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CULT AND CULTURE: AMERICAN DREAMS IN VANUATU¹

by Monty Lindstrom

During the recent and troubled independence of Vanuatu, marred by secessionist attempts on two of its islands (Tanna and Santo), an “American connection” attracted international attention. This connection consisted of an idealized conception of America entertained by certain *ni-Vanuatu* (people of Vanuatu) and of a number of links between political organizations in both countries. A singular concept of America as supreme source of Western material goods, knowledge and power, for example, has been a basic tenet of the John Frum Movement on the island of Tanna. John Frum, unusual for its longevity among South Pacific social movements, is one of those phenomena generally described as “cargo cults” (Worsley 1968, Burridge 1969). One of the factors sustaining the John Frum cult during the past forty years is the special relationship it claims with the United States. This relationship originated in a Tannese-American interaction during 1942 to 1946 when the United States government established large military supply bases in the New Hebrides.

The John Frum cult has evolved over the years through a number of organizational and ideological phases. The most recent of these was the participation by cult members in a revolt during May and June 1980 against the soon-to-be independent government of Vanuatu. This secessionist attempt on Tanna, and a companion one on the northern island Santo by members of a second organization called Nagriamel, received at

¹Vanuatu, once the New Hebrides, achieved its independence on 30 July 1980. My wife and I lived twenty months, during 1978 and 1979, on Tanna. We would like to thank Fulbright-Hays, the English Speaking Union of the United States, San Francisco Branch, the Department of Anthropology of the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, the Department of Anthropology of the University of California at Berkeley, our John Frum friends at Iapiro and our Vanuaaku Party friends at Samaria for the assistance we received and the welcome we experienced during this period.

the least the good wishes and encouragement of leaders of a third group, the Phoenix Foundation (Riley 1980). Phoenix is an American organization dedicated to founding a new nation in which the glorious, although presently besieged and tattered, principles of free enterprise and libertarian economics might be revitalized and put into full practice.

I review in this paper the history of the John Frum Movement and discuss the symbolic importance of America within this history. I also examine the several attractions linking John Frum, Nagriamel, and Phoenix together in the recent political turmoil in Vanuatu. These attractions consist of obvious overlapping political interests but also of more subtle (and more speculative on my part) cultural harmonics. Similar interpretations of the nature of man, of history, of human dignity and freedom, of power and of society are overtones which resonated throughout the disturbingly successful convergence of these Vanuatu and American cargo cults.

Although enigmatic rumor, scattered dances, and other cultic activity existed on Tanna in the late 1930s, what first drew the attention of James Nichol, the British District Agent, was a series of nocturnal meetings held in 1940 at Iamwatakarek, a kava-drinking ground near Green Point on Tanna's southwestern coast (Guiart 1956:152). Nichol investigated and learned of a mysterious figure, dressed in white trousers, long-sleeved shirt and hat with veil obscuring his face who appeared and spoke in a strange voice. Men from all parts of Tanna converged on Green Point to hear this being who said his name was John Frum. Older men today describe these pilgrimages of their youth and most claim that they saw John Frum personally or, at least, heard his voice emanating from inside a house.

John Frum, at first, urged people to more cooperative effort in clearing land for gardens and in building houses and also told them to obey both the government and the missionaries working on the island at that time (Guiart 1956:155). His message soon changed, however, into one of cultural revitalization. People say John Frum ordered them to return to the traditions (or *kastom* as these are called in Vanuatu) of their fathers. The years 1900 through 1940 had witnessed the widespread success of the Presbyterian mission. About two-thirds of the island's population had converted and submitted to missionary demands to abandon traditional practices such as dancing, the drinking of kava (*piper methysticum*), polygyny, and all labor on the Sabbath. Upon hearing John Frum's words, the Tannese of 1940 revived traditional dances and kava drinking. They also abandoned the church. On one astonishing Sunday, 11 May 1941, only a handful of worshippers attended the Presbyterian churches on the island (Campbell 1974:118). A census made in October 1939, seven months pre-

viously, had reported a population of 3,381 Presbyterian adherents (*Quarterly Jottings*, October 1939).

Nichol, the district agent, assumed that a small group of devious men were conspiring to make fools of their fellow islanders for some reason he could not quite understand--although he described the apparition of John Frum as both a "hoax" and a "racket" (quoted in Guiart 1956:408). He arrested two men, one of whom eventually confessed to dressing and acting the part of John Frum. The British and French Condominium government exiled these men to Vila (the capital of the group 140 miles north of Tanna) for several years. This capture of the purported impersonator did not dampen cultist enthusiasm, and these deportations were the first of many as cultist activity broke out at a number of other villages. The government arrested more than 140 men during the years 1940 to 1956 (Rice 1974:251-262). In 1956, it redefined the movement to be religious rather than political subversion and maintained generally a hands-off policy until the events of May and June 1980.

The early John Frum message developed millenarian tones in addition to encouraging the resumption of *kastom*. John Frum proclaimed the coming of a new age. He told people to throw away their European money, to kill their cattle and goats, and to abandon their gardens and houses as he would soon provide new money, new houses, food and animals. There are reports John Frum warned that the island would turn over and emerge joined with neighboring islands; that mountains would flatten and valleys fill; that all Europeans would vacate Tanna; and that anyone arrested by the government would gain freedom (Barrow 1952:4). Many people did kill their animals, quit productive labor and discard their money (C. McLeod, personal communication). Some threw it into the sea (Barrow 1952:4) while others participated in a run on trade stores (Guiart 1956:159, O'Reilly 1949:195, see also Priday 1950 and Marsh 1968).

