

FORERUNNERS OF MELANESIAN NATIONALISM

By JEAN GUIART¹

CARGO CULTS have come to interest not only the anthropologist but the general public also. Unhappily for the wide discussion they would justify, we cannot as yet lean on an exhaustive survey. It seems to me that this study will have to cover other significant if less known forms of what we must call "Melanesian Nationalism."

As an introduction to more detailed discussion, we may review some of the more important effects of culture change on native societies, as brought about by the impact of the white man's techniques, social organization and ideologies. We shall dwell for the most part upon New Hebridean and New Caledonian material, with which I am best acquainted.

(a) European techniques, materially representing the white man's standard of living, have been brought into the native's full view. There is ample proof that his acceptance of the many "schools" proposed to him, or his acquiescence in being put into "administrative shape," is due to the lure of these material ways of life.² To-day the general cry of the islanders is that they did not get what they hoped for, or at least received a very little part of it. The responsibility for this deception is laid on those who had undertaken the schooling. The more enlightened or dynamic groups attempt their own ways³ of reaching the goal of their wishes, the white man's standard of living.

(b) In most places the administration, often backing missionary initiative, has determined the setting up of a new political organization. Where traditional

¹ Institut Français d'Océanie, Noumea.

² Cf. F. M. Keesing, *The South Seas in the Modern World*, New York, 1941.

³ Cf. the general feeling in favour of co-operatives, "companies" as they are called in pidgin English.

chieftainships have been retained, they have been more or less controlled and given new prerogatives. In Fiji the local feodality seems to have been equated to English aristocracy; in New Caledonia, chiefs are considered and treated as normal administrative personnel; elsewhere local chiefs have been replaced by artificially created officials easier to control. Where administrative control has only come in the picture of late missions have either made use of the hereditary chiefs in their realm (New Caledonia), or have created entirely new chieftainships of their own (Tanna), so as to complete politically their Christian hierarchy of elders, teachers and pastors. This has been in most cases resented, the more so as it usually corresponded with artificial regrouping of populations.

(c) For often very material reasons most native groups have actually become converted to one of the numerous Christian faiths. Conversions of an earlier date lead here and there to some truly Christian individuals. But more often the observer has to conclude that only the exterior forms of Christianity have been adopted, that which suits best the ritualistically minded natives: taboos are more easily understood and adopted than creeds.

One could argue without end about the value to the native of the overt adoption of Christian faith. Nevertheless, it is generally admitted that it blends curiously with the more traditional faiths, which have by no means yet disappeared. Such a statement will bring us to some of the less known (or less publicized) facts of culture change.

(d) If, for instance, among New Caledonians totemism can be said to be almost a thing of the past,⁴ the cult of the dead is a very living thing, as some missionaries themselves will unhappily agree. We could even go to the length of saying not only that the cult of ancestors has been elaborated under the proximity of missionary predication, but also that it has crystallized and gained fresh impetus, although in most cases it has had to go underground. This is in fact so true that in recent years, having gained more self-confidence, the New Caledonians prevent any tinkering with the bones of their forbears in far away forest cemeteries, if necessary by forcing administrative action. Behind this is the faith in the all-pervading presence of the dead, either in the bush or nearer the homes of the living. True, the traditional higher mythologies speaking of a special land of the dead have lost most of their favour, being vaguely replaced in the native conception by the normal Christian sky-world. But the vision in dreams or during the daytime of a dead relative is more than ever determining behaviour. At the close of a fatal illness, young people of the present generation will claim to have seen their father or mother calling them back. Some people will still have prophecies or whole texts of new songs dictated to them at night by the dead. There is not a native teacher or pastor of my acquaintance who does not believe in the actuality of those things. And who knows those responsible for the offerings one will still find in some seemingly forlorn sacred grove?

⁴ Although I know of a native pastor claiming the cuttle-fish totem to be responsible for a rash from which he was suffering.

