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MELANESIA: *the three miracles*

Million Dollar Point: the Garbage Dump in 1975.

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The efforts of Melanesian societies to adjust to the modern world frequently result in the development of myths which act as a bridge between traditional societies and the various forms of dependence or alienation generated by the arrival of the Europeans. Cargo cults—widely varying, but basically a response to the same deep needs—are the best known forms of this production of myths in a transitional period which stretches from the moment when the original balance is destroyed up till the present day—almost a century. The subject material and arguments set forth here apply for the most part to the New Hebrides, although their more general aspects may well be relevant elsewhere.

The very diversely structured New Hebridean societies responded then to contact with traders, missionaries and administrators by generating myths which explained conflicts away by setting them on a higher and broader plane where—at least apparently—all difficulties are smoothed over. It was as though cultural stress resulting from failure to adjust could be made to vanish by collective sublimation in order that community life remain bearable, and the community itself capable of regeneration and survival. It was in this way that the Melanesians were to a large extent able to come to terms with their new world and themselves.

This imaginary Brave New World is a way of settling concrete, day-to-day problems when there is insufficient understanding to exert control over them. The capacity of the Melanesians to assimilate the mechanisms of commerce appears to have masked somewhat their almost total inability to assign cultural meanings, or a cultural interpretation, to what they discovered or learned.

In addition, contact with traders, missionaries and administrators extended no further than the coast, which explains the fact that there are still today groups which, although they have assimilated newly accessible tools and some consumer goods, have to a large extent

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Nagriamel pre-election streamer (March, 1975).

retained their traditional culture. There are, on the other hand, many New Hebridean groups whose customs have completely faded away, but who are outsiders to the imported, Europeanized world of the coast. To this day, only a minority can use the goods and services available without resorting to a mechanism of mythical adjustments and interpretations in order to give meaning to what they do and see.

Our purpose here is to examine the phenomenon of collective reinterpretation, or generating of myths, which is anchored in the climaxes of the history of these societies; the arrival of the Europeans, the landing and presence of the American forces and, lastly, economic and social development which came into being under the control of the administering authorities and national or international organizations. These three points are the three miracles of Melanesian society. They represent a sudden, brutal awareness of the onward march of history, but, simultaneously, the realization that history was moulded by and for western societies: the islanders perceived it, but could not participate in it. The three miracles make up the stock-in-trade of contacts and experiences upon which these societies founded their own reinterpretation, their own cultural appropriation.

1. THE MIRACLE OF THE WHITE MAN

When the first navigators—Quiros, Cook, Bougainville — discovered or visited Melanesia, they plunged the islanders into a state of bewilderment. These fair-skinned creatures who dealt out death from afar, and brought with them strange animals and formidably efficient tools—were they men or gods? The Melanesians were torn between fear and a cultural need to exchange goods in order to forge social ties, with the result that their relations with the white visitors hovered permanently between aggressiveness and co-operation, as can be seen in most of the narratives of this period (Shineberg, 1967, Holthouse, 1970). A well-received gift or a clumsy gesture was more than enough to tip the scales one way or the other. Hence, the better prepared expeditions achieved successful contacts, whereas incidents involving ignorant or righteously overconfident sailors degenerated into brawls.

The practice and etiquette of exchanging goods was highly ritualized in these societies, and the fact that most of the items now traded were totally unknown made these foreign inroads into traditional patterns even more difficult and delicate. Thus, the arrival of the first Europeans coincided with the arrival of new goods. The practical function of the latter was quickly grasped, but their social function, because it sprang from the ambiguous void between the two cultural systems, became a source of myths of all descriptions. This being so, we may more readily understand why Melanesian societies developed the lasting conviction that the power of the white man is, to a certain extent, an outgrowth of the objects which he possesses. In the eyes of the Melanesians, the European was virtually identified with the objects he manipulated; they were the outer signs of his power, the real contents of which were difficult to come to grips with.

With repeated exposure to missionaries, settlers and administrators, this pondering on the nature of Europeans and their power stopped, and the effects of the initial contact rose to the surface. However, the Melanesians never found full or final answers to these questions, being overwhelmed by an avalanche of new goods and patterns of behaviour—the trappings of the power of the white man. But all this remained perfectly meaningless to them, because they knew nothing of the society which had produced these foreigners and their objects; and the objects themselves were considered rather as tokens or attributes of wealth and power than as goods produced in a given technical and economic context.

