

2

Taking exception

We are eager to get to the islands, beaches, and lagoons of Manus and the flesh-and-blood people and remarkable events of the Paliau Movement. But before we do, we need to say more about some of the distinctive aspects of our approach and the issues they entail that we summarised in Chapter 1.

Problems with portrayals of the Paliau Movement and Paliau the man

Histories of Papua New Guinea (PNG) that mention the Paliau Movement ignore or minimise almost all its dimensions that aren't easy to depict in conventional political terms (Griffin et al. 1979: 99; Souter 1963: 241n; Waiko 2007: 11–13; White 1965: 151–6).¹ The Movement did have significant lasting effects on political institutions in Manus. But focusing narrowly on conventional politics does not do justice to the complexity of the Movement, its founder and leader, and the motives and experiences of Movement participants.

1 Other histories of New Guinea or PNG we know of (Dorney 1990; Moore 2003; Turner 1990) make no mention of Paliau.

The fallacy of opposing the political and the religious

Trying to distinguish what is political from what is religious is no more helpful for understanding Manus in the 1950s than it is for understanding contemporary Europe or America.² For instance, Christian reconstructionism (Ingersoll 2015; McVicar 2015) is a millenarian doctrine holding that Christ will return only after the faithful have established biblical law on Earth. It is influential on the right wing of American politics and virtually obliterates any but the most tortured distinction between politics and theology. Closely examining Paliau's career, as we will show, has much the same effect. We can also see both the man and the Movement more clearly if we largely dispense with the concept 'religion'.

Keeping politics but eschewing religion

Politics is a much more helpful concept than religion. The definition of politics generally accepted in anthropology is simple and useful: politics is behaviour concerned with obtaining and using power, something one can find in virtually all spheres of life—including those pertaining to metaphysical concerns—although frequently it is not overt. But not even a similarly broad definition of religion unites anthropologists. Roy Rappaport, a leading anthropological scholar of religion, does not dispute this, but he doesn't let it slow him down either: 'The concept of religion is irreducibly vague, but vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things' (1999: 23). Some prominent scholars of Melanesian religion also avoid proposing a definition of religion. Garry Trompf (1994: xv) chooses to think of religion in Melanesia 'much more as a people's "way of life" than merely worship or approaches to the "non-empirical realm" in particular'.³ In the same spirit, Swain and Trompf (1995: 15) prefer to

2 Jebens (2004b: 167) and Otto (1992b: 4–5) are among those who have stressed the inadequacy of such categories for interpreting millenarianism in both Melanesia and Europe. Landes (2011) is particularly useful on this topic. See especially Chapters 8–12.

3 Trompf's references to the Paliau Movement in his 1994 work on Melanesian religion show a sound grasp of Paliau's and the Movement's complexity, which he does not try to parse using simplistic categories.

write about *The Religions of Oceania* without committing to a definition, opting instead for ‘an open-ended and flexible understanding of the religious dimension’.⁴

Many anthropologists appear to regard whatever the term religion refers to as something not only inseparable from human life but also essential to it, like digestion. Rappaport (1999: 1–2) opines that, given the vast amount of time and energy human beings have devoted to ‘religious considerations’ over the ages, ‘it is hard to imagine that religion ... is not in some way indispensable to the species’.⁵ This compounds the confusion.

In this book, we use the terms religion or religious sparingly. When we do use them, we do so to refer to phenomena pertaining to human relationships with supernatural beings and powers, albeit recognising that many Manus people past and present may not subscribe to an opposition between natural and supernatural.⁶ But the natural/supernatural distinction is useful for understanding aspects of the Manus case, which

4 Speaking of ‘religiosity’ or ‘spirituality’ rather than religion (as, for example, in Douglas [2001]) does not clarify anything. Bruce Kapferer and colleagues (2010: 9) only muddy the water more by trying to define religiosity, calling it ‘an urgency to total commitment that is a force of the religious and that tends to find legitimization of its truth in the evidence of experience, in the qualities of its lived relations, and its capacity to rid the world of the perceived humiliations and injustices of encompassing realities’. As a definition, it is not only borderline inscrutable, it is also much too broad to allow one to distinguish ‘religiosity’ from myriad other human passions. In his classic discussion of millenarianism, Burridge (1969: 6–7) offers a definition of ‘religion and religious activity’ that appears to overlap with what Kapferer et al. are struggling to say. Equally prolix, it also fails to distinguish an easily recognisable object, to wit: ‘the redemptive process indicated by the activities, moral rules, and assumptions about power which, pertinent to the moral order and taken on faith, not only enable people to perceive the truth of things, but guarantee that they are indeed perceiving the truth of things’.

5 Here, Rappaport seems to be recommending religion as much as trying to understand it. This calls to mind Daniel C. Dennett’s observation that many more people nourish ‘belief in belief’ in God than could be said to actually believe in God (2006: 200–46). It is easier to find religion indispensable to the species if you contrive, as some anthropologists do, to find it even in people’s efforts to avoid it. Kapferer et al. (2010: 3), for instance, argue that ‘the apparent rejection of the religious in much secularism masks the secular subsumption of religious orientations’. They are correct to a certain extent. Forms of millenarianism that attempt to expunge all traces of the occult, such as some forms of Marxism, may nevertheless invite it in by assuming a necessary direction or purpose in human history. Such prominent intellectuals as Bertrand Russell (1997 [1935]) and Raymond Aron (2001 [1957]) have argued that various political isms are forms of religion. But it would be a mistake to argue that people are incapable of seeing things in fully secular ways, no matter how rare this may be. Hans Kelsen’s combatively titled *Secular Religion: A Polemic against the Misinterpretation of Modern Social Philosophy, Science, and Politics as ‘New Religions’* is of special note regarding this issue. Kelsen completed *Secular Religion* in the early 1960s, but he deferred its publication during his lifetime and the book was not published in English until 2012. We rely on Stewart (2012) for this information and for insight into Kelsen’s arguments.

6 We join many other social scientists in choosing such a definition. Barrett (2000: 29), for example, adopts the following definition: ‘a shared system of beliefs and actions concerning supernatural agency’.

we describe in Chapter 3. It fits many other cases just as well, if one doesn't confuse religion with theology. Theology is speculative, and it is often concerned with challenging rather than elaborating accepted definitions of religion. Everyday religion—working religion or religion in practice—is generally a matter of applying comparatively simple ideas without pausing for speculation.

The concept we need: A cosmology of animate and personal causation

Even given the above qualification, we will avoid speaking of religion when we can. To the extent possible, we will focus on a feature of the Paliau Movement's cultural context that has often been described as religious, but that we can define much more precisely. This is the strength in Melanesia—past and present—of what Schwartz calls a cosmology of animate and personal causation. Schwartz has also used the terms 'personalism' and 'personalistic explanation' to describe a cosmology that assumes the world is governed by conscious forces with many of the attributes of persons. That is, forces that have intentions and emotions and are sensitive to human will and emotion. Thus, there is little or no room for randomness or chance or the impersonal natural forces to which science, and people with a scientific bent, turn for explanations of many phenomena (Schwartz 1972: 33; 1973: 165). Other anthropologists have come independently to use personalism, personalistic, and similar terms to describe world views in which animate and personal causation hold sway, among them Stanley Diamond (1974: 144–6), George M. Foster (1976), George M. Foster and Barbara G. Anderson in their pioneering work on medical anthropology (1978), and Roy Wagner (1981: 87), who speaks of the prevalence of 'anthropomorphic or sociomorphic explanation' in Melanesia.

We have to eschew the term personalism because it has long been associated with more than one school of philosophy, none of which address questions usefully related to our purposes here.⁷ Anthropomorphism does not serve either. Anthropomorphism as usually understood—ascribing human attributes to non-human entities—suggests something narrower than what we have in mind. So, we will settle for speaking of a world view or cosmology of personified causation or simply personification of the world, with special emphasis on personifying causation.

⁷ See, for instance, the definitions offered in Blackburn (1994: 283–4).

Personification underlies much of what anthropologists call religion (e.g. Trompf 1994: xvi), with the exception of what are sometimes called non-theistic religions, such as forms of Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism, although personification figures in the folk versions of these traditions.⁸ Personification, however, is not simply another name for religion or for what E.B. Tylor, in defining ‘animism’, called ‘the doctrine of spiritual beings’ (1871: xii, 287, 420). Personification as we use it embraces a range of assumptions regarding the vital role of human or human-like forms of consciousness in shaping events, either as specific interested parties responding to human actions or intentions, or as vaguer moral forces, like karma or fate. While some people may conceive of the latter as impersonal characteristics of the universe, cognitive psychologists Konika Banerjee and Paul Bloom (2014: 285–6, cf. 300) suggest that at least some Euro-Americans tend to personify fate ‘as a type of goal-directed intentional force’.

