

“The Cult of Cargo”

By Canon Norman Cruttwell . . . who thinks that Western Materialistic Civilisation is Itself one Vast Cargo Cult!

Until recently, few people outside the South Pacific had heard of cargo cults, but since the Jon Frum Cult in Melanesia, the President Johnson Cult in New Ireland and the recent removal of markers on Mount Turu by cargo cultists in the Sepik area of New Guinea, they have received much publicity.

Canon Norman Cruttwell

An excellent book has been published about them called “Road Belong Cargo”, by Peter Lawrence.*

As development increases, not less but more cargo cults are appearing. It is estimated that there are at least 17 current in the Territory at this time.

The first such movement in

Papua seems to have been the Vailala Madness in the Western District.

The cults did not really proliferate until after the war as a result of the enormous amount of cargo brought into the country and squandered by the Americans.

Food supplies, vehicles, refrigerators, radios, guns, ammunition and all the complex impedimenta of a modern army were brought in by fleets of ships and planes.

No wonder the gaping indigenes were amazed and bewildered and no wonder that many of the cargo cults are centred on America, where surely the most powerful and munificent spirits must be.

The mythical Jon Frum for whom the New Hebrideans have been waiting 25 years is an American and so, of course, is ex-President Lyndon Johnson, to whom the New Ireland cultists looked in vain to be their leader.

This sea-and-airborne extravagance led to the idea that a great ship or plane would bring the ultimate cargo for which the underprivileged Papuans were waiting.

The first cargo cult at Menapi in Goodenough Bay looked for a great white ship which would bring not only the white man's goods, but also guns and ammunition to destroy him with, so that they could take over his plantations, stores and money.

For this reason, no more native food would be needed. Kill the



pigs, cut down the coconuts, dig up the gardens, dance, sing and feast, for to-morrow we shall have abundance.

This reckless extravagance and waste is the characteristic of all the cargo cults I have seen. The great day is always close, usually precisely defined by the leader. The millenium is always just around the corner.

For cargo cults are born of frustration — frustration at not being able to obtain the goods of the white man and his wonderful machines. Frustration at their inferior status, their ignorance and their inability to cope, and frustration at not being able to discover the white man's secret.

The uneducated Papuan and indeed many of the educated also, cannot believe that all these supplies have a natural origin.

They cannot conceive how anyone could make a thing so complicated as a ship or a plane. Even the materials are out of this world and as for the noise and the miraculous motion, these must be sheer magic.

How can a radio talk and sing and even answer people? Surely there must be a spirit inside the box.

The Papuan is not secular-minded. The spirit world is real to him and ever-present. It is only spirits who can make these things and give the white people such power.

What then are the spirits doing? Why do they give all these things to the white people and not to them? Often the cargo cult teaching says, "The spirits are sending them to us, but the white men are stealing them".

This leads to another very strong element in the cargo cult — a racial and political bias, directed not only against Europeans, but against any Papuans who serve or help them, whether in Government or Mission.

One of the early movements in

the Anglican area after the war was the so-called "Wedau Welfare Club". The leader set himself up as a sort of king, collected taxes and even put people in jail.

A recent cult in the Daga was led by a sophisticated ex-teacher who, although he wore European clothes himself, advocated a return to the old customs—everyone must wear tapa cloth or a grass skirt, no children must go to school and all money was to be burnt.

As an example he publicly burnt his bank passbook knowing perfectly well that his money was quite safe.

Luckily, the people were too canny to burn their precious dollars.

He also told them to elect their own House of Assembly with himself as Prime Minister and proclaimed "immediate independence". God, he said, was a Papuan and so, of course, was his son, Jesus.

He showed them pictures to prove it, which he had drawn very skilfully in crayons on school paper. Jesus had been born, lived, died and rose again in various Daga villages and had ascended into heaven from the summit of Mount Simpson.

Of all the elements in the cargo cult, the religious is the strongest and accounts for the almost fanatical zeal of some of the adherents. In some cases this has led to the murder of opponents and in the case of the Mount Turu Cult very nearly resulted in human sacrifice.

