

CHAPTER 2

*Why Secrecy?*



THAT CULTURAL SYSTEMS OF SECRECY occur unevenly across societies ancient and modern, large and small, is certain; they are surely not universal in the social life of human groups. Nor must we confound the existence of secrets in the lives of individual actors—whether via the concept of Freud’s unconscious wishes, or the phenomenological social self of Lewis Henry Morgan, Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, and Erving Goffman, among the many distinguished scholars who have considered this topic—with that form of secret knowledge and ontological being constitutive of the cultural reality of secret societies. Surely in the experience of privacy and individualism in the West the secret is a universal possibility, perhaps even likelihood, its vicissitudes contingent upon the desires and life experiences of individuals—the “accidental” series of the individual life history, in Freud’s sense. Indeed, it is precisely the contingent nature of human existence—its dependence upon shared symbolic reality, and the uses of secrecy to make and break consensual reality within the same society—that continues to make secrecy an enduring interest of social study.

However, the elaboration of these potentials into a full-blown “culture” or sociality of hidden practices and knowledge is quite another matter. Whatever the sources of such a historical formation, what is needed is not the psychoanalyst but the hand of the anthropologist and sociologist to provide both a lens and a method for understanding this phenomenon. For those of us privileged enough to reside in North American or Western European societies early in the twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine how reality could be divided between a public world and another so divergent that exit from one and entry into the other requires secret initiation. Most of us, scholars included, react in disbelief or with cynicism when con-

fronted with stories of ritual cults and exotic practices that supposedly kept outsiders in the dark; in a sense this skepticism is no different than the nineteenth-century view that gave rise to the antisocial theory of secrecy (see chap. 1 on Lewis Henry Morgan). We might call this the “missing discourse” on secrecy in the experience of anthropologists.

It is this book's premise that in certain times and places—and here we shall focus on Melanesia—the unstable character of social relations creates such anxiety and mistrust that it is impossible to make mutual plans and goals for social adaptation between male compatriots. Profound disruptions across generations of males made social relations conditional. In times of war and violence, the inability to predict allies or to trust colleagues led to great misfortunes and social disasters in which entire villages were destroyed. This social chaos and human calamity led to the use of secret ritual initiation practices and the founding of an institutional complex called the men's house as the cultural and psychological solution to an otherwise intolerable and perhaps ultimately unsuccessful sociality. The creation of “masculinity” as a social product and masculine performances as the main production of the men's house became the *sine qua non* of its existence. In such a social and psychological world, a huge gulf exists between the women's relational practices and social spaces, and those of the men. Prior to initiation, children are folded into their mother's world. The creation of agency in boys in such a world is problematical, contingent, and fragile. Indeed, *secret masculinity* is an apt term to describe the myriad processes that result in the adult outcome of marriage and fatherhood expected in the life course of young men.

But the contingency of their masculinity was not the only price Melanesian societies had to pay for this secret pact: secrecy in intimate social relations is a radical breach or hiatus that generates its own chronic dilemmas and human tragedy. In my own analysis of precolonial societies in Melanesia, I believe that much of the reason for this historical conundrum stems from warfare, as you shall see. No society was immune to its terrible consequences, but New Guinea Highland groups in particular, lacking the mechanism for redress and motivated by the value of blood revenge, were severely disrupted by virulent and seemingly endless deadly war. The images of New Guinea warfare popularized in the film *Dead Birds*, about the Dani people of West New Guinea, are misleading for the culture area as a whole. The film paints a far too simple picture of “ritualized” violence, of tit-for-tat, which, however true it may have been for the

Dani, does not begin to explore the cruelty and ravages of war raiding and violence among the peoples who will be studied closely in this book. The brunt of war was the responsibility of the men's house. The men's house was by definition a homosocial and male-privileged space, one given over to the stories of war and to the socialization of recruits who needed to survive it. This is the subtext of male ritual, violence, and sexuality as seen in the fine ethnographies of Kenneth Read, Fredrik Barth, Maurice Godelier, and Donald Tuzin, to be reviewed herein. Access through initiation was thus age-graded and hierarchical: first by gender; second by age; third by the commitment to emulate and aspire to be a Great Man; and finally, toward the end of life, by that die-hard's sense of clinging to power and hence to utopian immortality.

To excuse individual human actors and men as a category for their part played in the necessary social tragedy of secret masculinity is too simple as well, and probably misleading. Within the guise of secret ritual practice there can be no doubt in my mind that social abuses and such terrible, unseemly tragedies as murders and rape have occurred, and far more frequently than we probably would like to know. To call the initiations into the secret men's house "rites of terror" (Whitehouse 2000: 21) is not far from the mark. Thus, the following account raises but cannot ultimately satisfy the ethical questions with which I conclude this study. Anthropology, as we have seen time and again, most recently in the debate over the accusation of ethical abuses by the scientists and journalists among the Yanomami people of the Amazon, remains ill prepared to deal with the quandaries of such devastation (Geertz 2001). In the conclusion I shall examine the positionality of (primarily) male anthropologists who have typically misrepresented ritual secrecy as a game or a sham in the men's houses of New Guinea, essentially evading the moral and ethical problems posed for social study across time and space.

Lewis Henry Morgan's own use of secrecy reveals a tension about the cultural uses and potential abuses of ritual secrecy (see chap. 1). The secret orders that Morgan founded were not for selfish purposes in any narrow sense of the term, but neither, in the end, were they for the creation of a larger social purpose; Morgan himself grew disenchanted and ultimately withdrew from his creations. In fact, the story of secrecy in Morgan's life is illustrative of ambivalent individualism and conditional masculinity—of how the desire for male solidarity could be found in the men's secret societies, or not at all—among nineteenth-century men. Living in a time of

radically changing social roles and gender customs, when a crisis in religion was sweeping away simple faith and the crisis in gender was destabilizing the hierarchy of relations between men and women, male secrecy represented a secure homosocial space without a necessary homosexuality, a search for the eternal and a generative ritual, but without the spiritualism of women or the rejection of reproductive mothering.

In short, this cynical and romantic view of secrecy as antisocial is very old but flawed in Western social thought, and we shall inquire into its sources in the history of anthropology. Secrecy goes against the grain of civil society and the higher good in public affairs, it is still believed; but seldom has it been studied by anthropologists in Western nations, with the exception of such remarkable and fine works as those on Mafia secrecy in nineteenth-century Sicily (Blok 1974), antisocial sorcery fears and accusations in rural France (Favret-Saada 1980), and British contemporary witches for whom witchcraft is a part-time occupation (Luhrman 1989a).

This is a book about a particular historical form of secret masculinity and the cultural reality it produced: a pervasive ritual secrecy laced throughout social life. No doubt similar social forms are to be found in Western history, particularly before the modern period—a subject too large and complex to study here. However, in the modern period, it was common to regard Western European and North American social formations as relegating women in the nineteenth century to domestic spaces, while Victorian men were expected to enter the public spaces of the marketplace in order to compete and achieve male solidarity. Subsequent scholarship in the study of public/private domains in civil society has modified such a view. Masculinity, once seen as a “trait,” has come to be regarded as a social product and a performative structure, which stipulates particular social needs and norms (Connell 1995). The risk was failure to achieve the necessary performance in intimate relations and social work, and male secret sociality arose to meet the challenge of this conditional masculinity. It bears a family resemblance to a special order of secret masculinity, long known from parts of the non-Western world, that is constitutive of male initiation rites and secret ceremonies. The zenith of these could be found in the precolonial societies of Melanesia and the island of New Guinea in particular.

