care of home tasks like cooking, cleaning, and teaching, and cottage industries as diverse as home gardening, weaving or knitting or sewing, or, well...writing.

- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on are banned for familial persons?
- What jobs, career fields, callings, and so on exist specifically for familial persons?
- When familial persons work with single or paired persons, will they find equal opportunities, or different opportunities? Will they receive preferred treatment, or substandard treatment? How, and why?
- What are the expectations of sexuality for familial persons within the culture?

Here some form of sexual relationship is pretty much expected, at least among adult pairs of childbearing age. But sex can be considered only for reproductive purposes, or a matter of life bonding between the pair with all other relationships strictly forbidden, or it can be a situation where there can be multiple

wives, concubines, slaves, and outside girlfriends, with the wives and concubines and slaves expected to provide children who will remain in those caste roles (for legitimate sons to use), while girlfriends are for entertainment sex. And of course, every possible variation in between exists.

- What, specifically, are the expectations toward childbearing, and how may they be met?
  - What taboos exist, if any?
  - What special freedoms exist, if any?
  - How does the gender of the familial person affect what is forbidden and what is permitted?
  - How does the age of the familial person affect what is forbidden and what is permitted.
  - How do families interact with singles and pairs in matters of sexuality?
- What is the unspoken social contract for families? Write this out as "The perfect family will appear to those around it as ..." or "The perfect familial adult male will...." or "adult female will..." or "child will..."
  - Every culture has conformists and rebels. Where, and about what issues, are families in the culture splitting, with some conforming to expectations, and some rebelling from them?
  - What defines the member of a family in the culture, or the family as a whole, as either a success or a failure?

## **The Life Cycle**

### Everybody Went to My School

We've done some work with individuals as they relate outward, to their society and each other. Now we're going to look at individuals as they relate to their own lives. I cannot count the number of books I've read in which everyone is about the same age, has about the same background, has shared the same experiences. It's like reading about the lives of individual Tic Tacs. Some might be orange, some white, some green ... but they are all the same.

I can only think of a few stories that work in regard to a totally homogenous age group, and *Lord of the Flies*, that eternally delightful romp through childhood, sets the path they all follow. Dysfunction, baby—that's what that sort of homogeneity creates. If everyone in your story is the same age, something is wrong.

We exist in a full, rounded, fascinating world, and it includes everyone from newborn babies to centenarians on their way out. Life is a cycle, and including pieces of the full cycle, even as back-story, will add richness to everything you write.

Further, life throws us some nasty curves, and those curves are the interesting parts of a story. By fleshing out the roles your characters expect to fulfill, and then ripping those roles away from them and forcing them to make hard choices and go in unexpected directions, you give them resonance to readers who have had to struggle with the same things.

In the excerpt below, (taken from *Talyn*) I take my heroine and her colleague to the Great Temple to seek direction when the lives they have lived to this point have been overturned by the end of a war. My heroine earnestly seeks direction for her life, wanting to discover whether she should remain a warrior and faithful to the saint who has led her this far, even though she will have no work as a warrior,

or whether she should pursue an artistic dream and change her saint, her loyalty, and her life's path.

*Pada and I entered through the tall carved doors of the Great Temple, and the silence of the place rolled over us. The temple was busy—it ever is, for Jostfar speaks most clearly when the air is still and the mind is listening, and the words are always at hand there.*

*We made obeisance at the well. All wells and springs are the symbols of Jostfar, and sacred, for water is life. Each of us drew up a dipper of water and drank slowly. We wished each other luck, and parted company. Two people cannot seek a path in the company of each other; communion between god and man is a private thing, and brooks no third voice.*

*I went first to the shrine of Ethebet, which in the Great Temple is a sword half-sheathed in an uncarved stone. Uncounted soldiers before me have stood there, and rested a hand on the sword's oversized hilt, and searched for guidance. My search would be whether I would follow Ethebet's path at all; it was no easy question. I rested both hands on the hilt with my wrists supported by the crosspieces, and in my mind, told both Jostfar and Ethebet, "I have sworn to serve my taak, to defend with my life or by my death my taaksmen and the Confederacy and those who dwell within it, and to defend the paths of the Saints and the justice of Jostfar against enemies from without and from within, and I do not seek now to end my oath. I seek only to know how I may best serve in this new peace."*

*I sought my own silence then, and let my gaze drift over the Meditations of Saint Ethebet written on the wall before the sword-in-stone, not seeking favored sections or familiar passages, but only waiting for something to fall beneath my eye that spoke to the moment and the place in which I found myself.*

*And Meditation 397 stood out for me. "In peacetime, the path of the warrior remains hard, for the gratitude of the masses*

*falls away, and those who value peace above all call for the warrior to put away the sword. But the enemies of peace never sleep, and the warrior who lays down his sword offers his throat at the altar of sacrifice, and gives to the enemy the lives of all those he swore to protect."*

*I closed my eyes for a moment and thought on Ethebet's words; that Meditation would have been all many of my comrades needed to decide then on their path. But I have never looked at the Meditations on the shrine walls as an oracle; if I did I could as well buy one of the scribe's copies from market and pin it to a wall in my quarters and throw darts at the list when I was uncertain about the direction of my life.*

*I wished rather to choose my path with the seriousness it deserved; I wanted to honor the sacredness of my life and the random toss of a dart would not serve that.*

*Instead, with the Meditation in mind, I sought the assistance of one of the keepers.*

*He smiled at me. "We've seen a lot of Ethebet's brood through these doors of late."*

*"I'm in the last unseparated group," I told him. "We'll likely become scarce again soon enough."*

*"No hurry," he said. "Ethebet's scholars have penned some fine works. Which do you need?"*

*"I'm looking for glosses on Meditation 397," I told him. "And ..."*  
*I took a deep breath, "those works by Cladmus's scholars that offer direct counterpoint."*

*His eyebrows rose. "You've some work ahead of you. Cladmus and Ethebet run at crosscurrents on the issue of path and duty. Cladmus champions the vision of the one as the paramount duty of the pathseeker to his path; Ethebet's focus is of the duty of the one to the protection of the many, even if the price of that duty is the cost of the one. If you're getting into*



*Meditation 397, I have everything from parables and treatises to histories that are offered in support. And ..."* He looked up at the ceiling, thoughtful, and then at the aisles of books and scrolls and bound manuscripts that filled it from front to back and side to side. "... first a quick visit to Cladmus's shrine. You will have to tell me which of two of Cladmus's Meditations speaks more to your question."

*He led me through the stacks at a goodly pace, and we rounded the corner to find the interlocking ring that is one of Cladmus's symbols, and his wall of Meditations.*

*The keeper frowned and peered at the wall, and finally said, "Top left, second column, number 117, or middle of the next column, number 351."*

*I read the words of Cladmus in Meditation 117. "The voice of Jostfar is immanent in the pathfinder, and makes itself known in the path, only when the pathfinder walks alone. This need, the need for the pathfinder to follow his own vision, is therefore also his highest duty, that the full beauty of his life may be laid bare and Jostfar's blessing may be shared by all."*

*I located 351, and read it next. "The way of the man of vision is heaped with the scorn of the masses, for the price of the vision may be the sacrifice of love, of friendship, of honor, of charity, of family, of home, of everything but the single truth of that vision. Yet the worth of the vision cannot be known until it is brought forth, so it is the duty of the visionary to suffer the loss of all else if that is the price his vision demands to allow itself to be born."*

*I sighed, for a moment envying Pada, whose big decision was whether or not she should agree to Mindan law when marrying Dosil, or whether she should fight for the right to retain Ethebet's Law and bring Dosil in under that, so that she would retain her property and her name and the right to divorce him if she decided he did not suit her. Her family was pushing for*

*Mindan law, and for her to return to Minda's path, and she remained undecided.*

*For me, the question looked like it was going to be whether I preferred to be scorned as a soldier without an army, or as an artist without a patron. Either way, it looked like my days of being respected by the masses were about to come to an end.*

*I looked at the keeper, and I do not know what he saw on my face, but he laughed softly.*

*"If you ask a hard question, you must prepare yourself for a hard answer," he told me. "And yet, it may not be as bad as all that."*

*"You have recommendations?"*

*"I think so. I would suggest a mere two books to you. Neither is a scholarly gloss or a treatise; nor is either a collection of stories or parables. Both are histories after a sort—they are biographies. One is quite old. It is the biography of Helmeth of Boldrintaak, and I have it both in the original High Speech and in a later Middle Speech adaptation. The High Speech version is better if you're comfortable reading it. The second is a recent writing on the life of Loteran the Philosopher, who was an eminent Cladmian. Died in Kopataak four years ago."*

*"Why those?"*

*"Because Helmeth was a warrior in peacetime. And Loteran was a visionary in wartime. Both were unswervingly true to their paths, both lived lives that exemplify the Meditation you wish to know better and its obverse, and both dealt with issues that may help you answer your question and determine your path."*

*I took both books, thinking that war is a hard religion to follow, but that peace looked to be just as hard and twice as confusing, and left a hefty offering in the offering box. The keepers need to eat, after all, and they need to be able to commission more books. And then I went to the little eatery*

*where Pada and I agreed we would meet when we had finished our rituals.*

### **Exercise 4: Life Cycle Questions**

We'll do more questions here. Remember that you do not have to hit every single question about every single age group. Nor do you have to work in every single category. As your mind starts developing one section, you'll start getting a feel for how the other sections might go.

Remember, too, that you can drop into the Advanced Techniques at any time and really go into detail on any question that catches your imagination.

Finally, focus on developing the functional part of the society. If you want to write dysfunction, you still have to know what your baseline is, and why. It's from deciding on your norms that you'll be able to create the dysfunctions.

Let's go, then.

We'll take individuals in your culture through the life process from birth to death.

- Childbirth

In general, Western culture (a superculture that encompasses many cultures, subcultures, and countercultures that derive from Greek and Roman and eventual French and English philosophies and legal structures and expectations) makes certain assumptions about childbirth—that the child will be wanted, that the parents are happy to have it, that so long as it is healthy and the mother survives, the birth is a good one. These assumptions are broad, and leave room within smaller cultures in the subset to add their own restrictions—that the parents are married, that they are of the same religion, that the father has a good job, that the mother

will stay home to raise the child, that the family is able to afford a nanny to raise the child.... The possibilities within one culture are broad. But outside of Western culture, the possibilities are much broader. Let's take a look at some of them.

- Social traditions

In general, members of Western culture or its subcultures nest—prepare a place for the new baby, give and receive gifts, knit blankets and booties, attend parenting and Lamaze classes, and participate in other activities that emphasize the fact that the child in Western culture is generally wanted. More and more, fathers attend the birth and mothers are awake for it, family members are close by if they can be, and following a healthy delivery, the family celebrates. Other cultures do not act in this fashion.

- What preparations for the birth do the parents make before birth? Are there any taboos that must be avoided? Are there any foods that must be eaten, or clothes that must be worn, or colors that must be avoided. What restrictions are put on the mother during her pregnancy? On the father?
- Is the birth surrounded by fear or by joy? Are evil spirits considered present, so that they must be warded off? Are good spirits lured in? Is the process moved from the realm of the natural into the realm of the medical, with families held apart from the woman in labor, and the entire endeavor treated as a disease, or a problem that must be fixed? Is the new child welcomed or dreaded? During childbirth, do families gather while the woman is celebrated and cheered, or is she hustled

away to a dark tent somewhere, looked at as filthy, and treated as if she were in need of cleansing?

- Under what circumstances will the newborn be welcomed? Does gender matter? Does health matter? Does parentage matter, or the social status of the family, or the marital status of the parents? How is the newborn welcomed?
- Under what circumstances will the newborn be unwelcome? Does gender matter? Does health matter? Does parentage matter, or the social status of the family, or the marital status of the parents? How is the newborn made unwelcome?
- Does the culture in some way test its newborns for their ability to survive (as the Romans did with some newborns and exposure)?
- Are there circumstances in which a newborn might be marked for death, as were firstborns offered as sacrifices in some cultures? Will some babies be killed before or after birth because of issues like gender, known or suspected deformity, questions about paternity, or something else?

- Rituals

Western birth rituals are pretty simple. You name the kid before you leave the hospital. You obtain your child's birth certificate and (in most states) Social Security number, and you check with your accountant to see how the new arrival will affect next year's tax bite. If you're religious, you

participate in the religious welcome. Community-wise, your mother may or may not stay with you for a couple of weeks to make sure you don't do anything stupid, if the baby is your first. Friends will drop by and bring presents. Or not. But birth rituals can be elaborate, moving, and fascinating.

- Does the family have community obligations to fulfill before, during, or after the birth of the child? If yes, describe them.
  - Does the family have religious obligations to fulfill before, during, or after the birth of the child? If yes, describe them.
  - Does the family have government obligations to fulfill before, during, or after the birth of the child. If yes, describe them.
- Expectations

In Western culture, there are two expectations. One, the baby will be healthy. Two, the mother will live. If those two expectations are met, everyone is generally pretty happy. (An unstated third is that the putative father is also the real father—things can get ugly fast if that turns out not to be the case.) In other cultures, expectations can involve everything from a witchdoctor reading chicken entrails to gifts from foreign princes, depending on who the kid is expected to grow up to be.

- What expectations does a family have regarding the birth of the child? That it will be male? Female? Healthy? Have a specific birthmark? Fill a specific role in society when it grows up?
- Does the time or date of birth figure into these expectations?

- Success vs. Failure
  - While in general a live birth and a healthy mother will be considered successful, and a dead mother or child will be considered a failure, there might be circumstances where this will not be true. If there are, what are the circumstances?
  - The culture might have other criteria that determine the success or failure of the birth, from the gender of the child to whether the child was a lucky or unlucky number (the lucky first kid, the unlucky fourth), to whether the child had a specific birthmark, or was born at a specific date or hour, or whether the child did something at birth that was considered good or bad. What sort of other criteria does the culture use to determine the success or failure of the birth?

- Childhood

In first-world countries of Western culture, children are essentially decorative. Parents buy them toys and send them to school; children do not contribute to the family in real and critical ways. This is not the case in most other cultures. Children since time began have been at least an extra pair of hands around the house, and frequently become full partners in the work of the family from the time they're old enough to both walk and think in more or less recognizable fashion—around six years of age in a lot of cases. Children in these cultures know their part in the family, and they know their value—something lacking from modern Western culture, where children don't contribute to the survival of the family, and they know it. Kids want to help, and instead are shunted off into twelve years of pointless busy-work, followed by another four years of mostly-pointless busywork, after which they get

soul-sucking corporate jobs and drink themselves into oblivion on weekends. But that's my rant.

On to your culture.

- Social traditions
  - Before they can walk and talk, how are children treated and tended, and by whom?
  - Once they are able to walk and talk, how does this change?
  - Once they can reason (about age six), how does this change?
  - At what age are they considered useful?
  - How are these stages of their lives marked off? Do they have special clothes that they wear? Do they have hairstyles that mark their status?
- Rituals
  - Does the culture celebrate rituals that mark the passing stages of childhood? If so, what are the stages, and what are the rituals?
- Expectations
  - What expectations do parents have of a child at each stage of childhood?
  - How do these expectations vary from child to child in a family? Do boys have different roles than girls? Are expectations different for the firstborn than the lastborn? (For example, the firstborn is expected to take over the family farm, the lastborn is expected to stay home,



never marry, and take care of the parents as they grow old.)

