

A RE-THINKING OF SECRET SOCIETY AND ITS ROLE IN PRE-MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In the pre-modern era, societies functioned and depended on the joint efforts and contributions of every member of the society. This brought about the formation of some groups that championed one project or the other within the society and beyond. These groups were formed either by people of the same age, the same ideology, the same target, or the same purpose with the mind of making positive impacts in the society. It is based on this note that the concept of secret society was born. In examining this concept, this work will be done using phenomenological method of study and the theory of functionalism. This is because the writer will make every effort to be neutral in finding out the functions of secret society before this modern time that ushered in a change in its formative perspective. The paper therefore finds that the present day idea of secret society is not what it was in the pre-modern society and has to be re-addressed. It also observes that secret societies played prominent role in the pre-modern society which was commendable. Hence, the paper concludes that secret society as perceived and understood in the present time is a machinery for evil deeds and practices which are against its formative purpose and, therefore calls on all secret societies to re-evaluate their purposes and benefits to human societies which will either give credence to their continuing or being perceived from the same bad light.

Keywords: Re-thinking, Secret Society, Role, Pre-Modern, African Society

Introduction

Secret society is one of the institutions of the society; hence, the Nigerian society is seen as one of the societies that have its record and appearance. This is so because of its role and importance. It will be interested to note that the concept of secret society has always been interchangeable used as secret cult, which at sight has no specific distinction as per differentiating them, but in a careful and intellectual consultation, it gives a little difference. Secret society is viewed by some scholars as a club that unites people together, while using the nomenclature cult portends some atom of religious inclination. It is imperative to posit that the terms as used in the present day Nigeria connote the same thing which is not supposed to be so.

A closer examination, however, shows that beyond societal nuisance, secret societies fulfill economic, social, and political functions similar to those of associations based primarily on age and sex. For example, Robert Lowie was fascinated by functional resemblances between West African secret societies and certain men's organizations among the Plain Indians in America. This led him to suspect that the state might be found latent in solidarities or associations. The emergence of a splinter group of secret societies in the early 1970s, marked the beginning of a new orientation for future generations, as is being witnessed today. It also heralded the beginning of the proliferation of secret cult associations, not only in higher institutions of learning, but also in the society. At present, there are many secret societies all over the country, its members among other atrocities, kill, maim, rape, rob, steal, harass, intimidate, oppress, fight, kidnap, vandalize, repress, riot, assault, destroy and poison - both innocent and rival members. In short they symbolize a myriad of vices. Against this background, this work is intended to have a re- thinking of secret society and its role in pre-modern African society.

Theoretical framework

This work uses the theory of structural functionalism. This theory is a framework for building theory that sees the society as complex system whose part work together to promote solidarity and stability. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (Macionis, 2011). Furthermore, structural functionalism is a sociological theory that originally attempted to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual biological needs. Later, it came to focus on the ways social institutions meet social needs. The proponent scholars of this theory are Emile Durkheim, August Comte, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parson. In the opinion of DeRosso

(2003), structural functionalism looks at society through a macro level orientation by focusing on the social structures and institutions that make up the society, noting their respective and peculiar roles that shape the society. More so, the thrust of functionalism theory is that the society consists of several institutions performing specific functions for overall growth of the society. In the opinion of Hoult (1969), the central concern of structural functionalism is a continuation of the Durkheimian task of explaining the stability and internal cohesion of societies that are necessary to ensure their continued existence overtime. Many functionalists argue that social institutions are functionally integrated to form a stable system and that a change in one institution will precipitate a change in other institution. It is in this regards that societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms with their various parts working together to maintain and reproduce them. Hoult goes further to posit that the various parts of society are assumed to work in unconscious, quasi- automatic fashion towards the maintenance of the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this state and are effectively deemed to have a life of their own. These components are then primarily analyzed in terms of the function they play. In other words, to understand a component of society, one can ask the question of the function of the institution. Hence, a function in this regards is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part.

