

CHAPTER 1

CARGOISM

A Definition and Description of Cargoism

The term cargo cult is derived from the word kago in Pidgin English. The word refers to material wealth from a western origin.¹ Cargoism is identified with nativistic movements, and takes on the feature described by Gottfried Oosterwal of a messianic prince returning with his ancestors to the living descendants with a shipload of goods (cargo) from the West² Oosterwal's explanation emphasizes the desire to obtain goods. But the movement is broader than that. Kenelm Burridge states: "The most significant theme in the Cargo movement seems to be moral regeneration: the creation of a new man, the creation of new unities, the creation of a new society."³

A cargo cult arises out of expectations for deliverance from political, economic, and social destitution, and from the

¹Gottfried Oosterwal, "Cargo Cults as a Missionary Challenge," International Review of Missions 56 (October 1967):469.

²Ibid.

³Kenelm Burridge, Mambu, A Melanesian Millennium (London: Methuen & Co., 1960), p. 247.

expectation of a messiah-like figure who returns to accomplish the people's aspirations for this deliverance, as in Oosterwal's description. The messiah is an ancestor who is classified by the people as a redeemer or prince. He returns to initiate the period of deliverance for the people, and their inherent longing for a better and happier way of life.

An understanding of cargoism is complicated by the diversity of terms used to describe the movement. The activity may or may not be chiefly eschatological in nature, as is variously referred to as a messianic movement, millennialism, or revivalism. If the cult is mainly a response to a charismatic leader, it is termed prophetism or prophetship. The behavior that is chiefly an expression of economic dissatisfaction is known as a cargo movement. When political aspirations by nationals are involved, the activity becomes a contra-acculturative or revisionary effort.

In most movements, the native culture has admitted elements from two or more outside cultures or bodies of belief which have had sufficient influence to change the people's way of life. This is known as cultural syncretism. From the diversity of terms listed above, it is evident that the intent of a cargo movement may be interpreted in various ways. Peter Lawrence maintains that cargoism is chiefly religious in nature⁴ F. E. Williams believes that the cult is a response

⁴Judy Inglis, "Cargo Cults: The Problem of Explanation," Oceania 27 (June 1957): 252.

to charismatic leadership where the leaders function as self-interested prophets.⁵ Peter Worsley states that the cult results from the economic problems of the society, and the first awakening of nationalism in the hearts of the cargo people.⁶ Both Cyril Belshaw and Kenelm Burridge interpret it as an expression of moral protest against the inferior status of the native populace brought about by the presence of the affluent European community in their midst.⁷

Melanesian Cargoism

Freerk Kamma notes that "the term cargo cults . . . has become a blanket term for the movements in Melanesia."⁸ In this study, the term cargoism will refer both to Biak/Numfor cargoism, and Melanesian cargoism unless indicated otherwise.

Charles Valentine lists four aspects of a typical cargo movement in Melanesia: (1) cultural syncretism, (2) acculturative purpose, (3) prophetic mediumship, (4) millenarian faith⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ I. C. Jarvie, "Theories of Cargo Cults: A Cultural Analysis," Oceania 34 (September 1963): pp. 126-127.

⁷ See Inglis, "Cargo Cults," p. 255; and Jarvie, "Theories of Cargo Cults," pp. 14, 111.

⁸ Freerk Ch. Kamma, Koreri, Messianic Movements in the Biak Numfor Culture Area (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), p. 238.

⁹ Charles A. Valentine, "Social Status, Political Power, and Native Responses to European Influences in Oceania," in Cultures of the Pacific, eds. Thomas Harding and Ben J. Wallace (New York: Free Press, 1970), p. 371.

Valentine's aspects of cultural syncretism and acculturative purpose are related. Acculturation is seen when the messianic movement comes in contact with the more advanced Western culture. Behavior patterns of the native society tend to be adapted to outside influences. This is particularly true of peoples' attitudes toward material goods. A clash occurs between the Western and native societies over the goods: the nationals understand neither the infringement of Western society upon native life nor how to obtain what the Westerner possesses. The clash of the two cultures causes a breakdown of the old style of life without substituting anything new in the native culture. To compensate for this breakdown, and to eliminate confusion and insecurity in the society, the people rationalize the situation by using a combination of Christian and native (animistic) symbols.