- How are expectations different across social strata?
- How do the occupations of the parents affect expectations on the children?
- The value of learning
  - How is the education of the young carried out in your culture? By apprenticeships? By learning at home? By fostering out? By mentoring with masters? By sitting in a classroom reading textbooks?
  - What sorts of careers are possible in your culture, and how do children prepare to achieve them? Are they chosen by status? By ability? By competition? By lottery? By gender? By race? By oracle from the time of birth?
  - Aside from innate intelligence, are there barriers that prevent a child of your culture from obtaining the education another child could have? Slavery or caste status? Poverty? Illegitimate birth, ill-favored birth, bad birthmark, ugliness, race, gender, or something else?
- The question "Why?"

The question "Why?" is almost the defining mark of childhood in Western culture. Children ask, we answer (or evade answering as the situation seems to fit). But not all cultures reward or even tolerate curiosity in children. Some cultures use terrifying fairy tales and fables to show children what horrible

things happen to the curious. Some use beatings. Some mark persistently curious children as bad, or suggest they are inhabited by demons. Curiosity is valued in the young where innovation is valued in the culture as a whole. In fiercely tradition-steeped cultures where things are done the way they have been done for hundreds or thousands of years, or in totalitarian cultures where survival means never making waves, curiosity will not be viewed with happiness.

- So. How does your culture answer the question "Why?"
- How does it treat those who persistently dare to ask "Why?"
- Success vs. Failure
  - The perfect child of your culture will do.... what? Will be.... what? Will achieve what by the end of the age that your culture defines as the end of childhood?
  - The failed child of your culture will do.... what? Will be.... what? Will achieve what by the end of the age that your culture defines as the end of childhood?
- Young Adulthood

Young adulthood in a culture can be reached by anything from the age of first sexual maturity to the age of achievement of some sort of coming of age test; to a calendar-year number; to approval by a board of elders that the child in question is not going to embarrass everyone; to a religious passage proving that the child will remain in the religion and is thus worthy of adulthood. Young adulthood does not always confer all the rights and privileges of full adulthood, though;

sometimes the young adult must still prove himself or herself capable of living within the culture and carry the full weight of an adult's responsibilities before the young adult will be admitted into the ranks of the fully privileged.

- Social traditions
  - How does your culture determine who is and who is not a young adult?
  - What part do the actions of the would-be adult play in becoming a young adult?
  - Is adulthood seen as an achievement, or do people glorify the more helpless state of childhood as some sort of ideal lost Eden?
  - What privileges does the young adult earn by making this passage?
  - What privileges are withheld for a later level of achievement, or later status? (If any)
  - How are these later increases in achievement given?
- Rituals
  - What family rituals mark the entrance of the child into young adulthood? The choosing of a spouse? Sending off to a craft master for additional education? The deeding of a piece of land? The building of an independent home? The gift of money, or a set of tools?
  - What community rituals mark the entrance of the child into young adulthood? Hazing? A huge party? A gathering in which young adults are presented to society as available for matrimony?

- What religious rituals mark the entrance of the child into young adulthood? A coming of age ceremony? The assumption of a role in the religion, either as an acolyte or a full member? The taking of vows to the religion?
- What government rituals mark the entrance of the child into young adulthood? Swearing fealty to a king or lord? Entrance into military service? The duty of taxes? The requirement of a gift to the leader? Right to vote, own property, become self-determining?
- Expectations of Work
  - Is the young adult a fully functioning member of society, or is he still considered untried?
  - How does gender, race, or social status change the expectations with which the culture views the new young adult?
  - What work is open to the young adult that is not open to full adults or children? What work is closed to the young adult that is available to children or full adults?
  - How does the young adult in your culture regard future career improvements? Is it possible to change jobs? Is it possible to choose different work? Is it possible to pursue dreams?
- Expectations of Sexuality
  - How will the young adult of your culture find a mate? Will he or she seek one out, or will the culture provide approved methods of presenting acceptable candidates?

- Does your young adult have any choice in the selection process?
  - Is the creation of a family an immediate requirement of the young adult, or is a period of singleness (with or without possible experimentation) permissible, or even expected?
  - If singleness is permissible or accepted, what expressions of sexuality are permitted within your culture?
  - What happens to those young adults who stray outside of the permissible? Punishment, shunning, banishment, execution?
- Conformism and Rebellion

In Western culture, a certain amount of rebellion is expected from young adults. How much is tolerated depends on the subculture, of course, but in general, the West looks at young adulthood as the time for the individual to figure out who he or she is, allows a lot of independent exploration in order to get what we hope will be the best results. This is most assuredly NOT the case in most of the rest of the world's cultures. Young adults are generally given their places, and expected to toe the line and conform to cultural mandates. Rebellion is dealt with in ways that range from unpleasant to fatal.

- How does your culture view the rebellion of the young adult?
- How does it treat the rebellious young adult?
- How does the young adult who wants to rebel do so and still survive the experience?

- Success vs. Failure
  - The perfect young adult male in your culture will ....? The perfect young adult female in your culture will ....?
  - The failed young adult male in your culture will....? The failed young adult female in your culture will ....?

- Adulthood

Full adulthood in Western culture is a gimme—the only thing you have to do to gain all the privileges it confers is keep breathing long enough to get older. And when you get older, you can run for political office, join important secret societies, vote, drink alcohol, have a fairly libertine legal sex life, work your way into the best jobs, gain access to the best eligible sex partners, and on, and on. Western adulthood emphasizes rights but deemphasizes responsibilities.

In a lot of cultures, there aren't all that many rights, but there are a lot of responsibilities, which has to make life in general not a lot of fun.

The ideal mix would be a combination of both—you take on responsibilities, you get additional rights. But this isn't about creating an ideal culture. This is about creating your culture, which can have all sorts of difficult twists and turns.

- Social traditions
  - How does your culture determine who is and who is not a full adult? Are there tests? Rituals? Mandatory forms of government or religious service? Gender barriers? Race barriers? Caste barriers?

- What part do the actions of the young adult play in giving him access to full adulthood?
  - Is full adulthood seen as an achievement, or is it something people just age into? How does your culture view full adulthood?
  - What privileges does the adult earn by achieving this passage? Are there multiple layers of full adulthood?
  - What privileges are withheld for a later level of achievement, or later status? (If any)
  - How are these later increases in achievement given?
- 
- Rituals
    - What family rituals mark the entrance of the young adulthood into full adulthood? The successful birth of a first child? The opening of a personal business, studio, or craft? A place of prestige in the family hierarchy?
    - What community rituals mark the entrance of the young adult into full adulthood? Admission into a secret society? A place of prestige in a community group? The newly minted full adult taking on apprentices?
    - What religious rituals mark the entrance of the young adult into full adulthood? The assumption of a role in the religion, either as an elder or a full member? A ceremony? The assumption of a leadership role that will see the new leader teaching, or in other ways presenting the religion to others?

- What government rituals mark the entrance of the young adult into full adulthood?  
Recognition by a king or lord? Completion of military service, or a raise in rank or status?  
The right to collect taxes? Ability to become a leader? Right to bestow property, or bestow rank or privilege on others?
- Expectations of Work
  - Is the full adult expected to innovate, to teach his craft, to explore new ideas? Conversely, is his role to prevent innovation, to guard tradition, to maintain an unbroken line from past history to the future?
  - How does gender, race, or social status change the expectations with which the culture views the full adult and his work?
  - What work is open to the full adult that is not open to young adults or children? What work is closed to the full adult that is available to children or young adults?
  - How does the full adult in your culture regard future career advancements? Is it possible to change jobs? Is it possible to choose different work? Is it possible to pursue dreams?
- Expectations of Sexuality
  - How will the full adult of your culture find or keep a mate? How will he or she replace an unsatisfactory mate? How will he deal with a mate lost to desertion or death? How will he deal with sexuality if single?
  - Does the culture press the full adult to continue adding to family, to expand numbers



of wives or concubines, to support the households of his young adult children and their families? Must the full adult gather dowries?

- Is the full adult permitted sexual experimentation of any sort, or is that something that must be put aside?
- What happens to those adults who stray outside of the permissible modes of sexual expression? Punishment, shunning, banishment, execution?

▪ Conformism and Rebellion

In general, the full adults of a culture are those who have made it all the way through rebellious youth and settled into their culture, accepting its benefits and faults. Rebellion, for full adults, generally carries more risk than it does for the young, because full adults may have families that can be used as leverage or hostages against rebellion by the full adult. They also can own property that could be taken, have prestigious work that could be lost, and so on. Full adults are invested in the culture in ways that children and young adults are not. So for an full adult to rebel, the issues causing the rebellion are generally greater and more severe than those that will spur rebellion in young adults.

- How does your culture view the rebellion of the full adult?
- How does it treat the rebellious full adult?
- How does the full adult who wants to rebel do so and still survive the experience?

▪ Success vs. Failure

- The perfect full adult male in your culture will ....? The perfect full adult female in your culture will ....?
- The failed full adult male in your culture will....? The failed full adult female in your culture will ....?

▪

○ Old Age

Current Western culture as a whole stinks at dealing with old age, because Western culture as a whole currently values youth over age, and smooth skin over wisdom and experience. (Which might be why Western culture as a whole is not doing too well at the moment—if you're looking to the youngest and least experienced members of the culture for direction and leadership, you're going to get lots and lots of train wrecks.)

Cultures that value survival value their elders, who have solid experience in what it takes to survive and prosper; not having killed themselves with drug and alcohol overdoses or sexually transmitted diseases, gang shootings, nihilism, and having survived wars and peace, they offer facts regarding what kept them alive while those around them died. Most successful cultures hold their oldest members in high esteem, turning to them for advice, caring for them when they cannot care for themselves.

Cultures ossify if only the elders can speak. But they crash and burn if only the young have a voice.

▪ Social traditions

- How does your culture determine who is and who is not an elder?

- What part do the actions of the full adult play in moving him into the category of elder?
  - Is old age seen as an achievement, or is it something people just age into? Do people attempt to fend it off? How does your culture view old age?
  - What privileges does the elder earn by achieving this passage? Are there multiple layers of old age?
  - What privileges or later status are withheld for a elders, if any?
  - How are these later increases in achievement given?
- Rituals
    - What family rituals mark the entrance of the full adulthood into old age? The successful birth of a first grandchild? The wedding of the last child? The giving of a place of honor in the family hierarchy? Leaving work to retire?
    - What community rituals mark the entrance of the full adult into old age? A place of leadership in a secret society? A place of prestige in a community group? A master-craftsman status that brings other masters to study with the elder?
    - What religious rituals mark the entrance of the full adult into old age? The assumption of a role in the religion, or the handing off of responsibilities to someone younger? A ceremony? Becoming overseer of the new leaders who teach the religion?

- What government rituals mark the entrance of the full adult into old age? Recognition by a king or lord? Retirement from military service with or without pension? Release from the payment of taxes? Ability to become a leader? Right to bestow property, or bestow rank or privilege on others?
- Expectations of work
  - Is the elder expected to teach his craft or transmit the culture's heritage, mores, and conventions? Is the elder expected to explore spirituality, to transmit or create laws or other forms of guidance for those coming behind? Is the elder expected to find lessons from his long life and turn them into something useful for younger generations?
  - How does gender, race, or social status change the expectations with which the culture views the elder and his work?
  - What work is open to the elder that is not open to others? What work is closed to the elder that is available to others?
  - How does the elder in your culture regard future career advancements, or career continuance? Does the elder look forward to a future in which he is secure, or into an abyss of gradual poverty and darkness? Is he permitted control of his own destiny? Can he still pursue dreams?
- Expectations of sexuality

Sexuality among the elderly is viewed by those who are younger with awkwardness and frequent distaste. But the same desires exist, even if they

become less overwhelming, and at the same time increasingly more difficult to fulfill.

- How will the elder of your culture deal with a mate lost to desertion or death? How will he or she replace a lost mate? How will he deal with sexuality if single?
- Does the culture press the elder to maintain and support numbers of wives or concubines, and assist in the upkeep of households of his adult children and their families? What are the responsibilities of the elder to his progeny?
- Is the elder permitted sexual experimentation of any sort, or is that something that must be put aside?
- What happens to those elders who stray outside of the permissible modes of sexual expression? Punishment, shunning, banishment, execution?

▪ Conformism and Rebellion

Generally, by the time folks get old, they aren't interested in rocking the boat—their increasingly short future is tied to the culture they have helped build. But there are still cases where elders have, in the last years of their lives, started or participated in revolutions of various sorts. Look at Ben Franklin as a spectacular example of a man who in his later years ardently and passionately pursued rebellion, though he had everything to lose by doing so.

- How does your culture view the rebellion of the elderly?
- How does it treat the rebellious elder?

- How does the elder who wants to rebel do so and still survive the experience?

- The Cost of Aging

Inevitably the body begins to fail. The mind may not be as sharp, the senses may dim, hands and feet, arms and legs may no longer serve their purposes. Western culture once dealt better with this phase of life, but now frequently warehouses its unwanted elders in live-in-care communities or nursing homes. How does your culture treat its failing elders?

- Does your culture fight to prolong life? In which cases?
- What place has it made for dying elders? How do families care for dying elders? How does the community care for them? How does religion care for them? How does government care for them?
- What respect does the culture show dying elders?

- Success vs. Failure

- The perfect elderly male in your culture will ....? The perfect elderly female in your culture will ....?
- The failed elderly male in your culture will....? The failed elderly female in your culture will ....?

- Death

Sooner or later, everyone ends up there. Our lives define us, but death adds the punctuation. Western culture

currently tiptoes around the issue, using plastic surgery and euphemism to pretend that getting older doesn't lead to dying. Sharp shocks to the system come when the young die. When the famous die. But denial that death will touch them is the big hallmark of the Western death experience for most members of the culture. Other cultures do a better job of preparing, of acknowledging that Death always sits at the table and walks beside us.

- Social Traditions

- How does the culture treat the death of one of its members? Does it treat the death differently by age, by status, by gender, by singleness, or if the dead was paired, or familial?
- Does it treat the death differently when it occurs by different means—suicide or murder, disease or illness, when caused by congenital problems, accident or old age?
- How does the family deal with the death of a member, and those bereaved?
- How does the community deal with death and those bereaved?
- How does religion deal with death and those bereaved?
- How does government deal with death and those bereaved?

- Rituals

Rituals for the dead range from polite ceremonies where everyone sits around the gravesite dressed in black to horrors where everyone related to the dead person (if important) is sacrificed and buried with

him. There can be mandated periods of mourning, mandated sacrifices, mandated taxes, confiscation of property, enslavement of children or wives to pay of unpaid debt, and more. Death need not be simple or civilized—it can have a devastating effect on those left behind.

Or it can be a time of celebration as people remember the life of a loved one, and act out rituals to send him into a next life.

