Tanna Times
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Manehevi

SOMETIME AFTER 1900, MAPMAKERS found an English name for Green Point, a grassy headland on Tanna’s southwest coast. Southerly Tanna rises steeply up toward Mount Meren and Tukosmera, and jumbled creeks and ravines cut down to the coast. Nafe language, spoken in Kwamera and Port Resolution, shades away along the southwestern coast into Naha. Green Point is isolated. When William and Agnes Watt left Kwamera for Port Resolution in 1891, mission attention focused northward. In the 1930s, the nearest Presbyterian mission to Green Point was nine miles up the west coast in Lenakel, and many people drifted away. Some listened to rival Roman Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist missionaries. Others recovered customary spiritual ties to their ancestors, to Mwatiktiki, and particularly to Karapenumun, a mountain spirit who haunts Meren’s cloudy peak.

Manehevi, one lapsed Presbyterian, was a young man born about 1912. He lived along Meren’s lower slopes at Isiwan, a hamlet associated with Iankwanenia kava ground. His family had been nominally Presbyterian but abandoned the mission around 1930. Manehevi’s celebrity, so far as we know this, began a decade later in 1941. He appears in the historical record, arrested and imprisoned, as the first of many prophets of John Frum, Tanna’s latter-day and illustrious spirit guide.

Manehevi’s troubles began when he tangled with the British district agent James Nicol. Nicol, a onetime mechanic who married into the planter community and worked his way up the colonial hierarchy, had ruled Tanna since 1915 as the island’s sole colonial authority. Based in Lenakel, he relied on select, local leaders whom the British called “assessors” to surveil their villages, report misconduct, and help judge and punish mischief-makers. Nokues, one of Nicol’s assistant assessors, in November 1940 brought forward a complaint about eight missing goats. A lukewarm convert to Seventh-day Adventism, Nokues nonetheless built up his own herd of goats after SDA missionaries instructed the congregations to substitute goat meat for the island’s prestigious pork. Although feted
throughout the Pacific, the Hebrew texts that American SDA prophet Ellen White consulted declared pig meat and pig carcasses most unclean.

Nicol did not bother much about the missing goats although he interrogated two likely suspects, Kahu and Karaua. The goats, the two explained, had fed crowds recently gathered to greet a shadowy apparition who called himself John Frum. Nicol, on 3 January 1941, noted the name in a letter to his superiors in Port Vila, launching John Frum’s subsequent global celebrity. The island’s handful of missionaries and traders were increasingly uneasy. Something was brewing. Rumors proliferated. Folks acted up. Almost everyone stopped producing dried coconut, then Tanna’s only cash crop. The copra market had evaporated in 1940 when France fell to Germany. Mission bans on dancing and kava, in place for a generation, collapsed. People organized nighttime dances that pulled neighboring villages together, reviving customary exchange relationships. Many once abstemious men resumed kava drinking, spitting out their final gulps to honor and call out ancestral spirits.

And now John Frum. The spirit appeared regularly, but only during the night at Green Point’s Iamwatarkarek kava-drinking ground. Various stories circulated. John Frum wore a white robe with a white veil that covered his face; or he wore long white trousers, white shirt, and tie; or he wore a long coat with shiny gold buttons. He spoke Nafe language, or he spoke some mystical spiritual tongue. He spoke with a high squeaky voice, a voice later described as “like radar.” He cured disease with jabs. He foretold that the island would turn over. High and low places would level out, and the land would connect with neighboring Erromango and Aneityum Islands. John Frum preached: People must unite and disputes should cease. Hard work is finished. Whites will leave Tanna along with their money. Islanders from elsewhere should likewise go home. He will provide new money, John Frum money, to support a comfortable life. John Frum wrote down requests for favors in a big heavy book. One man requested power to revive circle dancing (nupu), banned among Christian converts. Another from Bethel village wanted a truck. Johnson Abil begged for wisdom. People today are pleased to argue that John Frum fulfilled most of these requests. Many trucks today drive Tanna’s potholed roads. Nearly everyone dances nupu at important occasions. Johnson Abil’s grandson was elected president of Vanuatu. Only one request failed to be fulfilled. A man from north Tanna, the last in line, wanted to become a child again after he died. John Frum refused the appeal, saying it was too late.