The first mention of the United States in cult ideology occurred several months after the initial arrests. This was in a letter sent by Joe Nalpin, a British policeman in Vila, to his father at Isini village, Tanna. The letter arrived in September 1941--three months before Pearl Harbor. Nalpin wrote that the people at Isini were to build a house for John Frum and:

then John Frum will gather the white man and talk to them. He will send his son to America to bring back the King. You must not be afraid. He showed me aeroplanes at Lonopina [name for Tukosmera, the highest mountain on Tanna] as thick as the bush. (Guiart 1956:410)

The reference here to America may have been in fortuitous counterpoint to the British and French governing the country at that time. Fischer

(1964) has suggested that colonized people call upon some nation they expect to help resolve economic and social inequalities because of its perceived power and difference from local colonial authority. Whatever the factors underlying this choice of America, it was a successful shot in the dark. Six months later on 17 March 1942, an American fleet arrived in Vila harbor and stormed the town expecting to discover the Japanese in control (Geslin 1956:249, Heidl 1944:234).² US armed forces quickly established themselves near Vila and, several months later, opened a second base on Santo to the north. These bases served first as front-line establishments supporting the battles of the Solomons and Coral Sea. As the war moved north, they became permanent supply depots with a personnel of over 100,000 servicemen. More than a half million soldiers and sailors passed through the New Hebrides on their way to and from the front. The total population of New Hebrideans at this time was less than 60,000 people (Geslin 1956:257).

The US military command soon discovered it needed additional labor and obtained permission from the British and French Resident Commissioners to recruit New Hebrideans. Tanna provided the largest number of these recruits (Geslin 1956:277, Rice 1974:214). Major Heidl, of the US Marine Corps, described islanders as “genuinely friendly and incredibly eager to help any Americans” (1944:239). Almost every Tannese man, young and old, spent at least one three-month tour of duty laboring at the bases. Older men today talk with pride about the help they gave to America. Although the salary the US paid was kept very low (about 25¢ a day) at the insistence of the French who did not want to inflate the cost of plantation labor after the war (Rice 1974:215), workers were housed and fed by means of similar support facilities servicing US military personnel. They ate rations in cafeterias, slept in Quonset huts and were issued military bedding (Geslin 1956:227). Certain of their Army and Navy bosses also managed to present them with illegal goods such as clothing, shoes, pots, pans, and cigarettes during and after their recruitment (Rice 1974:215). Men today on Tanna explain that what impressed them about America was its *nepwusien*, or wealth of possessions; its machines which made easy work such as garden preparation; and the generosity of the soldiers. The resident French and British colons in this once isolated colony, with only meager possessions at their command, were no match for the

²Barrow, district agent on Tanna in the early 1950s, notes “the natives around Vila had scoffed at the stupid Tannese for their wild ideas but now, when everything seemed to be turning out as they had foretold it, it was the turn of the Tannese to laugh” (19527). America was also an important ideological symbol of another cult, the “Naked Movement,” which developed on Santo in the mid-1940s (Miller 1948).

Americans. In Tannese eyes, America became the origin of all good things.

Back on Tanna, cultists began predicting the arrival of American soldiers either by ship or from the bowels of the central mountain range (Guiart 1956:182-183). Cult ideology began to manifest a concern with obtaining material goods in addition to freedom from the colonial powers with the assistance of America. O'Reilly (1949:199) suggests that people perceived the American dollars which were inundating the archipelago to be John Frum's promised new money. A major cult outbreak occurred in north Tanna in October 1943 (O'Reilly 1949:201-203, Guiart 1956: 184-188). This was organized by a man named Neloig who, with a group of supporters, began constructing an airstrip on which US planes might land to discharge soldiers. Neloig claimed to be John Frum's spokesman and also to be the ally of "Rusefel," the king of America. After being threatened for the first time with an armed resistance, the district agent summoned from Vila troops of the New Hebrides Defence Force. These sailed to Tanna and arrested Neloig with over fifty of his followers. Two American officers participated in the raid. One of these, Major Patten, addressed a crowd of about two hundred to 'explain the truth about America: that the US had no plans to land soldiers and, therefore, had no need of an airfield. "The troops then showed what they could do with Brens, Tommy guns, and rifles against a notice board of Neloig's" (Barrow 1952:9).

This American disclaimer, however, did not discourage Tannese interest and faith in the United States. Four decades later, people continue to sing out to the US to help them achieve their goals of economic and social development. The idea of America, along with certain military objects, continues to symbolize the cult's commitment to these goals. Cult leaders continue to communicate with John Frum and America, receiving knowledge in their dreams.

