

The Undersea Cavern Village of Aak

Home to around 250 Sea Orcs, or *Ketorka*, this is a series of connected natural and crudely-constructed caves and tunnels set in the basaltic bedrock below a range of mostly low sand and silt hills in the deep ocean, about 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) off the northwestern coast of Errynor in Alarius. The water column above these hills is around 3,600 metres deep (*circa* 11,800 feet), so the seabed here is in perpetual darkness.

The *Ketorka*'s name means roughly "Sea-Folk" in their own language, though they are only rarely encountered in Errynor's seas. They are water-breathing, tall, streamlined, hairless humanoids, with large, webbed, clawed hands and feet, large, dark eyes, and long, sharp teeth. They have quite robust control fins on their back, arms and legs that flatten into their skin when a burst of swimming speed is necessary. They are probably the fastest swimmers in short bursts of any of Errynor's undersea folk. They live chiefly by hunting fish, but are not above taking other prey - surface swimmers, for example - at need, or should opportunity arise. They can attack using a sonic stun burst at times, at a target up to 50 m/150 ft away. Although they can use vocal communication near one another, their preferred method is by eye-to-eye contact range telepathy. They can see normally, if only in monochrome, in the endless darkness of the deep ocean, as well as in colour when there is sufficient light. Their communities are widely-scattered over the seas, with no cohesive larger-scale or realm-like structures. Each tribal group, like that of Aak, usually has one or more undersea caves they regard as "theirs" within their normal hunting range, so they are relatively sedentary. They can make objects quite skilfully, primarily tools and weapons for hunting, which often show a remarkable degree of inventiveness. (They are variants of D&D's marine hobgoblins, the *Koalinth*.)

Ketorka society has no family structures as such. Pair-bonds exist purely, and briefly, for the purposes of mating, with the resultant young cared-for and trained by various members of the tribe until able to fully fend for themselves when "coming of age" at 12 years old. *Ketorka* can live up to 40 or so, though it is rare for them to survive much beyond 25 to 30. All are capable hunters and warriors, with strength prized above skill in general. Even so, each tribe member is expected to craft and maintain their own weapons and tools. Weaker young rarely survive long, except for those with magical aptitude, who may become shamanic priests for the tribe's totemic creature. In the case of the Aak *Ketorka*, this creature is the great sea serpent. Older or more skilful hand-crafters may be expected to spend more time creating new weapons and tools than out hunting, something they may not relish. The tribe is ruled and led by a strong, practical leader, always traditionally referred to as "The Boss", who remains in that role only so long as their strength and success lasts.

Ketorka are a superstitious folk, regarding all manner of unusual events as omens sometimes, often with a seemingly intuitive accuracy. This can mean an apparently identical event will be disregarded as meaningless on another occasion. Sightings of, or interactions with, any serpentine sea creature - such as sea snakes, ribbon fish, eels or even siphonophore chains (bioluminescent, free-swimming, string-like colonial creatures of the deep ocean up to 40 m, 130 ft, long) - are always considered significant, if open to interpretation. In extreme cases, such interpretation would be done by the tribe's shaman-priests.

Although for convenience, the Aak tribe's caverns are called a village, this is more an estimate of its population than for any resemblance to a land settlement of the same name. In the deep sea, there is no weather to be concerned about or protected from, for instance. It is though useful for the undersea peoples generally to have a safe place to rest and raise young until they can fend for themselves, along with carrying out other activities, such as making and repairing tools and weapons, where storage space for materials and somewhere to carry out the work is available.

Around 150-180 Ketorka are likely to be in or near Aak at any given time; the remainder will be out hunting or perhaps raiding. Aak lies within the Kelchayn Province of the Kachaya (Sea Devils), who tolerate their presence so long as they do not raid any Kachayan settlement or attack Kachaya elsewhere. There is a grudging respect for the Ketorka's insistence on continuing to live where they do, though the Ketorka have been here much longer than the Kachaya, in fact. The Ketorka are slightly in awe of the Kachaya in turn, and have taken to using sharks for riding in emulation of the Kachaya border patrols that pass overhead most days. They are nowhere near as proficient in doing so as the Kachaya, however. If they became aware of a significant threat approaching in sufficient time - perhaps an especially huge and dangerous deep sea creature, or an attacking force of other humanoids - they might attempt to warn the Kachaya, probably at the settlement of Patch, about ten kilometres, six miles, southwest of Aak (see the separate Aak Hills map), in a loose good-neighbour fashion, unless it might bring the Ketorka more trouble in return.

