

Orcs and transition of nation

It is a cornerstone of our Empire that a citizen can walk any path they wish through their life. To fight for the Empire, to create with one's hands, to pursue a study of magic and so on. It is also a matter of some pride for the Empire that no citizen is constrained by the circumstances of their birth, and those who feel another nation's way of life would suit them better are free to approach that nation's egregore and ask for admittance. But when these ideas were conceived, the idea that orcs would be citizens was not a consideration. So can orcs change nation within the Empire?

The simple answer would appear to be:

In theory, yes, but in practice, no.

Those citizens who wish an explanation of that answer should read on, and I will attempt to present my work in a form that is palatable to those raised outside the spires of Urizen.

Non-human species and the egregore bond

A crucial point to understand is that there is no practical reason why the magic of the egregore bond should not work on an orc. It is simply a shared magical bond not unlike the forming of a banner by a group of like-minded soldiers, but with the addition of (in place of a shared oath) a central focus that retains, preserves and explains the meaning of membership. It does not deal with the soul on any discernable level, and species is no barrier to entry; indeed rare examples exist where shapeshifting creatures have been seemingly loyal enough to take the egregore bond, and later turned out not to be human. Tales exist of Varushkans learning their spouses are secretly mora, and so on.

Differences between the nations

A common misunderstanding is that the egregores are similar, or somehow make decisions on such matters of the Imperial Orcs as a committee. Whilst the same basic ritual (a magnitude of one hundred in the realm of Autumn) was used to create each spirit, the egregores are representative of the national characters, and their attitudes will be wildly different or even opposing on any number of issues. Consequently whilst the first nine have not accepted any orc, the reasons for this vary.

It is worth noting that although I have made extensive enquiries in every corner of the Empire whilst conducting this research, in some nations the issue of whether an individual egregore would allow an orc entry has, as far as I can tell, never been a practical consideration. Highborn opposition to the acceptance of orcs in the Empire was so strong that it appears plain that there is no home in those lands for any non-human, although the complete lack of information on the subject may be merely classic archivist revisionism at work. The subtleties of life in the League do not appear to have ever appealed to any orc sufficiently that they desired entry; likewise I can find no evidence that the intellectual approach to life in Urizen has drawn any interest.

These examples of nations where the question of entry of an individual has never been seriously considered in any practical sense are important because they frame the fundamental issue. The first nine nations of the Empire as personified by their egregores are cultures built by humans, with human considerations. These cultures are shaped in part by isolation from or opposition to barbarian cultures, primarily composed of orcs. Orcs, perhaps due to their physiology, perhaps due to their connection with their ancestors or some other factor think in a fundamentally different way to humans. Orcs are more naturally aggressive, feel a greater need for familiar company, and hear voices compelling them to action. Barbarian orc cultures, and indeed the nascent culture of the Imperial Orcs, allow for and incorporate these qualities. Hence it follows that orcs are more comfortable in such environments, and it is difficult for orcs to adapt to human traditions. Certain readers may feel this paragraph reeks of prejudice. I would counter that to a certain extent prejudice is justified: these differences between the intelligent species are fact, not a matter of opinion. Likewise, the egregores know what they are looking for in a prospective member of their nation, and can see for various reasons that no orc so far presented to them is going to consistently display the right qualities.

On the matter of "Dark Egregores"

Every few years a citizen states that their egregore is not representing the national interest correctly. This has been happening for centuries.

What is generally happening is a group of citizens who are influential and outspoken develop an idea that seems to have merit, and convince others of their cause. The egregore opposes the idea because it perceives it to be outside the traditions of the nation, and consequently the citizens assume the egregore is being affected by some dark magic. After all, all citizens within earshot agree, so what other explanation can there be?

What is crucial to understand here is that citizens, especially in cosmopolitan Anvil, can often go through a rapid shift of opinion on some matter. The egregore is unlikely to follow suit since they represent the feeling of all citizens of the nation, most of whom have no knowledge of the idea. Preventing national traditions being watered down is in fact the primary reason for the egregores' creation, and a disagreement with luminaries in attendance at Anvil is not a disagreement with the nation at large.

To cite a recent example, the unity between Wintermark's three traditions was the target of a powerful curse cast by the Thule, utilising the most potent symbol of that unity, the Crown of Three Tears. The egregore took on three hosts at this time, perhaps because the spirit sensed many of its citizens would prefer to deal with a familiar face. However the egregore hosts themselves were unaffected by the curse until long after many tangible effects were discerned in the other citizens. The egregore spirit was in fact protecting those hosts from the curse, as discord between the traditions is not in the national character of Wintermark.

