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The Magic of Secrecy

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The 1986 Stirling Award Essay

The Magic of Secrecy

T. M. LUHRMANN

I, _____, in the Presence of the Mighty Ones, do of my own free will and accord most solemnly swear that I will ever keep secret and never reveal the secrets of the Art. . . . And may my weapons turn against me if I break this my solemn oath.

—Initiation oath in modern witchcraft,
from *The Witches' Way*,
by Farrar and Farrar

Magic is steeped in secrecy. Secret words supposedly open the doors to hidden treasure and remedy manifold ills; they are passed from magician to magician, like possessions, and competing practitioners contest the power of their hidden wares. Fantastic medieval witches held congress under the cover of furtive darkness and the Renaissance magi wrote their texts in garbled code. But the nature and function of this secrecy has been little explored.

In contemporary England there is a burgeoning interest in the occult. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of secretive groups practice what they call magic. They have a theory of magical technology, an elaborate metaphysics, and an extensive literature that tells them how to go about their practice. This essay describes three aspects of their secrecy: the possession of secretive knowledge, the assertion of a secret-laden way of knowing different from any other way of knowing,

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and the secretive group. Examining these three suggests that secrecy serves two functions. First, it supports the magician's belief in a theory that is socially unsupported and empirically difficult to verify. Second, it is therapeutic: the magician learns to handle his feelings and actions more effectively because of magic's secrecy. So secrecy gives with the right hand and also with the left. It reinforces a theory that may be false, while providing real, positive results in practice. Not only does it strengthen the conjuror's illusion but it makes the magic work because the secrecy in magic gives the magician a sense of control over his inner life.

THE PRACTICE

In England some two thousand people practice various forms of magic,¹ which is an activity of intricate ritual to alter events and influence people. For the most part they are sane and highly educated, and lead otherwise normal lives as civil servants, businessmen, and computer analysts. In 1983 I moved to London to carry out anthropological fieldwork within their loosely knit network. For 16 months I spent nearly every evening with practitioners, people who call themselves "magicians" and perform what they call "magical rites."

In magical rituals, magicians sink into meditative states and visualize the images described by the leader. The central image usually represents the goal of the ritual, and the working assumption is that group concentration on the image makes the goal more likely to be realized. The theory behind this practice is that the world is holistically interconnected, no part independent from any other. There are also subtle "energies," which pervade the universe and directly influence the way events unfold. The crucial feature of the theory is that these interconnections are sensed and affected by the nonrational elements of human psychology: by feelings, intuitions, dreams, and so forth. In a ritual, magicians are deliberately trying to bypass their "rational minds" and stimulate these nonrational responses. Using imagery as a focus for concentration, magicians think that they can alter the flow of these energies and interconnections in the directions subconsciously suggested by the image. Thus mind can affect matter, according to desired ends.

Central to this practice is a profound involvement with imagery, symbolism and mythology. Symbolic images are, of course, the

means to direct the flow of subtle forces. But the magician's interest in myth reaches far beyond his magical technology. The people who become magicians find the myths and stories of their childhood deeply compelling. They are, as it were, people who not only liked Tolkien but took the novels seriously, and they use the theory to legitimate their interest in myth-making and to assert that it has practical effects. Through their magic they develop deep affinities with particular deities, and feel them to be somehow significant in their lives. They meditate upon them, dream about them, write rituals based upon their myths. They can usually cite the Greek, Egyptian, Celtic and Nordic gods and may have a library of above 100 volumes about their myths and magic. Groups create their rituals from myths or myth-laden history, and before a ritual participants often read about the central images and rite and meditate upon them in detail.

Most sociological accounts would suggest that people join marginal groups out of socioeconomic frustration, a claim patently false in magic.² These participants tend to come from the middle class. If any profession predominates, it is the computer industry, but most middle-class occupations are represented. The people drawn to this purposive involvement with myth are more likely to have common personalities than similar socioeconomic profiles. Many of them become active practitioners by browsing in occult bookstores and then following up the groups, study sessions and open meetings advertised on index cards pinned to the shelves. Some read occult journals and, again, follow an advertisement for a study course or group. In their first year of practice they are trained in techniques of visualization and meditation, and introduced to myths from varied cultures. My impression, based on my close involvement with 50 people and my passing acquaintance with about 200, is that the sort of person who takes the relatively dramatic step of initiating contact, and then enjoys the practice enough to continue with it, has certain qualities. He is imaginative, self-absorbed, reasonably intellectual, spiritually inclined, and emotionally intense. He is probably also rebellious and interested in power, possibly dreamy or socially ill at ease. This is a descriptive, not a causal, account. The point is that magicians are normal middle-class people of a not uncommon temperamental cast.

Magicians practice in roughly four sorts of groups: the Western Mysteries, *ad hoc* ritual magic, witchcraft and paganism. These are not tidy categories, and I use the word “magician” to describe practitioners of all four. Some people belong to more than one group, and others practice on their own. Groups that are true to type, however, are noticeably different from each other. All of them ultimately descend from a 19th-century group—the Golden Dawn—created by three dissident Freemasons in the heyday of psychical research and spiritualism. They are very different from today’s psychics, spoonbenders, tarot card readers and the other things one associates with the occult. Those other occultists would not use the word “magic” to describe their doings. My observation of the Camden New Age Psychic Centre, the Charing Cross Psychic Centre, the tarot card readers, psychics, crystal ball gazers and the like that advertise in the leading magazine and work at the largest fairs, suggests that they have a lower socioeconomic level than magicians and lack their temperamental nature. Magicians think of themselves as the “real” occultists: the others, they say, are dabblers on the edge who merely observe the effects of ethereal energies rather than affecting them directly.

The Western Mysteries carry on the tradition of the Golden Dawn most directly, and its fraternities can trace a lineage of initiation to the 19th-century group. Its members are often conservative and Christian. Such groups are led by one person known as an “adept.” The theory is that a higher, nonphysical being is the real leader of the group. The adept is a trained specialist who has a privileged access to this “contact,” although all group members are said to share the channel. Contacts are said to watch over human evolution, and to guide occult rituals to aid that evolution. I have joined these groups in rituals to redeem the earth, to bring truth into Whitehall and the American conscience into British alignment. I was initiated by one fraternity in northern London, and have performed rituals with another in a borrowed manor house in Gloucestershire.

The second type of magic I call *ad hoc* ritual magic. These groups spring up independently of any chain of initiation but often take the Golden Dawn as their primary model. They are far more casually organized than the Western Mysteries groups, often formed by one or two interested amateurs who have read enough books on the subject to want to try their hand at practice. I joined several of these

groups. The most important met in a communal house where—as in the Western Mysteries fraternity—there was a special room set aside and only used for ritual. It was exotic, with strange symbols, incense and candlelight, and we performed rituals there in rainbow robes. The rituals were written by group members both for theatrical enjoyment and to see if we could draw the magical currents we desired. There was a sense that the group was “in training”: we would perform a ritual about the sea, and wait expectantly for water—as tears, emotion, even rain—to appear in our lives over the following weeks.

Witchcraft emerged in the 1930s, inspired by the new interest in anthropology and folklore and, more specifically, by newly published speculations about a pre-Christian witchcraft religion.³ Although witchcraft in its modern form bears some resemblance to the Western Mysteries, its ethos, symbolism and structure are quite distinctive. Its modern inventor, a civil servant named Gerald Gardner, published a spurious ethnography of contemporary witches and began initiating people into small groups called “covens,” led by women known as “high priestesses.” I was initiated into the first coven he created, the oldest coven in England, and I have participated in the rites of other groups. By now, there are many different types of witchcraft—feminist, Gardnerian, Alexandrian, named for their founders or their politics. All of them explicitly represent witchcraft as a religion, an ancient fertility religion, and they worship the “Goddess,” whom they see as the primordial earth mother venerated under many names in all early societies. She is Isis, Demeter, Astarte, and Inanna. All goddesses represent aspects of her multiple, changing form. Modern witches find her in the three phases of the moon, the sheaf of wheat, and indeed everywhere in nature. All groups but the extreme feminists think of her as having a consort, the stag god Cernunnos, Herne or Pan. On the great “sabbats”—Candlemas, Beltane, Lammas, Halloween, the equinoxes and solstices—covens theatrically enact the turn of the seasons. On the full moons they cast spells, rituals with quite specific intentions to heal sick friends and to bring coven members better jobs.