Only through ritual initiation can New Guinea boys in these precolonial societies achieve the agency necessary to be full partners with men and women—the ability to be regarded as moral agents and full persons. The

foundation of the men's secret society is a social contract to resocialize boys into masculine agents. But in order to attain this adult agency they must submit to being an object of desire and, among particular groups such as the Sambia of the New Guinea Highlands, to sexual objectification by older males who are themselves in the process of becoming agents. Prior to marriage, then, this process of becoming agents extends both to young initiates and older bachelors, who form a symbolic "marriage" set within the context of the men's society. By accommodating themselves to their respective secret roles in this symbolic play, the boys are promised eventual transformation from objects to subjects and the ability later to perform sexually as masculine agents with women and to serve as masculine warriors in the eyes of other men. This transformation reproduces inequality in male/male relations, which is hidden inside the secrecy of the men's house.

#### *Why Secrecy in New Guinea?*

One of the critical issues of Melanesian study over the past century has been whether men's secret organizations are the center of these precolonial cultures or the marginal decentering locus of society. The anthropological view, often cynical toward the role played by men's ritual secrecy, has been strongly influenced not only by modernist theories of secrecy but also by the reaction of colonial powers to secret societies (chap. 5).

It was once speculated, by Simmel (1950) and Foucault (1980), among others, that for certain historical individuals or groups, secrecy is a necessary protective device in the effort to avoid oppression. In the modern period there is good evidence in support of this idea, at least in the historical formation of sexual cultures (Herdt 1997a). However, such a view cannot explain the phenomenon of ritual secrecy in precolonial New Guinea, where the very people who were dominant and in power—adult senior men—were the ones who created and then reproduced the secret society. The difficulty with all such formulations of "culture" and "power" as applied to ritual secrecy is that they subscribe to an implicit homogeneous system of cultural meanings, a unitary form of reality performed on the stage of society. As Barth once noted, "Anthropologists are strong on using conceptions from the other cultural traditions we are studying as a means to transcend our own categories—but we tend subsequently to domesticate these ideas by re-integrating them through abstraction into our pre-established anthropology" (1987: 86).

Conversely, it has long been suggested by cultural critics of these practices that while other areas of a society were necessary or adaptive, the mere existence of secrecy suggested a lack of authenticity—duplicity, lying, cheating, hoaxes, and the effort to dominate or control others through deceptive means (reviewed in Schwimmer 1980). If we therefore assume, as did earlier scholars in the Melanesian literature, that ritual secrecy was for male domination of women and children, we are faced with a striking paradox. If the men are in power, why do they need secrecy to attain what they already possess? But if we deny that adult men are in power, we are then led to the enigmatic position that either the man's performance of authority is a sham, or else these acephalous societies have no legitimate authority or leadership at all. Clearly, the latter position is extreme and unsupported by the literature for a very long time (Berndt and Lawrence 1971; Godelier and Strathern 1991; Read 1959). Furthermore, if we agree with the sociobiologists, who typically insinuate that men physically or socially have the advantage over women (Tiger 1970), then we do not elucidate the matter of "power" nor problematize the relationships among power, ritual, and warfare for men at all. These prior lines of reasoning have avoided deeper questions. Where does male power come from? How are men's ontology and subjectivity socially created to support this power? By rethinking these questions we are led back to challenge the widespread assumption that "male power" is already present in personality, culture, or society, and thus to analyze the cultural basis for the cynical views of ritual secrecy in our own tradition of knowledge and understanding regarding such matters.

This brings us back to the question, Why study secrecy, and why is secrecy the solution to certain social problems? This book argues that a historically particularistic process of the development of male sexual subjectivity occurs in the men's house, without which boys would not occupy their adult positionality in these communities. I will argue this for theambia in chapter 3, and while others may question the relevance of theambia case for understanding these processes (see also Herdt 1993), several critical points provoke comparison. At the time of initiation rituals,ambia boys are symbolically treated as proxies for women (their mothers and sisters) (see Herdt 1982a). Because of the binary quality of secrecy—its powerful tendencies to essentialize and objectify insiders versus outsiders, and then to treat outsiders as Other—the entry of boys is highly disruptive, because they are classed with their mothers as outsiders before initiation.

The bodies of the boys are not male bodies and do not have the utopian qualities of mind, body, and spirit associated with initiated men. Thus in their initiation performances, the initiates *stand in* for women symbolically in all relevant ritual actions (Herdt 1982b). These concepts apply to the ideology. On the practice side, however, the boys have existed within the women's culture, which has no concept of male discipline or ritual discipline per se. It also lacked the subjective imagery of men's secrecy or the embodiment of ritual discipline, as in nose-bleeding purification (Herdt 1982c). Other New Guinea peoples who practice "boy-inseminating" practices also symbolize the desire on the part of men both to "grow" prepubertal boys and sometimes to "play" with them erotically (Herdt 1984a; 1999a). Once purged of pollution from the contaminated world of the women's houses, the boy's body is treated as a pure anlage of maleness but without sexual maturity or social masculinity. Temporarily the boy is perceived as, and also substituted for, the excluded women.

Now we can ask: What is the internal aim (what Foucault would have called the internal discourse, not available to those on the outside of the men's house institution, and certainly not available to women and children) of relationships created through ritual secrecy? In general, it is for the provision of social regulation through the creation of hierarchy and a code of honor in the men's house: a special trust, loyalty, and belongingness. Why is this badge of honor necessary for the men? After all, are they not members of the same patrilines, great clans, phratries, and tribes? Aren't their fraternal and filial ties to one another sufficient to create loyalty and trust? The answer is clearly "no." As a long line of scholars have suggested, particularly for New Guinea Highland societies (reviewed in Berndt and Berndt 1962; Brown 1995; Harrison 1993; Herdt 1981; Knauff 1985; Mead 1935; Meggitt 1964, 1979; Reay 1959), male/male relations are unstable and given to fracture. Fraternal competition and implicit age-peer rivalry are constantly mentioned as divisive forces throughout the literature (Forge 1972; Godelier 1986; Knauff 1993; Read 1965; A. J. Strathern 1974). The most notable of these forces in precolonial Melanesian societies was the threat of murder, rape, and pillage by external enemies. However, the threat to life and property by assault from neighbors, even affines, was ever present; intervillage relations were chronically unruly and unpredictable. Therefore, marital arrangements between kin groups (e.g., clans) were contingent and, without the presence of other mediating factors, such as the existence of ceremonial exchange systems (Feil 1978),

tended to deteriorate. Delayed exchange marriage through such practices as infant-betrothal was notoriously difficult to consummate (Godelier 1982), making social order, especially intervillage relationships, unpredictable.

The perceived threat, however, did not stop at the boundaries of the village: men routinely asserted that women, imported as wives from neighboring communities, were given to sorcery and the use of their vaginal or menstrual fluids to weaken and kill their husbands. That the sons of these same women were expected to be the next generation of warriors suggests the depth of mistrust in the daily life and politics of village communities.

The intergenerational schism was potentially explosive. The problem was that the older men did not trust boys prior to initiation. This statement is complex and needs unpacking, being a composite of political economy, oedipal dynamics, and spousal conflict, among other factors. However much grandfathers, fathers, and older brothers cared for the boys, they could not trust in them—either in their bodies or in their minds. If we were to say that this was “because of their mothers’ influence over the lads,” we would be partially right, since the account that men give in their own secret internal discourse at ritual initiation includes such testimonials. After all, the boys’ bodies are saturated with pollution from the women’s houses, and their bodies are thus unwitting agents of the transmission of pollution (Herdt 1982c). However, these prior accounts typically omitted the intentionality and agency of the boys themselves (and my own work only begins to address the gap; see Herdt 1987b). That is, the older men did not trust in the desires and intentions of the boys either; and it was the fear of betrayal and mistrust, as much as the boys’ polluted bodies, that vexed the elders (Godelier 1989). Yet, of necessity, the men had to socialize the boys to protect the village from external attack, and to do this, they had to transmit power to the boys. This was no mean task: the men had to overcome their own doubt about the loyalty and trustworthiness of the boys.

