

CHAPTER ONE

THE SECRET

This book is about secret societies: their dynamics, their *raison d'être*, their characteristics according to ethnographic accounts, and their importance for understanding changes in the archaeological record. Secret societies embodied some of the most awe-inspiring events in the cultural repertoires of traditional societies. They brought to earth masked spirits who performed supernatural feats and exerted exceptional influences on the living. Those in high positions claimed to hold the secrets of the universe and of life, to be able to control spirits, confer wealth, bring the dead back to life, exorcise the possessed, and perform supernatural feats. Secret societies often built elaborate special structures. These organizations may have been precursors of both stage magic shows and institutionalized religions, and they may have played critical roles in the foundation of complex political organizations.

By firelight, terrifying spirits could appear together with cannibals and supernatural destroyers. Primordial forces, unlike anything seen in normal life, were invoked, unleashed, and reined in again. Secret societies had mystery, pomp, impressive displays, and above all, claims to secret supernatural power. Adepts ate burning coals or spewed them out of their mouths as fountains of fire. The initiated appeared out of smoke or fell from the skies; they menaced the uninitiated who were forced to hide or flee. Behind the staged dramas, there were often real and macabre displays of ruthless power including human sacrifices. Trespassers on to the grounds of secret societies were killed or, if they were lucky, got off with a beating.

Reading the early ethnographic descriptions is not always for the faint of heart. The accounts may captivate readers owing to their incredible descriptions, but the images evoked can perturb sensitive dispositions and invade dreams. Secret society members did not shirk from using any tactics they could to impress and intimidate their fellow villagers, no matter how gruesome. Memberships in the most important societies came at high costs not only in terms of material property, but in physical and emotional terms as well. In addition to harrowing physical ordeals, total commitment to the societies was demanded. To prove such commitment, candidates in some societies had to make their wives available for sex with leaders of the society or even give their wives away, or they had to provide human sacrifices, engage in cannibalism, or even eat their own sons. To enter into the world of secret societies is to enter a world of mystery, magic, mortification, smoke and mirrors imbued with supernatural and real power. At times, comparisons with the “dark side” of the Force in *Star Wars* might not be too farfetched.

Perhaps because of these features, secret societies have fascinated amateur and professional researchers of politics and religion for well over a century, and the accounts are still captivating. As early as the 1840s, Paul Kane (1996:146,151) recorded a *Hamatsa* ceremony and used the term “secret society” to refer to exclusive ritual organizations on America’s Northwest Coast with costly initiations. Considerable anthropological attention was subsequently devoted to secret societies from 1890 to 1940, although much less interest has been displayed by academicians since then. Members were usually sworn to keep the secrets of their society’s power on pain of death. Secret societies occurred in tribal and chiefly societies and, in some cases, persisted into modern industrial societies. Anthropological luminaries such as Franz Boas and Philip Drucker have written extensively on secret societies, while innumerable books have been written about contemporary secret societies such as the Freemasons.

There are occasional excavation reports that have identified “dance houses” or “suthories” in California, and there have been many excavations of kivas in the Southwest. However, even in these areas, treatments generally stop at the description and identification of ritual structures (with notable exceptions by Gamble 2008, Weeks 2009, 2012, Ware 2014, and Dye 2016). In most other areas, secret societies have been ignored altogether (again with some notable exceptions by Whitehouse 1992, Mills 2014, and Dietrich and Notroff 2015). Whitehouse, in particular, was a pioneer in promoting the existence of secret societies in prehistoric cultures, especially Neolithic caves.

In archaeology, it has become fashionable to invoke the vague power of ritual and beliefs in attempts to explain cultural changes of the past, especially where impressive ritual structures appeared (Pauketat and Emerson 1997; Cauvin 2000; Whalen and Minnis 2001; Emerson et al. 2003:308; Parker Pearson et al.

2006:234–5; Parker Pearson 2007:142; Watkins 2010; Hodder 2010a:340, 348, 353; Whitehouse and Hodder 2010:142; Joyce and Barber 2015:835). However, the precise way in which rituals could create religious or political power has remained nebulous. At most, the existing explanations simply attribute major religious constructions to the power of beliefs and rituals without anchoring explanations in more tangible facets of culture. Alternatively, explanations have appealed to various social stresses that rituals purportedly helped alleviate. In contrast, secret societies have the potential of linking ideologies and rituals to the acquisition of power and particularly to explain why religion or ritual has played such an important role in the emergence of more and more complex societies leading up to civilization.

