Inequality based on privileged knowledge is an old topic in social analysis. It figures prominently, for example, in early works such as Condorcet’s study of human progress. Condorcet argues that obstacles to progress arise when society is divided into two categories: ‘the one jealously hiding what it boasts of knowing, the other receiving with respect whatever is condescendingly revealed to it’ [1955 (1795):17].

Condorcet’s characterization aptly fits the hierarchical nature of a secret association in which social divisions both within the association and in its relationship to outsiders are based on claims to privileged knowledge. The secret is essentially a boundary mechanism separating members of different social categories or groups. Therefore, the content of the secret is often insignificant compared to the rights, obligations, and privileges generated by the fact of secrecy. Mendelson describes this phenomenon succinctly:

What matters, then, is not so much the particular thing that is kept secret as the fact that some kind of secret is created, and that it pertains to the prestige and privileges of a sex or age group within the larger society. The secret here is a separating or distancing mechanism between a leading and a subordinate group . . . (1967:22).

In Kpelle society secrecy separates elders from youth. It supports the elders’ political and economic control of the youth. Most studies of West African secret societies, however, have analyzed them as educational institutions (e.g., Watkins 1943) or as cross-cutting institutions which complement secular leadership (e.g., Fulton 1972:1230–1231; Little 1966:69–70) and harmonize lineage rivalries (Horton 1971:101–103). This latter notion of cross-cutting functions represents a ‘horizontal’ approach: examining the complementary relationship between relatively equal social units. This essay, in contrast, focuses on the generally neglected ‘vertical’ dimension: the use of secret associations by the elders of the ruling lineage in a chiefdom to control the lower-ranked members of the community, especially the youth (cf. Berthoud 1969–70:47ff; La Fontaine 1977).

ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The Kpelle, numbering about 200,000, is the largest of approximately 16 tribal groups in Liberia. A smaller number of Kpelle people live in Guinea where they are called the Guerzé. Traditionally, the Kpelle are subsistence rice farmers, practicing slash-and-burn agriculture in the tropical rainforest. The rice staple is supplemented by manioc (cassava) and various fruits and vegetables. Meat is obtained by raising small
livestock such as chickens and goats, and by hunting. River fish provide additional protein, and ocean fish transported from the coast can be bought at local weekly markets. Some people engage in cash cropping, viz., cocoa, rubber, coffee, palm nuts, sugarcane, oranges, grapefruit, etc. Modernization in Liberia has also attracted many Kpelle to wage labor, especially at rubber plantations and iron ore concessions.

Political authority in Kpelle chiefdoms is divided between the public political offices and the ritual offices of the secret societies, both usually controlled by a ruling ‘landowning’ lineage which traces its ancestry to the founding settlers of an area. While this leading lineage has special rights and privileges over the land, the tribal community has rights to use the land.\(^2\) The boundaries of paramount chiefdoms, the largest tribal territorial and political units, were drawn for administrative purposes in the early decades of the twentieth century by the national government. This government was composed mainly of descendants of nineteenth century black settlers from the United States.\(^3\) Although the language spoken in approximately a dozen chiefdoms is predominantly Kpelle (the national language is English), the populations are quite heterogeneous, representing older alliances and affiliations among highly mobile groups of different tribal origin. The oral history of the Kpelle chiefdom where I worked indicates an active intermingling during the last half of the nineteenth century of groups from both the Gola and Kpelle tribes, in addition to smaller numbers of people from other tribes. They formed alliances to secure support and protection during periods of warfare and economic competition. (This history is typical of other tribal territories in Liberia which later became rigidly demarcated as paramount chiefdoms by the national government; see d’Azevedo 1971.) While patrilocal descent and patrilocal residence are the ideal among the Kpelle and surrounding tribes, the need for alliances gave rise to a bilateral emphasis in actual cases, especially among lower status families (d’Azevedo 1962a).

Kpelle society provides an ideal case study of secrecy because the institutionalization of secrecy is a paramount and pervasive feature of social life. Along with other tribes of Liberia and Sierra Leone the Kpelle political system has been defined by the characteristic trait of numerous secret associations (Eisenstadt 1959:213). The two most important secret associations found among the tribes of this region are the Poro and Sande societies into which all men and women, respectively, are initiated. Because of the importance of these secret associations, especially the men’s Poro, the tribes of this region are sometimes known as ‘the Poro tribes’ or ‘Poro cluster’, including ‘the Lokko, Temne, Kono, Mende, Bullom, Krim, and Sherbro of Sierra Leone and, in Liberia, the Gola, Vai, De, Kpelle, Kissi (Gissi), Gbande, Belle, Loma (Toma), Mano, and Gio’ (d’Azevedo 1959:68). Since the Kpelle share many historical and socio-cultural similarities with the other ‘Poro tribes’, the following analysis of secrecy in Kpelle society is directly relevant to all the tribes in this cluster. The analysis will proceed by supplementing the data and conclusions from my own fieldwork and that of others who studied the Kpelle with documentation of parallel social and cultural processes found in other ‘Poro tribes’.