The John Frum Movement, in its beginning a collection of rumor and scattered gatherings, has been most successfully institutionalized at Ipikil on Sulphur Bay, a village of east Tanna. The cult is now a powerful combined political party and church (Lindstrom 1981). This institutionalization became possible when government prosecution of cultists ended in the mid-1950s. A man named Nampas, along with other Ipikil bigmen returning from exile off Tanna, raised a red flag on Friday, 15 February 1957. Nampas claimed this flag had been given to him by John Frum and the Americans as a pledge of continuing responsibility and assistance although noncultists claim Nampas stole it from a US military fuel dump. John Frum leaders, in institutionalizing the cult, created a

number of ceremonies modeled upon the Christian. A night dance every Friday, lasting until Saturday dawn, corresponds to Christian Sunday worship. Members of the Ipikil organization (there are other political groups on Tanna in which John Frum is important) meet weekly at Sulphur Bay and dance to string bands. People claim that faithful attendance will eventually result in America's arrival on Tanna. The 15th of February has become the major annual cult holiday. Every 15 February, cult members hold festivities to celebrate John Frum's message and victory over the government in 1957. The cult also has its hymns, its prayers, its missionaries, and its offerings (which consist of flowers rather than money). Leaders claim to have the support of twenty-six "teams" (or villages) around the island, an approximate membership of 1,500 people.

Cult symbols derive from the wartime experience. These include wooden crosses painted red, copied from the doors of Army ambulances. US military uniforms and insignia, provided by passing yachtists and tourists, are prized possessions. A few men were lucky enough to secretly retain the numbered dogtags issued to them during tours of labor for the US military. Others still recall the songs they learned from American servicemen and are pleased to sing creditable renderings of "God Bless America" and the "Marine's Hymn" (Heinl 1944:240). Men also recall wartime institutions such as *iapiekus* (the PX). Every 15 February, a military drill team marches with bamboo rifles and the logo USA painted in red across the marchers' chests and backs. The team is commanded by a sergeant, "with stripes," who calls out still recognizable commands (which are, however, unintelligible to the Tannese) such as "to the right!" During the celebrations of 15 February 1978, cultists raised for the first time a United States flag.³ Although leaders claimed this had been sent by John Frum, it was apparently obtained from an American yacht.⁴ In 1979, cultists raised

People say the US flag is *rapsan, rapituv em raruveruv*--"white, black and red." (There is no distinct color lexeme "blue." The term which designates green also includes light blues while that for black refers to darker blues.) These colors symbolize for some the unity between white Americans, black Tannese (and also "negro" Americans) and the red Indians people have heard about.

⁴Sulphur Bay appears to be a popular port of call for American and other yachts. Rumors of cult activities circulate in the trans-South Pacific yachtist grapevine. Sulphur Bay also enjoys visits of numbers of tourists (American, French, English, Australian) who have heard of John Frum. There is a guest house in the village for these tourists and if cultists judge them to have a certain importance, they may perform a special flag raising or other ceremony. These visitors often subsequently supply cultists with military uniforms and insignia via the mails in return for Sulphur Bay's hospitality. The tourist who finds his way to cult headquarters is not the sort discovered at the more packaged and opulent resorts elsewhere in the Pacific.

two US flags (the second provided by a tourist from Venice, California). The people at Sulphur Bay continue to raise these flags at 8:00 A.M. and lower them at 4:30 P.M. with military precision. An honor guard watches continuously over the flying Stars and Stripes.

In addition to institutionalizing the movement, cult leaders have also modernized its ideology. John Frum's message has changed depending on social context over the past forty years. It began as exhortations to good, cooperative behavior; it then stressed cultural revitalization and a return to *kastom*; then predicted eschatological change and an exodus of the European colonials; then the arrival of American soldiers and material goods. Although cult ideology continues to reflect all of these themes, people today talk in terms recalling the early days of the American Peace Corps. Cultists expect that America will come to Tanna via Sulphur Bay (Lindstrom 1979) to teach people knowledge of how to construct and organize factories to produce the goods they must purchase since they do not yet know how to make them for themselves. What people presently expect from America are not fleets of cargo ships or squadrons of planes but industrial knowledge and instruction in the American way. Instead of being a mere source of raw material (i.e. coconut with a little value added by drying) people would vastly prefer to control the entire productive process--a control which would support dignity and their self-vision.

Who is John Frum? He may once have been Manehevi, the man Nichol arrested as the great impersonator in 1941. Others at the time suspected John to be a Japanese spy operating in advance of some planned military occupation (Rice 1974:216). The origin of the name is also unclear. It may be a reflection of a number of Biblical Johns the missionaries emphasized. It may originally have been John Broom--John being a broom to sweep the whites from the island (Rentoul 1949:39). It probably is not "John From America" as suggested by some (Dobson 1980:68). The similarity of Frum to another word, *urumun*, which means "spirit medium" in the Kwamera language of southeast Tanna, seems to me to be if not indicative at least evocative. A spirit medium serves as middleman between the living and the dead, linking Tanna to *ienkaren pen*, "the side away." He passes messages to ancestors and receives knowledge from them in return. John Frum is also a middleman who links Tanna with America. He travels back and forth between the two lands, carrying messages to America and bringing back knowledge and, perhaps someday, the Americans themselves.

People wonder if John Frum is a man or a spirit. They cannot explain how he travels but maintain he continues to visit the island, especially on Fridays. Cult leaders have constructed a special bed for him at Sulphur

Bay where he sleeps, secretly, after arriving to advise his friends. Some people claim to see John on his travels and to speak with him; others do not, although they may dream of him; and others, members of competing political groups, scoff and laugh and say John is nothing but the wind (*rosi nematagi*). The idea of a being such as John fits well with the traditional cosmological cast of characters which includes ancestors, spirits of place, and powerful culture heroes who remain active today (Lindstrom 1980).