However, whatever their own trepidation regarding this oedipal dilemma, the men were faced with an equally daunting force on the side of the boys themselves: they had to overcome the resistance of the boys to initiation. This was sometimes open, naked, and hostile. I have observed boys who hid or ran away into the forest in order to avoid being initiated, and the efforts and the countermeasures taken by the men to overcome them were a regular part of the social consciousness brought to these events (Herdt 1987a). Perhaps it seems obvious that boys would want to avoid the



pain and ordeals of these rites de passage, as the late Roger Keesing (1982a) once suggested. The matter is not as simple as that in retrospect, as Maurice Godelier (1986) has hinted in his accounts of the Baruya and the notable film series *Toward Baruya Manhood*, which documents their initiations. The boys admired the men; they loved their fathers and grandfathers; they wanted to emulate and be like the Great Man—that mythological concoction of sexy and swashbuckling virtue that was the pride of the men. But in these speculative images notice how I have taken liberties with the putative social sophistication of the boy as a subject, and indeed, such imagery construes the boy as an agent. But that is too facile.

While there is a wide degree of individual variation in this area of social entry into the men's house and secret reality, with differences in the subjectivities of males, a consistent line of evidence supports the idea that prepubertal boys in New Guinea precolonial societies were ambivalent and even hostile to being initiated by the men (reviewed in Gewertz 1982; Herdt 1987a; Read 1952; Tuzin 1982). When we ask why the (obviously ambivalent) prepubertal boys are inclined to the role dictated for them, the answer seems to be: "Because of the culture" (Mead 1935: 282). But such a view imagines a singular cultural reality, even though the boys could not know what hidden reality lay beyond the doors of the men's house.

This fractured view of the political economy of secrecy reveals the importance of separating culturally sanctioned rule and authority from power, while recognizing that in precolonial Melanesian societies, at least, there was no singular cultural reality or means for the achievement of power and control over public affairs. Power, as a variety of diffuse means of seeking and attaining regulation, was realized through diverse "technologies" and "devices" of social control (Foucault 1980), among them the significant but largely alien form (in the Western view) of ritual secrecy. Initiation into ritual secrecy created gender-distinctive worldviews. The habitus of these views were based in spatially segregated living arrangements throughout Melanesia. This in turn produced social actions and developmental subjectivities akin to full-blown ontologies (I say "akin" to but not the same as, since to essentialize these gendered worldviews as "ontologies," particularly in the Platonic sense, would make the men's hegemonic position inherently superior, and thus displace women from higher reality-making sociality, a notion that is unfaithful to the ethnography of the area). There were competing interests in these communities, which gave rise to distinct social and historical productions, including rit-

ual practices. The divergent realities connected to these rituals differed by gender: they were productive of, associated with, and created effects in individual awareness that concomitantly rationalized and motivated the rituals.

Initiation secrecy, in this model, is a strategic sacred and sexual system, a means of overcoming ambivalence, of creating eventual trust and loyalty between males. Trust, however, involves inclusion in a circle, and ritual initiation does this the hard way: by moving a boy inside the circle, all others are shut out. Conceptualizing ritual secrecy as relations that separate the genders and that make boys “mediatory objects produced by the men’s transactions” (M. Strathern 1988: 214) provides the theoretical space for understanding both the divergent aims of the genders and the means by which boys become objects (including erotic objects) of the men. Initiation is not of course the only social means for promoting the development of physical and moral “maturity” in the production of social “masculinity,” even in Melanesia. Nor is sexual objectification typical of this process, as I have noted elsewhere (Herdt 1984a). To make “whole” and to “complete” the person is a symbolic process (Read 1952) involving a variety of “forms that propagate” (Strathern 1988), among them the sexual—though few anthropologists have said so, Marilyn Strathern being one. And fewer male anthropologists have studied this aspect, or at least not belittled it—a curious point to which we shall return in the Conclusion.

But this is key: to create loyalty and trust the men of many of these communities had to overcome their own ambivalent attitudes about initiating their sons—not in terms of affection, but in terms of politics. Their ambivalence does not of course mean that these fathers failed to love and protect their sons, or failed to regard them affectionately in their domestic moments (see Langness 1990). The distinction is vital and the cause of much misunderstanding, as in the recent distortion of these issues by Langness (1999, esp. 63ff.), who trivializes the erotic component of male ritual secrecy. The men’s emotional ambivalence ought to be interpreted not only as a matter of personal experience (as Langness does) but of political psychology.

During my initial fieldwork among the Sambia in 1974 and 1976, for example, elders would not let the uninitiated boys come near the men’s house. Uninitiated boys were excluded because they were agents of pollution who shared in women’s bodies, fluids, and clothing. What the men failed to articulate—simply because it was tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966;

also see Barth 1987; Lewis 1980)—was that these boys shared in the women's culture and worldview. The men feared this relatedness and secretly dreaded that the boy's intimacies with his mother might somehow usurp male rule. Was this a rational fear? The question must be answered not in terms of individual differences but in terms of cultural reasoning. Surely the men dreaded pollution and depletion (Herdt 1982c); even more they feared the betrayal of boys and the undermining of their tenuous hold. In short, prior to initiation a boy was not a trusted agent, and this very difference conditioned the emotions with which the boy was regarded and his sexual classification in a system of secrecy.

Observers of these men's cults have sometimes conflated the public face of men's actions with the private and secret experience, as I long ago complained (Herdt 1981). But the paradox of power in societies such as the Gahuku-Gama, Baktaman, Ilahita Arapesh, Sambia, Baruya, and others studied in this book suggests male rhetoric and related public discursive practices assert supremacy; while secret ritual and the internal discourse of the men's house express anxiety, fearfulness, nostalgia, and inferiority. Both sides of male discourse are troubling and have never been satisfactorily explained. (The closest account, though not a totalizing one, has been to see these as variable elements of morality; see Read 1955.) I think the key lies in analyzing how ritual secrecy builds status empowerment and sexual subjectivity through rituals of embodiment in the developmental subjectivity of the boy.

In a prior generation, the paradoxical nature of the men's reality was referred to in terms of the Freudian defensive device "protest masculinity" (reviewed in Herdt 1981, 1987a, 1989c; Herdt and Stoller 1990). This notion asserted that the men were using masculinity and aggression as defenses against their own anxieties about women, especially to counter feelings of dependence upon women (Langness 1967). But as Godelier (1986) has skillfully shown, the paradoxical reality of men is a bit more complicated: publicly treating women as polluted, degraded, crafty and manipulative, alternately shy and sexually lascivious, and perhaps most paradoxical of all, *harmless to the men*; while secretly regarding women as threatening, disloyal and mutinous, even lethal (able to infect and deplete the male body) to male personhood. Like other scholars from an earlier period I once used the notion of defensive or protest masculinity (Herdt 1981, 1989c). But I now think that this concept is inadequate, not because it is Freudian, but because the process implied by Freud does not explain

the developmental subjectivity. Protest masculinity appeals to a reductive aspect, the conscious and unconscious fear of women through defensive thoughts and actions that attempt to create triumph out of trauma (Stoller and Herdt 1985). The construct already takes for granted or grants “power” as an intrinsic sense of superiority to male reality. What the Freudian concept cannot explain, because it does not deconstruct its assumptive identity state (masculinity), is where the power in maleness comes from. (Freud [1925], of course, took it for granted that males were superior to females, certainly anatomically and psychically.)

The paradox remains intriguing and requires ritual secrecy as a solution because in New Guinea it is not assumed that males are intrinsically superior to females—quite the contrary. Femaleness is, if anything, an inherently more vital and fertile principle in the world (Gillison 1993; Herdt 1981; Mead 1949). By interrogating the symbolic meanings of secrecy, one questions the basis on which male power and authority exist and are represented in the scheme of things, which questions the sources of male reality. Thus, we begin to reflect upon how male rule is created through social means such as ritual and how it is threatened or at risk because it is not inherently present in the beginning of the cosmos. This insight frees cultural analysis to examine the influence of the men’s house in producing male subjectivity, linking social life to the development of male sexual subjectivity and adult male rule.

