

Japanese ethnographers of the Pacific: beyond the deconstruction of cargo cults

Rodolfo Maggio

Abstract

In the last few decades, numerous Japanese ethnographers have been conducting research in the Solomon Islands. That resulted in a growing corpus of anthropological literature touching on various themes. The historical role that Japan has played in the Pacific, as well as its geographical proximity to the area, gave Japanese anthropologists a vantage point in terms of access, and a different perspective on these issues. The geo-historical advantage combines with the availability of ethnographic works produced by non-Japanese scholars, however the latter remain largely unable to access anthropological literature only available in Japanese. This not only limits the international circulation of ethnographies produced by Japanese anthropologists, but also the possibility of engaging with their different perspectives. This paper contributes to making the work of Japanese anthropologists more easily accessible to non-Japanese scholars, thereby widening its circulation. More specifically, this paper argues that the perspectives of recent Japanese ethnographies of the Pacific open up novel research trajectories and possibilities for non-Japanese scholars of cargo cults. The post-colonial debate developed differently in Japanese and Anglophone anthropology, which resulted in a rather different approach to the study of cargo cults. This paper thus connects these recent studies and suggests future possibilities emerging from the engagement with these different perspectives.

Keywords: Cargo cults, pacific, critical theory, deconstructivism, Japan

Introduction

In 2019, thanks to the generous support of the Japanese Society for the Advancement of Science, I had the opportunity to extend my study of the anthropology of the Pacific with ethnographies that never feature in the course material of an anthropology student in the West: Japanese ethnographies of the Pacific. Given my past ethnographic research in Solomon Islands, I began by focusing on the works published by Japanese ethnographers about this archipelago. I soon developed the impression that the history of Japanese research in Solomon Islands was a dynamic process of advancement, one that happened as a succession of contractions and expansions, isolated efforts, and researches that sometimes grew into collaborative enterprises.

A geographic and thematic concentration begins to appear in the 2000s with the research group led by Ohtsuka Ryutaro, Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Tokyo. From 1999 to 2002 Ohtsuka coordinated a large research project

entitled "Environmental Conservation in Asia" which also included collaborative research in Solomon Islands. Numerous Japanese anthropologists collaborated in this project and that is reflected in the exponential increase in publications (Ishimori 2007; Furusawa 2009; Furusawa 2016; Furusawa and Ohtsuka 2009; Midorikawa et al. 2003; Nakazawa and Ishii 2000; and others). However, despite the anthropological character, these researches tended to be more related to human ecology than anthropology strictly speaking. Unsurprisingly, a considerable proportion of the original research group became scholars of human ecology. A notable exception is Ishimori Daichi, who conducted anthropological research in the Christian Fellowship Church of the Western province and published the resulting ethnography (2011).

It is mostly because of this geographic focus and anthropological approach that I recently looked at Ishimori's publications to see if it was possible to use them in novel directions, that is, in "mainstream" anthropology. By "mainstream", I mean essentially the English-speaking, Anglo-American tradition, a network of scholars who would not notice the absence of Japanese ethnographies from the bibliographic references of a peer-reviewed article. I discussed the idea that Japanese ethnographies of the Pacific provide a different perspective to "mainstream" anthropology in an article that will soon be published on the *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*. I suggested that Japanese ethnographers of the Pacific relate with the colonial and post-colonial critique in a different way from most Western scholars. As an example of that, I presented the work of Yoshioka Masanori, particularly in relation to the discussion of the concept of *kastom* and its translation into non-indigenous terms. Yoshioka's anti-postcolonial work (2005) stimulated the methodological and theoretical orientation of current Japanese anthropologists of the Pacific, including the above mentioned Ishimori. They are equally influenced by the specificities of the Japanese post-colonial debate and are coming up with their own individual perspectives. In this article, I argue that mainstream anthropologists have much to gain from the study of these perspectives.

Another example of the benefits mainstream anthropology can get from the work of Japanese ethnographers emerges, in this case, from the works that suggest a re-discussion of cargo cults in Melanesia, indeed a long-lasting topic in anthropology of the Pacific. One of the scholars I looked at is indeed Ishimori. The debate around the "cargoist" features of the CFC brought Ishimori to examine the vast literature on Melanesian cargo cults and to take position in the debate. In his book "*Ikeru kami no sōzō-ryoku — Soromon shotō kurisuchan ferōshippu kyōkai no minzoku-shi*" (literally, *The creativity of the living God: Ethnography of the Solomon Islands Christian Fellowship Church*) he writes:

"based on a series of criticisms, it is possible to explore new perspectives by re-examining the cases collected during fieldwork. In the process, it is important to start rethinking the conventional arguments, in particular by taking the logic and concepts

inherent in each local society (and the phenomena and activities to be studied). That should also lead to re-considering them, rather than deconstructing all the views of existing concepts and the things that anthropology has built". (Ishimori 2011, pp. 358)

Although my translation from the Japanese text is far from perfect, it manifests a clear indication of the research programme: moving beyond deconstructionism. The discomfort with the conceptual fragility of what is left to be thought after the passage of deconstruction is all the more evident if considering that Ishimori has been discussing a post-colonial debate about cargo cults that happened mostly in English, that is, the language spoken by those who first labelled cargo cult as such and then spent the subsequent decades feeling guilty about that. As Buck wrote:

"Most of the discourse on "cargo cults" has been produced by people involved directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, with the colonial administration of Papua New Guinea. They were involved in the creation of power relationships between the colonized and those who controlled them, as Lt. Governor MacGregor categorically states, "for their own ends." (Buck 1988: 158)

Having no linear descent or affinity relations with the anthropologists who trained in the Anglo-American tradition, Ishimori is, like Yoshioka, in a position from which it is easier to see the limits of this tradition of studies. In particular, it is easier for him to feel dissatisfied by the fact that deconstructionism has left nothing but the ruins of the study of cargo cults. *The contemplation of the ruins*, as I have been calling it for a while, is not enough for these scholars. In order to understand why, it is necessary to provide a very brief recapitulation of, if possible, of the "the enormous literature on "cargo cult" (Dalton 2009) and the history of their anthropological interpretations.