A. Irving Hallowell (1955: 181) provides a classic example of a common kind of personified cultural construction of the world—what Hallowell might have called a personified behavioural environment—among the Ojibwa people of what is now north-eastern Canada: ‘All the effective agents of events throughout the entire behavioural environment of the Ojibwa are selves—my own self and other selves. *Impersonal* forces are never the causes of events. *Somebody* is always responsible’. Elsewhere (1960), Hallowell refers to conscious non-human agents in the Ojibwa cultural world as ‘non-human persons’.⁹ But the concepts of personification and animate and personal causation embrace an even

8 The Christian theologian Paul Tillich is well known for his efforts to free religion from personification by elaborating a concept of God as something other than a being. Rather, he argues for conceiving of God as the ‘ground of Being-Itself’, an idea that has not passed into folk Christianity. His best-known exposition of this idea appears in his 1952 work *The Courage to Be*.

9 Graham Harvey leans heavily on these items from Hallowell’s work and gleanings from the work of other anthropologists in *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2005). This volume has received considerable attention as a statement of what is sometimes called the ‘new animism’. Curiously, some proponents of the so-called ontological turn in anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 161) cite it as such uncritically. Harvey’s work, however, should not be mistaken for anthropology. Among other things, he appears to be unfamiliar with the concept of the behavioural environment, which is essential to understanding Hallowell’s work. In brief, Hallowell uses the term behavioural environment to refer to the culturally constructed environment within which people perceive and act in the world, specifically allowing not only for constructions shared by members of a group but also for universal features of human behavioural environments and features derived from individual experience (Hallowell 1955: 40, 75–110). While the ethnographic vignettes of ‘animism’ Harvey presents also illustrate varieties of personification, we hope it is clear that when we speak of forms of personification we are speaking of *culturally constructed* realities. Harvey is ambiguous on this vital issue.

wider variety of phenomena. Some degree of personification is probably a human universal. One can find vivid examples of this bias even in supposedly modern, highly rationalised settings. The work of W. Edwards Deming (1982), for instance, provides many examples of how, in Western business organisations, when things go wrong, managers often look first for inadequate employees rather than for weaknesses in the systems within which people work (cf. Smith 1994: 44).

To the extent that assuming a guiding purpose behind events implies a shaping consciousness of some sort, teleological thinking, which is rampant virtually everywhere, clearly qualifies as a form of personification. Teleological views of history are arguably attenuated forms of personifying causation, but couched in the language of materialist naturalism. And Banerjee and Bloom (2014: 277) report that teleological thinking—‘the perception that human life is guided by unseen intentional forces’—is common in the West, and that ‘it is not solely the consequence of culturally transmitted religious views, but rather reflects a general cognitive bias to perceive purpose in social and natural worlds’ (p. 287).¹⁰

Although personification is not the same as supernaturalism, naturalism is its antonym.¹¹ From a naturalistic standpoint the non-human world (with the exception of our more cognitively complex fellow animals) comprises entities and forces—such as viruses and the shifting of tectonic plates—that not only do not care about human thoughts or actions, they are not capable of taking an attitude of any kind, either towards human beings or towards each other. Anthropology as a science doesn’t necessarily require insisting on the ontological truth of naturalism; it must, however, insist on naturalism as a heuristic stance.¹² In Chapter 3 we discuss factors that give personification its strength in Melanesia, and we look at personification’s pronounced dark side. It is enough at this point to say that a personified understanding of the world is integral to all phases and faces of the Paliau Movement.

10 Bias towards both personifying causation and teleological thinking might be seen as a form of illusory pattern perception, a widespread cognitive bias that social psychologists have linked to belief in the supernatural and the paranormal (van Prooijen et al. 2017). Exploring the relationship between these phenomena, however, is beyond the scope of our book.

11 Foster and Anderson (1978: 54) help clarify why ‘supernaturalism’ is not an accurate antonym for naturalism when the latter term is used as we use it here.

12 We are aware that not all anthropologists regard the field as a science. Those who find our position troubling may want to consult Jarvie (1984), especially pages 51–4, Kuznar (1997), and Spiro (1986). We are also aware that there is a case for a historical relationship between millenarianism and modern science (e.g. Noble 1997); but the esteem in which Schwartz and Smith hold science does not extend to finding in it a route to social perfection.

Paliau's irreducible complexity

Undoubtedly, some who discuss the Movement and the man largely in terms of politics as a pragmatic, secular endeavour are simply uninterested in their other dimensions. Other oversimplified depictions, however, flow from their authors' biases. Margaret Mead's bias helps explain why Douglas Dalton (2004: 203–4) finds 'disagreement' between observers who describe Paliau's early mission as 'primarily a practical one' and those who 'describe in detail the dream-inspired biblical millennial message with which Paliau began his movement'. Dalton cites Schwartz's work and Otto's as examples of the latter emphasis. He relies on Worsley's *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1968) for an example of the former—that is, an emphasis on Paliau's 'practical' mission. In an essay written many years later, Worsley does refer to the 'First and Second Paliau Cults' (1999: 151); but, in *The Trumpet Shall Sound* he relies on Mead's *New Lives for Old* (2001 [1956]). Mead's commitment to drawing optimistic lessons for the world in *New Lives*, the first published account of the Paliau Movement, led her to discount evidence that Paliau was engaged in anything other than a self-conscious effort to, in Mead's words, 'incorporate the values and institutions of the Western world' and 'build a real modern culture' (ibid.: 16). She stressed Paliau's commitment to 'a limited earthly paradise to be realistically attained only by hard work and controlled behaviour' as opposed to sudden, supernaturally mediated transformation as promised by cargo cults (ibid.: 205).¹³ Journalist Osmar White's one-dimensional portrait of Paliau (White 1965: 151–6) also owes much to Mead's influence. White's only encounters with Paliau were in Mead's company (Mead 2001 [1956]: 196–204), and he depended for additional information on *New Lives for Old* (White 1965: 151n).

Some of Paliau's admirers carry on the tradition of asserting emphatically his fundamentally 'practical', 'secular', 'reformist', and 'rational and sceptical' orientation, as Biama Kanasa did in his 1991 obituary of Paliau in *The Times of Papua New Guinea*. Kanasa is clearly intent on distancing Paliau from any association with cargo cults. But he finds it impossible to ignore Paliau's deep entanglement with metaphysical concerns and recognises the importance for the Movement of what he calls Paliau's 'religious' ideas. Similarly, Mead noted the importance of the 'religious

13 For some of the lessons Mead found, and may have intended to find, see in particular her preface to the 1975 edition of *New Lives for Old* (2001 [1956]: xix–xxvi).

sanction' Paliau claimed for his leadership (Mead 2001 [1956]: 225). It is more to the point, we think, to acknowledge that Paliau lived fully within a personified world, as much when he ran for elective office as when—late in his career—he failed to demure, at the least, when followers identified him with Jesus.

Paliau was born on Baluan, one of the Admiralty Islands, about 25 miles south of Manus Island and substantially smaller. New Guineans of his generation did not usually keep track of their birthdates, but Paliau probably was born in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Unlike most of his contemporaries, he never joined a Christian mission and thus never received one of the many Christian names—such as Francis, John, Mathew, or Thomas—the missions bestowed on their converts. He remained Paliau Maloat throughout his life.¹⁵ Paliau is a common name in Manus, but from here on when we refer to Paliau without qualification we mean Paliau Maloat.

In *New Lives for Old* (2001 [1956]), Mead repeatedly emphasised Paliau's exceptional ability: he was 'a political genius' (p. 204), she wrote, with 'a mind as gifted as that of men who have led millions and changed the face of the earth' (p. 199). She also praised his charisma ('vice-regal ... carries an air of aristocracy about him' [p. 193]), and pronounced him manifestly superior to his contemporaries: he 'towered over his followers in statesmanship and planning' (p. 192) and was 'intrinsically superior to his fellows' (p. 204). Paliau did stand out from the crowd. His success in recruiting and retaining followers, however, depended to a great extent on what he had in common with the other indigenous people of Manus. He shared their hopes for a changed way of life, but he was also able to inspire his contemporaries to accept his leadership because he and they were immersed in the same cultural world. Like his contemporaries, Paliau did not question the prevailing personification of the world. He was also completely at home in a culture in which indirect and figurative speech

14 Paliau's obituary in *The Times of Papua New Guinea* (Kanasa 1991: 20) states that he was born in 1907. Paliau himself has given that date (Maloat 1970: 144), but in 1984 and 1986 respectively he claimed in conversation with anthropologist Alexander Wanek to have been born as early as 1892 or 1884 (Wanek 1996: 198).

15 Maloat was Paliau's father's name. Using one's father's name as a surname is probably a practice adopted from Christian missionaries. Such a change in naming practices was common in PNG (see e.g. Smith 2013: 205n2). It apparently had not yet taken hold when Fortune and Mead conducted research in Manus in 1928. Fortune (1965 [1935]) identifies Manus people by single names, using the names of their places of residence or a kinship relationship to another person to provide further identification.

was the norm and people were on constant alert for hidden meaning. Both Schwartz and Smith have seen the latter tendency so ascendant in various Melanesian locales that people assumed that speakers' intended meanings completely contradicted the literal sense of their words. The historic upheaval that gave rise to the Paliu Movement exacerbated this tendency and it metastasised during certain phases of the Movement.