The measure of support the John Frum Movement enjoys on Tanna and its relatively tight, by Melanesian standards, organizational structure make it inevitably of great importance within the local and national political arenas. The population of Tanna, about 17,000 people, is divided into a number of competing social groups. After suffering almost complete loss of support in 1941, the Presbyterian and other churches have gradually rebuilt and now encompass about half the island. Nearly all Presbyterians are also members of the Vanuaaku Party (which is now in power as the first independent government). Founded in the early 1970s by English educated New Hebrideans, this party demanded early independence and land reform. Colons and French speaking *ni-Vanuatu* founded a number of competing parties soon afterwards. Supported by the French government in opposition to the anglophonic Vanuaaku Party, these have united several times under different names. In the elections of November 1979, they ran as *La Partie Fédérale*. In the period leading to independence, these parties were commonly designated (first by the French and then generally) as “the moderates.”

Moderate party leaders courted the John Frum organization as it historically opposed those people who were members of the Presbyterian Church and Vanuaaku Party on Tanna. Cult leaders agreed to take part in politics and gave their approval in the founding of a John Frum Party. A John Frum candidate won a seat in the National Assembly in the elections of 1975, 1977, and again in 1979 as a member of the moderate team. The French—who had joined with the British in repressing the Movement in the 1940s and 1950s—became both its benefactor and protector in the 1970s. Sulphur Bay received a sixteen-foot boat with two twenty-five horsepower motors and also access to a new Toyota Landcruiser among a number of other gifts from the French during the critical period before the elections of 1979. The French Resident Commissioner, the highest colonial officer in the country, began to attend the 15th of February celebrations in the mid-1970s. He was there 15 February 1978 when, to his astonishment and probable chagrin, cultists raised their first Stars and Stripes. He was more pleasantly surprised in 1980, no doubt, when they added a French *tricouleur* to the flags flying at cult headquarters.

In 1978, cult leaders also organized the John Frum guards--a police force which arrested people accused of crimes ranging from adultery, to sorcery, to pig killing. (Leaders have established several sorts of "guards" or "armies" over the years organized along western military lines; O'Reilly reports John Frum guards active in 1940 [1949: 194].) The guards hogtied these unfortunates and brought them to Sulphur Bay where cult bigmen held meetings to judge and sentence them. The French representative on Tanna refused to investigate seriously any complaints arising from these vigilante police actions and, at the time, the British were unwilling to do anything unilaterally. Noncultists and members of opposed political organizations were genuinely afraid of the cult guards (whom they perceived as terrorists attacking mostly Vanuaaku Party supporters) and felt themselves abandoned by the British government.

As the elections of November 1979 approached, cult leaders appeared to be about to decide that John Frum people would not vote. They claimed to be satisfied with their own gardens and with their belief that John Frum and the Americans would soon help them out. After pressure from leaders of the francophonic parties, cult bigmen reversed their decision at a meeting held in October at Sulphur Bay. The French Resident Commissioner, Inspector-General Jean- Jacques Robert, made several trips to the island immediately before the November poll and distributed gifts (food, cigarettes, cloth, kerosene, etc.) to voters in a number of key locations. The period leading up to elections was quiet, but this quietude did not survive the electoral results. To most people's surprise (the John Frum moderate parties had polled more votes in 1975) the Vanuaaku Party won three of the five Assembly seats on Tanna (polling 2,784 votes to the moderates' 2,718) and also won eight of the fifteen seats on a new island council the French had unluckily insisted be written into the 1979 Constitution expecting this to serve as a John Frum power base. In the country as a whole, the Vanuaaku Party won twenty-six out of thirty-nine Assembly seats--a two-thirds majority. The new government and the two colonial powers agreed, after prolonged negotiation, on 3 July 1980, as independence day.

The losing moderate parties, however, complained of electoral irregularities and most newly-elected members--including the two moderate candidates elected from Tanna--boycotted the sessions of the Assembly. John Frum leaders, along with those of allied political organizations on the island, declared themselves independent on 15 February 1980 and proclaimed themselves to be the new nation of Tafea (this an acronym of the first letters of the five southern Vanuatu islands: Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromanga, Aneityum). They took little action following this decla-

ration until 26 May when Tafea supporters attacked the government offices at Isangel and took prisoner the newly appointed district commissioner, Ruben Tamata, and his deputy. Shortly before this attack, most French officials including the head of the gendarmerie left the island and the inevitable rumors claim that, before doing so, had left keys and full tanks of gas in the French government trucks which the rebels used to transport the kidnapped officials to Tafea headquarters in Middle Bush and to set up roadblocks (Ken Calvert, personal communication).