This approach now exposes an untruth in male ideology: that all males are equal. The system of Great Men, with its mythological imagery previously described as reliant upon an ideology of solidarity and equality in small social groups of men (Allen 1967), actually underscores this flaw (Godelier 1986). As Melanesianists have long suggested, relations among males were complicated, not egalitarian (Read 1959; M. Strathern 1992), just as relations between women and men were inherently unequal (see chap. 4). Ritual secrecy, then, seen from the life-course perspective—beginning with the boy’s entry into the men’s house before puberty, and following his growth and social development into old age—was a means of securing inequalities between males in these precolonial New Guinea societies.

### *The Divergent Desires of Men and Boys*

Stated simply: the social, political, and erotic desires of men and boys differ—reflecting a variety of formative influences on their being or ontology,

most notably warfare and the binaries of secret (vs. public) life and gender (male vs. female). Boys lack agency in the men's world because they are occupants of the women's house. Their masculinity is nil. In fact, boys actually have negative social status positions in the men's world due to their being classified with women. Thus, the boys are not subjects and cannot be agents of their own desires. Their positionality can only be that of objects.

The boys are unable to express their aims and desires, and are not accepted as full moral agents by men—or for that matter, by women, either. In order to become agentic in the men's world, the boys must be transformed from being “children” or “female-like” things, to “initiates” or “male-like things”—a notion so commonplace now as to occupy the status of cliché (Herdt 1982a). Typically this transformation requires a change in the bodily essences of the boys in some way; and typically, it is only the same gender—men for boys, and women for girls—who are believed capable and competent to complete this transformation (M. Strathern 1988). Among the Sambia, as is well known, this transformation in subjectivity and agency from child to initiate requires that the boys become recipients of semen.

Generally, there was a historical pattern surrounding this transformation in male reality and gender status in New Guinea societies, as implied before. The boy was initiated with mistrust, perhaps to overcome the suspicion of disloyalty on the part of the older men. Therefore, as the liminal way station en route to permanent residence in the men's house, the boy's initiation was a coerced or semi-involuntary compact, in which the boy serves as a subordinate (a woman-proxy, at first, due to his sociosexual classification with women) to certain older males. This subordination was political and social everywhere; among a few of the so-called ritual homosexuality societies, it was also sexual (Read 1984; Schwimmer 1984). The boy was transferred jurally forever from being under the authority of the women and his mother, and placed in the men's house, both of which structural changes immediately ameliorated the boy's social status in the men's house. These structural changes also made possible the defensive use of ritual secrecy thereafter as a means of screening the inner thoughts and desires of the boy from his mother and later his wife, the only other woman with whom he would have an intimate relationship. By accepting his subordination to the men, the boy began the advance of his own social career—a small but growing ability to enact his desires in secret and public.

Acceptance of his subordinate position therefore accomplishes three aims: First, it enables the boy to be socialized (actually resocialized) by men, in the direction of secret masculine codes and social and moral goals. Second, it enables the boy to develop the awareness of how to dominate and manipulate his future wife and other women, as dictated by the men's society. Third, it provides "role distance" (Goffman 1959) from the part the boy plays in being subordinated or dominated, which is generative of fantasies and desires—developmental sexual subjectivity—all constitutive of the receptive ritual secret masculinity being engendered in him by his seniors in order to perform in public as an adult manly agent. The puzzling qualities of this intricate process have been best summarized by Simon Ottenberg from his West African study:

In this sense secrecy, which by its nature appears to have an isolating and withdrawing quality (Bellman 1984), creates inquiry and assertiveness in the young child in response to it, and this process helps move the child along in maturation—paradoxically, to a clearer understanding of the larger world of which secrecy forms only a part. (1989: 56)

Again, however, initiation was resisted both by senior men and by boys, so the secrecy was transformative of the resistance on both sides. Preinitiated Sambia boys typically resisted assuming the powers of the senior men, and they did not want their childhood sociality and cultural reality, shared with their mothers and other women, usurped (see chap. 3). More strongly, the boys did not want access to the ritual secrets, most commonly because they associated the privilege of the secrets with the pain of rituals. Moreover, the majority of Sambia boys at their commencement of initiation did not desire the hidden homosociality of the men's house. They already had a comfortable domicile: the women's house, with the moral agency of meanings of the women's world. Of course many boys were curious about the secret doings in the men's house, but in most cases, their curiosity was not sufficient to overcome their fear and anxiety toward it (Tuzin 1997). Only later, as the initiates approached manhood, did their attitudes fundamentally change. As they came closer to marrying, they adopted the alternative cultural reality of the men's house—which they had long shared in and were soon to inherit. But it was not until they were faced with the prospect of forming intimate relations with a woman in the person of their

assigned bride that they became more highly motivated to actualize and implement the secret reality of the men's house. In short, at the moment they were to commence sexual relations with wives from potentially or actually hostile neighboring hamlets, then their desire to master ritual secrecy was matched by and energized through their sexual desire for women.

This kind of social developmental regime of ritual secrecy is thus a mutual compact between the generations to secure the commitment of boys to take on the rule of the older men by first securing their trust and proving their loyalty to the men's house. The boys' acceptance of their positionality—being at first objects, not subjects, of desire—facilitates their authority. By accepting their position as passive recipients of ritual action (for the Sambia, ritual insemination; for others, bodily treatment and decoration) the boys-become-youths prove their loyalty and earn acceptance in the inner sanctum of male secret power.

#### *Secrecy as Antisocial: Historical Views*

Is not the mere existence of secrecy, the critic asks, indicative of the duality of human existence, a proof of conflict within a society, no less than for an individual? Many authorities before the creation of anthropology thought in this way, and the great social theorists—including Durkheim, Freud, Simmel, and others—have generally subscribed to a negative view of secrecy that emptied it of social and cultural meaning.

A significant impetus of this romantic-cynical attitude about secrecy in anthropology comes from the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who argued that no human institution could rest upon lie or error. Society must be grounded in "reality" itself, Durkheim thought; "social facts" must present a singular and totalizing social subjectivity sufficient to describe this as "collective consciousness." This rational and Platonic truth has been the basis for social theory and anthropology since the turn of the century (Durkheim 1915: 14).

Of course, the advent of postmodernism has altered features of this epistemology. Theory has moved in recent years from regarding culture as an "acted document," the discursive knowledge and practices of which are identified with public social life, its exchanges and seemingly transparent lives (Geertz 1973, 1988), to practice theories that blur the boundaries of texts, persons, and communities (Knauff 1995). However, this epistemic

change has not entered much into how sociologists and anthropologists interpret secrecy. In its most fundamental sense, society is still regarded as a public phenomenon, its institutions grounded in “the nature of things,” that is, constituted by consensual “social and cultural reality” (Geertz 1984b; Giddens 1990). Many anthropologists continue to suggest that ritual secret meanings signify collective signifiers and codes (Barth 1975; Wagner 1972, 1975) in the public domain, though some scholars of secrecy, such as Schwimmer (1980), have long suggested the shortcomings of such theory. The signs of ritual secrecy appeal to something hidden, a force contra society, against culture. Secrecy does not match “reality” in this Western public/secular sense, which has led to problematic readings by social and cultural theorists who assumed that secrecy is either groundless or fraudulent, a “false consciousness” that deceived its own practitioners, in which case it cannot serve as a Durkheimian social fact (Whitehouse 1995).

This is the sense in which I will refer to many earlier ethnographic accounts from around the world as cynical-romantic views of ritual practices of small societies since the Victorian era. As we have seen, such a negative attitude was absent from the story of Lewis Henry Morgan, though Morgan’s peers were suspicious of secrecy, and his own feelings about secret societies obviously changed after he married and became famous.

