

## 8. On Messianic Promise

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### Introduction

I have learned many things from Don Tuzin's books. One of the formative texts of my education, as a graduate student interested in religious secrecy, was *The Voice of the Tambaran* (1980), and I poured over *The Ilahita Arapesh: Dimensions of Unity* (1976) just as carefully. Later, *The Cassowary's Revenge* (1997) became a guiding light for me during the process of writing my thesis on Christianity and cultural change among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. As it has for many of my generation, this book has been a condition of possibility for my own work—a book from the pen of a major figure of what we might call traditional Melanesian ethnography that provided proof that anthropologists could take Christian revival movements and the cultural changes they wrought seriously as objects of study and could, in doing so, produce ethnographies every bit as rich and satisfying as those of the past. A work of exceptional subtlety and rigorous, inventive argument, *The Cassowary's Revenge* was, to many who read it, a classic from the moment it appeared. I mention all this by way of saying that Don Tuzin, the writer, has been with me almost from the beginning of my engagement with Melanesian studies, and his work has been a major presence at every stage of my intellectual development.

And in 1998, Don Tuzin became my colleague and mentor. In those capacities, he taught me much more than I can begin to recount here. But I want to dwell on one lesson I learned from him that has been important to me and that bears on the argument of this chapter. That lesson is that people can be close and supportive colleagues even in the face of important intellectual differences as long as they are willing to argue those differences out whenever they come up. Don taught me this lesson because although he and I agreed about a great many things—not least the importance of Melanesian ethnography—deep down we favoured very different kinds of anthropological theory. As he laid out clearly in the opening pages of *The Ilahita Arapesh*, Don was a methodological individualist and, correlated with this, a nominalist (Tuzin 1976:xxv–xxx). Put very roughly, for him the world was created anew at every instant by individuals acting in the situations in which they found themselves. I, on the other hand, am much more comfortable in the other camp—a camp that is harder to name (Tuzin 1976:xxvi–xxvii), but that tends to be labelled holism or realism. Trained as a structuralist, I focus in my own work on standing cultural complexes, which I take to be real in

some meaningful sense, and on their power to shape the way social life unfolds. Broad theoretical distinctions such as those between nominalists and realists are always too blunt, and I can point you to realist-looking parts of Don's work (and in fact he was a great ethnographer of what I would call cultural structures) and to nominalist-looking parts of my own. But it was still the case that in the midst of my and Don's many long intellectual conversations—a genre of interaction of which Don was a master—often the areas of disagreement would run along these nominalist/realist lines, with him wanting to privilege individuals in one way or another and me wanting to privilege cultural structures. Don taught me how valuable it was to keep revisiting such recalcitrant issues as friends and as colleagues, even when perfect agreement is not on the horizon. This was one of the many important lessons in how to be an intellectual and a colleague that I learned from Don, a man who excelled in both roles.

I bring up this particular lesson here because the split between nominalism and realism bears on the topic I want to address in the rest of this chapter—that of messianism. Ever since I read *The Cassowary's Revenge* very soon after it came out (see Robbins 1998), I sensed that this was the book of Don's that fitted my own theoretical predilections most closely. For a long time, I thought this might just be because Don's methodological individualism had mellowed a bit with age, but now I am inclined to think that the drawing closer of our two outlooks that I see in this book also has to do with its focus on messianism as a kind of cultural change. For if we take messianism to aim for (even if it never fully achieves) change that is deliberate, rapid and radical then the kinds of cultural spaces messianism opens up are ones in which even realists will have to attend to how concrete individuals bring about momentous change—how they, as Don puts it, take 'history into their own hands' (Tuzin 1997:36). At the same time, inasmuch as messianic periods are ones in which all manner of cultural resources are in play—periods in which 'culture, history and psyche unite to create a "mythic" moment in which the barriers separating metaphysical domains are lifted' (Tuzin 1997:67)—even nominalists will have to attend to the kinds of cultural structures messianics shatter into the fragments they then redeploy to make a new life. Don made just this kind of cultural turn in *The Cassowary's Revenge*. This is evident both in his consideration of how the Nambweapa'w myth shaped historical action in Ilahita and in his complex argument about the way in which a central contradiction of Ilahita culture 'pressed for its own resolution' in the messianic Ilahitan destruction of their men's cult (Tuzin 1997:65).

