

AN "INDIGENOUS" NEW GUINEA CULT¹

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This paper is an account of a localized New Guinea Cargo Cult; of why it was accepted by some villages and not by others, and of the relationship of the cult to the degree of social change in those villages. The term "Cargo Cult" refers primarily to certain religious movements in New Guinea, especially to those occurring on the coast after the end of the last war. The principal belief of these cults has been that ships bringing "cargo", destined for the natives and not for Europeans, would come if natives carried out certain ritual practices, gathered together in large villages, and had nothing to do with Europeans (Lawrence, 1954). Often such cults have been associated with ideas of a world cataclysm, the return of the ancestors from the dead, and the disappearance of Europeans. Often hostility to Europeans has been expressed explicitly.

Generally such cults have been treated as one variety of messianic movement. A typical analysis of when they occur and what is their meaning, is that given by Firth (1951: 111-113).

"They are essentially reactions by the native people themselves, without European prompting, to the new forces introduced through contact with the West. They express on the one hand native dissatisfaction with existing conditions. On the other hand, they are attempts to get an adjustment... Here is an instance of the incompatibility between wants and the means of satisfaction. Blocked on the one side by inadequate resources, lack of training and lack of opportunity from creating the desired goods themselves, and on the other side by lack of knowledge from realizing the necessary techniques and economic steps required before goods can come to their shores, the New Guinea natives have turned to fantasy... It is part of an affirmation of native claims, native community solidarity, native values, in the face of what is conceived to be an impassive or hostile outside world."

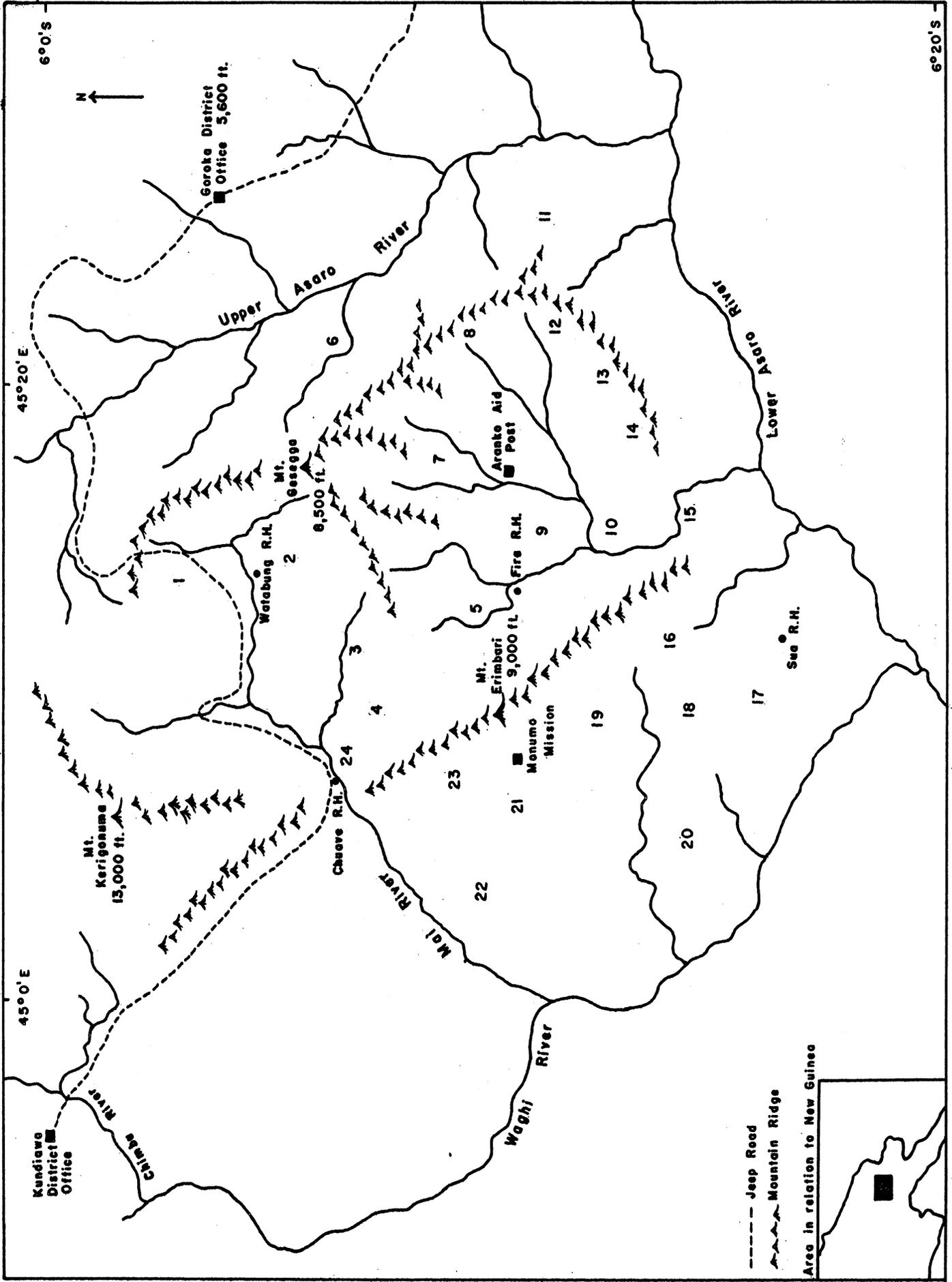
Other writers stress that the cults are a reaction "to psychological disequilibrium, to the hopeless cultural vacuum brought about by the impact of the alien on the indigenous culture" (deBruyn, 1951: 10). Still others have tried to show that cults occur when sufficient contact has occurred to cause a break-down of native values, but not enough to permit natives to participate fully in European culture.

