

Banished Pantheon

3.1 History

The world was once full of gods. In its infancy, humanity had not yet lost touch with the spirit realm. Indeed, we lived in concert with it, propitiating the paranormal at every significant event in our lives. These spirits were manifestations of the world's natural life force. They were reflections of the greater Gaia that encompasses all of earthly existence. Long before our predecessors used their first rock as a tool, these spirits knew sentience, intelligence, song and poetry. They in turn taught these wonders to humankind, guiding them up the long ladder of evolution. In return the spirits fed and thrived upon the emotional and psychic devotion of their human protégés.

For some spirits, to feed and thrive was not enough. They wanted to feast. And so they made the leap from helpful spirits to benevolent gods. They demanded not just thanks and gifts from humanity, but worship and devotion. The savage humans began to build shrines and say prayers, and these eventually grew into temples and involved ceremonies. Some men began to devote their entire lives to the new gods, becoming shamans and later priests. In turn, the gods grew in power as they feasted upon the worshipers' devotion. Where once they could make a plant grow strong and healthy, now they could cause whole forests to spring to life. They controlled the rains, the beasts, the winds, and the sun. The former custodians of nature had evolved into its masters.

Still, each spirit could not escape its original nature. Weather spirits could not control animals. Emotional spirits could not impact the physical world. Each god's true nature defined its divinity. So they banded together into groups so that they might work together and hold sway over all creation. These pantheons would then lay claim to a specific area or tribe of humans, fighting off any interlopers who came to poach upon their worshipers. The pantheons were quite devoted to their individual tribes, for as the tribe prospered and grew, so did their power and influence. Inevitably, as tribes became civilizations, and villages became cities, clashes between pantheons grew more and more common. Over the centuries many pantheons were lost with their worshipers, while others grew and prospered to dizzying heights. A battle between gods was always a terrible thing, invariably spilling over into the mortal world in the form of plagues, natural disasters, and even outright war with other nations. Often the gods would fight alongside their human followers, shrugging off mortal spears and arrows as they sought to kill as many of the opponents' worshipers as possible.

One pantheon, which originated in what we know today as Sub-Saharan Africa, earned a particularly ferocious reputation amongst the divine. Led by a trickster god called Lughebu, the Pantheon decided that the constant tending to the needs of worshipers was a slow and painful way to gather the spiritual energy upon which they thrived. Lughebu had discovered that fear and sorrow could feed a god just as well as love and devotion. There had long been gods who traded in such dread emotions, but even they gathered worshipers unto them – usually people wanting to stave off the god's wrath. Lughebu and his Pantheon decided to follow a different path, and harvest the negative spiritual energy directly.

By cutting themselves off from the shackles of worshipers, Lughebu's Pantheon was free to wander the world as they pleased, taking their prizes as they pleased. For many centuries they did just that, preying on the weaker pantheon, often going to war with the gods, destroying their people to the last wailing infant and then dispatching the fallen pantheon to oblivion. It was in a particularly hard fought example of these inter-deity wars that one of Lughebu's compatriots, a God of the Hunt called M'teru, made a terrible discovery. While the fear and sorrow of human was sweet and wondrous, the last gasp of a fallen god was pure ambrosia. Once he had shared his discovery with his fellow dark gods, the entire Pantheon became addicted to consuming the life force of other deities.

Now mere mortals were as gruel: enough to sustain their hunger, but never enough to satisfy it. The Pantheon began to roam across Africa, hunting down more and more powerful gods for their fire. With each brutal success the Pantheon itself grew more potent, absorbing the energy and abilities of those they defeated. The rest of the continent's gods could no longer ignore the threat the Pantheon posed. They overcame their local rivalries and past feuds to unite against the ravaging, cannibalistic gods that sought to devour them all.

The Pantheon and the alliance of gods met in battle in the verdant plains of north Africa. They fought a cataclysmic war that lasted for entire generations, fighting back and forth across the continent. With 100 gods for each of the thirteen members of Lughebu's Pantheon, the two sides were evenly matched. The war took a terrible toll on the surrounding countryside, killing tens of thousands of worshipers and stripping the earth bare of all life. By the time the war was finished, the lush forests and plains had been transformed into the desert we know of today as the Sahara.

