Rod bilong kago/rod bilong independens?
Cargo cults, the colonial press and independence movements in Melanesia.

Presented to the European Society for Oceanists,
Vienna, July 5-8, 2002.

A cargo cult ‘aeroplane’ made of bamboo.

About the author: Philip Cass has previously presented at ESfO (Leiden 1999) on the role of Tok Pisin in national identity in Papua New Guinea. Born in PNG, he has worked as a journalist and academic in Australia, PNG, Fiji and the UK. He is now Assistant Professor in the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. He was awarded his MA from Central Queensland University in 1997 for his thesis “The Apostolate of the press: Missionary language policy, translation and publication in German New Guinea.” This paper is drawn from research for his doctoral thesis “The colonial press and independence movements in Melanesia.”
This paper is drawn from my current research for a doctorate from Central Queensland University in Australia. My thesis looks at the colonial press and independence movements in Melanesia. Because this paper is drawn from research for a project that will take some years to complete it is as much a report on work in progress as anything else and so I would invite comments, questions, suggestions and corrections.

Before we start, a few definitions are in order. To start with, the period under consideration is roughly the end of the Second World War to 1980, a period of about 40 years. Melanesia includes Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, but not New Caledonia, West Papua or Torres Strait, which while ethnically and culturally Melanesian, are not independent.

By the press I mean anything and everything that was printed in the Islands, circulated in the Islands or aimed at Islanders or expatriates. In practice, this means anything I can read, which means English and pidgin, or of which I have translations or summaries. By independence movements I mean those currents, organisations and groupings which formed in the lead-up to independence. This has to include those movements generally referred to as cargo cults. The cults do have a place in the move towards independence, not because they were harbingers of national identity, but because in their own singular manner they allowed people to act for themselves without mission or government supervision.

It is also worth considering them because of the myths that were built up around them (and imposed by outsiders) and the way in which they caused colonial governments and expatriates to respond to more secular ‘self help’ movements that did play a genuine part in the move to independence.

It also seeks to answer some questions about what the cargo cults were (and are, for they still exist) and suggests that far from being some sort of proto-nationalist outburst, they were, in the main, either organised, ritualistic acts of sympathetic magic, which were, within the confines of the existing indigenous culture, perfectly logical and rational, or in a few cases, colourful but short lived con jobs by men who, like L. Ron Hubbard, realised that there was a great deal of sex and free food to be had in founding their own religion.

Unfortunately, a great many anthropologists seem to have been too willing to see the cargo cults – and sometimes Island societies as a whole - as a reflection of whatever political fancy has taken hold of them. Alas, people who build bamboo aeroplanes are not really proletarians in *ars tangat*. They are very intelligent, hard working people trying to harness the world’s goods in a way that fits in best with their understanding of the world.

---

1 Fortunately, there are at least some translations of local language publications, such as the Rev Neville Threlfall’s translations of *A Nilai Ra Davot* and translations of publications in a country like Fiji. With three written languages is much simpler than in PNG, with its thousand languages. (Threlfall, Rev N., ‘Index of articles to *A Nilai Ra Davot*,’ MS, Undated and ‘News and information from *A Nilai Ra Davot*,’ MS, Undated.)

2 I acknowledge that ‘cargo cult’ is actually a very loose term and not always applied correctly to movements with other aims. However, it seemed best to use a generally understood term.

3 The Hahalis Baby Farm would seem, at first glance, to be a classic example of the latter.
The first question we need to ask is whether the cargo cults were examples of independence movements, sympathetic magic or just plain foolishness? Let me give some examples of stories I heard growing up in PNG.

The first – and probably archetypal – story is about the group of villagers who cleared the kunai grass to make an airstrip and then built an ‘aeroplane’ out of bush materials, which they placed on the runway. The idea was that aeroplanes flying overhead would see the ‘aeroplane’ and fly down to join it, at which point the villagers would offload its cargo. If the story was true (and I heard numerous variants of it, including one in which a bamboo ‘submarine’ was built) then it would seem to be a fairly clear cut case of sympathetic magic.4

The other stories with which I was familiar included the one about the admin officer who arrived on an island, only to be accused by the villagers of having stolen President Johnson’s outboard motor.5 There was a movement at that time among some people to have Australia relinquish control of Australia to the United States and Lyndon Baines Johnson was in the White House.

