

The Trick, the Cult and the Religion: The Ecological Context

Robert J. Gregory¹, Janet E. Gregory², and John G. Peck³

1. School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

E-mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

2. College of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

E-mail: J.E.Gregory@massey.ac.nz

3. North Carolina State University, Toad Hall, Garner, NC 27529-0245, USA

E-mail: jgpeck@juno.com

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THE TRICK

ABSTRACT Those who observe or study cults often focus solely on the leadership and followers of leaders, and the effects both on the minds of followers and the larger society. A more productive way to view cults is to study and analyze the context and ecological arrangements that precede, accompany, or follow the appearance of cults. Tanna, Vanuatu with the John Frum cargo cult provides a case example.

In the late 1930's a man played some tricks on his relatives, neighbours, and friends. Soon, he took on the role of a cult leader. The cult quickly grew to become a mini-social movement that changed the political, economic, and social structure of the people in his society (Gregory et al., 1983). Eventually, in 1953, the British colonial powers-that-be recognized the John Frum Cargo Cult as a religious movement of the indigenous people on Tanna, Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides). The progression of a trick to a cult to a social movement to a religion depended upon the social and ecological context prevalent on the island and the political responses from authorities. This article describes the rise and growth of the John Frum Cargo Cult on Tanna in Vanuatu.

The rich ecological context of Tanna and the Tannese society must be considered in any description and analysis of the John Frum cult. These contextual factors include the economic impact of Western interventions, the Presbyterian inspired rule of Tanna law, the poor sanitary and health conditions, the missionary enhanced changes in marriage and kinship relations, the stamping out of traditional customs, and even the use of the traditional drug, kava (Gregory et al., 1981; Gregory, 1993). The loss of social traditions in a time of rapid introduced change was crucial to the generation of a cult.

Toward the end of the 1930's a shadowy and mysterious man joined at evening meetings of other men in South Tanna, to preach, teach, and proclaim those actions which he deemed propitious for the people in the society to live well. The figure kept his actual identity hidden, reportedly by wearing a shroud, but he became widely known by acting strangely and making statements advocating a return to customary ways. Although his actual identity can probably never be ascertained for certain, evidence collected during field work indicates that a Tannese man named Jack Kahu may have been the trickster, the man who became the mysterious John Frum. Kahu had worked in Port Vila for the British government as a policeman, and returned to South Tanna shortly before the advent of John Frum (Gregory and Gregory, 1984).

At evening meetings, John Frum, as the unknown person began to be called, made pronouncements about returning to custom, about the importance of drinking kava, a drug made from Piper Methysticum, (Forest) roots, and about a host of other life-style changes that the indigenous people could make by themselves.

The men attending these evening meetings drank kava, and discussed the problems endemic to their society. The kava ritual includes communal eating of food after imbibing the drug. Each participant usually brings items of food which are then shared. John Frum reportedly requested and urged others to produce chickens, then added other foods in his request, and then even goat meat. Soon, the British District Agent was notified that some goats were missing. The people who attended the meetings at which John talked apparently used a neighbour's goats, and this led to the speedy involvement of the British

government. The government agent, Mr. Nicol, questioned the local people, but could not determine exactly what was taking place. Soon, the British police arrested several men, charged them with various offences, then took them to Port Vila on Efate Island, and put them in prison. These men languished there, dreaming and prophesizing that John Frum would send them a sign.

The trick turned into a tall blown cult with the arrival of a sign, for in 1941 about 100,000 American soldiers arrived on Efate. The imprisoned men were freed, given roles in helping build bases, and were paid for their work. Other Tannese people were bought up and joined them in building bases. One of the most important signs was that the Americans interacted with far less of a "colour bar" than the British.

THE CULT

From 1941 to 1953, some of the Tannese circulated stories about John Frum, and sought to return to their traditional culture, the Kastom John Frum movement (Guiart, 1952). The Kastom people avoided the Presbyterian inspired "Tanna law" era, of the 1920's and 1930's to the best of their abilities. Tanna law meant that people who engaged in custom dances, used face paints, arranged traditional marriages, drank kava, or practised stone magic, were punished and vilified. In place of tradition, the Tannese were encouraged to attend the Presbyterian Church, be loyal to the Presbyterian ministers sent out from Scotland, use western, handed down clothing, and believe in Christianity.

