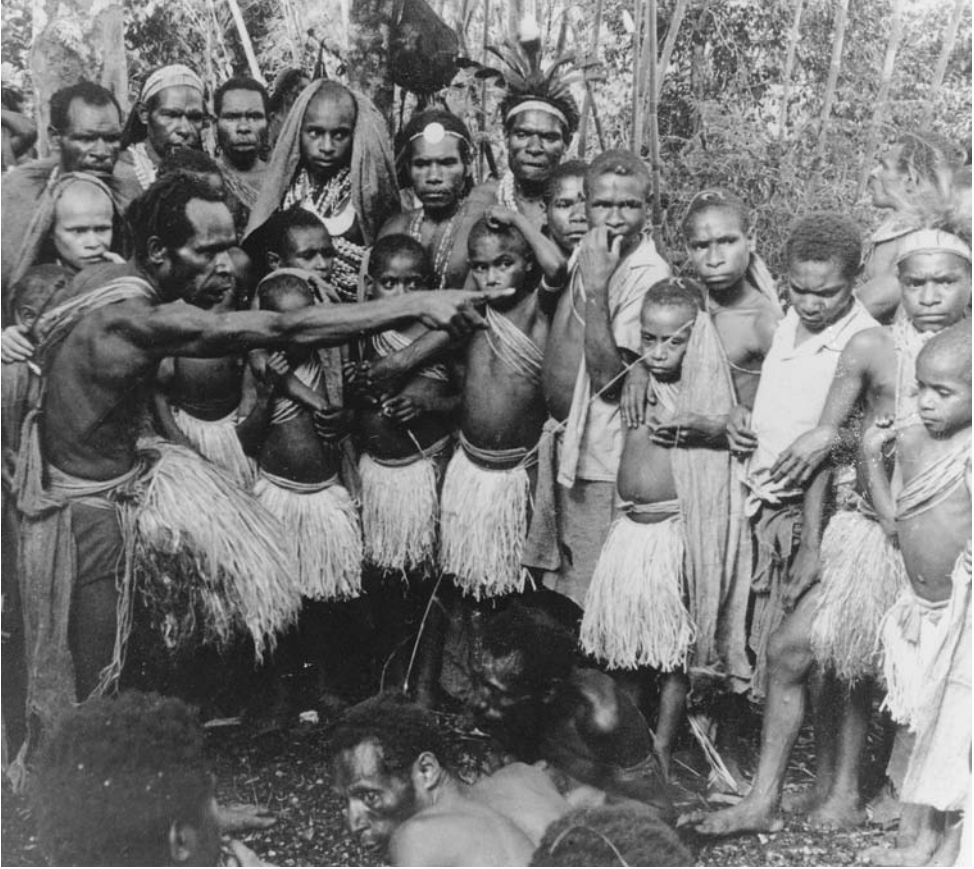


Secrecy and Cultural Reality: Utopian Ideologies of the New Guinea Men's House
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Gilbert Herdt

University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

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Published in the United States of America by
The University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
© Printed on acid-free paper

2006 2005 2004 2003 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herdt, Gilbert H., 1949–

Secrecy and cultural reality : utopian ideologies of the New
Guinea men's house / Gilbert Herdt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-472-09761-x (Cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-472-06761-3

(Paper : alk. paper)

1. Sambia (Papua New Guinea people)—Rites and ceremonies.
2. Sambia (Papua New Guinea people)—Sexual behavior.
3. Secret societies—Papua New Guinea.
4. Initiation rites—Papua New Guinea.
5. Sex customs—Papua New Guinea.
6. Homosexuality, Male—Papua New Guinea.
7. Papua New Guinea—Social life and customs.