SECRET SOCIETIES

With such a strong emphasis on secrecy in formal associations and everyday activity, Kpelle social life has a special ambience which, as a fieldworker, I came to sense as a
perplexing mixture of public actions managing surface appearances and hidden actions conducting the important transactions of the society. Simmel portrays the role of secrecy in a similar way: ‘The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former’ (1950:330). The second world, however, also has its levels. So a more accurate analogy for Kpelle secrecy may be that of Chinese boxes, an image used by Barth to characterize the structure of Baktaman knowledge: ‘it is constructed with multiple levels, and each level is organized so as to obscure the next level’ (1975:218).4

The hidden dimension of Kpelle social life is institutionalized into various secret societies. Each secret society controls a domain of important secret knowledge. In analyzing the culturally similar Mende secret societies of Sierra Leone, Kenneth Little notes likewise that ‘particular fields of the cultural life and their regulation tend to fall within the exclusive province of specific societies’ (1949:199). These societies are interest groups (cf. Simmel 1950:363), protecting their exclusive rights to particular knowledge by the socially sanctioned barrier of secrecy.

This section will outline the special knowledge domains of the most important secret societies, while the following sections will treat the elders’ ownership of knowledge and the use of this knowledge property to serve their political and economic interests. It is important to note that no secrets of these societies will be revealed. Only what Kpelle non-members are allowed to know will be mentioned (e.g., the ‘snake society’ has secrets about curing snake bites). This will not hinder the analysis because the content of the secrets is not as significant as the social organization generated by the fact of secrecy.

The important secrets of the men’s Poro society (the Kpelle term for the Poro society is pòlo) pertain to the land of a chieftom.6 Land has a sacred quality and the Poro society is its guardian. Offenses against the land, such as certain kinds of accidental death, are adjudicated by the Poro society, often in secret meetings outside the village in the ‘sacred grove’ of the Poro.7 Sometimes yamù, the mysterious ‘sacred being’ of the Poro (‘bush devil’ in Liberian English), enters a village to make proclamations about various community problems. When yamù comes into a village, all non-initiates must hide in their houses with the doors and shutters closed. Though not allowed to see yamù, non-initiates may hear him. Special sounds, like flutes and whistles, are produced by yamù and his wives, while shouting, singing, and horn music arise from the entourage of Poro members following him. Yamù also speaks an esoteric language which a special interpreter translates so everyone in the houses can understand the message. He makes important political decrees to the community as well as quite mundane ones. One evening the yamù in my area decreed through his interpreter that water could be drawn from a nearby stream only by dipping a cup into the stream and pouring it into a bucket. The stream had been low because of the dry season, and people collecting water with buckets were making the water cloudy and creating a community health hazard.

The women’s Sande society (sàne) lacks the power of the Poro but alternates as ritual custodian of the land with the Poro. When the land is ritually turned over to the women, yamù is said to leave the area for the deep forest where it remains until the land is returned to the men. Women’s ritual activities predominate in the community and their ritual guardianship over the land is reflected in such expressions as noii kaa ne ni yée ni yá (‘the land is in the hands of the women’ or ‘the land belongs to the
women'). However, the men's Poro society is not completely inactive during this time: only its ritual activities are subdued. The men still meet in the Poro 'sacred grove' to make the important decisions affecting the community. The dominance of the men and the Poro is not diminished by turning over the ritual activities to the women. Nevertheless, men fear the potentially harmful power of women's secrets. Anecdotes tell of men who died for infringing on Sande society rules, e.g., walking into the Sande 'sacred grove'. And men sometimes mention a fear of women's poisoning skills which they believe are learned in the Sande society.

Both Poro and Sande societies have long initiation periods. According to the cultural ideal these periods are four and three years respectively, but have been considerably shortened in recent years. Children attending government schools often join the society during a school vacation and consequently only spend two or three months in 'bush school.' While in 'bush school' the initiates have little or no personal contact with nearby villages or the opposite sex. When first initiated, they are said to be 'eaten by the bush devil', the boys by gamû and the girls by ɔfelɛ, the Sande counterpart to gamû, sometimes referred to as his sister. The 'bush schools' are held in alternating periods so that all the female initiates will be gone from the villages when the women control the land, and all the male initiates when the men are in control. During these periods they live in special clearings in the forest where they are taught some Poro or Sande secrets and some skills associated with their sex roles. 'Bush schools' are often large, sometimes containing several hundred initiates at a time.

While the Poro and Sande societies are the most relevant to this essay, some of the important subsidiary secret societies will be described briefly. They exemplify the Kpelle ethos that whenever there is an important cultural skill, it is usually appropriated and controlled by a secret society. The 'horn society' (mëla-sàle) has the knowledge and skill to control the evil activities of witchcraft. Members of 'horn society' also have the important function of standing guard at the entrance of the Sande 'grove' to protect the girls from witches or intruders. The 'spirit society' (mblìŋ-sàle) knows how to kill or drive away the departed spirit (mblìŋ) of a dead person who is causing trouble. The 'snake society' (kali-sàle) performs the important function of healing snake bite victims. The 'thunder society' (גבò) is believed to control thunder, lightning, and rain (Welmers 1949:228–229).