The other story concerns the Hahalis Baby Farm on Buka, a strange affair led by ‘King John’ and ‘Queen Elizabeth’ who established a cult in which, it was said, wives and girlfriends were shared on the premise that they would breed lots and lots of Bukas who would become a master. The members were eventually arrested and their leaders tried, but most were freed on a technicality. Now, was this a cult in which ‘King John’ and ‘Queen Elizabeth’ enjoyed a brief spell of uninterrupted sex and free food, or was it a serious attempt to defy Australian authority? As we shall see later, there was in fact much more to this than a cult in which frenzied sex and religious fervour get mixed up to the profit of the organisers.

Presuming these stories are true (and the Hahalis Baby Farm certainly was) what significance do these actions have? Building an ‘aeroplane’ is perfectly sensible if, in your world, sympathetic magic works. It also makes sense if you have never seen a factory and have no idea of how western business, manufacturing or transport works. It may be irrational and doomed to failure, but within your own worldview, it’s actually fairly logical. It is political in the sense that it is based on the premise of making the participants equal in goods to the Europeans.

President Johnson’s outboard motor is another matter entirely. The movement behind it may well have been a cult, but it can be interpreted as a desire to replace one big man (i.e Australia) with a stronger one (i.e America), which, within the traditional cultural framework, makes perfect sense. Such a movement was political in intent, but obviously doomed to failure.6

The effect of such cults may be regional, as with the Yali cult which spread along the coast between Madang and Wewak, or it may, as with the John Frum movement on

---

4 If the story of the bamboo submarine was true, it probably originated in Rabaul, where the Japanese used submarines to bring in supplies during the last years of the war.
5 It was, of course, a Johnson outboard.
6 Dalton has much to say on the madness, logic, rationality or otherwise of cargo cults, but does not seem to consider the remarkable capacity for dualism that exists within Pacific Islanders, whereby they can hold two quite distinct worldviews and switch between one and the other at ease with no great problem.
Tanna, be purely regional and then be expropriated for other reasons and become pseudo-national. Determining the significance of the cults in relation to political independence movements is rather more difficult.

There has been a tendency among some Western scholars, to see every manifestation of anti-missionary or anti-colonial behaviour as part of a nationalist struggle. The problem is that the move towards independence was actually fairly peaceful. There was some violence, but it tended to be regionally centred, as with the Mataungan movement on the Gazelle or the rising on Espiritu Santo. In most cases independence was more or less handed to the Melanesians on a plate; sometimes, it could be argued, against the wishes of a significant portion of the population. However, because the Pacific does not fit the pre-conceived, African-based model of the transition to independence, some scholars – and, it might be said, politicians - have sought to create suitably heroic independence struggles in the Islands out of whatever material comes to hand, including cargo cults.

Solomon Mamaloni claims the Marching Rule (more properly Masina Rule) movement in what was then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was a “politically inspired organisation.” He may well have been right, but the question is whether it was perceived as such at the time by its adherents or by the British colonial government and whether they would have meant the same thing. The problem is compounded because some of the cargo cults, which might have started as nonsensical schemes for making money out of a magic betel nut, sometimes blended into real self-help programmes and organised attempts to offer an alternative structure to what were seen as ineffectual local government councils. Yali, probably the most famous of the PNG cultists, started his career re-organising villages for the government after the Second World War, became dissatisfied and started his own distinctive movement, was jailed and released and by the early 1970s had created an organisation which had adherents in 200 villages around Madang. A cult it may have been, but it did offer resistance to the administration, both during and after independence.

It is absolutely necessary, therefore, to judge the various cults and movements that arose in Melanesia very carefully; to judge them within their own social, political and historical context but at the same time not to overplay or misinterpret their significance. It is also absolutely necessary, when trying to place the various cults, self-help movements and so on in context, to ask whether they really were steps on the road to national independence? I would suggest that it would be very hard to find much

---

7 Air Vanuatu used to print material about John Frum in its tourist publications, which would indicate that the cult is now regarded as not only harmless, but a good tourist drawcard.
9 The legendary PNG kiap, Jack McCarthy, who appointed Yali to the public service, defended him as a man who had good ideas but had let the adulation of his followers go to his head. McCarthy, J.K., Patrol Into Yesterday, Robert Brown and Associates, Port Moresby, 1972. Pp223-228.
evidence that any of the various movements were intended at the time to have more than local or regional significance. However, as we shall see in the next section, they were certainly perceived by many expatriates in the Islands as having just that significance and being extremely dangerous because of it.