During the war, all but the five strongest members of Lughebu's Pantheon fell to the divine host. These last five had in fact consumed the essences of their fallen comrades, leaving them all the stronger for their losses. The alliance of gods knew that they needed another approach, and so turned to a single, relatively obscure god who had long fought at their side. She was Teilekku, and she had been a spirit of knowledge. Now she was the first god of True Magic. She had discovered magic through her own worshipers: the ability to bend, shape and tear reality through sheer force of will. This magic differed from divine and spirit powers because it transcended its origins. A master of magic could affect anything in this world and beyond it, not just her own realm of spirit influence.

Teilekku taught her fellow gods a powerful magical ritual that she had devised, one that would defeat the evil Pantheon, although not in a way they expected. Instead of striking the enemy down on the field of battle, the goddess' powerful magics created an illusory army of gods for the Pantheon to devour. The five ravening deities fell upon the false prey, who fell easily before their might. As Lughebu and his comrades consumed their prizes, the second part of Teilekku's spell began to take effect. The magical energies surged through the evil gods' bodies, driving their own spirits out of their physical forms and into the Spirit Realm. The sudden release of such massive energies all at once tore Pantheon's divine bodies to shreds, leaving them no anchors on the physical world. The spell had effectively banished the Pantheon to the spirit realm, where they could no longer meddle directly with the affairs of gods and men.

The banished Pantheon raged impotently against the barrier between our world and the spirit realm. Without any anchor or calling in our world, they had no way to pierce the wall. Since they had long ago eschewed any pretense of gathering worshippers to themselves, there was no one on the mortal plane who could create such a link. Moreover, the remaining gods who had defeated them were doing a very good job of erasing any trace that the Pantheon ever existed, so that within a generation they would be completely forgotten by humanity.

Lughebu and the rest of the Pantheon spent much of their remaining energy trying to find some breach in the barrier, but this proved a waste. Finally, resigned to their fate, they decided to make the best of their situation. The spirit world is a vast, bizarre realm populated by pale afterimages and memories of the real world. It is a land of ghosts, forgotten gods, and nascent spirits waiting to be born into the world. The Pantheon spent countless lifetimes learning its ways and carving out their own kind of territory within the spirit world. They learned how to look through the barrier into the physical world, and even how to manipulate the dream spirits and send formless nightmares into the minds of sleeping children. They ruled over a horde of lesser spirits and demons, twisting them into malicious beings of pure negative energy and emotion. All the while they bided their time, waiting for a chance to once again feast upon the souls of gods and men.

One of their favorite ways to pass the time was watching scenes of great suffering and despair in the mortal world. Even through the spirit barrier they still gained some miniscule nourishment

from such events, like dehydrated men licking condensation from a stone wall. Thousands of years had passed, and they were now enjoying a period of particular depravity and evil, with human tribes selling each other into slavery to white men from the north. While certainly the world had seen such savagery before, this was a new height for evil since the Pantheon had learned to gather fragments of energy from the other side. The five gods flocked eagerly to any point of depravity and despair, especially amongst those who worshipped any of the gods that had banished them so long ago.

On one instance when the suffering was particularly great, in the hold of slave ship bound for the West Indies, Lughebu The Trickster felt the fabric separating the two worlds had grown particularly thin. He had long ago mastered the art of sending formless nightmares across the gulf between worlds, but now, for the first time he was able to send more coherent dreams; dreams that included his name. He had finally discovered the secret of breaking through the barrier at least in some small manner. It was a start, something to build on. At first he and his kin sent nightmares and visions to make a bad situation worse, hoping to eke out more sustenance through the barrier. Only later, after a few years of this largely futile exercise, did the sorrow starved Lughebu think clearly enough to see this breach's full potential.

Lughebu's mind thought back to a time so far gone that he scarcely remembered it. A time when he had been a lowly trickster god and Neanderthal man had left him berries to leave them be. To a time when he had worshipers. It was obvious that there were no gods looking after these poor slaves. They would be hopeless and desperate, willing even to devote themselves to the perverse desires of the Pantheon. And through their worship, he and his fellow banished gods would find a way back into the world. Then they would feast once more.

