

# MIDNIGHT AT BURNING HORSE

## Being Japanese in the Yakima Valley, 1942

**Summary.** This is a role-playing game for 3 to 5 players, one of whom is the Game Master (GM). The other players are first- and second-generation Japanese immigrants (i.e., *issei* and *nisei*) in the Yakima Valley of the Pacific Northwest during the early days of World War II. To play the game, you'll need pencil and paper as well as six-sided (d6) and eight-sided dice (d8) in addition to a copy of the *I Ching*, the Chinese book of divination called *Ekikyo* by the Japanese. You may also want lists of Japanese and American names appropriate to the period; see, for instance, *The Story-Games Names Project*.

To the Japanese who settled there beginning in the early days of the twentieth century, the native American place name "Yakima" sounded like the Japanese words for "burning horse." This seemed strikingly fitting for a wide sagebrush-filled valley, spread out between barren brown hills to the north and south, with its 100 degree summers and stark winters. Still, they made their homes there, leasing Indian land as tenant farmers and starting small businesses in the "Japan Town" quarter of Wapato. They lived through a wave of xenophobia in the 1920s, when the Ku Klux Klan was active, and began to establish themselves as members of the community, even bringing home an area baseball championship in the middle of the 1930s. But in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese of the Yakima Valley found themselves once more at the receiving end of racist and nationalistic hostility. To an endemic practice of discrimination was added bursts of jingoistic violence—though admittedly this was in some quarters thoroughly deplored. Nonetheless, by the middle of 1942, rising xenophobia prompted FDR to sign his infamous internment order, and the Japanese were removed from their homes, forced to sell their lease holds, and sent to internment camps for the duration of the war.

**Character Creation.** Roll 1d8 twice to create the character's *hakke*, or divination signs. Consult the table each time. The first roll is the character's *yin*, or active principle. It determines whether the character is *issei* (an immigrant from Japan) or *nisei* (a Japanese-American, born on U.S. soil). The second roll is the character's *yang*, or receptive principle. It determines the character's gender.

Roll	Sign	Symbol	Meaning (Strength)	Value	Generation	Gender
1	kon	Earth	receptiveness, passivity; <i>mother</i> (0)	000	issei	female
2	keni	Thunder	movement, peril; <i>oldest child</i> (1)	001	nisei	male
3	kan	Water	a pit, danger; <i>middle child</i> (1)	010	nisei	male
4	sui	Lake	pleased satisfaction; <i>youngest child</i> (2)	011	nisei	female
5	ken	Mountain	progress halted; <i>youngest child</i> (1)	100	nisei	male
6	ri	Fire	brightness, beauty; <i>middle child</i> (2)	101	nisei	female
7	son	Wind	gentleness, discernment; <i>oldest child</i> (2)	110	nisei	female
8	shin	Heaven	creativity, activeness; <i>father</i> (3)	111	issei	male

Examine the meanings associated with the *hakke* to develop a description of the character. Give each character a name. Also establish three *attributes* for your character; these are memories, beliefs, relationships, possessions, or other aspects that represent the character. If the character is *issei*, two of these should be related to Japan or Japanese culture while the third should be related to America or American culture; if the character is *nisei*, two are American and one is Japanese. Buddhist upbringing, Wapato Nippons baseball uniform, savings account at the First National Bank, memories of Mount Fuji are typical attributes; notice how they serve as resources as well as identity markers.

Together with the GM and other players, create a relationship map for the characters that identifies their relationships with each other. Connect characters only by ties of kinship and sex/romance. Add additional non-player characters to represent significant others in the Yakima Valley, including other Japanese, Americans, and possibly native Americans, but do not connect them save by kin or sex ties.

**Game Play.** Beginning with the youngest character, use the I Ching to read the hexagram created by the character's *hakke* to identify the character's starting situation.

As the GM, engage the player in role-playing character reactions or choices in response to that situation. Other players may participate in the reaction if warranted by situation. Once the situation reaches a crucial point—when you all want to know what happens next—roll dice. If the character's action was active, aggressive, or initiatory, the player gets dice equal to the strength of his or her yin *hakke* plus one. If the character's action was passive, defensive, or reactive, the player gets dice equal to the strength of his or her yang *hakke*. The player gets one additional die for each attribute he or she has used in role-playing his or her character's reaction to the situation. Other players may roll dice as well: one if their character is present in the situation, plus one for each attribute they use to describe their influence on the scene, plus one if they have a relationship-map tie to the active character.

Cancel out matching pairs of dice (other players with each other first, then with the active player, then within the active player's roll) so that no more than six unique results are on the table. Use those results to change the value of the character's *hakke* by "flipping" a 1 to 0 or vice versa in the position in the six-digit sequence created by concatenating the yin and yang *hakke* (in that order). So a die roll of "4" changes the first digit of the yan *hakke* (i.e., the fourth digit in the sequence) to its opposite state.

The GM then interprets the resulting *hakke* by reading the new hexagram. You may choose to regard canceled-out pairs as suggesting the presence of "moving lines" in the hexagram. Any player may gain "narration rights" by sacrificing an attribute. At this point, the active player's turn is over and the next oldest character takes a turn.

As the game progresses, the GM must ratchet up the level of xenophobic nationalism and racist hostility faced by the PCs while at the same time taking care to ensure that the environment is not uniformly hostile: there are sympathetic and even friendly neighbors among the non-Japanese of Yakima, as well as those who simply believe that the principles espoused by the Founders apply to everyone. At the same time, however, the political climate grows increasingly chilly and pressure should be brought to bear upon the *nisei* to make extravagant but ultimately unrequited gestures of patriotic loyalty: helping with the war effort at the expense of their own affairs, helping to register other Japanese and prepare them for internment, and so forth. The PCs may encounter jingoistic reporters, miscegenation-fearing ministers, prejudiced ignoramuses and other busybodies who will try to stir up trouble. The GM may wish to emphasize the impersonal evil of bureaucratized racism and xenophobia, with arbitrary denials of rights and stratagems by unsavory and predatory carpet-bagger types to take advantage of the injustice. Frozen bank accounts, forced sales of property, and similar threats to livelihood will take place. Alternately, a somewhat anachronistic (given the collapse of the local Klan in the 1920s) but not far-fetched Ku Klux Klan presence can be introduced to raise tensions and anxiety, perhaps with a burning cross rally or a raid at midnight by night riders on cowled horses.

The game ends when the characters leave the Yakima Valley, either by being evacuated to an internment camp in Wyoming or by some other means. Usually one or two rounds of play are sufficient to bring things to this pass.

## References

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