The Melanesians who returned from the plantations of Queensland told of the comfort and abundance in which the white men lived, but failed to relate these to the underlying production process, since they were given agricultural tasks and not industrial ones. With the money they earned, they were able to buy things, but not to gain understanding of the mechanism of industrial production and consumption.

Placed under the administrative control of foreign powers, and economically dependent on

commercial interests in which they had no share, the Melanesians suffered collective frustration, the repercussions of which are felt to this day, and may thus claim to be historic. The prime reason for this cultural shock which set in after the arrival of the Europeans was the upheaval of the traditional patterns of exchange by which New Hebridean societies obtained continued renewal, redistribution of goods, and surplus management, which were the cornerstones of their traditional political organization.

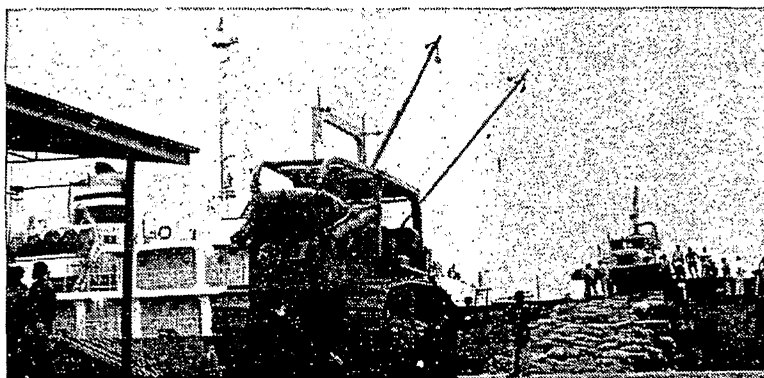
Even the spirit of exchange was distorted by the presence of new products. Trading with the whites revealed such a yawning gap in technology and material wealth that the Melanesians very understandably felt the desire to steal a few nails on the ships, first of all, and later collectively coveted ownership of all this wealth—and this is the essence of cargo cults. This desire soon turned into a feeling of having been cheated. The Melanesians were converted to the religion of the whites, but did not receive the promised 'wages of happiness', and did not eat what the missionaries and settlers ate. Some learned to drive vehicles and machines, but their newly acquired skills did not bring all these new European objects within reach. It was as if their rightful side of the bargain had somehow been appropriated or embezzled by the whites and employers. Gradually, and in a confused manner, they realized that their share was to be the leftovers, or indeed the rubbish, which white society would sell them if possible or simply leave them if not.

Thus, the miraculous arrival of the white man led only to the frustration of looking without possessing, of using without abusing, of having to buy singly objects of which hundreds and thousands were landed, precluding both enjoyment of the marginal utility of the object, and accumulation as a token of prestige, whereas, according to the festive traditions, belongings are there to be given generously, and the display of wealth is a prelude to its distribution. But the festivities in which the settlers had refused to let them play a part were to come once again within reach of the Melanesians when the Americans landed during the Second World War, setting the stage for the second, even more promising miracle: the American miracle.

2. THE AMERICAN MIRACLE

Most of the following facts and figures are quoted from a long article by Yves Geslin on the presence of the Americans in the New Hebrides. Even today, three decades later, it is astonishing to see the extent of the American phenomenon from 1943 to 1945. When, in June 1942, the Americans reached Santo, there was a total lack of infrastructure; everything literally sprang up overnight. Palekula aerodrome was built in five days, and by 1944 was catering for 1,100 aircraft, without mentioning the two other landing strips for bombers, replaced after the war by commercial DC 4s. In 1943 and 1944, 100 to 150 ships daily were moored at Palekula, while the floating dock at Surunda was capable of accommodating liners the size of the *Queen Mary*.

With 100,000 men stationed at Santo, the local population was substantially outnumbered and the facilities necessary for the everyday affairs of such a large force may well be imagined. The island rapidly became a gigantic barrack-cum-warehouse, bristling with hospitals, workshops and stores, and also featuring factories, laboratories, training camps and leisure areas. Since there was nothing on the spot, everything was flown or shipped in, in enormous quantities, the troops being considered to have come to stay for an indefinite period.



