

NIGHT'S DARK AGENTS

**Ninja and
Ninjutsu in
Role-Playing
Games by
Chris Elliott
and Richard
Edwards**

He whose sable arms, Black as his purpose, did the night resemble.

Hamlet II ii

For the most part, introducing elements of Japanese society into RPGs doesn't present too many problems. It is fairly easy to get information from libraries on the samurai, and provided appropriate allowances are made for the effects of the Japanese social system, players and referees can draw on European feudal models for commoners, the priesthood, magicians and thieves without going too badly astray. The ninja, however, are different. They have no real counterpart in European history, and despite their continuing popularity as subjects for books, films and television series, reliable information about them is hard to come by. This is not really surprising; all feudal Japanese institutions were obsessively secret, and the nature of ninjutsu means it would be doubly so. This series of articles is designed to explain who the ninja were, how they operated, and how they can be incorporated into role-playing games.

The Art of Stealth

Some estimates put the beginnings of ninjutsu as early as 500BC, and they are recorded as having been hired as spies by Prince Regent Shōtoku Taishi in the 6th century AD. Their last major use was in 1637, during the Shimbara war against Christian rebels on Kyushu, but there is good reason to believe that ninja were active in government service during the Taishō era, 1912-1926, and even in the Showa era, which began in 1926 and is still continuing today. Ninjutsu is therefore probably as old as Japanese history, but it has not remained unchanged,

and this helps to explain the conflicting accounts of its origins. Like most Japanese institutions, ninjutsu seems to have come from Chinese influence on a native tradition, with the resulting product being uniquely Japanese. Prince Shōtoku Taishi not only hired ninja, he was also a keen supporter of Buddhism, introduced about forty years before he came to power, and Chinese learning in general. Both of these, indirectly, were crucial to the development of ninjutsu. The Chinese classic *Sun Tzu - The Art of War* - eagerly taken up by Japanese generals, had a section on espionage which is likely to have influenced the existing Japanese tradition. (The characters for ninjutsu can be read as 'shinobi jutsu', from shinobi 'to steal in', and jutsu 'art or technique'; hence 'the art of stealth'.) During the bloody Gempei Wars between the Taira and Minamoto clans in 1180-1185, the Minamoto are said to have relied heavily on ninjutsu. Minamoto Yoshitsune, who finally defeated the Taira, is known to have studied the *Sun Tzu*, and allegedly had special training in ninjutsu. Early ninjutsu seems, therefore, to have been primarily a technique of military espionage.

Around the 9th and 10th centuries esoteric (secret) Buddhist teachings began to arrive from mainland China. These were spread by sects which, in contrast to those preaching Buddhism to the population in general, reserved their teachings for initiates. In 806, the monk Kūkai had returned from China and introduced the Shingon sect, which established its headquarters at Mount Kōya. Shingon Buddhism, the *School of the True Word*, practised Mikkyō, or secret doctrines involving mystical practices. In theory, these brought enlightenment which would allow students to tap the powers of the Buddha/Universe. In practice, they were a form of magic through incantations and spells, and the best known are the kuji-no-in, the 'nine signs'. (These appear in *Bushido* as the kuji-kuri, but were more than just a sign language. The hand positions which form the signs are shown in the book of the BBC series, *The Way of the Warrior*, together with an explanation of how they were used.) Although Zen Buddhism is usually associated with the samurai, it was not introduced until nearly four hundred years after Shingon Buddhism, and many higher ranking samurai practised esoteric Buddhism.

The ninja also absorbed these teachings, and it was their use of mikkyō practices which helped to give them a reputation for sorcerous powers. Along with the secret teachings of Chinese Buddhism came warrior monks teaching the martial arts, and generals and commanders fleeing the collapsing T'ang dynasty. All of these were to influence the survivors of defeated clans who fled to the mountainous provinces of south central Honshu in the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. Such refugees became jizamurai (samurai living like farmers) or lost samurai status altogether, but in the course of fighting for survival against superior forces, they became the nuclei of the ninja clans. This fight had the effect of making them close allies of the warrior monks, especially the yamabushi, who made frequent use of them in their

power struggle with the samurai.

On the principle of 'once bitten, twice shy', the ninja never abandoned the secrecy that had enabled them to survive and had given ninjutsu its emphasis on subtle manipulation of an opponent, rather than direct force, but in time they came to wield considerable power. There were over 25 major centres of ninja activity in Iga and Koga provinces in Kamakura times, and at one time they virtually controlled Kyoto by night. During the civil war which raged for over 80 years until Ieyasu unified Japan, they flourished. Despite the alleged abhorrence with which the samurai regarded the ninja, the relationship between them was intimate. Oda Nobunaga, who smashed the power of the Buddhist warrior monks, is also recorded as sending 46,000 troops against the ninja of Momochi Sandayu, boss of Koga province, in 1581. This did not prevent him employing his own ninja, led by one Kenpachi, who he sent against his enemies, such as Uesugi Kenshin. (It helps explain the fear inspired by the ninja when you learn that Kasumi Danjo, the leader of Uesugi's own ninja, had survived an ambush in which the rest of his colleagues had fallen, and killed the assassin threatening Kenshin, that his employer was still killed by Ukifune Jinrai, a dwarf ninja who had hidden himself, armed with a spear, inside Kenshin's privy.) Takeda Shingen, famous from Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*, made great use of the ninja, and is credited with important advances in their signalling and message techniques. The power of the ninja at that time is shown by the fact that he also attacked Momochi Sandayu, sending a ninja called Hajika no Jubei.

