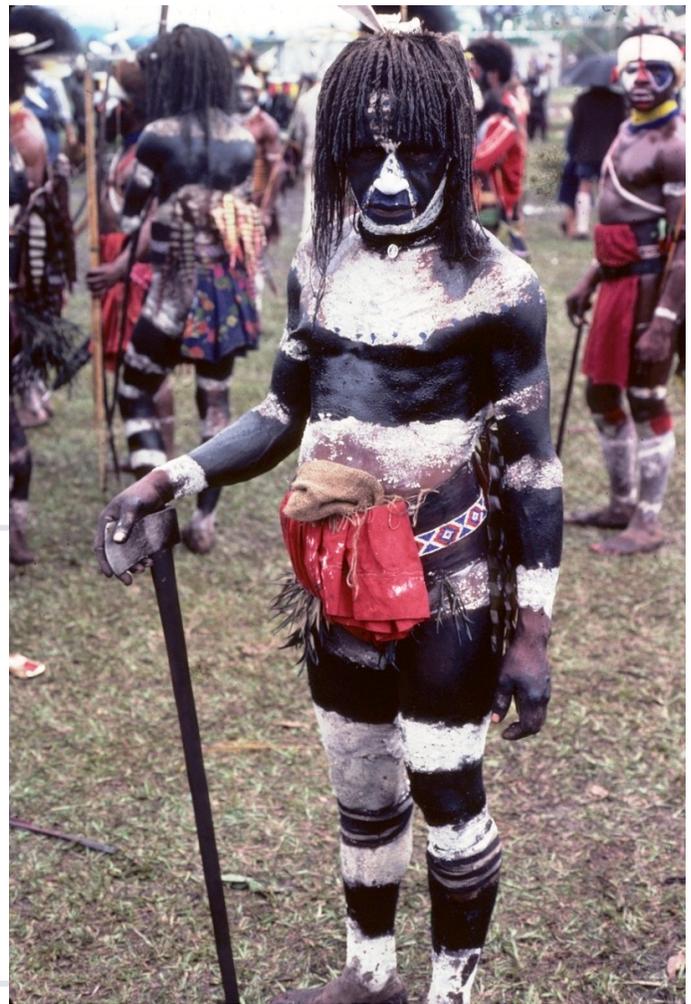


# Cargo Cults in Melanesia and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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The cargo cult is a combination of native beliefs or animism and Christianity whose manifestations were present in the Philippines, West Irian, and throughout Melanesia.

Traditional cultural dress is associated with various forms of Cargo Cult.

Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

## Introduction

In 1966 Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) anthropologist Dr. Gottfried Oosterwal delivered a reflective lecture at Union Theological Seminary, Dasmariñas, Philippines, about the activities of so-called cargo cults. The term, he said, derived from the Pidgin English word *kago*, meaning material wealth of Western origin. His personal experience with cargo cults took place when he was a missionary in the Philippines and West New Guinea (now West Irian), but he noted the manifestations were widespread throughout Melanesia and extended back to the 19th century when European missionaries first established themselves in the Pacific region.<sup>1</sup>

Oosterwal described the cargo cult movement as a combination of native beliefs or animism and Christianity. Local manifestations were characterized by the emergence of a prophet-like male who would announce the

imminent return of an ancestor spirit, one having messianic qualities who would redeem his adherents from Western dominance. The ancestral figure would bring shiploads or planeloads of clothing, weapons, tobacco, vehicles, and outboard motors for their canoes. This advent would usher in the end of oppression and injustices from foreigners. Dead ancestors would be raised to enjoy it all. The halcyon days would be preceded by cataclysmic signs, mountains would walk and quake or erupt in fire, rivers would change their course and flood the land, and the sun would not shine prior to the emergence of a newly created abundant earth. In order to hasten the advent, some adherents threw their coins into the sea, slaughtered their animals, and destroyed their homes and gardens. They reasoned these actions would encourage the redeemer to come quickly, and, after all, there would be no need for these possessions because everything was going to be provided free of charge.<sup>2</sup>

## Seventh-day Adventists and Cargo Cultists

Theoretically, the SDA faith and that of cargo cultists differed radically at their foundations. The SDA faith did not teach that ancestors continued to live in a spirit form and could reappear as humans. And SDA believers eschewed tobacco smoking, betel-nut chewing, and ritual dancing, unlike the cargo cultists. The parallels, however, were patently clear. The SDA faith held to a resurrection of ancestors and a series of cataclysmic signs in nature that would herald the advent of a messiah figure who would create a utopia for all adherents. These similarities made it easier for some members of the SDA mission to join the cargo cultists.