Arrival of public works equipment at Luganville (Santo) in 1974

The setting up of military infrastructure and basic requirements for the daily life of 100,000 men brought about a certain amount of inevitable friction, and above all the creation of an unofficial 'business' for the local population. The high salaries paid to the soldiers and the boredom inherent in expatriation were a windfall to restaurant owners and dealers in alcohol. The state of anarchy arising from the war economy was such that it was never possible to draw up an accurate inventory of stocks, and the resulting corruption inevitably led to all kinds of under-the-counter dealing in everything from cigarettes to jeeps and fuel, and even trucks.

Thus, a war economy was grafted onto the colonial plantation society, with the black market providing the necessary adjustment mechanism. The ensuing trade, while being out of all proportion to the previous economy, did not bring about any drastic change in the local society. Its impact was restricted to a

handful of settlers who became aware of the economic significance of machines, and developed somewhat more ambitious projects than in the past, but there was nothing that could be described as a boom, or which left a lasting imprint on the local attitudes. This emphasizes the limitation of a war economy, which has a restricted cultural impact; there is a process of adjustment, but no far-reaching change in habits.

It may be seen from this description that the American forces on Santo amounted to the temporary importation of a consumer society, which subsequently disappeared as quickly as it had come. The only tangible traces left were an enormous heap of rubbish, sheds, empty runways overrun by weeds, and broken-down jeeps which have been lying for years in backyards —these rusting relics can be seen even in remote islands and villages.

Such a formidable display of power and material wealth had a tremendous influence on the Melanesians, who came in large numbers to work on the building of bases, aerodromes and roads. The atmosphere being relatively devoid of colonialism, they gained from this permanent exhibition a foretaste of the power and wealth that they had always been deprived of. The second-generation foreigners were richer, and more generous with food and wages. But, above all, they spent unstintingly, and never hesitated to waste or destroy, thus guaranteeing themselves undying collective prestige; they became the Big Men, the Melanesian lords. Paradoxically, the black Americans were the only ones to be denied their aura of prestige, doubtless because, of all the Americans, they were the least well off. For the Melanesians, it was a time of festivity. Just as the yams heaped up on the village meeting ground are distributed after the traditional ceremonies, so the involvement of the local people in this ostentatious display of the symbols of power seemed to them to foreshadow the coming distribution amongst all those who had given their labour.

From 1944-1945 onwards, the American troops left the New Hebrides as suddenly as they had come. Their departure marked the end of the festivities; the time had come to share out the proceeds. Instead, the Melanesians looked on as the incredible took place. The whole enormous market folded up in a matter of months, sometimes of weeks; everything that could be carried off was removed, and the rest was thrown away in a last, chaotic operation, described by Yves Geslin:

> *Absolutely nothing was to be dismantled or packed up. No one felt like doing this, and, in any case, it would have been pointless, since it was impossible to find a fleet large enough to embark everything which had been landed on the coast of Santo. Simply abandoning the equipment was also out of the question because, as Service Command pointed out, this enormous array of objects of all shapes and sizes would have been channelled through an invisible network over all the Pacific, ending up in New Zealand, Australia, and the thousands of Pacific islands and atolls, with the result that, for ten years at least, the United States would not have been able to sell anything whatsoever in this part of the world. Most of the equipment—either in poor condition or brand new—was destroyed, which brings me to Santo's foremost curiosity: the 'Garbage Dump'.*

Some of the docks, and in some instances, even the bases, were bought up lock, stock and barrel by the Condominium, together with a few plantation owners, while most of the Melanesians looked on passively without being able to take an active part. But the proceeds of such sales were nothing in comparison to what was destroyed. By the end of 1945, there were ten acres of rubble jutting out into the sea. Anything unsaleable was simply dumped in the water. Yves Geslin:

> *A number of mobile cranes on tracks took up position at the tip of the dump, near the water's edge, and those present were then treated to an amazing sight. Unending strings of trucks rolled up to the dump. They were checked off on entering, and then emptied their trays near a crane. As the office furniture, refrigerators, radios and so on piled up, they were picked up by the cranes and flung into the sea. One after the other, the units were taken off the island, and the contents of their camps and workshops fed methodically into the dump. To speed things up towards the end, the trucks were not even unloaded. The black drivers climbed down, leaving the engine running. The crane operators took a cable twice around the truck, which was then hoisted some 20 feet above ground, and swung. The operator opened the grab at the appropriate moment, releasing the truck which, after describing a graceful parabola, hurtled down into fifteen or twenty fathoms of water. The operation was repeated* ad nauseam *from sunrise to sunset.*