With the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate, and the unification of Japan, the role of the ninja changed again. The rising power of the merchant class brought employment from this quarter, and they were also a key part of the system that enabled the Tokugawas to dominate the country for over 250 years. The metsuke, or 'censors' are best known now for their seals on woodblock prints, but they were also the shogunate's secret police, and the ninja, particularly the Hattori family of Koga, were notorious as their agents. With the coming of peace to Japan, ninjutsu lost the hostile climate to be a way of life for an entire section of the population. Although ninjutsu is still taught to a handful of students, preserved like other links with the past, the shadow warriors are like the samurai; their modern descendants are very different people, in a different world. Like the samurai, though, the ninja are the stuff of legend, and with the advent of role-playing games seem set for a new lease of life.

The Artists of Stealth

The historical pressures that created and shaped the ninja and ninjutsu produced a remarkable breed of men and women. A ninja was born into a subculture where secrecy was a way of life, and whose outlook was supremely practical. This not only meant that they acquired a formidable array of specialised techniques and devices, but also that they became adept at achieving their ends through ingenious uses (or abuses) of items in

general use, and the manipulation of their opponents.

Ninja training began early, at about five or six years old, with the development of balance and agility. At about nine the training concentrated on suppleness and flexibility, with the result that adult ninja could squeeze through tiny openings, hide in minute spaces, and like Harry Houdini, dislocate their joints at will. The young ninja also practised the basic techniques of unarmed combat, and later use of the sword and staff. Associated with each clan was a ryu (school or teaching) of ninjutsu, and from about twelve onwards, ninja were taught the special weapons and techniques of their ryu. They also made long runs to develop stamina, and spent hours in cramped quarters or hanging from trees to build patience and endurance. Swimming techniques, on and under the surface, woodcraft, and silent movement were also important. Later in their training, they were taught techniques of entry and escape, mapping and sketching, the preparation of medicines and chemicals, and the skills of acting and applied psychology that were so important to them.

Just as the roles of the ninja can be summarised for convenience as spy, commando and assassin, so the techniques and equipment used by them can be grouped under a number of headings. In other articles in this series, we will look in more detail at incorporating ninjutsu into AD&D and *BuneQuest*, and develop it in *Bushido*, but for those of you who use another system, the following can serve as a basis from which to work. It is a reasonably comprehensive, but by no means complete summary of the skills and tools of ninjutsu. If you are not familiar with Japanese history and martial arts, the names may look a bit daunting, but whenever possible we have given translations. Two tips may also help; try breaking the words down into syllables, eg Shuriken-jutsu becomes shu-ri-ken-ju-tsu (follow the bouncing ball!) and remember that 'jutsu' on the end of anything simply means 'art' or 'technique'.

Costume: Unless disguised, a ninja on a mission would wear the traditional shinobi-shozoku, consisting of split-toed shoes, trousers, jacket, gloves and hood. This was black or reddish black, and reversible. The inside was dark blue, green or white. (Japan has a very snowy winter).

Stealth: The ninja were expert in moving undetected, indoors and outdoors, in any terrain. They took advantage of cover and natural sounds, camouflaged themselves, and used a variety of techniques to confuse or distract the attention of scouts or guards. They had at least ten different techniques of footwork for moving over various surfaces, including 'nightingale' floors which were designed to squeak loudly when stepped on. The ninja employed special swimming techniques to move silently, and could hide underwater for long periods, breathing through a tube or from an air bag.

Endurance and Agility: Because of their training, ninja were capable of extraordinary feats. They were alleged to be able to cover 300 miles in three

days, and run without resting for up to 125 miles. The techniques of forced march used were called hayagake-jutsu. The technique of suppleness (nawanake-jutsu) has already been referred to, and allowed ninja not only to hide in confined spaces and pass through small gaps, but to escape from bindings or chains. Karumi-jutsu, or 'lightning' enabled the ninja to perform amazing feats of climbing and jumping, including the famous 'chakuzen-jutsu' - walking across walls or ceilings by using minute holds - or leaping up into the shadowy roof of a corridor to hide spread-eagled against the walls.

Survival and Woodcraft: Their operations often called for the ninja to live off the land, and they were accomplished trackers. The ability to move swiftly and without detection across all kinds of terrain made them dangerous opponents in wartime.

Martial Arts: Although it's convenient to divide these into armed and unarmed techniques, in practice this was not a rigid division. Jujutsu, the ancestor of modern judo and aikido, has been defined as the art of combat with minimum use of weapons. A ninja could fight with or without weapons, but would use whatever technique or mixture of techniques were most effective.

