

The Importance of Family Clans

Part One: The Medieval Clan

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Have you ever played in a fantasy campaign where the player characters had a life outside the dungeon? More of a life, that is, than expeditions into the wilderness and the occasional week of R & R in town? Some characters go so far as to build strongholds and operate out of them, of course. But how many of them *really* have lives?

When Throg the Mighty comes home for a winter after an arduous campaign against the frog folk of Granth, will he really be satisfied to spend all those long, cold nights curled up with his war horse for warmth? Or are we supposed to believe he has a steady supply of casual lovers who all walk conveniently in and out of his life with no regrets, regardless of how fond they may have become of him or whether or not they're carrying his child?

And speaking of children, is our dauntless warrior never troubled by the thought that through he lives life forever on the edge and may die any day in his quest for glory, there's no little Throg Junior toddling around the castle to carry on his legacy when he's gone? Then there's Throg's aging, widowed mother: her

arthritis keeps her from anything that could earn her an independent living, and the Sunnysdale Rest Home across town won't be built for another thousand years. Does the ungrateful wretch of an only child leave her to starve alone out in the cold?

The good old American nuclear family that supposed traditionalists lament the break-up of is itself a broken-down version of the clan organization of families that has predominated through most of recorded history. The notion that government is obligated to provide for those of its subjects unable to provide for themselves is a very new thing. In the days before popular government, you counted on your extended family to bail you out if you ever got into trouble you couldn't handle on your own, and your extended family counted on you to return the favor. Yet most players of FRPGs can't even tell you the names of their characters' parents. They live in a genealogical vacuum.

Filling this vacuum can add incredible depth, dimension, and meaning to the lives of the characters in a campaign. When an

adventurer is down on her luck, she can count on Cousin Gertrude to give her a crust of bread, and a place to sleep. When an adventurer is on top of the world, she can count on Cousin Gertrude to drop by the castle and ask for a cushy job (“The old hovel is getting so drafty. It’s bad for the children”).

Nepotism was a way of life in medieval times. It just made sense. Why leave someone you hired off the street to look after your castle and its treasure, when you could knight your own brother and make him your chamberlain? That isn’t to say there weren’t occasional inter-sibling plots and jealousies, of course, but betrayal was much more likely if you put your trust in someone who wasn’t bound to you by an obligation of blood.

The families of player characters can offer a wealth of adventure opportunities for a campaign. A PC’s family may be embroiled in a blood feud with another clan before the game begins, or become embroiled in such a feud during game play; the more powerful and important a character is, the more relatives he’s going to have coming to him to beg for help with various problems. Even without involving the extended family, a quest to avenge the murder of a parent or sibling is a classic fantasy story hook (though obviously one you wouldn’t want to overuse).

If you’re running a chivalric campaign in which the characters are knights and nobles, it becomes vitally important that you know who their relatives are. Marriage was a blatant political tool in medieval times, used to cement alliances between clans; and noble titles were handed out far more often on the basis of blood than on the basis of merit. When a great landholder died without an undisputable heir as his successor, the predictable result was chaos and civil war, as rival claimants fought tooth and nail for control of his realm.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of all to be had from developing a family for your favorite character, though, is that it can take some of the sting out of her eventual death if you know that her daughter will someday take up arms and follow in her footsteps.

The Nature of the Clan

Just as a nuclear family is formed by the splintering of a clan, a clan is formed by the splintering of a tribe. As a family unit, the tribe was considered antiquated and of little importance to most medieval societies, just as the clan is held in little regard by most Americans today. To consider oneself part of a tribe was a custom generally left to pre-feudal “barbarians.”

Dictionaries and encyclopedias are reluctant to let themselves be pinned down on

exactly how to define the word “tribe” – because it has been used to describe so many different large social units – but the most reliable and useful distinction we can make between tribes and clans is that clansmen are always related unilineally; tribesmen are related bilineally.

Being bilineally related means that the members of a tribe trace their familial relationship to each other through both the male and female lines, while the unilineal nature of a clan means that its members trace their relationship to each other through either the male line or the female line, but not both. A male-lineage clan is referred to as patrilineal and a female-lineage clan is matrilineal. You have to know which of the two your PC’s clan is before you can start to develop it.