Because my own theoretical interests and those that preoccupied Don come together so nicely around issues of messianism, I want to devote this chapter to some thoughts on what we might call the messianic promise: the possibility that messianism always holds out that life might be lived otherwise. Some of the

theorists of messianism I discuss in what follows were not ones who interested Don much, but I am convinced that the spirit of this inquiry is in line with some of the main issues that animated his own work.

## On Hearing the Messianic Promise

What does it mean to hear the promise of the messianic? If I were to answer that question on the basis of self-evidence, I would have to refer to several experiences: taken in order of occurrence, these would be encountering anthropology as a young student in the late 1970s and early 1980s; reading the literature on millenarianism in Papua New Guinea and later doing fieldwork with a group of people in that region who were adept at listening for the messianic promise; and, finally, reading and rereading Walter Benjamin's (1969) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In this chapter, I want to try to make these experiences speak to each other in a way that might be productive for anthropological practice, or at least for my own anthropological practice. In order to work towards that goal, let me proceed in reverse personal experiential order, starting with Benjamin (and addressing Derrida along the way), moving on to Papua New Guinea and finally to anthropology.

One might say that Benjamin's theses need no introduction among contemporary academics, but of course they always do. They are cast in a writerly style that demands that they be received as an event in the lives of their readers, and to say anything interesting with or about them you have to put your reading on the table. Mine has always focused most on time but has in the past few years also taken up Benjamin's related critique of progress. I start with time here and come back to progress in my conclusion. The crucial point about time on my reading of the theses is that messianic time arrests another kind of time. Homogeneous empty time is Benjamin's historically grounded name for the kind of time the messianic interrupts, but perhaps we can include workaday linear causal time here as well so as not to exclude from consideration the messianism of those who have never lived in the homogeneous empty time of modernity. Benjamin's images of how the messianic arrest of linear time occurs are justly famous: the messianic makes the continuum of history explode; it pulls the emergency brake on the locomotive of history. But what does this arrest of time establish? Here Benjamin refers to historical memory, suggesting that messianic arrests happen when the past flashes 'up at a moment of danger'. This is to say that critical to the construction of messianic now-time is the effort to read history as a repository of some moments of potential emancipation that shine through the gloomy muck of its record of oppression, suffering and disappointment.

When such moments resonate with what is happening in the present the two can form a fusion that happens to time, not just in it, and opens up radically new possibilities for action.

How do we listen for the promise of the kind of messianism Benjamin has in mind? On this topic, Benjamin is not so strong. Certainly, he tells us to approach history differently, attending more to its unrealised potentials than to its linear unfolding. And we can argue that he himself has modelled this kind of listening for us in his own raising up of an old tradition of Jewish messianism in these theses written in the aftermath of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. But still, there is something Benjamin is not telling us about how to live what he calls in the notes to the theses a critical ‘organized pessimism’ that does not foreclose hearing the messianic call (Benjamin 2003:404). And this, I think, is where Derrida comes in.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (1994:180–1) first introduces the concept of ‘the messianic without messianism’ in a footnote on Benjamin. He will in a later essay distance his idea of the messianic without messianism from Benjamin, but this initial conjunction—no matter how hedged and cautious—ought not be ignored. For I think Derrida has taken just the kind of step towards specifying what it would mean to listen for the messianic promise that one needs to take if one is to answer the questions about living messianically that Benjamin leaves largely unaddressed in the theses.

‘Messianicity’, Derrida tells us, is a ‘universal structure of experience’ (2008:248). It is a stance of ‘waiting for an event, for someone or something that, in order to happen or “arrive”, must exceed and surprise every determinant anticipation’ (Derrida 2008:251). It is an openness towards, or even an expectation of, an unexpected future. This, on Derrida’s account, is the messianic. The ‘messianism’ Derrida would have us do without is a tethering of the messianic to any kind of traditional content of expectation that would see the future as determinate (1994:59). Most often this content comes from a religious tradition and is represented by the figure of a known messiah, but of course Marxism and other post-Enlightenment political ideologies can supply it as well. Those who adhere to a messianism with determinate content too easily try to make progress towards realising it by shutting down other options. In the face of this danger, Derrida enjoins us to keep the structure of experience he calls messianicity in its pristine openness and to be vigilant in guarding against the messianism that would rob it of its ability to allow the event of a messianic cessation of time.