Among the traits that Mead admired most in Paliu was that he 'adeptly and responsibly, tried to be "all things to all men"' (2001 [1956]: 192). She wrote of his ability to interact confidently with government officials and anthropologists as well as with both the 'level-headed' and the 'mystical fanatics' among the people of Manus. There is no denying Paliu's ability to seize and hold people's attention and loyalty. He was a skilful orator and had the organisational ability to build on his rhetorical triumphs. But underpinning his talents was the fact that he shared with his listeners cultural orientations that enabled him to convey a compelling vision in an idiom they understood.¹⁶ He also probably knew that he could depend on many of them to hear from him what they wanted to hear. When Paliu did not explicitly play on themes of personified causation, many of his followers undoubtedly filled them in.

In his obituary of Paliu, promoting his image as pre-eminently a secular reformer, Kanasa (1991) suggested that those among his followers who took him as anything other than a 'practical' man were victims of their own 'misunderstanding' of what he was trying to achieve; they 'had their own expectations ... contrary to Paliu's aims'. Indeed, some degree of misunderstanding is almost certain in a cultural world in which people expect layered discourse and figurative speech. Paliu was undoubtedly aware of this. To the extent that people's 'misunderstanding' kept them within the Movement, it was very much to his advantage, even when their expectations were a poor fit with his immediate plans. Schwartz's reconstruction of the events of 1946–47 strongly suggests that what many people expected from Paliu in the early days of the Movement was a path to a sudden, supernaturally mediated and radical transformation of their world. Hence, to some it mattered little exactly what words Paliu used. Some participants in the events of both the 1940s and the 1950s probably made little or no distinction between ritual appeals to the ancestors to

16 Otto (1992c: 436–40) shows how Paliu's rhetorical success in Baluan rested on the consistency of his message with indigenous notions of a 'hierarchy of the reliability of knowledge' that did not necessarily pertain throughout Manus.

bring the cargo and what Mead would have called ‘practical’ efforts, like imposing more coordination on village life or wearing trousers, shirts, dresses, and other kinds of European clothing.

To the best of our knowledge, Paliau never doubted the animate, conscious foundation of things and the primacy of animate and personal causation. But within that world, Paliau was a free thinker. He promulgated ideas and practices at odds with both indigenous and Christian orthodoxies. Some of what he advocated was potentially dangerous by indigenous standards. For instance, ceasing to scrupulously avoid one’s future spouse in the course of daily life—a practice he sought to abolish—could bring punishment from an ancestral ghost. But Paliau spoke and acted as though he were immune from indigenous supernatural sanctions. And, unlike many Christian converts in PNG, he did not claim that he was protected by more powerful supernatural entities. We cannot see him, however, as someone driven by the conviction of having discovered new metaphysical truths. He never tired of metaphysical speculation, yet in his conversations with Schwartz—as illustrated in Chapter 1—he often sounded more like a man testing ideas than a prophet sharing revelations.¹⁷

Schwartz has described Paliau as a ‘social fantasy producer and as such ... demand oriented’ (1976a: 183). Nonetheless, Paliau gave no hint that he regarded the cosmological visions and theological constructions he purveyed as implausible. It is likely that he was as concerned with their value in attracting followers as with their ontological truth, but we cannot be sure that this distinction was important to him. On one occasion in 1965, Schwartz asked Paliau which religions he thought were ‘true’. Paliau responded that maybe one or two religions were ‘true’, but that most just relied on what the Bible reports of Jesus’s teaching. (At that time, Paliau was probably unfamiliar with non-Christian religions from outside PNG.) Asked if his own religion—his own interpretation of the Bible—was ‘true’, he said he thought that ordinary men had written some of the Bible, and that a lot of what Jesus really said had probably

17 Otto (1998: 74) comments on how the ‘Long Story of God’, which Paliau presented to audiences as a foundation of the New Way, differed from an autobiographical narrative Schwartz recorded. ‘The contrast between the two stories’, observes Otto, ‘is striking indeed. Whereas the Long Story is a religious narrative about creation, revelation and redemption, Paliau’s autobiography is characterized by rational analysis and psychological insight’. Otto goes on to suggest that while the ‘Long Story of God’ was directed at followers and potential followers, the autobiography Schwartz recorded ‘may perhaps be seen as a reflective exercise in which he used the anthropologist as a sparring partner’ (ibid.: 84).

been lost.¹⁸ Apparently taking ‘true’ to mean complete, Paliau said thus his own religion wasn’t ‘true’ either. Later in his career, Paliau would make grander claims for his cosmology and theology; but, in 1965, at least in private, he was more tentative. He undoubtedly, however, found his own creations more useful than those of others as rationales for action and visions that could move people. Whatever questions might have vexed him when, in a philosophical mood, he pondered the nature of things, he was pre-eminently a creator of things to inspire others and in which they could invest their hopes. We know that his flexibility regarding his own creations—his ability to revise as he saw fit—has troubled some of his followers. But it was also one of his great strengths.

While Paliau did not fit the conventional mould of a prophet, neither was he an ordinary politician. He advanced some highly specific programs for social change, and he never wavered in some of his positions, such as his opposition to the grand-scale exchanges of durable wealth for food characteristic of precolonial Manus. He was quite capable of assembling and leading a parade, and he knew how to work his way to the head of a parade that was leaving without him. Yet Paliau was also conspicuously indifferent to the potential material rewards of leadership. Some opponents accused him of amassing a fortune illegitimately, but if he did so—and no proof was ever produced—he did not spend it on himself. He maintained a spartan standard of living throughout his life. During part of the last phase of his career, in the 1980s, he lived in makeshift, virtually open-air quarters on the concrete slab beneath the elevated house of one of his followers in Lorengau.¹⁹

The most consistent thread in Paliau’s life was the importance he attached to maintaining a following, whether to listen to him tell the ‘Long Story of God’ (see Chapter 5), help him build a new kind of society, support his candidacy for the House of Assembly, or—towards the end of his life—listen to him orate about the real nature of a supreme being and the path to ‘true freedom’. Otto (1998: 85–6) ponders what he considers Paliau’s contrasting identities as ‘rational cultural innovator’ and ‘divinely inspired prophet’ and the possibility that Paliau ‘was able to consciously use his different identities as a resource and that he manipulated them,

18 Paliau was, of course, correct about this, and in tune with modern mainstream biblical scholarship.

19 Granted, he was also accused of sexually exploiting his ‘midwives’, female followers whom he trained in herbal medicine. He did enjoy the attention of these women, but no one ever produced evidence that he also enjoyed them carnally.

at least partly, according to circumstance'. But Otto rejects this simple hypothesis in the light of what he sees as Paliu's ability to maintain a more complicated 'self-understanding' throughout most of his career.

Paliu was surely what people call a natural leader. He demonstrated this dramatically in his exploits during World War II (described in part in Chapter 5). Under intensely trying circumstances, while others hesitated, he could make decisions and act on them, rallying support as he went. He was also a thinker and a consistent critic of the status quo. These inclinations fed each other. He could not be satisfied with thinking and criticising; he needed to act, and action required followers. In the end, however, he may have needed followers as much to support his sense of self as to support his efforts to change the world.

Assessing critiques of the cargo cult concept

A substantial number of anthropologists have dismissed or attacked the very idea of cargo cults. They argue that the term cargo cult is not only inaccurate, it is also demeaning; that it reinforces white supremacy; that reports of cargo cults are often reflections of the irrational preoccupations of outside—mainly 'Western'—observers, including anthropologists; and that cargo cults aren't really about cargo. Some have concluded that cargo cult as an anthropological concept has had its day. Lamont Lindstrom, for instance, allows only that 'for a time, it became part of standard anthropological jargon' (2013: 182; cf. Stewart and Harding 1999: 287). Lindstrom is too hasty.

What are cargo cults?

Instances of what some might call cargo cults have been identified outside Melanesia (see e.g. La Barre 1972 [1970]; Peires 1989). What Ton Otto (2010) calls 'material religions' can be found throughout the world. A type of Christian Pentecostalism spreading rapidly on several continents rivals Melanesian cargo cults in its emphasis on gaining material wealth (Kapferer et al. 2010: 4). America continues to produce new varieties of what are sometimes called 'prosperity gospels' (e.g. Bowler 2013). But what we call cargo cults in this volume are distinctively Melanesian,

engendered by a historically distinctive meeting of peoples.²⁰ Not only did the Melanesian and the intruding white or European societies have radically different capacities for material production, material goods had very different cultural significance in the respective societies. (Many Papua New Guineans still use European as a synonym for white people of all geographic origins—including, for instance, Americans and Australians. We will sometimes do the same.)²¹ And while the intruders exhorted Melanesians to better themselves through hard work and frugality, the Christian missionaries among them also implied—both in their doctrines and by their prominence in colonial society—that white wealth rested more on acumen in relations with the supernatural than on technological savvy, sweat (not necessarily ones' own), and a capacity for deferred gratification.