Paganism, the fourth major type, is a catchall category to include rituals that are framed in terms of a non-Christian nature religion and are magical in intent, but are not confined to small initiated

groups. These practices are, as it were, witchcraft's casual cousins. They share the same symbolism without the elaborate initiatory structure. Pagans meet at loosely structured events, where they do things that seem purely religious—offering summer fruit to Demeter—but which they describe as efficaciously “awakening” the earth. I have joined pagans on Highgate Hill, on Hampstead Heath, in Alexandra Park, to celebrate the season's change and to “work” for peace to be brought to different countries.

Secrecy is central to the practice of these different groups. Most members, for obvious reasons, keep their participation hidden: conventional civilians rarely take the assertion of witchhood with nonchalance. But far more is concealed than membership. New initiates take oaths to keep secret the symbols within their own group, and acquire special names, words and gestures that they swear never to reveal to outsiders. Within any one society, initiates of different degrees have symbols and names that they refuse to share with others lower in the hierarchy. This emphasis exceeds the protective function of concealment; people seem positively to enjoy the air of secrecy. Initiates of one group take pains to conceal their membership from initiates of another and, at general meetings, magicians of different types will speak abstractly about magic but remain silent about the specifics of their own practice, even when all present know of the others' affiliations. And more strikingly still in this abundance of secrecy, the “true” secrets are said to be those of a mystery that lies at magic's core. The following sections of this essay examine, first, the impact of concealing information—the special words, names, gestures and images that mark the practice—then, the still deeper issue of this assertion of mystery at the center of the practice and, finally, the secret practicing groups.

KNOWLEDGE CONCEALED

Concealment creates property, something that is possessed, and the existence of this special property distinguishes possessor from nonpossessor and alters the attitudes of both toward the thing possessed. The relatively small amount of theorizing about secret knowledge has focused on these issues.⁴ Simmel (1950) is the primary source here, followed by Bok's (1982) more recent work and those of Tefft (1980) and Bellman (1984). Concealing knowledge in magic often has the impact they suggest, but it serves a function that

they rarely mention: concealing information about a subject can reinforce the belief in its claims.

All knowledge is a form of property, in that it can be possessed. Knowledge can be given, acquired, even sold. It may seem less like property than objects because lies are common and mistakes easily made, and because it is not divided when shared. Nevertheless knowledge can be owned and held. And, like the difference between private and public property, it is secret knowledge that evokes the sense of possession most clearly. Simmel makes this point:

The strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession. For many individuals, property does not fully gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it. [Simmel 1950:332]

Shared knowledge and secret knowledge stand in the same relation as the public park and the private room. The room is always mine because it is never shared with anybody else. But I only feel that the park is mine when a foreigner admires its flowers or defaces its bench. "Mine" is what other people do not or should not have.

Possession differentiates. Concealed information separates one group from another and one person from the rest. What I know and you do not demonstrates that we are not identical, that we are separate people. The difference can create a hierarchy, wherein secrecy cedes social power to those who control the flow of treasured information. Two ethnographers of Sierra Leone, for example, argue that because literacy has increased the opportunity for secretive concealment, it opens the way to manipulate prestige (Bledsoe and Robey 1986). The literate Mende magician has access to knowledge that his illiterate companions cannot share, and he is granted prestige because he is seen to command the secrets hidden in the written text. In Bellman's West African forest belt secret societies, "everyone may possess knowledge but have different ways in which they can express it" (1984:143). The actual content of these concealed initiation rituals and society affairs is often shared, but mentioned only indirectly and in various ways. The expression used indicates social and ritual status by indicating how the speaker learned the information. When insiders assert themselves as insiders, they have power over outsiders.

Secrecy also elicits awe and deference toward its hidden contents. This is the primary point of Barth's discourse on secrecy and knowl-

edge in his study of a secretive men's initiation cult among the New Guinea Baktaman. Seven slow stages of initiation reveal progressively deeper "truths" that were deceptively inverted in earlier stages: the most impure animal is in fact the most pure, a lower house of initiation contains ossuaries unthinkable in those above. Because the deeper knowledge makes the early knowledge false—because no knowledge, then, is trustworthy—initiates treat all religious knowledge with ginger care.

From that first, frightening morning when initiations started, and through a series of subsequent stages, the novice develops a fearful awareness of vital, unknowable and forbidden power behind secret and cryptic symbols. [Barth 1975:219]

Knowledge, they learn, is dangerous, inherently deceptive, and acquired in often painful rituals. Even so, initiates take pride in their new knowledge, for it is to them the defining feature of their more senior status. The confluence of pride in greater status, deceptive data, and pain of revelation forms their attitude toward this special ritual knowledge.

[Ritual knowledge] is handled the way little boys in Europe handled the unexploded ammunition that they found: treasured for its unknown power, potential, secrecy—not with any real intention to use, and not to be experimented with to discover what destruction, or noise, an explosion really makes. [Barth 1975:220]

The way knowledge is acquired affects the way you feel about it. When the knowledge is hidden, and revelation demands hard, painful work but brings status in its wake, one treats these secrets with overvaluing awe.

Kermode points to the awe-inspiring secrecy that scholarship endows upon its subject. Interpretation lies between us and the original text like a plate of wavy glass, he says. "Once a text is credited with high authority it is studied intensely; once it is so studied it acquires mystery or secrecy" (Kermode 1979:144). Creative intellectual scrutiny wraps a text in secrecy by the daunting expertise needed to unravel its hermeneutic strands. "Like the scriptures, [Shakespeare] is open to all, but at the same time so dark that special training, organized by an institution of considerable size, is required for his interpretation" (Kermode 1979:144). An insider to Bible studies must not only know the ancient languages, the compositional history, the massive texts themselves, but he must also be competent to judge what all others have said about his subject. And the more he knows, the more complex and difficult his questions will

become. The barrage of scholarship demands ever greater mastery to understand, and its potential complexity is infinite because any narrative it tries to conquer eludes exhaustive explanation. To study any subject deeply is to invest it with secrecy and thus with the awe and deference the outsider accords to the knowledgeable initiate. **The accessibility of knowledge alters one's evaluation of its worth.**

"Knowledge" is a difficult term, and particularly difficult to apply to magic. Non-magicians would scarcely support the view that spells and incantations constitute anything like justified true belief. I use the term nonetheless because in revelations and in rituals you are learning something. By magical knowledge, I mean whatever magicians learn to write their rituals and cast their spells: the gestures, images, words, correspondences (for example, that blue is associated with Jupiter). This is knowledge of an odd sort: the words that open the door to Arabian treasure are miserably impotent within sceptical modernity. But this is precisely the problem of magic. **The ambiguity of whether magical knowledge is "true" or "real" is what makes magical secrecy so effective.**

The secrecy of magical knowledge reinforces magicians' beliefs by exploiting secrecy's respect-inspiring, awe-endowing properties. Magicians are not born but made, and made within a rationalizing, secular society. They need to persuade themselves that their magic is genuine, and that they are genuine magicians.⁵ **Keeping their involvement secretive of course protects them from social ridicule. More important, by treating their magical knowledge as secret, they make it seem powerful and desirable.** This effect builds on those described above. The differentiation between insider and outsider separates the magical from the mundane; this not only makes the magician feel special, but also shields his magic from conflict with scepticism. Magicians elicit feelings of awe and deference toward the hidden knowledge by implying that the secrets are too powerful to be made public, and by nesting magic in hard work and scholarship, and this elevates magic into a thing of value. The following pages draw out these observations at greater length.