Unarmed: The ninja's weaponless combat system was known as taijutsu, and fell into two main techniques. Daken-taijutsu (the way of attacking the

'What was that?'
'I don't know. Where?'
'There! A gleam of silvered steel in the moonlight - or a trick of the shadows, perhaps?'

bones) covered striking, kicking and blocking techniques. Ju-taijutsu 'relaxed body method' dealt with grappling and throwing techniques. Two more specialised techniques koppojutsu - 'bone breaking' and yubijutsu - 'nerve strikes' or attacks against the vital nerve centres of the body to paralyse, render unconscious or kill.

Armed: Generally speaking, all ninja were proficient with at least three weapons, and some were expert in as many as twenty. The four systems below were the most commonly used.

Sword: The ninjato, or ninja sword, was a slightly shorter weapon than the samurai's katana. Seldom decorated, its guard, the tsuba, was large and square, and the scabbard sword could be used as a step-up: The scabbard itself could contain powder to scatter in an opponent's eyes, be used as a probe, or with a removable tip become a breathing tube or a blowgun. Ninja were expert in tai-jutsu, a technique where the drawing of the sword and the first attack are all part of the same lightning-fast movement.

Sticks and Staves: Favourite weapons of the ninja, because they were readily improvised and formed part of many of the disguises they adopted, as well as being less obviously a weapon than a spear. Three main sizes were used; the 6' bo, the 4' jo, and the 3' long hambo (half-bo). Locks could be applied with the shorter staves to subdue an enemy. As many samurai learned to their cost,

when clashing with city patrolmen, a blow from a staff could shatter the finest blade like a twig.

Chains and Cords: Many Japanese weapons were modified by adding a chain or cord with which to attack or entangle an opponent. The kusari-gama, a rice sickle with a chain and weight on the hilt, was used by the samurai, but the similar kyoketsu shoge, which had a right angled blade and a hair rope, was unique to the ninja. The manriki-gusari, a chain with a weight at both ends, was known as a kusari-fundo when used by ninja. The kawa-naga, a grappling hook on a rope, was a climbing tool, but could also double as a weapon.

Throwing Blades: Known collectively as shuriken, these can be straight blades, ranging from needles to knives, or multi-pointed throwing stars. Although they could be poisoned, their main use was to distract or harass guards and pursuers. Shuriken could also be used in close range combat.

Gimmicks and Concealed Weapons: These were a trademark of the ninja. The shinobi-zue - 'ninja staff' - could contain a chain, sword or blinding powder, and be used as a smokescreen generator or blowgun. (Using a technique call fukiburi-jutsu, ninja could spit poisoned darts). Known as metsubushi, the blinding powders were usually made from ashes, pepper and sand, and could be thrown in 'eggs' which shattered on impact. Caltrops, or tetsubushi, were scattered to slow pursuit. A variety of collapsible ladders were used, as were nekode or shuko, hooked 'gloves' for climbing, and the shinobi kumade - 'ninja rake' - which telescoped out to form a climbing aid. A variety of bombs, mines, grenades, flash grenades and smoke bombs or powders were made use of, ignited from the doko or firepot concealed in the costume, or triggered by tripwires.

Chemistry and Herbalism: These arts were used to prepare medicines, poisons and many of the gimmicks mentioned above.

Hypnotism: Very little is known about saiminjutsu, the ninja art of hypnotism. Much was probably achieved by sleight of hand and the equivalent of conjurers tricks, but under the conditions most people met them, the ninja must have seemed sorcerers, able to work magic. Their use of the kuji-no-in, the mystic hand signs of Mikkyo Buddhism also contributed to this reputation.

Disguise: Although normally thought of as black-clad assassins, the ninja often used to disguise themselves as members of other groups, usually those found travelling the country. The most common were called the shichi-ho-de (seven ways of going):

1. Yamabushi - Mountain warrior-priest.
2. Sarugaku - Actor or entertainer.
3. Komuso - Wandering ascetic priest.
4. Ronin - Masterless samurai.
5. Akindo - Merchant.
6. Hokashi - Musician.
7. Shukke - Buddhist monk.

Next month, creating and playing ninja characters; more on ninja skills and equipment and an introduction to ninja tactics. □

This is the second instalment of a series about role-playing the Ninjas of medieval Japan in AD&D, RuneQuest and Bushido.

Creating and Playing Ninja Characters by Chris Elliott and Richard Edwards

Last issue, we outlined the role of the historical ninja, and the range of skills and equipment that made possible their uncanny feats. This part suggests ways of incorporating them into AD&D and RuneQuest, and expanding them as a profession in Bushido. As far as possible, this has been done within the original rules, rather than by creating new ones. This should make it easier to integrate the material with current campaigns.

NINJA IN AD&D

Both the assassin and monk character classes can be used as the basis for ninja characters, the assassin having skills of disguise and a secondary role as a spy, and the monk having skills derived from the martial arts. We have, therefore, given rules which are based on a synthesis of these two classes.

