

# A Nativistic and Millenarian Movement in North West Australia

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*[Editor's note: The following article was originally published as 'Nativismus und millenarismus im gegenwaertigen Australien' in 1964. It was written while the Petris were at La Grange in 1963, and, while not analytic, is marked by a refreshing immediacy. It is the only first-hand account of a nativistic (anti-colonial) and millenarian (prophesied future in which wrongs will be righted) movement with specifically Christian elements among Aborigines. The translation presented here is slightly abridged.]*

Nativistic and millenarian movements are usually analysed as symptoms of varying degrees of culture contact. Documented in Oceania, Africa, the Americas, and parts of Asia, they seem to have been largely, but not totally, absent from Australia (Muehlmann 1961; Guarglia 1959; Lanternari 1960). One known example is the Molonga cult. A dynamic movement hostile to Europeans, it had its origin in Queensland at the beginning of this century, and gradually spread throughout much of the continent (Siebert cited in Petri 1953:166). Until recently, no analogous or cognate movements have been observed in Australia.<sup>1</sup> However, recent events among traditionally oriented Aboriginal groups in West and Central Australia are suggestive of a new nativistic-millenarian movement.

Prior to discussing this movement, it is important to note that a kind of revivalist movement emerged in 1960 among local groups bound to white settlements on the northern fringe of the Canning Desert of Western Australia. The leaders were young and middle aged men who were tradition conscious and intelligent. All of them lived in a contact situation and attempted to come to grips intellectually with their experiences with European settlers and, through their own traditions and values, to find their own solutions to the existential problems of their people (Petri 1963:305f.).

The objective was an increased awareness of their cultural heritage through an intense cultivation of cult and ceremonial life, and through a revival of those traditions and institutions whose survival was threatened. It would miss the point, however, to see this endeavor as exclusively oriented toward the past. The presence of Europeans, and their technological supremacy, was accepted, and people were prepared to modify the old order to a certain extent, and to adjust to the new one. For example, there were rarely any misgivings about releasing children between the ages of six and fourteen from local communities and allowing them a boarding school education in the mission and state schools. People demanded, however, that the children be returned in order to induct them into the traditional initiation system and thus to give them a firm place in their own social and intellectual system. It was, therefore, a form of revitalism which saw survival not only in a revitalisation of the past, but also in a realistic assessment of the present. The revitalism of 1960 lacked prophetic, millenaristic, nativistic, and revolutionary ideas. Rather, it endeavoured to achieve a balance between the two different cultural worlds of Aboriginal and European Australians.

The situation we observed in 1960 no longer obtained in 1963. Among our first observations was a change in attitude: certain groups of Aborigines who, three years before, had been extraordinarily cooperative with us, had now become reserved. A new cult complex called *wanadjara*, which revived an old and widespread tradition concerning the activities of powerful Dreaming women, had been imported from the south. We were excluded from participation in *wanadjara*, and only rarely was H. Petri invited to the evening song sessions of the men. The people were polite, ostensibly regretted our dismay, and pretended that they thought we were no longer interested in men's and women's ceremonial life. Only after some detours were we to find out what was really the matter. Strong undercurrents of hostility toward Europeans had, in the last two years, gripped the territorial groups of the central western desert and seemed to have their epi-centre in the Jigalong Mission in the Lake Disappointment area. These hostile attitudes had spread to the northwestern coastal area of Australia. There they found a particularly fertile ground with all those Aborigines who, in the last twenty to thirty years, had moved from the arid regions of the south and were living in some tension with their hosts (Petri 1956).

Our research area during 1960 and 1963 was the Pallotine mission at La Grange, 120 miles southwest of Broome. The *Udialla*, desert migrants in the coastal community, were more or less open to anti-European ideas. The *Udialla* group, of heterogeneous ethnic composition, has always maintained strong links with groups living on the Protestant-sectarian mission station of Jigalong. These contacts contributed significantly to the fact that for years there had been tension between the *Udialla* and the *Gularabulu* who were coastal people belonging to the Garadjeri and Njangomada tribes. It was a continuously crisis-ridden situation which the Catholic La Grange mission could not ameliorate.