Magicians use secrecy to create a separate island within reality on which their magic seems to work. They create this island in many ways. Magicians speak of different "worlds" and different "realities." They go to considerable lengths to define whatever happens in ritual as distinct from the ordinary. They describe the time of the

ritual as different, and they remove their watches. They say that space, too, is different, and literally draw a circle around the ritualist as a “boundary between the worlds.” Setting, costume and theater then illustrate that other “world.” Published manuals stress the need to make the ritual different from everyday life. There are magical robes used only for rituals, and weapons wrapped in purple silk to hide them from the profane. Candles and incense transform the sitting room into Merlin’s cave with smoky, flickering light. Before a rite magicians draw the curtains, lock the door, and take the phone off the hook. The external world is quite literally excluded.

Secrecy substantially augments this separation. It does so by repeatedly stressing the need to keep the magic separate and asserting, moreover, that magic actually requires this separation in order to be effective. Thus secrecy not only heightens the sense of separation but justifies its creation. For example, students in magical training are told never to show their tools or weapons to outsiders, never to reveal their magical diary to anyone at all. One text written for “beginners” says: “magical robes, equipment and ritual books should always be kept under lock and key as power is built up in and around them and this becomes dissipated if things are just left about” (Green 1983:87). Most of the magicians I knew wrapped their equipment in special cloths and kept it out of sight. Tarot cards were also wrapped in special cloths and hidden, on the grounds that the touch of another person would decimate their power.

Renaming—the magical power of the name—is another example of this secret-laden separation. Upon initiation the neophyte is usually given a special name, to be used within the group but never revealed outside. I, for example, was initiated into a Western Mysteries lodge which demanded that I choose a motto for a name. On the night, the adept read the initials of the phrase aloud, and placed the full name in a box, which was then solemnly locked and placed beneath the altar. So although I had a secret name within the group, its full title was known only to myself. Throughout my time there, I was always addressed by these initials in the ritual, though over tea we reverted to common names. During initiation I also learned that the fraternity had a new name, its “true” name, different from the one I had known, and I was told a secret “word of power,” which was the name of the greater being who was thought to guide us. This renaming explicitly reiterates the separation from the mundane: the

reality has changed, the participants are no longer as they once were.

The crucial feature of secrecy here is that it not only separates two worlds but also allows magicians to move between them with ease. The straddled separation makes magicians feel special. They acquire identities far more dramatic than those of their daily lives, identities in which they have great power and influence. Keeping the magical identity secret prevents it from being challenged by outsiders while retaining the sense of power and daring that makes it exciting. It seemed to me that participants quite liked the fact that their neighbors remained ignorant of their activities but would be shocked by them if only they knew. One woman who led an otherwise drab housewife's life spoke eloquently of feeling special and more alive through magic. It gave her something different from her husband. And when he drove me to the station he asked me what we did at the meetings. "She tells me very little."

By keeping the two worlds separate but being able to move between them, magicians also insulate their claims from sceptical criticism—both other people's and their own. Magicians can hold their beliefs in secret without ever subjecting them to scoffing unbelievers. They can think of themselves as believing in magic, and get on well both in a magical context and within their everyday social world without putting their secretively held magical beliefs at risk. This sometimes has curious ramifications in magicians' own commentary on their practice. Some say that they leave their analytic minds behind them when they step into the circle, that they may question magical tenets while in their working world, but within the magic circle, they believe. In other words, they literally live between two worlds, and switch their beliefs accordingly. This is what I was told independently by a physician, a pension officer, a librarian, and a biochemist. The deep question raised is what they imply by the word "belief": it is at least the case that the separateness of the magical makes it possible for practitioners to offer this double-world description.

An important psychological phenomenon seems to lie behind the effectiveness of this strategy. In order to commit yourself to a belief that you do not yet hold, there must be a time when you acknowledge the possibility of the view but have not yet accepted it. During that period, you must be able to toy with the idea of believing, and

to imagine yourself as the sort of person who believes. It is then that the separateness of secrecy is instrumental. I was often told—by adepts, by witches, by most participants with whom I discussed it—that the suspension of disbelief was a necessary step toward committed, positive belief. To turn the possibility of belief into active commitment demands that the subject is comfortable with the “let’s pretend” position. Secrecy facilitates this comfort by removing the normal social barriers to socially unaccepted belief. You might feel pretty foolish invoking Hecate in the living room. But if you light the room with candles and smoky incense, wear special clothes, and claim that you are not really yourself but someone different and more powerful, you might at least pretend that Hecate’s power has begun to flow. If there is no one there to ridicule you because no one knows of your activities, and indeed if you have secretive co-ritualists who positively support your action and seem also to believe, then your belief will have a chance to grow. Embarrassment is a social disease. Secrecy can banish it and thus create the potential for private, idiosyncratic belief.

Secrecy also fosters a deferential attitude toward the contents of its secret knowledge. The concealment of magical names, words, images and gestures heightens the value of what has been hidden by implying that its power is too great to be lightly shared. Magicians make much of their moral responsibility in controlling access to magical knowledge. For example, the introductory pamphlet of one Western Mysteries fraternity asserts that magicians have especially stringent moral standards because of the importance of their work. To be a member of this fraternity, you must be a righteous, upstanding person who indulges in neither drugs nor homosexuality. Their founder justified secrecy as follows:

The knowledge guarded by the secret fraternities is too potent to be given out indiscriminately, and is guarded, not as a sordid trade secret, but as the power to dispense drugs is guarded—for the safety of the public. [Fortune 1967:112]

She goes on to say:

Can you, then, blame the guardians of this dangerous brightness if they use every precaution to ensure that it shall only find its way into clean and trusting hands? Be assured that the secrecy of the occult schools will never be relaxed till human nature is regenerated. [Fortune 1967:113]

These secrets are too powerful to share, claim the morally righteous. Maybe so: but by keeping them secret one need never test their

strength. To keep a secret creates the sense of the secret's power without the need for its demonstration.

This concealment is also part of magic's explicit theory, which asserts that mutual concentration produces a "thought-form" that has a real existence and a real effect. Were other people to be aware of this thought-form, their thoughts would blur the outlines of the image, as if an alien radio channel interfered with your channel of a different band.

The ritual-patterns used in any particular magical order are kept secret for a very good reason. The power of thought is little realized by the ordinary person, but in the magical workings of a lodge, constructive visualization is practiced, and definite "thought-forms" are created. . . . But because they are thought-built, they can be affected by thought, and for that reason are kept secret in order that the work which is being done by their aid may not be interfered with. [Butler 1959:16–17]

If the thought is shared, its concentrated intensity diminishes. Another guide says: "witchcraft consists of knowledge, and knowledge brings power. Power shared is power lost" (Huson 1970:27). Because thought affects thought, the magician's thoughts must be kept pure so that they will have the effect which he intends.

Reification and the magical power of words have been the subject of a long debate.⁶ The central questions have been, first, whether this sort of "concrete thinking" is characteristic of a certain stage of childhood, and second, what this implies about the adults who seem to use these thinking patterns. Hallpike (1979) argues that adults who use magic are functioning at a low level of cognitive maturity. Obviously if contemporary magicians exhibit these patterns in their magic and yet work as professional computer scientists, the pattern is no indication of necessary mental maturity—but these issues point beyond this paper's purview. The interesting point is that the explicit theory of magic elicits the awe that invests the secret with great power.