Lindstrom (1993a) and Tabani (2013: 15; cf. Sullivan 2005) are correct that the term cargo cult has been greatly overextended. When used carelessly, it can be just as unedifying a term as religion. From its beginning until today, the Paliu Movement has harboured millenarians. We reserve the label cargo cult, however, for the aspect of the Movement that made obtaining European goods—that is, cargo (in Tok Pisin, *kago*)—with supernatural assistance the central element of a sudden and momentous transformation of the world. We can speak with complete assurance only of the cargo cults within the Paliu Movement, but our study of the literature and our experiences elsewhere in Melanesia suggest that they are substantially similar to many—but not necessarily all—phenomena called Melanesian cargo cults.

Melanesian cargo cults feature variations on a few core doctrines. The central doctrine usually holds that performing the proper ritual with the right attitude can bring the return of the ancestors, and/or in some cases Jesus Christ—sometimes at a prescribed time and sometimes not, as we will see—bringing a bounty of the white world's wealth. One or more alleged prophets—claiming revelation from God, Jesus Christ, or the spirits of the dead—usually conveys to other participants instructions for performing the necessary ritual. Frequently, it is also revealed that whites

20 Otto (2010: 89) observes, citing Trompf (1990): 'only millenarian movements in Melanesia and the West appear to have a cargoist character, while ... case studies from Timor, Jamaica, and Africa completely lack this dimension. This confirms that there is a discernible quality that collectively sets a group of movements apart from others'. We are not entirely in accord with Otto, however, on the similarity of the Melanesian and the Western movements in question.

21 In Tok Pisin, Melanesians may use *Yuropian*—that is, European—interchangeably with *ol waitpela man* or simply *ol waitman*; that is, the whites.

have deliberately withheld knowledge of such ritual from Melanesians. The cargo usually comprises the kinds of material goods Melanesians have seen delivered to the whites by ships or aeroplanes. In Manus in 1960, for example, followers of the prophet Sua prepared a list of items they wished to acquire in the form of the kind of order for goods some had seen whites prepare, listing items and quantities. They presented it to Manus District Commissioner W. O'Malley, along with a sum of money intended either as payment for the goods or as a gratuity to the commissioner for passing the order along to the appropriate powers.²² The list illustrates the range of imported manufactured goods with which Sua's followers were familiar. Here are a just a few items from the list: 1,000,000 sheets of corrugated steel (of the kind used for temporary construction during World War II), 10,000 pigs, 16,000 writing pens, 4,900 sewing machines, 9,000 razor blades, 14,000 refrigerators, 16,000 radios, 40,000 drums of fuel, 4,000 warships, 500 pistols with cartridges, 28,000 chairs, 10 tractors, 10 motorbikes, and 5 bicycles.²³

Most cargo cults are much less specific in their material requirements. More central to cargo cult doctrines than the particular material goods sought is the idea that the ultimate source of the wealth of the whites is supernatural, but that whites have conspired to keep the means of producing such wealth a secret. Some cults have contended that the ancestors themselves create the cargo but devious whites intercept it and purvey it to the indigenous people, its rightful recipients, only in miniscule quantities in exchange for hard labour or money, of which they have almost none. Typically, cult doctrines are vague on what life will be like after the cargo arrives. Some doctrines hold that Melanesians will shed their black skins for white ones. Others envision God or the ancestors driving out the whites. Still others anticipate that once indigenes have fair access to the cargo they will live with whites as equals. Some cult prophets have also promised transformations of the landscape: mountains will be levelled and islands will be joined together, making travel and food production easier. Others promise that crops will grow without human effort and fish will jump into people's nets.

22 District Commissioner O'Malley showed Schwartz the document and told him how he had acquired it. Schwartz copied it by hand.

23 Lindstrom (1993a: 139–42) argues at some length that 'European' descriptions of the goods participants in the John Frum movement (on Tanna, in Vanuatu) sought that include refrigerators cannot be 'accurate, in the ethnographic sense'. He argues that including refrigerators in what he calls 'cargo catalogs' reflects 'European fancies rather than Tannese'. We cannot speak for John Frum adherents, but Sua's followers apparently included refrigerators in their list on their own.

Cargo cult as insult and instrument of oppression:

A weak case

One objection to calling something a cargo cult is that it echoes the efforts of white colonials in Melanesia to deny the status of ‘serious religion’ to ritual or organisational activities that colonial authorities saw as subversive (Lindstrom 1993a: 34). Nancy McDowell (2000: 378) argues that the cargo cult label implies that ‘others’ indulge in cults ‘while we have religion’. This, she contends, allows ‘we rational, intellectual academics’ to see ourselves and our ‘Western tradition’ as superior.²⁴ We grant that in everyday English speech, calling something a cult is usually not a compliment. It can, for instance, imply that an institution is founded on deceit by a cunning and charismatic manipulator. Some Melanesians take it that way, too; for example, in 2015, opponents of an emerging Wind Nation splinter group condemned it as a ‘cult’ (using the English word) and portrayed its leader as a fraud.

But scholars have long used the term cult with neutral intent. Anthropologist Martha Macintyre (2010) notes that ‘medieval historians write about the rise of the “Cult of Mary” and people recognise that it refers to a specific movement within broader (Catholic) Christian ritual traditions’ (cited in Tabani 2013: 14).²⁵ Barkun (2006 [2003]: 25) describes ‘the predominant usage’ of the term cult in the sociology of religion as not inherently pejorative. Daniel Dennett (2006: 194), following Stark and Finke (2000), endorses a non-pejorative definition of cult, or sect, that applies to some, but not necessarily all cargo cults, employing a distinction between higher-tension and lower-tension religious groups: ‘Tension refers to the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the “outside” world’ (2000: 143). In Dennett’s words, ‘in a spectrum from low to high, large established churches are low-tension, and sects or cults are high tension’ (2006: 194).

The term cult is also used to denote a kind of germinal religion. For instance, Scott Atran (2002: 271) contrasts ‘starter cults’ with ‘established religions’ (cf. La Barre 1972 [1970]: 60, 343). Further, many anthropologists

24 Two of McDowell’s apparent assumptions here are much too broad. First, that ‘we have religion’. Many Westerners do not, including many ‘rational, intellectual academics’. Second, she appears to associate religion with rationality, a notion we address later in this chapter.

25 Schwartz refers to the ‘Christ cult’ (1973: 170) and ‘the early Christian cult (and its Judaic and earlier antecedents)’ (1976a: 186), and Smith refers to the ‘Jesus cult’ (2002: 25), but it is probably unfair to cite our own works as precedents.

routinely use cult to refer to indigenous ritual institutions in Melanesia, such as men's cults or *tambaran* cults, although they may qualify this by identifying these institutions as Melanesian forms of 'religion' (e.g. Tuzin 1980). Even Lindstrom (2011: 256) is comfortable speaking of the 'Melanesian fondness for culting' as a means of coping with threats to social unity.

Joining cargo to cult, however, is more controversial. Lindstrom (1993a) argues that the term has deep roots in noxious colonial attitudes towards indigenous Melanesians. He identifies Lucy Mair as the first anthropologist to include the term in the index of a publication, in which she bluntly criticised disdainful attitudes towards cargo cults. Long before Worsley urged the progressive political significance of cargo cults, Mair wrote: 'the idea that [cargo cults] are mere nonsense, and can be stamped out by being treated as such, is a fallacy, as the younger officers of the [Australian New Guinea] District Services are well aware. In their view the motive force of the cargo cult is a feeling of helpless envy of the European with his immensely higher material standards' (1948: 67, quoted in Lindstrom 1993a: 36). But Lindstrom contends that the efforts of anthropologists to forestall or roll back the sensational and demeaning implications journalists, missionaries, and colonial administrators have given the term have failed.

We grant that some anthropologists have deliberately used the term cult in a derogatory way. In *New Lives for Old* (2001 [1956]), Mead was very clear that she approved of religion (see e.g. pp. 81–84, 94), in particular 'higher religions' (p. 309). But she almost invariably hung such modifiers as 'mystical' and 'semi-religious' (p. 208) on the words cult or cargo cult, and she contrasted participants in cults with 'responsible' people (p. 40). The bulk of more recent objections to the term, however, focus on supposed unintentional damage. Elfriede Hermann (2004: 52) contends that by adopting a term with such allegedly potent pejorative implications, 'anthropological discourses ... produced knowledge conducive to ruling over and colonising others so characterized'. In this she echoes Lindstrom, who argues that the notion of cargo cults as characteristically Melanesian—even given anthropology's 'context-sensitive, sometimes empathic cultural readings'—has encouraged outsiders to discount Melanesian aspirations of all stripes (Lindstrom 1993a: 71, 146–68). Early in his career, Michael Somare, who would become independent PNG's first prime minister, made a similar complaint: 'If Niuginians are organised, Europeans mark

them as “cultist”, e.g. [Pita] Lus, [Paliau] Maloat ... They are good examples of people with organisational abilities, but Europeans brand them as “cargo cultists” (Somare 1970: 492).²⁶

It would be impossible to determine empirically the extent to which anthropological use of the term cargo cult has helped blight Melanesian aspirations. Paige West (2016: 78, 84) describes cargo cult as a term that “got loose” from anthropology to become a rhetorical means of branding people as incapable and depriving them of control of their natural resources and their lives in general’.²⁷ Yet, while this may be a plausible hypothesis, the supporting evidence West provides is weak at best. Similarly, Lindstrom, Hermann, and other anthropologists who charge that anthropologists contribute to colonial and post-colonial oppression by using the term cargo cult provide no specific examples we know of that link anthropologists’ written words, on which they focus their criticism, with concrete damage done.²⁸ Lindstrom’s exploration of the history of the term also suggests that the denigration train was well down the tracks by the time anthropologists—like Lucy Mair—provided more neutral, sympathetic ways of understanding cargo cults.

