

the peth-masuwakt

Along the Ammam River, a tributary of the great Ukalla that runs through the Erimos region, dwell a little known and lesser loved people; the Peth-Masuwakt. Among them are two distinct subcultures, the Peth (*lit. people*) who are agrarians with permanent settlements in the Ammam valley, and the Masuwakt (*lit. between rivers*) who are pastoral nomads who have made the hard and unforgiving Parnais desert their home, tending flocks and gathering what little there is to be found in a region that is almost devoid of natural life. The Peth-Masuwakt are an offshoot of the Pjamöradi who dwell along the Ukalla river, exiled from that group due to a hereditary condition that is now widespread among them.

homeland

The Parnais Desert, the Masuwakt homeland, straddles the Erimos and Koilada regions. It is bounded to the west by the Ukalla, to the east by the Yuamasuk'a river and the Umikuvu Mountains, and stretching as far as the Peth-Masuwakt know to the north or south. It is an incredibly arid land with plateaus of varying height, sliced with thousands of slot canyons from rivers that were once woven through the region in time before memory, though these are since long dried. Rain is an exceedingly rare event, with the region receiving, on average, 15mm of rain per year. The innermost parts, known as the deadlands, may only



receive 2-3mm per year. Plants, water, and most animal life that isn't part of the Masuwakt herds are vacant, save for at the peaks of the foothills and at the rare and treasured oases and salt flats. The temperatures are unforgiving, rocketing to upwards of 40 degrees Celsius during the summer's daytime, and reaching as low as -4C during a winter's night. However, temperatures are usually milder, ranging from 27C-5C.

Far to the west, at the border of Peth lands is the Ammam River, which is a west flowing tributary to the Ukalla, which then flows north, and into the Erimosean Sea. Here, while still arid, there is enough water in the soil to support agriculture on a permanent basis, aided by the lack of a "true winter" that gets cold enough to kill crops. In addition to keeping smaller animals, the Peth here farm as much as the land will let them, and utilize the valley almost entirely for farming, keeping their settlements either carved into hills, or underground, wary to waste a single bit of the precious water or the soil it sustains. Along the high plateaus of the Peth, and one or two oases, limited terrace farming is coming into use, but is not yet widespread.



subsistence

The Peth, being agrarians, have a variety of foods that they farm along the Ammam and Yuamasuk'a rivers. Notable crops include agave, chia, wild rice, bush potatoes, many varieties of chili pepper, gourds, and a few tomatoes, although these are infrequent and prized. The golden acacia tree is often planted too, for it is one of the few trees that can withstand the aridity, and has many varied uses, such as food, perfume, dyes, et cetera. Near oases and along the riverline, the eucalyptus tree is found among the wealthiest of the Peth, from which they can control the flow of its exports, such as oil, timber, dyes, and honey. Finally, the Erimosan mesquite is used for timber and animal feed, and the honey produced from these trees is prized. They also keep peccaries and turkeys for meat, and a few keep kangaroos, although this is mostly left to the herding Masuwakt, who, being nomadic, are better able to utilize the land.



In the interior of the Parnais, the Masuwakt are pastoralists, who navigate the plateaus and foothills from oasis to oasis, with large herds of kangaroos, donkeys, and maintain and manage the great flocks of flamingo that settle on the salt lakes during summer.

The kangaroos and donkeys are used for meat and milk, although kangaroo hide is highly sought after as well. Flamingos are hunted for their meat, feathers, and eggs. Condors are sometimes hunted as well, for similar reasons. The Peth and the Masuwakt are generally happy to trade foods, such that neither subculture is lacking in a major food group.



Peth-Masuwakt cuisine is traditionally very spicy, utilizing the many chili peppers that grow well in the region. Food is designed to be easily transportable, and many meals use a slow cooking method that ensures a large amount of broth for minimal water usage. Organ meat and bone marrow are considered particular delicacies, as are the small pepino melons and prickly pears that grow along the banks of the Yuamasuk'a in the east, which make a particularly tasty dessert.



