CARGO CULTS AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE: THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVITY AND REPETITION IN THE POMIO KIVUNG

Andrew Lattas

Abstract

Garry Trompf’s work has explored the creative forms Christianity has assumed in Melanesia, and the various ways Christianity has been localised. He studied popular forms of Christianity as emerging Melanesian theologies of sin, punishment and redemption, and as part of the development of independent Melanesian churches. Using ethnography on the Pomio Kivung, I analyse the inadequacies of recent cognitive science characterisations of repetition in cargo cult rituals. Focusing on local ontologies of oratory, ritual and mimesis, I analyse the contradictions faced by cult movements seeking mainstream acceptance whilst still experimenting with the millenarian mimetic promise of myths and rituals.

Introduction

Melanesian millenarian movements, often called cargo cults, are well known both for their repetitive practices and for their inventiveness. Both can feature in cult myths, songs, dances, rituals, institutions, relationships and everyday practices (Williams 1923; Worsley 1957). Cult inventiveness does not necessarily stand in opposition to mimesis and repetition. For that inventiveness often involves producing novel ritual and mimetic practices that seek to copy, appropriate and surpass the transformative ordering power of western etiquette, hygiene, church liturgy, military-police practices, bureaucratic-government protocols and the cash economy. All may be merged in unorthodox ways with each other and with local customary practices and understandings of moral-ritual obligations to the dead. Recent cognitive science approaches to ritual and religion have used cargo cult ethnography to posit an opposition between creativity and repetition, which has been too quickly equated with another assumed opposition between imagistic versus doctrinal-discursive modes of thinking (McCauley and Lawson 2002). Ignoring the enormous philosophical work done on this problem by
Cassirer, Deleuze, Kierkegaard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Langer and Nietzsche (to name just some), this dualistic cognitive model has drawn inspiration and credibility from Harvey Whitehouse’s (1995, 2000) ethnography amongst Baining followers of the Pomio Kivung movement in East New Britain. Whitehouse argues that different religions, ritual systems and cult movements can be characterised by their systematic use of sensuous, climactic, imagistic thinking (which is supposedly more egalitarian and maybe indigenous) versus repetitive rituals and doctrinal-discursive thinking (which is supposedly more hierarchical and may be evidence of the influence of European church and state institutions). I will not reproduce the many criticisms of the Whitehouse dualistic comparative model made by anthropologists, religious studies scholars (including Trompf 2002) and even by some cognitive scientists (Alles 2004; Koch 2006; Knight 2003; Stewart and Strathern 2002). Instead I will use my own fieldwork in Pomio to question whether the mainstream Kivung movement can be characterised as just boring, unreflective (uncritical), repetitive rituals and logical discourses lacking enigma or the cultivation of secrecy and mystery (Whitehouse 2000, 63–4; McCauley and Lawson 2002, 91). I believe Whitehouse seriously distorts his Pomio ethnography when he argues that climactic sensuous imagistic rituals promote reflectivity, whilst discursive-disciplinary rituals inhibit reflectivity (see Lattas 2006a).1

**Cargo Cults and Christianity**

Having visited Pomio and written on the history and ideology of the Kivung movement, Trompf (1990, 1991) rejected Whitehouse’s dualistic comparative model of Melanesian religion as a reductionist oversimplification. Trompf’s own comparative approach to Melanesian religion studied popular forms of Christianity from a phenomenological position that incorporated history and politics. More specifically, Trompf studied how different Melanesian villagers merged the logic of their own customary beliefs and practices with those of Europeans so as to localise and reclaim the processes of their Christianisation and modernisation. Throughout New Britain, cargo cults, such as the Pomio Kivung, systematised

---

1 Whitehouse (2002, 2005) has a very modern definition of reflectivity as doubt rather than as confession. For him, it is a quantitative question of more or less doubt, rather than, as Evans-Pritchard (1933) argues, the grounds and limits within which different kinds of doubt and questioning can be exercised.