No one, however, has proposed an alternative label that captures the distinctiveness of cargo cults. Weston La Barre (1972 [1970]) includes them among what he calls ‘crisis cults’, Gesch (1990: 223) likens them to what he calls ‘enthusiastic movements in the West, both religious and political’, and Burridge (1995 [1960]: xvi), as noted earlier, reminds us of other descriptors attached to Melanesian movements, among them acculturative, adaptive, nativistic, or revitalisation (cf. Whitehouse 1995: 203). One could legitimately describe cargo cults that invoke missionary teachings as Christian sects. A definition of the ‘ideal-type [Christian] ... sect’ Burridge offers (1969: 125, following Wilson 1961) fits many cargo cults

26 Cited in Schmid and Klappa (1999: 108). Pita Lus, later to become Sir Pita Lus, was a member of the first PNG national legislative body to include indigenous Papua New Guineans chosen by popular vote (the pre-independence House of Assembly, first seated in 1964).

27 West’s (2016) analysis of the larger issue of rhetoric and sovereignty in PNG does not rest on her views on cargo cults. But she is on shaky ground calling cargo cult a term ‘generated and popularized by anthropologists’ (2016: 78). Lindstrom (1993a) contends that the term first appeared in print in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, a publication largely devoted to business issues, in 1945, in an article by a member of the Australian administration in PNG. Anthropologists did indeed begin using it soon thereafter, but—unless their works were more widely read than are those of today’s anthropologists—it may be exaggerating to say that they ‘popularized’ it.

28 In this, their efforts are disturbingly familiar to what Herbert Lewis (2014: 129) calls ‘textual fetishism’ in his trenchant defence of Franz Boas against charges that his work furthered colonialism and scientific racism.

neatly (cf. Hamilton 2001: 23–4). Or, one could label them heresies, as the Catholic Church judged millenarian movements sprung from official Christianity in medieval Europe (Watt 2001: 91), and as some missionaries surely did in Melanesia.²⁹ Marc Tabani (2013: 16) seconds Lindstrom's (1993b) suggestion that cargo cults be understood as a form of *kastom*, a Tok Pisin term (roughly analogous to the English word 'custom') some anthropologists have adopted to refer to self-conscious indigenous formulations of local ways, created in response to their perceived erosion by colonialism and institutions of foreign origin.³⁰ Otto (2010) includes cargo cults among what he calls 'material religions'. Some scholars include cargo cults among what they call New Religious Movements or NRMs (Lewis 2004). But we agree with Burridge (1995 [1960]: xvi) that of all the general categories into which scholars have proposed placing cargo cults, '*millenarian* smells the sweetest', and it stimulates useful avenues of analysis.³¹ But substituting a more inclusive label for cargo cult dodges the question of what to call the specific, characteristically Melanesian phenomenon.³²

The importance of showing Melanesians proper respect looms large in cargo cult criticism. McDowell (2000: 378) does not inveigh against calling things cargo cults, but she recommends that anthropologists treat cargo cults 'with the same respect we treat other new or transforming religions'. But mere levelling doesn't necessarily grant cargo cults greater dignity. Fokke Sierksma's tone was as even-handed as McDowell's but unambiguously less respectful to all concerned when he wrote, in 1965: 'Jesus standing before Pilate is just another messianic prophet standing before a District Officer'.³³

29 Fortunately, Christian missionaries in colonial Melanesia could do no more to discourage heresies than deny their adherents communion, sparing Melanesia campaigns of extermination (e.g. Oldenbourg 1961 [1959]) or the equivalent of a Spanish Inquisition.

30 Most of the anthropological literature on this phenomenon uses, like Tabani and Lindstrom, the spelling *kastom*. In Manus, *kastam* is the usual spelling and the one we will use when we return to this topic in Chapter 13.

31 It is interesting that Burridge (1995 [1960]: xvi) notes that at one time both millenarian and messianic were rejected as categories for 'cargo activities' because they were considered 'too loaded'.

32 Biersack (2013: 107) argues that the Mata Kamo movement in PNG should not be called 'cargoist' because it was millenarian; that is, its aim was not primarily to acquire wealth—although wealth was not irrelevant—but it 'sought a total transformation' of human life and the advent of a 'cosmically privileged "blissful" condition'. Biersack's argument that the concerns of Mata Kamo adherents were not 'materialist' depends on a particular reading of the meaning of this term. In any case, we regard cargo cults as a form of millenarianism, not a distinct phenomenon. Currently, Biersack (personal communication) tends to agree.

33 This remark appears in Sierksma's 1965 review of Vittorio Lanternari's *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (1963) and is cited in La Barre (1972 [1970]: 254).

Lindstrom contends that cargo cult ‘always carries along a circus aura of sport and faint mockery. Its roots in the politics of ridicule cannot fully be erased. The term is never entirely decorous or tasteful’ (1993a: 34; cf. Hermann 2004: 52).³⁴ Other scholars, however, provide contrary examples from within Melanesia. Tabani (2013: 21), citing Lattas (1998) and Macintyre (2013), notes instances of Melanesians using the Tok Pisin label *kago kult* ‘as one that is inherently powerful, not shameful’. Lindstrom himself (1993a: 162) observes that while ‘cargoism serves negatively within island political debate to label and denigrate anything that may threaten established orders’, it also ‘serves, positively, as a metonym of Melanesian culture. Cargo stories record a proud history of resistance to colonial domination. As a philosophy and protoscience, the cargo cult distinguishes Melanesians as Melanesians’. Lindstrom’s interest, however, is largely in the negative use, and we cannot deny that even scholars sometimes condescend more to cargo cults than to other forms of millenarianism. Despite a sound grasp of cargo cults as millenarian movements, Landes (2011: 140) is also prey to the notion that cargo cults ‘have an indelible element of the silly’.

Despite the controversies surrounding the term, we are not the only anthropologists who still find it useful (e.g. see Lattas 1998; Leavitt 2004; cf. Robbins 2004b). We grant the vagueness of the term cult, but *cargo* cult refers to something quite specific, as described above. Otto (2010: 92) distinguishes cargo cults from similar phenomena ‘elsewhere in the world’, referring to ‘the specificity of the cargo millennium’, and argues for keeping cargo cult because anthropologists need a distinct term for such a distinct phenomenon (ibid.: 88). If we thought an alternative term were necessary we would suggest cargo millenarianism. But we cannot recommend a wholesale purge of cargo cult, for the reasons given above. Further, if one wants to make the term’s referent look less humorously exotic to the uninitiated, changing its name isn’t likely to produce a long-lasting effect. The long game requires us to recognise the phenomenon’s profoundly pan-human dimensions. If anthropologists have demeaned Melanesians by writing about cargo cults, they have done

34 Schwartz has fought this tendency hand to hand. In 1971, *Psychology Today*, a magazine for general audiences, invited Schwartz to submit an article about the Noise. After a brief editorial process, he didn’t see the article again until it appeared in print, when he was shocked to see that the magazine had titled it ‘The Noise: Cargo Cult Frenzy in the South Seas’. A capsule description of the article referred to a ‘cargo cult freak-out’. In his article, Schwartz had taken pains to point out parallels between cargo cults in Melanesia and similar phenomena in the West. The article could not be recalled, but Schwartz returned his payment for it with a letter of protest.

so by not stressing enough that what Melanesians do in cargo cults is what people elsewhere and throughout recorded history have done over and over again, drawing their inspiration from Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and a host of other cultural traditions that many people regard with respect.

Neither a name change nor the long game we propose, however, would satisfy all critics, many of whom hold that phenomena like those Schwartz witnessed in Manus do not exist, or—if they do exist—that they are not about material cargo. We turn to these arguments next.

Cargo cults as illusion: An even weaker case

The problem of how to talk about cargo cults with appropriate delicacy goes away if we deny that they exist. Jebens (2004a: 8) concedes cautiously that ‘there might in fact be a correspondence between the term [cargo cult] and the Melanesian ethnographic reality’. There are anthropologists, however, who disagree.