Many of the religious ideas are taken from the Old Testament and the Revelation of St John. There is always a strong apocalyptic element in which the day of arrival of the cargo will coincide with the end of the world and the destruction of non-believers, usually by a great flood.

For this reason, one of the early Daga cult leaders, Gindat, built a square temple with a

grass-roofed spire on top. Everyone who entered this on the great day would be saved from the flood.

The curious thing was that about that time very heavy rain caused all the rivers to flood and a huge landslide made a tremendous roar in the middle of the night!

Many thought that the end had come and fled from their homes in terror. However, no cargo appeared and under the influence of a mission teacher the people renounced the cult and Gindat's own son was the first to start pulling the temple down.

In another cult, in my own area, the people built long huts which they called arks, on top of a ridge, and sheltered in these night after night, waiting for the flood to come. Even the hedges of red cordyline around the villages were regarded as protection from the flood, which for some reason would not pass the flower-power barrier.

Old Testament stories doubtless also inspired the people of Modeni to carve two idols and dance and pray to them. They were obviously male and female, thought by some to be Jesus and Mary, but more probably in the nature of fertility symbols, who would bring forth the cargo.

A fearless schoolteacher on our mission station emulated Gideon and pulled them down, carrying the arks to the mission station where, in the presence of Bishop George Ambo, myself and a huge crowd of people, they were publicly burnt and the cargo cult renounced.

Not only did the cult look back to the Old Testament, but it also looked forward to the second coming, not only of Christ, but of the angels and spirits of the departed, especially their own ancestors.

It was for this that the Uwano cultists built a stairway to the top of a mountain and the people of

Nepesip a sort of "angel port" on top of a hill. This consisted of two white circles of stone, one containing a cross for Christ to land and the other plain, for the spirits.

How do cargo cults begin? Very often they start from a dream.

One in the Menapi district was started by an old woman dreaming she saw a cross rising out of the ground which then split open and showed all the cargo beneath.

Another started by the leader producing a book which he claimed had miraculously appeared under his pillow at night. In it was God's message about the cargo. This was odd because he could not read.

Later I saw the book, which was a Dimuga language primer printed in Sydney.

Some of the simpler leaders appear sincerely to believe in their teaching, but others appear to be sophisticated con men, who find in the cargo cult means of exercising power over their people or of amassing great wealth for themselves.

It is hard to believe that the sophisticated and trousered ex-Government teacher already described really believed in all the nonsense he taught the people, and the chief leader of a cargo cult in the Daga who has collected thousands of dollars from the people can hardly be said to be disinterested.

He used the time-honoured method of all spivs and con men—"Give me a dollar and you will get one hundred back". But nobody receives a cent back and probably never will, as no records are made or receipts given.

