

The Mansren Myth in Randolph Stow's *Visitants*

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It has been a common phenomenon for cargo cults in Third-World colonies to offer the colonized both an immediate material release from, and long-term spiritual compensation for, colonial oppression and deprivation. Their peculiar form of religious fervor, awakened in periods of social and political unrest, customarily merges traditional beliefs in the end of the world with new ideas which anticipate the expulsion of the white man: indigenous millenarianisms, such as the belief in the collective rising of ancestral spirits dressed in white at the overturning of the world, are combined with modern imported variations, such as the faith in the emergence of a local messiah who will announce the end of the colonial order and the redistribution of the departing colonists' material wealth. Straddling two worlds, cargo cults have always been beset by contradictions. Their hostile demand for the expulsion of the white colonist is usually accompanied by the desire to wrest his possessions from him: a syndrome emblemized in the millennial metamorphosis, common to many cargo myths, of the messianic prophet and resurrected ancestor from black to white, or in the depiction of the former as part white and part black. Although the cults generally disrupt and destroy native cultural and religious traditions, they paradoxically look to the benefits of Western commodities to recover some of the traditional past's lost dignity and, in the words of one commentator, "depend for an impossible restitution on the very forces which degraded them in the first place."¹ On the one hand, cargoism is a product and creation of colonialism, caused by the shame of colonized inferiority which is generated by white racism; on the other hand, it is an avenue of escape from that shame for the victims of colonial domination. In *Visitants*, Randolph Stow's novel about cargo cults in Papua New Guinea, this ambivalence is summed up, surprisingly, in the person of the colonial officer himself, whose spiritual crisis and suicide are documented in the court inquiry structuring the novel and whose disintegrating colonial psyche is made to serve as a microcosm for the surrounding cargoist turmoil and tribulation that visit Kailuana and its neighboring islands.

As the official representative of the Australian administration in Papua New Guinea and, on the international level, of white expansion in the black world, Alistair Cawdor is himself partly responsible for the destruction of two local villages during a cargoist outbreak, which fact is made clear by the closing catechistical indictment of the native interpreter Osana. Moreover, at one point in the novel we actually see him engineering the Kaga men's feelings of shame by reminding them of an earlier cargoist outbreak.² But Cawdor is both agent of and participant in this shame. His own consuming sense of public and private shame, derived from both his

¹ Helen Tiffin, "Melanesian Cargo Cults in 'Tourmaline' and 'Visitants,'" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 16, No. 1 (1981), 123.

² Randolph Stow, *Visitants* (London: Picador, 1981), pp. 55-58. All page references are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

colonial role and his wife's desertion of him, constantly identifies itself with the shame of the people he administers and, in his increasingly demented condition, he apparently comes secretly to share the local faith in imminent rescue by the star-people who are intermittently identifiable with the Kailuan ancestors—a faith reawakened by the sighting of U.F.O.s in the area. The idea of the interchangeability, and reversibility, of the roles of colonized and colonizers in the novel is given archetypal form by Stow's use of Melanesian creation and cargo myths and, most particularly, by the Mansren myth of New Guinea.

Kenelm Burridge writes of reversals in Melanesian creation myths: "He [the prophet] announced that it had been revealed to him that before long the whole world would be turned upside down. The white people would serve the Fijians, chiefs would serve commoners . . . The idea of 'reversals' is common, and many Melanesian myths of origin place the beginnings of mankind in an earthquake, the reversal of a previous mode of being, or in the cosmos turning over so that the sky, now above, was once below, and men . . . under instead of above the sky."³ The germ of the millennial reversal of the positions of blacks and whites which is found in most cargo faiths is present in the common Melanesian myth of the two brothers, beloved of cargo prophets and best known in the form of the Mansren myth. In Burridge's outline of the Mansren story, the act of some mythical ancestor, such as the accidental killing of a snake or an eel, results in one of the brothers being well endowed with intellectual ability and inventiveness whilst the other brother is doomed to be dull and can only copy. Here creation myths begin to get tied up with colonialism: "The clever brother was the ancestor of white men, and seems to have represented white men as a class; the duller brother was the ancestor of black men, representing black men as a class." This was the first form of the myth, as it originated on the West Irian island of Biak. But Burridge's investigations of the alternative interpretations of the myth along the northern coast of New Guinea leave uncertain the extent to which the roles of the brothers were deemed to be preordained and unalterable: "Some saw the predicament of the dull brother as permanent. Others held that since the two men were in fact brothers, and brothers normally shared their assets, white men would come round to sharing their goods, privileges and capacities with black men. Thirdly, there were those who felt that if the clever brother did not share his assets, then he might be forced to do so or be made to withdraw from New Guinea."⁴

