Seeing Cargo Cults with a Culturally Relative Eye
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By creating a religion that revolves around the miraculous arrival of luxurious cargo through prayer and worship, many impoverished and culturally downtrodden Melanesians were largely ridiculed rather than assisted by other nations because of their unconventional ways of coping with and attempting to improve their economically and culturally neglected existence. (Haviland 2002:429). The desires of these cultists transcended material want and— even though they may have needed material assistance—it was really more than just a “consumer itch,” as Worsley put it (1968:lx) and more of an attempt to reestablish a satisfying moral foundation for themselves after suffering through what they deemed to be inhumane mistreatment and deception on behalf of foreigners—particularly Europeans— for so many years. (Ferrell 1993:6).

European colonization of the 17th and 18th centuries certainly took a heavy toll upon Melanesian villagers— their interests commonly conflicted but the ones that prevailed were always the institutionally sanctioned and this commonly went ahead without compromise; the villagers understandably found this unsatisfactory. (Worsley 1968:lx1) This disrespect, coupled with the observance that these Europeans were amazingly rich. (O’Byrne 1999:43) created a hybrid of vengefulness and envy that became the triggers for the formation of these ‘cargo cults.’ It made no sense to the modest Melanesians that these cruel and pugnacious Europeans had been rewarded with so much wealth and pleasure— it simply wasn’t right, they thought. After accumulating this great degree of anxiety and frustration (Haviland 2002:430) over the years the impressionable inhabitants of Melanesia concocted a cathartic fantasy for themselves so elaborate and profound that it actually evolved into a reality for these people.
For many Melanesians, the omniscient prophet of this fantastical reality became John Frum, a black American soldier who – according to their own beliefs – arrived in Melanesia in the mid-1800s and promised them a life undisturbed by economic discord and the undiplomatic demands of foreigners, especially Europeans. (Glines 1991:11)

This inspiring John Frum Movement suddenly provided cargo cultists with a newfound religion of sorts, to base their counteractions against the European colonialists upon.

Cargo cult prophets also factored Christian millenarianism into this religion, conflating Christ’s projected Judgment Day with the arrival of culture-, society-, and life-altering cargo. (Lindstrom 2003:2)

It quickly became apparent to the Melanesians that earning their own wealth and pleasure (or ‘cargo’) would be impossible while under European dominance. (Haviland 2002:429) This resulted in such revitalization movements as the one at Buka in the Solomon Islands in 1931 where a great flood was predicted to engulf all Europeans and, thereafter, a ship laden with luxuries sent by their ancestors would arrive for devoted followers. (Haviland 2002:428) After no miracles occurred, the cultists began to suspect that foreigners – probably Europeans – were actually intercepting and stealing away the cargo that their ancestors intended for them. (Encyclopedia 2003:1)

With that said, it is important to understand that cargo cults are more than just unitary systems of thought with no internal problems of interpretation and choice. They are “flexible innovations” (Worsley 1968:ixiv) – whole sets of principles molded to harbor different ways of acting out actions for particular interpretations of the beliefs. They don’t simply hold beliefs but use and test them – hence phases in movements.
(Worsley 1968:lxv) They develop new ideas and abandon others; however, in the face of dissenting evidence they tend to invent explanations like “bad scientists,” as anthropologist I.C. Jarvie would say. (Worsley 1968:lxviii)

Although not much came out of the Buka cargo cult, the 1941-45 Pacific War thereafter brought encouragement to the natives on the Melanesian island of Tanna – the birthplace of the John Frum Movement – in the form of the US military. Many Melanesians benefited directly from the arrival of cargo-laden aircrafts, working as labor corps recruits and receiving many rewards for their wartime services. (Lindstrom 2003:¶8) Finally – by genuinely worshipping their gods and ancestors – they thought that they were beginning to forge a new sense of self-respect, identity, and meaning in their lives (Worsley 1968:lx) after enduring decades of thievery and dehumanization at the hands of foreigners. They were convinced that they were experiencing the beginnings of a moral and spiritual revitalization – much more than the superficial pleasures of materialism.

However, as long periods of time went by with devoted ritualizing but without the arrival of any revitalizing cargo, cult prophets took up other forms of cultural encouragement. In addition to reinforcing the importance of their ancestors in these rituals, prophets claimed that the dead would resurrect. There was also the prophecy that the flesh of these faithful followers would turn white. (Lindstrom 2003:¶10) Respectively, these two prophesies paradoxically reflect the Melanesian peoples’ desperate reliance on their cultural history for redemption from contemporary hardships as well as the remarkable sense of cultural and racial guilt that white Europeans managed to instill in Melanesians through years of domination.
Intentionally or not, Europeans managed to counterchange these peoples’ appreciation and respect for one another, their culture, and their race into an acute degree of shame. (Worsley 1968:lx) The incessant blows and punishments by the Europeans commonly convinced the villagers to look upon themselves as unworthy individuals – and, in the case of the Tangu people of the Madang District in New Guinea – as “dogs.” (Worsley 1968:lxii) After experiencing that short-yet-sweet period of freedom and opulence during the American occupation, the Melanesians were once again overtaken by European colonization. (Worsley 1968:lxiii) At this point their own humanity had been frustrated far beyond the barrier of patience, which caused them to second guess their own cultural worth. Perhaps, they thought, their own ancestors were disappointed with them and felt that they didn’t deserve redemption after all. Therefore, the cargo cultists had to look to the divine to renew their relationship with their ancestors and to produce atonement – hopefully putting an end to their sense of guilt in order to acknowledge their true identity with dignity once again. (Worsley 1968:lxiii)

As the Melanesian resistance toward European colonialism increased without hesitation, then, cargo cult leaders used their prophesizing for political means. They confidently asserted to their fellow villagers that the spirits of their ancestors combined with the force of returning American soldiers would drive the European colonial powers out of their homeland. (Lindstrom 2003:49) In this manner, then, cargo cultism served a defensive purpose of intimidating and perhaps discouraging Europeans from exercising their usual totalitarian tactics by producing a unifying effect between nearly all of the native inhabitants of the Melanesian islands affected by European control. As anthropologist Jean Guiart said, it could even be expanded into representing “Melanesian
nationalism,” (Lindstrom 2003:49) whereby the alliances formed from cargo cultism contributed heavily toward the strive for national independence in the foreign-dominated country.

The metaphorical moral issue (Lindstrom 2003:42) of receiving the cargo was that the cultists firmly believed that the material possessions would have the power of reorganizing their whole social structure; however, this is not to say that they were necessarily searching for a complete reversal of fortune where Europeans would drastically become impoverished. To quote Worsley again, cargo cultists would oftentimes “emphasize a claim to human equality and community within the same society.” (1968:lxiii) The presence of vengefulness and hostility toward their longtime oppressors would certainly be there; however, it is the common misconception that these cargo cultists were looking to achieve superiority in their search for this new moral order.

Whether these cargo cultists were attempting to revitalize their cultures, reaffirm their personal sense of dignity, establish a basis of national equality, or all of these things, it is at least clear that the cults were formed for far deeper reasons than material gain. (Worsley 1968:lx) For indifferent Westerners, the collective ignorance of these people may be easy to chuckle over (Ferrell 1993:16) but what the cargo cultists of Melanesia and all other misinformed groups of people around the world truly need is for those Westerners to develop a keen eye along with a compassionate heart in order to comprehend the cultural strife that is actually going on beneath these external appearances of nonsensicality.
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