Lindstrom (1993a, 2004) has been the leading voice for the argument that Western *interest* in cargo cults, including anthropological interest, has more to do with an irrational Western obsession than with empirical phenomena (1993a: 207–10). The object of the Western obsession, writes Lindstrom, is ‘unrequited love’ (p. 184): ‘The story of the cargo cult is just another avatar of the prosaic Western romance’ (p. 198). Lindstrom marshals many colourful examples of Western popular culture stretching the cargo cult concept far beyond the limits of its use in ethnography. He declines, however, to provide any evidence that the obsession he ascribes to Westerners has led anthropologists to see cargo cults where they are not, on the grounds that his concern is with ‘discourse rather than with ethnographic reality’ (p. 13).³⁵

Others are less circumspect. Karl-Heinz Kohl (2004: 90–1), for instance, contends that cargo cults are projections of Westerners’ own ‘hopes, desires, and fears’ regarding ‘the pursuit of wealth and money’ in a time of rapid economic change in the West.³⁶ And Papua New Guinean scholar

35 Careful readers, however, will find that Lindstrom sometimes fails to maintain this distinction (cf. Otto 2010: 88).

36 Hermann (2004: 52) writes that Epeli Hau’ofa (1975: 285) makes a similar suggestion, that is, ‘the Westerner’s tendency to construct the Melanesian as a caricature of the Western capitalist has been instrumental in moving scholars to concede priority to the “cargo” notion’. One can find such a suggestion in Hau’ofa’s article, however, only by reading between the lines with one’s imagination in high gear.

Regis Tove Stella (2007: 117) declares—without offering evidence—that ‘the myth of the cargo cult’ was created by white colonials in aid of subjugating the indigenous people.

If our account of the Paliau Movement does nothing else, it presents empirical evidence of cargo cults that is hard to ignore. Empirical evidence, however, is easy to discount if ideology clouds one’s vision. Many anthropologists’ objections to both the idea and the empirical reality of cargo cults appear to reflect their conviction that anthropology has its roots in colonialism and is perforce neo-colonial in its outlook, its aspirations to objectivity cloaking a hidden (or perhaps merely inadvertent) agenda of oppression (e.g. Keesing 1994).³⁷ We reject this point of view, but we leave more focused criticism to the penetrating scholarship of Lawrence Kuznar (1997) and Herbert S. Lewis (2014).

Cargo cults are about cargo: Sufficient for some, necessary for all

But what if, beneath the surface, what we call cargo cults aren’t really about cargo? Roger Keesing protests that, although Melanesians may talk about cargo and seek supernatural aid in obtaining cargo, this is not an expression of ‘simple materialism’ (Keesing n.d., paraphrased in Tabani 2013: 8). But we know of no anthropologist who has ever argued that Melanesians seek cargo solely for some primal joy of possession, uninformed by cultural significance and historical context. The closest one can come to examples of ‘simple materialism’ in human life occur in fables (King Midas) or literature (Ebenezer Scrooge or Silas Marner before their respective redemptions), and in instances of real people whose attachment to material things was truly pathological, like New York City’s Collyer brothers. But even the Collyers doubtless found some meaning in their hoarding.³⁸ One can also find examples of ‘simple materialism’ in crudely stereotypical descriptions of the industrial capitalist world like the one Dalton offers: it is ‘a dead materialist one’, he writes (2013: 48).³⁹

37 Roger Keesing’s 1994 essay ‘Theories of culture revisited’ propounds such a view succinctly. The anthropology he criticises, however, is a caricature of the field.

38 On the Collyer brothers, see E.L. Doctorow’s novel *Homer and Langley* (2009), based on the real-life brothers.

39 Dalton defines a ‘dead materialist’ world in part by contrast with the world of the Rawa people of PNG, which is grounded in ‘an epistemology which assumes a consciously aware universe’ (2013: 42) and in which ‘things in nature possess an unseen interior living subjectivity which is continuous with human intelligence’ (p. 37). We would call this a personified universe, and it may be that from the Rawa perspective a universe seen through secular and scientific eyes would be less interesting. But if one does not insist on pervasive conscious awareness as a criterion for a lively universe, what we can see of it through secular and scientific eyes is far from moribund.

Annelin Eriksen (2010: 69), following (rather recklessly) Lindstrom (1993a) and Jebens (2005), contends that the ostensible aim of cargo movements, ‘the reception of Western goods’, might not be their ‘most important aspect. The very act of organising the movement might have been of equal importance’. Thus, ‘cargo cults were efforts to create new forms of local solidarity in periods characterized by great upheavals’. As we will show in our chronicle of the Paliau Movement, this generalisation does not describe *motives* for participating in the Manus cults, and the *effects* on social solidarity in the Manus case were considerably more complicated.

A more subtle argument is that cargo is indeed important in cargo cults, but largely as a symbol. Jan Pouwer (2000: 339) speaks of cargo as ‘a totalizing symbol which stands for physical well-being, freedom from want, economic wealth, social dignity and equivalence, political freedom and eternal bliss’. Garry Trompf (1994: 160) argues that the cargo symbolises ‘something more profound and less tangible than European goods themselves’—something he characterises as ‘new, enigmatic, even “eschatological” forces impinging on the time-honoured primal fabric of life’ (ibid.: 161). Referring to a cargo cult in PNG’s East Sepik Province, Donald Tuzin also minimises the importance of physical cargo. The cargo people seek, he argues, should be understood ‘in a mythic rather than a literal sense’ (1990: 368).⁴⁰

It is not entirely clear, however, if the scholars cited above intend to say that cargo is *only* a symbol (for Melanesians, that is; it certainly has become so for some anthropologists). Otto’s (1992b: 5) assertion that cargo ‘is not matter’, however, is quite plain.⁴¹ But this assertion is manifestly untenable in the Manus case. Consider the list of manufactured goods followers of the prophet Sua prepared in 1960, discussed earlier. And here is how one cult adherent described cargo to Schwartz in the 1950s: ‘Cargo is things, like what we see in stores. We think like this. We work hard, work hard, work hard until we die to get one shilling to buy a little something. In a short time it is used up. Now we think that it is true; all these things that we desire are near now if we hold fast to what they [the dead] say. They say it is not hard. Money, too. They say if they want to give us money, they can’. Some participants in the same cult also

40 Explaining what Tuzin (1990) means by this would require a considerable detour. Tuzin himself, however, makes it adequately clear to patient readers.

41 This is not Otto’s last word on the subject. He takes a more nuanced position elsewhere (2004: 210–11).

reported seeing its tutelary ghost holding a bag of money. And, as we describe in Chapter 6, during the Noise, the people of some participating villages chased away visitors arriving by canoe, determined to keep for themselves the wealth they were expecting.

These data do not, of course, show that cargo has *no* symbolic value. Such a conclusion also would be untenable. Anthropologists agree that material objects in Melanesia and in human society in general have rich symbolic functions. This is true even in Western capitalist societies, wherein—in the words of Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979: 10)—material goods are ‘part of a live information system’ necessary for constructing ‘an intelligible universe’ (p. 65) (cf. Smith 1994: 8–9).⁴²

Our descriptions of the Manus cults will show that some participants were after something more than material goods. The Manus case, however, also suggests that to understand such cult participants anthropologists should interpret material cargo not as a symbol—which can have an arbitrary relationship to that which it represents—but as a synecdoche, a part of something that stands for the whole.⁴³ Further, as we argue below, the Manus case strongly suggests that material cargo was the part of the whole that could do the work of a synecdoche most effectively.⁴⁴

Much about the kind of larger transformation—beyond access to material wealth—that some Manus people hoped for in the 1950s was at least as vague as the notions of Heaven of most Christians. (Will one have to learn to play the harp, or can one work on one’s golf game?) But it is easy to see how Manus people could have attributed larger significance to the whites’ material possessions and devices. They made indigenous forms of wealth, implements, and manufactures look virtually worthless and thus no longer able to underwrite Manus social and psychological desiderata—such as self-esteem, reputation, or power—as they had in the past (see Chapter 3). Judging from some of the rhetoric of the Paliau

42 Much of the work on this topic takes as its theoretical beginning Marcel Mauss’s thesis on the ‘well-nigh indissoluble’ links between people created by exchanging objects that ‘are never completely separated from the men who exchange them’ (Mauss 1967 [1925]: 31).

43 When we say that a symbol has an arbitrary relationship to that which it represents, we do not exclude the possibility that one can find a historical reason for the association of a symbol and its referent.

44 Otto (1992b: 5) comes close to saying this when he calls cargo ‘a cultural idiom ... in which millenarian visions are cast’. Lattas (1998: xi) may have something like this in mind when he writes that the ‘desire for commodities’ found in cargo cults is ‘a way of objectifying the realization of a new Melanesian self and a new Melanesian social order’.

Movement and the cults within it, for some participants, obtaining the cargo did imply achieving social and political as well as material parity with Europeans. But we doubt that anything other than material cargo could have represented such a whole as effectively, if at all. Material cargo was by far the most tangible aspect of white life with which Manus people were familiar; and, given the indigenous significance of material wealth, some Manus people probably did understand it, if not explicitly then inchoately, as the portal to a less tangible and more complex whole. But for others (as illustrated above) cargo was primarily ‘things, like what we see in stores ... money, too’, as a cult adherent once described cargo to Schwartz. To repeat Paula Levin’s formulation, cargo was sufficient for some, but necessary for all.