The Pantheon began to send dreams to the most desperate and yet strong willed of the slaves, both in the American Colonies and in the West Indies. Unfortunately for them, very few were willing to relinquish their old gods from Africa. The voodoo practitioners held sway over many, and their gods were still jealous and powerful. Worse yet were those who had succumbed to the white man's god. They proved entirely intractable. All that was left for the Pantheon were those few dark souls who had already turned away from any path that might lead to salvation. This ended up working well for the dark gods though, for such evil men and women proved the perfect conduits for their malicious plans.

These evil men and women became the first Shamans, worshipers and devotees of the Pantheon who could serve as conduits for their power and desires. The Shamans established small coterie devoted to carrying out the banished gods' will. The first trick they learned was how to send the negative energies from human sorrow and pain across the spirit barrier to feed the gods. In return the Lughebu and company would aid their worshipers as best they could, chiefly by providing information they had glimpsed through the barrier about the enemies of the Shamans. At first they could not interact directly with our world or their worshipers.

However, as their power grew, the Pantheon discovered more and more cracks appearing in the barriers. A crack is actually a poor metaphor, since the "cracks" were actually temporary and mobile: they were the Shamans themselves, and their victims. The Pantheon discovered that when the Shamans sent souls across the barrier, they opened a two-way passage, through which they could in turn send their own evil spirits and negative energy back. Although not nearly big enough for the gods themselves to slip through, they could send their spirit minions to possess the discarded bodies of the Shamans' sacrifices. They could even lend a part of their power to the Shamans themselves.

Throughout the 18th Century, the Pantheon's cult of followers grew slowly, reaching its height at the turn of the century in the United States. It never numbered more than a few hundred individuals spread out across West Africa, the Caribbean, and the Southern American colonies. It was in America that the cult really took root. With no established indigenous religions to compete with aside from Christianity, the predatory gods found fertile soil for their machinations. Their power continued to grow throughout the 19th Century, with the gods keeping a careful

balance between culling worshipers from both the black slaves and the white masters. It needed the misery and desperation of the slaves and thus found many willing worshipers amongst them. At the same time the Pantheon did not want to give the slaves enough power to destroy the institution that was causing them so much delicious sorrow.

With the coming of the Civil War, the Pantheon had a few golden years where pain, suffering and death were in such abundance that the barrier with the spirit world weakened even further. In the chaos of war, the Shamans of the Banished Pantheon went wild in some regions, and with the help of their dread gods discovered that they weren't the only ones that could receive divine energy from the other side. This was the first appearance of the zombie-like Husk, which would come to exemplify the Pantheon in future years. The Husks were bodies whose souls had been sent on to feed the evil gods. The gods then sent back one of their enslaved spirits to possess the body and give it a new and terrible life as a zombie.

The end of the war also brought the end of slavery, but not the end of misery in America. The Shamans and their gods took up with the many new hate groups that had begun to appear amongst the white population. Although they never supported any particular group's agenda, they did recruit from their ranks for their own purposes. The chaos of the Civil War had given the Pantheon a taste of added freedom and power, and it was something they longed to return to. When, decades later, the Great Depression struck, they thought they had found their chance. With so many millions unemployed and desperate, The Pantheon and its Shamans launched their biggest initiative ever. For the first time since their banishment, they were going to try and manipulate human history on a grand scale. They placed their operatives throughout the nation and were preparing to bring about a violent class war between the poor and the rich in America. Their plan encompassed both temporal and spiritual elements, with the Shamans using their powers to influence leaders on both sides of the coming war. They didn't care who won they simply wanted the conflict.

Fortunately for America, the 1930's brought more than the Great Depression alone. It also brought a new breed of heroes, men and women willing and prepared to deal with threats like the Banished Pantheon. The shadowy Mister E was one of these heroes. A founding member of the Midnight Squad, he and his compatriots dedicated themselves to fighting any evil with supernatural origins. Mister E had contacts throughout the occult world and had heard rumors of the Shamans and the devotion to some long forgotten pantheon of evil gods. While pursuing another case, he happened upon a meeting where one of these evil priests was using his powers to sway a large group of unemployed men. He listened closely as their small role in the coming class war unfolded.

