PRIMITIVE SECRET SOCIETIES AS RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

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Among the institutions which modern man discovered in the primitive societies that came to his attention in the last few centuries the so-called secret society has been one of the most fascinating. Even as most of the examples have disappeared or been radically transformed, articles and books continue to raise questions about the significance of this primitive behavior for an understanding of man at every level of cultural complexity. What does the widespread (but not universal) occurrence of these closed groups among primitive peoples tell us about the social and intellectual nature of man?

Two types of problems plague the literature which attempts to answer this question. First, there is some difficulty separating the secret society from closely related aspects of primitive culture. Phenomena like the men's house and puberty initiation certainly share many characteristics with the secret society but it is possible to be precise in distinguishing between them. The second area of confusion arises as the primitive secret society, identified and defined by one notion or another, is seen to be the nascent stage or Urform of some modern institution. The very use of the term secret society for these primitive associations has disposed many students, without further reflection, to group them with everything from subversive organizations and outlaw bands to mystery cults and masons. To establish a useful comparison with institutions from other levels of culture, I suggest that one turn instead to the monastic order.

In these paragraphs, therefore, I shall attempt to define the primitive secret society by distinguishing it from closely related phenomena and participatory but secondary aspects. Then I shall use the comparison with monasticism to suggest that there is a religious meaning to secret society organization that does indeed say something about the way man pictures and arranges his life.
Three geographical areas of ethnological study have exhibited numerous associations of the secret society type: North America, Africa, and Melanesia. This article is based on the Melanesian examples and the scholarship concerning them, plus general sociological and religious interpretations.

Identification of the Secret Society

In order to define the secret society, even as a religious phenomenon, it is necessary to define it in social or organizational terms. Some schools of investigation subordinate such factors, however, because they are more concerned with the history or economic functions of the societies. Many German students of Melanesian secret societies focus on "secret cult" as the primary factor.1) Geheimkult refers to any cultic performance which is held within a self-consciously closed group and space. Usually this means that the initiated men celebrate the cult apart from the women and children. Australia and Melanesia, including New Guinea, offer many examples of such ceremonial association.

From the perspective of social structure, however, the secret society is not quite the same thing. The secret cult is usually open to all the adult men of the village (all of whom were initiated as boys) but the secret society is characteristically selective in its membership. There are many indications of this departure from the more general secret cult pattern: Children far below the age of puberty or the age of its usual celebration may join a secret society.2) Likewise, adult males can be initiated into a secret society at an age at which puberty initiation would be considered impossible. It is also possible that an adult male in the village will never become a member at all. Finally, it is occasionally recorded that old women can become members of a society, albeit with special status unlike that of the male members.3)