- What rituals do the family and/or friends perform or require for the dead?
  - What rituals does the community perform or require for the dead or from the bereaved?
  - What rituals does religion perform or require for the dead or from the bereaved?
  - What rituals does the government perform or require for the dead or from the bereaved?
- Expectations
    - How does the culture as a whole view the future of the dead person?
    - How does that future vary related to the life the person lived?
    - How does that future vary related to the person's status, or gender, or age at death, or religious or government affiliation?
  - Success vs. Failure

It's a sad truth that people can be perceived as failures even in death. The ways to fail in both life cut short and manner of death in current Western



culture are many and varied: if you go out a famous but drug-overdosed suicide, waste brilliance or talent, die while sitting on a toilet, or do something so stupid you posthumously win a Darwin Award, you failed. (Rabbles and anarchists tend to idolize dramatic suicides and overdoses (Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Hunter S. Thompson; mainstream culture tends to abhor them.) Warriors for the culture die heroes, but how you define "warrior" depends on the culture you're in. Gang cultures define the guys who get shot while doing drive-bys as warriors; mainstream culture defines men and women in government military as warriors. Women in general have a harder time having their successes matter in life, but have a harder time being failures in death. And so on.

- So with that in mind, how does your culture define a success in death?
- How does it define a failure in death?
- What variables in religion, age, status, gender and so on will change whether the deceased dies a success or a failure?

○ Personal Structures

▪ Housing

Housing seems so simple on the face of things—you build a house and you stick a family in it. But cultural solutions to housing families are as complex and varied as the families they house. Everything exists from women's tents and men's tents to massive adobe structures that house entire extended families in one maze-like building to nuclear family brick-and-mortar houses to grand castles. You have your basic palm structure. You

have your log cabin. You have your felt tent. You have your woven sticks, and your timber-framed cabin, and your fieldstone cottage, and your compressed-dirt longhouse and a thousand other basic structures, and fancier structures based on those structures as civilization grew, all that serve the purpose (more or less effectively) of keeping people and their stuff warm, dry, and safe.

Now your job is to figure out what sorts of personal housing your culture uses, and who lives where, and how those places are the same, and how they differ.

- Divisions of housing
  - What sort of housing is available to singles? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will it be located? How will this housing differ based on age, status, gender, race, or other variables?
  - What sort of housing is available to pairs? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will it be located? How will this housing differ based on age, status, gender, race, or other variables?
  - What sort of housing is available to families? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will it be located? How will this housing differ based on age, status, gender, race, or other variables?
- Who builds the homes of the occupants? How does this vary in relation to age, status, gender, religion, race, etc.?
- Is there a community component to home building? Do communities pitch in to make

sure all their members are housed? Do they build the houses with community participation?

- Is there a religious component to home building? Does the house have to be blessed; does it have to have spells worked over it; does it require sacrifices or other special efforts before it can be built? Does the ground have to be consecrated, or in a specific area? Does it have to face a certain way, or sit in relation to specific plants?
- Is there a government component to home building? Are there forms to be filled out, permits to be obtained, bribes to be paid, officials to be placated, or other government issues do deal with? Does the government have a say in the land used? Does the government own all the land? Can individuals legally own homes?
- What sorts of rituals will new home inhabitants or owners go through when moving into their new homes? Will these vary from rituals when moving into previously occupied homes?

## Home Life

### We All Drink Coffee and Eat Fast Food

Here's another of those hidden rocks that sink books. Our lives are our sole source of relatively uncensored input; when we're writing, the only details we write with utter conviction are those that we know from having lived them.

And what we know creates serious blind spots if we've only lived one kind of life, whether it is a life as a suburban middle-class American, or lower-class Brit, or upper-class German. We take some things for granted which we don't realize we take for granted—that mail comes to our houses unopened; that we'll have running water (and have it every day); that electricity is normal; that plumbing works; that there will be enough food in the pantry or the fridges, or that food will be available at stores or elsewhere so that we can buy more of when we need it.

I was lucky enough to live a number of different lives as a kid. I lived in Alaska in a wood-heated log cabin four miles by river (there were no roads) from the nearest village, where the barge that brought us food came once a year, and where everything else we ate, we grew or killed ourselves; where the cold and the river that ran outside our front door and the vast trackless expanses of tundra and the wild animals that roamed it were both deadly; where once a week we pumped water into our house from the river and we stored it in an indoor cistern and treated it with Clorox. Where the only people who kept us alive were us, and acting responsibly and continuing to breathe were exactly the same thing.

I lived in a tiny house in the Igaron barrio of San Jose, Costa Rica, where thieves ran over the wall-bordered back yards and the roofs of houses (our backyard wall had cemented broken glass and barbed wire across it for this reason); where the Mercado Central offered the best shopping in the city, and stank of sweat and cookfires and buzzed with flies crawling on hanging meat and crawled with

pickpockets and rang with the voices of merchants selling everything imaginable from their stalls, dickering over prices with shrewd locals and gullible gringos; where the buses were painted with wonderful murals in gaudy colors; where simply being American was risky, and sometimes unpleasant.

I lived in a painted adobe compound in Chiquimula, Guatemala, with marble floors and red hand-made tile roofs and bars over the windows, which had no glass in them—windows with heavy board shutters that we closed at night for privacy; where huge rats and iguanas walked across the hand-planed beams in the open ceilings; where soldiers in uniform and carrying machine guns stood on street corners, watching everyone with cold eyes; where boys were rounded up and dragged into trucks from time to time and taken off at gunpoint to join the Guatemalan army; where in the evenings musicians gathered in the town square and the men walked counterclockwise on the walkway around the bandstand while women walked clockwise, and people greeted each other, but kept moving; where we were stopped in the mountains by machine-gun-carrying guerillas at a time in Guatemala's history (1975-1976) when thousands were being murdered for helping the poor, and where only months before, four nuns we knew through a friend were found buried with heads only aboveground and with their necks wired together, all shot in the head; and where, on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976, a hellish earthquake damaged our home and most of the rest of the Quaker mission. After which, we returned to the US.

And I've lived in different places and situations in the US. Upper-middle-class small-town country-club wife; trailer-park kid; dedicated ER RN; struggling writer-mom; It's been a useful education for a writer, and an interesting life, and it's taught me that nobody has a normal life.

Nobody has a normal life, but some lives definitely offer more varied fodder for novel-writing. So if you haven't had a lot of exposure to other cultures, you need to spend some time with the History channel, and with reading everything you can get your hands on about cultures explored by anthropology and archeology. Devour history. Go to the library and dig through their collection of really old

*National Geographics.* (The new ones are pretty worthless most of the time, from a cultural standpoint.)

Check out the internet, starting with a useful site like Wikipedia and the Geography Portal: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Geography>

Devour as much of the world as you can get your hands on, try to figure out the lines along which cultures developed and how they came to be what they were or are at their height, guess how the futures of current cultures are going to unfold.

### ***Exercise 5: Home Life Story or Vignette***

Write a short story or vignette of around 500-1000 words in first person about someone who lives a life utterly different than your own. You can investigate any genre, any time period, and any location on this world or any other. But your character needs to be part of a culture that shares almost no common ground with yours.

## **Communities**

### **You Can Be an Elf, a Warrior, a Paladin or a Thief, but Not a Newspaper Reporter**

It would be easy to blame shallowness in fantasy and SF on games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, or on Tolkien, whose world was full of elven princesses and human princes, both secret and otherwise, and pretty thin on beermakers and accountants and armorers and hog farmers. A lot of the shallowness in fantasy is in fact a result of imitators of Tolkien further thinning out his work, and a lot is a result of someone taking a D&D campaign and writing it out as a book.

But that's shallowness in only one genre, and shallowness is a sin that every genre suffers in equal and painful measure.

Readers notice shallowness, though they may not always complain about it. But when they never wander through a street and see the rest of the world going about its day, when the people surrounding them are exclusively of one or two classes and professions, when everyone has something specific to do with the story and no one is there because the world needs people like him, even if the story doesn't, then something in the back of those readers' minds is whispering to them that they are surrounded by cardboard props.

A community is all the people the culture needs to survive and keep it going. In hunter-gatherer cultures, you can have a pretty simple structure. You'll need hunters and weapon-makers and gatherers, healers and probably priests, folks to make and repair clothing, folks to store and prepare food, and someone to protect the community from outside threats, and to trade goods or young people who will be brides or husbands, with other communities. These jobs can all be held by mothers and fathers and kids, grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins, the group of five or ten folks that also makes up your basic family unit, or you can create specialists if you have a few more people.

At the point where you start adding farming or animal husbandry, things get a lot more complex. Farming requires serious skills, and not everyone can do it. The same goes for animal husbandry. Plus, if you have farming, you can have surpluses, and then you're into grain and fruit and vegetable preservation and storage, and marketing, and animal breeding and trading and meat preservation and storage, and maybe dealing with milk if there are surpluses in the herd, and from there, you start needing potters and maybe weavers and toolmakers of all sorts, and people to build houses and barns, and before you know it, you're neck deep in people to settle arguments over whose land ends where, and who stole whose sheep, and then you have to have guys to make laws, and guys to enforce them, and if your folks aren't nudists, you need shearers and spinners and weavers and dyers and knitters and folks to make shoes out of the leather and folks to make soup or musical instruments out of the bones and sinews, and ....

Right.

There is never a need to be shallow. You don't have to give everyone in every job in your culture a speaking part, but even references to going to see the guy down the street who makes plowshares to ask him if he can fix that plowshare your hero wrecked can help. Even if we then go on to discover that the rock is, in fact, an artifact which, when illuminated by the full moon summons a spirit who will turn him into the hero of your story. Having your hero hanging out with his friends over at a neighboring farm, where the sister is making a quilt and the mother is cooking stew can help, too, as can having him working at a barn-raising when the aliens show up.

### ***Exercise 6: Community Questions***

Answer a few, as broadly or as deeply as you need to find your culture's community.

- Community



Community is all about survival. *Community* is people helping each other—delivering each other's babies and building each other's barns and mourning each other's dead. Community is about guarding shared walls against outsiders, and making lives within those walls, whether the walls are physical or metaphorical. There is no representative job in a community, no one kind of work that you can point to and say "This job sums up who we are." In communities, people are all working toward common goals, but they're all doing different things to get there, and while some jobs might have greater status or greater monetary value, the guy who figures out a way to keep feces out of the water supply is as critical to the survival of the group as the guy who guards the walls and fights off invaders.

*Community* is the essence of *common ground*, and the ways that people share community and embrace it and work to better it determine the kinds of lives they will live and the kinds of futures they and their children and their children's children can hope for.

- How communities reflect philosophy

Your community can say it is about anything, holds any sort of values, strives for any sort of goals—but your community's true philosophy will be revealed in its actions. A community that says it values free speech but that seeks to suppress free speech is oppressive; a community that claims to value human rights but that protects the rights of criminals at the expense of their victims values nothing. You can find tremendous conflict in situations of this sort, and in the cultural divides that pit one community against another. It's up to you to put words into your characters' mouths, but also up to you to create their actions, which may or may not match their words.

- What does your community claim to stand for? What groups does it claim to support, what issues does it claim to value, what rights does it claim to uphold?
- How do its actions prove or give lie to its words?

- Is the community monocultural, or does it support two or more cultures with varying needs and philosophies? How does the community treat the cultures which inhabit it? If it includes aggressor cultures and non-aggressor cultures, how does it treat the rights of each group?
- Social Groups
  - Friendships

Friendships are part of community, not family. They are formed by people—related or not—who share common interests and common goals. Friendships have different values from culture to culture, and in some cultures may not be permitted in at all.

- In which situations does your culture accept friendships? Does age matter? Does gender matter? Does social status matter? Does race matter? Does some other factor matter?
- In which situations does your culture forbid friendships?
- How do friends in your culture meet, acknowledge each other, benefit from their friendship, and suffer for their friendship?
- Do friends bear specific titles or names for each other, use special language features like case or concept-words that don't translate into English?
- Do friendships have taboo areas where discussion cannot go without destroying the friendship?
- Do friendships have taboo areas where actions are forbidden if the friendship is to survive?
- Does the culture support different kinds of friendships? What are they, and how do they differ?

What remains common to all friendships in the culture?

- Gender relationships

No culture seems to have a handle on working out gender relationships to everyone's satisfaction. Non-sexual relations have a way of slipping, and things frequently get messy sooner or later. The possible trouble spots include obvious male/female relationships, but also male/male, and female/female relationships. These can be a mess in-culture or cross-culture, and such messes are always a source of good conflict for fiction.

- How does your culture view non-sexual relationships that exist outside of the family?
- How do members of the community who are not family and not friends relate to each other? What sorts of relationships are permissible or even encouraged? What sorts of relationships are forbidden or discouraged?
- Can members of opposite or different genders spend time together in purely social situations? (This question addresses the fact that some cultures recognize more than two genders.) In what circumstances? With what oversight? At what sorts of activities?
- How do age, race, religion, and other factors play a part in these relationships?

- Working relationships

The folks you work with aren't necessarily friends. They're colleagues, or superiors, or inferiors, or team members, or fellow sufferers, depending on where you work, the sort of work you do, and the sort of experiences you all share in your employment.

Western culture in general saves particular forms of address for the workplace, with the formal English of Sir/Madam still preserved after it has gone extinct throughout most day-to-day life. Work relationships are frequently set up with boundaries and expectations and rules that are in place to preserve cultural expectations, whether these relate to status or class or gender or race or religion or some other division.

Of course, this does depend heavily on the sort of work being done.

- How do work relationships in your culture tend to reinforce cultural values?
  - What sorts of work most fit the culture's ideal?
  - What sorts of work run most counter to the culture's ideal?
  - How do work relationships in your culture tend to challenge cultural values?
  - How does the culture deal with sorts of work that challenge the culture or encourage rebellion from cultural expectations and mores?
- Status relationships

The Smiths don't speak to the Joneses, and the Rockefellers look down their noses at the Forbeses. Or something like that. The people at the top of the cultural food chain are generally dedicated to preserving power and wealth, the people just below them are dedicated to achieving power and wealth, and the people at the bottom are dedicated to surviving from day to day. We go back to Maslow's Hierarchy (from *Holly Lisle's Create a Character Clinic*) and its uses in developing the immediate and compelling needs of

characters—only this time, we're developing the compelling needs of classes.

- What classes or layers of social strata exist in your culture? Who is willing to associate with whom?
  - What are the compelling needs of each class, and how do these relate to the sorts of work each class will be able to find?
  - Do language barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - Do social barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - Do legal barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - Do gender barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - Do race barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - Do religious barriers exist in moving up or down in status? What are they?
  - How do the barriers that exist in your culture affect relationships between people of different status in your communities? In your culture? Across cultures?
- Play and Challenge relationships

The love of sport in Western culture brings people with nothing else in common together. Rich and poor alike love baseball, basketball, soccer, hockey, horseracing, and on, and on. They may not sit together in the arenas, they may not pay the same for their tickets, but if for some reason they find themselves elbow to elbow, those brief exchanges tend to be genial and enthusiastic. Shared loves do that for

people. Various competitive sports have been instrumental in breaking down cultural barriers, in bringing in members of less-favored groups and making heroes of them to people who would have nothing to do with others of their group—because talent, skill, and heart cross all barriers and create winners.

Conversely, not all sports are available to all people. Not everyone dogsleds, not everyone plays polo, not everyone water-skis or surfs or races yachts or ice-skates competitively because of issues like availability of sports surfaces, cost of entry, climate, and on and on. So while some sports bring people together, others might be considered simply to highlight the differences between groups, classes, communities, or cultures.