With his brilliant analytical mind and mystic insight, he immediately recognized that this group was only part of a much larger conspiracy. He single handedly broke up the meeting and managed to capture the Shaman leading it. The foul high priest refused to talk, but Mister E found evidence on him that led him to another Pantheon cult. This time it was a group of bankers and financiers secretly worshiping the Banished Pantheon on the rooftops of their luxury apartment buildings. They too had instructions that would ultimately lead to a violent class struggle. After he'd brought these sinister silver spoon sybarites to justice, he gathered the rest of the Midnight Squad together.

Their then ensued a secret war in the shadows that lasted for almost an entire year. The Midnight Squad struck first, crippling the Banished Pantheon's conspiracy and preventing the imminent class war. The war in the shadows had just begun. The Pantheon struck back focusing their assaults not on the members of the Midnight Squad, but on their families, friends, and loved ones. As always, the evil gods went for pain and anguish over direct action. Mister E alone remained immune to such assaults, because his life and identity were a secret even the gods in the spirit realm could not plumb. He stood strong and fast against the Pantheon and his fellow heroes, nearly crippled with grief and doubt, rallied around him. Eventually the heroes proved victorious, capturing or eliminating almost all of the Pantheon's Shamans and smashing

their witless cult conspiracy to smithereens.

The defeat was so resounding that Lughebu and company could scarcely act on earth for another decade, a particularly harsh blow since it meant they missed out on any chance to capitalize upon the horrors of World War II, which happened just a few years later. Slowly they rebuilt their power base in America, still feeding off hate and sadness and grief. With each race riot, government brutality, and national tragedy their strength grew. By the end of the century they had recovered a fair amount of their former influence, but still not enough to attempt anything as audacious as what they had tried in the 30's.

Then the Rikti invaded. The pain, the horror, the anguish, the fear. It was almost overwhelming after so many decades of deprivation for the Banished Pantheon. They released their Shamans upon the war torn world, creating hordes of Husks to add fuel to the fire. With so many other, more pressing threats, The Pantheon was able to act largely without any serious interference from the world's heroes. Back in the spirit realm, the gods were salivating with hunger. They poured forth all their energy into empowering their Shamans. It was then that Lughebu discovered an entirely new opportunity. The massive amounts of death and destruction had so weakened the spirit barrier and inflamed the Shamans that the trickster god was able to actually possess his devotee for several hours, transforming their human forms into a physical manifestation of the god himself.

Creating avatars of themselves in our world was akin to flinging wide the jailhouse doors as far as the gods were concerned. Although at only a fraction of their true power, it allowed them to once again walk the earth and carry out their every depraved desire. Lughebu believes that transforming Shamans into Avatars is only the first step on the path to freeing themselves entirely from the spirit realm. Now the Banished Pantheon is determined more than ever to set itself free and to wreak bloody havoc upon the entire world.

3.2 Beliefs and Goals

More than anything, the Banished Pantheon yearns to return to Earth as free creatures. Such an event would be a disaster on par with the Rikti Invasion, as these five beings by themselves could level whole continents with their powers. Fortunately, at present there seems no way for them to break the curses laid upon them, but even so their power and influence on earth continues to grow now that they can project their avatars into the bodies of their worshipers. What they need is a source of power equal to that of the gods they used to devour with such abandon, but gods are few and far between in the modern world.

However, there is a new kind of god emerging, a very different type of being whose energy The Pantheon is just now developing a taste for: super powered heroes. Heroes are, in many ways, modern gods. They have powers and abilities beyond mortal men. They receive the praise, adulation, and even worship of those whom they serve and protect. The more fame they accrue, the more esteemed they are and seemingly the more powerful they become. Whether they realize it or not, when a hero receives the cheers and support of a grateful city, the experience leaves a residual energy on their spirit. The more people praise their name, the more spiritual residue builds up. This is the stuff of confidence and the aura of mystique that surrounds so many celebrities and heroes. The more a hero revels in his or her fame, the stronger the energy becomes as they tap into it subconsciously.

