

Psychology and psychopathology of messianic-prophetic movements

Observations on so-called “Cargo Cults” in New Guinea

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Abstract. *This paper summarizes the authors' information and observations on messianic-prophetic movements in New Guinea and their leaders. These so-called “Cargo Cults” arise from a syncretistic fusion of traditional Melanesian mythology with the Christian salvation message preached by church missionaries. Charismatic prophets, inspired by visions and dream revelations and entertaining grandiose ideas, proclaim the advent of apocalyptic events ushering in an earthly paradise for Melanesians and the return of their ancestors with all desired “cargo” believed to be withheld by the “Whites”. Perceived as messengers from the supernatural world, successful prophets initiate a cult movement by exerting suggestive influence on their followers, often leading to transient mass dissociation phenomena. Some cult prophets show manifest symptoms of psychiatric disorder. With the organizing help of able assistants, “Cargo Cults” may evolve into a religious congregation, a socio-economic or a political organization.*

Keywords: Millenarianism - Religious Syncretism - New Guinea - Psychology - Psychopathology.

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INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW “Cargo Cults” are Melanesian messianic-prophetic movements of the millenarian type. These movements show striking similarity with the eschatology of the original Christian tradition that – according to the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation – expects the near end of the world and the imminent Second Coming of Christ, ushering in the Millenium and the paradise of the righteous. Apocalyptic prophecies inspired millenarian mass movements throughout the mediaeval and Reformation ages in Europe and continued to stir up believers in modern times (Cohn, 1961; Thrupp, 1970; Wilson, 1973; Weber, 1999). Today apocalyptic revelations are still emphasized by fundamentalist Christian sects. In New Guinea it has been precisely this eschatologic message of the missionaries that most attracted the indigenous people to Christianity. What differentiates Melanesian Cargo Cults from messianic-prophetic movements elsewhere is the cargo ideology which, although not a formalized doctrine, is shared by many people in New Guinea. Cargo ideology comprises the following ideas:

(1) the prospect of this-worldly salvation upon obtaining the magic secret of access to industrial goods (“cargo”) hitherto concealed by the “Whites”; (2) the return of the ancestors; (3) the establishment of a higher social status for Melanesians in a new life of abundance.

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Cargo ideology developed on the basis of traditional Melanesian myths, Christian missionary teaching of biblical prophecies, and witnessing the influx of cargo for the “Whites”. A common motif in traditional New Guinean myths is the return of the ancestors, often led by a culture hero, with rich provisions for the living. Christian missionary teaching introduced the Melanesians not only to the Gospel message of salvation through Christ’s sacrifice but also to the millenarian prophecies in the Old Testament Book of Daniel and in the New Testament Book of Revelation. Cargo expectation was activated during World War II when the Melanesians observed the enormous amounts of American supply-cargo arriving by sea and air in the South Pacific for the Allied armies. As the indigenous people had never seen the production of industrial goods, they concluded that these foreigners acquired the cargo – which Christ and the ancestors had intended for the Melanesians – through a magic “secret”. The people expected the missionaries to eventually reveal this secret to their converts. As this expectation was not fulfilled, many Melanesians turned to indigenous prophets who re-interpreted the biblical teaching in line with the prevailing Cargo ideology. These prophets claimed knowledge of the required procedures and rituals to unlock the secret of access to the desired cargo which had hitherto been the tangible evidence of the wealth of the “Whites” and the symbol of their superiority. Cargo Cult prophets are typically inspired by dream visions. In New Guinean cultures dreams are trusted as valid communications from the supernatural world and widely used for divination and diagnosis. Some diviners retire to special “dream houses” to experience diagnostic dreams. To visit a “dream house”, W. Jilek ascended Mt. Clancy in the Southern Highlands, where diviners received dream messages from ancestral spirits through a string “antenna” connected to the peak of the mountain.