Not all sports are for entertainment. The Mayans killed the winners of its ball game as human sacrifices; other cultures have killed the losers. It's a good idea to consider not just the mechanics of their sports, but what rides on winning and losing—from gambling a few dollars to gambling lives or even nations.

- What sports are favored in your culture? How are these games played, and how are players chosen?
  - Which sports favor individual achievement over team achievement? Which favor team achievement? How do the audiences for these sports differ?
  - How do the sports get their best players? When does the culture begin training players into various sports? Do communities have a stake in winning or losing beyond pride?
- War and Peace

And then we come to war and peace, and how your culture

views each. Remembering that cultures are all about survival, consider that if you create a culture that fervently believes there is nothing worth fighting to protect, you'll be writing the story of the death of that culture. Conversely, if you're writing the story of a culture that loves war for war's sake, you'll have another sort of death culture. There are stories worth telling at both ends of the spectrum, though most stories lie somewhere in the middle.

- Civic structures

Civic structures exist to house community groups, businesses, religious groups, and government. In Western culture, the government has a hand in inspecting and licensing the processes of building and approving these structures. In part, this is to prevent social disasters like massive fires, collapses in earthquakes and storms; pollution of water, earth, or air; horrendous traffic; and other civic issues. It can also be to generate income to keep the government solvent—the income thus generated can fill the coffers of kings or the pockets of petty bureaucrats. Sometimes both. Civic building programs are rife with corruption in most societies and cultures, and when corruption interferes with things like well-thought-out building codes, disasters can happen.

Civic structures can be divided into businesses; community structures like park areas, arenas and theaters, and other places where members of the community without other affiliation can gather; religious structures, and government structures. Your culture may have some of these or all of them—or in very primitive cultures, perhaps even none of them. Consider the goals of your community and how its members operate together, and then figure out what sorts of civic structures it will have.

- What sort of civic structures do businesses build? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will these be located? How

will these buildings differ based on usage, status of the buildings, status of the anticipated clients, status, age, race, religion, gender of the owner, or other variables? What sorts of services or products will they offer, and how will the raw materials for these services or products be obtained? From whom, and from where, and at what cost? Who will benefit from the presence of these businesses? Who will suffer because of their existence? (Examples: a fishery, a pottery, a weaving factory, a slave market)

- What sort of civic structures do communities build? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will these be located? Who will be permitted entrance, how will the structures be used, how will the community as a whole benefit from their existence?
- What sort of civic structures do religions build? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will these buildings be located? How will these structures vary based on religion, the status of the religion, its members, and their wealth? What sort of activities will take place in these religious structures? How will these religious structures benefit the community as a whole? How will they adversely affect it?
- What sort of civic structures does your government build? In what sorts of neighborhoods or areas will these buildings be located? How will these structures vary based on use, and on the government's wealth, the community's wealth, and the community's standing with the government? What sorts of activities will take place in these buildings? Who will benefit from the presence of these government buildings, and who will they adversely affect?
- Who builds community structures? How does this vary in relation to the sort of building being built and the use to which it will be put?
- Is there a community component to civic building? Do communities pitch in to make sure the community has good



civic buildings? Is the community forced to donate time, effort, or money to these buildings, whether by the government, a ruling religion, a civic organization or other authority?

- Is there a religious component to civic building? Does the building have to be blessed; does it have to have spells worked over it; does it require sacrifices or other special efforts before it can be built? Does the ground have to be consecrated, or in a specific area? Does it have to face a certain way, or sit in relation to specific plants?
- Is there a government component to civic building? Are there forms to be filled out, permits to be obtained, bribes to be paid, officials to be placated, or other government issues do deal with? Does the government have a say in the land used? Does the government own all the land? Can individuals legally own their own businesses, or civic buildings, or are all such buildings government property, no matter who builds them?
- What sorts of rituals will new civic building inhabitants or owners go through before or during the use of these buildings?
- Community divisions

In Western culture in general, communities divide up into political districts, and political parties. They also form subgroups based on religion, race, civic volunteerism (Jaycees, Elks, Star Trekkers, Chamber of Commerce, Art Council, Friends of the Library, etc.), sports teams (grade school, middle school, high, school, college), band, and decidedly diverse private groups like writers' groups, country clubs, ren-faire groups, civil war re-enactors, and more. Each of these groups has a smaller but more specific area of common ground than the overall community, but the people will in almost all cases share the overall common ground of the community itself.

Some groups within a community will be acceptable to most members of the community; church groups, library groups, and volunteer groups that act for the civic good are among these groups. Some will evoke mixed reactions from non-members—ren-faire groups, country clubs, and other groups that have relatively high barriers to membership will be met with suspicion by those who don't fit in.

And some groups, like the Ku Klux Klan or street gangs or other groups that actively threaten some part of the community, will be viewed with revulsion by the majority of the community, including large percentages of those not actively threatened.

What sorts of community groups does your culture, and more specifically, the community about which you'll be writing, include?

- What are their goals?
  - Who are their members?
  - How do the members of non-related groups view each other?
  - What are the acceptable divisions your community sustains? Why?
  - What are the questionable divisions—those that elicit negative or suspicious reactions from about a third of the non-member community? Why?
  - What are the unacceptable divisions that exist in your community, and what do they stand for? How do they threaten portions of the community, and which parts of the community support them? Why?
- Cohesiveness vs. diversity

Communities, as noted before, can be completely cohesive—that is, contained within themselves and utterly cut off from

outsiders—and still survive quite well. In order to do so, they need only have outside threats minimized—either by being in a remote region, or by having the biggest and best army in their region, or by maintaining tight control over communication. Frequently, by doing all three. In this manner, China isolated itself from the rest of the world for centuries. Japan, too, maintained a large and fully functioning closed society.

Communities cannot be completely diverse and still be communities. If they have no common ground, these areas will host a gathered rabble, and will be unable to carry on any of the necessary business of communities because each little group's special interests will trump the greater good of the inhabitants as a whole. In rabbles, variations on feudalism invariably pop up, with the strongest staking out territories and offering protection to those who are weaker, but for a price. Medieval feudalism is only one variant, with serfs and freemen at the bottom of the power totem pole, and lords and kings at the top. Modern-day street gangs are another form of feudalism, with coats of arms replaced by gang insignia and street shootings replacing territorial squabbles between knights on horseback. The old feudalism might have been a bit prettier for those on top, but hell was still hell for everyone on the bottom.

Ideally, cultures will have enough openness to make room for new ideas—which can save a culture that doesn't have the largest population or the biggest army—but will still have enough common ground that people in the culture and its communities will be willing to work together for the good of the community and the culture as a whole. This is a delicate balance, because openness allows for the entrance and survival of rabbles within the community, and permits rabbles to advance their agendas without automatically being driven out or slaughtered. Rome became progressively more open as it expanded outward, making more and more people citizens who did not share the common ground of what had initially made a Roman citizen truly Roman. The decadence of the upper

classes led to the decline and fall of Rome, but so did the unwillingness of the average Roman citizen to fight for the survival of the culture's common ground.

Rabbles, remember, are defined as any collection of people within a culture who fail to meet **any** of the six criteria that a culture requires—that is, they either share no common ground with their culture; or refute its philosophy; or work against the goals of their culture; or refuse to set aside differences in order to benefit the group; or refuse to sacrifice time, effort or resources for the good of the group; or refuse to acknowledge that the good of the group has value; or work actively to destroy the culture in which they exist. Rabbles can band together and create new cultures or countercultures, at which point, they cease to be rabbles. However, as long as they define themselves only in the negative—that is, "We are against everything our culture stands for," but not, "Here are the values, philosophy, solutions, and future we stand for," they are rabbles.

Rabbles are not rare. They are, however, usually short-lived. Most cultures weed them out, frequently with swords or guns. It's also difficult to be perpetually against everything without ever adding anything positive to the cultural dialogue. Think of Eeyore, only grumpier, and without the cute bow on the tail.

So, with all of that said:

- How does your culture and its communities stack up in the cohesiveness vs. diversity department? Would it have a saying like the Japanese "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down?" Or would it be more, "An it harm none, do as you will?" Or would it be somewhere in the middle?
- What sorts of rabbles has your culture developed? How has it dealt with them?

- In your culture's history, do you see it having progressed from being open to being closed, from being closed to being open, always remaining the same, or some other variant?
- How well is it surviving in relation to its neighbors?
- Money and Commerce

Cultures produce things. They consume things. What they produce, what they consume, how they get these things from the people who have surplus to the people who want more, and what they exchange, are sometimes controlled by the government. But not always. Not all economies are based on money or value money ... or even have the concept of money. The following is a vast simplification of various types of economies.

- **Primitive economies** work on *barter*—everyone produces whatever they choose to produce, and people trade one item for another item to distribute goods. Each individual determines the worth of his own work, and what he is willing to accept in exchange for it. This form of economy is very good in small circles because it does not encourage taxes, it does not readily make room for black markets, and it does not lead to the easy creation of criminal subcultures, but it becomes unwieldy when applied to large groups, or across national borders. It does not deal well with perishable products in large quantities. It does not scale well.
- **Feudal economies** work on *coercion*. Those in power force those not in power to create what the economy needs, and permit the serfs or commoners to keep a meager portion of their labor so they can survive to keep creating, while giving everything else to those in charge. Taxes levied without representation are a form of coercion economy, by the way. Feudal economies develop hand in hand with might-makes-right governments.

- **Pure or theoretical communist economies** (“from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”), which have been tried not just by Marxists but by any number of religious sects, work by *top-down allocation of resources*, that is, they put leaders in charge of determining which people would be good at which tasks, and overseeing workers who create what the economy needs; these workers, in return, are supposed to receive what they need to live. From an idealistic and theoretical perspective, these economies sound excellent. Unfortunately, they tend to work badly in real-world situations for three main reasons.
  - One, individuals are much better than bureaucracies at figuring out what they would be good at, and at choosing work that they’re willing to do well. (They aren’t great, but they’re much better.)
  - Two, people don’t work too hard if they aren’t rewarded—and if they can put in twenty hours of effort per week and get paid \$100, or put in forty hours a week and get paid \$100, (because \$100 a week is what their government told is their designated need) they’ll put in twenty hours and production will halve. Or, if they’re forced to put in forty hours, they’ll work half as hard, and not care about the quality of what they’re producing.
  - Three, pure communist economies go badly because power corrupts, and those in power tend to decide along the way that leaders *need* a lot more than farm laborers.
- **Real-world communist economies** tend to be a renaming of the feudal economic model, though China is currently working on an economic model that mixes feudal and capitalist properties. It will be interesting to see what happens governmentally as China develops a middle class.

- **Capitalist economies** dictate that *the creator gets to profit from his creation*. The farmer gets to decide what he'll grow, and grow his crops or herds as well or as poorly as he chooses. The house builder can profit from building houses, and can build them as well or as poorly as he chooses. The creator's reputation, the quality of his goods, the demand for such goods by consumers versus the number of similar goods on the market, and a comparison of their quality will determine whether the farmer or the builder makes a profit. From the amount of money coming in, the builder or farmer will then plan next works to meet market needs better, either by growing more crops, or fewer crops, or better crops, or by spending less to grow them; or by building bigger houses, or cheaper houses, or switching to building offices. This system creates *free markets*, which can operate with or without government intervention.
- **Black market economies** spring up where those in power have a heavy hand in regulating the legitimate market. They will appear when desired products (alcohol, drugs, prostitutes, books, art, blue jeans or other prized items) are made illegal or are priced so highly because of taxes or other government tampering with market forces that the people who want them cannot obtain them legally. This opens up profit opportunities for those brave enough to work against the government, and they almost invariably involve crime, the creation of an underworld subculture. They will exist anywhere that suppression of desired goods exists, and in any economic model (though they don't deal well with barter systems, because the absence of a solid, uniform currency makes dealing in illegal products difficult—how many live chickens *will* a drug dealer accept in exchange for three ounces of cocaine?)

There are other types of economies, but these are currently the most common.

- How does your community determine the value of production—by barter, by coercion, by feudalism, by communism, by capitalism, or by some other market variant?
- What sorts of things can be owned? Are you building a monarchy, where all land is the property of the monarch? People can rent the land, build on it and in other ways improve it for human use, but they cannot own the land. Some cultures cannot (or could not) comprehend land as being a form of property at all, because land is forever and people aren't. Is your culture dealing with another culture whose language concepts do not include land as an ownable asset and title as an inheritable and binding agreement? Can people in your culture own gold bullion (or whatever your culture's government uses as the base unit of its economy)?
- Where are the markets, and who may attend them?
- Who oversees tax collection and determines who receives what goods, and in which quantities?
- What commodities does your culture create and trade?
  - What foods do your people grow in surplus?
  - What foods do they need to trade for?
  - What household items does the community produce? This includes raw wool, cotton, etc.; woven and knitted cloth; finished clothing and shoes; soaps and perfumes; cookware; beds and sheets and finished windows and doorknobs and stair runners and bath towels and tubs; and on and on.



- What household items does it need to trade for?
  - What technological items does it produce? (Pottery, swords, armor, fishing nets, fishing rods, copper, steel, computers, robots, rowboats, clipper ships, hoes and rakes, John Deere tractors, glass, cars, buggies, horses [for transportation or warfare] ...)
  - What sort of technological items does it need to import?
  - With whom does it trade, and what sorts of cultures are its trading partners from? Any possibilities of good story conflict in these folks, and the things that people will do anything to get?
- Production
    - How does your community determine production, everything from what is produced and how much is produced to who produces it? Are any of its production methods a good source of story conflict (slavery, forced labor, the inequality of feudal classes, market manipulation to alter production means?)
  - Consumption
    - Who gets to consume all the goodies, and what do they have to do to obtain them?
    - Who are the haves?
    - Who are the have-nots?
    - Why?

## Religion

### It Ain't All Sunday School

I'll tell you right now that building religions is one of my favorite cultural-design activities, second only to building languages. Very little can tell you more about people than what they worship, what they hide from, and why.

My fascination with this might have come from my own personal hands-on comparative religion course, started when I was about six years old, in which my parents immersed me (a couple of times literally) in various Protestant religions, trotted me to questionable parts of the globe, and inadvertently (and quite unintentionally) introduced me to a whole bunch of religions that didn't exist in Ohio, to entire cultures of people who thought in ways I'd never before imagined, and to a nest of bad examples set by missionaries of many different varieties of religion. There's nothing like watching sausage being made to put you off sausage, and I can say the same thing for religion. Watching dozens of missionaries of various sects implying that each other is going straight to hell (Do not pass go, do not collect \$200) will make a kid dissect every religion in existence looking for the truth, and watching one fundamentalist sect in particular coming in Win, Place, and Show in the *Americans Behaving Badly in Foreign Countries Award* every year embarrassed and shamed me on their behalf.

I've seen the hand of God in my life, but I've seen the hand of man in religion, and on a personal basis, I can't find any valuable connection between the two. I won't bore you with my personal philosophy, though.

I will note that God (or the gods) and religion are not the same thing.

