



GEOMETRY AND GRAMMAR OF MYSTERY: ANCIENT MYSTERY RELIGIONS AND WEST AFRICAN SECRET SOCIETIES

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Introduction

Mystery is the “known unknown.”¹ This is a short definition but rich in analytical possibilities. It evokes wonder – intellectual as well as religious – at the social fact of knowing and not knowing at the same time. It raises the puzzle of trying to understand a cultural and social world in which one function of what is known is to communicate a sense of what is not known. What is known is the presence of a mystery in the world. What is not known is the full content of the mystery.

Mystery is not a natural fact. It is a social and cultural phenomenon. The “idea of mystery...does not come” to human beings “as given” by nature; human beings have “forged this idea as well as its contrary.”² Mystery is constructed from the meanings a society assigns to the “known unknown.” These meanings are often institutionalized

¹ The philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan links his definition of mystery as the ‘known unknown’ to a cognitive theory of the “unrestricted openness of our intelligence and reasonableness” (Lonergan 1970:546-549). In this sense of the unrestricted questioning of the human spirit, Lonergan (1970:546) conceives human beings as “by nature oriented into mystery.” In contrast, the analysis in this essay adds further conceptualizations of mystery as an indexical order of meanings, a social construction, and a political resource.

² Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 26.

through social practices of secrecy, which constitute something as mysterious by setting it apart through purposive concealment. In religion, secret rituals are especially important in creating the aura of being “set apart” from everyday life. The doctrinal content of religious “mystery” includes particular beliefs about the power and presence of deities (or other supernatural forces) in the world, but the aura of this power and presence is enacted in secret rituals, where the social fact of mysterious powers is produced, and the source of those powers alluded to.

An illuminating historical case of the relationship between mystery and secrecy are the mystery religions of Ancient Greek and Rome. Secrecy was a constitutive element in these institutions, as Burkert emphasizes in his classic overview of mystery religions: “secrecy was a necessary attribute.”³ Secrecy, however, is not a sufficient criterion for categorizing mystery religions because not all secret cults in classical Greek and Rome were mystery religions (Burkert 1987:7). Secrecy, nevertheless, was a fundamental institutional feature of all mystery religions. The presence of “mystery” was revealed in secret rituals, and this ritual dimension is expressed in the etymology of the Greek words referring to these religious institutions – *mysteria*, *myein*, *myesis* – which conveys the idea of ‘initiation’.⁴ The idea of initiate is connoted by the idea of “the closing of the lips or eyes” which derives from the semantics of the “word mystery (*mysterion* in Greek)” which “derives from the Greek verb, *myein*, ‘to close’.”⁵ The “initiate, or *mystes* (plural, *mystai*) into the *mysterion* was required to keep his or her lips closed and not divulge the secret that was revealed at the private ceremony. “Vows of silence were meant to ensure that the initiate would keep the holy secret from being revealed to outsiders.”⁶ For comparative purposes, it is useful to note that West African secret societies are constituted by similar norms of silence – codified, for example, among the Kpelle of Liberia, in the phrase *ifa mo* (‘you should not speak it’).⁷ Mystery and secrecy are mutually constituted in these social practices of initiation and silence: what is concealed from outsiders and revealed to initiates is the mystery, and noticeable silence about those mysteries in the social life of the village, paradoxically, evokes their presence.

Burkert’s definition of his study of the ancient mysteries as “a

³ Burkert 1987: 7.

⁴ Burkert 1987: 7.

⁵ Meyer 1987: 4

⁶ Meyer 1987: 4

⁷ Bellman 1975: 15-16.

comparative phenomenology of ancient mysteries”⁸ is expanded here by integrating a phenomenology of secrecy with a geometry of secrecy. The latter topic concerns the relational properties constitutive of secrecy practices in mystery religions. The most general relational property, for example, is the dialectic of form and content, which implies that the content of secrecy is not as consequential as the social relationships and cultural meanings constituted by the fact of secrecy.

Focusing on form rather than content became definitional for the discipline of sociology at the turn of the 20th century, as conceptualized by Georg Simmel, whose classic 1908 essay on secrecy became an exemplar of this distinction.⁹ For Simmel, what was sociologically important about secrecy practices is not the exotic content of the secret but the particular forms of social and cultural relations created by the fact of secrecy, such as knowing and not knowing, inclusion and exclusion, domination and subordination, and the visible and invisible. His approach resembles a geometrical method insofar as the analysis formalizes relational properties in cultural content and social action of secrecy in different empirical cases. “A parallel [to social life] is found in the fact that the same geometric forms may be observed in the most heterogeneous materials and that the same material occurs in the most heterogeneous spatial forms.”¹⁰

A geometrical method provides a heuristic for discovering general patterns in the historical and ethnographic material of ancient mystery religions and West African secret societies.¹¹ Ancient mystery

⁸ Burkert 1987: 4.

⁹ The French founder of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, also emphasized social form over the material content of human behavior, as defining the special methodology of sociology.

¹⁰ Simmel 1971: 26.