Messengers (or ropes) traversed the island’s roads to spread the message, and people from all corners arrived in pilgrimage at Green Point. John Frum’s new
acolytes lined up to shake his hand and feel his flesh, including Soarum’s son Kauke and his grandson Iau. Sometimes, though, when one reached out to him he faded away. Or, John Frum disappeared inside his round house leaving Kahu or other middlemen outside to translate his squawky mumblings. Pilgrims heard anchor chains of invisible ships rattling off Green Point. Back in Samaria, Soarum’s son Kauke and his grandsons chewed over John Frum’s message. Most left the mission, avoiding Presbyterian services and schools. Samaria’s old church house went dark. Iau and others planted a red cross atop Nukwaneinupum, one of Mount Meren’s foothills that overshadows the village. Today, a mobile phone transmission tower rises in its place. Years later, however, Iau and other disaffected followers would grumble that crafty Manehevi and Kahi had concocted John Frum’s appearances, scheming merely to boost their chances for twilight sexual encounters with girls.

District Agent Nicol finally took action after Sunday, 11 May 1941, when only a handful of Islanders attended church and his own agency staff disappeared. Islanders that month mobbed Lenakel’s trade stores in a frenzy of spending that topped £1,000. They tossed onto store counters nineteenth-century gold sovereigns long removed from circulation. Nicol went down to Green Point where, so his agents reported, people had built a new village with a round house for John Frum. He found the village empty, as were shelters built around the kava clearing for the visiting crowds. Only a few women and children hung about. Nicol retreated to request police reinforcements from Port Vila. When two dozen colonial native police arrived, he again marched south to Iamwatarkarek and arrested Kahu, Karaua, and nine other suspects. The police torched John Frum’s village. As they led prisoners back north to Isangel, angry family and neighbors followed behind, shouting out that everyone must hold firm to John and keep the faith. The situation escalated when the party reached the Isangel Agency, but Nicol and his police managed to secure their prisoners and disperse the hostile crowd.

Manehevi was among the arrested. He had painted his face, as Tanna men and women do at important occasions. Kahu fingered Manehevi when Nicol demanded to know who was pretending to be John Frum. Nicol presumed some devious charlatan was impersonating the furtive spirit to no good end. He interrogated Manehevi but couldn’t get much out of him. Mi pleple nomo, “I was only kidding,” Manehevi replied. He wouldn’t say where he had hidden John Frum’s costume and book (which may have been a medical text retrieved from an abandoned dispensary). Manehevi could neither read nor write, and if he had impersonated John Frum, making lists in that book, his scribbling too would
have been unworldly. In disgust, Nicol ordered Manehevi tied to an orange tree for a day near the old British prison at Irifo, figuring to make an example of him. Island memory claims that Nicol’s policemen lined up to pull and twist Manehevi’s nose. John Frum though, so people say, appeared that night to break his chains. To appease Nicol, Green Point elders organized a donation of £100 to recompense the Condominium for its troubles arresting Manehevi and the other John Frum suspects.

When the police returned to Port Vila the following week, they brought Manehevi and the other prisoners with them. Sir Harry Luke, British high commissioner for the Western Pacific, visited the following July and snapped a photograph of Manehevi in a prison line-up. Luke, who in Fiji had struggled with another nativist movement led by the prophet Apolosi, also took Manehevi to be another trickster rebel. Like Nicol, he presumed that Islander ignorance accounted for political gullibility. He concluded that Manehevi “has been attempting, by imposing himself on the more ignorant of his fellow-Islanders as a sorcerer, to organize an anti-white movement in Tanna.”

The Condominium sentenced Manehevi, Kahu, and Karaua to three years imprisonment and banished them from Tanna for another five. Less than a year later, though, flotillas of American military forces arrived in Port Vila. The United States was desperate for native labor, and Condominium authorities emptied out the prisons to release manpower. They also permitted American military recruiters to draft Islanders into labor corps. Manehevi went to work at a US Army Air Force camp. After the war, he disappeared from the written record. He made his way back home to a quieter life on Tanna, but to a Tanna that ever since has been the island of John Frum. Manehevi settled in Ikahakahak, near Green Point, married Karaua’s widow, and had two daughters. He died sometime in the 1970s. Kahu, if indeed he was the original movement mastermind, also died in the 1970s from a wasting disease. People say he fell sick when he married again against John Frum’s orders.