**Reporting on cargo cults by journalists**

I have only begun to scratch the surface of possible newspaper and magazine sources, but enough evidence can be deduced from anecdotal sources and from books and other materials written by journalists (usually based on a series of newspaper feature stories) to give a good indication of how the cargo cults were treated.11

One of the earliest recorded reactions was in *Pacific Islands Monthly*, which reported expatriate reactions:

> “Planters blamed the suspect unpatriotic sympathies and religious irrationality of missionaries for outbreaks of native ‘cults,’ missionaries blamed the harsh treatment of natives by the colonial planters and government officers and colonial government officials blamed their liberal rivals in the Australian government.”12

I would argue that the response of the commercial press was predictable, insofar as it depicted the cultists as objects of fun or as threats to good government. However, it caused problems in the minds of the expatriate population and indigenes who sided with the administration or missions, by confusing cargo cults with what were genuine attempts at independent economic and social activity that were completely devoid of any cultic or ritualistic overtones. This may have contributed to such situations as that which arose with the Kabisawali Movement in the Trobriand Islands.13

Founded by John Kasaipwalova, a former university student who was also due to inherit traditional authority, the movement was a radical attempt at self management and economic development in defiance of the administration, missions and local councils. It was

---

11 The question of how the cargo cults were treated as a story opens up a veritable Pandora’s Box. See, for instance, Lindstrom, L., ‘Cargo Cult Horror’ in *Oceania*, 70:IV, 2000. On a broader scale, Rennie, N., *Far Fetched Facts*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, says nothing about cargo cults as such and ignores a great many other things, but is useful for its linking of common themes in literature about the Pacific.
“variously interpreted [from the outside] as a secessionist movement, a latter-day cargo cult, a localised revolution against established traditional and governmental authority, a skilful political campaign for parliament, a threat to European interests and a Machiavellian confidence game.”

The Kabisawali Movement received widespread media attention, both nationally and locally. The Australian Broadcasting Commission and the BBC made documentaries about the movement. The Post-Courier gave the movement extensive coverage when tensions between its supporters and detractors flared into violence in 1973 and Kasaipwalova was taken to court and later released on a good behaviour bond.

Without examining every publication, I think we can summarise three likely main reactions to the cargo cults.

The first, by the mission and government press, would have been wholly negative. This was not entirely because the cults often threatened their authority, but because it diverted energy and money from people at a time when the missions and administrations needed all available resources to re-build Islands devastated by the war with Japan. The islands could not be re-built if the labourers, plantation workers and villagers were attending secret ceremonies and giving all their money to sorcerers. They also knew that the cargo cults would not bring sudden wealth on magic aeroplanes and ships and that the expatriates were not going to magically whisked away and replaced by kindly ancestor figures from the sky. It is not surprising, therefore, if they issued warnings through their newsletters, sermons and visits by patrol officers about the dangers of the cults. They knew the people involved would eventually be disappointed and disillusioned. It would have been unthinkable for those with temporal and moral responsibility for the Islanders to not have tried to prevent them from becoming involved in the cults. This is not to say that missionaries and administrators with anthropological training or long experience were not sympathetic, but the fact that something is understandable does not make it tolerable.

We can look to the previously cited example from Pacific Islands Monthly as one example of how the commercial press responded initially. It is only to be expected that those with business interests would have seen the cults as threats to their profits.

The other reaction was for editors to treat cargo cults as a marvelous excuse for tall tales and colourful yarns. Some magazines, such as the ubiquitous Australasian Post, specialised in such stories and quite often ran features about Australia and the Pacific. As a story, cargo cults had everything: Colour, mystery, a hint of the exotic, magic and enough naïve hope among the cultists to induce in the reader a mix of laughter and pity at the folly of the human race. I should imagine that any journalist asked to chase up a story on cargo cults would have been on the first DC3 out of town.

We should also consider the period when cargo cults first came to the attention of the general press: The 1950s. This was an age of confidence, of re-building after the war, of scientific and industrial expansion, an age of purpose and vision. What could be more

---

14 ibid
15 op cit
interesting in such an age than to be presented with a group of people who seemed to so comprehensively misunderstood how the new world worked.\textsuperscript{16}

Not all reporting on cargo cults or self help movements. Australian journalist Keith Willey’s account of the Hahalis movement remains an excellent example of how to do things properly, for which reason I shall quote from it at some length. Posted to Port Moresby in 1964 by Mirror Newspapers in Sydney, Willey travelled to Buka to investigate the Hahalis cult first hand. The reaction from expatriates is typical of the fear of the new movements among some segments of the population, a fear created in part, I would suggest, by a mixture of proximity to the events and earlier media reporting.

“ ‘Make no mistake,’ the planter said, tapping the table with his bottle for emphasis; ‘on the day they give these people independence, Hahalis will take over the island. And then God help the rest of us.’