¹¹ Scholarly caveats arise when efforts are made to compare apparently disparate social and historical phenomena, such as Ancient mystery religions and West African secret societies. As an anthropologist with expertise on West African cultures and societies, I lack the mastery of source material possessed by scholars of classical historiography and archeology. Nevertheless, crossing disciplinary boundaries in this way can also be intellectually productive because – to borrow a quote the sociologist Weber when he ventured into studies of Ancient Judaism – the scholarly outsider using some of the same source data as the expert insider may “emphasize some things [issues] differently than usual” and ask different questions (Weber 1952:425). The hope of such interdisciplinary excursions is to suggest some new hypotheses that might lead

religions, for example, are typically organized around rituals, and initiations into those rituals. Secrecy, which is an important constituent in most of these rituals, creates an opposition between one who knows and one who does not know. This opposition provides the foundation for social hierarchy as well as reciprocity, a formula that Simmel emphasizes in his study of secrecy: “the relationship between the one who has the secret and another who does not” and “the reciprocal relations between those who share it [the secret] in common.”¹²

These relations are a source of many fundamental questions concerning religious mystery. Who possess special knowledge of a mystery, who are initiated into this knowledge, who are left out of this knowledge and initiation, and what political and economic advantages accrue to those with privileged knowledge? The relationship between social hierarchy and privileged knowledge is exemplified by the patriarchal dimensions of the mystery religions, a dimension emphasized by Bultmann: the “community was organized on a hierarchical pattern, the priest or mystagogue being the father of the community.”¹³ This insight signals the problem of unraveling the relationship between an ideology of patriarchy and the privileged control of ritual secrets and knowledge of mystery. It also implies a broader social theory of knowledge concerned with the relations of social hierarchy, social control, and power to differential access to knowledge.

Social status, moreover, is justified by claims of knowing something about a mystery – including, knowing that there is a mystery – and knowing how to initiate others into the mystery. Such claims, in turn, are made meaningful and palpable through the authoritative control of the rituals and symbols of the religion. Mystery is a cultural performance and communicative practice through which the social fact and control of the “unknown” is made present. The meaning in those performances and practices has a grammar, in Wittgenstein’s sense of a sequence of utterances (and nonverbal signs) as moves of meaning in communication. Studying the grammar of mystery follows a phenomenological style of bringing “words [and concepts] back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”¹⁴

Together Wittgenstein’s grammatical method and Simmel’s

to both general theoretical insights and new insights into particular historical and ethnographic cases.

¹² Simmel 1950: 345.

¹³ Bultmann 1956: 157.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 1958: 48.

geometrical method provide an integrated analytical toolkit for examining the key question of this essay: how is the institution of mystery constituted by the geometrical forms of secrecy, and produced by the grammar of communicating the meanings of the “known unknown.”

Secrecy and Mystery as Sociological Types

Various kinds of comparative analysis are characteristic of the scholarly literature on ancient mystery religions: for example, Burkert’s study of the “traits of identity maintained through continuous tradition [about a thousand years]...in studying the ancient mystery cults”;¹⁵ Meyer’s discussion of the origin of ancient mystery religions in “agrarian festivals” and the idea of a “cycle of nature related directly to human life”;¹⁶ and Burkert’s concern for the “similarities between Christian worship and the mysteries.”¹⁷ Bultmann shares Burkert’s concern with similarities, but as a method for identifying differences. The mystery religions – and other Hellenistic religious forms of Greek paganism -- are useful for comparison because only “by paying attention to what Christianity has in common with these other movements shall we be able to discern its difference from them.”¹⁸ Such comparisons clarify, moreover, the syncretism between Christian mysticism and the mystery religions.¹⁹

Other ethnographic and historical cases of secrecy in religious practices add to the cross-cultural range of comparison. One obstacle to a broader comparative institutional analysis linking secrecy and mystery, however, is the disciplinary boundaries generated by particular academic vocabularies. Social institutions labeled in particular ways by disciplinary conventions can obscure commonalities and patterns among institutions designated by very different names. For example, a scholar adopting a broader comparative view of “Ancient Mystery Religions,” for example, could argue that these institutions might just as easily be called “ancient secret societies” or “ancient secret cults” to mark the centrality of secrecy in these institutions. In the scholarly literature, they are sometimes designated in these terms: “their rites and ceremonies

¹⁵ Burkert 1987: 4.

¹⁶ Meyer 1987: 6-7.

¹⁷ Burkert 1987: 3.

¹⁸ Bultmann 1956: 11; cf. Bolle 1987.

¹⁹ Bultman 1956: 156-195.

were, partly at least, held in secret, a fact which tended to make them secret societies.”²⁰

Alternatively, “West African secret societies” could legitimately be called “West African mystery religions,” to highlight the importance of a cosmology of “mystery” constituted by the secrecy practices of these institutions. The idea of “mystery,” in fact, is an important religious notion in West African secret societies – encoded in terms and symbols communicating the meanings of ‘wonder,’ ‘awe,’ and ‘marvelous.’²¹ The semiotics of secrecy entails an aesthetics of mystery and wonder, an equation characteristic of religious practice generally.

One way to avoid the analytical shortcomings of disciplinary boundaries is to formulate the problem of secrecy (as well as mystery) as a sociological “type,” a construct which summarizes variables or structural principles defining the institutional features of that sociological phenomena. The goal of such a formulation is to stimulate generalizations about secrecy in religion that mutually illuminate similarities and differences in various cases. The technique of type analysis was made central to social science methodology in the foundational work of Weber who, like his contemporary, Simmel, sought to define and create, at the turn of the 20th century, the new discipline of sociology (or, social sciences, more broadly).²² The method logically specifies a set of institutional features as variables in an abstract model. The model, in turn, provides a heuristic or guide for examining, testing, and generalizing these features in historical and ethnographic reality.²³ Secrecy in religious life, for example, can be generalized by treating secrecy as a type of social behavior found in many social contexts. A comparative analysis of such types, as with any sociological comparative analysis, considers “contextual differences” – among historical and ethnographic cases – but strives to identify “underlying regularities.”²⁴

The underlying regularities examined in this essay are based on Simmel’s analysis of secrecy, and the variables are defined in terms of the dialectical relations he formalizes. For example, one institutional variable of a secret society is inclusion, namely, members are included in the group because they are taught the secret. Another variable is exclusion, namely, outsiders to the secret society are excluded because

²⁰ Bultmann 1956: 157.

