

Cargo Catechism

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Cargo Catechism

1. Here is how it all began. Old Anut made him some man and woman along flowers animals trees fish putem in a garden belong plenty canned beef ricebags (polished) instant coffee, tobacco matches and candybars. Old man and woman no pants and lots of whiskey. Baimbai plenty pekato mekim plenty trabel. Nogut. Old Anut took away all the canned food before they could even find the canopener. Quick lockup garden and hide all the whiskey. You wantem inferno Ol Man Adam? "Suppose you spik: I no got inferno, baimbai you go along IN."

2. Noah was a gutfela so Old Anut showed him how to build a steamer. Make him strongfela talk: get along steamer with plenty Cargo along all animals quick I make him rain longtime no can finish. Noah had a peaked cap white shirt shorts stockings and shoes. The rain came down and Noah rang the bell and off went the steamer with all the animals that's all. Steamer belong plenty canned beef ricebags (polished) instant coffee tobacco matches and candybars. No whiskey. Old Noah always properly dressed. Nix pekato. Nix trabel.

3. Baimbai rain stops and steamer lands in Australia. Old Noah finds a bottle of whiskey lying around Sydney. Bad news for everybody that's all. Noah want 'em one drink work him trouble no can finish. One drink takes off shoes. Two drinks takes off the socks. Son Ham belongs Noah watches and laughs when old boy takes off his pants.

For this Ham is deprived of cargo, canned meat, razor-blades etc and sent to New Guinea to be a black man. Shem and Japheth remain white, keep the Cargo and remain in Sydney.

CARGO CATECHISM is taken from the East canto of *The Geography of Lograire*. This poem, along with *Cables to the Ace* and others of Merton's antipoems is frequently regarded as some of the most complicated and inaccessible poetry Merton wrote. Yet, to regard these poems as a temporary aberration as George Woodcock did in his critical study of Merton is to ignore a central strand of Merton's literary output, and one that occupied him for the final years of his life as a hermit.

I have chosen to explore a short section of *Lograire* entitled 'Cargo Catechism.' Initially I found it one of the most incomprehensible parts of the poem. This changed for me in two ways. Firstly when I tried reading some sections of it aloud and the text itself came to life and secondly, upon reading some of the sources Merton was using in writing this poem and beginning to come to an understanding of what Merton was attempting to do in this canto and in the poem as a whole.

Cargo Catechism is composed of nine prose paragraphs all written in a similar style using pidgin English. The first paragraph is based on a New Guinea story concerning the creation of the world which begins in a similar style to Genesis: "Here is how it all began..." and the fall is attributed to sex and whiskey—the latter not normally referred to in the traditional Genesis story! The following paragraphs tell the story of Noah and the flood, and then Ham's sin of seeing his father naked which leads to the division of the races with Ham being sent to New Guinea as a black man and his brothers, Shem and Japheth remaining in Sydney. The remaining paragraphs explore the attempts to obtain cargo for themselves by the descendants of Ham.

In these paragraphs Merton has combined stories and words from anthropological literature¹ about the cults, with some of his own stories and words he has created in his own version of pidgin English.

In other sections of the East Canto of *Lograire* Merton explores a number of different manifestations of the cargo cults and explores the ways the natives coped with cultural change and fought – literally at times – to improve their lot and to gain access to the whiteman's cargo.

So, a little background information about cargo cults and then I'll go on to suggest briefly what I think Merton is attempting to achieve by incorporating them into *Lograire*.

Cargo Cults are Messianic, mystical, eschatological movements. They originated in New Guinea and Melanesia around the end of the nineteenth century and were still in existence up until the early nineteen-fifties, with sporadic appearances as late as 1965.²

Strictly speaking cargo cults are means by which primitives and underprivileged people believe they can obtain manufactured goods

by an appeal to supernatural powers—ancestors, spirits, etc. Through the coming of the missionaries and political administrators in the nineteenth century up until the return of the whiteman after the defeat of Japan in the second world war, natives had seen how cargo had arrived for the whiteman by sea and, ultimately, with the coming of the Americans after the war, by air.

The natives desire for cargo is not solely because they desire material things. They desire it because it will establish them as equal to the white man and give them an identity as respectable as his. They also desire it because they have become increasingly dependent on western goods so that, as old skills have been lost, western goods have changed from a luxury to a necessity—a process continually taking place in western culture. Cargo shows, or is seen as a proof of, their own fundamental worth.

The cults teach that the white man has a special means of communication with God, and that, if the native learns this special secret, he too will be able to share in these blessings. They do not have cargo as a result of some wrong-doing on their part—in this section it is attributed to Ham's sin of seeing his father, Noah, naked. So the story of Noah is incorporated by the natives into their own myth-dream as a means of explaining the apparent superiority of the whiteman and their own lack of cargo. Cargoism is a means for the native to assert their sense of personal worth—these stories contain a demand for dignity. *Lograire* presents a panorama of human exploitation – western, first world culture, encountering other cultures and destroying their myth-dreams – Mayan Indians, Native Americans or, in this case, Cargo Cults.

The natives had observed the way white men sign and stamp papers. As a result of this ritual, boats or planes arrived carrying the goods which affirmed them as the superior race, including their laws, their administration, their religion and the guns they used to enforce their position. Another occurrence was based on the natives observations of how the white men decorated their homes with vases of flowers, and they copied this in the hope of receiving Cargo.³ Cargo gave the white man status in the eyes of the natives. But such myths continue in our own culture today—people become rich through dealing in stocks and shares and gambling on the stock market or marking the right numbers on a lottery ticket. Electronic

commerce enables those who understand the technology, who speak the “hyper text mark-up language” to be the new entrepreneurs.

Besides illustrating an historical aspect of human exploitation Merton also uses the Cargo Cults as yet one more way of parodying the exploitative nature of western culture, especially modern advertising. For the natives, the desire for access to the whiteman's sources for Cargo symbolised what they felt was essential to the greater fulfillment of their life, yet was missing. So Merton can ask: “Is there really much difference, though, between kago and the coming of the good life promised in our fabulous modern consumer advertising?” (*Love and Living*, 83) Advertising projects images of a better life, of endless possessions and portrays a Western myth-dream of what is needed for happiness. Goods that were once satisfactory are “suddenly discovered to be inadequate, obsolete” even though they still function. A need to be on the information superhighway, to be information rich not poor. Yet there is a striking image from Bill Clinton's recent visit to India of Indian villagers stressing their need to be connected to the internet, whilst still not having a proper connection to a fresh water supply.

Merton concluded his essay on ‘Cargo Cults of the South Pacific’ by suggesting that the native and the white man need each other “to cooperate in the common enterprise of building a world adequate for the historical maturity of man.” For this to be possible we first have to be in touch with our inner self and understand the myth-dreams that operate in our own life and culture.⁴ When we are aware of these myth-dreams we will be able to recognise the myth-dreams of others. We will be able to avoid our myth-dreams turning into the nightmares of violence, war and racism, instead overcoming disunity and creating real relationships and true community with respect and tolerance for the stranger.

Notes and References

The literature Merton was studying is still essential reading for anthropology students today.

1. The Prophet Malik Movement on New Hanover Island occurred in 1964-5. Malik prophesied that Lyndon Johnson would arrive aboard the Queen Mary,

laden with cargo for the islanders. When this did not happen some Australian police posts on the island were attacked to punish them for "stealing the cargo."

2. When the natives began to copy this practice the whiteman became nervous and forbade it.

3. The belief that dignity has something to do with possessions, cargo, is ultimately a white myth.

Bibliography

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