In addition to food crops, the Peth also grow pitchuri, which can be mixed with wood ash and gum from the acacia to make a chew which is rich in nicotine, as well as thyme, and a unique herb to the area known as rika, which is vaguely reminiscent of mint, and can be found in teas, along with other herbs and spices unique to the high altitude region. Additionally, once every few years, the desert gets enough rain to burst forth into life. Not only is this seen as a blessed event, but it also means that millions of leaves, seeds, and flowers become available for gathering, which the Peth-Masuwakt do, undertaking something akin to a pilgrimage to wide open plateaus that have exploded into an array of colour and life. The seeds from these blooms are greatly treasured, as well as the dyes from flowers, and small loaves made from the seeds are used in religious ceremonies throughout the desert, rather than consumed on a day to day basis.

appearance

Like their neighbours, the Peth-Masuwakt are a dark-skinned people, ranging from 28-32 on the von Luschan Chromatic Scale, or a Type V on the Fitzpatrick Phototyping Scale.



Their hair is kinky/coily, ranging from a 3C to a 4C on the Coil Typing Scale. Many of them have straight, narrow noses and high, sharp cheekbones, closely resembling Earth's Ethiopids. They are tall and tend to be slim, if for no other reason than simple scarcity plus hard labour. However, a condition known as Waardenburg syndrome is highly prominent among the Peth-Masuwakt, with anywhere from twenty percent (among the Peth) to upwards of fifty percent (among the Masuwakt) having the syndrome. Because it is autosomal dominant, it carries through populations easily and strongly, and due to a founder effect, it is much, much, more prevalent among the Peth-Masuwakt; among other populations, its prevalence is approximately one in ten thousand. Waardenburg syndrome has many features, not all of which are present in every case, but the most common are:



- brilliant blue eyes
- complete and/or sectoral heterochromia
- wide-set eyes with flattened nasal root
- low hairline with a white forelock (poliosis)
- piebaldism; mottling of the skin
- moderate deafness



Rarer conditions may also appear, and these are usually more detrimental than the common symptoms. These may include an inability to straighten the fingers fully on one or



both hands, profound deafness, underdeveloped arms, premature graying of the hair. In very rare cases, usually marked by excessive piebaldism, there is severe vomiting, constipation and/or diarrhea, and inevitable death within the first year of life. This is known as "lethal white syndrome" among the Peth-Masuwakt, and infants are often left to die, as no one with lethal white has made it to their first birthday, and they are in constant pain for the entirety of their short lives. The example drawing below, right, is an artist

depiction of children with lethal white, the others are examples of healthy Peth-Masuwakt with Waardenburg syndrome. The syndrome carries no stigma, socially, and many bear it as a mark of pride. It was because of the rise of this syndrome among the Ammam subculture of the Pjamöradi that the people who would become the Peth-Masuwakt were exiled to the far bank of the Ammam, and began to claim the desert as their new home. Their appearance continues to be stigmatized by most outsiders.



Their clothing is often very simple, utilizing plain, undyed, cotton traded from the Pjamöradi, as well as tanned kangaroo leather. Men wear leather vests and cotton trousers, and women wear loose cotton skirts, with the same leather vests. Due to the changing temperatures of the desert, layers are required to protect against both sun, heat, and cold. Koifox fur, flamingo & condor feathers, and tannin-dyed clothing are less common, and usually reflective of wealth or status among heads of families or other influential individuals. Shoes are soft-soled moccasins that protect the feet from the stony landscape.

family & social life



Like their neighbours, the Peth are strongly patriarchal, with the male head of family having absolute power over his wife, his children, including those brought in by adoption or marriage, as well as freemen and slaves who work on his estate. This includes the power to exile, disinherit, or have killed any under his authority. However, the father of an estate also had large responsibilities; the management of his family and estate, as well as a duty to participate in civic life, and cruel or thoughtless estate-fathers could find themselves suddenly relieved of their rights, property, and life from angry sons or jealous rivals. Although this authority did not diminish naturally upon adulthood, adult sons who managed to start their own household no longer fell under the authority of the estate-father, now being their own. However, until this adult son becomes a father, the estate-father can not only deny marriage, but also dissolve it afterwards, as long as the wife is not pregnant. The same rule applies to adult daughters of an estate-father, until she is pregnant (and her husband confirms it) the marriage can be dissolved. This is mostly done in cases of infertility or suspected adultery, but there can be any number of reasons why a petty or vengeful estate-father would dissolve an early marriage.

