Merton, Cargo Cults and *The Geography of Lograire*

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The following essay is a brief excursus into Merton and cargo cults, especially in relation to *The Geography of Lograire* (hereafter *Lograire)*—although cargo cults are only a part of *Lograire's* sustained concern with the underside of the Euro-Christian expansion and civilizing mission.

Cargo cults or movements combine social, political, religious, economic, and magical elements, and have as their overt objective a plentiful and free supply of Western manufactured goods of all kinds, known as cargo or in the Pidgin *kago*. They have been occurring in the South Pacific since the late nineteenth-century and reached their greatest reported frequency in the years after the Second World War. Since the former Papua, New Guinea and adjacent islands amalgamated and became an independent nation, they have been gradually tapering off into a variety of "spirit" rather than cargo cults. Because the kinds of behaviors and symbolisms in cargo movements reach into native mythologies as well as misunderstandings of European or Western modes of thought and techniques, they were, at first, taken to be and repeatedly described as the bizarre activities of a few mentally deranged participants blossoming into particular kinds of mass hysteria: a reaction which reveals European misconceptions of the whys and wherefores of the movements.

Still, Europeans had some basis for describing the activities as bizarre. Some examples may be cited: the attempted use by nonliterates of scribbled pieces of paper as cheques in local stores and banks; the destruction of crops; acts of promiscuous sexuality which act out mythical first beginnings of society and hence a new or fresh start; the making of supposed radios and the aerials to go with them out of forest woods and vines, which would inform the participants of the imminent arrival of cargo; the return of the ancestors in steamships laden with cargo; marching to and fro in military precision with wooden rifles—imitating the European-

run police; decorating their houses with flowers as white folk did and do—and many other expedients, including, as we shall see further, a proposed or hopefully expected resurrection.

Yet what is regarded as bizarre by one culture is not necessarily so for the bearers of another tradition. One is reminded of a television skit which opens with a group of men and women sitting on what must have been, from the lilt of speech, a hillside in Wales awaiting the dawn and, one supposes, some sort of climactic event:

> "Did you bring the sandwiches then, Ba?" asks a well wrapped fellow of his neighbour.
> "Sandwiches?" the neighbour echoes indignantly. "In a few minutes now, we'll be sitting at the Heavenly banquet! Sandwiches indeed!"
> "Oh, yes of course" comes the reply. "But you brought the coffee didn't you? I could do with a coffee right now!"
> "Coffee!? Coffee?!" is the exasperated rejoinder. "We're about to drink ambrosia of the gods!"

And so on . . . a hunger cult perhaps? Hunger for what? Not sandwiches and coffee, surely! A Second Coming—but what then? In any case a peculiar mixture of the transcendent, faith and the mundane appetites of everyday.

So it is with cargo cults. Not simply cargo—though that would be reward enough—but the deeper meanings of having free access to cargo. Just before and after World War II, cargo activities began to be interpreted by Westerners in a variety of sociological frameworks and contexts, all having to do with cultural change, colonialism and consequent politico-economic deprivations, adjustments to modernity, and many variants within these general themes. The labels in the extant literature are legion: accommodative, acculturative, adaptive, adjustive (reconciling tradition with intrusive modernity); crisis, disaster (assuming some prior cultural or natural traumatic cause); nativistic, militant, denunciatory (which evoke rebellious responses to foreign rule); dynamic, dynamistic, vitalization, revitalization (emphasizing cultural renewals); or, to further emphasize undoubted Christian missionary influences, charismatic, prophet, Holy Spirit, salvation.

For reasons which may become more evident later on in this paper, especially the inherent similarity of cargo movements to Christian medieval millenarisms, later enthusiasms, adventist movements and more recent Western cultic activities (Jonesville and the Branch Davidians come to mind) all of which contain themes of what fairly clearly seem to be an ultimate redemption, it is useful to think of cargo cults as local variants within a more universal genre, as movements of a millenarian type rather than as psychological aberrations—though of course they may be that as well. Thus, the behavioral peculiarities are as antinomian as one could wish, and receiving the cargo, a plethora of Western manufactured goods, would stand for some sort of acceptable and desired salvation.

Let me say at once that there is precious little in Merton's "Cargo Theology" or "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific,"[1] with which I would disagree. Where Merton goes to myth dream (a collapsing of mythology and dream life, where dreams both derive from and feed back into mythology) and identity, I go to myth dream, new man, and redemption. Both Merton and I regard what used to be a common response, such as there's nothing spiritual about them or they just want the cargo as insufficient. More pointedly, perhaps, in instances where, for example, crops have been destroyed as a condition of, and act of faith in, the arrival of cargo, and the Colonial administration has felt it incumbent to provide all sorts of cargo foodstuffs to prevent a local famine, the rites might seem to an onlooker or even a participant to have worked. But since the people involved in the activities often continue with their cargo beliefs, the point is surely being missed. The cargo is both the actuality as well as the symbol of what is being sought.