As an aside, I would note that though Derrida worries that Benjamin has fallen into the trap of tying his messianicity to a particular messianism—in his case a Jewish one—I am not sure this really is a trap or, if it is one, that Derrida has himself avoided it. As Jacoby (2005) has recently reminded us in quite eloquent terms, the tradition of Jewish messianism has always under-specified the future

in just the way Derrida demands. Starting from the prohibition on making images of the absolute, it has proffered what Jacoby calls iconoclastic utopias (or in our case, eschatons), rather than ones based on blueprints for what is to come. Derrida's epoché of messianic content would thus not place him as securely outside Benjamin's tradition as he might imagine.

But more than perhaps entangling him in a Jewish tradition of messianism without the messianic that predates his coinage, Derrida's insistence on openness—on the disavowal of messianic content—also leaves him vulnerable to the question of whether or not anyone can really live this way. Can one listen for the messianic promise without listening for something specific? Would this reduce, as Eagleton (2008:87) remarks in a hostile response to Derrida, to something as unfortunate as harbouring 'a perpetual excited openness to the Messiah who had better not let us down by doing anything as determinate as coming'? My argument in the next part of this chapter is that we can learn from Melanesian millenarians that messianicity without messianism need not lead to this kind of absurd, unliveable stance.

## On Messianic Living in Melanesia

We arguably have more detailed ethnographic accounts of lived millenarianism from Melanesia than from anywhere else in the world. A huge literature on cargo cults and a more recent one of Christian millennialism in the region combine to give us an unusually rich archive of materials bearing on this topic. We can and have quibbled about whether we have the categories right—whether the notion of cargo cult in particular shelters too many disparate kinds of social phenomena under its capacious canopy to be a useful concept. But there is little doubt that messianicity and messianism are both well documented in the region in contemporary as well as in earlier works (Jebens 2004a; Robbins 2004b).

The main focus of the Melanesianist writing on millenarianism is well known. It is trained on recognisable social movements, generally organised around an intensified ritual life and aimed at achieving fairly well-articulated goals such as acquiring manufactured goods, ridding one's territory of foreigners or achieving Christian salvation. In the terms we have borrowed from Derrida, these movements represent messianism—an attempt to bring about a determinate future. But the Melanesianist literature is also marked by a more subterranean theme. Most groups that engage in full-scale millenarian movements do not do so constantly, or even for particularly long stretches of time. Instead, periods wholly devoted to ritual performance focused on achieving clear goals alternate with quieter periods in which people live in workaday linear causal time. But anthropologists have found—and this is the key point here—that even when

they live outside full-scale millenarian movements, many Melanesians live with a kind of millenarian openness that maps well on to what Derrida is calling messianicity. In these quieter times—times of what I have called elsewhere everyday millenarianism—people go about their normal business but remain ready for unexpected change, anxious to hear a messianic promise should it be made (Robbins 2001).

Even as anthropologists have not accorded everyday millenarianism the kind of attention they have given to full-scale millenarian movements, they have sometimes tried to describe it. In their accounts, we see both Derrida's openness to the event and Benjamin's hope that the unappreciated aspects of the past might sometimes knock the present off the tracks that its more appreciated aspects have laid down. Hence, for example, Burridge (1995) has talked about the myth-dream that proceeds and then underlies cargo cults as the rolling development of what Lindstrom (1993:49) nicely calls an 'unarticulated aspiration' for a future different from the present. Jebens (2004b:64), pointing to something similar, talks about the openness of much cargo language, a language in which it is quite possible to repeat phrases of the kind 'something will happen' without being heard to talk nonsense (see also Robbins 2004a:165–8). And while everyday millenarianism remains open to the future in just the ways Derrida would ask for, it also scans the past incessantly for elements that might find a place in a coming now-time, just as Benjamin would hope. As Don shows in his powerful analysis of the way a traditional myth came to legitimate a radical Christian revival movement that aimed to sweep all other aspects of tradition aside among the Ilahita Arapesh, during this millennial period, 'distinctions of past, present, and future dissolved' in a way that allowed a wholly new cultural configuration to arise (Tuzin 1997:128).

I hope to have at least indicated in somewhat abstract terms that there are riches to be gleaned in the Melanesian literature by those looking to learn what living a messianicity without messianism might look like. Before concluding, I want to give one more extended, concrete example of this kind of living. This is a very humble example from my own fieldwork among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea.

