

# Appendix A: Pathomimetic behaviour

Uncontrollable shaking (that is, *guria*, from which the Noise took its name); speaking in tongues; and death and resurrection, sometimes followed by apparent personality transformations, marked the Noise and the Cemetery Cult as distinct episodes within the Movement and played important roles within the cults.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of similar ‘stylized, extreme behavior’ (Schwartz 1976a: 161) in cargo cults throughout Melanesia is also what led some colonial Europeans to see them as manifestations of mental derangement. In analysing diverse instances of millenarianism, more sophisticated interpreters, such as Anthony Wallace (1956) and W.E.H. Stanner (1958), interpreted them as symptoms of stress brought on by cognitive confusion or inconsistency. Although F.E. Williams (1923, 1934) labelled the cult behaviour he observed in what was then the Gulf Division of the British colony of Papua the ‘Vailala Madness’, he described the shaking of adherents not as pathology but as mimicry; that is, as imitation of the behaviour of ‘abnormal’ individuals (Williams 1928: 54).

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1 There is nothing distinctively Melanesian about such behaviour. Apparently uncontrollable, often seemingly unnatural body movements are common in religious contexts throughout the world. Some of the most famous examples come from the Euro-American world. The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearance, founded in eighteenth-century England, gained its popular name—the Shakers—from the abandoned, apparently involuntary movement of participants in the sect’s worship services. American Pentecostal or charismatic Christianity—which is popular in some parts of PNG (Smith 2002: 126–33)—regards speaking in tongues and convulsive movement as signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit. PNG has also produced its own distinctive forms of such behaviour. Shaking, trance, or speaking in tongues, induced by staring at the sun along the shaft of a spear, were defining features of the Cult of Ain in the mid-1940s in what are now PNG’s Enga and Southern Highlands Provinces (Biersack 2011a, 2011b).

Regarding the Manus cults, Schwartz also regards mimicry, rather than psychological disturbance, as the basis for *guria* and related cult-specific behaviour, although—in contrast to Williams—he proposes that the most likely models were organic pathologies like epilepsy or cerebral malaria. He thus describes the behaviours he witnessed in the Manus cults as pathomimetic (Schwartz 1976a: 184ff.).<sup>2</sup> More important, Schwartz argues that the varieties of pathomimetic behaviour should be regarded as institutionalised, culturally structured reactions to experiences people assumed were, or sought to interpret as, of supernatural origin. People expected themselves to *guria* when God, Jesus, or the spirits of the dead were near or in possession of their bodies. At the height of the Noise they associated *guria* primarily with the presence of God or Jesus rather than the ghosts. Without such somatic manifestations, neither the subjects nor observers found it plausible that Jesus had been near or that there had been a true revelation.

In the instances of such behaviour Schwartz observed, he saw no evidence of conscious fakery, unless perhaps of the most artful kind. In Schwartz's words (1976a: 185):

by pathomimesis I am not suggesting simple sham ... Sham may occur, but usually it is a kind of collusion between actor and audience, with a submerged or studied unawareness of this collusion on both sides. When possession is desired or required as validation of a claimed link to supernatural forces, pathomimetic symptoms are produced and culturally expected as signs with magical instrumentality. Cultists believe that pathomimetic behaviour validates the reality or realizability of their goals and view it as a sign of (and therefore helping to bring about) the nearness or interest of the supernatural agencies.

We could also say that within the cults, pathomimetic behaviour was a form of culturally patterned wish fulfilment.

Although in the era of the cults many Manus people would have witnessed death in convulsion of some kind—for example, death from cerebral malaria—convulsive shaking does not seem to have been important as

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<sup>2</sup> In a serious misreading of Schwartz's argument regarding the role of pathomimesis in cargo cults, Lindstrom (1993a: 200) depicts it as a claim that cargo cults are 'a form of madness'.

a sign of spirit possession in indigenous Manus.<sup>3</sup> Christian missionary teaching may have contributed to the idea that convulsive seizures accompanied religious revelation. Tok Pisin versions of the Bible used by all the mission sects in Manus used the word *guria* to describe various manifestations of supernatural power. They referred to the *guria* that occurred at the death of Christ; the *guria* and the speaking in tongues that came to the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem at the first Pentecost; the *guria* that accompanied Paul's vision of Jesus; and the *guria* predicted for the day of the Last Judgement (in Tok Pisin, the *De Bihain* or Last Day). Also, certainly by the 1950s and perhaps by the time of the Noise, many Manus people knew that *guria* had been part of cargo cults in other parts of New Guinea.