Beyond deliberate concealment, the difficulty of obtaining magical knowledge also swaths it in secrecy and heightens the awe in which it is held. Magical knowledge is extremely elaborate. There are complex correlations between the Hebrew letters, astrological plants, tarot cards, plants, gems, scents, colours and so forth—a version of Renaissance theories of correspondence between earth, sky and heaven. To draw another into love, you should surround yourself with the signs of Venus in a ritual: wear an emerald robe, burn benzoin, light seven green candles and then concentrate upon your

desire. Practitioners acquire hefty reference texts that match gems, plants and so forth. To learn these associations properly is a lifetime's task. Not all magicians conquer such complexity and most say that book-studied knowledge is not essential to magical success. They assert that it is not what you say but how you say it that matters. Obviously this attitude is more defensible than the belief that particular words bring results: the ritual didn't fail because you used the wrong invocation, but because you didn't use it properly. But whether scholarship or know-how serves as the touchstone, magicians present magic as the consequence of long and patient learning. Entering magic is like entering a scholarly pursuit: the practitioner is impressed by the depth of knowledge, and dazzled by the learning of the leaders of the profession.

As a result, the magician can always explain failure by attributing it to insufficient learning while retaining the promise of potential success. There is always more to know. The fantasy of a truly successful command of magic depends upon detailed knowledge and expertise in performance so complex that actual achievement is impossible. Power remains eternally the promised prize but the means to attain it eternally elusive. The scholarship creates the secret of success as the unattainable end of eternal study.

So the very act of hiding knowledge raises the value of what is hidden, both by lending it awe and by keeping it from public confrontation with potential rivals. We have seen that secrecy insulates magic by keeping insider from outsider, protecting the claims from scepticism and creating a partial, let's pretend world in which one can believe in magic without facing social ridicule. We have also seen how magicians invest their magic with power and importance by emphasizing the dire consequences that would follow public revelation, and that they embed magic in scholarship and expertise so complex that successful magic always remains elusive. These are not premeditated effects. Magicians don't consciously plan to make their magic more persuasive by draping it in secrecy. But they revel in the secrecy that makes it exciting and vivid, and that turns out to protect magic in the rich and perhaps unexpected ways that raise suggestive questions about the emergence and maintenance of belief.



ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE

Secrecy plays another role in creating a certain type of knowledge. Contemporary magic presents itself as a mystery religion centered on a secretive knowledge of something inherently hidden and thus unknowable by ordinary means. This knowledge is called esoteric knowledge. Practitioners describe esoteric knowledge as the “deep secrets” of magic, and they say that it is these secrets that ultimately confer power. The anthropological issue is that acquiring the knowledge gives practitioners a sense of control over their lives.

To call esoteric knowledge “secretive” is to use the word in a strained way: truths of the mysteries are intentionally hidden only if you believe that there is a god who conceals them. But this is more or less what magicians do believe—or at least it is the myth-like account by which this knowledge is conceptualized. Magicians call esoteric knowledge secretive and speak about initiations through which deity-like initiators reveal knowledge that they have previously concealed. The real point seems to be that “esoteric knowledge” is the name given to a certain sort of experience, and that access to the experience itself is restricted to participants of secretive groups. Writing about the experience cannot give access to this knowledge: the experience must be experienced, and only the experiencer can lay claim to his own, unique and inherently hidden knowledge of what happened.

Magical groups see themselves in a lineage of ancient priest-hoods—Eleusinian, Druidic, Egyptian, even Atlantean. They think of their magical practice as the service to the Mysteries, a spiritual discipline that demands dedicated apprenticeship to those “beyond the veil.” In this conception, magical powers are conferred as by-products of this spiritual service; they are far less important than the service itself. The adept with whom I worked in Gloucestershire says this of his initiates:

Eventually there may come a time when the student wishes to devote himself definitely to the work of the group . . . It is the equivalent of taking monastic vows, except that the initiate’s life is lived nowadays very much in the world. [Knight 1979:265]

The monastic metaphor appeals to him because of this vision of dedicated discipline in the service of the mysterious. Or consider the protagonist of a novel about Arthurian Britain inspired by feminist witchcraft:

How do you write of the making of a priestess? What is not obvious is secret. Those who have walked that road will know, and those who have not will never know, though I should write down all the forbidden things. . . . It was the small magics that came the hardest, forcing the mind to walk in unaccustomed paths. To call the fire and raise it at command, to call the mists. . . . And then the mark of the crescent moon was set between my brows by the goddess herself. . . . but this is a mystery of which it is forbidden to speak. [Bradley 1982:157–158]

The training is cloaked in a mystery somehow inherent to the practice, and the religious mystery seems a far greater thing than merely practical effect-producing magic. The religious overtone is abundantly illustrated in actual magical practice. Witches are initiated as priests and priestesses of the Goddess, and Western Mysteries initiates ceremonially dedicate themselves to the service of the gods.

Magic is said to be a mystery religion: what this term is used to mean, and why magic is seen in this way, is the subject of this section of the paper. The first problem is to understand what is thought to be gained through initiation into the Mysteries—what constitutes the knowledge that such initiations involve. The second is to understand why the acquisition of such knowledge, and the disciplined development through which it is maintained, should be so tightly linked with the attempt to attain magical ability, and the result of this acquisition.

What does it mean to call something a mystery religion? To magicians, the term implies that magic is about finding profound meaning in symbolism. Magicians are interested in myth and fantasy, and symbolic images in theory direct the flow of force in rituals. But symbolism in magic is far more important than that remark suggests, and to call the practice a mystery religion indicates that importance. For each magician certain symbols come to embody the intensity of meaning, feeling and emotion that the cross bears for the devout Catholic. When magicians enter magic they suddenly confront an enormous complexity of symbols: the kabbalah, tarot cards, mythologies of different cultures. As they “progress,” they meditate on them, read about them, perform rituals about them, talk about them with their companions. Each symbol is associated with stories, often mythological, and the word “mystery” often suggests an impossibility that these stories present as truth. Witches, for example, talk of the Mysteries of Persephone as the knowledge that the living woman’s maturity comes through the embrace of death. More profoundly, the symbolism comes to represent the experience of using

it. When magicians say that their rituals are revelations of mysteries, they mean that through a ritual based on a certain symbol they come to understand a symbol more “deeply,” and that they find this experience of deep understanding impossible to articulate in conventional terms. They call this understanding a religion because the theory postulates a transcendent spiritual reality that the images represent.

As understood by these magicians, this symbolic knowledge of the Mysteries is of a different kind than instrumental, scientific or factual knowledge. The initiate of the Mysteries learns few new facts, little information that could be conveyed to others. Nevertheless he feels that he has learned something significant. The nature of this knowledge is ambiguous. There are, however, three recurring elements in the descriptions commonly given of it.

The first feature of this knowledge is that it is experiential. When magicians describe themselves as obtaining knowledge through initiation in the Mysteries, they mean that they have an experience they feel to be tremendously important, so important that they call their understanding knowledge. Esoteric knowledge involves an understanding that bypasses rational cognition and can never be expressed in words. The preminent text in witchcraft explains:

When we speak of the “secrets that cannot be told,” we do not mean merely that rules prevent us from speaking freely. We mean that the inner knowledge literally *cannot* be expressed in words. It can only be conveyed through experience, and no one can legislate what insight another person may draw from any given experience. [Starhawk 1979:7; emphasis in original]

There are secrets, but they are not the sorts of things encased in words. Even if you published all the rituals, no real secrets would have been released. The remark is constantly repeated: another witch I know slightly writes: “it is the *process* and the *experience*, not the secrets, that are the mysteries of the Mysteries” (Adler 1979:390; emphasis in original). Two Western Mysteries initiates, with whom I have participated in many rites, make this assertion in their published guide to magic:

The real secret about the Mysteries is that *they cannot be communicated by one being to another*; the mystery guardian can only give the guidelines and keys to knowledge, not the actual knowledge itself, which is revealed to the initiate by *personal experience and revelatory realisation*. [Matthews and Matthews 1985:37]

Truths of the Mysteries slip through the web of words like mist, and like mist they seem opaque and substantive but vanish when one comes close to capture them.