Secret societies have special areas where members meet to transact their affairs. The 'snake society' usually holds meetings inside a special house in the village. Other societies, such as the 'spirit,' 'horn,' Poro and Sande societies have sacred areas near the village in the surrounding forest. A secret area is marked off by a 'fence' (kàaŋ) at the entrance. Fences may be constructed of wooden poles, plantain stalks, piassava branches, or large mats made from plant fibers (see Harley 1941:13 and Welmers 1949:238). The fences of the Poro and Sande societies are the largest, about eight to ten feet high and fifty to one hundred feet long. During the initiation period, the Poro sacred area (and probably that of the Sande society) is marked off with special hanging 'medicine' leaves which close off all the paths around the area and warn the unwary not to pass (Welmers 1949:238). Only a member may enter. Trespassers are punished severely. In some cases, according to older traditions, the penalty was death.

A traditional village is surrounded by these secret areas carved out of the adjacent forest. The edge of the forest just outside the village is the threshold of a somewhat fearful world of hidden spirits and secret activities. In a village I visited, for example,
the secret areas of the Sande society and the 'spirit society' were only about 20 yards from the houses at the edge of the forest. The 'horn society's' area was a short distance further, about 200 yards from the village. The Poro 'grove' was about a quarter of a mile from the village. Its location was visible from the village because the massive crown of a tall cottonwood tree towered over the surrounding trees and marked the spot. The village graveyard, also viewed as dangerous, was in the forest just outside the village. The forest, in contrast to the village, is the area of greatest secrecy, privacy, and mystery. Here secret 'medicine' leaves are collected, secret society members conduct non-public discussions, and all the fearful spirits roam—especially the Poro namu, also very aptly called the 'forest thing' (loo-sëŋ).

KNOWLEDGE AS PROPERTY

The special powers and deepest secrets of a secret society are labeled såle which can be loosely translated as 'medicine'. Såle generally refers to 'substances, utterances, actions, and even organizations which are believed to possess unusual powers', and each form of important såle 'is a secret possessed by a person or a small group of people' (Welmers 1949:209, 211). The names of some secret societies include the word såle in compound terms which designate the domain of hidden knowledge under the society's control. For example, another translation of kali-såle ('snake society') is 'snake medicine'. Besides the powerful såle of a secret society, the term såle also refers to common medicinal preparations of everyday use.

The various kinds of important såle are owned by the ritual leaders of the respective secret societies. This cultural idea of ownership is expressed by the compound term såle-nammu ('medicine owner') which designates those who possess the secret knowledge of a particular 'medicine'. An owner of the most powerful 'medicines' and a leader in the secret societies is called zöö ('medicine person' or 'medicine specialist' or 'ritual leader'). Ownership of specific 'medicines' is also expressed in the concept of the owner of the leaf, denoting the proprietorship over the 'spirit of the medicine' which exists in the special 'medicine' leaves (Bellman 1975:121–127). 'Medicine' ownership among the Mende of Sierra Leone has been discussed recently by Jędrej (1976:249–250). In the Mende language the 'medicine owner' is the hândemù, a term derived from the cognate of the Kpelle word for 'medicine,' hále (Kpelle: såle).

Besides såle, another important domain of owned knowledge is history. A penetrating analysis of the ownership of historical knowledge has been written by d'Azevedo (1962b) who did research among the Gola, a group neighboring the Kpelle. Like the Kpelle, the Gola is one of the 'Poro tribes' and their ideology and use of historical knowledge closely matches that of the Kpelle. Therefore, the following discussion will draw upon d'Azevedo's essay as well as my own research in order to outline the Kpelle notion of historical knowledge as property.

The most important feature about the past for the Kpelle is not the general tribal history but the more specific recent history of individual families who settled in a particular area. Family and local community history is crucial knowledge because it bears on important questions of immediate concern: property rights and political position. Historical knowledge has instrumental value in solving problems of the present. Since it serves as an instrument of individual and sub-group interests, it must be carefully guarded and skillfully employed as d'Azevedo notes: 'In the local situation
individual family tradition is a rigorously guarded body of information' (1962b:19). Elders, as the acknowledged proprietors of this knowledge, weigh and debate various versions of family and community history because:

These become crucial concerns where individual interests in property and old feuds depend upon the validation that can be extracted by reference to the commitments, deeds and wishes of ancestors (d'Azevedo 1962b:26).

In addition, elders in the Poro society can use their knowledge of the community's genealogical history to subdue upstarts who try to fictionalize descent ties with ancestors of high-ranking lineages (d'Azevedo 1962a:514–515).