²¹ Murphy 1998.

²² Weber 1978: 19 ff.

²³ see Stinchcombe 1968: 43-47.

²⁴ Evans 1995: 29.

they do not know the secret. There is also a structure of inclusion and exclusion within the secret society in which those who know the deepest secrets are separated from those who know only some of the secrets, such as new initiates. The two variables of inclusion and exclusion can thus be treated as paired variables defining a structural principle in this sociological type.

In Simmel's formulation, the "social geometry" of secret societies is specified by dialectical variables, e.g., inclusion/exclusion, concealment/revelation, and domination/subordination. These dialectical relations, in turn, define structural principles within a particular "ideal type" that provides a method for examining, in Weber's conceptualization, the "combinations, mixtures, adaptations, or modifications" of such structural principles in particular empirical cases.²⁵ This method also leads to questions about the causal factors producing changes over time in particular sociopolitical structures, which is the topic addressed in the next section.²⁶

Religion and Political Change

Secret societies, like the mystery religions, may serve the goals of central authorities in a community – whether governmental or otherwise. Alternatively, secret societies may be seen as a danger to community authorities. "Two basic types of secret societies exist: those that support the existing political leadership or, at least, are politically neutral, and those that oppose the existing political status quo."²⁷ The historical question concerns what causal factors lead to one type or the other, as well as how one type may change into the other: e.g., from supporting community authorities to opposing them. There is always the fear that a secret society, "might not one day use its energies for undesirable purposes, although they were gathered for legitimate ones."²⁸

²⁵ Weber 1978: 954.

²⁶ The problem of method points to the challenge of theorizing the various dimensions of ritual practice, by addressing the complexities of ritual as "a vehicle of history-in-the-making" -- i.e., as a cultural mechanism of "social reproduction, cultural continuity, and political authority" as well as a means for "experimental practice," "subversive poetics," and creative "transformative action" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xxix).

²⁷ Tefft 1980: 15.

²⁸ Simmel 1950: 376.

The rise of secrecy associations, whether religious or otherwise, is often a consequence of political and social forms of repression. Heightened political repression leads to a proliferation of secrecy practices and secret societies. Simmel's theory of secrecy emphasizes this causal relationship: "In general, the secret society emerges everywhere ...as the protection of both the defensive and the offensive in their struggle against the overwhelming pressure of central powers – by no means of political powers only, but also of the church, as well as of school classes and families."²⁹ Central authorities often believe that "secret societies threaten it" and the "secret society...appears dangerous by virtue of its mere secrecy."³⁰ Such authorities are less afraid of the esoteric ritual secrets of the secret society than the use of the secret society for political purposes. Secret ritual activity can easily turn into secret political planning. The operation of secret societies at different political levels, moreover, shapes the dialectic of acceptance and repression. For West African secret societies, for example, what is seen as a legitimate mechanism of local-level chieftaincy government³¹ can be seen also as a threat and danger to the national government.³²

The history of the mystery religions indicate how intricately the rise and fall of religious practice is linked to the sociopolitical changes in society. In general, the mystery religions flourished during the Hellenistic period because "people were seeking new and more satisfying religious experiences."³³ Before and during this period the Olympian gods which were "linked to that of the Greek polis" were transformed into gods "unworthy of the worship and devotion of thoughtful Greek people" both because of political changes in which the Greek polis was not the center of the political world and of philosophical criticism of Greek religion.³⁴ Although "the Olympian pantheon maintained itself as a religious and cultural force in the Hellenistic world...the hearts of many were turning away from Zeus and the Olympians during this period, and many searched at home and abroad for gods that would satisfy more fully their religious longings."³⁵

²⁹ Simmel 1950: 347.

³⁰ Simmel 1950: 375-376.

³¹ e.g., Eisenstadt 1959:213-214; see also Weber 1978:905.

³² see Hojbjerg 2007.

³³ Meyer 1987: 3.

³⁴ Meyer 1987: 3.

³⁵ Meyer 1987: 3.

In addition, at specific historical periods, the mystery religions flourished because they were intricately woven with government functions. One of the best cases is the Eleusian mysteries devoted to the goddess Demeter, goddess of agricultural fertility and life. Eleusian mysteries, for a time, were an important religious support for “political power in the Greek world,” demonstrated by “her [Demeter] veneration by political confederations and ruling families.”³⁶ “During the ‘rule’ of Pericles the Athenians also started to use the Eleusian Mysteries for political aims by stressing their civilizing function;” soon “the Mysteries gradually started to serve as an important means of self-identification for the Athenian citizen.”³⁷ When a secret society, like the Eleusian Mystery, becomes an important legitimating support for the government, the government becomes vulnerable to challenge through attacks on the secret beliefs and practices that contribute to its legitimacy. The “expansion of its [political function] made the Mysteries vulnerable to attacks from enemies of Athens.”³⁸

The history of the mystery religions is both a story of community and government acceptance as well as community repression and rejection. Repression was common at the height of the Roman Empire when the mystery religions were experiencing more persecution. Many cases fill the history books. In 186 B.C., there was an accusation against the mysteries of Bacchus involving “a huge conspiracy...to overthrow the existing *res publica*.”³⁹ The danger felt by the government at the time led to “repression...so cruel and radical, with some 6,000 executions at the time.”⁴⁰ The difference between esoteric ritual secrets and secret political planning is demonstrated by a case in Sicily of a leader in the mysteries of the Syrian Goddess, “who became the leader of the slave revolt that lasted from 136 to 132 B.C.” Again, “the repression was absolutely relentless.”⁴¹ (Burkert 1987:53)

The force of the new Christian religious movement also began to drive the mysteries underground and contributed to their ultimate extinction. Augustine summed up this change by proclaiming “triumphantly that Christianity had swept like a blazing fire” through the empire. Finally, the end came with “the imperial decrees of 391/392

³⁶ Bremmer 1995: 69.