One interesting aspect of the present ancestor cult in New Caledonia is, so to speak, its democratic features. Probably because of its more or less secret existence, it has become (or remained) a matter of individual practice, without either priest or elaborate ritual.⁵ Yet it sometimes comes more or less into open notice. I know a Catholic missionary who, having permitted his flock to hold a recapitulative funeral feast in the traditional way, was worried to find small heaps of diminutive yams, which nobody seemed to care to take, and the presence of which nobody seemed willing to explain.

(e) The native faith in magic and sorcery in such societies has been widely publicized, if not always closely studied. My own personal study of the problem has brought me to what is not exactly a new insight concerning the evolution of magic in the last hundred years. Only a résumé of my viewpoint, however, can be given here.

At the time of the white man's arrival in Melanesia, native techniques of sorcery were different from what they are now. They dwelt mostly, it would seem, on the power attributed to certain things of the vegetable world, in most uses justified through the principle of sympathy, as defined by Sir James Frazer.

To-day's flourishing techniques of sorcery are based rather on the use of left-overs of a man's body (hair, nail clippings, excreta) or things having been in contact with the body, having been impregnated with its perspiration. I am positive that these techniques have only developed in recent times. In the New Hebrides, for example, one can follow on the map their spread along the coasts and from one island to another.⁶ Some districts (e.g. Big Nambas) have only acquired them in the last twenty years. One important feature of these newer techniques is that they are in possession of certain individuals (they, of course, show innumerable variants), instead of being practised by the representative of a clan. This emphasis, however, does not mean that the older magical methods have entirely disappeared.

In New Caledonia, recent techniques were evolved around the cult of a new god, called Doki, the "red one," said to have come from the New Hebrides. Lifu islanders brought this cult to the south, from where one can see it now gaining influence in the north, which has not as yet been overridden by it. Some men are known to have seen the "red god" crossing rivers in its march onwards. The material forms of the god are magical parcels in which mixed vegetable ingredients are combined with hair, nails, or teeth taken at night from a corpse—a mixture of older and newer efficacies.

In both New Caledonia and the New Hebrides the social aspect of sorcery offers identical developments. The new techniques are always possessed by individuals who acquired them elsewhere, often with European money and sometimes at

⁵ In the New Hebrides collective meetings for the purpose of evoking the dead are disappearing because of their conspicuousness. But no one will challenge their reality.

⁶ Such cases of transmission have already been pointed out to Deacon by his informants some 25 years ago; cf. A. B. Deacon, *Malekula: a vanishing people in the New Hebrides*, London, 1934. Abortion and sterilizing techniques have often followed the same roads of diffusion.

astonishingly low prices. These men are usually seeking power, which they gain through the terror they inspire in other people. For a long time they could only be subjected to secret revenge, making use of similar techniques. But public feeling subsequently grew up against sorcerers, laying on them the responsibility for the alarming depopulation. In the last years this general feeling has led to collective and more drastic measures. In numerous instances (e.g. Northern Malekula) such people were executed in conformity with decisions reached after general discussion of the case. They were either quietly strangled at night or killed with some ostentation.⁷

In New Caledonia a general movement started in 1939 on the same lines, although in less severe a way. Some men proclaimed themselves inspired and capable of detecting those who harboured the Dokis, the dreaded magical bundles. These clairvoyants were never more than three or four, and each kept in his own territory though he had initial contacts with the rest. They were called in by chiefs to cleanse their villages of sorcery. The responsible ones were found in due course and the bundles publicly destroyed. Some native officials even tried to get administrative patronage for such campaigns. The Government became suspicious, and, as this was the difficult period of New Caledonia going over to the side of the Free French, quite a number of natives were put in gaol. The movement, however, is still going on though more or less secretly. Some of its supporters explain they are only trying to root out sorcerers; they insist that magic in itself is not a "bad" thing, representing in native hands a power not in the possession of white people.⁸ We must consider such proceedings somewhat as a first move towards a reorganization of native society on autonomous lines.