There are real examples of somewhat anomalous egregore-related manifestations such as the giant Jack-in-Chains, and the horned creature known as The Krampus. I theorise that these entities are not correctly part of the egregore spirit, but rather some other supernatural entity such as a sovereign or tulpa that was important to national traditions and was somehow caught in the complex web of magical bonds extending from the egregore.

Back to the matter of orcs, I have collected some specific examples that should help elaborate on the points I have made up until now.

A Marcher Homecoming

Here follows an interview with an aging orc who spent most his life as a labourer for a Marcher Household in Southern Mitwold. I have removed all names:

Q: Could you please tell me how the rebellion affected you?

A: One day we were working the fields just like every day, then out of the blue about forty or so armed orcs showed up and told us we were free. Household yeoman couldn't do nothing about it - numbers and element of surprise. Their blood was up and pretty soon so was ours. We took what we could carry and went, then we got armed and went round freeing all the other slaves we could find. It felt good to be part of something like that, you know?. And the thing just kept getting bigger. Soon enough we were in these huge camps, singing songs, beating drums, practicing weapons, just being orcs together.

Q: What happened after the rebellion?

A: We got organised into big camps, only instead of military camps they were refugee camps, on account of we had no lands of our own and no way to get them. Then soon enough they were back to military camps again, but this time we were an Imperial army. The bigwigs started talking about how we were going to organise, and take land, and pressure the senate into giving it to us. The Plan, they called it, but if you ask me they was just putting on airs. Most took to it, but me and my family just started to get homesick, and we went back to the farm and asked for our old jobs back. Well, apart from the young'un that is, she wanted to stay and fight.

Q: As paid employees I assume? But why would you do that? How is that different from being slaves?

A: Of course we get paid now, that's the law. What you have to understand is that those stories you hear, backbreaking labour day and night in a mine, beaten and near starved, that wasn't how it was for us. I mean sure, we worked damned hard tilling those fields, digging ditches, planting, reaping, but then I don't think we did any more than the other workers did, the humans I mean. And there was always plenty of food, and the bunkhouse was... well, it wasn't a palace or anything, but it was warm and dry, and what else do you need?

Q: Tell me about Jack

A: So we were earning this money, but we didn't really have anything to spend it on, we started to feel like we needed to work toward something, and we asked if we could maybe buy one of the fields for ourselves, and start using the profits for something, really build something you know? The steward and the local landskeeper got this real queer look, and said we'd have to meet Jack. And if Jack said it was alright, it was alright. We got taught all sorts of things, about standing stones and the rebel march. We made sure our clothes were just so, we all got shown how to make these little straw poppets, to ward off evil, and the local monk shrived all our sins away. then we went to the local tavern and sat down with this big bearded man who was tucking into a pie and drinking cider.

Q: What did you talk about?

A: Well, he asked what we wanted out of life and why we weren't following the legions, and we said that just wasn't for us, we wanted a simple life working the land, and enjoying the fruits of our labours. He asked us a lot of details, but we knew our stuff. Then he talked to our steward for a while, and asked him about one of her workers, who was a merrow. She said he was brilliant, had such an eye for detail in the stockroom that he'd been put in charge of all the weighing and packing for the whole household. Jack also asked about a lot of other people in the pub, and the steward told him what she thought. One of them was a merrow, and she said he had an odd way of staring, it weren't natural, and maybe he'd be better off in Bregasland. Jack said we seemed like nice people, who were trying our best and that's always worth commending. But see he said, you're like that merrow and this pub is like the Marches. You get on OK in this household, but there'll be a lot of others who can't accept you, and if I let you set up your own household and own Marcher soil I'll never hear the end of it.

Q: And that was all?

A: No, then he said "Besides, I once dug up a rock that looked exactly like a carrot. Exactly like a carrot, mind you. But I still didn't eat it, did I?". Then he drank up and left.

Removing emotion from the equation, this story illustrates that orcs who do not wish to engage with The Plan may possibly live out their lives in comfort, but they are unlikely to be truly fulfilled, as there are too many ways in which they cannot participate.

The great dance of the Navarr

This is a direct quote from Maddoc, Brand of the Spring's Path Striding on the matter of Imperial Orcs

Many times have orcs travelled with our striding as we walk the trods between the Navarr heartlands. On a couple of occasions bands of orcs have asked if they may join up and live as we do for a longer time. I do not need Liaven to explain to me the great dance of the Navarr. The steps change, and the dance is always in motion, that much is true, but the dance has a purpose, and every dancer a place within it. Ask these orcs what their place is in the great dance and they can give a simple answer, but Terunael is not in their hearts and the great dance is not within their souls. The Imperial Orcs make good allies but they are not Navarr.