As a result of this phenomenon, the gods of the Pantheon have taken a special interest in conquering famous heroes and stripping away these auras of worship that have built up around them. The process comes naturally to any of the gods' avatars, which can consume the delectable aura as they defeat a hero in battle. They do not have to kill the hero. Indeed, they prefer not to. Instead they like to humiliate and temporarily or permanently cripple their foes. This not only produces the added bonus of sorrow and pain for the gods to feed on, it also makes it easier to strip away the fame aura since the hero himself comes to believe he is not worthy of the accolades he has earned.

Ideally there would actually be some sort of in game effect associated with fighting the Banished Pantheon. For instance, when their minions defeat heroes they lose extra Fame. Another interesting option would be to allow them to strip away unspent influence points or even to destroy unused favors. On the flip side they shouldn't be quite as tough as their difficulty level would suggest because of the added penalty. You could also balance the Pantheon by giving higher Fame rewards for defeating them, or giving them higher XP rewards than normal. Overall, the Pantheon seeks to sow sorrow at every turn. Pain and suffering are their bread and butter, and without a constant stream of agony and stolen souls, their power will begin to wither and die. Thus, the more of the city they can bring under their baleful influence, the better. Ultimately it would be grand if the entire metropolis felt their presence on a daily basis, becoming a necropolis of the spirit. But then again, they have a lot of competition.

3.3 Behavior Patterns

The Husks and Chambers make up the vast majority of the Pantheon's earthly army, and the evil gods are pretty free with their least powerful minions, setting them loose anywhere and everywhere they can. Because of their slow speed, Husks and Chambers work best in large groups, so it is very rare to see just one or two of these zombie-like creatures wandering the streets alone. The Pantheon likes to release Husks and Chambers in large herds all at one time rather than maintaining a constant flow of them into the city's populated areas. Thus there will be days when suddenly an area is flooded with Husks and Chambers, while weeks will go by without a single walking cadaver showing its face on the streets. These mass releases are designed to cause maximum terror and fear amongst the local population. There is invariably at least one Shaman in the vicinity, to help reap the dark harvest the gods of the Banished Pantheon demand.

It is however much more common to find solitary corrupt spirits roaming about the city and leaving chaos in their wake. The corrupt spirits love to cause their own brand of mischief wherever they go, and their flight power gives them a great deal of mobility. They are liable to pop up literally anywhere, although the Midnight Squad has taken precautions to ward some parts of the city against them.

Recruiting new Shamans is always a priority for the evil gods, since without them they can neither feast on stolen souls nor manifest themselves in our world as avatars. While anyone would be convinced that the Banished Pantheon has great power, it takes a certain type of person to be not only convinced, but seduced by such creatures. A fair amount of time and energy goes into cajoling a potential Shaman into the Pantheon's ranks. Thus a significant portion of the group's energies goes into taking care of worldly matters relating to their new initiates. Invariable evil to the core, a new Shaman wants revenge upon everyone in the world who ever did him or her wrong or even pissed him or her off. The gods encourage their priests to carry out these vendettas, and are more than happy to send corrupt spirits to terrorize ex-lovers or soul sucking Husk to demolish an old work place.

Lughebu has recently developed quite an interest in the lost city of Oranbega. Although they do not truly understand magic, the gods know that it is the key to their imprisonment and they want to learn more. Thus they have begun to send exploratory parties down into the underground city to recover whatever magical artifacts and items of power they can. This has led them into conflict with the Circle of Thorns on more than one occasion, but they generally try to avoid the evil magician and explore areas that the sorcerers have not yet claimed for themselves.

In the chaotic days following the Rikti War, Lughebu's increased powers sensed a sleeping god underneath the cemetery in Dark Astoria. It was the dead god Mot, whose evil power outstripped even the Banished Pantheon. The greedy Lughebu wanted to drink from Mot's divine essence and so commanded his followers to launch an assault on that city zone. The overwrought authorities fled before the zombie hordes and abandoned Dark Astoria altogether. No one yet knows why the Banished Pantheon has claimed Dark Astoria as its own; Lughebu is

still trying to figure out how to tap into Mot's power without waking him up.