The cargofied version of the Mansren myth delivered to the Kailuans by the prophet Metusela in *Visitants* gives added weight to the idea that inequality of black and white was not in the original nature of things but was merely a chance affair, an artificial arrangement which, as in many creation and cargo myths, is arbitrarily reversible into a diametrically opposed alternative. "Black man Jesus," Metusela tells Dalwood. "No white man Jesus. Jesus black" (p. 90). In Metusela's account, the white brother (the younger, indicating the recentness of the colonial incursion) achieves an advantage over his elder black brother not by any innate superior ability but by the theft of technology and material goods (or "cargo") which were originally intended by the presiding deities (the star-people) for the black brother and his immediate descendants (the Kailuan ancestors who, in some mythologies, themselves become the people in the stars at death). The white brother's progeny, called "Dimdims" in the novel, trick and cheat their way into an unjust ascendancy:

Because the younger brother had taken away the iron, the saw, the nails, the hammer, everything. He had taken them all away to Dimdim. That is why you have nothing. Your ancestor was foolish and angry, he let his younger brother take the things that belonged to him. The ancestor of the Dimdims was clever

³ Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p. 50.

⁴ Burridge, p. 64.

and a thief. And when other star-machines came, with bully-beef and knives and axes and trousers and all those somethings for your ancestor, Dovana's people tricked them into landing in Dimdim. They promised they would send those things to your people, but they stole them instead. So the Dimdims have everything, you have nothing. (p. 152).

Metusela's argument repeats that of the cargo prophet Mambu who appeared in New Guinea in 1937: "He asserted that the deities responsible for making manufactured goods had already dispatched them to black men, but that white men had intercepted the packages and changed the labels-redirecting the cargo to themselves."⁵

Stow's employment of the Mansren myth has two important ramifications. Firstly, it affects the way in which the Kailuans and their status are viewed in the novel. The Melanesian notion of a colonial-induced inequality as an accidental, and therefore changeable, state of affairs permits the native retention of human dignity and hope in the face of colonial domination. In spite of Metusela's wild exhortations and Dipapa's occasional lapses into "cargo-think," the Kailuan characters in the novel do not, as in the case of cargo cults in the African Congo, merely wait in prophetic idleness for the collective rising of the dead to restore stolen riches and end colonial oppression.⁶ Neither does a fatalistic acceptance of an unequal relationship result in dependency complexes and the subsequent alienating to the white world of godlike powers of invention which the local inhabitants are unwilling to develop for themselves, as in the case of one contemporary cargo mentality depicted in a recent African novel.⁷ Secondly, although Cawdor's office places him in the role of colonial aggressor, Stow's handling of the Mansren myth and the cargoist psychology which exploits it tends, as Helen Tiffin has noted, to cast him in the roles of traumatized, pseudo-indigenous victim and vicarious participant in the sufferings of his subjects.⁸ What the poetic association of Cawdor with the Kailuans reasserts is not so much the pristine, precolonial equality of the myth as their fellow victim-status under the shared burden of colonialism. In *Visitants* colonist and colonized alike are afflicted by many of the requisite conditions for a cargo faith as laid down in Burrridge's guidelines: firstly, a black-white reversal emerging from the colonial education system and the missionary spirit, which combine to produce, on the one hand, a moral European more in sympathy with his colonial subjects and, on the other, "a new man, a black man with European abilities and capacities of understanding, a black man enjoying European conditions of being"⁹; secondly, an oppressed or dissatisfied population having unequal access to European power and prosperity and awaiting a miraculous deliverance from the exclusion and isolation enforced by an alien culture and religion¹⁰; and, thirdly, a readiness to believe in the existence, earthly or otherwise, of an "ultimum bonum," a place "far away and beyond the seas where everything could be learned and the good things of this world obtained."¹¹

Firstly, cargoist mythology makes much of compromise between, on one side, the friendly and conscience-stricken European who empathizes and wishes to share

⁵ Burrridge, p. 65.

⁶ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed* (New York: A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 10-13, 21-23.

⁷ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 223-29. See my article, "Fragments: The Cargo Connection" *Kunapipi*, 7, No. 1 (1985), 45-58.

⁸ Tiffin, p. 123.

⁹ Burrridge, p. 69.

¹⁰ Burrridge, p. 48.

¹¹ Burrridge, p. 57.

his assets with his black brother and, on the other side, the potential cargo cult leader: the white-aspiring, well-traveled and opportunistic indigene who has broken into the European prestige system and wishes to share his gains with his fellows. "With the capacities of a white man, but adopting the relatively undifferentiated and idealized moral attitudes of the black man, the moral European is the obverse of the prophet who symbolizes the new man: the black man who has European capacities, who is worthy of the new kind of redemptive process which the European conditions of life entail."¹² If Cawdor, "the black-headed man in white clothes" (p. 53) whose masochistic guilt and shame align him with his colonial subjects, is the novel's "white black man," then his inverted twin image is the "black white man," the obsequious interpreter Osana who scoffs at Cawdor's tolerant interest in native superstitions and penetrates his pretence of disbelief in the star-people. They are both "liminal" men, halfway into the other's culture and unable to return to their own—the two sides of the same colonial coin.