James Nicol likewise departed Tanna, although more spectacularly. Hopping down to open a gate in December 1944, his runaway jeep (a bit of abandoned American military cargo) squashed him against the gate after he forgot to set the brake. Who wouldn’t ponder the logic of this sudden, unexpected demise, John Frum devotee or not?

Manehevi wasn’t the sole John Frum suspect or sucker scapegoat. Despite Manehevi’s incarceration in Port Vila, John Frum kept popping up around Tanna. In years since, the spirit continued to speak through a series of island prophets. Fred Nase was among the more recent of these, reworking John Frum
message's into the Unity movement to absorb, he hoped, all ideological island factions. Nase's prophetic fame rocketed when he predicted that Lake Siui, which nestled for centuries at the foot of Iasur Volcano, would drain away. In 2000, it did.

Back in July 1941, soon after John appeared at Green Hill, his spirit sons Isaac, Jacob, and Last One manifested themselves to several girls from Ipikil village on east Tanna's Sulphur Bay. Nicol arrested nine more suspects and exiled them to prison in Port Vila to join Manehevi and the other Green Point detainees. In 1943, John Frum appeared yet again to his prophet Neloiag at Green Hill, in far north Tanna. Nicol, this time, was rattled enough to call for an American reconnaissance team, the wartime New Hebrides Defence Force Troop, and more colonial police. The American officers reconnoitered and lectured gathered villagers that the USA had no need for the new airfield that Neloiag had encouraged his followers to clear with bush knives and axes. Defence Force soldiers demonstrated what their machine guns could do by shooting apart Neloiag's notice board. The police burned down Neloaig's house. Echo, a small American Army service boat, carried another forty-six John Frum prisoners north to Port Vila.

Colonial suspicion of Manehevi shifted when his arrest failed to stifle John Frum. No more a trickster sorcerer, he was framed instead as a foolish dupe. British authorities took him to be a sucker, probably Kahu and Karaua's pawn. He was, they concluded, a shiftless man of no great intelligence and no fixed abode. He wandered from place to place. He made no gardens. He sponged off others. But Jean Guiart, French anthropologist who surveyed Tanna in 1951 and 1952, pinpointed Manehevi's home ground at Isiwan. He recorded that Manehevi possessed the prestigious right to eat the heads of turtles exchanged along the island's ritual road system and to wear the shorter ceremonial feather headdress. Manehevi's mother, before she died, had been a celebrated kleva.

Why could Manehevi, when Nicol interrogated him, only answer “I was just kidding?” If wily Kahu and Karaua scapegoated him, Manehevi’s innocence or idiocy alone does not tell the whole story. Younger Tanna men often offer to suffer punishments meted out to family and friends, as several teenagers did when Nicol’s police rounded up their fathers and grandfathers along with Neloiag. Manehevi, a relative of Jack Kahu, had his own reasons for taking the rap.

Cargo Cults

Anthropologists and others soon tagged the John Frum movement with the catchy new label “cargo cult,” even though John Frum appeared some years before
the term did. No more mere anti-colonial obstinacy, John Frum was reframed as an exemplar, the classic case even, of widespread postwar Melanesian social movements. The label cargo cult first appeared in the November 1945 issue of the colonial news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly*. That month, Norris Mervyn Bird, whom the editors identified as an old Territories resident, wrote to warn of postwar flare-ups among Islanders misled by ill-digested Christian teaching and increasingly liberal and dangerous colonial policies. Bird was particularly perturbed that the new Australian Labour government in Canberra might liberalize its native affairs policies, including maintaining wartime Islander militias into the postwar era. Cargo cult chatter quickly spread through Australian academia, and then into anthropological circles overseas as ethnographers and others borrowed the term to label almost any sort of organized village-based social movement that professed religious and political aspirations, movements that were increasingly on colonialist and academic radar throughout Melanesia.

Cargo cult, the label, has continued to spread far beyond dry ethnographic accounts into unexpected corners of popular culture. In the final scenes, for example, of the 1962 film *Mondo Cane*, Gualtiero Jacopetti’s original “shockumentary,” we watch yearning Papua New Guinea Islanders clustered around a huge, roughly made wooden model airplane. They are gathered high up in the mountains, sitting on a new homemade airstrip carved out of the forest (like Neloiag and his busy followers, on Tanna). Their eyes eagerly search the skies, so the narrator tells us, for airplanes full of wondrous cargo that they expect will soon arrive. But they will be disappointed. No cargo planes will land. These Islanders are misguided followers of a tragicomic cargo cult.

