Review: [untitled]
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Reviewed work(s): Cargo Cult: Strange Stories of Desire from Melanesia and beyond by Lamont Lindstrom
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/682474
Accessed: 02/06/2008 08:16

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the ethnographer’s role in studying such an unusual group, he provides us with a provocative and unique case study in religious syncretism.


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This lively and enjoyable book, written for the general reader as much as for the academic, is a Foucauldian archaeology of the term cargo cult, which has come to dominate Western discourses about Melanesia. Lindstrom’s aim is to deconstruct the term as a means to reconstructing its intellectual ecology, the logic behind its success within and beyond anthropology.

In Lindstrom’s telling, cargo cult first appeared in print in 1945. Its parent was one Norris Bird, sometime “old Territories resident” and one-time ANGAU officer. A handful of missionaries and Pacific journalists were also in on the humble birth, but anthropologists soon moved in to claim the concept and raise it to sturdy youthfulness. From the fold of these tender mercies, cargo cult then sprang energetically into broader Western consciousness and now scampers from tabloid newspaper to tourist brochure, from pop-group name to pulp science fiction.

Steeped in motifs of waiting, trickery, and madness, Lindstrom argues, cargo cult has become an important part of the conceptual stock by which both we, and many Melanesians, grasp Melanesia. It is now a tool for Western delegitimization of Melanesian political aspirations—for example, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army is not a “real” revolutionary force but rather a cargo cult in rebel mask. It furnishes the scaffolding on which some contemporary Papua New Guineans construct nationalist ideology, and it is a discursive hand grenade that yet others lob at political opponents or upstart Christian missions.

The enormity of the deconstructive task Lindstrom sets himself in this volume is matched only by its complexity. His attempt on the project is therefore courageous, and his results are estimable even though not everyone will judge them a complete success. He does marvelous work weaving together anthropology’s image of cargo cult from numerous, tangled, bibliographic skeins, for example, but the shape of his loom seems somewhat skewed: largely absent from the analysis is the coordinate term millenarianism, which has significantly modified the semantic space on which the term cargo cult can and has been stitched. Several corners of the analytical fabric also seem stretched, as when Lindstrom is substantiating his claim that anthropology has read Melanesian culture itself as a cargo cult. To say that millenarian leaders must act as political entrepreneurs if they are to secure a following, for example, does not imply that Melanesians ordinarily conduct politics along cultic lines (pp. 60–61). To be sure, some analysts have dubbed Melanesian culture “cargoist,” but this highlights a third issue: anthropological conceptions of cargo cult are probably more inchoate, disorganized, and conflicted than Lindstrom’s synthesis allows.

In addition to tracing the semantic evolution of his subject, Lindstrom also evaluates, with varying degrees of explicitness, the constructions he encounters. The result is constantly exhilarating but sometimes disorienting. The sum of his commendably unrelenting deconstruction convinced this reader that anthropology really should do away with the term cargo cult; yet those who have suggested precisely this are caricatured as “ninja anthropologists” attempting to “assassinate the term through erasure” (p. 146). Careening with Lindstrom along the highways and byways of cargo-cult discourse, bowling over one construction after another, is a little like joining Mr. Toad on his wild ride. Fortunately, Lindstrom saves us from the intellectual ditch, deftly navigating toward a perceptive conclusion about the enduring attraction of cargo cult as a subject of lay and academic discourse. Culling evidence from Cosmopolitan to TV Guide, he adroitly shows how it echoes “our own diffuse but powerful discourses of desire and of love, particularly the melancholy of unrequited love” (p. 184). Though Lindstrom keeps us waiting for this intellectual cargo until the last few pages, it proves, unlike its Melanesian counterpart, well worth the wait.


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Anthropologists and sociologists of religion have often portrayed the United States as a uniquely fertile breeding ground for gurus, mystics, streetcorner messiahs, and communal experiments. Robert Ellwood’s Islands of