Belonging in Varushka

Here follows an account from the Boyar of a vale in Karov, involving the unclear status of some imperial orc mercenaries.

My schlacta had just returned from fighting on campaign with the Golden Axe. They'd been involved in some of the heaviest fighting as that army often is, and in the face of casualties, their field commander had taken the decision to share their spoils with some Imperial Orc mercenaries they'd met there, and fight together as a unit. They'd all become quite close, as schlacta on campaign will do, and these orcs returned to the vale with them.

There are plenty in my vale who remember the rebellion, and there was a lot of spilled blood and lost coin during that time. But these orcs were charismatic, gregarious. They were good with the children, they listened carefully to all the rules we follow, and they could party with the best of them. So I decided I would keep up their pay, and they could serve as schlacta, at least until I could find other replacements.

Over time my combined force of schlacta got into a few skirmishes fighting off the local wolves, and as you would expect, weapons and armour got broken and had to be replaced. Of course this was done locally and so their equipment started to look more and more Varushkan. Then there were other things. An orc would be given a fur lined hat to keep warm, or an embroidered shirt. I'm not certain who did it, but some had geese painted on their shields, for vigilance, and started calling themselves wardens. So it happened gradually, but after a while you could mistake them for a Varushkan banner, in the dark that is if you didn't get too close.

My wise one came to me and asked who these people really were now. Were they guests, foreign mercenaries, or trusted friends and family? Because of course the idea that people are accepted in under a certain auspice and continue to play that part is a matter of some importance in Varushka, as it's what our warding hearth magics tap into. And without our wards we are lost. We talked it over with the orc commander, and they said what they really wanted was to join the banner fully and stay in the vale permanently.

Now we knew for a few days at this time of year Mother Varushka would stay in a hut down a dark path a few miles travel from the vale, so we set out to ask her to recognise the orcs and have them swear the Schlacta's oath with her to witness.

"Mother, I have citizens of another nation in my vale and they wish to become Varushkan. As boyar I will vouch for them", I said.

"Well then, bring them forth, so I can see how they dress, and whether they understand how to stay safe."

The orcs came forth, and they showed her their bright embroidered clothes, their warden's charms, their lamellar armour and goose shields. They talked of warding ceremonies, travelling the roads around the vale killing the wolves, and all the other traditions of the vale. Mother Varushka spoke, and this is her answer, as best I can recall:

"You know that tradition is important, and that is good. I can see that you have tried very hard to learn the traditions of the vale, and that is also good. But I have made a bargain with an old spirit, and to fulfill that bargain I must uphold the traditions of the nation. Your clothes are very nice, and pleasing to this old lady, but it is your faces that I cannot accept. Until oh so very recently those faces were worn only by the slaves who worked our mines and the enemies who stole our land, burning our homes as they went. I can see that times are changing, and perhaps in time that will be good, but it's not finished yet. Visit me again ten or a hundred years hence and perhaps I will have changed my mind, but for now, these are not wardens of Varushka, but mercenaries from the tribe of Thrace, and of Grud the unshackled, and you, boyar, will treat them as such."

Those orcs stayed on with the vale for a few more months, but in accordance with the egregore's wishes, we stopped including them in the warding ceremonies, and no longer were they called warden. Eventually I hired on a gang of wagon raiders to replace them and they returned to the Winter Sun legion, where I understand they're very successful. We still exchange letters from time to time.

We can see that the egregore of a nation so concerned with tradition is naturally extremely conservative in outlook, and not given to changing its mind often, or quickly. Of course what she is representing here is not only her own attitude, but that of the vast majority of other vales and fellowships that make up the nation.

Challengers in Dawn

Here follows an account of an interesting discussion between some Dawnish Earls. This was in the evening following a tourney hosted near the Castle of Thorns, as recollected by a senior civil servant who ate at the top table that night.

Earlier, a group of orcs had surprised the assembled crowds by appearing unexpectedly, weapons in hand, clad in blackened and pitted full plate and demanding to compete in the tourney. The Dawnish knights present, never ones to turn down an opportunity to prove themselves in battle and seeing a direct challenge to their reputations, had no real choice but to accept.

The drama unfolded further when their leader (who I understand was a well known war-leader in

Thrace's army and saw a great deal of action during the rebellion), actually won the grand melee. I recall she fought with an enormous greatspear, the haft of which was festooned with brightly coloured strips of cloth that I believe were torn from captured banners. I also recall that her final opponent yielded after not only his shield but also the bones of his forearm were shattered by this mysterious challenger.