An incident during fieldwork jolted me into the realization that historical knowledge is closely tied to the crucial concerns of the present. I was interested in village graves as a means of collecting historical information about the local area. Most people are buried in a graveyard outside the village, but important persons, such as founding ancestors, are buried in the village. In one section or 'quarter' (koli) of a Kpelle village, I was interviewing a man about the graves where several recent ancestors of the quarter's lineage were buried. As my information named the ancestors in the graves and described genealogical relationships to living members of the quarter, a middle-aged man who lived in the quarter ran up to us, shouting that we had no right to be talking about his ancestors and putting their names on paper. He reprimanded my rather low-status informant who belonged to a different quarter for telling me these names. I promised him we would stop talking about his ancestors and discuss the problem with the chief when he returned. That evening the man demanded a steep fine from me, but the chief smoothed things over by assuring him that I did not know my questioning was out of place and that I would not take such liberties again. I learned later that the chief had also told my informant not to tell me the names of those buried in the village graves. My main mistake was not realizing that the information I was collecting belonged to the elders of that quarter, and that I should have diplomatically approached them for that information. My informant also erred in revealing information he had no right to discuss: 'one does not divulge what one is not supposed to know' (d'Azevedo 1962b:19). After this 'palaver' was settled, I learned that concern over land ownership and property rights was a prime cause of the man's anger. People told me that he was afraid of educated, wealthy Liberians trying to take over the land, using the names of ancestors put on paper as a record to decide who 'owned' the land. The written word bestows a special legitimacy to a version of history which traditionally competed with several versions. This man did not want me to distort a history which to him was not simply an object of curiosity, but a tool of survival.

Like this man, the elders in a community seek to protect and promote their versions of history. When elders meet to settle a disagreement, each presents his version of the past which bears on the matter until a consensus is reached. When these proceedings are held publicly, younger people feel they are acquiring valuable information without paying the customary gift to individual elders. D'Azevedo notes that at such occasions younger Gola will say, 'one can learn the secrets of the elders without showing respect (giving a gift) for each is trying to make himself great before the others' (d'Azevedo 1962b:19). Exulting over their apparent good fortune, younger people compare themselves to chickens and the historical knowledge divulged by the elders to
carelessly spilled rice: 'the old men are wasting their property: they are like a man with a hole in his full sack of rice who does not know why the chickens have come running' (d'Azvedo 1962b:19). But elders are skilled at appearing informative while really hiding important information. After public debates, for example, a Gola elder often calls his brothers and oldest sons to his house to correct the public version and instruct them in the private family version: 'the secrets which make our family strong and which others wish to learn in order to bring us low' (d'Azvedo 1962b:20). 'The public consensus version is derided as "the proper truth for children and strangers", while the family version is praised as the "truth for grown men that will make them kings in the world"' (d'Azvedo 1962b:20).

As with all kinds of important knowledge, historical knowledge has a dual nature. Public expression only skims the surface of the underlying private issues. The mature and perceptive can pick up allusions and hints which betoken these deeper issues. But the Gola claim that children and strangers (the Kpelle would add women) cannot see beyond the public account. Manipulating the public account is a tool in the competition over wealth and power—a competition both hostile and dangerous, as this Gola statement testifies: 'The man who lays his secrets before the world, showed his rivals how to become his enemies' (d'Azvedo 1962b:34). The Kpelle express this same belief by using the animal metaphor 'Tree Pangolin' for a person who wantonly reveals secrets. The Tree Pangolin is a scaly ant eater, covered with tough scales except for its belly which is soft and white. For defense it rolls up in a ball protecting the vulnerable belly with its hard scales. One Kpelle folktale describes how a foolish Tree Pangolin reveals to a hungry leopard the secret of its soft hidden belly. No longer daunted by the tough scales, the leopard proceeds to eat the Tree Pangolin by unrolling the ball of scales. (A proverb captures the theme of this story in concise form: 'Tree Pangolin showed the leopard how to eat him.') Powerful elders, however, are not Tree Pangolins because they keep secret the knowledge which would show their enemies how to 'eat' them.

CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE AS A SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISM

Since Kpelle elders stake privileged claim to knowledge of sàle and history, they have the greatest concern in sustaining the barriers and boundaries which protect their knowledge from encroachments. The youth learn to honor these boundaries through secret society training which imbues them with fear and respect for the elders' ownership of knowledge and their prerogatives over its distribution. They are taught to revere what is secret and to abide by the norms of secrecy. These norms are represented by the phrase ifa mò ('you cannot talk it') (Bellman 1975:15–16). 'When one joins a secret society he is given a special medicine called kafu over which he swears an oath of ifa mò' (Bellman 1975:16). The initiate promises not to expose any secrets of the society lest the kafu, a liquid potion, kill him or her. The oath of ifa mò impresses upon the youth the skill most demanded of them by the elders: the art of silence (cf. Simmel 1950:349–351).

