

# CULTS of CTHULHU

The WHY, WHAT and HOW of creating cults  
by A. J. Bradbury

Why do we need cults in CoC scenarios? With a more than generous list of fearsome creatures culled from the works of H. P. Lovecraft and others for investigators to battle against, surely these purely human foes are little more than slightly irrelevant icing on the cake - or are they?

## CULTS - WHY?

Human cultists, both individually and in groups, constitute a natural development of the Cthulhu Mythos. It is true that Lovecraft himself seldom made use of such characters in his stories. With the exception of the Order of Dagon, with its HQ in Innsmouth, he usually wove his plots around a single, insane worshipper rather than a group.

However, a CoC scenario is seldom, if ever based upon a single story. Indeed, there are few short stories which could, by themselves, provide enough material for anything more than a solo adventure. Quite naturally, then, most scenarios are based upon the Cthulhu Mythos as a whole - and the aim of scenario writers (professional and amateur) is to give a general feeling of the menace and terror which surrounds the Mythos rather than trying to be absolutely faithful to any particular story line.

Having said that, it is also worth repeating the oft-made point about Lovecraft's original stories, namely: the 'heroes' seldom go back for a second helping - usually because they are either dead, insane, or at least so terrified that they find it difficult to live with the small details of the Mythos they have stumbled across. With the exception of Randolph Carter I can't, offhand, think of a single non-Cthuloid character who appears, in person, in more than one story.

There is, then, an important dividing line between Lovecraft's stories and the CoC RPG. Lovecraft was primarily concerned with the creatures of the Mythos and the threat that they presented to mankind. On this basis he made the creatures as large, as terrible and as destructive as they needed to be in order to achieve the desired impressions upon the reader. His own investigators were, in a sense, merely cannon-fodder provided to heighten this impression. But not many CoC players will derive much satisfaction from having their characters wiped out, or at least driven hopelessly insane, every time they go off on an adventure.

Which brings us to the WHY of including cultists within scenarios and campaigns.

In the first place they act as stand-ins for the creatures of the Mythos. This is not to say that real monsters can't or

shouldn't be included as well. But isn't it just as easy, and far more realistic, to have human investigators battling against human adversaries (or Deep Ones, ghouls, etc.) with the usually indestructible Cthuloid monsters lurking in the background - unseen but 'sensed' at every turn? It seems to me that any group which claims to be able to confront Cthonians, Dimensional Shamblers, and even Great Cthulhu itself - time after time - without ever suffering more than a few relatively superficial wounds must either be exceptionally lucky in their dice rolls, or has relegated these creatures to the level of The Creature from the Black Lagoon!

But cultists don't only even up the odds in favour of the investigators. They can also be used to give a sense of continuity from one scenario to the next.

All of the groups described in **The Cults of the Dark Gods** have actually existed at one time or another. Prof. Archensbak's facts are true, as far as anyone knows - though his particular interpretation of those facts is open to question. It is not difficult, then, to imagine that there just might be a secret organisation working on an international scale for some nefarious ends, though it assumes different identities in different countries. (Please note - I'm not saying that such an organisation does, or ever did, exist, only that it is easy to imagine its existence.) By applying this idea to a series of scenarios, even though they do not make up a single campaign as such, the Keeper can lead his investigators, or mislead them, by introducing clues which seem to suggest that 'they' (The Brotherhood of the Knot, The Hermitic Order of the Silver Twilight, or whoever) are behind the events under investigation. This enables the Keeper to build up a much stronger storyline without having to develop every game 'from scratch.'

## CULTS - WHAT?

A cult, according to one dictionary definition, is simply: "A system of religious belief and the rites and ceremonies attendant on that belief." In practice, however, we usually tend to think of cults as being somewhat different from the main religions, either because they are splinter groups from an 'orthodox' religion (the Assassins, for example), because they involve certain secret teachings, or because they stand outside the normal stream of religious beliefs. Some Cthuloid cults could fit under all three headings, but the last two are particularly relevant.