The following day, 27 May, the government's Joint Mobile Force flew to Tanna, cleared the roads, and proceeded to Tafea headquarters where it engaged the rebels. Tafea supporters attempted to dynamite the Mobile Police but were routed with teargas. The two government officials escaped in the confusion and eventually made their way to safety (*Nabanga* 158, 31 May 1980). The police arrested some twenty people whom they jailed at the government station. Relative calm returned to the island. This lasted several weeks until the John Frum Member of Assembly, Alexis Iolou, convened a meeting of all Tafea supporters at Sulphur Bay. These united into an army and marched the night of 10 June the fifteen miles across the island to Isangel in order to free their arrested compatriots. Although half of the Mobile Police had left Tanna, those remaining were supported by a group of irregulars--Vanuaaku Party members who had gathered to help guard the government station. After talks between Iolou and W. Korisa (the Minister for Social Affairs in the new government who was at Isangel) had failed, someone began shooting. In the darkness, the Tafea army broke rank and disappeared. Near dawn, police discovered the body of Alexis Iolou. He had been shot by two rifles of different calibre and also knocked on the head. Although his death threw the island into a panic--most Vanuaaku Party supporters fled their villages and spent several nights in the bush--independence arrived three weeks later without major incident.

On 27 May, the day following the beginning of the revolt on Tanna, Nagriamel supporters on Santo also attacked the government offices there. Nagriamel, like Tafea, had declared unilateral independence on 11 January (*Nabanga* 141, 12 January 1980) and established a "new nation" called Vemarana, following a similar defeat at the polls. These two secessionist revolts in the north and south of the archipelago were obviously coordinated although all the details of this have yet to emerge.⁵ Unlike on

⁵It appears that certain members of the French administration conspired with leaders of the moderate parties meeting in Noumea, New Caledonia, in April in order to plan possible rebel action (Reinhardt 1980).

Tanna, the revolt on Santo was successful. Vemarana supporters kidnapped the government's representative, Job Dalesa, and occupied Santo town. Vanuaaku people fled the island along with most British and Australian citizens who were ordered to leave by their respective governments. Vemarana exercised total control over Santo town for two months. After much negotiation, the British and French governments finally agreed to send troops to Santo. These landed on 26 July to reoccupy Santo town the week before independence. Papua New Guinean troops replaced the joint British and French force on 16 August, and on 31 August, raided Vanafo village, the headquarters of Nagriamel, and arrested the leader of the rebellion, Jimmy Stevens along with ninety of his followers.

Jimmy Stevens had established Nagriamel in the mid-1960s as an organization demanding the reestablishment of *kastom* and the return of alienated, mostly French plantation land (Plant 1977b:35-41). Paradoxically, after making a land deal with the French government, Nagriamel subsequently received much support from French interests. It and the John Frum Movement were the two pillars of the Federal Party in rural areas of the country. Jimmy Stevens served as honorary president of this party.

In 1971, Stevens had also met an American named Michael Oliver. Oliver was in the South Pacific buying land and, after their meeting, became an adviser to Stevens. He financed a number of overseas trips which Stevens made, including one to the United Nations in 1976 where Stevens argued for the independence of Santo under the Nagriamel Federation (Plant 1977a:55). In June 1975, Oliver and a number of other Americans united in despair over the US economy, and in their predictions that the U.S. was headed for totalitarian socialism, founded the Phoenix Foundation. The philosophical underpinnings of this organization derive from the work of the economist Ludwig Von Mises (see Von Mises 1957, for example) and, more recently, from that of John Hospers, a philosopher at the University of Southern California and Libertarian Party presidential candidate in 1972 (St. George 1975:151).

In 1968, Oliver had published a book entitled *A New Constitution for a New Country* and had been involved in unsuccessful attempts to establish his new country on Minerva Reef, north of Tonga in 1972 (Du Bois 1976), and on the island of Abaco in the Bahamas in 1975 (St. George 1975). The *Phoenix Newsletter* of May 1977 warns of an increasing threat to economic freedom and argues, "It is necessary to have counter action. Our new nation project constitutes one such action which must succeed."

Back on Santo, Nagriamel declared independence several times in 1976 (in April and December). Oliver advised Jimmy Stevens in these at-

tempts at independence and told him to go “the free enterprise route and make your central government as small as possible” (Du Bois 1976:70). Reports that Phoenix also offered more substantial assistance--allegedly automatic weapons and ammunition--have been common over the past five years (Plant 1977a). The most recent of these reports surfaced during the Santo rebellion. Nagriamel did receive equipment enabling it to set up an illegal radio station which, in 1980, broadcasted on 3522 KHz as Radio Vemarana. In May 1977, the Phoenix Foundation published a *Na-Griamel Announcement* offering two-hundred year leases on four hectare plots of land in the New Hebrides for US \$9,000. The announcement described the Nagriamel Federation as a country without taxes, with free banking, and one in which “you will be left alone, as long as you do not infringe on the rights of others” (Phoenix Foundation 1977a). A *Na-Griamel Federation Constitution* also appeared at this time which guaranteed these rights. Oliver contracted with the Letcher Mint of Lancaster, California, to manufacture one ounce gold and silver coins with Jimmy Stevens’ head on the front and a Nagriamel logo on the back underneath the motto “Individual Rights for All.” The Phoenix Foundation sold these to its supporters in 1977 for \$200 and \$25 respectively although some pieces also found their way to Vanuatu both before and during the rebellion.

