

THE POWER OF RITUAL IN PREHISTORY

SECRET SOCIETIES AND ORIGINS OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY

The Power of Ritual in Prehistory is the first book in nearly a century to deal with traditional secret societies from a comparative perspective and the first from an archaeological viewpoint. Providing a clear definition, as well as the material signatures, of ethnographic secret societies, Brian Hayden demonstrates how they worked, what motivated their organizers, and what tactics they used to obtain what they wanted. He shows that far from working for the welfare of their communities, traditional secret societies emerged as predatory organizations operated for the benefit of their own members. Moreover, and contrary to the prevailing ideas that prehistoric rituals were used to integrate communities, Hayden demonstrates how traditional secret societies created divisiveness and inequalities. They were one of the key tools for increasing political control leading to chiefdoms, states, and world religions. Hayden's conclusions will be eye-opening, not only for archaeologists, but also for anthropologists, political scientists, and scholars of religion.

Brian Hayden is a Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and Professor Emeritus at Simon Fraser University. In addition to excavating sites on three continents, he has conducted ethnoarchaeological research in Australia, British Columbia, Guatemala, Mexico, Polynesia, and Southeast Asia. These studies have resulted in new models of domestication, feasting, social inequalities, and now ritual and religion. Hayden has been recognized for this pioneering work as a member of the Royal Society of Canada. His other works include *The Power of Feasts* (Cambridge, 2014), *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion* (2003), and *Archaeology: The Science of Once and Future Things* (1993).

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108426398
DOI: 10.1017/9781108572071

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hayden, Brian, author.

Title: The power of ritual in prehistory : secret societies and origins of social complexity / Brian Hayden, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia.

Description: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018014865 | ISBN 9781108426398 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Secret societies. | Primitive societies. |

Rites and ceremonies, Prehistoric. | Prehistoric peoples. |

Social archaeology. | Social structure.

Classification: LCC GN495.2.H39 2018 | DDC 366–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018014865>

ISBN 978-1-108-42639-8 Hardback

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“So well were the secrets of the religion kept that the esoteric knowledge of its dogma and ritual have only come to light after acculturation processes have left so few who practice it that these elderly people prefer to leave some record of it rather than letting it be completely lost ... These people ... deluded early anthropologists into an assumption that they had a simpler religious system than existed elsewhere.” (Bean and Vane 1978:669 – regarding California)

In Vanuatu, “The difficulties facing the traveller who wishes to investigate the religious notions of primitive peoples are well known ... there is the mistrust the natives justifiably feel towards the whites and which has made them close-mouthed ... men of high *suque* rank ... are particularly uncommunicative ... because they realize, quite correctly, that the subversion of their position is chiefly due to European influence; for this reason the old men vouchsafe no information and the young men know little ... because the ultimate secrets of the cult are disclosed to them only on reaching the highest ranks of the *suque* and it is given to very few to attain these.” (Speiser 1923/1996:307)

Along the Mississippi, “they are so close-mouthed as to all the mysteries of their religion that the missionary [Father Gavion] could not discover anything about it.” (Shea 1861:134)

“The initiation rites of the Keresan societies were kept secret and no shamans ever spoke to anthropologists on the subject.” (Levy 1994:312)

Fortune (1932:59fn,60) makes frequent reference to the difficulties he experienced in obtaining information about secret societies among the Omaha, with informants denying any knowledge of supernatural affairs or often fearing for their lives or expecting to die as a consequence of revealing secrets.

The Poro ritual “can never be described in full because those who saw it were bound by an inviolable oath never to reveal its secrets on pain of death” (Harley 1941a:123). The internal workings and doctrines of the Poro are a mystery (Harley 1941b:31). “The inner circles have scarcely been penetrated.” (Harley 1941b:32)

“It is difficult to discover more than the merest fragments of the secrets of Egbo, as any known informant would meet with a speedy death.” (Talbot 1912:40)

Among the Chumash, “the astronomers’ knowledge of the stars was certainly not shared by the common man.” (Hudson and Underhay 1978:100)

“Some such statement as this of the difficulties in the way of a certain knowledge of the subject is given here of the religion of the Melanesians.” (Codrington 1891:118)

“In general, the knowledge of astronomy ... was of an esoteric variety in the hands of the head of the secret society.” (Loeb 1926:229 — regarding the Kuksu in California)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As will hopefully become evident, my journey into the world of secret societies has been a long but fascinating one. The scenes conjured up by early ethnographers never fail to amaze and sometimes even perturb many readers, including myself. They are some of the most extraordinary accounts in the ethnographic record. So it seems odd that archaeologists have overlooked them for so long in most places. The goal of this book is to place secret societies at the forefront of archaeological consciousness and to have them occupy their rightful place in prehistorians' accounts of how and why many important sociopolitical and religious changes took place in the past. However, the prominence of ritual and religion in the emergence of socioeconomic and political complexity has always been something of an odd feature. The vast amounts of time and effort supposedly devoted to the spirits at Chavin, Teotihuacan, Stonehenge, Avebury, Ur, Karnak, and countless other major centers all seem strange if their only basis was belief in the supernatural. The argument in this volume is that secret societies provide the missing link to explaining how and why these developments took place. I hope that readers will find this less-taken-path as fascinating as I have.

Reading the early ethnographies for this book has deepened my appreciation for the very significant contributions that so many pioneering ethnographers made during the last part of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. It is apparent that they realized the importance of recording as much detail as possible about traditional ways of life that were rapidly disappearing, and they seem to have spared no effort to record those vanishing cultural traditions. We are incredibly lucky that they were active in recording information on secret societies when they were, for, as Bailey (1995:18) realized, there was a narrow window of time when this was possible. In his example, if Francis La Flesche had tried to record Osage ritual information ten years before 1910, no priest would have discussed religion with him. Ten years later, and any knowledgeable priests would have all been dead. This same situation characterizes many other areas where ritual information was obtained. We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to these early ethnographers, as well as the priests who realized that their traditions were dying and wanted to have them recorded for their descendants. They were

true visionaries. We also owe a great debt to the institutions and their leaders that sponsored and published so much of this remarkable work. J. W. Powell, Director of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the Smithsonian Institution, was a particularly key figure, but there were many others on all continents and in many other institutions. I am profoundly grateful for all these early records.

In more contemporary terms, I would especially like to thank D'Ann Owens-Baird for introducing me to the secret society world. Without her insights, this line of inquiry might never have happened. I would also like to thank Suzanne Villeneuve for contributing to the collection of data as well as to the debates about the archaeological interpretations of ritual remains at the Keatley Creek site. John Ware and David Dye were of great assistance in sharing their insights, data, and enthusiasm for secret societies. Shirley Johansen (2004) helped explore some initial parameters as part of an MA thesis. Last but not least, this publication, as well as other investigations into secret societies, was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this volume are those of myself and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.