The rigorous early training of ninja would be reflected in high attribute scores for dexterity and constitution, and overall we suggest the following minimum scores:

S	I	W	D	C	Ch
12	11	9	15	11	5

Hit points should be rolled as for thieves and assassins, and the same table used for experience levels. The concept of alignments is not one that fits very well with this sort of character, but the closest is probably that of true neutral. When all the druids reading this have finished throwing fits, the reason for this is that the ninja's use of any and every form of deceit and violent death sprang from professionalism rather than any commitment to the principle of evil, and at its highest, their role was to act as keepers of the social balance in a society divided against itself. AD&D is biased toward humans, but within the guidelines in the *Player's Handbook*, there is no reason why other races should not have similar castes, although because of the clan basis on which they would also be organised, it would be almost unthinkable for a non-human to be accepted into a human ninja clan, and vice versa. The use of magic is tricky, because although all classes in AD&D can use magic items, only two can cast spells, and the ninja are neither magicians nor priests. As with monks, they should be able to use enchanted weapons, rings, and the magic items designed for thieves and assassins, and gain the ability to attempt scrolls at higher levels. Whether or not they are allowed to learn



Player character ninja must always be members of a clan/ryu (school) and this should also apply to NPC ninja unless there are convincing reasons otherwise. Any treasure and magic items acquired must be surrendered to the referee, acting as the chunin (middle man) controlling the ninja, but items may be loaned back when needed for specific missions.

NINJA IN RUNEQUEST

The skills of ninjutsu can be simulated in *RuneQuest* without too many problems, but the ninja need a non-Gloranthan setting. While the guidelines below are compatible with the basic rules, therefore, we have not tried to relate them to the various cults and groups covered there and in the supplements.

Because of their early training, even young ninja were already far above the average in terms of physical abilities, as well as having a good grounding in a daunting variety of specialist skills. To reflect this in a character would mean starting them at advanced skill levels, and thus giving them an unfair advantage over ordinary characters. In an established campaign, where other players are already well advanced, you could use the rules for apprenticeship on p104 of the rulebook, and assume that five years training in all the appropriate skills has been given. The other alternative is to start a ninja character as any other, and assume that they are learning the hard way, by being given missions. Whether they keep a share of any loot to pass to the ryu as their fee, or receive nothing, or whether the other players pay a fee to the referee for their services is a matter of choice and the circumstances of the campaign. They should not earn money of their own, or acquire valuable items, but should have the benefit of free training and equipment from their ryu to compensate.

It is desirable for ninja characters to have minimum Strength and Dexterity scores of 13, and high Constitution and Intelligence. Size can be low, and charisma is unimportant. Power is dealt with below, along with the use of magic, but it should ideally start low and be increased through experience.

SKILLS

These were outlined in the first part of this series, and are now given as character abilities. Some additional information is given, mainly aimed at *Bushido* players and referees, but which should also be of general interest.

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some clerical spells to correspond to the kuji-no-in (nine signs) is for you and your referee to agree. Some suggestions are given below if you decide to do this. Generally speaking, though, it is not the principle of classes other than MUs and Clerics using magic that unbalances a game, so much as careless refereeing which allows too rapid progression of characters or the acquisition of too many magic items too easily.

To prevent ninja characters becoming supermen (or women) we have left the more specialised skills as optional extras which can be studied at the expense of further progression in the basic abilities. This means that on reaching second level and above, a ninja can opt to leave a basic ability such as silent movement unchanged, and instead gain a new skill. Once this has been done, the same decision must be made each time a new level is gained, ie improve abilities already gained, including specialist skills with more than one level, or gain new ones.

Costume

AD&D: The ninja's costume (*shinobi shozoku*) is only equivalent to AC10, and even if you use their trick of sewing steel rods into the sleeves to block sword cuts, it still only becomes the equivalent of a shield, AC9. Armour was worn, but mainly on military missions, and not always then, and would in any case interfere with stealthy skills. The 'Effective Armour Class' column from the Monk class can be used to represent unarmed combat skills, though. The only other alternative is to avoid combat like the plague, and fight dirty when you have to. (A good bet in any case.)

RuneQuest: The trick mentioned above can be considered as being equivalent to a parry with chainmail sleeves, but shouldn't be relied upon.

Bushido: As well as concealing their tools and weapons in pockets of their costume, ninja also carried two types of soles for their tabi (shoes). One was a rubber/gum compound, for grip, and the other a cotton floss material for silence.

Stealth Skills

AD&D: These correspond to Move Silently, Hide in Shadows and Hear Noise. In the water, ninja should not receive penalties for combat, due to their training. By special breathing techniques, they could stay submerged for three minutes, or ten using an air bubble trapped in their costume, and indefinitely using a snorkel. Treat all as basic skills.

RuneQuest: Use the thief skills of Camouflage, Hide in Cover and Move Quietly. Normal swimming rules apply, but bear in mind the comments above.

Bushido: Ninja could swim upright carrying objects without wetting them, and use similar techniques to write or draw maps while treading water. By use of floats, they could move heavy or bulky objects just under water.

Endurance and Agility Skills

AD&D: Use the movement rates for monks, and also allow sideways movement at normal rates. This technique, called *yoko aruki* (sideways walking) allowed ninja to move through very narrow spaces, or to hug the walls of corridors and buildings, and also made it impossible to tell from the tracks which way they had been going. These are basic skills. To simulate binding and escape, or use of *nawanuke-jutsu* (suppleness) to squeeze into or through tiny spaces, a roll can be made against dexterity. Failure to bind a captive gives them a chance to escape, and failure of other areas can be at the referee's discretion. Binding, or *hojojutsu*, is a single level specialism, escape is a basic skill, as are other applications of suppleness. The rules for climbing walls should be modified when climbing aids are used, as these will considerably increase the chances of success.