Although my *new man* and Merton's *identity* mean something similar, Merton, having written a book on the new man (*The New Man*, 1961), a highly spiritualized and even mystical new man, would be understandably reluctant to use the term in relation to cargo cults. A further difference is that while—together with many other commentators—Merton is hesitant explicitly to class cargo cults together with historical European cults or movements or more recent Western examples (such as the Jonesville or Branch Davidian cults), his verses on the Ranters in *Lograire* as well as other *obiter dicta* elsewhere, persuade me that he might have liked to do so.

With this brief introduction to cargo movements we may perhaps change the idiom of discourse. Instead of rehearsing the usual contexts of colonialism, political and economic difficulties, social

deprivations, and the problems of coming to terms with modernity and industrialization, let us try something different. Let us suppose that three interrelated and intertwined archetypal themes seem to inform not only the work, Lograire, but also cargo cults, and Merton's own life experience: the two brothers, Cain and Abel who occur in cargo mythology as older and younger brother; father and son, proto-typically Abraham and Isaac, the son being a willing sacrifice, but also in a variety of other guises; the two brothers as Noah and son Ham, Ham's son (Canaan) and descendants, and Ham's brothers; and the two friends, as in David and Jonathan, often a variant of the two brothers.

Here, it is well to remind the reader of certain pertinent aspects of Merton's life. Merton had a close relationship with his father and mother until his mother died when Merton was six; then his father abandoned Merton with relatives while he went off on his painting trips. When Merton became an adult he had an illegitimate child whom he did not acknowledge and abandoned. In his youth, Merton bullied his younger brother and prevented him from joining in games Merton and friends were playing. The brother's early death in the Second World War, flying with the Royal Canadian Air Force, affected Merton deeply. In young adulthood, Merton had a *coterie* of friends who discussed world affairs and their own feelings and views but did little that was positive—though he did spend some time working at de Hueck's Friendship House for disadvantaged children in Harlem. Perhaps Merton's best friend *cum surrogate* father was his thesis supervisor at Columbia University, Mark Van Doren.

Cain and Abel are explicit in the South canto with the white captain of a ship (Cain?) chasing a runaway slave (Abel?). Why the Lord favoured Abel's lamb over Cain's gift of farm produce has never been clear to me, nor I suspect, to a keen vegetarian, religious or otherwise. But there it is. Merton's frequent mention of the Lamb, son of God, Jesus, would seem to lead into a resolution of the two tensions (father-son/brothers) in the Eucharist, where the Lamb (flesh and blood) inheres in or becomes bread and wine—agricultural products. In cargo mythology, as between the two brothers, one of whom does something—and this varies from a silly mistake (as may be thought of Ham's happening to sight his father's nakedness) to incest or the whim of a Creator figure (as with Cain and Abel)—which entails black skin and no

cargo for, more usually, the elder brother, while, again more usually, the younger brother, a smart fellow, has white skin and lots of cargo.

How may this opposition be reconciled? In traditional terms it is scarcely possible. Furthermore, putting their own spin on Bible stories told by missionaries, particularly Noah and the flood, Ham is not only son—identified by Melanesians as the brother who made a mistake—but as brother, cursed by father, whose descendants, black-skinned like Melanesians, are doomed to inferior status. On the other hand, the descendants of Ham's brothers, with white skin, are favoured and so have access to cargo.

Unlike the situation in Polynesia and most of Micronesia, where the father-son relationship is important, the father-son in Melanesia, where the vast majority of cargo cults occur and have occurred, is not as in Freud or Oedipus. Possible problems in the father-son are offset by the disciplinary supervisions and influence of the mother-brother. In Melanesia, one never hears of "Our fathers . . ." but always the ancestors, who are thought of as male, certainly, but never confused with father. In a sense, one feels, without the father-son paradigm, the tension between brothers seems irreconcilable except, perhaps, in this context, through access to cargo—which itself requires a major reconciliation between those with cargo, white people, and those without cargo, black people—or, perhaps and on the other hand, through The Father, *Bigpela antap* (the Big one, God, on high) as the colloquial Pidgin has it. And if a divine Father/God is perhaps a little out of reach, maybe a more tangible and earthy father figure from a native New Guinean political authority is appropriately accessible.

Next, one might look at the Clapcott case in *Lograire*.[2] First, one has to say that Merton's treatment of this—as are his remarks about MacGregor[3] (onetime administrator of what was then Papua or British New Guinea, not Papua New Guinea) and the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski[4]—is overly onesided, concentrating on the brutal whites and the poor and oppressed villagers. In fact, MacGregor was a remarkably good and humane administrator. And Malinowski, a Polish national who accepted the option of going to the Trobriands rather than being incarcerated in an Australian camp for enemy aliens, probably did more for the understanding of other, particularly nonliterate, cultures than anyone else of his time.