It is not entirely clear what it means to say that truths cannot be communicated, but are known only through experience. The remark sounds like a strategic way to assert the impregnability of belief, by claiming that the belief cannot be rationally challenged. But it would be tendentious to see incommunicability as simply a retreat in the face of scepticism, a defensive reaction to doubt. People often say that religious truths are incommunicable, that mystical insight is ineffable. They may also say that the scent of ripe peaches or the sound of running water is impossible to describe. Magic depends heavily on sensual and spiritual stimulation, and when people learn something through their practice it may be that they genuinely find that it is difficult to put into words. They do talk about their experiences, like mystics who produce volumes on the ineffable, but they always say that words are finally inadequate. Esoteric knowledge seems inherently secretive because it can only be shared by giving someone the same experience you have had. You cannot simply put it into words.

The second feature of esoteric knowledge is that this ineffable, experiential knowledge is represented in symbolic images. You are initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, and at the moment of revelation you are shown an ear of wheat. You have learned nothing intellectually, but the emotionally draining experience is somehow associated with the wheat. The classic training manual in the Western Mysteries grandly asserts that the mind cannot comprehend the truths of the Mysteries rationally, but that the human can understand them when they are couched in imagery. Witchcraft is said to engage a different mode of thought from analytic rationality. In that mode, “verbal understanding is limited; [the mind] communicates through images, emotions, sensations, dreams, visions and physical symptoms” (Starhawk 1979:21). There is knowledge that has experiential content, but it is captured by images and communicated neither verbally nor in rational terms.

The essence of this distinction between the experientially image-bound and the rationally verbalized seems to be the sort of recognition involved in saying, “now I *really* know what love is.” The role played by the “really” in that sentence seems to be the sort of deeper

understanding described by esoteric knowledge. Greater acquaintance can always lead one to say, “now I *really* know,” but the intellectual content of the knowledge may remain more or less unchanged. Someone may be able to describe the Christian cross as the symbol of redemption through suffering. After a traumatic but successful trial, she may feel that she “really” knows the meaning of the phrase, although she has not added substantially to her intellectual understanding of it, and she will associate that newer insight with the image. Magicians seem to use the category of esoteric knowledge to indicate experiential acquaintance rather than intellectual content, and use imagery as a mnemonic for their experiential insights.

The third quality often mentioned is that knowledge of the Mysteries seems also to involve knowledge about oneself. Whatever is learned is unique and specific to each because it reflects, in some way, their inmost self. “In witchcraft, each of us must reveal our own truth” (Starhawk 1979:9). There is no objective touchstone. Esoteric knowledge is private and individualized. A beginner’s guide to magic advises:

From your own secret journal you will begin to discover patterns of your own emerging. This is the beginning of the magical journey of inner exploration. You are mapping an uncharted country which you alone can visit totally. [Green 1983:18]

Even if this esoteric knowledge were communicable, its communication would be meaningless. Book-learning is fine, but it is only your own interpretation that constitutes true knowledge to these magicians. Thus esoteric knowledge is secret in a double sense: you keep your journal intentionally hidden, and your experience is inherently hidden and personal, communicable to none.

The striking feature of this self-knowledge is that magicians assert that self-knowledge is the only way to gain knowledge of the external world. Magic is repeatedly said to involve knowledge of the “inner realities.” When magicians practice magic—when they meditate, visualize, or participate in ritual—they are said to be “working on the inner,” and magicians describe magic as a means of self-exploration: “magic is a series of psychological techniques so devised as to enable us to probe more deeply into ourselves” (Regardie 1964:28); in magic “there is a state of perception, of awareness . . . in which we are enabled to gain direct knowledge of inner

realities. This ability arises from our inmost knowledge, the heart of our being, our centre that is normally ignored or feared” (Stewart 1985:49). The intriguing assumption is that esoteric knowledge examines “inner reality” to know about an outer world. Two high-ranking Western Mysteries initiates—members of my London circuit—have written a two-volume introduction to magic in which they define the magical “tradition” as “a body of esoteric teaching and knowledge which constitutes a system of magical technique and belief dating from the beginning of time” (Matthews and Matthews 1985:2). They immediately assume that the reader is about “to explore your own *inner* landscape” in the “quest for a transcendent reality” (Matthews and Matthews 1985:2; emphasis in original). Magic “is a continual spiral of discovery: we go inward to come out again, and when the thread is wound out fully we must return inwards to take stock, to garner our findings, and to rest. This is the pattern we must follow, if we desire to learn” (Matthews and Matthews 1985:4). Knowledge of the world is indissoluble from a knowledge of one’s self and an ineffable knowledge of the divine.

The fundamental premise here is that by understanding the self at its deepest level one not only acquires true knowledge of the world but—crucially—the power to control it.

Although the keys to the Mystery are given to the initiate of the Western Way, each must still find the way in darkness by the light of personal intuition . . . at the heart-chamber of the mystery maze is freedom and mastery over the elements of life. [Matthews and Matthews 1986:3]

Again, this sort of remark is echoed throughout the teaching manuals: “knowing yourself is the first, and one of the most important, steps in ritual” (Ashcroft-Novicki 1982:12). Self-knowledge leads to self-control and to control of an outer world. “The inner you has a great many more senses than five. It can detect underground water, lost objects, metal pipes, and less obvious things” (Green 1983:79). The relation between the inner and outer can in fact be quite direct: “since magicians believe that the soul is the universe in miniature they also believe that it is possible to link any factor in the individual psycho-spiritual make-up with the corresponding factor in the universe at large” (King and Skinner 1976:13). It is an old Hermetic theme. The soul is the microcosm of the macrocosmic universe, and to alter it alters the world.

So magical practice turns on the assumption that the ability to control the physical world arises through experiential, image-bound self-knowledge. This knowledge is not a body of objective facts but a process of understanding, a way of knowing oneself. Many non-magicians think of magic as a science-like body of instrumental words and gestures, the false science Frazer canonized. But at least modern magic turns out to be a mystery religion in which the manipulated knowledge owes more to an esoteric mystery than to an instrumental science. Why should this transformation occur?

There are strategic explanations, for a concept of esoteric knowledge helps to sidestep disconfirmation and support hard-to-support beliefs. The words “open sesame” are not—or at least, not obviously—effective. The magician is in need of a theory that explains both why his rites have failed and how, if only he had greater expertise, the magic still could work. Esoteric knowledge neatly serves that purpose because by its nature it is incomplete. Scholarship creates an infinite regression of facts to be garnered and books to be read; esoteric knowledge creates an infinite regression because one can always have a deeper sense of self, or richer sorts of experience. One can never grasp the totality of self-knowledge, let alone exhaust experiential self-awareness. Your knowledge of the “meaning” of the moon can never be finite, as might be your knowledge of the rules of baseball. If a spells fails, then, the failure can always be attributed to ignorance while retaining the possibility of a future success.

Another strategic explanation is that this slide of the secretive into the esoteric elevates worship and spiritual service above immediate instrumental efficacy. Devotion and dedication are more highly valued than the ability to conjure successfully. The rewards of this exchange are great. The elevation of worship values the thing one can do over the thing one cannot. Paradoxically, the student comes to feel himself to be a better and more powerful magician on the basis of practices that have little to do with instrumental magic directly.

