

# 1984

Religion and Communication:  
The Case of Cargo Cults  
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Religious ideas and practices can be viewed as both concrete and abstract forms of communication. Concretely they unify disparate groups by crosscutting other social ties (region, race, kinship, polity). Abstractly they are forms of communication both with the accumulated ideas of the past, and with the potentialities of an uncertain future. For twenty-five years I have been studying a phenomenon of Melanesian culture called cargo cults. These are millenarian religious movements that appeared sporadically in the area since the eighteen-eighties and which, in altered form, are detectable to this day. They are structurally similar to millenarian cults throughout the world, and one can get a feeling for them from reading, for example, Leon Festinger's classic study *When Prophecy Fails*.

Melanesia is that language and cultural area that extends from New Guinea through the island chains into the Western Pacific. By and large untouched by the Islam of the Indonesian archipelago and the Buddhism of much of Asia, these island peoples had indigenous religions of their own, which we would probably describe as animistic and pantheistic. However these peoples were eventually contacted by Europeans who brought with them a new economic system, a new system of administration, and, deeply yet subtly connected with the first two, new religious ideas. The economic progress and modernity offered on the one hand was matched by the salvation offered on the other.

Cargo cults are manifestly syncretic. Each cult was highly localised, organised by a single (or small group of) prophets, and blended an amalgam of ideas and action seemingly drawn freely from local tradition, imaginative invention, and more or less garbled religious, economic and political elements imported by the white man.

A most striking feature of the cults was that they predicted the imminence of redemption, or salvation, and that the events would take place in a concrete form such as the arrival of a shipful of free goods, or an airplane bearing the souls of the dead, or a change of skin colour reversing the colours of the white men and the black men. The cults were often apocalyptic and caused grave social disruption before (and, obviously, after) the predicted apocalypse did not transpire.

The concrete communicative lesson that was learnt from the study of these cults was that despite the vast distances of empty ocean that separated the islands and cultures of Melanesia, the myths and ideas of the cults managed to spread themselves and have therefore a mutual influence that was not thought to be possible. Further reflection on this revealed that the reason the myths of the cargo travelled so well, is that they matched, resembled, and perhaps even recapitulated elements of the traditional religious ideas of Melanesia, about which very little is known in any historical depth.- It is not that their travel was made possible by this resonance,

but rather the transmission and appropriation of the slightest hints and flimsiest of rumours was effective because of these resonances.

By coincidence, it was also twenty five years ago that Elihu Katz published his classic article 'Communication Research and the Image of Society: The Convergence of Two Traditions', in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Katz argued that the atomised individual envisaged in much early mass communications research was going to have to yield to the discovery of the importance-of interpersonal relations for mediating communication and hence begin a process of convergence with the study of the reception of innovation by rural sociologists, who were learning to incorporate the mass media into what were once purely interpersonal models. This convergence on personal influence, on the influence of the mass media early in the diffusion process, and on the distance between the mass media and those getting the message only later in the process would, he predicted, mutually influence research design.

Anthropology has been remarkably innocent about communication research. And yet, from the pressures of their own problems, work on cargo cults has involved dealing with problems of transmission, reception and the mediation of personal influence. One might hope that a fruitful exchange could take place between the two traditions. The need for reform and enrichment of the tradition of anthropology has been a concern in all of my research.

Among the many problems cargo cults pose, let me pick out the following: how are significantly similar cults possible amongst widely scattered peoples with no known means of communication, this is the problem of *transmission*; what determines whether individuals and groups do or do not join the cult, this is the problem of *selective reception*; and, finally, why do the cults arise at all in this area, what message do they carry that makes sense in the context? This is the problem of the very classification of cargo cults itself. With peoples scattered over such vast distances, long before the era of electronic communication or even of aeroplanes, are the resemblances between the cults any more than projections by observers onto their material? Only if some means of inter-island communication can be found are we warranted in grouping such scattered events together. Only if we discover such lines of communication does the enterprise of offering a single general form of explanation, as opposed to a particularised local, historical explanation seem appropriate. That the phenomenon is to be explained culturally rather than locally is however suggested by their *persistence*. Given that the cults fail, i.e. the end of the world and the millennium do not arrive, it is significant that the message is preserved, modified and transmitted to subsequent or successor cults.