Western Ethnographies of Cargo Cults

Labels, reports and explanations

The history of how cargo cults have been understood by the West must be written from the perspective of those who first labelled the relevant phenomena as such, rather than starting from the first appearances of the phenomenon itself. That is because cargo cults are first and foremost a category of Western thought and, secondarily, a phenomenon. The term had presumably become common currency

among the expat community and the Allies before the end of the Pacific War. However the expression “Cargo Cult” was first printed in 1945, on an issue of the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, a magazine of colonial news founded in the 1930 in Sydney, Australia. The “old Territories resident” Norris Mervyn Bird wrote an article about his worries that the native people of New Guinea might be encouraged to unrest by a series of external influences, especially the “religious teaching of equality, and its resulting sense of injustice” (Bird 1945: 69). Such a sense of injustice would, more specifically, emerge from the conviction that the White Men had found a way to prevent the ancestor’s large carrier ships and airplanes filled with Western good from reaching the natives.

The term was applied also to an earlier set of phenomena that had gone under the label of “Vailala Madness”, from the name of the location where they were first observed between 1919 and 1922 by the then Government Anthropologist for the Australian Territory of Papua, F. E. Williams. These included the apparent imitation of behaviours seen as typically Western, such as tea parties in European fashion, drilling the rank and file as if the participants were impersonating soldiers, marching with military emblems painted on the body, the construction of wooden radios with carved headphones (White, 1965), mock airports, and airstrips, and a series of other phenomena such as glossolalia, the abandonment of traditional rituals, and the belief that ancestors would soon return on the said ships (sometimes imagined as Ghost Steamers) with the long awaited stocks of tinned foods, tools, and other ‘cargoes’ (Burrige, 1969).

The term was imported into anthropology by Ian Hogbin and Lucy Mair at the end of 1940s and beginning of the ‘50s, presumably because it could be applied comparatively throughout Melanesia much better than idiosyncratic expressions such as “Vailala Madness”, which was associated to a specific place in the Papuan Gulf (not to speak of the ethics of qualifying the phenomena as mental disease). However, cases such as the “Vailala Madness” were associated to and/or interconnected with a vast array of phenomena that the cargo cult label was never really intended, nor capable, to embrace. Rather, it was a loose term applied in an even looser way. It was used to indicate phenomena that were very diverse from each other, and even applied retroactively to rebrand phenomena that had been observed in the 1830s and originally defined as Pacific social movements (Barnard and Spencer 2009; Read 1958). Perhaps because of that, anthropologists started to use the terms beyond Melanesia too. Phenomena then included movements that variously articulated aspirations for Western goods, requests for otherworldly support, imitative practices replicating supposedly European behaviours, and various expressions of charismatic renewal. By the end of the ‘60s there was a long bibliography of publications in which the term had been applied and Peter Worsley, in his famous 1957 comparative compilation *The Trumpet Shall Sound* included as many as 60 case studies only from

the South Pacific. With this sort of comparisons came also the first serious theories about what cargo cults were supposed to mean.

Worsley himself proposed that the movements were in fact an act of rebellion against the influence of the West, expression of a sort of class consciousness that marked the shift from millenarian to secular ideas and practices (Worsley 1957, 1968). Before Worsley, Lucy Mair had suggested that the motivation behind the cargoistic behaviours was simply the desire for the “immensely higher material standards” (1948: 67) of the colonists. In other words, cargo cults were nothing but sub-optimal understandings of the procedures necessary to obtain the desired goods. It was therefore just a matter of time and education before Melanesians could figure out exactly how to get hold of what they wanted. This idea has stood the test of time despite numerous other theories have been proposed. Buck, for example, 40 years later wrote: “Cargo thinking was a generally held Papua New Guinean belief, simultaneously religious and secular, that Europeans somehow held and refused to share the key giving access to the kinds of goods unloaded from ships and airplanes. Given the colonial structure of Papua New Guinea it is hard to deny the symbolic validity of this analysis” (Buck 1988:159). However, as suggested by the plethora of competing theories, this explanation was, and still is, generally considered simplistic and insufficient to account for the diversity of phenomena that the cargo cult label brings together. Therefore, during what Lindstrom called “the cargo cult research’s golden age” (roughly the 1950s and 60s) a much wider array of theories were developed, including theories that explain cargo cults in terms of politics (Guiart 1951, Lanternari 1963; Keesing 1978, 1989), morality (Burrige 1960; Lawrence, 1964), and history (Harding 1967). However, these mostly had the merit of complicating rather than making the explanation of cargo cult as clear as possible.

Anthropological complications

One of the complications relates with the tendency to refuse far reaching, all explanatory theories. This tendency dates back to the particularism of Franz Boas and, in the case of cargo cults, there has been a proclivity to first promote and then oppose the search for an overarching explanation. First, as Buck wrote, “Cargo-cult discourse, like Said’s Orientalism, has provided a set of filters which force the user to see a wide variety of phenomena in an identical light” (1988: 158), and then those very filters were identified and rejected, as much as possible, in the name of cultural diversity. If a theory can be applied to all people who display a certain behaviour, regardless of culture, then what is the role of these people’s cultures? And consequently, what is the role of cultural anthropologists? Many tried to illustrate how there was something specifically Melanesian about cargo cults that could not be accounted for by general theories. Lawrence, for example, insisted that cargo cults

displayed typically Melanesian cultural elements along with historically specific reactions to the recent interference of foreigners with their lives (1964). Harding suggested that the Melanesian psyche was inherently attracted to foreign goods, a sort of cargo psychology (Harding 1967). The indigenous behaviours were not, in other words, a simple attempt to come to grips with a foreign technology with the means available. Rather, it was the expression of a culturally and historically specific way of relating to materiality (see also Otto 2009; Wallace 1956).

