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TAUGHT BY FRIEDL: THE POWER OF MILLENARIAN  
MOVEMENTS AS REFLECTED IN A NEW GUINEA  
CARGO CULT

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## ABSTRACT

Gottfried O. ("Friedl") Lang was a teacher and mentor to many undergraduate and graduate students during his tenure in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Colorado – Boulder. As senior advisor for my doctoral dissertation, his insights proved exceedingly helpful as I prepared my prospectus and then implemented field-work among the Asmat of Indonesian New Guinea. His views on social and millenarian movements were prescient, and his emphases on socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political dynamics as induced culture change takes place, guided me to a comprehensive analysis of an intriguing cargo cult. It was referred to locally as the "Belief in the 'Lord of the Earth' " movement.

**KEY WORDS:** Gottfried O. Lang, millenarian movements, cargo cults, socio-economic change

*Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*, in the German tradition from which Dr. Gottfried O. ("Friedl") Lang arose, refer to "freedom of teachers" and "freedom of students." These are ideals which he represented in the classroom, and which were reflected in the most intriguing graduate course I ever took. Simply entitled ANTH 610, "Seminar in Culture Change," it spanned the "field of change" from an anthropological perspective. As I began my doctoral work, the course inspired me to tackle issues of both socio-cultural and socio-economic change. The in-class presentations by fellow graduate students such as Lee Lefferts, Pat Gray, Joe Graziano, and Paul Brown were stimulating. Friedl himself inspired me to tackle field work of the most challenging kind, in the most challenging place I then could conceive: New Guinea.

By way of background, Friedl was interested in strategies of change, and he conceptualized these broadly at two levels: Those that influenced (and were affected by) individuals, and those that influenced (and were affected by) groups. This dichotomization was by no means simplistic, as he stressed in class. As these played out cross-culturally, he wanted to know how development processes were impacted. "Development" was becoming a major thrust of anthropological analysis, and Friedl – along with his faculty colleagues Deward Walker and Robert Hackenberg – was fascinated by its ramifications. In the 1970s, induced development was primarily categorized by anthropologists as "modernization," "urbanization," or "industrialization." Impacts on an individual, especially those that were psycho-dynamic, were best reflected in acculturation processes as (e.g.) a migrant moved into a slum. Impacts on groups, especially those that were socio-

cultural, were best reflected in adaptation processes as (e.g.) a millenarian movement formed. Social movements were of special importance to Friedl.

Although not a systems theorist *per se*, Friedl was keenly aware of systems principles. He stressed them in class; his observations influenced me greatly. He was inspired, in part, by fellow scientists at the University of Colorado's Institute of Behavioral Science, most prominently Kenneth Boulding, Elise Boulding, and Gilbert White. Kenneth brought a fascination with systems reflecting economic interpretations, Elise with systems reflecting sociological interpretations, and Gilbert with systems reflecting geographic interpretations. Like them, Friedl was a multidisciplinary. More like White than the Bouldings, Friedl – to use a current term – was very evidentiary-based. Empiricism ruled. He was an inductivist. Hard data had to be collected in the field before any conclusions could be reached.

## PRELUDE TO THE FIELD

In the "Seminar in Culture Change," we studied reactive change, induced change, and facilitated change. From Friedl I learned about the process of "facilitative development," about the ways in which outside change agents can create an environment conducive to change that meets the felt needs of indigenous peoples. We studied the variety of change agents, from missionaries to corporate executives to applied anthropologists. Looking back, it was a discussion of the intersection of government and mission impacts on the Asmat of Indonesian New Guinea (then, called the province of Irian Jaya, now the province of Papua) that first peaked my interest in conducting research

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for my doctoral dissertation there. Friedl had already begun field work in this region. I was further inspired by conversations with Ken Keller, whose article constitutes another contribution to this *gedenkschrift*, as well as by the work of Frank Trenkenschuh (1970), with whom I later had detailed discussions.