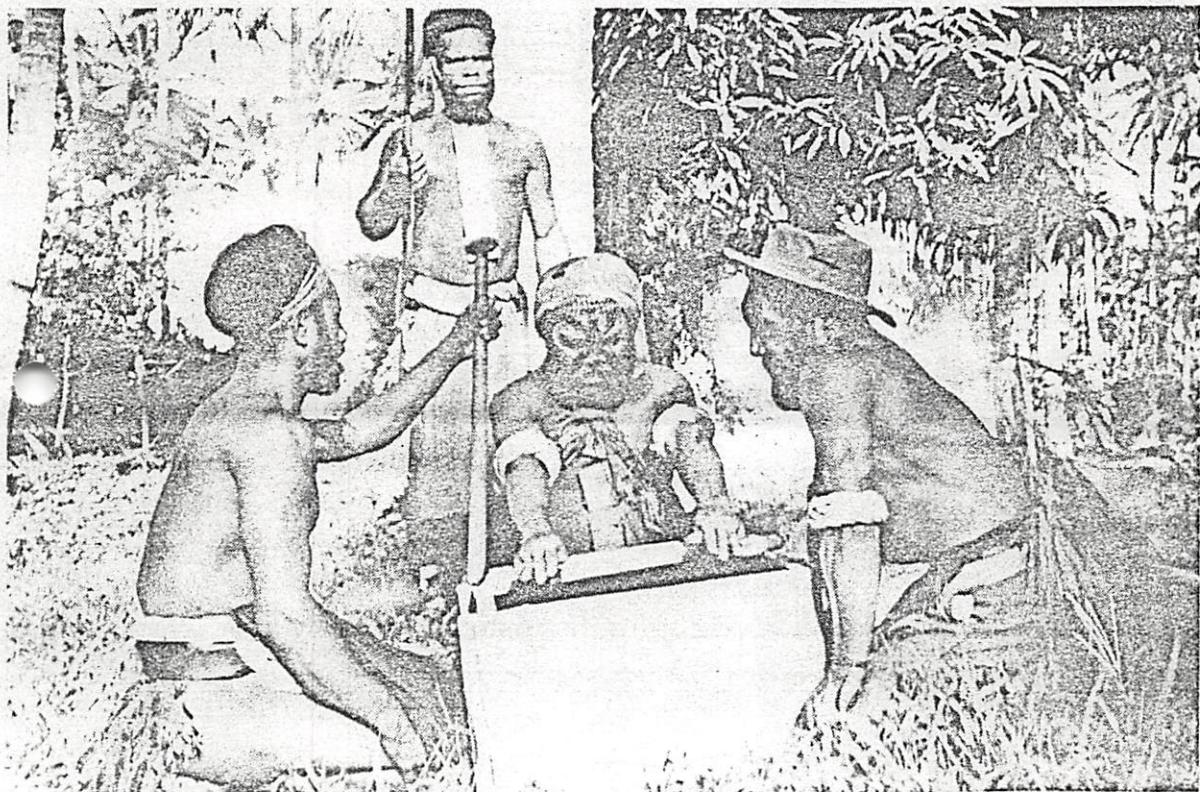
There is sometimes an uglier side to it than the mere collection of money, the destruction of property and false religious teaching, though these are bad enough.

One of the biggest cults in Papua was the Uwana Cult of 1947-48, which stretched from Boianai to Tufi and from coast to coast.

Uwana had a huge two-storey house at Arau, of which the top was his residence and the bottom a church on Sunday, a gambling den during the week and a cargo store when the great day came.

He had a box connected to a pole by a long vine. This was his radio by means of which he could hear what anyone was saying through his dominion. If anyone said anything against him, spears would come up out of the ground and kill them.

Cargo cultists try to make cash "grow". A "prophet" injects money into a rough home-made box. For \$3 he promises the money will multiply and fill the chest.



He had leaders in many villages, including one woman who could catch money out of the air. Her trick was somewhat spoilt one day when Bishop David Hand (now Anglican Bishop of New Guinea), then a young priest, went up after the performance and ruffled her fuzzy hair — sixpences and shillings fell out in all directions.

Deceit and power play a large part in the establishment of power by cargo cult leaders.

What is the answer to cargo cultism?

In the early days, the Government's policy was to put the leaders in jail and the Church's policy was to discipline or excommunicate them and sometimes to destroy their symbols.

This did effectively check them at the time. But the psychological causes were not removed and they continued to proliferate.

The new attitude is to try and find out what is good in them and try to direct it into more sensible channels. This worked out most successfully with the

Wedau Welfare Club, whose leader, Nicodemus, became first a teacher and then a manager of a co-operative store.

There are signs that the President Johnson and Mount Turu cults are now developing into co-operative welfare movements on more sensible lines.

The Churches must be held partly responsible for the religious side of the cults. Not because it is wrong to bring Christianity to these people, but because of inadequate teaching, wrong emphasis and lack of fellowship.

The strong apocalyptic element in the cult seems to be the result of certain missions who have over-emphasised the Old Testament and the second advent of Christ, with its overtones of judgment and destruction.

Perhaps we have not emphasised enough by teaching and precept the love and mercy of God.

There is no quick solution to the problem. We have to have much patience and sympathy,

especially for the misled people, and treat each cargo cult on its merits or demerits.

Where there is malpractice and dishonesty on the part of the leaders, they should certainly be punished and made to return money they have stolen by false pretences.

But where they are sincere we should try to encourage their undoubted gift for leadership and try to point out to them how it can be used to greater advantage for their people in co-operation with Council and Church, instead of opposition.