Secondly, Cawdor's fantasy of miraculous rescue by extraterrestrial visitants from the shame of his personal abandonment and loneliness parallels the Kailuans' myth-dream of their deliverance by stellar ancestors from the collective shame and alienation of colonialism. "We're not alone," Cawdor blurts out to Dalwood (p. 108); Benoni describes the islanders as "very hungry, very lonely people" (p. 150) during the cult disturbances. Metusela looks to the "ultimum bonum" of the star-people for restitution of the gifts stolen by the Dimdim brothers; the Australian's corresponding delirium, placing himself in the role of the mythical white younger brother, looks to prospective "Martian" colonists as to an elder brother in the hope that they will not deprive and forsake the cultures they dominate like the earthly colonial invaders whom they supersede.

In the specific matter of the Mansren motifs which pattern the behavior of the characters, however, Cawdor is cast not in the role of the younger and lighter brother but in that of the elder and darker one. The dark-complexioned Australian born in the Solomons both looks and feels like a native of the islands and both whites and blacks allude constantly to his abnormally dark skin and his native habits of speech, dress and thought: "He thinks like a kanaka, in some ways," claims the veteran planter MacDonnell (p. 121). At his suicide his face is dyed black by his own dried blood, reversing his skin color from white to black in death as the color of the cargo ghost is reversed from black to white as he enters the world of the ancestors: the cargo-prophet Buriga predicts that, at the millenium, "any Dindim that remained would be changed into a native, and all the natives would be changed into Dimdims" (p. 56). A native naval skipper's obituary repeats what Benoni has suggested earlier in the novel: "Now he is a black man true" (p. 181). In the Papuan story of the two brothers, the younger steals the elder's wife as well as his technology. The wife-stealing motif is repeated not only in recollections of the earlier Kaga outbreak but, more immediately, in the elopement of Cawdor's wife with the Osiwa doctor and again in the theft of the maidservant Saliba from Cawdor by the younger Dalwood, whom Cawdor's last scribbled note addresses as "Timi, my younger brother Timi" (p. 182). Cawdor's presentation of the gauche adolescent police cadet to the islanders as "my nephew" triggers further correspondences with patterns of native behavior in the light of the revelation that Benoni, nephew of the chief Dipapa, has also slept with one of his uncle's wives. Like the black brother in the myth, Cawdor is always the betrayed, injured, and deprived party and, like the younger brother in the myth, Dalwood at first seeks the aid and guidance of the older man, then betrays him, and finally assumes a quasi-paternal responsibility for him. In the policeman's condescending vision, his superior officer becomes a child-like pseudo-indigene who has to have things done for him and who sits "quiet on Mister Dalwood's knees like a baby" (p. 61) whilst Kailusa shaves him.

¹² BurrIDGE, p. 68.

Cawdor's status of "honorary native" extends beyond the stereotypical roles of the myth, however, and implicates him more particularly in the growth of a local cargo mentality. The villagers' neglect and destruction of their crops at Metusela's urging corresponds logically and materially with the patrol officer's deliberate self-neglect and remissness over health precautions, a parallel act of blind faith which casts him upon the mercy of a doubtful providence and eventually brings on the attack of cerebral malaria that maddens and effectively kills him. At the end, Cawdor privately mythologizes his death into the cosmic apocalypse of the cargo cult, when the world "turns over" and the messianic prophet of the grand reversal is taken back into the stars to rejoin the ancestors: "I saw. Timi, I saw. Down the tunnel. My body. Atoms. Stars . . . I can never die" (pp. 179-80). The drunken colonial expatriate who has "gone troppo" is, for Dalwood, the mirror image of the wild cargo prophet—"his eyes were like that man Two-bob's, Metusela's, so wide that they showed white around the brown" (p. 47)—and MacDonnell assigns to him the mystique of the messiah who is about to be abducted by visitants: "He's going away . . . I don't know how else to explain it" (p. 41). Dalwood's whimsy about Cawdor himself being "a Martian" (p. 127) touches upon the true nature of his neurosis by exposing the latter's demented need to believe in and identify himself with new colonial visitants who will undo the harm caused by the old ones. Cawdor's desperate fantasy about saviors from the stars, wildly entangled with figures from his reading in Aztec lore, functions in the same way as his fitful courtship and disastrous marriage: like them, it grasps at impossible escape routes from the enforced alienation of his colonial position and the loneliness of a way of life which he has identified himself with so deeply that he cannot leave it. It comes as no surprise when his private diary reveals that the first rumors of a link between the Kailuan ancestral stones and the sighted U.F.O.s emanated, via Benoni, from Cawdor himself (p. 149). Colonialism, it seems, conspires to make cargoists of us all.