Cargo Cults have been treated as one variety of the more inclusive category of "revitalization movement". These are "deliberate, organized, conscious efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace, 1956: 265). Such movements show a typical sequence. First, individuals experience stress from the unsatisfactory nature of native culture, and their efforts at reducing stress by acting in accordance with their mental image of what native culture is like ("the mazeway")

meet with failure. When the stress reaches a certain level, some people have hallucinatory visions, in which a new and better way of life is revealed. The visionaries gather disciples who follow the teachings of the visions, and, by acting in accordance with the new "mazeway", obtain release from the stress they have been suffering. The "mazeway" provided by the vision may be further modified as the new modes of behaving become institutionalized. If the movement is successful, the change that takes place in the native culture is not merely the innovation of a few discrete cultural items, but the re-organization of a large sector of the culture into a new Gestalt, which gives new meaning and new inter-relationships to previously unrelated elements of both old and new culture. In short, Wallace sees cults as one mechanism of rapid social change, but does not limit their occurrence to situations of contact with Europeans.

In my analysis of one local outbreak of cult behavior I do not wish to discredit any of the theories expounded above, since many features of the cult behavior are those already described. I merely wish to argue against a too facile acceptance of the idea that such cults occur only as a reaction to social disorganization by some contact agent (usually Western society), and against the proposition that such cults always have as an object the changing of an existing cultural "mazeway". I will try to show that cult behavior of a different type can exist: cult behavior occurring intermittently in indigenous social life, without the presence of contact agents. This behavior is a reaction to stress, but to stress which is implicit in the structure of native society, and which builds up and is "triggered" by individual visionaries before finding release in cultism. Cult behavior of this type is not directed at changing the existing "mazeway"; it provides a means whereby groups of people can obtain a release from stress through religious activity which is sanctioned by the existing "mazeway". Having obtained relief in this way, the natives can see the existing "mazeway" as effective, and are motivated to continue acting in accordance with it.

Cultural background. The cult I shall analyze occurred among the Siane and Dene peoples of the New Guinea Highlands in 1947. These peoples are a congeries of tribes in the mountainous area between the Goroka Plain and the Waghi Valley (see map). They live in villages situated on the mountain ridges at about 6,000 feet altitude. Typically each village is occupied by one named patrilineal, patrilocal clan of between 200 and 250 individuals (including the wives of the clansmen, who come from the surrounding clan-villages). Villages are scattered uniformly over the area, approximately two miles apart from each other. Groups of two or three clans compose unnamed phratries within which marriage is prohibited. These phratries combine for action only on the occasion of the largest religious festival of the area (the triennial Pig Feast). Within the phratries killing is forbidden, and during a war involving one clan of a phratry the other clans remain neutral and provide the mediators who eventually arrange a settlement between the combatants. The phratries often coincide with the largest land-holding group (the tribe) if the latter is small, but larger tribes, composed of four or more clans, include more than one phratry. The tribe, as a unit, has few rights vested in it and



45°0'E

45°20'E

6°0'S

6°20'S



Kandiewe District Office

Goroka District Office 5,600 ft.

Mt. Kerigunama 13,000 ft.

Mt. Geseggo 8,500 ft.