Other anthropologists were more concerned with the moral conditions of the indigenous Melanesians. For them, cargo cults were not a reaction to a condition of material imbalance but rather a way to restore a broken moral equilibrium (Burridge 1960, Lawrence, 1964). Melanesians had supposedly lost their dignity when confronted with the technological superiority of the White Man and the racism that came with it. That had created a sense of defeat and made them unable to find value in their overall condition as humans. In order to regain what they had lost, they needed a collective action aimed at creating the new Melanesian man in a new Melanesian society. The pursuit of cargoes, therefore, was only a surface indicator of a much deeper, existential struggle: the struggle for a new moral order in which Melanesians were not treated as animals, children, or anything less than a human by the foreigners. The newfound moral condition was further interpreted as the prototype of a specifically Melanesian way of creating emancipatory political movements. The Marxist influence on these theories was obvious: cargo cults were sort of non-Western ways for oppressed Melanesian groups to transition from a lack of class consciousness to the perception of themselves as a class.

In both interpretive tendencies there is perhaps some measure of truth, as there is in other theories that emphasise other aspects, such as the necessity of divine interaction to ensure material prosperity, a typically Melanesian episodic understanding of history in which cataclysmic changes are responsible for new eras (McDowell 1988), and the idea that cargo cult leaders were nothing but the consequence of a mixing between the traditional role of Melanesian big men and the perception of new possibilities of material acquisitions. The problem with these theories is still that they can at best explain isolated case studies while deliberately leaving out others. That is not necessarily a problem with the theories in themselves, but rather with the original tendency to include under the label of cargo cult an array of phenomena so wide that no theory could ever embrace meaningfully.

The realization of the limited reach of the available theories corresponded with three major phenomena, all taking place in the 1970s: the achievement of national independence in Melanesian states, the rapid decrease of phenomena that anthropologists categorized as cargo cults, and the growing impression that, by using that term, they had contributed to doing something terribly wrong. Starting from this moment, the theoretical efforts of anthropologists was no longer aimed at the

construction of solid theories, but rather at the deconstruction of the structures of power that had made those very efforts originally possible.

Deconstructions

The necessity to deconstruct cargo cults emerged from a variety of urges felt by anthropologists operating at the time when Melanesian States were becoming independent. One was perhaps the need to dissociate themselves from the cultural system that had produced both the subjugation of the Melanesian people until then as well as the words necessary to think and, thus, maintain that subjugation. In other words, the categorization process was seen as part of the repressive project of colonialism, a sort of “epistemic violence” (Spivak 2010) that hit deeper than the economic and political level. Rejecting the category of cargo cult was, therefore, not a result of the scientific recognition of the unsuitability of the concept, but rather a way to demonstrate that, despite white, foreigner and Anglophone, these anthropologists were not colonialists (Fuller 2019: 65).

A more scientific way to get rid of the term came from the recognition, mentioned above, that phenomena that came under the label of cargo cult had in fact little in common. Its inadequacy, however, did not come only from the recognition of the multiplicity of the phenomena unduly categorized as cargo cults, but also from the tendency, increasingly common after the 1970s, to consider even single phenomena as multiplicities in themselves. A late expression of this tendency in relation to cargo cults can be found in the following quote:

“The perception that modern material culture derives from a familiar rather than an alien world helped explain why many Melanesians developed rituals to elicit modern materials from traditional sources. This interpretive frame has, however, been questioned for essentializing ‘cargo cults’ and envisaging Melanesian cosmologies as ‘cargo cults writ large.’ It is objected that relating ‘cargo cults’ to existing cosmologies *downplays the myriad influences* and creative responses embodied in these highly syncretic beliefs, movements and practices, most particularly those associated with colonization (*e.g.* Hermann 1992; Lindstrom 1993: 41-72). (Cf. Blythe and Fairhead 2017:21. The italics is added by the author).

In another recent contribution to this debate, Dalton seem to recognize the origin of this tendency in particularism: “If “cargo cults” are anything they are “total” phenomena, simultaneously economic, religious, historical, social, aesthetic, moral, political, et cetera, and not reducible to any one of them (Mauss 1967 [1925]).” (Dalton 2009). It follows that the act of reducing this multiplicity to a definition amounted necessarily to a simplification that did not take into consideration the

fluctuations through time, the diversity of individual perspectives, and the modifications operated by the observer on the subjects of study. In other words, the impossibility to use the term cargo cult was not simply a result of changing political relations, but also of a different way of perceiving science and, above all, anthropology as a science.

This turn in the literature about cargo cults is, arguably, the result of a more general “inward” turn in anthropology taking place in conjunction with the publication of *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Clifford, Marcus, and Fischer shifted the anthropological attention away from the “indigenous point of view” and proposed a general critique of the discipline as exoticist and essentialist. Rather than attempting to offer scientific, as much as possible, representations of indigenous realities, anthropologists were supposed to expose the constructions of these supposedly pseudo-scientific discourses by pointing at the historical and political conditions that made them possible.

The postmodern character of this turn was very influential and is still recognizable in widely cited publications such as *Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of Desire from Melanesia and Beyond*, (Lindstrom 1993). Lindstrom suggests that the concept of “cargoism” should not be used to understand how Melanesians saw the West, but the other way around. As he later wrote: “Cargo cults are Melanesian, but cargo cult accounts belong to us” (Lindstrom 2004: 17). Conceptualized as such, they are inextricably intertwined with colonialism and the perception of Melanesians as irrational primitives to be controlled by means of the superior Western, scientific mentality. In other words, the term cargo cult is not less charged than “Vailala madness” and the other terms that have been used to pathologize Melanesians as mentally disturbed or non intelligent at best (see Leavitt 2004: 170; Hermann 1992; Otto 2004: 210). Furthermore, Lindstrom’s postmodern critique blames early observers, commentators and scholars for “othering” cargo cults by theorizing them as expressions of Melanesian cultures (Lindstrom 1993: 63-64). Such move, however, reveals a tendency in these very observers to attribute to others features that they are unable to recognize in themselves, especially the materialist desire. The conclusion that cargo cults do not exist outside the minds of the Europeans is thus reached, leaving nothing more to be deconstructed.