A major support of elders' authority is the threat of physical punishment or death from the mysterious powers of the secret societies. This threat serves to inculcate respect for the elders' control of knowledge. It is important to note the coercive power which supports these social norms of respect. Some discussions tend to neglect the
coercive means of power underlying the ideological aspects of African eldership. Meillassoux, for example, argues that elders’ authority over youth rests on withheld knowledge but not on any ‘contrainte physique’ or ‘force de police’ (1960:44). Kpelle elders’ rights to knowledge, however, are impressed on the young by the frightening experience of secret society initiations and the persistent threat of beatings, poisonings, etc., for breaking the secrecy oath. In addition to the ideological or normative support which Meillassoux emphasizes, coercive power which ‘rests on the application, or the threat of application, of physical sanctions’ (Etzioni 1961:5) is an important means of support for the elders’ control of knowledge.

The threat of physical punishment creates an atmosphere of fear which is more important than the actual knowledge taught by the zóó-ŋa (pl. of žóó) to the young initiates of the Poro and Sande ‘bush schools’. Referring to the influences of fear and respectful loyalty, Welmers notes that ‘the primary character of the initiation seems to be concerned with an attitude rather than with information’ (1949:241). Studies emphasizing the educational function of the Poro and Sande societies (e.g., Watkins 1943) overlook the primacy of attitude over knowledge content. Thus while the young may acquire some knowledge in these societies, they usually know the most important practical skills, such as farming techniques, before joining. In many ways, the young learn little that they did not already know. Rather, initiation intensifies respect for the elders and their apparent knowledge of the mystical powers of the secret society. Even the practical skills taught are not simply part of an education; instead, such learning creates a skilled labor force for the leaders of the secret society during the long ‘bush school’ sessions. The zóó-ŋa, for example, sell the mats which the initiates learn to weave.

The control of youths’ labour and services is a major benefit of elders’ authority in secret societies.10 Little hints at this important issue but does not pursue it when he mentions the use of Poro initiates’ labor by the secular chief: ‘Traditionally, he is also entitled, like the other big men, to the services of the young initiates in working his rice farm’ (1949:205; see also Little 1966:70). One Kpelle informant who had just finished more than three years in a Poro ‘bush school’ summed up the initiates’ activities as follows: they made farms for the zóó-ŋa, learned how to make baskets, mats, and hammocks etc., which the zóó-ŋa would take for themselves, and learned respect for the elders (Swingle, n.d.). A succinct statement by Meillassoux captures this economic aspect of African elders’ privileged knowledge: ‘the authority of the elders rests on withholding knowledge, and it is this which supports and justifies the control of youth’s labor products’ (1960:49)11 Meillassoux, however, emphasizes the elders’ redistribution of these products to the community while this essay considers the political and economic advantages gained by the elders.

Another important economic benefit involves the food, goods, and money extracted from the parents of children in the ‘bush schools’12. The zóó-ŋa who run the ‘bush school’ demand such items from the parents for the ostensible purpose of meeting the children’s needs. Parents are especially vulnerable to these demands because they fear the control of the zóó-ŋa their children’s well-being, and they know that some children have died in ‘bush school’. Therefore, they make every effort to meet the requests of the zóó-ŋa, realizing that the bounty is not just for the children. Harley describes similar behavior of Poro officials in the Mano tribe who use the food collected for their own feasting: ‘Various officials existed for no other purpose than to raid, beg, steal or
commandeer food for the continuous feasting' (1941:16). Payments from the parents represent essentially a ransom paid to the zõo-ya for their children. This ransom is most explicit at the end of the ‘bush school’ period when the children return to the village during a special ‘coming out’ ritual. At this time the parents must pay a fee to the zõo-ya for receiving their children back. One day on the way to a Vai Sande society ‘coming out’ ceremony, a man told me he had paid the women zõo-ya a large sum for each of his two daughters who were ‘coming out’ that day. He also told me that during the ‘bush school’ period the zõo-ya had persistently demanded small payments of seventy-five cents or one dollar from him. Like his daughters, this man was vulnerable to the authority of the women zõo-ya of the Sande society.

ELDERS OF HIGH-RANKING LINEAGES

The authority relationship between Kpelle elders and youth cannot be properly understood without considering the institution of eldership in the context of lineage ranking. Kpelle elders are differentiated according to their lineage connections. The elders of the landowning lineages—those lineages which ‘own’ the chiefdom’s land by exercising primary rights over its use—control the secular and sacred authority of a chiefdom. All the elders of these important lineages are called loi-námü-béla (landowner-people); the singular is loi-námü (‘land-owner’).¹³ A shortened form of this term is also used: loi-béla (‘land-people’). Since all lineage elders are not loi-béla the latter can be glossed as ‘community elders’ to distinguish them from the former. The elders of landowning lineages trace their ancestry to the early settlers of the territory while the elders of the lower-ranked lineages are normally descended from later arrivals. An elder of a landowning lineage may act as a lineage elder in the context of lineage and ‘family’ affairs and a community elder in the context of wider chiefdom matters.¹⁴ There is a certain parallelism in the authority exercised at the lineage and community levels: the authority of lineage elders over younger lineage members rests partly on certain mystical powers connected with lineal ancestors, while the authority of the elders of the landowning lineages over the whole community is supported in part by their access to the mystical powers in secret societies.¹⁵

