

10

Comparing the cults

Knowledge of the local history of millenarian thought and action is invaluable for understanding millenarian efforts in particular populations. Thus, before we examine the demise of the Cemetery Cult, we want to draw attention to important differences between it and the Noise and how our knowledge of local millenarian history helps illuminate them. Researchers often have very little such information. But in the Manus case we know a lot about the cargo millenarianism that preceded the Cemetery Cult—that is, the Noise. The most important thing we know is that the Noise emerged quickly and failed rapidly. The most striking ways in which the Cemetery Cult differs from the Noise look very much like reactions to the latter's swift rise and fall. We cannot say unequivocally that people were reacting consciously to that experience, but it is hard to avoid speculating that experience of the Noise had a profound influence on the thought and behaviour of participants in the Cemetery Cult.

People turned back to the Movement's gradualist program for change after the Noise came to nothing, but their millenarian hopes did not disappear. They did not even lie dormant for long. By all accounts, the Noise as a public phenomenon ended in 1947, but by late 1952 some Movement participants were again trying to subvert secular time and bring about a transformation of their world more dramatic than anything Paliu could (openly) promise. The Noise irrupted, blanketed the Movement area and beyond, and ran its course within a few weeks. This resembles what Hamilton (2001: 13), writing of Christian millenarianism, calls 'the classic intense movement that sweeps through a community like a bush fire, often dying down just as rapidly as it ignites'. In contrast, the Cemetery Cult emerged in late 1952, spread and developed over the

following year and a half, never gained a foothold in some of the locales or with some of the people formerly deeply involved in the Noise, and did not come fully into the open in Bunai until mid-1954. As described in Chapter 11, it also ended abruptly before it had time to fail on its own.

How the imminence of salvation shaped the Noise

It is possible, of course, that if Schwartz and Shargo had observed the Noise firsthand it would not have looked as dramatically contagious as portrayed in the accounts they obtained. There is no reason, however, to question their data on its duration and principal features. One important fact is that, to the best of our knowledge, although participants in the Noise knew about cargo cults in other parts of New Guinea, there had been no cargo cult episodes in the Admiralty Islands before the Noise. Participants came to it without a history of disappointment to dampen their hopes for rapidly obtaining a perfect world. Also, the virtually complete recruitment of the south coast Titan to the Movement was crucial to the rapid spread of both the early Movement and the Noise. It is impossible to imagine how word of Paliu's New Way or the Noise could have spread even somewhat 'like fire' without the Titan messengers' tireless canoe voyaging.

As for the near-unanimity of the south coast Titan in this effort, although they were as divided politically as the other major ethnic groups in Manus, they were in some ways more homogenous. As noted earlier, unlike either Usiai or Matankor, Titan people spoke a single language. They also had affiliated en masse with the Catholic Mission, whereas Usiai and Matankor communities had split among Catholic, Lutheran Evangelical, and Seventh-day Adventist missions.¹ This comparative Titan solidarity, however, did not extend to the Titan of the north coast. Sheer distance limited the intensity of their exposure to the Movement.

¹ Paliu himself was Matankor, not Titan. But his fellow Matankor never gave him more than weak support at best. Schwartz suggests that this was in part a case of the Nazarene effect; that is, the difficulty many prophets have in obtaining honour in their own countries. In addition, on Baluan, adherents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were especially resistant to both the New Way and the Noise.

In addition, a history of south coast Titan raiding in the north (Carrier and Carrier 1989: 38) may have made north coast Titan averse to taking up with a south coast endeavour.

People suddenly overcome by the *guria* marked the beginning of the Noise, wherever it took hold. But what happened simultaneously was more fundamental: Adherents of the Noise abruptly entered a world in which time was collapsed. In the world of the cult adherents, past and future, the living and the dead, crowded into the immediate present. And the immediate present teetered on the edge of the day of Christ's return, which would initiate a condition of timeless perfection. There was no need to think of a future beyond the last-minute flurry of preparations for the Second Coming. The goal lay not years or generations but days ahead. The immediate fulfilment of desire was imminent for all who lived or had ever lived. For the few weeks that the Noise endured, many of its adherents were immersed in apocalyptic time.