I. Title.

DU740.42 .H464 2003

305.8'89912—dc21

2003001358

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*Dedicated to my sister,
Cindy Brown,
for her courage and wisdom.*



In the secret societies we seem to have guardians of this unconscious experience who only allow its content to reach the general public in some disguised form. —*W. H. R. Rivers*



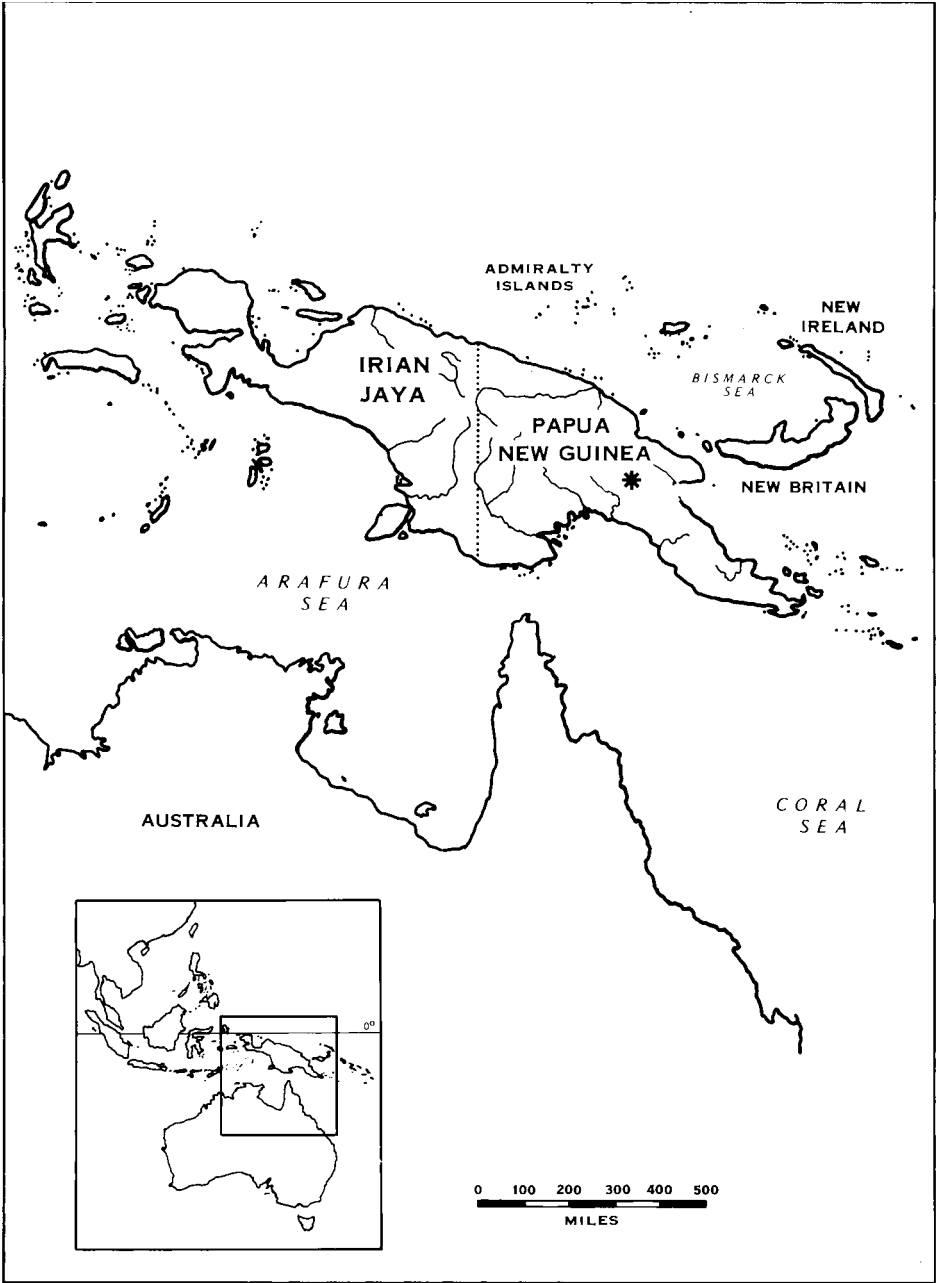
The man who lays his secrets before the world shows his rivals how to become his enemies. —*Gola proverb*