Among the loi-béla in the chiefdom where I worked, one man was viewed as the primary loi-námü (‘landowner’) who possessed the greatest authority over the land and the people on it. This man in his seventies is the grandson of the leader of a band of early settlers in the territory, and this ancestry serves to legitimate the status of his lineage as the highest-ranked descent group in the chiefdom. His grandfather’s original band—interestingly, composed mainly of Gola people—possessed a military strength which allowed them to dominate the few settlements in the sparsely occupied territory, and to attract other migrant groups seeking protection from warfare in the last half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the authority of this band of early settlers was supported substantially by the military protection it could offer. Now, however, support for this head loi-námü and his lineage rests on ties to the national government. Important members of his lineage offer the local community protection and patronage by serving as intermediaries with the government. He himself became a member of the Liberian Legislature, and his relatives now occupy most of the important governmental positions in the chiefdom. People in the chiefdom depend on him and his relatives to
seek their interests in the wider national system and to protect them from any abuses of
this system as it penetrates the hinterland.

Control of the ‘secular’ world has its counterpart in control of secret societies.16 Here again the landowning lineages dominate. The control of secret societies is achieved in large part by filling the high ritual positions, especially in the Poro and Sande societies, with members of these lineages. In the chieftdom I studied, the head landowner’s father’s sister’s son is an important zóo in the local Poro society. His sister is a high-ranked zóo in the Sande society and a leading midwife, a position shrouded in secrecy and possessed with considerable power over women. [Holsoe (1977:295) discusses the case of a Vai ruler in the early nineteenth century—his sister was the leader of the local Sande ‘bush school’—who used the Sande society as a mode of obtaining women to sell to European slavers.]

Similarly, in the Gola Poro society ‘members of its ruling hierarchy are part of one
ke kpo—male members of the core patrilineage of the chieftdom’, and the ‘local Poro is
directly concerned with maintaining the authority and property of the maximal
lineage’ (d’Azvedo 1962a:514; italics added). Moreover, the Gola ‘Sande organization
was and is limited in jurisdiction to the women of individual chieftdoms and draws its
officials from the core lineages of these entities’ (d’Azvedo 1969:10). Since lineage
connections prevail over age status, most Kpelle youth cannot simply bide their time
until increased age brings them high rank in the secret societies. Little’s description of
Poro ranking supports the point that most members remain forever beyond the reach
of the highest ranks: ‘the great majority of initiates never advanced beyond the most
junior grade’ (1965:358).17

Important zóo-qa, however, are not always members of the landowning lineages. Nevertheless, in the chieftdom where I worked all the ritual leaders of the secret
societies, whether members of these lineages or not, were subordinate to the leader of
the ruling lineage. The head ‘landowner’ of the chieftdom, for example, was not a Poro
zóo himself but he exercised ultimate authority over Poro and Sande activities, and he
could levy fines against the zóo-qa if they did not fulfil their responsibilities.

Attention to lineage and elder ranking is important because such ranking is often
overlooked in analyses which attribute a benign character to the inequality between
elders and youth in traditional African societies. Deluz and Godelier’s statement on the
Gouro of Ivory Coast is characteristic of this type of analysis: ‘All that is necessary is
for each individual to grow old in order to enter the group of elders and to gain the
benefits of age’ (1967:86). In other words, it is simply a matter of time in the
developmental cycle for youth to win independence from elders’ authority. This view
overlooks the fact that while young men do become old men, not all old men become
elders. Even more importantly, while some young men do actually become lineage
elders few become powerful elders in the community. In many ethnographic cases, as
with the Kpelle, only senior members of the highest-ranked lineages enjoy broad
authority in the community. Consequently, most old men, along with women and
young men, remain junior dependents of the elders of the high-ranked lineages.
Despite their age they are still essentially ‘youth’ in their dependence on these elders,
and they exercise even less authority than important younger members of the high-
ranked lineages.
SECRET KNOWLEDGE IN KPELLE SOCIETY