However, neither the political nor the scientific condition of anthropologists seem to have improved much with these moves, if it at all. From a political point of view, it is embarrassing to note that originally Western phenomena that had been imported in the Pacific (like Development Projects, Pentecostal or otherwise Charismatic Christianity) have not been categorised as cargo cults despite several elements of them (including the insistence on material prosperity, charismatic leadership, and nativism) could easily be subjected to the same kind of analyses that anthropologists developed when they categorized as cargo cults behaviours that originated in the Pacific. There might be some measure of political apology in the

recognition that “Cargo-cult discourse in European ideology rationalized the exploitative relationship between Papua New Guineans and Europeans as natural. Hence, the role of labor relations was justified and mystified” (Buck 1989: 164). However, recognizing the relationship between power and knowledge¹ is no less tautological than recognizing the relation between structure and function.²

From a scientific point of view, postmodern deconstruction has at best provided a much needed lesson of theoretical humility (Eriksen 2006) but has not contributed to the explanation of cargo cults, except for the rather solipsistic argument that it is just an invention of the West. Eventually, the critical, perhaps overly critical, attitude towards unsuitable definitions of cargo cults resulted in the deconstruction of the concept into parts without a tenable relation with each other: cargo cults, after the deconstructivist efforts, only exist in the minds of the anthropologists. Although there are some important points to be kept into consideration from the epistemic efforts of the deconstructivists, the ultimate result is, definitely, not a clearer understanding of the phenomena, but rather a tendency “to dissolve the object of study into the ether of postmodern reflexivity” (Harkin 2004: xvi). Like Ishimori, I recognize that this is not enough, and call for a re-examination of the ethnographic compendiums of case studies paired with a competent usage of these theoretical lessons. That sounds more interesting than the contemplation of the only thing left where cargo cults no longer “exist as an identifiable object of study” (Jebens 2004a: 2), that is, the ruins left behind after the passage of deconstruction.

Towards an intercultural theory of cargo cults

Despite the dismal condition of the study of cargo cults after the passage of deconstruction, scholars are interested in keeping the discussion alive. As Tabani wrote, “[h]owever vague and imperfect the notion of cargo cult is, our longstanding familiarity with it should at least encourage us to return to the Melanesian field and to ethnographic facts”. He implied that our objective should be to “break with its colonial connotations, as well as with its postmodern Western legacy” (Tabani 2018). If we could really do as he writes, the study of cargo cults would be considered as an avenue into “something deeper in our human self-understanding” (Fuller 2019: 60).

¹ As Buck wrote: “Europeans may have encouraged cargo thinking even while decrying it, in much the way that Foucault’s France created juvenile delinquents while claiming to reform them” (Buck 1989: 166).

² In this respect, it is relevant to quote Dalton: “Most sympathetic accounts point out that they function as innovative collective political or economic activities which sometimes succeed in achieving their purposes; even where they fail to significantly change political or economic circumstances, they always succeed at organizing people socially, thus serving their own tautological self-fulfilment as “social movements” (Dalton 2018).

Hence, in this article I am by no means suggesting that there might be something specifically Japanese about the *urges* to reform, or restart, the study of cargo cults. What I am suggesting, rather, is that Japanese anthropologists might be in a better position to promote the kind of discussion that might take us in the new directions.

Ishimori's dissatisfaction with the postmodern, deconstructionist conclusions of the recent anthropological studies of cargo cults is, indeed, not isolated. Jebens, for example, noted that admitting that the phenomena that went under the label of cargo cult are too "heterogeneous, uncertain, and confusing" should not suggest that the phenomena in themselves are not real. There have been recent attempts at re-igniting the study of cargo cults starting from the re-analysis of materials collected during the "first contact" periods or situations (Blythe et al 2017). My take on the plurality of these approaches is that they are to be reconciled into a practical theory, one that makes it easier for us to operate in the world. The problem with such a theory is that it is abstracted from specific socio-cultural contexts and historical processes and, as such, it cannot be discussed in the same way everywhere at every time. In particular, a theory of cargo cults that seeks to embrace the diversity of the phenomena in themselves is much more difficult to discuss in the Anglo-American anthropological tradition than it is in the Japanese counterpart. The reason, as I tried to illustrate in my recent article (Maggio *forthcoming*), is that the colonial past weighs much less and in a profoundly different way on the epigones of those respective anthropological traditions.

Looking at Western anthropology like a Japanese ethnographer

For a scholar trained in the Anglo-American anthropological tradition it is much more difficult to self-legitimise an intellectual enterprise aimed at reconciling the scattered pieces of ethnographic data left around after the passage of deconstructionism. Such an aim is seen as in contrast with the above mentioned search for heterogeneity. Searching for a unifying mechanism is regarded as no less compromising than denying the principles of political pluralism. As a fundamental value in the anti-colonial discourse, political pluralism has been imported into the anthropological discourse as if it corresponded to a scientific method. That was not necessarily wrong *per se* (no science is morally neutral), however we are now in a position from which it is possible to evaluate the merits of such a move. The anthropologists who seem to find more demerits are not a few. For example, Dalton wrote:

"If "cargo cult" is indeed us looking at others looking at us, being objective by keeping ourselves out of the picture is an interminable intellectual task, which accounts for why "cargo cult" never goes away and the discourse about it has such an unsettled, inconclusive quality." (Dalton 2018: 35).

However, it might be difficult for those who only operate in the English-speaking anthropological community to challenge the intellectual assumptions in which they were trained, such as the search for heterogeneity. Even though it is just a matter of switching the emphasis from seeing phenomena as more different than similar to more similar than different, it is an extremely difficult passage. The opposite move took place so recently and in relation to political debates about issues so contentious (such as race, class, freedom and oppression) that it is reasonable to expect sentient human beings not to feel comfortable in making such a transition. As Fuller wrote: “Cargo cults are among the more embarrassing phenomena that anthropologists have had to study, not only because of their inherently odd character but also the unfavourable light in which they put the members of a native society vis-à-vis their foreign interlopers” (2019: 60). Confronted with the embarrassment, virtue signaling is a predictable response, i.e. “anthropology is reduced to a set of rhetorical moves designed to demonstrate that the anthropologist had not made any significant errors or enemies among the natives” (65).