The instances of *guria* Schwartz and Shargo witnessed and descriptions of *guria* they collected, from both witnesses and those who experienced it, show that the term covered a wide range of behaviours. It was applied to violent shaking, mere trembling, or simply being overcome by weakness. Some people were more violently affected than others, although, according to accounts, none escaped it in Ndriol or Mok. Tjamilo reported that the first person he saw *guria* was Paliau, who trembled when he prayed in the church in Bunai before he initiated the Movement. Tjamilo cited Paliau's *guria*—a sign of his closeness to supernatural power—as one of the reasons he followed him to Baluan. In the cult mythology, which relates how Jesus visited Paliau in New Britain during the war, Paliau's body is said to have grown heavy with the presence of Jesus. Wapei shook violently and thrashed about on the ground when he first told of having been visited by Jesus, although he had the actual vision in a dream the preceding night. *Guria* affected a majority in Tawi and later in Titan Bunai and among the Usiai. From Mok came descriptions of people reeling and walking in tight circles, with rolling or staring eyes. Some descriptions speak of people feeling as if they were about to be lifted from their feet, as though they were being pulled upward by the hair, or as if their *tingting* were light and would have risen up to Jesus except that their bodies were heavy.

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3 We recognise other ways of explaining dissociative behaviour perceived as evidence of the presence of supernatural power. Melford Spiro (1967), for example, explains spirit possession in Burmese folk religion in terms of unconscious defence mechanisms, the operation of which may rise to the level of psychopathology. Schwartz (1976a: 184–6) notes that individuals with pathogenic tendencies may be self- or group-selected for cult roles requiring appropriate extreme behaviours, but he does not see this as an important factor in the Manus cults.

Most accounts associate the periods of the most intense *guria* with the first rapid spread of the Noise and with occasions when people concentrated all their thinking upon God in the churches. *Guria* in churches was reported from Ndiriol, Mok, Tawi, Pere, Bunai, and Lahan. A Catholic missionary who was in Pere at the time of the Noise described a man sitting in the church trembling violently, unresponsive to efforts to get his attention. Others who themselves trembled described their skins as cold and wet with sweat. Lukas Pokus described the heaviness of his body when God came into him, causing him to shake violently. He said that the trembling continued to return long after the Noise, whenever he concentrated his *tingting* on God, but that these seizures abated when he became distracted by worldly thoughts. Pita Tapo described becoming dizzy and then slipping into unconsciousness lasting several hours. *Guria* leading to unconsciousness was a typical pattern in Lahan, Pita Tapo's village. People said that Gabriel Suluwan of Titan Bunai manifested *guria* only with his head. Namu of Malei experienced *guria* during the Cemetery Cult when two ghosts possessed her, one going up each leg. Her convulsions were violent, lasting a full night. Nasei of Lowaya, who claimed that she was visited by Jesus and also possessed by a ghost, had extremely violent convulsions described as random thrashing about. Some people said that what happened in the *guria* was like what happened to white men when they drank whiskey.

When an individual went into the coma-like state that might precede a supposed resurrection or started to *guria*, others watched intently, eagerly assessing the validity of contact with supernatural power. Many found the convulsions frightening. But only occasionally did Schwartz observe anyone questioning the validity of an episode of *guria*, and the questioning always came after the fact. In one case, the rivalry between Lukas Pokus and Johannes Pominis of Pere led to Lukas questioning the validity of Pominis's *guria* and the associated revelation. Both had experienced convincing *guria* in public, and both had received supernatural messages that others regarded as validated by their shaking. Lukas's revelation differed somewhat from the similar revelations of Pominis and Tjamilo, but Lukas claimed greater validity for his because it was more current, like the latest edition of a newspaper. Also, on the level of worldly events, he had been more recently to Mok than had Tjamilo. Thus accredited, he accused Pominis of having the *guria* only with his body and not with his *tingting*.

An episode of *guria* was usually accompanied by some kind of vision and a verbal message. The vision or message could come during the *guria* or in the unconsciousness that sometimes followed it. Such messages could also come in dreams without *guria*. Outside the most intense periods of the cults, dreams without *guria* were the most frequent channels of perceived communication with God and with the ghosts. Familiarity rather than novelty gave a message its credibility. Lukas Pokus's latest edition was totally unoriginal and familiar. The more innovative a revelation, the more it required some kind of pathomimetic behaviour as validation. Wapei's dream of a visit and revelation from Jesus required the most dramatic form of presentation because of its novelty. In the Cemetery Cult, innovative revelations most often came during seances. They were affirmed by the whistles of the communicating ghosts in the presence of the possessed mediums, who signalled their possession with *guria*.