(f) Coupled with the desire of these natives to enjoy a material life equal to European standards, this wish for their society to achieve an independent existence is the accepted and conscious basis for all the "Cargo" cults or movements which have arisen in the area and attracted attention in recent times. The general idea seems to be that the ancestors are to bring in a white ship "Cargo" which will give the natives means of power equal to those of the white man. Since the war, the "dead ones" are sometimes replaced by mythical "Americans." A theme of non-co-operation seems to provide the attitude pattern most in favour, so as to prepare the way for the white man's departure and the coming of the expected cargo. Such an attitude ranges from the rejection of European money (John Frum cult in the New Hebrides) to the actual organization of an independent state structure (Masinga Rule cult in the Solomons). In the Loyalty Islands an abortive native communist party was being organized in 1945 on what seems to have been cargo-cult lines. It seems worth while reviewing with some precision the details of such similarities.

⁷ Condominium administration has been left ignorant of such proceedings, so great is the general agreement on the necessity of such measures.

⁸ The native belief in magic is to-day matched by the belief which many local white's have in the magical powers of the otherwise despised "canaques."

New Guinea.

The first occurrence of a strictly cargo-cult disturbance happened in 1913 in the island of Saibai, Torres Straits. A better known early movement, known as the "Vailala madness," was in force from 1919 to 1925 in the Gulf Division of Papua.⁹ The essential characteristics were: the myth of the cargo which was to come on a ship manned by "white" ancestors; ritual observances (in which communal food was eaten in honour of the recent dead) done in specially erected houses where daily offerings were sometimes laid; general meetings where the principal people of the cult took to having trances in series and divination through logs carried by five or six men.¹⁰

In later years similar cults have come into being in northern New Guinea. Some dwelt upon an old prophecy speaking of an upheaval as a result of which prior to the coming of the cargo the social position between native and white man would be reversed. Immediately following the close of the war, the departure of the American troops gave rise to all sorts of attempts to gain the material life of which the natives had seen such a forceful expression. By a rather logical method of trial and error, they tried to create the conditions appropriate to the arrival of the long delayed steamer: organization of camps with military discipline on the American model, building of cargo houses, reorganization of model villages, community teaching of English, general public confessions, destruction of gardens, wholesale killing of fowls and pigs,¹¹ and self-imposed sexual continence.¹²

Solomon Islands.

Analogous cargo cults have been reported about 1930 for Buka, also with the expectation of a steamer laden with goods, which would not come while food was available.

Better known is the more southern instance of the cult called Masinga Rule.¹³ This movement flared up with the departure of allied troops from the Solomons, with Malaita island as its principal centre. The myth of the coming of the cargo was combined with demands for high wages, education, and even political independence. Administration took action when "subversive" activities, such as military drilling and exaction of monetary contributions, began to be organized on too large a scale. Arrests were made but have not yet brought an end to the movement.¹⁴

⁹ Cf. F. E. Williams, *The Vailala Madness and the Destruction of Native Ceremonies in the Gulf Division*, Papuan Anthropology Report No. 4, Port Moresby, 1923.

¹⁰ A similar traditional technique of divination exists in the "Big Nambas" territory of Malekula, New Hebrides.

¹¹ It seems that the vacuum thus created would have to be filled by the coming of the cargo.

¹² Cf. E. F. Hanneman, "Le culte du Cargo en Nouvelle Guinée," *Le Monde non Chrétien*, N.S., No. 8, Paris, 1948, pp. 937-962.

¹³ *Masinga* would seem to mean brother, brotherhood.

¹⁴ Cf. Cyril S. Belshaw, "The Significance of Modern Cults in Melanesian Development," *The Australian Outlook*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Sydney, 1950, pp. 116-125.

New Hebrides.

Two manifestations of a cult have been put on record for the New Hebrides. The movement is the oldest on Espiritu Santo, where it was known under the various names of Runovoro School, Malamala or Naked cult. As a somewhat erroneous report has been published about it, we shall go here into some details.