‘Confidentially,’ he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, I think the Communists are at the bottom of it. Wait until you go out there, and you’ll see what I mean.’ “\textsuperscript{17}

Willey prepared for his visit to Buka by talking with a government anthropologist who described the Hahalis Welfare Movement as ‘an economic improvement unit, rather than a cult,’ an assessment he described as ‘an oversimplification; perhaps a dangerous one.’\textsuperscript{18}

Willey spent some time on Buka, interviewed expatriates, locals, the officer in charge of the police who arrested the Welfare men and then visited Hahalis itself. Willey estimated that the movement had appeared in the early 1950s. It was led by a former mission teacher, John Teosin and his wife, the self-styled ‘King John’ and ‘Queen Elizabeth.’ The movement might have merely seemed peculiar, but in 1961 its adherents refused to pay the administration head tax.

“They complained that they had been getting nothing in return for this money and in future would depend on ‘the Welfare’ to help them. They wanted no more to do with kiaps or missions. In effect, a group of villages had opted out of the Australian administration and set up their own self-governing state.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} What is interesting, from a journalists’ point of view, is that the term ‘cargo cult’ became so widespread and is now so commonly used. I did a database search using the term ‘cargo cult’ and only half the articles that turned up were from anthropology or history magazines. The rest were news stories in which ‘cargo cult’ was used as a term of abuse.

\textsuperscript{17} Willey, K., \textit{Assignment New Guinea}, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1965. pp98-117 passim. Willey’s book is based on his experiences in PNG and material gathered for his newspaper articles, so they give a good idea of what an intelligent journalist could do with the story.

\textsuperscript{18} ibid, p98.

\textsuperscript{19} op cit p100.
Willey then goes on to give a detailed account of what became known as the Battle of Buka and its aftermath. The police arrested 166 men, all but one of whom got off on a technicality. Thereafter the Welfare paid its taxes and remained outside the reach of the law. Willey then went to Hahalis where he interviewed Teosin who denied the Welfare Movement was a cult, describing it instead as ‘an idea of working.’ Willey described in detail how the movement’s 4000 members, spread through many villages, paid a 2 pound entry fee, gave up personal possessions and worked the land in common, something he said was ‘a primitive version of the Chinese communes.’ The Hahalis leaders seemed very determined to prove they were not a cult, but when Willey asked them about the ‘baby garden,’ the most notorious aspect of the movement, the atmosphere grew tense and Teosin defensive.

“Since 1963 all the single girls of Hahalis have been segregated in dormitories where they are available to men of the society – and to any European who wishes to use them. Children which result are reared by ‘the Welfare.’[...] Teosin has urged his followers to ‘fill up the land with people,’ and speaks of breeding a master race.”

Willey also explored other aspects of the movement, including the clash with the Catholic Church, which was the dominant force on the island and provided almost all the services on the island until well after the Second World War. Behind this again lay the figure of Sawa Korachi, a sorceror and henchman of Teosin’s who had founded the Sori Lotu, ‘a mixture of debased Christianity and sun worship.’ Willey quotes the then District Commissioner, P.J. Mollison as blaming Korachi for debasing what had begun as a genuine progress association.

In general, Willey does everything a journalist should do with a story like this. He certainly provides lots of local colour, but he obviously prepared for the story and interviewed as wide a range of people as he could. In general it’s a balanced piece and good model of how to write such a story. Ultimately, he concludes ‘it is difficult to tell where the economic improvement ends and the cult begins.’

Unfortunately, because it was so difficult to tell the cult from the progress movement, they were often seen as one, which greatly hampered acceptance of genuine grass roots programmes, such as the Kabisawali movement when they emerged later on.

Cargo cults and strange stories are not confined to one Island nation or one time, of course.

In 1980 they emerged again as the centre of attention during the Espiritu Santo rebellion on the eve of Vanuatu’s independence. Journalists who covered the uprising
sent back reports of warriors with bows and arrows outfoxing the British and French forces while their editors demanded even more lurid stories.

“...journalist were intrigued by reports about a tribe, somewhere in the south islands, who believed that the Duke of Edinburgh was divine. This story went further than Port Vila – it filtered through to London and prompted an immediate cable from one newspaper to its man on the spot: CANST CONFIRM URGENTEST THAT PRINCE PHILIP REGARDED AS GOD BY JUNGLE SECT.”

When I was working in Fiji in the mid ‘90s, the Daily Post, a tabloid much given in those days to filling its pages with foolishness, reported with a straight face that a village woman had given birth to snakes. About the same time the more respectable Fiji Times carried a series of stories about a group of Fijians who had given up their jobs and gone to sit on the wharf and wait for a ship-load of money to arrive from somewhere overseas. The money never arrived, but then, it never does. These stories were reported in the Fiji press verbatim, without any comment, although the Times did try to give the history of the money cult. Should they have done any more? Newspapers are not journals of anthropology or history; they are businesses that rely on their readers for survival.