But there is a more complex interpretation that arises from the nature of magic itself. Magic is the search for total control. “As I do will, so mote it be,” run the witchcraft spells. Yet people live in a world of uncertainty. They make choices within the constraints of insufficient information and their reasoning is hampered by their own irrationality. Esoteric knowledge makes the important uncer-

tainties inconsequential by mastering (or trying to master) our apparently irrational responses to them. As one manual says, “the objective of all these practices is to get YOU in total control of your SELF” (Green 1983:12). And perhaps not surprisingly, the practices work. That is, they provide, to some extent, a greater sense of self-control and personal competence.

Let me illustrate this point ethnographically, by describing the way esoteric knowledge is acquired. Death most vividly illustrates that humans are at the mercy of uncertainty. It is the most terrifying absolute of human life. Few people choose to die, and few choose the time at which death comes. And death is unknowable. One cannot know death and live. Magicians create rituals in which the uncertainties of death are rendered irrelevant.

Magicians place the knowledge and mastery of death at the center of their practice. One adept gives the following account of the student’s training:

During his progress through the early grades he should be trained in emotional and mental control. . . . After the individual has achieved the optimal mental, emotional and physical control over himself, which means control in function, not inhibition, it is his task to face the Dweller on the Threshold. . . . [This involves] personal agony in the Garden, Trial, Crucifixion, Descent into Hell and eventual Ascension. . . . Once the process has been gone through, the individual is in a position to look everything in the face, without distortion or delusion, and to accept full realization for all that he does or has done. . . . And how does he work out his destiny? . . . By acting within the centre of his being, his essential self. Not by acting according to the dictates of his mind, his emotions or his instincts, but by using them according to his and their needs. [Knight 1979:264–269]

The message is fundamental: to achieve self-mastery one must face and surmount the possibility of annihilation. More specifically, the story of the initiate’s training is that he first trains himself in self-control to the greatest possible degree. At this point he confronts his own death, emotionally experiencing death and his own redemption (this adept has cast the process in Christian form). If this experience is sufficiently vivid the initiate will have lost all irrational constraints, for he will feel that he knows and has mastered this most terrifying of experiences. The initiate will fear no uncertainty; he will feel no hampering biases. He will be that ideal of a human being, a unique being who acts with unfettered rationality to enact his own particular desires.

The important point about the initiate's esoteric knowledge of his own death is that some process has enabled him to feel that he has attained a sense of insight into the unknowable and has experienced things—like death—into which he cannot possibly have any insight. In magic the process in which this is most apparent is ritual. Ritual creates the sense through the referential ambiguity of poetic dramatization, which permits a kind of experiential knowledge of the unknown. Halloween should serve as the best example of this process. It is a central ritual in witchcraft, and celebrates the turn in the year when the dead are said to walk abroad. And in the ritual, the witch meets and makes his peace with Death himself.

Halloween is a "god" ritual in witchcraft. This means that it is the horned god, not the Goddess, who is incarnated in the circle, and thus it is the high priest who takes the central ritual role. He dons a set of antlers and walks around the circle, announcing that the year is dead and that a new one must begin. This, he says, is the night when the veil grows thin between the worlds of the dead and living, and as the dead come forth to feast with the living, so the living must confront the dead. And then Death gives his central speech:

I am the God who waits
 In the dead of the year, in the dark of life
 In the depths of the wood where no birds sing
 There will you rest again in my hand
 Be fearless to look upon my death's head
 For I have other faces and another hand
 To give again that which I have taken . . .
 Remember you trusted me in the spring green child places
 Finding enchantment;
 Found me merry in summer attendance when you wed
 Feared not to meet me in the autumn forest hunts
 Shrink not from me now in the winter snow . . .
 As the great cycle of the year brings forth the time of my domain
 Take me into your hearts, as you have ever been in mine.

All witches present salute Death in turn, and they share communion with him in his honor. Death has announced that he is integral to life, that he is but another form of being. Nevertheless participants are meant to confront, accept and incorporate death in his state of non-life that people commonly find terrifying. And the visual impact, as the firelight flickers over the horned, the furred mask, the death's sword held aloft, is an easy mnemonic.

Poetry removes the obvious reference of words. Poetic remarks are neither true nor false, for their empirical base is ambiguous and their logical structure that of metaphor, where the listener draws insights to make sense of the sentence whose literal meaning is false. And so the poetry can move in two directions. It removes the obvious truth of a description and makes it mysterious and unknown, and it speaks of the unknown in a way that cannot be dismissed as false. It intentionally transforms the intolerably banal into the mysterious and the unknown into the imaginable.

When magicians call esoteric knowledge a secretive knowledge, they exploit both of these directions. On the one hand, esoteric knowledge turns the obvious into the hidden. Death, for example, is rather ordinary. Flowers die. Worms die. To talk of the secrets of death is to assert that there are concealed truths behind the appearances. Yet on the other hand, the poetry turns the unknown into the imaginable. Your own death, once terrifying, is no more mysterious than the flower's. Magicians both make the mundane mysterious and provide a means to know the mystery.

Participating in rituals in which one meets death seems to provide an experiential awareness associated with those poetic images. No magician can experience death, but it is precisely the nature of magical ritual that the magician begins to feel as if she does so through the story of death that she is told. This is the mechanism at work in theater; the viewer feels that he comes to understand the experience of murder by identifying with the homicidal protagonist, even if he has never committed it himself. And this theatrical catharsis is esoteric knowledge par-excellence: an experience couched in images that ultimately hangs on your personal identification with the actors.

Magic is about controlling the uncontrollable world. Esoteric knowledge handles the ways in which control is thwarted: the unknowable uncertainties, of which death is the most terrible and frightening, the irrational motivations that govern human decisions. By mystifying the ordinary processes and poetically dramatizing them, the magician can come to experience the unknown, to feel as if he knows it, and so for him the unknown loses some of its terror, while the poetic grandeur of the secret mystery justifies the fear that remains. The fantasy is that total control comes with mastery of the uncertain and irrational, and thus esoteric knowledge is the key-

stone on which the triumphal arch of power hangs. That knowledge also serves a protective role: knowledge of the Mysteries offers an infinite regression of deeper truths whose total acquisition would make the magic work, and substitutes worship for efficacy as the highest form of practice.

The remarkable thing is that magical imagery probably does help magicians handle their irrationality, their fears, angers and strong emotion. One can only guess at the reasons. I suspect that imagery is therapeutically effective because its emotionally charged content is both sufficiently explicit to provide a useful model for emotional responses but also sufficiently masked so that this content is not denied or rejected out of fear. A man confused by conflicting feelings about his dragon-like mother does well to imagine himself as Zeus, for in such a guise he feels himself strong enough both to slay the dragon—which he can identify as evil—and lust after women. Rather than having to express some deep hatred for his mother, he identifies with a being more powerful than women, and who both loves them and is harangued by them.