³⁷ Bremmer 1995: 74, 78

³⁸ Bremmer 1995: 78

³⁹ Burkert 1987: 52.

⁴⁰ Burkert 1987: 52.

⁴¹ Burkert 1987: 53.

A.D. prohibiting all pagan cults and with the forceful destruction of the sanctuaries”; “the mysteries simply and suddenly disappeared.”⁴²

The fundamental dialectic of community acceptance and rejection in the history of secret societies is illustrated by the historical patterns of the mystery religions. Burkert’s summary of the causal link of society and religion in the history of the mystery religions can be generalized for all religions: “They were not self-sufficient sects; they were intimately bound to the social system that was to pass away.”⁴³ No religion is self-sufficient and separated from the social system. All religions become weaker or stronger -- or extinct -- depending on the way they are bound up with the sociopolitical system. This is one important historical lesson of the mystery religions.

Geometry of Secrecy

Another important lesson concerns structure rather than history. Simmel’s geometrical analysis shifted analytical attention from knowledge content per se to questions of forms of power and social hierarchy in the use of secrecy. In my own research on West African secret societies,⁴⁴ for example, the theoretical shift from content to form provided a better analytical angle for understanding structural relationships between men and women, elders and youth, high-ranking versus low-ranking kin groups, local-level versus national-level government as these relationships were constituted by secret knowledge in religious practices as well as in everyday life, e.g., secrets of the household.⁴⁵

A key premise of a formal analysis is the institutional significance of attitudes and social relations over knowledge content. A fragmentary comment by Aristotle on mystery religions illustrates the

⁴² Burkert 1987: 53.

⁴³ Burkert 1987: 53.

⁴⁴ Murphy 1980.

⁴⁵For penetrating analyzes of secrecy institutions in this area of West Africa, see Ferme 2000, on household secrets and other cultural logics of secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone; Hojbjerg 2007, on local secrecy and nation-state politics among the Loma of Guinea; and also the special issue of the journal “Mande Studies,” 2000, Vol. 2, which focuses on Mande secrecy institutions in West Africa). For a cross-cultural comparative overview of ritual and secrecy, see La Fontaine (1985).

sociological salience of this distinction. He “concludes that initiates into the mysteries do not learn anything,” rather they “are put in a certain state of mind.”⁴⁶ This relationship between initiation and attitude formation is often emphasized in scholarship on the ancient mysteries, which are often defined not in terms of doctrinal content but in terms of a “change of mind” achieved through secret initiation rituals: “Mysteries are initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.”⁴⁷ The change of mind is related to a change in social relations for the initiate. For West Africa, one researcher among the Kpelle of Liberia notes this significance in his comment on secret society initiations: “the primary character of the initiation seems to be concerned with an attitude rather than with information.”⁴⁸ This attitude includes deference to the knowledge of the elders, which provides an ideological resource for controlling youth.⁴⁹

In contrast to outsider fascination with the exotic content of secrets, Simmel stresses that the secret might be quite banal, and, therefore, attention should focus on the sociopolitical and economic formations built on the fact of secrecy. The ritual content of initiations in secret societies exemplifies this principle. For example, in both West African secret societies and ancient mystery religions, one of the main secrets often concerns the details of the ritual of initiation itself. And these details, for all their religious significance, are not as exotic as the outsider may think. The mystery religions exhibit this same pattern. The secret in the Elusian mysteries is surrounded by a suspenseful ritual drama in which the secret is finally revealed: “the great, admirable, most perfect...secret” revealed “in silence” was “a reaped ear of grain.”⁵⁰ Of course, this content of the secret points to the substantive issue of agricultural productivity and the gods protecting that productivity. But it also underscores Simmel’s principle that the exotic secret is not as consequential as the social structure created by the fact of secrecy. “In comparison with other associations, it here is the passion of secrecy...which gives the group-form, depending on it, a significance that is far superior to the significance of content.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Meyer 1987: 12.

⁴⁷ Burkert 1987: 11.

⁴⁸ Welmers 1949: 241.

⁴⁹ Murphy 1980.

⁵⁰ Burkert 1987: 91.

⁵¹ Simmel 1950: 363.

Grammar of Mystery

Secrecy is socially produced not simply by concealment, but by communicating the presence of something concealed. Mystery, likewise, is produced not by what is “unknown,” but by communicating the social fact of the “unknown.” These communicative practices imply that both secrecy and mystery are “already in plain view,” to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase for the linguistic constitution of social realities.⁵² Paradoxically, what is most hidden and mysterious in human affairs is incessantly talked about, and made public through this talk. Nothing “is concealed” and “nothing is hidden” because all the experiences engaging human beings – including the mysteries of religion -- are mediated and constituted by communicative practices, if only through a semiotics and aesthetics of allusion.⁵³

Secrecy is the institutional means for creating mystery in social life because it produces an intensified, imaginative awareness of “the unknown.” Secrecy manipulates the human sensibility that views “everything mysterious” as “something important and essential” – and, thereby, intensifies the social need “to pay attention to it [the mystery] with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality.”⁵⁴ An illuminating analogy of mystery and public attention is Foucault’s analysis of sex and discourse – i.e., the mystery of sex (both licit and illicit) produces an “incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more.”⁵⁵ The prudishness and sexual repression in some institutional domains of modern societies – e.g., religion, education, government – generates its opposite: “never more attention manifested and verbalized.” Such attention, moreover, is channeled by “centers of power,” which stimulate verbalization through public practices of social controlling what is purposively hidden from public scrutiny.⁵⁶ Analogously, in this dialectical logic, religious mysteries become worthy of attention because authoritative talk and privileged claims to knowledge make public the “unknowable” and “unsayable.”