What God (or gods) can add to your story is the supernatural at the level of the individual character:

- Transcendence in moments of everyday life

- Serendipity
- Miracles and magic
- Hope and joy even in moments of tremendous suffering

Religion brings other things to the party. A single religion adds a number of rich, deep elements to your story that not much else can:

- A codified structure for morality and philosophy
- Rituals, history, pomp and circumstance
- An interesting hierarchy of people in power
- A compelling method of wielding power and controlling both believers and nonbelievers
- Public and group functions, with the possibility of group-witnessed miracles and ceremonies
- Possibilities for religious armies, religious wars, and religious persecution (think "Spanish Inquisition vs. everyone")
- Possibilities for religious rebellion, religious reformation, and religious outreach (think "Quakers vs. slavery")

Multiple religions broaden your world, and bring great conflict to culture, because with religion as with potato chips, the world can never have just one. Oh, there may be one official religion in some locations and some cultures, but you can bet your white church knickers that if one religion is in power, there will be a hundred or a thousand others seething underneath the surface, just waiting for a chance to stick it to the oppressor god and his people.

No matter what religion, or lack of religion, you follow, the first concept to grasp is this: **Religions are not all the same.**

This is grotesquely politically incorrect of me to say, because if people admit religions aren't all the same thing dressed up in different clothes, then we have to open ourselves to the possibility

that some of them might be better than others, and that some of them might be downright bad.

Some religions are pretty good. If the religion's main message is that people should be decent to each other, spread love and kindness, and seek to better themselves and their world, and if that religion leads by example and never by force, you have what I'd call a good religion.

Some religions are so-so. They have bad histories of oppression, but have grown beyond them. They have improved their content and their message, they have started working for the good of individuals, and you're allowed to quit without them killing you.

Some religions are downright bad. There. I've said it. We'll traipse over to historical Incan culture to see just how nightmarish *bad* can get, as we watch the priests play a little game called "I can make the sun rise." The intellectual class was pretty bright in the Incan world—even if they never did figure out the wheel or rotating crops, they did a great job of developing the science of astronomy and putting together an awesome calendar (one that inspires awe, not one a Valley Girl could use), and they figured out the whens and wheres of eclipses. Accurately. For centuries into the future.

And then they took this brilliant knowledge, and they used it to warn their people that if the people did not obey the will of the priests, the gods would devour the sun and the world would end, and that only the sacrifice of the still-beating hearts and blood of still-living men, women, and children would quench the hunger of the gods and let the world go on existing.

Did the priests actually believe this? You tell me. They figured out thousands of years of eclipses, the dates upon which each would occur... and they kept track of this data carefully. Not just when the next one would occur, but when the next hundred would occur, and the next hundred after that.

So ... they've figured out the movement of planets through science, not vague superstition ... but they still think each and every eclipse is going to be the end of the world? Mmm? Or have the priests

discovered that by creating an artificial problem, and then presenting themselves to the ignorant masses as the only people in the world who can solve that problem, they can get their pick of gorgeous women, great foods, tons of money, spectacular dwellings, and best of all, that crack cocaine of humankind, **power**?

I won't give you an answer here. You're free to make your own decision. But from where I stand, and from what I've seen, I've learned never to bet on the other guy being as stupid as he looks. If his apparent gullibility is making him a profit, or keeping him in the driver's seat, odds are it's a pose, and he's about to rob you blind.

So. Good religions. Okay religions. BAD religions. And the realization that things change, and that good religions can go bad, and bad ones can get better.

If you build your religions with a wary understanding that power is addictive, and that those at the bottom can be sincere while those at the top can be sincere, too, but that they could also be simultaneously corrupt, creepy, and even dangerous, you'll offer your stories some good internal conflict to use while you have the external conflict of religions fighting religions, or governments, or communities. Or people.

Can't everyone just get along? In fiction, maybe they can. But if they do, you'll bore your readers.

Here's another snippet from *Talyn*, in which I get to use some of the Tonk religion to establish a scene:

*Ours was the last surviving group of the Beyltaak armed forces who would not move over into permanent peacekeeping or inspecting duties. Pada had made some sort of peace with the idea of binding herself to Dosil, and Dosil—the poor fool—had at last bought her a house on the bay, and had paid a taaklord's ransom for it. She would be moving into some semblance of domestic bliss as a merchant's wife, where she would keep the house and raise the children and do all those things that society matrons do, and she was happy. Happy to be almost done with the funereal atmosphere of Shields, happy*

*to have a future of her choosing ahead of her. She still did not think much of Dosil, but she had learned discretion with astonishing speed, and now complained about him only to me, and only in lowered tones. "I only paid two shadris per span. It is ordinary lace—nothing like Tonk lace. It is both thin and plain. But I thought I could use it as curtain edging." She grinned at me. "Imagine lace on curtains."*

*"Imagine," I said, trying to keep the sarcastic edge in my thoughts out of my speech. I am not a lace-on-curtains kind of woman, and I think once Pada has lived the life of a goodwife for a year or three, with her wings clipped and her tongue curbed, she will discover that she is not, either.*

*And yet we may all find that we are to become lace-curtain men and women, we warriors. For who will win the continuation of Ethebet's Law and honor the Meditations of Saint Ethebet when the merchants have silenced us and stand atop us shouting the pronouncements of Saint Minda? Only Minda ever sought to speak for all the Saints, and the Mindan followers of Jostfar are the only ones who hold their path above all the rest, and would seek to press its strictures upon those who follow the other saints.*

*The Saints Hetterick and Cladmus and Rogvar offer little of value to those of us who would follow Ethebet; Hetterick championed life-long celibacy, and while he is the saint of lawyers and mystics, the mystics are too far into their own worlds to offer their support, and the lawyers have argued more against Ethebet than for her.*

*Rogvar has ever been the favored saint of nomads, hunters and farmers, those who sanctify the hunt and bless the fields and consecrate the herds with naked parties in open fields. Rogvar's folk are good people, and they hold their precepts sacred—they value life and death in equal measure, and take neither for granted; they embrace the ebb and flow of seasons and the richness of the earth. But they are not, as a rule, great talkers, and they live far from the Mindan horde, so are not often*

*inconvenienced by them. And pressing the points of someone else's philosophy out of a great love of justice would not be their field, anyway; they bend to let the weight of the world wash over them, which is a good path. But it is not, and cannot be, the warrior's path.*

*Cladmus led artisans and all those who created from raw materials, and had little to say about the lives of his people except where they spun reality out of their dreams and visions. I could decree my path for Cladmus in the temple and turn away from Ethebet. I had served with honor, and my service was now, to all appearances, come to an end. Many of my comrades on their day of separation had gone as their first act and at the temple committed themselves to a new life under the hand of a new saint.*

*But many had not.*

*Pada and I had chosen the Great Temple which sits in the heart of Beyltaak for our ritual. We were agreed that we would seek the voice of Jostfar there, because the keepers of that temple were best versed in all five Saints and all six paths—they dedicate their lives to Jostfar alone, and serve the words as their sacred duty. Because they must serve all the words of all the paths, they are bound to favor none. They and they alone wear the mark of Jostfar singly, and live without choosing the path of one of the Saints. The keeper of the post temple is an Ethebetan; she could not offer us the broader guidance we sought.*

## **Exercise 8: Religion Questions**

On to asking the right questions to build your culture's religions, then. Pick a few. Answer as broadly or as deeply as you need to get the underpinnings for your culture's religion(s).

- Religion in general

You can break religion up into its philosophy, its scope, its

content, and its format. The Incan **philosophy** was that the gods were angry and hungry and needed to be appeased and fed. The Incan **scope** was—as far as we can tell—absolute: Religion had the power to reach into the homes of individuals and drag them out to be sacrifices to their gods; it was the arbiter of life and death. The Incan **content** included the specific gods who needed to be appeased, their particular beefs with humanity, and a laundry list of actions necessary to keep them from swatting humans off the face of the Earth like flies. And the Incan **format** was: Build big temples, put altars on top of them, and rip the hearts out of all sorts of people in order to keep the world ticking along. (There is a lot more to it than this. But we'll stick with the ugly gist for the sake of space and getting on with business.)

- Philosophy of religion

The philosophy of your religion is what it believes, and this may or may not have anything in common with the culture as a whole. Clearly, the religion will be welcomed if religious philosophy and cultural philosophy are a good fit, and will be persecuted if culture and religion clash. And of course, in theocracies, the culture and the main religion will be all tangled up together. Ask yourself:

- What do the members of this religion believe defines the Truth? Most religions have a one-line tag that sort of sums up the experience—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Our god is a jealous god," or "The little people make great fodder," or whatever. Work out this one-line tag.
- How do believers benefit by following this religion?
- How do they suffer by following it?



- How does it make their ties to community and culture stronger, or conversely, how does it separate them from community and culture?
- Scope of religion

The scope of religion is basically how much power it has. If the religion can send someone to your door to kill you because you quit, or said something bad about it, or took some action that the religion disapproves, that is a religion with massive scope. If it can kick you out of your community or make your family no longer have anything to do with you, that's big scope. If the religion is stuck with telling you that you're a bad person for doing what you did, and you're going to go to hell someday, that is a religion with minimal scope. Scope is very important in creating religions.

- How deeply into members' lives does your religion reach?
  - Is it a required part of all public education? Private education? Are its books the only permissible education?
  - Does it attack other religions verbally, or require its members to avoid nonmembers? Does it forbid any other religion from existing in its sphere? Does it have the power to enforce this demand?
  - Do its mandates require specific moral actions and behaviors? How does it enforce its mandates? Through shame? Through dialogue? Does it control the law for its own people, declaring what are crimes, judging criminals, and handing out sentences? Does it control the law for everyone?

- Can it influence kings and generals through dialogue? Can it persuade its members to act in concert to influence leaders? Can it force its members to act to influence leaders? Is its priesthood the leadership? Can it gather armies and wage war? Does it have its own standing army?
- Does it encourage specific behavior in private, among family members? Can it enforce this encouragement through regular meetings with families, or through preaching? Does it have more specific powers to reach into intimate lives? Can it demand that all its members, even within families, keep watch over each other and turn in those—even family members—who have strayed from the path?
- How does it outreach?

Not all religions proselytize—that is, go out seeking new converts. Some religions maintain that all children of the parents are immediately members, but some maintain free choice at the option of the child when he reaches the age of reason, or adulthood, or some other defined marker. Some religions specifically choose as members children of the mother, some choose children of the father. Some require that a prospective member must be an adult (or of the age of reason or consent) in order to join.

- How does the religion you're building gain its new members? From volunteers? Through birth? By free choice? By the sword? Are members required to seek new converts? If so, how are they to do this? Which members? What tools are they given (words, handouts, guns) to convert non-members?

- Does the religion permit members to quit? When? Under what circumstances? What specific actions do they have to do to become non-members? (Hand in a QUIT card, sign a roster, take counseling, change their names and move to a foreign country?)
  - Does the religion penalize members who quit? How? With censure? By banning from the afterlife? By shunning? By threatening them? By passing a death sentence on them?
  - How does it treat the families of members who quit?
- What does it dictate?

Religions claim control over everything from what members eat to when they have sex, to what clothes they wear, to what jobs they can work at, to who gets to marry whom, to who gets treated like a king and who gets treated like the maid nobody liked. Some religions satisfy themselves with guiding their members toward spiritual peace and wholeness; some want to own them body and soul.

- Which aspects of life does the religion you're building seek to control?
  - How does it seek to enforce this control? In what ways does it succeed? In what ways does it fail?
- Content of religion

This could be a massive course in itself—comparative religions and what they teach, and where each religion branched off from a previous religion, and how they share points of philosophy, and how they differ. But for the sake of space and time, I'll give you links to a few

general belief systems (both religions and philosophies), and then send you into the questions.

1. Animism—where religion all began—the belief that everything is alive and connected  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism>
2. Deism—popular with the founding fathers and the creation of Western culture—belief should be founded on observable fact and human reason, which will reveal the existence of a supreme being  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>
3. Monotheism—one god, the possibility of many saints, angels, demons, or alternate immortal additives <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotheism>
4. Dualism—two things in opposition to each other (good vs. evil, Light God vs. Dark Goddess, etc.)  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dualism>
5. Polytheism—one religion, many gods  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polytheism>
6. Agnosticism—the doubt in the existence of a god or gods or the possible meaninglessness of same  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnosticism>
7. Naturalism—believes that the supernatural and the natural are the same thing  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism\\_%28philosophy%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_%28philosophy%29)
8. Idealism—the belief that everything is of a mental nature, and that only minds and the objects of the mind exist <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idealism>
9. Humanism—belief in the value of individual humanity and the search for values through human means while rejecting the supernatural  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism\\_%28life\\_stance%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism_%28life_stance%29)

10. Nihilism—the belief that life has no meaning (the founding basis for the religion of moral relativism) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihilism>
11. Nontheism—the absence of belief in both the existence and nonexistence of a deity (we call this straddling the fence where I come from) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nontheism>
12. Atheism—absence of belief in god, or the belief that god does not exist <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism>
13. Also look up (if you're so inclined): Acosmism, Antitheism, Binitarianism, Determinism, Duotheism, Esotericism, Eutheism and dystheism, Gnosticism, Henotheism, Ignosticism, Kathenotheism, Monism, Monolatry, Mysticism, New Age, Nondualism, Omnitheism, Pandeism, Panendeism, Panentheism, Pantheism, Polydeism, Spiritualism, Theism, Theopanism, Transcendentalism, Transtheism, Trinitarianism, Unitarianism

Right. That should be enough of that for a while. Need an aspirin or a breather? Go be nice to yourself for a while, take a few deep breaths, and take a drink of cold water to clear the senses and the palate. When you come back, have some questions, and make your own sense of the mess.

As always, pursue your own questions when they arise. Don't feel bound to answer mine.

Now....

- What do your believers believe?
  - How would you categorize their philosophy?  
How do they categorize man's relationship

with god(s)? With other men? How do they explain the universe?

- How do they view life and death? What value does the individual human being have?
- How do they view the relationship between religion and the individual? Between religion and the community? Between religion and government?
- How do they define morality? Good and evil? Faith? Tolerance? Justice?
- From where do their beliefs originate?
  - Are they a splinter group from a current religion? The natural evolution of a previous religion? Something entirely new invented by a single visionary? The government, or a religious arm of the government?
- What actions do their beliefs encourage?
  - Do they seek to make their world better? How?
  - Do they seek to make the lives of their followers better? How?
  - Do they seek to make the lives of all people, including non-believers, better? How?
  - Does gender, race, age, or any other factor figure in to who will benefit from this religion and who will suffer under its members actions?

CONVERSELY

- In what ways do members act to make their world worse?
  - In what ways do they make the lives of their fellow members worse?
  - In what ways do they make the lives of non-believers worse?
  - How do these negative actions relate to the philosophy of the religion? Are these negative actions supported by the religion? Are they required by the religion?
- Format of worship

And on to what I consider the color guard of the religion drum and bugle corps—here's where your story can pick up not just a lived-in feeling for your world, but also that bit of red-velvet, pearls-and-emeralds, flash-of-gold pomp and circumstance that religion can bring to a story or back-story. Or, if you're inclined in that direction, it can bring sackcloth and ashes drudgery. I've used both, personally.