If the anthropological study of religious commitment is underdeveloped, the anthropological study of religious non-commitment is nonexistent. The anthropology of religion will have come of age when some more subtle Malinowski writes a book called, “Belief and Unbelief” (or even “Faith and Hypocrisy”) in a Savage Society. —*Clifford Geertz*



Women are the bane of a peaceful society, and as long as men never compromise their masculine unity, they will hold the secret to a paradisiacal world devoid of women and full of life's pleasures. —*Donald F. Tuzin*



Map 1. New Guinea and off-lying islands (asterisk denotes location of Sambia)

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Preface & Acknowledgments



A BOOK IS A CHAPTER from one's life, at least it is for me, and like all liminal markers, it foreshadows endings as well as beginnings. The invitation to give the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1991 was no different in this way, though it took far longer, a decade longer, than I imagined to sort the chaff and save the wheat.¹

The present book is a greatly revised version of the original lectures. In it, I have proposed a general theory of the conditions that foster secrecy, especially among men, who, in dealing with social anxiety and mistrust, deploy rituals of conditional masculinity to gain purpose and agency, achieve homosociality and trust, imposing hierarchy and rule over younger males and women. The personal and institutional outcome is to create an alternative, hidden cultural reality in society. While previous theorists in Melanesian ethnography and anthropological study in general have paid little attention to the role of sexuality in these processes, this book demonstrates the significance of sexuality in homosociality and relationships between the genders. This historical formation is especially interesting in view of the fact that in Melanesia it precedes the development of "homosexuality" as a category or homosexual subjects in the cultural meaning system. I draw upon Victorian studies to contextualize the social career of Lewis Henry Morgan (chap. 1), showing how homosociality and ritual secrecy existed as a means of achieving intimacy before homosexuality stepped onto the stage of modernity.

I should have been cautioned against the pitfalls of investigating secrecy by the famous example of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, who spent years on this construct in the human imagination early in the twentieth century (see chap. 2). The key to studying secrecy is to allow the

passage of at least a decade, maybe even two, in order to say something new about the subject. My own research into secrecy has led me to define two distinctive types, which I term *ritual secrecy* and *contractual secrecy*; this book is about the former. Though ritual secrecy is a compact between persons (unlike contractual secrecy, as between lawyer and client), it is closer to the category of the gift, the order of things which can neither be sold or given, but must be kept (Godelier 1999). Eventually, I hope to publish a larger study focused on understanding contractual secrets formed between individual agents in the modern and postmodern eras, especially the way that hidden contractual relations were historically productive of sexual subjectivity and private selfhood since the time of the French Revolution.

Beginning with my own historical society and moving outward to Papua New Guinea, I deconstruct the exoticism inherent in secrecy and the tendency to transform members of social out-groups into marginalized Others typical of the way in which secrecy is treated in the academy and popular culture today. I encourage my readers to question the dominant misunderstandings and prejudices against secrecy that prevail in anthropology and the social sciences: that secrecy is generally a sham or hoax, rather than a valid means of establishing trust and interdependence in times of social and political instability, and that secrecy is a cursory social practice rather than providing the impetus for creating utopian cultural reality. Such views conflate the individual or private secrecy of late modern life with the more complex, collective secrecy that was a product of myth and ritual ceremonies in areas such as Melanesia and New Guinea. We should be skeptical of the idea that secrecy always works “against” society; instead, it can be viewed as an alternative method of constructing and legitimating hegemonic control of the social order by one particular group—or one gender, as in the case studied here—over another, a view close to Simmel’s. Such a critique inevitably challenges the received worldview that secrecy is a force that disrupts interpersonal relations and works to undermine human potential. An alternative approach is to view secrecy as one of the desperate tools of the human imagination for managing highly complicated—if not at times seemingly impossible—social relations. I must admit to my concern at being seen as an apologist for secrecy in taking such an approach.