⁵² Wittgenstein 1958: 42.

⁵³ Wittgenstein 1958: 128.

⁵⁴ Simmel 1950: 333.

⁵⁵ Foucault 1990: 18

⁵⁶ Foucault 1990 [1978]: 49.

The theology (as well as anthropology and history) of mystery reflects a “grammar” of language usage.⁵⁷ Mystery is generated by a sequence of utterances (and nonverbal signs) used to communicate the presence of the “known unknown,” and the significance of that presence. The social reality of mystery emerges through this reflexivity of meaning. And the methodological task is to pay attention, not just to the signs of mystery but to further meaningful moves in the sequence, such as the responses referring to and commenting on the signs of mystery.

The grammar of mystery is also a speech economy for communicating mystery because some individuals or groups claim more interpretive authority than others for defining mystery in the community. This relationship between authority and mystery is dramatically summed up by Dostoevsky in the words of the Grand Inquisitor of *The Brothers Karamazov*: “So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is...the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow.”⁵⁸

Identifying the “riddle, the secret, the mystery” is a semiotic process. What is visible (or audible) becomes a sign of mysterious invisible forces. Ancient mystery religions provide useful case material for addressing this fundamental problem of religion, namely, understanding the role of invisible, mysterious forces in the social world. Religion can be defined by this necessary, but not sufficient attribute: “invisible forces purposely operating behind empirical events.”⁵⁹ Mystery adds the further dimension of an awareness of the presence of these forces combined with an inability to fathom their nature. Mystery, like secrecy, is built on a dialectic of the visible and invisible (or the revealed and concealed), which has a geometrical form of social worlds encapsulated by other worlds. Simmel’s sociology was preoccupied with clarifying such geometries of social form: the “secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.”⁶⁰

The semiotics of mystery, however, follows a logic by which one world, the manifest world, points to (i.e., indexes) a second, invisible world. And the grammar of mystery is structured by authoritative responses that interpret those indexes. History and ethnography provide

⁵⁷ Wittgenstein 1958: 11ff, 43 ff.

⁵⁸ quoted in Benjamin 1968: 124.

⁵⁹ Kolakowski 1982: 16.

⁶⁰ Simmel 1950: 330.

rich documentation of the indexes marking the presence of mystery in a community. Among the Gola of West Africa, for example, “the mist and strange sounds which emanate from a certain mountain may be explained as the smoke fires and speech of a village of *djina* [spirits] who live within the mountain.”⁶¹ Making sense of such indexes within a community, however, is an authoritative practice of interpreting the mysterious forces behind events. It is also an aesthetic practice in which the wonder and mystery of those invisible forces – and the “unknown” that they represent – is interpreted as an aesthetics of power. Secrecy and the sublime converge in this aesthetics of mysterious power.⁶²

Mystery is socially controlled by managing the words, signs, and symbols of secret ritual practices in which the presence and nature of the mystery is both concealed and revealed by those in authority. Practices of concealment and revelation differentiate the sociopolitical world into those who control knowledge of the “known unknown” and those dependent on that privileged knowledge. Such differentiation generates a set of reciprocal relations – such as, the exclusion of outsiders, the stratification as well as the solidarity of insiders – which are the constituent elements of institutional secrecy. These formal elements comprise a geometrical structure of reciprocal social and cultural relations, an ontological image that clarifies the nature of institutions as built up by relational properties.⁶³ Both the geometry and grammar of this institutional form of mystery are instantiated in the sequence of meanings in communicative practice.

Ethnographic Interlude: Scenes of Mystery

This essay shifts the analytical terrain from the phenomenology of the ancient mystery religions, as in Burkert’s project,⁶⁴ to the phenomenology of mystery, as constituted by secrecy practices. The challenge is to understand the social accomplishment of mystery as performed, represented, and described. In the examples below, I illustrate this notion of accomplishing mystery in reference to particular institutional forms -- such as the Catholic church in the first example – and to particular institutional practices.

⁶¹ d’Azevedo 1962:25; see Butler 2006, on the materialization of magic.

⁶² Murphy 1998; see Nooter 1993, on secrecy and African art.

⁶³ Simmel 1971: 26.

⁶⁴ Burkert 1987: 4.

The first example is simple, but premised on a profound question: how is a child taught mystery? Like a lot of Irish Catholic children in the Boston area I was taught by Catholic nuns in elementary school. I remember how the nuns would often draw our attention to the mysterious significance of events. Something would happen in the community or in the world and the nuns would interpret it for us, bestowing it with the religious significance of mysterious and divine forces at play. Chance encounters and serendipitous events would be placed in a framework of the workings of mysterious forces. The sound of a fire engine siren passing the school might be interpreted as a reason for divine intervention. A human tragedy meant some mysterious purpose.

What I learned was an everyday hermeneutics of mystery (in addition to the usual dose of a hermeneutics of guilt, which is logically related to mystery). Our Catholic lives included, of course, the mysteries of formal rituals, such as the Eucharist. We learned that bread and wine possessed another mysterious meaning. The nuns spent a lot of time explaining the meaning of these ritual mysteries. But they seemed to have a special genius for evoking the everyday workings of mystery, which was generated out of the same cultural logic as the formal rituals and mysteries of the Catholic faith. Mystery was not set aside for Sunday worship. Mystery was an important part of understanding everyday events, and part of the everyday discourse explaining those events.