Now consider the Clapcott case. He was a single white male, a planter who probably never saw another of his own kind for months at a time. And yes, he took native women into his bed—something that in those days was considered normal and natural, pulling the white stranger into the local web of kin relationships. Suspicion and even alarm might have resulted had he not been so. Further, the woman was usually well rewarded in cash or kind—cargo. In short, such women, usually local villagers' wives, were conduits of cargo, as it were loaned out to lonely whites in exchange for money or cargo or both. It is quite false to think, as Merton seems to do, that this usage was a kind of white-black oppression, although in today's world, of course, it might be seen as a form of male-female oppression however profitable to the woman it might be. In those days, however, a woman found security in being a wife and having the children who would look after her when the husband died or was killed. For a man a wife was valuable not only for dependable sexual relations and children but because she nurtured the crops in the garden and carried loads of ripened tubers (weighing maybe 200 lbs.) as well as babies from garden to village. In short, a wife was a valuable economic asset to husband and kin. Add access to cargo and it was truly a value-added arrangement.

When the wife of an up-and-coming cargo cult leader, whose access to cargo had been augmented by letting his wife out to Clapcott, died, he was of course much put out. Also, having a slight if confused acquaintance with Christianity, he seems to have thought that if Clapcott were killed—read sacrificed—his wife would be resurrected as white with total access to lots of cargo (which might remind one of a recent Californian death cult in which participants in a mass suicide expected to be resurrected into another kind of life as new and superior beings in a spacecraft supposedly cruising above).

Accordingly, Clapcott was done to death—not, be it noted, by the cargo leader, who might be supposed to be the injured party in an adultery, doing so in response to adultery, as Merton would seem to have it, but by henchmen: something alien to and simply not done in traditional Melanesian culture, where no one would support such a personally injured party unless action was first taken by that party.

It is easy to suppose Clapcott was killed for his adultery, for supposedly taking workers or villager's wives by force. What force, one wonders—a man alone among a potentially hostile people? Here, surely, we have an attempt to even the score. Abel killing Cain or Joseph being left in a well by his brothers for being favored by the father but later becoming reconciled, brothers together and united. However, in this case, there was no escape from the well, no resurrection, no cargo; only an administrative posse of police, somebody squealing or informing, and the arrest of those involved in the homicide. There is no reconciliation. Ham's descendants have been left to their fate. The more faithful of the cargo cultists had to wonder what had gone wrong.

Some further points arise from the Clapcott case. In spite of what has already been said about the father-son dimension in Melanesia, sons may fairly frequently encounter both in dream or waking life, the ghost of the dead father, appearing as a pale white cloud. With or without being asked, the ghost-father might give advice to the son. But this advice could well be malicious or maybe at best choked with ambivalences. Just what to do about such advice the son had to figure out for himself. Nevertheless, it was advice, a gift which, like the responses of the oracle at Delphi, had to be treated with circumspection. Able sons benefited; the incompetent made wrong interpretations.

This aspect of the father-son takes us back to the ancestors, thought of as male, pale or white like mist or clouds, who may also bear gifts. Further, males in Melanesia are or were thought to possess a sort of *nous* (my adaptation from the Greek for the Tangu word *gnek)*, seat of thought or intelligence located in the forehead, which is or was considered immortal. That is why males become ancestors and ancestors are regarded as male. Women, on the other hand, are or were thought not to possess such a *nous* or *gnek*. When a woman died, she was envisioned as becoming a mouse or a rat pottering about in the food storage or kitchen. Thus, while living wives actually can or could be conduits of cargo, the ancestors, dead males, like fathers' ghosts, are, on the other hand, frequently figured as the future suppliers of cargo: they make the cargo somewhere far away and load it into ships. But, on the voyage over, someone changes the labels on the packages so that they are addressed only to white folk. To counter this difficulty, cargo cultists assert, the ancestors themselves are going to take charge of the ships and their cargoes, so ensuring that the cargo goes to their

descendants. Further, the ancestors might be persuaded to come sooner rather than later if only they, the living, could figure out correctly what would please them. In the Clapcott case, however, it is a resurrected wife, now with a white skin, who is going to become the source of cargo.

Going a little beyond what has already been said, this may be a small facet of what is in fact a quite massive Christian missionary influence. For it is the womenfolk who first become Christians, who take to Euro-education much more readily than the men, who today crowd the meetings of all kinds of local, regional and even international social organizations....Why? Well, perhaps the fact that Christianity gives women an immortal soul and seems to allow them something like a *nous* or *gnek* may have something to do both with their readiness to accept whites' education and with the dead wife's hoped-for resurrection as white with cargo.