Valentine's aspects of prophetic mediumship and millenarian faith also are closely related in Melanesia. The prophetic mediumship is based on charismatic leadership by individuals. Max Weber gives the following definition of charisma in a leader:

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as a person endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.¹⁰

Melanesian charismatic leaders promote either indige-

¹⁰Max Weber, The Theory of Social Economic Organization (New York: Free Press, 1947), pp. 359-360.

nous or a combination of indigenous and Christian supernatural beliefs, depending on the tribe where the cargoism is practiced. Such men claim to have extraordinary visions of people returning from the dead, the arrival of goods, or social and political changes. Along with the visions, the prophet must show signs to the people if he is to continue as a leader of the cult. The signs may be in the form of a miraculous healing, a supernatural raising of someone from the dead, or a predictive prophecy that comes true in the lives of the cultists.

The people of a millenarian society accept the utterances of the prophet and thus reaffirm his leadership. If he alters his prophetic statements and the people accept these changes, the new pronouncement becomes new truth for the society and the future hope continues to be anticipated by the people.

In his prophetic role, the leader answers the questions posed by his followers regarding the future and timing of arrival of the goods. Since he functions as a communicator, the prophet gives the message that he knows the people want to hear. The adherents do not follow the leader because of his moral qualities. They trust him because he is able to instill confidence and to evoke a felt need or value which is culturally satisfying to the hearers. The people have a utopian concept of what life is supposed to be. They look to the charismatic leader for fulfillment of their expectations

because he claims to be able to predict this future event and to make the event occur.

Part of the prophet's function is to explain his failures for not bringing the utopia to pass. The prophet predicts future occurrences in a vague or general manner. He must do this to give the people a sense of uncertainty regarding the imminency of the final fulfillment. There is no problem in believing that the event will occur; the timing is the matter in question. The prophecies of the leader are stretched out over a long period of time or changed occasionally to cope with new social situations that arise. The generalities of the predictions can be compared with the vagueness of daily horoscopes found in newspapers. When the predicted event does not occur, the prophet gives reasons for his failure consistent with the society's acceptance of failure and disappointment. By rationalizing his failures, the leader maintains his authority over the group. The movement does not die among the people because of the basic cult belief which continues according to the original myth. There may be neglect of some cultic activities for a period of time, however, by the people until the next prophet arises. The new prophetic voice renews the desires of the community to carry out the hope of the myth, and to reactivate the cultic practices.

The millenarian faith is based upon the prophetic statements of the charismatic leader. He announces the timing of the return of the ancestor who is the messianic prince.

The specific characteristics of Melanesian cargo cults reflect what has been generally stated about cargoism. Upon his return a messiah will bring a shipload of Western goods consisting of items such as clothes or out-board motors. The dead will be raised and begin a new life together with the people who are alive on earth at that time. Abundance of food, and freedom from oppression and injustice from foreign governments, also characterize this future time. This is the utopian bliss for which the people have waited.

The messianic prince's return is conditioned upon the activities of the cultists, which may include the building of large storehouses to contain the expected cargo, the destroying of crops and livestock, or the spending of money. These acts hasten the coming of the messiah to replace the dissipated items and to replenish these goods during the "Golden Age" or millennial state. Although the movement is called millenarianism, the time frame is not a literal thousand years, but a figurative designation to describe a future event.

Brian Schwarz suggests four basic tenets that sum up very succinctly the elements contained in a Melanesian cargo movement:

- 1 The belief that Melanesians have lost their true identity and with it the fullness of life through some foolish or sinful act of an ancestor.
- 2 The expectation of the return of an ancestor (or ancestors), who will restore their lost identity and bring back the Golden Age.
3. The vision of this-worldly salvation; salvation as

something to be experienced here and now in a concrete, material way, and as embracing the whole community and the whole creation.

4. The belief that knowledge of the correct ritual and its correct performance will open the way for the advent of the day of salvation.¹¹

Schwarz' tenets are similar to Charles Valentine's aspects of a typical cargo movement in Melanesia. But Schwarz is closer to the heart of a cargo movement when he refers to points one and three. He brings into focus the spiritual dimension of cargoism whereby the cultists have lost their identity through a foolish action on the part of the ancestor. I submit that true identity with God has been lost through the fall of man, and cargoism in a Melanesian society is a substitute for the basic need in the lives of the cultists to restore that which God originally intended for mankind, including the Biak and Numfor people. That need is for fellowship with God and for contentment in all of life's trials and uncertainties.

Secondly, Schwarz observes that the salvation which the cargoists envision embraces the whole community and the whole creation. I suggest that a proper understanding and interpretation of the cultural myth of the Biak and Numfor people will help them to see the type of community and creation which God has planned for them.

¹¹Brian Schwarz, "Cargo Movements," in An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, ed. Ennio Mantovani (Goroka, Papua New Guinea: The Melanesian Institute, 1984), p. 243.