One was taught a special kind of noticing and attentiveness to signs, and the meaning of mystery in those signs. For a Catholic school child, mystery had a grammar: objects, qualities, and events were signs, and signs were communicated in a sequence in which latter signs referred to and explained previous ones. First, something happens. It has a meaning, but the meaning is unclear until it is explained with other signs. A nun would explain that the event had meaning (i.e., it is an index), and that the meaning involves a mystery of divine presence and action. Thus, the grammar of mystery as signs reflexively referring to other signs was embedded in an institutional context of a religion taught to children through the interpretive authority of those who claimed knowledge of the workings of mystery in everyday life.

In the above example, the analytical emphasis on institutional learning is not intended to minimize the human experience of mystery, as Kolakowski eloquently describes it in the conclusion to his study of the great mystical texts of different religions: “behind the cultural and psychological variety, the astonishing persistence of certain basic

themes...suggests that we have here to do with a rare human experience which is nevertheless as universal as love and fear.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the emphasis here is to foreground the experience of mystery as institutionalized, as given shape and meaning by the social structure of a community, as evoked in everyday discourse and embedded in social interaction. Institutional analysis means that even common experiences, such as love and fear, take a social form. Society assigns whom we can love (and whom we should hate), and defines who and what to fear (who is an enemy). Such analysis demands close attention to how something is learned – how is love, fear, or mystery learned in a society? Wittgenstein emphasizes this principle in his later work:⁶⁶ namely, to understand a concept we should examine how it is learned – in what institutional contexts and through what social conventions? This methodology was followed in the above example of a Catholic child learning mystery.

The three examples below shift to scenes from my anthropological fieldwork in West Africa, but the analytical orientation is the same: attempting to locate this human experience of mystery within particular institutional contexts, which not only shape the experience but constitute it. The secret societies in this fieldwork belong to a cluster of ethnic groups spread throughout the countries of Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone often known as the “Poro cluster,” a designation using the presence of the Poro secret society, in which all boys and young men are initiated, as a diagnostic trait of these ethnic groups. The importance of the Poro society – and the female secret society counterpart, called “Sande,” as well as numerous subsidiary secret societies – has led one political scientist to argue that the political systems in this West African region are best typologized by highlighting the political role of secret societies in the community.⁶⁷

For the first example, imagine you are in this West African rainforest zone, where communities interpret the rainforest as an icon of what can be heard but not seen, what can be sensed but not fully understood, and what is felt as present but hidden. The rainforest is a spiritual resource of mystery and secret society activity, in addition to serving as a natural resource for human sustenance. The workings of mystery in the rainforest, however, is socially created and

⁶⁵ Kolakowski 1982: 100.

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein 1958.

⁶⁷ Eisenstadt 1959: 213.

institutionalized within particular social organizations, as the examples below testify.

One of these organizations is the men's witch-driving society among the Kpelle of Liberia. This is a secret association of men whose task is to protect the village from witches. One day this secret society announced through the village that in the evening they would perform a ritual of cleansing the town of witches. The announcement was also a warning that all the women and uninitiated males had to stay inside their houses while this ritual was performed. So like other non-members I went into the house where I was staying and closed the shutters in my room and waited. What was unseen was, nevertheless, heard. The evening was filled with many sounds, especially beautiful were the initial sounds of a beautiful, high-pitched voice calling out a forested hill next to the village. The first call was far away, then a second call sounded closer, and a third call closer still, as if this singer and his group were proceeding to the village. There was a final call right outside the village, followed by the loud noises of what sounds like people rushing into and around the village, stomping the ground, and shouting with agitation. These noises, I was told, represent the men of the witch-driving society fighting with and driving out the witches from the village.

This scene of secrecy raises important questions about the relationship between the visual and the auditory in secrecy practices -- namely, what cannot be seen can be heard, and what is heard is intended to communicate the presence of secret activity and mysterious forces. There is a special aura of wonder and fear evoked by hearing but not seeing the activity. And those controlling the secret ritual have an interest in communicating the message that they are trafficking with extraordinary forces. The use of sound to index mystery is a performativity of power and authority, as well as knowledge.

In the next scene, imagine you are in the same rainforest but this time the sounds from the forest are heard daily, early in the morning around dawn and in the evening around dusk. It sounds like feet pounding in unison in a dance rhythm as well as voices in song, but these sounds are coming from the rainforest so you cannot see anything. What every adult in the village knows but does not talk about openly or freely is that the women's secret society -- called "Sande" -- has initiated girls and young women. The new initiates are living and learning in a sacred grove in the forest not far from the village. Sounds of singing and dancing sounds

rising from the rainforest every morning and evening mark the presence of this secret initiation.

Silence in the village about sacred and secret goings on in the rainforest adds an aura of mystery to what is heard but not seen, heard but not talked about. In this case, there is a daily mystery, when one arises in the morning, and for me, while I took my bath outside in the bath fence at dusk. These indexes are also reminders of the mysterious powers associated with the Sande society – powers, for example, to harm men (as well as women) who break Sande “law.” The aesthetic of mystery -- a fear and awe associated with the beautiful sounds arising from the rainforest – is also mixed with the normativity of mystery – i.e., with rules, regulations, and punishments in themselves fearful because of this aesthetic.

