

ORVRANKA



People and Habitat

The Orvranka are a human ethnic group that live and around the high-altitude mountain range known as the Crown of the World. They are sometimes called "Yak People" by outsiders, due to their reliance on the shaggy mountain yaks for transport, labor, food, clothing, medicine, building materials, and virtually any other resource that they can wrest from a yak's body.



There are two primary subgroups in Orvranka culture, divided by habitat:

The **lower tribes** live on the frigid desert plateau south of the main mountain range. The plateau tribes are primarily nomadic herders. There are a few permanent settlements, but they are more like large camps with rotating populations than real cities. Warriors of the plateaus wear headdresses constructed from the upper skull and horns of yaks, often with the hide and hair preserved and intact; this has given rise to stories among outsider cultures of half-human, half-yak hybrids, though there is no truth to such rumors.

The **upper tribes** live in the mountain heights, in cities built around ancient fortress-monasteries. Though large and quite beautiful, these cities are also extremely isolated, often positioned at the end of precarious mountain passes barely wide enough to admit a single-file yak train. The city-dwellers maintain contact with each other and with the outside world by means of airships — gondolas of wood and bone and yak leather hanging beneath massive airbags made of hundreds of roughly stitched-together yak hides, propelled by bound air elementals.

Orvranka tend towards lean, tall builds, with hawkish noses and prominent cheekbones. Their eyes are usually brown or black, but occasionally a bright, pale blue, and usually display epicanthic folds. Skin tone is pale to ruddy tan; hair is straight and ranges from black to brown to auburn in color. Facial hair is sparse but can grow quite long.



Religion and Mythology

The Orvranka practice a complex, animistic religion, with literally thousands of gods. Each tribe and city has its own pantheon, and each family has its own sub-pantheon. When a woman marries, she brings her old family's gods with her to her new family, and new pantheons and sub-pantheons are created in the shuffle. Even the most devoted priest-shaman can have trouble keeping track of them. Members of the plateau tribes tattoo themselves with the symbols of their tribal and familial deities; this practice is less common in the cities. Both upper and lower tribes practice sky burial, and revere vultures as sacred animals.

According to their mythology, the Orvranka were originally divine, deva-like beings who became trapped in human form, and whose minds are now reincarnated from body to body. There may in fact be some truth to this, although evidence suggests that their progenitors were not angelic beings as such, but rather a species of disembodied, psychic entities from another solar system that came to this planet many millennia ago. The Orvranka tell stories of a massive explosion at the dawn of history that poisoned the land for miles in every direction. Depending on how one interprets these stories, this event (usually called "The Fire That Shouted") is identified as either the arrival of the progenitor race on this planet, or the catastrophe that led to their entrapment in physical bodies.

Psionic manifestations are not uncommon among Orvranka, although they tend to describe such phenomena exclusively in terms of spiritual summonings and imprecations. It is an open question among scholars of other cultures, whether the countless gods and spirits of the Orvranka religion are actual entities, or simply semi-autonomous extensions of the summoner's own psychic will. Psionically gifted Orvranka usually become priest-shamans, or particularly talented and deadly rangers, depending on the nature of their power and their personal proclivities.



Threats

Although their geographical isolation tends to protect the Orvranka from sustained conflict with other cultures, they do occasionally contend with threats from within.

The mountains are inhabited by a species of blue-skinned, four-armed giants, who wage constant war on upper and lower tribes alike. The reason for their enmity is lost to history.

Certain particularly desolate regions of the plateau are considered taboo by the lower tribes. The Orvranka will not even speak of these places, except to say that they belong to a territory known only as "Leng". Oddly, the regions that are said to be a part of Leng are not all geographically contiguous with each other.

The Abassylar Heresy

Throughout their history, priest-shamans of the Orvranka have cast their minds out into the spiritual realms, in search of answers regarding their peoples' origins and ways to reverse the fall that trapped them in this cycle of human reincarnation. Several years ago, a group of monks in one of the mountain cities pushed farther than anyone had gone before, and contacted something . . . inimical.

The Orvranka describe it as a form of possession, although as with all aspects of Orvranka mysticism, it is not clear whether it is truly the work of spirits, or some form of psionically induced madness. The Orvranka call these entities *abassylar*, demons that eat the souls of the dead and cause disease and madness in the living. A person infected with an abassy (singular) suffers violent, cannibalistic compulsions, but is not by any means mindless. In fact, the abassy apparently also confers an intense clarity of thought, experienced as a form of enlightenment. Consumption of the "five nectars" — excrement, semen, brain, blood, and urine — is seen as a means of sublimating base matter into psychic/spiritual energy, with the eater's body serving as a bridge between planes of being. All of this is understood, via some obscure, convoluted logic as a means of achieving the Orvranka's original state as bodiless avatars of Heaven.



What is particularly horrific about this madness is that it appears to transmit virally. A possessed individual can infect someone simply by explaining it to them via a series of syllogisms known as the Sutra of the Nectars. When a population of infected becomes large enough, it self-organizes into a social system designed to sustain and expand itself, with a caste of cannibal-priests shepherding and feeding on a flock of willing, enthusiastic victims.

The upper tribes are extremely secretive about the existence of the abassylar plague, but it is suspected that at least two mountain cities have fallen to it so far. Neighboring cities have kept the infected isolated by collapsing the mountain passes that connect them and blockading the skies with airships. However, it only takes a few whispered sentences to break quarantine, and so far there is no known cure.