In the CoC rulebook we find that, of

the three categories of Deities and Monsters listed, most cults relate to either the Outer Gods or the Greater Old Ones - plus the Great Race of Yith. And just as each creature has different characteristics, so each cult will follow different purposes and forms.

Among the Outer Gods only **Nodens** has no known cult, possibly because he appears to be at odds with the other gods - especially **Azathoth** and **Nyarlatheptep** - and is therefore unlikely to offer worshippers the same destructive powers that cult members usually seek. All of the other gods, and the Great Old Ones have cult followings with the exception of **Cthugha** (who has no cult!), and **Azathoth** who is only worshipped by individuals. The reason for the 'singular' nature of Azathoth's worshippers is said to be because "Only the pathologically insane would worship such a being", yet none of the other gods or old ones are exactly attractive. It seems much more likely that Azathoth's tendency to destroy everyone in sight when called on has led to the swift extinction of any organised groups before they have time to become firmly established.

Of all the other beings who have attracted cults, Nyarlatheptep is probably the most widely worshipped, though since none of them are dedicated to Nyarlatheptep as such we may safely assume that each group worships a different facet of the god, and has its own peculiar set of reasons and objectives upon which that worship is founded.

Which brings us neatly to the question of how a Keeper might go about the job of setting out the details of a particular cult.

## CULTS - HOW?

Given the nature of some of the misguided accusations levelled against RPG's in general let me start by saying that a Keeper does NOT need to have any cult knowledge at all in order to create a cult for use in CoC scenarios. What he or she will need to decide before anything else is: 'What is the purpose of the proposed cult?' This will be the basis for deciding what entity the cult will be dedicated to, and will be determined, to a certain extent, by the nature of the members of the cult.

I've already mentioned that Nyarlatheptep is one of the most popular of the cult deities, and for this reason alone you might well decide to go for some other being for a change. In the list below I've tried to outline as briefly as possible the reasons for selecting a particular Mythos character as a 'cult focus.'



**AZATHOTH** - An unlikely choice for the reasons given above and in the rulebook.

**NYARLATHOTEP** - Can appear to cult members/take part in cult ceremonies in human form. Has the power to impart advanced scientific knowledge and/or assign members of any of the alien races and monsters as cult servants. Particularly attractive to cults seeking worldly power.

**SHUB-NIGGURATH** - A fertility goddess (?) with particular appeal to backward peoples in remote places such as jungles, backwoods areas, etc. Unlikely to be encountered in an urban setting unless one or more of her followers have come to town with a travelling show such as a circus.

**YOG-SOTHOTH** - Has particular appeal to those seeking arcane knowledge and, in more modern times, groups interested in flying saucers and similar phenomena. May reward followers with the gift of a piece of glass through which they can see into other dimensions, though such a gift can have its drawbacks (see GLASS FROM LENG, Rulebook p. 74).

**GREAT CTHULHU** - Primarily worshipped by those who believe that Cthulhu will one day re-awaken and rule over a world dominated by its followers. Like Shub-Niggurath is most popular amongst backward/primitive tribes and particularly the Deep Ones and their 'human' relations.

**HASTUR** - Cult ceremonies involve many unspeakable practices amongst which blood sacrifices and cannibalism are the most common. Has its roots in the seldom-visited parts of Central Asia but may be brought back to the West by travellers in that area who have fallen foul of, for example, the Tcho-Tcho tribe.

**SHUDDE M'ELL** - Though normally only found amongst tribesmen in the East Indies the worship of this being might be uncovered by anyone making a definitive study of the druids of ancient Britain. Probably only found in the West as small groups of not more than half-a-dozen people with a grudge against society.

**TSATHOGGUA** - Another favourite amongst those seeking arcane knowledge. This being's main gifts to its followers are the ability to cast spells and to create 'gates' for long distance/interdimensional travel.