As my dissertation prospectus unfolded, I came to focus on the nature of “modernizing” socio-economic impacts on Asmat villagers. I planned to work in six coastal villages within the Bisnam region of Asmat. Given the dense jungle and swampy environment, they are interconnected only by river or sea travel. A secondary research focus also emerged. In discussing social movements in the seminar, Friedl had covered reactive, millenarian and cult movements. He had emphasized the pioneering work of Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956) and Peter Worsley (1968). He had noted that certain movements (such as early Christianity) were innovative, incorporative, and culturally engaging, and that – following Wallace – the processes of leader visioning, of spreading the visionary message, of recruitment of followers, and of retention of members were essential. He had noted that so-called “cargo cults” were common in Melanesia, and that – following Worsley – they were indicative of certain indigenous coping mechanisms and reactive change to outside influence. He had mentioned that such a movement *cum* cult had begun among the Bisnam Asmat, in the village of Ewer. An ethnographic case study might well be warranted.

## IN THE FIELD

Beginning in 1966, the village of Ewer began to experience manifestations of cargo cult behavior. The latest was during 1973, when I first arrived, with lingering effects still being felt in 1974 as I was concluding my research. This portion of my article outlines developments surrounding the four major Ewer cult manifestations, and then analyzes this behavior in terms of (1) functional transformation over time of a relatively stable cult structure, with a decreasing interest in cargo and concomitantly increasing intra-village struggle for power; (2) Big Man activity as broadly manifested throughout Melanesia; (3) economic and development problems in the Asmat region. Following Friedl, I came to recognize that no single explanation of cult behavior would suffice. Rather, a cargo cult can best be interpreted systemically, as a complex set of reactive yet adaptive socio-cultural responses to outside pressures. Following David Gallus, who also contributed mightily to my analysis and co-authored an earlier paper with me (Van Arsdale and Gallus 1974), I came to understand the role of the Catholic Church in influencing such behaviors. Friedl also influenced by interpretation of the church’s role.

In categorizing the cult activities in Ewer I follow the classic definition of Meggitt (1973: 1): A millenarian move-

ment involves a series of actions designed to bring about certain existential changes, after which “the elect” participants will enjoy special benefits such as the acquisition of power, wealth, and happiness. A millenarian (or cargo) cult is that kind of millenarian movement which emphasizes and employs religious-magical doctrines and rituals to explain and achieve its purposes. Most have taken place in Melanesia.

It is crucial to recognize that a millenarian movement in its broadest interpretation can follow either Western-recognized processes of political and economic development, or non-Western yet locally recognized processes for achieving the same development status. Early on, Finney (1969: 59-60) found that cargo cult actions and market-oriented activities could be conceptualized as competing ways open to Melanesians to obtain wealth, and that where favorable preconditions existed commercial activities with their demonstrable returns might well be preferred to cargo cult activities. Adrien Vriens (as reported to Frank Trenkenschuh 1974) had made similar findings among peoples of southwest Papua, including the Marind and Mappi. Still other cults in Papua reflecting this included those among the Muyu, Mimika, and Kimam (Trenkenschuh 1974). As will be shown, for many of Ewer’s adult males such commercial and economic activities had not been readily accessible. In its earlier stages the cult members chose what to them seemed a more viable alternative: ritualistic methods to attain economic and even ethnic parity with “whites” (who, for them, included Javanese). These ritual insights were offered by a few men striving to increase their own power and prestige.

