

# IT IS FORBIDDEN



A STORY GAME OF CREATING CULTURES

# INTRODUCTION

*“Avoid the seven noxious things...idolatry of Allah, magic, killing one whom Allah has declared inviolate, consuming the property of an orphan, usury, turning back when the army advances and slandering chaste women”*

– *The Koran*

*It Is Forbidden* is a team-based story game of creating cultures – two separate cultures – while also roleplaying out the tragic consequences when the cultures mix. The cultures are built on a framework not based on what they produce or what they value, but what they forbid: their superstitions, bans, heresies and taboos. The things that are forbidden keep our deepest fears at bay, and reveal our darkest desires, and fear and desire make a society.

The game is for 4 to 20 players. It does not require a GM. It takes about two hours to play one session, depending on how many players you have.

The essence of the game players taking turns to add to a list of laws, customs and superstitions, things that are forbidden by their tribe. With each round, the importance of the laws and the consequences of breaking them escalates. At the end of the game, the two lists provide an insight into two separate cultures, and the scenes played out will provide a sense of how those cultures interact and conflicts that will emerge in that interaction. This information can then be used as a basis for further creative exploration, but it is the end point of this game.

This game does not simulate colonialism. It could be used for that purpose, but it presents the two cultures neutrally. Neither is the more destructive or more parochial or more expansionistic, by default. This is not meant to present a view regarding the destruction of indigenous cultures in the real world. There is a much better game that simulates that: *Dog Eat Dog* by Liam Liwanag Burke, which you should so go and play. *It is Forbidden* presents the cultures neutrally because it gives you more room for creativity, and to illustrate that all cultures are in fact the same in their fundamental building blocks (with the hope, perhaps, that this might also give people insight into the racism of colonialism. We also have not gone down that path because there's no need to rehash what *Dog Eat Dog* already did so well. You could use it to model the very first encounters between two cultures which, after the game, evolves into something more suitable for *Dog Eat Dog*.

This game is about cultural clashes, though, and could prove distressing or uncomfortable for anyone whose identity or lived experience involves their culture being assaulted. As always consult your players about this before beginning play, and be sure to stop play immediately if anyone becomes uncomfortable.

Speaking of influences, you'll see influences here from Ben Robbins' *Microscope* and *Kingdom* which are great games also.

# GETTING STARTED

To play *It is Forbidden*, you will need:

- Four or more people divided into two teams. The rules are written assuming teams of even numbers, between 2 and 10 people on each. If you have an odd number of players, one player may choose to be the Third-Culture Individual and the rules for this case are included after the main rules. The TCI will not be a part of either team and will have a slightly different experience than the others (see the *Odd One Out* section for more.) Alternatively, since the game does not need a GM but does benefit from a facilitator (or rules teacher), one player can step out to take this role, or the facilitator can step in to make up even numbers.
- A Tribe sheet for each Team (see the last page of the rules)
- A selection of index cards to assign people to teams and roles.
- A space where all the players can gather and be heard by each other, typically around a table.

The game has two main phases: setting up the basics of the two Tribes, and then the three rounds of lawgiving, which will be covered in the next two sections. First, however, you must determine the basic assumptions of the game, which we'll call the Bare Bones. Everyone needs to decide what kind of setting, broadly speaking, the cultures exist in.

Theoretically, *It Is Forbidden* can be played about any setting, anywhere, even micro-cultures like people moving in next door. Some players might even wish to specify no Bare Bones, to allow for the most creativity, but it will not work if some are thinking of people moving into an apartment while others are expecting epic space opera. It's up to you how much you want to limit your game at the outset and it depends on how narrow you want the outcome. If you want the two races to exist in a certain fantasy world, you need to specify the conditions of the fantasy world. Appropriately, the most important thing to specify is what you don't want; that way anything else can be permitted.

Some assumptions are built into the game. The two cultures share the same living area, the same kind of terrain, weather and ecosystem, although they may see it with very different eyes. Neither culture can easily leave this area. They are stuck here and stuck with each other. At the start of the game, there are enough resources for both of them to survive. That may change.

The *Other Bones* section contains more ideas for kicking off your game if you can't think of your own. The easiest assumption is assume two human tribes, on earth. A simple starting example is with something like European settlers encountering something like the Navajo, somewhere in the Sonoran desert in the south-west United States and north of Mexico.