RuneQuest: The normal daily movement rates should be adjusted to take account of the distances ninja could travel, while indoors a basic rate of 10 movement units should be a good level. The normal rules for climbing and jumping work well enough, but *nawanuke jutsu* and *chakuzen-jutsu* (ceiling walking) can be treated as separate skills.

Bushido: Ninja used poles or springboards (pulled up after them to prevent discovery) to clear walls eight, nine, or ten feet high, and this gained them a reputation for superhuman leaps. By use of an acrobatic 'ricochet' technique, they could in fact actually clear up to 25' lengthways in a single jump.

Survival and Woodcraft Skills

AD&D: Ninja should be allowed tracking skill equivalent to a ranger's, as a basic skill, and also the ability to live off the land outdoors, but not in a dungeon. They can use the special rations mentioned below in those, however.

RuneQuest: Tracking will be a skill taught by ninja ryu, as will survival, although the latter should be rolled on a daily basis, with failure leading to a loss of 1 point of Con per day, recovered at the same rate as damage from wounds. The rations below will avoid this problem, and can be prepared as a 'potion'.

Bushido: Between missions, your character can while away their leisure making *kito-gan*. These are tablets made from ground rice, millet dust, wheat germ, potato flour, Job's Tears (a type of plant), carrot scrapings, dried hakobe grass, and other secret ingredients. They provided field rations, and were alleged to delay thirst for up to five days.

Martial Arts

AD&D: Rather than using the unarmed combat rules on p72 of the *DMG* (Pummeling, Grappling and Overbearing), it is easier to use the monk's table for open hand attacks. This is a basic skill, but characters opting to learn *yubi-jutsu* (nerve strikes) as a specialist skill can add the 1/2HP per level to damage as monks. Those studying *yadome-jutsu* (arrow cutting) can knock away or dodge missiles like monks using their hands or weapons. Use the assassin's 'To Hit' table, and the same rules for weapon proficiency when dealing with armed combat, and take the bastard sword (ninjato), staff, and dart (shuriken) as initial weapons. The rules for grenades and breath weapons will cover powder attacks using blinding eggs or blowguns, and *iai-jutsu* (fast draw) can be treated as an advanced skill giving +1 to initiative for each level learned. The hex based combat system on p69 of the *DMG* is a help, if you don't already use it.

RuneQuest: The *RQ* rules for punches, kicks, grappling, defence, etc, can serve as a basis for martial arts. For *koppo-jutsu* (bonebreaking) treat the hands as light or heavy cesti, and progress as a normal weapon skill. *Yubi-jutsu* (nerve strikes) can be treated as claw attacks, with each successive level increasing by 1% the chance of a critical hit which will disable the limb concerned. Bearing in mind the comments on p100 of the basic rules, you can use statistics for the bastard sword, staff, sickle etc, for their ninja equivalents. Treat shuriken as throwing knives, using the rules for pitched shots, and for chain weapons assume a grappling attack is made to throw an opponent, without the chance for them to block a successful hit. They can also be used like a grain flail. Dave Morris' article on *RQ* samurai in *WD40* suggests treating *iai-jutsu* as a skill reducing the strike rank of a sword with

successive levels of mastery.

Bushido: Although it is not listed as a ninja bugei, you should include *bojutsu* (staff). It was characteristic of ninja weapons that they were often disguised, and the simple traveller's staff could become a deadly weapon, or itself conceal another, such as a chain or a blade. The nine shuriken (a lucky number) usually carried could be used as tools to dig, drill, and scrape, and an iron tobacco pipe could be just that, a weapon, or a snorkel. Ninjutsu is an approach, rather than a collection of exotic hardware, and the ninja were supreme improvisors and adapters.

Chemistry and Herbalism

These skills can be used to prepare poisons, explosives, secret inks, medicines and antidotes. It was common to poison water sources or leave out poisoned food to trap ninja, and because of this they not only avoided such hazards, but were expert at detecting poisoned substances through their scent and appearance. In *AD&D*, ninja can manufacture and detect poisons as an assassin would (use Find Traps), and can call on clan resources for the other items. The alchemist skills in *RuneQuest* and the Taste Analysis skill can be used in the same way.

Hypnotism

Saiminjutsu (ninja hypnotism) can be treated as sleight of hand, suggestion, magic, or a bit of each. *AD&D* players can use Pick Pockets for sleight of hand tricks, and ninja could be allowed limited clerical spell ability to represent use of the *kuji-no-in*. This should be a specialist skill, only available at 3rd level and above, and limited to appropriate spells such as *detect magic*, *find traps* and *command*. One spell per level is gained, to a maximum of nine, and these are limited to those useable by a cleric two levels lower than the ninja. In *RuneQuest*, the *kuji-no-in* can function as a focus for battle magic such as *ironhand*, *detect traps*, *countermagic*, etc. These should only be taught by a Buddhist temple, which will require payment by service. Pick Pockets skill can be used for sleight of hand. *Bushido* players can treat hypnotism as a Task, with a value depending on the circumstances, and use a BCS for sleight of hand similar to other practical skills. Don't make the effects too powerful in either case.