The hostile attitude of the *Udialla* towards Europeans received further impetus through the activities of Don McLeod. A European social reformer, McLeod had formed mining cooperatives near Port Hedland and Roebourne organised according to socialist principles and composed solely of Aborigines. Aboriginal social reformers travelled throughout the northwest and, through generous donations of flour for ceremony and through promises of future social justice and wealth for Aborigines, created a following, particularly among the migrants from the southern desert who

hitherto had had the least contact with Europeans. Aboriginal recruiters for socialism had also instructed people not to tell anything to visiting anthropologists as these people would sell their 'Law', i.e. their traditions and cults, to a hostile West Australian government bent on their suppression. We received this information from several *Gularabulu* who had been in contact with Europeans a few decades longer than the *Udialla* and who lacked sympathy for McLeod's ideas.

Although these factors explain the mistrust and disapproving attitudes on the part of some Aborigines at La Grange mission, they say little about anti-European attitudes among Aborigines of the western desert.

In September 1963 we received unexpected information from W.G., a member of the *Udialla* group (Djulin tribe). People from *Garo* (an intertribal meeting centre and point of intersection of various mythic groups) had brought the cult complex *wanadjara* to the eastern region known as *Wonajagu* or *Woneiga*.<sup>2</sup> In this eastern region, it happened, so it was said, 'a short time ago' that Jinimin (Jesus) appeared one day to a group of Aborigines as they were about to stage one of the *Wanadjara* ceremonies. The *Wonajagu* people were said to have always believed in Jesus and his power and to have found this belief to be consistent with their Dreaming tradition and with the traditions and cults imported from other areas. This epiphany was said to have happened on a 'missionary' station. We were unable to find out the exact location.<sup>3</sup>

When Jinimin-Jesus revealed himself to his believers in *Wonajagu* country, he was said to have had both black and white skin. He proclaimed that all land belonged to the Aborigines and that henceforth there would be no difference between Black and White Australians. This state of affairs, however, would only be realised if the Aborigines could muster sufficient strength and power to fight the Whites successfully and thus to attain a position from which they could get their own way. This would be achieved only if they rigorously adhered to their own Law. Thus the Christian saviour was attributed both with the role of a guardian and keeper of Aboriginal culture, and with that of a revivalist prophet.

It was said to have been early afternoon when Jinimin-Jesus descended from heaven. Everybody was surprised and frightened, and no one dared to touch the apparition. Some men, however, had taken their box-cameras and made photographs. After his exhortation to keep alive the 'Old Law', Jinimin-Jesus had people perform *worgaia* (a cult complex concerning Dreaming activities of the two earth mothers, probably originating in Arnhem Land).<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, Jinimin-Jesus was said to have promised the *Wonajagu* people that after their successful fight with the Europeans, they themselves would receive white skin. Holy water would fall from the sky to cleanse them and make them light. In the late afternoon he returned to heaven, taking with him both *wanadjara* and *worgaia* cult complexes.

Associated with this Jinimin-Jesus myth is another remarkable conception. According to both W.G. (Djulin) and W. (Yulbaridja), another member of the *Udialla* group, there is, 'on the other side of Galidjida', southeast of Fitzroy Crossing, at the foot of a mountain range near two water holes, a large stone ship which Jinimin-Jesus sent from heaven. The informants said that the ship had been in this place since *bugarigara* (Dreaming). The ship was said to have a double significance. After the annihilation of Europeans through the deluge of Holy Water, it would serve as a second Noah's Ark for Aborigines. It was also said to be filled with gold and luminous crystal which are the basis of the future wealth of Aboriginal society.

That society will be equal, or even superior, in power to the present White society. No Europeans were able to find this ship or to see it. It would reveal itself only to the eyes of a certain member of the Mangala tribe: T., the son of a *Garo* cult chief, and a powerful *maban* (shaman) in his own right.

The Jinimin-Jesus belief has millenarian objectives and is a new syncretistic cult with distinct revitalistic and nativistic tendencies. It emerged in a culture contact situation and can be compared to movements in New Guinea and the archipelagoes of eastern Melanesia, for which there is a comprehensive literature on the subject (Worsley 1957). Cargo cults encompass the idea that ships richly laden with goods will arrive and will facilitate a different future. Such beliefs always occur in Oceanic redemptive longing and seem comparable to the idea of the stone ship at Galidjida.<sup>5</sup>

At this stage we cannot foresee what developments this movement may take. As it has already spread to the Fitzroy River area, it may be hypothesised that it had a large following in the western desert where it originated, but detailed information is not available.