The reason why Japanese ethnographers might be in a better position to transcend heterogeneity is not only that Japan had a shorter, smaller, and suddenly interrupted version of colonialism. Another reason is that Japan itself had become a colony of the United States after the war, a condition that some argue is still in place to some extent, despite being officially presented as a partnership. Such condition of subjugation made Japanese, anthropologists and not, well aware of the kind of thought mechanisms through which the identity of colonized folks are processed. For the purpose of the present argument, I will only mention the most relevant: imitation.

Japanese have always been seen as imitators, and not without reason. The most obvious elements introduced in the culture from abroad is the Kanji system, imported from China, Zen Buddhism originated in India, and an innumerable small but relevant examples from Western cultures, ranging from art, to business, to technology. In fact, some argued that the reason for the exceptional economic growth experienced in post-war Japan is at least partly attributable to the unparalleled Japanese “copycat” culture (see Stanlaw 2004: 174). However, those who see the imitation process as unidirectional can only do so as long as they deliberately omit to mention how cultural elements travel in multiple directions. Regarding Zen Buddhism, for example, Ohnuki-Tierney notes that its contemporary Japanese version is in fact one that Japanese are re-importing from the West after the West imported it from Japanese intellectuals of the Meiji era who... were attempting to self-orientalise. (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990: 204). That is to say, on the one hand, that there is no such a thing as a copycat culture, for cultural phenomena are, by definition, ideas and practices that travel through time and space without any natural sense of ownership. On the other, it means that Japanese people are entirely capable of receiving the label of copycats, recognize their own ability to import, as well as their own capacity to

appropriate foreign cultural elements in a recognizable Japanese way, as much as they are used to recognize the thought processes, and the fallacies, of those who call them, and others, a mere “copycat culture”.

Consequently, they do not need to do as much self-reflection as anthropologists trained in the Anglo-American tradition in order to understand that categorizing an indigenous group as mere copiers of Western technology might be brutal but not devoid of some measure of truth. They have been, and still are, subjected to the same treatment and for that reason it is much easier for them to talk about *copying* as an obvious component in the cultural encounter. Scholars trained in the Anglo-American tradition have a much harder time in doing the same thing, even though it might be a perfectly reasonable way to resume the study of cargo cults.

Reflecting on our tendency to look at others as copiers

Studying the history of interpretations of cargo cults suggests that both, i.e. the cargo cults and the interpretations, can be understood as a result of a commonality, already identified by Theodore Schwartz (1976), between Melanesians and Westerners: the desire and ostentation of wealth. I think this tendency is connected to our inability to admit how that desire has animated and still animates ourselves. The fact that there is a debate about whether it is appropriate or not to call Christianity a cult cargo (Segato 1995) is the clearest indication that this could be the case. It is a moral as much as political problem that prevents us from calling things with their names. Postmodernism, particularly its neo-marxist expression, prevents us from taking this step because we fear that any label and corresponding definition will necessarily be the product of unequal power relations. Japanese ethnographies of the Pacific are much less prone to getting stuck into this kind of problems. In extreme synthesis, what I extracted from the study of the ethnographies of the Pacific produced by the Japanese is not just ethnographic material nor theoretical reflection, but rather a deep-felt awareness that the West has treated both Melanesians and Japanese as copiers under conditions of colonial subjugations, thereby creating an unconscious association between such conception and such condition.

However, the tendency to copy from each other is a human trait that we should be more comfortable with, just like the Japanese do when they admit (sometimes cheek-in-tongue) that so much of what they are and do originates elsewhere. Moving towards the realization of a material desire by means of successive sub-optimal attempts should not be seen with an attitude of superiority, but rather with the necessary openness to understand copying as a fundamental trait of human nature. That means we can, as anthropologists, serenely return to the positions of the past without ignoring the lessons of theoretical humility learned over the last decades.

Cargo cults are a culturally specific way to approach the issue of prosperity imbalance in order to equilibrate that which appears as an unnecessary disparity between humans who, by sharing common nature, should also be equally entitled to equal prosperity. Hence, what has gone under the label of “cargoism” is a very rational approach to learning through action. The technology brought by the Westerners was of such complexity that Melanesians were confronted with the following choices: ignore it; or, approach it and then learn whatever the Westerners want to teach you; or, try to learn it by yourself. Given the competitive rather than cooperative interests cherished by both Melanesians and colonists, it was unlikely that the former could learn much from the latter, who more often than not exploited the knowledge and power imbalance at their own advantage (Buck 1989: 163-65), or were understood as doing so³ (Dalton 2018).

Because no single Melanesian was in a position to understand enough about the new technologies, the indigenous people might have thought better to cooperate. Hence they created groups that sought to understand the secrets of the Western cargoes, especially their origin. They reproduced with the means they had whatever they thought useful to bring them closer to understand the procedure to obtain what they wanted. However, because the technology was of such complexity, from the point of view of the West these were “religiolus” (Charles 2008), irrational, stupid attempts (Dalton 2000a, 2000b; Kamma 1972, Lattas 1992). And even when some anthropologists started to insist that there was nothing stupid or irrational, they still failed to recognize that the main point of the cults was to master a technology. The last who openly recognized that was Mair. The reason is, arguably, that subsequent interpreters did not want to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of saying that Western technology was superior. They did not want to say that, and they insisted that the Melanesians were not trying master it, even though their actions were clearly a reflection of the opposite. However, that such explanation was rather correct was also suggested by the subsequent history of cargo cults: Melanesian cargo cults rapidly decreased in number along with the spreading of independence movements, that is, when Melanesians citizens gained increasingly suitable understandings of the procedures and technologies they wanted to obtain. If that was the aim of their initial attempts, it was perfectly rational and there was no point in continuing to implement less optimal means when more optimal ones had become available and validated through experience.