Phoenix was also interested in the possibilities of the John Frum Movement on Tanna. In 1979, a *Constitution of Tanna Federation*--essentially the same as the earlier Nagriamel version--appeared. Apparently, this was directed more to Phoenix supporters than to John Frum people since it made little impression on Tanna. Nevertheless, Tafea leaders may have expected significant American support when they stormed the government offices acting upon their earlier declaration of independence. When interviewed in Carson City, Nevada, in June 1980, Oliver denied being behind the dual revolts on Santo and Tanna although admitted that “the separatist movement in the New Hebrides island chain was scheduled to be capped June 18 by orderly takeovers on northern and southern islands” (Riley 1980). He also described the newly elected Prime Minister, Walter Lini (who is an Anglican priest) as a “Marxist-Leninist racist bastard of the worse kind,” and had previously stated: “I want Jimmy Stevens to become independent” (Dobson 1980:68).

I do not know how much and what type of assistance and encouragement the Phoenix Foundation gave Nagriamel on Santo and John Frum on Tanna. The Vanuatu government certainly assumed that the revolts were assisted by French colons and by rogue Americans. Walter Lini reported several times to the international press that Phoenix was behind the rebellion and that “at least three or four Americans from the Phoenix

Foundation” were in Santo during the revolt (*Contra Costa Times*, 2 June 1980:10). After his capture, Radio Vanuatu reported that “rebel frontman Jimmy Stevens has named the Phoenix Foundation as a source of money to the rebel movement and has blamed foreign influence for the arming of the rebellion” (*Voice of Vanuatu* 41, 6 September 1980). An authority discovered in Vemarana records empowered Stevens and other rebel leaders to draw up to \$20,000 a month on an account held in the names of Vemarana Federation and Tafea Federation by the Noumea branch of the Banque de l’Indochine et Suez. Other signatories of the account were Michael Oliver and F. Thomas Eck, principals of the Phoenix Foundation (Reinhardt 1980).

Whatever the actual facts, it is certainly true that John Frum people on Tanna have long expected America to help them achieve material well-being and freedom from the French and British. These expectations, along with the interests and character of the Phoenix Foundation were important calculations in the consideration and planning of their revolt.

After reestablishing its control on Santo, the Vanuatu government set up a number of courts to try the rebels. These courts fined or sentenced to prison those *ni-Vanuatu* found guilty of participating in the revolt. The government also deported a number of French nationals (and local people who carried French citizenship), and, as many people had already fled the country, declared more than a hundred people to be prohibited immigrants (*Voice of Vanuatu*, 7 October 1980). In November, the government also declared Jean-Jacques Robert, the last French Resident Commissioner, to be a prohibited immigrant (Reinhardt 1980).

Jimmy Stevens faced eleven charges (pleading guilty on all but one) which ranged from kidnapping the government’s district commissioner, to importing illegal Vemarana passports and copies of the Nagriamel constitution, to operating an illegal radio station (on which he had, on 28 May, urged the Tannese to rebel). After being found guilty on all counts, Justice Cooke, the Chief Justice, sentenced Stevens on 21 November 1980 to fourteen and a half years in jail and to fines totalling 220,000 FNH (about 3,380 US dollars) or to an additional two year and eight months jail time in lieu thereof. In his summation, Cooke noted that Stevens

was invited to America by some bogus society called the Phoenix Society--was feted there and received legal assistance in the drafting of a Lincolnian Constitution for Nagriamel which included all essentials for a full government.

He also refused to accept the defense counsel’s argument that the imported passports and copies of the constitution were actually intended as

tourist souvenirs being merely “the completion of a dream or a fairy tale . . . not really intended for an independent state” (*Voice of Vanuatu* 53, 27 November 1980).

Underlying the rebellion was a convergence of interests and goals of these two Vanuatu organizations and the American Phoenix Foundation. Obvious political attractions link Phoenix and Nagriamel and, to a lesser extent, John Frum. For Phoenix, successful secessionist movements on Santo and Tanna would provide the long-sought new nation and the possibility of enacting the new constitution. In early June, a week after Vemarana’s success on Santo, the Phoenix Foundation distributed a prospectus to Europeans in Vila offering shares in a “Vemarana Development Corporation in a way that suggested it will virtually run Santo if the secession should succeed” (Salmon 1980:11). For Vemarana and also for the less-successful Tafea, Phoenix offered several things: a source of monetary and alleged logistic support, an advantage over competing local organizations stemming from these contacts (or “roads” as *ni-Vanuatu* call them) with America and the outside world, and an ideology derived from American libertarianism (Hospers 1971) which demands a very weak and limited central government. Jimmy Stevens and leaders of John Frum, upon losing the elections, insisted that the 1979 constitution be rewritten. They demanded that Vanuatu be a confederacy of islands without a strong federal government (*Nabanga* 153, 11 April 1980:4; *Nabanga* 156, 9 May 1980:3; *Nabanga* 157, 20 May 1980:8). They argued that only Tannese should govern Tanna and that only people from Santo were qualified, by *kastom*, to govern Santo. Here, the political aims of both the Phoenix free enterprisers and Vanuatu cultists ran in tandem.

Finally, the fact that Phoenix members are mostly American is an added attraction.” Perhaps John Frum’s predictions were at last coming true. When asked by a reporter for the French newspaper *Nabanga* if he feared that the Americans he was inviting to install themselves on Santo would completely transform the island and its culture, Jimmy Stevens replied:

I say this squarely, I am not afraid. Since I do not fear the English or French, I do not fear the Americans. I know the Americans; I worked here with their parents in the 1940s. They can return and help us (*Nabanga* 157, 20 May 1980).