The first occurrence might have been the murder of the Greig family on Big Bay in 1908, the circumstances of which still remain mysterious. The case of the murder in 1923 of a plantation owner, Clapcott by name, seems clearer. The corpse was cut up and distributed throughout the bush tribes of the interior. Clapcott had been for some years on rather bad terms with most of his native neighbours, who accused him of interference with their women.¹⁵ He had been subjected to assaults and some destruction of his coconut trees. The inquest revealed that he had been killed on the order of a certain Runovoro. This man had prophesied that the dead ancestors would come back if it was not for the presence of Clapcott. Runovoro had a wide following throughout the centre of the island. The movement could be entered for a fee. He was said to be invulnerable and to have already come back from the dead, as they put it in pidgin English: "stump belong banana e cutem finish, by by him e grow back again." He seemed to believe it, as he gave himself up without the slightest show of fear. Runovoro and two of his accomplices were executed.

Although some reports came in that the movement was going on in the bush tribes, there was not any real show of disturbance before 1937. This time the principal man, Avu-avu, was arrested and died in prison before anything serious happened. There was the same tale of the white man's presence preventing the arrival of the dead, but it had the new variation about the ship, which would bring the cargo right to the spot where Clapcott had been killed.

In the last years the existence of the movement has been publicized by the Presbyterian mission whose progress it threatened. The cargo-cult myth is still as vigorous as ever. A dock built to receive the cargo was burnt down by the British District Administrator. Some elements which may not all be new have been recently brought to light: a special house for a modernistic ritual including preaching and community singing,¹⁶ poles and creepers representing a "wireless belong boy,"¹⁷ the cargo said to be American, and a road being built to transport it to the bush villages. Quite a number of other details have been given by the missionary worker, J. Graham Miller, but they are open to some doubt, owing to his obviously mixing recent happenings such as are recorded above with more traditional elements: communal houses and exposition of corpses on a funeral platform.¹⁸

¹⁵ Clapcott denied it and to clear himself caused some illiterate natives to sign a written statement absolving him of the accusation.

¹⁶ An informant spoke to me of shaking fits and prophesying.

¹⁷ It was said to have no more importance than a toy: "belong play no more."

¹⁸ Both these details were reported as early as 1937. Cf. T. Harrison, *Savage Civilization*, London, 1937, pp. 271, 370 and 381.

The "John Frum" movement in Tanna, southern New Hebrides, is better known, although its history is much shorter. Some brooding was observed in 1940, but the affair really started early in 1941. It was said that the god Karaperamun, master of the highest mountain of the island, appeared under the new form of John Frum, King of America. In the first instance John Frum spoke directly, but at a later stage sent his word through messengers known as "ropes of John Frum." The results of his messages were striking: churches of all denominations were deserted by the people; Christian villages broke into small units scattered in the bush, each family going to live on its own ground in small and unhealthy shelters. On Saturdays people met for a renewal of the traditional dances and men drank kava, all things hitherto forbidden by the Presbyterian mission. A new money, with a coconut stamped upon it, was to replace the white man's money; people spent all their money in stores, saying, "by by money belong me he come, but face belong your fella king, take em he go back"; some even went to the length of throwing their carefully stocked gold pounds into the sea. The idea was that when there would be no money left on the island the white traders would have to depart, as no possible outlet would be left for their activity. With the white men gone, John Frum would appear in his glory to his children and give them all the material riches of the departed Europeans. He will come on a Friday, and this day must from now on be sanctified. At the appointed time, Tanna island will flatten itself, mountains filling the river beds, and Aneitium will join with Erromanga and Tanna, and a "golden era" will start on this new enlarged island.

This general picture has since shown only a few variations, some of which have given rise to administrative anxiety, and consequent repressive measures. Of the two men who had proclaimed themselves John Frum, one man was arrested and exposed, and the other one finally interned in the New Caledonian lunatic asylum. This last one had requisitioned labour for the building of an aerodrome for American planes, and with the armed guard he had organized, had put the District Agent in a rather unhappy position.¹⁹ For the time being, the movement seems still alive, but remains under cover for fear of administrative action. The only overt feature is a cry for better instruction, which some native leaders would make the basis of all the agitation. Missionary activities, after what seemed a complete stop, have been renewed on a rather modest scale. Dancing and kava drinking go on as hard as ever.²⁰ Some leaders, considered as too dangerous to be left on the spot, were exiled to Port Sandwich, on Malekula. Apparently remaining quiet, they carried on an efficient but unobtrusive propaganda. Following this, the John Frum movement has been carried, sometimes in a very active form, into most of the central islands—

¹⁹ He had to ask for reinforcements by radio under the pretence of demanding a ship to evacuate him from the island.

