



## NFJA Notes

**The Social Potentiality of Secrets:  
A Note from Fieldwork in Seram, Eastern Indonesia**Geger Riyanto<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>*Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University*

As someone who carried fieldwork in Seram Island, Eastern Indonesia, I found anthropological works on secrets to offer compelling comparisons to my finding. Since Georg Simmel (2009), secrets have often been noted for their potential to generate social formation. What is of importance, particularly, is their concealment and divulgence. The sharing of secrets requires mutual trust, which bonds the participants involved in the interaction or group. On the other hand, their disclosure is powerfully intriguing. The revelation is often expected to be cathartic, transformative, or even endangering the established relationships. Beryl L. Bellman's work (1984) on the Kpelle of West Africa shows that in its secret society initiation ritual, no new information is being conveyed to the newly admitted member. Still, regardless of the content, the entrustment of secrets becomes the central gesture of the ritual of rendering one into a part of Poro group. In different social settings such as the Wana of Southeast Sulawesi, Jane Atkinson (1989) finds that shamans' power is associated with their words and gestures whose meaning is concealed from their audience.

Among various communities throughout Seram Island, the telling of a community's mythical history is often accompanied by discreet gestures indicating that the told story is supposed to be a secret. Such is the case as well among the Buton, the in-migrant community of the island with whom I spent most of my time in the field, who lives in Parigi. The true history is regarded as a secret and its revelation will be followed by great chaos. Nevertheless, the interesting thing about the Buton community is they are generally incapable of narrating the history of Seram. They are regarded as outsiders by the other Seram communities, which renders them as ones that are not supposed to know the island's past. Unable to narrate history, however, the Buton suspect that the locals are withholding secrets from them. They claim to hear from somewhere, usually from locals of the most regarded community, that they are actually the first people of Seram. The revelation of this will upturn the existing social order and restore their position in Seram. Suspicion of secrecy, in this respect, enable the Buton to comprehend their cosmic standing among the others—much like myths, even though myths or exegetical tradition are mostly absent from their community.

Atkinson, J.M. (1989) *The Art and Politics of Wana Shamanism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bellman, B.L. (1984) *The Language of Secrecy. Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual*. Rutgers University Press

Simmel, G. (2009) *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms Volume 1*. Leiden: Brill