Their general hunting range extends only to about the Patch area to the southwest, to prevent going deeper into Kachayan territory, but 50 km and more to the northeast (30+ miles) as this is not so restricted. On the northwest-southeast axis, they can range up to roughly 30 km (20 miles) from Aak to the northwest, though again a lot further to the southeast, away from Kelchayn Province, maybe up to 60-70 km at times (35-45 miles). This area covers essentially all of the Aak Hills, and extends far beyond them to the east and southeast particularly.

In the higher, rocky, Aak Hills, about 20 km (12 miles) northeast of Aak, is the Rocking Stone. This is a huge boulder perched atop the highest peak there. It is around 40 m (130 ft) across, and rests on only one small region of the peak, in such a way that the Stone cannot roll away, only gently rock to and fro, making a tapping sound at each limit of its swing. Ordinarily, the Rocking Stone is still and silent, but even a light touch, a large creature, or several smaller (human-sized) ones, swimming past close-by, is enough to set it in motion. The Kachaya use this sound as an oracle (see the "Oracular Shrine" and "Rocking Stone" sections in the separate Aak Hills map notes for more information). The Ketorka think this is nonsensical, but do sometimes use the Stone as a signalling device to their fellows at the Aak caverns. The passage and guard chamber leading to the complex's Back Door are the perfect place to listen for such sounds at Aak, transmitted through the connected intervening rock strata. This also means they know when the Kachaya are using the Stone as an oracle, or when something else has set the Stone in motion. Likely because of the tribe's longevity here, expert listening guards are always able to differentiate clearly between the various sounds involved.

As noted already, the Aak Ketorka have an especial affinity for serpentiform creatures, including the local deep water, metre/yard long, ribbon fish. Many tribe members have one or more of these as companions that are always with that individual. Not quite wild, not quite pets, they may assist the Ketorka in a fight sometimes. The tribe's greatest reverence is retained for the great sea serpents, however. They believe themselves hugely favoured should they ever see or meet one in the ocean. Such tribe members who survive the encounter often become leaders or high-ranked shamanic priests.

The Ketorka's favoured weapons include those made of stones such as obsidian (for its sharp edge), along with other types such as the ubiquitous sea floor basalt. Most are made from bone and wood, however, the bone honed and sharpened to a keen, often barbed, edge or point. In overall form, the weapons are shaped like shorter swords, maces, and spears. The spears frequently have multiple tips for increased effect against large, strong creatures or enemies. These can be mistaken sometimes by others - notably land humanoids brought up on such tales - for tridents. They also make considerable use of nets, often ones strung with small, barbed, bone hooks to increase their effectiveness and grasping power.

The Cavern Village

Tunnels within the cave complex are usually roughly circular, so are about as high as their width shown on the map. Most of the caves are higher than this, although being water-filled, the connecting tunnels can enter and leave them at a variety of heights above the floor. A useful rule-of-thumb is to assume a cave will be approximately twice as high, floor to ceiling, as the widest (thus highest) tunnel entering it. The two loose "floor contours", "Floor Lower" and "Floor Lowest" on the Key, can be taken as roughly adding a similar level of depth each to that area. So, for example, the higher parts of the Council Chamber cave have a floor to ceiling separation of 20 feet or so (6 m), increasing to 40 feet (12 m) where its eastern floor lowers, a separation which increases again to *circa* 60 feet (18 m) by the deepest-floored part of the linked Shrine cavern. Tunnels and caves that slope more markedly, without increasing in size like this, are indicated by arrowed lines that always point up. Neighbouring tunnels and caverns need not be at the same relative depth below the surface as one another either, even where they connect. No one walks here, so all the floors, walls and ceilings tend to be rough, beyond those places where the Ketorka habitually settle to rest. Most places are unlit, although bioluminous lights are used at times (not necessarily living animals, as the glowing fluid retains its light-emitting properties for some time when expelled by creatures that use it so), often contained in lantern-like baskets. A few caves are fitted with such baskets.

The caverns are situated below the bottom of a valley in the lower Aak Hills. Both surface access routes - marked as "Cave Entrance" and "Back Door" on the map - are quite well-concealed, with long-silted-over excavated rock debris laid out to resemble natural features in the Aak Hills close-by. The Back Door is particularly well-hidden, such that even the Kachaya are not aware of it.

Labelled areas within the caves are described in alphabetical order below. Those areas not labelled are either multi-use places, or those chiefly used by resting Ketorka and those looking after the young.

Back Door: This entrance to the village is very well concealed on the surface, at its eastern end. It is maintained as an escape route, a secret entryway, and used when fresh materials are brought to the nearby Weapon & Craft Workshops. It is permanently guarded inside to prevent unwanted intruders, albeit there is no physical “door” as such.

Boss & Guards: The living space in the northern caverns for the tribe’s current leader, their close associates and guards. Even when the Boss is away from the village, some guards remain here to prevent access to the adjoining Treasury. The floor here is smoother than in most caverns elsewhere through much use.