Many of the dualistic qualities of secrecy previewed in Western history—individual/society, public/private, and so on—are the source of perennial debates about the meaning of what Durkheim (1914) called the “duality of human existence,” the social view that humans are individuals and members of groups. But secrecy also goes against the grain of some of the most cherished Western notions of “human nature,” which fear the “nature” or “animal” side of people, in favor of the “social contract” in neoliberal democracies. I think these sentiments are historically very old manifestations of a Western Protestant and Calvinist tendency that valued public sociality and mistrusted all things clandestine or secret.

Psychoanalysts have contributed strongly to the cynical attitude about ritual secrecy, mistakenly conflating it with the individual or what I have called contractual secrecy, as reflected in the following prominent passage from Bruno Bettelheim:

Rites that claim occurrences contrary to nature, but that cannot demonstrate such events, must be secret if the participants are to be able to maintain to themselves that the occurrences did in fact take



place. Moreover, secrecy protects the belief against the doubts of skeptics, who, because of the secrecy, cannot collect evidence detrimental to the belief. . . . The fact that all these are fictions must be hidden if the devotees are to be able fully to enjoy the psychological advantages gained by symbolic achievement. Secrecy thus is necessary for the continuing satisfaction of the needs of the believers. (1955: 228–29)

I think that this view, quite close to Freud's general evaluation of religion as an "illusion" that fulfills the needs of the worshipper who regresses to an infantile state when confronted with anxiety, mirrors the psychoanalytic interpretations of ritual secrecy in New Guinea (Lidz and Lidz 1989). Secrets, as in the popular culture notion of "family secrets," may be quite harmful to the lives and aspirations of individuals (Bok 1962); and cultural myths may motivate the use of secrets within families to suppress the revelation of difference, including sexual difference (Herdt and Koff 2000). Surely the culture of secrecy surrounding the Church and the publicity surrounding accusations of sexual coercion by priests and cover-up by the Church in 2002 have accentuated the deep mistrust of sexual secrets. However, another strand of thought sees the potential in secrecy for creativity (Pincus and Dare 1978), and, going back further, protection of individual liberty through secrecy (Simmel 1950).

### *Simmel on Secrecy*

The writing of Georg Simmel on secrecy, as much as anyone's, drew attention to secrecy as an important paradigm for critical social theory, and no text in the social study of this area is better known than his influential essay "The Secret Society," written around 1900 (reprinted in his collected works [1950]). In his remarkable essay, Simmel advances the main theme of an ontological theory of secrecy in understanding the creation of cultural reality, and I regard this as the precursor to the approach taken here. While Simmel does not explicitly contrast ritual versus nonritual secrecy, his reference to ritual opens the way for an ontological view:

The striking feature in the treatment of ritual is not only the rigor of its observance but, above all, the anxiousness with which it is guarded a secret. Its disclosure appears to be as detrimental as that

of the purposes and actions or perhaps of the very existence of the society. . . . Under its characteristic categories, the secret society must seek to create a sort of life totality. (1950: 359)

Simmel's suggestion that ritual secrecy creates a "life totality," or what I will call a secret ontology (shared reality), is illustrated in the case studies that follow.

Simmel stressed the fundamental insight that secrecy is, as we might say today, a form of cultural production, albeit the product of a divided society, while expressing a certain moral cynicism about the reality and necessity of the secrecy. Simmel's emphasis upon secrecy in conflict situations of sociopolitical oppression (what he called "unfreedom") was the first positive treatment of the collective forms of secrecy known to comparative sociology and anthropology. Coming out of nineteenth-century pseudoevolutionary and rationalist concerns about the emergence of civilization and democracy, Simmel reflected the biases of the society of his times. He argued for the transitional emergence of the secret society as a lesser form of social evolution that would eventually give way to a higher form. He also found harmful functions in certain brands of secrecy as well and thus perpetuated the extant folk culture of romantic cynicism, which concerns all forms of hidden association. These were to be mistrusted, Simmel felt, and their secret form was regarded as selfish and generally as "anti-social." Power was part of the reason. Simmel was ingenious in connecting self-interest to secret formation. He argued:

The purpose of secrecy is, above all, protection. . . . Of all protective measures, the most radical is to make oneself invisible. In this respect, the secret society differs fundamentally from the individual who seeks protection of secrecy [because it is] not the individuals, but the groups they form, which is concealed. (1950: 345)

Here, Simmel wrestled with how to make a shared cultural reality out of the threads of individual secret acts.

Symbolically, Simmel's work viewed secrecy as "a second world alongside the manifest world" (1950: 330). This metaphorical relationship between part and whole comes close to a rethinking of the distinction between "culture" and "society," in which society contains a symbolic world—culture—parallel to a structure of social relations or a process of

social practices. Yet Simmel's metaphoric term "world," and the subordinate term "manifest," suggest that he could not further explore this analysis of the multiple power structures associated with multiple cultural realities within the same tradition. How can the members of the secret group and those excluded speak the same language and share in the same culture, but not belong to one "society"? Their leaders are the leaders of the containing society, yet they may attack or even assassinate those who are not members. The problematic extends into the secret formation as well, for this is no simple social solidarity (Allen 1967); secrets are status privileges that separate inside from outside, but within the secret formation, secrets create hierarchies of younger and older members of the hidden order. It may further antagonize segments of the population, such as the genders, creating secret and public spaces suggestive of secret and public persons and bodies.

When it came to non-Western societies, Simmel's assumptions of functional adaptation, harmony, and homogeneity further thwarted the understanding of divergent cultural realities. Simmel's work was thus instrumental in shifting but not fully analyzing the structural/historical assumption that a "society" contains but one cultural reality. We see this most clearly in what Simmel refers to as the "protective" functions of the secret groups, such as early Christian communities who were persecuted.

The fact that secrets do not remain guarded forever is the weakness of the secret society. . . . The protection which secret societies offer is thus absolute, but only temporary. In fact, for contents of a positive social value to be lodged in secret societies is only a transition which, after a certain period of growing strength, they no longer need. (1950: 346).

Hence, Simmel saw systems of collective secrecy as structurally unstable, an element of theory with which I largely agree, notwithstanding the cynicism from which it derives. But what he fails to see is that consensual groupings can crosscut or dissect a society, shifting centers and peripheries of power. Even when Simmel refers again to the social amelioration that eventually transformed formerly persecuted Christian groups into the "dominant religion" within society, he imagines a complete change of the social economy and reality of the people, rather than a multicultural population or a divided social consciousness. The reified concept of "secret soci-

ety” conflates time and space. All of these are problems stemming from the notion of the modern society as homogeneous and the assertion that secrecy must be a declining process of social evolution.

But there is the logical converse of Simmel’s position: That secret rites are products of historical diffusion, derived from another place and time, but nevertheless preserved through secrecy and then reproduced in the contemporary group. Here is W. H. R. Rivers, the great riverboat doctor-ethnologist of New Guinea:

There is reason to believe that the knowledge thus inaccessible to the people at large has come from elsewhere, having been derived from external culture of which even those who act as its custodians have no tradition. The knowledge thus guarded is closely analogous to the unconscious experience of the individual in that it belongs to a remote past that has become accessible. In the secret societies we seem to have guardians of unconscious experiences who only allow its content to reach the general public in some disguised form. It is worthy of note that such esoteric public knowledge is with especial frequency the motive of dramatic and symbolic representation. Of all the facts collected by me in Melanesia none show the dramatic quality and the use of symbolism more definitely than the ritual of the secret organization. (1917: 402)

Such notions are not far removed from those of Lewis Henry Morgan; they even employ some of the same imagery (“custodians” and “guardians”). We shall find that the same imagery hovers over the work of Barth (1987).