The Urapmin are a group of 390 people living in West Sepik Province. They converted en masse to a charismatic form of Christianity in the late 1970s and since that time have been waiting intently for Jesus's return. Sometimes they feel sure that His coming is imminent, and they drop everyday life altogether for a week or more at a time and in classic millenarian-movement fashion devote all their time, day and night, to performing Christian rituals. More often, however, they accommodate their millenarian attentiveness within the bounds of their daily routines, constantly looking for and talking about the possibility of dramatic change but doing so while they garden and hunt. During these times,

their millenarian hopes encompass, among other things, not only Jesus's return but also the possibility that mineral prospecting on their land might lead to the development of a major mine like the one that was built during the 1980s in Tabubil, a town on the land of their neighbours five days' walk to the south.

One day during one of these quieter periods, a young man arrived at my door rather breathless to ask if I had bought gardening gloves recently. This was a reasonable question, since after picking up a scorpion-like spider while clearing a garden about a month before I had told my companions I needed to get some of these gloves the next time someone went to Tabubil, where I knew they were sold in the supermarket. But no one I knew well had gone to the mining town since then, so I had not bought any gloves yet. I told my visitor this, and he expressed some agitation. He told me that a pair of gloves had turned up in the bushes by the main path people follow to make the six-hour walk home from the nearest airstrip where one can fly to and from Tabubil. People thought the gloves were mine. But if they were not, what could their appearance in Urapmin mean? Not sure what to answer, I followed my visitor to the area in which the gloves had been found. A small crowd had formed, and when I told them the gloves did not belong to me, they collectively began to ponder the significance of their appearance. Gloves were white-people things, they noted. Could this mean a mine would be built and Urapmin would become a white town like Tabubil? Could it mean that Jesus—Himself white—was finally returning to gather the faithful? Open-ended speculation along these lines developed apace, and, as people's excitement rose, they sent an emissary to consult a powerful Spirit man—a housebound man capable of consulting the Holy Spirit to learn about things that might happen in the future. For some time, all of us waited to hear what he would say.

Let me interrupt this narrative momentarily to point out that it would not have been that difficult for people to provide a simple, locally sensible explanation for the appearance of the gloves. First of all, they were in a recognisable yellow bag emblazoned with the Tabubil Supermarket logo, so there was no mystery as to where they originated (it seems that, even when one operates the only electrified full-scale supermarket within several days' walk of any real competition, branding is still important). They were also stashed along the main path one would use when coming home after flying to Tabubil. And finally, people often stash things they are tired of carrying in the bush by the side of the road, to come back for them later. It is true that no Urapmin had bought gardening gloves before, or at least not that anyone could remember, but people were always picking up new bits of modern life they could afford and bringing them home to try out, so it was not out of the question that someone would take

a chance on gardening gloves in this respect and leave them by the side of the road to pick up later. At least for me, this line of reasoning rendered the gloves comprehensible.

But my main point here is that no Urapmin chose to take this line of reasoning. Instead, they took the appearance of the gloves as a chance to stop and listen in case they might be making a messianic promise—a promise about a future in which the gathered Urapmin people were not sure what to expect except that it would be different from the present. As it happened, about an hour into waiting for news back from the Spirit man, Deni showed up. Deni is a man in his mid-thirties who is very ambitious and who likes to accumulate as many fancy modern accoutrements as he can; he is one of the few Urapmin, for example, who often wears sunglasses. He had heard about all the commotion and had come to tell us all the gloves were his. His young daughter had got tired of carrying them home from the airstrip and had set them in the bushes to come back and get later. His announcement ended all speculation. In light of it, I guess I had been right. This time around, the gloves were making no messianic promise. But then again, had they been making such a promise, I would have missed it, and the Urapmin would not have. In this minor passing incident, as in many others, they showed they were ready quite quickly to let time stop and to organise around such a promise should it be made. The differences between myself and the Urapmin in this regard bring me to anthropology by way of conclusion.