As yet, the potential importance of secret societies has gone largely unrecognized in archaeological theoretical worlds. Where there have been attempts to identify and situate secret societies, or “religious sodalities,” in broader cultural dynamics, as in the American Southwest, the architectural remains have generally been interpreted in functional terms, especially as a ritual means for reducing social tensions and binding amalgamated kinship groups together in the same community (notable exceptions include Gamble 2008, and Ware 2014). This functionalist interpretation is in stark contrast to the ethnographic accounts of secret societies which the following chapters illustrate.

In Europe and Asia, the very concept of a secret society seems to be unknown or not well understood among archaeologists. The recent weighty tome on the prehistory of religion from Oxford University Press (Insoll 2011) does not even have an index entry for secret societies or ritual sodalities, and there is no discussion devoted to them other than two very brief passages. This lack of attention by archaeologists is curious since the anthropological literature describes secret societies as playing prominent roles in community dynamics. Given the widespread ethnographic occurrence of secret societies in tribal societies, it would indeed be surprising if secret societies did not play important roles in many prehistoric cultures throughout the world. The goal of this book is to help rescue secret societies from this state of oblivion in archaeology and to demonstrate that they likely played pivotal roles in socio-political and religious developments in the past. I am convinced that they constitute a sort of “missing link” in the cultural evolution of more complex societies.

I have been investigating secret societies for more than twenty-five years and have concluded that they provide a critical link in our understanding of how individuals augmented their power in many communities and regions. I first became alerted to the potential importance of secret societies when D’Ann Owens undertook a study for me of the ritual contexts of children’s handprints and footprints in the Upper Paleolithic painted caves of France. In order to understand what those rituals may have been like, she examined

the ethnographies of complex hunter/gatherers to see what kinds of rituals children were involved in. Owens concluded that the most likely context for children's participation in rituals was secret societies (Owens and Hayden 1997).

On the basis of that study, I realized that secret societies not only could be potentially identified in the archaeological remains of complex hunter/gatherer and tribal cultures, but that secret societies were often the most powerful organizations in those societies. Moreover, the power they wielded cross-cut kinship and even community boundaries. Serendipitously, in my own excavations at the Keatley Creek site on the Canadian Plateau, there were several puzzling small structures about 100–200 meters from the core of that large prehistoric village of complex hunter/gatherers. I initially thought that these small outlying structures might be dwellings of outcasts, migrants, specialized hunters, possibly shamans, or women's menstrual houses. However, after Owens' study, and given the very secluded nature of the structures on the outskirts of the residential area at Keatley Creek, together with the ethnographically documented existence of secret societies during the nineteenth century in the locality, it occurred to me that these might be specialized ritual structures used by secret societies. Subsequent investigations of those structures have largely confirmed this interpretation (Hayden 1998; Hayden and Adams 2004; Sheppard 2007; Morin 2010; Villeneuve 2012), a topic that will be discussed further in Chapter 10.

Given these developments, together with my ongoing interest in aggrandizer strategies for promoting aggrandizers' own self-interests (Hayden 2001, 2014), I was keen to find out more about the underlying nature of secret societies, and was fortunate to have Suzanne Villeneuve take up the research program dealing with the small peripheral structures at Keatley Creek. She became intrigued by the issues involved and has vigorously pursued additional research projects related to the possibilities and problems surrounding these structures. The following chapters owe a great debt to the early ethnographies, and I hope that many readers will find the resulting observations and thoughts as exciting as I do. Thus, I would like to begin with some discussion of why secret societies are important for archaeologists and exactly what a secret society is.

WHY ARE SECRET SOCIETIES IMPORTANT?

The preceding comments provide a general background for understanding why archaeologists and anthropologists should be interested in secret societies. More specifically, these reasons can be enumerated as follows.

First, secret societies are recognized in their own communities as being important and powerful, often embodying the most elaborate traditions of their cultures in terms of ritual, art, music, food, dance, costumes, and language – all

aspects that make individual social groups unique and contribute to their cultural identities.

Second, secret societies only appear to emerge among transegalitarian (complex) hunter/gatherers and subsequent agricultural tribal or chiefdom societies (Driver 1969:349,360,365,396; Owens and Hayden 1997; Johansen 2004). As such, they constitute a relatively recent phenomenon in cultural evolution, likely extending back only to the Upper Paleolithic, or in exceptional circumstances perhaps back to the Middle Paleolithic.