Mt. Erimberi 9,000 ft.

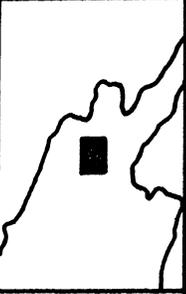
Monumo Mission

Firs R.H.

See R.H.

--- Jeep Road
 Mountain Ridge

Area in relation to New Guinea



Upper Asaro River

Lower Asaro River

Waghi River

Mol River

Chiana River

Wefabung R.H.

Arauke Aid Post

Chuave R.H.

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no occasions when it regularly combines for activities. However, the tribal name is the one most commonly used when referring to any clan of that tribe, and I shall use only tribal names throughout this paper.

Politically the most important unit is that of the clan-village. Each clan is corporately opposed to every other clan outside its own phratry, by affinal relationships and by warfare. Ideally this relationship is a balanced one, with equal numbers of women being exchanged in marriages, and with each side killing or harming equivalent numbers of individuals in warfare. Warfare for territorial gain is unknown. Balanced reciprocity is also expressed through the makings of ceremonial payments of shells or "valuables", which should cancel one another exactly. In practice this balanced opposition does not occur; what one sees are the efforts of individual clans to gain more wives than they give out sisters, to kill or insult more enemies than kill or insult them, or to give away more valuables than they receive and thereby to gain prestige. At the same time one group must not permanently alienate or annihilate other groups, or it will be unable to obtain wives. In warfare the presence of neutrals provides a mechanism for preventing the expansion of any one clan from going too far. In the circulation of valuables the existence of a limited stock ensures that the goods do circulate and do not merely accumulate in the hands of any one group. Balance occurs on a larger societal level, but is the result of many ups and downs for individual clans.

The religion of these peoples involves a belief in ancestral spirits (korova) who are pictured as the opposite of what humans are on earth. They are white while humans are black, they are cold and damp while humans are hot and dry, they are composed of spirit while humans are composed of blood, they live in low-lying land while humans live on ridges. They have a vaguely conceived dwelling place called Makana, but they hover around the clan land and the burial places. They (especially the spirits of newly dead persons) can attack humans and make them behave as though possessed, but in general the spirits are the agency through which humans obtain all good things - health, full adult growth, pigs, and wealth in valuables. The Pig Feast, held by each phratry every three years, is in honor of the korova, for whom pigs are killed, symbolic boards called gerua constructed, dances performed, and the dancers from other groups paid with gifts of pork. With the support of the korova, youths are initiated and enabled to grow to adulthood, and large distributions of pork and valuables are made to other clans, who acknowledge the power of the korova by accepting these goods provided by the spirits. The korova are symbolized in many ways, including the designs on gerua boards and the sacred flutes. They are also associated with the blood of girls born to the clan, and precautions must be taken so that this blood is not "lost" by the girl's first menses occurring outside the clan territory.

Historical background. The first explorers of the New Guinea Highlands passed through the Siane area in February 1933 (Leahy & Crain, 1937: 140-151). A later party crossed the southern Dene area in October

1934. These visits were immediately followed, especially in the Siane area, by great religious activity. Tins, paper and refuse that the travellers had given or thrown away, and the shells with which they had paid for their food, were all wrapped up and hidden in men's houses, while the natives killed pigs and held dances. The Europeans were believed to be returned ancestral spirits, both because of the color of their skins and because of their riches. The dances and killings of pigs were similar to those at the Pig Feast in honor of the spirits, and were held to prepare for the time when the objects obtained from the "spirits" would turn into valuables like shells. Informants say the dancing went on for weeks, but at the end of this time the pieces of paper and tin remained unchanged, and the natives knew that the newcomers were merely human beings. The natives settled back into their normal activities.

During the succeeding twelve years no Europeans re-entered the southern Siane or Dene territory, although some European goods did come in as ceremonial payments. Steel axes became common, making men's garden work easier; the frequency and scale of ceremonial participation increased; and the number of shells and other items of wealth increased several-fold. At the same time warfare also seems to have become more frequent. In a society where fighting and monetary activities provide (with fornication) the chief topics of conversation, none of these changes can be interpreted as producing a "dissatisfying culture" or a "cultural vacuum". The reverse is true. During this period native social life went through a period of florescence, comparable with the florescence of Plains Indian life after the introduction of the horse. This is not to say that all groups were uniformly satisfied. The groups to the north obtained more wealth than the groups to the south (Salisbury, 1956), and they used their wealth to obtain larger numbers of pigs and wives from the southern groups. With the increase in warfare, clans must have changed more abruptly than before, from a position of power to one of defeat, although some clans had always suffered from reverses in war.