Such a choice was intellectually viable as well. It followed traditionally accepted Asmat practice. Peter Lawrence inspired me in this respect. He believed it important to analyze cargo cult behavior along rational-intellectual lines found in the society itself (1967; 1970), rather than applying purely sociological analyses which might yield results suggesting “maladjustment.” Following established religious-intellectual lines of reason found in their society, Asmat cult members wanted immediate material satisfaction and saw cargo cult activities as the most viable alternative given the pressures they were confronting. Asmat behavior regarding traditional economic opportunities and exploitation of resources is intellectually directed along these same short-term guidelines, and their initial cargo activities were a logical consequence. After repeated failures to achieve their goals and the desired cargo, as will be shown, the cult leaders gradually modified the functions of the cult toward more political and traditional curing objectives. The role of the so-called Big Man shifted, but remained central to these objectives.

Some of Papua’s earliest millenarian cults appeared in the Lake Sentani region in the 1920s (Worsley 1968: 98-99). These were in response to the combined effects of mis-



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sion and government penetration. Within the Asmat region, although information is scattered, cults or cult-like activities were reported in several villages prior to 1966. The cargo cult which emerged in Ewer apparently was the most powerful and – for me – the most intriguing.

## KEPERCAYAAN TUHAN TANAH: BELIEF IN THE “LORD OF THE EARTH”

### Phase I

During October of 1966 a 27-year old man whom I will call Marsellus Ndomber broke into the Catholic pastor's storeroom in Ewer. (Throughout, the names of key “Asmat actors” have been changed.) As the pastor was frequently in Agats, the administrative center of Asmat some six miles away by river, he did not initially miss the tobacco, money, and clothing which were stolen night after night.

Ndomber began dividing these goods (Asmat, *pok*) with others in Ewer, telling them he had received the supplies from the “Lord of the Earth” (Indonesian, *Tuhan Tanah*). Tuhan Tanah had appeared to him in a vision and presented a secret key, with which he was able to unlock a hole in the ground from which the *pok* appeared. It seems the people began to believe his story, and gladly accepted his gifts. Such holes traditionally were revered as special portals.

My informants said that initially no one knew Ndomber was stealing these supplies. He thus was able to gather a group of followers about him, all relatives, most of whom belonged to the fam or two-segment moiety (Asmat, *yew*) Jower. All were young men, and most in the probable position of desiring to enhance their own power and prestige, as members of Ewer's most powerful *yew* at that time.

Ndomber became a Big Man, a man of influence, in Ewer as his following expanded. His story concomitantly expanded to say that Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the angels were giving him advice. They had also informed him that on a certain date there would be a great happening. All believers in Tuhan Tanah would become white, each becoming a “master” (Indonesian, *tuan*). They would receive “freedom” (Indonesian, *merdeka*), and the hole would supply even more *pok* than before.

All these things would happen if Ewer's people believed in Tuhan Tanah, and rejected all that was traditionally Asmat. Bows, arrows, spears, and other implements must be burned, proclaimed Ndomber. No longer were men to use body paint or women the traditional garb (the fiber mini-skirt, *awer*). When each became a *tuan* with white skin such things would be unnecessary. Any traditional items hidden and not burned would rot. Since their food would come from cans, hunting and gathering would be unneces-

sary. There was even a plan to cut down many of the sago palms, which provided the key dietary staple, as these would not be needed.

These events all hinged, said Ndomber, on the sincerity of the people's beliefs. As a majority of villagers were already baptized Catholics, they were to obtain rosaries and pray fervently each Sunday. In response church attendance shot up, many items indeed were burned, and sago chopping ground to a halt. Ritualized drumming and dancing began. About this time Ndomber began to wear a star-shaped pin he had stolen. The people began calling him “President.” That he referenced books in his declarations also was deemed a virtue.

Also at about this time, a person whom I will call Gabriel Esakam returned to the village from the southern coast where he had been working for the Catholic mission. This Asmat man later would become village head, under Indonesian government auspices, but even in 1966 he was viewed as up-and-coming from both mission and government perspectives. He also was seen as a potential program innovator. It is extremely important to note that he was a member of the *yew* Jowijof, Jower's chief fam rival for power in the village. Esakam heard of these cult activities and decided to investigate, as did the pastor who finally had discovered the missing supplies.

