

The Classical Study of Cargo Cults

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In some parts of the South Pacific, colonialism and even contact with Europe had been intermittent to minimal before 1900 or even the early 1900s. However, two epochal events occurred in this period to change all that—the two World Wars. These conflicts brought foreign men and foreign goods to these areas in quantities never seen before. Thousands of soldiers and other strangers came ashore and unloaded caches of goods the likes of which no had ever imagined. Indigenous islanders could have no idea where these people, and even more so their goods, came from; the one thing they knew was that the strangers had a lot of “cargo” and that the whites never seemed to work for any of it. The strangers stood around, marched around, sat around, but they never produced anything—yet they had an inconceivable largesse of stuff. Cargo cults were an indigenous attempt to make sense of this new situation and to acquire some goods for themselves; not surprisingly, their initial interpretation was religious. As Peter Lawrence put it, the cults were “based on the natives’ belief that European goods (cargo)...are not man-made but have to be obtained from a non-human or divine source” (1964: 1). However, in the wake of the disruptions of large-scale foreign contact, the movements were much more than that. Kenelm Burridge argued that the key theme in the cults “seems to be moral regeneration: the creation of a new man, the creation of new unities, the creation of a new society, of which wealth or material gain is but a part” (1960: 247).

One of the first and best-known examples is the “Vailala madness” that “broke out” in 1919 among the Elema people of Papua. Missionaries, particularly the London Missionary Society, had been active on the island for some time, and soldiers occupied the area during the war with all their material goods. At least some of the missionaries had condemned and suppressed traditional religion, and land and labor

had been expropriated from the natives; Peter Worsley (1968) pointed out that most of the adherents of the Vailala movement had been indentured laborers and were at least partially acculturated, often speaking English. Even worse, in the gold rush of 1910 nearly one-fourth of the native workers had died in the first half of the year, and the discovery of oil near Vailala River in 1911 only aggravated conditions. Overall the effect was to expose the Papuans to a “mysterious and irrational” European system which they at once resented, coveted, and misunderstood (Zamorska 1998:3).

The founding of the Vailala madness, or what the followers called the *kava-kava* or *kwarana giro*, *kwarana aika*, or *haro heraripi* (“head-he-go-round” in pidgin English, indicating the dizzying nature of the experience), or *iki haveve* (“belly don’t know,” another local expression for dizziness or ecstatic trance-like feelings), is usually attributed to a man named Evara, an elder who enjoyed both some degree of acculturation and some talent for trance and dissociation. However, when his father died many years before the present outbreak, he had experienced his first “madness.” He experienced it again when his younger brother died, and this time he told others about it and it spread. Naturally, it was not the dizziness or madness alone that captured his and others’ imagination but the specific “revelations” acquired then. He learned while in trance that a steamship would be coming for the natives, carrying their dead ancestors as well as stashes of cargo. In initial revelations rifles were mentioned among the cargo, although later ones emphasized food and other trade goods like tobacco. When these events came to pass, the whites would be expelled, and the indigenous folk would be restored to their independence and rightful ownership of resources.

The movement expressed a certain kind of native self-loathing (Evara claimed that “brown skins were no good...he wanted all the people to have white” [Worsley 1968: 82]), alloyed with traditional views that the ancestors were whitish. As it progressed, it developed a more elaborated doctrine with a visibly

Christian aspect. Many members referred to themselves as “Jesus Christ men,” and garbled notions of heaven and god emerged. God was called *Ihova*, and heaven was named *Ihova kekere* or Jehovah’s land. Others occupying heaven with *Ihova* included *Noa*, *Atamu*, *Eva*, *Mari* (*Atamu*’s daughter), and two of *Ihova*’s children, *Areru* and *Maupa*. An old decayed picture of King George V was offered as the likeness of *Ihova Yesu-nu-ovaki*, that is, Jehovah the younger brother of Jesus. Obviously, the movement was not only syncretistic but also millenarian, expecting a new age to dawn when the ancestors returned and deposed the Europeans. This was entirely in keeping with traditional focus on the ancestors, but the result was an opposition to the old rituals: masks, artifacts, and ceremonies were deliberately banned and destroyed.

New behaviors and rituals were established in their place. Tables with benches around them were set up in the center of villages. At these tables villagers sat for feasting to the dead ancestors, men sitting on the benches and women and children sitting on the ground around them. Additionally, ceremonial houses, called *ahea uvi* or “hot houses,” were constructed, also with tables and benches inside. Only practitioners of the movement entered the houses, which were seen as meeting places for the dead and the members as well as places for the members to retire for inspiration, waiting for that characteristic feeling in their stomach to indicate the onset of the “madness.” Finally, a pole or flag pole played a prominent role, apparently used as a communication device with the ancestors: energy or revelation would pass down the pole, into the ground, and then up into the bellies of the communicants, inspiring their trance experience. There were also ethical or moral proscriptions associated with the cult, including rules against stealing and adultery and violating the sabbath. However, in keeping with tradition, the worst behavior of all was neglecting the dead and the feasts that they needed or demanded. Some of the leaders of the movement also claimed or were claimed to have powers of divination, especially to see the causes of illness.

Julia Zamorski characterized this attempt as a kind of “magical leveling”—restoring parity, or even superiority, to the local people through religious/spiritual agencies. Finally, these movements also represented a *first* response, which was still a community-based response, to the challenges and threats. They were efforts to achieve “increasing unity and integrity” which were bound to fail and did fail; however, they were a first step in working out a new program of “modern” mobilization that could eventually lead to the creation of new identities and new communities, probably following the individualization of the indigenous community, as Lawrence cited above.

References

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