This is the place where you develop not just your pantheon of gods and devils and annoyed dead relatives to be placated, but your liturgy, holy books, poetry, songs, and religious garments, and your holidays and High Holy Days, and all the other trappings that eventually stick to religion like barnacles on a boat. (Or diamonds on vestments). A lot of the work that goes into the sections above always *feels* like work to me. This stuff, though, is pure play.

Note: To save myself from using lots and lots of parentheses, I've used the term "gods" to refer to every religion's possible deity or supernatural element. As you've seen above, the possibilities are endless, and I

don't even want to try to address them all. Please substitute the appropriate term as you work through the questions.

- Gods, Saints, and Prophets
  - Who are your religion's gods, and what do they stand for? Do they have a hierarchy? Do they have a past history? A future history? How do they feel about their worshippers? How do their worshippers feel about them? (Go to Deep Background Sheet)
  - What do your religion's gods require of worshippers? Are they friendly about it? What do worshippers require of their gods? How do they go about asking for it? How good are the gods at delivering?
  - Aside from gods, does your religion have saints, prophets, angels, demons, spirits, deified family members or other additional supernatural beings? What do they do? How do they figure into your theology? How do they involve members in the religion?
- The Ceremonies
  - Does the religion have regular services? If so, what is the order of service—that is, what do the priests or ministers do during a service, what do the people do, and if applicable, what do the gods do? (Go to Rituals Sheet)
  - Are the ceremonies situational—that is, are there different ceremonies when a birth or death is involved, when people are getting married or divorced, when the seasons change, or when a political or religious leader



dies or the government changes hands? (Go to Rituals Sheet)

- Who do the ceremonies affect? Do the genders worship differently? Do age groups worship differently? Do the races? (Go to Rituals Sheet)

- The Holidays

Not all holidays are happy. Winter Solstice Firstborn Sacrifice day would be grim. Christian Ash Wednesday is decidedly dark. Fertility festivals like the old pagan Eostar were probably happy times for adults overall, and the Western Christmas is fun for kids. But when you're building cultures, you have to figure out not just when the religious holidays are, but why they exist. They're at base going to have something to do with dealing with the relationships between gods and men, and if you have happy gods they probably won't be dismal, but if you have angry gods, holidays are probably a good time to hide under the bed.

- What regular holidays does the religion celebrate?
- Are any of them related to the position of planets? If so, what and how? How are these holidays celebrated?
- Are any of the holidays related to seasons? If so, what and how? How are these holidays celebrated?
- Are any of the holidays related to the birth or death cycles of gods? If so, what and how? How are these holidays celebrated?

- Are any of the holidays related to human historical or allegorical events—days when humans in their dealings with the gods were perceived to either triumph or fail? (A human marrying a god, for example, or the day that humans were kicked out of heaven.) How are these holidays celebrated?
  - Can you think of other religious holidays your people might celebrate?
- In-home

Some religions may be practiced entirely in solitude, in the privacy of one's home or back yard or private shrine. Some will be practiced mostly with other worshippers, but will have a component that true believers practice in their homes, with or without family members or others.

- Does your religion have a private component?
- What elements of the religion are practiced in private?
- Are there specific rituals or liturgies that are done privately?
- Does the way a private person speaks with the gods differ from the way a priest or other official speaks with the gods?
- Does the way the gods speak to a private person differ from the way the gods speak to a priest or other official?
- Do private communications with the gods have the blessing of religious sanction (that is, are they an approved part of the religion), or are they a rogue element that undercuts what priests and official religion offer. (Has private worship become a sort of

people's religion running counterpoint to established religion?)

- Is there any persecution of private worship?

- Buildings

Most people, when they think of religion, have a subconscious picture of a building that goes along with that religion—a church or mosque or temple or shrine. The buildings are not the religion, but they can play a powerful part in controlling, channeling and advertising for it.

- Does your religion utilize specific buildings? Are they public or private? (Building Design sheet)
- Do these buildings simply house worship services, or do they contribute to the religion and the culture in other ways (by being a repository for holy books or theological tomes or just books in general; or by offering classes; or by offering services like childcare or elder care or meals for the poor)?
- Are the buildings ever used for destructive or negative things: the imprisonment or execution of heretics; human sacrifice; or secret meetings of Star-Chamber-type groups?
- Are worshippers in general aware of these other activities?

- Outreach

Outreach can be anything from sending folks door to door to let neighbors know the religion is having a cookout in a few days, to sending a church bus to pick up kids whose families don't attend services, to sending missionaries to the other side of the world to spread the religion, to sending guys with swords from house to house giving the

residents the choice to convert or die. Outreach can be friendly or nightmarish, helpful or destructive, voluntary or involuntary (on both ends—some religions require that all members serve as missionaries for a term).

- Does your religion participate in any sort of outreach, whether spontaneous or carefully organized?
- How do these outreach attempts work?
- What is the goal of outreach?
- At whom are they aimed? (Members of your religion who have fallen away; members of a specific other religion; anyone who is not a member of your religion?)
- Are they voluntary or mandatory in any way for those doing the outreach?
- Do they involve any sort of coercion toward those being contacted? If so, what and how?

## **Government**

### Where the Rock Meets the Hard Place

It's just plain truth that you can't please everybody. Governments are a painful example of this truth. Governments work in opposition to freedom to some degree because all laws are abrogations of various freedoms. Granted, some of these are necessary abrogations—for example, forbidding the freedom to merrily slaughter one's neighbors without consequence; forbidding random rape and pillage; forbidding rounding up the kids in the neighborhood and selling them to the next town over for a handy profit.

But government becomes a self-sustaining entity with people who profit mightily by participating in it; these people become institutionalized (think US Senators who have served more than two terms, for example) and corrupt, and no matter how good it might have been to begin with, the government will become corrupt and work first for its own benefit, second for the benefit of those who line its pockets, and last (if at all) for the benefit of the people. Tyrants, dictators, and kings make no pretense of benefiting anyone but themselves and their cronies. In most cultures and most cases and throughout almost the whole of human history, there has existed no assumption that common individuals have rights, or that people are in any way to be considered equal. No God-given freedom to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No right to own property, no right to act in one's own best interest, no right to protect oneself or one's family.

In the few cultures where the radical concept that the individual has worth above and beyond his use to the government has taken hold, the struggle to maintain the rights of the individual while meeting the legitimate needs of the government is a constant and frequently acrimonious struggle.

Politics is always ugly, and rarely beneficial. Government is almost always evil. Laws are rarely as necessary as they're made out to be.

And the little guy is the one who loses in nine-hundred ninety-nine out of a thousand cases.

Government creates its own form of common ground in relation to cultures, though usually by creating a common ground for favored cultures and a separate common ground for despised cultures. Favored cultures' positions within the favor of the government will then create antagonisms between the cultures (think Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites, or Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians) that are in general destructive to the common good of the people who live beneath the squabbling.

Are there good governments? Inasmuch as there are governments that are firmly held in check by the common people, that are denied much power or much money, and that are confined to the legitimate activities of government—the guarding of borders and the protection of the rights of the people within those borders—then there are good governments. So in the real world ... not so much.

(You might have a different opinion, and just love your government or even the entire institution of government, of course.)

Here's a useful article on Forms of Government on Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forms\\_of\\_government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forms_of_government)

Various forms of government include but are not limited to:

Aristocracy, Autocracy, Caliphate, Democracy, Despotism, Dictatorship, Meritocracy, Monarchy (Absolute and Constitutional), Oligarchy, Republic, Islamic Republic, Single-party state, Theocracy, Tyranny

- Government and culture  
When the government exists as part of a single culture without countercultures or conflicting subcultures, the possibility exists for a minimal degree of corruption and a relatively broad degree of satisfaction with the workings of the government and its outcomes.

At the point where a government must represent two or more cultures that have different interests, all chance of overall

happiness disappears. Then government becomes a struggle between those who have power and those who want power, and it is a source of constant conflict and general unhappiness, discontent, and trouble.

While not great in real life, this fact is wonderful for writers of fiction.

### ***Exercise 9: Government Questions***

Answer as few or as many of these questions as you need, either broadly or deeply, to get the feel for your culture's government and power structure.

- How does your story's government relate to your main culture? How does it relate to other cultures that it governs?
  - How does the culture in power treat other cultures?
  - How do the other cultures work with the government? How do they work against it?
- The Hierarchy of Power

What we see in government is not always the truth. Those who are nominally in charge may not always have real power (the current Queen of England vs. England's Parliament, for example.) Corporations, secret societies, and religious groups can have invisible but very real connections, or they can have visible connections, to those who are nominally in charge. Hidden controllers' power can derive from money owed or needed, from spiritual influence, from blackmail, and a host of other directions. In cases of underage leaders who inherit power, real power generally resides with someone behind the throne, a fact that can have fatal results for monarchs who grow into power and want to take it in a direction different that

the one preferred by the uncrowned puppetmaster.

Even assuming that those in power do have real power, how do they delegate it? Are there councils and committees and subcommittees and study groups and pollsters and spin doctors and lawyers and court whisperers and professional poisoners (of reputations or of food)? Are there ambassadors and aristocrats and lackeys and grovelers? Or does one man or one woman hold the reins of power alone, carrying out all the functions of government? Your possibilities are endless.

- Executive Power

Though the executive leader of a people is usually seen as "The Guy In Charge," executive power can be wielded by hereditary, voted-in, or strong-arm individuals, or by councils, religions, think tanks, or by no one at all, with the culture meeting and voting democratically on every single issue, town by town or region by region.

- Who or what is the recognized head of your government? King, President, Council of Regents, Office of Bureaucratic Muckety-Mucks, High Priestess, Supreme Warchief, guy with the biggest stick, guy with the biggest brain?
- Is the executive office a figurehead office, or one with real power?
- How does your leader delegate power?
- To whom does your leader willingly listen and from whom does he willingly take advice? Why?
- To whom does your leader unwillingly listen, and from whom does he unwillingly take advice? Why?
- If your leader is a figurehead, who holds the real power? How did that person or group get real power? How does he or the group hold it?



- Who opposes your leader? Why?
- How deep does the power of your head of government go? Is he responsible for the gathering and ordering of armies? The making of laws? The dispensing of justice to individuals? Can he go into individual homes and claim property or people? Is he above the law, or must he, too, obey it?

○ Legislative Power

The making of laws can fall to the people of the culture, with community discussions and individual voting creating new rules. It can fall to religion, which can either fall back on laws "handed down by the gods" and then modified by the religious leaders, or by the religion's members or leaders making up laws based on religious thought or their own prejudices. The making of laws can fall to elected government officials who represent their constituents or their special-interest controllers, to roving packs of rabid lawyers, to hereditary lords, to gang leaders, to "The Guy in Charge," and on and on. The laws made can be good, bad, harmless, evil, hilarious, or stupid, and sometimes combinations of the above.

- Who makes the laws in your culture?
- How did this person or group get the job?
- How do they deal with old laws?
- Do they have a guiding principle around which they must form their laws (a constitution, a religious book, a historic epic poem, a collection of antiquated laws)?
- Are there areas or subjects about which they may not make laws (religion, sex, pregnancy and childbirth, composition of additives to coffee, availability of booze)?

- Are the laws required to represent everyone, or do separate laws apply to separate people?

- Judicial Power

From judges in powdered wigs to lawyers in sharkskin suits to the executioner with his guillotine or massive axe, the power to judge is a terrifying thing. And it can be held by anyone from "The Guy in Charge" to some cold-eyed religious fanatic to a judge who thinks anyone from your race, culture, or creed is automatically guilty. Almost all legal systems in the world presume the guilt of the accused, and the accused must prove innocence at his expense. Very, very few presume the innocence of the accused, and the officers of the government must prove guilt at the government's expense. And in some legal systems, to be accused is to be guilty, and only the question of sentencing hangs in the balance.

Wherever there is crime, though, there will be some way of dealing with criminals, and everything from tossing them in the oubliette and forgetting about them to patting them on the wrist and saying, "There, there, you had such an unhappy childhood; please don't murder anyone else," has been tried.

- What sort of justice system prevails in your culture? Who judges presumed criminals? Are there checks and balances—a mandated government or private representative for the accused, a jury of peers? Or is guilt presumed with the judge holding the role of judge and jury, and the accused forced to speak for himself and prove his own case?
- How are sentences given? Is there a code with fixed sentences for certain crimes? Are there restrictions in form of sentencing, or can the judge require the convicted criminal to run in circles naked in the town square because he thinks it would be funny?

- Who carries out sentences? Is there a prison system, a series of work farms, a mandatory slavery system, automatic execution? Are there guards, bailiffs, slave markets, overseers? Is the family of a criminal subject to the same punishment as the criminal? Can, for example, an entire family be sold into slavery to pay off one man's unpaid debts? Can an entire extended family be executed because of a "contagion" theory of criminality, where anyone who is related to a criminal is guilty of being a criminal, too?
- Military Power

Armies can be loyal to a nation, a constitution, or "The Man in Charge," and standing armies can be used for everything from improving roads in peacetime to suppressing unpopular cultures in the area, to committing genocide, to looting and stealing sheep, to teaching kids how to survive in dangerous situations. Not all armies are created equal, either; the well-trained, well-equipped, well-controlled army is a rarity in a world where kids can be rounded up in town and inducted by force and made to march in their bare feet against their own people.

- What sort of military does your culture have?
- To whom or what does it swear allegiance?
- Does it have a history of coup attempts, or successful coups?
- Is it permanent in nature, or is it something that gathers during threats?
- What sort of training does it get?
- What sort of hierarchy does it have?
- Is military membership voluntary or involuntary?

- Are there benefits to belonging to the military, such as citizenship at the end of service (as in Rome), or healthcare and housing, or regular meals?
  - Are the families of military members cared for in any way?
  - What are the dangers of military membership? Does the surrounding population approve of the military, or are parts or all of it anti-military?
  - Does the military have definite outside threats to deal with? Is the culture or country at war? Is it threatened by invasion? Is it threatened by war?
  - Does the military have a positive peacetime role?
- Surreptitious power

Think of the Illuminati. The Star Chamber. Fat old men smoking cigars in a darkened back room. Money changing hands.

There's always a power imbalance in government somewhere. Always. There is always someone, somewhere, attempting to buy or strong-arm influence. There is always someone using back channels to circumvent justice. There is always corruption, decadence, dishonesty, bribery. The question is, does this rottenness originate in the government. Does "The Guy In Charge" take bribes, force tributes, sanction secret spying, belong to secret organizations, have a hidden agenda that works against the will of the people he governs. Is he willing to execute someone for a bribe. Is he fond enough of tiger-skin hats and slave girls that he'll make deals with his enemies to the disadvantage of his own people?

Or is he scared of the power of some Illuminati-like

organization that has people in positions all around who can take him out at a moment's notice if he doesn't do what they tell him?

- What surreptitious power-holders does your culture have? How do they work? Who can be members? What are their goals?
- Are they government insiders, or do they influence the government through secret manipulation from outside, or are their goals unrelated to their own government and their interests turned elsewhere?
- Are they basically good—people working to overthrow corruption and slavery and a regime filled with torture and injustice?
- Are they basically evil—working to acquire ever more power at the expense of people already less powerful?