Suggested Causes Of Cargoism in Melanesia

What is the reason behind the development of such movements? It is strange indeed that cargoism is found mainly in Oceania, but even in this Pacific region there is a diversity in the ways that cargo cults are expressed. Some areas show no cultic activity even though the conditions are similar historically and politically to the areas in Oceania where cargo cult societies are located. What is the reason for such a diversity of response to cargoism?

Building on Worsley's idea that economic problems cause discontent within the cargo society, we note that the cult is found mainly among lower levels of society where the entire group is oppressed and seeks deliverance from such oppression. This is true especially in areas where colonialism has ruled. In Oceania, cargoism frequently is found in an isolated, agrarian region where Western missionaries attempted to evangelize the local population. But the people saw more than Christianity in the presentation of the Gospel. They also saw the white man's wealth and luxurious level of living. In order to attain a sense of self-worth, the nationals desired to attain the white man's economic status. The simplest way to accomplish this was to accept the Westerner's religious values. The religion of the primitive society where cargoism was found was generally animistic. Since religion played a major role in the thinking of the people, they made a transition to move outwardly from the native religious system to

Western Christianity because it seemed to offer wealth.

Secondly, Belshaw and Burrige observe the moral protest of the native populace against the European community. This protest arises from a desire for political independence, and a quest for self-respect. The quest is expressed in the form of cargoism. Whereas the people want their freedom, they also admire the white man because of his position in government, and his wealth. This ultimately leads to jealousy toward the westerner's social and economic status. The westerner, therefore, is placed in the precarious position of being hated and admired at the same time by the people. The cultists have two options for resolving this conflict; they can expell the white man, or they can hope for a supernatural event that will remake the native society. They believe that such a supernatural occurrence was the basis for the westerner's society and lifestyle. In some cases, violence does rule in the nativistic movements, but by and large, the Melanesian cargo movements resort to the hope of a miraculous event with the return of their ancestors.

In order to obtain political independence and freedom from social oppression, the cultists of cargoism embrace one or more of three basic lines of reasoning: (1) a comparison of the present with the past world as the people remember their past, and wish to return to a former age of "golden days." (This type of thinking is expressed by the Navaho Indians in the American Indian Ghost Dance); (2) a comparison of the

present to the future; and (3) a comparison of their own living conditions to those of other people.¹² The three approaches focus attention on the time element in cargoism, that is, whether or not the movement is centered on the past or the future.

In Melanesian cargoism, the reaction to political and economic suppression may be expressed either passively or actively in cultic activities. The passivists resign themselves to their present situation in this world, and to their lot in life. Their hope of some future event keeps them going in this life. They look for a brighter and better tomorrow. This approach to life can be compared to that of American blacks of former days who resigned themselves passively to white supremacy, yet persisted in their hope to be free one day. The slaves expressed this resignation in their songs such as "Them Golden Slippers" and "Swing Lo Sweet Chariot."

The cargo activists prepare for the future day of bliss with various dynamic expressions of their beliefs, such as dietary regulations and destruction of property and livestock.

Biak and Numfor Cargoism

Many of the observations made above regarding Melanesian cargoism are valid for the Biak and Numfor people. Although we will now deal with cargoism among this specific group, occasionally, references will be made again to these

¹²Peter Worsley, The Trumpet Shall Sound (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. iv.

observations of Melanesian cargoism as they apply to Biak and Numfor.

The cultic expression of cargoism in Biak and Numfor is known as the Koreri movement or the Manseren movement. The word Koreri comes from the root meaning of the Biak term "to change skins."¹³ Various explanations have been given for the use of the word Koreri. The cultists interpret the meaning of the word to be an eternal state free from the present conditions of sickness, poverty, problems, and death, where the people are perpetually young. They compare this state to the molting season of snakes. As the skins of snakes are continually renewed, so also the lives of the cultists will be continually renewed to stay young looking.

A Koreri movement consists of a group of Biak and Numfor people who prepare for the return of their mythical hero Yawi, who is also known by the name of Manseren Manggundi, or more popularly, by the name of Manarmakeri.

The word Manseren means "freedom" or "land" in the Biak language¹⁴ This name also has been given by the people to the mythical Biak hero Manarmakeri after he passes through a fire which changes him from an old man with scabies to a young, handsome man. The Biak and Numfor people also refer both to God the Father as Manseren Allah, and to Jesus Christ as Manseren Jesus.

¹³Kamma, Koreri, p. 18.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 17.