The first time an SDA missionary encountered a cargo cult was apparently about 1927, when Robert Tutty was working on Bougainville Island. A self-proclaimed "prophet" acquired an old almanac and distributed its pages among those who were to receive the cargo. He predicted all the Europeans would leave the area, and his people would have sole use of the goods. Government officials imprisoned the man for six months to deter the false hopes.<sup>3</sup>

Two decades later, in 1947, Tutty met with a second national leader who gathered a following under similar promises. On the island of Baluan, off Manus, a charismatic figure named Paleou had persuaded many islanders of the imminent arrival of a cargo boat. Paleou was said to be surrounded by a mysterious glow and commanded his followers to shake themselves vigorously until they saw God. Under his direction, a hole was dug in the ground, and messages to their ancestors requesting specific cargo were dropped into it. Still under orders, the villagers threw boxes of coins into the sea together with other possessions and smashed their canoes. When the deadline for the boat passed, they threw more money into the sea. Still the boat didn't arrive, and the leader accused the Europeans and SDA folk who resisted his speeches of thwarting the boat's arrival. Some of the lighter household goods thrown into the sea floated past nearby Lou Island, where SDA members retrieved it. Government officials eventually arrived on Baluan Island to thwart the movement.<sup>4</sup> On one visit to Baluan, Tutty played mischief by pretending to be the long-awaited cargo boat. He decked out his vessel with

bunting and sounded his siren continuously as he approached the shore. The villagers rushed excitedly to dress up and watched expectantly, only to be bitterly disappointed when they realized it was only the SDA mission boat.<sup>5</sup> Tutty's tease was never going to win converts.

Some SDA members on Baluan joined the cargo cult. A few years later, SDA missionaries reported small numbers of the cult were baptized, but because of the lingering animosity toward Europeans, it was difficult to make significant inroads.<sup>6</sup> Not until national missionaries Sobu and Pulepada began to evangelize the island in 1961 was any advance made among apostate members and former cultists.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1940s, SDA expatriate missionaries working the northern coast of Papua New Guinea between Madang and Finschhafen initially experienced resistance due to a cargo cult along those shores. All mission faiths were given the same rebuff despite the fact that government officials had outlawed the cult. The SDA mission finally broke down some prejudice with medical treatments for the sick, the first being the recovery of a woman suffering serious postnatal complications.<sup>8</sup>

The cult manifested itself in the Sepik River region in 1957 but with one aberration. Instead of the goods arriving by boat, they were expected to rise from the ancestral graves located on higher ground away from the river. The cult leader, therefore, ordered the villagers to tidy the graves out of respect for their ancestors. On this occasion, government officials moved in quickly to arrest and imprison key cultists.<sup>9</sup>

On the island of Tanna, Vanuatu, the SDA mission enjoyed a large following prior to 1940, but soon after, many believers were persuaded by a cargo cult known as the John Frum movement. John Frum was the fictitious messianic character alleged to be bringing the cargo. The name is thought to be a corruption of John Brown, who helped to liberate American blacks during the Civil War, a story probably overheard by Tannese islanders.<sup>10</sup> In the 1950s, efforts were made to reclaim SDA church members.<sup>11</sup> The central village of the cultists was at Sulphur Bay, where they had thrown large sums of money into the sea, and in the jungles, they had built wharves to receive the cargo. As on Baluan Island, it was a local minister who eventually had some success in reestablishing the SDA mission on Tanna. His name was Japheth Faleu, a Fulton College graduate who, in 1961, began an elementary school and conducted public meetings, resulting initially in 15 conversions.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Some small pockets of the cargo cult still exist in isolated coastal areas of Melanesia. However, with access to more widespread education, the Church's encounters with cargo cultists have largely dissipated by 2019.

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## NOTES

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6. R. A. Harrison, "Bismarck-Solomons Medley," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, April 11, 1955, 3–4.
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