**Y'GOLONAC** - Like Nyarlathotep this being has the power to appear in human form. Nevertheless he is more likely to be worshipped by individuals who have delved into texts such as the Revelations of Glaaki. Beware of flabby academics bearing strange ideas!

**YIG** - Known as the 'Father of Serpents' this creature is generally worshipped by native tribes in Central (and South?) America and the Caribbean. Cultists will usually have the power to defend themselves by calling up deadly snakes and/or Cthonians.

These are the central creatures of the Cthulhu Mythos who might lurk, in person, at the climax of an investigation. But their followers will seldom reveal themselves in their true colours to an outsider. Cthulhu cults will usually be hidden behind a facade of some kind, especially those which have taken root in an urban setting.

A cult of **Hastur** worshippers might, for example, be recruited from among the members of an explorers' club. Their cover would be monthly private suppers during which they (allegedly) discuss their exploits and plan future expeditions. The cult would probably be exposed if their rituals become excessive - almost inevitable sooner or later - or if they make away with a reputable if slightly shabby citizen, mistaking him for vagrant.

A cult of **Shudde M'ell** or **Y'gonolac** followers, on the other hand, are more likely to be found in an academic setting - private school or a university, for instance. Alternatively they might be using a group of modern druids as a 'front'. Such a group would be more difficult to detect unless they performed some overtly destructive action or if the investigators uncover the cult's headquarters, full of arcane texts, etc.

Finally, in the cause of greater realism, the Keeper should hide clues to the identity of the creature being worshipped by a particular person or cult in the earlier stages of a scenario. This not only introduces an element of detective work into the game but also gives the investigators some chance to prepare themselves for the final confrontation rather than depending on some hasty, last-minute dice rolling.



## HOW CULTS WORK by Pete Tamlyn

Players in Call of Cthulhu encounter cultists with about the same frequency that players of fantasy games encounter orcs. They are the standard enemy. Unfortunately it often turns out that cultists in CoC behave just like orcs as well, i.e. they are portrayed as crazed, murderous loonies who attack on sight with no thought for tactics or their own survival. Well, as the saying goes, cultists are real people too. This article suggests a slightly more calculated (if equally insane) mode of behaviour.

I intend to deal here with cults in "civilised" countries only. Cults operating amongst primitive tribesmen may well have just as sophisticated a structure and, in their own way, be equally as cunning, but the organisation will be quite different. Also I will only deal with a large, established cult. Smaller cults with much fewer layers will also exist. The sort of cult described below could be found in any "western" country from the 18th Century onwards. Indeed, many are still active today...

The thing that cults strive most to avoid is publicity. Of course the general public is unlikely to believe tales of Cthulhu and co. even if they are splashed all over the **News of the World**, but many senior cultists are prominent men and women whose social standing could be severely damaged by stories along the lines of "MP in Naked Magical Sex Rite." Because of this, most cults are organised according to the Onion Skin Principle; only those at the very centre of the cult get to know what is really going on.

There are stages that an initiate goes through as his membership progresses and he discovers more about the organisation he has joined:

### Level 1:

#### The Friendly Society

The basic level, and the only one known to the public at large, is the Friendly Society. Nowadays such things are something of an anachronism in Britain, but before the advent of the Welfare State they performed a vital service to the community. The normal means of operation was that the members paid a regular subscription in return for which the Society agreed to pay a pension to any member who became unable to work due to sickness. Some societies would also pay medical fees, unemployment benefit and so on.

As you can see, at this level the cult may well be doing a lot of good work. Whilst this is obviously abhorrent to any true servant of the Mythos forces, it does have its uses. Firstly it is a very respectable cover behind which to hide a cult. Second, the operation can be run



at a profit which is creamed off to finance the cult's secret activities. Finally it gives the cult a huge membership from which to recruit its more senior members. Perhaps the leaders may even plan to use this huge membership as a source of POW for a really powerful spell.