# THE TRIBES AND THE LAND

The two Tribes must first decide who will be the Newcomers, and who will be the Residents. There is no mechanical difference between the two, but it can certainly affect roleplaying. Both can be interpreted to have an implicit superiority. Players can pick which one they want, or decide randomly. Then the two Tribes move on to describing the Land they occupy.

Each Tribe takes a Tribe sheet. If they like they can come up with a name for their Tribe and write it at the top. The two Tribes now define the Land they live in, as they see it, within the constraints of the Bare Bones.

Starting with the Residents, each Tribe completes the following three sentences:

**The land is bountiful because:**

**The land is harsh because:**

**The others are strange because:**

Although each subsequent answer can be informed by the ones before, each Tribe will see things very differently so they should absolutely disagree on what is bountiful and what is harsh – one Tribe's trash is another's treasure. Players can answer the questions collectively, or pass each question to a new player on their team.

*Example of Play: The two teams have agreed that their races are in a fantasy world. The Residents set a beachside tone by deciding their word for their Tribe is the Fishers. The Newcomers call themselves the Varka.*

*The Fishers declare their land is bountiful in Giant Clams. The Varka find no use for clams, but have found the seas to be rich in Sea Rabbits. The Fishers find the harshest thing of their land is that there is so little wood for construction. The Varka are not used to such wild weather and cannot deal with the constant flooding of the land. The Fishers shake their heads and wonder why the Varka do not build on the high land!*

*The Fishers also find it perplexing how the Varka can detach their limbs. The Varka team are excited to know this is something they can do, and feel sad that the Fishers cannot. Also it seems the Fishers have no gills or flippers for swimming.*

Some player may inquire why the Newcomers are here, as migration is rarely whimsical. Let the reason emerge naturally from further play. Unless it suits your goals, there's no need to assume a European-style colonialism at work.

# THE ROLES

Tribes – no matter how alien – are typically made up of the same sorts of roles. To spur creativity and roleplaying, players are randomly assigned roles. You can do this with a dice roll or by handing out cards (shown in the Appendix). Once they have drawn their cards, each player should write down their roles on the top of their sheet.

Ten Roles are provided. For small groups you may want to only offer the first four or five, to ensure the most important people in the Tribe are represented. The roles are deliberately very general to allow them to be interpreted widely, as the list of examples shows. The Roles overlap in their examples because of this.

**The Chief:** They make the rules, and are responsible for all of us.  
*emperor, matriarch, sovereign, patron, governor, king, consul*

**The Priest:** They keep the magic and lore, and explain the ways of the land.  
*witch, medicineman, magi, scholar, shaman, healer, godspeaker, scientist*

**The Lawkeeper:** They code the laws and choose how and when they apply  
*judge, policeman, ritualist, sheriff, marshal, guide*

**The Provider:** They keep us nourished; without them we would all die.  
*farmer, farrier, hunter, trader, nurse, midwife, trader*

**The Protector:** They keep us safe from those outside the land and the laws.  
*soldier, warrior, policeman, sheriff, enforcer, guard, watchman*

**The Watcher:** They watch high and low to make sure the laws are obeyed.  
*reporter, spy, busybody, gossip, moraliser, zealot, puritan*

**The High:** Though not chief or priest they are often above the laws.  
*wealthy, connected, highborn, noble, worthy, blessed*

**The Low:** They are most often beneath the laws – under its boots.  
*worker, poor, untouchable, serf, servant, slave, beggar, thief*

**The Weak:** The laws exist to protect these, who cannot protect themselves.  
*very young, very old, maidens, mothers, gifted*

**The Storyteller :** They know why the laws arose and how to pass them on.  
*teacher, scholar, historian, archivist, lorekeeper, notary, scrivener, reeve*

Just because a role is not dealt out to the players does NOT mean that their Tribe lacks someone in that Role, it just means that Role will not be appearing in scenes. Each Tribe may however take this moment to select one Role which definitely does not exist in their Tribe (put an X under that Role).