In a culture whose clans are patrilineal, a married woman is considered a full member of her own clan and an honorary member of her husband’s clan, while her husband and children are all simply members of the husband’s clan. In a matrilineal culture, the reverse is true.

Within a clan, the practice of nepotism ensures that its members will tend to be of the same broad social class (upper, middle, or lower), and encourages them to go into the same line of work. Thus you needn’t sit down for any heavy brainstorming sessions when you

try to flesh out a character’s relatives by assigning them jobs. If you know how even one makes a living, you’ve got a pretty good idea of how they all do. There are exceptions, of course, but discussing them would turn this into an essay on medieval economics as much as one on medieval family structure, and it would be folly to try to discuss both topics in the small space allotted in a magazine.

Patrilineal Clans

Thanks largely to the influence of the conquering Roman Empire (and its spiritual heir, the Roman Catholic Church), patrilineal cultures dominated western society throughout most of the Middle Ages. All the major societies of the modern western world developed from these cultures, and thus the modern reader should already be well acquainted with most of their customs. As the importance of blood relation thins, though, we tend to forget the past significance of a child’s legitimacy.

In our day, although most men would clearly resent having to raise another man’s son by his unfaithful wife, a child’s legitimacy is otherwise an exclusively spiritual concern. The church says it’s a sin to bear a child out of wedlock, so illegitimate children, their mothers, and sometimes their fathers carry a stigma in many social circles. In the days before the rise of Puritanism, however (which includes all of the Middle Ages), legitimacy was far less a

spiritual issue than a political one, and the illegitimate son of a knight by a peasant woman would proudly brag of his relationship to his father.

Because political power and wealth were both inherited, and inherited through the male line, it was vitally important to know who a child's father was. Marriage created a sacred contract that would theoretically keep a man's wife from sleeping with any but him, and thus create a reasonable security that any children she bore would be his own. A casual lover, however, was always free to take other lovers. So it was hard indeed for a man to be sure when her children were his. The dichotomy of legitimacy versus illegitimacy rose from a father's need to be sure of his own children. This incidentally explains why a member of a patrilineal society might applaud a man's virility for sleeping around, then mercilessly condemn his wife in the next breath for a single indiscretion.

The practice of concubinage, common to many patrilineal societies of the Middle Ages, allowed a compromise between the dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate children. The arrangement was essentially a temporary marriage. In most cases it endured until the man chose to dismiss his concubine, and any children born of the union were considered "sort of" legitimate. For the legal purposes of

inheritance they were considered younger than any fully legitimate siblings they might have, not matter when which was born, but they were in all other ways treated as legitimate.

Unless polygamy was allowed in his society, a man could no more take a wife while he still had a concubine than he could take a second wife while still married to his first. Taking multiple concubines was a similar violation of the rule of monogamy.

Matrilineal Clans

By their very nature matrilineal clans need have little concern over their children's parentage; the identity of the mother is never in question and the identity of the father is irrelevant to determining a child's place in society. Removing this simple stress can transform a culture profoundly. There is no male equivalent of the concubine, for instance, because the whole concept becomes pointless. If a woman wants a temporary relationship, she takes a lover instead of a husband. No public contract of faithfulness is necessary.

Marriage can still be a political tool for a matrilineal clan, especially in a patriarchal society. The structure of such a society would be one in which rulership passed from the husband of one clan elder to the husband of the next – an arrangement which existed among the Picts of northern Britain in the early

medieval period. Matrilineal cultures in general (and those that are also matriarchal in particular), will tend to view marriage in a much less somber and stately light than patrilineal cultures do, and marriage for love will be much more common.

An interesting side-effect of the matrilineal structure is that boys look to their maternal uncles and not their fathers for instruction and support. In the unlikely event of a blood-feud between a man's sons and his nephews, he would be honor bound to side with his nephews since they – and not his sons – are members of his clan.

With the medieval family structure defined, next issue we'll provide you with the concrete payoff of this abstract discussion: a set of tables to help you create clans for your characters and to guide you in allowing those clans to grow and develop as your campaign progresses.

Originally Published

SHADIS Magazine, Issue #20, Volume IV
Number 2. July 1995: 47 – 50.