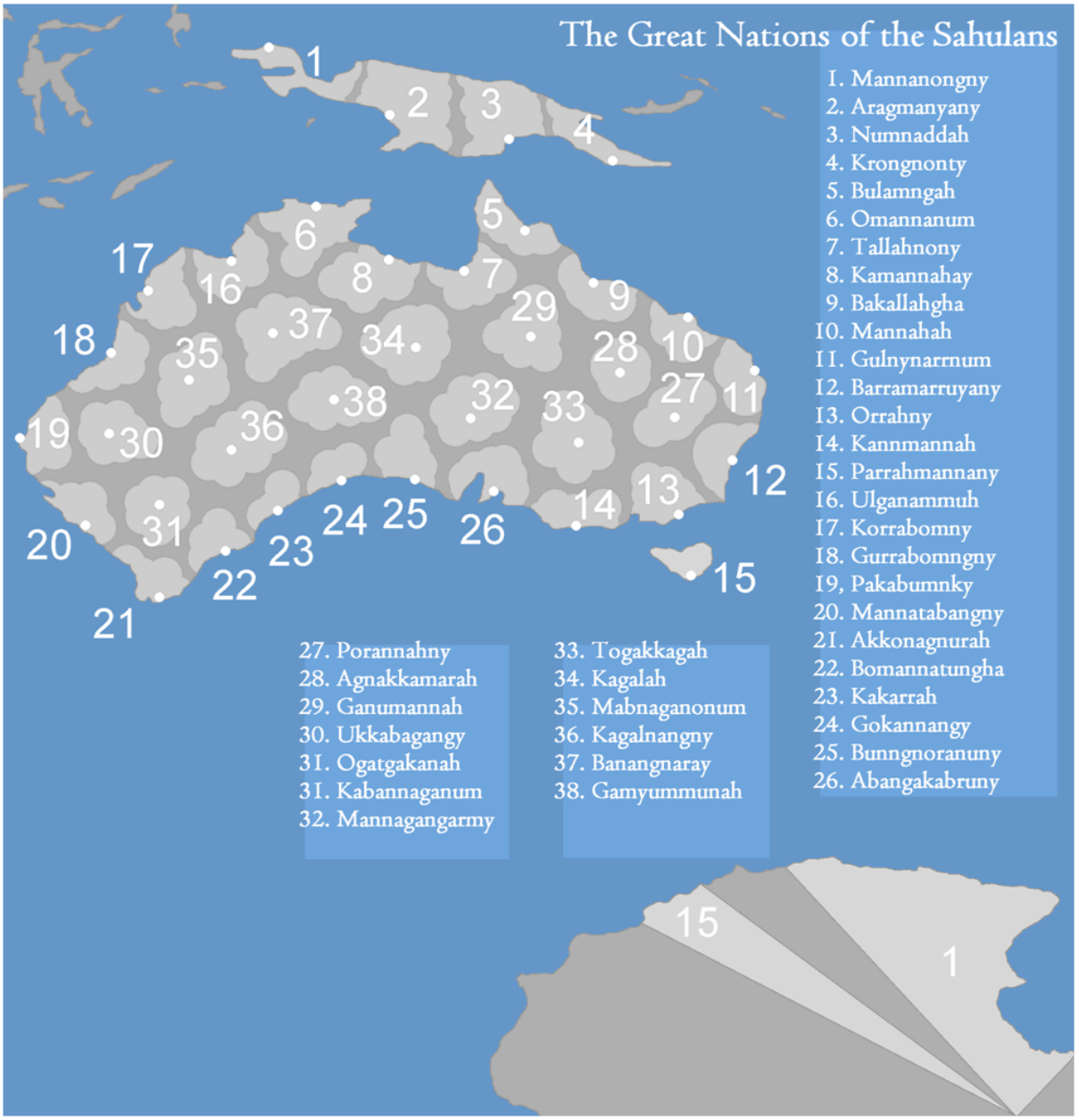

Great Mannanongny

When the first people reached the continent of Sahul, instead of finding it abundant with delicious creatures, by some incredible stroke of ill fortune, every land animal that they caught happened to be highly poisonous. Their small population was almost destroyed by a string of deadly meals and the survivors became so wary of trying new kinds of meat that they stopped all attempts to hunt the native animals, living on plants and aquatic life.

This avoidance became religious, with the animals soon regarded as sacred, as an enduring explanation for their inviolable status, even when the people themselves had repopulated sufficiently to resume their ancient traditions of warfare and cannibalism.

Rivers of blood were spilt over who was kindest to the sacred beasts. To maintain not only their religious beliefs, but to protect themselves from violent accusations of impiety, people

would go to any lengths to help the local creatures, gathering food for them, alerting them to dangers, braving their maternal wrath to nurse their young and in times of famine, even sacrificing their own lives to feed them.

By indulging the animals to such extremes, the people inadvertently encouraged relationships with them that resembled domestication, though rather than using the animals to better their own lives, they began to cooperate primarily for the benefit of their interspecific wards.