*The Varda decide they do not have a Chief, but rather that all authority in their culture is determined by the Holy Church, and the Priest as its representative. The Fishers decide they are a strongly socialist and communal society, and have no Low members; everyone eats and everyone is sheltered.*

Players may also like to keep their individual Roles a secret from the other Tribe, to simulate the fact that those outside a culture cannot recognise the cultural cues that assign someone to a certain Role. Alternatively, players can simply keep this knowledge separate from their characters. You're adults, you can do that.



## ROUND ONE: INSULT

Now that lawmaking begins in earnest. Starting with the Newcomers, each player will describe an attempt to complete a task and fulfil a need. Then a player from the other Tribe will explain why this attempt fails and the need is not fulfilled. The reason the attempt fails will give rise to a new law. Once each player on each team has done this, we move on to Round Two. For the purposes of this part of the game it works best if the players now rearrange themselves so they are seated alternately by Tribe, i.e. so each Newcomer has a Resident on their left and their right.

In all rounds, players can do this by simply narrating what's going on and why, or roleplaying out separate scenes. In each case the process is the same.

### **Crafting An Action**

Every action attempted in the game must have the same components. There must be a Desire, an Action, and a Consequence. The current player needs to state what they want to happen, how they are trying to achieve that goal, and what will happen if they fail.

Importantly, in Round One, the level of the Desire and the Consequence are limited. Desires should only be about things you Want. Things that would be nice to have, useful, handy, helpful even but not particularly critical or important. Likewise, the Consequence of failure (and also of breaking the law in question) should never rise above an Insult. People may get mad, be disturbed or frightened or confused, suspicion may be rife and betrayal may be considered but no injuries can be sustained or property damaged. Leave those things for the later rounds; let the pot slowly rise to a boil; it works better that way.

### **It Is Forbidden**

Now the player to the left (assuming alternate seating), being of the other Tribe, will describe why the action fails or cannot succeed. This should be done by forming a law, and the law should always be formed in the negative, describing that which is forbidden, the things that thou shalt not do. They must also *explain why*. Although laws typically persist long beyond their original cultural context and societal purpose, you won't get a vivid and creative culture unless you provide the context.

### **Are the Laws Temporal, Religious or Something Else?**

The answer to this is: it depends on your Tribe and the decisions you make in the game. If you have a Priest and no Chief, religion may be the whole of the law. If you have a Chief and no Priest, religion may not be important at all. Some laws may just be habits and cultural tics, some may be laws of nature like "don't try to pat the snakes". Culture is made of everything that means something to a people, and it comes from a variety of sources. Laws are likewise a collage.

Players should choose both their actions and their laws based on their Roles, the Land's bounty and harshness, and what has been established previously in the game. However, to ensure the most fluid creativity they should not discuss or debate their ideas. When it is your turn, what you say goes. The only rule is don't make a new law that contradicts an old one, or makes an old one meaningless.



## Making A Scene

As mentioned, the game can be played with simple narration and description, or each player can craft a short scene. They should describe where they are and what they are doing, and suggest possibilities of who else is present. The player to their left is always assumed to be present, and can insert themselves at any time. The current player otherwise has final say over who is in the scene but other players can request their presence at any time. The scene should quickly establish the Desire, the Action and the likely Consequences, and then move on to establishing the failure of the Action and the reason for that – and then the Consequences that occur or will soon follow. If they like the current player can let the Lawmaker decide the Consequences – shifting from the consequences of the failed action to those for breaking the taboo.

At the end of the scene or the narration, the player who crafted the Law writes it down on their Tribe sheet. Play then passes to the left, so that now someone of the other Tribe will describe an action, and the player to their left will be crafting the Law. Continue until everyone has had a turn, then move onto Round Two. You may like to rearrange the seating order between each round to keep things fresh. It's also a good idea to pass the Tribe sheets around so everyone can see what has been established.

### Optional Rule: Laws By Type

As you make your Laws you can mark them by what kind of law they are: R(eligious), T(emporal), C(ultural) or N(atural). This way a quick glance can tell you what kind of laws are dominating your culture, and perhaps whether you wish to make up some of the kind that are in lower numbers.

