

Ancient Associations

Richard Chacon

The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and Origins of Social Complexity

by Brian Hayden

Cambridge University Press, 410 pp., \$125.00.

THE ROLE TRADITIONAL secret societies play in the lives of indigenous peoples has long been a topic of interest to anthropologists. In 1879, Franz Boas drew attention to the importance of such sodalities for the tribes of the Pacific Northwest coast in *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*.¹ Published in 1941, a similarly exhaustive study conducted by George Harley in Liberia, *Native African Medicine*, documented the impact of the Poro secret society on the Mano people.² Large-scale investigations like those by Boas and Harley subsequently fell out of favor among archaeologists and ethnographers.

Brian Hayden's *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* is a cross-cultural study of traditional secret societies, exploring their nature and the role they may have played in the emergence of complex societies. Hayden is well suited for such an undertaking. Over the course of his career he has conducted archaeological excavations at numerous locations around the world and ethnographic fieldwork among various indigenous populations. This new book is notable both for its global perspective and the comparative approach employed by Hayden, which places his work firmly in the lineage of the earlier studies by Boas and Harley. In this sense, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* marks an important redirection in archaeological and ethnographic research, whilst also shedding fresh light on the power of ritual and its role in the rise and maintenance of social inequality.

THE SCOPE AND DEPTH of the research presented in *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* is truly remarkable. To illustrate the essential characteristics of secret societies, Hayden draws on data gathered from dozens of sodalities operating throughout North America, along with data from comparable groups in Mesoamerica, Oceania, and Africa. His claims regarding the nature of secret societies and their contributions to the advent of

social complexity find ample support in the archaeological and ethnographic material he presents.

Many examples of New World secret societies are presented and analyzed by Hayden.

- *Pacific Northwest coast*: the Hamatsa Society of the Kwakwaka'wakw, the Wolf Society of the Nuuchah-nulth, and the Sisauk and Kusuit Societies among the Bella Coola of British Columbia.
- *California*: the Antap Society of the Chumash, the Kuksu Cult among the Pomo and neighboring groups, and the Hesi Society among the Maidu.
- *American Southwest*: the Puebloan Katsina Cults.
- *Plains*: the Society of Chiefs among the Osage, the Midewiwin Society of the Omaha, the White Buffalo Cow Society of the Mandan and Hadatsa, along with various sacred bundle societies among the Pawnee and other native groups.
- *Eastern Woodlands*: the Midewiwin Society of the Ojibwa and the Mitawit Society of the Menomini.
- *Mesoamerica*: the cargo system of the Maya.

Hayden also examines the following examples of Old World secret societies.

- *Oceania*: the Suque Society and the Nimangki Society of the New Hebrides and the Ganekhe Cult among the Dani of New Guinea.
- *Central Africa*: the Mani Society of the Azande and the Kubwanda Society in Rwanda.
- *West Africa*: the Poro and Sande Societies of the Mende.

Hayden's research revealed a number of core features among the sodalities he analyzed. First and foremost, secret societies sought to benefit their members and to dominate nonmembers. In turn, members often profited through exorbitant initiation fees, or fines levied against anyone who violated the society's rules. In almost all cases, sodalities controlled local political figures to varying degrees and wielded an inordinate amount of influence in their areas of operation. Many secret societies used terror

as a means to ensure compliance with their dictates and ideology. Destruction of property, beatings, murder, and cannibalism were among the forms of punishment and retaliation routinely dispensed by these groups.

Hayden also found that secret societies were staunchly hierarchical. Status was derived from access to esoteric knowledge communicated only in oral form. In an effort to impress the local populace, secret societies organized processions, ritual dances, and public performances of so-called miracles. Supernatural powers were deemed too dangerous for the uninitiated to wield. Only initiated members possessed the requisite knowledge to safely employ such powerful forces on behalf of the community. These abilities could be accessed by means of chants known only to initiates, ritual masks believed to facilitate possession by spirits, and the handling of special paraphernalia such as talismans, bullroarers, and rattles.

Secret societies were able to transcend kinship, community, and ethnic boundaries by establishing regional networks that provided members with safe passage, lodging, preferential trading status, and access to ritual activities far beyond their local communities. Members could be recognized as initiates at distant locations by means of arcane and enigmatic physical symbols. The widespread nature of these networks also likely facilitated the diffusion of particular artistic styles and motifs.

HAYDEN'S WORK REPRESENTS a significant contribution to archaeological studies of secret societies. "In Europe and Asia," he writes, "the very concept of a secret society seems to be unknown or not well understood among archaeologists."³ Hayden is puzzled by the lack of attention they receive. "Given the widespread ethnographic occurrence of secret societies in tribal societies," he continues, "it would indeed be surprising if secret societies did not play important roles in many prehistoric cultures throughout the world."⁴

In *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory*, Hayden examines a range of purpose-built structures, such as earth lodges, sweat lodges, and kivas. These played an important role in the activities of secret societies and were used for initiations, public rituals, and feasting. Despite "many excavations of kivas in the Southwest," he notes that reports "generally stop at the description and identification of ritual structures."⁵ Hayden is convinced that much remains to be learned about secret societies from the archaeological record. Researchers should be mindful that these groups often employed a range of objects, such as masks, quartz crystals, exotic shells, drums, rattles, bullroarers, flutes, and whistles, as part of their activities. It was also not uncommon for high-ranking members from many sodalities to be accorded lavish and unusual mortuary treatments. From these clues, Hayden posits links between secret societies and the Chacoan great houses, such as Pueblo Bonito. He suggests there

may also be similar connections to ritual centers at locations such as Göbekli Tepe in Turkey and at Chavín de Huántar in Peru.