Rivers’s ideas suggest how the sequence of time—the eternal unconscious that reveals regressions to infantile thinking in Freud’s sense—becomes the storehouse of authority, and the core of symbolic meaning, in secret societies. Later, Rivers (1922) would review evidence on rebirth symbolism, discovering that death and rebirth were critical to the symbolism of secret societies in many areas of the world. Of course this text reflects the problems and opportunities of dealing with precolonial descriptions of secrecy. But what matters is his assertion that ritual secrecy derives its meaning not from present-day social functions or values but from the past, indeed, the archaic.

The fundamental imagery of this dualistic paradigm—society versus

secret society—is a distortion or, more accurately, a disruption of normative time and space relationships. An odd instance of “condensation,” Simmel’s model imagines that two social entities (secret society, secular society) can somehow “occupy” the same “space” and “time” simultaneously. This is a logical outcome of thinking of a “primitive” society as homogeneous, having “simplex” roles, in which each actor supposedly has only one role, or at least performs only one role at a time. Of course this fiction also imagines a linear progress from simple to complex societies that ultimately eliminates the need of secrecy (1950: 345–46). I shall disagree, as noted in the final section of this chapter on social economies.

Perhaps this model might work in mass societies, such as the United States, in which anonymity and secrecy are the means of the preservation of individual rights against the oppression of the State. For example, the secrecy of homosexuality is a complex means of hiding and passing, and dates back—in its classification as sodomy—to the early modern period (Van der Meer 1994). While the secrecy of homosexual relations began as an individual matter, it quickly grew into a semicollective concern in urban centers such as Amsterdam, Paris, and New York. Sexual secrecy is more a thing of the past, so it is said (Sedgwick 1990); but secrecy undermines political and social movements among lesbians and gay men, who were hitherto made invisible (and in some sense “protected”) as well as victimized by secrecy and passing as heteronormal (Adam et al. 1999; Herdt 1997a; Herdt and Boxer 1993).

The extension of this idea of secrecy and neoliberal individual rights beyond the West into simple societies is very problematical, however, for its basis in contractual arrangements between individual concepts (e.g., sexual identity) is peculiar to the West (Teunis 1996). In the case of male secret societies in West Africa or Melanesia, by contrast, how might we construe male secret cults as protective of rights, especially in relations with their own women and children? After all, is not the power of public affairs lodged primarily in the male role, and in warriorhood, as the seat of the secrecy? Such questions were of course beyond the purview of Simmel and were unanswerable at the time because of the paucity of ethnography. Simmel’s idea does not travel well primarily because the conceptualization of “society” on which it was based was too simple and nondynamic (see Murphy 1971).

This conflation of time and space—which is problematic throughout the scholarship on ritual secrecy, from Simmel to Hutton Webster and

Rivers—should be seen as an instance of a larger intellectual history. As the important work of Fabian (1983) has shown, such a concept of time probably derives from linear models of progression in the epistemology of nineteenth-century evolutionism with which anthropology has been saddled in its language of description and analysis. In this case, spatial relations between the “society and secret society,” instantiated in notions of sequences, developmental transitions from secret to public groups, and progression from magic to science, all implicitly rely upon the crutch of evolutionary time frames (Fabian 1983: 17). Some of these preconceptions were carried over into the Melanesian literature through displacements that will become increasingly transparent.

One final point on Simmel. It is well known that Simmel posited two types of secret formations: one in which the group is itself hidden from the society, such as a subversive political faction; the other in which the existence of the secret formation was known to the larger society, but the identity of the individual members remained anonymous or secret. Without being entirely explicit about it, Simmel strongly implied that the latter form was more “primitive” than the other and was to be found in “nature” peoples. Conversely, the other, more “sophisticated” mode of secrecy was identified with the transition to modernity.

But there is a third ideal type of secret society, unknown in Simmel’s time but common in New Guinea. The most important instances of secret societies known to Melanesia (Allen 1967) meet neither of Simmel’s conditions, since, in many cases, the existence of the secret society is acknowledged, and its individual members are known and recognized as such by the public in these societies. In this light, Simmel’s notion of “public” is far too simple for the multilayered cultural reality of ritual and public rhetoric discursive practices of precolonial and now postcolonial (Lattas 1999) Melanesian societies.

Contrary to Simmel, I want to stress that these distinct types of secret societies are not bound to a linear progression or evolutionary sequence, as we shall see; they occur across a range of societies, large and small, preliterate and complex, being reducible neither to a particular form of social structure nor to historical survivals from an earlier age. These formations of ritual secrecy are, however, created under the social conditions of unstable, chaotic, or breached social relations, whether as a result of some kind of political domination, intense warfare, mistrust, or gendered social conflict. For New Guinea, the chief outcome of these instabilities among

males was to create ritual secret realities lodged in the men's house that signified a utopian male world.

*From Secret to Private and Public*

Whatever the status of these brooding questions for Morgan's generation and the cohort of Simmel to follow, few would disagree with the assertion that secrecy is nowadays felt to be a "bad" or antisocial thing for an "open" democracy such as the United States. Intellectually, I think, this view in social and cultural study still derives in part from the famous opinion of Simmel: "The secret is . . . the sociological expression of moral badness" (1950: 331). However, as we have seen, the roots of suspicion of secrecy are far older than Simmel. It is true that secrecy is more suspect than ever, as if the end of cold war has brought a deeper suspicion of the hidden and greater prize for transparency than before. A flood of books on the nefarious activities of the CIA (Prados 1996) and KGB (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2001) have exposed the paranoia, secret warfare, and attempts of these fallen boy scouts to disrupt the world powers' governments, including democracy within their own systems. Nearly a century after Simmel's influential writing, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and other social scientists continue to argue, seemingly oblivious to this cultural history, that whereas privacy is "legal," secrecy is best seen as an "immoral" or "illegal" species of privacy (Tefft 1980: 13–14; 1992): "Privacy has a consensual basis in society, while secrecy does not" (Warren and Laslett 1980: 27). The clinicians often take an even more caustic view, as evidenced from a recent cross-country scholarly study of Alcoholics Anonymous that stated: "Originally, AA was more about disclosing the secret than about searching for the authentic self: 'We are only as sick as our secrets'" (Makela et al. 1996: 161).

Secrecy and the law again form a problematic relationship in the early twenty-first century—long after the Victorian lawyer Lewis Henry Morgan began to turn away from secret societies. A recent commentary on donor insemination by legal scholars in the United States, entitled *Lethal Secrets*, argues the anti-society position quite well:

We firmly believe that the practices of secrecy and anonymity must end. . . . We are convinced that in all DI [donor insemination] families, the need to maintain secrecy and anonymity has had an

adverse effect upon all the members. . . . Whenever a family lives with a secret, the fear of revelation of that secret is a specter that haunts those holding the information, ultimately straining the relationship. (Baran and Pannor 1989: 152–53)

Here we see a convergence of clinical and legal opinions.

Secrecy was typically defined as the involuntary concealment of information, with privacy seen as a purely voluntary matter (Tefft 1980). The public/private divide in our society (Seligman 1998) comes into relief. What is at stake in this rhetoric is trust—shared social confidence, and perhaps even moral and legal degradation (Goffman 1963). Institutional secrecy, in this cynical view, poses a threat to the social contract, for it would create a culture that is “spurious” and inimical to the creativity of individuals, unlike a “genuine” culture, to recall Edward Sapir’s view from the early twentieth century. The cynical view states that secrecy destroys the supposed seamless sociality that makes culture a “good thing.”

Anthropologists working in New Guinea were not able to escape the powerful grip of this modernist epistemology, its preconceptions and prejudices, in their own ethnographies. The cynical attitude toward secrecy, inflected through Western ideas associated with antisocial tendencies and the individualistic public/private dichotomy, have been projected more or less directly into interpretations of ritual secrecy in non-Western societies. As noted before, these interpretations derided ritual secrecy and treated its permutations in Melanesia as way stations along the road to a “higher social evolution” that would eventually lead to rational “civilization.” In the writings of Hutton Webster (1932), in particular, secrecy was interpreted as a device for manipulation or oppression. Even Simmel’s highly creative work implied that social evolution would inevitably eliminate secrecy in favor of the confidentiality of personal contracts. Thus the ideals of sectarian Western civic disclosure suggested a change from group secrecy to individual privacy in culture and public affairs.