Being a Westerner (furthermore, an American), a lifelong academic, and a neoliberal who abhors institutional secrecy places me in an awkward position. As an anthropologist who values cultural relativism, I subscribe to

the ideology that transparency of intent through social action is the most preferable means of creating a positive social climate and promoting the ideals of democracy. On the other hand, as an anthropologist, I am aware of the middle-class privileges and liberal democratic tradition implied by this ethnocentric suspicion of collective secrecy. More than two decades of work in New Guinea have convinced me that secrecy is but one of the many cultural and political devices employed by societies that hover desperately near the edge of cultural overthrow, often due to the forces of war.

The tenacity of secrecy in human society can never be taken for granted. The Western liberal democracies thought that they had left the culture of secrecy behind with the cold war (Moynihan 1998). During the cold war, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, these concerns were intensely focused upon East versus West rhetoric, gender segregation based on exaggerated perceptions of gender role differences, and the cultural imaginal of international espionage. But James Bond and his adolescent boy's world of sexual reveries and more-or-less clearly defined enemies have been retired. Present-day fears of corporate spying and sabotage, cover-ups and denials of wrongdoing at the highest levels of the government and military, and allegations of scandal in the White House have further blurred the boundary between the rights of an individual to a private life where he or she may pursue a number of personal interests and the right of the public to know of treason and public threat.

Indeed, just as we thought secrecy was about to disappear from the national consciousness, at least as a signifier of state security and patriotic nationalism, the events of September 11, 2001, shattered the present. Amid the worldwide hunt for those terrorists responsible for the attack against America and the effort to bring down the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. government deployed new and virtually unprecedented measures of secrecy. These efforts have subsequently caused a variety of retrospective examinations of the relationships between war and secrecy, and hence, masculinity, as, for example, the question of how much Franklin D. Roosevelt engaged the United States in a secret war leading up to the Allied effort early in World War II (Persico 2001). Secrecy refuses to go away and may become more contested than ever in the life of civil societies.

My own introduction to ritual secrecy was among the Sambia, a group of hunters and gardeners numbering two thousand people inhabiting the southeastern fringe of the Central New Guinea Highlands. I was able to

observe—through a total of sixteen different male initiation ceremonies over a number of years—the systematic way in which secrecy permeated every aspect of male subjectivity, social relationships, and sexual activity. Secrecy was a part of female ritual and secular life in Sambia culture as well, albeit separate from males. Sambia boys, beginning anywhere from age seven to ten, were initiated into two fundamental secret structures of knowing and being: ritual practices of boy-insemination that continued for many years until marriage and fatherhood, and a concomitant structure of nose-bleeding rites begun in first-stage initiation and perpetuated until the individual's death later in life (Herdt 1982b). Here, one is constantly impressed by how ritual secrecy serves as a structure of subjectivity in the production of cultural reality. Of course there are a variety of additional forms of hidden power embracing religious practice—shamanism, spiritual healing, sorcery, dream divination, and soothsaying among them (Herdt and Stephen 1989)—but it is ritual secrecy that dominates male Sambia mental life and the creation of their particular sociality.

Cultural communities like those of the Sambia in precolonial Melanesia, and Highlands Papua New Guinea especially, lacked the necessary resources and political consensus to establish sufficient trust or unity between the genders and across generations to ensure social reproduction. The solution to this problem was thereby sought after in several domains, most notably ceremonial exchange and secret initiation cults. Of these two paradigms, I believe that ritual secrecy was the more difficult and tenuous to maintain, but also the most effective in dealing with the challenges of living in armed societies requiring social cooperation (cf. the ancient Greeks; Dover 1978). This may seem a bold claim, but I believe that is warranted in the light of the accumulating evidence to be reviewed below.