Several features of the Noise matched its foreshortened time scale neatly. It appropriated much of the cosmological and metaphysical content of the Paliu Movement and appended to it the prophetic elaborations that occurred in each village. But its ideology was spare and unstandardised in comparison with that of the Cemetery Cult. The organisation of the Noise was rudimentary because there was neither time nor—more important—need to make anything other than minimal preparations for the final transformation. Similarly, there were few or no attempts to anticipate what kind of organisation the return of Jesus and the ancestors might require, for they would certainly tell people what to do. Further, in the foreshortened life of the Noise, there was no time for a dramatised struggle with scepticism before conversion, something that was a nearly universal step in recruiting people to the Cemetery Cult.

This is not to say that no participants in the Noise had doubts. But much of the more drastic activity of the Noise probably propelled people quickly beyond the point at which they could entertain doubts without severe discomfort. Experiencing *guria* and destroying property may have demonstrated to people their own commitment even as they demonstrated it to Jesus and the ancestors. Lukas of Mok told how, as he began to doubt and fear that Mok villagers had impoverished themselves in vain, he was moved to a final act of commitment: casting into the sea the box of Movement funds, a symbol and an important element of the path to the more prosaic future they might achieve through action in secular time.

In Ndriol, many factors led to Wapei's murder. But it was, nonetheless, also an irrevocable act of magical commitment. If the Noise were true, no death would be final and people would forget their destroyed and discarded material goods in the flood of new wealth received.

How caution shaped the Cemetery Cult

The basic activity of the Cemetery Cult—building cemeteries on a supernaturally decreed model and gathering bones from dispersed burial sites—made rapid culmination of the cult impossible. But one must wonder if, at some level, Cemeterians created this tedious process because they feared that their efforts could rise and fall as rapidly as the Noise. They hovered on the edge of apocalyptic time, filled with hope, but holding back from putting that hope to the ultimate test.

Although prophecies, dreams, and visions kept Cemetery Cult adherents' passions high, the Cemeterians did not invest as heavily in the hope of sudden supernaturally mediated fulfilment as did adherents of the Noise. In the Cemetery Cult, neither the tutelary ghosts nor the living leaders demanded that people destroy their property; nor did the ghosts, dreamers, or visitors to Heaven proclaim a specified day for the Second Coming.

To sustain their morale, adherents of the Cemetery Cult had to cling to the conviction that the Second Coming might happen any day. Yet—with the exception of Thomas's interpretation of a volcanic eruption, described below—they avoided with remarkable unanimity committing to a date. Tjamilo, in Bunai, was perhaps the only adherent of the Cemetery Cult completely explicit on this score: mortals could not know the precise day, he insisted.² The ghost of Thomas might have announced a date and compelled people to take drastic actions in preparation, but he did not. And neither did his medium, his interpreters, or even the long string of persons who addressed questions to him. The adherents thus denied themselves the possibility of forcing the hand of God through the power of their commitment. But they also spared themselves a growing fear of disappointment as the declared Last Day—or, worse yet, one Last Day after another, approached.

2 It certainly sounds as though Tjamilo had at least heard from missionaries such biblical admonitions as Matthew 24:36 (King James Version): 'But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only'.

St Augustine of Hippo was only one of many early Christian thinkers who pondered the timing of the Second Coming, but he probably gave the most practical advice to fellow churchmen.³ He counselled that they should avoid preaching that the apocalypse was imminent because by doing so they set people on a path to disappointment that could undermine their Christian faith (Landes 2011: 48). During the Cemetery Cult, both leaders and the rank and file appear to have adopted a similar stance spontaneously. With no overt central coordination, local cult leaders refrained from pinning hopes to a specific date, as though their still-fresh memories of the Noise were enough to make the example of restraint the Johnston Island cultists set compelling.

At the same time, the Cemeterians seized on any hint of the Last Day's approach. The arrival of the anthropologists, the eruption of a volcano in an area where there had been no volcanic activity in living memory, the approach of Christmas, and, especially, the approach of Easter, the day of Christ's resurrection, were occasions for burgeoning hope that the Last Day was near.⁴ Each such event stimulated some further development in the cult, some new ritual, and some further attempt to complete the process of purification, but no firm commitment to a date. The eruption of the volcano came nearest to eliciting a commitment from Thomas, the ghost of Johnston Island. Through a medium, he invoked the volcano as a warning to non-cult villages. After the volcano had sunk beneath the sea, during a lull in its activity, Thomas reportedly announced that its reappearance would mark the Day of Judgement. But the volcano surfaced three more times during the life of the cult without heralding the Last Day. Rather than see this as impugning the ghost's integrity (or that of his handlers), people quietly ignored these events.