This, then, was the end of the American miracle. Their insanely grandiose destruction created a legend around them, winning them a mythical prestige which has lasted to this day. Curiously enough, the frustration of the Melanesians is not directed against the Americans themselves, but against those who managed to buy something for virtually nothing, the main culprit being the New Hebrides Condominium. Whereas mindless destruction did at least bring glory with it, bargain buying was a step back into the banal and unglorious colonial economy; the Melanesians found themselves back where they had started, convinced that the purchasers had robbed them of the

goods that were rightfully theirs.

The cultural response was immediate. Firstly, the Atori affair in 1946: Atori wanted to build a road through the bush for the arrival of the American cargo. And later, rumours of the return of the Americans spread throughout the islands, as though a new explanation had to be found now that the miraculous opportunity had been missed, as though a new procedure had to be devised to enable the cargo to circumvent all the obstacles placed in its path and reach those for whom it was destined.

3. THE MIRACLE OF DEVELOPMENT

The land on which the Santo Garbage Dump is situated is today held by an American-owned company dealing in public works and other investments, in particular real estate. This coincidence is more than merely an amusing anecdote, and it brings us to the third and last miracle: development. It was not until the administering authorities, France and Britain, introduced institutions intended to usher in the rudiments of political life that the New Hebrides gradually began to emerge from the lethargic slumber of a plantation economy and missionary conformity. This political development was, of course, also to be economic, with the result that a number of public and private investments were planned.

We shall not examine the details of these economic projects, however important their political aspects may have been, but rather consider their impact on the New Hebridean communities for whom they were conceived. Only a few—the more evolved urban classes—grasped the political and economic nature of these investments, the majority of the rural population seeing them essentially as a latter-day miracle. It was as if, ignoring the technical and economic investment planned and contributed by the Europeans, the Melanesians made the project theirs by injecting into it their own cultural and mythical investment. An excellent example of such attempts at cultural appropriation of an imported process is offered by Nagriamel, a political and religious movement in the North of the New Hebrides. (Hours, 1974.)

The two previous miracles having miscarried, investments tend to be received, if not as something rightfully owed, at least as a well-deserved reversal of the situation, or as belated fulfilment of thwarted hopes. This explains why the Melanesians often take only a fleeting interest in projects they themselves requested; their interest wanes once they realize that they have little control over the process and that, for example, the granting of loans or credit will not turn into a cheque made out to the community, but into construction work involving the awarding of contracts and the intervention of Europeans. The result is that such projects—initially considered miraculous because a wish or expectation is fulfilled by some unexpected help—very quickly develop into a cultural game which materializes in the form not of goods, but of signs of power. In other words, investments—considered in fact as a gift—constitute the opening stakes in a game in which the entire community projects itself into a future of wealth and plenty, completely out of touch with reality, whence the subsequent decline in interest.

The notion of needs is generally defined by Europeans, whose criteria are meaningless in native culture. The completed projects are of course useful, but not in the way that the Melanesian communities to which we are referring expect them to be. Under these circumstances, there is nothing surprising in the resulting discrepancy between a project and the use to which it is put. Indeed, this phenomenon has been observed in all parts of the world; the developing countries, in particular, provide a wealth of examples. In the New Hebrides, however, it is heightened by the mythical expectations arising from the cargo cult, which have permeated all levels of cultural life.

Development projects, then, are given a purpose different from that intended by their sponsors, and thus are recast to include a new myth announcing the advent of a new state of abundance; this future wealth is of course material, but also cultural, in other words, redefined by those for whom it is intended.

What was to be a road connecting two points becomes a six-lane motorway; a primary school is the seed from which a future university will spring; a herd of livestock turns into the beginning of a canning factory.