Therapy seems to work when someone externalizes, or labels, some internal feeling and then is able to transform it, though how and why that happens seems quite unclear. Narratives could be therapeutic because of the way in which someone finds a central character or symbol moving, the way in which they identify with it. The person would imagine herself as that character by using her own experience as the ground. This probably constitutes some sort of labeling process; you imagine what Demeter's grief must feel like because of the grief you have suffered yourself. If that character has emotions that you have repressed within yourself, your identification may help you to experience these feelings more directly. If the character undergoes some change you again imagine the change based on your own experience, and perhaps imagine yourself through some experiences you have not had, or not dealt with properly. The narrative then becomes a practice ground, a dry run to handle feelings and responses in new ways.⁷

Certainly there are many tales to tell of magic's therapeutic efficacy; the timid woman who grew more confident by identifying with *Sehkmnt*, fiery Egyptian lion-goddess; the man who reforged his manhood through a dream-gift of a sword. I will give only one account. Mary told me that it was only after she had become a witch

that she was able to accept her womanhood with pleasure and pride. She is an unusual witch, a conventional housewife who believes that a woman's place is within the home. But when she was growing up she had difficulty seeing any woman's role as worthwhile. She said that she was a second child and was, as a girl, unwanted, and that her father felt that it was useless to educate a girl. At 18 she came across a book about witchcraft and found it compelling, hunted around for a coven and got initiated. The witches' worship of a universal female deity made her feel creative and powerful. Indeed, when she had difficulty becoming pregnant with her first child, she said that reading the myths of the Goddess enabled her to become fertile.⁸ The Sumerian myth of Erishkigal and Inanna was particularly important, as was the classical tale of Demeter and Persephone. Inanna is a young woman, queen of earth, who chose to go below the earth and was confronted and killed by Erishkigal, queen of hell, before she reemerged. "I began to realize that a woman must face her dark side, a sort of death, and that this confrontation is the source of creativity." Childbirth and witchcraft each taught Mary that the pain that accompanies menstruation and childbirth is a good pain, not some sign that women fail at their body's task of reproducing but an inevitable element of life. Women are the powerful center of life-giving process. Other female witches might use these lessons in a different way, but for Mary witchcraft legitimated her choice to be conventionally feminine because through it she gained a confidence in her womanhood that her childhood had not afforded, and it gave her that confidence without forcing her to confront directly her no doubt complex feelings about her father.

The issue of how imaginative involvement works therapeutically is deep and unsettled. It seems clear, however, that imaginative involvement with myths and images can be curative. Their curative properties have something to do with externalizing—providing a public label for—internal feelings, and with the ambiguity of the link between inner feeling and outer label. The secrets of the Mysteries are probably therapeutic because the magician can both identify his feelings and keep the identification hidden. Secretive esoteric knowledge allows you both to gain the benefit of controlling your own self-knowledge, of holding a secret about yourself, and of knowing truths which, if phrased explicitly, you might reject. Secrecy is integral to this psychotherapeutic function.

SECRETIVE GROUPS

Secrecy also contributes in another way to magic's satisfaction. The secretive group is neither publicly open nor subjectively private. Because of this shared privacy, magicians can discuss their personal lives within the circle far more openly than around the quotidian coffee table. The most dramatic instance of this trespassing of ordinary boundaries, in my experience, was when a woman in the witchcraft coven asked us to "do" something for her because she was terribly depressed. People prodded her with questions, so as to know what sort of spell to do. What wasn't worthwhile? She talked for 20 minutes, about feeling uncreative, unfulfilled, not confident. For the spell, the group put her into the center of the circle, and gave her a sword to hold as a symbol of a successful warrior's struggle. They chanted around her, stopped, and held their hands high. At this point her husband put his arms around her neck. The high priestess whispered, "Don't lean on her." And at this the woman burst forth into a mixture of shouting and tears. "Yes, that's it, you always lean on me, always protect me, never let me be myself." When she seemed to finish, the high priestess—a woman of capable equanimity—said, "do you dare to affirm to the Goddess that you can do what you want to do?" Silence. Then the woman took the sword, held it aloft, and said, "I dare to do what I want to do." "Convince us." And this time the woman spoke in clear and ringing tones. And each member of the group kissed her and said, "we believe you."

Such groups implicitly and explicitly encourage intimacy between their members. This woman, Caryl, said that she could never have cried like that except within the circle, a remark I often heard. People felt safe in speaking openly within this safe and good enclosure. In addition, the very structure of spell-casting encouraged them to do so. To understand what visual imagery a spell should use, the group questions the person who requested it. In the coven I joined, many spells were psychological in nature: someone wanted a boost of energy, wanted to revive flagging spirits, wanted a sense of direction after forced unemployment. The requester would talk for up to half an hour before the spell was performed, about what he felt and why he felt that way.

Theoretical accounts of secretive groups have often discussed this creation of an intimate, protected world, though those accounts

have not focused on the therapeutic value of this openness. Simmel's (1950) account is particularly elaborate. In the applicable elements of his theory, the secret society encourages members to trust one another, to treat each other as equals, and to develop affective bonds; the secret society tends to be highly self-conscious of its social life; and the secret society tends to present itself as a counterimage of the ordinary world, clearly set apart from it and organized along different lines.

For Simmel, these groups engender trust because each member relies upon the others not to reveal their shared concealment. This is of course particularly strong when the individual would be at risk if his membership in the group were known. Simmel describes this reciprocal confidence as moral solidarity: "in the confidence of one man in another lies as high a moral value as in the fact that the trusted person shows himself worthy of it" (1950:348). Reciprocal confidence also creates a sense of equality among members (1950:374) and, by reducing the complexity of contexts in ordinary life, reduces also the degree of conflict. "The intensified seclusion against the outside is associated with intensification of cohesion internally" (1950:369). Bok stresses the affective component of the solidarity created by severe initiations (1982:52); see also Aronson and Mills 1951). She points out that secrecy creates a sense of shared privacy and trust because of the group's explicit acceptance of its members. The secret society "offers the freedom to trust and to be creative, and the excitement of transcending ordinary limitations" (Bok 1982:49). Groups encourage intimacy by removing social barriers. Trust is an emotional bond forged through the mutuality of sharing something private with others, and trusting them not to violate that privacy.

Simmel also asserts that secret societies tend to be highly self-conscious of their social life. He speaks of the society's "*consciousness* of being a society—a consciousness which is constantly emphasized during its formative period and throughout its lifetime" (1950:363; emphasis in original). The society becomes riddled with arcane rituals whose only purpose is to differentiate it from the outside world, and they make of the group a secluded world peculiarly aware of its own mechanisms.

There are perhaps no other external traits which are so typical of the secret society, and so sharply distinguish it from the open society, than the high value of usages,

formulas and rites, and their peculiar preponderance over the purposive contents of the group. [Simmel 1950:358]

Such formalism dominates the group and the group's awareness of itself.

Ritualism produces, or helps to produce, the other characteristic of such groups—their construction of a second “world,” parallel to but distinct from the mundane.

Through such formalism, as well as through the hierarchical organization itself, the secret society makes itself into a sort of counter-image of the official world, to which it places itself in contrast. [Simmel 1950:360]

Simmel speaks of the formalism as creating a boundary that separates the two worlds, welding the secretive one into a unified whole.

Its secret surrounds it like a boundary outside of which there is nothing but materially, or at least formally, opposite matter, a boundary which therefore fuses, within itself, the secret society into a perfect unity. [Simmel 1950:362]

As Bok notes, this secretive world may acquire new vocabulary, new ways of speaking, new jokes. The secretive world may be seen as an ideal, which the constraints of an outer society—a false, phenomenal world—prohibit. The result of this confluence of characteristics is that the group is defined as safe, good and pure. The special world is within the magic circle, the evil, oppressive world without. Inside, one can weep and cry, do things that are shameful, and still be accepted—in fact, doing things that are shameful can even be required as a sign of commitment to the group. Inside, one has the trust and confidence of all the members. No one will laugh at you as an outsider.

Magical groups bountifully display these characteristics in groups that are socially self-conscious, trusting and explicitly out to create a separate world. Witches literally draw a circle on the floor as the “boundary between the worlds.” Western Mysteries magicians walk three times around their circle and announce that the group is “contacted” onto magical forces that are not real upon other, more worldly planes. The archangels, spirits and “thought-forms” of magic are said to be tangible in the magical world, while in the ordinary world one might call them imaginary. Members address each other by different names and assume different identities, speak and hold themselves with greater dignity. Elaborate rituals signal the entry into and departure from the world that magic holds as real. For example, in witchcraft the priestess draws the circle in the air

above the chalked circle on the floor. She purifies salt and water with the words of a medieval grimoire, and sprinkles the mixture around the circle. She invokes spiritual beings to “guard our circle and witness our rites.” She carries incense to the four directional quarters. Then, she “opens” the circle and admits each member of the group, purifying them individually, and “closes” it again by redrawing the circle in the air above the chalk. This air-drawn circle is treated as a real boundary throughout the evening. To leave it—only if necessary, but the rites are long—the member “slashes” it in the air with his ritual knife, and “redraws” it when he returns.