Cave Entrance: The main way in to the complex, located at its southernmost point, this is reasonably well-concealed on the surface, if not so well disguised as the Back Door. Again, there is no physical gate here, though there is a constant guard presence just inside.

Cells: Any humanoid captives are brought here to the northwest caverns and kept in one of the three heavily-netted smaller cave-Cells. The nets cannot be removed or opened from inside the Cells. In each Cell cave, the alcoved circular feature is a combined magical accessway and restraint device that can be operated from the passage outside each Cell, though only by a tribal shaman-priest. On command, any Cell occupants can be magically restrained as if by a powerful serpentine creature coiled around them, which drags them into the circle, holding them immobile there until the command is released. Subsistence food can be magically transported from outside into the circle under similar shamanic command without needing to open the Cell net, while the circle also acts to magically clean and refresh the Cell’s water gradually and periodically, without requiring a command, once activated. Each circle is built into the floor, ringed by small, squared basalt blocks, the interior a type of crushed-stone concrete which has an unusual pale green colour. An identical circle is built into the ceiling directly above this, forming an invisible “tube”. When command-activated (only), both concrete circles emit pale green light.

Council Chamber: A large cavern on the central-eastern side of the village, sufficient in size, with the adjoining Shrine cavern, to hold the whole tribe when required. This is the place where important ceremonies are held, such as the accession of a new Boss, the coming-of-age rituals for 12-year-olds, preparations for major hunts, raids, or important journeys. There may be debates, or more often physical combat “arguments” here, which is about as close as the place ever gets to a recognisable parliamentary debating chamber as might be found elsewhere. This form works for the Ketorka, however. Whatever the occasion, the tribe’s shaman-priests always preside and conduct the ceremonies. Protocol dictates that most tribe members enter and leave from the northwest, while the priests enter and leave via the accessway on the south side of the Shrine. Both Council Chamber and Shrine are lit on all such occasions.

Feast Hall: Adjoining the Boss’s chamber on its south side, and in essence simply part of the same cavern, this is where feasts are held to celebrate especial successes for the tribe, including victories over an enemy, the accession of a new Boss, and after any other major ceremony in the Council Chamber. Part of the Boss’s role is to ensure the feast is well provided-for, and to distribute booty from the Treasury to especially favoured or

successful tribe members who were instrumental in whatever event caused the feast to be held, during the celebration.

Guards: These labels indicate four places in the complex where groups of guards are commonly located, along with those in the Boss's cavern discussed earlier (under "Boss & Guards"). One group is always present in the caves by the Cave Entrance passage. Another is always located in the cave and passageway leading directly to the Back Door. As noted previously, this latter group's responsibilities also include listening for, and reporting on, sounds transmitted to this cave and sloping passageway from the Rocking Stone. A third group is located by the broad, netted entrance to the Larder cavern (see below), to ensure the netting remains firmly closed. They also protect the accessway to the northerly Cells passage, when in use. The fourth group carry out a similarly protective role by the entrance to the southern Cells passageway when either of the Cells along it are occupied. They are not present otherwise, however.

Larder: This large, net-closed cavern at the northern end of Aak is the main food store for the community. Live food animals from successful hunts are kept here until required, free to swim and even feed upon each other until then, secured from escaping. Collecting food from here is sometimes conducted as a series of practice hunts for the tribe's youngsters, helping them hone their skills. The entrance net's fixity is ensured by Guards, who also keep watch on the nearby northerly Cells accessway, when that Cell is in use.

Priests' Quarters: Smaller caves along a winding series of tunnels in the southeastern part of the complex are where the tribe's shaman-priests learn to control and use their magical powers. A wooden chest of important ritual items is kept in one of these dead-end passages, rescued from a shipwreck long ago. Such treasures include sea serpent teeth, skin and carved bones, gold and gold-based jewellery, gemstones, symbolically carved and inscribed pieces of wood and stone. The priests attend the main Shrine and the separate Sea Serpent Shrine daily to conduct rituals and ceremonies, as well as at other times for larger tribal events in the main Shrine. These duties are in addition to their normal guard and hunting activities. The serpentine passages have been deliberately constructed, while taking advantage of natural features that were already here among the caverns.

Sea Serpent Shrine: On the southwestern side of the Priests' Quarters is the smaller of the village's two Shrines, but its more important. A great, beautifully carved, basalt statue of a coiled sea serpent is this Shrine's primary focus. It is about 4.5 m (15 ft) high. A loose offerings pile of gold nuggets, coins, cut gemstones, teeth and small carved stones fills the floor of an adjacent alcove-cave, while opposite the sea serpent statue, at the Shrine's northwestern end (marked by the ringed star on the map) is a magical circle incised into the floor, coloured bright red. From within this circle the high priest can perform safely a number of magical rituals and actions. These require considerable skill and power for success. One is to temporarily bring to life the sea serpent statue to help defend the caverns at great need. Another, requiring several days of concentrated effort, is to summon an actual sea serpent outside the complex in the Aak Hills. Other rituals, of comparable power and effect, and needing similar efforts, are also possible. The Sea Serpent Shrine can be lit magically (that is, not simply using bioluminescence) for short periods when needed.