Janga, the Varka Provider decides that he wants to build some fences to keep in the sea rabbit herd. He grabs some sticks he finds lying around and begins hammering them into the beach. A Fisher called First-To-See comes screaming over to him, knocks Janga over and pulls the sticks out of the ground. The Fisher explains that the wooden sticks are individually crafted clam-spears, passed down through generation and generation from their ancestors. No Fisher can use a spear that does not belong to them, and clam-spears are so important that is the only thing wood is used to make. The Fisher player writes down "It is Forbidden to touch a spear that is not your own, because they are gifted to us from our ancestors, and are carved with our family names".

First-To-See is keen to help, however, in the Varka's need for tools. Passing a Varka he does not know, he rips off one of its detachable limbs, hoping to show Janga how to use that to make a fence. The Varka screams in outrage and emotional violation. First-To-See assumed that since the limbs came off, they were just tools, but the screaming suggests otherwise. The Varka High Priest spits on First-To-See for his indecency. The Priest's player writes down "It is Forbidden to detach someone's limbs without their consent."



## FURTHER ROUNDS: INJURY AND DEATH

After Round One, the process is repeated through two more Rounds, with each giving each player a chance to attempt an action, and the player to their left make a new Law. But with each round, the stakes rise.

In Round Two, your Desire should escalate beyond just a Want, to a Need, and the Consequences to Injury. The Need is something important, but not life or death. Your Tribe can survive without what you Need but it could get rough. People might get sick or injured, but they won't die. Property and reputations may get damaged. Things can be repaired but not quite fixed. Likewise the laws should rise in severity and import. If Round One were faux pas, peccadilloes and misdemeanours, Round Two brings us broken taboos, violations and misdemeanours.

And then in Round Three, the stakes rise again. Now the Need has become a Lack. Something has run out, or is missing, or is in insufficient supply to keep everyone alive. It could be food, shelter, or medicine, or something more abstract such as security, information, health, or belief, but whatever it is, unless the Tribe gets what it Lacks people are going to die. The volcano is erupting and there's not enough high ground, the Mongols are charging and there's not enough time to get to the caves to hide. Other consequences include capture, torture, destruction and desecration. Damage done is permanent and irreparable, and with long-lasting effects beyond.

Laws here are likely mortal sins, unforgivable acts and crimes of the blood – they must be, because keeping the law is preferable to the death of others (although only those outside the Tribe, of course, who matter less). Yes, this means that when your action fails, your character may die. Other characters in the scene may also die. If you die before you get your turn to create a scene, take on the role of someone related to or associated with the deceased, or affected by their murder. The easiest option is simply the newly appointed person to the Role.

*The Varda detach their limbs when they sleep, only needing them for hard work. They have found, however, that the limbs are so useful to the Fishers that their limbs are being stolen during the night. This leaves them waking up limbless, but the crimes do not seem to stop. They ask the Fishers to set their own tribespeople to guard against the thefts. The Fishers refuse. They see it as signing their soldiers to being led by an outsider. The new Law is “It is Forbidden for non-Fishers to lead Fishers soldiers”. As a Consequence, the Varda catch and execute a Fisher thief under their own justice system.*

*The Fishers are angry about the execution but have their own problems: the sea rabbit framing has led to the extinction of the clams and they are starving, but find when they try to eat sea rabbits they become horribly sick. They beg the Varda to release the magic that lets them eat the rabbits, believing it must be some trick in preparation. Varda shake their head at this barbarism. “It is Forbidden to cook the flesh of sea creatures” they explain – for we are all from the sea, our flesh is their flesh.*

## ENDGAME: WAR AND/OR PEACE

The end goal of the game is complete: each culture now has its set of Laws, and all sorts of ideas have sprung up around those Laws and their context and meaning. But the story may not be finished. Indeed, the situation between the two Tribes may have reached a fever pitch. So what happens next?

First, each Tribe decides if they will go to war. They can do this by discussion, or take a vote: if half or more of a Tribe votes for war, war will happen. Roles do not apply here, Chiefs must follow the will of their people and the tide of history. And of course if one Tribe starts a war, the other Tribe must respond in kind. So who wins? Again you can decide by discussion, or with a random mechanic.

Gather the Role cards of the players together and shuffle them well. Deal out half the cards (plus one if there are an even number). Those characters are killed in the war. Then examine what is left of the Tribes. If one of them has more members than the other, they are the victors. If it is a tie, an uneasy détente occurs instead.