What is distinctive of the Sambia and other kindred groups in New Guinea is not that men attempted to dominate women as well as younger males with the appeal to readiness for warfare as their ultimate justification, for that is surely common. Men's rhetoric here was anchored in reality and was not merely a matter of rationalizing their tenuous domination; however, their claim was neither innocent, smooth, nor seamless. As I have stated from the beginning of my anthropological work, the boys resisted initiation (Herdt 1981), but what I did not emphasize was how Sambia men also resisted initiating their own sons and grandsons (chap. 3). Could they entrust their own sons with ritual secrets? The primary fear was that the boys might betray them to their mothers, that is, the wives of

the men, and thus undermine the entire foundation of ritual secrecy. But the men's anxiety revealed a deeper problem: the very nature of this shared secret reality, its legitimacy, its utopian flavor, and its social construction (chap. 4). It is hard to know the extent to which these political and psychological dynamics were present in precolonial societies; however, a careful examination of ethnographies and deconstruction of several critical ethnographic cases suggests that New Guinea men have faced the issue of sensing that ritual is their own invention, and they needed somehow to hide this fact from themselves (chap. 5).

Ritual secrecy before the Pax Australiana was an epic project of gender politics, a kind of endless reclamation of the male body with a utopian goal: reclassifying boys as men and transferring their subjectivities from the women's house to the men's house. Rebirth is the primary metaphor in Melanesian communities, "rebirth through ritual," including the sanitization of the young boy's body and the resocialization of the contents of his mind, knowing, and being. According to local male belief, these changes in social status for the boy—who had been formerly categorized with women—were the royal road to his physical growth and maturation. The "ideologies" involved in this dietetics rationalized and motivated a variety of complex "encompassments," of claims and counterclaims about what ritual does for each gender, as Marilyn Strathern has adequately demonstrated (1988: 115).

This study will carefully examine how the boy's own subjectivities were altered in order for him to become a secret-sharer and to test his loyalties and trustworthiness among the community of men. This requires that we study ritual secrecy as the embodiment of subjectivities, aesthetics, and energetics through the staging of social performances in public and private, or secret, relationships. Anthropologists have long doubted what constitutes the "truth" and "illusion" of male-dominated traditions (Keesing 1982a), and for good reason. However, I am reminded of Malinowski's reaction to the critics of his theory of Trobriander magic: "The natives understand that magic, however efficient, will not make up for bad workmanship" (1922: 115). The warning is applicable *pari passu* to the romantic-cynical view of ritual secrecy. The Sambia understand all too well that while ritual secrecy is a way of generating social relations under complicated political circumstances, the deployment of secret rites cannot make up for bad faith or incompetent gender relations.

I have referred to skeptics of these traditions as being in the "cynical-

romantic” tradition of anthropology’s romantic rebellion against the Enlightenment (Shweder 1984). By this, I mean that anthropologists who subscribe to the tenets of cultural relativism have often viewed the cultures of Melanesia as integrated systems of meaning, coherent and worthy in their own separate contexts, both following in the Malinowski tradition of functionalism and in keeping with Boas’s principles of descriptive relativism (Geertz 1984a; Spiro 1989). Ethnographers’ romantic regard for these cultures, however, had its limitations; for instance, when it came to the arena of ritual secrecy in male-female relationships, the romanticism turned into cynicism. Many ethnographers have followed the lead of K. E. Read (1952) in describing the relevant ritual performances of men as a hoax, or even worse, as a lie. This is the principal aspect of these ethnographic interpretations that I will argue against in this book.

It is wrong empirically (at least) to claim that ritual secrecy was primarily a deception, fraud, or hoax—as it was typically depicted by the ethnographers just mentioned. Such accounts presented ritual secrecy as an empty exercise used to cover up the presumptuous desires of men who wanted to dominate their society or the nonconstructive efforts that make for vast edifices of cultural production, such as the Sepik River Tambaran men’s cult house complex (Tuzin 1980). To the extent that such perspectives render a worldview differently, they seriously distort and misrepresent the local ontologies or cultural realities of these complicated and fragile symbolic structures (Harrison 1993). Such interpretations refuse to accept the legitimacy of the cultural reality endorsed by these people. I believe that this refusal on the part of anthropologists is linked to the trouble that secrecy posed for the personal circumstances of male ethnographers, as well as with the difficulty of truly comprehending the life and death stakes that were involved with these regimes of ritual secrecy in the men’s house.