This is not to say that women, on the whole, are seen as lesser. They often serve as trusted advisors to their husbands, given that they are more at hand for the day-to-day running of things. This extends, broadly, to the whole of the community. The Peth have one major city, but even in smaller farming villages and towns, there is a strong sense of community, but coupled with a sense of “minding one’s own business.” Although there is an aristocratic class that rules the city of Puřmeash, actual authority is very primitive, and still mostly relegated to estate-fathers.

Among the Masuwakt, there are loose confederations of families and clans, but no true rule. Disputes are settled between the parties involved, peacefully if necessary, and with a duel to first blood if previous methods are inefficient. Sex and gender roles are functionally non-existent in the deadlands; everyone does what they must to survive. The oases have permanent buildings, mostly in the form of



rammed earth pit houses, that cycle between families and clans as they move at their scheduled time. Marriage is also very loosely defined, with group unions being very common, and children being raised by the tribe as a whole, rather than just their biological mother and father. However, these tribes tend to be fairly warlike between each other. Ideally, this is a ritualized duel, but it most often breaks into skirmishes for the right to control herds or oases. Every so often some chieftain or other tries to unite the tribes under one banner, citing their shared appearance, heritage, and homeland, but this rarely lasts for more than a generation. Time will tell if the tribes will ever coalesce, perhaps with some “help” from the Peth...

tools, tech, & trade



The Peth, being close to the very advanced Pjamöradi and closer to the river has allowed them to develop relatively quickly, compared to their deadlands counterparts. They are a Tier 1/2 subculture, on the verge of a singular “city-state.” They are familiar with **canal irrigation**, greatly expanding their viable planting area, **terrace irrigation** due to steep altitude changes in their area, where basins would be unfeasible, and simple plows, the design of which is directly from their neighbours downriver. They have **domesticated a number of local crops** (discussed above) and regularly plant one or two types of tree, although these are not yet “domesticated,” and have also **domesticated animals**, both turkeys and peccaries, although the former is far more common than the latter. Along with these, they also have rudimentary **apiaries and beekeeping**. They are also familiar with the idea of carpentry, but are not generally very good at it yet, due to the scarcity of wood, which has much greater uses. Instead, they are familiar with **adobe brick making** as well as **early masonry** with the use of mallet and chisel to form rough blocks, along with **gypsum-based plaster**. They also have some knowledge of fish traps and simple stone wall architecture for clams and mussels. They are familiar with metal items, but are unaware of any in their territory, and so have not yet learned to do anything beyond cold-working.

On the other hand, the Masuwakt are much more primitive, as they reside in the least hospitable area on the continent, and possibly in the known world. They are decidedly Tier 4 and if a Tier 5 existed, they would probably be that instead. They are expert pastoralists, however, and have **domesticated kangaroo and donkeys** to sustain them from oasis to oasis. They have **limited**



horticulture at these oases, mostly herbs, pituri, and forage plants, but very little in the way of crops for humans. They also use **mallet and chisel** from the Peth, but they do not create full houses or building, but use **dry-stack stone** to supplement natural rock shelters, or occasionally carve out small grottoes into the slot canyons for religious purposes. Notably, they also use **salt-masonry**, carving bricks and sometimes full shelters out of salt, in addition to carrying large blocks with them for the purposes of salting meat, and trade with the Peth and others. Most of their tools are bone-based, being the one thing they do not lack for, although human bones are never used for this. The tibia of a kangaroo, sharpened and given a leather grip, makes an excellent multipurpose tool, for example. They also use **stone and leather bolas** for entangling birds, notably flamingos at salt lakes, but they are not opposed to use them against other humans, too.

The Peth-Masuwakt have a wide array of **weaponry** at their disposal, including atlatls, assegai spears, bolas and slings, bows, push daggers, and spiked leather-wrap gloves. They have had to cultivate a distinct martial culture, due to their derision from their neighbours.

religion & belief

Like others along the Ukhalla river, the Peth-Masuwakt are monotheistic, worshipping the god Aña, who they know to be alone, ineffable, inconceivable, immortal, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same. They know him as the Uncreated Light, the Throatless Voice, Being-as-Being, and other epithets. It is believed that because Being Itself cannot touch non-Being, that before time, the lwaa were formed by Aña as both assistants and as a barrier, dimming His Light somewhat, in order to make it actionable in the presence of Utter Nonbeing. These lwaa he made in families, each with a name and a responsibility for a facet of creation, each according to the order in which they were created by Aña.