The fruition of these modest projects will necessarily fall short of the expectations of the Melanesians; of necessity, it will fail to procure them the promised and expected power and thus, once again, the Melanesians feel the benefit of the miracle slipping out of their grasp. In their minds, the bulldozer which builds a road, or clears a field, is far more important than the road itself, or the crops which will appear in its wake. It remains the image of power harnessed by the Europeans. It is a tool of power which the New Hebrideans cannot own, and therefore they take no interest in what it can produce. If the miracle of development were truly to come home to its rightful beneficiaries, it would be in the form of a cargo of trucks, cranes, and mechanical shovels of which the Melanesians would be the only users, the real owners, free to use and to abuse, free to destroy if they so desired.

CONCLUSION

The three Melanesian miracles can be described as a deep and lasting expectation, and an attempt to control a socio-economic process which has its centres of decision in the metropolitan countries. When the bottom falls out of the copra market, the New Hebrideans consider the ensuing drop in prices as a tax or levy, which they express as 'cutem', or 'cut'. They cannot understand why the price has fallen; to them it is the work of an awesome and occult power wielded by a few initiates.

Lack of education is of course partially responsible for this inability to explain socio-economic phenomena in terms of anything except miracles. But the main reason for it is the fact that these societies were swept directly from their traditional culture into the mysteries of the market economy. They are the very last, and least informed link in the chain; they receive not messages, but merely signs, which they attempt to interpret with the limited means at their disposal. Just as the goods they receive are mostly left-overs, the information they are given is residual information, and can only be co-ordinated by a mythical interpretation.

Thus, the outward signs of power are taken to be power itself, a play-acting semblance of development replaces development, a single element (object) replaces the whole in which it is a functional part, and magical creation is substituted for production. Via the three miracles, the Melanesians have invented a new set of instructions for a universe of unmatching objects, thereby creating a language in antagonistic partnership with that of our industrial society.

By contesting the permanent shortage in which they live, while the Western world is beginning to contest overabundance, the inhabitants of remote islands are taking an unwitting part in a global context they are doing their best to elucidate. In a recent work, Jean Baudrillard makes a striking analogy between consumers in a consumer society and the followers of the cargo cult. 'Advertising cunningly substitutes the enchantment of the cargo' (the state of total and miraculous abundance of which the Melanesians dream) for the relentless logic of the market. Consumption is governed by a magical idea, and daily life by a mentality which dreams of miracles. It is a primitive mentality, in so far as a primitive mentality may be defined as one which is based on belief in the absolute power of thought; here, we are dealing with belief in the absolute power of symbols. Affluence is, in fact, nothing more than the accumulation of these symbols of happiness.

Thus, underdeveloped peoples take Western 'aid' for granted, considering it as something natural, which should long since have been granted them. They see it as a magic medicine having no relation to history, technology, continued progress and the world market. But if one cares to devote a little thought to the matter, it would appear that the miraculously enriched Western consumers behave collectively in exactly the same way. While the myth of the cargo is declining in Melanesia, it is undergoing rebirth in the West.

The production of myths, the mechanism by which Melanesian societies adjust to history, is the driving force behind all cargo cults. It creates both a demand for material goods, and the desire to consume. However, manufactured goods are not produced locally; consequently, consumption is relegated to a remote and plentiful future which is nourished and enriched by myths. In industrial societies, it is the production of objects which gives rise to consumption. These objects then either become mythical when consumed, or are mythically consumed. Thus the cycle, production of objects/consumption of myths, may be renewed indefinitely.

The Melanesian society produces myths, whereas its industrial counterpart produces objects. Both, however, consume myths; the myth of a miracle which never comes true, unceasing exorcism to obtain total happiness, that is, affluence. Both have succumbed to the myth of objects, which may or may not be physically present, but which in any case are eternally waited for in order to be destroyed. This being so, and considering the imbalances which have arisen from growth in the industrialized countries and the climate of wishful thinking which reigns in overdeveloped countries, one may well wonder if it is not less dangerous to produce myths than objects, and whether our most urgent objective should not be to strike a more just balance between those who have too much and those who do not have enough, thus making the pipe-dreams of both less chaotic. This presupposes that cultures and societies exchange something other than mere rubbish and patent recipes for the happiness of groups and individuals. It also presupposes that the also-rans of history enter the international family of nations and become capable of distinguishing an object from its shadow. Only in this way can the islanders hope to avoid the experience of a cultural garbage dump, the disparate, unwanted and outdated cast-offs of other countries.

Original text: French.

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