After the first founding dreams and visions of the Cemetery Cult, most subsequent dream revelations tended to be only slightly innovative. Dreams often required a sign to confirm them or to warn that they should be heeded. As minor prophecies, they were sometimes self-fulfilling, as in Pwatjumel's dream of a design for the graveyard. Late in the Cemetery Cult, dreams validated minor moral revivals by reiterating the injunctions of the New Way and warning of God's displeasure. The dreams people heeded usually had little in common with the confusion, condensations, and symbolism of ordinary dreams. Like accounts given by the dead-and-resurrected or those who reported waking visions, they were long, comparatively coherent narratives.

Speaking in tongues occurred frequently. Like the *guria*, people took it as a sign of the validity of an associated supernatural message. Like *guria*, it could lead to someone asserting or accepting leadership or the status of a prophet or medium. Schwartz and Shargo also observed a few instances in which people's behaviour changed so greatly following an episode of *guria* or death and resurrection that they seemed to have undergone a personality change. Schwartz surmises that the apparent change was probably not the effect of the experience itself. Rather, such changes in behaviour were also culturally patterned possibilities for validating the experience to both the actor and the audience. In the cases that Schwartz and Shargo were able to observe most closely, the apparent personality changes were only temporary.

Ponram's death and resurrection illuminated a number of other cases of which Schwartz and Shargo had heard but not witnessed, as well as some cases they had witnessed without realising that they were connected with the cults. Ponram's death came at a time when many people were in the village, so his house was quickly packed with spectators. He did everything exactly right, satisfying the established expectations of the onlookers. Sitting in the audience, Schwartz had the sense that he was the only one who did not know what was going to happen next. First, Ponram, despite the fact that he was known as a notorious liar, had 'died' convincingly enough that his sons ran in seeming panic to fetch Schwartz and the medical assistant. Ponram was probably neither deliberately lying nor consciously pretending. He was behaving in a way that was by now familiar, even expected, though not necessarily expected of any particular individual.

His sign language was also familiar, and his message was so familiar that his audience readily interpreted his slightest gesture. In addition to the incessantly repeated admonitions of the New Way, he communicated supernatural disapproval of things of which *he* did not approve in his hamlet and family. He also delivered a plan for a graveyard that validated, and was validated by, the plan of which Pwatjumel had dreamed a few days earlier. For weeks afterward he behaved as a changed person. He dressed in the best European clothing he could obtain. He assumed an air of moral superiority and importance incompatible with his earlier status and deportment. People told his story in meetings in other villages as far away as Baluan. He spoke up at meetings for a while. Then, as response to him died away, and as cult leaders presented more spectacular contact with the divine, Ponram drifted back into his normal state as a quarrelsome old man.

As Ponram's case illustrates, by validating nearness to supernatural powers, pathomimetic behaviour also validated people's claims to at least temporary status or leadership within the cults. We have already noted that a few of those who played significant roles, such as Tjamilo of Bunai and Kisakiu of Tawi, did not manifest pathomimetic behaviour and made no claims to receiving direct supernatural revelations. Rather, they rose to leadership through their abilities to interpret such behaviour and organise action in accord with its alleged meaning. But a person who was the vehicle of supernatural revelations, validated by cult symptoms, had a potent claim to leadership. People who achieved leadership by this route

often eclipsed—at least temporarily—those whose leadership was based on mundane sources of legitimacy. Pathomimetic behaviour, then, played an important role in creating new, cult-specific political hierarchies.

A number of men spoke of themselves as having been made by the Movement; that is, to have achieved a degree of status within the fluid lines of the new institutions that would not have been open to them otherwise. But the most drastic inversions of ordinary status hierarchies occurred in the cults. Most conspicuous were the adolescents who, in the old culture, would have neither had nor wanted a voice in village affairs. Others included women who achieved considerable influence in the cults through serving as mediums, as they could have done in the old culture, but not in the New Way. There were also older men who, within the Movement, had yielded authority and prestige to younger leaders, but who could, within the cults, enjoy some of the status they had lost.

Perhaps the most striking example of a change in status through successful validation of a claim of supernatural sponsorship was that of Joseph Nanei, the adolescent cult leader of Lowaya. Joseph's leadership and the particularly arrogant and dictatorial form it took could have been predicted on the basis of his earlier personality and the personalities of available adult models of leadership. His rival in Malei, Kampo Monrai, another adolescent, had almost all the same visions, and saw ghosts from even more remote generations than those seen by Joseph Nanei. But he did not manifest a personality change that might have validated his importance as a messenger from the dead. He remained the amiable person he had always been and could not assume arrogant command of his elders. (Being from Malei, a hamlet that took a subordinate position in the cult dominated by Lowaya, also limited his leadership potential.)

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