Hayden devotes considerable space to examining the relationship between secret societies, caves, and rock art. The use of caves for ritual purposes has long been clear from the archaeological record, and Hayden theorizes that many of those rituals were associated with secret societies. He points to discoveries from a number of sites as evidence to support this thesis. The *Grotte de Hortus* and *Les Trois Frères*, two caves in the south of France dating from the Middle and Upper Paleolithic, respectively, are notable examples. The former features enigmatic human remains, while the cave art found at the latter includes a therianthrope being often referred to as "The Sorcerer." The association between secret societies and caves can also be seen at the Scalora Cave site in Italy, dating from the Neolithic, and the similar Nakovana Cave in Croatia. Among the chambers at Scalora there is evidence for the presence of an underground sanctuary. At Nakovana, used from Neolithic to Hellenistic times,⁶ the distribution of fine ceramics around a unique, phallic-shaped stalagmite strongly suggests the presence of secret societies.

AMONG THE MANY valuable theoretical contributions found in *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory*, one of the most notable is the lack of support for communitarian models in the data assembled by Hayden. These models hold that rituals, including those of secret societies, were created to foster effective and harmonious socioeconomic cooperation. In stark contrast to such idealistic and functionalist notions, Hayden documents how secret societies not only encouraged the acquisition of political power, but also helped create and maintain social inequalities. Hayden proposes an aggrandizer model, which holds that secret societies were created and run by ambitious leaders in order to further the self-interest of the organizers and their supporters. Far from fostering harmonious socioeconomic cooperation, the data presented by Hayden demonstrates that secret societies actually increased social inequality and competition within communities.

The claims and evidence put forward in *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* challenge widely held notions that secret societies are inherently benign, or even altruistic, in nature. This should come as no surprise. Hayden has a long history of confronting deeply entrenched views held among his colleagues. In his analysis of contemporary Maya cargo holders, Hayden accepts neither commonly asserted functionalist or adaptationist models in which cargo holders are viewed as serving their communities, nor explanations that characterize the cargo system as an oppressive scheme designed by Spanish colonials to exploit the Maya.⁷ He instead documents how the Maya

cargo system has been, in fact, a competitive system that allows individuals with sufficient energy, organizational skills, and motivation to accumulate personal wealth and power in a socially acceptable manner.⁸ Hayden's willingness to question received wisdom is also evident from his analysis of the behavior of Futuna Island chiefs.⁹ Instead of upholding the notion that chiefs work primarily for the benefit of their communities via altruistically motivated redistributions, his fieldwork reveals that they are motivated, for the most part, by self-interest.¹⁰

After almost a century of neglect by social scientists, Hayden's magisterial new study of secret societies from a comparative perspective is long overdue. *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* serves to confirm Hayden's status as one of the most important researchers in his field. It is also a study that will rightly be regarded as a landmark examination of these groups and their contribution to the emergence of social complexity.

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1. Franz Boas, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), 311–737.
2. George Harley, *Native African Medicine: With Special Reference to Its Practice in the Mano Tribe of Liberia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).
3. Brian Hayden, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and Origins of Social Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.
4. Hayden, *The Power of Ritual*, 3.
5. Hayden, *The Power of Ritual*, 2.
6. Hayden's claim linking Bronze Age secret societies to the creation of rock art is of great importance to scholars interested in understanding the origins of Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art. In a recent publication with Johan Ling and Yamilette Chacon, I argued that secret societies were the creators of Bronze Age Scandinavian rock art:
 7. For the notion that the cargo system is functionalist, see Frank Cancian, *Economics and Prestige in a Maya Community: The Religious Cargo System in Zinacantan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965). For the notion that the cargo system is exploitative in nature, see Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Walker and Company, 1964).
 8. Brian Hayden and Rob Gargett, "[Big Man, Big Heart? A Mesoamerican View of the Emergence of Complex Society](#)," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1, no. 1 (1990): 3–20, doi:10.1017/S095653610000043.
 9. Brian Hayden and Suzanne Villeneuve, "Who Benefits from Complexity? A View from Futuna," in *Pathways to Power: New Perspectives on the Emergence of Social Inequality*, ed. T. Douglas Price and Gary Feinman (New York: Springer, 2012), 95–145.
 10. For the notion that high-ranking indigenous leaders work primarily for the benefit of the community, see Charles Stanish, *The Evolution of Human Co-operation: Ritual and Social Complexity in Stateless Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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