While the pastor was unable to pin down the thief due to lack of evidence, Esakam had more success. He hid under the store room and caught Ndomber stealing more supplies to supplement his revelation that the Virgin Mary would walk through Ewer later that night. Ndomber begged Esakam to allow him to perform fellatio, the traditional Asmat custom binding one to secrecy. Instead, Esakam reported the incident to the pastor, the head teacher, and government officials in Agats, the administrative center. Ndomber was arrested for theft and jailed in Agats. The pastor demanded that the people who had received *pok* return it; slowly it was brought back.

Making one last attempt at retaining his prestige and power as “President,” Ndomber escaped from jail. He told the people that he had simply “reappeared” in Ewer. Yet he was soon re-arrested, belief in the cult seemingly subsided, and he never again regained his power and prestige. When released, he turned to a nondescript life. When questioned during November, 1973, one informant told me that people thought it was foolish that Ndomber had stolen the mission supplies.

### Phase II

During July of 1968 the teachers and new pastor assigned to the church in Ewer began to notice the villagers remaining home more than usual. Drumming was on the in-

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crease, and mission- and government-sponsored work was again slowing down. Being unwilling to leave the village (for reasons noted shortly), Ewer men refused to paddle the teachers the six miles to Agats or to bring them food, as was the norm.

It was learned soon after that a middle-aged man whom I will call Leo Owusipitsj had been speaking to the villagers from a comatose state, "as if crazy" (Indonesian, *macam gila*). He was probably suffering from epilepsy, a condition further compounded by a case of malaria tropica. Among other things he had told the people to listen to his cousin, a man whom I will call Andreas Yokor, one of the ranking members of the faction Ndomber had built up – but a member of neither yew Jower or yew Jowijof. (His was yew Darkau, a point which becomes important later in this analysis.) Yokor, crippled since his youth, was able to attract a following owing to his previous association with the cult, his family relationship with yew Jower, and his position as a *ndembero* (traditional curer) with special contacts in the spirit world.

Through a series of dreams Yokor reported that an old bearded man had appeared to him, and had offered a key leading to numerous kinds of *pok*. The old man also revealed that *merkeda* was imminent. Other dreams were of dead people, which he not only reported to the villagers but to the pastor. Although the pastor told him dreams were not to be feared, like other Papuan peoples the Asmat believe dreams of spirits and the dead to be extensions of reality.

For fear of missing the promised freedom and *pok* no one dared leave Ewer. No canoe trips could be engaged. However, Gabriel Esakam (who by this time had become the Indonesian government's village head) heard rumors of the cult's re-emergence and again quickly reported it to officials in Agats. Before the situation could develop further Owusipitsj and Yokor were called to Agats and warned by officials of the consequences of such talk. The village seemingly returned to normal, although it later was learned that secretive talk had continued until the next phase occurred.

### Phase III

Actually a delayed continuation of the events of 1968, this phase of the cult surfaced in July, 1969. At this time Esakam, the village head, left for an extended trip to Java. Apparently his presence had kept "cult talk" underground because shortly after he left both cousins, Owusipitsj and Yokor, began talking of Tuhan Tanah more openly again. It was said that Yokor would "open everything" and that white skin would replace black skin. The village of Ewer would become a big city. At this point Yokor began revealing his dreams again.

During early August, participation in the mission-

sponsored fish cooperative ceased. Pig hunters no longer brought in pigs. Further belief in the cargo cult was probably enhanced when Owusipitsj died on August 16 due to complications surrounding his malaria tropica. Yokor quickly emerged as the sole cult leader, strengthening his position by proclaiming that Owusipitsj had not died at all but would return when Tuhan Tanah opened the hole in the ground for the emerging *pok*. Traditional Asmat mourning calls for prolonged wailing and rolling in the mud by close relatives, women in particular. Hence it was a marked contrast when, due to Owusipitsj's supposed return, no such mourning occurred at his burial. When questioned by the pastor, several people responded that they had learned from the Catholic religion not to wail at a funeral, but to pray.