And yet, having recently argued elsewhere for the press to do more to help its readers understand what is going on in the world, I can hardly refrain from doing the same here. To quote Maria Lepowsky in full:

“Cultural practices cannot be analyzed without considering the political contexts, the power relationships in which they currently exist and without taking into account the changing political contexts of the recent and more distant past.”

The commercial press is quite capable of doing this if it wants to, but all too often it simply presents material uncritically. Now, this is well and good in itself. Newspapers should, after all, make a clear distinction between presenting the basic facts of an event and keep analysis and comment entirely separate, or at least make enough information available for the reader to make a balanced judgement. Unfortunately, the fact that cargo cults are such a good story means that the story often falls into the hands of wide-eyed journalists who will believe pretty much anything they are told and insisting on repeating all the cliches that historians long ago abandoned.


Just as stories of cargo cults and fantastical tales still appear in the Pacific press, so the cargo cults still hold an appeal for western journalists looking for something exotic. However, I would suggest that there has been change in the way cargo cults are reported. Where once they might have been the basis for a ‘good story’ or a piece of serious reporting on a social/political problem in the colonies, now they seem to attract an entirely different kind of writer who seems determined to report on the cults entirely within their own cultural framework. One recent example from Harper’s Magazine suffices as an example of all that is wrong – and all that has ever been wrong – with this sort of reporting.

Written by Will Bourne (and how grateful we should be that he was not christened Mel) he begins his long piece by describing the village of Ipikel on Tanna:

“Ipikel...is a place where little boys in rally shorts patrol the bush with boys and arrows, looking for birds; where the only fresh water for 550 people comes from a hole scooped from the red and black rocks at the edge of Sulphur Bay; where medicine means filling incisions with leaves and binding them with vines; where there is no glass to speak of and no metal apart from a few sheets of corrugated tin and the steel blades of bush knives. This is a place without money, without hunger, without work beyond a little casual cultivation; a place where the guava and the coconut fall ripe into the outstretched hand.”28

At moments like this I long for P.J.O’Rourke to jump out from behind a bush and yell: “They’re poor, hungry and have never seen a flush toilet” just to balance things out a little. Then perhaps we could drop a ripe coconut on Mr Bourne and see how he likes it. It would appear that some journalists, especially those who have never lived anywhere except the industrialised west, are prone, as Brunton puts it, to

“get carried away by the darling aspects of cultural differences...All the redemptive yearnings of the contemporary world are projected onto unsuspecting indigenous traditionalists, who are thus transformed into deep environmentalists steeped in spiritual certainty, homogenous in their beliefs, secure in their identity and luxuriating in the warm bonds of community.”29

This has absolutely nothing to do with John Frum, or Tanna or the real causes of the movement. This is all about satisfying the fantasies of a western journalist who suffers from the delusion that sleeping in a thatched hut for a few nights without electricity means he has tasted paradise.

Now, this article is a long way past the date at which the New Hebrides gained their independence and became Vanuatu, but I think it is useful to consider it for the simple

reason that while PNG, the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji have become independent, the cults have not gone away. They will come back in one form or another and will need to be reported on carefully and accurately.

So, where do I go from here?
Newspapers must be regarded as a primary sources for this thesis. Now, journalism is my first profession, but I must, regrettable, acknowledge that newspapers are not always entirely objective, or, in some circumstances, accurate. However, newspapers can be a valuable source of information if treated cautiously. Newspapers are not the only source of information about the recent history of the Pacific, nor were cargo cults the only events that occurred in the drift towards independence in Melanesia. Studied carefully together, however, they can illuminate not only different stages in the minds and behaviour of the Island communities, but of the way that journalists and other writers responded to them and so influenced the attitudes of their own communities.
Bibliography

Alasia, Waleanisia et al., Ples Bilong Iumi: Solomon Islands, the past four thousand years


Crocombe and Tuza (eds) *Independence, Dependence, Interdependence: The first 10 years of Solomon Islands Independence*, ISP/USP, 1992,


Threlfall, Rev N., ‘Index of articles to A Nilai Ra Davot.’ MS, Undated.

Threlfall, Rev N., ‘News and information from A Nilai Ra Davot.’ MS, Undated.

Todd, I., *Papua New Guinea: Moment of Truth*, Angus and Robertson, Melbourne, 1974


Philip Cass
Zayed University
Abu Dhabi, July 2002