Let's imagine a final scene. In the previous two scenes, there was an aesthetic of sounds which evoked the presence of mystery in the community. In this scene, there is an aesthetic of the visual, specifically the adornment of the Sande initiates when they finish their initiation period, leave the sacred grove, and ritually return to the village with a ‘coming-out ceremony.’⁶⁸ The new initiates enter the village as new persons (symbolized also by having new names), mature persons with new knowledge and powers. The mystery of this new identity is represented by the special adornment and demeanor of the girls. The fresh initiates are wearing special clothes, often white wrap-around style dresses, and their demeanor has changed, heads and eyes are lowered in a solemn manner, and walking is very measured, almost as if they are learning a new way to walk as new persons. This style of walking is an index of their new mature, and mysterious, identity.

One of the most noticeable aspects of adornment is the white clay (collected in river banks) smeared on their bodies and faces. Whiteness has multiple meaning related to feminine beauty in Sande cosmology.⁶⁹ But it is also a mark of the presence of the mystery, the mystery of secret knowledge and powers gained through initiation in the hidden, sacred grove of the rainforest. White clay marks the female initiates as belonging to a powerful secret association, as being a person protected by those powers, and even dangerous when nonmembers

⁶⁸ The initiation period for Sande initiates was traditionally three years, but modern life, e.g., Western schooling, has produced an adaptation to much shorter periods, such as during the two or three months of school vacation.

⁶⁹ Boone 1986: 21-23.

transgress the social boundaries established by the association to protect the new lives of their initiates in society.

The significance of white clay also points to the relationship between the sublime world of mystery and the prosaic world of law. The white clay marks the young new initiates as belonging to the Sande secret society, and are thus protected by the special powers that the society possess, including magical powers to cause harm, especially in the case of men who trespass Sande restrictions. But even in everyday life, the mysterious power backing Sande regulations are signified by white clay. The Sande society, for example, “may declare...that a certain grove of fruit trees is under its law,” and signify this restriction by putting a “daub of [white] paint on each trunk” as “a warning that the tree is not to be touched.”⁷⁰ The white clay signifies the presence of mysterious powers that could harm those who transgress the Sande law about fruit trees. The concrete and everyday phenomenological world of white clay and fruit trees are filled with the meanings of mystery – as well as the punitive meanings associated with transgressions against mysterious powers.

The adornment of white clay on the faces and bodies of young Sande initiates illustrates a key dialectic of mystery: invisible powers must be alluded to in public and even performed to evoke their presence. One dictionary definition underscores this link between public drama and mystery: mystery is “any affair, thing, or person that presents features or qualities so obscure as to arouse curiosity or speculation.” Adornment is one important means of publicly dramatizing mystery, and thereby arousing curiosity and speculation. Mystery is like adornment in the art of flirtation. Adornment hints at what is concealed (as well as unsaid), and at what is mysterious because hidden but glimpsed.

This function of adornment is analyzed in all its dialectical nuances in Simmel’s famous excursus on adornment in his essay on secrecy. On the one hand, Simmel identifies secrecy as a form of adornment: “the secret operates as an adorning possession and value of the personality.”⁷¹ Secrecy paradoxically operates with the logic of adornment, which is “to lead the eyes of others upon the adorned.”⁷² On the other hand, adornment is, conversely, a form of secrecy – i.e., a

⁷⁰ Boone 1986: 21.

⁷¹ Simmel 1950: 337.

⁷² Simmel 1950: 338.

concealing as well as revealing. What “recedes before the consciousness of others and is hidden from them” through adornment “is to be emphasized in their consciousness.”⁷³ People wear clothes not only to be modest but to allude to immodesty. Likewise, in religious contexts, people adorn themselves – e.g., Sande young women daubed with white clay -- not to hide the mystery of their power and knowledge (and its supernatural source) but to draw attention to the presence of that mystery.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

The indexes of mystery in a community, like white clay, constitute a system of meanings, all centered on the social object called “mystery.” The meanings are communicated through signs that are dynamically and spatially connected to what is pointed to in a context, e.g., a footprint signifying the presence of an animal, a weathervane signifying the direction of the wind, or white clay marking a young woman as possessing new secret power and knowledge. This logic of indexical signs is relevant to understanding how mystery is communicated because an index, as Peirce emphasized, focuses the attention – e.g., a rap at the door – and can even startle us.⁷⁴ We know that something happened (e.g., a loud noise: a thunderbolt?) but we do not know precisely what it was. Mystery operates with this same logic of something happening – or, some object or quality made manifest -- but we do not know fully its meaning. The meaning becomes clearer, of course, when someone explains what happened, and explains how what happened is an index of invisible powers. The system of meanings about mystery communicated through such a logic can be characterized as an indexical order of mystery.⁷⁵

Mystery is an indexical order also because indexes are part of institutions – or, more technically, the meanings they communicate constitute the reality of the institution. An institution is a set of social positions as well as the norms and beliefs regulating social relations between those positions, which cluster around a particular functional need of the society, e.g. the family. An indexical order is the set of signs which communicate in specific contexts the meaning of those social

⁷³ Simmel 1950: 337.

⁷⁴ Pierce 1985: 13-14.

⁷⁵ For a technical elaboration of the notion of “indexical order” within semiotic theory, see Silverstein 2003.

relations and regulations. The West African Sande society, for example, is an indexical order. It is a religious institution manifested (socially accomplished) through the indexical signs, which communicate the meanings defining the norms and beliefs about secrecy and mystery pertaining to female identity and power – as well as defining the authoritative and subordinate positions created by those norms. Daily sounds from the rainforest index the presence of this mystery and power, and other related indexes – e.g., white clay – communicate additional meanings about this presence, producing together a system of meanings. Such indexes draw attention to the “invisible forces purposely operating behind empirical events,” to use Kolakowski’s characterization of religion.⁷⁶ Indexes of mystery startle -- evoking wonder (and even fear) – and provide the basis for an institution based on wonder and fear.