Shortly after the burial, Yokor changed his tact and declared that he was even more powerful than his cousin had claimed. Through a dream he revealed that he had been taken on a world tour. In Java he had learned Esakam, the village head, had been shot and killed. Yokor then said: "See what happens to people who don't believe me. Whoever does not believe will get the same." This convinced many people even more strongly that his power was real. Each Thursday recruits met at his house to hear further revelations.

Informants reported the following Yokor monologue from one of these meetings: "We must stand by ourselves. Tuhan Tanah says that if we stand by ourselves, our lives will be changed and much better than now. We will undergo a great change. Our skins will become white and we will have all types of *pok*. This will happen only if you believe. Whoever does not believe will become pigs, or dogs, or fish, or snakes. Also we must keep this secret. Whoever reports this to the pastor or to the government will become water." During other meetings he added that the Asmat must be free of Indonesian influence, and that all the people of Papua must be prepared to fight for their freedom. Pan-Papuan, anti-Indonesian sentiments were running strong at this time throughout the province.

Yokor proclaimed that it would therefore be necessary for Asmat to have its own government, and so the following offices were established: President of "Free Asmat," Vice President, Governor, and District Head. Other offices all followed the established Indonesian government hierarchy. Yokor made certain that he spoke to the people, especially potential recruits *cum* disciples, in Indonesian, which not all Asmat could understand. This further elevated his status. He assuredly would assume the post of President.

During October and November, 1969, belief in Ewer's millenarian movement reached an all-time high. This amount of fervor was not seen again. There was drumming every week, the pig and fish cooperatives were dead, and peo-

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ple refused to leave the village except when absolutely necessary to gather food. Children showed no enthusiasm for school, teachers were brought no food, and according to Yokor's orders the church was filled each Sunday.

A skilled analyst, Yokor also kept close tabs on socio-political developments within the Catholic church. Father Alphonse Sowada, a beloved Crosier priest, was to be ordained the first Bishop of Asmat on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. Yokor proclaimed that after the feast of ordination a "great happening" would take place. He would approach the Archbishop of Marauke when he stepped out of the plane at Ewer, and at that moment Asmat's flag would arise from the ground. Its colors would be red, white, and blue with a cross. Immediately the ground would open and factories, machines, automobiles, airplanes, clothing, electric generators, boats, medicines, food, and kitchen utensils made of gold would appear. Each Asmat person would become a *tuan* at that moment, and from then on would never work again. The *pok* then would be sent to the Asmat village of Ayam, known for its relative prosperity, which would become the capital of Asmat. Word of this revelation spread to other villages, the coastal village of Owus apparently becoming especially convinced of the truth of the reports.

A few days prior to the ordination, Gabriel Esakam (reported by Yokor to have been killed in Java) returned to Ewer. Yokor and his colleagues quickly went to Agats and asked the government to remove him as village head. When their request was refused rumors began spreading of a duel which would result in Esakam's death. The more that Esakam investigated the cult activities, the more vigorously the cult's leaders lobbied against him. A great deal of excitement accompanied the November 23<sup>rd</sup> feast of ordination, but when Yokor's revelations were not realized he twice rescheduled the "great happening." During December the government demanded a full report on the cult. This was provided by Esakam and two other villagers. The members of the cult's "government" were called to Agats and warned of the consequences which continued cult activity would bring about. Yokor merely declared he had been aiding the Catholic mission by promoting better attendance at church. Yet this pressure by the government was enough to diminish enthusiasm in Kepercayaan Tuhan Tanah once again.