The crowd was hushed as the Knight of Roses approached the orc and offered his favour. It was at this moment that the stunned crowd was surprised once again by one of the orcs unfurling a banner picturing a yale surrounded by broken manacles on a field of black, and announcing themselves as a household of Dawn.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, I was lucky enough to be seated at the top table of the banquet hall post the tourney. Present were several of the most prestigious households' Earls, all of the senators of the time, and the Knight of Roses. The egregore I suspect, already knew his mind well enough, but he asked the earls of the idea of an orcish household.

A well known troubadour had pointed to tales they knew of Dawnish households present, and how their legendary deeds stretched back hundreds of years, before the Empire and back to the age of the ancient Kings and Queens of Dawn. The orcs, he said, had forgotten their history, and what they could recall was screamed inside their heads by dead barbarians, and there is no glory in the barbarian tribes. But it could not be denied that the rebellion was full of tales of glorious deeds, and that what they had lost had been taken by the Empire, in a way that was coming to be seen as shameful.

The Knight of Roses asked the Earls if they would allow an orc to join their house through a test of mettle. All answered yes, they would offer that chance to anyone. But I recall examples of the tests suggested were to bring proof of the deaths of all six Thule dragons, to cut a mountain in half, and to return with starlight captured in a jar. Some of the earls suggested they might take an orc yeoman, given the right orc, but the Knight of Roses said to take a yeoman without prospect of nobility was un-Dawnish. However, the prospect remained that an orc could pass a seemingly impossible test; humans had done it.

The question of marriage was even thornier. Tests of ardour were also likely to be next to impossible, and of course any such union would be chaste as with marriages without close blood relatives. And of course the nobility of any proposed orcish household could not marry within their own household. Everyone was a little uncomfortable as it began to become apparent that there were important elements of Dawnish culture that an orc could simply never participate in, and the conversation moved on.

As the night drew on the Knight of Roses stood and addressed the orcs at their distant table:

"You fought gloriously today.

Let us look toward a future fighting together on the battlefields of the Empire, and attain eternal glory together.

Let us look forward to challenging you, and being challenged in turn, in the bourse, conclave, and perhaps one day the senate.

Let us weave tales together that will be sung throughout the ages, as we travel through the labyrinth and you cross the howling abyss.

Tales of your glorious quest to find a homeland

Tales of orcs, and knights there will be, as allies and adversaries

But tales of orcish knights there will not be, now or ever."

I remember many faces around the room smiling, and many others looking somewhat stunned, but mostly I remember the orc bellowing as she rose, overturning a huge table sending platters of food and goblets of wine clattering to the floor, as the orcs stormed out of the banquet hall.

In Dawn we see an example of a nation whose cultural traditions are closely tied with human ideas about love and marriage in which orcs could not participate fully. I believe the egregore was demonstrating that the Dawnish would rather have a powerful ally and competitor than a new underclass that they were not entirely comfortable with. Whilst his words seemed cruel on the surface I believe he was intending to do the orcs a kindness by forcing them to concentrate on their own future.

The Politics of Wintermark

Rather than seek out personal stories from the Winterfolk, it may be worthwhile to summarise a little

recent history.

During the rebellion, Wintermark treated the rebel fighters as harshly as anyone in the Empire. However, it is not in the character of the Winterfolk to hold grudges, so just as with their tradition of weregild, once a matter is done with it remains done with. So it was with the end of the rebellion. The Imperial Orcs became a nation and as a nation Wintermark accepted that, and in time became a firm ally to the orcs. It also helps that in Wintermark there is a strong emphasis on the merits of the individual, meaning an orc is unlikely to be looked down upon simply because of their species. Finally, add in the enthusiasm and respect for warfare apparent in both nations and you have a potent recipe for friendship.

"Three peoples, one nation", is a chant sometimes heard in Wintermark moots such as the Witan, and refers to the distinct nature of the three traditions (once separate tribes) of Wintermark who nonetheless work together as a single nation. Occasionally at Anvil in recent years the chant "four peoples, one nation" was used, demonstrating how strong the allegiance had become. I spoke to a Steinn bannerman who hosts the spirit of Sulkivaris about this. He confirmed that he was a little sceptical. The semi-legendary war against the trolls was the unifying force for the three tribes, and whilst there were no doubt orcs in those lands also, there is no indication that they fought alongside the humans, and there is of course no Crown of the Four Tears. However, and this is crucial, he acknowledged that Sulkivaris is by its nature a spirit that binds diverse cultures together and finds common ground. He stated that had this continued he would have needed to determine if it was truly the will of the nation (and not just some loud voices in Anvil) that the imperial orcs become a fourth tribe, but that he was not entirely opposed to the concept.