Numbers of anthropologists continue to promote readings of what cargo cults are ‘really about’ that push interest in material goods far into the background. In doing so, some take considerable liberty. Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz (2004: 7) argue for the primarily symbolic nature of cargo when they take on Jared Diamond’s depiction of the cargo cult leader Yali in Diamond’s popular volume *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997). Diamond introduces his grand scheme for understanding human history with an account of a 1972 conversation with Yali in which Yali asked Diamond: ‘Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?’ (Diamond 1997: 14). Errington and Gewertz are correct that Diamond fails to appreciate the culturally specific importance of material wealth to Melanesians; they observe that Diamond seems to think Papua New Guineans want foreign material goods because they are ‘inherently desirable’. But they go a little too far when they assert that ‘Yali was really asking less about cargo per se than about colonial relationships between black and white people’ (Errington and Gewertz 2004: 25). This is plausible speculation, but it is speculation and does not merit the adverb ‘really’.

Dalton (2004: 207) far surpasses Errington and Gewertz in putting words in people’s mouths.⁴⁵ He tells of how a Papua New Guinean asked him in the early 1980s: ‘How is it the Whitemen ever thought to make machines?’ Dalton writes that he took the question to mean: ‘Are you Whitemen really the gods you pretend to be or not?’ Regarding cargo cults among

45 See also Landes’s (2011: 415) criticism of Lindstrom for the same tendency.

the Iahita Arapesh of PNG, Donald Tuzin (1990: 368) argues that ‘cargo is not really what the cults are about’. The cargo people seek is ‘an image of Self-Person unity’, not unlike what they seek in their indigenous ritual institutions. Tuzin’s argument for the reality of Iahita concern about self-person unity is coherent and based on impressive ethnography. But his conclusion that this is what cargo cults are ‘really about’ is a jump that should leave readers restive. What does he mean by ‘really about’? And how can Errington and Gewertz or Dalton be so confident when they tell us what someone was ‘really’ asking?

Doubtless Yali was *concerned* about colonial relationships, but he *asked* about cargo. There is unseemly haste here to discard people’s own words, even acknowledging Melanesian fondness for indirect and layered speech. We, Schwartz and Smith, have found many Papua New Guineans ready and able to ask questions about white wealth and Melanesian poverty in ways that leave little room for reinterpretation. A sample from among the questions Papua New Guineans have asked us: Is it true that Catholic priests know how to get money from the dead? Will you go to the cemetery with me some night and show me how to get money from the dead? When did whites get factories and machines; when Jesus died? Patrick Gesch (1990: 222–3) writes of similarly blunt questions asked of him ‘in moments of quiet friendliness’, including ‘Will you speak out the Secret to us now?’—that is, the secret of how to obtain material wealth without physical effort.

Anthropologists are trained to look beneath the surface of what people say and do, but it is easy to go too far. One can speculatively relate virtually any aspiration, intention, or concern human beings express to more abstract interests. This sometimes illuminates an issue, and sometimes it helps make what seems exotically inexplicable less so. But sometimes it simply glosses over something an anthropologist finds discomfiting—like an apparent obsession with material things.

Anthropologists who insist that material cargo is *not* central to cargo cults are concerned in part with countering popular ethnocentric tendencies to depict Melanesians in demeaning ways. Some may also be trying to counter their own ethnocentric discomfort. We agree with Andrew Lattas (2001: 161) that anthropologists’ ‘ethical apologies for the natives’ materialism imply their own ethnocentric ontologies. They imply a materialist-spiritualist opposition—where the desire for material goods and wealth is seen to corrode the legitimacy and integrity of political-

ethico concerns', thus suggesting a 'Christian-inspired, God-versus-Caesar dichotomy'.⁴⁶ A tendency to denigrate the material world is present in many philosophical or theological traditions. But it is probably most familiar to Euro-Americans in its Christian form, as often expressed in the Christian Bible: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal' (Matthew 6:19–20, King James Version).

Melanesians do not generally feel that material wealth stands in opposition to virtue or that material wellbeing is separable from social and metaphysical wellbeing. Bruce Knauff (1999: 35), for instance, sums up the relationship of food and the human body in Melanesia as follows: 'material substance cannot be divorced from social and spiritual life; food is irrevocably tied to personal relationships and to unseen effects that may enhance or alter its potency. Social and spiritual relations form the precondition for nourishment and growth, and the body is conceptualised in terms of these'. Biersack (2001: 74) describes such a relationship more vividly in her analysis of a ritual pertaining to boys' maturation among the Paiela people of PNG's Enga Province. Pieces of bark used in the ritual symbolise boys' skin 'and the wealth that the boys will accumulate'. This reflects a Paiela conception that 'wealth "comes to the skin", meaning that it becomes integral to a person's reputation and image'. Integral, we should add, in a socially desirable way.⁴⁷ This conception is common in PNG. For example, as Marilyn Strathern (1975) reports, struggling unskilled migrants to Port Moresby from rural areas describe their plight as having 'no money on our skins'. In a related vein, Smith (1994) explores the integral connection between collective material wellbeing and right relations among the living and with the dead that the people of Kragur village, East Sepik Province, felt in their bones in the 1970s. Similar

46 Lattas notes, however, that such a dichotomy may appear 'nowadays' among 'informants influenced by charismatic forms of Christianity' (2001: 161).

47 Biersack (2011b) tackles a similar issue regarding the Cult of Ain in what, in 2011, were PNG's Enga and Southern Highlands provinces. (Parts of Southern Highlands Province have since been incorporated into Hela Province, formed in 2012.) Anthropologists studying its manifestations in different times and places have reached different conclusions on the relative importance to its adherents of 'an ascent to the sky', to dwell eternally in what some might call a spiritual realm, and acquiring material wealth. Biersack's review of the research leads her to conclude that 'these two goals not only did not compete but were substantially the same' (2011b: 238).

conceptions are not, of course, absent in the West. But in Melanesia they do not strain in tension with a common interpretation of a major cultural tradition, that is, Christianity.

Allowing people to be irrational

Errington and Gewertz also object that Diamond, by vastly oversimplifying the significance of cargo, casts Papua New Guineans as ‘the agents of their own domination’ (2004: 25). Diamond can be faulted for aspects of his methods, but we disagree that it is wrong on principle to depict people as unwittingly complicit in their own oppression. To understand human behaviour, one has to leave open the possibility that people sometimes help create and maintain self-destructive illusions.

Doing so looks irrational, but it is indisputable that people *are* often irrational. As Schwartz has written: ‘Belief systems cannot be explained entirely on the basis of a rational calculus of experience. The social scientist who attempts such an explanation is rationalising on behalf of the people he is studying because he takes the irrational as pejorative. But such an explanation does not have an invidious implication when the irrational is considered a potential component of all human behaviour’ (1976b: 219).⁴⁸ Regarding cargo cults, Worsley (1999: 154–5) accepts that they can be irrational, but argues strenuously that they are no more irrational than various ‘fundamentalist’ versions of the major world religions and such ideologies as racism, nationalism, fascism, communism, and World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment. He concludes: ‘To single out Melanesian Cargo [Worsley’s capitalisation] cults as if they were the most striking contemporary instances of irrational ideology, religious or otherwise, is ... supremely ethnocentric arrogance’. We cannot imagine any anthropologist disagreeing.⁴⁹

Worsley could have included non-fundamentalist versions of world religions among ideologies that might be called irrational, for they often proudly divorce themselves from quotidian reason. Kierkegaard’s

48 Robert Coles (1999: 56) quotes Anna Freud making much the same point. Discussing with Anna Freud her father’s comparison of religious faith to infantile neurosis in *The Future of an Illusion*, Coles notes that he found the tone ‘uncharacteristically harsh, even scornful, not the way Freud usually addressed readers’. Anna Freud replied: ‘As you know, to speak of “infantile neurosis” in connection with anyone is to describe them as a fellow human being!’

49 And, contrary to McDowell (2000: 378), we find it hard to imagine any anthropologist offering much resistance to ‘acknowledging our own irrationality’.

commentary (2012 [1843]: 7) on the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:2–8) is a vivid example: ‘Abraham was ... great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness’. The New Testament continues this theme, as in St Paul’s praise for the precedence of imagination over empirical evidence: ‘Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’ (Hebrews 11:1, King James Version).⁵⁰ Yet, the implication of irrationality is among the most heartfelt complaints some critics make of the term cargo cult (e.g. Biersack 2013; Hermann 2004: 52; Lindstrom 1993a: 66–72). Again, many fear that this unfairly diminishes Melanesians. McDowell (2000: 377) opines that to call cargo cults irrational perpetuates the assumption that “we” are rational and “they” are not’. This allows ‘us’ to ‘distance ourselves and continue the hierarchy implicit in colonialism’. Hence, to be on the side of the angels ‘we’ (an unspecified ‘we’) must find the rationality in cargo cults.⁵¹

The most typical anthropological argument for the rationality of cargo cults is that they have a coherent inner logic given the cultural and social context: that is, they are logical given indigenous Melanesian notions of causality and the circumstances of the Melanesian encounter with the West. As Burridge puts it in *Mambu* (1995 [1960]: xvii), cargo cults make sense in terms of ‘a particular cultural idiom within a historical bracket’. But, at the very least, as the historical bracket shifts, such an analysis may become less applicable. In Manus and elsewhere in Melanesia, people adhere to cults after decades of intensive involvement with, and practical mastery of, material technologies from the industrialised world—including, in Manus, participating in wartime construction projects and working as mechanics and clerks with the occupying military forces. Some of today’s leading members of Wind Nation are highly educated and have held important positions managing PNG’s economy and infrastructure. It is difficult under these circumstances to see cargo cult beliefs as simply rational constructions of all the available

50 The English Standard translation is even more explicit: ‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’.

51 Like many others who make such an argument, McDowell is very free with the pronoun ‘we’. (Enclosing it in single quotation marks in the passage cited is a rare gesture on her part toward greater care.) It is generally difficult to determine to whom precisely she and others are referring, although the possible referents appear to be anthropologists, sympathisers with colonialism, heirs of the Enlightenment, or some combination of these categories. Most often, however, the referent seems to be people of the West. Thus, in defending Melanesians against unfair representation in this way, McDowell and others provide excellent examples of what James Carrier (1992) aptly calls ‘occidentalism’; that is, a tendency to represent ‘the West’ stereotypically that mirrors the ‘orientalism’ Edward Said (1979 [1978]) criticises.

information. We find it impossible to ignore the degree to which cargo cult beliefs and hopes—like the key doctrines of the major world religions—require those harbouring them to abandon the pragmatism they exhibit in everyday life.