## Phase IV

Due to the fear of government reprisals and the continued presence of Esakam in the village as government head, little information surfaced about the relative strength of the cult from 1970 through 1972. However, enough information later was obtained to indicate that cult beliefs persisted. Yokor was regularly consulted as

one having special contacts with spirits, and was called on in his role as a *ndembero* to divine and cure illness. So were others. While the structure of the Ewer cult fluctuated, it was in the increasing power and prestige gained by cult leaders in their developing roles as *ndembero* that functional transformations were evidenced. Socio-cultural and socio-political adaptations were emerging concomitantly.

In May, 1970, the wife of one of the villagers who had helped Esakam prepare his cult-critical report for the government died. Some recalled Yokor's earlier statement that anyone revealing cult secrets to the government would die. Others reported that an increase in illness in Ewer at that time was due to Esakam's continued reporting of the people's secrets to the government. A teenage girl's role in afterbirth burial, with subsequent socio-political complications, added fuel to the fire. Interest in government-sponsored health programs dropped.

Although the next two years saw little outward signs of cult activity, undercurrents were stirring. By early 1973 the Indonesian phrase "kepercayaan Tuhan Tanah" had been heard in other, more distant Asmat villages, and possibly had been heard in connection with cult activities in the Muyu and Kimam areas of Papua. The emphasis in Ewer, although diminished, still focused nominally on *pok*. Yet David Gallus and I came to believe that fam-specific power struggles, the emergence of a new generation of Big Men, and a general dislike for outside intervention – by the government, missions, and non-Asmat teachers – were key. Gabriel Esakam's role, as both innovative leader and government contact, remained at the fulcrum.

One day, to the teacher's surprise, three Ewer students openly revealed to the class the new members of "government" in the cult. While Andreas Yokor remained as President, several new members had been granted important titles. A list of members had been drawn up which included the names of teenage boys, as well as several children. It was stated that after years of unfulfilled revelations the group wanted results. Hence an asphalt airstrip would be needed, with young Ewer men becoming pilots. The simple mud-and-grass airstrip in use for years would be inadequate. Mission aviation pilots would not be needed. How this transformation would be accomplished went unstated.

The latest manifestation finally came more clearly to the surface during August, 1973. A man from the neighboring village of Per died suddenly after a jungle trip. Before he died he told of a snake he had met in the jungle. The creature had a book and a key (both symbols used by cult leaders in Ewer during the three previous phases). The snake threatened him with death if he did not take the book and key, but as he was afraid he re-





fused. Because of his death, as the snake had predicted, the story quickly reached Ewer. (One Asmat man who helped spread the story was a Catholic catechist and teacher in Per, who originated from Ewer.)

During August and September, 1973, the non-Asmat teachers again reported that villagers were not bringing them food. By October it was noted there was a general lack of enthusiasm for village projects and mission-sponsored work. Some people believed the pastor should pay them for cleaning up the village, and others mentioned their desire for non-Asmat teachers to leave. Men complained that zinc roofing should not go on the new teacher's house, but on the local government office instead (a request that, in fact, was implemented in January, 1974). One evening after a fight involving an outsider, an Asmat man openly declared: "Outsiders are not wanted in Ewer."

Clamouring for a new village head peaked in October, and once again in early November. One of the men mentioned to fill Esakam's office was seemingly picked at random; his credentials were non-existent and he was not well-liked. However, he was a member of yew Jower. It was argued that he would be able to lobby for higher prices for indigenous products sold in Agats. By contrast, it was argued that Esakam was always pushing for government projects and hard work, but was not able to arrange things to suit the people. He also did not know how to read or write, they pointed out, and did not sit in his office enough. Yet in late November, when there was the opportunity for a village-wide vote to replace him, the overt Jower/covert cargo cult faction could not muster enough support to replace him.