The earliest explanations of cargo cults much resembled the atomised models of mass communication mentioned by Katz. Cargo cult behaviour was found by observers to be bizarre and possibly even deranged. Grown men and women acted out what resembled games and fantasies. They prophesied ships arriving with treasure and the souls of the dead, or extinct volcanoes spewing forth the returned spirits; they built tables in the jungle and sat at them scratching marks on paper; they erected jetties for ships; they prayed to strange gods to deliver them jeeps, canned goods, even U.S. Presidents; they organised men into marching units, with improvised uniforms; sometimes they even spoke in tongues. Such derangement was not individual, but collective, a kind of hysteria, perhaps, brought on by, well, by what? By the native tendency to revert to irrationality; something colonial rule and education might rescue them from. A disappointing explanation, then; *postulating as it does a Lévy-Bruhl-like model*

of the natives as struggling to assert a *logical\_side* over the *pre-logical\_mentality*. Disappointing because it offered *no mechanism and no trigger*. The best offer was a metaphor: the metaphor of indigestion. Somehow the cash economy, the missionary teaching, the colonial administration was too many ideas for them to handle at once, so they became all garbled up.

Under the influence of this model, crucial questions were not asked. Who in these societies became the prophets, i.e. first promulgated the cargo cults ideas? Where did they get them? How did they recruit followers at first, and later? And what distinguished cults that kept going and those that collapsed?

After the nineteen twenties such explanations from mental states were buried and superseded by functionalist studies that tried to situate the .cults into *detailed examinations of the integrated culture*. Unfortunately, the cults were hard to understand from the point of view of integration: it seemed as though they were very far from functional, possibly dysfunctional. Functionalists disdained diffusionism, and hence were not concerned with how cult ideas spread between islands, only how they spread on islands. So they turned their attention to the questions of who became prophets, who were the first followers, who the later, and how the cults fared and altered. This proved difficult. Melanesia is a culture area without chiefdoms, and with relatively little stratification. Much of its affairs are dominated by what are known as 'Big Men', men, that is, with a prestige and weight in the community that has been achieved rather than ascribed. It wasn't that Big Men became cargo cult leaders, especially as some were women; rather that cargo cults seemed connected with the reassertion of lost Melanesian status. The Europeans in a way usurped the big men, and Melanesians looked to prophets who, by conjuring up the paraphernalia of European status could regain status for native big men.

To the functionalist, then, the cults are the result of an intricate dialectical interchange between traditional notions and the intrusion of the Europeans, s manner of communicating demands to the Europeans and imposing tasks upon themselves.

Parallel to functionalist explanations was the cultural anthropological treatment, which regarded the cults as an adaptation to culture clash. Beginning with studies of the Ghost dance, and continuing through studies in American protectorates, this seems to have a developmental view, that culture contacts are hard to absorb, and so millenarian cults are, to shift the metaphor back to digestion a kind of burp. Metaphors and images are, I believe, not the same as theories and explanations.

Late in the era of functionalism Marxist ideas made a foray into the cargo cult areas. Marxists look, of course, to the raising of proletarian consciousness, as the natural development of exploited peoples, possibly mediated in the first instance by nationalism as a means of identifying their class position vis a vis the white bourgeoisie. Hence the cults can be regarded as partly mystical, partly pragmatic mediations between the exploited and the exploiting. Transcendence of both the mysticism and the nationalism should take place, but has not. The process of decolonisation following apparently a different scenario.

Missing from all these accounts is any address to the concrete problems of communication involved, namely of similar ideas moving between widely scattered islands, and, once communicated, of their reception--not just differential selection as between town and country, but also in being made sense of at ail. The key, it seems to me, is to find the channel. I

believe the channel to be the social system of the white men. The fundamental form of communication between islands has been by the boats that carry missionaries and traders. The message they carry is that a new high status group, big men, if you like, have arrived. They have power, wealth, organizing ability; they bypass or displace traditional big men, who feel devalued. This in turn devalues all the ordinary Melanesian men, because their scale of rubbish men to big men now lacks one of its poles. Colonial officials, traders and missionaries all belong to the same group, all reinforce each other's business. Not working is 'immoral' to the priests; not going to church is derelict to the DC; all white men do some trading.

Also communicated by these boats, possibly through their native crews, is the hint that a recipe has been found for this situation: that if native peoples organize themselves like white men they will receive the tokens of status, the cargo, and hence the imbalance will be righted, status will be regained.

The cults then offer a message intelligible in the situation, a message combining ideas and action. It is transmitted by a social system that carries it without being aware of itself as carrier, just as some diseases are passed on by those who are not sick; at the reception point we need the model of personal influence, of some members of a group with heightened awareness, and an anthropological map of the network of interpersonal relationships through which an opinion leader's influence will diffuse. Along such lines we are beginning to get the hang of cargo cults, and also overcoming the rigidities of earlier anthropology.

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