In late 1944 a dysentery epidemic in the south brought the first European patrols into the area, on the request of several important men of Komunku tribe. The latter may well have been afraid of reprisals for sorcery believed to have caused the dysentery deaths among the southerners, since they were then fighting against Ramfau and Emenyo tribes over the killing of a woman. In March 1945 the fighting was stopped by a Government patrol which had to fire its rifles and a peacemaking was arranged. The natives of all tribes with whom I talked, viewed the end of fighting as a good thing and there did not appear to be any kind of resentment against Europeans.

To ensure future peace, three Rest Houses were built at about 15 mile intervals, and at each of these Rest Houses a native police constable (pidgin: polisboi) was stationed. These polisbois were from the coastal regions, or from Papua; they had been extensively trained; they were semi-literate in pidgin and were armed with rifles. By native accounts they were officious in carrying out what they thought were their duties. One Lutheran polisboi insisted that all the natives in the area around his

post should attend church services conducted by himself. The polisbois used force to make natives provide them with food; they treated local people as inferior beings, calling them buskanaka (wild savages), which was greatly resented. But their influence on native life seems to have been small. This is understandable since each one patrolled an area of over 60 square miles inhabited by about 5,000 people, since they knew little of the language and natives are adept at concealing matters which they do not want others to know, and since they were largely dependent on natives for food and services.

The cult. Such was the situation when, in 1947, a prophet² came from the East around Kaintu with news of visions that had been seen, and which told of an imminent return of the ancestral spirits from the dead. According to a European witness, the prophet, who had been a native mission evangelist, brought with him a white wooden cross. He told the natives that in the near future there would be a great flood, in the course of which everyday objects which the natives collected would be turned into such valuables as shells and rifles. The prophet travelled along the south bank of the Lower Asaro River. He turned up the Fira River and preached among the clans of the Ramfau tribe who heeded his preaching, though the men of the Aranko tribe to the north did not respond to his message. This may account for his not remaining with the Ramfau people whose actual cult activities appear to have been quite limited. Instead he turned to the west and preached in the valley of the lower Waghi River.

His greatest success was among the Gai and Onankari tribes near the modern Rest House called Eni, and there a woman saw a vision confirming his message while she was in a delirium from guria sickness.³ The prophet persuaded these people to build a large house in the bottom of the gorge of the Waghi River, which in this locality runs between 2,000 foot high ridges, on top of which the villages are built. The villagers killed all their pigs (which the spirits would soon replace) and held dances in honor of the ancestors. They took round stones from the river bed, smeared them with pigs' blood, wrapped them in leaves and put them on one side in the house. They also cut staves of wood and shaped pieces of soft sandstone in the form of knives, which they put with the wrapped stones. All the young girls of the tribe also went into the house, as did the prophet. The dancing in the villages, and the playing of the sacred flutes continued for some time but did not differ from what occurs normally at a Pig Feast. In fact polisbois went to watch the dancing without any incidents occurring.

Soon, however, the cultists sent word to all the northern tribes that the blood that had been smeared on the stones had changed into lengths of red cloth; the stones had sprouted leaves of newspaper and black twist tobacco, the stones themselves had turned into gold-lip shells, while the sticks had turned into rifles. They invited everyone to come and visit them, at what would be the largest distribution of wealth that the area had seen. One polisboi went into hiding in the bush when he heard that the natives now had rifles, but he was persuaded to return when Komunku men told him that the cultists' rifles were delusory. Other

polisbois went to witness the distribution, which turned out to be premature, according to the cultists, for, as they and the prophet were carrying the "shells" from the house in the gorge to the villages on the ridge, the "shells" in their wrappings of leaves "turned back into stones". This was because they "had not danced long enough to make the spirits return permanently". One of the polisbois from Chuave told the cultists that their beliefs were nonsense, and he tried to break up the gathering. In the course of the struggle he received a bad beating. He carried the story of cult activities to the Government Office in Goroka.