## Level 2:

### The Philosophical Brotherhood

Those members who enquire about the origins of the Society will be told that it began as a Philosophical Brotherhood which can trace its ancestry back through history. There will probably be some story about how the members were persecuted by kings and popes for their political or religious beliefs. The exact nature of the story changes depending on the sort of person the cult is trying to recruit. Members are told that the Society has continued its secretive traditions "just in case" and, if they are found suitable, they can be initiated. It is all made to sound intriguing and probably great fun.

Suitability in this case is judged largely socially. The society may only accept male initiates, or only people with a certain level of income. These restrictions may relate to the real cult practices, but are more likely to be designed to appeal to the prejudices of the sort of people the cult wants to recruit. Normally all a candidate for initiation has to do is get sponsored by two existing members.

The initiation ceremony itself will be largely play-acting. There is no serious magic involved unless a senior magician needs POW urgently. Also the whole thing will, at least until the 1960's, have overt Christian trappings so as to avoid any suspicion of scandal. Nevertheless at some point during the ceremony the initiate will be required to perform some innocent seeming sequence of actions, perhaps including a seemingly nonsensical chant, which irrevocably binds him to the service of the cult's True Master.

## Level 3:

### The Mystical brotherhood

Once initiated the member will discover some of the 'secrets' of the Brotherhood. Perhaps to his surprise he will discover that it has profound mystical leanings. It will claim famous alchemists such as **Francis Bacon** and **John Dee** as members. He will also be told that there are many grades within the society and he will be encouraged to try to gain promotion by promises of further esoteric knowledge and, perhaps more important at this stage, authority within the society.

In order to prove his worthiness the member may be given tasks to perform. Can he master the secret cypher? Can he perform a clandestine mission? Can he function as leader of a group of uninitiated members? Can he recruit new initiates? As well as giving

the member the impression that whatever promotion he is seeking is worthwhile (because it is quite hard to get), these tests are an invaluable sorting out process by which the leaders of the cult decide how the initiates will progress.

Many unpromising members get no further than this level. They will either remain as ordinary initiates, vainly recruiting further members in an attempt to gain the desired promotion, or will be shunted into seemingly important, but actually peripheral, posts such as Branch Secretary or Treasurer. Such people often work very hard for the cult, raising money and boosting membership without ever having the slightest inkling of what they are working towards.



## Level 4:

### The Magical Brotherhood

The more capable members are quickly moved on into seemingly unimportant posts. Such positions are carefully chosen so as to avoid upsetting the duped 'officials' and give the members promoted to them the opportunity to progress in secret. They have reached level 4 at which they learn real esoteric secrets. These will include such things as ancient magical systems (e.g. the Qabalah) but no real magic as yet. It will, however, be made plain that these systems do work and that the cult's leaders do perform magic. A small demonstration may be arranged to prove this.

The initiate is also put through much more rigorous testing, both psychological and practical. This is almost certain to involve breaking the law at some point. The member will have been carefully chosen so that there is little chance of his baulking at this, and the cult will soon have the means of blackmailing him into doing what he is told if he ever shows signs of doubt. Once he has proved himself in this way there will be a second initiation into the secret Inner Order.

## Level 5:

### Real Magic

The ceremony for admission to level 5 will involve some actual magic and will bind the members much more fully

to the cult, perhaps by branding him with some secret mark as well as by magical means. nevertheless it will still retain many Christian trappings, albeit somewhat heretical ones.

The initiate now begins to learn real magic. He starts with very simple stuff such as hypnotism, yoga and the use of drugs, progressing later to basic spells like **enchanted** and **Voorish** and **Elder signs**. He also discovers that there are many grades of adeptitude which he will need to climb before he can do anything really spectacular. The only members who get this far will either be those with very strong magical potential or those whose overwhelming ambition will ensure that they strive to master their lessons and progress as fast as possible.

## Level 6:

### The Cult Of A Forgotten God

Once the initiate has mastered sorcery well enough to take part in major rituals at which invocations are necessary he must move on to Level 6. At this point it is admitted to him that the veneer of Christianity was simply a front designed to avert suspicion. Instead he will be told that the cult's power is derived from **Pan**, **Mithras**, **Osiris**, or perhaps some little known African deity. The God chosen will probably be a figure whom the cult's True Master can at least impersonate, but the awful truth remains hidden. If the initiate has doubts at this stage it will be pointed out to him that it is too late for that; he has already sold his soul.