Understanding secret society

A secret society is a club or an organization whose activities, events, inner functioning, or membership are concealed from non-members. The society may or may not attempt to conceal its existence. The term usually excludes covert groups, such as intelligence agencies or guerrilla warfare insurgencies that hide their activities and memberships but maintain a public presence. It is an organization that does not allow people who are not members to find out about its activities and customs. The exact qualifications for labeling a group a secret society are disputed, but definitions generally rely on the degree to which the organization insists on secrecy, and might involve the retention and transmission of secret knowledge, the denial about membership or knowledge of the group, the creation of personal bonds between members of the organization, and the use of secret rites or rituals which solidify members of the group.

According to Schurtz (1960), secret societies anthropologically and historically, have been deeply interlinked with the concept of the Mannerbund, the all-male warrior-band or warrior-society of pre-modern cultures. A purported family tree of secret societies has been proposed, although it may not be comprehensive. Spence (2019) defines a secret society as an organization that is exclusive, claims to own special secrets and shows a strong inclination to favour its members. He goes further to say that the group's existence is usually not kept secret, but some beliefs or practices are concealed from the public and require an oath of secrecy to learn. The group promises superior status or knowledge to members and the group's membership is in some way restrictive, such as by race, sex, religious affiliation, or invitation only. Barrett has used alternative terms to define what qualifies a secret society. He defined it as any group that possesses the following characteristics (a) has carefully graded and progressed teachings, (b) teachings are available only to selected individuals, (c) teachings lead to hidden and unique truths and (d) truths bring personal benefits beyond the reach and even the understanding of the uninitiated. He goes on to say that a further characteristic common to most of them is the practice of rituals which non-members are not permitted to observe or to know its existence.

A conceptual view of theories of the origin and function of secret society According to George (2005), many suggestions concerning the basic motivation for secret societies have been proposed of which one of those theories emphasizes the sexual element. In this view, secret societies constitute an attempt by men to establish a life independent of women, a rejection of feminine power and influence. Secret societies that are not exclusively male are reluctant concessions or counter-reactions to this motive. Other theories on the all-male composition of so many groups include suggestions of homoerotic attraction and the observation that many male animals cultivate activities limited to their gender. This pattern of male bonding can be as casual as the camaraderie incidental to the hunt or the neighborhood bar, or it can take the highly organized form of the secret society. Patterns of gender grouping in work, war, and play also may have their roots in male bonding and thus contribute to the strength of the secret society phenomenon.

The second analysis emphasizes the social and political functions of the societies. On the one hand, the secret society may be consonant with the existing social and political order and may reinforce that order through the fear it inspires. On the other hand, a secret society may be an agency for change, rebellion, or reform. In this situation, it will be opposed by the dominant forces in society, and its need for secrecy will be greater. Its

membership and its very existence will be kept secret if possible. Certainly, such groups will be labeled criminal by the dominant society, but they may also be understood as supporting an alternative political or social structure. Going further in his assertion, he maintains that in many historical situations, the phenomenon of secrecy has given rise to the attitude that every secret organization is a conspiracy against the welfare of the rest of humankind. The rest of society, if sufficiently distressed, might blame all social ills on a real or even a supposed secret society. It is unlikely that many secret societies have been as powerful or as conspiratorial as public opinion has on occasion conceived them to be. Especially destructive when used as a basis for discrimination and repression is the supposition that subversive secret societies exist among minority populations. The threat, real or imagined, that a secret society represents to the total community is an important factor in the social dynamics of such a group.