The war mortally undermined the colonial system although the final effects of this would not play out in the Pacific until the 1970s. Postwar anthropologists turned away from describing coherent cultural systems and explaining social order to more pressing problems of disorder and social change. Previous social theory digested with great difficulty the mad frenzies of cargo culting wherein people were liable to dump traditional marriage custom in favor of free love, or resist economic modernity by discarding hard-earned shillings and pounds into the sea. Protest, insurrection, insurgency, and upheaval were then in the air, even in the far Melanesian fringes of the colonial world. And, just over the horizon, were the 1960s. In much of the West, civil rights, women’s rights, anti-war, and anti-authoritarian movements soon would shake established powers and norms. Trance, dance, free love, drugs, cult communitarianism, the New Man, and the New Age all impugned corrupt and immoral political systems. Bizarre cargo
culting, in obscure Melanesia, echoed developments within the postwar capitalist mainlands.

Leading their movements, cult prophets commonly drew on Christian millenarianism, sometimes conflating the arrival of cargo with Christ’s Second Coming and Judgment Day (often called the “Last Day”). The word cargo (or kago in Melanesian Pidgin English) was rich in meaning. It signified various sorts of manufactured goods (vehicles, packaged foods, refrigerators, guns, tools, and the like) along with European money. Or, cargo represented the struggle for a new political order, the assertion of local sovereignty, and the withdrawal of colonial rulers. Or again, cargo metaphorically stood for human salvation and a final transcendence of everyday reality. The defining motif of the cargo cult, though, was unrequited desire for cargo itself. Having observed transports of military supplies during the Pacific War, cultists took to scanning the horizon for cargo submarines, planes, and John Frum’s invisible ships.

A common theme in cargo cult stories was that island ancestors were key players in the production of manufactured goods. Some spun stories of a technologically wise ancestor who long ago had sailed away to America, or Europe, or Australia and there taught the secrets of cargo, leaving behind his dimmer brother who was ancestral to less technologically advanced island communities. The Tannese knew a version of this story. The saltwater that flooded from the buried sea snake Tagaru’a’s eye socket washed away Islanders who, like James Cook, would one day return to Tanna, transformed. Other cargo myth asserted that wily Europeans stole industrial knowledge from Pacific ancestors, or were filching cargo that ancestors beneficently shipped back to home islands.

Cultists invented new rituals to induce the ancestral dead to reroute cargo flows. The cultic task was to penetrate the secret knowledge that people presumed to support European technological and political prowess, and to acquire this knowledge and associated goods alike. The human task was to restore local dignity and establish egalitarian relations with troublesome white newcomers. Alexander Rentoul, who oversaw the British agency on Tanna when Nicol took a few months leave in 1943, modeled pervasive colonial inequalities. When island men reached out to shake his hand signifying that they would abandon John Frum, he could only reluctantly comply: “I had never been a man to shake natives’ hands, but as their request appeared to be an opportune manifestation of their desire to return to a more regular life, I was happy to receive them.” John Frum notched another small success. White men would now, sometimes, shake one’s hand.
After the war, the American military in some places assumed the imagined role of cargo provider. Like the Tannese, many Islanders elsewhere in Melanesia had worked on Allied bases where they received slightly better pay and gained access to a welcome variety of new wartime goods and services. When the militaries withdrew from the southwest Pacific, money and goods became scarcer. On Tanna, John Frum supporters predicted the return of US military units along with the wartime cargo they had enjoyed as labor corps recruits. John Frum leaders also incorporated wartime experience of military routines and equipment into postwar cult ritual and liturgy, including drill-team marching, bamboo rifles, red crosses (from Army ambulances), numbered dog (identification) tags, and khaki uniforms. Movement leaders at Sulphur Bay over the years have raised several American flags when they could get these (figure 7).

Many Pacific movements, in addition to simple material goods, pursued various sorts of social transformation. This, too, reflected political conditions at the end of the Pacific War. The Japanese advance dislodged the Dutch and the Australians from much of New Guinea and the British from the Solomon Islands. Large American occupation forces destabilized colonial authority in the New Hebrides and, to a degree, in New Caledonia and Fiji. At the war’s end, when the colonial powers moved to reestablish their authority, Islanders who had mainly governed themselves during the war years resisted the reassertion of European control. Some cult prophets, in response, predicted that ancestors, or returning Americans, would drive the colonial powers from the region. In these areas, as on Tanna, cargo cults laid the groundwork for the nationalist Melanesian independence movements of the 1970s.