# **SECTION THREE**

## **Advanced Techniques**

## Rules of Advanced Techniques

Advanced techniques take you deeply into one small section of your culture. They give you the flavor of life in the world you're writing about, whether it is this world and today, or a world that never existed and never will. While the questions and answers in the basic section were designed to give you a broad overview of your culture and how it worked, this section will give you individual books to quote from, specific outfits for your people to wear, specific songs for them to sing, bottles and jugs for them to carry around, boats for them to sail, and much more.

It's entirely possible to get so swallowed up in this part of culture-building that you don't write the book, so here are some rules for you to follow before you start in.

1. **List before building.** Sometimes just knowing that most of your cities have a library, a bakers' guild, a public bath, roadside eateries, and a hunters' market will be sufficient. You might not need to map out all (or any) of those areas.
2. **Only build what you need.** If you need the layout for the stable to write consistently, don't feel that you also have to do the granary, the chicken coop, the pig wallow, and the field layout.
3. **Build as you go.** If you think you're going to need a cathedral, a complete bay with docks and taverns and other businesses, the layout of the market, street maps, layouts of all your characters' homes, and more ... WAIT. As you're writing about the market, sketch out what you're actually writing about. When you get to the cathedral, create only the part you're using. But **don't attempt to build everything you think you'll need in advance.** You won't need as much as you think you will, and your plans may change, and you might kill off characters you thought would be important.
4. **Build small, not large, and build parts and facades, not entire items.** For example, do the floor plans for a basic house, not floor plans for every variety of house in the culture.

Write out quotes and snippets from the Book of Mekinekwa Wisdom, not the whole book. Knit just one pair of prayer socks to get the feel for the mantras and magic involved, not the prayer robe and the prayer hat and the prayer skirt and the prayer pants and the prayer underwear and the prayer rug.

5. **Stay organized.** Keep everything logged into your notebook, glue, staple and otherwise connect samples into the notebook, and protect your work by making backups.



## Art and Artifacts

You're writing along, and suddenly one of your characters digs an ancient box out of the rubble of a collapsed building, and it glows mysteriously in his hands. And he recognizes it as the work of a long-vanished race of people whose artisans created such wondrous boxes.

Or your character is a potter, and he sits cross-legged all day in the dirt at one corner of the open-air market, sculpting pots on a wheel, and you happen to mention that these pots look like the homnurahengi who inhabit the nearby forest.

Or your character knits magical socks, and you suddenly want to know how that magic works. (Well, this would be *me*, actually, but we'll pretend that it could also be you.)

Our world is full of stuff, and a lot of it is pretty interesting stuff. From beautiful stained glass to hand-carved chairs to hand-woven tapestry to the things archeologists dig up to old coins salvaged from shipwrecks, we're fascinated by the mysterious pasts and intriguing properties of things.

These cool things can enrich your storytelling. Again, working with the art and artifacts of your world turns into play at the deepest and most satisfying levels, and you can forget about the writing you're supposed to be doing while immersing yourself in the textures of your world.

So, again, here are the steps to keep yourself on track with your writing.

- **Write** descriptions of objects first.
- **Draw** illustrations second.
- **Make** samples last.

Writing descriptions is just that. In your word-processing program, list out the items your culture uses that you'd like to know more about. List them by name (you learned how to make good names for things in the *Create A Language Clinic*). Then write out just a paragraph for each item—who uses it, how it's made, what it looks like, how much it costs.

If this just doesn't make it real for you, drag out your quadrille paper and start sketching. (NO, you do not have to be a good artist to sketch out your stuff. You're doing it for you, and what you need to get out of the process is, perhaps, the rough shapes of pieces of clothing and what they're called, or possibly a rough approximation of what those homnurehngi pots we talked about look like. Little hunch-backed dwarves with bow legs and potbellies? Sylph-like creatures with folded wings that form the handle? Sometimes you need to doodle a thing for the part of your brain that works in words to understand what the part of your brain that works in pictures had in mind.

And maybe even that won't be enough.

And making samples is so fun.... If you like to knit socks, and you're actually knitting a pair of socks with glyphs in the language of your culture, and using your culture's magic system, you're working, right? Of course you are. I was.

The above is tongue in cheek, but in fact, by doing the knitting, I figured out most of the magic system one of my cultures uses. I figured out how mixing colors changed the magic, and how mantras and prayers worked into the manufacture of knitted items (including, but not exclusive to, socks), and how my culture could hide secret messages to other members of this oppressed group in their knitting while not tipping off their oppressors to what was going on. I wouldn't have gotten the same bang for my buck by drawing a pair of the socks; by creating them, I knew for a little while what it felt like to be these people, to have my hands and mind moving as their hands and minds moved.

There is a time for creating a real sample artifact from your world's culture, and that time is when you need to get inside it.

Try to create something small that you can use later. Hope it will smell nice.

Anyway, you have to keep all your culture's stuff, from your written descriptions to your sketches to your hand-made artifacts, organized.

For that you'll need Cultural Artifacts Sheets. You'll file these in your index, with (at least) one for each category:

- Home Life
- Community
- Religion
- Government

Subcategories can be things like clothing, tools, artworks, magical items—anything that your folks use and that you want to develop and keep track of. Print off one sheet for each category (to start with) and one sheet for each subcategory. So you won't actually have Clothing on the same page with Household Items, as I do in my example below.

If home clothing and community clothing are the same, you can always put a notation in your Community Index that clothing is in Home Life.

And finally, in this regard, I know of authors who create montages and other works of art to figure out what their books are about. Jennifer Crusie is one of them. I'm not, but I do think it's a great idea. If you make such things, feel free to do a Cultural Artifacts Sheet for the entire book. Category: Book. Subcategory: Plot. And stick it in front of the rest, with a short definition for each item, and link to any pages of notes, sketches or samples you create to get a handle on just what your story is going to be about.

### Cultural Artifacts Sheet

Category	Subcategory	Name/Description	Sec/Pg #
Home Life	Clothing	Akshar—toga-like shirt	C-23
		Belgad—short skirt with pants worn by men	C-23
		Kepple—long skirt with pants worn by women	C-23, 24,
		Bro-hata—tall tie-up stockings	C-30 plus item in sock drawer
	Household items	Gneef—nest-bed on the floor	C-8
		Fine garbey—group seating pit with cushions	C-9
		Simple garbey—stone or wood group seating pit	C-9

Most of your culture-building work will fall into the Art and Artifacts section, simply because it encompasses everything from the manufacture of food and clothing, to the building of things like ships and carriages and jets and spaceships, to the use of eating utensils and bath towels. Toilets and showers and trash disposal units, hand-spun wool and linen, toolboxes full of household tools, stunning chandeliers and whale-oil lamps—you'll create and file all of them here.

But there are other fascinating things in the world that don't fall comfortably into this category. For them, move onward.

## **The Cultural Library**

The Cultural Library is your collection of books, folk tales, epic poems, magical scrolls, oral history and storytelling that you want to create to support your cultural development.

It's insanely fun to quote bits from various religious or folk books, plays, poems epic and otherwise, folk tales, and other bits of collected coolness that exist only in your own mind. Keeping track of these bits of wonderful wisdom is a bigger trick. The Cultural Library sheet and the accompanying Books, Scrolls, and Folk Wisdom is designed to let you do that. You'll use one Books, Scrolls and Folk Wisdom Sheet for each book or author, and one or more Cultural Library sheets to keep track of your entire cultural collection.

You'll want to keep your Cultural Library sheet in the front of your notebook with the other tables of contents. However, each of your books, scrolls, memorized tales, etc., will be filed in the applicable section. For example, if you decide you want characters to quote from the Sacred Book of Families, file it in your family section.

Within sections, keep all books together, just as you'll keep all artifacts, all floor plans, and so on, together.

### **How to fill out the Cultural Library Sheet**

Since what you're doing is creating an imaginary library, this should feel a whole lot like play. While it makes sense to organize with the future in mind (one sheet per category, allowing yourself room to add extra sheets per category if your books take off), it doesn't make sense to get bogged down in massive alphabetization, or trying to keep only one book type on a page.

Your book categories can be anything that makes sense to you and that you'll be able to figure out a year or ten from now. Choose from things like Law, Religion, Folk Tales, How-To, Fantasy ... feel free to use the same system that bookstores or libraries use. Or make up your own system.

When you've decided on a few categories, print off on sheet for each, and get to work. Here's an example of a Cultural Library Sheet I've filled out to demonstrate different resources that can occur under one category:

### Cultural Library Sheet

Book Category	Book Type	Author/TITLE	Degree of Authority	Sect/Pg #
Religion	Cultural bible	God, <b>Book of Reason</b>	Highly respected	
Religion	Gloss	Toasted Theologian, <b>Commentary on the Book of Reason</b>	Heretical	
Nonfiction	Biography of Toasted Theologian	I.M. Hiding, <b>He Questioned Reason,</b>	Debated	
Epic poem (unwritten)	Historical epic, tale of the gods before Reason	Unknown author, <b>Gargantal</b>	Heretical Forbidden	

Remember that you don't actually have to write anything about any of these books beyond what's on this sheet. Sometimes, just being able to have a character throw a few interesting titles in the mix can be enough.

If you want to do more, though, continue to the next section, where we'll create and organize content for some of the books you've come up with here.

## ***Books, Scrolls, and Oral Histories***

You have some pithy little commentary you'd like to make as an authorial aside. Or you've thought of something funny to say, but don't have anyone into whose mouth you can put the words. Or you want to give your world the feeling of having a history that stretches back to the dawn of time.

So you wing a little folk tale that talks of the time before time, and put it into the mouth of a character; or you include a quote from a book, and scribble down your made-up author's name, and the book title in the story. And you go on your merry way.

Until you think of another pithy *bon mot* or delicious folk saying. And then you have to dig back through one novel, or several, or an entire series, because you know this one will be just perfect if you can attribute it to your previous fake author.

I have been here, my friend. In THE SECRET TEXTS trilogy, I had quotes that I attributed to half a dozen writers and one playwright; in *Talyn* I used several authors that I considered reusing in *Hawkspar*, and hunting through books to find quotes and attributions is no fun.

Besides, if you flesh out your pretend author just a bit, you'll be able to create other sayings that fit his life. And you might end up, as I did, writing a prequel that uses this author as the main character of your book. (Vincalis the Agitator, if you were wondering—prequel to THE SECRET TEXTS trilogy.)

So here's how you make and organize all those great quotes and little stories and partials.

Print off one Books, Scrolls, and Folk Literature Sheet for each author you want to develop. Do a very short biography of the author on a separate hole-punched sheet of paper—something along the lines of:

*Hagda Stos Megestada was born into wealth and power as the son of a tribal chieftain in the Kormetan Outback, but was kidnapped from a rival tribe and enslaved at the age of four, and only achieved his freedom at the age of twenty-two, when*

*he killed his owner and fled through the dreaded Hesling Forest without food or supplies. When he once again reached his own people, he was identified by the tattoos on the soles of his feet, and welcomed as a long-lost son. Though he never became the tribal chieftain, his stories of his journeys and his themes of heroism and derring-do characterize his work.*

Then you start filling out a sheet, using the little you know from the biography to amplify. One sheet per author, one sheet per book by author, and file them in your notebook alpha by author, and alpha by title. Pencil in page numbers if you think this is going to be an active author for you.

### **Books, Scrolls, and Oral Histories Sheet**

Author Hagda Stos Megestada .

TITLE	Quote or Summary
War Hawk	Biographical story of Megestada's first escape attempt at age seventeen, and the adventures he had before he was captured and returned to his owners.
	"I mette me a fyne woman along the roade, whom I teased and charmed, until she tooke me into her hutte and made for me dynner and a softe bedde." Chapter 2
	"The innekeepe grabt me and shaket me until my teeth rattled in my heade, and sait to me, <i>You came here spyingen for the Loche Capat, haft you notte!</i> " Chapter 5
	"Bears, wolfs, tygern—they clustert by the ryver waitingen their nexte meal, and all them lookit at me." Chapter 6



For stories, fables, bits of poetry or entire epic poems, you can either start filling in the sheets, doing three or four lines per box, or you can spread out onto lined paper, and simply file subsequent pages behind the Books, Scrolls, and Folk Literature Sheet for that work.

### **A word on creating foreign-language poetry.**

It's occasionally fun to create one in another language, and quote a bit from it, and then translate the gorgeous poetry into English.

Though I didn't specifically go into the creation of poetry in the *Create A Language Clinic*, here's how you make it. You worked with cases, suffixes, and helper words, as well as with varying word order. To create a poetic language, or at least one that adapts itself well to poetry, you can take one or all of the following steps.

- Create a *poetic case* that allows you to add a poetic suffix to the ends of lines, making things rhyme and at the same time declaring "This is POETRY!"
- Make sure that nouns or verbs are designed to rhyme when conjugated
- Tink around with word order to permit yourself to move words around to where they'll rhyme.
- If you've also used the techniques to create words that have no equivalent concepts in English, you can come up with gorgeous poetry that struggles for an equivalent English translation and is impossible to rhyme.

Of course, internal rhymes and meter are important, and if you're not interested in rhyming poetry, you can play with shapes of lines on the page and other arty things. (Especially good if you've also created an alphabet and can write in your language.)

The effect in your story will be to have something as rich and textured as Chaucer in Middle English translated into limping English prose. Which will add richness and texture to your world. Which will also look all kinds of impressive, and make you look brilliant.

And it's a lot of fun to do.

The same rules can apply to creating foreign-language outtakes from manuscripts. Having a character pick up an ancient tome, carefully open it to a random page, and read aloud from the text, first in your language and then in a halting translation, is an interesting way to give a feel for the history of your people and the place in which they've found themselves.

Just remember that you only want the *flavor* of your created language in the book. Use just enough to add spice and verisimilitude, not enough to bog the reader down in what is, except for the die-hard language fan, an exercise in wading through gibberish.

## Music and Dance

I have written a number of songs for books. Most of these were in my earlier books—*Fire in the Mist*, for example, kicks off with Faia herding the sheep out of town with her dogs, and singing an excerpt of her own words to “Lady Send the Sunshine” (also a song I made up). The full version appears in its correct form either later in that book, or in one of the other two Arhel novels. (I don’t remember which is correct right now, and don’t feel like digging up the books and looking it up.)

I have done the music for some of the songs, too. “The Lamentable Love of the Lady and the Dragon” made its way into *Minerva Wakes*, (and around a few cons in the past ten years) but it had been destined for a much earlier book, and I worked out the tune first on guitar, and then wrote the words.

I’ve been playing with GarageBand on my computer, doing some riffs that remind me somewhat of Eskimo songs I heard as a kid, and just a little of the songs of the dead I imagined for the Arhel books. They’re *a cappella*, deep and dark and creepy, filled with whispering ghost voices and the stronger, clearer voices of the living. They’re something I’m putting together to give me a feel for one of the cultures in *The Ruby Key*, and they’re working well for me.

Now, you have to understand that I’m not much of a musician. I barely read music, I have no clue about the rules of composition, and the only instrument I play even passably is the guitar. You’ll notice that while you’ll find some of my background sketches on my site, you won’t find any MP3s of me singing or playing anything. I play well enough to do what I want to do, which is to mangle the Clapton version of “Classical Gas” and to write songs that I can use to get the feel of music in my books.

You don't have to be great at this. You just have to be willing to push yourself in directions you don't usually go in order to get something for your culture that is unique.