Third, because the most powerful members of communities generally dominate the highest ranks of secret societies, and because they control significant resources and means to advance their own hegemonic control in the community, secret societies constitute powerful driving forces for cultural changes including major changes in ideologies, cultural values, and beliefs, as well as new sociopolitical relationships including an increased centralization of power.

Fourth, secret societies generally include members from different kinship groups and even communities, thus establishing a supra-kinship and supra-community level of organization, control, and power with a far wider demographic and economic base than otherwise might have existed. Secret societies, therefore, could have served ambitious individuals as the means for establishing community and regional political organizations with centralized control. Ware (2014:114,194) emphasizes that ritual sodalities in the American Southwest were regional organizations that often encompassed different linguistic and ethnic groups. Other ethnographers have explicitly linked the development of secret societies to the limitations of kinship systems for developing political control (e.g., Chapters 2 and 7). Such regional organization also characterized the American Northwest Coast, the Great Plains, the Great Lakes, California, Africa, and Melanesia. Thus, secret societies have a strong tendency to form far-reaching regional networks or interaction spheres.

Fifth, secret societies are important because they constitute a major means for extracting surplus resources and wealth from community members and for concentrating these surpluses in the hands of a few individuals. Moreover, they only appear to have occurred in areas capable of producing significant surpluses. Both the carrot and the stick were often employed, with rewards for those who contributed and intimidation or coercion used for those who were reluctant contributors. Supernatural justifications for these levies and physical means of enforcing requisitions typified many secret societies.

Sixth, secret societies may have led to the development of some of the most notable prehistoric ritual centers and ultimately to the formation of regional state religions. Archaeologists have long been aware that religious institutions seem to have played key roles in the emergence of political complexity, from the first “communal buildings” or shrines of the Neolithic, or even the Epipaleolithic, to the dominating temple or mortuary mounds or megaliths

of early chiefdoms, to the impressive ziggurats and pyramids of the first states. The scale of investment and the artistic efforts devoted to religious institutions dwarf any other undertaking in these polities that archaeologists have detected. Yet, for a long time, attempting to deal with religion was considered a hopeless task by many archaeologists, as exemplified by Hawkes' (1954) dictum that religion and ideology are the least accessible, if not totally inaccessible, aspects of prehistory. Similarly, in an interview in *The Mystery of Stonehenge*, Atkinson stated that when archaeologists reach for past people's minds, they slip through your fingers like sand (CBS 1965). As a result, for a long time, the reason why religion was so central to the emergence of political complexity was viewed in terms of religious fanaticism or other mysterious factors. It has only been recently that ethnographers, ethnoarchaeologists, and archaeologists have begun to investigate the link between politics and religion (Aldenderfer 1998:304–5; 2010; Dietler 2001:70; B. Hayden 2003; Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008). I argue that it is no happenstance that chiefs and early kings played prominent roles in rituals and feasts. Because of the political roles that secret society members played within – and between – communities, secret societies appear to have considerable potential for understanding why ritual and religion were such central elements in the early development of political systems. It can be argued that secret societies were the first institutionalized manifestation of ritual organizations linked to political power, and that this was, in fact, the explicit goal of secret societies. Therefore, the political dimension of secret societies may be critical to understanding the evolution of political systems.

Seventh, secret societies play important roles in lower or middle range archaeological theory. They are eminently visible archaeologically, especially where caves or specialized structures were used. They had ideological characteristics which help to explain the changes in iconography that characterize key periods in the archaeological record in certain areas, such as the European and Near Eastern Neolithic, and even the Upper Paleolithic. And the existence of secret societies helps explain unusual features of the archaeological record such as the use of deep caves, therianthrope images, human sacrifices, and cannibalism.

Thus, there are a variety of important reasons why archaeologists should be interested in secret societies. It should be emphasized, however, that no claims are being made for the universal occurrence of secret societies in the development of complex societies, especially since alternative organizational frameworks could serve similar functions of extending political control beyond kin groups. Alternatives to secret societies could have included: saroans (large-scale work exchange groups), hunting societies, feasting societies, military and marital alliances, age grades, village administrations, extending kin networks to clan–phratry–moity dimensions, pilgrimage organizations, other types of sodalities, and spirit quests. Nevertheless, secret societies appear to have been relatively common at the transegalitarian and chiefdom levels, and they were

powerful tools for promoting the self-interests of ambitious individuals, especially in terms of political control.