Technically, those attempts might have been less than perfect. Nonetheless they should not be considered as irrational. Rather, they should be considered in the

³ Again, Dalton’s words seem appropriate here: “If Europeans are stymied by the epistemological ideas of native peoples, the “cargo cultists” I knew were baffled by the Westerners’ sociology. The only thing these “cargo cultists” could not figure out is why “whitemen” would not share their secret – the knowledge they obviously must have but for some reason will not share. “Some of us don’t believe that whitemen are telling us everything” is how they explained themselves to me.” (Dalton 2018)

more general category of what we try to do when confronted by a problem without an easy solution. Trying to resolve it in ways that may appear to be illogical and irrational would be incorrect only to the extent that the knowledge necessary to solve the problem with certainty was available. Melanesians did not have that knowledge available but they tried anyway. As individuals, they mostly failed, and that is why they subsequently organized in cooperative groups. Once the mastery of the technology became progressively evident, they started to share what they learnt, and the result was that cargo cults began to disappear.

Conclusion

Imagine someone doing black magic, think about what they would do. They would buy black candles and wear sorcerers' clothes, buy one of those fake booklets, and start reciting sentences they don't know the meaning of. They would seem rather ridiculous, and we could formulate all sorts of theories about why they are so irrational, stupid and ignorant. And yet that is a perfectly reasonable way of exploring the mechanisms of magic. But perhaps magic is too easy an example. Let's take the example of a novel. Do you know the technology that is necessary to write a novel that touches everyone's heart? I don't think so, otherwise we would all do what Murakami Haruki does and touch the hearts of millions of people. Most likely, if you were to write a novel, what you would do is *imitating* your favourite author. The way s/he writes has completely caught you, but you don't know why and especially do not know how to do the same. So you imitate. And unsurprisingly, the way you imitate the voice and style of that author seems especially ridiculous, even to yourself. The comparison of your early attempts with the original is pathetic. Yet what you are doing is perfectly rational: you are trying to learn a secret art, an art that no group of people has yet transformed into mere technique. There is no available knowledge about such an art, only sub-optimal understandings. Hence, if you still want to go ahead, if you do not want to give up, you just have to keep trying. Melanesians must have thought the same when confronted with technologies that they could barely fathom. Theirs was a very rational urgency to understand what they did not know yet, through the heuristic means of trial and error specific to their culture.

Learning through trial and error is a fundamental human trait and we should stop denying other people from having it, even if it makes us uncomfortable in relation to the colonial past as well as our present. There are so many things that we do with a sub-optimal understanding of the procedure. What of our way of dealing with knowledge? Think of your own reasoning when you are writing a proposal. Isn't it money that you are after? Of course it is. It does not mean that this is the only reason, but it is a reason strong enough as to modify in some fundamental way your

proposal, its execution, and aims. It is not a perfect application of the procedure. Is that a cargo cult?

What of our way of dealing with migration? What of our way of dealing with education? What of our way of dealing with economy and inequality? We can hardly say we understand the procedure to deal with it. The economist Bryan Caplan, writing about the dismal performance of Communist countries' leaders who try to imitate "a few random characteristics of advanced economies", suggested that Communism might be "the largest cargo cult the world has ever seen" (Caplan 2011).

What of our way of dealing with parenting? Many seem to have figured out the perfect pedagogical formula to raise successful children. Is that a cargo cult? What of our way of dealing with marriage? The growing rates of divorce should provide another lesson of theoretical humility. What of our way of dealing with morality? Those who preach and even study it seems to be so little equipped with it. What of our way of dealing with the world order, Illuminati, and conspiracy theories? What about the advertising with famous people who use products we are told we should use if we want to be famous? What of our way of dealing with self-improvement? What about the books concerning the 17 things that successful people do before breakfast? What of our way of dealing with social media, mimicking the life of happy people? What of our way of dealing with climate change? Why don't we just label idealism as a form of cargo cult? As Sullivan wrote, "'cargoism' has jumped regional boundaries to become a popular English language reference to all kinds of raised expectations" (2005: 1).

Recuperating the study of cargo cults is possible if we realize that we are already living in an enchanted reality even if, for some reason, we assume ourselves to be able to differentiate from its disenchanted version (Weber 1946). If only we were less convinced of our own superior rationality, we would stop calling cargo cults the behaviour of others and look at ourselves: we are doing exactly the same thing, essentially trying to improve our condition with our imperfect means. Looking at Japanese ethnographers made me realize how much we think of the others as trying to emulate us and how little we think of ourselves as similar to the others: it is not that they want to be like us, it is that we refuse to realize how much we look like them.

In making such reflection, I was inspired by the work of Naoki Kasuga, an anthropologist of Melanesia himself, who wrote an article (Kasuga 1997) that touches on the issues discussed so far. He argued that the tendency of the first observers to call the cargo cults "Madness" was caused by a sort of fear. They were afraid, it appears, that by dignifying the observed behaviours as rational they would have also admitted that the "savages" might, one day, be able to close the technological gap. Should the natives master Western technology, the self-other divide that separated them from the colonists would disappear. That was something that the colonists could not accept.

I do not necessarily agree with the argument, however this is not the reason why I mention it in the conclusion. The reason is that I believe that such an argument could be generated in Japan but not in the Anglo-American tradition. That is because, in order to be able to say that the colonists were afraid that the natives might be able to close the technological gap, you must first admit that such a gap exists, which is far from easy in the context of Anglo-American anthropology. Secondly, you must be able to explain why that would be an appropriate representation of the indigenous point of view. In other words: how could you prove that cargo cults are about technological diversity? There is a long bibliography of Anglo-American anthropologists who have provided arguments why, as mentioned above, cargo cults are about something else: political change, moral regeneration, millennial history, etc. Hence the point for me is really to keep developing alternative theories where these can be safely discussed, i.e. in non-Western traditions like Japan. I think that we should be only marginally interested in the previous theories developed in the Anglo-American tradition, consider them as if they were peripheral, as if the power center of mainstream anthropology had already shifted away from England or the United States.