Whether there is war or not, there still remains the same issues as there were before. And this is the final act of the game: the players sit down and discuss how to find a way for the Tribes to live together. Obviously the violence of the war may make this more difficult as resentment will remain – but on the other hand, war can resolve some of the terrible Lacks and make things simpler, in the most brutal and horrifying way.

This is a puzzle with no guaranteed solution. The game is in trying to find a solution, and perhaps realizing there is no perfect answer.



## ODD ONE OUT

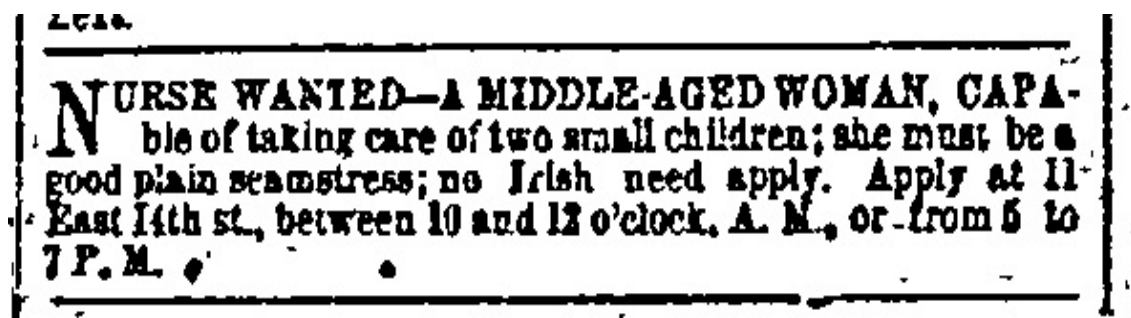
If you have an odd number of players, and don't want to have unbalanced teams, one player can take the role of the Third Culture Individual. In the real world culture is never rigidly delineated, and individuals frequently are raised with experiences in both cultures. In some cultures in the past such individuals were called half-castes, half-breeds or half-bloods, but these terms are considered old-fashioned, inaccurate and in some cases offensive. The term Third Culture Individual (or TCI) describes how the two cultures interact in the person to create a third culture in the combination.

Playing a TCI in *It is Forbidden* follows much the same process. The TCI can participate in discussions about the nature of *both* tribes, and what they consider bountiful and harsh. The TCI also gets to make up Laws in each round, in their own way.

At the end of each round the Third Culture Individual crafts two scenes. Starting with the Newcomers, the TCI picks one Law of that culture they are obeying, and crafts a scene around demonstrating their diligence in trying to conform to that Tribe's Laws. A player or players from that Tribe will then reply with a reason why the TCI still does not conform, because of a new Law just added. This is typically a subtler, more fine distinction on the obedience of the Law, reflecting the harsher status applied to the TCI.

The TCI should keep their own sheet of Laws and write down both the Law they chose originally, and the new Law applied to them. After doing this for the Newcomers, they should do the same for the Residents: chose one of their Laws and craft a scene around their obedience, leading to their failure to be accepted because of a new Law. At the end of the game, the TCI will thus have their own sheet of Laws, indicating how such dual-culture people might survive in the space between the two cultures.

The Third Culture Individual may be well-treated by some of the Tribe but they have no official Role and are typically socially ranked below the Low. They may even be seen as "worse" than the other Tribe. By default, they do not get a vote regarding war in the endgame. Your game is free to change these assumptions of course. It may appear to be not much fun to be the TCI but it can be a dramatically powerful role that reveals some very important and subtle aspects of both Tribes, and their prejudices.



## OTHER BONES

The simplest and easiest way to run *It is Forbidden* is with no guidelines. That way you're bound to get something nobody could have ever expected. That said, limitations can spur creativity in some of the most interesting ways.

The most obvious ways are to limit things by stating explicit conventions of a preconceived setting, perhaps a world you enjoy or roleplay in already. This can help you choose a terrain and a climate, as well as setting the bounds of things like magic and religion. It also helps set tone, which is very important. When the mind is free to wander, it often tends towards the silly or inappropriate (for a context), if you fix things to a narrow setting at the start you will get everyone on the same page and have no need to reject an idea during play.