These groups are also emotionally tightly knit and trusting. In part this is the direct result of the cost of betrayal. Those involved are often civil servants, lecturers, businessmen, and the like, who might find it embarrassing to be publicly identified. The continuing proof that members can be trusted automatically deepens the sense of intimacy. And the explicit openness allows members to talk about feelings and experiences they might find difficult to air in other contexts. In the discussion over a spell members give constructive advice, comment on the requester’s description and, as in Caryl’s case, frame the spell so that it suggests ways in which her behavior might change. Therapy, again, depends upon the external expression of some internal feeling, and the shared privacy encouraged by a secretive group allows the sharing to occur more readily than it might otherwise.

The magical group is therapeutic. Yet it neither defines itself as a therapy nor describes its members as sick. These effects arise out of making the private public. Public risk-taking is heightened by the protected intimacy of the secretive group; private risk-taking is the point of esoteric knowledge, where identification with an image means using public symbols to structure private feelings. Through the two, magicians become happier, healthier people. Their magic produces few rabbits from any hat, but the secrecy erected to protect them from the truth of this instrumental failure leads to personally more satisfying success. Magicians are not so much intellectually deluded as emotionally more fulfilled through the practice of their art, and secrecy is central to their satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Secrecy is commonly discussed in terms of the way that the holding of secrets affects other people, or the way that holding secrets or

being secretive sets one group off from another and changes the nature of the social whole. These are the grand themes of the major contributors to the subject; Simmel (1950), Shils (1956), Bok (1982), Bellman (1984) and even Kermode (1979). Far less attention has been paid to the role secrecy plays for the individual who holds the secret (but see Herdt 1981). This is a grave error. Modern magic would seem like an ideal case study in which to explore secrecy, because it combines so many features thought central to it: magical groups are secret societies that withhold information from outsiders and claim that secrecy is essential to effectuate their goals. And the most compelling aspect of secrecy in modern magic is the impact it can have upon an individual's experience.

Secrecy is about control. It is about the individual possession of knowledge that others do not have, and from the psychological consequences of this privileged possession follow its effects in magical practice. Secrecy elevates the value of the thing concealed. That which is hidden grows desirable and seems powerful, and magicians exploit this tendency to give their magic significance. They can use secrecy to conceal their magic from scepticism and to give themselves a context in which their own scepticism may be muted. In other words, secrecy alters the attitudes of both insider and outsider toward the thing concealed, and in magic insiders seem to use this mechanism to bolster their ill-supported faith in magic's value.

Not only may secrecy alter one's attitudes toward the thing concealed, but the experience itself of concealing may be deeply educational. Bok points to the individualizing function of secrecy as central to the young child's development. Learning that it is possible to keep a secret teaches a child that he is an independent self who has some control over his world. His parents are not, after all, omnipotent thought readers. Secrecy functions "as a safety value that allows partial control over privacy and human contact" (Bok 1982:37). To hold a secret is to assert your control over your private life, to choose what it is that you make public. It is this that makes secrecy therapeutic.

Magicians use secrecy to develop a sense of control over their lives in at least two ways. Esoteric knowledge allows them to identify and label irrational fears and other emotions so that these emotions can be redescribed. One experiences death, labels it symbolically as the horned god, and redescribes it as life. The redescription of the label, and the labeling process itself, may give the magician a sense of per-

sonal volition within the sometimes terrifying turmoil of his inner life. Symbolic imagery creates secrets about the self through identifying feelings that the magician may not want to acknowledge, and yet through the symbolism those feelings can be negotiated without making the acknowledgment explicit to the outside world or even to himself. At the same time the shared privacy of the secretive group also enables the making public of the private—the externalization—that therapy demands. The feeling is no longer so terrifying once its burden has been shared. Through the secrecy, through making a private world public without risking the privacy, the magician may gain a sense of control over what he may experience as inner chaos.

Secrecy is exciting. Little children are thrilled when they first learn that they have power through the secret; adolescents form secret societies for the sake of having them; magicians revel in their activities of which few outsiders know. The excitement seems a central feature of secrecy, one not well addressed by such as Simmel, and its explanation would seem to lie in the control and negotiation of the private selfhood that secrecy allows. Control over your inner life, which is structured in a manner that you could lose it—you could share the secret—is exhilarating, particularly to those struggling for a sense of self. Secrecy offers such control. It is central to magic because magic is about control, and particularly, about controlling the inner world as a means of or in lieu of controlling the one without. And the magical control of the inner psychological reality becomes the more potent with secrecy's aid. Secrecy fills an essential function in diverting disconfirmation, but the appeal of magic lies in the way it makes its members feel, and its positive psychological help can be considerable. Insofar as magic fails, secrecy masks the failure and perpetuates the illusion. Insofar as magic seems effective, therapeutic secrecy initiates its potency.

NOTES

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¹This figure is an educated guess, based on the number of people I met, the number of those who had taken home study courses in magic (about a third), and the number who had enrolled in such mail order courses in Britain (about 2,000, but many of those were international or inactive; I would have thought that some 600–700 were active British students).

²Standard sociological texts explain recruitment to cults, sects and marginal groups as the consequence of relative deprivation of some sort. Beckford (1975) has an excellent discussion of these theories; they include Troelstch (1912), Niebuhr (1929), Glock (1964), Runciman (1966), Demerath and Hammond (1969). Simple economic deprivation, however, will not explain the practice of these middle-class magicians, nor will simple personality disorder theories (as in Lofland and Stark 1965). More recent discussions of marginal religions, by Beckford (1975) and Barker (1984), stress a combination of risk-free problem solving, developing friendships within the group, and creative satisfaction as the factors that propel people toward committed membership in such groups, an account that seems more apposite to modern magic.

³The specific book in question was Murray's *Witchcult in Western Europe* (1921). Other influential books included Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1922), Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), Evans-Wentz' *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911) and, later Graves' *The White Goddess* (1968; first edition 1948).

⁴Much of the work on secrecy—for example, much of Simmel (1950) and most of the articles in Tefft's (1980) collection, as well as Shils' (1956) analysis—focus on government concealment of information. Thus while there is a large literature, little of it is directly relevant.

⁵Many people believe or half-believe in astrology, tarot and the like. The belief that your own theatrical gestures can produce physical consequences is far less common and far more likely to be socially unsupported.

⁶The debate on the cross-cultural study of thought began substantively with Spencer (1887), Boas (1911), and Lévy-Bruhl (1910) and continued with Vygotsky (1978), Whorf (1965), Lévi-Strauss (1966), Berlin and Kay (1969), Piaget (1966, 1972), Cole and Scribner (1974), Goody (1976), and Hallpike (1979), as well as such contributions that have been made through the rationality debate in Wilson (1970), Horton and Finnegan (1973), and Hollis and Lukes (1982).

⁷There have been a number of discussions of the therapeutic value of different forms of narrative. Among the many contributors, Singer (1974), Singer and Pole (1978), Masters and Houston (1972), Noll (1985) focus on daydreaming and mental imagery; Winnicott (1971) and Axline (1969) consider play; Bettelheim (1977) discusses the "importance of fairy tales." The area is fascinating and complex, but too many-sided to be discussed within this short space.

⁸In fact she said that it was one book in particular that made her fertile: *The Descent to the Goddess*, by a Jungian analyst (Perera 1981).

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