Ninja Tactics

Now you have a character with an arsenal of dirty tricks, the next question is how you use them. This is the subject of the third of these articles, which contains information on strategy and tactics. The difference between life and death can be a small thing like forgetting to use insect repellent. The ninja, Kirigakure Saizo, was speared through the floor by alert guards in the room above, who had noticed mosquitos hovering over his position.

How do you slip past sentries as if invisible, and confound pursuers by disappearing into thin air? How, when you are surrounded in a building which is then set alight, can you emerge unscathed? All this, and more, in the final part of *Night's Dark Agents*, next issue! □

ACTS OF BLACK NIGHT: NINJUTSU FOR PLAYERS

*Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
Complots of mischief.*

Titus Andronicus V 1 64

Ninja Tactics

These were not based on brute force, but on the manipulation of an opponent by applied psychology. Even where physical force was used, the overall aim was always to mislead, confuse or frighten an opponent into doing the ninja's will.

Wherever possible, the ninja avoided direct confrontation, since the nature of their work involved operating in a hostile environment where they would face overwhelming forces if detected. The key to success was therefore thorough preparation, to ensure undetected entry and operation, and also to arrange a reliable means of escape afterwards. Hidden caches of equipment, food, and medicine allowed the ninja to operate for extended periods in enemy territory, and avoid dangerous contacts. Once a thorough initial reconnaissance had been carried out, the ninja could infiltrate using 'yo' or positive techniques, such as camouflage, or 'in', negative techniques, which involved working in the open, but in a disguised form, such as one of the 'seven ways of going'.

When operating in this way, the ninja often carried the *rokugu*, or 'six tools'. None were suspicious in themselves, but all could be turned to the ninja's purposes. They were; a short length of bamboo (*uchitake*), rope (*kaga nawa*), rain hat (*ami gasa*), stone pencil (*seki hitsu*), medicine (*kusuri*), and towel (*sanjaku tenugui*). A ninja could obtain employment with a temple as a caretaker or similar, and work to be transferred into the enemy lord's household; return disguised with defeated troops; or infiltrate as an attendant in a procession. (Kunoichi, female ninja, favoured infiltration and seduction, but if you fancy a challenge many male ninja were, like Japanese actors, skilled female impersonators.) When operating 'openly' the ninja had to concentrate for most of the time on appearing to be no more than they were disguised as; a simple monk, a travelling musician, or any of the other covers they adopted. Sometimes such disguises became false identities, maintained for years on end. When infiltrating by stealth, however, or once they were free from observation, they could use any technique or equipment to achieve their aim.

Night was the friend of the ninja; night and foul weather. Driving rain, snow, and fog cut down sound and visibility, and even when these were not present, they would wait for moonless or cloudy nights, and a wind to move the leaves and grass and cover their passage. To ensure maximum night vision, the ninja might remain in darkness for up to 24 hours prior to the mission, hidden in a cave or hole in the ground. They would then pick a weak spot in the enemy's defences, such as an empty room or an avenue of approach considered impossible and thus lightly guarded, and also a psychological moment, such as the hours before dawn, or when guards were coming to the end of a watch and

*This is the third and final part of
our series on Ninjas in role-
playing games.*

NIGHT'S DARK AGENTS

Tactics & Strategy by Chris Elliott and Richard Edwards

starting to relax. *Crack!* Something in the camp fire explodes, scattering sparks and embers everywhere; the guard leaps up cursing and hopes that none have lodged in his armour. Spear held at the ready, he peers into the darkness, but can now see only the after-image of the fire, flashing as he blinks... A simple trick, designed to spoil a guard's night vision, but one that could be used to slip past sentries unobserved, or as a distraction to cover another ninja's entry elsewhere. Dogs and water fowl could betray the ninja when disturbed, and were usually poisoned, but frogs and the crickets between the stones of a wall fell silent instead, and needed a different solution. The ninja's skill as a *yogen* (chemist) provided substances which could be spread on the surface of a moat to make the frogs croak loudly for long enough to cover entry, and others which could perform a similar function with a cage of crickets carried as the wall was scaled. During sieges, the ninja were alleged to have used such exotica as the *yami doko* (kite in the darkness), a man-bearing kite, the *kito washi* (human eagle), a cloth and bamboo glider, and the *yagora*, a ferris wheel like machine that could drop a stream of ninja over a wall, but more stealthy approaches were usually favoured. A common entry was by water, and here the ninja could scatter duckweed on the surface, and move beneath the floating mass, breathing through a snorkel. Because of the very humid summer of Japan, buildings had false attics and underfloor spaces for ventilation, into which a ninja could slip, by dislocating limbs if necessary. They could also use the selection of saws, chisels, borers, keys and miniature hammers concealed in the pockets of their costume. Having previously established the location of a victim's *futon* (mattress), they could then be speared through the flimsy floorboards and matting. Such spaces, however, were often strung with threads linked to alarms, triggered when touched or cut. On entry, hinges and sliding doors would be lubricated with oil, water, or urine, to stop them squeaking, and the ninja would cover their mouth with their hood to

muffle breathing. Expert at detecting the non-random breathing and noises of feigned sleep, they also used the trick of sprinkling rice flour on a 'sleepers' face. Not enough to wake one really asleep, it would panic someone pretending, who would think they were the victim of some hideous ninja poison. Doors could be locked or jammed shut as the ninja moved through a building, to delay any pursuit.