Melanesian cargo cults may continue to erupt, or they may prove to have been a twentieth-century reaction to globalization, colonial inequality, and the disruptions of world war. The trajectory of most cargo cults was short. Followers abandoned a prophet and his movement when no cargo arrived and the world did not transform. Active culting melted back down into background, ordinary cargo desire. Some movements, however, successfully institutionalized themselves and remain active in different forms. John Frum today is managed by third-and fourth-generation leaders and has elected members to Vanuatu’s national parliament. Other onetime cargo cults have likewise been institutionalized into political parties, or new religions, or both. Some, like John Frum, serve as minor attractions celebrated and promoted by touristic entrepreneurs.

Much of the desire and energy that once animated Melanesian social movements gush today into new Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian mission
enterprises. Beginning in the 1980s, fundamentalist Christian missions based in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States notably strengthened their recruitment efforts throughout the Pacific. Influenced by this renewed Christian millenarianism, many Islanders have joined Holy Spirit movements. Rather than waiting for cargo ships, followers instead seek to be possessed by the Holy Ghost in order to bring about sudden transformations of self, society, and world. Typically, Christian leaders undertake healing and anti-sorcery campaigns, cleansing villages of hidden sorcery paraphernalia feared to cause illness, death, and disorder. New Christian prophets predict the Last Day, the return not of cargo but of Christ, and the impending establishment of a new cosmos. As Pacific Islanders
are increasingly absorbed into the world’s economic order where inequalities persist and grow more profound, resistance movements (Christian, cargoist, or otherwise) certainly will endure.

Whatever cargo cult’s future in the Pacific, the label itself has come to be widely applied, and no longer just in Melanesia. Cargo culting today may be anything that some critic deprecates. The term reproves projects that demonstrate fervid desire (for wealth, or whatever); involve some group or collectivity of the desirous; and whose desires, or the recommended means to achieve these, can be discredited as irrational. Tragic cargo desire mistakes tawdry material goods or dubious political programs to be real solutions to life’s problems. The Internet abounds with many scolding examples of global cargo cults, as a form of rebuke.

But cargoist desire can also be an honorable sentiment as it was, occasionally, in accounts of Melanesian cultists. Good cargo culting celebrates personal development, creativity, and individual freedom. Cargo cult is a parable of our peculiarly modern mode of desiring, desire that is always ultimately unrequited, unquenchable, and never ending. This theme sustains cargo story’s enduring popularity. As cultural moderns, we take desire to be naturally unrequited. We rightly crave human perfectibility, freedom, and wealth but we would be astonished should we one day actually realize all this. Self-development is, and should be, a never-ending task. Should aching desire terminate, so would life. Tales of exotic Melanesian cargo culting, thus, capture our own understandings of human desire as a constant, essentially unrequited, and universal impetus. Doesn’t everyone want cargo? Isn’t desire always infinite?

**Kastom**

John Frum supporters deny firmly that they are involved in any sort of cargo cult. They are, rather, connoisseurs of telling stories and seekers of truth. His followers’ core truth is that John Frum saved Tanna kastom. Had John not appeared at Green Point, and just in the nick of time, colonial and missionary meddling would have eradicated cherished traditions and proper Tanna social order. From Green Point onward, John Frum’s prophets and followers have preached the recovery of island kastom. Into these cultural recuperations, they mix island conceptions of overseas goods and practices, including American flags, marching and drilling, and nowadays much talk of economic development.

John Frum, despite his several identities as John the Baptist Frum, or John from America, or John Clever, first appeared as an indigenous island spirit.
Kahu testified to District Agent Nicol that the figure he initially encountered climbing about Green Point’s rocky shores wearing a white robe, or perhaps this was a long coat with gold buttons, was Karapenumun. The powerful mountain spirit had descended from Mount Meren and wanted a house to be built nearer the beach, at Iamwatarkarek. His new name, so he told Kahu, was John Frum. His message advocated revival of *kastom*, of the island’s customary social order that worrisome and deepening contact with mission and colonial outsiders had greatly undermined.