The indexical order, in addition, overlaps with a symbolic order insofar as an index pointing to a mystery in a particular context may also be sign with conventional meanings (a symbol) about mystery. White clay is both a symbol and an index. It is a symbol of specific Sande ideas about mystery, but it is also an index, in the contextual use of the symbol, marking the presence of mystery in that moment and space.

The different techniques developed in this essay for analyzing mystery as an institutional form and communicative practice – such as, geometrical and grammatical methods as well as indexical analysis – were also directed to broader questions about mystery as framed by a theory of secrecy, as well as questions about secrecy as framed by a theory of the sacred. The implications of these theoretical questions are many and varied, but one major implication will be outlined in this final section.

This essay has attempted to understand mystery through the relations between secrecy and the sacred, which entail another central relationship in social theory between the individual and society. Both categories of the “sacred” and “secret” have etymological roots in the semantics of being “set apart,” and this logic of separation implies a theory of the relationship of the individual to society. For Durkheim, this etymology serves to define the idea of the sacred as what is “set apart,” e.g., the sacred is set apart from the “profane” world of everyday life, and the individual becomes the “sacred” in the social form of a being set apart in freedom and responsibility.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Kolakowski 1982: 16.

⁷⁷ Durkheim 1995 [1912]:44, 273-275, 426-427.

Simmel's theory of secrecy addresses similar Durkheimian questions relating the logic of separation (and connection) to individuation. Secrecy as a setting apart "is a first-rate element of individuation" in two senses: "social conditions of strong personal differentiation permit and require secrecy in a high degree; and, conversely, the secret embodies and intensifies such differentiation."⁷⁸ A notion of the "secrets of the self" (e.g., self-differentiation from society) in Simmel's theory of secrecy and individuation has roots in the Kantian notion of individual freedom. Secret societies are a social space of individual freedom (as well as constraint): every "secret society contains a measure of freedom, which the structure of the society largely does not have."⁷⁹ In an Enlightenment sense, individual autonomy can be defined as the "secrets of the self" combined with the individual's free use of reason in the public sphere.

The ancient mystery religions are an important chapter in this philosophical history of secrecy as a cultural resource of individuality and freedom. In one genealogy of individuation in Western philosophy, the mystery religions are subsumed within Platonic notions of the self, reason, and responsibility, and incorporated into the history of philosophical thought. Derrida's argument about this genealogy, builds on Patocka's notion that "mystery or secrecy" is constitutive of "a psyche or of an individual and responsible self"...because it is through mystery and secrecy "that the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so it becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility."⁸⁰ Through this separation, the "history of the responsible self is built upon the heritage and patrimony of secrecy," beginning with the ancient mystery religions but never reaching an end.⁸¹ The invisibility of the cave in the secret rituals of the mystery religions is the precursor to the invisibility of the self in individual thought and responsibility.⁸² Ancient mystery religions provide sociocultural material *bonnes à penser*, good for reflecting on the hermeneutics of the self as well as the hermeneutics of the social control of subjectivity.

This philosophical story of mystery, secrecy, individuality, and freedom can be recounted in more formal terms using Simmel's geometrical method of analyzing the interrelated, dialectical relations –

⁷⁸ Simmel 1950: 334-335.

⁷⁹ Simmel 1950: 360.

⁸⁰ Derrida 1995: 15.

⁸¹ Derrida 1995: 7.

⁸² Derrida 1995: 15.

e.g., freedom/constraint, and individual/society (as well as revelation/concealment, inclusion/exclusion, and domination/subordination) -- constituting the social institutions of secrecy and mystery. It can also be formulated in more phenomenological terms: namely, a grammar of sequences of signs about mystery in the communicative practices of social life, and a grammar of a politics of authoritative interpretations in this sequence. At both analytical levels of geometry and grammar, ancient mystery religions reveals the depth of a fundamental puzzle in human social life: the relationship between mystery and the sacred practice of secrecy. Mystery, as we learn from Greek etymology, conveys the idea of being initiated into a reality that is a mystery because it is secret, and holy because it is separated from and closed off – e.g., through vows of silence – from noninitiates or outsiders. What is set aside as a mystery, however, is a constant presence in social life insofar as hints, allusions, performances, processions, and representations index the mysterious reality hidden behind ordinary events.

Finally, mystery is a big topic, and like other big topics in the study of human social life, it seems to require a capital letter: “Mystery.” It is like other big topics, such as Power, Change, Faith, Oppression, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, Prestige, which are often given capital letters in social science, making them grand, abstract entities. But the anthropologist typically tries to bring such dignified topics down to earth, making them more “homely,” by taking “the capital letters off them” – by approaching “more abstract analyses [of such big topics] from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters.”⁸³ This essay has tried to do both, linking abstraction and detailed acquaintance with concrete social life, especially the everyday language and logic of mystery. It developed a theoretical model of the relations constituting mystery and secrecy, but it also identified those abstract relations and the grand topic of “Mystery” in local, institutional contexts, such as coming-out ceremonies with young women wearing white clay, or fruit trees daubed with white paint – or a reaped ear of grain in Elusian mystery rituals – as well as leaders of the women’s secret society using their mysterious powers to punish men who transgress the boundaries of female privilege and protection. The hope is that the abstract model provides insights into the relations and regularities constituting the institutional forms discovered in the

⁸³ Geertz 1973: 21.

comparative material on mystery and secrecy, and insights into the grammar of the communicative practices producing those forms.

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