Of course the Imperial orcs did not become the fourth tribe of Wintermark. Reports at the time suggested that once the initial emotion of the moment had died down, the orcs decided that they needed to find their own identity and follow their Plan, no doubt disappointing many merchants dealing in banners and sign-painting who would otherwise have had work for years.

The next stage in the drama unfolded when Senator Ate Korpiisson, representing Sermersuaq raised an historic senate motion to relinquish the recently regained territory of Skarsind, with the intention that it be gifted to the Imperial Orcs. It was voted in unanimously and the senators of Wintermark were carried out of the senate on the shoulders of the orcs present, to wild cheers and applause.

To say that everyone in Wintermark is happy that their allies have been done this kindness is of course not true. There will be many who wish events played out differently, especially now that the reality of large numbers of orcs building new communities in what many Winterfolk consider their ancestral homeland is beginning to set in. Thought what anyone can legally do to change the situation at this point is questionable. It will be certainly be fascinating to watch this unprecedented situation unfold.

Freedom in the Brass coast

Lastly, recorded here is a story I was told by an aging hakima who did not wish to be named. Like all the stories I collected, I have little way of verifying its authenticity but its events are supported by the patterns I have observed.

Make yourself comfortable and listen to my tale, for it is a tale of woe.

Long had we exhorted the right of every being to live free, and ample proof of our rightness was all around us. For the slaves had cast off their shackles and burned the counting houses of their masters. All was in chaos, and the Empire on its knees for want of listening to the brazen truths of the Freeborn.

Out of this chaos and death, one man arose who would right the wrongs and set the orcs on their long road to freedom, with money in their pockets and food in their bellies. His name was Ahraz i Contrero i Guerra and he was truly great. In a time when other nations could consider only how to beat their enemies back down to their former station, or were simply concerned with how to live through the Winter, he had a greater vision.

He secretly made contact with the rebels, and of course you know the next part already. A deal was reached to end the fighting and the senate created a new nation for the orcs, although of course they lacked the land upon which so much imperial power is based. But I digress, for this is not the end of my tale. There is one thing you do not know and this is that a great orc arrived at Ahraz's door dressed in the

manner of a Kohan. She was one of Thrace's trusted commanders and a fearsome sight she was swathed in silks and armed to the teeth.

"You have done us the greatest service in giving us our freedom", she said with great force, "and I am here to serve you in return. You will have made many enemies, and I shall protect your person at all times. None shall harm you whilst I draw breath, and when I fall my service to you, who have done so much for my people, will bear me across the Howling Abyss where I shall reside forever to guide future generations of free orcs."

"How could you misunderstand me so?" said Ahraz. "You fought a rebellion to be free of servitude and bondage. I made sacrifices so that you could keep the freedom you had fought for. And there will be much work for you now, to make something worthwhile of that freedom. So now, at this time, you should feel obligated to no-one, least of all me, who did only what I knew was right and just, and acted of my own free will. I have plenty of Kohan who serve me well. Live your own life, I implore you!"

The orc turned to me, for my name was Dust, Fire and Glass.

"It is Ahraz who does not understand. Ahraz has given me freedom to do as I will, and I wish to follow the path of Loyalty, and to keep Ahraz safe for he is my redeemer, and he has made me reborn, Freeborn!"

She spoke with passion and conviction, she knew freedom, and her truths were on display for all to hear. The orc and I danced with joy, and I reached out with my magic and started to bind her to me, and just as our dance reached its height the magic stopped, and the bond was not made. And she was not Freeborn, and neither was I Dust, Fire and Glass, not that day, not that year, and not ever again.

Here I theorise we see the last defence of the egregore spirit against a host that for whatever reason (and I think in this case he was overcome with passion in a very Freeborn way), is truly not acting according to its wishes, and by extension, the will of the nation.

My Conclusions

Stories that I have collected here, and conversations I have had with both the hosts of egregore spirits, and other citizens of the Empire have made several things clear to me.

None of the national egregores are currently of a mind to accept an orcish citizen.

Not all of them have the same opinions however, contrast the Knight of Flowers of Dawn, who effectively ruled out the idea in perpetuity, with Mother Varushka's answer of "Not yet." And Sulkivaris' response which could more accurately be summed up as "Maybe, I just need to give it some thought."

This is a reflection of both the traditional outlook of the nation, and the current feeling of those people: the entire people.

The host, ultimately, has no power over the spirit and if the spirit feels it has no other option it is more than capable of abandoning the host to pick one it feels will host it correctly.