In order to re-orient the study of cargo cults, I think that we should be interested, like Kasuga and Ishimori, in the first reactions to cargo cults. Political, culturalist and especially deconstructivist interpretations say more, in my opinion, about the anthropologists who argued in their defence than they say about the cargo cults they attempted to explain. We should first look at the motivations behind Western interpretations of cargo cults in order to figure out why they are limited. Kasuga has his theory about the first colonists: they were afraid. I have my theory about subsequent anthropologists: sense of guilt. I believe sense of guilt is an extremely powerful psychological force, and anthropologists in the decolonization period felt they had to say things that would not undermine the status of the natives. That included a reluctance to admit that the natives were imitating the Westerners. Saying that implied that the Westerners were worth being imitated, and thus that they were somehow superior.

Japanese ethnographers of the Pacific like Kasuga can be used to move back to the original study of cargo cults. There is a world of possibilities with cargo cults, for they are everywhere (including Facebook and Instagram, for example) but we need to get the definition right if we want to include new phenomena into the category. In this article, cargo cults are defined as operations informed by a sub-optimal understanding of the perfect procedure to obtain a desired outcome. In formulating it in this way, the definition agrees with Buck's idea: "In fact, an answer to the question, "When is a cargo cult not a cargo cult?" may be quite simple: when it succeeds" (Buck 1989: 159).

However, as operations informed by a sub-optimal understanding of the perfect procedure to obtain a desired outcome, cargo cults have been painted in

colonial tones. "Cult" is indeed a derogatory term, and cargo too, for it implies that the natives were materialists (McDowell 1988: 121). The term was indeed coined to turn the phenomena it referred to "into a symbol of the strangeness and inferiority of Melanesian cultures" (Tabani 2009). These derogatory aspects of the label are inseparable from the evolutionist connotations and their colonial origins. Post-colonial reflexivity, deconstruction, and the critical attitude towards such discourses revealed the mutual support between knowledge and power that is inherent in the label, however, the fact that the term is still considered problematic suggests that post-colonial anthropology was unable to fix the problems colonial anthropology contributed to originate.

In order to strip the term of its colonial tones, and move the debate forward, we need not a post-colonial, but an anti-post-colonial anthropology (Yoshioka 2005). However, the categorization of everything that is not perfect knowledge of the procedure as cargo cult would necessarily lead to the categorization of everything as cargo cult, which is just like saying, nothing. It is possible to avoid such problem by specifying how cargo cults are "not everything". Their specific characteristics include imitation, transformational intent, narrative of loss, nativist claims, charismatic leadership, and hope in the return of ancestors and the future liberation from labour, and the list could continue. Inevitably, the more features are included in the list, the less the number of phenomena that the definition could indicate. Ultimately, the specification of these features would result, time and again, into the same problems that critics of earlier definitions identified. For example, such a restriction might entail the association between the listed traits and a specifically "Melanesian" way of being, a sort of "incarceration" into what Appadurai called "metonymic prison" (Appadurai 1988: 37; c.f. Scott 2010). Another problem is that a classification resulting from the lateral comparison (Candea 2019) of observed phenomena that share some features will necessarily result in the realisation that some other features are not shared. A polythetic classification (Needham 1975) would perhaps be necessary. It follows that both general and specific definitions have their own problems and that the alternation between re-editions of pre-existing debates cannot be considered a progression towards new avenues in the study of cargo cults. The point might rather be to isolate one feature, such as the search for prosperity, and recognize within ourselves, as human kind, the universal ignorance of the perfect procedures to obtain it. The benefit of choosing this pathway consists of the political affirmation of anthropological unity of humans and the scientific suggestion that such ignorance might tell us something about who we are. We are human beings trying to do something with the little we have. If the critical reader of this article thinks that such an explanation might be too simple, please consider that looking for a more complex explanation at all costs might lead us no further than the contemplation of the same ruins we have been contemplating for way too long.

References

Abong, M. and Tabani, M. 2018. (Eds). *Kago, Kastom and Kalja: The Study of Indigenous Movements in Melanesia Today*. Pacific-Credo Publications.

Barnard A., Spencer J. 2009. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, London: Routledge.

Bird, N. M. 1945. Is there danger of a post-war flare-up among New Guinea Natives? *Pacific Islands Monthly* 16(4, Nov.), 69-70.

Buck, P.D., 1988. Cargo-cult discourse: myth and the rationalization of labor relations in Papua New Guinea. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 13(2), pp.157-171.

Burridge, K.O.L. 1960. *Mambu: a study of Melanesian cargo cults and their social and ideological background*. London: Methuen.

Burridge, K.O.L. 1969. *New heaven, new earth: a study of millenarian activities*. New York: Schocken Books.

Caplan, B. 2011. Commie Cargo Cult. *EconLog*. https://www.econlib.org/archives/2011/02/commie_cargo_cu.html Accessed on 1.11.2019.

Candea, M. 2019. "Comparison, Re-placed". in Eriksen, A., Blanes, R.L. and MacCarthy, M., *Going to Pentecost: An Experimental Approach to Studies in Pentecostalism*. London: Berghahn Books.

Dalton, D. 2000a "Introduction". In D. Dalton (ed.), *A Critical Retrospective on 'Cargo Cult': Western/Melanesian Intersections*, Special Issue of *Oceania*, 70(4): 285-293.

Dalton, D. 2000b "Cargo Cults and Discursive Madness". In D. Dalton (ed.), *A Critical Retrospective on 'Cargo Cult': Western/Melanesian Intersections*, *Oceania*, 70(4): 345-361. [Special issue.]

Dalton, D. 2018. Between "Cargo" and "Cult". In Abong, Marcelin and Marc Tabani (Eds) *Kago, Kastom and Kalja: The Study of Indigenous Movements in Melanesia Today*. Pacific-Credo Publications.

Eriksen, T.H. (2006) *Engaging Anthropology the Case for a Public Presence*. Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Berg.

Ishimori, D. 2007. Disentangling fundamentalism and nativistic movements: an analysis of the Christian Fellowship Church in the Solomon Islands. *People and culture in Oceania*, 23, pp.33-52.

Ishimori, D. 2011. *Ikeru kami no sōzō-ryoku — Soromon shotō kurisuchan ferōshippu kyōkai no minzoku-shi*. Kyōto-shi: Sekai Sisōsha.