## **On Messianism and Anthropology**

In many ways, this chapter is inspired by two recent articles: one by Guyer (2007) and the other by Bialecki (2009). In both of these articles, the authors deploy ethnographic work on evangelical Christian messianism (in the Derridian sense of an anticipation of a determinate future) as a mirror for anthropological relations to time and event. For both, those who hold to schemes of Christian messianism lose their ability to plan for and act towards the near future in politically potent ways. Guyer's argument lays this out clearly, and Bialecki builds on it to demonstrate that in addition to eliding the time frame of meaningful strategic planning, left-leaning North American charismatics also foreclose political action by assuming that any meaningful transformation will come as a miraculous rupture and that, if they themselves work to bring about a change, the very fact of their effort will ensure that whatever it produces cannot be the millennial transformation for which they hope. For both Guyer and Bialecki, there are lessons in their ethnography for anthropologists, who are

equally vulnerable to losing sight of the near future and to focusing on notions such as hope that attenuate their focus on the ways human beings actually bring about change.

These pieces have inspired me to ask here if there is not a kind of millenarianism worth living for anthropologists—a kind that might allow for the efficacy Guyer and Bialecki are seeking in anthropological practice and that, we should not forget, the anthropologists, sociologists and historians who first made millenarianism a major topic of contemporary study in the 1960s hoped to find in their subject matter. I have sought to find that kind of liveable messianism in this chapter in Benjamin's notion of moments in which homogeneous empty time stops and the present ceases to govern one's sense of possibility, and in Derrida's specification of messianicity as a structure of experience that stands open to the possibility of an other-than-present beyond current expectations. I presented material from New Guinea by way of suggesting that it is possible to live in the ways Benjamin and Derrida promote.

As a student in the 1970s and 1980s, I encountered an anthropology that I found saturated with what I, at least, thought was just this kind of messianic impulse. It was an anthropology committed to ethnography as at least possibly an encounter with an otherness it did not predefine, and in figures such as Mead and Benedict it had a history of making reports of such otherness effective at home in ways that on occasion interrupted homogeneous empty time by appearing as an event. After a long period of productive and necessary self-critique, anthropology has almost wholly lost this messianic openness to otherness. I cannot recount that history here, and we all know it in any case. But we should also recognise that without that openness to otherness, we now often adopt the linear time line of progress Benjamin so adamantly attacked; we are now much more about seeking means of amelioration in a world of stably defined goods such as human rights, health, political participation and economic wellbeing than we are about listening for messianic promises that might explode the progressive time line along which these goods are arrayed. In saying this, I want to write carefully. I recognise that anthropologists are led by their current preoccupations and temporal sensibilities to do good and necessary work. But—to use a phraseology that belongs wholly to models of time oriented to progress—I worry that this work keeps us so busy that, unlike the Urapmin, and, I would argue, unlike earlier anthropologists, we would have trouble stopping to listen when, in the field or at home, a messianic promise might be being made.

## Coda

As a methodological individualist (see Gardner, this volume), Don Tuzin was always interested in the ways people made their own worlds. They might not always realise the kinds of worlds they are making, he was quick to note, but unless social life goes very wrong they are always free agents making their lives by choosing how to respond to the situations that confront them. A holist or realist, I am always in contrast more apt to stress the weight culture brings to bear on the acting person even if he/she construes his/her life largely in terms of individual choice. But when it comes to examining moments of messianic fervour, I have tried to suggest here, we need to attend to acting individuals—those who choose to hear the messianic promise—at least as much as we attend to the cultural structures from which they hope they are about to become dis-embedded. In the study of the messianic, I have suggested, the theoretical opposition that Don and I so often explored in our conversations tends, like so many other oppositions, to at least attenuate itself, if not collapse.

Don often made verbally a point I cannot recall ever seeing him put in print. Melanesianist anthropology, he liked to argue, had probably produced proportionally more major anthropological theories and theorists than any other region of the world. It punched above its weight in this way, he liked to suggest, because Melanesianists knew that they would never be able to claim the discipline's interest on the basis of the geopolitical importance of the countries they study or on the sheer numbers of people who lived in them. Instead, to be listened to at all, Melanesianists have always known they had to strive to address issues of very general interest in theoretically novel ways. I would not claim to have accomplished such a lofty goal here, but in Don's memory I did want to try to move in that direction, and that is why this chapter has addressed a topic of general interest at the moment (millenarianism), has tackled it in broad theoretical terms, and has tried to ground its argument in at least some discussion of Melanesian ethnography. Don excelled at this kind of complex, multi-voiced writing, and he enriched Melanesian studies immeasurably by his work. I hope to have been able to evidence a little bit of what both Don and his work have meant to me in my own effort here to follow his lead.

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