It is also unclear whether the anti-European attitudes, which originate at Jigalong mission, can be connected with the Jinimin-Jesus cult. According to the Native Welfare Department (WA), there is a cult called *gurunu* in Jigalong which has become a nativistic cult. However, both of our informants at La Grange maintain contacts with Jigalong and claim that *gurunu* is just another name for *wanadjara*. The message of Jinimin-Jesus was that *wanadjara* would be the cult from which people in the desert of the south and southwest would derive power and strength to fight Europeans. *Wanadjara* activities were particularly favoured in La Grange by the *Udialla* who were hostile to Europeans, as well as by some *Gularabulu*.

We can state with some certainty that reinterpreted Christian and socio-reformatory ideas contributed to the transformation of a non-aggressive revitalism into an aggressive, nativistic, and millenaristic dynamic. This development appears to have begun only after Australian policies towards Aborigines had become widely liberalised. Full citizen rights were soon to be granted to Aborigines. In addition, Catholic missions had moved not only to accept traditional life as far as it was compatible with Christian ethics, but also to support it.

## Notes

- 1 The Kurangara cults in the northern Kimberley district of Northwest Australia, cited by V. Lanternari in reference to A. Lommel (1952), are not religious or prophetic movements which have been triggered through the contacts with White civilisation. Rather they are mythico-traditional lines and associated ritual practices which occupy a key position in the cultural and population dynamic of the arid interior of Australia. (See Petri 1956).
- 2 These two terms are used by the groups of the western desert and of the Kimberley district to refer to all eastern desert regions and their inhabitants. Woneiga is also a tribe or rather territorial group which has its old hunting grounds in the central border area of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. (See Meggitt 1962).
- 3 Aborigines in this area denote as "missionaries" all Protestant missionaries of Lutheran and also sectarian denomination while the Catholic missionaries are called "fathers longa catholic law". Among some Aborigines not yet directly touched by missionary activity the idea has formed that there are two different Jesuses one is "birga" = the big boss of the "fathers" and has a mother. The other, who has no mother, but "made himself", is obeyed by the "missionaries".

- 4 Cf. R.M. Berndt (1951). We heard of the "Worgaia" dynamic for the first time in 1954 on Anna Plains station from an eastern Kimberley Aborigine who used to live there. It has spread in the course of the last nine years in a south-westerly direction along the Fitzroy River and reached La Grange shortly after our arrival on this mission station, in May 1963. "Worgaia", moreover, is the name of a tribe or territorial group whose habitation area is near Newcastle waters in the Northern Territory (Meggitt, *loc.cit.*, table opp. p.5). How far there is a connection between the "Worgaia" tribe and the cult complex of the same name, we were as yet unable to find out.
- 5 Frederick Rose conducted field work in the period between July and October 1962 on Angus Downs station in Central Australia. He studied the social and economic changes to which Aboriginal society was subjected by the contact with the White Australian colonial culture. In his short report on the results of his undertaking, published in 1963, he mentions also a kind of cargo movement which in some respects approximates more closely the movements of this kind known to us in New Guinea and Melanesia than the as yet still very diffuse cargo idea of the Aborigines of the western desert, which is associated with the stone ship of Galidjida in the Fitzroy River area. Rose writes as follows:

...an unusual feature in the cult life of the Aborigines is the appearance of the cargo cult. The belief associated with it, consists in the idea that the Americans will return to Angus Downs with a large number of trucks laden with sacks of flour, tea and sugar. The trucks and the food stuffs will be handed over to the Aborigines. The root of this conception of course goes back to the war when American trucks laden with food and ammunition went back and forth between Alice Springs and Darwin. Moreover, after the war these trucks passed into the possession of the Whites, namely — so the Aborigines believe — by a trick. When the Americans return, the Aborigines will not, as they say, be deceived a second time and will indeed receive the trucks and foods. The cargo cult belief is not associated with specific cult forms and rites...

We are faced here with a range of ideas which in identical or cognate form, lie at the base of numerous cargo movements of Oceania in the war and post-war period. It is also noteworthy that here, as is the case in the western desert (and in contrast to Oceania) a certain, very materialistic expectation of salvation is not directly associated with the traditional cultural and cultic complexes.

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