Cult prophets announce the imminent advent of cataclysms followed by the return of the ancestors, the coming of Christ, or of a traditional culture hero. They also predict the arrival of cargo, the beginning of a golden age of abundance and harmony for the Melanesian people. Cult prophets are often seen as messiah types and may be identified with Christ. For a time they exert an irresistible suggestive fascination over their followers who react to the prophetic pronouncements with general excitement, often with a collective altered state of consciousness leading to dissociation and bizarre behaviour. Since the European colonial intrusion in New Guinea began in the 19th century, more than 200 Cargo Cult movements are on record (Guariglia, 1959; Lanternari, 1963; Muehlmann, 1964; Worsley, 1968; Christiansen, 1969; Burrige, 1970; Strelan, 1978; Steinbauer, 1979; Trompf, 1990).

PREVIOUS PSYCHIATRIC STUDIES OF “CARGO CULTS” In contrast to the voluminous ethnological literature on Cargo Cult movements in New Guinea, clinical studies of cult prophets and activists by psychiatric experts familiar with Melanesian cultures are lacking, with the exception of the work of B.G. Burton-Bradley, an Australian psychiatrist and anthropologist who spent three decades working in Papua New Guinea (Burton-Bradley, 1975). Burton-Bradley postulated that the main motif behind Cargo Cult expectation and activity is status anxiety, a consequence of the cultural encounter with the West. While stating that the majority of cult followers appear to be in a normal state of mental health before and after the acute cult excitement, Burton-Bradley has presented detailed clinical data based on psychiatric history, mental status and medical examination, of some persons who initiated Cargo Cult movements through prophetic dreams or hallucinations and projected their megalomaniac ideas about their divine mission, sometimes identifying themselves, and being identified, with Jesus Christ. Burton-Bradley found in some messianic figures evidence of recurrent mania, grandiose paranoia, paranoid schizophrenia, epilepsy, thyrotoxicosis, and syphilitic meningoencephalitis (Burton-Bradley, 1970; 1975). A frequently held belief among cultists is that the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy and access to the desired cargo will require either the self-sacrifice of the prophet, or somebody else’s sacrificial death, patterned on biblical example. Burton-Bradley documented his psychiatric findings on men who killed in the delusional belief that a human sacrifice was needed in order to bring about the expected millennium with tangible benefits for their

people (Burton-Bradley, 1972; 1976). We also heard factual reports of such incidents from well informed members of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Papua New Guinea.

AUTHORS’ ENQUIRIES ABOUT THREE CULTS AND THEIR

LEADERS In 1984 and 1985, W.G. Jilek was WHO Mental Health Consultant in Papua New Guinea. During this time we, the authors, visited most provinces of the country. We had the opportunity of interviewing prominent figures and witnesses of social movements considered as Cargo Cults. In three of the provinces we visited – East Sepik, Papua Gulf, and North Solomons – recent cult movements and their leaders had attained nationwide publicity.

Mt.Turun movement in East Sepik

The Mt.Turun movement in East Sepik Province was the most prominent New Guinean “Cargo Cult” in recent decades. It is a classic paradigm of a Melanesian messianic-prophetic movement, driven by expectations of cargo benefits, religious salvation, and socio-political liberation; a syncretistic mixture of indigenous mythology with Christian eschatology. This movement was the achievement of two men, Matias Yaliwan and Daniel Hawina. Yaliwan, the prophet of the movement, held the popular reputation of possessing supernatural powers. Many took him to be the “Black Man’s Messiah”. It is reported that throughout his life Yaliwan had periods of withdrawing into seclusion and inactivity, alternating with periods of hectic activity. Already at a young age he sometimes showed inordinate religious excitement, and because of his strange behavior he was briefly hospitalized. One day in the mid-1960s Yaliwan had his religious key-experience, literally speaking. While doing manual work on a Catholic Mission he found an old tabernacle key with the image of angels on it. He immediately associated this key with a picture in the Book of Revelation in the New Guinea Bible: an angel holding a key and a chain to lock up Satan in the Abyss for the Millenium. He was convinced God had sent him the “key to heaven” with which he would open a new world for the people of New Guinea. Guided by mythical dream visions, Yaliwan saw himself as the religious and political saviour of his people and soon found many adherents. He made grandiose public claims to national leadership, but when official recognition failed to materialize, he became disturbed and harbored paranoid suspicions. However, he never gave up his conviction that he was the divinely chosen leader of Papua New Guinea. Daniel Hawina, the younger deputy leader of the Mt.Turun Movement, became known as eloquent orator and organizer of the movement’s Peli Association which gained nationwide appeal with up to 200,000 dues-paying members. It was named after a hawk – Peli – the totem animal of the local clans which became associated with the eagle depicted in the Book of Revelation. Backed by Yaliwan’s charismatic reputation, Hawina mobilized the Peli Association members towards magico-religious and socio-political action.