A third theory about secret societies stresses more positive social functions. It is argued that secret societies foster a person's sense of identity. In tribal societies they afford some people a sense of privacy in the midst of proximity, and in modern societies, they give the individual a special status in the midst of pressures for conformity. It is clear that in some societies, the secret group is a primary means of education and socialization. Insofar as the desire to improve oneself or to achieve greater power and status can be considered a beneficial motivation in human life, the secret society has had the positive function of offering people a way to advance their programs of social and financial success. Such aspiration to greater significance and fuller existence brings us to the religious motivations and functions of the secret society. There is a style of being religious in which the reason and goal of religious activities is the improvement of one's strength or ontological status. By performing certain ritual, ascetic, or ethical acts, or by thinking certain thoughts and controlling the mind, this kind of religion seeks to promote one's career in this or another world. In light of this kind of religious motivation, the secret society is a major arena for structuring, formulating, and traveling a path toward that goal.

The goal, as well as the path, varies from society to society, of course. Among tribal peoples the attempt to progress beyond the stage of adulthood achieved through puberty initiation often takes the form of more and more rigorous physical ordeals. It may involve learning magical techniques. The goal may be conceived in terms of transcending the ordinary human condition, especially by identifying with the dead and

the spirits who occupy the next higher rung in the hierarchy of being and power. Many masked dancing rites performed by secret societies are understood to represent the return of the dead to the world of the living. Some of the most shocking practices of secret societies for example, the eating of raw human flesh in a secret society of the Kwakiutl Indians of North America can be seen as a way of demonstrating the transhuman (and certainly nonhuman) nature of the life of a secret society member (members of this kind of secret society think of themselves as being something else, superior to humans; the cannibalism demonstrates that they are no longer human because they do something no normal human being would do). The right of secret society members to frighten or steal also derives from this supposed superior existence.

The higher status and power bestowed through the secret society might be conceived as benefiting the fertility of the earth, improving one's health or wealth, giving greater power to the tribe, or enhancing one's interior life. When the secret society is seen as a school for attaining ecstatic states or mystical knowledge, its similarity to monasticism becomes apparent. The element of secrecy is not so prominent in the conventional monastic community; hence the connection between monasticism and secret societies has seldom been recognized. Nevertheless, monastic communities do cultivate religious advancement and identify with a stage of humanity beyond the ordinary, as do many secret societies.

There is nothing inevitably good or bad in the form of the secret society itself. It is a powerful human phenomenon that can be turned to purposes either beneficial or harmful to its members, the larger society, or both. Of course, many of the factors listed here can be operative at the same time; thus they can strengthen the attraction of a secret society for its members by fulfilling many expectations, both religious and secular.

Distinguishing Features of secret society

Still speaking on secret society, George (2005) opines that secret society is characterized first by its being a voluntary or selective group within a natural community. He noted that although there may be times and places in which nearly every one of a certain gender, age, and status may be included; there is always the theoretical possibility that some otherwise eligible person will not be elected to join the group. The possibility of exclusion is a powerful factor in the socio-psychological dynamics of a secret society. The pool of potential members is also restricted, usually to men beyond puberty. There are few secret societies that include women or

children, although secret societies restricted to women are known, such as the Bundu society among the Mende people of Sierra Leone.

Obviously, another primary characteristic of the secret society is secrecy. It is not characteristic of secret societies, however, that their very existence or their membership is secret. Instead, it is the knowledge of their activities, rituals, texts, doctrines, myths and offices that are restricted to the group. Some argued that such secrets are new, dangerous or deep matters that demand the protection of secrecy. In this light, it might be said that the secret society is humankind's nursery for new insights and new political or social structures. No matter what the depth or the power of the secrets, however, there is always a measure of artificiality in keeping them secret. Furthermore, at least in some cases, the secrets so carefully guarded are actually trivial and assume importance only because they are shared secrets. At the base of secrecy lies not so much a set of hidden facts as a group of experiences, any group of people that works or performs rites together shares memories that others do not have.

The third major feature of secret society is initiation. There is a logical necessity that entrance into the group be clearly marked so that the group and the individual can be sure exactly who is and who is not included. Many of the initiatory practices can be understood as means by which the simple fact of inclusion in the group is emphasized and reinforced. There are other dimensions to these often elaborate initiation practices. However, in their use of ordeals and trials, the symbolism of death and rebirth can become apparent. One does not merely join an organization, but undergoes a transforming experience and achieves deeper contact with the meaning of life and the world.

