

## Introduction to the Outer Regions

THE "OUTER REGIONS" were created by the artist Karen Kuykendall, whose book of paintings, *The Cat People*, and her justly famous Tarot cards immortalized these fantastic lands and peoples. There exists among Ms. Kuykendall's records a complete "Travelers' Report" upon which this book is based.

Each of the five queendoms—The Diamond, Vapala; The Sapphire, Kahulawe; The Ruby, Thnossis; The Topaz, Azhengir; The Emerald, Twahihic—varies greatly. Each is ruled by a Queen, but all pay full obedience to the Emperor. It is a carefully preserved custom that these rulers come into power not by inheritance, but through election, the Emperor through a series of severe tests.

The territory of these queendoms is mostly arid desert, and the harshness of the environment has shaped both people and cultures. What appears a frightening and barren world to stray travelers from the hardly known inner regions is accepted as home and a loved one by the five nations, the inhabitants so attuned to the "essence" of the land that they are unhappy and adrift apart from their roots.

The principal food of four of the queendoms comes mainly from algae beds, for the whole region contains a vast shallow thermal of briny waters in which live many kinds of these plants. Only in Vapala, which is a mesa territory, is other vegetation to be found—true plants—though some of these are grown in the glass-bubble-protected oasis cities of Twahihic. Both people and animals, however, depend mainly on the algae for food and water.

Kahulawe is a land of slickrock isles which are pitted with caves and crevices, crowned by weirdly carved sand spurs sheltering the algae pans. Between these (most of which are owned by the settlements of Houses and clans) lie stretches of barren sand. The

weather is very clear and sunny, so much so that most traveling is done by night. There are periods of death-dealing storms which may last for days. The people raise herds of oxen-like yaksen and the oryxen used as mounts. They produce fine leatherwork and jewelry and are a most prosperous and quiet folk. Their independent women are noted traders and often the leaders of the caravans.

Volcanic Thnossis is in direct contrast to this quiet neighbor. Quake prone, with rocky potholes and crevices which breathe out steam and gases, it trades in sulphur, pumice, iron, glass, and weaving. There are many noted smiths in Thnossis. This is the most unstable of queendoms, and its people are fiery of temper, moody, and fatalistic.

Most desolate of all is Azhengir, for it consists of wide salt flats and baked alkali lands. Its weather is very hot and clammy near the large salt pans, and as the other countries, it suffers from the sweep of violent sandstorms. Salt gathering is the main industry, though there is some manufacturing of limestone and gypsum products and glassware. The people accept their hard life fatalistically and find their main source of escape in music, singing, and playing on a wide variety of instruments.

Twahihic is known as the sand queendom. The terrain is undulating with great sand dunes. The glass-dome-protected settlements cover the oases. There is almost no rain. Smothering sandstorms and tornadic winds are always threatening. The inhabitants provide recreation for tourists from the other nations. Dune skiing and flying are very popular. Twahihic is also the center for fine glass and ceramics.

Vapala has the distinction of being the formal seat of the Empire. Situated on a huge mesa tableland, it has orchards, grasslands, and farms. There are two seasons, wet and dry. Farming, some herding, diamond mining, and the mechanics of solar energy provide work for the inhabitants. A profitable and stable country with the most advanced technology, its people are arrogant and inclined to consider those of the other four queendoms to be "barbarians."

Animal life has an important part to play in all five queendoms. The heavy-coated yaksen are both beasts of burden and sources of wool and meat. Oryxen, much lighter, larger, antelope-like creatures, equipped with murderous horns, are kept for riding. It is usual to clip the horns, though some expert horsemen and women are proud of mastering the more wild horned mount. One with clipped horns is known as a pa-oryxen.

Within almost all homes are kottis, small cats, independent of character. These choose the humans they wish to associate with and are highly esteemed. To deliberately kill a kotti is considered worse than murder and the offender is subjected to the death law.

The royal leopards have long been the symbol of imperial power. In fact, the Blue Leopard of Vapala is first guard to the Emperor and has a part in selecting those taking the tests for that position.

On the other hand, the larger sandcat is dreaded, as they dispute territories with human settlers. They are highly intelligent and have customs of their own. This species is distrusted and yet held in awe by the humans.

However, both sandcat and man have a common enemy in the packs of huge rats which prey upon all living things, befoul the algae pans, harry the herds, and are a source of death wherever they strike. Their hunger is never eased and they turn upon their own kind if no other prey is near. They breed continually and the litters are very large.

As to the customs of the queendoms: There are no formal marriages. Women only accept mates when they come into heat and not all of them ever do. Children are greatly desired but the birthrate is low. In Kahulawe, Vapala, and Thnossis a mating partnership is for life. In Twahihic and Azhengir polygamy is practiced and in those queendoms women who fail to come into heat are treated as servants and laborers. Children, being relatively few, are cherished and families are close-knit for the most part. However, unfit children and adults are put to death, since the community at large cannot support the unproductive. In Kahulawe and Vapala, where the normal deaths are fewer, the population of both people and animals is carefully monitored by a Minister of Balance and surplus of either humans or animals can be condemned. It is the quality of life rather than the quantity which is desired.

Belief is in the Cosmic Order and the Essence of the lands. Human sacrifice has been known in times of great drought. Often a ruler or person of importance volunteers as victim. But organized religion does not exist.

Only Azhengir practices slavery. In other countries servants have a firm social standing and dignity of person.

The solo—a rite of passage—is practiced in Kahulawe, Azhengir, and Twahihic. To be successful in this severe test, a

young person must prove his or her ability to be accepted as a full adult.

In Kahulawe, Vapala, and Thnossis the Queens are elected by a council of representatives. The Queen has absolute power for life. In Azhengir and Twahihic the monarchy is hereditary; a Queen who does not bear children can be replaced.

Warfare used to be known between the isles of Kahulawe and in struggles between Houses of Vapala and mining towns of Thnossis. However, there has now been a long period of peace. Warriors still follow the traditional training but their only duties are the protection of caravans against the periodic raids of outlaws and the search for travelers lost in the harsh country. However, there is constant intrigue between the Great Houses of Vapala, with assassination and quiet murder often ridding some lordship of an enemy.

This then is land and people as they are in the here and now, but there are hints that all is not well and the future may be clouded as we come to the end of the reign of the Emperor Haban-ji. The waves of history are known for their rise and fall.