On completion of a mission, or when detected, the ninja would have to make good an escape. Here, where they were often in view of pursuers, and always racing against time, their ninjutsu was tested to its limits. Much depended on how well preparations had previously been made. Using a springboard or vaulting pole, the ninja could apparently leap walls with a single bound, leaving guards stranded on the other side.

Apparently trapped in a tree, they would slide along previously prepared ropes to safety. Ahead of the fleeing ninja is a river. Now he will be surrounded and cut down, or shot as he swims across.

Except that he seems to hardly pause at the bank, and run across the water... A hidden ford, the location of the stones known only to the ninja that placed them, and changed from time to time.

Guards could also be led through patterns of mines. (Yes, they did have land mines, called *uzume-bi*, and also grenades, called *nage-teppo*.) Smokescreens were also used, and sometimes these were poisonous. To buy time, caltrops would be scattered behind, or in emergencies thrown like shuriken. A wickedly neat ruse was to throw a sha-ken with a small length of spitting fuse attached. It wasn't a bomb or grenade, but few guards took the chance of finding out the hard way. Flash grenades blinded pursuers, and when they were recovered, the ninja would have disappeared. They might simply be a few feet away, curled into a ball, but pursuers were more likely to follow the noise made by another ninja, or assume from the splash of a large stone in the water that their quarry was making an escape elsewhere. How do you catch a sorcerer who can vanish into thin air? Seen in a corridor, a ninja would disappear, actually braced between walls and roof after a single acrobatic leap.

Outdoors, they could sit on the bottom of ponds for hours, breathing through a snorkel, hang suspended from the branches of trees using their rope, or bury themselves in shallow 'earths' with only their mouths exposed. Even when trapped in a building which was then set alight to drive them out, they would hug the thin zone of breathable air just above the floor to avoid suffocation, far more dangerous than flames, and then use any available tools to break through the floor to bury themselves in the earth beneath. After their disappointed pursuers had consoled themselves with the thought of the agonising death they must have suffered, they would emerge to continue their work. In all that they did, one of the ninja's most powerful weapons was their reputation for occult powers, which they did nothing to dispel. Ahead of a guard, a stone lantern moves, becoming a terrifying demon breathing fire... *Onibi gakure*, the technique of wearing a demon mask and blowing fire from a tube. (For some idea

of what this must have looked like, try to catch the classic Japanese movie *Onibaba*, where a similar sort of trick is used.) Always remember, be tricky. As that great Occidental sage Bill Tidy once said, 'There's more ways of killing a cat than hitting it with a brick.'

DRAGONS IN THE WATER: NINJUTSU FOR REFEREES

One should be as a dragon lying hidden in the depths of the water; that is, carefully conserving one's energy while observing the progress of events and preparing to act when the right moment occurs.'

I Ching

There were three levels of ninja, the *jonin* (high man), *chunin* (middle man), and *genin* (low man). Ninja ryu (for game purposes the difference between ryu, schools or traditions, and the clans with which they were associated is not important) were organised on the classic cell structure, and although the *jonin* directed its activities, the *chunin* acted as cutouts, ensuring that the *genin* who actually did the dirty work were unable to betray his identity. Because of this structure, the role of *jonin* is an ideal one for a referee, serving much the same function as a Patron in *Traveller*. In theory, just as the *yakuza* (gangsters) sometimes acted like Robin Hoods rather than robbing hoods, so the *jonin* was concerned to restore the balance of society by aiding the oppressed, and this can be a useful source of scenarios. In practice, however, even when achieving such worthy aims, they were as subtle and devious, not to say unscrupulous, as ever. Different *ninja* could be assigned to the same mission without knowing, to avoid treachery, or so that only the *jonin* who received all their reports knew the true picture. In a variation on this ploy, each *genin* might be given part of a message which when put together would give them their orders. On occasions, a *ninja* could be given false information so that when captured and interrogated, they would mislead their captors. It also pays to remember that although we hope that most referees will play *jonin* as moral if ruthless patrons, that their real-life counterparts were quite prepared to accept, say, a contract to suppress a peasant revolt by arson and terror.

Organising the Ninja

Ninja ryu varied in size, but one of the most powerful, the Koga ryu, in the province of the same name, took in around 50 *chunin* families, each controlling 30-40 *genin*. Player characters should start as *genin*, although you may wish to eventually 'retire' senior characters from active service to become *chunin*, or even allow them to establish their own tradition, and become *jonin* of small ryu subsidiary to a more powerful one. Because the *ninja* were a separate caste (or out-caste) in Japanese society, the clan and ryu were immensely important to them. It is possible to have RPG *ninja* characters as freelance agents, but better for them to belong to a ryu, as this provides both a ready made background, support, and a source of scenarios through the missions players are given. The