3.4 Enemies and Allies

The Pantheon will happily ally with anyone and everyone who asks for their assistance, as long as the end result is more pain and suffering in the world for them to feed upon. Since they have very few temporal goals, their agenda seldom conflicts with those of other villain groups. The flip side is that they very rarely actually care if their erstwhile ally's agenda gets fulfilled. Indeed, as often as not, when things turn bad for their ally, they will change sides, since they can feed of an ally's fear and loathing just as easily as an enemy's.

The one exception to the above assertions is the Circle of Thorns. As mentioned earlier, Lughebu and the rest of the Pantheon have a great fear for and interest in all things magical. They do not understand magic and cannot work it themselves, but they want to learn. They believe that there is a magical key to their prison and they think that the Circle of Thorns might be able to help them find it. Thus they try to work with the magicians whenever possible. Unfortunately for them The Circle is only slightly cooperative. Each group tries to exploit the other without really helping them. This leads to more than a few scuffles between the groups, particularly down in the caverns of lost Oranbega.

Several villain groups find the Pantheon to be as great a threat to them as the city's heroes do. Crey Industries has no use for the group, considering them pests and a threat to call of their plans. Likewise the Fifth Column feels much the same way, being disdainful of their African roots and their chaotic nature. Nemesis, as always, feels free to manipulate them to his own ends, and often succeeds in doing just that. The Freakshow basically appreciate the group's nihilism and chaos causing tendencies, and frankly to really understand what they're dealing with.

The Rikti present another interesting case. Their world long ago abandoned gods and religion of any sort. They know nothing of magic or the spirit world, and frankly are more than a little skeptical about the whole thing. There's no denying the Banished Gods' power though, and they think it can be used to their advantage. After all, they care little for what happens to humanity, they just want to win the war. They believe that the Pantheon is, like themselves, an invading army from another dimension. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Banished Gods are equally wary of the Rikti, since the aliens are emotional blanks to the evil deities. The Rikti can't be Husk, their souls can't be harvested, and they produce no delicious negative emotions to feed upon. Lughebu has made some overtures of cooperation with the Rikti, but thus far the two have not worked out any kind of formal alliance.

The Dawn Patrol stands as the greatest opponent of the Banished Pantheon. They have been fighting and defeating the villain group since the 30's, and until the Rikti Invasion, they were viewed as a nuisance group. Now that the evil gods can manifest their avatars on earth, fighting them has become a much higher priority for the hero group. They are now quite proactive in seeking out Shamans and concentrations of Husk before they can attack the city. Their magicians have also begun to develop special charms and enchanted items designed to negate the powers of the Corrupt Spirits. They give these out as favors to their trusted allies and members.

3.5 The Future

The Banished Pantheon has big plans for the future. While destroying souls to create Husk is certainly useful, it is not the ideal fate for every man woman and child. No, they are much better used as a renewable resource of anguish, at least until the gods can escape their prison entirely and roam the world at will. With this in mind, Lughebu has begun to develop a semi-complete stage of possession, wherein a spirit is implanted into a human being whose soul is still there. The human spirit will remain dominant, and the poor victim unaware of what has transpired.

Nevertheless he or she will become a walking beacon of some negative emotion, infecting themselves and everyone around them. The Midnight Squad will need to come up with some way to exorcise these spirits or eventually the whole city will fall under their gloomy sway. There are also plenty of other malevolent creatures from the spirit world that the Pantheon would like to slip through into our world. At this point only the Corrupt Spirits can traverse the barrier, but soon the gods might find away to send larger, more fearsome spirits to our world to wreak havoc. Beings like the monstrously huge Juggernauts of War or the sprawling Spirits of Chaos.

All is not necessarily dark in the future. Should the situation ever become incredibly dire (such as the gods themselves being free), the world could well see the return of Teilekku, the goddess of magic who first banished the evil deities many millennia ago. She would offer new powers, abilities, and items to who would follow her in her crusade against the banished gods.