Closely related to the phenomenon of initiation is the hierarchical structure of the secret society. Often the society seems to be an outgrowth and extension of puberty-initiation practices. As such, it is based on the notion that human life does not merely grow into maturity, but that a distinctive, new kind of existence or ontology must be attained in the transformation from child to adult. Likewise then, it is reasonable to recognize still higher stages of life with other initiations. The secret society itself represents such a stage beyond the status of simple adulthood and within the secret society there may be other stages or levels of advancement. Role differentiation within the society is from this perspective, not merely a differentiation in function, but a manifestation of degrees of metaphysical weight or height.

Finally, secret society regularly posits a myth concerning its origins that is central to its self-consciousness. Such myths are probably not historically accurate, but should be read as indications of the concerns or mindset of the group. Many primitive secret societies, for example, tell a story in which their secrets were derived from a woman, but subsequently kept from other women. This does not necessarily mean that the male secret society was a device by which the men in a previous age wrested control from the women in a matriarchal society. It does, however, indicate a tension in the men's psychology: they are keeping from the women something in which the women also have or have had a stake.

Examples of secret society in Nigeria today

The list of secret societies in Nigeria today is endless. This is because of the gains gotten from being a member be it secular or sacred secret society. According to an internet source (<https://www.legit.ng/1087120-list-secret-societies-nigeria.html>), Chidirim noted some secret societies in Nigeria which among others are:

- (a) **Freemasonry:** First Great Masonic Lodge was created in 1717. The Masonic Lodge is the basic unit of Freemasonry organization. The lodge is created for regular meetings. These meetings can have a ceremonial part to confer a Masonic Degree of one of the presented members. One of the distinctive characteristics of Freemasonry is their ceremonies and rituals. It's known that secret societies have their rituals and are distinctive from one another, but Freemasons pursue special treats in the rituals. The rituals should follow main principles of Freemasonry, like morality, dignity, and freedom. Grand Lodges can accept any member as long as he/she is free and a person of a good nature. Many famous people in Nigeria, like singers, actors and politicians are part of Freemasonry. According to the rules of Freemasonry, a member can reveal that he or she is a participant of Freemasonry Lodge, but cannot reveal the identity of another member.

- (b) **Hashshashin:** The Hashshashin is in the secret society list as they had a tremendous power during the middle-age. It is a mysterious organization of Muslim assassins that conducted their deeds in the 13th century. This member of secret societies in Africa was formed out from Shia Muslims; they banded together to create a group of assassins who supposed to be protectors of the Utopian Shi'ite state. Their numbers were small, and could use only guerrilla tactics to protect their community. They were assassins of extra class and supposedly responsible for killing kings and queens. Some conspire theorists suppose that these famous assassins are

still alive and are amongst of secret societies in Nigeria. They still use their secret tactics to prepare most notorious assassinations in the history. They have a purpose, they still desire to create Shia Muslim Utopian world. Assassins take only the best killers into their ranks and provide additional training to the members.