⁶Any American group may be welcomed, given the facts of historical and symbolic circumstance, by disaffected *ni-Vanuatu*. Most US groups, however, do not share Phoenix’s goal of establishing a redesigned type of state organization on small islands.

Besides these shared political interests--John Frum and Nagriamel looking for support in their dispute with the newly elected government and Phoenix searching for unencumbered land on which to establish its new world--there are a number of cultural similarities and interpretive structures shared by members of the interacting groups. Anthropologists have frequently pointed out parallels in the economic behavior and concerns of both Melanesians and Americans. They have described Melanesians as primitive capitalists (Pospisil 1963:3) and (although this is an admitted caricature), "thoroughly bourgeois, so reminiscent of the free enterprising rugged individual of our own heritage" (Sahlins 1963:289)--men greatly interested in controlling others by controlling the production and exchange of material goods and knowledge.

If Melanesians are free-enterprising, primitive capitalists, are Americans free-enterprising sophisticated cultists? There are other, more subtle similarities between the two cultures which might be adduced. These involve notions of the individual, of human ontology, of freedom and dignity, of the nature and scope of society, and of the means by which society may be changed and improved. Of course, none of these cultural similarities are exact. Most exist only on a superficial level. The fact that they do exist, however, can explain the ease of communication between Vanuatu and American cultists and the discovery by those involved of shared interests and goals. Even a superficial, surface-level similarity in one's approach to the world allows Americans and *ni-Vanuatu* to agree on bounded, simple goals and the means by which these might be achieved although each side fundamentally misunderstands the totality of expectation and real concerns of the other. These cultural similarities perhaps become especially apparent and notable as they are manifested in concentrated and extreme form in political fringe groups such as John Frum, Nagriamel, and Phoenix.

A notable component of both cultures is a stress on the importance of the individual, although this is an individual within society. Read, who worked in the New Guinea Highlands, writes of the Melanesian person:

a highly developed feeling and regard for the "lower" psychophysical self, the ideosyncratic "me" is clearly evident in a wide range of characteristic behavior . . . the desire to dominate, to stand out from one's fellows, to receive their submission and their adoration is characteristic . . . (1955:273).

A successful man is one who

can to a certain degree manipulate public opinion and if necessary defer to it without relinquishing his control of his individ-

uality, a man who is insightful and aware of group needs (Read 1959:427).

Similarly, the successful man in Vanuatu (as are Jimmy Stevens and the John Frum leaders) is one whose name becomes known; a man who, because of his knowledge, his ability, and his links with others, stands out. He does not stand alone, however, but stands as a leader of some group of followers. A man is successful to the extent that others agree he is so.

The idea of the individual is also an important theme within American culture--although there is more stress on the notion of autonomy and less on the necessity of followers. In Melanesia, to paraphrase Henley, a man is only captain of his soul if he has passengers on board. In America, on the other hand, there exists a notion of antisocial individuality and those people recognized as playing this role earn a peculiar sort of respect and prestige. A person can legitimately act according to his reading of some higher set of moral rules, even if his actions infuriate or threaten others around him. As Michael Oliver puts it: "Each of us according to his own conscious and beliefs must control his own actions" (Du Bois 1976:21).

A related notion, shared by members of both the Melanesian and American organizations, is that capable individuals can change or make history. Von Mises, the Phoenix ideologist, argues a "great man" interpretation of history against any theory of ineluctable destiny or historical laws of change. He writes:

Only individuals think and act . . . What produces change is new ideas and actions guided by them . . . These innovations are not accomplished by a group mind; they are always the achievements of individuals . . . It is always an individual who starts a new method of doing things, and then other people imitate his example. Customs and fashions have always been inaugurated by individuals and spread through imitation by other people (1957: 191-192).

Although Tannese may not phrase their notions of social change in exactly these words, they too recognize that men create history by purposely altering social configurations. Groups, whether these are based on cognatic or unilineal descent, on kindreds, on residence, or on some end people gather to accomplish, are contingent, surviving at the pleasure of individuals. If dispute occurs, people quit, move away, and join or form other groups. Sometimes a person destroys what has been; sometimes he builds anew. By conceiving some idea and acting upon it, people reshape their society. Men trace the emergence of a new moiety system, which developed within historical time, to four men. I witnessed the birth of

several new villages--new residence groups founded by men with ideas. The new village built as Tafea headquarters in Middle Bush on Tanna is another example of the malleability of social form. In both America and Vanuatu, individual efforts change the structure of society. Phoenix members expect to succeed in establishing a new country. Vemarana and Tafea expect to establish a confederacy in Vanuatu. By dancing and following John's word, John Frum adherents expect to establish a new Tanna.

A third notion shared by actors in the two cultures is that of the importance of success in the economic realm in the evaluation of personal honor and dignity. Americans have welfare cheats; Melanesians their "rubbish men"--these denigrating appellations reserved for those people who fail as economic actors and partially opt out of the exchange system. Both welfare cheats and rubbish men receive without being able to give; they take but do not repay. Brunton (1971) has argued that cargo cults in Melanesia are political attempts to cope with disruptions in traditional exchange systems. One such disruption occurs when new wealth objects--such as European money--that are uncontrollable by the people who use and desire them--enter into an economic system. Writing of the introduction of money at Mt. Hagen, New Guinea, Strathern notes the people there

did not, however, understand its true source, and therefore they did not properly control it. Indeed, this perception was accurate: they could not fix rates of exchange for goods they sold and were dependent on the mystery of the "world market." The Red Box cult clearly expressed a desire for inordinate amounts of cash, to make Hageners equal if not superior to Europeans, and also a wish to know money's true origins and so to manage its supply for themselves (1979:96; see also BurrIDGE 1969:41-46).