At this time (mid-1947) the Government was considerably worried by the anti-European element in many of the Cargo Cults in coastal New Guinea, and the stories of the polisboi, which almost certainly included a mention of the stores of rifles, sounded alarmingly like an anti-European uprising in the Highlands. Speedy measures were taken to stop the cult, and a detachment of native police under the Assistant District Officer went to the affected villages, followed by crowds of natives from non-cultist villages. At the disturbed villages the patrol was met by all the male cultists, armed with bows and arrows and with sticks which had been hidden in the cult house. The natives pointed their weapons at the patrol and warned them not to come any nearer, or they would fire their wooden rifles and arrows. The assembled natives waited on all sides to see what would happen. In this tense situation shooting started, and the order for the police to fire was given. As would be expected the wooden rifles were ineffective, and in the ensuing battle 13 cultists were killed. The patrol bought ten pigs in exchange for shells in a nearby area, and there was a large feast, which the natives interpreted as a peace-making. Informants say that the prophet was jailed, but I obtained no official confirmation of this. Cult activity stopped immediately and had not recurred by the time of my visit in 1952-53. Relationships with Europeans seemed most cordial.

Native attitudes to the cult outbreak are interesting. The headmen of unaffected northern tribes tried to persuade the Government Officers to lead a war of annihilation against the southerners. They explicitly associated the projected distribution of wealth and the display of rifles, with the facts that Gai and Onankari had been badly beaten in warfare some time previously and that they felt they were getting less shells and women than were the northern groups. By using their rifles Gai and Onankari had intended to become politically supreme, while by distributing shells they would have put other tribes under an obligation for all time. Even in Ramfau, where the cult had been accepted but not acted upon, the attitude in 1953 was that the cultists were just stupid to think that their rifles could be effective against European weapons, and that it served them right to be killed. Everyone, including the cultist tribes themselves, condemned the prophet in 1953 as a liar, whose main object had been the seduction of all the young girls who had been secluded with him in the store-house by the river.

Analysis. Let us examine this outbreak of cultism and relate it to some of the theories about messianic movements. The original movement, of which the present cult was an off-shoot, clearly resembled the cults analyzed by Wallace in all respects. Starting with visions occurring in an area (Kainantu) which had been disorganized, deprived of goods and

otherwise frustrated during the war (Berndt, 1952: 56), the movement gained force and prophets were sent out. Its failure does not concern us here. Among the Gai and Onankari the prophet's message triggered off a whole new sequence of visions, ritualistic behavior, and attempts at missionizing. When considered apart from the Kainantu movement, the Gai and Onankari cult had the form of a revitalization movement in its own right.

But an answer to the question of why the cult was accepted by the two Dene groups cannot be phrased solely in the terms used to explain the occurrence of revitalization movements, nor exclusively in terms of social disorganization, of extensive contact, or of a desire to change the cultural "mazeway". The area as a whole was not disorganized, but it was in a state of well-being, and the coming of Europeans during the preceding two years had improved matters further by bringing peace (although the presence of polisbois was a source of grievance). Compared with their state ten years previously, Gai, Onankari and Ramfau were prospering. It is only by comparison with the richer and momentarily politically superior northern tribes that the southerners were badly off. But such temporary states of disadvantage were common in the indigenous way of life.

The extent of European contact cannot be used as an explanatory variable either. All the Siane and Dene tribes had been in contact with Europeans for the same length of time (about two years), while it was those tribes whose contact had been more extensive, and presumably more traumatic, (the northern tribes) who rejected cultism.

A desire to change the culture was also lacking in the cults. The rituals used were identical with those of regular ceremonial. The belief in the eventual return of the ancestral spirits was, and is general, although the belief that this would come as part of a great flood was perhaps an innovation by the prophet. Nevertheless this belief was congruent with the older idea that the spirits are associated with dampness and low-lying ground. The idea that the ancestors can turn everyday objects into wealth was also prevalent; the prophet provided an authoritative statement that changed belief into action. The means of obtaining ancestral support by killing pigs and dancing were the same as those employed every three years in the Pig Feast. The idea that young girls were closely associated with the spirits was also present in native religion, and their deflowering by the prophet could well have had some religious sanction as producing blood which would attract the ancestors. The presence of rifles as something the ancestors could provide may be explicable in terms of one crucial incident in the initiation cycle. During the initial seclusion of novices, ancestral blessing is called down upon their bows and arrows, and then the boys are led out to do pitched battle with another clan. Since the natives had seen how powerful European weapons were, it is understandable that the ancestors' blessing should be called upon to make native sticks as powerful as these weapons. In short, the cult behavior can be seen as a repetition of indigenous cultural patterns.