In another Tannese location, the Sulphur Bay people, a splinter group, formed another variant of the cult. These people had so little knowledge of their traditions, that the people could not reconstruct their culture. Instead they developed a bastardized version using some part of tradition and a "cargo inspired" set of rituals. A red cross served as one totem, as did carved wooden figures of pilots and airplanes. Young men marched with bamboo "guns" under the direction and leadership of elders who had experienced the American military culture. An annual march and celebration in mid-February focused on the hoped for return of John Frum, to the acute dis-

may of the British and French colonial rulers. Guitar music and Friday night dances cemented relationships, and drew the members of a number of villages together. The nearby active volcano, Yasur, served as the repository of sacred mysteries, and tourists freely paid to visit (Muller, 1974).

The cult leaders were held in prison in Port Vila, some for up to 17 years. The people prepared for their return, as well as for the return of the now mystical John Frum. The Tannese thought that, based on the events of World War II, the Americans were the key, although a visit by a British member of the royal family created a potential newcomer in mystical cult leadership.

RELIGION

In 1953, the British decided that they wanted a better relationship than the almost constant confrontation they were experiencing. As a strategy, they promoted John Frum as a religion. Given this new paradigm shift, the Sulphur Bay people appeared to accept a more religious interpretation of the former cult. The marching became symbolic, as did the mysterious red crosses, carved figures or icons, and Friday night dances. The leaders returned to Tanna from Port Vila. Older men, now, they were heroes of a sort, but also had lost some of the fire of their earlier years. Followers slowly became less keen on pursuing John Frum, and though interest remains, most Tannese realize full well that there is no relationship between cargo and cult.

The Kastom John Frum people did not fall back to religious framework, as compared with the Sulphur Bay people. In this lies the need to expand this story to examine context.

ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Cults begin when tricksters or unusual happenings are acknowledged, and then, if and when the perpetrators are persecuted, as by an authority figure or group. Until persecution occurs, the aberrant behaviour inherent in tricks is simply behaviour that differs from that acceptable to the majority of people.

When a community or political entity reacts negatively to deviant behaviour by a small but

determined group, this creates or can create, a cult - an institutionalized deviant behaviour in which a few fringe or marginal people are involved (Gregory, 1999). Cults begin during times of change, particularly economically hard times, or when future hopes are lost or are in a state of decline. On Tanna, the depression of the 1930's affected copra prices, and the economy was dismal though the middle and late 1930's. The Dravidian Iroquois kinship system was in disarray, for the missionaries blocked traditional cross-cousin marriages, as dictated by headmen of villages. The complex spiritual framework, including beliefs in ancestor worship, was denied by missionaries. The politics of confrontation prompted the Tannese to seek their own political system (Gregory and Gregory, 1984).

The context for the conversion of a cult to a religion appears to depend upon longevity, and scale, and most of all, a tolerant attitude by the powers-that-be. On Tanna, the British change from active confrontation to tolerance in 1953 led to a more placid situation where the fire and brimstone quality of the movement retreated. Time, plus the involvement of more people, gradually cooled the confrontation and helped institutionalize the cult. The death of the original leaders and a changing social and economic climate, enabled the rest of the cult members to broaden their goals and actions, but eventually lose strength.

Looking beyond the descriptive facts of a cult to observe the larger social patterns, the broad

ecological context, facilitates understanding of the cult and creative or transformative forces, that is, the development of revitalization movements (Wallace, 1956). Too often the powers that be ignore the context of cults and focus their attention solely on deviance and cult leadership. Media similarly find reporting on superficial aspects simpler. Ignoring the context then appears to become the rule. This appears to be the situation in the United States with regard to a reporting on a number of recent cults. Given the likelihood of cult emergence during and around the time of Millennium, better understanding of cult formation and behaviour is essential.

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