By coincidence, in late September, 1973, fifty Ewer men had gone to Agats to sign up for wage labor with an oil exploration company that had recently opened operations in the interior Asmat region. Although these men repeatedly prepared to leave to begin their contract, they were forced to wait owing to various company delays. Yet enthusiasm for the wage labor continued at a very high pitch. However, none of the cult's leaders signed up, nor expressed much interest in the possibilities of such work. When, in early October, a group of Ewer men returned from an unsuccessful crocodile hunt in the Mimika region, some 75 miles to the northwest, they were further frustrated to learn that they had missed their chance to sign up for wage labor. Yokor told them not to worry, since they would soon receive *pok* from Tuhan Tanah.

At about this time, Yokor spoke with one of the more influential women in the village, reporting that – although he was crippled – the pastor had seen him in perfect health. The pastor had seen him with "two perfectly good

legs, walking normally." Thus the theme of the power of the church and the pastor, which was prevalent in the earlier cult manifestations, was still present.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

### Functional Cult Transformations

Over a period of eight years Ewer's millenarian cult remained viable. Its four major manifestations indicate that belief in the cult fluctuated but remained generally widespread, extending at times beyond the village. As of 1974 Andreas Yokor had become an increasingly influential Big Man. Several informants, both in Ewer and its sister village Syuru, stated flatly he had become the most influential man in Ewer. All this took place despite the fulfillment of not a single revelation, and despite the continued presence of Gabriel Esakam as village government head. This can be explained in part by the functional transformation of the cult while its structure remained essentially the same.

The inter-yew power struggle (a tight-rope dance among fam) which became increasingly pronounced after 1968 was one facet of the cargo cult's functional transformation. Friedl's insights on development in Asmat, just recently then having been published, helped me analyze what had transpired (Lang 1973). As he later suggested, in the context of induced development and reactive change, an anthropologist studying social movements (millenarian movements being one type) should focus on socio-economic and socio-political factors. (By contrast, a psychologist should focus on psycho-social factors.) *Pok*, the cargo, represented socio-economic, not merely economic, status. Yew affiliation represented socio-political, not merely political, status. Both *pok* and yew affiliation are malleable within Asmat society.

But in 1966 this was not the motivation behind the cult. The original visionary, Marsellus Ndomber, was a member of yew Jower. Hence by first gathering a close-knit group of supporters from Jower and his own extended family as recruits *cum* disciples, he was in the ideal position to capitalize upon his membership in this important fam. He had no particular Asmat-recognized charisma nor special attributes, so it is probable that were he to have been a member of another fam the cult's initial success would have been compromised. That the people were extremely hopeful of receiving the promised *pok* was, of course, another factor in his favor.

Ndomber the "cult visionary," and later Yokor the "cult manager," were the most important leaders of the cult's development during the most crucial period in its eight years of existence. Belief in Tuhan Tanah as the provider of *pok* was still present, but after his failure of



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1966 Ndomber had no other personal attribute or pre-existing influence by which to continue mustering support in his drive to become a truly Big Man. It is probably no coincidence that shortly after Esakam became village head, shifting the balance of power toward yew Jowijof, that cousins Owusipitsj and Yokor revived interest in the cult. From the viewpoint of cult leadership the functional transformation was in full swing, because not only did Yokor want to become a Big Man, yew Jower was now in a secondary power position – and he was beholden to it through family connections but not membership. Yokor was a member of a third yew, Darkau, less influential than either Jower or Jowijof.

Evidence is circumstantial but it appears that one of Ewer's most influential and elderly former headhunters was behind some of Yokor's maneuvers. From a socio-political perspective, this would make sense. Both were members of the same extended family but different fam. Throughout Melanesia it is rather unusual for a man as young as Yokor (ca. 25 years at the time) to command such widespread influence; the older men would usually pay little attention to "young upstarts." This would seem to be particularly so among the Asmat since feats of war and headhunting, even in the 1970s, were no longer alternatives by which a young man could gain prestige. Other avenues had to be opened. With the elder's support Yokor would have been assured of solid village backing, and not merely among younger people or members of yew Jower or yew Darkau. The elder was respected throughout much of the Bisnam Asmat region. Furthermore, I learned that the elder would very much like to have had Esakam removed as village head. Esakam frowned on the elder having five wives.