People at Green Point today say that Karapenumun, now John, first appeared to them along with Nakwa, his evil twin spirit. The two island spirits struggled and wrestled until John vanquished Nakwa, who escaped, disappearing over the mountain. Some Green Pointers jealously suggest that the runaway Nakwa was the bogus, second John Frum who materialized later in 1941 to girls at Sulphur Bay. Still others, defenders of true *kastom*, castigate John Frum followers everywhere as seriously misled. If Karapenumun truly had come down to Green Point as John Frum, he would have sported a *kastom* penis wrapper and not wrapped himself in some white bedsheet or buttoned jacket.

John Frum demanded that meddlesome European administrators and missionaries must return home, but so should people from other islands then living on Tanna, and so should the Tannese themselves. Importation of rifles and shotguns from the 1860s and resultant bloodier feuds had shaken customary connections between personal names and places. People ran from their homes seeking refuge with distant kin and exchange partners. Many in the 1930s were living away from home grounds. Refugee children could take names from new places, but land issues increasingly simmered.

John Frum advocated a return to kava drinking. This revived the main means to contact ancestors, many of whose bodies lie buried under the island’s kava clearings. That last mouthful of kava drinkers spit into the air sprinkles down on these graves, opening up a communication channel. Drinkers mutter prayers and entreaties, and ancestral replies come to them as they sit quietly listening to the kava. Missionaries condemned kava as an evil intoxicant, a heathen alcohol even. They feared kava drinking as a pre-Christian sacrament. John Frum at Green Point appeared first to men, since only men properly drink kava. His new devotees prepared and drank many cups. In this sudden revival of kava drinking, *kastom* changed. Drinkers in these years began straining their kava infusions into half coconut shell cups rather than the canoe-shaped wooden bowls or folded banana leaves that their fathers had used. Where, I asked Samaria friends, did people find enough kava to drink in 1941? Despite thirty years of Presbyterian
abstention, they said, Nekahi and his family strategically had remained outside
the church, cultivating both kava and village ancestors in case island hearts
might adjust, in case the spirits bounced back.

John Frum urged people to dance again. Missionaries disdained dance almost
as much as they did kava. Dances are all-night affairs and they distrusted
opportunities for illicit sex that festivity might allow. John’s revivification of
dance also recuperated pre-Christian society. As people perform the island’s
common circle dance, *nupu*, they sing of ancestors and spirits. And the dances
that accompany gift-giving among kin and neighbors sustain Tanna’s reticulated
exchange network. People in Samaria, so recorded anthropologist Guiart in the
early 1950s, said that they were reluctant to return to church because they were
ashamed of their John Frum dancing and their kava drinking. Shame, perhaps,
but kava and dance make island life exciting and meaningful.

What of *kastom* sexuality? Nicol and the missionaries were appalled that
John Frum’s nocturnal meetings might climax in uproarious orgies. There is
little evidence of this. The Tannese, thanks either to island *kastom* or to years of
somber Calvinist training, are remarkably modest, even prim folk. John Frum
followers did not recoup the once customary *pran vi*, or village “prostitute” (so
missionaries tagged her), a young unmarried woman who once served men living
on kava-drinking grounds. Christian converts had abandoned customary men’s
houses and also *pran vi* long before 1941. Man, wife, and children by then all
lived together in newfangled boxy houses in surrounding hamlets. Nicol, none-
theless, complained that John Frum Prophet Neloig had promised “prostitutes
for his soldiers and as many wives as they wanted.”

Like effective social movement leaders anywhere, John Frum prophets mainly
concerned themselves with social unity, with defusing conflict among follow-
ers. On Tanna, they sensibly concentrated on troublesome issues of sex and sor-
cery as major risks to social unity. Movements that failed to cultivate internal
harmony or innovate mechanisms of social control did not survive long. Cargo
leaders across Melanesia commonly had much to say about sex, either declaring
an end to customary rules and constraints on this, hoping that this might lessen
conflict, or demanding sexual abstinence from all. Cult leaders, likewise, were
wary of *kastom* sorcery practices. On Tanna, John’s followers eagerly retrieved
and put back in service as many power stones as they could but they avoided the
*nukwei nahak* once used to sicken and to kill.