In the late 1960s, Yaliwan and Hawina focused on the cement markers that a U.S. Air Force surveyor team had placed on top of Mt.Turun, an ancestral spirit ground sacred to the local population. Yaliwan and Hawina proclaimed that this was a trespass committed by White strangers who had put a magic curse on the indigenous people’s livelihood, as indicated by an arrow sign on one of the cement blocks. In 1969 they removed this offensive block and waited two days for the expected cargo to come out of the mountain. Instead, they were arrested by Australian police and sentenced to a term in prison, where Yaliwan experienced a dream vision of himself as the coming Messiah of Papua New Guinea. After release from jail, Yaliwan and Hawina, now of national fame, succeeded in gathering a large following determined to have all foreign markers removed from the sacred mountain in order to open its door for the return of the ancestors and the arrival of cargo. In line with the biblical symbolism of the number “7”, the date of this act was set as the 7th day of the 7th month of 1971. On this day Yaliwan and Hawina led 300 followers on top of Mt.Turun and dug out the remaining cement markers, while thousands awaited the landing of many American planes with cargo on the nearby air strip. This did not happen; but the event, widely reported in the media, made the Mt.Turun movement and the Peli Association known throughout Papua New Guinea. Hawina kept

the general excitement alive by having the Peli Association members trying various magical money-making schemes with features of traditional fertility rites. Yaliwan embarked on a political career to realize his vision of becoming the national saviour. His charismatic reputation won him a seat in the House of Assembly. There he rose to announce that he was the “Leader of Papua New Guinea”, only to be ignored by other politicians. This rebuff caused Yaliwan to feel mentally affected through sorcery. He became depressed and paranoid and was incapable of continuing his mandate. However, after he spent some time in seclusion he resumed his role as prophet-messiah, and for years many people believed that Yaliwan would eventually fulfill their millenarian expectation and bring about the desired “good times”, perhaps through a Christ-like self-sacrifice. As for Daniel Hawina, he succeeded in the 1980s to have himself and most of the Peli Association members co-opted by the New Apostolic Church, a Western fundamentalist millenarian Christian sect that endeavours to “shorten the time for the Second Coming”, thus providing an excellent fit for the aspirations of the Mt. Turun Movement. Hawina invited proselytizing Canadian missionaries of the New Apostolic Church to his area and organized mass meetings where hundreds of new converts, together with their dead ancestors, were baptized and “sealed” by the Canadian “apostles” who then ordained Hawina as the District Evangelist of the New Apostolic Church.

On our visit to his home in the Mt. Turun region, East Sepik, Matias Yaliwan told us:

“In 1971 I removed the markers from Mt. Turun, the White Man had desecrated Mt. Turun, a holy mountain, belongs to our people. Adam and Eve came out of Mt. Turun. I removed the markers and we got independence but we did not yet get the good time. The White Man has everything but after some time we shall also have these things. They are hiding from us the things that rightfully are due to us. [reading from the Book of Revelation]: ‘The trumpet shall sound and all dead people will come to life again’... All mankind will gather here on Mt. Turun, but some will be damned forever, only 144000 will have the good times. All mankind will be of one kinship, all will have only one kind of skin, the same kind of skin that you have. White skin is a good skin. Our skin is black; we are not happy, we must work hard, we are not free. In the good times we shall have everything, we need no longer work then. To get the good times, one man of Papua New Guinea must die on the cross... I am the only leader of Papua New Guinea. I have been Member of Parliament for six months. Some people were jealous of me, so somebody made sorcery and I became sick in the head. So I gave my seat up. They keep me away, but many people come to see me, they all know that I am the Leader of Papua New Guinea”.