The inter-yew power struggle further can be understood by digressing long enough to explain the basic kinship organization pattern in Asmat. It can be termed "Hawaiian" in that it is broadly classificatory and generational, hence can be conceptualized horizontally rather than vertically. Lineages and clans are not recognized. Where one lives in a village is very important. A dualistic worldview is found in many aspects of Asmat life, including the division of each fam into moieties and the idea that each fam is represented by a spirit world fam of the same name whose membership must be kept in balance with the real-world fam via the proper number of births and deaths. Through the mid-1950s, this dualism further played out in revenge warfare and headhunting raids.

Given this rather flexible system, although one generally retains the ascribed membership in the fam and moiety of one's father, this can be altered if the total village fam system is perceived to be out of balance. The houses of any one fam tend to be grouped in the same part of the village, near its men's house. However, a man of a

different fam usually can build his hut in a different fam's section if he has family ties there, strong friendships, or intentions of improving his own position in the village. Over time such a spatial orientation can be translated into a change in fam membership. This is what I have termed "residential override" (Van Arsdale 1975: 259-260; Pouver 2010: 105). By requesting permission from the respective fam leaders (who consult each other as well as spirit world fam leaders) a switch can be made. Informants told David Gallus and me that Yokor had come close to switching from yew Darkau to yew Jower on several occasions, and his home was located in Jower's section. Yet by maintaining Darkau membership he was in a better position by which to solicit extensive support from both Darkau and Jower.

## Transitional Big Men

Marshall Sahlins (1968) developed an important early typology of Big Men and their leadership styles in Melanesia. However, it was Glyn Cochrane (1970) who wrote what I have found to be the most compelling overview ever of Big Men in the context of Melanesian cargo cults. While considering *tradition*, he also considered *transition*. In Asmat, it was among the younger men of Ewer that the balance of power was being actively fought over, much of it by means of Kepercayaan Tuhan Tanah. What was reflected as *power* at the fam level was the result of striving for *influence* at the individual level. Those belonging to yew Jowijof were less active than those of yew Jower and yew Darkau. Yet influential older men and some of the fam leaders played a strong role in what power shifts actually did occur. As I first appreciated by reading the work of Rolf Wirsing (1973), information is best understood in these contexts as potentially transformative political power. Family networking, yew power dynamics, and individual personalities all came into play in complex fashion within the village. At a still broader level, these all came into play as Asmat society reactively confronted induced processes of culture change.

The fact that Friedl was a devout Catholic did not subtract from his ability to assist with my analysis of the "Lord of the Earth" cult; it added measurably. It seemed that, at one and the same time, he could add personal insights about the impacts of religious belief on one's life and yet ethnographically analyze the incentives and constraints that the church imposed upon Asmat people. Friedl helped me realize that in one sense Kepercayaan Tuhan Tanah had everything to do with religion, and in another sense it had nothing to do with religion.

While my analysis was primarily couched in socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political terms, Friedl also reminded me of the psycho-dynamic and personal dimensions (Lang and Van Arsdale 1975). Marsellus



# The Applied Anthropologist

PETER W. VAN ARSDALE

Taught by Friedl...

Ndember the cult visionary, Andreas Yokor the cult manager, and Gabriel Esakam the primary "cult antagonist," could also be seen as intriguing personal figures with fascinating personalities. Each was attempting to cope with the pressures of induced culture change while simultaneously maneuvering for position and influence. That Andreas Yokor increasingly engaged in traditional curing practices in his role as *ndembero* strengthened his transitional role as emergent Big Man. The importance of *pok* dwindled. He continued to capitalize on his understanding of the Catholic Church, his at-times strong relationship with it, and yet his at-times antagonistic relationship with it. He continued to capitalize and manage his socio-political relations with multiple fam as well.

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