The main emphasis in the opening chapters of this book will be on complex hunter/gatherers since they represent the first clearly recognizable step in this trajectory, long before agriculture was introduced. If we are to understand the reasons why secret societies formed, the contexts that they emerged in, and their impacts on existing social or political frameworks, it will be critical to examine complex hunter/gatherer societies. But first, it will be useful to obtain a few more insights into the nature and the character of secret societies.

WHAT IS THE SECRET?

One misconception needs to be addressed from the outset. The term “secret society” instills visions of clandestine meetings by people whose memberships and activities are carefully concealed from public scrutiny. In fact, this is not what is secret in secret societies. Instead of a hidden existence for these ritual organizations or a membership that was kept secret, everyone was usually well aware of the existence of these societies and knew who belonged to them (e.g., Brandt 1977:22). Members even flaunted the fact that they had been initiated, and they usually put on public displays to awe everyone in their communities with their arcane and profane powers.

The real “secret” was the ritual knowledge that members claimed was the key to their supposed arcane supernatural powers. The most important secrets were known only by the highest ranking members of secret societies. As Brandt (1980:130) observed among the Hopi, the secrecy was internal, not external. Secret knowledge was kept from lower ranking members as well as from the public. Such knowledge was typically supernatural in nature but need not have been.

BEHIND THE SECRET DOOR: A DEFINITION

In anthropology, any non-kinship organization is referred to as a “sodality.” Sodalities can be organizations based on politics, sports, occupational specializations, rituals, music, dance, military roles, or almost any other activities. Secret societies are a ritual type of sodality (Driver 1969). However, there can be many different types of ritual sodalities. Secret societies differ from other types of religious sodalities in a number of key respects, according to Warren and Laslett (1980:26–31) and Johansen (2004:13). At one end of the spectrum are inclusive or “open associations,” such as religious-based charity organizations which welcome participation from anyone and have no secret doctrines. At the other end of the spectrum are “secret associations,” or secret societies, which exhibit exclusive access to knowledge that is generally used for

purposes of controlling spirits as well as controlling people. Characteristically, membership in these organizations, at least for the higher ranks, is voluntary and based on the ability to pay progressively exorbitant advancement fees. The political position of a family in the community is often important as well. Many, but not all, activities are concealed from the public. When many researchers refer to “ritual sodalities,” as is common in the American Southwest, they almost always are referring to secret society types of organizations.

There have been a number of attempts to define secret societies in more specific terms. Wedgwood’s (1930:131–2) definition of secret society is “a voluntary association whose members are possessed of some knowledge of which non-members are ignorant.”

I prefer to be a little more specific and to follow Johansen (2004:10) in defining a secret society as *an association with internal ranks in which membership, especially in upper ranks, is exclusive, voluntary, and associated with secret knowledge.*

Entrance and advancement fees are one of the hallmarks of secret societies as a means of excluding those deemed undesirable (Loeb 1929:256). Like pyramid schemes everywhere, secret societies provide the greatest benefits to those in the upper ranks. In order to distinguish these types of organizations from relatively elaborate tribal initiations, it may be necessary to include the stipulation that secret societies – at least in their more developed forms, as opposed to the derivative types discussed below, see “Classifications” – involve the production and surrender of significant surpluses, or even that they involve power-based (or defensive) motivations in their organization as well as in the recruitment of members. Because of the variability displayed in ritual organizations that have been identified as secret societies by various authors, it may eventually prove to be necessary to use a looser, more polythetic approach to defining secret societies. In polythetic classifications, no one criterion is absolutely essential as long as most criteria are met. However, such an involved undertaking is beyond the scope of this book and a task for the future. For the present purposes, it is sufficient to be able to discuss some of the major recognized examples of secret societies in the ethnographic literature.