Later in the twentieth century, during the cold war with its schizophrenic ideologies, secular secrecy became virtually synonymous with communism and the accusation of homosexuality as a means to vilify and destroy marginal or nonconformist groups (Corber 1997). The efforts of secret quasi-military organizations, especially the FBI and the CIA, to “combat communism” and protect the “national security” interest were often thinly veiled manipulations of power-grubbing. All privacy, includ-



ing sexuality, was open to surveillance, which became widely identified with international espionage networks or the misguided utopias of delusional individuals who founded personality cults based upon social hatred and predictions of apocalypse. Even today, nothing is more incendiary in Western debates on privacy and civic responsibility than to suggest that officials have improperly kept secrets from the public, even in times of war.

But what has this to do with initiation in New Guinea? A general principle, call it a rule of cross-cultural translatability, emerges (Herdt 1991a). As the apprehension of secrecy grows, and greater efforts to control the representation and performance of reality are exerted through secret means, the public order expands. The sphere of personal privacy contracts concomitantly. In precolonial New Guinea, typified by the enormous sweep of male secret societies, there remains little or no social space or cultural ontology accorded to late modern Western "individual privacy." Consequently romance and intimacy as embodiments of the self were scarce (Giddens 1990). As the historical secret societies expanded in importance and social salience, so says this view, the pressure on individuals reached its zenith: the "de-individuation" made famous by Simmel. What this meant for the production of masculinity was a greater sanctioning of men's roles and tighter monitoring of their adherence to secret rituals. The tension between domestic and secret (Tuzin 1982) increased; the opposition between rhetorical speech in public versus secret objectification, male subordination, mistrust, and fear of boy-recruits may have threatened to burst the seams of kinship and community consensus. Today, under the influence of postcolonial change and globalization (Foster 1995; Whitehouse 1995, 1998), the societies of Papua New Guinea are witnessing the emergence of new domains of individual commerce and mercantile individualism, bringing on totally new demands for privacy and the demise of ritual secrecy (chap. 5). This view has always precluded the idea of a counterhegemonic form of agency developed through ritual secrecy.

Historically, the modernist view of liberal democracies suggested that there could be but one legitimate form of social reality—transparent public affairs—which made secrecy a counterfeit form, whether in Morgan's secret societies or in East-West *realpolitik*. It further suggested that there could be but one form of valid subjectivity, indicative of one mode of subject/object relations, sanctioned by official or formal power, that is, the State. But consider this Foucauldian twist: the more secrecy was feared in

the nineteenth century, the more it grew in popularity. And then again: the more secrecy was suspected of disrupting the twentieth-century State—as it was staked out in cold war politics, despised but also envied in spy novels and the Sunday papers, prompting an ethos of “national security” accusations against traitors who “sold secrets” to the Enemy (Communists, Jews, Homosexuals; you get the picture: Herman 1997)—the more did anthropologists in the mid-century portray ritual secrecy in so-called primitive cultures as “false consciousness”: mistaken, fraudulent, or just plain silly.

This worldview, to sum up, was thoroughly modern in its prejudices; for its suspicion of secrecy radiated from a social order of neoliberal democracy and expressive individualism that derided the distance between self and society, and especially the harboring of a secret. I think such a cultural worldview was foreign to Lewis Henry Morgan. Indeed, the perspective that has hovered over the scholarly and popular literature on secrecy for at least a century interprets the secret as a “disease” of society and a pathology in the actor. This “romantic-cynical approach” to secrecy idealizes secular humanism and its romantic liberal democracy, much as it is cynical toward the hidden elements of private life. There is much good that has come from the liberal democracy tradition of the West; I complain only about its use as a foil against secrecy.

The fact is that such attitudes often confuse notions of privacy in matters of rationalism and individualism, the suppression of persons or the concealment of things from the public, as indications of subversion. But the collective secret should not be confused with the private, and the voluntary concealment of information must not be confounded with those forms of power that suppress knowledge or action against the will, however this is mediated. Our contemporary version of public affairs is generally suspicious of anything hidden, even those esoteric rites or religious practices whose ultimate concern is union with God, and that would regard as sacrilege the dissemination of religious experience in secular society. Perhaps this dour Western perspective on secrecy is itself antireligious: the transition away from a worldview that once prized religious faith more than reason, community more than individualism, embodied by living in complicated intimate attachments, toward the diffuse market relations and fragmentary contracts celebrated in anonymous urban life today.

An examination of this scientific cynicism reveals two primary postulates. First, social scientists generally do not accept secret practices as cultural conventions that are “real” or “true,” except insofar as they indicate

false consciousness or domination. Even in this regard, many social and cultural theorists ignore or disregard secrecy as unworthy of scientific scrutiny, and I believe that their reasons can be traced back to the epistemology expressed by Durkheim's "social facts," that is, society cannot rest upon a social lie, and therefore many scholars cannot take seriously the social and psychological meanings of ritual secrecy. The second postulate, however, is just as important and is more relevant to this study: the notion that without trust, communal or collective organization is impossible to fathom for social theory. The idea is explored brilliantly in a recent essay by Adam Seligman, who writes: "Without a shared universe of expectations, histories, memories or affective commitments, no basis of trust can exist." He goes on to warn that in the absence of trust, as in cases of "radically incommensurate life-worlds," "indeterminacy becomes intolerable" (1998: 36).

For the democratic theorist unable to imagine a society of "radically incommensurate life-worlds" that is stitched or held together by ritual secrecy, as occurs in New Guinea communities, the failure to trust is pivotal. Again, such a worldview misconstrues ritual secrecy as purely a fantasy or illusion in the mind, the result of wish fulfillment and unconscious forces, in the case of Freud and his followers, such as Bettelheim. It may disregard secret organizations as manifestations of power based upon lies or hoaxes, without credibility in "reality." Both images derive from the Western cultural imagination and have been exported to different times and places. But in both these imaginings, secrecy is scorned as perverse and remains underanalyzed in Western and non-Western societies.

This worldview is thus reinforced by the liberal democratic values of modernity, which counsel that, in all matters, the public arena is to be elevated over the private domain (Seligman 1998). Is it not striking that, amidst concerns over national security following the terrorist bombing in New York of September 11, secrecy has become more common and less attacked in the United States? In such times, "indeterminacy becomes intolerable," in Seligman's words; privacy and individual rights are sacrificed to State security. It is true that the same cultural tradition that produced the idea of civil society (especially in the writings of Hegel) and sacrosanct individualism values private life and the space of the person as beyond the legitimate intrusion of the Western State (Bellah et al. 1985). Secrecy is a constant threat to the perceived moral legitimacy of the State in such examples. Of course, some have suggested that the public ideal is

created here as a means of generating resistance and transgression, especially in sexuality and gender relations (Manderson and Jolly 1997), where intimacy and secrecy hold sway. Perhaps it is the intimate romantic bond of late modern marriage and “partnership” wherein secret contracts achieve one of their highest forms.

Whatever the cultural reality in Western society of these postulates, they are of limited value for understanding the larger historical and cross-cultural phenomenon of secrecy. Certainly they do not address the socio-cultural interstices of secret practice, particularly in the paradigm of ritual secrecy. An obvious failing of the public/private duality is its difficulty in rendering individual differences and subjective meanings across societies—which is especially troublesome in matters of intimate discussions (Herdt and Stoller 1990). Conventional notions of the public/private distinction suggest that the public actor should not be subjected to surveillance and sanctioning with respect to her or his private rights; or if the private actor is considered in relation to social conduct, analysis typically hinges upon opposition to the rules of public life (Foucault 1973; Geertz 1966; Wikan 1990). Only recently have hidden or secret aspects of the system of meanings and action been deeply rendered in ethnographies (Lattas 1999; Ottenberg 1989; Schwimmer 1980; Stephen 1994; Whitehouse 1995, 2000).