- The **Namaru** family were the first-created, and their spark of the Uncreated Light shone brightest. As such, they are leaders and commanders, guiding the other lwaa. But they also added fire, the sun, and the spark of Uncreated Light that resides in every human.
- The **Asharu** family controlled wind, breath, air, and the interconnectedness of all things. Their job also governs relations between humans, and between humans and animals, animals and plants, and so on. They were also the ones who gave the Breath of Life to humanity and all creation, enabling it to work as a harmonious whole.
- Next up are the **Anunakti**, who created the earth itself, the land, the stones, and the precious jewels within. The lwaa in this family are often seen as somewhat distant, but nevertheless, they gave the knowledge of precious metals and gems to humanity, as well as the knowledge of shaping stone.
- The **Nibiru** family was far distant from creation, as their task was to place the stars in the sky and order their movement. They placed one sign for each family in the sky, so that humans would never forget them. This family of lwaa also concerns itself with time, dreams, and travel, and gave to humanity the power to dream.
- The **Llamasu** are a favourite family. They were in charge of creating the water, the deep rivers that cut through the land that being life and abundance. In addition to this, they also brought art, music, and sensual pleasure. They are the most raucous family, often requiring luscious food and alcohol in their rituals. To humanity at the beginning of time, they gave a two-fold gift of water, and, ahem, carnal enjoyment.
- The sixth family is the **Rabithu**, who had the very important job of creating all the plants and animals. They worked closely with the Asharu to build the relations between predator and prey, but it was this family who gave each animal their form and shape, which in turn gave humans meat and fruit and grain. They taught humanity to hunt and gather food at the dawn of time, so that they would not go hungry.
- The last family, and the smallest, is the **Chalaku** - the family with the dimmest bit of Uncreated Light among the lwaa. Death is their business. A sad and sorrowful lot, death was not originally meant to touch humanity, but the decay of the world means that, over time, humanity came under their touch as well. However, they make room for new life, so they are also seen as bastions of hope.

These lwaa, despite being the focus of most rituals, are not worshipped as divine in themselves, but for the Uncreated Light that is within them, fueling their work. They act as intercessors, guardians, & guides to humanity, interacting with the world on behalf of Aña.

There is a priestly class that leads the people in the rituals for each lwaa, and is responsible for helping individuals find out which family of lwaa is suited for them to have a particular devotion to. These families of lwaa really are like family, in some sense, such that, all else being equal, those of the same lwaa are expected to stick together - blood family ties trump these sometimes, but not always. It is an additional layer of social nuance that makes the interconnectedness of the Peth-Masuwakt more alien to outsiders. Major life events (marriage, death of a loved one, etc) may necessitate changing one's spiritual family, but it's certainly not something to be done on a whim, and is always somewhat stigmatized, even if it is merited, and those who elect not to change after these events are perceived as stronger or more spiritually robust than those who do.

In addition to, or perhaps in parallel to, this structure, there are also the monastic priests, who do not choose a family of lwaa at all, but are able to worship Aña in Himself by choosing extreme poverty, isolation, and solitude. They live in small cells known as lafra, which are carved into any suitable sandstone, but ideally within the narrow slot canyons that carve the landscape. The cells are small and bare, with a



single bed and table as part of the stone, such that there is no movable furniture. During the time of testing, where a man or woman is considering becoming one of these holy ones, they wear a copper shackle around their ankle and a stud is added to the wall. Twice a year, a single link is added to the chain, and when the final one is added, the monk knows that they are now literally and spiritually tied to their cell for the rest of their life, for they could have left at any point before the final link to the chain is added. The length of the chain is such that they have free movement within the lafra, but no choice to leave save to throw themselves out of the open side to die, hanging by their ankle. They spend their days giving treasured spiritual advice, and communing directly with Aña through a prayer known as the Triple Praise. The Tish'eyain (lit. "three-fold praise") or Triple Praise is a short, formulaic prayer. It is the foremost monastic prayer, and can be repeated up to thousands of times a day. This continual repetition should spur inner contemplation and, eventually, a perpetual inner prayer of the heart, regardless of external activity, whereby the soul becomes aware of its own need for the Divine. The words of the Tish'eyain are as follows:

Aña llauchai, Thua neiuyath llauchai, Thua na'paik llauchai, řakoumata nethama thui kiakt.

Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.