Setting a specific genre and style can also be important. Two societies in the Old West will interact in different ways if you wish to emulate something like Lucky Luke compared to if you want to emulate Deadwood. If you want a cartoon feel, the game doesn't have to escalate to death, just to things blowing up and characters having their hair burned off. Speculating on a culture of coyotes and roadrunners could be a lot of fun – and indeed, the “cultures” being explored can be based on narrative truths outside the story universe. Taking your favourite genre and playing out typical scenes using the lens of *It Is Forbidden* can be a great way to unpack that genre and find the rules it obeys. It is forbidden for the cavalry to show up before the climax, after all.

Limitations are the best way to approach the Bones as well: forbidding your players to go down obvious lines will provide more fuel than permitting them to do things. Taking away some of the swathes of assumptions we make about cultures will always be interesting. You can do this in the Describing the Land stage but you can get in before that to make the point and stop people making assumptions. Forbid religion, or magic in fantasy. Forbid written language, the presence of wood or stone, the assumption of humanoid forms, mortality, the need to consume, the persistence of physical laws. It may seem like a blank slate but it's covered in hundreds of invisible assumptions you can forbid to make it blanker.

The other way to find new areas to explore is by playing around with the definitions of tribe, society and culture. Microsocieties and subcultures exist everywhere, and are constantly clashing with each other (this is what we usually call politics). We even clash cultures and unwritten laws in the tiniest groups – you could play this game about two step-families moving in together or a couple getting married (just tone down death to divorce). The alternative of the microscopic is of course the macroscopic, where the tribes are empires, or planets or species. The human relationship to animals is an example of culture clashes from being okay with euthanasia for our dogs (death) to wishing we could lick our genitalia in public (insult).

I encourage you to find new and exciting ways to play the game, and to let me know the ones I could never have thought of!

OUR PEOPLE ARE CALLED:

WE KNOW THE OLD WAYS / WE BRING NEW WAYS

THE LAND IS BOUNTIFUL BECAUSE:

THE LAND IS HARSH BECAUSE:

THE OTHERS ARE STRANGE BECAUSE:

**Chief**

**Priest**

**Lawkeeper**

**Provider**

**Protector**

**Watcher**

**High**

**Low**

**Weak**

**Storyteller**

## ROUND ONE: INJURY

It is forbidden to...

because....

## ROUND TWO: INSULT

It is forbidden to...

because...

## ROUND THREE: DEATH

It is forbidden to...

because....

<p><b>CHIEF</b> YOU MAKES THE LAWS AND KEEPS US SAFE</p> <p><i>emperor, matriarch, sovereign, patron, governor, king, consul</i></p>	<p><b>PRIEST</b> YOU KEEP THE MAGIC AND EXPLAIN THE WORLD</p> <p><i>witch, medicineman, magi, scholar, shaman, healer, godspeaker, scientist</i></p>
<p><b>LAWKEEPER</b> YOU CODE THE LAWS AND CHOOSE HOW THEY APPLY</p> <p><i>judge, policeman, ritualist, marshal, guide</i></p>	<p><b>PROVIDER</b> YOU KEEP US ALL FED AND SHELTERED</p> <p><i>farmer, farrier, hunter, trader, nurse, midwife, trader</i></p>
<p><b>PROTECTOR</b> YOU KEEP US SAFE FROM THOSE WITHOUT LAWS</p> <p><i>soldier, warrior, policeman, sheriff, enforcer, guard, watchman</i></p>	<p><b>STORYTELLER</b> YOU TEACH THE LAWS TO OTHERS</p> <p><i>teacher, scholar, nurse, archivist, lorekeeper, notary, messenger, reeve</i></p>
<p><b>WATCHER</b> YOU MAKE SURE ALL OTHERS OBEY THE LAWS</p> <p><i>reporter, herald, spy, busybody, gossip, moraliser, zealot, puritan</i></p>	<p><b>HIGH</b> YOU ARE ABOVE MOST OF THE LAWS</p> <p><i>wealthy, connected, highborn, noble, worthy, blessed</i></p>
<p><b>LOW</b> YOU SUFFER THE MOST IF LAWS ARE BROKEN</p> <p><i>worker, poor, untouchable, serf, servant, slave, beggar, thief</i></p>	<p><b>WEAK</b> YOU ARE MOST PROTECTED BY THE LAWS</p> <p><i>very young, very old, maidens, mothers, gifted</i></p>