- (c) **Ordo Templi Orientis:** The Ordo Templi Orientis has *Mysteria Mystica Maxima* as the main manifest of the secret society. Their occult practices came to the world in the early twelfth century. This group is actively relying on the practices of mysticism and occultism. If a member has a desire to move on the career ladder within the borders of the organization, he or she should acquire a certain level of mystic knowledge. Famous esoteric - Aleister Crowley composed the core philosophy and lore of the group. After his death, the order started to experience serious problems with getting new members. The twenty-first century provided new ideas to the old occultist groups in the secret society list. The members of Ordo Templi Orientis are present in many countries of the world, like the USA, the UK, France, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa and others.
- (d) **Bilderberg Group:** This group has its members as famous bankers and high society representatives from all around the world. They provide their operations under the same veil of mystery as secret cults. This participant of the list of secret societies in Nigeria started in 1954. Every year the group sends invitations to world leaders, media moguls, captains of industry all around the globe. The core philosophy of the group is resisting to Americanism that was spreading in the world after WWII. The Bilderberg group is suspicious due to several reasons: They never allowed press to be present during the conference. They never announce the topics of discussions. They never provided any information about purposes of their group, still all their meetings are highly secured from eyes of everyone. They are not open to the public and the places of the meeting can be patrolled by flying jets.
- (e) **The Knights Templar:** The full name of this secret society in Nigeria is "The United Religious, Military and Masonic Orders of the Temple and St. John of Jerusalem, Palestine, Rhodes, and Malta". The members of this secret society do not claim the direct legacy from the Templars - one of the most powerful orders in middle-age. They claim to be an offspring of Masonic Groups. The Knights Templar clearly follows the ideas of the historical Knights' order. The members of the organization are participants of the high hierarchy of the society, like politicians, business

owners, and media people. The Knights Templar also takes symbolism legacy from the Freemasonry group. As they claim, they follow the same philosophy in the ideas of getting new members and symbolic rituals. It means that if a person has a desire to be a part of The Knights Templar, he or she should be free and has a good nature.

- (f) **The Order of the Golden Dawn:** This group in Nigeria was created by Dr. William Woodman, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, and William Wynn Westcott. The three persons were participants of Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia and Freemason order. The core of the philosophy for The Order of The Golden Dawn is taken from Renaissance writing, Freemasons, Ancient Egypt tales, Christian mysticism, Hermeticism, and Qabalah. The main document of the group is known as the Cipher Document. They follow the ideas of morality, but they have a belief that this morality can be achieved through the mystic rituals. Nevertheless, they highly protect these rituals from the eyes of people. Therefore, their vision of morality can be different from other secret societies in Nigeria. It is unknown what the real price is for a person who desires to enter The Order of The Golden Dawn.
- (g) **The Black Hand:** This was created in Serbia in 1912. They followed the ideas of Narodna Adbrona, the organization that had a desire to create a United Slavic Federation across the whole world. In the very beginning of their history, they fought against Austria-Hungary. They also had strong politic connections with Russian Empire and were financed by it. The actions of the Black Hand led to the WWI and supposedly WWII and Cold War. These cases make The Black Hand one of the most influential secret organizations during the twentieth century. Some conspiracy theorists claim that the offspring of the Black Hand has influence across the world. They follow the ideas of creating the Pan-Slavic world. Nevertheless, they do not have much response from other nations as their claims to the world can be distinguished as the same that had the Nazi Germany during the WWII.
- (h) **The Knights of the Golden Circle:** The Knights of The Golden Circle started as one of the religious secret societies during the American Civil War. Their main principles at the very beginning of creation were to make the slave trade flourish again. Their main efforts at the very beginning were concentrated on the annexation of the Mexico and other parts of Central America. Nevertheless, with the starting of the American Civil War, they switched their direction from ideas of colonialism to the support of Confederates. The group did not follow the ideas of mysticism,

like other members of the list of the secret organizations in Nigeria. They preferred strict ways in taking their goals, like creating bandit groups to take them seriously.