SECRETS AS ILLUSIONS

The political and economic factors discussed above are more significant for our understanding of Kpelle secret societies than the content of the skills or secrets transmitted during initiations. It would be misleading, however, to conclude from the relative insignificance of the secrets themselves that secret societies are 'illusions' as Jędrzej labels them in his recent essay on Mende secret societies (1976:255). Jędrzej seeks to criticize the position that the secret itself 'creates the separation and exclusion' of male and female secret associations (1976:255). Although he is raising an important and perceptive point, he weakens his argument by analyzing these associations into oblivion, claiming that there are 'probably no secret societies among the Sewa Mende or even the Mende as a whole for that matter' (1976:255). The confusion in his argument is partly due to an emphasis on the cosmological dimension, e.g., the Sande society 'is an illusion created by the ritual separation of the sexes' (1976:255), at the expense of the social organizational aspects. Thus, a secret may be called an illusion in the sense that it is insignificant or nonexistent—the secret may be that there is no secret—but it is not analytically useful to label as illusions the associations based on such secrets. (One could equally label all of social reality a game of illusions.) Despite the illusory quality of many secrets, they can support and legitimize the separation and exclusion of members of social categories or groups. Simmel makes a similar point in his statement that the aura of secrecy bestows a group identity on a secret society that is more important sociologically than the content of the secrets: 'In comparison with other associations, it here is the passion of secrecy—always felt and always to be preserved—which gives the group-form, depending on it, a significance that is far superior to the significance of content' (1950:363). The important questions about secrecy go beyond the nature of the secrets to the social context in which secret associations thrive (see Cohen 1971, on the political context of Freemasonry in Sierra Leone).

Some secrets have more of an illusory quality than others. An important distinction here is between the secrets which represent the traditional mystical beliefs of the secret society and the secrets which emerge in secret society meetings from deliberations over pragmatic political and economic affairs. The Poro society, for example, holds periodic sessions in the 'sacred grove' outside the village in order to rule on important community issues. In this way crucial decisions are made covertly under the direction of the zdo-na with the sanction of the supernatural forces of the secret society. The oath of secrecy prevents the members from divulging the discussions and rationale underlying these decisions. In addition, an official version of events can be constructed in secret sessions and promulgated publicly by a unified membership. Important facts concerning local history, land rights, political succession, etc., can be construed in a way the leadership of the secret society deems best. Secrecy in these matters guarantees that members will be silent even if the public version offered does not quite fit the facts. Such pragmatic secrets are sometimes overlooked by scholars in favor of the supposedly exotic traditional secrets. Ironically, this oversight attests to the skill of the zdo-na in using the apparently unfathomable mysteries to divert observers from the secrets of community policy-making. The Poro and Sande societies provide the elders of the dominant lineage not only with mystical legitimation but also with a sacred 'veil' behind which they can manipulate the important decisions affecting the community.
CONCLUSION

Most scholars have analyzed West African secret societies in terms of educational or cross-cutting functions. Some have noted the hierarchical structure supported by the elders' control of secret knowledge but have tended to view the elders' authority as used simply in service of the community. In contrast, I have argued that Kpelle secret societies serve the secular authority (rather than balancing or checking this authority), accentuate lineage differences, and contribute to a social system whose primary benefits from youth's labor are secured by the elders of the ruling lineage in a chieftdom.

It should be acknowledged, of course, that the power and wealth of Kpelle elders, especially those of the landowning lineages, are maintained in a complex of ways which cannot be simplified into a single mechanism. Rights over land (cf. Meillassoux 1960:46) and women (see Bledsoe 1976, 1980) are examples of other means. The claim to privileged knowledge is nevertheless a crucial tool of social control. Of course, elders sometimes use their knowledge to provide beneficial services to the community, such as curing snake bites. But there is another aspect to their use of knowledge which this essay has delineated. The resulting image of Kpelle elders is not one of benevolent, wise old men who pass on hallowed cultural traditions to the young. Rather, it is one of calculating elders who withhold more than they teach and use claims on withheld knowledge to keep the young under their thumbs.19

NOTES

1 This paper is based on fieldwork among the Kpelle of Liberia carried out in 1973-74. Financial support for this research is gratefully acknowledged to the Foreign Area Fellowship Program, The National Institute of Mental Health, and the National Science Foundation. The conclusions, opinions, and other statements in this paper, however, are those of the author and not necessarily those of these institutions.

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2 The private purchase of tribal farm land is accelerating in contemporary Liberia. Since subsistence farmers and low wage-earners have little chance to accumulate capital, they are falling behind in this trend toward private ownership of land.

3 See Liebenow (1969) and Lowenkopf (1976) for analyses of the Liberian political system.

4 My analysis differs, however, from Barth's analysis of Baktaman secrecy in that I emphasize the political and economic dimension of secrecy and ritual knowledge. Kpelle secrecy—and, I believe, most cases of secrecy—is best understood in the framework of political and economic interests (cf. Barth 1975:219).

5 The Kpelle transcriptions in this essay are based on the standard Kpelle orthography developed by William Welsmers (1948, 1962). The following phonemes require special explanation: kp—voiceless stop, simultaneous double articulation in the velar and bilabial positions, gb—voiced stop, simultaneous double articulation in the velar and bilabial positions; y—voiced velar resonant; g—voiced velar nasal, as in the English word 'sing'; b—voiced implosive, bilabial stop; e—mid front vowel, as in the English word 'get' ; o—low back vowel, as in the English word 'useful'. Tone and nasilization are phonemic and the Kpelle language. Standard Kpelle orthography uses three tone markings. High tone is indicated by /\, low tone by /, and /\ indicates a high tone followed by a low tone. No mark indicates mid tone. Nasalization is represented by /~/. For an illuminating discussion of the Poro society in a historical perspective, see d'Azevedo 1959.