I have made the same point above with regard to the modernization of the John Frum ideology. What people on Tanna want is knowledge which would allow them to manufacture and thereby control the economic goods (including cash) they now must obtain from European sources. The sudden appearance of gold and silver coins bearing Jimmy Stevens' likeness must have been a convincing argument for Phoenix's power.

Brunton's theory--that cults arise in times of disruption in the economic system--seems also applicable outside Melanesia. The existence of the Phoenix Foundation in the US is predicated on fears of the breakdown of the American economy. Its newsletter of May 1977 contains a litany of dire warnings:

phony environmental issue . . . dire energy crises . . . breakup or outright nationalization of most industries . . . anti-free enterprise news media . . . more and more inflation . . . government controls increase . . . each month, more people come under communist domination . . . the viability of the western nations' structure is becoming more untenable.

The emergence of Phoenix--whose name itself suggests millenarian rebirth through fire--and the emergence of Melanesian cargo cults such as John Frum also interested in salvation through wealth are responses to the same sorts of economic concerns.

The loss of control by Melanesians and Americans over their own wealth and over the choice of how this wealth is obtained, managed, and exchanged threatens their dignity and sense of personal worth. Cults, such as John Frum on Tanna or Phoenix in America, aim to reconstitute dignity by recapturing control of exchange systems and wealth objects from either the Europeans or the overblown American government, whatever the case may be. Cult ideology stresses a reformulation of the economic system in order to reformulate human nature. Relative success in economic exchange is the measure of man but, more importantly, the particular type of exchange system involved constitutes his nature.

Both groups share an idea that the planned, reconstituted society and economy will forward the betterment of all. Although John Frum cargo ideology and also that of Nagriamel (Hours 1974) have become modernized and sophisticated to a great extent, people are still interested in obtaining material goods and material knowledge. When John Frum returns from America, these goods and this knowledge will be enjoyed by all loyal cult supporters. Likewise, if free enterprise and libertarian principles could truly be put into effect, the lives of all citizens would improve. Only the deserving poor would be left in an "unfettered economy" (Hospers 1977) as a free market system would insure less unemployment, greater productivity and more material goods, and satisfaction for all. Only when the tyranny of government is abolished will individuals enjoy true economic freedom and experience real human liberty.

Finally, in the design of future new nations, John Frum, Nagriamel, and Phoenix all hearken back to a more perfect past. Each perceives its actions as guided by a body of inviolable law: *Kastom* on the one hand, free enterprise on the other. The historicity of these moral systems is to a great extent myth, the ethics being continuously revised to address current interests and problems. John Frum and Nagriamel leaders both stress the importance of upholding and maintaining *kastom*. Jimmy Stevens argues:

one of the other areas of disagreement between the two parties is respect for the culture and the tribal customs of the people. The National Party [Vanuaaku Party] pays only lip service to these customs while the Nagriamel has made the respect for them a basic part of its party's philosophy (Plant 1977b:40).

Cultists use their ideas of true *kastom* to justify and legitimate political action including the recent secessionist revolts (*Nasiko*, 28 February 1980).

The Phoenix Foundation also looks to a more perfect past when the economy was unfettered, when there was no income tax, when powers of government did not overly impose on the individual. Hospers argues:

the idea of having a free enterprise republic, however small [such as Vemarana or Tafea] could be a signal beacon, reminding people of the potential which existed in the US more than 200 years ago (Du Bois 1976:69).

These two charter myths, *kastom* and free enterprise, serve both as political ideology in the respective organizations and provide guidelines for the establishment of a more perfect future.

Would the revolt in Vanuatu and the association of these Vanuatu and American organizations have been so successful if shared cultural styles of perception and interpretation did not exist? This is, of course, impossible to positively answer. I have suggested, however, that these thematic cultural harmonics did strike notes which resonated in the heads of rebels of both cultures. It seems particularly appropriate that an American movement, coming out of the acknowledged spiritual home of cargo and materialism, should find support in Melanesia. Vemarana and Tafea, willing even to have their constitutions written by Phoenix, recognized in these Americans (as they had recognized in the American soldiers of a generation before) a knowledge of the importance of exchanging goods: a people who really know how to handle cargo.

The secessionist attempts have failed and the properly elected Vanuatu government is back in control. John Frum members on Tanna may once again withdraw from national politics--as they threatened to do in 1979--to cultivate both their gardens and their expectations of America's imminent arrival. The failure of America (in the guise of Phoenix) this time around will not destroy the cult. John Frum survives not only because its ideology addresses concerns people find serious, but because the group is a strong competitor in the island's political arena. A symbolic affiliation with America serves as an ideological boundary marker differen-

tiating John Frum people from other Tannese. As long as the idea of America symbolizes this local political distinctiveness, an answer to economic desires, and a solution to economic inequality (a problem perhaps insoluble in a ministate such as is Vanuatu), the Tannese will continue to dream upon John Frum and his friends, the Americans.

Department of Anthropology
University of California
Berkeley

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