Bushido rules already have a structure of six clans, A-F, friendly, neutral or hostile to each other. This is a good way of encouraging players to role-play, but hardly makes for scintillating dialogue when two *ninja* encounter one another on a mission. "Cran A?" "Iye, Cran F, wakarimasu ka?", followed by the zip of flying sha-ken, a groan and a thud. Instead of this, therefore, we have taken six actual ryu, whose special techniques are known. Choosing one of these will give a player a level of expertise or skills not available to other *ninja*, but means also that they may have to deal with hostile clans to obtain their services, equipment, poisons, etc. These are the six:

Togakure Ryu: Favoured the *tutsubishi* (caltrops) and *shuko*. These were climbing spikes worn across the palm of the hand. (Like the *nekode* in *Bushido*). The band around the hand was metal, and could be used to block sword cuts, giving rise to legends of *ninja* stopping blades bare handed. In *AD&D*, this can be treated as a skill giving a +1 to 'Effective Armour Class' for each level of expertise. For *Bushido*, treat as a 'Parry' option, with the further option of a 'Second Strike' attack or the 'Lightning Strike' *okuden* to represent a follow-up attack with the other hand.

Kyushin Ryu: Known for their unorthodox use of standard weapons, especially spears (*bisento*). Players and referees should use their imagination here, and allow a better chance of success when, say, throwing arrows.

Fudo Ryu: Specialists in *iai-jutsu* and *shuriken-jutsu*. Rather than restrict these techniques (or any others) to a particular ryu, it will probably be better to give a bonus reflecting greater practice and superior technique. Don't make this too generous, though, or you'll give an unfair advantage over other *ninja* or non-*ninja* characters.

Gyokku Ryu: Expert in *yubijutsu*, or nerve strikes. In *Bushido*, this can be treated as the 'Precision Strike' *okuden*, bare handed.

Koto Ryu: Users of *Koppojutsu*, bonebreaking technique. It is difficult to simulate this in *AD&D*, as hits are not taken on individual locations, but for this skill and *yubijutsu*, which could also disable limbs, you can opt to aim bare-handed attacks at limbs (except the head for *koppojutsu*) and then apply the Monk rules for stunning opponents. On a *koppojutsu* attack, the limb will be 'stunned' for only as many rounds as the level of the attacker, but also suffer the optional 1/2HP damage per level. In *Bushido*, treat *koppojutsu* as an *okuden* of *atemi-waza*, giving an increased chance of critical success, and then using the optional rule on broken limbs on p65 of Book 1. For example, an adjusted BCS of 15-24 normally scores a critical success on a roll of 1 or 2. Using this technique, that becomes 1, 2 or 3, and so on for higher BCSs. It can be used in both strike and grapple attacks.

Kusunoki Ryu: This ryu had a vast network of spies. They are therefore ideal for referees to use as a neutral 'NPC' clan, who operate as information brokers.

Each ryu should be friendly to one other (except the Kusunoki Ryu), neutral to the Kusunoki Ryu and one other, and hostile to two.

Ninja Strategy

Ninjutsu, properly practised, was far more than just esoteric combat techniques and gadgets. At its highest level, it used applied psychology to manipulate an opponent into doing the *ninja*'s will, preferably without being aware of it. Even the *genin* on a mission relied heavily on practical psychology to confuse, mislead, distract or frighten his enemy. This is the most difficult aspect of the art for a referee to come to grips with, and beyond the scope of this article to even begin to cover adequately. Even a basic appreciation of it, though, will help give your campaign and scenarios more depth and authenticity in respect of the *ninja*, and should make them more satisfying to play if your group is into anything more subtle than straight mayhem. Central to the teachings of *ninjutsu* was the concept of the 'five manifestations' of all things – Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Void. Everything, from overall strategy and espionage tactics to combat tactics and even combat postures, could be categorised in this way. The *ninja* classified their opponent's needs and weaknesses under these manifestations, and planned their strategy accordingly. For instance, an opponent whose personality operated mainly on the Water level was prone to anger and other strong emotions, and could be goaded into rash action. One whose emotions were on the more physical Earth level, on the other hand, was prone to laziness, and sought security. They could be discouraged, or distracted, as in the case of a guard, bribed, or manipulated by threatening their security. In game terms, what this means is simply that as 'jonin' you would design a scenario that encouraged players to study their target, and select a method of carrying out their contract that played on its weaknesses, or complemented an enemy's attack. It also means that you should not limit your or the player's strategies to direct assault. Although the *ninja* were famed (or infamous) assassins and commandos, they were also masters of espionage, and you should make good use of disguise, bribery, blackmail, misinformation, counter-espionage, hirelings, 'sleepers', double agents, and all the other trappings of the silent war.

FINAL NOTE

For scenarios you can incorporate as much or as little of the supernatural as you like. 'Genuine' magic could be used to counter the 'sorcery' of *ninjutsu* and the *Kuji-no-in*, but keep the effects on the same level; it's not much fun being a *ninja* if the resident castle Security wizard thinks that there's one in the bushes and flattens half an acre with a meteor strike just to be on the safe side. This series has covered a lot of ground, and some of it has had to be done very sketchily. We hope, however, that most of it has been new to most of you, and that it has succeeded in its aim of giving an insight into the approach to life that made the *ninja* and *ninjutsu* unique, and suggesting ways in which this can be introduced into role-playing games. □

Ore-no-shibori-wa doko-ni oitero yoku wakatteraso.