Cemetery Cult followers nevertheless let it be known that the ghosts were urging them to hurry their preparations. We take the position, of course, that cult followers were speaking to themselves through the ghosts. And, perhaps, in speaking through the ghosts they were—without realising it—urging God to bring about the Last Day before the Native Government Council (NGC; see Chapter 7) was installed. As the coming of the NGC came closer, many cult followers became more intense, their intensity betraying hints of desperation.

3 Hall (2009) discusses this issue in depth.

4 Mead (2001 [1956]: 29) describes the volcanic eruption not far off the south coast, easily visible from Pere village, that occurred within a few days of the arrival of the Mead, Schwartz, and Shargo party in 1953.

Given the slower pace of the Cemetery Cult, requiring people to destroy the tools with which they made their livings would have been out of the question. Cemetery Cult activities did put a dent in food production, but participation was much more compatible with normal life than participation in the Noise had been. We may be stretching a point here, but even the role of the *gurua* in the Cemetery Cult displayed such compatibility. The *gurua* affected only a few participants in the Cemetery Cult. In each village or hamlet that came wholly into the cult only one or a few people were taken by the *gurua*. And although the *gurua* in the Cemetery Cult was occasionally as violent and dramatic as in the Noise, it did not spread by contagion to spectators. In cases in which more than one person was affected, they usually did not *gurua* simultaneously but on separate occasions. Clearly, the implicit conventions governing such behaviour had changed.

Also in contrast to the Noise, during the Cemetery Cult only one person in each village became a connection between the ghosts and the living. And, except in the case of Joseph Nanei, this person did not necessarily exercise real cult leadership. Most mediums were women: Sapa on Johnston Island, Namu in Malei, Nasei in Lowaya, and other women in Nuang and Kapo. A scattered few provided all the steady and formal contact the Cemetery Cult needed with the ghosts. A larger number of persons had single or occasional contacts with ghosts. These attested that the dead were indeed thronging back. But all that a particular village required was one sustained, oral contact that repeated all that had been laid out on Johnston Island, bringing the revelation to each village through one of its own ancestors.

The Cemetery Cult divides the Paliu Movement

Although Cemetery Cult participants remained formally part of the Movement, the cult strained Movement unity. When confronted by their opponents and critics, cult villages and hamlets threatened to withdraw from the Movement. At the height of their confidence they even criticised Paliu sharply. But they made no moves to leave the Movement, either substantial or symbolic. It even looked like they conspired implicitly with their opponents to keep reports of the cult from spreading outside the Movement villages.

But such moderation did not prevent increasing tension within the Movement. Although the old antagonism between the Titan and the Usiai affected cult affiliation in some cases (as described in Chapter 9), the larger tension within the Movement did not develop along the Titan–Usiai divide.⁵ During the Noise, most of Paliau’s followers saw its apocalyptic millenarianism as consistent with Paliau’s teachings. For many, the Noise ultimately strengthened rather than weakened their commitment to the Movement. Indeed, there was considerable overlap between Paliau’s teachings and program and Noise doctrines and activities. One would have to cut things very fine to find significant competition between forthright millenarianism and the secular, albeit ambiguously so, dimension of Paliau’s activities until after the Noise ended. But the Cemetery Cult made such competition explicit.

Cemetery Cult adherents held that their way embodied the original ideals of the Movement of 1946 better than the current Movement did and that the Movement had grown decadent. And the cult developed most rapidly and its adherents acted most decisively almost entirely after it became clear that Paliau’s efforts to bring about change in secular time were bearing fruit. Specifically, there would soon be an NGC embracing the south coast and a government-sponsored cooperative would soon follow. Yet whatever material benefits the NGC might offer, the cult adherents saw them as inadequate. The Cemetery Cult, like the Noise, aimed directly at regaining the First Order of God, the condition of humanity in Paradise. They might have reasoned that with the NGC in place it would be impossible to continue the cult, except on a scale and in a manner inadequate to its grand aim. The Cemeterians certainly would face not only the ridicule and opposition of their peers; they would have to defy an institution with the power of the Australian administration behind it. They now had no time to spare.