On the whole it is true to say that the more educated and converted Christian people do not follow the cults and they will in time die out or become so modified that they will no longer qualify for the name.

But the most important thing is to give the people the means to improve their standard of living by encouraging cash crops and locally-owned business and co-operatives.

It is no use leaving this to the

Cultists clear the jungle for an "airstrip" in expectation of a magic aeroplane they believe will bring "cargo" from Heaven.



Agricultural and other departments of the Administration, which are understaffed and sometimes unrealistic. We the Churches must be involved in these things, too. Christianity is for the whole man.

As a Papuan Roman Catholic priest recently said in Port Moresby: "A Papuan sees no division between sacred and secular." The problem is how to do this without too violently overthrowing the culture of the people.

For much of the frustration which leads to cargo cults is due to the tension between the old and new life and the ever-accelerating pace of development.

Some say that education is the answer. Certainly it is important that the people should know about our technology and know

it is not the spirits but know-how which produces cargo.

But instruction should not be confined to school children, who under the new education system are increasingly in the minority and who nearly all end up in the towns.

Instruction should be given in the villages through adult education, suitable film and film strips; and we should try to keep up our exempt or evangelistic schools which do not qualify for registration, so that the thousands of children who have no schools to go to will have some means of gaining not only phonetic literacy, but also knowledge which can be profitably used in local economic development, and spiritual values which will condition the uses to which all such knowledge is put.

Do not let us think that the cargo cult mentality is peculiar to Papua New Guinea.

Surely our western civilisation is one vast cargo cult in which the pursuit of material wealth and power is the be-all-and-end-all of the system and which contains far less of the spiritual than the Papuan cargo-seekers.

Unfortunately we keep the cargo to ourselves and do not share it with our vastly more numerous neighbours and so we encourage the cargo cult in the non-affluent societies.

This may soon be the cause of our downfall in which they may well be dragged down, too.

We hypocrites! Let us first cast out the beam in our own eye; then we may see clearly to pull out the mote in our Papuan brothers' eye.

What Payback Means to Expatriates

Cargo cults, sorcery and cannibalism do not generally affect the lives of Europeans living and working in Papua New Guinea.

However, one custom that has involved Europeans is "Payback", a complicated system of eye-for-an-eye tooth-for-a-tooth compensation for real or imagined wrongs.

One man has learnt about payback the hard way—by experience. Mr. Peter Howard, a 36-year-old English planter, was driving to Mount Hagen when his vehicle accidentally struck and seriously injured a Jiga tribesman.

Mr Howard, who came to the Territory 12 years ago and built up a successful plantation and trading business, rushed the injured man to hospital but he died soon after admission.

In Mount Hagen that same day, outside the divisional police headquarters where Mr Howard had gone to report the accident, he was attacked with slabs of concrete and other weapons by

four members of the same tribe, who would have killed him but for the intervention of a passing European. He had to spend two weeks in hospital as a result of his injuries.

Local courts heard both the case against Mr Howard on the accident charge, and the case against the four men who had assaulted him.

On the assault charge three of the men were released on good behaviour bonds and the fourth was acquitted. Regarding the driving accident the court found that, on the evidence presented, Mr Howard had no case to answer a manslaughter charge.

So far as the Criminal Court was concerned, Peter Howard had been cleared of liability for the death of the Jiga tribesman. However, the man's relatives were bound by tribal law to exact compensation or avenge his death.

The Jigas, upset that Mr Howard had not been punished by the white man's law, let him

know that he would have to make payback for the dead man. Initially they demanded \$4,000 and 28 head of cattle—the alternative being that Howard or another white man would die.

Administration officials advised him to pay. If he didn't, they said they could not answer for his life.

With Administration officers serving as intermediaries, negotiations on the amount of compensation began. It was finally fixed at \$1,000 and four bulls. The money was paid in ten cent pieces and the men went away content.

In an odd twist, Mr Howard told the Jigas that if they wanted to apply their law to the case they would have to go the full distance and compensate him for the bashing—which had included a fractured skull—he in turn had received from their colleagues!

This was settled at \$20 and one pig. From this entire strange episode Mr Howard emerged, if not unscathed, at least alive.