The ends to which the cult was directed were not those of changing the "mazeway", or the organization of native culture. Outsiders were sure that the cause of the southerners accepting the cult was their desire to

avenge military defeats and to compensate for their relative disadvantage in the possession of valuables. After the cult had provided them with rifles and shells the southerners would have acted in accordance with the traditional "mazeway" and would have fought and distributed wealth to alter their relative standing within the existing political structure of balanced sovereign clans. Gai and Onankari aimed to displace the tribes which were at the top of the political hierarchy but they did not intend to change the structure of the hierarchy.

In fact the cult did not provide its adherents with goods, nor did it put them at the head of the hierarchy. Yet when some cultists were shot and peace made, the leaders were not treated as martyrs, but the cultists quickly returned to their normal pursuits and apparently forgot their dissatisfaction. This would suggest that the cult did successfully perform a function of some kind, and to see what this function was we should examine the effects of the cult. In the first place, the tribes of Gai and Onankari were a focus for the visits and talk of the whole area for several months. They killed and distributed all their pigs in large feasts, and during the ensuing months were undoubtedly invited to many other feasts at which they obtained repayment. Secondly, although the Europeans showed that they were the most powerful "clan", they also showed, by making peace with Gai and Onankari, that they considered the defeated clans to have a respected place in the hierarchy. In short, the Europeans' behavior was understandable in terms of the existing "mazeway", and served to provide the dissatisfied tribes with rewards, which were also those included in the existing "mazeway".

Gluckman has described what he calls "rituals and rebellion" in southeast Africa (1954), in which, through political activity designed to replace the incumbents of chiefly posts, tribal members in fact reaffirm their allegiance to the office of chief. Gluckman contrasts these rebellions with "revolutions" designed to create new political structures. In a similar way we might contrast the Gai and Onankari cult with coastal New Guinea cults which try to create new religious and political structures; the Highland cult could be seen as a reaffirmation, through religious activity of belief in the existing cultural pattern of religious and political behavior, on the part of a group which had temporarily been deprived and frustrated under that system. The temporary frustrations were forgotten in the excitement and public interest, while the ensuing exchanges or fighting showed that the "mazeway" could in fact provide a rewarding way of organizing behavior.

It must be a matter of speculation how common such cults were in indigenous New Guinea, but there is some evidence of their occurrence before contact with Europeans, and of their continual recurrence during the whole period since European contact. Berndt (1952) and Blood (1945) have described cults occurring before direct contact with Europeans. The Siane in 1933 exhibited behavior characteristic of cults, although this was their first contact with Europeans. De Bruyn (1951) reports that the Mansren cult of Biak has been alternately quiescent and flourishing over the last 40 years of European contact, while it may have begun earlier. The fact

that all the elements used by the Siame in their cult activity (with the possible exception of rifles) were used in native ritual shows that cults would not be precluded by a lack of appropriate traits in the pre-contact religion. Contact with Europeans is not a prerequisite for cultism.

I suggest that the burden of proof must rest with those who wish to show that cults did not occur indigenously. There is presumptive evidence that "indigenous cults" did occur in New Guinea.⁴ Although their form, as exemplified in the Gai and Onankari cult, is that of a revitalization movement, their function is different. Revitalization movements occur in changing societies, and use the reaction of individuals to stress, to provide a new "mazeway" or new principles of organization for a culture that has become dissatisfying. In apparently static native societies, where some groups commonly experience frustration, "indigenous cults" may occur periodically and may serve to reaffirm a belief in the existing principles of social and cultural organization, while permitting deprived groups to obtain emotional release and greater social recognition within that organization. Contact with Europeans, social disorganization and a desire for change may produce an epidemic of revitalization movements; "indigenous cults" can be viewed as a symptom of a social pathology that is endemic.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork on which this study was based was carried out as a scholar of the Australian National University between November 1952 and November 1953. I wish to thank the University for their support, Messrs J. Searson and A.R. Lane for helping me to evaluate native information about the cult, Dr. Lucy Mair who suggested that this material might be worth publishing, and Dr. Edward Norbeck for a critical reading of the text.
2. As far as I could discover, this was the first occasion on which the natives had any contact with cults or prophets coming from areas which had been in contact with Europeans.
3. On the coast the pidgin term guria refers to malaria, and the sickness was reported to me by a European as being malaria. However, malaria was unknown in this area of the Highlands, and I found that the most effective treatment for guria sickness was to administer salt tablets. The disease may well be a form of salt starvation or heat exhaustion.
4. There is also evidence of the occurrence of "indigenous cults" in 16th century South America (c.f. Métraux, 1927), while recurrent cultism is also a phenomenon of modern American life.

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