In order to feed the giant marsupials, they learned to harness their power, leading and equipping them for labour.

Families became dedicated to serving animal families and societal roles were formalised. Because of their dedication to their own animals, there was little desire for social mobility, so clans became deeply specialised in tending their own particular concerns.

With agriculture and aquaculture came permanent settlement. With permanent settlement came permanent possessions. Instead of constantly re-making the same tools, the people were able to spend their energies on innovation, spurred on by competition with their neighbours. Writing soon developed. Dirt and stone walls were built, then torsion engines, then tunnel systems, then geothermal mills, then glass melting and optics, allowing sunlight to be collected and transported to the labyrinths.

Seafarers from Asia learned to avoid the strange shores of Sahul, which it was said could cause any vessel to sink as soon as it could be seen on the horizon. Boats were never developed, nor metal working, though the people valued native metals, which were deposited in their temples at the beginning of each year. Their growing scarcity was yet another cause for determined and merciless wars, which frequently erupted, waged both above ground and in the defensive labyrinths below.

As the continent gradually divided, so too did its people. They grew weary of sudden death from solar lasers and megafauna powered artillery hanging over their heads. The compulsion to savagely pursue every pretext for war was a burden borne for tens of thousands of years, but slowly, things changed. Instead of repopulating the lands of defeated tribes, it became customary to leave them as wild land, defended from incursions from far, far away; observed with mirrors and lenses. The remaining tribes naturally dispersed to beyond their range of reconnaissance. The ten thousand peoples of Sahul were whittled down to forty. They stopped communicating. Technology stagnated. When the two big islands split, it was a relief for the people of both shores, but they remained ever-vigilant, gazing out to sea and making sure it was as empty as the terrestrial no-man’s-land with which they surrounded themselves.

James Cook steered well clear of the islands in 1770, unlike a number of other European ships which had mistakenly ventured too close in the preceding centuries. With great trepidation, having been thoroughly briefed on the dangers of the waters, which were feared from China to Portugal, Alexander Milne approached the islands with a fleet of ironclad warships in January, 1874. The fleet came under fire at a range of fifteen miles. Suffering few casualties, it retreated, reinforced and returned. Ultimately, four months later, on the third

attempt, it was able to follow the projectile fire to the very city of Great Mannanongny, which it found to be completely deserted, its panicked population having gone to ground.

Making contact was difficult and involved fatalities. Eventually, communication was possible through pictograms and the tension gradually fell, though learning of the Europeans' sacrilegious culture caused some major re-ignitions.

The culture shock was mutual.

Ultimately, it was agreed to generally maintain a respectful distance. Trade agreements were made, technology was exchanged, but face to face contact was kept to a minimum and the continent was not opened to new settlements, its isolationist city states persisting to the modern day.

Thanks to the late date of European contact, the manipulation of native peoples that had taken place in the Americas was not repeated. The British Empire was careful to disseminate technology equally to the Sahulan nations and established a precedent of mediating between them in a respectful and civilised manner.

Great Mannanongny was of no special trade importance to the wider world, having few goods unsurpassed by the other Sahulan nations, but as the nation of first contact, it introduced the world to the Sahulans and its people shaped the common perception of the wider culture. It was through Mannanognys that the Europeans were able to translate Sahulan languages and have engaged in the most extensive scholarly cooperation.

They were the first Sahulans to construct seaworthy vessels and their nation played a major role in Antarctic exploration, meriting its own Antarctic territory, upon which a string of research bases have become the primary hub for engagement with the outside world, though visiting scientists are required to strictly adhere to Mannanognyan customs.

Today, there are almost a million Mannanongnys, belonging to fifty-four castes, each of which is bonded with a single species of animal. Each caste maintains a residence in the upper city, with larger residences, temples and office complexes below ground. The surrounding countryside contains emergency shelters, but citizens otherwise commute each day.

The Mannanongnys control thirty vanquished tribes, bound in a kind of slavery in which they are able to dedicate themselves to the tending of their own animals, in which the Mannanongnys are inexpert, but they are slaughtered for food at regular intervals. The population of these tribes is never more than a few thousand.

Crime is rare and the penalty is uniformly death, even for children.

No holidays are celebrated, but many dates come with annual responsibilities, relating to maintenance, production and religion.

Typical costume for both sexes is a western-style t-shirt with a short kilt and underwear. Body paint was once used for identification, but now the paint is printed on clothing.

Aside from a few hiccups during their early meetings with Europeans, the Mannanongys have not fought a war for over twelve thousand years, though they remain ever ready, maintaining formidable modern armed forces.

While new industries are readily mechanised, traditional industries are carefully managed to ensure balanced and healthy lives for the animals which take part, be they giant beasts of burden or skilful cockatoos or water birds.

The largest industries produce:

Leafy fruit trees

Terrace farmed fish and rice

Root vegetables

Seafood

Stonework

Electronics

Fungi

Sago

Podocarp cones

Marine vessels

Sponges