Does this constitute irrationality? We propose a conception of rationality that is not culturally limited: we hold that all human beings share an objective reality that is distinct from any particular cultural construction, a reality to which we all must adapt. To be rational is to formulate and pursue aims that appear achievable in terms of *what one knows* of that shared reality, one's cultural construction of an ultimately shared reality. Conversely, setting and pursuing goals that depend on a version of reality that flies in the face of *what one knows* of that reality—what Schwartz calls a person's or group's accessible reality (a term we will use again)—is irrational. We do not mean, of course, that there are no *reasons* for irrational behaviour; they are simply not reasons that make sense within a particular accessible reality. Hence, we give no rationality credits for the internal coherence of an actor's reasons or salutary unintended consequences of their behaviour.⁵²

This conception of irrationality does not provide a finely calibrated instrument for measuring the rationality or irrationality of particular ideas or behaviours. A major obstacle is the impossibility of apprehending the boundaries of anyone's accessible reality. We insist, however, that respect for the people they observe does not require anthropologists to strain until they can expunge from their analysis all hints of irrationality as we have defined it, an effort that can easily lead them to positions beyond what their data justify. Certainly, in cases of millenarianism, we can and must leave open the possibility that people may want something so much that, in the hope of attaining it, they put aside understandings of reality—accessible realities—that previously have served them well. Landes (2011: 99) writes that 'the prophet must overcome the innate common sense of most people'. We prefer to think of 'common sense' not as something 'innate' but as the taken-for-granted culturally constructed understandings of the world that enable a society to survive and reproduce. But we take Landes's point. In our Manus case, it appears that many people were eager for someone to help them overcome their reluctance to abandon old, reliable

52 Nicholas Bainton (2010: 94) suggests that a tendency among anthropologists to focus on functional analyses emphasising the 'socially positive' aspects of cargo cults is an effort to 'side-step' sensitive issues pertaining to rationality.

ways of understanding the world for something untested but infinitely more exciting. In the early years of the Movement, some of its adherents yearned for a prophet and found one in Paliau. And those who wanted a more unambiguous cargo prophecy found it elsewhere, as we describe in Chapter 6. In both cases, Movement adherents who seized on cargo prophecies could do so only by putting aside their working knowledge of their accessible reality.

We are aware that some anthropologists are not comfortable with the idea of a reality that is not a social construction. To pursue anthropology as a science, however, one must assume a reality independent of culture, at least during business hours (cf. Jarvie 1984: 53). We are, however, more than comfortable, at all hours, with philosopher John Searle's dictum that 'there is a way things are that is independent of how we represent how things are' (1995: 156).⁵³

Fortunately, there is a lot of latitude for creating versions of reality that have at best tenuous relationships to what Searle calls the 'brute facts' of existence; that is, reality distinct from cultural constructions.⁵⁴ People can do so without harm, and perhaps much to their benefit, in dream life, play, or art. They can even build substantial institutions around notions that depart radically from the brute facts without impairing their ability to survive and reproduce. But, ignoring some brute facts may not only diminish the quality of group life but also—for example, in the cases of racism or nationalism—threaten the survival of other groups.⁵⁵

53 There has been considerable critical discussion of Searle's ideas among cultural anthropologists. See especially *Anthropological Theory*, volume 6(1), 2006. No critiques we have seen, however, incline us to disagree with Searle's (2006: 81) fundamental proposition that there is an observer-independent world and that 'the real observer-independent world does not give a damn about us. Things such as hydrogen atoms and tectonic plates do not become something different "once observed and interpreted by human agents". They remain the same ... In this respect they differ from money, property, government, marriage and other social institutions'.

54 It's hard to speak about this without seeming to equate 'brute fact' reality with nature as opposed to culture, especially because the most ready examples of brute fact reality come from what we are accustomed to calling nature, such as hydrogen atoms and tectonic plates. But—if we read Searle correctly—it seems apparent that 'a way things are that is independent of how we represent how things are' is not merely another way of saying 'natural' as opposed to 'cultural' phenomena.

55 George Orwell made a similar point in his 1946 essay 'In Front of Your Nose': 'We are all capable of believing things which we *know* to be untrue, and then, when we are proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield'.

We stress that acting irrationally is not the same as acting immorally. It can, however, be extremely dangerous. People do not have to penetrate to the quiddity of being to survive, but neither can they live completely divorced from it. In the end, to survive, let alone flourish, people must allow for a certain amount of what Schwartz calls reality seepage. The Breatharian belief that people can survive on light and air alone poses little threat to non-Breatharians, except innocents under their influence. But it puts individual Breatharians in immediate peril, like a woman in Scotland who died while fasting according to Breatharian principles.⁵⁶ Some groups with millenarian ideologies have posed far greater dangers to both their members and others than the Breatharians. Well-known cases included Heaven's Gate (best known for a 1997 mass suicide in California), the People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ (founded in California, but best known for a 1978 mass suicide/murder in Guyana), the Order of the Solar Temple (associated with a string of murders and suicides in Europe in the 1990s), and Aum Shinrikyô (infamous for poison gas attacks in Japan).⁵⁷

But we do not have to go to darkest California, Europe, or Japan to find examples of the danger of ignoring brute-fact reality. Landes (2011: 91) calls the Xhosa cattle slaying of 1856–1857, in what today is South Africa, a case of 'suicidal millennialism'. Home-grown prophets convinced the Xhosa that if they 'would slay all their cattle, destroy their grain stores, cease planting crops, and purify themselves of all witchcraft, a great day would dawn when the British would vanish from the land and the ancestors would live again, bringing with them new and more plentiful cattle and grain'. Enough people heeded this prophecy to cause 30,000–50,000 Xhosa to starve and to enable greater consolidation of the British regime and extended white settlement on Xhosa lands—a 'self-inflicted catastrophe', in Landes's words (2011: 91).⁵⁸ Biersack (2013) writes of a catastrophe on a smaller scale among the Ipili-speaking followers of the Cult of Ain in PNG. Under the influence of a cult leader, many came to believe that they would find wealth at the bottom of a pool to which the leader took them. 'Despite the fact that Ipili speakers fear water and

56 BBC Online Network (21 September 1999) reported that a woman died in Scotland while fasting in accord with Breatharian principles (news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/453661.stm).

57 There is substantial literature on each of these cases. Also, *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (Lewis 2004) places these and similar cases in context.

58 Although this horrifying episode is often mentioned in the literature on millenarianism, Landes notes that the 'only extant scholarly monograph' on it is by J.B. Peires (1989), and that a critique of that study is available in Andreas et al. (2008).

do not swim', Biersack writes, 'they entered the water and ... drowned' (ibid.: 96). This may sound apocryphal, but Biersack's (2011a, 2011b) careful research on the Cult of Ain suggests that it is not.

We will not argue that all the people involved in the highly disturbing incidents noted above were indisputably irrational; that is a tough call and would require extensive information on their accessible realities. Could one then argue that they must have been behaving rationally in their own terms? That would be a stretch, because they clearly ignored whatever reality seepage had hitherto allowed them to survive or forestalled their attacks on others. The 'rational in their own terms' interpretation is arguably more pejorative than suggesting that they were exhibiting a capacity to ignore accessible reality of the kind Kierkegaard admired in Abraham.

It is hard to imagine the Titan people of Manus—famously at home on and in the water—suffering the fate of Biersack's Ipili speakers. During the 1946 cargo cult, however, some of them destroyed their canoes, seriously jeopardising their livelihoods. Titan have impressed observers with their empirical bent and pragmatism, even in their dealings with the spirit world. This makes the fact that they were core participants in the cargo cults within the Paliau Movement all the more worthy of explanation. In the next chapter, we describe the principal features of indigenes Manus life, including the Titan's predominately hard-headed relationship with brute-fact reality. This sets the stage for our chronicle of the Manus encounter with the European world and the Paliau Movement's response.

This text is taken from *Like Fire: The Paliau Movement and Millenarianism in Melanesia*, by Theodore Schwartz and Michael French Smith, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LF.2021.02