As initiation of a broader NGC approached, opponents of the Cemeterians sought more vigorously to end the cult before it jeopardised the NGC’s advent. The Cemeterians responded with a burst of activity, and the cult reached its climax almost literally on the eve of the inauguration of the NGC. One can easily see here a final effort to attain

5 The Titan of Tawi and Johnston Island had initiated the cult, and it eventually incorporated the Usiai villages and hamlets of Kapo, Nuang, Malei, and Lowaya. But other Usiai villages opposed the cult and it failed to gain a foothold among many Titan. Even so, the Titan of Bunai tended to think of the cult as an Usiai phenomenon, while the Usiai of Malei and Lowaya thought of the opposition as primarily Titan.

the cult's ultimate goal before its adherents resigned themselves to the incremental program of the NGC, which was now the centrepiece of the Movement program—a program with no overt commitment to achieving the First Order of God.

Unity and localism in the two episodes

The villages of the Noise each pursued its cargo with fierce independence, determined to defend their own abundance from the people of other villages. This extreme localism interrupted the centralisation of political organisation and collective action the Movement was beginning to implement. Capitalising on people's shared experience of failure in the Noise and their sudden loss of direction, Paliaw was able to revive and build on the pre-Noise spirit of unity to support more effective central organisation and concrete collective accomplishment, manifest in the new composite villages. The spirit of collectivism weakened somewhat after the initial burst of post-Noise activity, but a remarkable degree of solidarity and unanimity persisted.

Until, that is, the Movement stagnated and the Cemetery Cult emerged. Although adherents of the Cemetery Cult engaged in some low-key proselytising, they also stressed the necessity of independent revelation within each village or hamlet. Consequently, even though the Cemetery Cult was more centrally oriented than the Noise, it exhibited its own potent localism.

The Cemetery Cult was more centralised than the Noise in several ways. The focus on the ghost of Thomas is the most obvious of these. Cemeterians in different locales all subscribed to Thomas's superior abilities to divine the locations of the remains of their dead, and local teacher-ghosts occasionally went to visit Thomas, sometimes to return with him to the Sky where some said they met Jesus. Also, the ideology of the Cemetery Cult was more uniform than that of the Noise and the spirits of the ancestors were depicted as remarkably well organised. In the world of the dead, the spirits of all generations and of all villages were together with Jesus—to use the Tok Pisin word the cultists favoured, they all sat in *kibung*—that is, meeting or ritual gathering—with Jesus, in a manner resembling the public assemblies in Movement villages.

But the worlds of the living and the dead met only in each particular village. And the Cemetery Cult echoed the same kind of jealous localism characteristic of the Noise. Adherents of both the Noise and the Cemetery Cult believed that each village would receive its cargo directly from the ghosts of its own dead. In Lowaya, people even planned separate sections of the cemetery for each of the constituent clans or remnants of extinct villages that made up the village. Cemeterians in each village feared having to share their cargo with the people of other villages and they feared that the sins of other villages might jeopardise their own chances of reward.

Even in the composite village of Bunai, each of the two Usiai hamlets that joined the cult claimed independence and even ignorance of the early cult developments in the other hamlet. And cult adherents in both hamlets denied the very obvious influence of Nuang and Kapo on their own cults. Ironically, however, cult villages and hamlets could not have been more consistent in abiding by the principle of full independence if they all had been responding to a memo from the same head office.

Such localism might seem to clash with a quest for a fundamental transformation of the world, not just one's own small corner of it. We know, however, that some adherents of the Cemetery Cult either did not recognise this logical dilemma or they assumed—not necessarily consciously—that it would be miraculously resolved. In periods of millenarian fervour, of course, people set aside the pragmatic logic that enables them to survive and reproduce in normal times. Despite the cult's localism, many adherents hoped for a transcendent result. Schwartz pointed out to one participant that transferring the remains of all their dead to the relatively small spaces allocated to the ritual graveyards would leave no room for new burials. The man replied that this would not be a problem because once the task was completed, the Last Day would come and there would be no more deaths. But, as we describe in the next chapter, Paliu did not allow the adherents of the Cemetery Cult to put their faith to a final test.

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.2021.10