²⁰ Cf. P. O'Reilly, "Prophetisme aux Nouvelles-Hébrides. Le mouvement Jonfrum á Tanna (1940-1947)," *Le Monde non Chrétien*, N.S., No. 10, Paris, 1949, pp. 192-208, and Jean Guiart, "Le mouvement John Frum á Tanna" (to be published).

Ambrym, Paama and Epi. The story of the movement is now widely known and many visitors have been to the place of exile of the four Tannese.²¹

The movements just reviewed are the most important, although they seem very much alike. We can assume that what is in one place a most important item will have to be recognized elsewhere only as a trend, sometimes not even well characterized. Propaganda for a native co-operative, for example, can take the form of an announcement of a native millennium.

In 1939 some men of the extreme north of Malekula organized a co-operative movement meant to bolster copra production so as to obtain through the profits means of bettering the material life of their whole group. In the first years the activity was mostly confined to planting coconut groves. After the war, one of the leaders began spinning stories of the cargo-cult type, with ships which were to bring goods from America ; he gave as his reference a Captain W. Otto of the U.S. Army, alleged to have made him such promises. This leader had had some contact with the exiled John Frum leaders from Tanna. His talking caused trouble for some time and had the result of frightening the Administration. Fearful of repression, his colleagues ousted him, so as to go on untroubled with the economic organization of their co-operative, which is beginning to show some results, though through the very expensive help and advice of a young European trader. The movement is actually in such a rapid state of expansion that it has obliged the Condominium Government to study specialized legislation.

In the New Caledonian archipelago events show some parallelism but are still less characteristic. In 1945, after the war, a communist movement was launched among the natives. It spread very quickly but has since then subsided, when the dishonesty of the main European promoters was recognized. In Lifu, one of the Loyalty Islands, the activity was mostly non-political in appearance, having centred around a desire of the native people to acquire a ship of their own to trade directly with Noumea. Money was collected to buy the ship. Talk was also going on that it would be sent from France by the Metropolitan Communist Party. Coupled with agitation for "liberty" and promises of material wealth to come, the whole set-up often took quite a cargo-cult appearance. In this case, however, it must be considered as a possibility which had neither the time nor the opportunity of being realized. People are still collecting money for their ship, but the political label has now been relinquished.

In an article on cargo cult in New Guinea, the Lutheran Pastor E. F. Hanneman very aptly linked it with the contemporary instances of syncretism, either as a temporary disturbance inside the mission, or under the more organized fashion of an autonomous sect. They certainly have to be taken into account in the general survey of Melanesian nationalism.

²¹ In accordance with a new administrative policy they have recently been allowed to return to Tanna.

Numerous cases of parallel movements have been reported in earlier times but have been little studied. The best known is the 1885 Tuka cult in Fiji; a prophet called Nava savaka dua, "he who speaks once," arose, speaking of an upheaval after which social and racial values would be reversed, and Jehovah would be subordinated to local gods. This teaching replaced the older prophecy, according to which the serpent-god Ngendrei would come back one day and would restore the might of his people over Europeans. In New Guinea, too, syncretism was only bringing a new mythical justification for the general wish to get rid of white men and at the same time to acquire their riches.

More recently independent sects which have come into being insist on religious autonomy and little, if at all, on material aims. But it can often be inferred that the latter remain under cover for reasons of more or less conscious opportunism. Actually in movements such as have been studied on Fiji,²² one can easily notice the wish for independence in religious as well as secular affairs, but neither the leaders nor the people seem desirous of giving any indication of the real aims of the movement. One can explain away such happenings by accusing the headmen of ambitious and unscrupulous exploitation of their followers' credulity; but the over-simplicity of such a judgment is evident and quite unsatisfactory. The defectiveness of this often repeated administrative view has already been pointed out by Cyril S. Belshaw,²³ himself a former administrative officer.