Whether cult or movement, whoever at Green Point took the initial steps to
create a John Frum church also followed *kastom* practice. The Tannese are mas-
ters at devising complex divisions of ritual labor. Customarily, men possessed
diverse *kastom* rights to make rain; others the management of pig and crop fertility; others to direct the winds; and so on. Christian converts likewise assumed several different leadership roles within the church as elders, deacons, teachers, and more. John Frum’s new acolytes, too, took on complementary jobs. Some served as his ropes or messengers. Some, like Manehevi, acted as his police, keeping order among the gathered throngs. John Frum job titles proliferated: governors of wages, of light, of food, of hurricanes, and even lawyers. Seventy years later, the latter-day prophet Fred Nase replicated this system. His Unity movement divided into a rainbow of affiliates. The red company functioned as movement police; the black supervised *kastom* law; the green managed John Frum heritage and issues; the white sought out and destroyed sorcery stones and other miscellaneous evils; and the yellow specialized in curing the sick.

John Frum’s message celebrated home ground and *kastom* but it also incorporated the alien and the new. Novel therapeutic techniques like stik (injections) addressed steady anxieties about health and healing. Money, too, had come to stay. John’s followers ditched their British pounds and French francs to encourage whites to leave Tanna but in return John would provide a new currency. The £100 that Nicol received, presuming this was recompense for cultic bother, might have been payment for him to go home. If the Presbyterian and Catholic day of rest was Sunday, and the Seventh-day Adventists honored Saturday, John’s day would be Friday. Friday remains the movement’s holy day although the Prophet Fred later took Wednesday as his own. Like Christians, John Frum devotees conceived hymns and John Frum prayers. They erected John Frum crosses. They laid offerings of flowers at John Frum altars. Whether or not Manehevi could read and write, John Frum’s other prophets have brandished various books, scribblings, and signboards, their own sacred texts.

And there is cargo. Islanders took the growing numbers of planes up in wartime skies to be John Frum’s, as were those curious ships steaming north and south along the horizon. And what was stil (steal), marvelous technologies like radar with which one could see at great distances, or make the invisible visible? The world, and the war, were closing in. The Tannese, in 1940, were already where many of us find ourselves today, sinking deeper into economic regimes of unrequited desire, of unquenchable demand. They faced relentless questions of making sense of the outlandish, of resituating themselves within a changing world. What to make of messy and increasing global flows of people, of things, and ideas? What’s with the new, the alien? What happens to the old, the familiar?

One response is to celebrate *kastom*: to become a cultural and religious fundamentalist and find comfort in local ideas, in home cooking, in mother tongues,
and in faiths of fathers. Anthropologists have, with reason, explained cargo
cults as social revitalization movements that preached fundamental themes of
nativism, nationalism, cross-cultural accommodation and adjustment. More
ni-Vanuatu again actively revaluated *kastom* in the 1970s, in the lead-up to the
archipelago’s independence. What would it mean to be ni-Vanuatu? What might
glue the new nation together? National identity and unity, too, rooted them-
selves in honorable island *kastom*.

The world today is awash with comparable social movements that reflect
and address present unhappiness and future worry, be these Tea Parties in the
United States, Islamists in the Middle East, Hindu fundamentalists in India, or
ultranationalist parties in Europe. John Frum’s messages and prophesies likewise
struggle with pressing questions, then as now. Manehevi, Kahu, Karaua, and
Nicol are long gone from the island. John, though, remains as do the two elong-
gated stones he left behind at Green Point to mark the promise of his second,
third, and many more future comings.

In 1941, British and French colonials caught in the far Pacific suffered their
own wartime anxieties. John Frum certainly echoed these. After the New Year
of 1942, Presbyterian missionary doctor William Armstrong intercepted a letter
that Joe Nalpin, in Port Vila, sent to his father Somo (Semu) in Lenakel, on
Tanna. Nicol had arrested Nalpin, a traditional healer, for cheating his patients,
jailing him in Port Vila. Nalpin wrote Somo that John appeared again to him, as
he had for several years, asking for a house to be built in Sydney village, overlook-
ing Lenakel. No one on Tanna any longer should fear arrest and colonial repres-
sion, for John “will send his son to America to bring the king.” Here was another
truthful John Frum prophecy. America arrived in force two months later.

Note

1. Harry Luke, *From a South Seas Diary* (London: Nicolson and Watson,
1945), 203–204.

Further Readings

*Manehevi*

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John Frum

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Cargo Cults

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