The two terms "Manseren movement," and Koreri movement" are synonymous in Biak and Numfor thinking. The word Manseren depicts the mythological messianic personality, and the other, Koreri, sets forth the messianic expectations of the people. Where the general practice of Biak/Numfor cargoism is referred, we will use the terms Manseren and Koreri interchangeably.

The first reference to the Manseren movement was recorded in January, 1854.¹⁵ There may have been as many as one hundred such movements over the years, all ending without the fulfillment of Koreri. But groups of people still continue to hold to the myth, and the hopes connected with it.

Three essential elements must be present for a valid Manseren movement to occur: koonor, Manseren, and Koreri.¹⁶ The word koonor refers to a herald in the Biak language. He is the prophet who announces the coming event of the messiah Manseren. This messiah makes the event of Koreri happen. Koreri is the period of utopian bliss for the cultists. In all of the reported cases of a Koreri movement, none has ever gone beyond the koonor stage of development.

A movement begins with the appearance of a herald who announces that he has had a dream or vision of Manseren Manggundi. Manggundi has told the prophet that he will soon return to his people. To hasten the hero's coming, the people will exhibit their belief by dancing, by destroying their gardens, and, particularly, by abstaining from eating pork and

¹⁵Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 102.

squash. These conditions for Manggundi's return were laid down by the mythical hero before he left the Biak/Numfor area with his promise to return there again. The practice of abstaining from eating pork and squash is still one of the most prominent restrictions for many Biak and Numfor people, even when there is not a herald or a present, active, Koreri movement. A number of prophets have arisen and died without bringing fulfillment of the people's dreams. During World War II there was a great revival of cargoism. Several important konoor became prominent and predicted the period of Koreri. I knew of two men in the area where we served as missionaries who would be classified as leaders in the Biak Numfor cargo cult.

The cultists believe that when Manggundi returns, the ancestors of the Biak and Numfor people will be raised from the dead, there will be an abundance of food and material goods, and the living people will be changed into Koreri people. One interpretation of the Manseren myth is that, during the utopian bliss, the dark skins of the people will be changed into white skins like those of Westerners. This view of Koreri reflects admiration for Western culture.

The Mansren movement, then, is centered in future fulfillment. The cultists hope to create a new society by appealing to a past myth centered in past values or social relationships. Future happiness will result from belief in this myth.

Working Premises

As has been shown, Melanesian cargoism in general entails several elements in its expression of faith. This is true also of the Manseren movement. While there are political and economic aspirations, the movement is chiefly a religious expression of the cultists' faith in their myth.

My belief is that the spiritual renewal of the people and the society is the most significant aspect of cargoism. The basic problem is man's separation from fellowship with God, and his desire to substitute for that fellowship goals that he believes will satisfy his desires. The acquisition of goods is one such substitute. Because of the obvious craving for material goods in a poor society, the observer of the B.ak and Numfor culture may be led at first to believe that poverty is the basic cause for cargoism. I will show that, when a person has a right standing with God, and a knowledge of that standing, his attitude toward the Koreri movement can be changed.

Secondly, I believe that the myth of a particular tribe or society is a primary cause of the the messianic movement. Man is inherently religious by nature, and the myth is a religious statement of a people's faith. Although the economic, social, and political factors play a role in the overall effect of the messianic movement, the message of the Gospel must strike at the heart of belief in cargoism which is expressed in a syncretistic acceptance of Christianity.

Gottfried Oosterwal observes that:

. . . the "new" (Christian concepts) and the "good news" also has been misinterpreted in terms of the old. God became largely the giver of cargo. And "what He has given to the white man would He, who loves us all, not give it to us also?"¹⁷

Oosterwal's statement is an accurate picture of the present situation among the Biak and Numfor people. The society that was totally animistic is now a mixture of Christianity and animism. The people look upon themselves as being Christians, but their practices and lifestyle betray the fact that they still hold to animistic beliefs.

In moving from an understanding of cargoism in general to a particular expression of Biak and Numfor cargoism, we note certain fundamental features inherent in the Koreri/Manseren cargo cult:

1. The movement is based on a revelational religion
2. The cult is economically oriented
3. The physical needs of the cultists are expressed in terms of a religious phenomenon consistent with their belief in Koreri
4. Tribal solidarity is prominent among the people
5. An animistic world view is evident in the tribe
6. The people express a millenarian hope for the future

Some of these observations correlate directly with the basic elements of a movement; namely, konoor, Manseren, and Koreri. The six features listed above must be addressed in

¹⁷Oosterwal, "Cargo Cults," p. 475.

dealing with the spiritual renewal of the Biak and Numfor people, and in dealing with their myth which ties in so intimately with their society.