If we were to attempt a general conclusion based on solid foundations, we would need more than this cursory review. A detailed study of the mythical background and the activities of all these movements would be necessary and will have to be done. My intention was only to stress the necessity of studying them all together, without isolating cargo cults from the sundry other movements which give us the necessary links and often the necessary light for an over-all picture.

Nevertheless, I can give here some tentative conclusions. In the sociological background of these movements we do not find any general similarity; the social basis may in each case be quite different, the participants belonging to all categories, ranging from bushmen to Christians of long standing. The common element is a lack of balance in the actual native society, the traditional frame having been undermined or destroyed, and the newly organized one being the result of a more or less open and direct interference in local native affairs. Personal experience has taught me that Melanesians will only be intent and persevering on plans they have thought of by themselves. On the other hand, they are capable of making the most of any structure imposed upon them. No account of propaganda seems to have been able to convince them of the good intentions of the white man. They judge him in terms of the material wealth he seems to enjoy, at what they think is their own expense. When it is not hatred, contempt for the sons of their conquerors is often outwardly displayed, and it can rarely be said that the native suffers from an inferiority complex;

²² Cf. A. C. Cato, "A New Religious Cult in Fiji," *Oceania*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 1947, pp. 146-156.

²³ Belshaw, *op. cit.*

they simply bide their time, being convinced that one day they will get even with us. From time to time they have tried to accelerate the historical process; up to date they have failed, although it must be recognized they have always reaped some advantages from the past existence of their subversive movements.²⁴ In the Melanesian realm, which in reality comprises countries of very little economic future, Administrations are usually insufficiently powerful and are loath to keep up a repressive policy for too long, lest it should seriously endanger the lives of the few scores of scattered Europeans; moreover, military expeditions of the past have proved too costly. The natives are conscious of what possibilities such an awkward situation offers to them. If some are going too far in the claims for independence, other leaders will step into the picture with moderate and less outspoken requests for education and medical facilities. There will not be any real hostility, however, between those who take a radical position and the more prudent people; the discussion will be in terms of efficiency; ethical judgments only come in through the use of European concepts, the philosophical connotations of which are not understood by the native who makes use of them.

In other words, native society presents us with a varied and multi-faced picture. It can be assumed that the more co-operative leaders (if they are not administrative puppets) represent the people as much as the prophets and the cargo-cult style revolutionaries. For European administration in the area, this affords possibilities of putting into being a workable if unwritten arrangement with Melanesian society which would favour its swift material and intellectual progress without barring the possibility of local European activity. The future of the islanders obviously lies in co-operation with the white man; but the realization of this must be brought home to them before they get out of control as a result of prolonged disillusion and bitterness. When they themselves come at their own slow pace to make use of modern political methods, the present opportunity will have been lost. These islands may be Paradise, but past experience shows that they are not impervious to social upheavals.²⁵

JEAN GUIART.

²⁴ In New Caledonia natives are nearing complete political equality. It must be said that since the advent of the white man they have always given instances of a more efficient organization than the rest of Melanesia. Viewed in a general way, their two rebellions (1878 and 1917) have been instances of classical colonial military struggle, very different from a cargo cult.

²⁵ I must thank Professor F. M. Keesing, who read this paper in manuscript and made many valuable suggestions for improving my English. I would like to add here his own comment on my conclusion: "The factor of European race consciousness and superiority might perhaps be brought out more fully as driving the native back upon himself and limiting opportunity. A dual educational task exists, one facet native education, the other, education of Europeans to realize the seriousness of the by-products of their attitudes."

28 OCTO 1968

Reprinted from *Oceania*, December 1951. Vol. XXII. No. 2

FORERUNNERS OF MELANESIAN
NATIONALISM
BY JEAN GUIART

SYDNEY
AUSTRALASIAN MEDICAL PUBLISHING COMPANY LIMITED
Arundel and Seamer Streets, Glebe
1952



ORSTOM Fonds Documentaire

N° 22935

Cote B