Toaripi Cargo Cults in the Gulf of Papua

Among the Toaripi people in the Gulf of Papua, prophetic cult movements with millenarian cargo expectation have been coming and going in waves since the Gulf populations were involved in the frenzied excitement of the “Vailala madness” of the 1920s (Williams, 1977). Successive Toaripi prophets started short lived cults by claiming to have direct communication with God and to be guided by the Book of Revelation. In 1984 reports of a new cult movement among the Toaripi people of Mailovera in the Gulf of Papua appeared in the media. A church deacon reported that cultists claim to contact their dead by radio telephone and practice magic on graveyards, leaving food for the ancestors there with buckets of water supposed to accumulate healing power. The Chief of the National Mental Health Service suggested that we visit the area with an officer of the Service to gauge the psychosocial situation. We travelled by Landrover and canoe to Mailovera to interview the presumed cult leader, Erekofo Torea, and local key informants. Torea was a respected elder and healer with a reputation of possessing miraculous curing powers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he was the leader of a cult movement, prophesying the arrival of Jesus and the ancestors with cargo coming out of a sacred mountain, while the “Whites” would have to leave. Cult members had to take turns sleeping on the sacred mountain to receive the ancestors’ messages in their dreams. Eventually the Australian authorities ordered the arrest of Torea for causing public disturbance. The cultists expected their prophet-leader to die as a martyr like Jesus, as his death would usher in the millennium when indigenous people would become like the “Whites” and enjoy the “good life” with Western cargo. The crowd became wildly excited when Torea was led away to be imprisoned, albeit for a short time only. Subsequently, Torea’s following further increased and he

incurred the hostility of some church men. He constructed a "big house" with secret rooms for curing-sessions and a "conference room" where he met with bereaved family members who were able to hear noises from deceased persons when he talked to the spirits. Torea was able to determine the cause of death and advise relatives what should be done. Informants stated that Torea often diagnosed by opening the bible and praying. We saw that graveyards were decorated, food was left there for the ancestors, and buckets of water to be charged overnight with healing power.

During our visit in his village in the Gulf of Papua, Erekofo Torea spoke of the problems now facing the younger generation: "Our people are now living a mixed life, the traditional life of our grandfathers and modern life. Because of this mixed life that's where all sort of sickness come from." In his talk he referred to examples of the rapid socio-cultural change and its pathogenic effect on the young generation of his people - which could be generalized to most populations of Papua New Guinea. He mentioned "sick making worries" afflicting young people, very similar to the psychosocial syndrome among some aboriginal populations in North America, described by W. Jilek as anomic depression, characterized by anomie, relative deprivation, and cultural identity confusion (Jilek, 1982). Torea said he encouraged the revival of Toaripi traditions, such as re-establishing the Eravu clan buildings where young people would be initiated in traditional customs. While traditional initiation of male youth has been abandoned under "modernization" in many areas, it is still practiced in remote villages of the Sepik region and has an important function in cultural and gender identity formation (Jilek & Jilek-Aall, 1978). Torea also related his past efforts to unite the Toaripi people through his religious vision:

"I have tried to get the people together to apply what is written in the bible. I did succeed one time to live as one people, working as one people, but then this problem came when we got other people to break us up and split the people and now our people are living separate lives. I do have enemies who try to destroy the good work I have been trying to do in this community".