6 The chiefdom I studied has five local 'sacred groves' of the Poro society, each located near a major village of the chiefdom. While each local Poro has its own namà, the 'sacred being' of the Poro, one
particular namù is the leader of the others. All the local Poro groups come together for the important Poro activities of the chiefdom.

Bellman identifies this society as possessing two names. The first resembles the term collected by Welmers; the second is the ‘iron society’ (koli-sàdò) (Bellman 1975:25, 124).

9 The translations of this proverb is:

ak à wí-sípèré e koli mì.


11 This statement from Meillassou and the subsequent one from Deluz and Godelier are my translations from the French.

12 The gist of an economic perspective on secret societies is exemplified in Ottenberg’s description of the priests of an Igbo secret society who perform sacrifices for barren women: ‘They wax fat on the money, food, and wine that are brought for these sacrifices’ (1971:119).

13 The term namù (‘owner’) is used in additional compounds which express a hierarchy of territorial ‘ownership’. In ascending order these compounds are pé-re-namù (‘house-owner’), koli-namù (‘quarter owner’ or ‘section owner’; this refers to a town division), taa-namù (‘town owner’), and le-re-namù (‘landowner’).

14 Some fieldworkers among the Kpelle have recorded the word kala as the term for a Kpelle patrilineage (Bellman 1975:185–188; Gibbs 1965:201). It should be emphasized, however, that Kpelle descent group affiliation is often more a matter of the relative wealth and political power of various kin than a matter of genealogical reckoning. In my own fieldwork the kinship group most frequently mentioned by informants is called káyó which refers to a group of bilateral relatives.

15 An important manifestation of African lineage elders’ mystical power is the curse. Kopytoff discusses the role of the curse in Suku society:

An elder—any elder—represents to a junior the entire legal and mystical authority of the lineage. The very fact of eldership confers upon a person mystical powers over the junior. He can curse his junior in the name of the lineage, thereby removing from him the mystical protection of the lineage (1971:131).

16 Brandt’s recent study of Pueblo Indian secrecy (1977) parallels my own in its emphasis on the politics of secrecy. She analyzes Pueblo religious secrecy as a political strategy, employed both within the community and in the interrelations with the external society.

17 The potential of controlling a subordinate group through the ranking system of a secret society is discussed by Simmel: ‘there is here the special challenge of completely controlling a large, potentially and ideally subordinated group of human beings, by developing a scheme of positions with their rank interrelations’ (1950:357–358).

18 Middleton makes a related point about the relationship between Lugbara secrecy and the reshuffling of moral and social categories: ‘The essential part of secret knowledge is that its possessor can reshuffle or re-form a system of categories (and this, of course, is the basis of any kind of power) ... ’ (1973:315). It should be added, however, that construing reality—or reshuffling categories—in Kpelle secret societies is not simply a straightforward consensual process, but also involves competition among competing claims and definitions.

19 While the elders try to cling to the benefits of the old tradition of secrecy and secret societies, the young strive to escape the burdens of that tradition. See Bledsoe’s studies (1976, 1980) of modernization for an analysis of the social strategies available to Kpelle women and the young as they strive to escape the burdens of the traditional system (cf. Wilson 1977). The story of elders and youth, however, is more complex than simply a rejection of the former by the latter, as Cohen aptly explains for the Pabir/Bura: the ‘Pabir/Bura younger generation are striving to free themselves from the authority of the elders’ while they also ‘reverse such authority as part of their own ethnic identity and pride in the wider context of Nigeria’ (Ronald Cohen, personal communication).

REFERENCES


Résumé

La connaissance secrète en tant que propriété et pouvoir dans la société Kpelle : les anciens contre les jeunes

Cet essai analyse la relation d'autorité qui existe, chez les Kpelle, entre les anciens et les jeunes dans le contexte de la hiérarchie lignagère et des institutions à caractère secret. Les anciens se réclament, en effet, d'un savoir privilégié acquis dans les sociétés secrètes, en particulier dans le Poro masculin et le Sande féminin, pour justifier l'autorité qu'ils exercent sur les jeunes et sur le produit du travail de ces derniers. En outre, le contenu même des secrets compte moins que les pratiques politiques et économiques fondées sur l'existence du secret. Une distinction importante est faite entre les anciens des lignages qui possèdent la terre et ceux des lignages de rang inférieur. Seuls les premiers contrôlent à la fois les positions politiques laïques et les fonctions rituelles des sociétés secrètes. Cette analyse se distingue des études précédentes qui soutiennent que les sociétés secrètes d'Afrique Occidentale servent avant tout à éduquer les jeunes, ou à modérer l'autorité séculière. Elle se distingue également des études qui voient d'abord dans l'autorité des anciens un moyen de redistribuer le produit du travail des jeunes au profit du bien-être de la communauté.