The basis of the ontological theory on secrecy featured in this work was originally published as the article “Secret Societies and Secret Collectives” in the sixtieth anniversary issue of the journal *Oceania* (1990). Certain ideas and fragments from that article have been used herein, and permission to reprint the material by Oceania Publications is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks go to Francesca Merlan and Les Hiatt for their comments and assistance. A study of the coming-out process among lesbian and gay youth in Chicago that I worked on in the late 1980s provided me with another

perspective, although that material is not directly applicable here. The time I have spent teaching in higher education has provided me with another source of inspiration and insight on this topic. At Stanford University in 1981–82, I taught my first seminar on New Guinea secret societies. My students there were of great help in reconceptualizing theories and ethnographies in the literature at the time. In particular, I would like to recognize the significant contributions of Eytan Bercovitch in this regard and direct attention to his own later work among the Atbalman of New Guinea, which has been a pleasing and much needed addition to the literature. Another seminar on secrecy and culture, taught at the University of Chicago in 1994–95, provided additional critical ground. Finally, presentations to the faculty seminar at Vanderbilt University during my sabbatical in 1997–98 were of help in bringing the work to its present form.

The Department of Anthropology at the University of Rochester served as my host for the Morgan Lectures, and I am ever grateful for their invitation. In particular, I am indebted to Professor Alfred Harris, then editor and coordinator of the Morgan series. Equally helpful was the kind personal and intellectual exchange I experienced with Professors Grace Harris and Al Harris at their home and in many other settings over the course of my visit. I would also like to thank the other faculty of the university for their hospitality, especially Robert and Nancy Foster. It is a pity that the retirement of Al Harris and change in the management and publisher of the Morgan series resulted in this book being printed elsewhere.

This work relied upon the insights of several notable scholars, in particular the German sociologist Georg Simmel and my dear teacher and friend, the late Kenneth E. “Mick” Read. I am indebted to my friend and colleague, Ray Fogelson, for introducing me to the ethnography of Lewis Henry Morgan. At this point, I would like to acknowledge a large intellectual debt to several scholars whose works on secrecy have been influential in my thinking: Fredrik Barth, Maurice Godelier, Erving Goffman, Robert Murphy, Simon Ottenberg, Marilyn Strathern, and Donald Tuzin.

I would also like to offer deepest gratitude to my colleagues and friends Eytan Bercovitch, Bruce Knauft, Michele Stephen, and Donald Tuzin, whose work has taught me about the cultural production of secrecy. For comments and critical feedback on the original lectures or subsequent texts, I am indebted to Eytan Bercovitch, Caroline Bledsoe, Andy Boxer, Volney Gay, Tom Gregor, Gert Hekma, Gregg Horowitz, Bruce Knauft, Bill Murphy, Niels F. Teunis, and the late Robert J. Stoller. Although I

have not always agreed with all of the criticisms and suggestions, their influence upon me (both conscious and unconscious) is profound, and I hope this work repays their rich heritage in some measure.

The book was begun on sabbatical in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where I was Visiting Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam in 1992–93. I am grateful to the University of Chicago for its sabbatical support. Seminars in Dutch, French, and German universities during the time afforded important opportunities for exchanging ideas about this book, and I should like to thank Han ten Brummelhuis, Maurice Godelier, Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin, Pierre Lemonnier, Ton Otto, and H. U. E. Thoden van Velsen for their hospitality. I would also like to thank Professors Johannes Fabian, Frans Husken, and Willy Jansen for their kindness. The completion of this book was also funded by an award of the William Simon Henry Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, the support from which is gratefully acknowledged.

And let me recognize the support of Ingrid Erikson and Susan Whitlock for their editorial work at the University of Michigan Press.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my dear sister, Cindy Brown, kin and friend to me in this equally strange and marvelous world. To her I offer this small tribute of my love and respect.