Now to something which, on the face it, seems far removed from cargo cults, but which, in its relevance to the father-son relationship, provides an insight into cargo cults: the relation of Ibn Battuta, the North African Muslim traveller in *Lograire:*

> A SLAVE
> CUTS OFF HIS OWN HEAD
> AFTER A LONG SPEECH
> DECLARING HOW MUCH
> HE LOVES THE SULTAN.[5]

Now Sultan and slave are as father to son, and the slave or son is figured not so much committing suicide as becoming like Isaac, the willing sacrifice to or for love of the Father or Sultan.

Among the Muslim Malays of Malaysia, on party occasions in the villages—weddings, anniversaries and such—evenings could be spent listening to the recital of stories accompanied by the performance of a shadow play, an acting out of suitable stories by puppets placed against a lighted screen. One of the stories of interest to us here concerns a hero, Hang Tuah, who was, together with a friend, a renownedly faithful servant of their Sultan (father), always available for deeds of derring do. One day, the story goes, the Sultan summons Hang Tuah to an audience. Says the Sultan to Hang Tuah:

> "Are you the faithful servant I think you are? The time has come to test your loyalty. I want you to bring me the head of your friend—that will show your loyalty to me above all other loyalties."
> Sad at heart, Hang Tuah bows to the Sultan: "Your will be done, Sire..."
> So Hang Tuah goes to his friend and tells him what he has to do. The friend, the willing sacrifice, replies: "Very well. You must do as the Sultan asks. Behead me."
> Albeit reluctantly, with one swipe of his parang, Hang Tuah beheads his friend and, returning to the Sultan, presents him with the head of his friend.

In the past, when this story was told the audience would accept the climax in a silence proper to the tragedy. But in the weeks leading up to *merdeka* or political independence, the story was greeted with growls of disapproval and, as is the wont of storytellers and puppeteers in relation to their audiences, the ending of the story began to change to accord with the mood of the audience.

> "No!" exclaims Hang Tuah when the Sultan tells him what he wants done. "I will not kill my friend!"

The cheers of the audience usually drowned out anything further the storyteller had to say. Son has become independent of father as paternal colonialism wanes.

Much the same sort of evolution has occurred in relation to cargo cults. The number of these cults, as such, outside Melanesia—among Polynesians or Micronesians, for example—are so few as to be negligible. Within Melanesia, a very few have occurred among the Highland peoples: polities among these peoples are reasonably stable, the mother-brother is less emphasized, the father-son has a more dynastic relevance than among the coastal peoples where the vast majority of cults have occurred. Unlike the situation in the Highlands, the peoples of the coastal areas received the direct thrust of colonialism. The area was suitable for plantations of coconuts (for the manufacture of cooking oils and soap), and so the need for labor, indentured or, later, contractual, introduced disease-ravaged populations. Unstable indigenous political systems have been the norm.

Today, however, with political independence, and as with Hang Tuah and independence from paternal colonialism, cargo cults have been falling away. Brothers and friends are finding matters other than cargo to quarrel about and, perhaps, finding some sort of reconciliation of their sibling rivalries in the Fatherhood and stabilities of political independence. But if the politico-economic situation of the past has eased, being succeeded by measures of prosperity, stability, and access to cargo, in Melanesia as elsewhere in a world becoming more and more uniform, industrialized, and bringing its own uncertainties, here and there salvation and spirit movements reveal a spiritual void that some feel a need to fill.

To conclude: one cannot but stand in awe and admiration of Merton's breadth of scholarship and depth of insight. But it surely cannot be said that *Lograire* is among the highlights of his work. Personally I enjoyed the Thonga lament and the piece on Ibn Batuta but found most of the remainder to be rather heavy going: the persistent and then fashionable anti-colonial, anti-missionary stance married to racist white-black tensions tends to grate when driven too hard. In *Lograire,* Merton seems to me to emerge as very much a man of his moment and the transient circumstances of the time.

In his *Author's Note* Merton says that *Lograire* is a "purely tentative draft of a longer work in progress."[6] I do not know what Merton had in mind for that longer work, but I like to think he would have left *Lograire* alone and gone on to other things.

Notes

1. See "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific" in Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) pp 80-94: "Cargo Theology" is an alternate title for this transcribed lecture that is used in the notes of *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) p. 147

2. "Dialogue with Mister Clapcott" ("East" IX), *Lograire,* pp. 113-116.

3. In "Cargo Songs" ("East" III), *Lograire,* p. 91.

4. In "East with Malinowski" ("East" II), *Lograire,* pp. 89-90; see also pp. 91, 93, 95.

5. Prologue to "East" Canto, *Lograire,* p. 81.

6. *Lograire,* p. 1.