## level 7:

### The Mythos Cult

There are good reasons for the final level of deceit. Firstly the true awesomeness of Mythos deities is likely to be too much even for the most hardened cultist. The threat to his sanity may cause him to risk all and expose the cult. Besides, what sane man wouldn't balk at the fact that the Mythos deities have no regard whatsoever for mankind, indeed that they intend to exterminate it. No, not until the cultist is truly insane will he reach level 7 and learn the truth about the deity he serves.

# Beyond The Facade

by A. J. Bradbury

Cults, as we have just discovered, are an important part of the **Call of Cthulhu** game. A. J. Bradbury here describes a sample cult, suitable for inclusion in any campaign, or for a one-off use in an adventure.

The following introduction is in the form of a letter, which can either be posted to the players by an acquaintance/friend of the PCs. In this case, it should be signed by the relevant NPC.

Alternatively, the letter may be discovered on the body of a mutilated corpse, and delivered to the party to investigate the cause of death. Other clues directing them to either Danby or the Far Eastern Club should be made available.

*My dear friends,*  
I must caution you about the strangeness of a man whom we both know. **Peter Danby** has recently returned from his extended visit to the Thibetan remoteness. On his return, he has brought with him a short, rather sinister-looking native called **Dalkashali**, whom Danby refers to as his personal butler.

We both know that Danby is a member of the **Far Eastern Club**, and indeed have both conversed with him there. But his recent visits have seen Danby preaching an eastern philosophy of a sect which he claims exists deep in the Himalayas - **The Friends Of The Monastery Of Light**. Curious to discover what this was all about, I attended one of their meetings. In it, after a frenzied speech by the charismatic Danby, there was a vague promise that the members would be assisted with a physical



assault on any business rival they feel threatened by. Now that strikes me as being rather unusual, and when added to all the mumbo-Jumbo about secular deities and eastern gods, I begin to doubt the sanity and intent of Danby and his ever-present sidekick.

**Keeper:** What is really happening is that Danby (once a hard-eyed, clean cut explorer) was captured by a group of **Tcho-Tcho** tribesmen (including **Dalshakali**), and driven insane by their unspeakable tortures. He is now completely under **Dalshakali's** control. His facade of sanity is maintained by regular doses of a potion derived from the leaves of the **Bourelisganathia** plant, administered daily by the native. Without this drug, he would be re-

duced to a gibbering wreck in 10 to 12 hours.

The Far Eastern Club is frequented by middle-aged explorers and traders. Many members are rich enough to help fund expeditions to remote areas of the world, yet have themselves never ventured further than Monte Carlo.

Danby is attempting to recruit members for the sect under **Dalkashali's** direction, laying the foundation for a cult of **Hastur** worshippers. The statuette which presides over the sect's meetings is a figurine of **Hastur** partially concealed with pieces of mirror (actually the segments of a 'Glass from Leng'). Once he has recruited a half dozen members, local tramps will be abducted and killed to be cooked (according to certain unspeakable Tcho - Tcho rituals), and served up as 'Lhasa Lamb' at the sect's monthly dinners. From this point on, the development of the cult will depend on the plot of the scenario or campaign in which it appears. The Tcho-Tcho native and his human puppet may simply be seeking fellow worshippers to take part in their loathsome rituals, using blackmail (over the cannibalistic feasts), or the promise of services of byakhee to attack members' business rivals, etc. On the other hand, 'they' may have something very much worse in mind, including the summoning of **Hastur** himself via the Glass of Leng! Any cult members attempting to escape the strongholds of **Hastur** will suffer the same fate as the victim in the opening paragraph - agonising death at the claws of a demon of retribution, such as the servile **Byakhee**.

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