- (i) **Rosicrucians:** The order of Rosicrucian was believed to be the idea of German Protestants in the 1600s. Their main idea was derived from Christian ideas and believes in the one true nation that comes from God. It's believed that Nazi Germany officers also followed the ideas of this order. Even Adolf Hitler was a potential member. He believed that one true nation of God to rule the world was the German nation. The idea of the members of this secret society in Nigeria still lives, despite the Nazi context of the cult. They believe that only one nation is to be ruled over the world, the Nation that has been chosen by God.
- (j) **The Illuminati:** This society gets the golden prize in the list of secret societies in Nigeria. It seems to be the most influential and the most powerful secret society in the world. If you have a desire to become a member of Illuminati, then you have to pay the blood price. Many people are ready to pay this price for the fame, glory, and money that are offered. Many influential people in Nigeria are members of Illuminati. All Illuminati have only one idea - is to create a united world that can follow the orders of Illuminati. They do not have any morality in taking the ways of achieving their supreme goal of taking the world.
- (k) **The Ogboni society:** This should not be confused with the Reformed Ogboni Society, which was created by Christians in the 1900s. Sources indicate that information about the Ogboni society is limited. Several sources also indicate that they are referred to as a "secret" society or as a "cult". In a chapter on organized crime in Nigeria in the book entitled *Traditional Organized Crime in the Modern World*, Obi N. I. Ebbe catalogues the Ogboni secret society as an organized crime organization, sometimes burdened by negative rumours, half-truths, and infamy.
- (l) **Ekpe:** This is a masquerade cult with members who are typically well-respected agents of wealth distribution in the community and other reputable and outstanding personalities. Being a member of the group is a self-enriching quest for members and their families. To give back to the community, they sponsor feasts and throw parties for the sole merriment of the people. The Ekpe from Cross River and Akwa Ibom have migrated to other parts of Africa and some foreign countries like Cameroon and Brazil.

- (m) **Okonko** This is an Igbo equivalent of Ekpe, the Okonko society is only open to a certain calibre of men in the community, including titled elders, kingmakers and law enforcers of no questionable character. Its festivals are strictly meant for members, and only initiates can follow Okonko processions at ceremonies. Initiation holds in three stages and lasts for seven days. Palm leaves to the group hold great significance. For instance, when held between lips, it shows silence and divinity

Secret society and the pre-modern African society

The Secret societies have played significant roles in the economic, political and social aspects of different communities in Africa. Their ideologies and way of life sometimes help redefine how an entire community was administered. Members of these groups were influential and powerful. This institution played roles in the socio-political and religious affairs of the Yoruba people. They aimed at striking a healthy balance in the aspects of fairness and justice. In pre-colonial history, the judiciary of Yoruba kingdom was under the tutelage of the Ogboni members. But this later changed with modernity and translated into dubious tendencies, attaching a derogatory tag to the group. It still functions in few remote kingdoms and was popular in Nigerian Yoruba and Igbo-speaking communities, Togo and Republic of Benin.

It is clear that in some societies, the secret group was a primary means of education and socialization. In as much as the desire to improve oneself or to achieve greater power and status can be considered a beneficial motivation in human life, the secret society has had the positive function of offering people a way to advance their programs of social and financial success. The higher status and power bestowed through the secret society might be conceived as benefiting the fertility of the earth, improving one's health or wealth, giving greater power to the tribe, or enhancing one's interior life. When the secret society is seen as a school for attaining ecstatic states or mystical knowledge, its similarity to monasticism becomes apparent.

It is pertinent to conclude here as this paper has noted before that, there is nothing inevitably good or bad in the form of the secret society itself. It is a powerful human phenomenon that can be turned to purposes either beneficial or harmful to its members, the larger society, or both. Of course, many of the factors listed here can be operative at the same time; thus they can strengthen the attraction of a secret society for its members by

fulfilling many expectations, both religious and secular. These and more are reasons for the continued existence of secret society in Nigeria today.

Conclusion

Secret society in our normal understanding has been a wrong organization which is labeled as a menace and evil in the society. The study has help in repositioning and correcting such notion. This work has been a concerted effort in understanding secret society in Nigeria on which the paper has made an attempt to trace it from the origin, highlighted its features, pointed out some secret societies in Nigeria and made some clarity and explanations on them. The paper therefore summarizes that some secret societies are not evil organization because they have helped in bettering the lives of the masses and bringing about a better government which has invariably brought a flourishing economy. It is based on this notion that it posits that, the goodness and badness of a secret society is dependent on the interest and mind set of the particular society.

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