TRIBAL INITIATIONS, SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS, ORIGINS, AND GRAY AREAS

Despite the best attempts to craft a definition of secret societies, there remains a gray area in which secret societies can be difficult to distinguish from other organizations. This is especially true when dealing with elaborate tribal initiations such as occur in some Australian Aboriginal societies (a problem recognized by Webster 1932:90–2; Elkin 1945:4; Eliade 1964:65), as well as among American Plains cultures with their age grades or warrior societies (Peters 1995:52). Other examples of gray areas involve the induction of all boys

in a community into the lower ranks of some secret societies such as those in Melanesia and in New Guinea (Eliade 1964:65), the West African groups that adopted the *Poro* (MacKenzie 1967:26), and Nuuchalnuh groups in which the Wolf Society was prominent. In the inclusion of all males, and sometimes all females, they resembled tribal initiations. However, in these widely recognized examples of secret societies, there existed subsequent higher grades of secret knowledge to which far fewer individuals had access and these high-ranking members were generally the most powerful and wealthy people in hereditary descent groups. In effect, the general level of initiation versus the more restricted levels of initiation can be viewed as separate ritual organizations with the higher ranks constituting the core of the secret societies. This situation is surprisingly common in organizations that anthropologists have labeled as secret societies, many of which are considered classic examples such as the *Poro*, *Ekkpo*, *Suque*, and Wolf Societies. However, similar types of organizations have not generally been considered secret societies in Australia (see Chapter 7).

Several anthropologists have interpreted these and other features as indications that secret societies originated from tribal initiations through a process of progressive restriction of membership at later initiation stages (possibly through age grading) which required specific abilities, kin group membership, and wealth (Webster 1932:2,20,76,83,93–4,135). Other commonalities with tribal initiations include the hard physical ordeals involved, the frequent death and rebirth themes, seclusion periods, special clubhouses or men's houses, and rituals of reintroduction into mainstream society often with new identities of initiates (Webster 1932:2,135).

However, a key difference is that, in general, tribal initiations function to prepare adolescents to take on adult roles, to marry, and to maintain community traditions (Webster 1932:139). In contrast, secret societies seem to function to concentrate power in the hands of a few exclusive high-ranking individuals who control the organization and who try to further their own interests, thus constituting a “rude but powerful aristocracy” (Webster 1932:78,83). However, the same thing has sometimes been said about Australian Aborigine initiations that are not generally considered as secret societies (see Chapter 7).

Early in the twentieth century, Wedgwood (1930:134–5) raised this issue, stating that initiation into secret societies and initiation into a community of males in Melanesia “often bear a close resemblance to one another, for in both the candidate or novice is apprised of some secret or secrets of which formerly he was ignorant. But ... from a sociological point of view they are distinct, the one being optional in the limited degree indicated ... the other compulsory.” Membership in secret societies “is not preordained ... as is membership of family, clan, or tribe.”

As suggested in the discussion of definitions, one possible way to distinguish secret societies from tribal initiations may be on the basis of the production

and surrender of surplus production (wealth) from the initiate's family. This is generally not a prominent feature of tribal initiations. In Webster's (1932:104) view, with the emergence of secret societies "religious aspects become more and more a delusion and serve as a cloak to hide merely material and selfish ends." There are also varying degrees of ritual knowledge that are involved in membership in different societies. In organizations where little ritual knowledge is involved, the issue must be addressed as to whether they are fundamentally secret societies or societies based mainly on some other kind of common interests such as warfare, social entertainment, wealth acquisition, or mutual help, with only a superficial overlay of ritual secrecy.

In fact, all of the above kinds of organizations (tribal initiations, age grades, social or entertainment sodalities, military associations, and others) may co-exist in a community and blend into secret societies, creating considerable confusion in any attempt to unravel the importance of secret societies. In addition, ethnographers have largely focused almost exclusively on the more impressive main secret societies with only occasional passing references to minor secret societies, which sometimes were prolific and exhibited somewhat different features, such as defending members from the depredations of more powerful secret societies.

Another complication is that some groups such as the Pueblos of the American Southwest and communities in Vanuatu had numerous secret societies. While all males were not required to join any one particular society, *all* males were expected to become members of one society of their choice. Such situations raise further difficulties in terms of recognizing exclusive ritual organizations unless there was a ranked hierarchy of such organizations, which there usually was.

In addition to these considerations, secret societies sometimes took the form of military fraternities and involved ancestor worship, thus blurring the distinctions between these different types of organization. However, ancestor worship can be distinguished on the basis of an exclusive worship of ancestors within a lineage, whereas the invocation of "ancestors" in secret society contexts included ancestors from different kinship groups, and often simply pertained to previous office holders in the secret society, whether related by kinship or not.

Thus, defining secret societies and distinguishing them from other types of organizations is far from straightforward. Hence, I have attempted to deal with the clearest ethnographic examples of secret societies in the following chapters.

ORIGINS

As just noted, some ethnographers have viewed secret societies as developing out of tribal initiations (e.g., Webster 1932). In contrast, on America's Northwest