"Hahalis Welfare Society" in the North Solomons

The recent cult movement on Buka Island in the North Solomons was started soon after World War II by Sawa Korachi, a prophetic "Big Man" and his followers who were inspired by expectations of cargo provided by the ancestors but hitherto taken by the "Whites". Korachi inaugurated the creation of a "Welfare Society" at Hahalis, Buka Island. His nephew John Teosin was educated at the Catholic Mission and later attended Technical School in the westernized city Rabaul, New Britain. His uncle claimed that Teosin had learned the "cargo secret" of the Whites there. Under the charismatic leadership of John Teosin, the "Hahalis Welfare Society" developed into a socio-cultural and politico-economic organization, guided by an ideology of nativistic revival with a syncretistic Neo-Melanesian religion centred on a traditional culture hero as New Guinean saviour figure. Worship of the united indigenous people was promoted in ceremonials independent of the established Christian churches. Teosin's followers installed him as "king"; apparently he had his own bodyguard and "police force". Australian government agents attempting to apprehend Teosin had to retreat when confronted by a crowd of hostile local people. Eventually a stronger police force was able to arrest him and his associates but his early release only boosted the prestige of his organization. The "Hahalis Welfare Society" revived some traditional customs to propitiate the ancestors, the creators of "cargo", but also made social innovations. To make marriageable young women available to young men and not only to privileged seniors, volunteering girls could stay at "club houses" built by the Society and receive male visitors, preferably Society members, until they decided to marry one of them with their family's consent. Traditional dancing and singing was promoted. The society acted as collective parent to the babies born by these young women. This system aroused the ire of the missionaries to whom Teosin responded by quoting the bible: "*Go and multiply!*"

During our visit to his big house at Hahalis, Buka Island, John Teosin related the history of the movement he was leading:

“In 1955 we organized the Hahalis Welfare Society. The leading people from each of the four clans of Buka Island elected me as their leader. The colonial [Australian] government did not like that. They had introduced a personal head tax. The people did not know where the money was going, so we refused to pay the tax to the government. We, the Welfare Society, collected the tax amount from every man and used the money to build the road and water tanks. We had our own businesses but the government did not allow that, they did not want independent development by the people. We developed our own worship according to traditional custom, we used ideas both from the Catholic and Methodist Church, we prayed together, outside, not in a church building. We made our own Melanesian worship because our fathers had the principles and ideas of Christianity before the missionaries came; the idea of God, called Sunahan in our [Halia] language, and the idea of an evil spirit. In 1962 the colonial government arrested me and other leaders of the Hahalis Welfare Society after a fight with police. We were charged with spreading Cargo Cult rumours, they sentenced us to many months in jail but we got out after three months. We did away with the bride price; it got too high. A girl should have the right to choose her man; so we introduced a new way of getting married, exchange of letters between young man and girl, then their fathers had to agree to their marriage. We also recognized the traditional custom marriage, so the church did not like that. We brought boys and girls from the villages to Hahalis to learn the traditional customs from the elders - traditional dancing, garden keeping, handicrafts, old traditional stories. The youngsters were kept in separate houses here, some for about six months, others longer, one to two years. Some also got married during that time, custom way. The church was against teaching the young people the heathen customs, as they called it. They called it a “baby garden”, that was their name for our school that was teaching traditional customs. Now we have our local language school here where the children learn our traditions, we don’t need the custom school anymore...When independence came [1975] I was elected Member of the Constituent Assembly and helped work out the constitution”.

CONCLUSIONS

The Cargo Cult movements in Papua New Guinea emerged during the era of rapid social change in the 20th century, from Stone Age cultures to modernity. Although these cult movements developed against the background of traditional Melanesian mythology, they received essential impulses from the missionary teaching of biblical revelations and also from the spectacle of modern Western opulence, especially the enormous amount of cargo supplied for the Allies by ship and air during World War II.

These cult movements may seem bizarre, but they are not essentially different from messianic-prophetic movements that have historically occurred in Europe, and among non-European populations under the influence of Christian missionary teaching. The cult movements in New Guinea also have significant features in common with fundamentalist religious sects, and with political ideologies proclaiming a secularized millenarian utopia, such as the “Classless Society” or the “Thousand Years Reich”.

Dr. Burton-Bradley provided clinical evidence of psychopathology in certain Cargo Cult activists. The information we obtained on the main prophet of the Mt.Turun Movement indicates a history of symptoms indicative of affective and paranoid disorder. However, manifest psychopathology appears unlikely in the presented cases of the Toaripi and the Hahalis cult leader.

The Mt.Turun Movement points to the decisive role of the capable deputy leader in organizing the followers of a mentally-imbalanced messianic prophet, thus successfully transforming the cult movement into a local branch of a modern church. The historian of religion will find parallel examples of such developments in Western and non-Western societies.

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