You can conjure up magnificent orchestral pieces listened to by thousands of beautifully-dressed fans, or a man in black who goes up to strangers in the street and sings their deaths at them, or a woman in the kitchen humming folk songs as she does housework and watches the children.

You can have religious music for services or private worship or weddings and funerals, or for the magical dances that precede the fertility festival; government music to introduce the chieftain just home from a successful war, or to march the army down the hill toward the enemy; you can have community music like folk dances and rock concerts and parties to introduce young people of eligible age. And private music in home life, with families singing together, or crews on ships singing as they work.

Music has an important place in culture—all cultures I know of have some sort of music.

In order to keep from getting sucked into creating music for your culture to the detriment of your writing, however, build your music in the following way:

- **List** titles and composers or artists
- **Write** a few lines of lyrics, or even lyrics for the entire song
- **If all else fails**, sit down with a musical instrument or your voice and a recording device of your choice, and **compose** the entire piece of music, complete with contrapuntal harmonic vocals, full orchestral scores, or whatever else you need to get your head into the music of the culture

Developing finished music will be productive if your culture is one in which music plays a critical cultural role. Can't think of a situation like that? Think of the late 60's and the 70's, when an enormous part of one generation worshipped the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and

bands like them—and the drugs and rebellion those groups advocated. Western culture is still living with the aftereffects of that time and that segment of counterculture.

For additional ideas, see Music: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music>

To keep track of your music, there's just one sheet, the Cultural Music Sheet. Do one sheet per category, so you won't actually have a sheet with both Government and Religious music on it. If you're using music heavily in your book, do one sheet by composer, as well. I've never needed to do this. I tend to be a light music user.

Fill sheets out like this:

### Cultural Music Sheet

Category	Composer / Title	Lyrics snippet	Sect/ Pg #
Gov	Cnostig, Esmud/ March of the Gladiators	Hail the glorious, come to die or triumph...	Full lyrics, D-27. Score D-28
	Tonigcon/ Long Live the King	With wisdom great and justice fair,	Side note: Tonigcon was executed for
		And brilliance dripping from his hair...	crimes against music
Rel	Cnostig, Esmud/ I Sing My Soul to You	In me life shivers fresh and new,	Full lyrics, C-19
		and all I am I owe to You	

Keep your additional music pages—lyrics and compositions—in the sections where they belong—Home Life, Community, etc.—and use

the Cultural Music Sheet as a quick reminder of composers, titles, and one-liners to use in dialogue and exposition.

For example, sometimes, you can refer to the amazing music everyone is listening to, and have a character say to another, "Well, of course it's magnificent... that's 'March of the Gladiators,' by Esmud Cnostig. It's one of the five greatest pieces of music ever written."

Sometimes, to present the full feeling for the culture in which you and your future readers will find yourselves, you need to have a group of characters singing in unison:

With wisdom great and justice fair,

And brilliance dripping from his hair ...

If you don't want to write anything more of such a terrible song, you can use the page number column to acknowledge that the composer was justifiably executed for crimes against music (or something related to your entry,) and have a character comment on the sad fate of the song's creator.

Aside from the sheer fun of working out the entire piece of music and the orchestration, and the fact that it will make the culture more real to you as the writer, I haven't found a use for doing the full music monty. It is no simple thing to sell a book publisher on the idea of hiring a group to record your music to put on a CD to include in the book, you know? If you succeed, of course, please tell me how you did it. I have some stuff on my hard drive ....

But enough of that.

We haven't spent any time yet on getting a clear view of where and how your people live, work, play, worship, and get told what to do. Time for Architecture.

## Housing and Architecture

Cave floors. Dirt floors. Cold wood floors. Colder marble floors. Floors with inlaid gold and semiprecious stones.

Adobe walls, cloth tent walls, paper walls, bamboo walls, palm-frond walls, wood walls, log walls, plaster walls, brick walls, stone walls, walls covered by tapestries, walls filled with packed earth or pink fiberglass.

Doors, windows, stairs, ladders, lighting, plumbing, heating, cooling; houses on cliffs, houses underground, houses in trees, houses build on bridges, houses in towns and cities and in the country, houses over businesses or behind businesses.

Trailers and condos and apartments and row houses and townhouses and single-family dwellings and duplexes and complex family compounds and high-rises and brownstones and tents in the desert or on the tundra.

People find shelter, or make shelter, in more ways than the mind willingly imagines. Then, having made it, they set about to improve it, and make it nice, and keep out the bugs and the thieves and other dangers. They put stuff in their houses (back to *Art and Artifacts* you go to decide what sorts of stuff), but it won't always be the same sort of stuff. The Japanese household is austere, uncluttered, minimalist. Even more minimalist is the household of the poor Guatemalan who lives in a palm-frond hut with a wife and kids, and a dirt floor and only owns one pair of clothes and one pair of tire-soled sandals for himself, the same for his wife, and no clothes at all for the kids who are under age five.

For some additional information to spur your imagination, see:

- Building: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Building>
- Human Habitat: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_habitat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_habitat)

- House: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Housing>
- List of House Types:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_house\\_types](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_house_types)  
(which is definitely not complete, but is a start).
- Government buildings:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government\\_Buildings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_Buildings)
- Community: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community>
- Religious architecture:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_architecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_architecture)

You'll also want to look through:

- Architecture: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architecture>
- Palace: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palaces>
- Castle: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castles>
- Monastery: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monastery>
- Temple: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple>
- Cathedral: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral>
- Mosque: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque>
- Shrine: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrine>
- Courthouse: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courthouse>
- Prison: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prison>
- Town planning: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town\\_planning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_planning)

There are a number of things you can do with Housing and Architecture, and the fact is that most of them will consume you. So start small. Very, very small.



- **List first!** The buildings and outbuildings in a typical home. The kinds of buildings in a community. The kinds of buildings by religion. The kinds of buildings used by government. Use brief written descriptions first, lengthier written descriptions for more important types of items.
- **Draw** only those items where listing won't suffice, and then don't draw everything. A few critical details can give the feel of a fully fleshed-out world. The unique handlebar-mustache shape of door handles; doors that swivel on a central post to open on two sides; an underground house with the sturdy greenhouse-glass roof that is all that sticks above the surface.

You may have to map a town or part of a town, or a neighborhood. Remember that before people laid out roads, cows made cowpaths and other animals made paths, and people used them. Not all towns are built on grids. Some just evolved.

Squares will suffice for houses. You do not need to do the actual shape of each building, nor do you have to draw in outbuildings. You can use squares and single dark lines for roads, and then mark some of them with names and draw them in more detail, if necessary.

- **Building models?** Yes, of course you can. And I'm sure somewhere out there, a writer has built a to-scale model of his town, with roofs that lift off to show the living and working spaces within. Maybe he's painted them. He could have been using that time to write, of course, and when he was done, he wouldn't have to find a place to store that massive model. Or when he was done, maybe he put down miniature railroad track and ran trains through it in his basement, in which case he got to deduct a scale-model railway layout on his taxes because it was research, and more power to him.

But he still could have been using all that time to write.

No matter how deeply into this you get, though, you still want to keep all of your information where you can find it again the next time you decide you want to work in this world. So.

The *Buildings and Architecture Sheet* to the rescue. It's called that because the majority of buildings in the world are vernacular—that is, they were built by the owner or some guy the owner hired, and they have no architect's pedigree behind them. Saint Peter's Cathedral, the Roman Coliseum, and the pyramids were all vernacular structures, so don't scoff. Architecture is something built by an architect, and its engineering and physics and fire and earthquake and hurricane proofing have all presumably been thought out, along with such arty stuff as its philosophy, and whether it's supposed to look like a bird or a deconstructed book, or whatever.

You'll use the *Buildings and Architecture Sheet* like this:

### Buildings and Architecture Sheet

Category	Builder/Name	Description	Sect/Pg #
Home Life	N/A/ Basic house	Includes outdoor privy, sleeping loft, great room with central cooking fireplace	Floor plan A-12
Comm	Surtis, Galoyn/ Crastik Rite Hall of Magic	Building used to teach magic and to house local wizards and magic students—offers classes to the community	Floor plan B-14
Rel	Surtis, Galoyn/ Temple of Higsis	Building used for religious services, cookouts, youth meetings, and annual human sacrifice	N/A
Gov	Surtis, Pekk and Galoyn/ The Green House	Maklord's official office, public servant offices, Hall of Justice	Full description D-11

Again, you're going to be mostly using descriptions of the buildings in your writing. You can have characters notice the open-air market, The Green House's remarkable green glass spires that soar into the sky so high they seem to disappear. You'll have characters notice the fall of light through stained glass, or the warm amber light of windows covered with oiled, thinned animal hides. You'll be able to describe the smokiness of the adobe house with the simple fire-pit-and-roof-hole cooking fire. These details go a long way, though, and you do not want to ramble on and on in description about the structures you've created. A light touch, three or four details in one paragraph, will reach the reader, whereas you'll lose people if you go on for a page.

Another way to introduce architectural detail in your writing is through dialogue, or by having someone jump off a building, or in other ways engage it actively. Fighting to get a door open, getting splinters while sliding down a railing, talking about the building that looks like it's about to collapse, and then daring each other to enter it—all of these will make your descriptions active rather than passive.

As for floor plans, you can use them to figure out where someone will likely hear noises, and where they won't, or where secret passages open up and where they lead to. They're also helpful for making sure that characters are consistently looking north when they're looking out a window that faces north, and that halfway through the book they don't suddenly have a south view from that window. I love floor plans, and have to keep myself from making too many.

Models...well, in every case I can think of, you'll spend your time better elsewhere. But this may just be me.

So. Let's move on to Science and Magic, and our final set of special techniques.

## Science and Magic

I put them together because I develop magic the same way I develop science. I figure out its special physics, I establish rules on how it works, and then I follow these rules carefully as I write, and let my characters deal with both the positive and negative consequences.

To get a look at the special rules I created for magic in one of the worlds I successfully wrote in (Matrin, in THE SECRET TEXTS trilogy), read The Rules of Matrin's Magic:

<http://hollylisle.com/tm/matrinmagic.html>

Also look at the Calimekkan Calendar (Science):

<http://hollylisle.com/tm/matrincalendar.html>

And the Karnee Curse (Science/ Magic/ Rules of shapechangers):

<http://hollylisle.com/tm/Karnee-curse.html>

In making up good science and good magic, it helps to have some familiarity with existing forms of science, and to a lesser extent, with existing forms of magic. I like science better overall; for me, it's a lot more fun and satisfying to play with the possibilities of quantum physics and entanglement

(<http://www.joot.com/dave/writings/articles/entanglement/>)

than it is to go back to the primitive Law of Substitution, where the part may signify the whole

([http://members.iimetro.com.au/~hubbca/universal\\_laws.htm](http://members.iimetro.com.au/~hubbca/universal_laws.htm)) or the magical properties of rocks

(<http://www.serioussilver.com/magicstones.html>). But this is just me, and both approaches to developing a culture's science or magic are valid.

You learn about your subject, then you change it.

In general, your work in science and magic for your world will be written. You can figure out how tools work, what sorts of machines your folks have discovered, from simple to wildly complex; you can determine how they do agriculture and how they keep on track while sailing oceans or space; you can investigate their interests in things like ancient ruins, paleontology, lost languages, undersea exploration, flight, and more.

And you can develop magical languages (see *Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic*), and include magical writing. You can design magical guilds, or science guilds, or tool-making and tool-using guilds.

And you can create various artifacts for your magic users or science users to wield, like sextants and astrolabes and boxes with magical properties (yep, back to Arts and Artifacts for these).

- **Write** first.
- **Draw** second.
- **Build** only when all else fails to get you the information that you need.

Remember that you do not need to include your entire background on how your science or magic system works. That information is for you to use and for your readers to catch on to gradually, as they read through your stories and start getting a feel for how your culture hangs together consistently.

Be sparing in your use of description—write a paragraph or two.

When possible, show the magic or science in action, and best of all, show it in a scene where life and death are on the line and the success of the science or magic is the key that will save the day.

Use dialogue, and bits of spells in your culture's daily language or magical language, but not too much. Tease; don't overwhelm.

You can keep track of everything you've done on a Science and Magic Sheet, like this:

### Science and Magic Sheet

Category	Science/Magic	Name/Description	Sect/Pg #
Home Life	Health Magic	Rules and Spells of Healing and Health Maintenance	A-24
Comm	Communal Agriculture	Science/Magic: Rules of Growing and Fertilization and Crossbreeding	B-11
Rel	Religious Rites	Magic of communing with the mind of God	C-5
Gov	War and Protection Magic	Rules of Summoning and Shaping Energy to Attack and Defend	D-19

Do one Science and Magic Sheet per category so you have room to expand. So you'll never actually have Home Life on the same sheet with Government.

File your sheets in the sections where the science or magic will be used. Science of sea navigation will be filed in Community, for example, relating as it does to trade, exploration, and things like fishing.

Magic can include things like Physics of Magic, spells and incantations, lists of ingredients or machines or other equipment, rituals, and on and on. Or socks. This is where details of the magic socks I knitted for one of my cultures are filed.

# **SECTION FOUR**

## **Worksheets**

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World\_\_\_\_\_Culture\_\_\_\_\_Era\_\_\_\_\_Page\_\_\_\_\_

## Cultural Background Sheet

### Cultural Pedigree

World		Sect/ Pg#
Era		
Language Name		
Race or nationality of native speakers		
Native continent and country		
Age of culture		
Precursor cultures		
Offshoot cultures		
Other		

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

# HOME LIFE INDEX

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

# **COMMUNITY INDEX**

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

# **RELIGION INDEX**

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

# **GOVERNMENT INDEX**

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

### Cultural Artifacts Sheet

Category	Subcategory	Name/Description	Sect/Pg #

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Library Sheet**

Book Category	Book Type	Author/TITLE	Degree of Authority	Sect/Pg #

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**Books, Scrolls, and Folk Literature Sheet**

Author \_\_\_\_\_

TITLE	Quote or Summary	Sect/Pg #



Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Music Sheet**

Category	Composer/TITLE	Lyrics snippet	Sect/Pg #

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

### Buildings and Architecture Sheet

Category	Builder/Name	Description	Sect/Pg #

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**Science and Magic Sheet**

Category	Science/Magic	Name/Description	Sect/Pg #

# Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic

World \_\_\_\_\_ Culture \_\_\_\_\_ Era \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

## Sheet

Category			Sect/Pg #

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## **Conclusion**

### **It's All Just Beginnings**

I've shown you my basic and advanced techniques, my organization system, and some general ideas and links to useful information that will help you make your cultures richer. Everything I've done here has only scratched the surface. Every time you start building a culture, your research and your personality and your interest will lead you in different directions, ones that I haven't even imagined.

But my questions won't be your questions, because what fascinates me won't necessarily fascinate you, and what compels me forward in a story and drives me to write won't necessarily compel or drive you. So at the back of the rest of the stack of indexing sheets and worksheets, you'll find one like the other indexing sheets, except it's blank. Use these to keep track of the parts of your culture that aren't covered by what I've presented.

And good luck. I hope you have as much fun building your cultures as I do, and that your results will help you achieve deeper, richer fiction.

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