Shark Guards: Unlike the Guards elsewhere in the village, the term “Shark Guards” is more an honorific title, as this is the cave where the tribe’s shark riders live, store their gear - saddles, spears and strong crossbows primarily - when not being used in action. The Shark Guards care for and feed the riding sharks in the adjoining netted Stable, as well as practicing riding and fighting from them, in the Stable and across both the large Training Cave areas alongside. Youngsters being tested for aptitude in shark riding come here as well. There are generally around 15 competent adult Shark Guards, with an equal number of riding sharks available most of the time. Ability to ride sharks is rare among the Ketorka, so those who can do so tend to be seen as something of an elite group as a result. The loss of any is particularly deeply felt by the community, which would almost certainly require revenge.

Shark Stable: This is the netted cavern in the northwestern part of the complex where the *circa* 15 riding sharks currently used by the tribe live when not being ridden. Food is released live into the cave by the Shark Guards periodically, who also look after, train and ride the sharks.

Shrine: Adjoining the large Council Chamber cavern in eastern Aak, this is a still larger cave. Both are lit only when major ceremonies are being held here, though the Shrine is used daily by the tribe’s shaman-priests. In the lowest part of the chamber, on its floor, is a low, stepped, square, stone dais, flanked by two statues on circular plinths, an apparently incongruous circular fire-pit set in front of the dais. The dais is about 45 cm high (18 inches). The high priest stands atop, or floats just above, the dais, with assistants on/over the steps and alongside it, to conduct the rituals and ceremonies here. The statues are of life-sized Ketorka with sea serpent heads and necks for feet and legs, heads that gape out towards the audience in front of them. The firepit can be made to blaze with magical “flames” of many colours which the priests command and control, varying to match the nature of the ceremony involved. Images of past or future scenes can be made to appear in this “fire” as well, again all part of the ritual display. Across the whole cavern wall behind this grouping is an immense, low-relief-carved, realistically coloured, twining and coiling sea serpent. Given the size and height of this wall, and the intricate form of the creature’s design, this artwork serpent is probably greater than life-sized.

Top Cave: So-named as all the caverns and passages leading in slope up towards it. It is used as a convenient assembly-area for raiding and hunting parties before they set off, and also the traditional cave they halt in when they return.

Training Caves: The two largest southwestern caverns are set aside for training youngsters, and adults when new manoeuvres may be required, as well as training the tribe’s riding sharks. A large area of scattered rubble makes it possible to adjust the configuration of these caves, particularly in the narrow section where the loose rocks are shown on the map. Sometimes the training area may be expanded into the adjoining caves and passages, although never into the Trophy Rooms. An especial challenge set for youngsters involves searching as far as the smaller cave shown with more loose rubble on its floor, northwest of the Sea Serpent Shrine (which cave does not directly connect with that Shrine). The Training Caves are usually empty when not in use.

Treasury: A smaller cave off the Boss & Guards cavern in the northeastern part of the village, where numerous non-tarnishable items of found treasure and loot are stored, in an eclectic variety of salvaged containers. The large oval item shown in the centre of the floor on the map is a magical mirror of some kind, liberated from a wreck, with its silvering quite undamaged, though no Ketorkan has yet been able to establish how it works, or what it does. Magical items mingle with gold objects, coins, gemstones, carved bones and stones, many sea serpent teeth and other smaller sea serpent bones, distributed apparently randomly among the mostly wooden chests, boxes, buckets and barrels.

Trophy Rooms: A pair of caves northwest of the Training Caves, and accessible only from them, containing bones - chiefly skulls - from important, or particularly deadly, foes the tribe has overcome down the generations. These form subsidiary shrines for the tribe, to remember and draw strength from past events, and to help train and inspire youngsters, including passing on the tales of their acquisition to the next generation. Both caves can be lit to enhance the effect of seeing and learning about the objects here.

Weapon & Craft Workshops: Over to the northeast of Aak, in the caves and tunnels leading to the Back Door, are areas set aside for weapon and tool making and other craft activities. Materials, including salvaged wood, bones of many kinds, and stones, are left scattered by the walls here, free for use by any Ketorkan. Areas may be lit when in use, especially for fine work, and there is almost always someone here tinkering away at some new item, or a repair. The caves are still busier when a party returns bearing fresh materials, sorting and identifying important or interesting new pieces for fresh work.