Hermann, E. 1992 “The Yali Movement in Retrospect: Rewriting History, Redefining ‘Cargo Cult’”. In A. Lattas (ed.), *Alienating Mirrors: Christianity, Cargo Cults and colonialism in Melanesia*, *Oceania* 63(1): 55-71. [Special issue.] Ingemann Frances.

Fuller, S. 2019. Academia as cargo cult. In Sassower, R. and Laor, N. (eds.), *The Impact of Critical Rationalism: Expanding the Popperian Legacy through the Works of Ian C. Jarvie*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland.

Furusawa, T., 2009. Changing ethnobotanical knowledge of the Roviana people, Solomon Islands: Quantitative approaches to its correlation with modernization. *Human Ecology*, 37(2), pp.147-159.

Furusawa, T., 2016. *Living with Biodiversity in an Island Ecosystem*. Springer Singapore.

Furusawa, T. and Ohtsuka, R., 2009. The role of barrier islands in subsistence of the inhabitants of Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands. *Human ecology*, 37(5), pp.629-642.

Guiart, J. 1951. “Forerunners of Melanesian nationalism”, *Oceania*, 23(2): 81-90.

Harding, T.G., 1967. A History of Cargoism in Sio, North-East New Guinea. *Oceania*, 38(1), p.1.

Harkin, M. 2004. “Introduction”. In M. E. Harkin (ed.), *Revitalization Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Kamma, F. C. 1972. *Koreri: Messianic Movements in the Biak-Numfor Culture Area*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Keesing, R. 1978. Politico-religious movements and anti-colonialism on Malaita: Maasina Rule in historical perspective. *Oceania* 48, 241-61; 49, 46-75.

Keesing, R. 1989. Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific. *Contemporary Pacific*, 1(1-2): 19-42.

Lanternari, V. 1963. *The religions of the oppressed: a study of modern messianic cults*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Lattas, A. 1992 "Hysteria, Anthropological Disclosure and the Concept of the Unconscious: Cargo Cults and the Scientisation of Race and Colonial Power". In A. Lattas (ed.), *Alienating Mirrors: Christianity, Cargo Cults and Colonialism in Melanesia*, Special Issue of *Oceania*, 63(1): 1-14.

Lawrence, P. 1964. *Road belong cargo: a study of the cargo movement in the Southern Madang District, New Guinea*. Manchester: University Press.

Leavitt, S. 2004 "From 'Cult' to Religious Conviction: The Case for Making Cargo Personal". In H. Jebens (ed.), *Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 170-186.

Lindstrom, L. 1993. *Cargo cult: strange stories of desire from Melanesia and beyond*. Honolulu University of Hawaii Press

Lindstrom, L. 2004 "Cargo Cult at the Third Millennium". In H. Jebens (ed.), *Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique*. University of Hawaii Press.

Maggio, R. *forthcoming*. Japanese ethnographies of the Pacific: language, politics, and perspective. *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies* 7(2), Special Issue on Language and Translation.

McDowell, N. 1988. A note on cargo cult and the cultural construction of change. *Pacific Studies* 11, 121-34.

Midorikawa, T., Yamauchi, T., Ishimori, D. And Ohtsuka, R., 2003. The seasonality of food and nutrition, and the food security in the South Pacific people-nutritional sufficiency in the slack season of fish catch in a traditional horticulture and fishing living village, Solomon Islands. *Japanese Journal of Health and Human Ecology*, 69(4), pp.132-142. (In Japanese)

Nakazawa, M. and Ishii, A., 2000. Demographic effects of modernization in a small village of Solomon Islands. *The Journal of Population Studies*, 27, pp.7-13.

Nd. Papers, 1962-1993. MSS 427, Box 18, Folder 2. Mandeville Special Collections Library. Melanesian Archives. University of California San Diego.

Needham, R., 1975. Polythetic classification: convergence and consequences. *Man*, pp.349-369.

- Ohnuki-Tierney, E., 1990. The ambivalent self of the contemporary Japanese. *Cultural Anthropology*, 5(2), pp.197-216.
- Otto, T. 1992. From Paliau Movement to Makasol: the politics of representation. *Canberra Anthropology* 15(2), 49-68.
- Otto, T. 2004 "Work, Wealth, and Knowledge: Enigmas of Cargoist Identifications". In H. Jebens (ed.), *Cargo, Cult, and Culture Critique*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 209-226.
- Otto, T. 2009. What happened to cargo cults? Material religions in Melanesia and the West. *Social Analysis* 53, 82-102.
- Read, K.E., 1958. A "Cargo" Situation in the Markham Valley, New Guinea. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 14(3), pp.273-294.
- Schwartz, T. 1976. The Cargo Cult: A Melanesian Type-Response to Change. In DeVos, George A. *Responses to Change: Society, Culture, and Personality*. New York: Van Nostrand, p. 174.
- Scott, M. 2010. Debates, Remarks and Comments. *ASAO Sessions 2009-2010: Kago, Kastom and Kalja. Old Theories and New Realities in the Study of Melanesian Movements*. Unpublished documents.
- Segato, R.L., 1995. *Christianity and Desire: The Biblical Cargo* (No. 192). Departamento de Antropologia, Universidade de Brasília.
- Spivak, G. C. 2010. "Can the subaltern speak?" revised edition, from the "History" section of Critique of Postcolonial Reason', in Rosalind Morris, (ed.), *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 21-80.
- Stanlaw, J. 2004. *Japanese English: Language and culture contact* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.
- Wallace, A.F.C. 1956. Revitalization movements. *American Anthropologist* 58, 264-81.
- Worsley, P. 1957. *The trumpet shall sound: a study of 'cargo' cults in Melanesia*. London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Worsley, P. 1968. *The trumpet shall sound: a study of 'cargo' cults in Melanesia* (2nd expanded ed.) New York: Schocken Books.

Yoshioka, Masanori, (2005), *Han-posutokoroniaru jinrui-gaku: posutokoroniaru o ikiru Meraneshia* [*Anti-Postcolonial Anthropology: Living in Postcolonial Melanesia*], Tokyo: Fūkyōsha.