### *Anthropology's Dilemma on Secrecy*

The romantic and cynical attitudes about secrecy, trust, and social life reached their zenith when anthropologists working in other cultures regarded ritual secrecy as a rational or cognitive process that could be understood as linear and rational. This view led to the conclusion that since the secrets did not square with “reality,” being outside of public affairs (i.e., “culture”), the secret content must be revealed as a hoax, lie, fiction, or fabrication, a series of dominations or modes of “false consciousness” premises that promoted domination or exploitation in preliterate societies.

However, such notions rest upon a false preconception: Because ritual secrecy is not a rational knowledge discourse, it rather depends upon the sensory, the embodied, the lived experience of being and knowing. Ritual secrecy is closer to living a life that is in accord with the imagery and sensations of beliefs, and the revelations of faith, as these are practiced, wor-

shipped. The distinction thus drawn is similar to Whitehouse's (1995) division of religious phenomena into the "imagistic" and the "doctrinal," and his work lends support to our analysis. Clearly ritual secrecy belongs in the category of the imagistic, and I agree with Whitehouse's assessment: "Anthropologists have exaggerated . . . the extent to which Melanesian fertility cults possess certain transmissive features found in Christianity" (2000: 95). The evocative, revelatory, world-as-becoming quality of ritual knowledge through secret initiation is clearly less doctrinal, until it comes to the instilling of masculinity, which forms another stage for later doctrinal exegesis, and adult socialization (Herdt 1981). Ritual secrecy as a form of male discipline is about practices and duties, being devotional, pious, observant of worship, and so on. As we shall see played out in the ethnographies reviewed in this book, emotional imagery, subjectivity, and sexuality are foundations of ritual secrecy.

I want to suggest, then, that the received worldview of secrecy ought to be challenged on two levels: first with respect to the ethnographies of Melanesia, as we shall revisit them; and second with respect to the history of science, of anthropological science in particular, to explain why anthropologists in studying ritual secrecy often went against the grain of cultural relativism dominant in anthropology to proclaim secret practices a fraud. Why did some surrender to the Durkheimian tendencies to see culture and society as monolithic—as one reality, one worldview, one mode of consensual social action?

To return to the historical hiatus in the anthropology of secrecy laid out in chapter 1 on Lewis Henry Morgan: my guess is that the ethical problems of studying ritual secrecy have often proved too great and complicated for the lone field-worker. Secrecy, if it were based (as Durkheim might have said) on a "lie," or, as New Guinea ethnographers such as K. E. Read claimed, upon a "hoax," placed the phenomenon outside of the purview of anthropology. The notable ethnographers whose accounts we deal with later were burdened by the long suspicion of secrecy as antisocial in the West, particularly in the domination of women and children. The dilemma is that the cultural relativism of the day ought to have suggested that the anthropologist accept the ritual secrecy at face value. In a descriptive relativist approach, ritual secrecy would have been viewed as representing conflicting orders of cultural reality, of belief and unfaith, which were internal contradictions to these societies, not merely "lies" and "hoaxes." However, the liberal democracy values of these prefeminist

period scholars, including their privileged position as white males, and their sympathy for women and the amelioration of women's lives, may have all played a part in their interpretation. That they effectively combined the historical view of secrecy as cynical with this sympathetic and therefore romantic skepticism of the men's customs was certainly understandable in its day. As I shall suggest in the Conclusion, the positionality of white heterosexual male anthropologists limited their ability to understand the conditional masculinity on which ritual secrecy, especially its homosociality, was based. It was after all so at odds with the colonial position of their own masculinity.

### *Ritual and Contractual Secrecy*

We are studying ritual secrecy in the context of precolonial New Guinea societies, but as this chapter reveals, the interpretations of these forms have typically inflected the preconceptions of the dominant form of secrecy in the modern period of the West—contractual secrecy. To sum up the positive and creative ontological dimension of these forms: ritual secrecy creates a shared cultural reality through initiation as a means of negotiating personal and social ills that finds no other ready solution within certain historical conditions. Ritual secrecy thus shares with gift exchange (Godelier 1999) the qualities of indebtedness and relatedness attached to the original “owner” of the secret who teaches and transmits its power through hidden rituals. Masculinity of a certain historical formation was one of its products. The cultural problem of endemic warfare and unstable political and marital alliances in New Guinea certainly presented such a historical situation. The special genius of ritual secrecy, as we shall study its permutations, is to provide a means of living in two cultural realities simultaneously—a perfect or utopian one, that of ritual formulas and dietetics, with often hidden hierarchies, which elide all the messy difficulties that trouble an ideology of intimate, vulnerable bodies, situated in imperfect earthly existence, full of the human emotions of conflicted desires, demands, and impossible loyalties.

Contrarily, there are social and psychological dependencies incumbent upon secret contracts, particularly the intimate and relational modes (such as parent and child) that are removed from the public code of rational and liberal democratic values and that enable the exploitation of demands and power in small circles, to produce such secret contractual relations. As

expressed between the lawyer and client, or between psychiatrist and patient, priest and confessor, secrets are poured into the contractual partner in exchange for money or another precious commodity or good. And here, too, there are characteristic social and psychological problems of a historical age, including possible abuses of power, that find their solution within these indefinite and conditional arrangements; and no other form of social practice can supply their rewards and punishments.

Although it is easier to identify contractual secrecy in mass societies, there are hidden forms of “naturalizing” body and supporting ontological practices that qualify for ritual secrecy in the modern period, as we have seen in Victorian male cults. In more recent times, however, British covens of witches around Cambridge provide a rich illustration of the embodiment of alternative concepts of time, space, and being, the accoutrements of special clothes, ritual utensils, magical spells, and so on (Luhrman 1989a). The British adepts, both women and men, come in search of mystical support for their desire to attain a divergent reality; they seem to reject the civic community as humdrum, unsatisfying, too messy and incoherent for an ideal pursuit of Spirit. And through a disciplined “interpretative drift,” to use Luhrman’s expression of it, these actors remake their precepts and concepts, reconstructing an existing consensual system of sensibilities and desires, which pave the way for the production of a new cultural reality. Seldom is this completely successful. But when it manages to invalidate the mundane and contest the fickle or polluted notions of a disliked way of life, it is clear that the contemporary witches of England have worked very hard to build an alternative secret reality that they prefer to the ordinary one. To study such a world as an anthropologist is no easy task. It reminds us of the difficulty of creating authority in the midst of studying the seemingly irrational or magical, not to mention the multiple problems of method and ethics that entail a radically different way of life. These are the issues that must be reconsidered in anthropology’s encounter with secrecy.

Ritual secrecy is created out of conflict and fear, providing a means of trust and loyalty between people who are challenged to defend a way of life. Their worldview and shared realities express common desires for emotional and cognitive coherence and clarity of boundaries, and entities, inside and outside of the person/self as constituted in culture. The ultimate cause of this desire, however, rests in the political economy of social life and cannot be reduced to an internal process, even though the ontological

characteristics of cognition and emotion are developmentally necessary to produce the outcome. Yet this is also true of language, and the one does not lead to the other, even though it is hard to imagine a system of ritual secrecy without language (cf. Forge 1966). Once the tradition of secret reality is laid down in ritual formulations, they may then be combined with collective drives for power. For the individual agent, ritual secrecy becomes a means of defending the person/self from all social criticism, as well as self-doubt. Critical feedback can unsettle the secret perfection of hidden social classifications. This is what the ideology and practice of ritual secrecy achieves, and the studies from New Guinea to follow are indicative of how often it succeeded.